Naked power: women and the social production of water in anglophone Cameroon

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Introduction

In 1959 a woman stripped off her dress and stood naked in front of a crowd during a political rally in the small Cameroonian town of Tombel. She was exasperated because, despite three decades of discussion about it, there was no piped water supply in town. Within a few years a new public network was in place and her protest had become part of the local story of producing that water system. Three decades later the women of Tombel felt obliged to take to the streets once more as a protest against the government’s attempt to close down public taps and charge users for water as it was collected. At the front of this recent protest a few old women marched naked. The next day the government’s water engineers fled town, and they haven’t returned since. This chapter is about power, and the capacity of women to develop water supplies despite their apparent powerlessness.

Throughout the literature on water and development the importance of women tends to rest on their role as water ‘consumers’ (Bulajic, 1998; Carter, Tyrrel and Howsam, 1997; Cleaver and Elson, 1995; Dufault, 1988; Fong, Wakeman and Bhushan, 1996; van Wijk-Sijbesma, 1998; White, Bradley and White, 1972; Shiva,
In this chapter, however, it is proposed that women should also be considered in the history of the ‘production’ of water. Women were not only the principal users of water, but they were also, in some ways, the makers of modern water supplies. Much of the existing literature on water and women actually disempowers women because it ignores their historic involvement in making water infrastructure, water institutions and water politics. Those who are now arguing that the projects of the past have failed because they did not include women risk erasing a history of the ways in which some women achieved specific objectives in this sector. Erasing this history of women’s involvement is actively disempowering because it contributes towards a dismantling of a tradition through which women have dragooned, coerced and persuaded men into participating in the production of water.

But what does the idea of the ‘production of water’ entail? Water and nature are so closely intertwined symbolically that it is counter-intuitive to talk of ‘the production of water’. Water isn’t made, it just exists. Despite the obviously social means by which humans acquire the water they need, the substance itself remains stubbornly natural to human eyes. Our first reflex is that water is the opposite of a ‘product’. Yet, the technological, industrial, economic process by which water is extracted from the ground or rivers, filtered and sterilized, distributed through a network, consumed, recollected, retreated and put back into rivers is a familiar one. Within that confined engineering context the idea of the production of water is unproblematic. But in the sense it used here the idea of the production of water includes other elements too. It entails the social arrangements that govern the use of water, the rules that regulate the way that people behave around water sources, the committees that meet to decide about the allocation of resources, the local values that water is associated with and finally, the cultural meanings associated with water
(Strang, 2004). All of these elements have a history and a politics; these combine to make water what it is in any particular place. The production of water stretches far beyond the visible and invisible elements of water engineering to encompass the broader relationship between water and society.

The production of water is a historical, geographical process which weaves together material and discursive changes. Before water ever enters a pipe network and becomes an engineered product it is already a produced social substance. But equally as the water enters the pipe its social meaning changes; the material transformation of water and the social meanings of water are co-produced (Swyngedouw, Kaika and Castro, 2002; Forsyth, 2003). This notion of the production of water draws freely on those authors who talk more generally about a ‘production of nature’ (Harvey, 1974, 1993; Smith, 1984; O’Connor, 1988; Benton, 1996; Peet and Watts, 1996; Swyngedouw, 1997; Castree, 1995). They emphasize that cultural ideas about nature are often ideological and reject any tidy separation of nature and society. To this is added the cultural theorisation of commodity biographers, who argue that prior meanings adhere to objects long after the political and economic conditions of production have changed (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986).

The value of this expanded notion of the production of water is that it captures the ways in which women are involved in the process. By extending production to include elements such as the establishment of the rules of behaviour at a water source it is easier to see that women have always been a key part of this story. Even though women have been only minor participants in formal water engineering they have often made demands for changes in the physical infrastructure, the rules of access and the arrangements for payment. By using historic forms of protest (such as nudity) they have articulated their demands in an effective way despite having no
formal control over decision making. It is hard to make generalisations about gender relations in an area as culturally diverse as anglophone Cameroon, but in general most overt social structures suggest that men hold a dominant position, yet there is still scope for women to find ways to express their own interests; there are established rituals of resistance. The key texts on women in Cameroon have often emphasized the tension between an historic and a contemporary vision of gender relations and the need for women to become politically organized and better educated (Endeley, 2001; Fonchingong, 1999; Forje, 1998), but they have also shown that despite the fact that most women have historically had low status they have not been entirely without power (Ardener, 1975; Diduk, 1989, 1997; Goheen, 1996; Ritzenthaler, 1960). This discussion draws out the ways in which these two aspects are linked in the field of water supply.

The empirical material used in this chapter was gathered from archival sources and interviews in Cameroon in 1998, 1999 and 2003 (Page, 2000, 2003). After a very brief description of the physical context of the area, the chapter looks at the history of women’s involvement in producing water supplies throughout the twentieth century. This is divided into four sections: the pre-colonial period, the colonial period, the early post-colonial period and the present. Emphasis is placed on rural and small-town water supplies.

**Water in anglophone Cameroon**

Anglophone Cameroon comprises the North West and South West, two of Cameroon’s ten provinces (Figure 1). The South West has very high rainfall (> 3000 mm/year) and the North West has marginally less, but is higher in altitude. In general
both provinces have high relief and are well watered, enabling most water supplies to be provided by gravity from springs.

![Map of Cameroon showing provinces and towns](image)

**Figure 1** Cameroon international boundaries, provinces and towns mentioned in the text

However, within both provinces there are particular places where the lack of a suitable drinking water supply was a limiting factor on pre-colonial settlement and on later urban growth. For example on Mount Cameroon around Buea there is a shortage of springs. Nevertheless, relative to many other regions of Cameroon, and indeed much of sub-Saharan Africa, these two provinces are not an arid environment. Yet despite high levels of water resource availability many people are effectively excluded from access to safe convenient water supplies (Table 1). This is either because there is no functioning engineered supply where they live or because there is
a supply, but they cannot afford to buy access to it. Such statistics are not particularly reliable, but they do show the ongoing challenge of providing supplies in this area.

| % National population with access to safe water supplies | 32/43 |
| % Rural population with access to safe water supplies | 45 |
| % Rural population in the SW Province with access to safe water supplies | 21 |
| % of the national population with access to water inside their homes | 11 |

**Table 1 Contemporary Access to Piped Water in Cameroon**

Sources: low national figure Government of Cameroon (1999), high national figure FAO (1994), rural figure FAO (1994), South West figure DRA consultants for South West Development Authority(1997), domestic figure estimate based on accounts held by the national water corporation SNEC (*Société National des Eaux du Cameroun*).

**Women and the production of water in the pre-colonial period**

At the beginning of the twentieth century water was already being engineered in the sense that humans were transforming their locality to suit their needs. In 1900 the vast majority of the 700,000 people (Kuczynski, 1937) living in what became anglophone Cameroon collected water from springs or wells. Where such sources were unavailable the pools of fresh rain water that gathered in tree roots or inside the conical leaves of *Colocasia* were also used. Amongst the Bakossi people around Tombel, where the roofs of houses were made from the leaves of tree ferns, gutters were constructed from hollowed out plantain stems. These caught the rainfall running off the roof and sent it to water butts\(^1\). In some places, buckets made from hollowed out tree trunks were built and put outside the home to catch the rain\(^2\). At springs
communities constructed small dams so as to create pools suitable for washing, and built spouts under which it was possible to place a calabash to collect water to carry back to the home. Sometimes, if distances were short, extended gutters made from plantain or bamboo were used to channel drinking water down a slope nearer to settlements. In most cases maintenance of the path that ran to the spring was an annual communal activity. Once water was carried back from the spring it was stored in earthenware containers (often in a corner of a principal building, to the right hand side of the door). Water was allowed to settle for some time in these pots so that sediment dropped to the bottom. Water at he turn of the century was a social product.

The task of gathering and transporting water was made as easy as possible, but what role did women take in this process? Consider a situation where a community collected water from a nearby spring. First, women were involved in the communal work of constructing the path to the spring. The standard view from colonial documents was that it was primarily the men who undertook the labour of communal work. However, the division between the labour task itself and the associated social practices is less marked than was assumed. The labour itself is only half of the task; communal work is often followed by communal eating and drinking, and the latter is no less a part of the activity than the former. So the preparation of food on communal work days was part of the pre-colonial production of water. Second, as the women were the principle carriers of water they effectively maintained the path to the spring by using it. Third, since it was generally women who gathered water, it was women who established and policed codes of behaviour at the spring itself, only turning to men when they needed to enforce those rules through punishment. So, even before the first pipe was laid women were key to the production of water.
The earliest piped water supplies in the area were constructed during the German colonial period in settlements near the coast. Two were built by the colonial state between 1900 and 1903 in Buea and Limbe and two were built at missionary stations, one near the coast and one further inland near Tombel at Nyasoso. All these systems were primarily used by the colonists, with a token tap for the use of Africans. As new plantations were established in the early twentieth century so the number of piped networks increased. These pipe networks on the plantations were used by Africans, but they had more to do with the reproduction of labour power than any welfarist sentiment. (Ardener, Ardener and Warmington, 1960; Konings, 1993). There are fewer ways in which it is possible to write women into this first phase of piped water supplies. They were constructed using forced male labour and supplied plantations, which were predominantly male environments (during the German period). Such limited construction work that took place was embedded within the thoroughly male world of colonial engineering.

Yet it is possible to find traces of women’s involvement in debates around water in this period from the archival record. By the 1930s colonial officials were well aware that women helped to generate the cash within a domestic unit that paid for water levies for example. More importantly, advocates of investment in water supplies within the colonial bureaucracy incorporated women into their arguments by portraying them as the ultimate beneficiaries of improved water supplies. Colonial officials took the view that because the local men who dominated the Native Authorities (which constituted the institutional basis of indirect rule within this area)
did not carry the water themselves they were unwilling to take on the financial burden of developing water supplies as a responsibility of local government. The figure of the woman as a consumer became central to the lobbying that preceded construction. In addition, women (as mothers and housekeepers) were identified as the social group through whom the European colonial state would purge Africans of their insanitary ways. So for example in 1934, when money became available specifically for ‘the improvement of the condition of women’, opinion was divided between those who believed it should be invested in education about sanitation and home making (primarily the missionary organisations) and those who believed it should be invested in water supply infrastructure (primarily the medical establishment and District Officers).

The figure of the woman as a domestic guardian and water consumer became increasingly important in the 1950s when ‘Community development’ was institutionalized as a means of building water supplies in rural areas. As ER Chadwick, the official responsible for this development strategy wrote

in some cases women have to carry water to their villages for distances of up to five miles. To do away with this drudgery so that the women may have more time to improve their homes, the people themselves in a great number of villages have constructed, under the guidance of a rural water supply officer of the Public Works Department, and with the support of the District Officer rain water storage tanks around their schools and other buildings. The people have supplied sand and stone and worked without payment.
Women were identified as a specific target for community development because ‘if a woman learns something, she gives her learning to her children’\(^7\) and because ‘the standard of living is the standard of the home and the home is in the charge of the housewife or mother’\(^8\). So though women were not included in technical training programmes, they were to be included in educational tours and village discussions\(^9\). In addition, it was suggested by Chadwick that the project funding for Community Development projects could be handled by women\(^10\). Women were even to be involved in the physical labour of construction.

All that was necessary was for everyone to join together and for each to do a share of the work...this man to collect stones, this man to fell some trees, this man to dig, this man to fetch water...this man to do this and this man to do that. All the men in the village, and some of the women too were given work to do\(^11\).

The close association between women, water and domesticity was firmly established in the minds of colonial officials. Water was seen as a woman’s thing and women played key roles, not only in the ideological justification for particular forms of infrastructure investment, but also in the actual project implementation process too. In this respect water supplies during the colonial period were produced both for and by women.

**Women, Community Development and Rural Water Supply 1960-1990**
The lasting significance of colonial ideas about community development was that they produced a template for rural water supply that continues unbroken to the present. After independence the Government of Cameroon swiftly ran up against financial constraints. The demands for water supplies from towns and villages rapidly exceeded the availability of capital to build them. In these circumstances community development became a key strategy: ‘The main value of the organisation lies, in its ability to tap and organize community self-help... there is a vast reservoir of voluntary labour which can be tapped once an organisation is established for the purpose’.

Capital expenditure on water supplies by the state soon became conditional on a community being willing to donate labour, materials and some proportion of the costs to the project. A whole government ministry was formed dedicated to this approach to development. This body, in co-operation with a Swiss NGO that acted as a conduit for foreign aid, organized the construction of over 100 separate rural water supply systems between 1964 and 1988 (Helvetas, 1989).

These postcolonial development projects incorporated women in three main ways. First, women were involved in raising the money needed for the ‘community contribution’. Rural water supplies in Cameroon are often the concretisation of women’s capital. Women were often the community’s treasurers and they also acted as entrepreneurs looking for new ways by which the community could raise funds (Niger-Thomas, 2000). Women sometimes established new communal farms, the profits from which were put towards water supplies, they monopolized and co-ordinated sales of palm wine in local markets for the same purpose. Since water was identified as of particular benefit to women there was also a degree of solidarity between those women who had moved from the village to town and prospered (external elites) and the women who had remained in the village. If the external
women’s groups wanted to support their sisters in the village as often as not they chose to do so through financing water supplies. Men also made financial contributions, indeed the formal individual levies for men were usually twice that of the women, but women were often more zealous in raising this money, and had to be more imaginative in doing so since they tended to have less ready access to a cash income.

Second, women were also often active participants in the physical construction of the projects. In the vast majority of cases these supplies were gravity-fed piped systems from spring catchments. There was considerable variation in the degree to which women were involved with labour in different places, but some generalisations can be drawn. Women were considered capable of carrying materials and digging trenches, but not for cracking stones, working with concrete or undertaking building work. This division of labour reflects both local cultural values and the values of the different external institutions who were involved in the projects. Universally, however, women were expected to prepare the food for the occasions that marked key rites of passage during the project cycle: project initiation meetings, visits from donors, completion of key elements and project inaugurations. The women’s work supplying and preparing this food should be incorporated into the costs of production.

Third, women were producers of these projects in as far as they were the people who demanded that a water supply system should be built in preference to other projects. For example in Tombel, a small town in the Bakossi area, it was the women who asserted the importance of water at significant public meetings. A piped water project had first been proposed in the 1930s but for a variety of reasons was never built. In 1959, Cameroon held elections for Prime Minister, and Tombel was
one stop on the campaign tour of John Ngu Foncha, the eventual victor. At a mass rally he demanded to know what the people of Tombel needed. One woman, an activist from a different political party, stood up and told Foncha that the women of Tombel would like to vote for him, but they were ashamed to go to vote because they were dirty. They were dirty because there was no water for them to wash with once they came back from their farms. To demonstrate that she was dirty she took off her dress and stood before the crowd naked, and continued her complaint by saying that they would have liked to prepare a meal for Foncha, but that they were ashamed because they had nothing to boil the food in except urine.

This melodramatic episode can in part be understood as a party political challenge and in part as a gender political challenge. The woman was taking a well established form of protest against the behaviour of specific men and adapting it to the circumstances of party politics (Ardener, E. 1996; Awasom, 2002). Those older protests had used nudity, faeces and urine to play on male anxieties about impotence in order to humiliate individual men who had offended women. As Shirley Ardener puts it when discussing these forms of militancy, ‘when the women of Cameroon subject a man to such a display they demonstrate that they no longer recognize his power to elicit conformity.’ (Ardener, S., 1975: 43) It is unclear from local ethnography (Balz, 1995; Ejedepang-Koge, 1971) whether such forms of protest were an established feature of the local Bakossi society or whether they were imported from the North West province along with the labourers who came to work on the cocoa farms around Tombel. However, the meaning was clearly understood: the language of insult was being used to provoke the politician to deliver on his claim to be powerful. Foncha subsequently took a personal interest in the case and lobbied hard for the construction of the Tombel water supply.
Women and water in contemporary Cameroon

Many of the ways in which women have been involved in the production of water continue to the present, but it is their role in politics and protest, which is particularly significant. Where men often chose to register their complaints about water rates through petitions to government or letters to the newspapers, women are more inclined to take direct action. These protests generally relate to two state policies. First, the closure of public taps and second, the attempts to charge for water at public taps. Both came to the fore in the 1980s.

Water rates were first legally introduced in 1934, but for many years they only impinged upon the lives of a tiny proportion of the African population because water supplies were so limited. The official policy of the British administration was that those who used piped water ought to pay for it in proportion to the amount they used, and that water rates should be set at a level which generated sufficient income to cover the costs of running the systems. However, in reality the difficulty of collecting the rates meant that water supplies were subsidized from general revenue. After the expansion of the number of urban networks in the late 1950s a larger number of people were officially expected to pay for their water. In order to make it simple to collect the annual water levy was included in the poll tax and was collected by local councils. This had the advantage that many people were unaware of the fact that they were paying for water, but it had the disadvantage that much of the money was siphoned off into council coffers. Even if all the water bills had been collected the rate was set at such a low level until 1980 that it did not cover the running costs of the systems (Table 2).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Expenditure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1935-36</td>
<td>£387/19/1</td>
<td>£257/2/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937-38</td>
<td>£411/7/-</td>
<td>£423/9/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950/51</td>
<td>£404</td>
<td>£1770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954/55</td>
<td>£753</td>
<td>£1635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961/62</td>
<td>£11,214</td>
<td>£18,439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971/72</td>
<td>4.4 million CFAF</td>
<td>125 million CFAF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979/80</td>
<td>21 million CFAF</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982/1983</td>
<td>12.3 thousand million CFAF</td>
<td>12.9 thousand million CFAF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985/86</td>
<td>16.5 thousand million CFAF</td>
<td>19.4 thousand million CFAF</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Rising Levels of Subsidy in Cameroon’s Water Supply Sector**

Notes: after 1980 the figures refer to all of Cameroon as opposed to just the two anglophone provinces. CFAF = Communauté Financière Africaine Franc

Source: Page 2000

Between 1960 and 1972 attempts to raise the water rate by the government were frustrated by the House of Chiefs, the second chamber of the Parliament, who objected to the idea that water could be sold. As a result this pattern of an increasing deficit between income and expenditure continued until the administration of water supplies was transferred from a government department to a quasi-autonomous national parastatal corporation called SNEC in the early 1980s. This transfer coincided with a huge investment in the water supply infrastructure, during which most of the water supplies now operating throughout Cameroon were constructed. The planning for this expansion had been carried out in conjunction with
UNICEF and the WHO and loan funding came in large part from the World Bank. The systems were generally built by international engineering consultancies on a contract basis without community involvement. During this rebuilding, universal chemical water treatment was introduced and electric pumps were brought into widespread use, which made systems safer and more reliable but also more expensive to operate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Price of Domestic water (CFAF/m³)</th>
<th>French Franc Equivalent Price/m³</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1963-70</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>0.154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>30-70.5</td>
<td>0.6-1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982 (January)</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>2.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982 (April)</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>4.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 The National Water Price Rises 1975-1999

Notes: the CFAF was devalued in 1994


The experience of the move from local government control to a national water parastatal was mixed for most households in Cameroon. On the one hand outdated technology was replaced by effective modern supplies with increased
reliability in terms of more regular supplies and better quality water, but on the other hand the water changed in taste and far more importantly in price (Table 3). All new house connections and public tapstands after 1980 were installed with water meters. Householders with water inside their homes started receiving monthly bills and local councils started receiving monthly bills for the public tapstands. Regardless of the improvements in infrastructure the new water supplier rapidly became extremely unpopular both with individual households and with local councils.

Councils soon found that the cost of supplying water to public taps was eating up between a quarter and a third of their annual budgets, and as a result many started to default on their water bills (Table 4). SNEC treated public taps in the same way they did private account holders; those councils who failed to pay their bills had their public taps disconnected. Towns such as Bali, which regularly defaulted on payment, rarely had more than a few public taps that were operational. Indeed the council there never persuaded SNEC to open more than 9 of the 36 taps that were built during the 1984 reconstruction. The reduced number of public taps resulted in long queues to collect water and increasing frustration. From the perspective of SNEC and the Government of Cameroon such inadequate public supplies were an incentive for households to bring water into the private sphere. From the perspective of many households the cost of installing a domestic water supply was completely prohibitive. The struggle to keep public taps open has been long and protracted. Only since the rapid decline in standards of living in the mid 1990s have the authorities recognized that public taps are set to remain part of the urban landscape for the foreseeable future.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Council</th>
<th>Debt to SNEC (Millions of CFAF)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buea</td>
<td>520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumba</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limbe</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiko</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muyuka</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tombel</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nguti</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mundemba</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 Local Council Debts to SNEC in the South West Province, May 1998

Source: The Herald 25<sup>th</sup> May 1998

The battle to preserve public taps and thus access to ‘free’ water has been one in which women have taken a key role. For example, in Limbe in August 1982, 200 women marched on the office of the Senior Divisional Officer, the most important government official in town.

Carrying plastic and enamel buckets, the women chanted slogans denouncing the activities of SNEC and calling for a complete overhaul of the water system in Limbe urban township... Prominent amongst their complaints was the inconsistency of the water supply in Limbe town in general and New Town in particular. The women also complained against the spiralling water bills with little or no water flowing from the taps. Finally the reduction in the number of public stand taps meant increasing
hardship for those without water in the house... The Senior Divisional Officer thanked the women for the orderly manner in which they presented the grievances and promised to look into the matter. He appealed to the women to be patient since matters of the sort could not be redressed overnight. Apparently satisfied with the Senior Divisional Officer’s promise, the women trooped back to town chanting “Massa we thank you for your promise.”

The officials were surprised by the protest which was unusual during a time in which sycophancy dominated public language and repression of dissent was the norm. The leaders were subsequently detained, but stuck to their story that the protest was spontaneous rather than planned.

The policy of reducing the number of public taps did not, however, change. The women were assured that the plans to upgrade the infrastructure in Limbe were in hand, but at the same time SNEC announced that the number of public taps would be reduced from seventy-one to forty-two. Once the construction work actually started in 1985 the Ministry revealed that the number of public taps that they would pay for had been reduced to twenty-one. The local council were given the option of paying for additional tapstands to be built, but at the specified cost of 560,000 CFAF/tap they could not afford to do so. However, since the women forced the authorities to recognize that many households in Limbe could not afford to bring water into their homes the policy has changed. SNEC now acknowledge that such communal taps perform a vital social function and have abandoned their policy of removing them entirely.
Having recognized the need for public taps though, SNEC have looked at other ways of making them financially sustainable and of stemming the efflorescence of council debts. In particular, since 1993 SNEC have been trying to privatize the public taps. This entails closing the tap, then leasing it to a private individual, who will stay by the tap and sell water at a recommended rate of five CFAF for a ten litre bucket. SNEC claim that this rate should generate a sufficient profit over a month to make this an attractive business proposition, without denying anyone access to water. Since the individual who takes on the lease is charged for all the water distributed from the tap they have a financial incentive to ensure that none is wasted and they will report damage as soon as it happens. This system was introduced to a number of towns across Cameroon in the 1990s, however in Limbe the threat of the privatisation of public taps generated sufficient anxiety to bring the women onto the streets once more. Even more dramatic, however, was the opposition to such a policy from women in Tombel.

In 1993 the Governor of the South West Province announced the new policy of privatising public taps and told the Tombel people that they should be prepared to start buying water from the taps. The people immediately refused and in response more public taps were closed by SNEC. In January 1994 the Tombel Women’s Association wrote to the local Divisional Officer complaining that they could not afford to pay for water, and that they resented paying for a service which was declining in quality. They demanded that SNEC should leave Tombel and that the treatment works constructed in the early 1980s should be disconnected and be replaced by the system constructed in 1963. Though the newer system was more elaborate and had a physical and chemical water treatment plant it was associated with SNEC. The women preferred the earlier, simpler network which was not seen as
belonging to SNEC or indeed to government, but was generally perceived to have been a gift from Prime Minister Foncha to the people of Tombel in general, and the women of Tombel in particular. After a week when nothing was done, they went as a group to the old reservoir and began clearing the vegetation around it as a means of expressing their desire that it should be reconnected.

After a further fortnight 4,000 women marched through town to the SNEC office, which was besieged, and various ‘traditional’ rites were carried out. At the front of the crowd some old women marched naked, and on reaching the SNEC office they urinated on the steps. As one marcher put it ‘nakedness is the highest and last stage of the women’s society in Bakossi. From there only death can solve the problem’16. The Tombel men were in hiding, for fear of seeing these old women naked17. Various herbs were thrown down on the step of the office, which were said to be able to transform into poisonous snakes if the threshold was crossed again18. The SNEC employees who had been warned of the gathering crowd had already fled and refused to return to the office ‘partly to avoid the wrath of the people and also to keep away from the ‘juju’ put there by the women’19.

The protest was co-ordinated by a woman who had spent many years working for Community Development and had been actively politicized as an advocate of women’s rights. As with the earlier use of nudity in 1959, this was a reworking of elements of traditional protest in a modern context. The engineers who ran the water in Tombel, the Divisional Officer, the Governor of the Province, the local Member of Parliament are also men and the traditional authority (a chief) are all men. The form of the protest adopted a template from gender conflict because the forces who appeared to be conspiring to remove free access to water were all men. Of course, the majority of men in the town also objected to paying for water and the protest cannot be read solely
in gender terms. Since SNEC is a parastatal corporation an attack on SNEC is an attack on the government. Since the government often emphasizes its respect for ‘tradition’ it is only by using ‘traditional’ forms of protest that communities are able to challenge the state in a context where forceful government repression is common. Local government bureaucrats in Tombel have been able to negotiate a path in which they both condemn the expulsion of a government agency but also express their respect for the women and their assertion of their traditional rights. Local male leaders have been able to preserve good relationships with the governing political party by categorising the action as ‘traditional’ and therefore in some ways tolerable. So the protest was not only a protest against men, it borrowed forms of gender protest and reinterpreted them in a way which suited the contemporary political context.

After expelling SNEC from town the women handed the water system over to a community committee, dominated by men. The SNEC treatment works was abandoned, but the SNEC distribution network is still used. A small number of public taps have been kept open and there is no charge for their use, though yard taps and private connections incur a fee. After dissatisfaction with the probity of the individuals on the water committee, the key post was given to the woman who had been involved in the initial organisation of the 1994 protests. Under her leadership the committee managed to break even and in fact they were even able to save enough money to plan some small extensions to the system. However political grievances and ambitions within the Tombel community have meant that she has been removed and the future of the water committee is now less clear.
Conclusions

The story of women’s contribution to the production of water in Cameroon in the 20th century shows at least two things. First, the idea that women are only connected to questions of water policy and water history because they are water consumers is simply inadequate. Rather than start our discussions about women and water at the point where the women collects the water from a well, puts it on her head and sets off home it is necessary to ask: how did the well get there in the first place? And, what role did women take in the process of bringing that well into being? This is more than the usual gripe that writing around development policy and development projects tends to have a casual disregard for history and the particularities of place. Rather the logic of ‘women in development’ rests, ironically, on a denial of the role women have played in the past. That argument runs something like this: the rate of failure of water projects (urban and rural) are high because women have been excluded from the project cycle in the past. Including women, it is suggested, can transform failure into success. To sustain this argument it is necessary to emphasize the difference between past and present in terms of women’s participation. Such strategies seem historically untenable in Cameroon, they deploy an impoverished notion of power and they rest on the assumption that women have played no part in the making of the history of particular places. The empirical material presented here is aimed at contesting such a position. This is not to say that more determined efforts to include women in project planning, implementation and evaluation are not merited; there is undoubtedly scope to include women in projects in increasingly meaningful and innovative ways. But it is important to remember that women in Cameroon have been central to the rural development discourse for at least thirty years, and have contributed to the making of rules of water management and the
reproduction of the cultural values around water for far far longer. There is no need to
deny the asymmetries of power between men and women in order to admit the
possibility that women have in a variety of ways influenced the development of
Cameroonian water supplies over the last century.

There is an obvious query in relation to the peculiarity of the specific
context I have described, but at the very least this case study ought to raise the question
of whether similar narratives can be considered in other places. To ignore the
institutions and historical triumphs that already exist may be to miss an opportunity to
instrumentalize a potentially progressive tradition. Rather than incorporating women
into an arbitrary, uniform and externally conceived project cycle the best opportunity
for empowering women may be to publicize their achievements in places like Tombel.
In this town women have challenged attempts to close down public taps and make
water-users pay at the point where they collected their water; they have been at the
forefront of public hostility to the idea that water is best treated as an economic
commodity. As part of the resistance to these policies women have not only called on
long-standing ideas of water as a divine gift, but also have emphasized the role that
communities in general and their mothers in particular played in the construction of
water supplies in the 1960s. Their objective has been to defend existing rights of access.
Water has become a symbol of the benevolence of the first generation of independence
leaders and the competence of communities in relation to the grasping and inept state
and its water corporation. Women have not been alone in calling on recent episodes in
the history of water development to help justify action against further marketisation of
drinking water in Cameroon, but their actions in the past have often been unfairly
neglected.
Second, this case study shows that it is necessary to expand what is understood by the ‘production of water’ in order to reveal the crucial role women have played in the past. The construction of water supplies not only includes the actual direct labour of moving materials, digging pipelines and building (in which women have at various times participated) but also the ancillary labour such as preparing food for community labourers and the indirect labour, such as collecting money or running committees (through which a community’s wealth has been transformed into pipes, cement and technical expertise). In addition it is also necessary to extend the notion of production to include the making of ideas as well as the making of infrastructure. This includes both the symbolic meanings that accrue to water and the ideas about the correct (most efficient, most just) way to deliver water to those who need it.

In recent years social sciences have been enchanted by ‘consumption’ as a neglected sphere of research whose importance was undervalued because of an earlier obsessive prioritisation of ‘production.’ The use of the idea of the ‘production of water’ as set out here is not a bid to reverse the current trend so much as to start bridging a false dichotomy. Consumption can only be understood in relation to production and vice versa. It is precisely because of women’s involvement as water consumers that they were involved in the production of water in the past; and it is that past involvement which may underpin their present claims to rights, for example of ownership or access.
Notes

1. Interview with S.N Ejedepang Koge (historian of the Bakossi people), Tombel, 24th April 1999.
2. Interview with Fokwang Fofuleng (born 1917), Bali, 2nd April 1999.
3. ‘Bayangi women can sell their own products, buy their own salt and clothes and contribute towards their husbands tax.’ February 1934 DO (District Officer) Mamfe (Scaley-King) to Resident, Buea (Rutherfoord). BNA (Buea National Archive) File Sa(1933)2 ‘Measures for the improvement of the condition of women.’
4. BNA Sa(1933)2 ‘Measures for the improvement of the condition of women’.
8. ER Chadwick, pamphlet ‘A short list of quotations concerning Community Development’ 8th May 1952 BNA loose in File No Se(1950)2.
16. Interview Mr Epote, Buea 20th April 1999.
17. Interview with Mr Sone, Buea 21st April 1999.
19. The Herald 14th February 1994. ‘Juju’ is a general term referring to all aspects of witchcraft.
References


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Bamenda: Helvetas.


