

Female Missionary Activities and the Redefinition of Gender Roles in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon 1904-2006

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Abstract

Prior to the coming of Christian missionaries into the Bamenda Grassfields, the people carried themselves according to their traditions and customs which were patriarchal and male dominated. With the advent of missionaries and the introduction of Christianity, new mores were introduced into the Bamenda Grassfields politically, economically and socially. The rupturing of space and time amounted to a break with the past and the adoption of a new life style by natives of this region, which include the articulation of a new perception of God and how He operated, a new vision of societal organization and respect, and the emergence of a divided public, that is, the traditional and the Christian inclined groups. This study will carefully discuss the activities of female missionaries of the major Christian bodies – Presbyterian, Baptist and catholic – within the study period.

Christianity did not only orchestrate change in the lifestyle of the indigenes but also marked the beginning of the redefinition of gender roles. This work sets out to demonstrate the fact that female missionaries played a decisive role in the implantation and growth of missionary activities in particular and Christianity as a whole and the empowerment of women in particular. This paper explores both primary and secondary sources for collecting data. The historical method was used to investigate, trace, narrate, describe and analyse the activities of female missionaries in the Bamenda grassfields of Cameroon. The study will, consequently, provide underpinnings to the feminist discourse that is creeping into all academic disciplines.

Key Words: Missionary, Female Missionary, Woman, Empowerment, Change, Bamenda Grassfields.

Introduction

Prior to the coming of Christian missionaries into the Bamenda Grassfields, the people carried themselves according to their traditions and customs which were patriarchal and male dominated. With the advent of missionaries and the introduction of Christianity, new mores were introduced into the Bamenda Grassfields politically, economically and socially. Christianity did not only bring a change in the lifestyle of the

indigenes but also marked the beginning of the redefinition of gender roles. This work sets out to demonstrate the fact that female missionaries played a decisive role in the implantation and growth of missionary activities in particular and Christianity as a whole and the empowerment of the women in particular. This paper will therefore discuss the advent of female missionaries in the Bamenda Grassfields, the changes they brought into the political, economic and social life of the Bamenda people. Changes will be discussed particularly in the domains of Christianisation, agriculture, trade, communication, education and health services. Emphasis will also be laid on the female missionaries' attempt to lift the African woman from her slave status to a self sustaining individual. The study will, consequently, provide underpinnings to the feminist discourse that is creeping into all academic disciplines.

Before the advent of Christianity the Bamenda people knew an almighty God who created everything they saw around them. The female missionaries in the Bamenda Grassfields area were missionaries' wives who accompanied their husbands to mission fields in Africa. They were later joined by single female missionaries. Female missionaries worked in collaboration with their male counterparts as well as single-handedly in introducing new mores into the Bamenda Grassfields from 1904 to 2006. However, the activities of the female missionaries in Cameroon and particularly in the Bamenda Grassfields are so pathetically eclipsed to the extent that the epistemological concerns of contemporary African feminist discourse may be questionable. The study covers the Bamenda Grassfields currently known as the North West Region of Cameroon. These people had occupied the region centuries ago before the colonial period. This region is composed of three main ethnic groups who claim diverse origins, namely, the Tikars, the Widekums and the Bali-Chambas (Fanso, 1989: 44-45).

Understanding the phenomenon of female missionary with particular focus on the cases of the Bamenda Grassfields within the selected denominations (Baptist, Catholic and Presbyterian) required analysis collected from early researchers who must have worked on similar cases within and out of the area under study. The general works on male and female missionaries were important to this study in that some of the hypotheses and paradigms will be tested in the study.

For a turn of the century Protestants believed that the very gifts that made women saintly homebuilders also made them successful ambassadors of Christ. Though the argument was made not without dissension, these Protestants believed that the Word and the Work of God went hand in hand. Thus, mission organizations opened hospitals and schools, taught English in foreign lands and ran orphanages to care for and Christianize destitute children. These ideals of "Christian civilization" (Hutchison, 1987: 101) were mostly in the hands of women missionaries. Hunter explains that, by 1910, 55 out of every 100 American Protestant missionaries a group numbering in the tens of thousands whose reach extended from the cities of the United States to Southeast Asia, Africa, and South America were women. Furthermore, he narrated that the congregational associations which supported these missionaries were also dominated by women (Hunter, 1984: 211). Beaver added that women doing magnificent jobs in remote villages have rarely been rewarded by adequate recognition. In virtually all mission situations, a husband's work assignment takes priority over his wife's. This explains why the role of the married woman missionary has usually been a derived role in that her role was largely defined by her husband's assignment (Beaver, 1980: 89-91).

Chinwe who writes from the African feminist perspective focuses on the oppression by patriarchy in traditional African societies and therefore on the discourse of protest against the cultural injustice on the girl child in traditional societies. Her writings indeed aim at showing that women have multiple capacities that go beyond mere relevance for domestic assignment (Chinwe, 2005: 5). Her principal point of view is that modern African society must change its attitude towards the woman, marriage and motherhood, which, desirable as it is, constitutes only an option for *woman being* in contemporary Africa. That the women, when

given the chance, can tower over men in mental and material achievements. It is obvious that these works fall squarely in the feminist discourse and gives a reason for the examination of the status of women in the Bamenda traditional society especially before the advent of missionaries. Nwapa's works also constitute a testimony of the indispensability of the woman in the social and economic fabric of African community. They demonstrate the confidence she has in the ability of African women to lead a life of fulfilment within or outside marriage unfettered by men, provided they are economically independent (Nwapa, 1966: 5).

The issue of female missionaries in the Bamenda Grassfields has not yet caught the interest of researchers. Thus, much literature does not exist on their activities in the area as a whole. The preoccupation of most writers has been the advent and establishment of missionaries in this area. Kwast traces how the Baptists came to West Cameroon. His Study of Baptist Growth is indeed contextualized in terms of the changing role of the traditional political, economic and socio-cultural observances with the advent of Christianity in this part of Cameroon (Kwast, 1971: 67-84). Similarly, Jam, when writing on the advent and activities of Baptists in the Bamenda Grassfields, opines that holders of tradition in this region of Cameroon perceived the degeneration of their traditional belief system with the advent of Christianity (Jam, 1994: 16-21). Hughes Concentrates on the medical activities of the missionaries in this area, he states that such activities were used as a driving force behind the effective implantation and penetration of the Baptists in the interior of the Bamenda Grassfields (Hughes, 1980: 60-70).

According to Joseph Mfonyam, the Basel Evangelical Missionary Society (Basel Mission) arrived Cameroon in 1886. The mission brought the gospel to Bali in 1903. This was immediately followed by the creation of schools and health centres (Mfonyam, 2010: 17). Dah examines the presence of the Basel Mission in Bafut. He insists that for one hundred years of its existence, Christianity has been at war with Bafut traditional world views (Dah, 2011: 6-7). These works, though written in different settings, serve as a framework for this research which seeks at examining the activities of female missionaries in the Bamenda grassfields.

As concerns the methodology, an interdisciplinary approach in quantitative and qualitative data collection was used for this research given that the subject cuts across disciplines such as sociology, geography, economics and history. Secondary sources (both published and unpublished) and primary sources (including oral interviews) were used. Collected data was scrutinized through functional and systemic methods of analyses and presented using the thematic and chronological approaches. The findings are organized in three main parts. The first part presents the pre-missionary Bamenda Grassfields. The second part traces the advent of female missionaries in the Bamenda Grassfields while the third part discusses the activities of female missionaries in the Bamenda Grassfields. The paper begins with an introduction and ends with a conclusion.

PRE-MISSIONARY BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS

Prior to the advent of Christianity and the coming of the missionaries, African societies practised traditional religion which defined the real identity of the people of the Bamenda Grassfields. Traditional religion therefore contributed in designing their world view and as such guided their actions (Burckhad, 1992: 74-79). African traditional religion involved the recognition of the existence of ancestors and also to other natural spirits that inhabited trees, streams, mountains, rocks and so on. Communication with the gods was done through the performance of rituals which were usually practiced openly through the use of songs, prayers, sacrifices, prescriptions and warnings. Prayers were made through the ancestors to God Almighty. Traditional religions in this area admitted little or no change. They had no founders, reformers, or prophets, and were handed down much in the same form from one generation to the next.

Politically and administratively, Bamenda Grassfields societies provided examples of how religion and politics blend in African societies. Haselbarth asserts, "It belongs to African tradition that we cannot easily distinguish between the secular and religious realm, not even in politics" (Haselbarth, 1976: 189). Power or divine rights were fully attributed to the *fons* who acted as the guardians of the different tribes. However, their powers were checked by members of the most powerful regulatory societies. Women were also represented in traditional administration by the queen mother and in this area.¹ Law was inextricably linked to morality and religion which held the society together. African traditional religion insisted on faithfulness as a concrete indication of love: faithfulness to one's religious duties, authority, relations and civic obligations. (Burckhardt, 1992: 149-150). The fundamental requirement for traditional diplomacy in Bamenda societies was the sacred character of the respect given to the elderly in general and to elderly women in particular (Chinwe, 2005: 6-9).

The family in the Bamenda Grassfields was closely related to the concept of community. One's parents were not just the persons biologically responsible for his conception. Therefore, the African family was very much extended. Ancestral belief gave traditional religion a family dimension since ancestors were considered members of the family and their spirits continued to associate in the lives of those who were still alive (Awolalu, 1976: 57).

As concerns traditional economy, the indigenous people made a living by hunting game and gathering wild fruits until about 3000 B.C. when they turned to food crop production and animal husbandry. Some of the earliest food crops to be introduced in this area were millet and rice from North Africa. Later banana, maize, cocoyam, plantain, cassava and tobacco, among other food crops, were introduced following the opening of Africa to increasing South American and South-east Asian influence in the sixteenth century (Nkwi and Warnier, 1982: 124). The predominant system of agriculture was subsistence farming. Women did most of the farm work and constituted the greater number of the agricultural population in the Bamenda Grassfields. Women in general made up about 70 percent of the agricultural population in Nso for instance. But, when it came to land possession or ownership, the woman was relegated to the background. According to customary tenure rules, men owned the land while women only had the right to use the land of their own lineage or that of their husband's lineage.

Industry and trade in the Bamenda Grassfields was characterised by local economic specialisations which made trade and exchanges a way of life. The Tikar tribes were noted for their mastery of the art of weaving and pottery. The early phase of trade in the tribe was dominated by the barter system. Later, beads and an iron currency in the form of hoes or standardised iron came into use. In the 1850s, cowries and brass rods also came into use as a currency in the area.

In the social domain, traditional religion was also practiced to ensure the proper preparation of youths for future roles and status. Hence, each individual was followed up by a line of rituals from birth to death with rituals performed or accorded by the family head. There were rituals for birth, naming, passage from one growth stage to another, marriage death and burial. The status of the woman was greatly limited to her role of wife and mother. All women were expected to marry and marriage entailed the payment of a bride price. All women were expected to have children and in the context of patrilineal communities boys were necessary to continue the family line. The woman was not valued for what she was but only for what she could produce (Nguh, 1992: 25).

The health situation of the people could only be explained in relation to their ancestors. Witch doctors (well trained in traditional medical practice, psychology and psychiatry) symbolised the hopes of their societies' good health, protection and security from evil forces. (Akurigu, 1997: 90-92). Traditional

¹Interview with Wachong Azah, 78 years, Paramount Chief of the Essimbi Clan, Benakuma, 10 October 2010.

Education was based on indigenous knowledge accumulated by Africans over long periods of time in response to their different spiritual, physical, agricultural, ecological, political and socio-cultural challenges. However, important findings from the Bamenda Grassfields and most of the African traditional societies assigned to women the role of educator. As such, women have always been active promoters of harmony in the community, which can be referred to as a culture of peace (Zimmerman, 2002: 78-79).

Advent and implantation of Female Missionaries in the Bamenda Grassfields

The first female missionary to come to the Bamenda Grassfields was a Basel. This was Mrs. Keller who came with her husband to Bali in 1904. She was followed in 1909 by Anna Merkle and Klara Schultze. From Bali the Basel Mission Stations were created in other Grassfield areas that already had active congregations and catechists like Babungo in 1914. Missionary Gohring Ammann and his wife laid the foundation of the Babungo mission station in June 1914 but their work was interrupted by World War I (Keller, 1997: 36). The Mbengwi mission station was created in 1930 with Rev. and Mrs. Wunderli. Weh Mission Station was created in 1932 with Rev and Mrs Schneider. Kishong Mission station was created in 1932 with Rev. and Mrs. Leu. Bafut mission was created in 1937 with Rev George Tischhauser and his wife B. Tischhauser while the Mankon mission was created in 1957 with Rev. Baer and his family.

Dorothy Orthner was the first Baptist female missionary to arrive the Grassfields area in 1924 accompanying Rev. Orthner, her husband. They were later joined by Ganstrom, Paul Gebauer and Clara (his wife) to help the native pastors evangelise the Grassfields area. In the course of time, the Belo Field was created in 1929 (Hughes, 1980: 28). Carl and Erica Bender moved to Mbem where they founded the Baptist church and the Mission was established in 1930. Paul Gebauer was sent to assist in Mbem 1930 and was joined by his wife early in 1935 (Gebauer, 1938: 6). When Erica was leaving Mbem, Edith Koppin was sent to replace her in 1936. In 1938, Robert Jam and George Dunger and his wife, Louise worked together to effect the implantation of the Warwar Field, in the Mambila area. Moreover, the putting together of efforts by both the white and native evangelists in spreading the Word of God around the Bamenda area gained them the Bamenda Field in 1948.

Catholic female missionaries arrived the Bamenda Grassfields in October 1935 (Malsiner and Yuh, 1986: 3). These were sisters of the Franciscan order that originated from Tyrol in Italy. The first five sisters who arrived Cameroon in October 1935 were sisters Martina Albenberger, Dorothy Wild, Odilia Hillebrand, Camilla Geier and Cleopha Jocher (Lafon, 1988: 15). Another group of sisters that came to the Bamenda Grassfields was the Holy Rosary sisters. They were invited by Bishop Rogan for the development of education in Cameroon. In 1952, Mother M. Magdalen Brady and Sr. M. Laboure Keane (Holy Rosary sisters from Nigeria) responded to the invitation and travelled to Cameroon and finally settled in Mankon – Bamenda. The vocation of Catholic female missionaries was fundamentally geared towards serving humanity through the pastoral and social apostolates (Lahert, 2006: 19).

Activities of Female Missionaries in the Bamenda Grassfields

Female Missionaries and Traditional Administration

Female Missionaries were concerned about the wellbeing of the whole person having very little or nothing to do with the colonial government policies. In order to achieve this they were holistic in their approach. Politically, they preached the Good News which reformed leadership and administration which henceforth had to focus on peace and development. At the beginning of a new mission work, familiarity and friendly informality especially with the royal family were often the rule. This made them able to collaborate easily with the chiefs for anything they wanted to do like recruitment of labourers and announcements for the

vaccinations of children.² Another important institution of chieftaincy that was infiltrated by the sisters was the personality of the queen mother. Once converted, the queen mothers were used as tools for further evangelism especially to palace wives and the chiefs. In Kom for instance in the 1930s, the queen mother stood strongly behind the sisters in their fight against the chief's marriage to several wives. Her role as the chief's adviser was also exploited by the sisters who sent her with pieces of advice to the chief concerning leadership.³

Female missionaries came across secret societies which governed most tribes like the *kwifon*, the *chong*. Female missionaries worked with and discouraged women from belonging to female secret societies like the *anlu*, *takumbeng* and the *Manyi* societies. In every case, missionaries insisted on the sovereignty of God over all earthly powers. Such women, despite their positions, were reminded of their subordinate position to the man by the missionaries (Mfonyam, 2011: 45-45).

Female missionaries were seen as representatives of the colonial government and its laws. This was because the missionaries advised Christians to take their cases with non-Christians to the modern courts. However, for cases between Christians, female missionaries, especially Lina Weber and later, Rose Marie Peters visited converts' homes and settled their disputes (Dah, 2003: 21). Baptist and Catholic Sisters also preached against punishments of ostracism and murder dished out by chiefs against culprits as pagan practices. In a bid to soften some of the traditional laws or put an end to them, most traditional rulers who were the custodians of traditional law were converted to Christianity. According to Koppin, Reddig and Eleanor Schulert who arrived the Ndop area in 1952, "the Bible was meant to reform, not to condemn, destroy or kill defaulters." (Funteh, 2001: 22). They knew that the easier way to transform the traditional family's perspective of justice was to first penetrate the habits of the women folk. From the 1980s, the Holy rosary Sisters started developing the idea of justice and peace in their communities. The sisters found it necessary to sensitize Christians on their rights as they inter-relate with each other in and out of Church (Lahert, 2006: 34).

One of the Church's great tasks was to foster family life since the family was an essential unit for change. Basel, Baptist and Catholic female missionaries identified the status of women and girls as a particular missiological problem they had to resolve so as to convert the African family. The monogamous family unit was regarded by all missionaries as the basis of a Christian society. Christian wives, according to these women, were supposed to fill the traditional roles as providers of conjugal comfort and as house makers. Another way of raising the standards of the traditional home life was to teach girls and women ways of love, purity, integrity, humility, prayers and industry (Dah, 2003: 94-97).

Promotion of Economic Activities by Female Missionaries

Wherever female Missionaries settled they practiced agriculture as a means of self-reliance. When the sisters arrived in places like Shisong, for instance, they cultivated the foodstuffs they were familiar with. Sr. Martina started a garden in Shisong where she cultivated lettuce, green beans, potatoes, carrots and tomatoes. In convents with orphanages like Shisong and Njinikom, farming was done on a fairly large scale so as to minimize the financial cost of feeding the increasing number of orphans (Ndi, 2005: 160). In the early 1930s, Baptist missionaries like Dorothy Orthner and Clara Gebauer opened large Gardens in Kom and Mbem respectively (Geary, 1975: 42). New agricultural techniques were introduced to women who were trained on gardens and demonstration farms by missionaries. Through agriculture therefore, the female missionaries helped the indigenes to improve the productivity of their agricultural resources. This was also

²Interview with *Fon* Abumbi II, 60 years, chief of Bafut, 29 June 2011, Bafut.

³ NAB-CB 1943/1, League of Nations Report, p. 17.

in response to the problems of malnutrition, poverty, disease and environmental degradation faced by the people. Female missionaries encouraged women especially to come together and work towards their physical and moral development. Each convent and mission had at least one sister in charge of farming and the garden in particular (Verdzekov, 2000: 25).

As concerns animal husbandry, the missionaries practiced and encouraged animal rearing and animals like oxen, goats and cows were reared. They also introduced poultry farming and kept fowls both for their consumption and for sale. In addition to Theology girls were taught cattle rearing, farming and gardening while in the Emmanuel sisterhood and in the Marriage Training Centre (La Communauté des Soeurs de L'Emmanuel, 1997: 18).

From the time of their arrival in the Bamenda Grassfields, female missionaries were generally concerned about enhancing the so-called domestic skills and attributes of women in various fields of training. For instance, between 1946 and 1949; Verna Ganstrom was particularly concerned about the economic and spiritual wellbeing of the women. During her stay in Belo she writes that:

In our early years at Belo 1946 to 1949, I asked the Belo Church women to come to our home to learn how to sew buttons on, to repair tears and make simple seams all by hand. Each completed a dress that they could wear. We tried some cooking of green beans, guavas, and talked of nutrition and cleanliness. We had a short Bible lesson and fellowship – all in Pidgin English. Their fingers were stiff from farming but each delighted to guide the needle (Meinerts and Bonglac, 1997: 6).

Because of their interest in the promotion of African art, Presbyterian and Catholic female missionaries opened handicrafts centres in places like Bali, Bamessing, Bafut, Njaitu, and Akum. The handicraft centres produced baskets, stools, drums, which were collected, exhibited and sold both at home and abroad by the missionaries (Dah, 2003: 120-122). Physically impaired people were trained in SAJOCAH Bafut to use cane in producing chairs, trays, baskets and baby cots.

Trade and commerce was encouraged and improved upon by female missionaries in and out of their mission stations. The missionaries practiced trade by barter shortly after their arrival. Mrs Keller and her husband had to use tobacco and cutlasses to buy things like meat, potatoes, oil, milk and fat. In Schools, learning material was exchanged for locally produced goods. For instance each graphite (writing material) was bought with three cobs of maize while an exercise book was sold for five bamboos which were used for construction (Dah, 2003: 26). These rates were set by the Kellers in Bali and were maintained by the female missionaries during their work here. When the British currency became the legal tender in circulation, Louise Dunger and Laura Reddig forced the people around the Ndop area to gradually abandon their local currency and use the sterling. Dunger cites Reddig as concerns this in her own words: "We found it unwise, though difficult to deal with such unrecognised items. We imposed the general use of the sterling. Treatment was no longer payable in kind, but in cash. An injection cost six pence." (Dunger, 1942: 306-307).

As concerns Communication and infrastructural development, missionaries generally trekked from one village to the other following their arrival in the Grassfields. In some cases, the villagers built bamboo carriers to carry the white missionaries from one village to another. In every case, the villagers served as porters for the baggage of the missionaries. This was replaced later on by horses which facilitated their movement. Motor cycles were introduced and used by the missionaries after World War II. As from the 1950s, the first vehicles (Vox Wagens) were used by missionaries to travel around the Grassfields.⁴ In Bafut, the Agyati and the Nsem bridges were built with the help of Presbyterian female missionaries though they were still built in the traditional style. Otherwise, missionaries encouraged the colonial governments to create earth roads that linked their centres of religious activity to the different villages around. Sr. Lydia

⁴Interview with Simon Asang, 86 years, Retired Rev Pastor of the PCC, Bu, 16 August 2009.

Pedala between 1976 and 1982 spearheaded the construction of the cow bush bridge in Bafut which linked their farms to the village and the markets Catholic sisters did much in the construction of bridges linking farms to the villages and markets and easing movement from one village to the other in Djottin between 1999 and 2001 with funds they received from an Australian Non-Governmental Organisation. This project was handled by Sister Christa Patella who was also of Australian origin.⁵

Africans' economic situation was improved upon as natives were able to safeguard jobs as servants of God. The presence of schools, sisterhood and health centres had created several basic jobs for villagers. Self-reliance was encouraged and realized through the economic activities of the Presbyterian female missionaries especially among the girls they trained in their marriage training centres (Bowie, Kirkwood and Ardener, 1993: 28). Girls were trained to become financially and materially independent while women were trained to become financial assistants to their husbands and children. The settlement of female missionaries and their creation of educational and health facilities had a significant economic impact on particular areas of the Bamenda Grassfields. Petty businesses also flourished as business men and women had a steady demand for their goods from the students and workers in the villages.

Social Activities of Female Missionaries in the Bamenda Grassfields

According to the missionaries, "mission was the heartbeat of the gospel and the life of the Church." (Bowie, Kirkwood and Ardener, 1993: 23-24). Most missionaries made an attempt to be adaptable to the needs of Africans in order to win them over to Christianity. They intentionally and purposefully spent time with unbelievers, forming relationships with them, getting to know their needs and concerns and imploring them to be reconciled to God. As an integral component of their pastoral duty, female missionaries explained the creed of Christianity to their new converts. They insisted on Baptism as it was a sign of incorporation into God's family. Again, the Baptist female missionaries, especially Dorothy Orthner in Belo Field, Edith Koppin, Clara Gebauer and Reddig, all in Mbem, strongly preached about the appropriate or recommended manner of dressing during worship. George Dunger portrays this in these words:

The traditional authorities were forced mostly *by our wives*, pastors, priests and deacons to imitate us. They removed their caps and covered their eyes and interlocked their fingers in prayers. They forgot their balm of authority and were taught how to pray *by our wives*. Emphasis mine (Dunger, 1940:205).

Sisterhood was also encouraged and practised by Presbyterian and the Catholic female missionaries in the Bamenda Grassfields. Shortly after their arrival in Shisong, a sisterhood was created by the Catholic sisters. The Emmanuel Sisterhood was founded by Sister Magdaleine Marie Handy in 1971, in Makak in the Centre Region of Cameroon was transferred to Bafut in 1975. (La Communauté des Soeurs de L'Emmanuel, 1997: 18). Convents were opened in other villages where sisters were either trained or called to service for humanity. Catechism was later left in the hands of sisters who were trained in pastoral institutes. They were particularly involved in teaching doctrine to women and children (Malsiner, and Yuh, 1986: 7). Once in the sisterhood or convent the girls accepted celibacy and the spiritual motherhood of God's people.

It is important to emphasize the fact that female missionaries ascertained the ramifications of change in the Bamenda area since 1904 vis-a-vis the premissionary period. Having underscored female missionary activities of the three mainstream churches in the Bamenda Grassfields, it is obvious that they laid the foundation for Christian women associations that have stood the test of time. The mainstream churches each

⁵Interview with Sr. Gabriella Nene. Rev. Sister and Coordinator of Catholic Health Centres, Kumbo Diocese, Yaounde, 26 July 2010.

developed a powerful and strong women's association that carries out evangelisation and empowers the woman.

The associations created were the Cameroon Baptist Convention Women's Union (CBCWU) in 1957, the Christian Women Fellowship (CWF) of the Presbyterian Church in 1961 and the Catholic Women's Association (CWA) in 1968. The activities of these associations in the Bamenda Grassfields were either a continuation of the activities of earlier female missionaries or borne out of the ashes of female missiological efforts. These associations either continued with what their female missionaries did or introduced new forms of evangelism following the changes in their societies and the world at large. These movements were instituted after the independence of their Church organisations from foreign missionary organisations. They were all geared towards the development and emancipation of women in the churches and in the societies. Apart from the concentration on religious studies in these movements, other extracurricular activities were carried out. These movements became the back bones of their denominations as they were very influential in generating funds and organising church events both at local and national levels.

Education and evangelism were intertwined as a means to an end and one was a stepping stone to the other. Missionary women came to Africa with the aim of bringing Christianity to the inhabitants with all it implied in terms of changing traditional values and customs (George, 1956: 10-11). It was for this reason therefore that emphasis was laid on the invitation of unmarried female missionaries to open up schools for formal education in the interiors. 1907, Sister K. Schultze was sent to Bali to open a Vernacular boy's school. Thus, general education was introduced and *Mungaka* (the Bali language) was to be used as the teaching language in the Bamenda Grassfields (Keller, 1997: 23). In order to improve on the level of education, Miss Hummel opened a primary school in Bali in 1929. Another primary school was opened in Bafut in 1935. Miss Adelheid Hummel created a girls' school in Bali in 1934 where she focused on domestic science. This school was transferred to Bafut in 1937 and became the Marriage Training Centre. The female missionaries did not only run the PGSST, but got involved in teaching in other Presbyterian secondary Schools and the Women Teacher's Training College (WTTC) Mankon (Ngwa, 1973: 1-2). Baptist female missionaries, who were involved in the creation and management of primary and Bible schools, training centres and secondary schools were Kittlitz and Weisenburger (in Belo) Ruby Salzman, Hilda Tobert and Bernice Westerman (in the Ndu area) while Ida Forsch worked in the Kaka and the Bangolan areas (Forsch, 1954: 16-18).

The Franciscan sisters created a girls' school in Shisong in 1939 and another one in Njinikom in 1958. Sisters who were particularly involved in opening and teaching in primary schools included Odilia Hillebrand, Sr. Annunciata Colcillovo, Sr. Mary Margaret, Sr. Assumpta Neiderstatter and Sr. Scholastica Breitenberger. Their teaching apostolate extended between places like Shisong, Njinikom, Wum and Tabenken. Sisters like Sr. M. Fidelis also taught in the St. Pius X. Teacher Training College there in Tatum. Catholic sisters also created rehabilitation and handicap centres like the Saint Joseph Children and Adult Home (SAJOCAH) in Bafut in 1981 (Awambeng, n.d:64) and the Treasure Centre in Mendankwe in 2002. The Holy Rosary sisters opened the Holy Rosary sisters started their educational activities in the Bamenda area in 1964 with the creation of Our Lady of Lourdes Secondary School with Sr. M. Antonia Stanley as its first principal. In 1967, a Home Craft Centre was opened in Akum with Sr. Anne Mary O' Hannigan as Principal.

With the enormous educational endeavours mounted by the female missionaries, there was a visible change in educational media. Learning gradually shifted from oral exploration of folktales, proverbs, riddles and oral poetry to a more organised and intensive system of education conducted in classrooms. Education also became the most effective means of exercising social control and of shaping the women as the system

wished them to be. Towards the end of the 20th century, women from the area of study began to have a voice in social development. Although African traditional religion reaffirmed the subordination of female to male, the separation of spheres of activity within it enabled the women to exercise authoritative roles among members of their own sex. Shifts in priorities of women as a result of mission encounters became evident. Their daily social rhythms changed.⁶ Critical consciousness developed from mission education which was not only about imparting skills but developed a critical approach to life. This Christian social conscience helped indigenes to see the problems and the immediate needs of their societies and their Country and work towards solutions (Koschorke, Ludwig and Delgado, 2007: 207).

Health and Medical work began with the informal first aid and mobile clinics and advice given by missionary wives of the Basel and Baptist missions. It gradually developed into the establishment of clinics and well equipped hospitals, with missionary nurses and doctors. Female missionaries, most of whom were trained missionary nurses tended to take a particular interest in health issues, especially maternity and childcare. High infant mortality rate was one of the aspects of health which missionary nurses never minimised in the Bamenda Grassfields (Bowie, Kirkwood and Ardener, 1993: 154-157). The most common diseases they treated around this time included dysentery, malaria, worms, tropical ulcers and stomach complications (Dah, 2003: 44). In 1907, Sister Klara Schultze and Anna Markel opened a dispensary in Bali. The dispensary was later transferred to Mbengwi and an orphanage added to it. It was again moved to Bafut in 1937 where it stayed (Keller, 1968: 9). In 1929, Else Bleher opened a polyclinic in Bali which served both as a maternity and treatment centre. Meanwhile, in 1936, Mrs. B. Tischhauser recorded 5,856 people who came to Nsem mission station for treatment. She was joined in February 1937 by Sr. Marie Zurcher.

From 1936, Baptist female missionaries like Koppin, Reddig, Kittlitz and Erna Ganstrom moved from one village to the other administering treatment to patients (Ahrens, 1951: 9). Koppin and Reddig resorted to the training of native nurses to help them in their work. While Koppin and Reddig created the health centre in Mbem, Kittlitz created the Belo Health Centre. (Muffih, 1996: 44-45). Meanwhile, Reddig who was particularly concerned with the problem of leprosy struggled for creation of the leprosy clinic in Mbingo. By 1957, six leprosy clinics had been opened Isu, Ndu, Acha, Batibo, Balikumbat and Bamali.⁷

Upon their arrival, the Catholic sisters immediately opened a dispensary and a maternity in Shisong. After the creation of the Njinikom St. Francis convent Sr. Camilla and Sr. Augusta Sr. Brunhilde and Sr. Assumpta started off with a maternity and a dispensary on 12 January 1953. In April 1956, the Our Lady of Fatima Convent health centre was opened in Nkambe and reopened in Binju in April 1966 meanwhile, the Bali convent and health centre were opened in February 1970.

Missionary work developed sound administrative practices and procedures from the start of their ministry. Female missionaries like Lina Weber left the people and students who knew her with memories of hard work and strictness. Missionaries worked as overseers of mission stations, managers or directors of health centres, principals and teachers of schools and always had positive effects on the students in particular and the Christians in general. In addition to their religiosity, their managerial skills were highly admired and copied by Cameroonians when they worked with them or took over offices from them.⁸

Another area of interest to the female missionaries was the treatment and care of orphans, the handicapped and malnourished children. In Bafut, Sr. Zurcher also cared for orphans brought to the mission station. She therefore requested for an orphanage which was built in 1938.⁹ Catholic sisters started with an orphanage in Shisong. Others were opened in Njinikom, Wum and Bafut. Sisters who were particularly

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ MBHCA 25/603, Our Attention, 1999, Mbem Baptist Health Centre Archives, p. 10.

⁸ Interview with Fomuso Peter, 74 years, Educationist, 13 October 2010 Bamenda

interested and worked in orphanages included Sr. Lina Plank, Sr. Sophia, Sr. Hilda Sitzmann, Sr. Therese Martin, Sr. Breda Dowling, Sr. Cornelia, Sr. Ada, and Sr. Cleopha. In order to effectively care for the orphans, sisters employed women and young girls from the villages around as guardians and babysitters in their orphanages (Dah, 2003: 43). Under the leadership of Sr. Lydia Pardeller the sisters were able to create a handicap and rehabilitation centre in Bafut which they called Saint Joseph's Children and Adult Home (SAJOCAH) in 1975. The sisters had to help disabled children to develop mentally and physically and be as near normal as possible.¹⁰

The Basel female missionaries believed that Christian monogamous marriages were a guarantee to the building up of the Christian church. However, Christians were allowed to marry according to Native Law and Custom. Missionaries encouraged the people to solemnize their marriages in Church after the customary procedures. In 1909, the first three couples got married in the Bali Church (Keller, 1997: 124-125). During their stay in Mambila, Ndu and Kom, the Dungers faced the problem which they referred to as "marriage and dowry *palavers*" (Dunger, 1945: 6). While George Dunger concentrated on sensitizing the men, his wife, Louise, counselled female converts on marriage issues. Hence, divorce was discouraged. The payment of bride price before Christians could be married was put off by the Baptist missionaries between 1936 and 1954. But after gaining their independence in 1954, the CBC Christians insisted on the payment of bride price and the compromise of the two families involved before a couple could be joined in Holy Matrimony.

Social Violence Against women

Violence against women was also managed by the sisters at the level of the church. The preponderance of female missionaries meant that missionary records were also of considerable value in regard to gender issues. Christianity gave women the opportunity to be heard and they became models to non-converts. Violence (psychological and physical) was almost a natural phenomenon to women beginning from their homes and extending into other spheres of the traditional society. Catholic sisters were trained to care for human beings, both male and female, as part of their religious call and this gave them a full knowledge of the dignity and value of both men and women (Bart, 1997: 17). From childhood, girls were stopped from going to school for formal education by their fathers, who saw them as inferior to boys and as assets of income to their families.

In most African marriages, women were treated as housemaids and not as equals by their husbands. Female missionaries taught Christians to fix very low bride prices for their daughters so that men do not see their wives as pieces of property that are bought over into their families. They insisted on the symbolic meaning behind the payment of bride price which according to them was a sign of commitment by the man. Polygyny was seen as degrading to women rather than to men. Most Christian women accepted and practiced monogamy following the teachings of the female missionaries. (Caincross, 1974: 104-106). Forced marriages were discouraged by the Catholic sisters who helped the girls to run away to convents which became a refuge for such girls until they got husbands of their choices. Female missionaries therefore upheld the Biblical teaching of love, especially between husbands and wives: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for it" (Latourette, 1953: 560). Sisters also preached against the inferiority of the woman in the society which led to the massive adhesion of women to Christianity and its new concepts of equal rights for men and women.

The concept of Women Emancipation was exercised in the Bamenda area by indigenous women following their experience with female missionaries. Male converts were asked to send their female children to school

¹⁰Interview with Cecilia Wiryenkfea, 50 years, Rev. Sister and Director of SAJOCAH, Bafut, 19 August 2006.

and to allow their wives to head church groups which prepared them for socio-political development. Most women became bold enough to join socio-political Associations in and out of the church. Women developed the spirit of empowerment which they used to fight for their rights. The *anlu* demonstration of 1958 for instance was one of such political uprisings spearheaded by Catholic women. The aim of this cult had always been to fight and punish crimes against womanhood in Kom (Ndi, 2005: 225).

Poverty alleviation was also one of the successes of the social activities of the sisters as Bamenda people generally experienced a better lifestyle with their presence. Sisters were dedicated to providing both the spiritual and material needs of the people they came across. They had as assignment to live God's word, proclaim it, work into the fabric of human society, and culture, and extend God's love to all, especially to the oppressed and the poor. In order to alleviate poverty that was still widespread in this area, sisters introduced projects that fostered self-reliance and immediate relief from suffering. Bamenda people were no longer plagued by the effects of poverty which used to include quality food shortages, malnutrition and illiteracy. Through their traditional Catholic values of serving people of all Faiths, the sisters at their arrival in each village visited very poor homes and assessed their needs. On almost a weekly basis, they provided parcels of food to families that were in great need. With their physical needs met, the indigenes became more faithful to the sisters and opened up more for their teachings. (Penny, 2003: 8-17).

Conclusion

Results from our research work in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon have proven that, the historiography of this region has been subjected to various types of studies. But very few have gone beyond the activities of female missionaries in the various communities in the area, especially since the advent of missionaries activities in Africa in general and in Cameroon in particular. It is in this light that this study has gone an extra mile by attempting to cover the advent and the activities of female (women) missionaries in our selected denominations (Baptist, Catholic and Presbyterian) in the Bamenda Grassfields. This study has examined pre-missionary society in the Bamenda Grassfields and the mode of life of the people on the eve of missionary activities in their land.

Note should be taken that the area under study has provided examples on how religion and politics blend in African societies. The presence of female missionaries in the Bamenda Grassfields from 1904 to 2006 had a great influence on the traditional values of the people. The changes brought by these female missionaries enormously affected the African traditional beliefs and this to the advantage of the new evangelistically approaches.

Change was experienced more in the context of development by the Bamenda traditional society in general and women in particular. In spite of the many problems and difficulties confronting the converts, it is unarguable that Christianity has sunk deep roots in Africa and in the Bamenda Grassfields in particular. They have made irreversible impact on the Continent's religious and spiritual landscape. Christianity came with political, economic and social growth for the Bamenda Grassfields. However, the religious hunger for the sacred which has evolved from the traditional religious background to the contemporary pluralistic society still persists. This is the central value that must not be wasted, but ought to be vigorously preserved and sustained by all well-meaning religious people in the Bamenda area.

As a study in feminism, the purpose of this study has been to argue that women were essential in the realisation of missionary activities in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. Without women, the missions in the Bamenda Grassfields would have achieved far less. The missionaries, regardless of their gender, came to restructure and reform the indigenous societies in which they lived. Missions were not only for men and what female missionaries achieved in this area generally increased knowledge about the accomplishment of missions in the Bamenda Grassfields. Women's influence was seen as civilising as was missionary work

which was not merely a female virtue but also a Christian duty. Women missionaries unconsciously acted as testing ground for new ideas about women's role in the society. While changing the society as a whole, female missionary work could also be seen as a wider reflection on issues affecting women in the area of study within its scope.

This research is relevant to the current debate on women empowerment and gender equality. The women in the Grassfields society accepted Christianity in order to free themselves from the oppression of the native customs of their traditional society, and not because they were really interested in the new religion. The political, economic and socio-cultural empowerment of the women of the Bamenda Grassfields was the result of female missionary activities carried out for them and with them. In their intention to imitate white female missionaries, Bamenda women proved that women were the best group of people to be used for missions. Helping the less privileged and vulnerable in every society is not only a motherly virtue but a Christian duty. The ability of the Bamenda Grassfields women to adjust their missionary activities to modern times is proof of their ingenuity in contributing towards the continuous development of their society.

In view of the innate qualities of women and thanks to the position they have occupied and the part they have played in the traditional society, African women in general can and must be actively involved in missionary activities. In this regard, modern African countries can no longer afford to exclude women in important peace processes. This must be done not only when working for peace within, but also between nations and regions in Cameroon. They deserve to be made part of the delegations that are seeking for peace in any part of the continent especially if they are granted key positions in the religious scene.

It should be a modest proposal that, further research should be carried out on other denominations or churches especially on how their presence has affected feminist activities within and out of the Bamenda Grassfields. The fact that female missionary activities have come to stay in the Bamenda society is beyond dispute, and the fact that more than seventy-five percent of the Bamenda people today are Christians is another indisputable truth. But the question, which must be answered by future researchers in this area, is whether the initial, over-whelming success and progress of the missionaries will be maintained in the Grassfields society till the close of this century. With consideration to the changing roles of women in religious, social, political and economic contexts in the Bamenda Grassfields society, one could say that before the end of this century, women would have gone a long way in achieving their desires, mainly through their own struggle.

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