

**MASCULINITY AND FEMALE RESISTANCE IN THE RICE ECONOMY IN METEH/MENCHUM VALLEY  
BU, NORTH WEST CAMEROON, 1953 – 2005**

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**ABSTRACT**

Male chauvinism and female reaction in the rice economy in Bu, Menchum Division of North West Cameroon is the subject of this investigation. The greater focus of this paper is how and why this phobia has lessened over the years in favour of female dominion over the rice economy. The *point d'appui* of the masculine management of the economy and the accentuating forces which have militated against their continuous domination of women in the rice sector have been probed into. Incongruous with the situation hitherto, women have farms of their own bought with their own money accumulated from other economic activities. In addition, they now employ the services of men to execute some defined tasks in the rice economy. From the copious data consulted on the rice economy and related economic endeavours, it is a truism that be it collectively and/or individually, men and women in Bu are responding willingly or not, to the changing power relations between them in the rice economy with implications for sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Masculinity, Female Resistance, Rice Economy, Cameroon, Sustainability

## **INTRODUCTION: RELEVANCE OF STUDY AND CONCEPT OF MASCULINITY**

Rice is a staple food crop in Cameroon like elsewhere in Africa and other parts of the world. It has become increasingly important part of African diets especially West Africa and where local production has been insufficient due to limited access to credit (Akinbode, 2013, p. 28), huge imports from Asia have augmented the quantity consumed (Larson et al, 2010, p. 1; Lessons from the Rice Crisis, 2011, p. 6). Rice cultivation also contributes to income and welfare of producers like in Cameroon (Molua, 2010, p. 73). This crop is in fact the world's single most important food crop and a primary food source for more than a third of the world's population and many of the rural population (Kranjac-Bersavljevic *et al*, 2003, p. 3; Kassali *et al*, 2010, p. 63; Paris *et al*, 2010, p. 13). In many African countries including Nigeria, Cameroon and Sierra Leone domestic production is lacking behind demand (Ayoola et al, 2011, p. 1013; National Rice Development Strategy Sierra Leone). This partly explains why Lambi and Kometa (2008) and Goufo (2008, p. 742) have recommended a full scale rehabilitation of the Upper Nun Valley Development Authority (UNVDA) in the North West Region of Cameroon to increase rice cultivation for the socio-economic enhancement of the people of Ngo Ketunjia Division, sustainable livelihood and government support of agricultural policies.

The rice economy from cultivation to sale is in the hands of men and women who play defined and also complementary roles. In great rice producing countries like the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam, rice production is a family enterprise. Each family member is assigned tasks depending on social norms, specialisation and opportunity costs. Men are specialised in land and seed bed preparation, application of chemical fertiliser, spraying of pesticides and hauling of the farm produce. They are exclusively responsible for the use of machinery in production. On their part, women pull and transplant seedlings, weed the farm and are deeply involved in post-harvest activities. They also cook and bring food to farm workers (Paris *et al*, 2010, p. 13). This practice is also common in other countries including Cambodia and Cameroon. In both countries women withdrew their labour services from rice production for sorghum cultivation (Resurreccion et al, 2008, p. 5; Cagley and Klawitter, 2009, p. 1).

Rice production in Cameroon was for long a male dominated activity. It is cultivated on a commercial scale in the North and North West Regions of the country. There is small scale production in several parts of the country including the Meteh/Menchum/Mughom Valley areas of Menchum Division of the North West Region. Although in other countries like Burkina Faso, The Gambia and Cote d'Ivoire where women were fully engaged in rice production and commercialisation much earlier (Cagley and Klawitter, 2009, p. 2; Carney and Watts, 1991, p. 678) in Cameroon it took a long time. The Laimbwe women of the North West resisted their non-involvement as rice farmers in their own right and today, the rice economy is largely under their control. Elsewhere like in Ndop, the income women generate from rice is crucial for family survival, its sustainability through children education and health care. It also provides the basic capital for petty trading to enhance living standards of households. These women also pay royalties to the traditional ruler for their own rice cultivation which was hitherto not the case (Fonjong and Mbah, 2007, p. 145). Generally speaking, women have been the economic backbone of Cameroon and its strive for sustainable production of agricultural products for home consumption and industry but they have continuously been marginalised due to male chauvinism like elsewhere in Africa (Nana-Fabu, 2006, p. 148; Jenkins 2005/06).

Masculinity as a specialised area of study in gender studies has attracted scholarly debate for some time now. McMahon argues that masculinity is an abstract, fragile, unemotional, independent and non-nurturing concept and Kimmel and Messner contend that it is what it means to be a man. Still, Brittan posits that masculinity is “the dominant form of male behaviour in any particular milieu.” Cornell looks at the concept differently. He opines that it is a practice through which men and women engage their place in gender. The effects of this are revealed in bodily experience, personality and culture. Like Cornell but even more critical of the concept of masculinity is Hearn’s postulation. He argues that there is no sufficient precision in the use of masculinity and that it is not collectively but individually possessed. For this reason, it should not be used as a primary underlying social behaviour. Hearn further opines that “the usefulness of the concept is generally taken for granted and what is offered is a description, frequently a list of traits” (Brittan, 1989; McMahon, 1990; Kimmel and Messner, 1990; Connel, 1995; Hearn, 1996).

On his part, Seidler opines that men draw their sense of individual identity and happiness from their individual achievements to the extent that it is often hard to recognise their own and others needs as dependent on certain social inter-relationships. He also contends that “men often feel they should not have needs at all, especially since they are brought up within a liberal moral culture to be self-sufficient and independent.” Foucault relates masculinity to femininity arguing that “where there is power, there is resistance.” On the other hand, Amadiume posits that the power of the African women is placed in a more historical perspective. This power has an economic and ideological basis which is derived from the importance that is given to motherhood (Seidler, 1989; Haccault; Amadiume, 1997).

Several inferences can be made of these views on masculinity vis-à-vis femininity and the link with sustainable development. According to McMahon, masculinity is as complex as human behaviour because in some circumstances men control the economy and in others women take the lead. Even when men are in control there is no unanimity. The question that arises especially in response to the argument raised by Kimmel and Messner is what does it take to be a man? This is because at times women carry out functions which were initially reserved for men as is the case with the rice economy in Bu village in Cameroon where since the 1980s women are overwhelmingly in control of this sector. Can we then say that when women take the lead they become men? Here lies the vagueness in the definition of Kimmel and Messner. Be it men and/or women who control the economy, this has implications for sustainable development of this economy for the common good.

The views of Brittan fit into the scheme of things in many African traditional societies. In the past, that is the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, men were convinced that rice cultivation in Bu<sup>1</sup> and other areas was more or less the preserve of men or heads of households who were exclusively men. Women who ventured into this sector for whatever reason were scorned at. With the unfolding of time, new challenges threatened the survival of the rural home and men began re-examining their perception of women with regards to the rice economy. These new challenges included increasing birth rates and the debilitating economic crisis of the mid 1980s with increasing prices for basic commodities. The dominant form of behaviour that emerged was that women should as much as possible be allowed to do whatever they deem fit. This was important because without their support in the rice sector, it would have been difficult for men to feed their households considering the increase in the prices of basic needs. It would also have been difficult to handle continue to increase rice production with limited labour services.

Besides, Hearn's argument of masculinity being individually and not collectively possessed is somehow tenable. Even his contention that masculinity should not be considered as a primary underlying social behaviour is only true to an extent. Hearn has however over-simplified the concept of masculinity to the extent that he seems to deny or undermine the contention that men have a general way of behaviour especially in rural Africa where there exist separate institutions for men and women with those of men having more influence than those of women. As long as men continue to define the economic landscape through their own institutions to the exclusion of women, the full contribution of all and sundry to development and sustainable livelihood would remain a mirage. When women challenge this through subtle and radical means, then they may succeed to break into male stereotypes and make a contribution to economic development and social enhancement within any given community.

The postulations of Focault and Amadiume are more fitting to male/female relations in Bu village in the North West Region of Cameroon. The argument by Focault that where power is exercised resistance follows depicts the situation with the rice economy in Bu from the 1980s onwards. In the rice economy which was established in the 1950s, when men exercised the power of control, women resisted it in various ways. Similarly, Amadiume posits that the power of the African women is placed in a more historical perspective. In fact the women of Bu became interested in the cultivation of their own rice because they were to attain economic empowerment and the benefits that go with such empowerment. Today, their empowerment is reality in that they control the rice economy. Apart from owning farms of their own, they have also mobilised their children to support them materially and financially. This has increased output of the commodity, provided employment for many young people and also led to infrastructural development in Bu village to the delight of many including also the men.

In fact, within the rice economy in the Laimbwe<sup>2</sup> community of Bu in North West Cameroon, men had hitherto controlled the economy from the nursery to the sale of rice between the 1950s to the mid-1980s. They were the owners and controllers of the farms, the crops and the female labour on them. Women were at best junior collaborators without the power to influence the use of money from the sale of rice. They could not continue to bear this shameful subordinate position and sprang to action by challenging orthodoxies related to ownership of rice farms in their own right. In revolt, many of them stayed away from or came late to work and prevented their children from going to the rice farms of their husbands. These children were taken to the maize fields managed by their mothers. As the socio-cultural and economic landscape came under questioning, women invaded the rice economy not without resistance from men through their own institutions.

### **THE EARLY RICE ECONOMY IN BU**

Rice, a cash and staple crop in Bu was first introduced into the community in 1953 from Abakaliki in Nigeria (Simon Njuh, 2005, Personal Communication; Richard Mbei Walu, 2005, Personal Communication; Nathaniel Fonjong, 2005, Personal Communication; Zacks Kelah Toh, 2005, Personal Communication).<sup>3</sup> During this epoch, British Southern Cameroons was administered from the British colony of Nigeria.<sup>4</sup> The early rice specie was upland rice. The villagers cultivated the crop for themselves and also for their Fon, Chu Mbonghekang. The period of cultivation was August immediately after the maize harvest. A piece of land was cleared, hoed and the rice seeds sprinkled on the prepared farm. Men were responsible for clearing the land and women tilled the soil. The following year upland rice cultivation was

taken up by other village notables who employed the family labour to cultivate it. It is interesting to note that as women took on the actual process of cultivating this new crop, men assisted them in the preparation of food. The food was usually plantains and palm oil which was also the people's staple prior to rice cultivation.

The cultivation of upland rice in 1954 rose tremendously for several reasons. The agricultural department of the colonial government obtained one hundred weight of improved rice seed from Abakaliki which was distributed to rice growers in Bu. The intention of this move was to promote the cultivation of rice for sustainable livelihood through its consumption and sale to purchase other basic needs of the people. The farmers received this improved specie with much enthusiasm and planted it for improved yield. They were also comforted by the promised power driven rice hulling machine by the government to facilitate the hulling of the harvested crop. The land in Bu was also earmarked for particular attention in the development of rice growing not only on technical grounds but also because of its greater facilities for evacuation to the market when compared with Babaji in Menchum valley. The village is also blessed with a fertile valley ideal for rice growing because it is a confluence for Rivers Meteh and Menchum.<sup>5</sup> These factors were a catalyst to the improvement of rice production in Bu, a few years after its introduction. Besides, the crop also generated income not only for the villagers but also for the colonial administration in the form of tax payments.

In spite of the importance and the enthusiasm with which upland rice cultivation was embraced by the people, its cultivation eventually dwindled. The phasing out of upland rice cultivation was partly due to the introduction of coffee cultivation. This crop became more profitable than rice. As early as 1954, a few coffee plants had been cultivated. At this early stage, its cultivation was not a threat to rice production but by 1959, its cultivation was attracting more income than rice.<sup>6</sup> After independence and following the introduction of the Second Five Year Plan (1965-70) by the federal government of Cameroon, coffee cultivation was intensified. The objective of the plan was to foster the commercialisation of the agricultural sector, reform and reorganise it. There was equally emphasis on the diversification of cash crop production.

The introduction of the Five Year Plan encouraged farmers in Aghem Town, Bu, Zhoa and Fungom to embark on coffee cultivation, a crop hitherto cultivated in Kom on a commercial scale (Kah, 1998, p. 122; Simon Njuh, 2004, Personal Communication).<sup>7</sup> Such intensification of cultivation impacted negatively on rice cultivation in Bu with women not actually involved in coffee cultivation from the very beginning. By the late 1960s rice cultivation had dwindled to the point of extinction. Its cultivation and sale in the heydays had however provided men with the additional means of income to uplift the standards of living of members of their families.

The upland rice that was harvested was pounded by women and children in mortars carved from wood using pestles. Thereafter, the crop was sold in the Wum market, a twelve kilometre trek from Bu by these women and their children. After the sale of rice the people had money to buy kerosene for their lamps, cooking oil, fish and other necessities of the home. The colonial administration's promise to better the situation by making available the hand operated rice hulling machine did not materialise. The rationale was due to the uncompleted road but before the end of the colonial epoch, the road from Wum to Bu had been completed. In spite of this, there were still many culverts to be completed.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile any expenditure from the sale of rice was not done without common agreement between husbands and wives. In some homes, proceeds from the sale of rice were used to educate their children.<sup>9</sup> This notwithstanding, when the cultivation of

upland rice phased out, swamp rice cultivation was eventually introduced in the community in 1974. Its very early years was dominated and controlled by men as women were more or less taken for family labour.

## INTRODUCTION AND CULTIVATION OF SWAMP RICE

Swamp rice cultivation was introduced into Bu in 1974. Prior to this, the other Laimbwe village of Mbengkas had taken to rice cultivation a year earlier. This early cultivation was the handiwork of Sam Mbwai Achang who had spent some time in Tingoh (Mile 24) on the Wum – Bamenda road cultivating rice. The Tingoh rural settlement had been introduced to rice cultivation by some Chinese. Seeds were given out free to men who cultivated and owned the crops. From Tingoh, rice cultivation extended to the Menchum Valley area of Mile 37. As rice cultivation spread along the Menchum valley other Laimbwe men from Bu such as Mathias Bah and Jacob Isoh descended from Bu to cultivate it. The crop was introduced in Bu in 1974 by Sam Mbwai Achang (Ndang, Manuscript; Sam Mbwai Achang, 2005, Personal Communication).<sup>10</sup> The men of Bu enthusiastically welcomed it and among the first rice cultivators were Isaiah Tschemaaghi, Tom Bong Ache, Daniel Buhghebei, Clement Che Koi, Mutika Ndeh, Moses Metsche Ngoobi and Philip Abang (Tom Bong Ache, 2005, Personal Communication; Mutika Ndeh, 2005, Personal Communication).<sup>11</sup> Women only joined men as cultivators of their own rice farms later. From the very beginning, they were at best only part of the family labour.

The success of the pioneer rice cultivators in 1974 encouraged many other men to join in rice cultivation the following year. Meanwhile in the previous year, some did not join contending and rightly too that rice cultivation would lead to the swelling of people's legs because it entailed standing in water the whole day (Nathaniel Fonjong, 2005, Personal Communication). Some pioneers like Isaiah Tschemaaghi were able to dowry their wives and buy radios from the sale of five bags of rice at 20,000 francs CFA (Simon Njuh, 2005, Personal Communication). Rice cultivation thus became a way of people raising income to marry wives and for them to become used to things that were "modern" such as the buying of a radio and listening to news. The many doubting Thomases some came out of their indifference to embrace the rice business militantly.

Some men formed groups or *njangis* to help one another clear their individual rice farms in the swampy and fertile areas of the Meteh/Menchum valley. According to the unwritten constitution of these *njangis*, each individual prepared food, corn beer and made a little financial contribution to a collective fund. Besides, every member was to be physically strong and personally present during the clearing of farms of members. Some of the areas which were cleared for rice cultivation were Nchuumbang, Zhehfang, Eboofeguighe and Nduufetschie. At this early stage of rice cultivation men did the nursing of the rice grains, clearing of a piece of land and dividing it into plots, tilling the soil as well as transplanting the rice with the entire family. Men also joined women in weeding the rice plots and in the harvesting of rice from the beginning to the end. Besides, it was the sole responsibility of the men or male children to keep the pathways separating the plots clean on a regular basis. This was to ease surveillance of the entire farm from the destruction of animals and birds respectively. Young boys also tended the farms from birds when the rice was getting ready for harvest.<sup>12</sup> Their mothers provided them with corn fufu and other foodstuff and they took their hooks to the streams and rivers for mudfish and tilapia as an accompaniment. These notwithstanding, women later on felt relegated to the background and fought back tigerishly using different alternatives.

## **BASES OF FEMALE RESISTANCE IN THE RICE ECONOMY**

The decision by women to cultivate their own rice farms was a challenge to male tight control of every phase of cultivation and harvest to the commercialisation of the crop. Resistance to male exclusive control of the rice economy took different forms. One form was late-coming to work or staying away from work without an explanation. The strategy of late-coming hurt and also deprived men of food for the day. Due to the failure of this form of resistance to move men to reconsider their exclusion of women in the rice economy, some women decided to stay away from cultivating the rice for men. They engaged in other agricultural work for money to solve some of their problems than to suffocate under men for nothing in return (Vilian Neme Sih, 2002, Personal Communication; Mama Ngoisei, 2003, Personal Communication).<sup>13</sup> In polygamous homes, women's resistance took the form of quarrels among co-wives on issues of financial rewards. Husbands in most cases had preference for the younger wives and often treated them better than the older ones. This was usually not taken kindly by these other wives. They accused their husbands for not recognising their contribution to wealth accumulation prior to the arrival of the younger and now favoured wives.

Some women who felt cheated with their children withdrew their labour services from their husbands and other male relations. Rather, they engaged these children in the harvesting of maize and groundnuts. This usually happened in July and August the peak period of rice cultivation. The greater influence over the children was facilitated by the fact that women have greater control over their children than men in Bu due to the system of matrilineal succession. The women were further angered by the fact that men did not assist them when they were sick preferring to squander money with 'free women.' Even basic household needs like salt, oil and soap were left to the women although this was not in all cases (Vida Wei Chou, 2005, Personal Communication; Moses Ngui, 2005, Personal Communication; Alfred Njong, 2005, Personal Communication; William Afuh, 2005, Personal Communication; George Fuhkeghe, 2005, Personal Communication).<sup>14</sup> On the basis these and other grievances, some women started their own rice farms rather than remain servants or unpaid labour for men.

Many women were also unhappy with the men for unfulfilled promises. During the planting season promises made to women included the education of the children, the purchase of dresses for them, the provision of household needs including pots and dishes. In most cases these things were never bought nor done after the rice harvest. With regards to the dresses, some men bought but not what their wives wanted just because they did not want to give them the money to do so. This angered women with some of them accusing men of negligence and reckless abandon (Dorothy Zonghefeh, 2005, Personal Communication; Zachs Kelah Toh, 2005, Personal Communication).<sup>15</sup> Many would have preferred divorce but did not because of the need to secure the proper upbringing of their children with parental control.

Men did certain things to cause the women to revolt against them. For example, they would not provide acceptable housing facilities according to village standards. For this reason, many women took to an active involvement in the rice economy to enable them build houses of their own. Another manifest grievance of women was their inability to spend money after selling rice in the purchase of basic commodities like oil, salt and soap. They were expected to hand everything to men some of whom used it for membership into traditional institutions such as *Kuifuai*, *Tschong* and also contract more marriages for themselves and their nephews. Even during the harvest season, little quantities of rice women carried in their head ties for household consumption met with reprisals from men (Evangelay Sih, 2005, Personal

Communication). Men valued rice more in monetary terms. They sounded uncompromising with those especially their wives who carried rice for local consumption. Some women would go around borrowing money for the upkeep of the family while their husbands hoarded rice for other activities. These grievances put together led women to resist male control of the rice economy.

Besides, there was a feeling among Laimbwe men that women should be excluded from the decision making process in the rice economy. They advocated that only heads of families should take decisions in this domain. They resolved to encourage women cultivate food crops like maize and cocoyams while men cultivated rice for cash to use it for development. This impression was re-enforced by an announcement from the *Kuiifuai* male regulatory society in the 1980s that women should be excluded from managing their own rice farms (John Wakem, 2005, Personal Communication; Andreas Kom, 2005, Personal Communication).<sup>16</sup> *Kuiifuai* influential members did not see the rationale for women cultivation of their own rice fields. In fact, why should women be allowed to compete with men in wealth control in a traditional society where men lead and women only lead by following them? Intent on contributing their own quota towards the development and sustainable management of the resources of Bu, the Laimbwe women of Bu were vigorous in their demand for the liberalisation of the rice economy. The more men employed delay tactics to involve women rice farmers as equal partners, the more they resisted them through subtle means.

#### **MALE MONOPOLY CHALLENGED**

The era of male monopoly of the rice economy and associated development soon gave way following a long period of female resistance. The early cracks developed from within *Kuiifuai* when leading personalities like Soppo Ndang (Andreas Kom, 2005, Personal Communication)<sup>17</sup> spoke out strongly in favour of women ownership of rice fields of their own. His position was re-enforced by the fact that as a blind man he would not stop his wives from developing rice farms of their own. Besides, the debilitating economic crisis of the 1980s impacted heavily on the rural areas Bu being no exception.<sup>18</sup> In order to contain the crisis and poverty there was need to liberalise the rice economy and increase productivity. It was not long after this that the men of Bu recognised and appreciated women for their contribution towards fighting poverty through the production and sale of rice in their own right.

Women employed different stratagems to engage in rice cultivation and eventually take over control and management of the rice sub-sector. Some of them force their ageing and ailing husbands to partition their rice fields to the different households. Some men quickly yielded to this because they thought the households would raise money and educate the children, a thing they were physically unable to do in the changing circumstances. Other women whose husbands were not having rice farms or opposed their becoming rice farmers did certain things to invade this male space. They took the pains to accumulate money from the sale of vegetables, maize, cocoyams and okro to later on purchase or rent rice plots which they cultivated. Other women who could not buy farms combined what they got after harvest with other savings to own a permanent farm (Beatrice Afuh, 2005, Personal Communication; Evangelai Mum, 2005, Personal Communication; Martina Mbei, 2005, Personal Communication; Grace Towa, 2005, Personal Communication; Febe Endow Ambei, 2005, Personal Communication; Grace Ndoong, 2005, Personal Communication).<sup>19</sup>



In some cases, children living in some big towns notably Bamenda, Tiko, Douala, Yaounde, Limbe, Kumba and Melong have sent their mothers money to purchase rice farms and support themselves. They do this among other reasons to stabilise the family income and relieve them of too much heat by way of numerous demands during school reopening and the Christmas festivities.<sup>20</sup> Among the many women who now have personal farms in Bu which was a taboo in the past are the late Ruth Tunghe, Beatrice Afuh, Evangelai Mum, Mbei Martina, Towa Grace, Febe Ambei Endow and Grace Ndoong. These rice farms now belong to their matrilineages because their husbands do not have control over them.

In addition, those women who did not have enough money to buy or rent farms and were fortunate to have maize farms in swampy areas quickly transformed them into rice fields. Some of such farms transformed into productive rice plots are in Nduneei (a place of no return) in Menchum valley. The extensive nature of some of these farms has made some women great rice farmers. The decision to transform maize farms into rice farms was not through the approval of the men. Rather, it was the pressure of a changing society that warranted every hand to be put on deck to develop food self-sufficiency. Rice became appealing to these women like the men because it was both a food and cash crop. Some of these earlier maize farms were however cleared by the women themselves or they paid young men to do it for them.<sup>21</sup>

Another common thing that propelled women to the leadership position in the rice economy was the fact that they use men to get to other men to rent or buy farms for them. This was not always very easy from the beginning because these intermediaries were themselves a hurdle to the attainment of the dreams of these women. In some cases women did not succeed to purchase rice farms because of male chauvinism (Timathias Ebu, 2002, Personal Communication; Philip Abang, 2002, Personal Communication).<sup>22</sup> Not long afterwards some women decided to deal directly with rice farm owners. This yielded fruits because afterwards the women succeeded in possessing rice farms of their own. The two parties usually held discussions, agreed on the price and then signed documents in the presence of witnesses. It was only after this had been done that transfer of control and ownership to the purchaser was executed.

Furthermore, for a more effective control or leadership of the rice economy some women began to pay men from the late 1990s onwards to clear, harvest and transport their rice home. Apart from family labour, they also started paying young girls to plant rice in the plots earlier tilled by men. Some of them often dictated the method of payment for a service rendered such as measuring rice in tins or money (Kanghe Metti, 2005, Personal Communication; Jonathan Ndang Afuh, 2005, Personal Communication).<sup>23</sup> Some women rice farmers also began to pay other women to assist in weeding the rice farms in the last years of the 1990s and the start of the year 2000. The importance of weeding was and has remained a way of ensuring a healthy yield and facilitates the harvesting process. Women rice growers have also solicited the services of their male children to keep the pathways separating the different rice plots clean as well as regulate the circulation of water in the entire rice farm for a successful yield.

In addition, women rice cultivators made use of the labour services of their children to guard the rice from the destruction of birds and animals like cane rats. Single household women solicited the services of their boyfriends and male children to erect fences of elephant stalks in areas where the rice farms were close to uncultivated pieces of land. This was to prevent animals like the cane rat from destroying the growing rice crop. Some other men were employed to erect semi-temporal structures for rest during work. Some of these structures served as stores for the harvested rice before it was later transported to the market. Some of these structures are more or less permanent and have for several years harboured

families (especially women) all week as they only returned home during the weekend (the traditional weekend). They returned to attend the market, participate in death celebrations and observe the *Utuo-Metschie*, the “Country Sunday.”<sup>24</sup> All these measures have been employed to boost women control of the rice economy and to increase output.

## **WOMEN POST-HARVEST ACTIVITIES**

After harvesting this cash and also food crop, women did a number of things which were visible. For the purpose of sustainable development, some used the money from the sale of rice in purchasing roofing sheets and constructed their own houses. This was and has remained the practice with female headed households, divorced women or widows. Others constructed attached structures to the already existing one.<sup>25</sup> This was a revolution in Bu from the 1980s onwards because prior to women control of the rice economy, only men built houses from the proceeds of rice or palm oil production. In the first decades women were limited to food crop production including soya beans, vegetables and maize the excess of which was sold in the local village market.

Some women also adopted the policy of storing up rice in barns only to sell them later on at a higher price. Many of them were however unable to do this for several reasons. Firstly, some have rice as a food crop which made it difficult for them to store some for the future. The absence of an organised marketing system created chaos in the marketing of rice to the extent that women at times literally gave away their rice cheaply to the *buyam sellams* in the Wum market. Besides, rice harvestings coincides with the end of year festivities. For this reason many women sell up almost everything to sustain the family and also provide the basic needs of their children. Some other women were always wise enough to buy rice cheaply during the harvesting season from other women and men only to sell it later and make a huge profit.<sup>26</sup> This profit was re-invested into other economically rewarding activities like maize and groundnut cultivation.

Furthermore, women sold rice and made purchases for present and future use. Some household and other necessities which they often bought included oil, salt, soap, pots, dishes, dresses, and shoes. Other women bought domestic animals like goats, pigs and fowls for rearing (Kah 2013).<sup>27</sup> Through this, they acquired cash to handle some of their pressing problems during the rainy days. When the demand for goats, pigs and fowls increased during the dry season due to death celebrations and other festivities like Christmas and New Year, these women sold them at attractive practices and make a profit for themselves. Considering the importance of these domestic animals some made fences for them and bought their feed regularly. These fences were constructed not in their husbands’ homes but in their own compounds or those of their mothers’ brothers. This is because Bu is a matrilineal fondom in Cameroon.

Besides, when women hauled rice, it was to raise money for future use in the rice and maize farms. Some of the money was used in the transportation of maize from the valleys and hills but more importantly to educate their children, provide for their health needs and pay for a trade for any of them willing to do so (Vilian Neme Sih, 2002, Personal Communication). Among the different trades invested for the sustainability of their children included hairdressing and sewing for the girls; motor repairs, building and carpentry for the boys. Some women paid for the elementary education of their children and continued to do so in secondary schools in Wum and today in the Government Secondary Bu itself. This was real investment which demanded that a house should be rented and basic school needs of the children provided. While some women rice cultivators became thoughtful to help develop capacity in the family others did not and thought

more of themselves like some men. This notwithstanding, female control of the rice economy received scathing criticisms from men some of whom firmly believed that something needed to be done to reverse this situation by regulating women rice farming.

## **MALE FURY VERSUS FEMALE CONTROL OF THE RICE ECONOMY**

Ever since women took the bold decision to own rice fields, some Laimbwe men became uncomfortable with the situation. Many of them faulted women management of the affairs of the rice economy from cultivation to commercialisation. One of the grievances of women, prior to involvement in rice economy as important stakeholders was the reluctance of men to allow them have rice for home consumption. When they eventually became rice farmers in their own right, some men accused them of being worse than they were when only men controlled the rice economy. They buttressed their argument saying that women also valued rice only for commercialisation and not consumption (Andreas Kom, 2005, Personal Communication; John Wakem, 2005, Personal Communication; Alfred Njong, 2005, Personal Communication; Moses Ngui, 2005, Personal Communication; William Afuh, 2005, Personal Communication). Women retorted contending that men ought not to criticise them because they had abandoned the running of the home only to women. For this reason, they needed to sell the rice and purchase these household needs.<sup>28</sup> Some men however considered the argument lame pointing to the fact that women sold the rice not to buy basic needs but their dresses and other make-ups. Whatever these respective arguments, women have since taken control of the rice economy and this has contributed to an increase in output of rice in the Meteh/Menchum river valley.

Besides, men continued to criticise women for usurping the responsibility of contracting marriages for their male children which is contrary to the tradition and custom of the Laimbwe people. In the Laimbwe tradition and custom, a boy gets married to a girl through the agency of the mother's brother or the father as the case may be. In the distant past, mother's brothers were mostly the go between their sisters' sons and the parents of the girl to be married. Today, some women have broken with tradition because they feel that they have money and can do everything. They no longer direct their male children to their brothers or the husbands as the case may be. They have become the go between the children and parents of the girls intended. Some men vigorously argued that women rice farmers were doing this only to ridicule them and needed to be disempowered by preventing them from farming rice. The reason is that the sanity and sanctity of tradition needed to be restored (Simon Njuh, 2005, Personal Communication; Nathaniel Fonjong, 2005, Personal Communication; Richard Mbei Walu, 2005, Personal Communication). This practice of flouting tradition with impunity some men argued was the handiwork of female-heads of households. This also included those who lost their husbands and were unwilling to succumb to any male relative of the deceased husband (Ibid).

There were other practices of women in the rice economy that attracted serious criticisms from men. Women were accused of harvesting, threshing and winnowing rice just enough for it to be head-loaded home by the children and themselves. This was interpreted by some men as a selfish attitude meant to prevent some of them who no longer cultivated rice from having some winnowed rice for their own consumption. Other men also faulted women for not buying the necessary material like tarpaulins for packing harvested rice for eventual threshing and winnowing. Many of them did not buy bags to transport the commodity.<sup>29</sup> This explains why some women collected these materials from their husbands and at times without prior information. Some women did not even bother to buy cutlasses and files needed to

facilitate rice cultivation and preferred to take these things from men. In spite of these criticisms, some women boasted that they had the wherewithal to pay others perform the tasks at every stage of the rice economy and did not need to own these material like cutlasses and tarpaulins.

Furthermore some men were unhappy that women deprived them of their children during the planting and harvesting of rice but expected them to handle their health, school and other basic needs. The question that kept puzzling them was how women would take away their children but shy away from taking responsibility over them. Some became convinced that the wayward attitude of children was due to the negative influence of their mothers. Some mothers withdrew their children from school in September to assist them in the rice fields. Many of those working in the towns and cities were made to send money and other basic needs only to their mothers.<sup>30</sup> Those who abandoned education for rice cultivation with their mothers paid the price of illiteracy and the attendant ramifications. Male critics also thought that it was the negative doctrine of women that made their children to focus their attention only on their mothers through purchasing rice fields and cultivating them.

Some other men who had sold their rice farms posited that this was done because of the neglect of their wives and sisters. They argued that these people never provided them food nor catered for them when they were sick. At their age, they needed support but which was not forth coming. These men further contended that they had treated themselves and had had to repair dilapidated portions of their houses all by themselves. Other men were unhappy that they were now borrowing money to pay for labour in their rice fields when they were blessed with family labour. With such fury, they vowed to have nothing to do with women because of their rebellious attitude (Tom Bong, 2005, Personal Communication; Mutika Ndeh, 2005, Personal Communication; Richard Mbei Walu, 2005, Personal Communication). These arguments aside, the unfolding saga in gender relations in the rice economy in Bu has some lessons for any meaningful development and sustainable endeavours.

## **LESSONS FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD**

The rice economy in Bu which started several decades ago has come of age. It now employs many more women, children as well as men in subsidiary positions. Prior to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, men called the shots in this sector and women cried foul. The reverse is true today. Women are overwhelmingly in control and some men are crying over spilled milk. The tendency is that, the future of relations between the sexes in the rice sector in Bu would likely spell doom if lessons are not drawn from the present dispensation. The lessons will serve as a therapy in that they can enable the people of Bu to develop their community more than is the case now. This is because rice cultivation has impacted heavily on the socio-economic development of the community through the construction of houses, provision of health, the construction of a rice cooperative society and the education of children beyond the elementary level.

One of the salient lessons that can be drawn from this study is the conscious non-exclusion of people from any economic endeavour that contributes to sustainable development. This is more so at a time that this enterprise promises greater prospects for development and growth. The steady involvement of women in the rice economy in their independent capacity has contributed towards an increase in the production of rice and by extension, the reduction of poverty and hunger in Bu and the surrounding towns especially Wum that relied on Bu for food supply. During Bu and Wum market

days vehicles load bags of rice for distribution in Wum. Through this, family income has increased in a rural setting with no government paying occupations except for teachers of the nursery, primary and lone secondary school. The increased output and the availability of money with women have contributed towards improved housing through the construction of houses from rice money. Housing problems, a serious preoccupation in the urban and other rural environments is not so preoccupying in Bu because every year people build houses after selling rice.<sup>31</sup>

Another lesson is that today, many more children can afford an education, learn a trade and be attended to medically. This attested to by the authorities of the several nursery and primary schools including also the Government Secondary School Bu. They have said that many women are responsible for the most part in the payment of the school fees of their kids (Jefred Ndang Fein, 2005, Personal Communication).<sup>32</sup> In the past, the fathers of girls were opposed to their education but today, their mothers want them to have a decent education. Some of the children now attending secondary and high schools in Wum rely on their mothers for rents, feeding, and provision of uniforms, school fees and the purchase of books. Just imagine that women were not economically empowered through this rice economy in Bu, this would have had a heavy toll on the overall education of children of Bu. A society that neglects the education of its children and especially the girl children cannot boast of developing rapidly. The involvement of men and women in the rice economy in varying degrees in Bu has therefore contributed to boosting the education of the children of Bu. The more they are educated, the more they will grow up to contribute their own quota to the development of their fonderom. Besides, the health of the sons and daughters of Bu has been assured since money from rice cultivation and other related activities has been used to treat people when they are sick. Pregnant women now regularly attend clinic and pay for drugs and when children fall sick, they are taken to the health centre for treatment. These children also receive regular vaccination from common diseases like measles, polio, chicken pox and small pox. In the past women and their children depended almost entirely on the men for their health needs. This was cumbersome for these men, some of whom lived reckless lives. Since women are now very deeply involved in the rice economy, they have the money and are using it to improve on the health needs of all and sundry in the family. Many children no longer die at infancy because of the lack of medical care. There is a government health centre in Bu and this has saved the people from trekking to Wum, some 12 kilometres away for medical attention. Only very serious cases are referred to the Wum General Hospital.

In spite of the contributions of these women rice growers to the development of Bu in particular and Cameroon in general, one vital lesson to draw from this experience is for women and men to work together for greater productivity and development. The result would be the education of many more children, their attainment of higher levels in paying jobs as well as the development of the domestic economy. It is rather unfortunate that today married men and women but for a few exceptions, work separate farms with separate treasuries. Some women proudly say that the cutlass they possess represent their husband and the hoe the wife (Kah, 2011). Some men on their part are barely limping as they struggle on in the rice economy. Greater success would be registered if both sexes engage in the rice economy as collaborators with their children solidly behind them and giving them the additional push.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the introduction and cultivation of upland and swamp rice in Bu. It has revealed that from the initial stage men were firmly in control of the rice economy to the extent that the *Kuifuai* regulatory society subsequently made an announcement to the effect that woman should not own and cultivate rice fields. This male leadership eventually dwindled especially so because many young people who provided labour migrated to the towns and cities for jobs and education.

Women for long were only junior collaborators in spite of their pivotal role in the sustenance of this economic activity. As the years unfolded, some men coupled with the debilitating world economic recession spoke in favour of women. These women also took the bull by the horns, so to speak, and went into the rice economy in their own right. The floodgate was now open for many more women to own and control rice fields. Although they started off by renting a few plots of rice and transforming some of their maize fields into rice fields, they eventually bought farms from those who initially stood on their way.

Since then a lot of changes are unfolding in the political economy of rice cultivation in Bu with lessons for the present and future. Some women have constructed houses with rice money. Others have sent their children to secondary schools, provided for their health needs and today are saving a lot of money from their rice sales in credit rotating schemes or *njangis* for other sustainable activities. In the near future we might likely see a situation where many men are working as labour in farms owned by women. This is happening now but not on a large scale. Many women use the labour services of their children to the exclusion of their husbands and male relatives. There is need for collaboration between men and women to reap more benefits from rice cultivation especially following the introduction of high yielding species.

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<sup>1</sup> The village of Bu is some twelve kilometres from Wum the chief town of Menchum Division in the North West Region of Cameroon. The village is blessed with a lush forest, fertile Meteh/Menchum valley and an extensive savanna which have encouraged economic activities of various kinds including rice, an important cash crop in the area.

<sup>2</sup> *Laimbwe* here refers to a group of villages speaking a common language. These villages include Bu in Wum Central Sub Division of Menchum Division as well as Mbengkas and Baisoo located in Fundong Sub Division of Boyo Division, all of the North West Region of Cameroon.

<sup>3</sup> The first three were young boys when upland rice cultivation was introduced into Bu village from Abakaliki in the 1950s. Toh Zachs Kelah on his part was the former chairperson of the Bu-Mbengkas Rice Cooperative Society (BMRCS); File No. 5428, Ci (1954) 2, Annual Report Wum Division 1954, National Archives Buea (NAB).

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that when Germany was defeated and forced to give up her colony of Cameroon, it was partitioned into two unequal parts. The British administered 1/5 was further partitioned into two administrative units namely British Northern Cameroons governed from Northern Nigeria and British Southern Cameroons eventually governed from the Eastern Region of Nigeria. Wum Division to which Bu was a component part was established on 5 July 1949 alongside Nkambe Division. In 1968 the name changed to Menchum Division named after the River Menchum.

<sup>5</sup> Annual Report for Wum Division 1953 by D.O. A Sprilyan, NAB; File No. 5428, Ci (1954) 2, Annual Report Wum Division 1954, NAB

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<sup>6</sup> File No. 5428, Ci (1954), Annual Report Wum Division 1954, NAB; Interview with Simon Njuh, Richard Mbei Walu and Nathaniel Fonjong, Bafren Quarter Bu, 25 March 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Economic and Political Reports, File N°. DMC 606, Vol. II, Divisional Archives Wum (DAW). Joseph Sang who was one time Court Messenger, Tax Collector and Ward Head of Mujang Quarter Bu was one of those who embraced the cultivation of coffee from the very beginning. To facilitate the cultivation of coffee, a coffee nursery was put in place.

<sup>8</sup> File No. 5428, Ci (1954) 2, Annual Report Wum Division 1954, NAB; Report of the Native Authority Foreman of Works for Annual Report Wum Division 1955, NAB; File No. Ci 1956/1a, Annual Report Wum Division 1956, NAB.

<sup>9</sup> Among some of the illustrious sons of Bu who were partly educated with money from the sale of upland rice were Retired Justice Nyo Wakai, Retired Headmaster, Stephen Fang Wangwo, Alphonsius Mbeng (late), James Ache (late), Daniel Zohzele (late) and George Kpwai (late). Justice Nyo Wakai, a founding father of the Social Democratic Front (SDF) party served the State of Cameroon in various justice departments. He retired as a Supreme Court judge and died a year ago. Daniel Zohzele worked with Posts and Telecommunications rising to the rank of Postmaster. Stephen Fang Wangwo on the other hand retired as primary school teacher who before retirement was Headmaster of a government primary school and George Kpwai was an architect based in Fundong in Boyo Division. All of them have died.

<sup>10</sup> Mr. Ndong Ebenezar Fung was one of the longest serving Managers of the Bu/Mbengkas Rice Cooperative Society Limited.

<sup>11</sup> These two elders gave up rice cultivation several years ago. Mutika Ndeh sold his rice farm to a woman. He is one of those who facilitated female ownership and control of rice farms in Bu village.

<sup>12</sup> This researcher lived through the experience. As a kid he accompanied his father to the farm when members of his group joined him to clear a rice farm in 1976 at Nduufetsche. The clearing went on for a number of days and after the clearing, the farm was divided into rice plots. I have also been involved in the rice economy from 1976 to 1996. From the clearing of the rice field, tilling, planting, weeding, clearing of pathways, tending and harvesting the rice, head loading, hulling and selling the rice I have been deeply involved. It was money from rice that I was educated from the elementary level in Bu through secondary and high school education in Bamenda and Bambili as well as my University education at the University of Buea Cameroon where I now teach history.

<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that Vilian Neme Sih was an early female rice farmer. She was even involved in a protracted court case with the mother's father Pa Andreas Kom over a piece of land which was given to the mother and after her death she wanted to own this piece of land. It took the other children of the grandfather to force her out of the farm.

<sup>14</sup> George Fuhkeghe was a pharmacist in the Bu Health Centre who attended to the health needs of the population on a daily basis. He argued that most of those who bought drugs or who paid for the hospitalisation of children and maternity needs of pregnant women were the women with money from the sale of rice and other agricultural items.

<sup>15</sup> The two belong to the younger generation of men and women in the rice economy in Bu. They are all agreed that men do not provide for the basic needs of women which explains why they resisted male chauvinism in the rice economy.

<sup>16</sup> Both village notables are influential members of the *Kuifuai* regulatory society in Bu and retired rice farmers.

<sup>17</sup> Soppo Ndong was a leading village figure of the Eselemei family and could be relied on for changes in village policies that affected women. This might have been due to the fact that he was blind although he remained a farmer his visual impairment notwithstanding.

<sup>18</sup> For more on the external and internal causes of the economic recession in Cameroon and its ramifications especially from the mid-1980s onwards, read Victor Julius Ngoh, *History of Cameroon Since 1800* (Limbe: Presbook, 1996), 299-302.

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<sup>19</sup> They all have farms of their own bought from men.

<sup>20</sup> In an interview with many *Laimbwe* children in Bonaberi and Makepe in Douala as well as Likomba Tiko, they argue that they are willing to buy more rice farms for their mothers at home to fight against poverty and also to prevent their fathers from maltreating them.

<sup>21</sup> In a visit to the *Nduunei* temporal settlement I observed that women were taking up challenges for themselves by clearing their own rice farms or paying labour to do so.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Abang was among the first generation of rice growers when it was introduced into Bu. He retired from rice farming and was a great fisherman in the Meteh and Menchum Rivers.

<sup>23</sup> Both provide their labour services during the farming season. Kanghe Metti also fetches firewood for sale.

<sup>24</sup> *Nduneei* is in fact a temporal settlement in Bu. Many farmers who do farming here cannot go back home on a daily basis because of its distance from home, thus the name *Nduneei*, meaning a place of return.

<sup>25</sup> There are many houses today in Bu owned by women.

<sup>26</sup> This view is shared by many women. Some of them also add that, the rice must be well taken care of because it is also used for food to augment the quantity of food available.

<sup>27</sup> Although some women claim that they are not owners of some of these domestic animals, they usually keep them under the control of men.

<sup>28</sup> A majority of the women interviewed share this view.

<sup>29</sup> Truly many women are not bothered to buy these things that a rice farmer should have.

<sup>30</sup> In a matrilineally organised society like Bu, this is the more reason why many children have affection with their mothers.

<sup>31</sup> It is competition between young couples to construct a house so that they can move away from their parents to their new homes. Money is usually gathered from the sale of various items and invested in the moulding of sun dried bricks, purchase of wood for the doors, windows and rafters as well as the purchase of zinc and nails.

<sup>32</sup> He is the Head teacher of Government School Bu and one time chairperson of the Presbyterian Church Bu.

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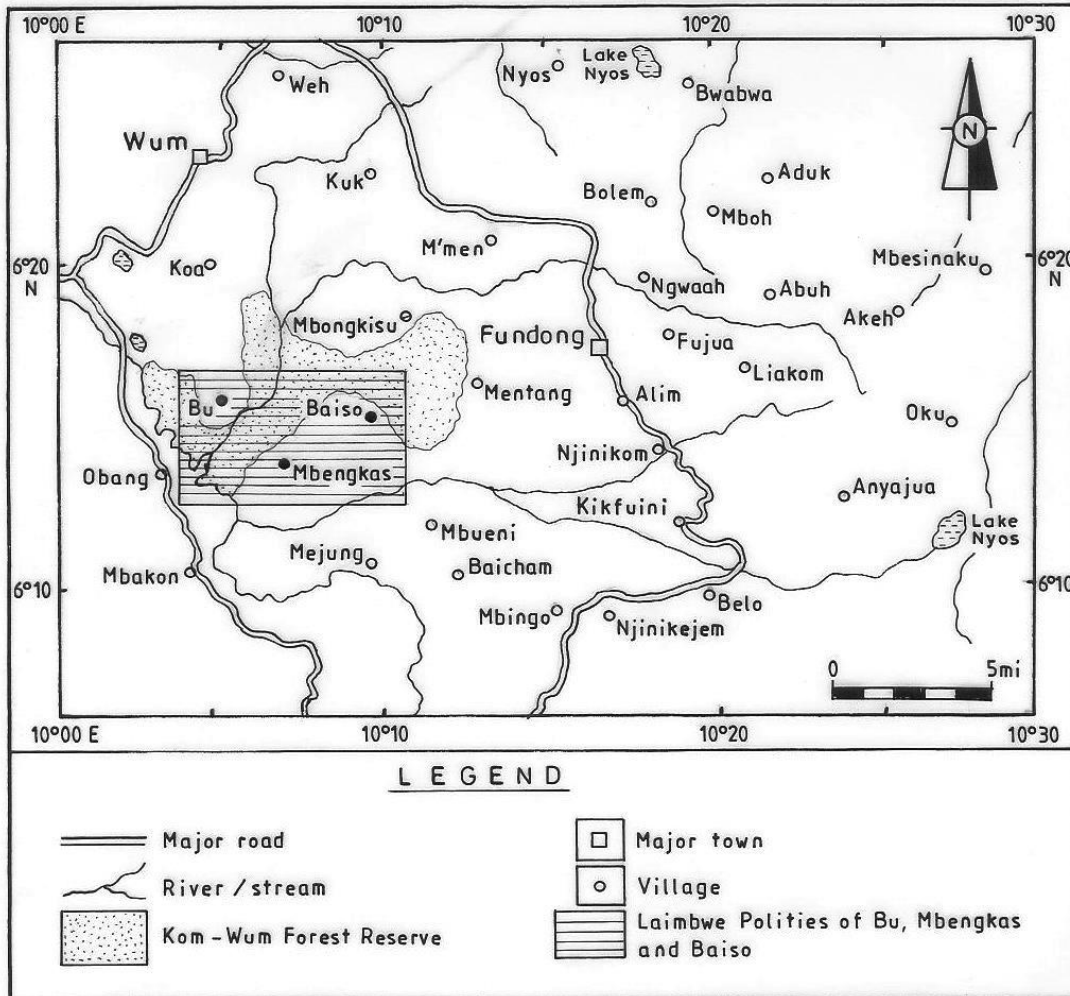
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Locating Bu and the other Laimbwe Polities in the North West Region of Cameroon



SOURCE: Adapted from the Map of Nkambe, NB-32-XVII, N.G.I., Paris, 1979.