

African Women Chiefs as Partners in Regional Governance in Cameroon: The Case of “Nkunkuma” Marie-Louise Zoa

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received on: 30 Jan 2025 Revised on: 27 Feb 2025 Accepted on: 05 Mar 2025 ©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords— Women Chiefs, Marie-Louise Zoa, Gender Equality, Regional Governance, Women Empowerment, Cameroon</p>	<p><i>The inclusion of women in regional governance processes has of recent gained tremendous attention in most African societies as a means to foster more inclusive and sustainable development. In Africa, men for the most part, have been the ones at the helm of affairs and decision-making while women are relegated to the background most of the times. This paper therefore explores the role of African women chiefs with particular reference to Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa, of Okoa community in the Centre region of Cameroon as a key partner in regional governance in Cameroon. Her unique contributions to decision-making, conflict resolution, community development, as well as her role as the custodian of cultural heritage of her community cannot be overemphasized. Through qualitative interviews, the paper examines the barriers and constraints women chiefs face, such as patriarchal norms, limited access to resources/education, and gender-based discrimination. The paper however contends that there is need for collaboration between African women chiefs and other stakeholders such as government institutions, civil society organizations, and international development agencies in order to foster inclusive partnership and regional governance. It further advocates for the recognition and empowerment of African women chiefs as vital partners in regional governance in Cameroon. By so doing, this will foster gender equality, promote women’s leadership, and provide avenues for meaningful participation of women chiefs in decision-making processes.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

The role of African women chiefs as partners in regional governance is an important aspect of promoting gender equality, and effective governance in Africa, given the fact that women in Africa occupy secondary or minority positions as far as leadership positions are concerned due to cultural and political ambiguities. Women (including Cameroonian women), according to Muoghalu and Abrifor (2012),

are discouraged from participating in public life from childhood through adulthood by authority figures such as husbands, fathers, mothers and other relations due to cultural image of a virtuous woman defined as quiet, submissive who should be seen and not heard. Because of the patriarchal nature of the African society, most women still believe and accept the traditional perspectives that view women as inferior to men, second class citizens, weaker sex,

to be seen and not heard, child bearers/ primary care-givers, and so on. In most cases, they feel the game of politics is an exclusive reserve of men and dare not venture into it and those who manage to venture are usually contented with the back seats (Ngara et al., 2013).

In the same vein, Ugwuegede Patience Nwabunkeonye (2014) opines that religious practices are sometimes used as powerful instruments of stereotype against Nigerian women political aspirants/politicians from active participation in politics. For instance, in Northern Nigeria, the purdah system (i.e. house seclusion of women) of the Islamic doctrine strictly bars women from participating in politics either as voters, political aspirants or even participating in campaigns/other electoral activities. However, when it comes to the issue of political leadership and formulation of government policies women's role in Islam is limited to supportive and advisory (Nwankwo and Surma, 2008). Also, the Christian doctrine on her part does not accord women much role in public life.

However, in some traditional African societies, women have held formal positions as queens, queen mothers or female chiefs. For example, the Akan people of Ghana have a tradition of "Queen mothers" who play important advisory and decision-making roles alongside male chiefs. Similarly, some societies in Nigeria have had powerful female rulers: Iyalode of the Yoruba people, Queen Amina of Zauzau, Princess Inikpi of the Igala Kingdom and a lot more. In Cameroon, the Nso dynasty in the North West region, was founded by Ngonnso, the queen mother. All these, are evidences that African women chiefs play important roles in leadership and their contributions to regional governance cannot be overemphasized.

These women chiefs, also known as queen mothers or female traditional leaders are very few, but play significant roles in preserving and safeguarding the artistic and cultural heritage of their people in various chiefdoms/kingdoms in the African continent as well as in their communities thereby contributing enormously to regional governance. From time immemorial women have been the keepers of traditions, custodians of oral histories, and creators of exquisite art forms. They have often served as priestesses, diviners, and mediators between human

and spiritual realms. These religious leadership and expertise have been crucial in maintaining community cohesion and practices.

Although over the years, women have been relegated to the background on issues of the overall community development especially in developing nations like Cameroon, one could say that, this is borne out of the sentimental attachment on the feminine gender. Historical evidences show that African women and Cameroonian women in particular have for long been playing crucial roles in the political life of their countries, and this has contributed in no small measure in shaping the political system of their nations. For example, the Aba Women's Riot in Nigeria in 1929 was a major anti-colonial uprising led by women. Also in Cameroon, the *Anlu* and *Takembeng* women's secret groups of the North West Region were very much influential in re-shaping the political situation in Cameroon in the 1990s. These women's activism according to Bertha Epie-Eyoh (1993), demonstrates that "women have always been the backbone of every political rally or political march in support of democracy or in demonstrations against repression"(184). These are indicators that, for development of any kind to be successful, a vantage position should be accorded to the women, as they constitute a larger proportion of the population in Cameroon. In this regard, they should not be left out on issues of decision-making that bothers even on their lives as a people.

Today, women are participating more actively in leadership roles through regional governance, and community development than ever before as a result of political re-awakening and awareness. More often than not, they are besieged with challenges of which discrimination is more rife. Majority of the men more on chauvinistic dispositions are preoccupied with the notion that decision-making is exclusively for the men folk while women are to be instructed on what to do. This idea of seeing the women playing the number two role at homes has come to play itself out in the political life of the people. However, with regards to the ever dynamic nature of things globally women are now seen in other communities as avant-garde most especially in developed nations. Nevertheless, African women chiefs such as "Nkunkuma" Marie-Louise Zoa have recorded some measure of appreciable leadership

roles in regional governance and political achievement thereby, meeting her leadership objectives though with limited support and resources at her disposal.

Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa otherwise referred to as "Nkunkuma" Marie-Louise Zoa is the female traditional ruler of Okoa community in the centre region of Cameroon who serves as the custodian of artistic and cultural heritage of her people. Okoa is located in the outskirts of the city of Yaounde, at Soa in the Mefou Afamba Division of the Centre Region of Cameroon. This community has a long history of colonization and slavery where many people fled from slavery from various parts of the continent and took refuge in Okoa. According to Her Majesty (HM) in an interview August 2023, a lot of Tutsis fled the Rwandan genocide and took refuge in Okoa where many of them later became integrated in the community and have become great farmers and land owners. The Okoa community is noted for her hospitality as she is host to people from diverse parts of the nation from the North, South, North West, South West regions and many more. This accounts for the reason the community harbours people from various ethnic groups. According to Cedric Mimfoumou (2019) the indigenous people of Okoa, are the Etengas, while settlers like the Maka'a, the Nanga-Eboko and the Ndong people have over the years become full-fledged indigenes of this community.

Leadership of the people of Okoa has been under the tutelage of Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa for over 40 years. She ascended the throne in 1982 at the age of 20, four years before the demise of her father, the former chief of Okoa. In a typical patriarchal society where leadership is mostly in the hands of men, we come across a female traditional ruler who is vested with the powers and authority to lead a whole chiefdom. The question that arises here is: Why the choice of a female successor despite the fact that she has male siblings? In a response, she says: "I cant really explain my father's decision but I believe it was divine since my father was a great visionary. Power comes from God, and parents understand their children better and can predict their future. I have brothers and sisters but my predecessor chose me." (Interview with Marie-Louise Zoa, August 26, 2023). At her young age of ascending the throne as a

female Chief, it is obvious that she would have definitely had some challenges leading her people. She however, declares that:

The chiefdom is not the chief alone. The chief is just at the helm of affairs. That notwithstanding, I was so young and understood very little about the cultural norms and practices of my people, but I was so so fortunate to be mentored by my father four years before his demise. Unlike the case in most chiefdoms where succession is done after the death of the former chief. This transition period, gave me the opportunity to learn a lot from my predecessor, the notables and the royal entourage. I accompanied my late father, in performing several rituals and duties of the Chief. So these four years were a period of learning for me to better equip me for the duties that await me. It is thanks to this procedure and the wisdom bestowed upon me by my ancestors that I have been able to successfully rule over my people for all this length of time (interview with Marie-Louise Zoa, August 26, 2023).

This indicates that succession in traditional African kingdoms and chieftaincies varies across different cultures and societies. In many traditional african kingdoms, the kingship or chieftaincy is hereditary and the succession often follows either patrilineal or matrilineal lines. The throne is passed from father to son or from ruler to their sister's son. On rare occasions do we find succession handed down from father to daughter as is the case with Marie-Louise Zoa. This indicates that the succession process is often complex, nuanced, and adapted to the unique circumstances and traditions of each kingdom or chieftaincy. As such, the role of women chiefs in leadership and governance cannot be overemphasized.

The traditional African women chiefs though very few are of great influence on the African continent and in regional governance in many ways such as representing the women in their communities in the political and developmental arenas as well as preserving the cultural heritage of her people.

II. REPRESENTATION AND VOICE

African women chiefs represent the interests and concerns of women within their communities. They provide a unique perspective on issues that affect women, such as gender-based violence, maternal health, education, and economic empowerment. By amplifying women's voices, women chiefs ensure that the needs and priorities of women are incorporated into regional governance processes such as education for all children especially young girls, curbing girl-child marriage and re-enforcing certain traditional marriage practices. Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa, serves as a peace mediator in issues affecting women in her area especially in cases of domestic violence where women are molested by their male counterparts. Most of these disputes are settled within the traditional ambit of the local authorities without necessarily bringing in either the forces of law and order or going to court. She is known for her ability to mediate disputes, foster dialogue and promote reconciliation. In regional governance, her participation can contribute to the creation of an inclusive and peaceful society by incorporating gender-sensitive approaches to conflict resolution and peace building. Her presence is a strong symbol of the feminine power which gives voice to the voiceless in her community.

Her majesty's activities in her community Okoa, reiterates the fact that women in traditional societies play a major role in peacemaking and conflict resolution as they constitute a greater percentage of inhabitants in Cameroon. These women in their traditional roles, have been known to pilot most of the affairs of the land from the pre-colonial era till date. Their role in conflict resolution, prevention, peacemaking, peacebuilding and reconciliation cannot be over-emphasized. This is because apart from performing their biological and social roles of caring, giving birth and bringing up humans as mothers, women have the potentials of partaking in activities geared towards peaceful resolution of conflicts as well as in peacebuilding. The traditional African women leaders usually assume the role of peacemakers in families, communities and the society at large as is the case with HM Marie Louise Zoa. As a peace mediator in her community, she ensures that women are united across party, ethnic and class differences to foster peace in most troubled

communities. Their unity and determination stems from their everyday experiences and concerns such as protecting their children, finding food, clean water or shelter, protecting themselves from violence and particularly sexual and gender-based violence associated with conflict. These and many more are the concerns of HM (Marie-Louise Zoa) and her notables, to ensure that there is maximum peace in her community.

While most women are left out of the arena of regional governance probably because of their femininity and cultural biases against the womenfolk, "Nkunkuma" Marie-Louise Zoa, has been very instrumental in the domains of skill acquisition and women empowerment. Her production of a specially designed Ekang traditional attire with the use of local materials like raffia, cowries, wild fruits, "Obom" (bark of a rare wood species), woven together with leopard polyester material is of great significance. As an entrepreneur, she trains young girls and boys in the production of these special traditional attires (caps, necklaces, jackets, gowns etc) worn by notables, and dignitaries reflecting the culture of her people. This skill acquisition centre equally serves as means of youth empowerment and financial independence. Within Cameroon and elsewhere, her recognition as a designer of this special Ekang traditional attire, has conquered the hearts of many as these outfits are in high demand across the nation and why not internationally. Her artistry has enabled her to sustain traditional art forms and serves as an income generating avenue for the Ekang youths in the industry as well as the community at large. By promoting and marketing African art and crafts through her traditional attires, Her Majesty does not only contribute to the preservation of her cultural heritage but equally empowers herself and Ekang youths economically. Her participation in several art exhibitions and conferences won her the 2019 best participation prize during the Mvet-Oyeng festival in Ambam, Cameroon. She has equally earned several other awards to her honour where she presented her culture to the outside world. Her activities and leadership roles are in tandem with regional governance processes since she impacts positively in her community and uses her position as a medium for peace negotiation and economic empowerment. This portrays that women chiefs serve as role models and

advocates for gender equality and women empowerment. Her presence as an activist in regional governance in Cameroon, provides a platform to address gender disparities and advance women's rights thus challenging gender stereotypes.

Civil wedding ceremonies in Cameroon are often the prerogatives of the mayors or deputy mayors. However, the law also allows for traditional chiefs to be designated by the state to officiate civil marriage ceremonies. This makes marriage ceremonies more accessible especially in rural areas where government offices may be absent. It equally allows for the incorporation of traditional customs and involvement of respected community leaders in the marriage process. These can make the civil wedding more meaningful and culturally relevant for the couple and their families. Her Majesty, Marie-Louise Zoa is one of the government representatives designated to officiate civil weddings in her community. This places her within the ambit of regional governance as she works hand in glove with the state to ensure that distance is not a barrier for would-be couples in her rural community. Her palace accommodates both the traditional and civil arenas for wedding ceremonies. The practice of designating traditional chiefs as civil registrars in Cameroon is a unique approach that combines the legal requirements of civil marriage with the traditional authority and cultural significance of the local community.

III. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Most African women chiefs actively engage in community development initiatives, focusing on areas such as healthcare, education, sanitation and economic empowerment. They recognize the importance of investing in human capital and work towards improving the well-being and livelihoods of their communities. Most of these African women chiefs collaborate with their regional governance stakeholders, including government officials, civil society organizations, and international development agencies to foster community development in their areas of jurisdiction. Through these partnerships, they share best practices, exchange knowledge, and advocate for policies that address the specific needs and challenges faced by women and the communities at large. Collaboration with regional governance bodies such as the government, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), individuals and groups of

persons/elites, enables women chiefs to access resources, build capacity, and influence decision-making processes in their communities. By so doing, women chiefs contribute to the formulation and implementation of policies that promote sustainable development and social progress in their communities.

Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa in this domain of community development and in collaboration with the municipal council has allocated a large portion of land for the construction of a market, a health centre, and a primary school to cater for the immediate needs of her community. According to her, underground work is underway in search of funds from government agencies, NGOs and private investors to actualize these projects and many more. The African Roots and Heritage Foundation (NGO) is one of such organisations catching up with the pace to construct a library and a research centre at Okoa community. These are all policies put in place by Her Majesty to foster and promote sustainable development and social progress in her community.

As part of economic sustainability and community development, "Nkunkuma" has constructed an ecotouristic site on the Mefou river closer to her palace popularly known as "Pieds dans l'eau" (Feet in Water) which serves as both a restaurant and a touristic site for many people within and outside the community. At pieds dans l'eau, tourists have the opportunity to enjoy the Ekang traditional meal known as "ndomba" (an Ekang dish made from fresh river fish "pepper-soup" prepared with local spices) with their feet immersed in water. This site is surrounded by the beauty of a natural forest landscape with its flora and fauna, and the serenity of the atmosphere coupled with the rippling sounds of the running stream as against the hustling and bustling life in the cities. On these quiet waters, is a strong sense of communion with nature, reminiscence of the natural and authentic beauty of the community of Okoa.

IV. PRESERVATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE AND THE RESTITUTION OF AFRICAN SACRED OBJECTS

Most African women chiefs serve as custodians of the culture and traditions of their people. They equally play a vital role in preserving and promoting cultural practices, indigenous knowledge, and traditional values within their communities. By

actively participating in regional governance, women chiefs can advocate for the recognition and inclusion of cultural diversity in policies and programs, contributing to the preservation of African cultural heritage.

The traditional African women chiefs have been of great influence on the African continent in many ways and one of such is through the preservation of oral traditions where they have acted as custodians of cultural heritage. For centuries, African societies relied so much on oral storytelling as a means of transmitting historical accounts, myths, legends and moral teachings from one generation to another. These women were central to this process of passing down these narratives from one generation to another, thus ensuring their continuity and relevance. Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa as one of the richly endowed traditional African women leaders has stood the test of time and leaves no stone unturned by bringing up the young princesses in her chieftdom in the ways and customs of her people. These young girls beautifully clad in traditional attires take turns in attending to Her Majesty in both private and public functions. By so doing, they are gradually immersed in their traditional roles and practices as they learn the history, myths and cultural practices of their people thus ensuring their continuity and relevance. Despite all these, globalization has become a threat to the survival of some of these Ekang cultural practices such as bride price, widowhood, and funeral rites just to mention a few.

Throughout Africa, women have been at the forefront of cultural rituals and ceremonies which are essential in the preservation of their cultural heritage. From initiation ceremonies to marriage rituals, widowhood and funeral rites and many others, women have played central roles as priestesses, performers, dancers, singers, and organizers. These rituals often serve as a means of transmitting cultural values, social norms, and spiritual beliefs. African women's active participation in these rituals ensures the continuity of traditions and the preservation of cultural heritage within their communities. Her Majesty Marie Louis Zoa, is taking major steps towards the revalorisation of the bride price practice in her community which to her is of great significance in the African marriage system. Marriage for African peoples according to John Mbiti (1969) is:

The focus of existence; It is the point where all the members of a given community meet. The departed, the living and those yet unborn. All the dimensions of time meet here, and the whole drama of history is repeated, renewed and revitalized (133).

This indicates that marriage in Africa is not just about husband and wife but it involves a whole community. Bride price which is one of the major unifying factors in African marriages according to Her Majesty, is gradually losing its sense of originality, as it has been commercialized in recent times in most African communities.

Various societies have different demands for the bride price according to their cultural heritage. For the Ekang people of Okoa, bride price consists of kolanuts, palm wine, palm oil, and a few cowries. According to Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa, "it is worth-noting that in recent times, this is no longer practicable as most families have attached a lot of material benefits to it and most young girls in some communities no longer feel comfortable with this practice" (interview August 26th, 2023). This is because psychologically, the practice has created "an ownership mentality in men" which according to Stephen Baffour Adjei, "could lead men to see their wives as their purchase over whom they exercise unfettered authority including physical and psychological abuse"(qtd in Chika Oduah 2019). Many African scholars, feminists and critics have condemned this practice, describing it as dehumanizing because it seems to commodify women. Despite these criticisms, a lot of African women still believe that bride price gives them a sense of identity and self-worth in marriage. However, Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa seeks to reinstate the originality and symbolic significance of bride price practice in her community. This to her, is one of the key aspects of her cultural practices and heritage that she desires to preserve and encourage among the young ones.

Africa is a vast continent with distinct cultures, languages and people with different crafts and traditions and as such, African art though dynamic has changed in form, function, and meaning over time. However, the concept of indigenous African art has remained static. This is because pre-colonial sacred objects have an aura of untainted

timeless past reflecting the way of life of the African people (Mbu, 2023). These sacred objects carry with them the people who venerate them thus a disconnection of the people from their cultural heritage propels a spiritual disconnection from the sacred things that bind them together. Colonization had a major impact on Africa's culture, history, and African art which some critics argue that contemporary African art, including description, materials, subjects, and purpose, were greatly influenced by the culture of the European countries that colonized Africa. The historical disappearance of African artefacts and their eventual display in museums in Europe and America is one of the things that has raised current debates on their restitution which becomes one of the ways to reconnect the people back to their roots. African arts and cultures in their diverse forms are highly valued and respected respectively in the global world today. This diversification of African arts and cultures, forms a colourful cultural heritage distinct of the people only. This is in line with what Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy (2018) describe in their book on *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics* as an interrelation of two dynamics. They opine that:

The intellectual and aesthetic appropriation combined with the economic appropriation of the cultural heritage of the other, which, within the cities of the conqueror, within his houses, his circles of experts and on the art market acquire a value, another life disconnected from their origins. Intentional alienation and deculturation of subordinated populations whose psychological equilibrium has been broken, sometimes definitively, through the focal objects-objects of orientation that have been passed down from one generation to the next (7).

This indicates the cultural alienation of a people from the sacred objects that bind them together, thus, the reason for a high demand for the restitution of these cultural artifacts by Africans. All these demands are indications that a people's cultural heritage seen in the sacred objects is priceless and, therefore, needs to be preserved in their appropriate quarters to ensure that

spiritual connection among the people who venerate them.

Besides these debates are also general concerns about the preservation of these artefacts upon return to their original abodes in Africa, where many Kingdoms are doing their best to preserve their cultural heritage. Some people argue that, due to wars and poverty within Africa, the continent is not yet institutionally ready to protect and retrieve these objects. Kiefer quotes Julien Flank, the owner of Galerie Flank in Paris that exhibits tribal art from Africa, Oceania and the Americas in an interview where she says,

Returning the objects is possibly a good point, entering into dialogue is the best thing that we can do. But who are we going to return the objects to? I'm not sure today the museums in Benin are ready in terms of conservation, condition of the buildings to welcome these objects" (Euronews 2018) (00:01:24 - 00:02:47).

Some African countries like Ghana and Nigeria have gone ahead to debunk this argument by Julien as some of their returned looted cultural artifacts, are currently found in museums in the Benin Kingdom in Nigeria and the Ghanaian Museum where they are carefully preserved.

Although Okoa chieftom does not have a history of plundered artefacts by colonialists, Her Majesty is keeping with the pace of time given the fact that debates on the restitution and preservation of African artefacts have taken center stage in both Western and African discourses. On her part, Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa is collection of the sacred objects found in her chieftom are in safe keep as she looks forward to constructing a museum where these artefacts can be well preserved and displayed for both public and private consumption. This would go a long way in preserving the history, and cultural heritage of her people thereby reiterating the fact that African artefacts should be left in the hands of the African people for they constitute part and parcel of the life of the people who venerate them.

V. CONCLUSION

The extent of women chiefs' involvement in regional governance varies across African countries and communities. Some regions have made notable

progress in recognizing and supporting the participation of women chiefs, while others may still face cultural, social, or legal barriers. However, the increasing recognition of the value of women's leadership and the promotion of gender equality and women empowerment provide opportunities for women chiefs to play a more prominent role in regional governance, contributing to more inclusive and effective governance systems in Africa. African traditional women leaders have continued to play a pivotal role in preserving and safeguarding their artistic and cultural heritage. Through their involvement in artistic expression, cultural rituals, and entrepreneurial endeavours, Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa has demonstrated a strong sense of leadership and zeal as the custodian of the Ejang cultural heritage. Her contributions are crucial for maintaining the richness and diversity of the Ejang culture while at the same time, deconstructing patriarchal narratives that only men are heads of chiefdoms in African communities. Her reinforcement of certain government policies in her community have helped in shaping and maintaining order in Okoa. Her presence in the political arena gives a strong voice to the people whom she represents. As such, discriminatory socio-cultural laws of inheritance/succession should be positively reviewed by stakeholders (particularly traditional/religious rulers) and government should adopt and strictly enforce policy frameworks and empowering programmes for women chiefs to enhance economic sustainability and community development. Recognising and supporting the work of traditional African women rulers is essential for fostering cultural continuity, women empowerment, and sustainable development across the African continent.

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