

PICTURES (IMAGES) AND CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER ECONOMIC ROLES AMONG THE NSO' OF CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT

Discourses on gender are most often very complex over roles. Scholars especially on Black African societies in many ways have attempted to demarcate such roles along the female-male divide. As interestingly as this knowledge construction is it has more or less been limited to textual representations which do not quickly display visual imageries of the specific and cross-edging roles that gender division of roles play in African socio-economic processes. It is in this context that with the aid of visual illustrations and using a qualitative historical research design informed by primary and secondary sources, this paper presents and critically examines the extent to which economic functions are shared and distinguished between females and males among the Nso' of the Cameroon Grassfields. It questions whether or not these roles from an iconographic point of view have remained resilient or whether the line is progressively blurring off to give room to more complementary trading of roles. It is argued that the overburdened textual literature on how females and males negotiate economic roles among the Nso could be quickly conveyed in visual symbols.

Keywords: Construction, economic, gender, pictures, images.

Introduction

Gender roles are the social and cultural roles played by males and females. Gender roles entail how people are expected to act, speak, dress, groom, and conduct themselves based on sex. These roles determine the distribution of males and females into social roles in society and consequently impact individuals' occupational choice, type of profession as a worker, spouse, parent, and many other aspects of life. Gender equally refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviors, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl, or boy as well as relationships with each other. The division of roles in black African societies was assigned in most cases strictly according to gender (Fomin, 2016:253).

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Before colonization, women had a position of influence in society. In African bicameralism, women participated in the running of public affairs within the framework of a women's assembly. This assembly sat separately from the men's assembly but the two shared influence and power. The resistance against foreign invasion and occupation of West African nations such as Dahomey (Benin) and the Yorubas in Nigeria is said to be a result of the women's assembly meeting at night (Murtala, et al. 2022). African bicameralism allowed the blossoming of both males and females and allowed the full use of both the feminine and masculine mind. Bicameralism is an ancient example of African democracy that put to full use the human resources of society in a manner that supported and encouraged everyone.

In Nso' like other African societies gender roles are nurtured roles and responsibilities conferred on either gender as a result of the social constructs of respective societies. For example, in Nso' activities like farm work were predominantly a male responsibility while in some exceptional cases, women shared work in the fields with men in land preparation and cultivation. Despite these women multi-task by exclusively taking care of household chores such as fetching water, grinding grains, cooking, and caring for the children. Women also carry out the role of overseeing the preparation and initiation of grown young girls into womanhood. To reduce the textual burden and construct gender economic roles among the Nso' of Cameroon, pictures (images) are used as one of the crucial sources in reconstructing history.

It is important to note that, there exists a lot of documentation on the history of the Nso' ranging from Gender and accumulation in Nso', the history of the Western Grassfield, Social readings in the Nso' history, and other documentations of history but we can attest that despite this literature there exist some gaps, especially on some certain aspects of

Nso' history which we can reconstitute through pictures like gender economic roles. Scholars, curators, and collectors have had an increasing interest in knowledge of early photography materials from West Africa galvanizing new multidisciplinary networks of scholarly research (Haney and Schneider, 2014:307). African photographers have been actively involved in writing and shaping the visual history of their continent since the mid-19th century (ibid). In Africa, Cameroon and Nso' in particular, memory construction has been revisited through monuments, museums, and archives. Despite the extraordinary popularity and circulation of photography in Nso', it has not yet received significant attention. It is in this regard that this study sets out to construct gender economic roles among the Nso' of Cameroon through pictures.

Oral tradition holds that after a quarrel over succession to the stool of Rifem Tinki who reigned on the Tikar throne failed to name his successor Mveing who succeeded Tinki by brutal force sent all rivals away. On living, Nchare one of the rivals informed his sister Ngonnso' who then sought to follow him. Nchare secretly left at night and traveled to River Mbam where he constructed a hanging bridge. When he saw his sister and followers approaching him, he hurriedly crossed and destroyed the bridge. (Fanso, 1989) Faced with difficulty in crossing the river, Ngonnso' and her suite then went upstream along the bank of the river. After settling on different locations, they finally settled on their present site in Kumbo. The Nso' people established the cultural/traditional roles and norms that governed the Nso' Fondom. In this light, one of such roles was based on gender given that men and women performed varied tasks. The central objective of this study was to examine the centrality of pictures/images as a repository to construct gender economic roles among the Nso' of Cameroon. The research therefore seeks to present a historical and visual understanding of gender economic role among the Nso' of Cameroon through pictures.

Pictures and the construction of gender economic roles among the Nso'

The pre-colonial period witnessed the emergence of several polities in Nso'. This involved the diverse forms of contribution to economic growth by both men and women who were fully committed to the advancement of the cause of the traditional society. Men and women engaged in various activities, especially in the economic sector which were very beneficial to the Fondom and its citizens. Some of these activities included agriculture, craft work, smelting, hunting, short and long-distance trade, pottery, and livestock production. Women in pre-colonial West Africa were not homogenous groups that lived a static life relegated to domestic spheres. Women in Nso', just like men contested, negotiated, complemented, and transformed their societies through their diverse roles in economic life. This paper seeks to examine how these economic activities were carried out according to gender roles and how pictures serve as a repository for preserving these memories.

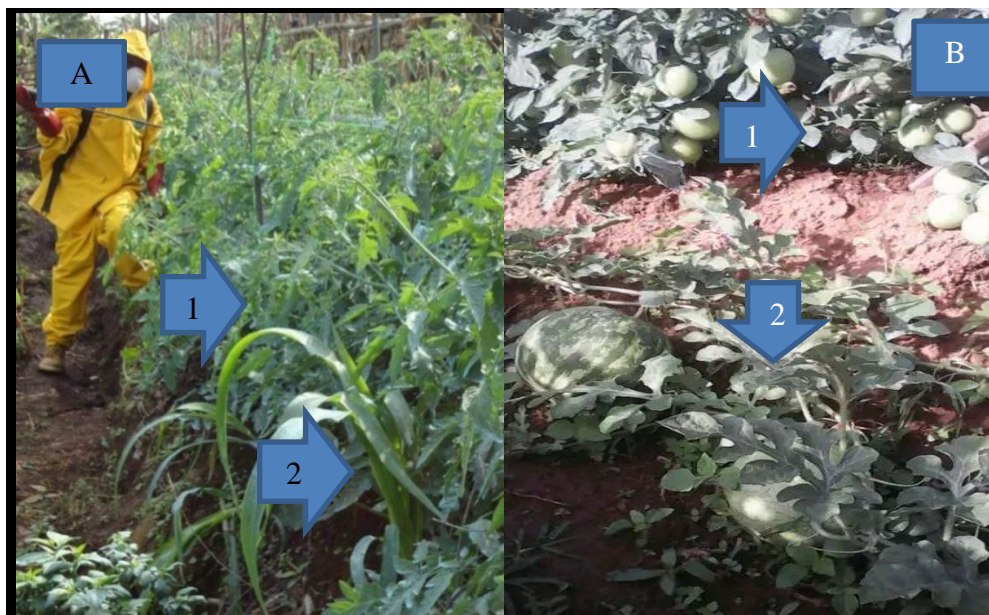
Agriculture and gender economic roles in Nso'

The production of food products within local communities has always been a priority and necessity for rural and urban livelihoods in Cameroon. This has made rural communities be held in high esteem based on their services and aptly capabilities to feed the national population and combat food insecurity, malnutrition, and poverty. At the center of agricultural production in rural communities were the women farmers (Betombo, 2018:5).

Agriculture being a predominant economic activity in Africa was practiced by men and women who had shared roles. In the Nso' culture, the division of labor was/is broken down along gender and community lines. Men owned the fields while women owned the crops (Gohen, 1995:73-78). Crops harvested were sold by women in marketplaces and the proceeds

were given to the husbands. The cultivation and production of food crops required a huge workforce. This workforce was provided by men and women farmers. Nso' women have been called the "backbone of the Nso' country" because of their farming occupation (ibid, 63). Cash crop production has continued to be of prime importance in Nso' carried out by both men and women. In some cases, mostly men were involved in this production and even in situations where women were involved the profit realized was given to their husbands who decided how the money realized would be used. Among crops produced for commercial purposes are tomato crops. In its cultivation, a system of mixed cropping is practiced and is done along gender lines.

Tomato cultivation has been a great economic activity in Nso' contributing to economic development. In its production, other crops are planted on the same land. Some of the crops planted alongside tomatoes included; watermelon, potatoes, and maize. Tomato produced in Nso' has not only been consumed or sold in Nso' but exported to Bamenda, Douala, and even to Nigeria (interview with Bongla 2022.). This activity has been dominated by men. While men owned the tomato on the farm, women planted maize on the same land for home consumption and commercial purposes (figure 1). This contributed to a high standard of living as it generates income (interview with Nsah, 2022). A picture of this activity is demonstrated below which was captured by a farmer for his personal memory reconstruction.

Plate 1: Mixed Farming System in Yer/Nso' 2020

Source: Yufenyuy Amos private photo collection, 2020.

Plate 1 shows a system of mixed farming in which tomatoes (arrow 1 picture A) and maize (arrow 2, picture A) were cultivated on the same piece of land. On the other hand, plate 1 picture B also illustrates tomatoes cultivated on the same land as watermelon. In its cultivation men are largely responsible for nurturing the tomato crops. It should be noted that women equally took part in tilling the soil in preparation for planting. Given that women are mostly involved in taking care of children and in most cases taking them along to the farm it becomes dangerous when it comes to caring for tomato crops as such it is dominated by men. This is because tomato cultivation requires serious care. To protect tomatoes against insects, insecticides are sprayed on the plant. In doing this people put on an overall/jacket and nose mask to protect themselves against the chemicals from the insecticide which is harmful when there is direct contact with the body. Some of the insecticides used are believed to be poisonous as such during this exercise children are not allowed beside the farm (interview with Yufenyuy, 2022.)

The picture calls to memory the income generated from tomato farming. Tomato cultivation generated other economic activities like basket weaving. Some people specialize in producing baskets used by farmers as their source of livelihood. It also elucidates the gender division involved in this cultivation as men owned the tomatoes while women in most cases owned the maize which was planted either for home consumption or for commercial purposes. It is believed that after tomato cultivation the land becomes very fertile because of the insecticides used as such women plant maize, potatoes, and beans after tomatoes have been harvested. The results is always experienced through high yields produced. Agricultural activities in Nso' attracted stakeholders to get involved in promoting this economic activity.

Stakeholder's involvement in agriculture

In promoting agriculture, the Mayor of Kumbo council organized a yearly agricultural show in which farmers came in their numbers to showcase their healthy products. Important dignitaries like the Fon of Nso', ministers among others were invited to this event. People from neighboring villages and towns attended this event as it was an opportunity to sell and buy goods. During this show prizes ranging from money, trucks, watering cans, hoes, machetes, and crop seedlings were given to those who had the best products. Men and women participated in the show. Below is a picture demonstrating the 2013 agricultural show in Kumbo. It was captured by Bulami for his collection.

Figure 1: Agricultural show in Kumbo 2013

Source: Bulami Edwards' private photo collection 2013

Figure 1 illustrates the various dignitaries; the Fon of Nso', the Mayor of the Kumbo council, and the ministers' representative as they moved around to examine the products farmers brought. The lady holding a book in her hand took stock of the various items brought. Some of the items included Beans, Potatoes, and cabbage among others. The Nso' people are noted for their high production of beans, potatoes, maize, and groundnuts among other crops. Some villages like Mbiame and Vekovi are noted for potato farming. It is generally believed that every household in Nso' produces Maize and Beans either for home consumption or for commercial purposes. This was done by Men, Women, and children (interview with Shafe, 2022).

Events like Women's Day celebrations were another avenue in which women farmers were encouraged to carry out this economic activity. In this regard, singing competitions, dancing competitions, football/handball competitions, drama, and other competitions were organized. Through this medium the best groups that performed in

singing, dancing, and drama were given prizes worth; seedlings, insecticides, and agricultural tools like wheelbarrows, hoes, machetes, and farming boots among other things. All these were efforts made to promote agricultural production. A picture of this activity has been preserved by Joan one of the beneficiaries of this activity. It was captured by Ntani's photos.

Figure 2: The Bongkisher women's group Ndzemboh and the prizes they won on the women's Day celebration, 2010



Source: Banla Joans private photo album.

The photograph is a demonstration of the prize awards given to women in Jakiri during the 2012 Women's Day. The content of the prizes included, seedlings, wheelbarrow, insecticides, and other items. Represented in the photograph are Bongkisher women's group Ndzemboh. Two signboards ("A" Bongkisher women's group Ndzemboh and "B" Unity Farming Group Mbokevu) illustrated some of the groups that won the prizes. Through these initiatives, farmers experienced an increase in crop yield and had enough for consumption and commercial purposes.

Women sometimes constitute themselves into groups and cultivate on each other's farms. Like in Nso', the rural women farmers of Bombe Bakundo formed co-operate labour groups in which they performed rotational co-operate labour (Betombo, 2018:6). They cultivated all the different farmlands of the rural women farmers (members only)

depending on the set table. This form of labour donation which equally existed in the pre-colonial and colonial eras in Bombe Bakundu manifested especially during the weeding farming exercise (ibid). This practice is very common in Nso' with well-organized groups formed for this purpose. Figure 4 demonstrates a group of women who came together for this purpose. The picture was collected by Bulami for his personal memory recollection.

Figure 3: Kisoo(hoe) women group of Tabah Kumbo 2013



Source: Bulami Edwards' private photo collection 2013

Figure 3 elucidates the communal life of women in Nso' as they constitute themselves into groups to help each other. The photograph was snapped at the Kumbo council field during the 2013 agricultural show. The women's organization network called *Kisoo* (hoe) is an example of the working relationship that exists in Nso. In groups like these women share ideas on farming methods, tools to be used, and the type of manure needed, among other things (interview with Biy, 2022). Men equally have their groups but their groups are often concerned with other activities other than agriculture. Men in most cases constitute themselves in groups and take part in activities like the construction of each other's

farms, and the transporting of harvested maize from their member's farms. A picture of this activity was captured by Dule for his personal memory preservation in 2020.

Plate 2: Group of young men preparing to transport maize, 2020



Source: Dule Christian's personal collection, 2020

Plate 2 demonstrates community life practiced in Nso' during maize harvesting. While women constituted themselves to harvest, men of all age groups constituted themselves to transport the maize to the farmers' homes. During this process, women prepare food for entertainment while men prepare palm wine for the same purpose. Plate 2 (picture A) is an illustration of the joy they feel during such moments while (picture B) indicates men eating to get energy to transport the maize. This practice has stood the taste of time. Despite the replacement today with motorbikes and vehicles transporting the maize, men still join together in arranging the maize in bags for easy transportation. It is important to note that for women, the practice of coming together to harvest from each other's farms continues to date.

The solidarity of working together in some cases is expressed when men and women constitute during community. In Nso' there exists a position of *Yeesum* who is in charge of organizing women to work on the royal farm. *Yeesum* here is usually one of the *Fon's* wives or a princess who

has been bestowed the powers to take care of royal farms. According to Banlanjo, Yeesum was put in place to ensure the sex division of labour in the Fondom. To prevent Famine and feed the nation, the Ayeesum vee Nto' were joined by the wives of Nshiy se lav (ex-nwerong pages and palace attendants) to supervise work on the Fon's Farms. Their main duty was centered on guarding against hunger and famine in the Fondom and specifically the palace. They organized people to provide labour for clearing (done by men), cultivation, planting, weeding, harvesting, and storage of crops (Banlanjo, 2013). Aside from working on royal farms, men and women equally come together for community work. This is illustrated in Figure 6. The picture was captured by Kemkia an amateur photographer for his personal use in 2013.

Plate 3: Group of Men and Women working in farms in Mbiame village 2013.



Source: Kemkia Christian's private photo collection, 2013.

Plate 3 (Picture A) constituted a group of women who organized themselves to work on each other's farm as they believed in the idea of many hands doing lighter work. The photograph expresses the gender role of women in childbearing and upbringing demonstrated in picture "A" as the woman sitting is holding her baby even on the farm. Plate 3 (picture B) is also demonstrated by arrow 1 pointing at the woman

carrying the baby on her back. Arrow 2 is placed in the middle of three men among others who partook in this community work. The picture jogs to memory the idea of communal life which was a common practice among the Nso'. As demonstrated by plate 3 picture B, in some cases women and men cultivate crops together. This was/is manifested during community work. Community work is common in agricultural production which is often considered as the backbone of the Nso economy. It is also manifested through road construction, the building of bridges, and community halls among others. During this activity, the gender role of women is food preparation while men bring palm wine respectively.

Palm wine production is another economic activity in Nso'. It is solely a men's activity from preparing the palm bush for the collection process, collecting the wine to its distribution (interview with Tata, 2022). Palm wine is very significant in Nso's tradition as it is used for various purposes.

Palm wine production as an economic activity

Palm wine production an important economic activity in Nso' continues to generate a lot of income. Mensai, a village in Nso' is noted for the production of the best palm wine. This is an economic activity practiced by men. In the past, it was believed that almost every male person in Nso' was involved in palm wine production. Some people hold that once a male child was of the age 3-5, the father gave him a palm tree to plant so that by the time he become a youth, it will be ready to produce palm wine (interview with Fai, 2022). A picture of palm wine production captured by Bulami an indigene in Nso' involved in palm wine production. It was captured for his personal memory collection.

Figure 4: Process of palm wine production

Source: Buhlami Edward's private collection, 2022.

In producing palm wine, the palm tree is shaped and arranged to prepare an easy flow of palm wine as seen in Figure 4. Women generally are excluded from hard work like this which explains why palm wine production is a male gender occupation. In collecting palm wine, a traditional calabash is used to aid in collection from the palm tree a stick pinned beside it to prevent the calabash from falling. Dry plantain leaves or clean grass is equally used to rap the mouth of the calabash to prevent dirt from entering the wine and equally to support the calabash to remain glued to the tree. A machete seen in Figure 4 is used to cut and arrange the area from which palm wine was extracted. The photograph refreshes the memory of the process of palm wine collection. This activity has been transferred from generation to generation. The calabash used gives a cue on traditional utensils.

Aside from using calabash in collecting palm wine, in the past, it was the main utensil used in transferring palm wine after collection. Palm wine is significantly used in performing sacrifices/rituals, paying the bride price, entertaining visitors, and most importantly, it is very significant

when visiting the *Fon*, either by men or women. Men were/are expected to carry palm wine in calabashes when visiting the *Fon* what is always called “*ki mbun Fon*” (paying homage to the *Fon*) as it is a significant gift for the *Fon* in the Nso’ tradition (interview with Tardzenyuy, 2022). The machete calls to memory another economic activity (iron melting) that has gone extinct in Nso’.

Gender role in iron smelting as an economic activity among the Nso’

Iron smelting was an economic activity in Nso carried out by men. Nkar village was noted for the production of iron tools. Tools such as the gong, hoe, sword, axe, knife, and spears among others were highly demanded making it the focus of production. As a warrior society, the Nso people produced swords that were used in fighting wars. The gongs were used as an instrument of communication. It was used in Cameroon villages as a tool for communicating messages from the *Fon* in many areas often done by town criers who hit the gong conveying messages to communities. Today this economic activity is extinct and can only be seen in pictures and from remains of iron ore in areas where smelting took place. A picture of this activity has been captured by the author for memory recollection.

Plate 4: Types of gongs produced in 2023



Source: Authors’ collection 2023

The view of the gong calls to mind communication tools used in the past. Seeing a gong with cowries automatically implies it is a royal object. It equally signifies the social stratification that existed in the use of metal tools. According to Nso tradition, objects bearing cowries are used exclusively by royals. Apart from the gong, agricultural tools like spades, and hoe among others are produced. It is important to note the gender economic roles in the smelting technology as only men were the sole producers of smelting tools. They contributed greatly to hunting which was another economic activity as they produced hunting tools. Spears and traps were produced by blacksmiths which aided hunting which is a significant economic activity in Nso' which could be constructed in pictures. Hunting was/is another economic activity in Nso' through which gender roles were/are portrayed.

Gender roles in hunting as an economic activity in Nso'

Hunting in the past was one of the most common traditional activities in Nso'. It is an important economic activity carried out by Men. It was/is usually conducted in small and bigger groups of 3-12 men of different ages depending on the type of Animals being hunted. Hunting was done specifically for consumption and commercial purposes. In the Nso' fondom there was usually a royal hunt in which men hunted for the *Fon* on the *Fon's* reserve forest. Hunting as an economic activity in Nso' has a great impact. It was/is a significant contributor to humanity. The supplementary meat and materials from hunting included protein, bones for implements, sinew for cordage, fur, feathers, rawhide, and leader used in clothing and footwear (interview with Nsai, 2018).

Hunting as an economic activity had great impacts in Nso'. One of the impacts of hunting was the founding of Oku. Oku was founded by Tata the prince of Nso'. He was a prominent hunter who was widely known for his hard work and was supposed to be the next *Fon* at Kovvifem after his

father but when he went hunting on returning home his father was missing (Dead) and his younger brother Jing crowned *Fon*. Out of anger, he left Kovvifem to Babessi where he continued hunting. Her mother followed him because he was the only one supplying her meat but died in a cave in the Ngongba forest where she was buried. His contact with the Ntul and his good relationship with the people made him recognized as the *Fon* leading to the founding of Oku.

One exceptionality of hunting in the Nso' Fondom was the royal hunt in which men hunted for the *Fon* on the *Fon's* reserve forest. Before the hunting activity took place, priests (traditional religion priests) performed rituals to determine climatic conditions for the period or days chosen for the hunt. These rituals varied according to the species hunted or the season the hunt was taking place. It was done at the hunting shrine in the palace to cleanse the hunting site from any ill lock and to invoke the spirits of the ancestors to guide hunters during the expedition and for a successful hunt (interview with Nsaiboti, 2022). The Manjong warrior society was in charge of this royal hunt. During the hunt, Nso warriors were stationed at various points and the forest was burnt to chase animals out of their hiding places for easy hunting (interview with Yeika, 2022). The fons' hunt group called the *Ngwah* was led by the *fwim* section. These sectors planned periods when the warriors went out for hunting expeditions and all animals hunted were brought before the *Fon*. *Jwim* literally means hunting in *Lam Nso'*. The forest in areas like Mbokam hills was one of the *Fon's* reserved bushes for hunting. A photograph of one of the evidences of a successful hunt in Nso' is demonstrated in Fig 5. It was captured for memory reconstruction purposes in 1967.

Figure 5: Evidence of a successful hunt, 1967

Source: Delavmfu's personal collection, 1967.

This photograph is evidence of a successful hunting activity. In the photograph, we have Fon Sehm Mbinglo III, two hunters, and the leopard that was presented to the *Fon*. The photograph is said to have been captured in 1967. In Nso tradition, big animals like the leopard caught during hunting either by individuals or the *manjong* were/are presented to the *Fon*. The photograph provokes questions like who are the people in the photograph, why was the animal tied, and why are they standing beside the *Fon* without a cap? Answering this, as a warrior society, the *Manjong* which was/is in charge of providing the royal household with firewood and meat organized royal hunts in the *Fons* reserved forest. As demonstrated by the photograph, in 1967 they went hunting and the result was the life leopard caught and brought from the Kitiwum area to the palace and presented to *Fon* Sehm III aka Taa Mbinglo.

It should be noted that big animals like leopards were/are eaten only by the *Fon* (interview with Yenla, 2022). It was an honour in the past for any group of hunters to present such animals to the *Fon* who in return organized big feasting for the people. Due to the honour accorded to those who hunted such animals, the hunters in Figure 9 filled with joy could not go home to change their dress and put on the caps as such rushed

straight to the palace. It is important to note that in Nso' tradition, it was/is a crime for a man to come before the *Fon* without a cap but in scenarios like this, the *Fon* could permit the hunters to present their achievements even without the caps. The *Vkiy Ntoh* (palace wives) in this regard were in charge of preparing corn fufu and serving the wine brought by palm wine tappers to the people for the feasting. Women therefore despite not involving in hunting activity, play their role by cooking and serving the meal.

Again, the fact that the leopard is eaten by the *Fon* explains why its skin is used on/before the throne. This calls to memory how Mbiame came about as a separate *Fondom* in Nso'. Oral tradition holds that after the prince of Nso migrated because of a succession dispute, during hunting, a leopard was caught and after contemplation, they could not eat it given that the prince had not been made *Fon*. As such, the next option was taking it back to Nso' to give the *Fon*. Caught up in this dilemma given the circumstances they left they saw it as humiliation and refused to take it to the *Fon*. To make the prince eligible to eat such animals in the future they decided to make him the *Fon* of Mbiame. It is important to note that today hunting as an economic activity has generally diminished in importance with the advent of large-scale domestication and animal husbandry.

Animal husbandry is the branch of agriculture where animals are reared, bred for meat, fiber, eggs milk, and other food products. The Nso people engaged in animal husbandry like poultry farming. Poultry farming here is a form of animal husbandry in which birds such as chickens, ducks, turkeys, and geese are reared to produce meat or eggs for consumption and commercialization. In the case of Nso' most chicken is bred in large quantities.

Almost every household in Nso' is involved in fowl breeding to supplement diet or for commercial purposes. The fowls are allowed to stay around the

compound to fend for themselves. Agric fowls are equally kept in large quantities by those who were involved in poultry farming for commercial purposes. This one involved the use of chemical manure and sophisticated feed and needed constant care. This led to the employment of personnel who specialized in taking care of it. These fowls like the case in Bafut were reared with concentrated feeds composed of grains and animal by-products to give protein content (Neba, 2018). Fig 10 is an illustration of a poultry farm in Kumbo captured by Nyuylem for advertisement purposes in 2015.

Figure 6: Illustration of poultry farming in Kumbo, 2015



Source: Tata Jude Nyuylem's personal collection, 2015

This activity provides meat supplements as well as fertilizer for crops. It is carried out by both genders. Manure from animal doing is used in crop cultivation. Its use has been adopted by many farmers as it reduces their expenditure on chemical fertilizer. Again, organic fertilizer apart from being expensive is equally not environmentally friendly. Chemical fertilizer is equally considered harmful to the human system making farmers rely more on organic manure from animal remains (interview with Tata, 2022). Apart from its supplements, this activity equally provides employment opportunities for those who engage directly in poultry farming as well as those who diverted from selling bush meat to

the chicken business. Some indigenes from Nso' opened big poultry farms and employed workers to feed and take care of the animals.

Bee Farming is equally an important economic activity in Nso'. It is a male-dominated activity. Men engage in weaving bee hives and placing them in areas suspected to attract bees.

Figure 7: Bee Farming in Nso', Shisong 2020



Source: Dule Christian's personal collection, July 10th 2023

Figure 7 is an illustration of a bee hive placed on a tree. Given the photograph, one will ask why the bee hive is placed on the tree, the material used in providing the hive, and the reasons for choosing the particular place. In bee farming, farmers take into consideration areas with flowers around, where bees sometimes circulate, and other things. In producing the hives, they use bamboo which is divided into two and nailed in a round shape. Due to the tedious nature of the labour involved in producing the hive, looking for a suitable position for the hives, and the dangers involved in honey harvesting made the economic activity to be dominated by men. Again, most often men are in a better position to locate a better place to place the bee hive since they engage in hunting and are versed in the bush. All this makes bees farming more favourable to men than women. Apart from the profit obtained from honey, bee farming is also a source of employment for those involved in the weaving of bee hives (interview with Kemkia). Bee farming is a source of employment as some people specialize in the production of hives. Mbiame has been noted for its production of natural honey. All economic activity

in Nso' attracted commercialization as people needed markets to sell what they had to get what they needed resulting in trade.

Trade as an economic activity

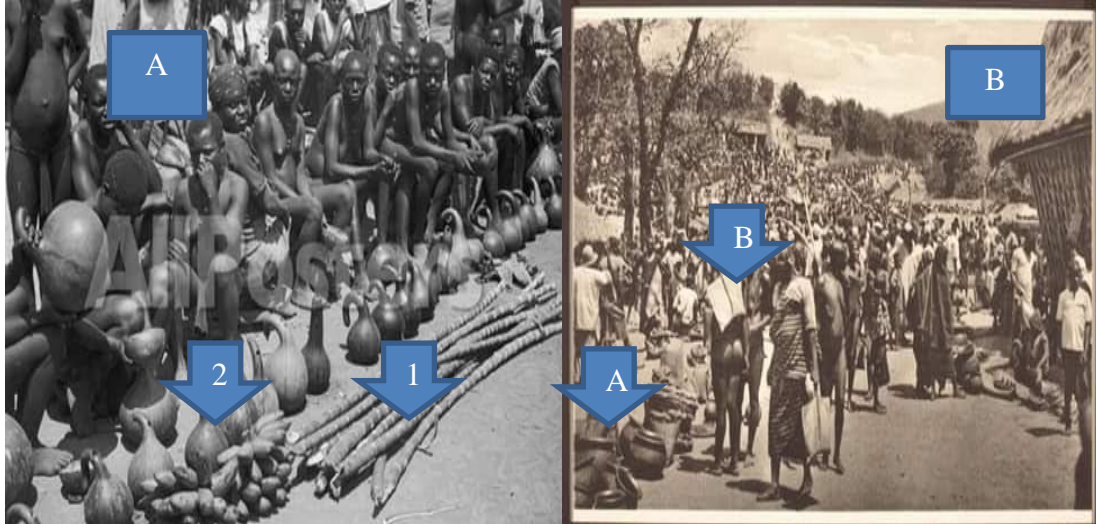
The fact that man cannot possess all items in life resulted in trade. Trade therefore constitutes an integral part of the economy in Nso'. In the past trading activities were constructed in the form of long and short-distance (local) trade. This form of trade brought about gender division of roles. While men are mostly involved in long-distance trade, women are more concerned with short-distance trade. Women concentrate on local trade within the communities. Women's trading is exclusively for foodstuff and a few handicraft products (McCall, 1961). More valuable commodities are handled by men and in most cases in the past it was sold through long-distance trade.

Local trade

Local trade is trade practiced within short distances. In the Nso' Fondom markets are created in which members of the communities gathered to sell their goods. It is not limited only to the Nso' people as foreigners equally come to buy and sell their products. Small markets exist in almost every village with specific market days. The Nso' main market is located at Mveh central market. The Nso' Fondom has eight traditional days. Within these days, each village decides on a market day suitable and convenient for its members. At the village level, villagers exchanged and sold their goods to purchase the ones they needed. Women trade mostly in these markets due to their domestic occupation of the home. The biggest market day in Nso' *Kaavi* (a day in Lamnso) is reserved as the main market day. It attracts customers from all over the country and internationally. Proceeds obtained from sales by married women were handed to their husbands who decided how the money would be spent

(Gohen, 1995). Figure 8 is an illustration of a local market in Nso' at Squares.

Plate 5: Women at the market in squares Nso', 1930's and 50's



Source: Dule Christian's personal collection, 1930's and 1950's

From Plate 5, women could be seen to have dominated the market which confirms the assertion that women were more involved in local trade in the past as men and young boys concentrated in long-distance trade. From the view of the photograph, women could be seen (plate 5, A) sitting beside their commodities. Among the commodities are calabash, bananas, and sugarcane. This tells the story of the goods produced within that period. The commodity dominating the market as seen is calabash. It calls to memory that before the introduction of maize, the Nso' people had egusi and pounded cocoyam as their traditional meal. It is important to note that in the cause of producing calabash, egusi is removed from the calabash. Plate 5, B equally showcases more women in the market. The arrow "A" points at clay pots which brings the puzzle of clay pots produced in Nso'. It should be noted that "Kaavi" (a day in Lamnso) was/is the biggest market day in Nso' and continues to date to attract traders all over the country which explains why people are selling clear pots. The arrow "B" also points at a traditional bag in Nso' which served several purposes. It was produced by people of all genders. Besides local

trade, there was long-distance trade which was a male-dominated activity.

Long distance trade

Long-distance trade practiced in the past in Nso' was of great importance and contributed to economic growth and better living standards for those engaged in it. Kola nut was the highest trading commodity in long-distance trade. Kola nut was exported to Babessi, Bangolan, Ndop, Fouban, and Banyo (NAB, 1972). The increase in kola nut demand especially in northern Nigeria prompted Nso' traders to trade their kola nut in northern Nigeria because of the enormous profit derived from it (NAB, 1934). This benefit derived from the trade made it a major commodity for long-distance trade for many years. Fanso-Free has it that by 1922, according to the assessment reports, every quarter and hamlet in Nso' cultivated kola but they were found to prosper most in the sub-villages of Nkar and Melim and Meluf as well as immediately around Kumbo itself (Fanso-free, 2013).

Figure 8: Men on their long-distance trade journey



Source: Delavmfu's personal collection, 1972

Two men can be seen in Fig 8 carrying goods. It was believed they were on their way to the market to trade their Kola nuts (interview with

Delavmfu, 2023). Kola trade in Nso' came into existence in the 1920's. Lineage compounds were marked by Kola nut trees. In Nso' the kola nuts harvested from lineage head compound trees were handed to the Shufai or Fai of those compounds. Due to its profitability, men of ages 30 and above engaged in long-distance trade with kola nut. Commenting on the kola nut trade long before the 1920 E.M Chilver holds that "Nso' appeared to have been the largest producer originally" (Chilver, 1967). The production and sale of kola was the most important source of income in Nso'. This was partly due to the good harvest and favorable prices that existed in the northern regions. In March 1973, Kiyan won the first prize in kola production during the agricultural show in Buea (Kongnso, 1974). This demonstrates how valuable kola nut was in Nso' and the level with which it was produced.

Conclusion

The study proves that pictures have been a medium through which memories are preserved and could be relied on in constructing gender roles in Nso'. The study focused principally on how scenes from pictures could be used to bridge the gap of textual burden in constructing gender economic roles among the Nso of Cameroon. Through the pictures examined, gender economic roles in Nso' are seen to be complementary. It also indicates that despite the complementarities, each gender has its limits regarding some economic activities for instance men own the land while women own the crops but decisions on how the proceeds from the land are used depend on men. Through photographs, gender economic roles of agriculture, hunting, smelting, and calabash production are constructed. Photographs of hunting activity which was a male-engaged activity served as aid memoire in bringing to memory the instances that led to the founding of Oku and Mbiame. It should be noted that pictures assist in our understanding of events by capturing scenes, presenting reality, making history, documenting events, preserving memories, allowing us to witness at a distance, and serving both records and

services for writing history. Despite the importance of pictures as historical repositories, their interpretations most often are critical and do not immediately translate a holistic view of the historical narrative associated with the picture. This therefore necessitates complimentary oral versions and written sources to build up a more comprehensive account associated with the picture for better understanding.

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