

A large, dark, stylized letter 'W' watermark is centered on the page, serving as a background for the text.

WOMEN OF THE
GRASSFIELDS

PHYLLIS M. KABERRY



Frontispiece

A Woman of Zhoaw Village, home from the farm.

WOMEN OF THE GRASSFIELDS

Focusing on the chiefdom of Nso' in the Bamenda 'Grassfields' of British Cameroon, *Women of the Grassfields* is an extremely significant work of anthropology and gender studies. Phyllis M. Kaberry's fieldwork was prompted by the conditions in Bamenda in the 1940s when, despite considerable natural resources, there was underpopulation, very high infant mortality, and the status of women was low. By examining the social and economic status of women in the region, Kaberry produced a rich and engaging study of Nso' politics and kinship as well as the texture of both men's and women's lives.

First published in 1952, the book is central to the development of anthropology in its concentration on women's lives and the situating of gender in the larger context of local culture and the particular historic conditions. Kaberry, a true participant observer, also advanced the methodology of ethnography by giving her informants a real voice.

Mitzi Goheen's new preface explores the book's continued relevance since its first publication and its influence on later research and writing on Cameroon for scholars from a wide range of disciplines.

Phyllis M. Kaberry (1910–1977) was educated at the University of Sydney and was reader in Social Anthropology at University College London for twenty-six years. She is the author of *Aboriginal Woman*, also available from Routledge.

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ABORIGINAL WOMAN

Sacred and profane

Phyllis M. Kaberry

WOMEN OF THE GRASSFIELDS

A study of the economic position of women
in Bamenda, British Cameroons

Phyllis M. Kaberry

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Marshall Sahlins

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Phyllis M. Kaberry

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PREFACE TO NEW EDITION

It is truly gratifying to see Phyllis Kaberry's important book republished in a series that will make it available and bring it to the attention of a wide audience. First published in 1952 by Her Majesty's Stationery Office, *Women of the Grassfields: a study of the economic position of women in Bamenda, British Cameroons* has long been essential reading for anyone interested in the Grassfields of western Cameroon. Kaberry's careful and detailed ethnography has provided critical background for research and writing on Cameroon for scholars from a wide range of disciplines. (History: Chem-Langhee (1984, 1989); Engoteyah and Brain (1974); Fanson and Chilver (1990), Lafon (1982), Mzeka (1980), Price (1979), Rowlands (1979); Fine Arts: Koloss (1992); Political Science: Bayart (1979), DeLancey (1989), Jua (1989); Economics and Development Studies: Koopman (1989), Lewis (1980); Anthropology and Women's Studies: Aletum and Fisiy (1989); Ardener (1975), Diduk (1989), Fisiy and Geschiere (1991), Geschiere (1986), Goheen (1996), Guyer (1981), Nkwi (1987), Rowlands and Warnier (1988), Shanklin (1999), Wendi (1990)). This list is far from complete, but it does give some insight into the importance of this work. In addition to its importance to research, *Women of the Grassfields* also provides a significant and detailed local history. At the time of its first publication and even today, the Nso' people see this work as an accurate account of the time; Kaberry provides enough detail and frank analysis to make her perspective (and those of her informants) clear. When I first went to Nso' in 1979 I was impressed and surprised by the accuracy of Kaberry's ethnography; after almost twenty-five years of doing field research in Nso' I am still in awe of her work. This is not only because she was a brilliant ethnographer. *Women of the Grassfields* contains perceptive insights into theory and practice that in retrospect seem prescient, and locate this book as a pioneering work in anthropology and women's studies. It is a pleasure and a privilege to introduce a new edition of this classic ethnography.

In the mid-1940s, Phyllis Kaberry traveled to the highlands of western Cameroon, commissioned by the International African Institute to write a report on the social and economic position of women. After a survey of the

entire Bamenda Grassfields, she settled in the chiefdom of Nso' to begin research. By this time, Kaberry was already an accomplished and distinguished scholar, an anthropologist highly respected both for her scholarly writings and for her careful, detailed field research. With extensive publications and substantial field research experience in Aboriginal Australia and New Guinea, Phyllis had an established reputation as a leading scholar of Oceania, the region that composed the focus of her university studies.

Although she had not done field research in Africa, her reputation as a scholar and her research on women made Phyllis Kaberry an obvious candidate for this project. Her academic training and credentials were impeccable. She took her first degree in anthropological studies with an emphasis on history at the University of Sydney. Here distinguished anthropologists of Melanesia and Aboriginal Australia mentored her, most notably Raymond Firth, Ian Hogbin and A.P. Elkin. She completed a Master's degree with First Class Honours, and by 1935 had two papers published in *Oceania*. In 1936, at Firth's suggestion, she moved to the London School of Economics to prepare her doctoral thesis under the supervision of the eminent anthropologist of Melanesia, Bronislaw Malinowski.

By 1939, Kaberry had completed her doctoral thesis. It was published almost immediately under the title *Aboriginal Woman: Sacred and Profane*. In this book, she argued that the then typical view of Aboriginal women as outside the sphere of the sacred was not an indigenous one. On the contrary, she proved that women in Aboriginal society held important sacred and ritual positions and participated in creating sacred art. This work emphasizes the need to focus more field research on women's subjective lives and perspectives. It also demonstrates the importance of sustained long-term field investigation to discern local or indigenous taxonomies and paradigms. Kaberry expands and develops these themes in *Women of the Grassfields*.

Phyllis Kaberry's investigations in Australia and New Guinea, which in addition to her book included a number of published articles, foreshadowed two additional themes that would become central to her field research in Cameroon. First, she was deeply concerned with the natural environment in its relationship to human populations. Second, she was adamant that local people be given their own voice and not be objectified as "text." This theme remains salient in current discourse on anthropological field research, but it was not a widespread concern in the 1940s.

As noted earlier, Phyllis Kaberry's field research on women and her distinguished publishing record made her, from the perspective of the International African Institute, a perfect candidate for the job. However, to her, this charge to travel and do research in Africa initially seemed less than perfect. Her research interests in the 1940s were in New Guinea, and she planned to do field research there after World War II. It evidently took some hard talking and strong persuading before she agreed to take on the African project. Her decision to take on this research project and make the journey to

what was then the British Mandate, shortly to become the United Kingdom Trust Territory, of Southern Cameroons was to have far-reaching and lasting effects. Some of these are important to our understanding of the significance of Kaberry's field research and writing, and the importance of *Women of the Grassfields* in shaping future research in a number of fields and disciplines.

The first is a personal and professional shift in her primary research focus from Oceania to the highland Grassfields of western Cameroon. This region and its peoples remained an abiding passion and research interest for the rest of her life. She made two fourteen-month field trips to Nso', the first in 1945–6 and the second in 1947–8, after a brief return to London to present her report to the International African Institute. She was determined to spend as much time as possible in the Grassfields and stayed closely in touch with a number of her Nso' informants, many of whom had become close friends. Kaberry was promoted to a Readership at the London School of Economics in 1951. She now had to take on all the accompanying obligations of teaching and administrative duties this entails. Determined to revisit the Grassfields, in 1958 when she received a Leverhulme Fellowship, she returned to Nso'. This time Elizabeth (Sally) Chilver, an Oxford historian anxious to study colonial administration in place before it disappeared, accompanied her. Phyllis's passion for the Grassfields was contagious, and Sally too became enthralled by the region. Thus began a long collegial friendship and a collaboration that produced twelve jointly written articles between 1960 and 1974 (see "Publications relating to the Grassfields by Phyllis Kaberry and Elizabeth Chilver" in the Bibliography). Kaberry and Chilver also collaborated in the research and writing of *Traditional Bamenda*, a locally published book that became a classic on the Bamenda Grassfields (Chilver and Kaberry (1968)). This book was the result of their concern that an adequate basis for social and historical studies of the region was needed, one that would be made available locally. *Traditional Bamenda* is remarkable in its breadth and detail. In this book, Chilver and Kaberry cover the entire Grassfields in what is today the Northwest Province of Cameroon. The Grassfields constitute a distinct culture area composed of a number of chiefdoms of varying size and complexity. Overall the Grassfields chiefdoms described by Chilver and Kaberry range from the small village chiefdoms of Widekum to the expanding conquest-states such as Nso'. While these chiefdoms are linguistically and ethnically diverse, they share a number of features, including the centrality of chieftaincy, the importance of men's secret societies, and an emphasis on title and rank as significant political attributes. *Traditional Bamenda* records singularities and commonality in these diverse chiefdoms in detail; it accomplishes the aim of the authors to provide a comprehensive local history. When one considers the terrain covered and the diverse languages spoken in the region, this is a truly astonishing work.

It is not difficult to see why Phyllis Kaberry developed an attachment, even

a passion, for her research in Nso' and for the region in which it is situated. The high Grassfields Kaberry entered in 1945 is an area of proud beauty and sweeping landscapes. It is easy to fall in love with the sheer beauty of the region. Here, mountains rise to heights of 1,700 meters, plunging into deep valleys and ravines. During the rains, outcroppings of granite and dark thunder clouds stand in stark contrast to the sun shafts dancing on the tall grass as it bends and sways in the winds of a gathering storm. In the dry months a thin layer of red dust hangs in the air and colors the landscape. During the rainy season waterfalls cascade down the sides of the steep hills, becoming more sedate with the changing season. The spectrum of greens covering the hills and valleys is various, from the light green of the high grass on the hillsides to the deep, rich forest green of raffia bushes lining the streams in low-lying ravines. However, the breathtaking vistas and spectacular scenery do come at a price. There are few flat places and even today few decent roads. To walk about on the slippery red clay paths and roads in the rainy season is to assault one's ankles and knees and at times to put one's life in jeopardy. With astute accuracy, local people speak of walking as "trekking." Phyllis must have covered hundreds of miles of steep terrain on foot, trekking to every corner of the region from village to village before she settled in Nso'.

Despite the physical difficulties, she fell in love with the region, and Nso' people, men and women alike, loved her. From the beginning of her first research trip she was an energetic and committed participant in Nso' life. Deeply engaged with the lives of the women she was studying, Phyllis became an advocate for them with both the traditional and colonial authorities, all of whom she was unafraid to confront. This book as well as her subsequent publications reflect her determination to help women farmers fight both the destruction of their crops by cattle and the men who turned a blind eye to their problems. She was concerned, and rightly so, with the early signs of the commodification of land, a practice that went against Nso' land tenure rules and undermined women's access to farmland. She used her influence with the colonial office to promote the appointment of Elizabeth O'Kelley as Principal Adult Education Officer for women. Ms O'Kelley introduced a number of labor-saving devices; the most important of which were hand-operated corn mills women could afford and control. Dried corn is hard and difficult to grind into the corn flour that is a staple of the Nso' diet; the introduction of these corn mills helped alleviate much hard work. Phyllis continued her advocacy role throughout her time in Nso'; she saw herself as a peer and a friend to the Nso' women. She accompanied them to the farm and participated actively in all aspects of their life.

Phyllis Kaberry's enthusiasm for the Bamenda Grassfields in general and the chiefdom of Nso' in particular, and her commitment, even devotion, to the people there formed a central leitmotif of her research from the mid-1940s until her death in 1977. Her productive collaboration in field research

and writing with Elizabeth (Sally) Chilver was another. Their joint work to support both scholarship on Cameroon and Cameroonian scholars has remained central to networks of communication that span three continents. They actively encouraged a number of Nso' people to pursue a higher education; several of these now teach at the University of Yaounde. Local scholars and local histories were also encouraged and supported. There is now an organization called The Kaberry Research Centre whose central mission is to encourage the writing of local histories and collect writings on the Grassfields to make these available for research.

The immense value of Kaberry's work to research on the Grassfields and beyond in Cameroon should be clear by now. *Women of the Grassfields* also became an important work for feminist writing and development research. Its early focus on women, and its implicit message that gender roles are contextual, socially constructed and negotiated as well as central to understanding African society *writ large* have become central tropes of women's and gender studies in Africa and beyond. While examining "women's role" in Nso', Kaberry found that women's role or position or status cannot be understood outside of the overall social institutions and political economy. *Women of the Grassfields* originally was to be a study of the "position of women." Kaberry took the work far beyond this narrowly conceived project. This book is a comprehensive historical ethnography in a regional setting describing the structure of Nso' politics and kinship as well as the texture of both men's and women's lives. It is one of the earliest studies of the social construction of gender demonstrating on-going negotiations over the meaning of gender roles. At a very early time, Kaberry points out the necessity of situating gender (or women's roles) in a larger context constructed by both local culture and the particular historical contingencies. Here we see in some detail how the meaning of gender is often contested and always negotiated. Kaberry is one of the first anthropologists to demonstrate women's agency. We see this in her earlier work in Australia. It becomes a central trope of gender roles in *Women of the Grassfields*. Much of her subsequent research in Cameroon continues this theme. It is no surprise that her work has become a cornerstone of feminist research and writing on Africa and beyond.

Kaberry takes gender into the heart of our understanding of Nso' political economy; *Women of the Grassfields* clearly transcends her original charge to study "women's position" in the Bamenda Grassfields. This book is significant in a number of ways, most of which are mentioned above. Its early focus on women's lives and Kaberry's arguments about the social construction and centrality of gender in political discourse may be central tropes in feminist studies today, but these were unique ideas at the time this book was written. The same is true of her methodology. She insists on giving her informants a voice and does not view them merely as "text." Her dedication to long-term field research is based in part on her insistence that it is critical to learn the local language and discern meaning in local categories and taxonomies. She

was a true participant observer with a keen eye for detail. And she was devoted to the people of Nso' among whom she lived and worked. Phyllis Kaberry received a number of awards in recognition of her outstanding field research and academic achievements, including the Rivers Medal and the Wellcome Medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute. But her most prized honor was bestowed by the *Fon Nso'* in 1958 when she was given the title “*Yaa woo Kov*” (literally translated as “Queen of the Forest”). In her eyes and those of the Nso' people with the bestowing of this title she became a “*wir Nso'*,” a true Nso' person. Phyllis Kaberry was a classic (and classy) anthropologist who set high standards for field research and scholarship. All of these attributes combine to make *Women of the Grassfields* a classic work.

Mitzi Goheen
2003

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I would like to thank Shirley Ardener for her help with this preface, and Sally Chilver for her great help, guidance and friendship over the past twenty-five years.

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(Except where otherwise noted, this Preface was based on unpublished notes and conversations with Elizabeth (Sally) Chilver and Shirley Ardener and on my own fieldnotes.)

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(c) Epitomes and transcriptions of Kaberry's and joint field notes on particular topics have been compiled by E.M. Chilver for MESIRES and local research groups. These include compilations on Nso' clans, installation rituals (Nso' and Mbot), on particular groups (Tang-Mbo, Bafreng, Big Babanki, some Ndop chiefdoms) and a report to the Bali History Society.

PREFACE

IN 1944 the International African Institute was consulted on the question of organising a field study of the peoples of Bamenda with special reference to the position of women. Its attention had first been drawn to this matter by Dr. Margaret Read, a former research Fellow of the Institute, following enquiries made of her by the Chief Commissioner, Eastern Provinces, during her visit to Nigeria as a member of the Commission on Higher Education in West Africa. The need for such research had been reported by the Cameroons Development Corporation, and shortly after a despatch was addressed by the Governor of Nigeria to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, in which he drew attention to conditions in the Bamenda division of the Cameroons under British mandate, where, despite considerable natural resources, there was underpopulation, and social obstacles to opportunities for economic development and educational advance were apparent. Among factors thought to be in part responsible for the situation were a very high infant mortality rate to which social factors might be contributing, and a low status of women.

The Governor transmitted with his despatch two reports, one by a lady education officer and one by the Senior Resident, Cameroons Province, in which the need for appointing more women educationalists was urged in order to assist the adaptation of a backward society to changing conditions, and in particular to assist the people in meeting the new forces which were impinging on them. The Governor pointed out, however, that educational workers could not hope for even a moderate degree of success without the assistance of a social anthropologist to provide information which would enable them to guide and assist the people aright. The first essential, therefore, was a study of the general social and economic conditions of the people themselves. He therefore requested that a grant might be made from the Colonial Research Fund to enable such investigations to be carried out.

The Colonial Social Science Research Council, to which the matter was referred, recommended after consultation with the International African Institute that direction of the research should be entrusted to the latter and a grant for this purpose was made to it from the Colonial Research Fund.

The Institute was fortunate in securing the services of Dr. Phyllis Kaberry, who had already carried out anthropological field work in North-Western Australia and in New Guinea, and had given special attention to the status of women among the peoples studied. She had held research and teaching fellowships in the Universities of Sydney and Yale and her publications included a book based on her Australian studies entitled *Aboriginal Woman* (Routledge, London, 1939). In January 1945 she left for West Africa and worked for an initial period of 18 months among the Nsaw and other peoples of Bamenda. Returning to England in July 1946 she presented an interim report on her findings and in January 1947 resumed her field studies for a further period until April 1948.

The present work embodies Dr. Kaberry's full report on the particular aspects of social life which she was invited to study. This is, however, provided within the framework of a comprehensive account of the social and economic life of the peoples of Bamenda. One of its most striking contributions at once to the theoretical analysis of social relations and to the factual knowledge needed by administrators is to be found in her study of the system of land rights among

the Nsaw and other peoples where the village communities are linked in a centralised political system. She shows first how the titular ownership of chiefs is, in the routine of production and consumption, traditionally quite subsidiary to *de facto* control by the head of a kin group, and that both are subject to strong customary obligations, breaches of which evoke opposition, non-co-operation and defection that are held to be morally justified. She shows too that, though in relation to the rest of the tribe and the chief, land is regarded as held by the men of a lineage under the authority of their head, yet in the domestic context women, as wives of these men, exercise real control over land use by virtue of their rights as producers over the crops they grow. Any proposals or actions directed towards changes in the allocation and use of land or in farming techniques must reckon with this series of rights which are at each level limited by moral standards and practical restraints.

Dr. Kaberry reaches her more general conclusions, however, after a vivid presentation of the daily life and manifest attitudes that she observed during her long residence in Bamenda villages. The reader, whether scholar, administrator or layman, will appreciate both her account of actualities of life in the Bamenda highlands today and her study of the cultural forces, traditional and new, that underlie them and are helping to shape the future.

DARYLL FORDE,
Director, International African Institute.

INTRODUCTION

AT the beginning of 1945 I undertook, at the request of the Government of Nigeria, to make a survey of the economic and social position of women in the Cameroons Province and in Bamenda in particular. For the reasons which I have already discussed in an earlier report, my work was eventually confined to Bamenda.

The terms of reference for my research were broad, but how broad was not at first, I think, generally recognized. The activities of the Bamenda woman are many-sided and cannot, without distortion, be abstracted from the context of tribal life and placed in a cultural vacuum. Their investigation entails, primarily, a study of economic, kinship, religious and political institutions. The need for the same breadth of approach holds equally for the presentation of the results of research. In other words, ones starting point is not the women but an analysis of a particular aspect of culture. On that basis one may then proceed to examine in more detail the way in which the structure and organization of rights, duties and activities within a group of institutions affect the position of women. All this has implications for the type of generalization that can be formulated and for the planning of anthropological fieldwork in the future.

In the first place, this handling of data yields a series of statements on the role of women in particular segments of tribal life. Generalizations at this level are valid, significant, and of value to those concerned with the problem of raising the status of women and promoting their welfare. An attempt to go beyond this and, by a species of anthropological or moral arithmetic, to decide whether the position of women in general is high or low, or good or bad is, in my opinion, likely to prove profitless. I have made this point with almost monotonous regularity in all my reports. It is repeated here because one still finds in the questionnaires of such bodies as The United Nations Trusteeship Council a demand for broad generalizations on the position of women in such and such a territory. Clearly, the replies to such questions are at best superficial, at worst distorted, and almost invariably contradictory. Let me give two examples which I found embedded in the Government files. A missionary who had spent many years in Bamenda asserted that "the women of this Division have achieved a remarkable degree of freedom and independence contrary to notions abroad". Another missionary of a different denomination but also of considerable experience of the country stated: "The status of women is alarmingly low. The main causes of this are considered to be the dowry system and polygamy—especially in its extreme form as practised by local chiefs, village heads and prominent men of the tribe". As a further contribution to this diversity of opinion it is not inappropriate to cite those given me by some women of Nsaw. "Woman is an important thing, a thing of God, a thing of the earth. All people come forth from her." And this statement—also made by the wife of a polygynist: "A woman is a very God. Men are not at all. What *are* men?" Sometimes the answer to this rhetorical question was—"worthless!" Again, in response to my inquiry why people mourned four days for a woman and only three for a man, the men offered the explanation: "A woman is one who bears the people (of the country). Women are very important. Women are like God, because they bear children." It should be noted, however, that to the people of Nsaw even God has his limitations and is not omnipotent.

Obviously some of the commentators had in mind certain activities or customs which they regarded as an index of the general position of women. But, if allowance is made for this and the judgment is taken to refer primarily to a particular practice such as marriage payments or polygyny, it is still of little value unless it is shown to be based on a detailed knowledge of the institution concerned and its interlocking relationships with other aspects of tribal culture.

With the economic aspects of polygyny and marriage in general I shall deal later in this book.¹ It should be stated at the outset, however, that it is not the task of the anthropologist to produce a policy, despite some tendency to regard him as a species of medicine man called in to diagnose a disease in the body-social and to prescribe a cure when traditional remedies have failed! And this brings me to a point which was raised earlier in connection with the planning of anthropological research. It should be clear from the preceding discussions that there is no short cut to the study of women. Generalizations on their status and roles are the end-product of an intensive process of investigation into the social organization or into a particular set of institutions of a tribe. In the framing of projects for research much would be gained, I think, if the terms of reference recognized this fact and indicated more precisely the scope of fieldwork entailed. In other words, instead of defining a research project as "a survey of the economic and social position of women", I would substitute for this "a survey of the economic and other aspects of social organization". Or, if the object of particular interest were the position of women in marriage and the family, then the terms of reference should be broadened to include a study of marriage and the family. This is not an attempt to expunge or to exclude the women from the picture. On the contrary, it seeks to provide a broad and reliable basis for valid generalization on their role and status by ensuring that all the relevant factors will be taken into account and that their particular problems will be placed in a perspective where integral relationship with others are made evident.

As far as the presentation of my own material in this book is concerned, I have confined myself to an examination of the economic position of women, not merely because the terms of reference for my research laid emphasis on this aspect, but because problems in this field are in some ways the most pressing and the most difficult of solution. They affect not only the women but are bound up with the role of agriculture in the economy, the system of land tenure, pastoral and trade development, the introduction of new occupations, and so forth. Women, as wives, mothers and daughters, produce most of the food and spend the greater part of the day on the farm. In this sphere of activity they enjoy considerable independence and have well defined rights; and it is in this sphere that there has been less change than in others. For example, the influence of Missions, Native Courts, and especially of Reviewing Officers is modifying marriage law in such matters as freedom in the choice of a spouse, custody of children and divorce,—questions with which I hope to deal in another publication. But Christian women, not to forget the pagans, still continue to farm and still accept in principle and largely in fact the traditional division of labour between the sexes. The placing of agriculture in the foreground for detailed analysis reflects, then, its importance in the life of the women. Changes introduced in this field will affect not only the status and position of women in marriage and the family, but will radically modify the economy and the general standard of living.

¹ This report was submitted as a manuscript to the International African Institute at the end of March 1951, and a copy was later sent to the Government of Nigeria. Since then the text has been revised for publication in book form: Chapter I has been shortened and some of the later chapters have been re-arranged and reorganized

In what is to follow we shall endeavour to approach problems along broad sociological lines. We shall be concerned with ecological conditions,—the type of natural resources, the traditional means of exploiting them, the range of economic needs, and the bearing of all such factors on the division of labour between the sexes. In discussing land tenure we shall not be content to list the women's rights to usufruct, but shall view it as a functioning system. Nor can this subject be dissociated from the more general problems which affect not only the women but all members of the community,—namely, soil conservation, the return for labour in terms of harvest yields, and the extent to which these have to be supplemented by the purchase of extra quantities of food.

Finally, while analysing as fully as possible particular disabilities under which the women labour, account will also be taken of the contribution of the men and its implications for the functioning of the economy as a whole. For, in the long run, the alleviation of the lot of the women is bound up with the welfare and general improvement in the standard of living of the community, of which they form but a segment.

Before bringing this introductory section to a close I should like to discuss the conditions under which my fieldwork was carried out in order to indicate the nature, range and limitations of the material I collected and the extent to which it constitutes a reliable basis for generalization.

Originally it was intended that I should make a survey of the Cameroons Province, that is Bamenda, Mamfe, Kumba and Victoria Divisions. But after almost a year in Bamenda I realized that a survey of even a selected number from its 23 Native Authority Areas would demand all the time I had available and, ideally, much more. An attempt to cover the other Divisions would yield little reliable data for valid generalization. Such a survey would have fallen into the category of tribe-trotting, but not scientific fieldwork. With the consent of the Government of Nigeria, I therefore spent my second tour in Bamenda.

The reasons for my choice of Nsaw (Banso) as a centre for intensive study have already been discussed in earlier reports and require but brief mention here. The Tikar are the largest ethnic group in Bamenda and are subdivided into a number of independent chiefdoms, differing in size, language, political structure, and kinship organization. Nsaw is the largest of these and, like most of the Tikar, is patrilineal whereas Kom, an area which I seriously considered as a centre for intensive investigation, is matrilineal. Secondly, the political structure of Nsaw still retains many of its traditional features but other aspects of the culture have been and are being modified under the influence of Missions, the Administration, schools, the expansion of trade, medical services, the presence of immigrant Fulani and Hausa, and transients who travel the main motor road which passes through the capital, Kimbaw. There is a Roman Catholic Mission in the charge of European priests at Shisong, some 2 miles from Kimbaw, and also a maternity clinic run by the nuns at the convent closeby. The Mission has its school at Shisong and a smaller one in Kimbaw, where the Basel Mission also has a school in the charge of an African headmaster. There is a hospital and dispensary with an African dispenser, a U.A.C. store and a large market.

I reached Kimbaw on the 4th April 1945 and, by courtesy of the Basel Mission, stayed until the end of October in their Resthouse which was in Veka'akwi area and within about 3 minutes' walk of the nearest compound. At my request the Administration kindly seconded one of the Court Messengers to act as my interpreter, guide, philosopher and friend; and for the first three

months I had lessons in Lamnso from Benedict Somo (an ex-schoolteacher) his wife, and another woman. Father Stokman lent me grammar which one of the Roman Catholic Missionaries had compiled and it proved most helpful. At the beginning of November I trekked north, but did not spend much time in Nsungli as, according to the *Intelligence Reports*, its social structure and economy appeared to be similar to that of Nsaw and I was anxious to reach the forest peoples to the north in Mbembe and Mfumte. After 7 weeks I returned to Kimbaw, and I spent about a month there before visiting the outlying village of Vekovi, where I had reason to believe fewer changes had occurred in the traditional system. In March I spent a week in Djottin-Vitum, a conquered village of Nsungli extraction, and then passed on to Kom where I had three weeks. An illness cut short my stay in the Bafut N.A. and I returned to Kimbaw at the end of April 1946. I remained in Kimbaw until the end of June, but lived in a hut in one of the larger compounds (hut 13 in Mbonyaar Compound of Sketch Plan, App. D).

In July I returned to England for leave and to write my Preliminary Report; and I reached Bamenda again in January 1947. After a fortnight's stay in Kimbaw, I began a long trek on foot through Ndop to Bamenda Station; and then, from Nyen (in Meta) through the other Widekum tribes of the west and so north to Aghem and Fungom. Again, I planned my survey on the basis of information in the *Intelligence Reports*, and selected the village of Teze in Ngie for a month's fieldwork before spending brief periods in the other tribes. Dates and length of stay are given in an Appendix, but I did not reach Bamenda Station until August. After a week in Bali I went back to Kimbaw, with the object of obtaining some quantitative data—budgets, farm measurements, and recording of diaries. I took over the hut which I had occupied in my first tour, and lived there from September to March 1948.¹

Fifteen months, all told, were spent in Kimbaw and other villages of Nsaw, but unfortunately the period was not a continuous one. After my first tour there was a long interruption lasting almost fifteen months before I returned to Kimbaw, and this proved something of a linguistic setback. However I was able to work alone with the women none of whom, with two exceptions, had even a knowledge of Pidgin-English. I spent most of my time on the farms and in the compounds; I never summoned people for formal interviews to my house, though many came to visit and gossip. As far as possible I avoided "paying" for information, but from time to time I made presents, usually in kind—salt, cloth, trinkets, soap, tobacco, and so forth—to those who assisted me and who became my friends. Needless to say gifts poured into the house, mostly in the form of farm produce, fowls, eggs and fruit, and for these I made a return. Where I was recording budgets of the individuals concerned I made a somewhat reluctant note of our mutual transactions!

Much of the material in this book is drawn from my Nsaw notebooks, and most of the African terms and texts are in Lamnso. I have used the orthography recommended by the International African Institute with one or two exceptions, namely *wv* for bilabial *v*, and *fh* for bilabial *f*. Most final vowels in Lamnso are palatalized and the sound sometimes approaches the German *ich* and sometimes *y*. Both are recorded in my notebooks since individuals varied in their pronunciation, but in this text I have employed the phoneme *y*. There are two *o* sounds: *ɔ* represents the vowel as in "hot", and *o* the vowel as in "caught". For the spelling of place-names I have adopted the current anglicized version: Nsaw for *Nso*, and Kimbaw for *Kimbo*.

¹ Full details of my itinerary are given in Appendix A.

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It is difficult to know where to begin and where to end in making my acknowledgements to all those who gave me assistance and hospitality during my fieldwork. First of all, however, I should like to express my profound sense of gratitude to the Government of Nigeria and the Colonial Research Committee for making possible the opportunity and privilege of undertaking research in Bamenda. The investigation was financed by a grant from the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund and was carried out under the auspices of the International African Institute. I am deeply indebted to the Director, Professor Daryll Forde, for his advice, encouragement and unfailing interest in my work, and to Mrs. B. E. Wyatt, Secretary, for her many acts of kindness while I was in the field and here in London. I should also like to thank Professor Margaret Read who, after her return from Nigeria in 1944, first whetted my curiosity about the Cameroons. Over a luncheon table, strewn with maps, she "sold" me Bamenda in an hour. I say "sold", but after a few months in the Cameroons there was never a more voluntary and enchanted captive to the landscape and its people than myself.

Before leaving London I also had the good fortune to meet Miss G. Plummer (then Deputy Director of Women's Education Nigeria) and Mr. W. E. Holt (then Senior Education Officer, Cameroons), both of whom gave me valuable information and advice. The Department of Education, Nigeria, was particularly interested in my research in relation to its bearing on problems of girls' education and I became its special *protégée* while in the field. I should like to express my thanks to Mr. R. Davidson (Director of Education), Mr. T. Baldwin (then Deputy Director), Miss G. Plummer, Mr. W. E. Holt, Mr. B. Cozzens, Miss A. Spence, Mrs. J. Sandiford and other members of the Department for their help and hospitality.

In the British Cameroons Government Officials all co-operated to facilitate my research, to organize transport, and to extend generous hospitality. By anthropological standards my two tours were long, and without the friendship and encouragement of Officials, and not least the opportunity for stimulating discussions, I should not only have been deprived of many pleasures but should have lapsed into that state of staleness which is apt to beset even the experienced fieldworker after the first eight or nine months. I should like to record here my gratitude to all those with whom I came into contact, and in particular to Mr. A. Bridges (then Resident of the Cameroons Province) and Mrs. Bridges, Mrs. P. G. Harris, Mr. W. Aston-Smith (S.D.O., Bamenda), Mr. C. Mayne (then S.D.O.), Mr. Brayne-Baker (S.D.O.), Mr. F. Kay (then S.D.O.), Mr. J. Stapleton (then A.D.O.) and Mrs. Stapleton, Mr. W. Newington (S.D.O. Kumba) and Mrs. Newington, Mr. J. Pedder (then S.A.O.); Mr. S. E. Gwilliam (S.A.O.), Mr. J. McCulloch (then Vet.O.), and Dr. D. McLaren (S.M.O.).

During my first seven months in Kimbaw and again for three months in 1946 the Basel Mission most generously allowed me to occupy their comfortable Resthouse. I thank them and the other Missionaries of Bamenda who gave me hospitality and who performed many acts of kindness. My nearest European neighbours were the members of the Roman Catholic Mission at Shisong, two miles from Kimbaw. The Rev. Father Stokman took a keen interest in my work, lent me a Lamnso grammar which he had compiled, found my first Lamnso teachers for me, and at all times was ready to help and advise. Mother Camilla and the other nuns at the convent were my very good neighbours and made my existence almost a sybaritic one with their regular gifts of vegetables, strawberries and cream. Last and not least my warmest thanks are due to Mr. and Mrs. Paul Gebauer of the

American Baptist Mission for their kindness and the pleasant days I spent in their company.

My greatest debt is to my African friends and acquaintances in Bamenda without whose courtesy, trust and co-operation my research could not have been carried out. They endured my questioning and my "satiating curiosities" about every detail of their lives with forbearance, humour and patience, and never made me feel an intruder. To single out individuals from among the hundreds whom I met is perhaps invidious but, inevitably, there were people in Nsaw whom I came to know well over my long stay in that country and who greatly assisted me in my work. I should like to express my thanks to the *Fon* of Nsaw, the Queen Mothers, the Councillors and Court Officials; to Mr. Vincent Lainjo (then N.A. Treasurer), to my interpreter and friend, the late Benedict Tata, and to my first teachers of Lamnso, Mr. Benedict Somo and his wife Christina Lambiif. I lived in the Veka' akwi area of Kimbaw and now take the opportunity of thanking my friends at Djem, Mbonyaar, Kinga, Menggu, Ka and other compounds who saw me almost daily over many months and always made me welcome. Mr. Sylvester Ndjodzeka kindly lent me his house at Mbonyaar and he, the *Fai*, and other members of the compound made me feel at home and one of the family. Finally, I should like to record my appreciation of my two stewards, Mr. Michael Keng (of Oku) and especially Mr. Daniel Mbinkar Tatah, who not only looked after me but helped me in my work.

If this book throws some light on the problems of the women and contributes in any measure to our understanding of their values, courage and wisdom it will have gone a little way towards discharging my debt to them for the confidence and friendship which they so generously extended to me.

P.M.K.

London, 1951.

Chapter I

THE PEOPLES OF BAMENDA

DISTRIBUTION OF MAIN ETHNIC GROUPS

BEFORE we examine the economy of Bamenda and its bearing on the position of women, a somewhat detailed account of the history, ethnic character and distribution of the peoples is necessary since very little information has been published. The total population of the Province as given in the Annual Report for 1948 is 301,000; but this is estimated from figures for adult taxable males, the last census having been taken in 1931. The people are negroid, with possibly a northern strain in some of the Tikar tribes. They vary considerably in physique; but, in general, those of the uplands appear to be taller, wirier, and of better build than those of the forest, where malaria, filaria, yaws, goitre and elephantiasis are prevalent.¹

Apart from the analysis of the Nkom language by the Rev. Father Bruens,² very little linguistic research has been done in Bamenda. The Basel Mission has translated the New Testament into Bali, and the Roman Catholic Mission has made some study of the language of Nsaw and produced a catechism in Nkom. The languages of Bamenda have hitherto been classified as Benue-Cross River (or semi-Bantu) and the Tikar placed in the Bafumbum-Bansaw group. But, in a recent set of articles dealing with a reclassification of West African languages,³ Greenberg has suggested that Bali, Bafut and Ndob (and presumably this would be extended to the dialects spoken by other Tikar peoples in Bamenda) are Bantu. But a definitive classification must wait on further research, as well as the publication of the results of the linguistic field survey of the northern Bantu Borderland now being carried out from the French Cameroons.

Until 1949, Bamenda was organized into 23 Native Authority Areas (see map in Appendix), but these did not in all cases coincide with ethnic boundaries. In Fungom, for example, there are a number of villages which differ in dialect, culture and provenance,—some deriving from the French Cameroons, some from the Benue Province. In the Ndop N.A. there are 12 small chiefdoms which neither linguistically nor culturally form a homogeneous unit, though 10 of them point to Ndob in the French Cameroons as the centre

¹ As far as I am aware there are no anthropometric data for the British Cameroons. Dr. Olivier has made a preliminary survey of the principal tribes of the Southern French Cameroons, and he includes a very small sample of 21 men and 13 women from the Tikar at Fumban. *Vide*, "Documents anthropométriques pour servir à l'étude des principales populations du Sud-Cameroun," *Bulletin de la Société d'Études Camerounaises*, 1946, Nos. 15-16, p. 64.

² A. Bruens, "The Structure of Nkom and its relations to Bantu and Sudanic," *Anthropos*, Band XXXVII-XL, 1942-45.

³ Joseph H. Greenberg, "Studies in African Linguistic Classification. 1. The Niger-Congo Family," *South Western Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 5, No. 2, 1949, pp. 5-7. Greenberg has classified the West Sudanic nucleus, the Benue-Cross River, the languages in the British Cameroons, as well as some to the east, as Niger-Congo. Within this family he has tentatively distinguished 15 genetic sub-families; and to one of these—the *Central Branch*—the languages of Bamenda belong. This group includes, among others, the Cross-River languages, Munshi, Mbarike (Zumper), Jukun-Kyentu-Nidu, Bitare, Tigong, Batu, Ngoro, Bantu (Bafut, Ndob, Bamun, Bali, Banyen, Banyang, Ngami), and Mambila. In Bamenda, the Mbebe of the north appear to have linguistic affiliations with the Tigong; the Aghem claim to have migrated from Munshi; Badji (or Badjong-Pai) in Fungom is said to be of Zumper origin; while the Widekum may be affiliated with the Banyang in Mamfe.

from which they emigrated. In Nsungli,¹ where there were the three Native Authorities of War, Tang and Wiya, the position is more complicated since the villages which belong to any one of these units do not occupy a continuous stretch of territory, but are interdigitated among villages belonging to the other two sub-tribes.

Some of the administrative units in the northern and western forests (as in Mbembe, Ngie, Meta and Esimbi) reflect to a much greater extent similarities of dialect and custom; but, while there is some consciousness of a common cultural heritage, the people themselves have never recognized a central political authority. It is perhaps only in Nsaw, Kom, Bum and Bali, where strong consolidated kingdoms had been created prior to the arrival of Europeans, that the existing Native Authorities corresponded fairly closely to the traditional system of organization.

Following upon the proposals made in 1948 by the Administration, 22 out of 23 of the Native Authorities agreed to federate into four groups, each with its own central treasury and council.² Bali remained outside this reorganization since none of the Authorities could be persuaded to become members of a group in which it was included. Traditional hostility dies hard: the people have not yet forgotten that in the last century Bali conquered villages in the south and south-west, exacted tribute, and, under the Germans, received recognition as a suzerain power. They are fearful of domination: as one ruler phrased it—"if you federate with Bali, you might just as well cut your own throat!" Such an attitude is no doubt unduly apprehensive today, but the appointment of the *Fon* of Bali as a member of the Eastern House of Assembly in 1946 has, if anything, reinforced it.

So far we have discussed the relation between administrative units and ethnic grouping, and attention has been directed to those differences of dialect and custom which are stressed by the people themselves. But, if traditions of migration and broader linguistic and cultural similarities are adopted as criteria, the peoples of Bamenda fall within five main groups:

- (a) Tikar,
- (b) Widekum,
- (c) Mbembe,
- (d) Bali,
- (e) Aghem.

To these must be added the Hausa and Bororo (or Pastoral) Fulani who have entered the territory in increasing numbers since the advent of British rule. The former tend to congregate in the large market villages; while the latter pasture Zebu cattle on the hill tops of the plateau, more especially in Nsaw, Nsungli, Kom, Bafut, Fungom and in Ngwo.³ It is difficult to arrive

¹ The term *Nsungli* is not the name of a particular tribe, but is applied to the War, Tang and Wiya groups by the Nsaw. It derives from the Lamso word for chattering, *nsunglin*. Since, however, these three groups present marked similarities of culture and dialect in contrast with neighbouring peoples I have, for the sake of convenience, retained *Nsungli* as a classificatory term for them. This has been and still is the practice of the Administration in its *Reports*.

² The groups are (i) North-Eastern Federation (Mbembe, Mfumte, Misaje, Mbem, Mbaw, Nsungli); (ii) North-Western Federation (Fungom, Bum, Kom, Aghem, Beba-Befang, Esimbi); (iii) South-Western Federation (Ngwo, Ngie, Ngemba, Meta, Mogamaw); (iv) Nsaw-Ndop-Bafut Federation; (v) Bali. Bamenda, formerly a division of the Cameroons Province, became a Province in July, 1949. The Province now contains three divisions, namely Bamenda, Wum and Nkambe.

³ No census has been taken of the Fulani and Hausa; but, according to the *Annual Report for Bamenda*, 1947, there were among the former about 1,500 payers of *jangali* (cattle tax)—a rough approximation to the number of adult Fulani men. There were 156,870 cattle in the Province.