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Echoes of Resilience:

Women's Voices and Agency in Nso Cultural Traditions of the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon

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Abstract

This paper explores the echoes of resilience embodied in Nso women's voices and agency within the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. The Nso People trace their history to Princess Ngonnso, the founding mother of the Nso ethnic group. Ngonnso represents the foundational female figure whose legacy underscores women's enduring spiritual and symbolic significance in Nso society. Although Nso has a centralised patriarchal social structure headed by the Fon *and assisted by a council of traditional rulers and regulatory societies, women have demonstrably matricultural functions when transmitting oral traditions, teaching cultural values, organising communal labour, and preserving Indigenous knowledges. Nso women's roles in reproduction and*

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community development further position them as major sources of continuity and power. This study draws on historical analysis, oral traditions, and contemporary accounts to reveal women's power in Nso socio-political landscape. Findings reveal that although women are largely excluded from formal male-controlled political councils and public decision-making - justified by male hegemonic ideologies - forms of influence persist through informal networks, religion, and resistance to exploitative customs. This article argues that women's agency in Nso culture is not merely reactive but a persistent, resilient force that sustains social cohesion, economic vitality, and cultural identity amid patriarchal constraints.

Keywords: women's voices, women's agency, Nso cultural traditions, Bamenda Grassfields, Nso matriculture

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Résumé

Cet article explore les échos de la résilience qui s'expriment à travers les voix et l'agentivité des femmes Nso, dans les Grassfields de Bamenda, au Cameroun. Le peuple Nso fait remonter son histoire à la princesse Ngonnso, figure fondatrice du groupe ethnique Nso. Ngonnso incarne ce pilier féminin originel dont l'héritage souligne l'importance spirituelle et symbolique, toujours vivace, des femmes au sein de la société Nso. Bien que la société Nso soit dotée d'une structure patriarcale centralisée dirigée par le « Fon *» et secondée par un conseil de chefs traditionnels et de sociétés régulatrices, les femmes exercent manifestement des fonctions relevant d'une matriculture lorsqu'il s'agit de transmettre les traditions orales, d'enseigner les valeurs culturelles, d'organiser le travail communautaire et de préserver les savoirs autochtones. Les rôles des femmes Nso dans la reproduction et le développement communautaire les positionnent en outre comme des sources majeures de continuité et de pouvoir. Cette étude s'appuie sur l'analyse historique, les traditions orales et les témoignages contemporains pour mettre en lumière le pouvoir des femmes dans le paysage sociopolitique Nso. Les résultats montrent que, bien que les femmes soient largement exclues des conseils politiques officiels contrôlés par les hommes et des processus décisionnels publics — une exclusion souvent justifiée par des idéologies hégémoniques masculines — des formes d'influence résilientes persistent grâce à des réseaux informels, à la religion et à la résistance face aux coutumes exploitantes. Cet article soutient que l'agentivité des femmes dans la culture Nso n'est pas simplement réactive, mais constitue une force persistante et résiliente qui*

soutient la cohésion sociale, la vitalité économique et l'identité culturelle au milieu des contraintes patriarcales.

Mots-clés : voix des femmes, agentivité des femmes, traditions culturelles Nso, les Bamenda Grassfields, matriculture Nso

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Introduction

The Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon constitute one of the most culturally vibrant and anthropologically significant highland regions in Central Africa. This area is made up of an elevated plateau characterized by volcanic soils, misty valleys, savannah grasslands, and a network of interconnected *fondoms (*chiefdoms). The region is also characterized by a dense concentration of communities, languages, and political institutions whose histories have been shaped by migration, settlement, warfare, trade, diplomacy, agriculture, and processes of state formation. Paul Nkwi and Jean-Pierre Warnier explain the long history of population movements and the complex processes through which the landscapes and societies of the western Grassfields were formed.[1] They argue that the region has experienced relatively continuous and dense settlement over several centuries, and that its contemporary social and physical landscapes are products of successive processes of migration, agricultural transformation, and interaction among communities.[2]

Within this wider Grassfields environment, the Nso constitute one of the major centralized polities of the region. The area also includes culturally rich communities such as Bamessing, Babungo, Wiya, Kom, Bafut, Bali, Mankon, Aghem, and Oku, among others. According to oral traditions, the dynastic ancestors of the Nso people originated from such places as Rifum and Bankim and made their way south to their present location.[3] These societies are characterized by strong traditional institutions, kingship systems, regulatory societies, and complex political structures headed by male traditional rulers and a council of elders. These polities developed traditional institutions of governance in their

[1] P.N. Nkwi, and Jean-Pierre Warnier, *Elements for History of Western Grassfields* (University of Yaounde: Department of Sociology, 1982), 5-6.
[2] Ibid., 6.
[3] V.G. Fanso, *Cameroon History for Secondary schools and Colleges, Vol.1: from prehistoric times to the nineteenth century* (London: Macmillan Publisher, 1989), 34. The *fondom*s of the Bamenda grassfields emerged from waves of migrations, conquests, and alliances dating back several centuries, involving movements from the Tikar plains and Adamawa Plateau. The Tikar *fondom*s in the Bamenda grassfields include Nso, Kom, War, Bafut, Wiya, Fongom, Tang, Bum, Mbem, Bambili, Mfumte, Oku, Bamunka, Babungo, Bambalang, Bamali, Bafanji and Babessi. Others in the district between Mbam and Ndjim rivers are Bankim, Bang-Heng, Ina, Ue, Yakong, Ngame, Ngume and Ditan among others.

administration generally headed by men. Nevertheless, women exercised matricultural functions through kinship networks, motherhood, ritual authority, and advisory roles.

Nso is one of the Tikar *fondoms* of the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon.[4] It is found in the Bui Division of the Northwest Region of Cameroon. It has an estimated population of over 400,000 inhabitants and a density of about 250 persons per square kilometre[5]. The Nso *fondom* is headed by a *Fon*, a male ruler who resides at the heart of a centralized yet flexible governance structure. The Nso *fondom* has a hierarchical system of government which comprises the *Fon*, male councillors, regulatory societies, and an intricate kinship network, all operating within an agricultural economy heavily dependent on women's labour.

The organizing concept in this article is matriculture. This woman-centric concept was developed by Marie Francoise Guédon from the work of Clifford Geertz; he writes that "Culture is a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life."[6] This is the theoretical foundation from which matriculture was subsequently developed. Building on Geertz's work, Linnéa Rowlatt writes that "Matricultures are a society's cultural system which relates to women, mothers, femininity, and other associated concepts such as births, sex, or grandmother."[7] In this same light, Marie Francoise Guédon writes that "We use the expression 'matricultural systems' to designate that part or those components of culture that sustain, express, and welcome women's participation in the socio-cultural fabric, whether it sustains a matrilineal kinship system or not."[8]

Guédon's establishment of the concept of matriculture, based as it is on Geertz' theory of cultural systems, provides a useful foundation for understanding Nso matriculture not as a fixed institutional structure, but as a web of culturally constructed meanings surrounding Nso motherhood and womanhood. From this perspective, maternal roles, female authority, kinship practices, rituals, oral traditions, symbols, and everyday practices become meaningful because members of the community collectively interpret and attach significance to them.

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[4] E. M. Chilver and P. M. Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda: The Pre-Colonial History and Ethnography of Bamenda Grassfields*, Vol. I, (Buea: Government Printer, 1967), 11.
[5] M. R. Njilla, *Management of Property/ Resources for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods in Bui Division, Northwest Region of Cameroon* (University of Buea: M.Sc. Dissertation in Geography, 2009), 9.
[6] C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York : Basic Books, 1973), 5.
[7] L. Rowlatt, "Blind: The Western Gaze at Matricultures, Historically. Part I," *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, 1:1 (2020), 17; based on Geertz' famous definition in 'Religion as a Cultural System' in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 123.
[8] M-F. Guédon, 'Introduction,' *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural StudiesI*, 1, no. 1 (May 2020): 6; URL: https://www.networkonculture.ca/activities/matrix; accessed 30 September 2026.

In this study, matriculture is conceptualized as an interpretive lens for understanding the cultural meanings attached to motherhood, womanhood, maternal ancestry, and women's contributions to society. Rather than treating matriculture as synonymous with matriarchy or women's formal political dominance, the study understands it as a system of shared symbols, values, narratives, and practices through which women and mothers are culturally represented, interpreted, and accorded social significance. This is in line with Geertz's interpretive approach to culture, which emphasizes the importance of examining the meanings that people attach to symbols and social practices within particular cultural contexts. From this perspective, matriculture concerns not only what women do, but also what their roles, identities, and contributions mean within the Nso society.

With regard to Nso cultural traditions, matriculture provides a framework for examining the symbolic and social significance of women as mothers, ancestors, culture bearers, agricultural actors, custodians of oral traditions, advisers, mediators, and participants in community life. It draws attention to the ways in which cultural narratives, rituals, kinship practices, symbols, and everyday interactions construct and reproduce ideas about the value and place of women in the Nso community. Such meanings can generate forms of informal authority and agency even where women have limited access to formal political institutions.

This work is relevant in Nso where Ngonnso symbolises the Founding Mother and has great spiritual and ancestral connections to the *fondom*. This does not imply that Nso society is matriarchal or that women exercise formal political authority over men. Rather, where the concept of matriculture provides an interpretive lens for examining how cultural symbols, kinship relations, ritual practices, oral traditions, titles, and everyday social interactions construct the significance of women and create culturally legitimate spaces for their agency, the historical figure of Princess Ngonnso symbolises the maternal origin of Nso identity and legitimises women's cultural significance and authority. Women's responsibilities in childbirth, naming ceremonies, initiation rites, marriage negotiations, and funeral rituals illustrate how maternal values shape the social organisation of the Nso *fondom*.

The concept of cultural authority is particularly important because it acknowledges forms of women's power that may not be visible in formal political institutions. Instead, women influence Nso society through family leadership, community associations, and educational activities. Mbu Dora Nyuykighan, for example, argues that Nso women's power often emerges through cooperation, complementarity, and cultural participation rather than confrontation with patriarchal institutions.[9] This perspective is particularly relevant to Nso society, where women exercise influence through women's institutions, market organisations, agricultural cooperatives, religious and ritual rites; their authority is

[9] M. D. Nyuykighan, 'Gender Representations in Selected Nso Folktales of the Northwest Region of Cameroon,' *International Journal of African Society, Cultures and Traditions*, 13:1 (2025), 25.

exercised through consensus-building and community service. She also explains how Nso women preserves cultural norms and values across generations through education and socialisation. In Nso society, women are the principal agents of cultural reproduction. The women teach their children Indigenous languages, clan histories, moral values, traditional dances, folktales and proverbs. Through these activities, women ensure the continuity of Nso identity and heritage.

Phyllis M. Kaberry's *Women of the Grassfields: A Study of the Economic Position of Women in Bamenda, British Cameroons* explains how Nso logic rationalised gendered labour divisions in ways that highlighted female indispensability. She explains that Nso men claimed that preparing land for the planting of crops was "a woman's job which is too strenuous for the men." Her observations, gathered through immersive participation[10] (including accompanying women to farms), demonstrate that women's control over planting, harvesting, processing, and surplus management granted them *de facto* economic autonomy. Kaberry also notes that Nso women consider themselves very important to the community because "All people come from her. Women are like God because they bear children."[11]

Miriam Goheen's *Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops: Gender and Power in the Cameroon Grassfields* offers a focused analysis of Nso society. This work presents Nso women as the 'backbone' of the economy of Nso.[12] Nso women were and are still involved in subsistence agriculture. They cultivate several varieties of food crops to feed their families and use the surplus items in trade. This recognition of women's foundational role in the Nso society coexists with institutional mechanisms that channel their influence towards the social sphere. The men assume leadership and decision-making supremacy while women engage in agricultural and domestic realms to ensure societal reproduction and stability.[13]

Y. C. Nkeneh, in her analyses of the Bamenda Grassfield *fondoms*, describes the women of this socio-cultural area as occupying a 'deep state' position. That is, they exercise informal advisory and stabilizing roles that sustain institutions during crises or successions. She explains that the women in the Bamenda Grassfields play a vital role in determining who

[10] Immersive participation refers to the active and direct involvement of individuals in an activity, experience, cultural practice, or research process in a way that allows them to become deeply engaged in it rather than simply observing it from a distance. In a nutshell, it involves learning, understanding, and experiencing something by participating in it personally.
[11] P.M. Kaberry, *Women of the Grassfields: A Study of the Economic Position of Women in Bamenda, British Cameroons* (London and New York: Routledge, 1952), 110-111 and 117.
[12] M. Goheen, *Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops: Gender and Power in the Cameroon Grassfields (*Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 207-209.
[13] D.B. Ngoran *et al*, 'Incidental Benefits of Female Constituted Social Groups in Nso' Polity of the Cameroon Grasslands: Colonial and Post-Colonial Appraisal,' *International Journal of History and Cultural Studies*, 7:1 (2021), 21.

becomes a *fai* (head of a sub-clan within the *fondom*) or a 'notable' by serving as technical advisers to their husbands, who channel their suggestions to the powers that be. The women examine the character, speech, and competence of any aspiring leader of the *fondom* and make their suggestions to the men who take the final decision. In times of crisis, the women influence the decisions of the *fon* by urging him to take a particular course of action. Indirectly, the women advise their husbands to enthrone a leader who will enhance prosperity and wellbeing of the *fondom*.[14]

This work centres on reconciling the formal exclusion of women from Nso political systems with their resilient agency. That is, although women have been very instrumental in the development of the Nso *fondom*, they have mostly been excluded from governance and decision-making. Nso customs and traditions construct governance as a masculine prerogative, thereby sidelining women in issues of administration. Despite this limitation, ethnographic, oral, and historical evidence reveals women's multifaceted power in the areas of marriage, reproduction, and collective action (via women's associations addressing grievances or economic needs), as well as cultural narratives (folktales) that occasionally foreground female intelligence and resourcefulness. All of these contest the apparent passivity of Nso women.

Data for this article was collected from primary and secondary sources. Primary data, which is most of the data, was obtained through oral interviews conducted with traditional rulers, women, and members of the community who live, experience, and participate in the issues discussed in the work. Interviews were conducted with persons between the ages of 40 and 80. This age group was selected to obtain reliable information on the issues discussed. To identify the interviewees, the researcher adopted the use of the snowball method, wherein one participant leads the researcher to another. The choice of those interviewed was dictated by the desire to complement the information gathered from oral sources and secondary data. The interviews were unstructured, with an open-ended question guide. The researcher / author also adopted the participant observation method, by participing in cultural ceremonies and women's association's events; this allowed me to observe activities that were carried out in my presence. Secondary data was collected mostly from textbooks obtained from private and public libraries in Bamenda and Buea. Information was also extracted from online Journals. These books and articles provided useful data on the socio-political and economic history of the Nso ethnic group. The information obtained from these books facilitated our understanding of the issues under discussion.

Methodologically, this work adopts a qualitative historical research method. The qualitative approach is appropriate because it enables an in-depth understanding of

[14] Y.C. Nkeneh, 'The Role of Women in the Political Transition of the Bamenda Grassfields *Fonship* Institutions in Cameroon,' *International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education*, 10:9 (September 2023), 20-22; URL: www.arcjournals.org; accessed on 23 May 2026.

women's experiences, voices, cultural practices, and agency in Nso *fondom* of Cameroon. Given this focus, qualitative methods allow for a deep exploration of lived experiences, meanings, and symbolic practices within Nso society. The ethnographic orientation is particularly appropriate for examining Indigenous knowledge systems and oral traditions in their natural setting. The historical narration allows the researcher to trace changes and continuities in women's roles.

This paper examines the echoes of resilience embodied in Nso women's voices and agency within the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. It posits that, notwithstanding systematic formal exclusion from core political institutions, Nso women have historically and continue to exercise meaningful voice and agency. This agency manifests through control over agricultural production, reproductive and kinship roles, informal women's associations, oral narratives and folktales. These contributions resonate as enduring 'echoes of resilience' - subtle yet powerful forces that sustain household economies, community cohesion, lineage perpetuation, and cultural identity across generations, including pre-colonial migrations, German and British colonial rule, postcolonial nation-building, and the contemporary challenges posed by the Anglophone Crisis.[15]

Historical Foundations: The Legacy of Ngonnso, Founder of the Nso Ethnic Group

Oral traditions trace the origins and establishment of the Nso *fondom* to the fourteenth century, when Princess Ngonnso, a royal woman of Tikar descent from the Adamawa region (near present-day Bankim or Kimi), led a migration westward with her followers. It positions Ngonnso as the central architect of Nso political and cultural identity. According to Fai Michael Verye, the migratory history of Nso began in c.1387 with the death of *Fon* Tinki of Tikar; he reigned at Kimi from 1350 to 1387, and his death led to a succession crisis. That is, before his death, *Fon* Tinki designated his son Nchare Yen as heir; however, Nchare Yen was by-passed by his half-brother, Mbwandu. Nchare Yen felt humiliated and left in anger with his younger brother Mfoomban. Nchare Yen and Mfoomban did not want their elder sister, Ngonnso, to accompany them because she was already married. The brothers left in secret, but they were followed by Ngonnso and her companions. Like her brothers, Ngonnso vowed never to return to their original settlement at Rifum.

When Nchare Yen and his brother saw that Ngonnso and her band were following them, they hurriedly crossed the Mbam River with the aid of a ntang (a hanging bridge) and then destroyed the bridge to prevent her from accompanying them.[16] Nchare Yen went southwards and founded the Bamum dynasty, while Mfoomban moved eastwards and

[15] The Anglophone Crisis began in Cameroon in 2016. It is a complex conflict rooted in long-standing socio-economic, cultural and political grievances held by the English-speaking regions of Cameroon against the Francophone-dominated government.

founded the Mbam dynasty. Unable to construct a bridge at the Mbam River, Ngonnso and her followers decided to move westwards along the banks of the river Mbam and settled at Mbonso; here they met the Taankum people, who were unfriendly to them. They later moved upstream and settled at Ndzen-nso. From Ndzen-nso,[17] she and her followers trekked to Kovvifem, located to the northeast of Kumbo.[18]

This narration introduces interpersonal and gendered conflict: Ngonnso, as elder sister, acts to join her brothers' migration but faces refusal due to her marital status, a detail that underscores both her agency and patriarchal constraints, even in the origin story. The bridge-cutting dramatizes betrayal or strategic separation, forcing Ngonnso's group to adapt by moving westward along the Mbam River.

At Kovvifem, Ngonnso and her followers met a small group of settlers called the Visale, whose major occupation was hunting. These were the earliest settlers of the area; they later became known as the *Nso Mtaar* (the great lords). They warmly received Ngonnso and her followers and allowed them to settle amongst them. Through a peaceful dialogue, the Visale surrendered themselves to the authority of the Ngonnso migrants because their ruler died without having a male child to succeed him.[19] Grassfield *fondoms* such as Nso, Bafut, Bali, Mankon, Babungo and Bamum, among others, practiced rulership by patrilineal descent, whereby governance and decision-making processes were mostly managed by the men. For this reason, Ngonnso was not enthroned as the first *Fon* of Nso.

There are two versions on who became the first *Fon* of Nso. Leh and Jing were the sons of Ngonnso, and the first version claims that Leh was the first *Fon* of Nso while the second version presents Jing as the first *Fon* of Nso. It is difficult to determine the true identity of first *Fon* because no dates have been attributed to their periods of reign. However, despite the controversy, this legend of Nso origins has some truth. According to Lantum, the son of Ngonnso succeeded the throne in exchange for many rights and privileges, while the Visale were given titles of great lords; they were allowed to own the land and to participate in the administration of the *fondom*. It should be noted that from the outset Nso tradition did not allow women to rule. Without this, Ngonnso would have been the first *Fon* of Nso.[20]

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[16] F. M. Verye, *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Nso Kidiif Ritual as Model of Genuine Reconciliation* (Protestant University of Central Africa, Yaounde: Doctorate Thesis, 2007), 74-75.
[17] It is important to note that some of the places conquered were given these names in honour of the Founding Mother, Ngonnso.
[18] Verye, *TRC and Nso Kidiif Ritual*, 74-75.
[19] D.N. Lantum, *The Nso' Went to Mvem 16- 18 December 1994* (Kumbo: Nso History Society Publication, 2002), 65.
[20] Ibid.

Despite not occupying the role of *Fon*, Ngonnso founded the Nso dynasty through peaceful means by merging her group with the Visale, who accepted Nso royal leadership. When she founded the Nso dynasty after moving from one place to another, her people sought to settle in a safer place void of raiders, diseases and hunger;[21] Kovvifem is important in the history of Nso because that is where the first *Fon* was enthroned and the Nso took a separate political identity. The word identifying the people – Nso – is likely to have originated from the name of the founder of the Nso dynasty: Ngonnso. This narrative directly supports the article's theme of echoes of resilience: Nso women's agency amid constraints. With the name 'Nso' derived from 'Ngon-nso,' the story also explains linguistic and cultural structures by linguistically centring female ancestry in ethnic identity.

The Nso migration was prompted by several factors including succession disputes, search for peace, fertile land, favourable climate, and rebellion against injustice, among others. The Nso, during their migratory history, adapted institutions to suit the changing conditions. For example, as they migrated, they brought with them some social features from Rifum: a regulatory society (*Ngwerong* and *Ngiri*) assisted by royal councillors (a traditional council that guarded and advised the *Fon* on issues of administration).[22]

In a nutshell, Ngonnso migrated from her homeland after rejecting patriarchal succession norms that favoured a male rival over more legitimate or capable heirs. Accompanied by a band of followers, she undertook a deliberate migration to establish a new settlement that evolved into the Nso *fondom*. This act of self-determination highlights female initiative in polity formation, negotiation with new environments, and the forging of a distinct communal identity. The story highlights the role of women in Nso history, despite institutional biases toward male power.

Despite the important role played by Ngonnso in the history of Nso, the society developed a more highly centralized patriarchal political structure over time. Today, the *fondom* is headed by a *Fon* who holds sacred and secular authority. He is assisted and advised in issues of administration by traditional male councillors or male titleholders *(Fais* and *Shufais*) and supported by influential regulatory societies. Chief among these societies are the *Ngwerong*, a regulatory body with enforcement, judicial, and ritual powers, and the *Ngiri*, linked to royal princes and dynastic continuity. These institutions concentrate formal decision-making, settle disputes, and carry out rituals for the wellbeing of the society. The majority of Nso women are largely excluded from inner councils and high titles.[23]

[21] Ibid.
[22] Verye, *TRC and Nso Kidiif Ritual*, 76.
[23] C.G. Leinyuy, *Nso Traditional Political Institutions* (University of Yaounde: Post Graduate Diploma in History, 1983), 74.

Ngonnso, therefore, was an active agent who initiated migration and established a new political entity, embedding female initiative at the heart of Nso collective identity.[24] She is one of the female ancestors who connects living Nso to pre-colonial history, embodying continuity amid change. A key restitution document states that "Ngonnso serves as an important leader in the history of Nso. The fondom is named after her."[25] The spiritual and symbolic elevation of Ngonnso transforms her from historical founder to mother deity and incarnation of the Nso worldview. As mother deity, she is central to rituals of fertility, prosperity, protection, and ancestral mediation. The stories told through and about Ngonnso transmit knowledge and practices intergenerationally.[26]

Historically, the statue of Ngonnso, a well carved wooden female figure adorned with cowrie shells, was kept in the Nso palace museum for posterity; the statue was stolen in 1902 during a punitive expedition led by German colonial military officer Kurt von Pavel.[27] The refusal of the Nso people to accept German administration had provoked the Germano-Nso War of 1902 to 1905, and at Nkar, a few German troops were killed. The Germans responded with heavy application of superior weapons, such as machine guns and firearms, which far overwhelmed the Nso's crude weapons. This German expedition was led by Von Pavel and Captain Glauning, who had reportedly killed about three hundred Nso soldiers at Vekovi. Following this victory, German soldiers invaded the Nso Palace where cultural objects and artefacts were kept and took the statue of Ngonnso. The Germans eventually succeeded in weakening the political power of the Nso Indigenous rulers by implementing German administration and policies in the land. The statue of Ngonnso was taken from the Nso Palace to the Berlin Ethnological Museum.[28] Its removal severed spiritual links, interpreted by Nso as contributing to communal imbalances, and crises affecting the community.

Till date, the people of Nso yearn for the return of this statue to the f*ondom*. During the *Fon's* trip to Germany in 2022, he visited the Berlin Museum where the statue of Ngonnso is kept. Recognising Ngonnso as the mother, founder, and spiritual guardian of the Nso people, the *Fon* offered prayers and sought her forgiveness for the prolonged separation of her statue from its homeland. He also implored her to intercede on behalf of the Nso people and to bring peace to the *fondom*, which has been deeply affected by the ongoing Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon.[29] During her own 2023 visit to the Berlin museum, Sylvie

[24] Ibid.
[25] Open Restitution Africa Project, *The Restitution Journey of Ngonnso from Nso in Cameroon*; URL: https://dataplatform.openrestitution.africa/case-study/2/, accessed 29 January 2025.
[26] S. Njobati, personal communication.
[27] H. Yinyuy, *Nso Response to Colonial Administration and Christianity, 1902-1961* (University of Buea: Long Essay Department of History, 2005), 17.
[28] Ibid., 18.
[29] RGL RGL, 'The Fon of Nso meets the Founder of Nso – Ngonnso at last; the visit to Germany,' *Regartless*; URL: https://regartless.org/and-at-last-they-meet-the-fon-of-nso-and-ngonnso-symbol-of-divinity-fertility-and-peace/, accessed 12 November 2026.

Njobati, who hails from Nso, stated that, "It was emotional because I was seeing… our founder… our mother locked up in some glass container. And for 120 years, she's been yelling out. She needs to be back home."[30] Njobati expressed her commitment to repatriating the looted artefact to Nso land once peace and stability are restored to the area. The delay in bringing back the statue of Ngonnso from Berlin is linked to the ongoing Crisis in Cameroon. This effort represents modern echoes of Ngonnso's agency: women and allies reclaiming heritage through activism, education, and international pressure.

The *Ngam Lii Wong* (Nso Annual Cultural Week Festival) was established in 1976 during the reign of *Fon* Ngah Bifon III. That year, the people of Nso *Fondom* began to communally commemorate Ngonnso, the revered heroine, mother and founding matriarch of Nso people, in recognition of her enduring legacy and contributions to the establishment of the dynasty. In 2008, it was rebranded as the Ngonnso Cultural Festival by *Fon* Sehm Mbinglo I in honour of the enduring legacy of Princess Ngonnso. This Festival is celebrated every year in the month of December. Women massively participate through dance, storytelling, presentation of marriage customs, and traditional dishes. The festival fosters cohesion and presents Nso heritage to the world through the various activities carried out. The Ngonnso annual festival is celebrated annually by Nso sons and daughters residing in Cameroon and other parts of the world.[31]

In synthesis, the historical foundations centred on Ngonnso reveal a tradition where female agency is constitutive rather than marginal. From migration narratives of rebellion and leadership, through sacred embodiment and colonial disruption, to restitution activism and cultural festivals, these elements sustain echoes of resilience. They interact dynamically with patriarchal institutions, informing the negotiated gender relations explored in later sections.

Patriarchal Structures and Formal Exclusion from Nso Governance

The patriarchal structures of Nso society confined governance and administrative authority to men, thereby highlighting the remarkable resilience and agency of women. Despite the matrifocal legacy associated with Princess Ngonnso, the Nso *fondom* evolved into a highly centralized political system in which authority was concentrated in the hands of the *Fon*, male titleholders (*Fais*, *Shufais*, and *Sheys*), and male regulatory societies such as *Ngwerong* and *Ngiri*, thereby reinforcing patriarchal governance structures.[32]

[30] K. Chakanetsa, 'Cameroon's Ngonnso: 'My fight to bring our sacred stolen statue home,' BBC News: The Comb podcast, BBC World Service, 17 June 2023; URL: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-65746910, accessed 12 November 2026.
[31] Interview with J. Ayufowontoh Mbinglo, a Princesses of Nso. Mbinglo is a cultural activist, a teacher, and a trader by profession. She is married to one of the notables (rulers) of the Nso *fondom* and they are blessed with four children. Interviewed by author in Buea, 31 December 2025.
[32] *Shey i*s a titled elder who belongs to the traditional hierarchy surrounding the *Fon* and the notables.

Nso political organization is fundamentally hierarchical and male-centered, with the *Fon* at the head of administration. *Fonship* in Nso tradition is seen as divine and the *Fon* is treated with respect and honour by his subjects. As head of administration, the *Fon* appoints traditional officials and councillors. He presides over matters of administration and commands authority in the society. The *Fon* possesses extensive authority and the power to dismiss any official who fails to perform their duties or violates the established rules. He also occupies the highest command in the military hierarchy. Despite these extensive powers, the *Fon* is not above the law; he can be questioned and sanctioned by the *Ngwerong* if he fails to uphold the laws, customs, and norms of the community.

In addition, the *Fon* serves as the traditional religious high priest of the *fondom*. Together with the lesser high priest (*ta-wong*), the *Fon* performs weekly, monthly, and annual rituals and sacrifices on shrines to appease the ancestors as well as the gods of the land to ensure prosperity and the wellbeing of the people**.** During these events, prayers and incantations are also rendered to God through the ancestors, asking Him to forgive the sins they might have committed, and also that He should bless the land and its people with good harvest and prosperity.[33]

With this authority, the *Fon* is seen as a sacred being. This makes his people loyal and obedient to him. The *Fon* lives in the palace and performs rituals to ensure the safety of the community. All important issues concerning the *fondom* are discussed at the palace. The *Fon* is assisted in issues of administration and governance by the *Vibai*, a protective and advisory council of male notables.[34]

The *Vibai* are next in political rank to the *Fon*; members of the *Vibai* are seen as a 'hedge' that surrounds, guides, and restricts the *Fon*. The *Vibai* hold regular meetings in the palace with or without the Fon to discuss matters affecting the community. Most of their titles are hereditary, and selection is based on bloodline. These *Vibai* are grouped in different classes and assigned to control different areas of Nso. The primary members are heads of lineages or villages in the Nso community who serve as collaborators and cabinet members of the traditional council. These notables are classified in various categories according to ranks or positions they hold in the community. The most important of these notables include: *Fai*-o-Ndzendzev, Tankum, Yuwar, Tsenla, Do Ru, Do Ngven, Ndzendzev Tsen, Lun and *Shufai* Waynseeri woo Yer. The second category of notables comprise those

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The title of *Shey i*s both an honour and a responsibility. It is given by the *Fon* or a lineage head to one of his subjects as a sign of honour or acknowledgement for his contribution to the welfare of the village/community. Although the specific responsibilities of individual *Sheys* may vary, they generally preserve and transmit Nso customs, history and values to younger generation.

[33] H. Yinyuy, 'Indigenous Leadership and Governance in Colonial and Post-colonial Cameroon: A Historical Analysis of Traditional Institutions among the Nso People,' in *Journal of Developmental Issues in Education and Humanities*, 1:3 (July 2025), 129.

[34] Ibid.

who were made *Vibai* in recognition of the size of the population of their areas of influence. This category of *Vibai* include the Sop, Shuv and Mvem clans.

The next group of Indigenous male leaders in Nso are the *afai* (plural of *Fai*). The title *Fai* (singular) literally means 'the head of a compound' or the leader of a clan. He exercises control over his subjects and possibly an entire village. Generally, the *fai* pays regular visits to family members to know if they are in good health. When a *fai* dies, his death is announced to the *Fon* by the elders. After that, a new *fai* is enthroned in the presence of members of the compound. Once enthroned, he may serve as the family head, as the priest of the ancestral shrine, and as the *Fon's* delegate. He is expected to be responsible and to exercise good leadership, and if he neglects his duties or wastes the assets of the family, he will be sanctioned by the *Ngwerong* or *Ngiri*. Those with poor conduct are cautioned to change their character, and those who refuse to change are automatically replaced by the *Fon*.[35] The *fai's* wives play a vital role in determining a successor; they serve as technical advisers to their husbands, and they examine the character, speech, and competence of the candidates, among other virtues, without being visible. In times of crisis, the women can influence the decision of the *fon* by urging him to accept their candidate. Indirectly, the women advise their husbands to enthrone a leader who will enhance prosperity and wellbeing of the *fondom*.

Another category of male title holder in Nso is the *Atantoh* (*Tantoh*); these are high-ranking notables. Throughout its migratory history, the Nso *fondom* of Cameroon expanded by integrating leaders of allied ethnic groups, such as the Visale, and vassal communities into its traditional government. Today, these high-ranking notables assist the *Fon* in administration, manage royal agricultural estates (coffee, kolanut, and raffia), and arrange marriages for the *Fon's* daughters and granddaughters. They equally assist the *Fon* in tending to visiting dignitaries. Any one of them can make announcements on behalf of the *Fon* to the Nso community.

Individual *Atanoh* (plural) hold distinct positions in administration. For instance, *Fai* Maamu, the senior *Tantoh*, serves as the *Fon's* spokesperson during their meetings at the traditional or customary court at the palace. Collectively, they generally handle social and economic duties at the palace and take care of palace occupants. They also attend council meetings to serve as the *Fon's* delegates on public occasions and at the installation of clan and village heads.[36]

From precolonial times, women have been excluded from the male dominated patriarchal system of governance. Nso customs and traditions do not allow women to serve as chiefs, *fais*, *shufais* or *tantoh*. However, when there is a vacancy and there are no eligible or

[35] Kaberry, *Women of the Grassfields,* 378.
[36] E.M. Chilver and P.M. Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda: The Pre-Colonial History and Ethnography of Bamenda Grassfields* Vol. I (Buea: Government Printer, 1967), 98.

legitimate heirs, a woman can be appointed to serve for a short time while making arrangements for a possible male successor to take over.

It is also vital to note that the wives of these notables equally play a special role in the community. The wives of *afai*, *shufais* and *atanto* serve as *vikìy baá* (*wiiy baá*, wives of notables), while the wives of the *Fon* serve as *vikìy nto'*, (*wiiy nto'*, royal wives). These women play the role of peacemakers in their homes and in the community. For instance, in areas or homes where there are marital disputes or conflicts, they usually step in and encourage couples to settle their disputes amicably through peaceful dialogue. Thus, they contribute to peace and development in the *fondom*.[37]

Although the Nso people have a patriarchal system of governance, the women also have various institutions and agencies which contribute to the development of the community. One of the most important female institutions in Nso is the office of the Queen Mother. When a new *Fon* is installed, the title of *Yefon* (Queen Mother) is given to his mother. Each *Fon* appoints a *Yewong* (mother of the country), *a* highly revered royal woman who serves as the deputy Chief Priestess of the clan. These two women advise the *Fon* on social issues and on issues related to women.

The *Yefon* and the *Yewong* embody important dimensions of female authority within the Nso royal institution. The *Yefon r*epresents the strength and authority within the maternal line while the *Yewong r*epresents the younger generation of royal women and the continuity of the royal lineage. Their positions show that women are not simply supporting figures within the Nso political system; they occupy culturally recognised spaces through which maternal identity, royal legitimacy, lineage continuity, and women's influence are sustained across generations. They are indispensable in conducting state rituals and sacrifices vital for the prosperity and wellbeing of the Nso people. They participate in the installation of a new *Fon* and in his burial.

During traditional ceremonies, and other ritual performances, the *Yefon* and *Yewong* carry items like corn *fufu*, pounded cocoyams, cooked pistachio, calabash and a royal basket on their heads. These crops can be read as cultural symbols through which Nso society expresses ideas about gender, kinship, fertility, continuity, and social responsibility. In the framework of matriculture, maize, cocoyam, and pistachio are therefore not simply subsistence crops; their cultivation and circulation can symbolize the female sphere, womanhood, fertility, maternal responsibility, and ancestral continuity. Women's engagement with these crops materializes matricultural values in everyday life, particularly through food provisioning, seed preservation, household productivity, and the transmission of agricultural knowledge across generations.[38] Their significance

[37] Interview with H. Kumela, *Wiiybaa* (wife) of *Shufai* Mbonkisan and daughter of *Shufai* Ntselah, Kiyan-Kumbo; interviewed by author, 25 December 2025.
[38] Ibid.

consequently extends beyond their economic utility to encompass meanings associated with female identity and ancestral blessing.

Apart from these royal titles, the title of *Yaa* is awarded to women who are successful in the domains of trade, education and agriculture, among others, irrespective of their status as noble or commoner. These female elites advocate for social justice and fair treatment of men and women in the Nso community. The Y*ewong*, the *Yefon* and *Yaa* participate in traditional religious festivals and serve as custodians of Nso culture. They represent women's voices, and are the spokespersons of the women on vital issues affecting the land and especially the lives of women.[39]

Another female institution is the *kfuə́m se Fon*, whose members are mostly the elderly wives of the *Fon*. They advise the *Fon* on issues concerning women in the royal household. One of its shortcomings is that it is limited to only a few of the *Fon*'s wives, for their main role extensive: to supervise the *Fon*'s farms, control the harvests, welcome visitors to the palace, and to organise women into farming groups.[40]

With the advent of Christianity and the establishment of Christian Women Associations, however, many Nso women, including royal wives, have become deeply involved in Christian life. Consequently, this shift has led to a decline in their participation and active roles in traditional rituals.[41]

In a nutshell, the *Fon* is assisted by a network of male advisors and titleholders, with regulatory functions delegated to secret societies that operate as impersonal enforcers of tradition. This system, while oriented toward communal well-being in Indigenous accounts, has historically prioritized male domination in public spheres. Central to this patriarchal system of governance are the male titleholders - *Fais*, *Shufais*, and *Sheys* who form the administrative backbone of the *fondom*. They constitute the indispensable link between the palace and the clans, and sub-clans that make up the *fondom*. These titles are overwhelmingly awarded to men. From pre-colonial to contemporary times, the title of a *Fai* or *a Shufai* is awarded to males only. The *Fai* and *Shufai* serve as the primary heads of sub-clans and clans of the *fondom*. They are equally in charge of performing rituals, sacrifices, and blessing the marriages of their subjects.

Just below the *Fai* and *Shufai* is the *Shey*. This title is not inherited: - rather it is given to anyone who has contributed to the sociocultural and economic development of the Nso people. Traditionally it was only awarded to men, but things have evolved greatly in this

[39] Yinyuy, 'Indigenous Leadership and Governance,' 132.
[40] Ibid., 133.
[41] H. Yinyuy, *The Evangelising Efforts of the Presbyterian and Catholic Women Associations in Nso, Cameroon, 1961-2013* (University of Yaounde 1, Cameroon: Ph.D Thesis Department of History, 2020), 79.

area and it is now given to women to honour them for great achievements in the community.[42] This is an indication that nowadays women have become a respected public force and their voices are being heard in the land. However, this evolution notwithstanding, the formal patriarchal structure on which the Nso polity is anchored, remains a great stumbling block on the road to women's economic and cultural emancipation in Nso *fondom*.

Economic Agency: Women as the Backbone of Production and Sustenance

Economic agency constitutes one of the most significant domains through which Nso women exercise voice and show resilience within the patriarchal framework of the Bamenda Grassfields. This section focuses on the agricultural sphere where women's intensive labour, and decision-making over crops play an influential role in the development of the society. That is, while men, through patrilineal inheritance and titular authority, allocate and symbolically own the fields, women dominate the processes of cultivation, harvesting, processing, storage, and marketing of food crops.

Agriculture is the major economic activity in the Nso economy. From precolonial times to the contemporary period, agriculture remains an important economic activity because it provides food to the population both at the national and local levels and, equally, serves as a source of employment. Both men and women are involved in agriculture as a source of livelihood; they carry out subsistence agriculture, whereby most of the crops cultivated are for local consumption with little for sale. Division of labour follows gender roles: men own the fields, clear the farm, and assist the women with planting and transporting the crops from the farms to the storehouse.[43] Meanwhile, the women exercise control over planting decisions, crop management, harvesting, selection of seeds, weeding, storage, and the disposition of surplus within the household. This shows that women exercise real rights as producers over the crops they grow, even as land itself remained under (male) lineage authority.[44]

In order to boost productivity and increase yields, women manage multiple plots and practice mixed cropping on the same piece of land. Examples of food crops which they cultivate include staples like maize, cocoyam, beans, potatoes, cassava, vegetables, millet and groundnuts. With the introduction of Christianity and colonial rule in Nso *fondom*, however, men were introduced to commercial agriculture and now most of them practice pastoral farming for commercial reasons. The men also grow cash crops like coffee and

[42] Ibid.
[43] Goheen, *Men own the fields, Women own the Crops*, 73-78.
[44] N.K. Banla *et al*, 'Pictures (images) and Construction of Gender Roles among the Nso' of Cameroon.' in *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 4:1 (2022), 20-21.

eucalyptus.[45] Women's labour forms the backbone of subsistence, while the men only help to clear the farms in preparation for actual farming as well as transporting the crops from the farms after harvest. This shows that at least there is some division of labour between men and women in the area of farming. This division of labour reflects the gendered organization of Nso society where women ensure household food security while also contributing to local economies. Women's control over crop production extends to decisions about what to plant for household consumption and what to do with potential surplus. This grants them influence over food security and intra-household resource allocation.

In practice, Nso women manage a diverse agricultural portfolio centred on food crops that ensure household and community sustenance. Typical activities include intercropping maize with legumes and tubers, cultivating cocoyam, groundnuts, beans, and vegetables on multiple dispersed plots allocated by husbands or lineage heads or rented plots. Women decide planting sequences, weeding schedules, and harvest priorities, often balancing subsistence needs with small-scale surplus for local markets or social obligations (e.g contributions to funerals, marriages, or women's groups). Men might assist with initial clearing or fencing, or focus on certain male-associated crops or livestock, but most of the work in agriculture is carried out by women.[46] This division grants women influence over nutritional outcomes, seed selection, and storage.

Till date, farming remains the main economic activity and it has a strong social importance. Women work collectively on farms through labour-sharing arrangements. These gatherings create opportunities for social interaction, exchange of ideas, and strengthening of kinship ties. The intensive cultivation of food crops enables the women to dominate local markets and sell food crops, crafts, or locally made household goods. Markets serve not only as economic centers but also as spaces for social networking, information sharing, and community interaction.[47]

In 1952, Phyllis Kaberry, an anthropologist who worked with women in the Bamenda Grassfields, presented the challenges faced by women to Elizabeth O'Kelly, the British Colonial Officer in British Southern Cameroons from 1950 to 1960. Among these challenges was the need for hand-operated corn grinding mills. Kaberry advocated for labour-saving technologies, such as the mills, that were affordable and controllable by women, precisely because she recognized how women's overburdened schedules limited their broader agency.[48] Grinding corn was one of the most difficult and time-consuming

[45] Interview with E. Verye, farmer in Kifem /Mbam, one of the agricultural areas of Nso. Interviewed by author 26 December 2025.
[46] Goheen, *Men own the fields, Women own the Crops*, 73-78.
[47] Ibid.
[48] M. Adams, 'Colonial Policies and Women's Participation in Public Life: The Case of British Southern Cameroons,' in *African Studies Quarterly*, 8:3 (Spring 2006), 9-10.

tasks faced by women in the Bamenda Grassfields, especially in Nso, where the women were using mortars and stones to process corn into flour.

In 1954, the first grinding mills were installed in Nso and other areas of the grassfields; an association was established to manage them and membership was open to all women regardless of ethnic origins or religion. Initially, the corn mill association was a non-political initiative intended to improve the wellbeing of women, and it greatly promoted the spirit of socialization irrespective of cultural and religious background. Women equally gained new skills on how to manage a hand-operated corn machine, which included strict rules on how to operate the machine and avoid the destruction of their own property.

This association later gave birth to the formation of other women's cooperative societies in the Grassfield areas.[49] Women strongly participated in cooperative unions, and expansion of female social groups for financial pooling and knowledge sharing. Ngoran identifies the benefits of these associations for facilitating collective action for the purchase of farm tools, business start-ups, and community development, and transmitting new production methods while maintaining mutual trust based on ethnicity, kinship, and shared experience.[50] Thus, women's economic roles shifted from purely domestic struggles for survival to modernised public agency.

According to Angelica Wiysahnyuy**,** agriculture remains the major economic activity in Nso, where both men and women are involved in agriculture (albeit in different ways, as described above) and provide food to the population at the local and national levels. Women organize cooperative farming groups to increase productivity by coming together to work on their friends, relatives, or members' farms rotationally. This helps to reduce individual workloads and to strengthen social bonds.[51] This policy has positively influenced women towards adopting other collective strategies, including female social groups for mutual support, credit pooling (see below), and transmission of new farming methods introduced by the government or Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

Another women's cooperative system is the *njangi*, or *ngwaa vikiiy* (saving and thrift schemes) associations. These are rotating savings and credit associations where women within a community contribute money in a week or month and the total amount is given to one member in turns. Money contributed helps women to start a business or assist in the payment of their children's school fees.[52] These *njangi* groups constitute autonomous financial spaces for and managed by women, especially important in a society where they

[49] Ibid., 10.
[50] Ngoran *et al*, 'Incidental Benefits of Female Constituted Social Groups in Nso,' 21.
[51] Interview with A. Wiysahnyuy, the wife of *Shey* Fabian Bongasov, a farmer, and 'buy am sell am' seller, 6 June 2018. She owns several farms in places such as Nkuv, Tooy, Kai Yeh, Nugha, and Tadu in the Kilum maintain forest area. In addition to farm work, she sells food crops at Mbveh market and uses the money to sponsor her children in schools / colleges in Cameroon.
[52] Ibid.

are excluded from land ownership; they prove that economic agency does not necessary require formal land ownership.

Colonial and postcolonial transformations introduced both opportunities and constraints to women's economic agency. German and British colonial administrations promoted cash crops (e.g. coffee, tea, tobacco, or groundnuts in certain zones), thereby channelling support toward male farmers or cooperatives which disrupted customary tenure[53] and increased pressure on women's labour. Land commoditisation, contrary to traditional rules, threatened women's farmlands. Post-independence policies also enhanced agricultural modernization, sometimes favouring mechanization or large-scale schemes.

The Cameroon Anglophone Crisis, which escalated to insurgency in the year 2016, has further tested Nso women's economic resilience by disrupting markets, displacing farmers, and straining access to land and inputs (particularly in remote areas). Armed confrontations, road blocks, frequent 'ghost towns,' and fear of violence have prevented many women from carrying out farming activates. As such, many fertile lands have been abandoned and allowed to fallow. Women have borne a disproportionate burden in maintaining household food security amid conflict, yet have also mobilized through informal networks for peacebuilding, livelihood support, and cultural preservation. Education and urbanization have enabled more women to diversify into non-farm activities (trading, small businesses, or salaried work), thereby upgrading their status and voices through various domains in the society.[54]

Social and Reproductive Roles: Sacred Continuity and Power

Social and reproductive roles form a vital domain of women's agency and resilience in Nso cultural traditions within the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. Women's contributions to childbearing, nurturing, socialization, and community fellowship grant them significant powers in Nso society. These roles position women as essential sources of prosperity and continuity of bloodlines in the community, even while institutional powers are mostly held by men.

Women were and are still central to the organization of family life and community development in the Nso *fondom*. At the domestic level, they are responsible for

[53] Customary tenure is a traditional system through which a community determines who can own, use, inherit, or control land according to its established customs and practices. Under this system, land rights are usually acquired through inheritance, traditional authorities, or long standing occupation. Traditionally in Nso society, men own the land but women cultivate, manage, and determine what crops are cultivated.
[54] Interview with Kumela, 25 December 2025.

childbearing, nurturing, feeding, cooking of food, healthcare within households, and the moral education of children. Through these activities, women transmit cultural values, customs, and social norms from one generation to another. In polygamous homes, elderly women act as advisers and mediators in family disputes and they promote peace and reconciliation within households and villages. Nso women in various quarters or villages also organize communal labour to clean water catchment areas, and maintain community halls and roads within the vicinity. In addition, they carry out charitable works to assist widows, widowers, elderly men/women and venerable families in the community (assistance may be given in cash or in kind, according to the needs of those visited). For instance, when a member of the community is very sick, the women pay regular visits, pray, encourage them, and assist the family in farm work. It should also be noted that women organize purification and ritual ceremonies linked to stillbirths and funerals. While carrying out these activities, they also pray for God's mercy and restoration.[55] These activities equally contributed to spiritual and social harmony within the society.

In big compounds and palaces, reasonable and mature elderly women were and are still in charge of managing lineage and royal households. They organize work among co-wives, and influence dynastic matters as described above. The ability of these women to come together to advise, warn, and discipline a *fai*, *shufai* and even the *Fon*, when he goes contrary to customs and norms of the society, points to collective action.[56] Although the women are not allowed to serve as *fais*, *shufais* and chiefs, they still participate in the political economy and kinship structures in an indirect way by advising their husbands when these worthies are members of the decision-making council.[57]

Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg explains that in the related Bamileke *fondoms* of the Grassfields of Cameroon, the two highest-ranked royal wives share this advisory role and are thus able to choose the women who will bear the sons who could become the next Bamileke *Fon*. She concludes with an articulation of the links between women's role in human reproduction and the divine king's role in in social reproduction, both occurring in a rapidly changing context of a multiethnic African nation. She argues that procreation, cooking, and social reproduction greatly influence politics and decision-making across the Grassfields societies.[58] Supporting Feldman-Savelsberg's hypothesis, in Nso society, women's reproductive role extends beyond biological motherhood to become a foundation of dynastic continuity since the legitimacy and succession of the *Fonship* depend upon the preservation of the royal lineage through women.

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[55] Yinyuy, 'The Evangelising Efforts of the Presbyterians and the Catholic Women Associations in Nso,' 283.
[56] Interview with J. Ayufowontoh Mbinglo, Princess of Nso *fondom*, interviewed in Buea, Cameroon, 31 December 2025.
[57] Nkeneh, 'The Role of Women in the Political Transition of the Bamenda Grassfields *Fonship* Institutions in Cameroon,' 20.
[58] P. Feldman-Savelsberg. *Plundered Kitchens, Empty Wombs: Threatened Reproduction and Identity in the Cameroon* Grassfields (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 106.

Furthermore, Nso women have established vibrant social groups and cultural associations across the national territory and in the diaspora that enhance unity and collective responsibility. An example of these are the *chong* groups, whose members perform *chong*, a traditional royal dance, during major cultural events. The dance has secret functions associated with the spiritual mandate of cleansing the land or sanctioning errant male leaders while uniting women in mutual support. *Chong* demonstrates how female authority can be institutionalised culturally, rather than being merely informal, by emphasising female solidarity, moral regulation, fertility, and the transmission of knowledge across generations.[59] This female institution provides an important example of how a matricultural institution allows women to preserve cultural continuity, regulate aspects of social life, and exercise collective authority. Through the *chong* group, older women teach younger women about marriage, motherhood, agricultural practices, sexuality, social etiquette, ceremonies, and responsibilities within the community.[60] The institution thus contributes to the preservation of female-centred cultural knowledge which is not transmitted through male political institutions.

According to Ngoran, the spirit of working together to achieve mutual objectives was never uncommon. Historically, Nso female social groups were based on mutual trust, cemented by a common bond of ethnicity, culture, friendship, and neighbourliness. She argues that mutual aid groups, traditionally for births, funerals, and bride wealth, with adaptations addressing school fees, medical costs, farm tools, business start-ups, and knowledge transmission (new farming or health methods), have existed in Nso since precolonial times. Operating on trust networks built through kinship systems, village communities, religious affinity, and occupational commonalities, they enable resource pooling and solidarity without formal institutions.[61] These organisations encourage solidarity, mutual financial support, agricultural cooperation, and transmission of traditional or cultural knowledge within villages.

Cultural Narratives and Representations: Voices in Folktales and Everyday Discourse

Nso women also play a vital role in the domain of culture. Some of the means of the transmission of culture is through storytelling or folktales, riddles proverbs, indigenous music and traditional ceremonies (births, deaths, and marriages among others). Folktales in Nso culture function as powerful mechanisms for socialization, moral instruction, and the reproduction of cultural values, including gendered expectations. Mbu Dora Nyuykighan's work on gender representations in Nso folktales articulates their

[59] Interview with Kumela, 25 December 2025.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ngoran *et al*, 'Incidential Benefits of Female Constituted Social Groups in Nso' Polity," 21.

multifaceted significance.[62] These folktales not only play vital roles in the socialisation process and entertainment arena but equally serve as vehicles for moral education and cultural identity.

It is vital to note that folktales do not merely serve for entertainment but as active agents in shaping societal norms, values, and beliefs among the Nso people. Storytelling is often performed by elders (most often women) at evening gatherings or during communal events, and tales transmit expectations of femininity (nurturing, caregiving, obedience) and masculinity (bravery, leadership, provision) while reinforcing cultural identity tied to the *fondom*'s history, including echoes of Ngonnso's founding leadership. Their dual role in socialization and moral education means tales warn against vice (e.g., disobedience, greed) and promote virtue, with gender serving as a key lens for these lessons.

Nyuykighan's feminist analysis reveals a dichotomy: a pattern of recurrent inequality with men as the dominant group and women as the subordinate class in the stories, yet spaces for subversion where female characters exhibit agency. She acknowledges women's roles in nurturing, domestic, or morally guiding roles as consistent with traditional Nso femininity, while also identifying counter-narratives that portray women as resourceful, intelligent, and influential. However, most of these tales only reinforce patriarchal stereotypes and women's submission. This dichotomy reflects a patriarchally-inflected matriculture, where tales socialise girls into daughterhood, wifehood, and motherhood, and boys into adventurous or leadership roles. The emphasis on "challenging the notion of women as merely passive" is significant for the article's theme of resilience.[63]

One such tale, *Vindze' vi yii bayir ansho'ti tan*' (Wrestling is often encouraged by the bald-headed) by John Suuyka, centres on Kpuboy who marries Princess Yuyar. After five childless years, she bears a son, Mbiin, thus bringing joy to the *Fon* and community. This narrative underscores the centrality of childbearing to royal and familial legitimacy, with women's value tied to reproduction. Child bearing is a sacred duty, and not just a biological function. This is because Nso dynastic lines rely heavily on the spiritual purity of the royal women, and their ability to preserve he cosmological balance of the *fondom* by giving birth to future royal households. It reinforces the sacred reproductive roles of women, and portrays motherhood as redemptive and communal. Barrenness in the story implies temporary trial rather than permanent stigma, yet the emphasis on procreation aligns with broader Cameroonian patterns where childless women face derogatory labels. The tale celebrates female contribution to lineage continuity, thereby linking to economic backbone roles.[64]

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[62] Nyuykighan, "Gender Representations in Selected Nso Folktales of the Northwest Region of Cameroon," 24.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid., 30-34.

Women play active roles in cultural ceremonies surrounding events such as births, marriages, funerals and harvest festivals. During celebrations such as birth, marriage, and death ceremonies, they prepare meals, perform traditional dances, and sing songs of praise or dirges. During these ceremonies, women demonstrate social unity through collective cooking and entertainment activities that enhance communal identity. Nso women also carry out weaving of mats and other embroidery works which are important social activities because they preserve the cultural identity of the Nso people.[65]

Generally, Nso women are very active in socio-cultural life. The activities they carry out have gone beyond domestic responsibilities to include cultural preservation, religious practices, economic cooperation, and social protest for the welfare of the community. Through women's associations, ceremonies, and farming group associations, they continue to enhance solidarity and contribute significantly to the development and preservation of the Nso cultural heritage.

Resilience Amid Constraints: Contemporary Negotiations and Transformations

The contemporary era has brought profound transformations to Nso society, testing the resilience of women's voices and agency while simultaneously creating new spaces for their expression and influence. This section examines how Nso women navigate persistent traditional constraints alongside postcolonial, educational, migratory, and crisis-induced changes. The ongoing Anglophone Crisis has imposed severe hardships such as displacement, violence, economic disruption, and social fragmentation. Yet women have responded with adaptive strategies, collective mobilization, peacebuilding initiatives, and cultural reclamation efforts such as the 'Bring Back Ngonnso campaign.'[66]

Contemporary transformations in gender relations among the Nso, such as access to formal education and urban migration, has enabled many women to challenge restrictive gender norms and participate more actively in public life. Education and urbanization have expanded opportunities for some women, enabling challenges to exploitative customs, while female social groups and diaspora networks sustain solidarity and economic resilience.[67]

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[65] Yinyuy, *The Evangelising Efforts of the Presbyterian and Catholic Women Associations in Nso, Cameroon 1961- 2013*, 70-74.
[66] The online campaign 'Bring Back Ngonnso,' launched in 2021 by Sylvie Njobati and the *Fon* of Nso, and popularised by Amnesty International, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin's official museum account, and the Cameroon Embassy in Berlin, among others.
[67] Personal Observation.

Postcolonial transformations, including independence, state policies, and economic shifts, have created both opportunities and intensified pressures on Nso women's traditional roles. Colonial and early postcolonial eras introduced cash cropping, mission education, and cooperative movements that altered gender divisions of labour. Doreen Bongdzeem Ngoran argues that the colonial and post-colonial eras are characterized by the existence, diversification, and modernization of female social groups in the Grassfields of Cameroon. Nso women have not been left out of this new movement, as several women's groups sprang up within this period, supported by the colonial administrators and missionaries. That is, the colonial era saw the emergence of women's groups as a response to changing realities, with British authorities providing support for associations that promoted self-help, adult education, and economic activities.[68]

In the Nso context, groups like the Mbonyar Women's Group (1950), Sabo Salama Women's Group (1952), and, in the 1960s, Christian Women's groups adapted precolonial mutual aid traditions to address new needs (such as the care of orphans) by providing food, clothing, school fees, medical costs, and farm inputs, among others. These women's groups operated in a patriarchal setup yet served as levers for financial pooling, solidarity funds, thrift and loans, and community development. By 2010, more than two hundred registered women's groups existed in Nso, with objectives ranging from promoting unity and income generation to advocating for women's and children's rights and sensitizing against societal ills.[69]

In the contemporary era, education has been a double-edged sword in Nso women's development initiative. Formal schooling, introduced by missionaries and expanded post-independence, has enabled literacy, delayed marriage, encouraged career diversification, and challenged polygyny or early unions. Education has amplified voices in civil society, with Nso women contributing to advocacy on health, agriculture, and rights. Yet it has also intensified burdens: for example, educated daughters may remit financial support while facing expectations to uphold reproductive roles.[70] This dynamic echoes broader Cameroonian patterns, where women power micro-economies and humanitarian responses, sustaining families amid state limitations.

The negotiation between continuity and transformation is also evident in the socialization of younger generations. Traditional Nso society emphasizes communal responsibility, respect and obedience for elders, and gendered apprenticeship roles. However, exposure to modern education, Christianity, urban lifestyles, and global media has altered intergenerational perceptions of gender and authority. A. Bame Nsamenang argues that Nso socialization emphasises moral instruction and the development of social intelligence

[68] Ngoran, 'Incidental Benefits of Female Constituted Social Groups in Nso Polity,' 21.
[69] Yinyuy, *The Evangelising Efforts of the Presbyterian and Catholic Women's Associations in Nso*, 230-231.
[70] Ibid., 214.

and responsibility by an individual. He notes that traditional socialization methods are in flux, with urban and educated parents showing fewer indigenous viewpoints as compared to rural counterparts.[71] In this light, rural women actively stand at the centre of these transformations as mediators between Indigenous traditions and contemporary aspirations.

The Cameroon Anglophone Crisis represents the most acute contemporary constraint that is profoundly disrupting Nso society through violence, displacement, school boycotts, market closures, and insecurity, among others. Women have borne disproportionate burdens as caregivers, farmers, and survivors of gender-based violence, yet they continue to serve as peace builders and economic sustainers. Many men have been displaced, killed, or detained and some have migrated in search of safety. In a nutshell, the Crisis has exacerbated gender-based violence, including rape. Consequently, women have assumed additional responsibilities which used to belong to men, such as clearing farms, transporting crops, and rearing animals. Women's groups have adapted traditional solidarity funds for trauma support and economic recovery.[72] These efforts demonstrate the evolving roles of women in Nso society. Their actions are visible in humanitarian leadership as they step in to fill the gaps left by the failure of state institutions.

The Crisis has weakened customary governance structures. The firing of gunshots and deadly weapons in the area have disrupted many rituals, destroyed family compounds, and closed communal festivals. Despite the challenges posed by this Crisis in Nso, the *Fonship* has not disappeared despite the disruption; the *Fon* of Nso remains the supreme traditional authority of the Nso people and continues to exercise considerable cultural, spiritual, and symbolic leadership. The *Fon c*ontinues to issue royal decrees and presides over important cultural matters through delegations led by traditional councillors who have been working to encourage reconciliation, unity, and the preservation of Nso traditions. In his various New Year messages to the Nso since the outbreak of the Crisis, he has always called on all the people of Nso to embrace peace and rebuild social cohesion.

However, it must be noted that the *Fon's* powers and authority have been greatly affected by the Crisis. Before the Anglophone Crisis, the *Fon* was sacrosanct and it was inconceivable for his authority to be challenged. His word was virtually law. But the Crisis has undermined some of this authority: he has been kidnapped several times and even though no harm was done to him, this was unfathomable before the Crisis.

Despite these challenges, the *Fonship* and cultural practices of the Nso people remain a central symbol of Nso identity. The Palace continues to serve as a reference point for Nso

[71] A. Bame Nsamenang and Michael E. Lamb, 'The Acquisition of Socio-Cognitive Competence by Nso Children in the Bamenda Grassfields of the Northwest Region of Cameroon,' *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 16:3 (1993), 429.
[72] Interview with Kumela, 25 December 2025.

people within Cameroon and in the diaspora. Many cultural practices have been readapted rather than abandoned. The Crisis has fractured patterns of social interaction and interrupted the transmission of customs, but has also encouraged new forms of cultural preservation through diaspora organizations, digital communication, royal publications, and community initiatives.

The experiences of Nso women in the Bamenda Grassfields reveal a dynamic interplay between resilience and constraint. Although patriarchal structures continue to shape social and political life, women have consistently negotiated spaces of agency through economic activities, social networks, migrations, education, and cultural institutions. Contemporary transformations have expanded opportunities for empowerment while simultaneously generating new tensions and challenges. The story of Nso women is therefore not simply one of victimhood under patriarchy, but rather one of adaptation, negotiation, and continuous redefinition of gender roles within changing historical contexts.

Conclusion

This article examines the multifaceted dimensions of women's voices and agency in Nso cultural traditions of the Bamenda Grassfields. It has sought to place Nso women at the centre of the story of their society, not simply as mothers, wives, farmers, traders, or custodians of tradition, but as historical actors who have continuously negotiated the structures within which they live. Their experiences reveal a complex picture of power. Women have been deeply involved in sustaining families, transmitting culture, producing food, managing households, participating in economic activities, and responding to community crises. Yet these responsibilities have not always translated into equal control over land, resources, political institutions, or formal decision-making. This tension between responsibility and authority is at the heart of understanding women's agency in Nso society.

The concept of matriculture provides an important entry point into this complexity. The cultural significance and the changes attached attached to motherhood, female identity, reproduction, and the continuity of the community demonstrates that women occupy an important but not static place in Nso cultural imagination. The memory of Princess Ngonnso further reinforces the significance of female identity in Nso historical consciousness. However, the study has also shown that matriculture - the system of meanings and symbols associated with women and mothers - should not be confused with matriarchy (the governance and economic authority of women). The cultural recognition of women does not necessarily mean that women possess equal institutional power. Indeed, the coexistence of female cultural centrality with predominantly male political and customary institutions exposes one of the central contradictions of Nso gender

relations.

Formally, patriarchal structures dominate Nso *fondom*; the office of the *Fon*, male titleholders, and regulatory societies such as *Ngwerong* and *Ngiri* coexist with and are sustained by women's resilient contributions across historical, economic, social, reproductive, and cultural domains. From the foundational migration led by Princess Ngonnso in the fourteenth century, through colonial disruptions and postcolonial transformations, to the acute challenges of the Anglophone Crisis, Nso women have exercised power that is neither marginal nor merely reactive, but generative and enduring. By foregrounding these echoes, this article challenges simplistic narratives of female subordination in African chiefdoms and contributes to broader understandings of gender, power, and cultural continuity in patrilineal societies. As understood in Nso matriculture, women's agency is integral to the *fondom's* vitality, social cohesion, economic sustenance, and identity formation, thereby demonstrating that resilience is not passive endurance but an active, negotiated force woven into the fabric of tradition itself. In essence, the echoes of Nso women's voices, from migratory history through colonial encounters to today's challenges, reveal a tradition of dynamic negotiation rather than static patriarchy.

Biography

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