

# EXPLORING THE STATUS AND ROLES OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN WITHIN THE LOCAL ECONOMY OF MAMFE IN BRITISH SOUTHERN CAMEROON, 1922-1961

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**Abstract:** African indigenous women have always been underrated in scholarly discourses though instrumental in the growth and survival of local economies. It is in this regard that this paper highlights the status of the Mamfe women and their roles in the domain of artistry, fishing, agriculture, palm oil/kernel production, salt production, the sewing service, education and skilled jobs, investments and, trade in the years, 1922-1961. The paper argues that female labour was the most contributing factor to food production, household upkeep and the growth of the local economy of Mamfe in British Southern Cameroon. It debunks the untested opinions of some Cameroonians that associated the Mamfe women to solely prostitution- a perception that ignored the women's potentials and the vital role of female labour. The data analysed was collected from primary sources: oral interviews with targeted participants and witnesses, archival materials and theses and, secondary sources: published books, journals and the internet. The historical mode has been used, largely qualitative analysis presented in a thematic manner. Findings reveal that during the years reviewed, Mamfe women were suppressed and engulfed in a patriarchy culture. Yet, they were the backbones of households; ensured food security and stirred the growth of the Mamfe economy. The, paper concludes that women are a key resource in rural economies as exemplified in Mamfe, which is reflective of other parts of Africa including Cameroon. Implementing gender-based policies would therefore enhance women's participation in the development of rural economies- a prerequisite to food security and poverty alleviation in Mamfe- Cameroon and Africas in general.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Women; Local Economy, Mamfe, British Southern Cameroon.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The economy of British Southern Cameroon was characterized by former German colonial estates and economic institutions that neglected female labour and food production in favour of male labour and the production of cash crops destined for European markets [1]. This led to the rural exodus of many male labourers to the Plantations at the coastal towns of Tiko, Victoria, Muyuka and Malende. The local Economy of Mamfe is Located in the South West Region of the Republic of Cameroon. Mamfe was formerly under German rule but due to native resistances (1904-1908), locally referred to as the *Mpaw manku* wars, its Agborkem headquarter became thinly populated. The Germans later transferred the head-quarter from Ossindinge (Agborkem) to Mamfe at the lower Cross River site because of its population and strategic location [2]. The Cross River is a navigable river that links Mamfe and the Eastern Region of Nigeria. In 1916

the Germans were defeated by Britain, France and Belgium in the First World War in Cameroon and as a result Britain and France partitioned the territory. *Osindinge* Division then became part of the British zone of Southern Cameroon and was renamed, Mamfe Division in 1921 [3]. British Southern Cameroon was ruled as part of Southern Nigeria during the British Mandate and as part of the Eastern Region of Nigeria from 1947 to 1954 when it became a quasi-autonomous region within Nigeria. It gained its full autonomy and political independence in 1959 and 1961 respectively. Mamfe was later named after the River Manyu (Cross River), modified under decree no. 03/DF/250 of 3rd July 1968 and included in the Administrative map of Cameroon as Manyu Division [4]. The aforementioned references suggest that most scholars have explained the history of British Southern Cameroon and that of Mamfe in particular either generally or from a male dominated perspective. It is in this regard that this paper examines the status of the Mamfe women during the period of British rule in terms of the importance of their functions, ownership of property, marriage and culture in general and their roles in the domain of artistry, fishing, agriculture, palm oil/kernel production, salt production, the sewing service, education and skilled jobs, investments and trade.

## II. THE STATUS OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN MAMFE, 1922-1961

The status or positions of women may be defined in terms of the importance of their functions and their rights and duties. For instance, it was said that the position of women was low because their status was inferior to that of men although they enjoyed considerable privileges and authority in certain matters. Though a woman was subordinated as a wife to her husband and was expected to render him obedience, she was also under his care. Secondly, she shared with him a common interest in the welfare of their children. Together they worked for a common end and made decisions in their respective fields of activity

on behalf of the members of their households; the woman in matters pertaining to the home, food, the care and discipline of children, the growing of food crops while the men gave assistance in the heavier farm work and the provision of necessities such as salt, oil, medicine, tools and clothes [5].

As far as ownership of property was concern, women though cherished by men were deprived of ownership of property. This was because of the patriarchy or patrilineal kinship system, which allowed only the male children to inherit property. As a result, women who resisted these conditions migrated to emergent towns in search of better opportunities. However women possessed usufruct rights over land [6]. They performed the bulk of the agricultural work. The status of women in Mamfe during the colonial period was characterized by the search for socio-economic self-sufficiency amidst their patriarchy cultural background. Hence, Migration became an attraction to the few women who dared challenge Patriarchy.

In terms of marriage, a newly born baby girl could be engaged at birth with a knotted middle branch of palm tree. To maintain the relationship, the suitor gave gifts to his in-laws and quite often he became a friend to his father in-law. The suitor also helped his in-laws to clear their farms and fetch or split fuel wood (firewood) and dowry was paid using European iron bangles referred to in the Ejagham dialect as *Ebi-mbanga* (red iron-wire bangle [7]. This probably originated from the *Efiks* in calabar whose chiefs acquired them from the early European traders they traded with [8].

In fact, some girls were engaged at birth and others at puberty. They were forced to marry older men seeking their hands in marriage. This was very disadvantageous to the girl child because, by the time, they became mature their husbands were too old to afford for the family. Hence, the women became the breadbasket of their families as they worked in the farms, fetched firewood and assumed their household responsibilities [9]. When the girls became mature, some of them decided to break off the relationship in search of socio-economic independence elsewhere [10].

Polygamy (a marriage union between one man and two or more wives) was very common in the Mamfe communities before the post independent era. Although polygamy has greatly reduced in the Bayang and Ejagham communities, it is still part of the Boki and Akwaya ethnic groups today. Most interviewees on the issue reveal that polygamy was a source of prestige, labour and wealth to the polygamous husbands but it subjected the women under burden, male domination, competition and jealousy [11].

Clara Ayuk who was in a polygamous marriage affirmed that co-wives brought up their children separately with the proceeds they made from their farms and or petit trade. They also prepared family meals and husbands expected food in their dishes each day although they did not provide food money. The burden increased with the number of children most of them named after their mothers for purpose of recognition. Sometimes polygamous husbands manifested love towards the young and violence towards the older wives. This caused some of the women to move out of their marital homes to seek for better conditions elsewhere, many of whom resorted to petit-trading [12].

From the pre-colonial and colonial times women of the Mamfe communities were subjected to levirate marriages where upon the death of a husband the wife was forced to marry any of the brother in-laws. This was because a married woman was considered as someone bought to deliver children for the husband's family. Hence, it was preferable for a widow to remarry one of the husband's brothers than to continue giving birth to children with somebody of a different family. Some women were used to settle debts (female collaterals) [13]. The women owed absolute obedience to their husbands [14]. But many of them liberated themselves by divorce during the post-colonial era and joined their relatives, friends or sisters involved in trans-border trade and commercial sex.

In the event of husband's death, the widow was referred to as *Nsong* (meaning, a slave, in the Ejagham dialect) and *kenkwesse* in the Bayang dialect. Widows were most often accused of killing their husbands and sometimes beaten up by the *Ebongu* masquerade. They were also expected to sleep on bare floor and banned from neither talking nor greeting anyone with their hands. The ban was uplifted only after the performance of the widower's rites [15]. These tribulations were the root causes of female migration and the search for economic independence through trans-border trade in commodities and commercial sex that characterized the Mamfe women of Manyu (Cross River) during the post-colonial times.

Most girls were not given the opportunity to undertake formal education except the usual informal training provided by their mothers and grandmothers and aunts. The main reason was that the colonial teachers used canes, lashes or corporal punishment on school children. So, parents did not want their female children to be beaten [16]. They also believed that girls were good for marriage to generate wealth or pay debts. However, a few girls who fortunately worked as household servants under missionaries and those who migrated to towns and elsewhere achieved formal education. Parents who were enlightened because of their links with missionaries or travel experiences also sent their female children to school.

In the case of household responsibilities, the women cared for and raised their children with love. When a woman returned from the farm with her husband, the woman was compelled to go to the kitchen to cook the family meal while the husband relaxed over a glass of palm wine or chatted with friends [17]. The heavy involvement of women in agriculture and domestic duties suggest that women were subjected to double shift and worked more hours than men every day.

### III. MIGRATION

In the 1950s and 1960s some indigenous women of Mamfe travelled to different cities and towns within and out of Cameroon in search of better life. This was partly because the cash crop and monetary economy introduced by the colonial authorities led to the quest for money and better standard of living in emergent townships. Apart from the search for money to uplift their families, some Mamfe women moved out of their villages because they were not comfortable with the custom of early and forced marriages. As a result, some migrated to the coastal towns of Cameroon (Douala, Victoria, Tiko, etc) for prostitution since these areas appeared thickly populated as a result of the presence of foreigners and the existence of labour intensive plantations. Some moved to join their husbands who were Nigerians or working in Nigeria or in the Cameroon coastal plantations [18]. The women involved in prostitution at the coast lived in quarters popularly referred to as *Bayangi Quarters* [19]. Those who travelled abroad settled in Lagos and Kaduna in Nigeria, Gabon and the Island of Santa Isabell in Spanish Guinea (Equatorial Guinea). However, some of the women acquired valuable skills such as tailoring, hair and cloth dyeing, which they used to make money to help their families at home [20]. Those who learned tailoring became hand needle and hand sewing machine seamstresses, a few others went to school and later picked up jobs [21].

### IV. ROLES OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN THE LOCAL ECONOMY OF MAMFE, 1922-1961

Whereas migrant women from Mamfe manifested home connectivity; extending financial and material support to their families, women who remained in the village communities of Mamfe were very involved in activities such as artistry, agriculture, fishing, salt production, trade and more as examined in the subsequent themes.

#### A. Artistry

The Mamfe indigenes built their traditional houses in groups, and helped each other in turn. The men first pined and tied the sticks, before the women plastered the walls with clay and then the men returned to roof it with thatches. During each session they did so with songs of praises and this made them to work as one community. Furthermore, the *etanbong* (traditional mats used to sleep on) and *okperes* (dishes made using the calabash pod) in addition to *efakghas* (clappers

made out of Indian bamboos used during dance), *enon-otop* (locally made mud beds) and *nju-otop* (hand-plastered houses) were living marks of the women's art [22]. In most of the villages, some women groups raised funds by plastering the houses of those who hired their services. Dancing was also an important element of Artistry in the Mamfe communities. As a way of preparing dancers, a girl was selected and initiated into *nkim* (a cult dance) through circumcision and dance. For the case of *ndem* (another cult dance) the women were taught the sign language called *nsibirri*, meant to maintain secrecy. The *ngboandem* (a member and dancer of Ndem) was also taught a separate language called *essop-ndem* and a greater feast performed during her initiation, marriage and during death. [23].

Any girl selected to become a *Monikim* dancer was trained for six months within a room or house free from any distraction. The chosen lady possessed lustful buttocks and was well taken care of indoors (a period of fattening). During this time one of her aunty taught her cooking skills, various dances and songs and how to make the Ejagham designs used to decorate the face, body and ceremonial objects. The secrets of marriage were also revealed to her. All these gave her a special beauty, making her suitable for marriage. She was referred to as *moninkim*-meaning a child (member) of *nkim*. Upon graduation, various villages were invited for the unveiling of the siren from which the *moninkim* may also find a husband. When the *moninkim* swung her buttocks to her left and right everyone felt the jingling [24].

Unlike the *ndem* that animated only on special occasions, the *moninkim* danced quite often. The people gathered every evening to watch the *moninkim* learn how to dance and sing. Spectators rewarded her with gifts in kind or cash, which made the exercise lucrative. The young men hovered around trying to pick up young girls for it was usually a time of flow for the young people. Besides, the *moninkim* was like a role model that most young girls wanted to emulate. The *moninkim* disciple wore foot bells that jingled and produced a subtle and soothing music as she danced. She also had beads on her neck and a red hat with feathers and beads. She co-coordinately gyrate her hips to the musical rhythm played from locally made drums and flutes [25]. Some of the songs of the women cultural clubs were composed into modern music by male and female musicians alike for purpose of generating income in the post-colonial and post independent eras.

### **B. Fishing**

Fishing was dominated by men but some women also did fishing during the pre-colonial and colonial era, especially in the villages of Mbakang, Agborkem, Bache, Tali, Babong, Otu and Egbekaw. Fishing was done in the Manyu River and other surrounding streams. A C shaped elongated basket that narrows downwards was used to trap fishes. The C shaped structure of the basket made it difficult for the trapped fishes to escape the basket. There was also another type of fishing known as *Pocknyen*. [26]. This practice was carried out during the heart of the dry season when the level of the water table had dropped. Usually, an artificial barrier made of mud walls was erected on two sides of the stream to prevent water from flowing. The trapped water was drained, leaving the fishes on bare ground. Apart from fishing women were very involved in agriculture. [27]. The Fishes caught served as an important source of protein to many families and as such, it improved the dietary intake of the indigenes.

### **C. Agriculture**

Apart from fishing women were very involved in agriculture. Agriculture was and it's still the life wire of the local economy of Mamfe and Cameroon in general. Mamfe and the upper Cross River are endowed with abundant land which permits the practice of shifting cultivation. The crops planted corresponded with the hot wet climate of the forest zone. Clearing of the forest was usually done in the dry season, specifically in the month of November. Before the first rains of March, the cleared bush was sufficiently dry for burning; a practice which the indigenes strongly believed, does not only helps to clear off the forest but increases the soil fertility. This practice rather destroyed the soil nutrients, resulting to low yields in subsequent years making shifting cultivation highly emphasised. Women used hoes to till the soil before planting crops. The most important food crops grown were cocoyam, cassava, yams and plantains. Other crops like maize, groundnuts, pumpkins, melon, pepper and sweet potatoes were also cultivated. Pepper, maize, groundnuts, melon and pumpkin were ready for harvest after six months. Others like cassava, yam and plantains were harvested only after one-year period. In 1930, the Assistant District officer, of Mamfe, C.J.A.Gregg assessed the nature of female labour in agriculture in the Bayang community as follows:

*The plots may be continuous but are more usually separate, and the size of each one will be appropriate to the physical power of the woman for whom it is intended, women then piled branches against the bottom of the trees and set fire to them.... The women hoe grass, leaves and sticks into small heaps and cover them with mounds of earth. Seeds and tubers are carried to the farms by children, women plant, and weed and harvest*

*the annuals. Men prepare and plant the plantain suckers and women keep the feet of the plantain stools weeded and packed.... when a mother takes her baby to the farm and works with it bound to her back with a loin cloth'....all cleaning and hoeing is done by the women. Once a man's yam farm is prepared his labour ends, he never touches it again, and he never helps in the farms...except for a few days in each year, women bear the burden of the breadwinner [28].*

The foregoing report shows that women in the Mamfe-Ekok area were energetic and ensured the food sufficiency that characterized the local economy of Manyu. Foodstuffs were grown for family consumption but excesses were sold to neighbouring trading villages.

Although it is widely acclaimed that only men did the tedious task of clearing the forest, some women also cleared the forest. As far as the forest land was concerned, the right to ownership was based on the principle of possession, that is, whoever cleared a virgin forest automatically became the owner. For example, the following women were known to have cleared portions of forest lands at the time. They included: Mary Agborndong of Mfuni (married in Ntenako), Bertha Ntui Asong Asek of Besongabang (married in Obang), M' Ayuk-ngojo of Njeke-nygaleck (married in Ewelle), M' Agborndip-esibe, M' Abe Maga of Ewelle and a good number of women in Akwaya, Ubang, Babong and Upper Bayang cleared forest farmlands in the 1950s, which they owned. [29]. In addition, female labour was very instrumental in the production of palm oil, palm kernel and palm kernel oil which attracted both internal and external markets and companies[30].

#### **D. Palm Oil and Kernel Production**

Palm oil and kernel production was a major economic activity in most of the Mamfe communities during the pre-colonial and colonial era. Men aided by their ex-slaves, climbed the palm trees while the women processed the palm nuts. The women boiled the palm nuts and carried them in large baskets to nearby streams where they pounded and pressed the boiled nuts to extract palm oil. From the palm nuts the women manufactured not only the red oil for cooking but also kernel oil (*aku-mbang*) and soap. The palm kernel oil served as robbing oil while the soap was used to bath or wash dresses. The palm kernel shells were cracked and served as beads for necklaces [31]. The essence of female labour in palm oil production was revealed in a colonial intelligence report of the Banyang clan during the mandate period as follows:

*The Western and Southern Bayang produce palm oil by the common Nigeria boiling and pounding process but the people of the rocky country to the north and east use a combination of the hard and soft processes. Both methods involve more work for the women than men. Given sufficient number of bearing trees and female labour, one man might be able to produce 480 gallons of oil a year...more is sold but the proceeds are retained by their wives for their own or for household purposes, and in eastern Kenyang much is battered and the rest consumed...The estimated average sale of 32 gallons of oil a year at 6d i.e. 16/ a year refers to 2376 persons whose collective incomes therefore amount to 1900 pounds. [32]*

The above report indicates that without female labour the production of palm oil and consequently marketing would have been difficult. Hence women were the brain behind palm oil and palm kernel production in the Mamfe communities. This was the foundation for the formation of the Manyu Women's Palm Oil Cooperative during the post independent era [33]

#### **E. Salt Production**

Many women were involved in the production of salt using salt water. They got salt water from the Cross River and other streams and salt ponds. The women of Kesham, Baku, Afap, Mbankang, Ikimechi, Agborkem, Nsannakang and other villages produced salt for home consumption and commercial purposes [34]. Men and women moved to the streams or salt ponds with their *Nkem- Akan* (Calabash used to carry salt water). At the stream both men and women would strip off their loins or clothes and enter into water with the calabash. They turned the inside part of the calabash and pressed downwards to cover a hold at the corner of the stream where the salt water flows. Once the calabash was full, the salt water was filled in a big heating pot (*Abo-ngo*) bought from the British companies of John Holt and United African Company in Nigeria and Mamfe. This process was done for seven days until the heating pot got full. Girls and boys of the colonial era described the scramble for salt in Mbakang with the words *effelle ka Akan, mbok Ka nju* (in the *Ejagham* dialect) [35]. This means come and see men and women (in their nakedness), scrambling for salt and talk only at home.

The heating pot was put on fire under very high temperature for dehydration. The hot fire enabled the water to dry off leaving the dry salt apart. Later, the salt was tied in bundles using leaves (*gongo* leaves), dried using charcoal fire and smoked on the barn. The bundles of salts (*ekpok-akan*) were sold to neighbouring villages and strangers [36]. Thus, apart from agriculture and salt production, Manyu women at the time also participated in trade which was an important economic activity in the era before 1986.

### F. The Sewing Service

Before the introduction of European materials in pre-colonial Cameroon women in the Mamfe - Ekok - Ikom area were involved in sewing activities. The earliest seamstresses used needles and bear hands to make skirts out of European pieces of cloths. Also, during the colonial days, some women were fortunate to learn home economics and machine sewing in Nigeria and within the missionary set up. This group of women moved from one village to the other sewing clothes for people who were financially viable. For example, Abbe AMagga of Ewelle while in Lagos in the 1930s learned needle work and the hand-machine sewing. She was sponsored by a European sewed the dresses of many persons in Ewelle and other central Ejagham villages. [37]. Bertha Ntui Asong Asek complemented her Betolla drinks sales with the sewing profession she learned while serving as a house help to some Basel Missionaries. She moved within the Ubang villages sewing [38].

### G. Education and Skilled Jobs

Some Manyu women received formal education at a time when women were highly disfavored and marginalized. This was because of their links with Christian school missionaries and their closeness with Nigeria where formal education had gained grounds during the British Mandate and Trusteeship periods. In fact, as early as 1913 when the Catholic Mission opened the first school in *Ossing* village, a handful of Mamfe girls whose parents were catechist or close to the missionaries achieved elementary education. For instance in 1936, the Saints Peter and Paul Catholic School Okoyong registered 125 boys and 25 girls most of whom were from the Bayang and *Ejagham* villages [39]. Some of them attended standard 1 to 3 but could not finish because of fees. Yet, they saw the importance of education because they could read and write and they were always the clerks in village council meetings [40].

In fact, lucky girls from enlightened backgrounds went to school and ended up having white collar jobs not common for women in those days. Many of the educated women became nurses, teachers, lawyers and magistrates, and professors. For example, in the 1940s, Dorothy Obi whose father was a Catholic Catechist, attended St. Joseph Catholic School Mamfe and Queen of the Rosary College Okoyong (Q.R.C) in the 1950s. In the 1960s, she worked in the electricity company (SONEL), in Victoria, now Limbe. [41]. During this era Mary Mbi from Kesham because of her elementary education worked in the Community Development Office in Kumba while Mary Aja of Akwaya also worked in the Community Development office in Mamfe and Fontem. Nagi Besong also became a wardress [42].

The grooming of female students in QRC Okoyong is evidence of the fact that the education of the girl child which is a pre-requisite for the emancipation of the women and poverty reduction was experienced in Manyu Division much earlier than was the case in some parts of Africa. For example, the number of girls who attended public schools and those admitted in Q.R.C. between 1956 and 1961 was encouraging. This laid the foundation for the emergence of a female elite class that provided specialized and organizational skills in the post-independence era. For example, the 1967 Council Staff list for Mamfe Central revealed the names of some educated women holding duty posts in the 1950s (see Table I).

**TABLE I: SELECTED FEMALE STAFF OF THE MAMFE CENTRAL COUNCIL LIST OF 1967**

| Names of Female Staff | Year of Appointment | Post of Responsibility   |
|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Mrs.M.M. Ayuk         | April,1957          | Grade II Community Nurse |
| Mrs M.O. Besong       | April,1959          | Grade II Midwife         |
| Mrs.M.B. Mbi          | April,1959          | Grade I Midwife          |

Source: Selected from File No: DME 1639/S.c.Vol.I Council Staff Mamfe Central, 1967, Buea National Archives.

The presence of women in important jobs of life like nursing and midwifery, suggests that women of the Mamfe area actively participated in the development of the Mamfe community.

In the teaching domain, Sabina Ako qualified as a Domestic Science teacher in the 1950s. Comfort Ashu from Sumbe qualified as a teacher and taught in the famous Bilingual Grammar school Man'O Wa Bay opened in 1962 but later transferred to Molyko; Margaret Abunaw also became a teacher in the 1960s, Serah Johnson of Mamfe also qualified as a teacher and taught in C.K.C. Mamfe, Takang Abunaw Margaret was a teacher and retired as a National Inspector of education (now co-proprietor and Principal of Victory Bilingual Grammar School Etougebe Yaounde), Faustina Ojong Yembe and host of others. These women trained the labour force that provided services to the Cameroon nation at large and are remembered for their teaching skills [43].

In the health domain, Ajan Ekuri from Agborkem, after her primary education in St Joseph Catholic School Mamfe, did Nursing Aid in Victoria and worked as an auxiliary nurse in C.D.C.Mokonje and Tole. Regina Ako trained as a nurse in Victoria became a full nurse in C.D.C. Mokonje and Ekona. Therese Ndum and Christensia Nkiri Asam of Ndebaya were trained as nurses in Nigeria and Mamfe respectively in the 1960s. The late Professor Macmoli, an Ophthalmologist was evidence of the Manyu women contributions in the health domain. This group of women served the nation and helped to control the health, hygiene and sanitation of their community and families [44]. They also remitted back home and through various associations they made their contributions for projects in Manyu.. It also shows that they were among the earliest African women to achieve formal education at a time when women in Africa were subjugated by men.

### **H. Savings and Investments**

The ability of Manyu women to save and invest could be traced back to the pre-colonial and colonial days when village women formed cult clubs and age group associations known as *nkan* (in the Ejagham dialect). Through these associations they devised the system of group farming co-operatives, and local credit groups called *nchup* (in the Ejagham dialect). [45]. During the colonial days some women saved money in women associations and in time of need they obtained loans. However, several women practiced hoarding.

The women also saved money in the meeting groups to acquire meeting uniform clothes and construct permanent structures. For example, the famous enlightened women group in Mamfe in the 1940s and 1950s were the Glee Club and the *Semon-sengoh* (let's try and see). These forums brought together Manyu women in Mamfe to exchange ideas on developmental issues. According to the revelations made by Eta Bertha:

*The Glee Club women saved money and built a hall at the present day preventive entrance where the former customary court exists. The women of these associations practiced thrift and loans to help themselves. For example, Regina Ojange Obi took loans to increase her dry fish and Cray fish business while others took loans to send their children to secondary schools. [46]*

It is worth noting that several Mamfe women stored or hoard money within their households and in meeting associations. They used their hard earned savings to build houses and sponsor their children to school. In fact Manyu women's savings contributed to the economic boom of Mamfe because the women's savings and hoardings enabled loan grants, interest yields and investments in housing, trade and education.

### **I. Trade**

Trade was an important commercial activity in the Mamfe area on the eve of independence. Women were involved in both short and long distance trade. Short distance trade in Manyu included trade within the villages in Manyu, extending to her eastern neighbours. For example, a hard working woman like Alice Tabot Enow of Nchang revealed that she produced surplus plantains, vegetables and *garri* which she sold on market days. She explained that the money obtained was saved in *njangi* and used to sponsor her nieces in mission secondary schools like Queen of the Rosary College Okoyong. [47]. Trade transactions increased during periods of bumper harvest. The Mamfe women sold palm oil, garri, coconut, kernels and kerosene to their neighbours in the grassland region. Meanwhile, their husbands bought pigs, goats and fowls from the Mbo and Bangwa [48].

In the 1950s, Regina Ojange Obi moved to Victoria several times to buy dry fish and Cray fish for sale in Mamfe.[49] The trade in illicit drinks also imparted the life of many Manyu women in the 1950<sup>s</sup>. Retired Community Development officer, Eta Bertha, affirmed that her mother, Bertha Ntui Asong Asek sold *Betola* (an illicit hot drink like gin from Fernando Po) and used the money obtained to take care of her children [50]. Ako Sarah Agbor also affirmed that after the death of her husband (a Southern Cameroonian warder in Nigeria) she sold *afo-fup* (a hot drink usually prepared locally and sold illegally) in Hausa quarters-Mamfe, built her house and single headedly brought up her children one of whom became a Cameroonian Minister [51]

In fact, oral evidences proof that during the British Mandate and Trusteeship period in Southern Cameroons some Mamfe Women moved to Ikom-Nigeria to buy food items and detergents. Some of the women also visited the Ikom hospital. Women in the grassland areas of Akwaya were involved in the production of rice and trekked several miles with basins of rice on their heads to sell in Nigeria [52]. But, at this time The British pound sterling was the main currency for exchange in the 1950s and there were no border restrictions because the British ruled Southern Cameroon as part of Nigeria.

## V. CONCLUSION

This article reveals that both the natural and human environment predisposed women into artistry, fishing, agriculture, salt production, trade and other economic activities. Women were already instrumental in diverse socio-economic activities that contributed to the growth of the Mamfe communities prior to the independence and re-unification of Cameroon. Despite their patriarchy background, some women travelled farther in search of better life. Endowed with agricultural, trade, education and travel experiences, they worked for the survival, development and protection of themselves, their children, families and community. These experiences, plus imbedded potentials were passed onto the younger generations and became useful to the Mamfe women of the post independent era. Also, women in border communities with the same culture, language and ancestry such as the, the Keaka or Ejagham and Boki carried out mixed settlements and intermarriages. The study concludes that women were the backbone of the local economy of Mamfe, as in other rural economies in Africa including Cameroon. They sustained households; ensured food security and stirred the growth of the Mamfe economy. Hence, implementing gender-based policies would further enhance women's participation in the development of rural economies- a prerequisite to food security and poverty alleviation.

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