

## Review Article

## Amazing Pursuit of Traditional Titles in the Nso Fondom of Cameroon in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and Impact in the Society; The Case of the Sheey Title

Aurelia Kihla Bamwai (PhD)<sup>1\*</sup><sup>1</sup>The University of Yaounde 1, Department of History**Article History****Received:** 22.07.2024**Accepted:** 27.08.2024**Published:** 31.08.2024**Journal homepage:**<https://www.easpublisher.com>**Quick Response Code**

**Abstract:** Traditional titles existed before the European Powers colonised Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Cameroon traditional societies were an epitome of every other African society that upheld these titles. In the Nso fondom, Traditional Authorities awarded titles because they realized that it was easy to administer the population with designated individuals charged with the duty of bringing together people to carry out development in the fondom. The acquisition of such titles thus became a sign of honour and prestige to those on whom they were conferred, even though the titles were only awarded to those who distinguished themselves in society either by their achievement or by belonging to a particular lineage. These titles ranged from *Kibai*, *Shuufaay*, *Faay*, *Sheey*, *Yaa*, *Mfoome* etc. During the post-colonial period, the Nso fondom witnessed a proliferation of title holders in the society particularly those of the *Sheey* class. The desire to uncover the driving force behind this increase prompted this research. Using information from oral and written sources and applying a qualitative and quantitative research methodology, we came up with the findings that the excitement of title award ran and has continued to run in the blood of many people who saw in it an opportunity not only to contribute to the traditional administration of the people and the society as a whole, but also to be noticed. The outcome of this was that title donors disregarded the status quo which required the title to be awarded pursuant to the initial traditional value fervently upheld by the ancestors of the *Fondom*. Therefore, in order to revive the traditional value of the title, title donors should adhere to the old tradition of award that laid emphasis on maturity and integrity as well as the readiness to act as custodians of the customs and traditions of the *Fondom*.

**Keywords:** Traditional Title, Sheey Title, Pursuit, Post-colonial Period, Nso Fondom.

**Copyright © 2024 The Author(s):** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution **4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)** which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

### INTRODUCTION

Traditional titles in organised African societies are not a thing of today. During the scramble and colonial annexation of Cameroon, the coastal chiefs were motivated with the award of titles by the British traders and missionaries, since they discovered that Africans loved titles. These titles empowered them to administer the local population on behalf of the colonial masters. This initiative was designed to make administration of the colony easier for the colonial masters in what was known as the British indirect rule. The local chiefs served as a bridge between the colonial masters and the local population, and were responsible for the mobilization of

the population to carry out common initiative projects and communal work for the development of the colony. This was a great achievement and a sign of honour to them and consequently made many to strive for the award.

The Nso fondom is located in Bui Division in the North West Region of the Republic of Cameroon. It is a patrilineal fondom whose foundation dates back to the pre-colonial period. Nso is regarded as the largest fondom in the Bamenda Grassfields and one of the oldest fondoms in the North West Region of Cameroon, dating as far back as the 14<sup>th</sup> century [1]. The award of titles in

<sup>1</sup> E.M. Chilver and P.M. Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda: The Pre-colonial History and Ethnography of the*

*Bamenda Grassfields*, Vol. 1, Buea, Government Printers, 1968, P.97

\*Corresponding Author: Aurelia Kihla Bamwai  
The University of Yaounde 1, Department of History

the Nso fondom dates back to the pre-colonial period during which local authorities realized that it was easy to administer the population with designated individuals charged with the duty of bringing together people to carry out development in the fondom. The acquisition of such titles thus became a sign of honour and prestige to those on whom they were conferred, even though the titles were only awarded to those who distinguished themselves in society either by their achievements or by belonging to a particular lineage. However, it is obvious that the excitement of title award continue to flow in the blood of many people who see in it an opportunity not only to contribute to the traditional administration of the people and the society as a whole, but also to be significant.

The administrative machinery of the Nso fondom like that of all other western Grassfield fondoms, forms a range of title holders that ranks from the highest to the lowest in descending order of importance. The highest being the Fon at the head of the administration, assisted by the *Vibai* (great lords or state councilors), selected from a class of *Ashuufaay*, *Ataanto*'' or lineage heads with special palace duties, *Afaay* (lords), or lineage heads with no special palace duties, the *Asheey* (lordlings), the *Ayaa* made up of *Yefon* (*Fon's* mother), *Yewong* (queen mother or priestess of the *Fondom*), *Yesum* (mother of the farming estate) etc., and finally the *Amfoome* who were military leaders especially in the days of wars. The administration is also assisted by traditional societies like the *Nwerong* (regulatory society), the *Ngiri* (society of princes and male cadet royals) and the *Mfuh* (the highest lodge of military establishment). Within the inner core of *Nwerong* and *Ngiri* traditional societies, are found *Sheey* title holders of different categories, who assisted in the running of societal issues.

Since 1972, there has been a rampant growth of *sheey* title holders in the Nso fondom. There was an exaggerated increase in the number of non-hereditary *sheey* title holders as compared to those of the hereditary class. The manner in which non-hereditary titles were awarded seemed to have been the driving force behind the easy acquisition of the title. This aroused a lot of interest and anxiety in the young and the middle-aged people who desired to acquire the *Sheey* title so as to gain prestige and recognition that accompanied it, and also on the researcher who sought to find out the driving force behind the interest for the title. It is possible to think that the bed rock of the multiplicity of the *Sheey* title holders resulted from the challenge that came from the elite sons of the land who sought to have a greater say in local affairs by challenging the old institution that was built on hereditary titles.

In order to retain power over local affairs, the traditional power brokers created non-hereditary titles based on merit, and which could be used to integrate the elite of the land into local administration. Nevertheless, those who rendered meritorious services and did not have the opportunity to grab the titles undertook to spend huge sums of money to gain admission into the inner circles of the *Nwerong* and *Ngiri* traditional societies in order to acquire the status of *sheey ngang*. This was contrary to the old traditional pattern of title award that was based on criteria like necessity, age, sex, services rendered to the fondom etc. The rampant award therefore made the title that was held in high esteem by the forefathers of the land to look mean in the eyes of the ordinary man. It is therefore necessary to focus this study on the driving force behind the rampant award of the *sheey* title in the Nso fondom.

### Concept and Origin of *Sheey* in Nso

*Sheey* like every other title was an appellation accorded to a person on the basis of some achievements or family connections. The origin of the *Sheey* title is not well known, but oral tradition has it that it was originally that of princes which was created and used for sub lineages [2]. Other versions hold that it was introduced by the Nso fondom to assist the traditional administration in carrying out its duties within the community, especially due to the increase in the population of the fondom, and also as assistance to the *Faay* or *Shuufaay* whose compound or lineage became too large [3].

The *Sheey* title consists of hereditary, non hereditary and honorific classes of title holders. The title is considered as the lowest in the administrative hierarchy [4]. There are five distinct classes of this title – those of the *Menchan* or sacrificial class, a prince heading a large family, those of the *Nwerong* and *Ngiri* class (*asheey vee nto*'), those of the *Ngang* or members of the *Yenwerong/Yengiri* class and those of the *Mbumi* or honorific class [5].

The old institutional framework that was built on hereditary titles was considered by many people as not responding to the changes in the society especially power sharing. In that light, the elite sons of the land who wished to have a greater say in local affairs pushed the local authorities to show some flexibility by creating non hereditary titles based on merit. This led to an increase in the number of title holders in the society especially the honorific class. Those who could not meet up with the qualifications needed to be awarded a *Sheey* title and desired power forced their way into acquiring the title within the *Nwerong* and *Ngiri* class of title holders as *ngang Nwerong* or *ngang Ngiri*, by performing the necessary rights and obligations which required huge

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Mzeka N. Paul, aged 74, retired civil servant, Bamenda 10<sup>th</sup> August 2008

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Sheey Sevidzem Patricia, aged 37, Teacher, Yaounde 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2008

<sup>4</sup> P.N. Mzeka, *The Core Culture of Nso*, USA, Jerome Radin Co., Agawam, Ma, 1980.

<sup>5</sup> Mzeka, *The Core Culutre*, P.71

sums of money. This accounted for the increased number of *asheey* found in the society [6].

### Motives behind the Quest for the Sheey Title

A lot of reasons have been advanced for the keen interest developed by many Nso indigenes in acquiring the *Sheey* title, and why some of them have actually been awarded this title. These reasons also account for the increase in the number of *Sheey* title holders during the study period. This article classifies the reasons from both the external and internal perspectives.

#### External Reasons

Traditional title award and acquisition were greatly influenced in the Nso fondom during the study period by certain external factors out of the fondom, ranging from the 1977 decree on chieftaincy reorganization, the advent of democracy and multi-party politics and the economic crisis of the early 90's, which swept across sub-Saharan Africa and almost amputated the economies of several countries.

#### The 1977 Decree on Chieftaincy Reorganization

The decree N° 77/245 of 15<sup>th</sup> July 1977 reinforced the superiority of the Cameroon administration over traditional chieftaincy institutions. In the general rules stipulated in chapter II with regard to the designation of a chief, article 8 stated that the candidates must be physically apt and morally sound and should be capable of reading and writing [7]. Nkwi Paul reiterated on this issue when he says;

Since chiefs are regarded as government administrative agents, they should be able to read and write in order to have first knowledge of government policies. By reading and understanding government circulars and instructions, the Fon will be able to keep their populations informed [8].

This article was issued to empower the chiefs to ensure the smooth transmission of information from the administration to their people since they were considered as agents of the administration. In order to fulfill this requirement and at the same time maintain the integrity of the tradition of the Nso fondom, especially that of royal heritage, the Fon of Nso decided to bring the elite sons of the land closer to tradition by awarding the *Sheey* title to a good number of them, thereby making them agents of administration to mediate between the government and the Fon, and also between the people and the Fon.

### Influence of Multi-Party Politics in the 1990s

The re-introduction of multiparty politics and democracy in Cameroon in 1990 was a turning point in the history of Cameroon in general and that of the Nso fondom in particular. It greatly affected the award of traditional titles in the fondom, especially the *Sheey* title. Multi-party politics and democracy revolutionised the mentality of the Nso people, by inculcating the ideas of liberty and self-expression in their minds. In this regard, they found in this innovation a landmark and an avenue to exercise freedom in traditional institutions as well as political parties. One of the easiest ways by which many people gained access to these political institutions and parties was by acquiring the *Sheey* title because the paramount Fon of Nso was in dire need of them to mediate between him and the administration and to mobilize the population for political ends. This endowed the title holders with the ability to express themselves in public and consequently pushed many to acquire the title in order to make their voices heard.

#### Economic Crisis of the 90's

Even though the economic crisis of the late 1980s and 1990s had adverse consequences on the people of the Nso, it facilitated the award of the *Sheey* title to the people by the Fon who needed funds for the construction and administration of the palace. It was a critical period in the history of the fondom because this crisis coincided with some important projects, such as the construction of the Nso Fon's palace, which was ongoing. In order to get enough funds for these projects, the *Sheey* title was awarded to many people without so much consideration about traditional norms and values. These were particular individuals who were not much affected by the economic crisis and their desire was to make a difference by obtaining the title at a time when many were shying away from it.

#### Internal Reasons

Internal factors equally influenced the award and acquisition of the *Sheey* title in the Nso fondom during the study period. The emergence of a new elite, the quest for power, the display of wealth, the desire for recognition, the change in the mode of acquisition, the quest for prestige, acquisition due to circumstances, the search for mystical powers, license to polygamy, motivation to others, tribal identity, curiosity, the desire to control lineage property and the desire for a grandiose traditional burial are internal factors that contributed to the massive award of the *Sheey* title in the Nso fondom during the study period.

---

<sup>6</sup> Read more on the different classes of *Sheey* title holders in A. k. Bamwai, "Incredible Quest for Traditional Titles in Nso; A Case study of the *Sheey* Title, 1972-2006" DIPES II Dissertation in History, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> H. Anu, "Lefua (Chieftaincy) Titles in Lewoh Chiefdom; 1903-1992", M.A. Dissertation in History, Yaounde, 2006, P.99

<sup>8</sup> N.Paul, *Regional Balance*, P. 64, in M. Kein, "The Award of Traditional Titles in the Grassfield Fondoms: The Case of Mbei (Santa Sub-Division), 1922-2002", M.A. Dissertation in History, University of Yaounde 1, 2006, P. 80

### Emergence of New Elite

The elite sons of the land who had been exposed to new ideas through education sought to change the sphere of influence of the administration in Nso by extending the old institutions that were built on hereditary title ownership to cover the acquisition of non-hereditary titles based on merit. This action debarred the old British colonial policy of indirect rule that maintained and adopted the local chiefs as agents of administration, leaving out the educated elites who considered themselves qualified and apt to rule more than these chiefs [9]. By so doing, some of the educated elite holding offices in public and corporate institutions were integrated into the local, institutional framework through the award of traditional titles, especially the *Sheey* title.

The 1972 decree on chieftaincy reorganization required traditional administrators to be capable of reading and writing, contrary to the traditional norms of enthroning traditional rulers regardless of their education level. Taking into consideration the contingency of the decree, traditional rulers were left with no option but to integrate the elite of the land into the traditional administrative framework to act as agents between the government and local rulers.

The Fons realized the usefulness of these elite in development projects for the fonom and sought to bring them closer to the palace through the award of these titles. The elasticity of such recruitment was the price the traditional power brokers paid to retain command over local affairs, because it went a long way to avert conflict between these rulers and the elite.

### Quest for Power

Another reason that accounts for the massive acquisition of the *Sheey* title in the Nso fonom was the quest for power. According to Humphrey Tatak, “man by nature hungers for power” [10]. He desires domination in every sphere of life, and always feels that he can rule the people correctly if given the chance to do so. From the standpoint of History, the quest for power and domination were the bone of contention between the protagonists in most events like the First and Second World Wars.

It was the desire for domination that triggered the elites of Nso to criticize the indirect rule of the British claiming that they were exempted from administering the people whereas they could do better. The hunger for power made people, who could not be lineage heads or Fon by virtue of birth, go an extra mile to acquire the *Sheey* title in either the *Nwerong* or *Ngiri* society, no matter how much it cost them, because the insignia

attached to the title was a sign of respect and authority in the society.

During development projects and initiatives, the *Sheey* title holders assume a leadership role and help in coordinating the activities of the projects. Apart from that, they also collect revenue on behalf of the palace and ensure that the outings of the Fon are properly coordinated especially in situations where he has to travel out of the fonom [11]. This active role of the *Sheey* title holders was interpreted by others as the exercise of power, and those who longed for such went in for the title.

### Display of Wealth

The acquisition of the *Sheey* title in the Nso fonom was very costly, and many rich people saw in it an opportunity to demonstrate their wealth. Many people, especially those that had already acquired the title, in the Nso fonom had the tendency to believe that its acquisition was a sign of generosity and a way of pledging allegiance to the Fon, which made the excited ones to seek the title so as to showcase their status in society.

Describing this situation, Muluh, in his document entitled “Adulteration of the Noble and Sacred Traditional Heritage of your Ancestral Values”, stated that “worse still, the reason behind some of this unwarranted crowning range from material and financial considerations....” [12]. Some people in the desire to exhibit their wealth paid more than the required sum, making available a lot to eat and drink, thereby attracting other youths who desired rustic and incessant feeding to seek the acquisition of the title. The Fons took advantage of this weakness and awarded the *Sheey Mbumi* title to many in order to generate revenue for the palace upkeep and developments.

### Desire for Recognition

The desire for recognition was one of the dominant reasons that motivated people to seek titles, especially the non hereditary ones. Most people in the fonom found in the *Sheey* title a landmark which could enable them acquire fame and recognition in the society. In this regard, those who because of their social status or by birth could not be awarded the hereditary *Sheey* title, worked extra hard to get the means and the influence in society which enabled them to obtain the non hereditary *Sheey* title. These people longed for an affiliation with particular groups in the palace and very much wanted to have their voices heard and to command a lot of respect

<sup>9</sup> L.T. Mangula and Co, *Ordinary Level History for Cameroon Schools, Bamenda, ANUCAM Books, 2002*

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Tatak Humphrey Mbuy, aged 51, Reverend Father, Bamenda, 8<sup>th</sup> August 2008

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Sheey Lukong Pius Banye, aged 42, Teacher, Kumbo, 21<sup>st</sup> August 2018.

<sup>12</sup> H. Anu, “Lefua (Chieftaincy) Titles in Lewoh Chiefdom, P.104

in society [13]. They considered the acquisition of the *Sheey* title as a means of realizing their dreams.

Furthermore, title holders in general were endowed with special honour, and also received preferential treatment during public manifestations and social gatherings such as the cultural week, funeral ceremonies and death celebrations. Many people acquired the *Sheey* title in order to fall in this category and to reap the benefits of a *Sheey* title holder during public meetings and social gatherings. Moreover, a lot of people felt good and dignified especially when they appeared in traditional regalia like the *ndzey-njav* which immediately identified who they were [14], while some felt satisfied when they were not called directly by their name but with the prefix *Sheey* attached to it. This drew the attention and admiration of some people who sought to acquire the title and become like them.

### Change in the Mode of Acquisition

History has proven that change is a constant phenomenon in life and is inevitable. The award of the *Sheey* title in the Nso fondom has consequently evolved with the changes that have taken place therein, especially as traditional administration changed hands with the passing away of Fons. In the same way, societal innovations such as changes in the socio-economic, political and administrative set up have also prompted changes in the mode of acquisition of the title in order to adapt to contemporary realities.

A good example of a change in the mode of acquisition of the *Sheey* title was witnessed between 1947 and 1993. The then Fon of Nso; *Sehm Mbinglo* III (1947-72) awarded the *Sheey Mbumi* title strictly to those who contributed significantly to the growth of the fondom. His successors were so liberal that they awarded it to those who contributed little to the growth of the fondom and even to their relatives, regardless of the effect on the value on the title and impact of such award on the society. *Ngah Binfon* II (1972-83), because of his generosity and humorous nature conferred the *Sheey* title on many people who happened to come closer to him [15]. His successors, *Ngah Binfon* III (1983-93), and *Sehm Mbinglo* I, the incumbent, multiplied the award of the title because of palace construction projects.

As time went on, the Fons became materialistic and the desire to acquire wealth from development projects, palace upkeep and personal use made them dish out the *Sheey* title to those who could afford. Modernization and globalization also brought about important changes in the structural, political, and socio-

economic administration of the fondom. In this circumstance, the Fons had no choice but to adapt to the changes that had taken place as a result of the innovation. Therefore more avenues of revenue collection had to be explored, and the *Sheey* title became a fertile spot from where a reasonable amount of revenue could be derived for the smooth functioning of palace institutions [16].

The coming to power of *Sehm Mbinglo* I witnessed a remarkable change in the landscape of the *Sheey* title award and acquisition. He embarked on a costly foreign policy which required him and some of his acolytes to visit the United States of America on two occasions. These visits fell within the framework of change, and brought them into contact with new innovations, new people and new ideas. The new ideas helped to shape the minds of the Fon and his entourage and this brought them out of the old traditional attachments and criteria of title award to more flexible criteria. It helped them realize the important and indispensable role of the intellectuals in the traditional and administrative development of the fondom. As such, many intellectuals, both in America and at home, were massively awarded the *Sheey* title in a bid to bring them closer to the traditions of the land and involve them in the development of the fondom.

The last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw important strides in the struggle for the emancipation and empowerment of the women folk around the world. The Beijing Conference of 14-15 September 1995 on Women Empowerment highlighted the role of the woman in society, the outcome of which was the involvement of the woman in all the domains of life, in a bid to implement the goal of gender equality by ensuring the participation and full involvement of women in every aspect of development. The Beijing Conference had a positive impact on the award and acquisition of the *Sheey* title to women in the Nso fondom. Prior to this period, it was believed that the woman had certain limitations that did not warrant her to acquire certain titles, including the *Sheey* title. These limitations frustrated their social advancements and development efforts given that they outnumbered men [17], and as such their impact was not felt in the development of the fondom.

The *Nso* woman therefore moved from the old fashioned society that was dominated by the men to a more open one in which her role was felt as she contributed immensely to the development of the fondom. As a result of this the *Sheey* title, especially the *Mbumi* (honorific) *Sheey* title was conferred on women to honour them for services rendered to the fondom.

---

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Ngah Peter, Aged 73, Trader, Kumbo, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Sheey Lukong Augustine Lendzele, aged 25, mason, Bamenda, 8<sup>th</sup> August 2008

<sup>15</sup> E.L. Ngoran, "The Growth of Social Classes in *Nso*", DIPES I Dissertation in History, ENSAB, 1987, P.46

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Bongka Syveria, aged 53, farmer, Kumbo, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Yula Janet, aged 48, Trader, Bamenda, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2008.

Therefore the women began to have the opportunity to claim the honorific *Sheey* title, in the same way as the men, and this gave them freedom of expression during family meetings and the ability to take part in the decision making process [18].

### Quest for Prestige

Prestige, which became the order of the day, especially among the youths in the Nso fondom, was another driving force behind the acquisition of the *Sheey* title. Those who had the means decided to enhance their status in order to make a difference and reap the social benefits attached to the *Sheey* title. It was not only prestigious to use wealth and acquire the title but also to appear in public in traditional regalia, drink from the *Ngiri* or *Nwerong* cups, wore *Nwerong* or *Ngiri* caps, be given preferential treatment in public as well as to be addressed as *Sheey*. This honour made them feel as if they were above the ordinary people and consequently motivated other people to acquire the *Sheey* title.

The *Sheey* title holders also enjoyed certain privileges that ordinary people were not offered. They had easy access to the palace and could easily meet with the Fon than any ordinary members of the society. Some boasted of their important status to the extent of looking down on ordinary people [19]. The dignity of the *Sheey* title holders inspired many people to strive for the title, especially those who loved to be respected and honoured in society.

### Acquisition due to Circumstances

Many people got the *sheey* title because of circumstances in which they found themselves. For some it was a case of absolute necessity, especially *asheey vee nto*, who because of compulsory service to the palace were awarded the title at the end as reward for services they rendered to the palace. Those who fell within the category of *asheey vee nto* were either the sons of *ex nshiyaselav* who were obliged to send their sons to the palace, some male criminals who had committed serious crimes and male refugees. They were expected to serve as palace guards for nine good years after which they were awarded the *Sheey* title. Tributary chiefs also caught male children and sent them to the palace for compulsory service. Their services were not voluntary because they were forced to do the work which no other person could do as there was no payment at all in return for the services rendered.

Peer influence also played a vital role in the acquisition of the *Sheey* title in the Nso fondom. So many young people were influenced by their peers to acquire

the *Sheey* title. Those that had already acquired the status of *Sheey* were held in high esteem by their entourage and the community as a whole. Their peers, who felt the necessity to get not only the same status in society but also a high reputation, worked hard to acquire the *Sheey* title. Indeed, this was a way of letting them understand that they were also in the position to do what they had already done [20].

Furthermore, some people got the title by inheritance. A *ngaiwir* in a lineage, who assisted the *Faay* or *Shuufaay* in his duties was made *Sheey* of the sacrificial class (*Michan class*) and when he died, his successor was equally made a *Sheey*. A son of a lineage who settled with his family somewhere out of the main lineage was made *Sheey* as the size of the family increased. His successors were also awarded the *Sheey* title. Also, a *Sheey* that had performed the initiation rites (*shishur* sacrifice) and admitted into the inner circles of either the *nweong* or the *Ngiri* traditional society was obliged to present a successor before he died. The successor became a *Sheey* by virtue of inheritance.

Moreover, some people were made *Sheey* because they by-passed tradition and saw what they were not supposed to see. Within the Nso fondom and palace, there existed some shrines that were prohibited to the general public and to which only certain title holders had access. Any non-title holder who either by design or accident entered the shrine was cleansed and awarded the *Sheey* or *Yaa* title in case it was a woman. This cleansing removed any curse to which the person was exposed as a result of the entry [21]. The wife of an important *Sheey* of the land like *Sheey wo ngang* was also made a *Sheey* by virtue of the fact that she washed her husband's traditional dresses which he wore during sacrifices carried out in sacred places forbidden to the lay people [22].

### Desire for Mystical Powers

Like any other people found in most African communities, the people of the Nso fondom have superstitious attachments and beliefs in almost all happenings. Individuals believed, and still do so today, that evil spirits were responsible for ill luck, deaths, poor harvest, childlessness, illnesses and failures that were rampant in the community. Because of this type of belief, the society allied with traditional practitioners and soothsayers to whom so many went for protection from evil spirits, especially the spirit of witchcraft.

The acquisition of the *Sheey* title was a shield against any evil spirit, and it was believed that any person

<sup>18</sup> W. G. Yenika, G.W., "The Emancipation of the Nso Woman today with Particular Reference to Title-taking: A Philosophical Reflection", Bachelor's Dissertation in Philosophy, STAMS, Bambui, 1990, P.46.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Laika Aurelia, aged 56, trader, Bamenda, 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Fai Frederick K, Byke Rider, Bamenda, 8<sup>th</sup> August 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Kisi Evelyn Bobongha, aged 42, trader, Kumbo, 19<sup>th</sup> August 2008

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

who had performed the necessary rituals in the *Nwerong* and *Ngiri* societies possessed some supernatural powers that enabled him to protect himself from any evil or wicked forces [23]. The *Sheey* title holders of the *Ngang* group were very much feared because they were believed to possess the powers that the masquerades possessed. Writing on this issue, Chilver and Kaberry commented on the powers of the *Yengiri* as they say:

It owned a medicine which strengthened its members; it could place injunctions – sticks to protect the property of its members, intervene on their behalf in disputes, and discipline its own members by fining them not only for breaches of its regulations, but for unbecoming conduct [24].

Members of a masquerade society endowed with such strength were likely to be feared by the society. This attracted many people to seek protection from these societies through the acquisition of the *Sheey* title. The essence of the mystical powers was for personal protection. Nevertheless, some people sought these powers in order to do evil and the outcome was their untimely death [25].

### License for Polygamy

Polygamy was a typical characteristic of pre-colonial African societies, especially the Nso fondom. With the advent of colonisation, Europeans introduced Christianity, placing African societies on the dilemma of Christianity and African traditional religion.

While embracing Christianity, most of the Nso people could not completely sidetrack some aspects of traditional religion such as polygamy and pagan sacrifices to the gods. As a result, some people found themselves stuck between tradition and religion. Tradition allowed the people to go in for as many wives as possible, especially title holders. Moreover, during the pre-colonial period, the wealth of an individual was measured in terms of how many wives he was able to keep and maintain and the number of off springs he was capable of raising. At that time, the mainstay of the people was farming and the many wives provided the assistance needed by their husbands in their farms, especially those who did large scale farming.

Title holders got married to as many wives as possible because the weight of the title and its prestige could not be felt in only one wife [26]. The introduction of the social teachings of the church, especially the doctrine of one man one wife, did not influence any change in the status of some of the title holders especially

those who had embraced them and the real traditionalists continued to seek titles in the palace despite the doctrine of the church as justification for polygamy.

### Motivation to Others

Title donors like the Fon realized that the award of titles to people, who in one way or the other had rendered meritorious services to the fondom, was not only a token of appreciation for services rendered, but also a sign of encouragement for the children of the land to be committed to the sustainable development of the fondom. It was a good development strategy because people who longed for the award of the *sheey* title associated with or embarked on some development projects in the fondom that could earn them the title.

Projects like the construction of the palace attracted much attention of those who wished to acquire the *Sheey* title in the fondom, because those who were committed to the implementation of this project donated either, sand, cement, zinc, or even cash to the palace. Besides this, philanthropists, especially those who embarked on helping orphans of the Shisong General Hospital Orphanage by donating food, clothes and other items, and some business men who engaged in other development projects within the fondom also earned the honorific *sheey* title [27].

### Tribal Identity

The Nso man's concern for his tribal identity is so important that he can hardly conceal it. His identity is so conspicuous that it can hardly be hidden, and it is forcefully incumbent on every son or daughter of the land to reveal it wherever he or she is. The Nso people are gregarious and live together in closely-knitted communities. They enjoy a spirit of togetherness, and always undertake collective action in the pursuit of the common good. Their language and the so called "*viwir ve Nso*" (the pride of the Nso man) are glaring aspects of their tribal identity [28].

As a symbol of their faithfulness and attachment to the society of their kinsmen and the desire for posterity, the Nso people undertook many activities that could identify them with their tribe. The acquisition of titles, especially the *Sheey* title was one of the most outstanding of these activities. It drew them closer to their tribe and tradition [29].

### Curiosity

Many people sought the *Sheey* title because they were curious to know more about their culture and

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Sheey Tar Gerald, aged 36, tailor, Kumbo, 20<sup>th</sup> August 2008

<sup>24</sup> Chilver and Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda*, P.102

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Sheey Tar Gerald

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Ngah Peter.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Sheey Tayun Oliver, aged 74, Farmer, Kumbo, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2008.

<sup>28</sup> T.H. Mbuy, "*Nso Concept of Man*" Bachelor's Dissertation in Philosophy, RMS Bambui, 1980, P.48.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Ngo Elizabeth, aged 62, farmer, Kumbo, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2008.

to understand and help in preserving it [30]. This particular class of people constituted an exception because the acquisition of knowledge and the preservation of their tradition was the bottom-line of the search for the title. They were unlike others who acquired the title because they either wanted to publicly display their wealth or to gain some prestige and a feeling of importance in society.

The outcome of the quest for knowledge was that in the process some of the *Sheey* title holders wrote and published books on traditional practices and customs that were preserved for the interest of posterity. This group of people that acquired the title for fact finding purposes were hardly identified by the society. This is because even though affiliated with either the *Ngiri* or *Nwerong* traditional societies, they did not take any delight in flamboyant traditional regalia and insignia such as the caps, bags or the cups. They were only identified by those members of the society that were interested in their work of art, for those who published something, and by those people who belonged to the same circle like them [31].

#### **Desire to Control Lineage Property**

Some people advocated for the *Sheey* title especially that of the hereditary class because of the desire to arrogate to themselves the right to manage and control lineage property. Some even used the newly acquired power to appropriate family property for themselves. Those with evil intentions went as far as eliminating their rival brothers in order to have a smooth access to the title [32]. The hereditary *Sheey* title holders of this nature were wicked and this wickedness was manifest in almost everything they did. They usurped the family property, sold most of it and squandered the proceeds forthwith. Because of this kind of attitude, they were doomed to failure because of the low esteem in which society held them.

#### **Desire for a Grandiose Traditional Burial**

In Nso traditional society, a *Sheey* title holder who occupied an important position in the inner circles of either the *Ngiri* or the *Nwerong* traditional society, like a *Sheey* *woo ngang*, was given a grandiose traditional burial at his death. During his funeral ceremony, he was mourned by all the *jujus* of the inner circle of his society.

The *Sheey* title holders, who had already carried out the initiation ceremony to the fullest, (the *shishur* sacrifice), were buried by either *Yengiri* or *Yenwerong* depending on their affiliation. The burial was followed by a colourful ceremony marked by the display of and entertainment from masquerades of the inner circles of their society. A lot of people admired and envied this

kind of burial and sought the *Sheey* title as a means of getting a befitting burial when they died [33].

## **CONCLUSION**

This study entitled “Amazing Pursuit of Traditional Titles in the Nso Fondom of Cameroon in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and impact in the Society; the Case of the *Sheey* Title” is an attempt to examine the driving force behind the escalating pursuit of the title among the Nso indigenes during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In order to better understand the study, the work makes mention of traditional titles that exist in the Nso fondom. It equally defines the *Sheey* title and traces its origin together with the different classes of title holders of this particular group. The work goes further to examine thoroughly the reasons why the Nso society suddenly developed an interest in the title from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In order to have profound knowledge of the *Sheey* title, the different classes of *Sheey* title holders are discussed and they are an asset to the development process in the fondom and contribute in the enhancement of the various institutions that carry out meaningful development in the society. Even though many of them acquired the title for positive ends, most were dubbed “ministers without portfolio” because the acquisition of the title failed to create the desired impact on the society thereby sapping not only the respect and honour but also the influence and significance of the *Sheey* title in the Nso fondom.

The new criteria for the award of the *Sheey* title have had a negative impact on the traditional value of the title. At inception, the ancestors of the Nso fondom prescribed the requirements to be met before a *Sheey* title could be conferred on individuals such as maturity and integrity. This was made taking into account the prevailing conditions at the time. Due to the exigencies of modernism and the necessity to carry out palace projects as well as those of the entire fondom, new criteria began to replace the old one thereby making it possible for many to strive for the title. In any case what used to obtain in the past is already history, while the present is providing both the title donors and bearers thereof different opportunities, the future still remains some kind of a mystery as we cannot unveil the criteria that the future donors may decide to use in the domain of title acquisition, and especially the *Sheey* title.

Our study would be incomplete if we end without suggesting some recommendations regarding the award and acquisition of the *Sheey* title in the Nso fondom. Within the study period there have been no specific criteria for the award of the title, leading to the

<sup>30</sup> Interview with *Sheey* Jaff Edwin, aged 41, Council Administrator, Kumbo, 21<sup>st</sup> August 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Idem

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Kisi Evelyn

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Tar Patrick. Farmer, Kumbo, 25<sup>th</sup> August, 2008.



non respect of the original criteria thereby creating a negative impact on the authenticity of the title and the traditional value attached by the founders of the fondom to it. The question that came to mind during our research study was whether in future the *Sheey* title should be awarded to any one that has the means to influence the donors who are sorely in need of funds to run the royal family and to undertake development projects in the fondom. Another question was whether the massive award of the title by the donors was not a sign of greed and materialism which has helped to change the traditional value of the title that was held in high esteem by the ancestors of the fondom. This paper attempts to provide some answers to these puzzling questions and also suggest some basic guidelines on the award of the *Sheey* title in the Nso fondom.

In order to keep the basic traditional value of the title intact, we suggest that the title donors take into consideration the following requirements:

- Maintain the old tradition of maturity and integrity in the award of the title. One of the conditions for eligibility should be the age of the recipient. He or she should be reasonable, married and ready to assume responsibility for their actions in society.
- He or she should also be a man or woman of good character and capable of positively impacting the lives of other people in society and of setting examples for others to emulate.
- The *Sheey* title should be awarded to sons and daughters who are ready to assume their responsibility as custodians of the traditions and customs of the Nso fondom. In this respect, the originality and integrity of these customs and traditions will be maintained as they will be handed down from generation to generation.

If the above criteria for award of titles is respected by title donors, the original traditional value of the title will be held intact. Even though the award of the title has to reflect the changing fortunes of time, it will be for the interest of posterity, and especially those that would like to carry out research work in this area to get a first hand knowledge of the originality of the *Sheey* title and the initial traditional value that was attached to it by the founders of the Nso fondom.

## Sources Consulted

### A. Published Sources

#### a. Books

- Chilver, E. M., & Kaberry, P. M. (1968). *Traditional Bamenda: The Pre-colonial History and Ethnography of the Bamenda Grassfields*, Vol. 1. Buea Government Printers.
- Mangula, L.T., & Co. (2002). *Ordinary Level History for Cameroon Schools*, Bamenda, ANUCAM Books.
- Mzeka, P. N. (1980). *The Core Culture of Nso*, USA, Jerome Radin Co., Agawam, Ma.

#### b. Articles

- Kaberry, P. M. (1959). "Traditional Politics in Nsaw", in *Africa*, 29(4), 366-383.
- Ngum, J. L., & Lantum, D. N. (2002). "600 Years of History: Leadership Role of Women in Nso Polity", in *The Nso went to Mvem*, Kumbo, Nso History Society Publication.

### B. Unpublished Sources

#### a. Dissertations

- Anu, H. (2006). "Lefua (Chieftaincy) Titles in Lewoh Chieftdom: 1903-1992", M.A. Dissertation in History, University of Yaounde I.
- Kein, M. (2006). "The Award of Traditional Titles in the Grassfield Fondoms, the Case of Mbei (Santa Sub-Division), 1922-2002", M.A. Dissertation in History, University of Yaounde I.
- Mbuy, H. T. (1980). "Nso Concept of Man", Bachelor's Dissertation in Philosophy, RMS Bambui.
- Ngoran, E. L. (1987). "The Growth of Social Classes in Nso", DIPES I Dissertation in History, ENSAB.
- Yenika, G. W. (1990). "The Emancipation of the Nso Woman today with Particular Reference to Title-taking: A Philosophical Reflection", Bachelor's Dissertation in Philosophy, STAMS, Bambui.

### Oral Sources

Name	Age	Profession	Place of Interview	Date of Interview
Bongka Syveria	53	Farmer	Kumbo	25-08-2008
Fai Frederick Kfebani	40	Byke Rider	Bamenda	08-08-2008
Kisi Evelyn Bobongha	42	Trader	Kumbo	19-08-2008
Laika Aurelia	56	Trader	Bamenda	03-10-2008
Mzeka, N. Paul	74	Retired Civil Servant	Bamenda	10-08-2008
Ngah Peter	73	Trader	Kumbo	25-08-2008
Ngo Elizabeth	62	Farmer	Kumbo	24-08-2008
Sheey Elias Banka Fondufe	77	Retired Civil Servant	Bamenda	02-10-2008
Sheey Jaff Edwin	41	Council Administrator	Kumbo	21-08-2008
Sheey Lukong Augustine L.	25	Mason	Bamenda	08-08-2008

Name	Age	Profession	Place of Interview	Date of Interview
Sheey Tar Gerald	36	Tailor	Kumbo	19-08-2008
Sheey Tayun Oliver	70	Farmer	Kumbo	24-08-2008
Shey Lukong Pius Banye	42	Teacher	Kumbo	21-08-2008
Shey Sevidzem Patricia	37	Teacher	Yaounde	03-08-2008
Tar Patrick	65	Farmer	Kumbo	25-08-2008
Tatah Humphrey Mbuy	51	Reverend Father	Bamenda	08-08-2008
Yula Janet	48	Trader	Bamenda	03-10-2008

---

**Cite This Article:** Aurelia Kihla Bamwai (2024). Amazing Pursuit of Traditional Titles in the Nso Fandom of Cameroon in the 20th Century and Impact in the Society; The Case of the Sheey Title. *EAS J Humanit Cult Stud*, 6(3), 123-132.

---