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## THE HAUSA – MBORORO WOMEN'S HOUSEHOLD AND COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES IN NORTH WEST CAMEROON: A HISTORICAL INVESTIGATION

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### ABSTRACT

The Hausa and Mbororo women found in the North West Region of Cameroon migrated from Northern Nigeria alongside their male counterparts in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they had arrived and settled in the North West Region. While the Hausa and Mbororo men were busy trading and grazing their animals, the women were more engaged with their household economy. Two types of families existed among the Hausa and Mbororo Communities, namely the nuclear and extended families. Even though the men dominated those families, nonetheless, the role of the women in the well being of the family cannot be under estimated. The organisational ability of the Hausa and Mbororo women in their household and commercial activities were enormous. The major objective of this paper is to show that even though the Hausa and Mbororo women in the North West were relegated to the background, they nonetheless played very important role as far as household and commercial activities were concerned. Thanks to their engagement in petty trading activities, they contributed enormously in the well being of their family and society. It is about time for the Hausa and Mbororo men to realise that the betterment and up-bringing of their families cannot be left on their hands alone. Full emancipation should be granted to their wives so as to help them not just run the family, but also the society as a whole.

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### INTRODUCTION

#### Background to the Coming of the Hausa-Mbororo Women to the North West Region

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Jihad wars were being undertaken by Uthman Dan Fodio, the Hausas and Mbororos were also involved. In the course of spreading the Islamic faith, the Hausas migrated to Adamawa along side their women. Another motivating factor that led to the influx of the Hausa population to Adamawa was trade. Many of them from Nigeria and other areas entered Adamawa to trade in Ivory, Kolanuts and slaves.<sup>1</sup> While in Adamawa, many of the migrant's traders continued their Southward March to the North West Region of Cameroon.

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This was purposely to spread Islam and also to take advantage of the trading opportunities in the region. It is worth while noting that there were a significant number of Hausa women among the contingent of Hausa migrants.<sup>2</sup> When they arrive in the North West Region, the Hausas, most especially the women folk established trading links with the local inhabitants. Among the villages in the Bamenda Central area with which they traded were Santa, Bali, Bafut, Mankon, Nkambe, Nso, and Mendankwe. This trading links necessitated the establishment of Hausa settlements in the region.<sup>3</sup> The Mbororo, just like the Hausas came from Northern Nigeria in search of greener pastures and grazing grounds to feed their cattle. They arrived Northern Cameroon at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While in Northern Cameroon, they continued their migration down South to the Western Grassfields. The gradual influence of the Mbororo into the North West Region began in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Ardo Sabga led the earliest permanent group from Banyo that settled on the

<sup>1</sup> H.R. Rudin, *Germans in the Cameroons 1884-1914, A case study of Modern Imperialism*, New York, Greenwood Press Publishers, 1938, p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> N.A.B., C.B. 1916, file 110/17, Bamenda Division, Annual Report for the year ended, 31.12. 1916.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Babanki Tungo escarpment overlooking the Ndop plain, now known as Sabga. Ardo Sabga came through Fouban and Jakiri with thirty Jafun herdsmen of Gosi clan, who owned considerable herds of cattle. Among this were a significant number of Mbororo women. Having settled, they established trading links with the local population of the North West Region.<sup>4</sup> While the Hausa and Mbororo men were busy trading and grazing their animals, the Hausa and Mbororo women engaged themselves with their household economy. The women efficiently organised their household activities to the extent that they were able to carry out other economic or commercial activities that earn them some money which enable them take good care of their family.<sup>5</sup>

### Objective of the study

The major objective of this study is to critically analyse the Hausa-Mbororo household and commercial activities in North West Cameroon. We intend to examine how the Hausa and Mbororo women organised themselves and what they reap out of their economic activities. To what extent did those economic activities undertaken by the women help not just in the development of the family, but also the community at large?

### Geographical Location of the North West Region of Cameroon

Our study area is the North West Region of Cameroon. North West Region of Cameroon constitutes parts of the territory of Southern Cameroons. The North West Region is found in the Western highlands of Cameroon. It lies between latitudes 5° 40' and 7° to the North of the equator, and between Longitudes 9° 45' and 11° 10' to the East of the Meridian. It is bordered to the South West by the South West Region, to the South by the West Region, to the east by Adamawa Region, and to the North by the Federal Republic of Nigeria.<sup>6</sup> The North West Region is one of the most populated Regions in Cameroon. It has one major metropolitan city: Bamenda. The Region saw an increase in population from about 1.2 million in 1987, to an estimated 1.8 million people in 2001. The population density, at 99.12 people per square Kilometres is higher than the national average of 22.6 people per square kilometre. The region urban growth rate is 7.95%, while the rural growth rate at 1.16%. The North West Region is made up of administrative divisions; the region formally known as province was created in 1972 with five divisions. These were Mezam, Momo, Bui, Menchum and Donga and Mantung Divisions. Today it has seven divisions, Boyo carved out of Donga-Mantung and Menchum and Ngo ketunjia carved out of Mezam. There are thirty one Sub-division in the North West Region.<sup>7</sup>

### The Hausa-Mbororo Women and Household Activities

Two types of families existed in the Hausa and Mbororo Communities, namely the nuclear and extended families. A nuclear family was one where a household was made up of the father, mother and children. The extended family type was made up of the father, mother, Children, grand parents, cousins, aunts, and uncles, and sometimes friends. In the North West Region, the extended family dominated over the nuclear. This was observed both in the Urban as well as the rural areas.<sup>8</sup>

Pastoralism in Mbororo family for instance was managed at the level of the household, with cattle ownership concentrated in the male family head. Livelihood roles within compounds were allocated according to gender, and also to age and activities regarding the movement, health and sale of cattle. The wife or wives of the family head had milking rights, but did not have the power to sell the cattle.<sup>9</sup> Hausa and Mbororo women bore responsibility for the majority of household tasks, such as fetching firewood, water carrying, cooking and child rearing. It should be noted that according to the Quranic rules and principles, some of these roles, especially the first two were to be taken care by the husband. The women tend to use female children to assist them with these tasks. The Hausa and Mbororo community were some of those rare communities of modern times in which there was still a lot of respect for hierarchy and cultural issues.<sup>10</sup> Age constituted a further important dimension along which participatory roles and status were accorded in the Hausa-Mbororo family, particularly in relation to division of labour and wielding of authority. Older female family members tended to dominate decision making on domestic issues, although widows could suffer declining influence and growing marginalisation. However, as with most social structures, there was a degree of fluidity that militated against drawing rigid boundaries between age groups.<sup>11</sup>

In general, the division of roles within households tended to ensure that women remain within the domestic sphere, lack access to capital and have little influence over household decision-making. This both parallels and contrasts with women in neighbouring farming communities, who also focused on household rather than market production, and generally had limited land rights only by virtue of marriage. However, women in most other ethnic groups in the North West had historically played a role in selling food surplus, while Hausa and Mbororo women were not often valued according to their entrepreneurial competence.<sup>12</sup> In terms of status, women in farming communities were often held to be 'close' to God as a result their responsibility for food crops and community esteem could be derived on the basis of farming prowess. More over, their 'marginal' status in terms of decision-making and access to the cash economy had formed the basis for 'counter-hegemonic' protests and movements in response to various encroachments on the female sphere of agricultural subsistence economy.<sup>13</sup> The space available for Hausa-Mbororo women to transform their 'Subordinate' and 'marginal' status appears to have been more limited, although it was not entirely prohibited. For example, although women lacked the right to sell their dairy cows, they did in some sense own their dairy cows, in that they tended to inherit the same cows that they were allocated to milk as young girls.<sup>14</sup> However, there is little evidence to suggest that Hausa and Mbororo women's contribution received the community-wide recognition that it did women in farming communities. Although milking is still a crucial element of most Mbororo women's life, it still lacks economic importance and restricts the possibility of their economic autonomy from men. Where as women from farming communities were expected to market any surplus, Mbororo women's trade was blocked by a lack of market demand and restrictions on their mobility as a result of Islamic practices.<sup>15</sup> The dominant marital system among the Hausa-Mbororo was and is still polygamy. As a result of this, marriage often provided a further arena for disempowerment of Hausa-Mbororo women.

<sup>4</sup> P.N. Nkwi and J.P. Warnier, *Elements for a History of the Western Grassfields*, Yaounde, Publication of the Department of Sociology, 1982, p.83-86.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Sariki Hausawa Usmanu, old Town, Bamenda, 25th December 2009.

<sup>6</sup> P.S. Ndele, "Inter-tribal Conflicts in the North West Province of Cameroon: Causes, Consequences and Perspectives", Maitrise Dissertation, Catholic University of Central Africa, 1998, pp. 1-10.

<sup>7</sup> Neba, *Modern Geography*, P. 171 : N.N. Emmanuel, "Settlement, Grazier or Agricultural land: A Confrontation of Interest in the North West Province of Cameroon", *Annals of the Faculty of Letters and Social Sciences*, University of Yaounde, No 10, 1981, P. 175.

<sup>8</sup> S.Hickey, "The Role of Non-Governmental Organisation in Challenging Exclusion in Africa: Participatory development and the Politics of Citizenship formation amongst the Mbororo-Fulani in North West Cameroon", PhD Thesis

in Philosophy of Development, Staffordshire University, England, 2002, pp. 130-135.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid; Interview with Hajiya Mami, Hausa Housewife, Bamenda, 27th November 2002.

<sup>11</sup> F. Woazineh, "Participation of Women in Decision-making: case of Mbororo Women in the North West Province of Cameroon", *Dschang*, 2007, pp. 1-40.

<sup>12</sup> P.A.B. NW/Qala.1996/2/Bk, Michaela Aishatu Pelican, *Mbororo Women and Household Economy*, 1996 ; Hickey, "Non-Governmental Organisation", p. 130-135.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> M.P. Pelican, "Getting along in the Grassfields : Interethnic Relations and Identity Politics in North West Cameroon", Ph. D thesis Martin-Luther University, Halle-Wittenberg Germany 2006, pp. 5-150.

<sup>15</sup> Hickey, "Non-Governmental Organisation", p. 130-135.

Men were allowed to take as many as four wives, which some Hausa-Mbororo men appeared to misinterpret as an instruction rather than as a maximum guideline. In some instances polygamy offered co-wives opportunities to develop social capital among themselves, allowing them to divided labour between themselves in a way that freed them from household tasks on an alternative basis.<sup>16</sup> However, mistrust, competition, and even violence were more prevalent characteristics of co-wife relations. The system of girls being betrothed from the age of thirteen remained a significant obstacle to their completing even elementary school. Although marriage usually offered women a steady income, it also provided the basis upon which they were excluded from wider socio-economic and political participation, to the extent that it reduced their opportunities for education and tied them down to domestic work loads. Men's primacy in the public sphere, albeit limited, remained predicated upon women's subordination in the domestic sphere.<sup>17</sup>

The level of Hausa and Mbororo women's participation in socio-economic activities beyond their compound was restricted not only by their productive and reproductive labour roles and their lack of an autonomous source of income, but also by social and cultural constraints. Participatory research exercises in which women were requested to map out their web of communications revealed a limited level of mobility and social interaction, with movements beyond the compound restricted to buying foodstuffs and household goods at local markets and visiting health centres.<sup>18</sup> Social calls tended to be restricted to neighbouring compounds, particularly during times of illness. In contrast, men frequently left compounds for cattle markets, the mosque, the Divisional Officers office and law courts, usually in neighbouring towns, and also travelled to other divisional centres. In terms of education, boys were generally favoured on the false believe that girls were more susceptible to 'Western' influences than boys.<sup>19</sup> Hausa and Mbororo women's civic and economic participation beyond the compound was also strongly proscribed in the North West by their weak linguistic and educational ability. As many as half of all Hausa and Mbororo women in the North West Region were unable to speak pidgin well, the lingua franca in Anglophone Cameroon. Although some spoke local languages, many women reported that this communication barrier left them feeling like foreigners when they ventured to move beyond the compound.<sup>20</sup>

The extent of Hausa-Mbororo women's informal access to power, to which feminist studies of citizenship are often directed, is more difficult to assess. Some women were able to gain community respect and influence decision-making processes at institutional and family levels, the critical factors being education, seniority in their position as wife (a status that can be held by either the first or the last wife), Charisma or respect relating to *Pulaaku* However, organizational power was relatively weak amongst Hausa-Mbororo women particularly when compared to women in farming societies in the North West where female secret societies and credit groups were widespread. Although some communities reported that they had been running credit groups for over two decades. Hausa and Mbororo women did not have a strong tradition of organization amongst themselves.<sup>21</sup>

Hausa-Mbororo women therefore tended to occupy subordinate positions to men in citizenship status and participation, both within and beyond the Hausa-Mbororo communities. This status was

founded on and reinforced by processes of exclusion and authority. Cultural and political economy constructs to fender roles limited the extent to which women influenced decision-making. Combined with the exclusion of girls from education, the quantity and quality of women's interaction with the wider political community was substantially less than that of men.<sup>22</sup> Unlike women of the traditional communities of the North West Region, Hausa and Mbororo women were not even able to transform their marginality into a counter-hegemonic process of self-empowerment, because of the (growing) cultural constraints and a lack of economy autonomy. The growing engagement with Islam had tended to exacerbate and create further inequalities. Increasingly confined to the domestic sphere, many Hausa-Mbororo women remained caught in the double bind of second-class citizenship status.<sup>23</sup>

### Dressing and Feeding Habits of the Hausa-Mbororo Women in the North West Region

The Hausa and Mbororo women of the North West Region had a unique way of dressing. When they arrived the region, the women dressed in wrappers and blouses. The Hausa and Mbororo female way of dressing spread quickly in Cameroon and became popular. Non-Hausa and Mbororo women were more and more dressing like them and some Grassfielders made such dressing their official wears.<sup>24</sup> It should be stated again that the religion of most Hausas and Mbororos is Islam which preaches descent dressing, especially during prayers. This explains why the Muslim women in the North West who were dominantly Hausa and Mbororo of course mostly dressed in blouses and wrappers that became for many people Muslim women dresses. As concerns foot wears, Hausa and Mbororo women were fond of leather slippers and shoes. Married Muslim women usually covered their head with wrappers as prescribed by the Quran; The Mbororo women also wore traditional bangles, chains and ear rings. They also like marking their faces.<sup>25</sup>

As concerns food or feeding habits the Hausa and Mbororo women found in the North West Region had different types of diets that they fed on. Here, the Islamic religion had an influence on the type of food the Hausa and Mbororo women ate. Their most favourite dish was corn fufu produced from pounded maize and eaten with rich sauce of vegetables and meat. Other favourite food items of the Hausas and Mbororo women were pap, meat, milk and butter.<sup>26</sup> The Hausa and Mbororo women played a great role in feeding the family. Every family made sure they had at least one farm or garden on which they planted corn, cocoyam, beans and groundnuts. The husband paid the local people to do the fencing, clearing, hoeing and weeding of the farms. The women were involved in planting and harvesting. Tilling the soil was perceived as unsuitable to the Hausa-Mbororo women. Some Hausa-Mbororo women were also engaged in the selling of food crops like onions, tomatoes, pepper and maize. In order for the Hausa and Mbororo women to meet up with household expenses they sold some of the food crops after harvest.<sup>27</sup> Hausa and Mbororo men always ate together in small huts constructed for that purpose. While they were eating, their women stood by waiting for any instruction from their husbands. The husband might ask for additional food to be added or for water to drink. It was only after the wives had fully satisfied their husbands that they retired to their own huts to start eating. Hausa and Mbororo women also ate together.<sup>28</sup> In a situation where a husband was married to many wives, each wife had her day of cooking. The husband provided her with enough money to cook for that day. The entire family had to feed on the food prepared by that wife for that day. And so it went on in rotation from one wife to another.

<sup>16</sup> N.F. Awasom, "The Hausa and Fulani in the Bamenda Grassland (1909-1960)", Third Cycle Doctorate in History, University of Yaounde, 1984, pp. 15-50.

<sup>17</sup> Pelican, "Household Economy", pp. 3-20, Woazineh, "Participation of Women", pp. 1-40.

<sup>18</sup> Hickey, "Non-Governmental Organisation", pp. 130-135.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid; Adu Rhamani, "The Socio-Economic History of the Fulbe (Mbororo) in Mezam Division in the Twentieth Century", Maitrise Memoir in History, University of Yaounde I, pp. 10-50.

<sup>21</sup> Hickey, "Non-Governmental Development", pp. 130-135; A. Sali, "Socio Economic Assessment of Traditional Grazing Amongst Pastoral Groups: case study of the Mbororo-Fulani in the North West Province of Cameroon", Maitrise in Agronomy, University of Dschang, 2004, p. 27-30.

<sup>22</sup> Awasom, "Hausa and Fulani", pp. 15-50; Hickey, "Non-Governmental Organisation", p. 130-135.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Hajiya Mami.

<sup>25</sup> A. Khurshid, *Islam, its Meaning and Message*, Lagos, Islamic Publication Bureau, 1978, pp. 156-164.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid; Interview with Hajiya Mami.

<sup>27</sup> Hickey, "Non-Governmental Organisation", pp. 130-140.

<sup>28</sup> Sali, "Traditional Grazing", pp. 10-40; Interview with Hajiya Mami.

No woman cooked on the day that was not hers because it would cause problem. From the above analyses, it is clear that the Hausa and Mbororo women were first of all respectful to their husbands. They were also well organised. In a nutshell, the Hausa and Mbororo women in the North West played very important role in the well being and day to day running of their families.<sup>29</sup>

### Hausa-Mbororo Women and Commercial Activities in the North West Region

#### The Hausa Women in Trade

Hausa women in the North West were greatly involved in trading activities. They carried out business ventures along side their male counterparts. The Hausa women bought food items like maize, groundnuts, cassava, and cocoyam from the locality and transformed them into consumable marketable product like *bakuru* and *dakwa*. Oil was also extracted from groundnuts. Hausa women also prepared their own soap, *bakin sabulu*, which sold like hot cake. This was done with the use of wood ash and other items. The Hausa women also prepared and sold food to strangers who came to Bamenda.<sup>30</sup> The Hausa women in the North West were indeed a force to reckon with as far as trade was concerned. Some of them even went to the cultivation of cash crops which they sold out of the region. There was serious competition between the Hausa and local women as far as the selling of crops was concerned. The Hausa women made a lot of money out of those trading activities. They use most of that money in taking care of the family. As such help in the development of not just the family in particular, but the community as a whole.<sup>31</sup> Taking into consideration that it was mostly the extended family that existed among the Hausas, the husband alone could not bare the expenses of the family. The wives were obliged to come to the aid of the husband. Most of the money they earn in their commercial activities was use in the up bringing of the family. The husband could be away for long while the wives are taking good care of the family.<sup>32</sup>

#### Mbororo Women in Cattle Trade

Mbororo women in the North West Region were also a force to reckon with in cattle trade. A Mbororo husband usually allocated three to five cows to each of his wives. Heads of cattle for controlled breeding, weak cows and those to be sold always remained in the vicinity of the compound to be tended by the women. Mbororo women also extracted milk and butter from the cows for sale. Milking was primarily the duty of the women with active assistance from their daughters. In the evening, the cow head boy or *gainako* will lock up the calves of three to eleven months to prevent them from sucking during the night in order for the women to milk in the morning.<sup>33</sup> The sign for milking was the mooing of the mother cow to feed the calves. The Mbororo women would then tie the legs of the cow before proceeding to milk them. Each cow usually supplied from a quarter to one litre of milk in one instance. The family consumed part of the milk while the rest was sold to Hausas and local people. The milk called *Kossam*, was usually kept for two-to-three days to become sour *pendi*, before it processed to butter *nebbam*.<sup>34</sup> Mbororo women in the North West sold part of their milk and butter to support their family. Nowadays, only young Mbororo women sell a small quantity of milk and butter. The butter industry was boosted when the Bambui Experimental Farm and Jakiri Veterinary Centre were opened in the late 1940s. They sent agents to the Mbororo settlements found in the North West to purchase milk for the production of butter under

cleaner or more hygienic conditions. Dairy activities brought much money and development to the North West Mbororo women.<sup>35</sup> In addition to other domestic activities that they rendered, Mbororo women also carried part of the milk and its bi-products (cheese and butter) to nearby villages to sell. In such villages, a few people who had interacted with the Mbororo bought milk and butter which they consumed themselves and cheese for their domestic animals (dogs, cats). In some of the villages too, were found some Town Mbororo and Hausas who provided a great market for milk. Money got from this commerce was use to buy soup ingredients, some basic need, shoes and even dresses for children. Food was also bought for the family.<sup>36</sup> By the late 1980s the selling of milk was no longer a dominant and prevalent activity. By the 1990s, it was mostly carried out by poor families where the husband was not able to provide the family basic necessities. The husband might be a cow boy working for other cattle owners and given the opportunity to sell milk. Milk selling fell because out put also dropped. When the Mbororo became permanently settled, they began to embrace modernity. Some Mbororo women complained that they found it difficult to carry milk to the villages to sell because there were no fixed markets for it. Many also found it shameful to carry milk from one part of the village to another to sell. Nonetheless, some Mbororo women are still fully engaged in the selling of milk in the North West Region.<sup>37</sup>

Apart from milking the cows, Mbororo women engage themselves in some petty business to earn money. They sometimes prepared *dakere*, a mixture of corn fufu, milk and sugar for sale. They also fried some chewables like *Makara* for sale. Nowadays, Mbororo women are trying to emancipate themselves by coming out of secluded life and engaging themselves in bigger businesses. Some of them have trained as seamstresses and also engaged in other profit making activities in order to earn money to help them meet up with their needs and the development of the community.<sup>38</sup>

### Conclusion

The Hausas and Mbororo women found in the North West Region of Cameroon are a force to reckon with as far as household and commercial activities were concerned. Arriving the region at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they quickly established their settlements alongside their male's counterparts. As their male counterparts were preoccupied with the political, economic and socio-cultural organisation of their various settlements, the Hausa and Mbororo women on their part were busy organising their household activities. The wellbeing of the family was their primordial objective. Taking into consideration their family status and religious backgrounds, the women were some sought of relegated to the background by their male counterparts. As time went on, the Hausa and Mbororo men came to realized that they could not run the family effectively without the help of their wives. They started seeking advice from them. The Hausa and Mbororo women also realised that in order to contribute to the well being of the family, they needed to emancipate themselves financially. They started engaging in petty trading activities. They also engaged themselves in farming. Parts of the crops harvested were eating at home while the rest were sold in the market. The proceeds gotten from that were use in the up bringing of the family. By the late 1990s and early 2000, it was realised that Hausa and Mbororo women were not just good household keepers, but also good organisers and they contributed enormously not just to the well being of the family but also to the development of their community as a whole.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> P. M. Kaberry, *Women of the Grassfields: a Study of the Economic Position of Women*, London, Routledge, 2004, p.20; Awasom, "Hausa and Fulani", pp. 20-90.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>34</sup> D.A.W., File No 28/666, Mivelebt if cattke vik. 1, Interview with Hajji Mami.

<sup>35</sup> Pelican, "Household Economy", pp. 1-20; Awasom, "Hausa and Fulani", pp. 20-50.

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