# Men Own The Fields, Women Own The Crops: Gender And Power In The Cameroon Grassfields

*Miriam Goheen*
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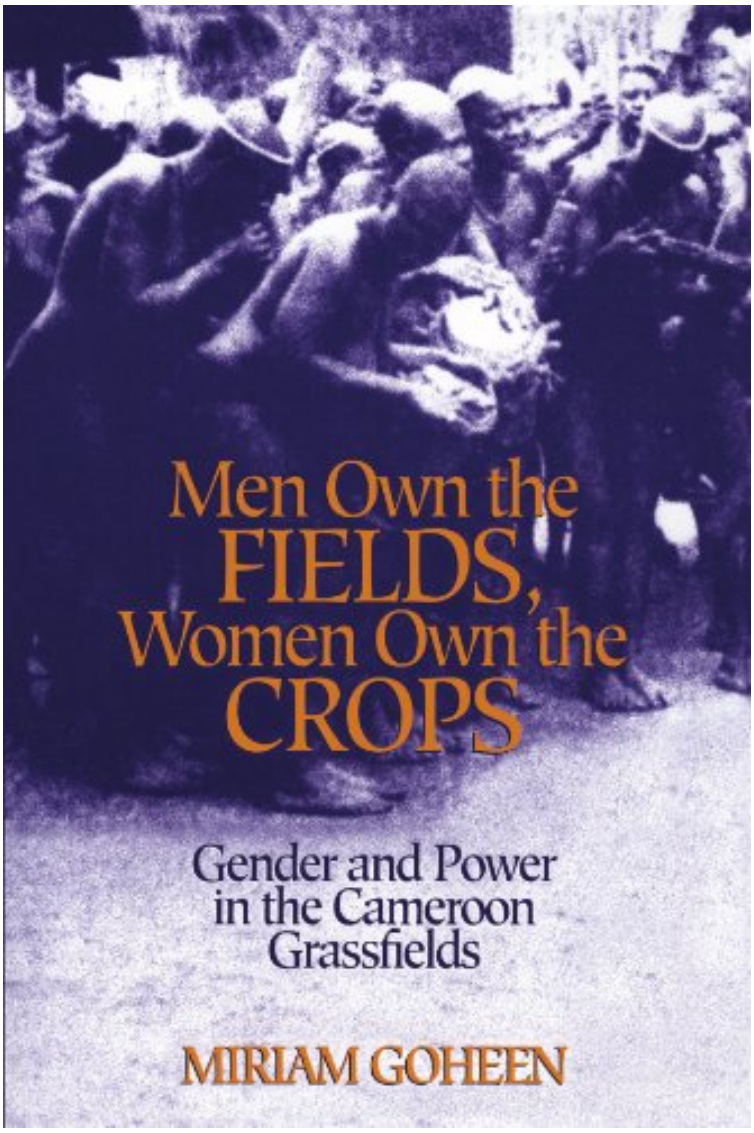




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**Miriam Goheen : Men Own The Fields, Women Own The Crops: Gender And Power In The Cameroon Grassfields** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Men Own The Fields, Women Own The Crops: Gender And Power In The Cameroon Grassfields:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Structure and the Individual in Goheen's Men Own the Fields,

Women Own the CropsBy A. S. BrandtMiriam Goheen traveled to the grassfields of Cameroon intending to study "the relationship between local and national politics within the postcolonial state" (3). There, she was struck by how, amidst a culture experiencing the changes associated with "the commodification of almost everything" and the "increasing internationalization of culture," it is gender relations that are most relevant to "an understanding of the complicated interconnections between Nso' and the national state today" (4). Goheen's ethnography focuses on the "internal power relations" of the Nso', and then explores how these power relations "articulate with national power" (4). These internal power relations are defined and supported by the relationships between men, women, and production: "Women play a key role in this study because control of their productive and reproductive labor in Nso has always been central to maintaining the hierarchies of male power and status" (8). Goheen explores in her work how women have become the source of "male power, status, and accumulation," how "national-local practices, legal systems, and cultural institutions within the postcolonial state have served to articulate male power in the local arena with power at the national level," and processes that are counter to the male hegemony that has come to define the state and experience of Nso' society (10).Throughout her study, Goheen draws attention to how "the meaning of power relations" among the Nso changes due to historical processes and changing conceptions of the material (10). Thus, she explains, two central analytical issues of her study are: "the integral interdependence between anthropology and history," and "the relationship between practice and discourse, between the material and the ideological, between base and superstructure in the ways that these are articulated and reproduced in and by the contours of history" (11). It is through Goheen's attention to the political economy of gender and the influence of historical processes on Nso' identity that she is able to identify the counterhegemonies that challenge customary hegemony yet strengthen the structure of gender roles as opposed to a counterhegemony that challenges the gender roles solidified by the postcolonial national state.Goheen's overarching thesis is that the structures of Nso' society have produced a "gendered hierarchy" that assigns women the role of provisioning the household and producing children (16). In so doing, men are afforded the time, status, through high numbers of children and dependents, and personal money to seek political power and maintain customary power. Such a structure of domination stems from the precolonial past, and was expanded and reinforced through colonial and postcolonial rule. She establishes this thesis through the five chapters that follow a largely theoretical introduction. In the final two chapters, Goheen explores two distinct counterhegemonies to the hegemony of male domination established through precolonial customs and reinforced through the colonial and postcolonial states. First, she explores a dispute between the chief of a larger village within Nso', the Fon Nse', and the Fon Nso', the leader of all of Nso'. For Goheen, this counterhegemony serves as an example of how resistance to hegemony can be "absorbed into the larger hegemonic project of the postcolonial state; ultimately this resolution does not serve to reproduce the dominance of the paramount fon, but instead reinforces the power of the state and the new elite" (178). In contrast, Goheen argues, there is a second counterhegemonic discourse in the rejection of marriage by the elite women of today and in marriages of elites that reject the traditional separation of men's and women's roles and share money equally between partners. And, "the political and potentially transformative aspect of struggles over the cultural meaning of gender cannot be ignored" (196).In the course of her argument, Goheen is very successful in her discussion of the structure of Nso' society, the ways in which material and historical processes have worked to mold the structure of this society, and how structural changes have influenced power relations, particularly between men and women. She begins her study outlining the structure of society. In chapter two, Goheen documents the geography and social setting of Nso', revealing that the "Nso' physical and social worlds are inextricably interconnected" (24). We learn that the Fon is the customary leader of the Nso', acting as "the intermediary between the living and the ancestors, and is responsible for negotiating and ensuring the health and well-being of the Nso' people"(27). Importantly, "there have always existed a number of checks and balances on the power of these rulers" (27). First, the mtaar people, free commoners, act as a check upon the authority of the Nso' because the "Fon Nso' must have a mother who is a mtaar woman... [the Fon Nso'] is in a sense both the son and the son in-law of the mtaar lineage heads and must take their advice seriously" (28). Second, in precolonial times, the secret societies of both men and women were able to successfully voice their protests to the Fon. Finally, men and women of high rank, i.e. male title-holders and female members of the Fon's family were afforded particular powers within the Fon's household and family. Later, Goheen reveals the ways in which the colonial and postcolonial states have strengthened the power of the male elite and eroded the powers associated with the female elite. Goheen's primary concern here is the fluidity of these categories as Nso' is influenced by the national state particularly so that she can explore the complex relationship between hegemonic and counterhegemonic processes. "What appears as hegemony from one vantage point," she puts forth, "appears as counterhegemony from another" (46).The arrival of colonial powers are, for Goheen, an example of the historical processes that shaped the structure of Nso' society, and certainly brought changes in material processes that were directly relevant to power relationships. The arrival of the Germans served to "strengthen the executive [the Fon] at the expense of the consultative institutions centered on the palace," such as the Mtaar people and women (52). Chapters three, four, five, and six explore the means through which male hegemony was established in Nso' and how changing material conditions, particularly the growing prominence of a cash economy, influenced male power and excluded women from power.Goheen points out that "hegemony requires consent and consensus about the legitimacy

of the dominant discourse" (56). This consensus was accomplished through the diffusion of symbolic power throughout the Nso' empire. This symbolic power is acquired through the accumulation of children and dependents who can serve as a work force, increase the status of male household leaders, and provide men with greater access to cash. As a hold over from the time of the Nso' empire, men are identified as warriors, while women are responsible for maintaining the household: "These gender identifications, negotiated in the distant past when warriors were essential to establishing regional hegemony, have worked to free men from the primary responsibility of provisioning the household" (74). Today, "by assuming responsibility for provisioning the household, women free men's incomes for extrahousehold investment in entrepreneurial ventures, social networks, and status," and consequently, women are at a disadvantage to acquire these public powers (92). Thus, with the introduction of a cash economy as a consequence of colonialism, women's labor was relegated to the private sphere, and men, who participated in the cash economy, were associated with the public sphere. Importantly, "the boundaries between public and private domains, always shifting and contested in precolonial Nso', became more static and rigid within the colonial (and later that national) state" (66). Additionally, the cash economy, leading to the commoditization of land, and increased government control over the distribution of land, particularly through the government's positive relationship with customary land tenure, has "reinforced" men's control over the land worked by women, and "although it may not go unchallenged, male hegemony is ultimately strengthened by this relationship" (140). As a final example of how changes in conceptions of the material have reshaped and reinforced male-female power relations, Goheen describes how the postcolonial state has used male secret societies as important political institutions while ignoring female secret societies. The postcolonial state, realizing the importance of Fon's hegemonic power, uses traditional hegemony to establish its own power, particularly through a new educated male elite. Goheen asserts, "When local politics is carried out in this idom and national and local politics are articulated through secret societies, women are excluded from participation. The ability of the new elite men to use traditional institutions and the traditional title system to graft new forms of power onto the existing status hierarchy in Nso' articulates local and national male control, and contributes to the dominant discourse of male hegemony" (162).While her articulation of how historical and material processes shape the structures of gender hierarchy in Nso' is comprehensive, if not repetitive at times, Goheen's study begs the reader to ask if one can adequately document oppression and resistance to oppression without accounts of individual experience and women's own interpretations of their place in society? Goheen's fully structural analysis of the gender hierarchy in Nso' society feels impersonal and not successfully supported with evidence because a reader engages only with Goheen and not with any actual members of Nso' society. The ethnography would greatly benefit from some incorporation of Nso' women's own reflections on their role as provisioners of the household and on their conception of reproduction in the context of male dominance.Goheen does present some individuals in her conclusion, during which she outlines her conception of a women's counterhegemony that she contends successfully challenges male power. Here, however, she is concerned entirely with elite women and their means of entering the public sphere. In her introduction, Goheen asserts, "this study argues that it is in this process and ultimately in the articulation between gender and class, the role of gender in the relationship between what Bayart has termed the dominants and the domines, that we can locate a counterhegemony which is likely to be truly transformative of the structures of the postcolonial state" (17). Yet in reality, the only classes with which Goheen is concerned are those of men and women. By describing these new trends of elite women as counterhegemonic, and by not examining the effects on or including the voices of non-elite women, Goheen both excludes the poor from the liberation of this resistance and does not explore the new hegemony that could be created to subvert the poor to the elite.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops: A Valuable, Though Imperfect, Examination of Land, Gender and Hegemony in CameroonBy A. GarryMiriam Goheen provides valuable insight into Cameroonian gender and power structures in her examination of Nso life, Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops. The text centers on a discussion of hegemony in Cameroonian society, but uses lens of land, gender, and modernity to reveal deeper nuances of its role. Goheen effectively details the power dynamics resulting from cultural practices surrounding production and reproduction, allocation and ownership of resources, local and national male power structures, and social hierarchy. Ultimately, Goheen successfully establishes that earlier practices of male domination (especially in relation to land) determined women's roles as largely subservient to men. It is only in the more contemporary period that gender constructions have come, however reluctantly, into the public arena for debate.The frequent invocation of her title is a noteworthy repetition in Goheen's work, and is the clearest way of communicating her overall point. Goheen cites this Nso phrase to summarize the relationship between gender, land, and power. "Men own the fields, women own the crops" describes men and women as "fathers" and "mothers" of the field, who have important duties to best use farmland. Women are expected to till the land, and through this work, as Goheen notes, women produce 90% of Cameroonian crops consumed. Men are the holders of the land, who allocate it as they see fit to female family members and dependents to farm. The balance of labor and gender was skewed, in part to keep women from "positions of power or public decision making," thus enabling traditional male hegemony. In this short phrase, Goheen encompasses the general representation of men as holders of power and women as support for that arrangement. But Goheen argues that this relationship was sensible in earlier times, because it resulted in "gender complementarity"

rather than inherent inequality.The advent of `modernity,' in terms of colonial and capitalist structures, significantly complicated this ages-old statement. Goheen details the changes to women's roles as their work in the fields is commoditized. Particularly in rural areas, Goheen notes, a woman's sales of excess crops supports the "welfare" of her family when she sells them in local marketplaces. Furthermore, the national food supply is largely constituted of this surplus. Yet current Cameroonian laws do not give women equal access to owning land as individuals or through development programs. Traditional methods of farming and subsistence, the main sources of women's social and economic influence, are at risk. New practices resulting from increasing commoditization of land also changed land use due to new inheritance patterns. Traditionally land remained in the possession of a farmer's titled lineage head; upon death, the land would return to the community. But notions of land ownership have become more "individualized," and land use if often passed to the previous farmer's sons. These changes have profound implications for both farmers and the titled men, because despite increased materialization of wealth, much power remains in land and labor.This composition of power is repeatedly emphasized in another important phrase throughout Goheen's text: "the fon has everything, the fon is a poor man." This Nso saying reveals the social burden of being elite in this Cameroonian society. Although national government is present in northwest Cameroon, local leaders like the fon more established positions of authority that are linked with local traditions and rituals. Fons are expected to redistribute their wealth freely to their dependants, and to support them in times of hardship. These dependants are especially numerous because fons often take wives for political purposes, thus becoming centers of extensive lineage and kinship networks. This pattern is replicated by other important figures in Nso life, specifically the sheey, faay and shuufaay who often use their assets to support extended families and pay school fees for young relatives. In repeating this statement several times throughout the text, Goheen communicates to her audience the mutually exclusive relationship between "material riches" and "renown" in Nso society, and makes an important point about nonwestern conceptions of wealth more generally.Despite the insight Goheen's work sheds on modernity and African life, there are several important points of criticism. Goheen's treatment of gender lacks a complete examination; throughout her work, she focuses on the interaction between the genders, instead of presenting a complete picture of the context from which each group was coming from. If anything, Goheen seems to focus on men's roles in Cameroon, even writing that "women's political power" is "virtually ignored" and "almost nonexistent." Though she treats these descriptions as negative, in her work she makes little effort to challenge or even exhaustively examine this reality, instead focusing on men and their roles as elites and landowners in social hegemony. It is only in the final concluding chapter that Goheen focuses largely on women's attempts to take their lives into their own hands. Goheen does not necessarily fall into the academic gap of using masculinity as a primary tool of examining women and women's agency, but she trips heavily into it.Additionally, Goheen focuses largely on the fons and their various family members (the wirfon), without giving a clear voice to non-royal members of society (the mtaar). Perhaps this weakness results more from Goheen's research capabilities after her installation within the fon's family. She described elites (many of whom have advanced education) but does not contextualize who they are elite to. It may be that so-called `class' distinctions are subtler than those in Western environments, or "not...hierarchical in any measurable sense." Yet even when describing tenant/landholder relations, it is unclear how life differs based on their differing amounts of wealth and power, or, conversely, if it does not. Her picture of the hegemony in Cameroon is imprecise and would benefit from a more balanced description of elite and non-elite groups.A final problematic aspect of Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops is Goheen's tone. Although she largely writes to make valuable academic contributions, Goheen at times references irrelevant or inappropriate experiences. For example, when writing of possible exploitation of Nweron authority, she characterizes some as "easy opportunities for one's enemies to make accusations, much like the marijuana laws in United States today." Earlier in the text, Goheen also recounts an experience of drinking too much with fon, in a joking manner. These stylistic choices may not discredit Goheen's work as a whole, but they do call her positionality into question. It is difficult to separate her academic intentions from her personal attitudes, and these minor transgressions disrupt the otherwise cohesive flow of her writing.Overall, Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops effectively illuminates many aspects of Nso life in northwestern Cameroon. Goheen fills several gaps in Western academic research, and updates earlier observations, both of which are noble endeavors. Her strong theoretical framework combined with first person accounts and anecdotal research presents a rich tapestry of information. Goheen argues especially persuasively the role of land in greater Cameroonian hegemony, and its associations with gender and modernity. This dialogue is one that most likely plays a more significant role in other African women's lives than I had previously thought. Her text is very accessible, making it an especially useful text for a less specialized audience. However, her work also has a few serious shortcomings in areas of contextualization and style. This criticism does not negate her contributions to Cameroonian research and academic analysis, but it is important when assessing her work as a whole. In a society where African women are often described by foreign media, and even by scholars, as "victims" and African men as "chauvinistic...drunkards," Goheen's mostly well-articulated work has an important place.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Insightful and InformativeBy Coral R MartinMiriam Goheen's 1996 work, Men Own The Fields, Women Own the Crops: Gender and Power in the Cameroon Grassfields, examines the intersections of gender, cultural flux, contestations of power,

and political plurality in Cameroon's Nso' chiefdom. In her analysis, Goheen pays special attention to the position of women and their avenues of power in the male-dominated Nso' political system. With a focus on the Nso' chiefdom's complex relationship with the centralized government, Goheen explores several realms of Nso' politics in which the role of women is in flux, these include; the restructuring of the fon chiefdom system, the allocation and the commoditization of arable land, attitudes concerning marriage. The book is organized around eight chapters with a brief prologue that orients readers with a brief introduction of the effects of globalization, education, and political reordering in roughly the past twenty years (considering the 1996 publishing date).A recurrent theme in the text is Goheen's reference of Phyllis Kaberry's research with the Nso' nearly forty years earlier. In her introduction, Goheen identifies Kaberry's work as a catalyst for her own research. For the reader who is not familiar with Kaberry's work, the consistent thread of conversation between Goheen's experience and Kaberry's work can be somewhat alienating. In addition, while highly readable, Goheen's analysis tends to be somewhat dense. Some chapters, for example "The Forging of Hegemony", which examines Nso' reliance on women's reproductive and productive capacities as well as conceptions of Nso' female identity, may have benefited from being organized in to more than one chapter. These stumbling blocks aside, Goheen's work appeals to any reader concerned with the effects of political plurality, the construction of identity between the tensions of tradition and modernity, as well as women's right to self-determination.

Womens laborproducing both crops and childrenhas long been the linchpin of male status and power throughout Africa. This book lucidly interprets the intricate relations of gender to state-building in Africa by looking historically at control over production and reproduction, from the nineteenth century to the present. Miriam Goheen examines struggles over power within the Nso chiefdom in the highlands of Western Cameroon, between the chiefdom and the state, and between men and women, as the women increasingly reject traditional marriages. Based on a decade of fieldwork, this work tracks the negotiations between chiefs and subchiefs and women and men over ritual power, economic power, and administrative power. Though Nso men obviously dominate their society at both the local level and nationally, women have had power of their own by virtue of their status as women. Men may own the land, for example, but women control the crops through their labor . Goheen explains clearly the place of gender in very complex historical processes, such as land tenure systems, title societies, chieftancy, marriage systems, changing ideas of symbolic capital, and internal and external politics. In examining womens resistance to traditional patterns of marriage, Goheen raises the question of whether such actions truly change the balance of power between the sexes, or whether resistance to marriage is instead fostering the formation of a new elite class, since it is only the better-educated women of wealthier families who can change the dynamic of power and labor within the household. The issues raised in this book are not unique to Nso but apply throughout the African subcontinent. Written in a straightforward way with much of the theoretical argument in footnotes, Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops marshals important arguments of wide relevance in present-day Africa.

From the Inside FlapWomen's labor-producing both crops and children-has long been the linchpin of male status and power throughout Africa. This book lucidly interprets the intricate relations of gender to state-building in Africa by looking historically at control over production and reproduction, from the nineteenth century to the present. Miriam Goheen examines struggles over power within the Nso chiefdom in the highlands of Western Cameroon, between the chiefdom and the state, and between men and women, as the women increasingly reject traditional marriages. Based on a decade of fieldwork, this work tracks the negotiations between chiefs and subchiefs and women and men over ritual power, economic power, and administrative power. Though Nso men obviously dominate their society at both the local level and nationally, women have had power of their own by virtue of their status as women. Men may own the land, for example, but women control the crops through their labor. Goheen explains clearly the place of gender in very complex historical processes, such as land tenure systems, title societies, chieftancy, marriage systems, changing ideas of symbolic capital, and internal and external politics. In examining women's resistance to traditional patterns of marriage, Goheen raises the question of whether such actions truly change the balance of power between the sexes, or whether resistance to marriage is instead fostering the formation of a new elite class, since it is only the better-educated women of wealthier families who can change the dynamic of power and labor within the household. The issues raised in this book are not unique to Nso but apply throughout the African subcontinent. Written in a straightforward way with much of the theoretical argument in footnotes, Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops marshals important arguments of wide relevance in present-day Africa.From the Back CoverWomen's labor - producing both crops and children - has long been the linchpin of male status and power throughout Africa. This book lucidly interprets the intricate relations of gender to state-building in Africa by looking historically at control over production and reproduction, from the nineteenth century to the present. Miriam Goheen examines struggles over power within the Nso' chiefdom in the highlands of Western Cameroon, between the chiefdom and the state, and between men and women, as the women increasingly reject traditional marriages. Based on a decade of fieldwork, this work tracks the negotiations between chiefs and subchiefs and women and men over ritual power, economic power, and administrative power. Though Nso' men obviously dominate their society at both the local level and nationally,

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