



Gender Category and Gender Variance in Bafut and Kom Tales

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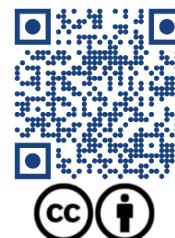
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Abstract— This paper interrogates the construction of gender category, gender variance and performance context in Bafut and Kom tales from the North West Region of Cameroon. Drawing from field interviews, questionnaire, live performances, and textual analysis, it further examines how gender identities are represented and negotiated in Bafut and Kom oral tales. Anchored on gender theory and cultural criticism, the work demonstrates that gender within these tales is not a fixed biological constant but a performative and culturally mediated category. In both Bafut and Kom societies, orature functions as a social archive that mirrors power relations, cultural values, and contestations of identity. The analysis reveals that while patriarchal structures remain influential, oral tales often provide subtle counter-discourses that elevate women's roles, question male dominance, and celebrate gender complementarity. Through the fusion of performance, tradition, and social analysis, Bafut and Kom tales emerge as key sites for understanding the dynamics of gender in Bafut and Kom in particular, and transformation in African oral cultures, respectively.

Keywords— Gender Category, Gender Variance, Performance Aesthetics, Cultural Relativism and Cultural Criticism.



I. INTRODUCTION

Gender remains a defining principle in the cultural and literary organization of African societies. From folklore and ritual to political representation, gender has been central to how communities structure authority, inheritance, and identity. In many African oral traditions, (Bafut and Kom), gender distinctions are not merely biological but social, symbolic, and performative. As Butler (1990:25) posits, gender is constituted through repeated acts that are culturally sanctioned and contextually sustained. To her, gender is not something inherent or natural, but rather something that is continually performed and constructed through repeated acts and behaviors. She criticizes the notion of a stable and fixed identity, emphasizing the fluid and complex nature of gender. It is a complex interplay of social, cultural and individual factors. Her ideas have in a bid helped to challenge and disrupt traditional frameworks and societal norms that restrict gender identities to a binary understanding. Within the Bafut and Kom societies of

Cameroon, oral tales serve as mirrors of these performances, dramatizing the tensions between patriarchal order, matriarchal order, cultural transformation, and social justice.

Bafut and Kom tales, as forms of orature, reveal how communities articulate social hierarchies and moral codes through the tale and performance. The Bafut people, predominantly patriarchal, organize kinship, politics, and religion around male authority, while Kom exhibits a dual system that accommodates both patrilineal and matrilineal inheritance. In both cases, performance becomes a pedagogical and ideological tool, encoding gender expectations, legitimizing leadership, and defining moral virtue. Within these same tales, one encounters strong female voices in some spaces that disrupt conventional hierarchies and expose contradictions in cultural practice.

The significance of gender in these tales lies in its dual role as both a mechanism of social order and a site of resistance.

Women and other marginalized figures use narrative spaces to express agency, question injustice, and reposition themselves within communal power structures. Orature thus functions as a discursive arena where meaning is negotiated rather than fixed. As Finnegan (1970: 7-10) notes, oral literature is dynamic, changing with each performance and each audience. It is timeless. This change allows performers to introduce new interpretations that reflect evolving gender realities. The interpretations are always in context.

The theoretical foundation of this study builds upon gender theory and cultural criticism. It seeks to establish that gender in African orature is not a rigid binary but a continuum of roles and possibilities shaped by context. The work also situates itself within the growing body of African culture that foregrounds indigenous frameworks for understanding gender.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with gender in African oral traditions has evolved from early ethnographic studies to contemporary reinterpretations. Finnegan (1970) remains foundational in understanding orature as a repository of collective knowledge. However, Finnegan's descriptive method often overlooks the embedded ideologies that structure oral narratives. Later critics such as Okpewho, (1992:104-105) and Yankah, (1995:53) shifted attention toward performance and audience interaction, emphasizing orature as a dynamic process rather than a static text.

In the Cameroonian context, scholars like Mbangwana (1993: 92-93), Neba (2016: 66), Mbuh (2018:41), and Che (2023:58) have examined the performative dimensions of storytelling in the grassfield, showing how tales articulate ethical values, power relations, and cosmological beliefs. These studies confirm that gender is central to narrative meaning and performance aesthetics. Women narrators, for instance, use repetition, metaphor, and humor to criticize social inequalities while maintaining the communal harmony expected of traditional performers.

The intersection of gender and orature has been further illuminated by African feminist theorists who argue for culturally grounded interpretations of gender identity. Oyèwùmí (1997: 5-7) criticizes Western feminist readings that impose Eurocentric binaries onto African contexts, emphasizing instead that precolonial African societies often understood identity through lineage, age, or social role rather than biological sex. Similarly, Amadiume (1987: 8) and Nnaemeka (2004: 378) illustrate that African women's power operates through negotiation and complementarity rather than confrontation. These frameworks are particularly relevant to Bafut and Kom societies, where women's participation in storytelling and ritual

performance reveals a subtle balance between deference and defiance. Herskovits (1948: 13-14) and later Geertz (1973: 36), provide another lens through which gender politics in oral tales can be understood. They emphasize the importance of interpreting cultural practices from within their own systems of meaning. This perspective guards against the universalization of feminist models and allows for the appreciation of indigenous conceptions of gendered power. In this view, tales that appear patriarchal by Western standards may, within their local logic, embody principles of balance and reciprocity. In recent years, scholars of performance studies, including Barber (1997: 8-9) and Schechner (2013: 48-50), have underscored the importance of the performance event in shaping meaning. The storyteller, audience, and context co-create the tale's ideology. This perspective enriches the study of gender variance, since each performance becomes an opportunity for gendered expression and renegotiation.

Critics such as Healey (2015: 304) and Ramtohul (2020: 3) extend this conversation to modern African societies, linking gender representation in literature to socio-political activism and policy reform. Their work highlights the continuum between traditional oral expression and contemporary gender discourse. Wankwe (2018) and Neba (2016: 25) observe that patriarchal institutions persist but are increasingly challenged by female intellectuals and performers who reinterpret cultural norms through art.

III. METHODOLOGY

Against this background, the present study adopts a comparative and interpretive approach that combines textual analysis with ethnographic insights. Tales were collected through field interviews, questionnaire, direct observation, and recordings of live performances in both Bafut and Kom. Using qualitative analysis, the study examines gendered motifs, character roles, and performance techniques. By aligning literary interpretation with contextual understanding, the paper highlights how gender variance emerges not only from textual content but from the interactive process of storytelling itself. This study situates itself within two overlapping critical trajectories. Gender theory and cultural criticism. Through these lenses, Bafut and Kom tales are understood not merely as cultural artifacts but as dynamic negotiations of gendered experience, revealing the creativity and adaptability of African societies in reimagining social roles.

IV. SITUATION OF THE STUDY AREA

The Bafut and Kom communities are located in Cameroon's North West Region, a region rich in linguistic, cultural, and

historical diversity. Both are part of the broader grass field cultural area, which is renowned for its hierarchical political systems, artistic traditions, and elaborate oral heritage. Despite sharing common ancestry and language affinities, Bafut and Kom exhibit a distinct culture, especially in gender relations, performance traditions, and belief systems.

V. THE BAFUT COMMUNITY

Bafut is a Sub Division in the North West Region of Cameroon. It is situated between latitudes 10.00 and 10.13 and longitudes 6.05 East and North of the Equator. Bafut is one of the largest Fondoms in the Grassfields, with a centralized political structure headed by the *Fon*, who serves as the spiritual, political, and judicial authority. The *Fon* is assisted by a council of elders (*Nchindas* and *Kwifor*), whose authority extends over village governance and ritual practices. Social organization in Bafut is predominantly patriarchal, with inheritance and lineage traced through the male line. However, women occupy significant roles in social and religious life, often serving as mediators, healers, custodians of family ethics and some of times inherit their fathers.

Women's organizations such as *Takumbeng* and *Fubwen* play crucial roles in the regulation of moral conduct and social protest. The *Takumbeng* women, in particular, have historically acted as agents of justice, using spiritual symbolism and performance to challenge corruption or abuse of power. Their ritual performances are characterized by chants and dance which embody female spiritual authority. These cultural structures provide the backdrop for understanding gender dynamics in Bafut tales, where women may be marginalized in formal politics but exert moral power in the spiritual and performative domains.

VI. THE KOM COMMUNITY

Kom is an ethnic group located in Boyo Division of the North West Region of Cameroon. It shares boundaries with Mezam Division, Ngoketungia Division, Bum Sub Division and Menchum Division. Kom, like Bafut, is a traditional kingdom led by a *Fon* and supported by noble lineages known as *kwifoyn* or *ngumba*. However, Kom exhibits a more balanced kinship system that integrates matrilineal and patrilineal principles. Inheritance in Kom often considers the maternal uncle's role, which symbolically affirms the interconnectedness of both gender lines in maintaining social harmony.

Kom society places strong emphasis on education, wisdom, and moral uprightness, values that are frequently dramatized in oral tales. Women in Kom are key

participants in rituals and communal ceremonies. They are recognized as custodians of peace and intermediaries between the domestic and public spheres. Tales collected in Kom reveal a pronounced concern for justice, moral order, and the preservation of dignity in gender relations.

Both communities share a deep belief in ancestral intervention and divine justice, principles that inform their oral tales. The storytelling environment is usually at night around firesides or during community gatherings facilitating socialization and moral education. These contexts make orature a central medium through which cultural values and gender ideologies are transmitted.

VII. HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Colonialism, Christianity, and globalization have deeply influenced the gender landscape of both Bafut and Kom. Missionary education introduced Western gender ideals, which often conflicted with indigenous notions of balance and complementarity. Consequently, gender roles have evolved, with women increasingly participating in leadership, education, and public discourse.

The modern Bafut and Kom woman stand with one leg on two worlds. Traditional and modern and this duality is reflected in their oral tales. Tales today often include educated heroines who mediate between old and new values, embodying both continuity and transformation. As Ngwa (2025) observed in her fieldwork, storytelling in these communities remains an arena of cultural resilience, where gendered meanings are debated, redefined, and performed.

Thus, understanding the Bafut and Kom socio-cultural landscape is essential to interpreting their tales. The moral codes, political systems, and performance aesthetics of these societies provide the foundation upon which gender categories and variances are constructed and understood.

VIII. CONCEPTUALIZING GENDER CATEGORY, GENDER VARIANCE, AND TALES

The notion of gender category in African oral traditions extends beyond the biological differentiation between men and women. It embodies the social, spiritual, and symbolic expectations that define how individuals participate in community life. In the Bafut and Kom societies, these categories are expressed through oral tales that encode values, legitimize institutions, and transmit intergenerational knowledge. However, these categories are not static, they are subject to change and reinterpretation through performance.

IX. GENDER CATEGORY AS A CULTURAL CONSTRUCT

In most Bafut and Kom narratives, gender is symbolically represented through archetypal roles like the cunning trickster, the proud hunter, the selfish woman, the woman who silenced the leopard chief, the woman who humbled a Fon and the proud hunter. Each of these characters carries moral and didactic weight. For instance, the woman who humbled the chief symbolizes the unseen voice and wisdom, while the one who silenced the chief symbolizes rain, fertility, continuity, and moral rectitude. Butler (1990) argues, such representations are performative. They depend on repetition and reinforcement within specific cultural contexts. In this sense, gender category functions as a performance of social identity rather than a reflection of biological destiny. The repetition of these archetypes in tales helps sustain community values, but variations in their portrayal reveal the flexibility of gender interpretation. The Kom tale, "The Fon's Cap Remover: The Lintels," in which the woman puts a substance in the Fon's food so that he will go to the rest room frequently. Her intention is to humiliate disgrace the Fon. She succeeds in demonstrating how moral authority can transcend gender boundaries. This duality where women are both constrained and celebrated captures the dialectical nature of gender in oral tradition.

Gender refers to how characters are identified and portrayed and how these portrayals reflect societal roles, expectations or biases. Characters are gendered male or female (category) with social roles as mother, chief, warrior or wife. They have fixed expectations about behavior, power and morality. They also have roles to play with males associated to warrior and female as mother. The roles are often fixed but can be challenged. The male having power and leadership and the female linked with domesticity and emotion.

Another lens presents gender variance referring to gender roles, identities and expectations differing from the binary norms of male or female or masculine or feminine or from what is considered typical in mainstream societies. This includes the fluidity and diversity of gender expressions that are depicted in the oral traditions and folktales of the Bafut and Kom societies. Here, binary gender roles are challenged with female characters performing male coded roles like warriors, leaders and trickers or male characters displaying traits typically assigned to women like nurturing or emotional expression and vice versa. Tales, question rigid male or female roles, showing that gender roles can be fluid and context based. The analysis below presents some tales in which women take on leadership role showing that authority and bravery are not inherently male traits and are

accessible to any gender based on circumstance and character. Again, the tales often reflect how gender is performed based on cultural expectations rather than biology. Tales depict characters being punished or rewarded for not conforming to gender norms, thereby reflecting the community's negotiation of gendered behavior. Some of the characters in the tales cross dress, deceive or assume other gender roles temporarily to achieve a given goal. This temporary or permanent subversion highlights how gender can be used strategically, showing its constructed and flexible nature. Gender here is a broader range of acceptable behaviors and roles as interpreted within the local cultural framework. This deals with gender fluid which refers to gender identity that is not fixed and changed over time depending on the situation. A person who is gendered fluid, may feel more male on some days, more female on others or identity within neither both or other genders entirely at different times. Expected roles are not followed and defies and bends the category. The category is in the box and the variance shows what happens when one steps out of the box with movements beyond boxes and flexibility without total rejection. This is displayed when roles are deliberately crossed and reversed through disguise or ritual showing that gender is not static in the narrative space.

It is then, through these stories that one can gain a deeper understanding of gender dynamics and the importance placed on maintaining balance and harmony between men and women within the Bafut and Kom communities. This has to do with investigating the traditional and contemporary gender roles and expectations, including division of labour, similar responsibilities and social norms. In traditional tales, in Bafut and Kom, male and female gender vary in terms of representation.

Hooks (2004) examines how traditional masculinity harms men and women, advocating for a redefinition of male roles in society. He emphasizes the interconnectedness of race, class, and gender, arguing that these identities shape experience of oppression and privilege. Also, traditional masculinity suggests a stifled emotional expression and leads to destructive behaviours. A new model of masculinity that embraces vulnerability and emotional honesty is good to advocate. Education as a role ideal in liberating women and men from limiting gender roles. In this wise, Hooks (2004) examines popular culture and its impact on societal norms regarding gender and race.

Historically, and as far as gender category is concerned, these tales often portray traditional gender roles, where males are depicted as brave, heroic figures, provider, protector, strong, courageous, and skilled in hunting, farming, wellbeing and security and other activities that contribute to the sustenance and protection of the

community. They are leaders, decision makers, authority, chiefs or council members, influence and power over the community in times of crisis and conflict, wisdom, physically powerful and capable of defending communities. Females, on their part are seen as passive, nurturing or in need of rescue, primary care givers, caretaker, maintaining households, raising children, providing emotional support to their families and vital to the wellbeing and cohesion of the community. Okpewho (1992:336) says that

Folktales, particularly from patriarchal societies, often depict male characters in dominate roles while women are positioned within subservient or supportive roles. He recognizes, however, that there are also moments in these stories where female characters challenge these roles, though these subversions do always lead to permanent change in gender structures.

Ngugi (1986:127) corroborates this idea by noting:

How colonialism reinforced gender roles, often leaving the oral traditions of African societies to perpetuate such roles where men are heroes and women remain passive or secondary... also explores how these traditions, while seemingly reinforcing the status quo, can carry subversive potential, particularly in oral forms, where women sometimes find ways to express agency and subvert patriarchal structures.

The men are portrayed with primary roles while women secondary. The Bafut tale titled, "The Woman and the Ghost", wherein, the "matinesong", takes advantage of the absence of the woman's husband to give torments to his wife and child. Her plans are thwarted because the man comes back to save them. The man is portrayed as brave and heroic. When the bird informs him about the situation of his family, he immediately takes to his heels to salvage the situation. He does everything possible to prevent the ghost from tormenting his wife and child. He prepares an axe, places it on the burning wood to get warm and red as his weapon of defense. He waits for the ghost and finally uses it on the "mantinesong" (long tooth) which she has and in return,

The ghost turned her head and the basket fell on the ground and asked whether she was keeping somebody. Oh le Nwo (you've kept somebody). Before long, she removed the long tooth and it was moving towards the woman to engulf her, but the husband removed the axe and hit on the tooth "King."

She falls on the yard and says: "I knew that there was somebody" and picked half of the tooth and disappeared into the bush (its place of living). When the ghost goes with

the axe, the man as heroic and brave as he is, visits the ghost in its closet, and finally recovers the axe. The man uses his prowess to defend and maintain his home. Similarly, the Kom tale captioned, "The Seven Proud Sisters" wherein the Tortoise discovers the names of the girls when they thought that no one could do so. This is a test to anyone who will give their names before getting married to them. The male tortoise is presented as heroic. He is able to use his wit to gain the seven proud sisters. He is so clever, and that is why he succeeds in getting married to the seven sisters who are equally so proud. The tortoise kills a bearded he-goat, takes off the beard and stuck it to an axe, using gum from a tree. Later, he places the axe on the sister's path and hide in a nearby bush. This is how he gets the names of the sisters:

When the elder sister came first and saw the axe, she called to the next sister following her, Bi. I have seen something strange, she said, what is it Nain? Bi replied. An axe which has grown a bread, remarked the eldest of the sisters. As they came along, each called to the next, following by name to talk about the mysterious axe with a beard, while they talked and called out one another's name. Tortoise listened and took note in his hide out.

Tortoise's wit and wisdom gains the Fon's daughters. The male's role in Kom is so important in acquiring benefits, either for himself or for the society. Rich (1980:637) in this light note, "compulsory heterosexuality, maintained and reinforced by every institution, creates a climate in which woman-identification appears deviant". The man is seen as a powerful and all-knowing person, while the woman's role is unacceptable or reduced to the lowest ebb. The tortoise uses his wisdom to gain the girls as opposed to their ignorance in concealing their names. The male gender maintains his role as heroic intelligent and strong in the society, as he dominates and commands over others, especially women. There is social representation, and gender is caught between the notion of essentialism, affirming that women are naturally and fundamentally different from men, based on their sex, according to the traditional patriarchal society.

It is important to note at this level that there are significant changes in tales over time as the society evolves in Bafut and Kom. In more modern retellings and adaptations, one may find a shift towards a more progressive and egalitarian representations of both male and female characters. These tales often strive as one will notice to challenge gender stereotypes and explore diverse perspectives. The diverse representation is essential in promoting inclusivity and equality. Men no longer control the society and women are no more relegated to the background, thereby, introducing

a new variant of female men and male female. In both communities, under study (Bafut and Kom), efforts are being made to empower female characters as well as explore the complexities of masculinity and break away from rigid gender norms. The representation of male and female characters in tales have evolved over time thereby, presenting some contemporary narratives geared at balanced and inclusive portrayals in terms of gender politics. There is a conscious move in Bafut and Kom tales to challenge and redefine these traditional portrayals. These tales have embraced more diverse and empowering female characters with some of the men pushed to the periphery.

The Bafut tale, “Legend of Nyaa Nyele, the Woman Who Silenced the Leopard Chief” where the woman uses bees as a way of letting the chief share the power he has. She succeeds in her dwell as the chief succumbs to her decision. Nyaa Nyele gives a voice to the female folk, when she silenced the Leopard, Chief Ndi Aghen, using bees, buzzing around his head. They do not sting, but circle him for days. To the woman, there should be a balance between the men and women. Power should move with wisdom. The chief is humbled by women who use bees for a balance. He therefore abides by what she says. He must let go the rule by fear, share his ear, not just his voice and take counsel from a woman. When the bees vanish, the chief names her his “kwifong Ntaah” (the unseen voice in his ear). Though without a staff, every decision passed through her. She never sat on the throne, but the throne leaned towards her shadow. Again, the “Myth of Mbu Awobo: The First Woman of the Forest Whispers” in Bafut, presents another lens through which women show their importance in the society ruled by men. Nyuy Mfor, gives fire to men and the voice of the forest Abu’ Awobo to women. The man uses fire with a lot of pride thereby, maintaining their positions as masters of all. Though with soft voices, the women travel in their dreams. They silence the men and they forget to dream. Without visions, ancestors whispering, drums not answered by the spirits and silent oracles, the men bow to the women in return to the dream. Equity is restored and the chief submits to the council of women, by letting them serve as guards in royal homes.

“Ankweyi”, keeper of whispers, “Fire may light the way, but breath speaks to the spirits”. Finally, the women are empowered and their voices taken into consideration by the men.

To add to the above, the tale christened, “Nyaa Nyele and the Proud husband” in Bafut, shows Nyaa Nyele as a woman of great valor sharp tongue and unmatched wisdom. What she says is important to those who approach to her except pa Tanda, her proud husband who believes women are to be seen not heard. To him, the woman’s place is in

the kitchen. He fails in thought and is unable to find the sacred talking drum after wandering in the forest. He castigates the woman for not knowing palace matters. On the contrary, the woman later becomes the person who discovers the drum hidden inside a hollow tree. She is rewarded by the chief to the greatest dismay of the man. The voice of the woman is recognized with the man despised. Nyaa Nyele says gently that “A man may carry a spear, but if he refuses to ask for the path, he will stab his own foot.” Consequently, Pa Tanda, rejecting of the right pathing reduces him to a secondary role.

Like Bafut women, women in Kom are also empowered resenting a challenge to the patriarchal structure in place. The Kom tale “Legend of Yensi Fo Nyay: The Woman Who Humbled a Fon,” presents the proud Fon, Fon Suh, a brave man in battle, rich in cattle but poor in listening. He believes in no woman teaching a man anything, not even the spirits. In this wise, the many wives he has, have no voice in the affairs of the palace. To him, “Let the firewood speak and not in the presence of the flame”. When drought hits the land, Yensi tells the Fon that the cause stems from the ignored female voices. According to the Fon, there is nothing that the women can do that men cannot. Ironically, he is shocked when Yensi speaks to the sacred rock that harbours the ancestors and it finally rains. The action of Yensi, gives her a seat in the inner council, (a gourd of blessing at the rituals) and a sacred title of seer. The voice of the woman is heard thereby elevating her to a higher rang of the society.. Roles are reversed with shifts depicting women as visionaries and leaders in the community.

In addition, the “Myth of Iya LA Anyuy: The First Daughter of the Moon,” in Kom shows Iya performing what ought to be done by men. She gives a balance between the moon and the sun by addressing them, though she has not been given a seat in the shrine and a voice in the council. She cries in silence by invoking the first mothers whose bones laid beneath every footpath and whose milk fed the first hunters. From her cries, things come back to normalcy. The oracle testifies that it was not cowries or goats that stabilized the society but IyA. The voice of the woman comes in here to pacify the society. She assumes the qualities of the man and is embraced by the council of leaders who later listened to her. This reflects what Oyèwùmí (1997: ix) calls “the cultural logic of gender,” in which social roles are determined not by anatomy but by relational positioning within the community. Thus, in Bafut and Kom societies, a woman can assume masculine role especially when she acts for the interest of the society, as well as men can display traditionally feminine qualities such as compassion and care.

Gender variance also refers to the concept of individuals not conforming to traditional binary gender norms and this is found in most narratives in Bafut/ Kom culture and folklore. They have a rich oral story telling tradition that often explores diverse expressions of gender. The gender variance is depicted through characters who defy traditional gender roles or exhibit characteristics typically associated with the opposite gender. This includes individuals who engage in activities or occupations not rationally assigned to their gender or who challenge societal expectations and norms surrounding gender identity and expression. Within the cultural context of Bafut/ Kom Tales, they offer insightful perspectives on the fluidity and complexity of gender, thereby highlighting the importance of acceptance and understanding of diverse gender identities and expressions.

The APA style (2024:8) emphasizes that “gender is the range of characteristics pertaining to and differentiating between, femininity and masculinity. Depending on the context, these characteristics may include biological sex, sex based social structures that is gender roles or gender identity”, the context here, Bafut and Kom communities. The man and the woman are differentiated with each assuming its own role in the society. In this wise, a character is assigned a specific gender at birth but later expresses a strong inclination towards activities and roles traditionally associated with the opposite gender. This character in the Bafut / Kom tales faces challenges and obstacles due to societal expectations, but ultimately finds acceptance and respect for their individuality and unique contributions. These tales in Bafut / Kom often aim to challenge rigid gender norms and promote inclusivity, celebrating the diversity of gender expressions and identities within the Bafut cultures and sometimes beyond. It is very important to know that the specific stories and details may vary within different tales in Bafut/ Kom as the story telling traditions are diverse and can evolve over time. In this situation, there is bound to be the switching of gender roles embodying both male and female, whereby individuals address or assume roles traditionally associated to the opposite gender.

From the above, the display of the gender identities, can be biological or socially imposed. From a biological perspective, the tales show that it is not everybody defined as woman or man that is considered a woman or man. In other words, it is not the possession of certain genitalia that keeps one in a particular gender group defined by the society. Some individuals have a combination of both the xx chromozones and xy chromozones. This combination at birth makes them to set the way they do despite the genitalia that they may be carrying and the definition given them by the society. Thus, the genitalia that makes the society to see

them as female or male become questionable. Also, physical bodily attributes may or may not be a true reflection of the social category given an individual by the patriarchal society. De Beauvoir (1949: 283) notes that “one is not born a woman but rather becomes one”. However, when the society makes them either male or female, many subscribe, without verifying whether their new status tie with their activities and their innate bodily attributes. Thus, the carrying of a female genital does not necessarily make one a woman because the dominant genes might be male genes, though the little genitalia, is female. This fluidity or variance in gender questions societal division of male and female, and at the same time valorizes the role of some female whom the society, from time immemorial, have seen as female, whereas they are not. Women also feign these different roles as means of asserting themselves in a typical patriarchal setup. This new category integrates her into a new community which the binary role assigned her at birth cannot offer. This pushes them from the periphery of society to their own center, though their individual societies might continue to see them as outcasts.

In the tale, “A Wicked Woman” amongst the Bafut, the protagonist takes the qualities which are not associated to women. The son who constantly brings his friend to pass the night with violates the mother’s order of allowing the friend to sleep in front and later is killed by the mother who wakes up and takes a blade, sharpens it and cut the throat of the person sleeping in front, only to discover later that she has killed her son. Her intended plans of killing the son’s friend, ends up, ironically with her son being killed. What is important to note here is that, a mother who traditionally is supposed to be a comforter and nurturer turns out to be a murderer. She regrets later, and when the rest of the community discover her actions, she is disserved by everybody as price for her wickedness.

Roles are also challenged as seen in the Bafut tale. “Why the Thumb is Short” because of the thumb’s actions amongst the other fingers. That is why, it is short and distant away from the others. The thump is supposed to stand as a leader (male) to see into it that things move rightly for the other. Unfortunately, it is relegated to the periphery.

Jones (2020:102) postulates that “Through the lens of gender, we can uncover the underlying power dynamics in literature, revealing how societal norms shape character roles and narratives”. The male who is the leader is supposed to stand tall in society, to represent the societal norms which shape men’s roles in tales. Unfortunately, the Thump is unable to perform that role and decides to betray the others:

But the fifth finger the thumb, looked red and his eyes flashes with anger. What do

you mean. He interrogated the first second and third fingers. If you steal that man's cocoyam and fowl, then I shall implicate you. I shall tell him. I swear''. The thumbs (fifth finger's) negative reaction greatly infuriated his famished mates. They leagued and gave him the beatings of his life. He was trimmed off the hand. He lay unconscious for more than one week. That is why the thumb is short and is further away from the rest of the fingers.

As seen in this myth, the societal expectations and norms are challenged by the action of the Thump. This situation helps in promoting inclusivity and the celebration of the diversity of gender expressions as the other fingers try to be more active than before, after trimming the Thump.

Wihbongale (2020:200) on this note articulates that tales from these cultures, focus on how narratives depict women in positions of power and authority, often subverting traditional gender expectations. There is a shift in power and authority away from the thumb. This highlights the complexity of gender roles in the tales, thereby revealing how telling can both reflect and influence societal attitudes toward gender in dynamic ways.

The situation in Kom is not different from that of Bafut when it comes to challenging gender roles. "The Kom Creation Myth," presents Nandong, the Fon's sister as path finder, as she leads her people out of Babessi following the python trail:

When the python trail eventually appeared, Nandong led the Kom people to follow it on their journey to the promised land. The python trail led the remaining Kom people for several years in the wilderness until they finally reached their present destination. They travelled through Jakiri in Bui Division to Ijim forest where they settled for sometime before moving to Idien at Djottin where they settled near a stream beside a raffia bush.

Traditionally, she is not permitted to lead the people following the patriarchal structure in place. This act gave birth to the matrilineal kinship system, which is part of the Kom culture to date. The matrilineal birth of the Kom culture stemmed from the role that was given to Nandong to lead the Kom people out of Babessi, by the late Fon. She became a good leader, a decision maker and upheld the tradition of the Kom people. This is not her traditional role but as the narrative purports she assumes it and becomes so perfect. From all indications, the woman can pass for a good ruler, especially with changing times and if given the place. One will say here that when women are given access to full

education, health care, taking part in political decision making, the society will be "ordered". If the women and girls and other gendered members of the society begin to beat their own drums and not just dance to the rhythm of others, the entire community will be transformed positively. I think that those who wield power must start by unlocking opportunities to relegated genders to participate fully in the political and economic life of the people. This will lead to inclusivity and equal opportunities for all genders. After all, Chinweizu, (1990 : 12) notes that "women rule the men who rule the world".

In Bafut tales, gender variance is often presented through characters who transgress prescribed norms. In the tale "Ndele Mbue," a woman assumes leadership in the absence of her husband and saves the kingdom from famine. Her courage and intelligence earn admiration, but her defiance of traditional hierarchy provokes punishment. This mirrors the ambivalence of patriarchal structures that both depend on and repress women's agency. In the tale's conclusion where the gods acknowledge her sacrifice, suggests divine sanction for gender fluidity, even as social institutions resist it. Similarly, in Kom tales, female tricksters emerge as agents of transformation. In "The Proud Hunter," a woman outwits male elders to get hold of a python. Her use of wit symbolizes intellectual power as a form of feminine agency. This situates African women's empowerment in strategies of adaptation and subtle resistance rather than outright rebellion or physical confrontation.

Gender variance in these tales also extends to male characters. Certain narratives portray men who nurture, cry, or sacrifice for communal well-being, challenging stereotypical masculinity. In the Bafut tale "The Woman and the Ghost," presents the man who goes through thick and thin to save the wife and child from "matinesong" (the ghost), defying the expectation that caregiving is exclusively feminine. Through humor and empathy, such tales validate emotional expression and caregiving as communal virtues, not gendered weaknesses.

These examples demonstrate that oral literature provides a space for exploring the elasticity of gender categories. As Finnegan (1970) asserts, orature's performative nature makes it responsive to the community's evolving realities. Narrators, through improvisation, can reinterpret gender roles according to contemporary needs, thereby transforming collective consciousness.

X. PERFORMANCE AS GENDERED NEGOTIATION

The performance context of Bafut and Kom tales adds another layer to gender variance. Narrative sessions, usually held in family compounds or community gatherings, are

participatory events where the teller, audience, and environment co-create meaning. Performance is thus not merely an act of narration but a negotiation of social identity. In Bafut, women often perform folktales that address moral conduct, kinship loyalty, and domestic harmony. Their performances use song, rhythm, and repetition to encode both compliance and criticism. The humor and irony embedded in their delivery allow them to challenge authority without direct confrontation. In Kom, women's narrative sessions reinforce social cohesion while reaffirming female solidarity.

During performance, gender is enacted not only through language but also through gesture, costume, and audience response. For instance, a female storyteller imitating a male chief may use exaggerated gestures to parody authority, eliciting laughter while simultaneously revealing the performative construction of power. Similarly, male performers who adopt female voices in tales to evoke empathy for women's struggles, blurring gender distinctions and expanding social understanding.

This performative interplay supports Schechner's (2013 : 28) concept of *restored behavior*, where each performance becomes a re-enactment infused with new meanings. Gender, in this sense, is continuously maintained in performance recreated and reinterpreted.

XI. TALES AS MORAL AND POLITICAL COMMENTARY

Beyond entertainment, Bafut and Kom tales function as moral commentaries on power, justice, and leadership. The treatment of gender within these tales often mirrors larger political tensions in the community. For instance, tales that depict the consequences of arrogance or abuse of power indirectly criticize male dominance in social institutions. In the Bafut tale "Legend of Ngum Nyele: The Woman Who Silenced the Leopard Chief," the chief's abuse of authority leads to divine punishment, emphasizing that justice transcends gender and status. Ngum Nyele becomes an epitome of neorality, embodying the voice, integrity, patience, and courage. Similarly, Kom tales frequently present women as mediators in conflicts, drawing on their symbolic association with life and reconciliation. The "Legend of Yensi Fo Nyay: The Woman Who Humbled a Fon," the woman solves a pertinent problem in the community. She discovers the drum, thereby ending what is the worry in the land. She is the wise one of the spirits and gains a sacred title as seer for the women.

Such moral frameworks reveal that gender variance in oral tales is not merely a literary device but a political discourse. As Barber (1997) notes, African performance is inherently political because it reflects the community's ongoing

dialogue about power. Through their tales, Bafut and Kom narrators articulate moral visions that challenge exclusion and advocate balance.

XII. SYMBOLISM AND SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF GENDER

Gender in these tales is also tied to spiritual cosmologies. In both Bafut and Kom belief systems, the world is perceived as a continuum linking the living, the ancestors, and the spirits. Women are often cast as mediators in this continuum due to their association with fertility and regeneration. In certain tales in Bafut, like the "Myth of Mbu'Awobo: The First Woman of the Forest Whispers," women invoke ancestral spirits, symbolizing their connection to the metaphysical world. This spiritual dimension of gender complicates the binary division between masculine and feminine. The Kom belief in *Foyn* (ancestral blessing) attributes spiritual authority to both genders, depending on moral worth rather than physical attributes. Tales that depict women or men receiving ancestral guidance, highlighting the community's recognition of moral and spiritual equality beneath surface hierarchies.

XIII. GENDER VARIANCE AS CULTURAL EVOLUTION

Finally, gender variance in Bafut and Kom tales can be understood as a reflection of cultural evolution. Oral tales have been adapted to modern influences such as education, Christianity, and globalization, which have altered traditional gender roles. New tales incorporate themes of schooling, migration, and women's leadership, blending traditional motifs with contemporary realities. For example, recent Kom tales feature educated daughters who use wisdom acquired in school to resolve family conflicts, symbolizing the merging of indigenous and modern values. These evolving tales show that orature remains a living medium that captures societal transformation.

By conceptualizing gender as both a narrative category and a performative practice, this study reveals that Bafut and Kom tales provide critical insight into the negotiation of identity in African communities. The interplay between stability and change, conformity and deviation, illustrates the resilience of African oral literature as a space of intellectual and moral reflection.

XIV. CONCLUSION

This study has examined how gender category and gender variance are constructed, performed, and reimagined in the oral traditions of Bafut and Kom. Through the analysis of selected tales and performance contexts, we found out that gender in these societies is not a static biological distinction

but a socially negotiated and performative category. Consequently, women assert symbolic power within patriarchal structures. Also, the analysis affirmed that oral African Literature is not relics of the past but a living, reflexive and transformative art form capable of shaping contemporary understanding of gender dynamics.

Bafut and Kom tales simultaneously reinforce and challenge patriarchal ideologies. While male authority is legitimized through royal and ancestral symbolism, female characters frequently subvert these hierarchies through wit, moral authority, and spiritual power. The result is a complex narrative field in which gender variance operates as both a literary and social mechanism for dialogue and change. The work also confirmed that orature remains a critical site for examining the evolution of gender relations in African societies. Storytelling, as a collective performance, enables communities to interrogate their values and articulate visions of justice, equality, and coexistence. The flexibility of oral performance allows for reinterpretation across generations, ensuring that gender discourse remains responsive to contemporary realities. Bafut and Kom tales not only preserve cultural heritage but also function as tools of transformation, teaching that social harmony requires flexibility in gender roles and respect for individual agency. Ultimately, the examination of gender category and variance in these tales reinforces the view that African oral literature is a living intellectual tradition deeply reflective, having dialogue and transformative. It provides a model for understanding gender as a continuum rather than static, and highlights the role of storytelling as both a cultural mirror and a moral compass for society.

DISCLAIMER STATEMENT

This article is derived from the doctoral research of **Irene Nchang Ngwa**, conducted in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Bamenda, Cameroon. The views, interpretations, and conclusions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the University or its affiliates. The work respects cultural ownership of the oral materials collected from Bafut and Kom storytellers and acknowledges their invaluable contribution to Cameroon's cultural heritage.

AUTHORSHIP AND LEVEL OF CONTRIBUTION

This article represents a collaborative scholarly effort. **Irene Nchang Ngwa** contributed the main research design, fieldwork, data analysis, and drafting of the manuscript. **Prof. Adamu Pangmeshi** provided theoretical direction and critical guidance throughout the research and writing

process. **Prof. Divine Che Neba** offered analytical insights, structural recommendations, and overall supervision of the final text.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

African oral traditions are often seen as reflections of culture and morality, but they are also living discussions on social change. This article uses tales from the Bafut and Kom communities of Cameroon to explore how gender roles are performed, contested, and reimagined through performance. By focusing on how both male and female characters navigate patriarchal and matriarchal, systems, the work highlights the resilience of African men and women and the fluidity of gender identity in oral traditions. The paper demonstrates that oral tales remain crucial for promoting social awareness, inclusivity, and cultural balance in the face of modernization and globalization.

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