

The Socio-cultural and Political Role of Women in the Teke Kingdom XIXth - XXth Centuries

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ABSTRACT

The Teke company recognizes a heavy responsibility of women in their status as wife and mother and in their participation in different social, cultural and political activities. In this matrimonial society, the Teke woman is a true artist in the history of the Teke kingdom. On this subject, the political history of the Teke kingdom invokes the implication of the woman in the management of the kingdom and in the sense that the role of the woman is very noticed in this Teke civilization which continues to resist as best it can the perverse effects of globalization. As one of the last kingdoms in Central Africa, the Teke kingdom, which resisted during slavery and European penetration, has long known the importance of women. It was in this sense that it had made it possible to place her in the socio-cultural and political sphere. The Teke woman being a dynamic woman worked with great ardor, occupying an important place within the kingdom where her presence was almost noticed everywhere.

KEYWORDS

socio-cultural role; politics; woman; organization; Teke kingdom

INTRODUCTION

The African continent is one of the continents with a long and rich history. This story is in fact special in the sense that it is difficult to explain all the possible details. The first writings were made by European missionaries and travelers who sometimes tried with great difficulty to write the historiography of Africa while distorting certain facts. The African continent was from immemorial time inhabited by diverse and very varied peoples who were politically organized in empires, kingdoms and chiefdoms. On the subject of the peoples of the present Congo, history teaches us that the Congo has known three kingdoms, including the Teke kingdom considered to be one of the last vestiges of Central Africa. In this kingdom, women played a large-scale role in the socio-cultural and political fields. The purpose of this article is to first show the role of women in the socio-cultural field in the Teke civilization. Next, this work intends to study the role of women in the political field. These are the main points that this article proposes to study.

RESEARCH METHODS

This methodology to consist of to conduct field research that has identified role of woman in the Teke kingdom. The methodology used for this type of work was based on field observation and the analyzes. There was also talk of using a maintenance guide initiated according to the objectives set. This enabled us to discover precisely the role of woman in the Teke kingdom. These various pieces of information gathered after the field survey allowed us to compare them with the written sources which are therefore the documentary research. Of undeniable utility, the research on the ground also allowed us documentation

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Women in Teke Society

Women in marriage

In Teke society, woman has her well-defined place in marriage, in her home as mother and wife, in the production and education of children.

Indeed, among the Teke as everywhere in Africa, the woman is the pivot of production. In this case, she can only have a position or consideration in relation to a husband or a marriage (Ndzeli, 2021). The insufficiency of access to the means and nomadism's of information, education and communication are at the base of her ignorance or her weak knowledge in all the fields of the life (Anonymous, 2015).

The *ouke* or *oukali* woman plays a very fundamental role in the grouping of lineages it is from her or from her *libala* marriage that the family is founded, which is enlarged with the different *etsina*. Nevertheless, in the Teke kingdom, the departure of a daughter of a lineage would be felt as a great loss and suffering because she will be secured by her husband.

In the Teke kingdom, the woman was a precious person who had to be chosen from a young age. This is why, a young girl could already have been chosen before the nubile by a person who had to offer her a symbolic object to prove her love and lay the foundations of the engagement. This object was then given to the girl's parents. But the selected girl was not returned to her husband before marriageable age. It was necessary to wait for the man's maturity to effectively assume his functions as head of the family before the woman went into marriage.

Among the Teke, polygamy was considered a sign of wealth. It is in this sense that Teke proverb states that "*ikouo nge muo oudzou* " that is *To- say having a single coat is kept naked in other words, having a single woman is to be almost naked*. Despite her departure from the family for the matrimonial home, the Teke girl still remains attached to her lineage through maternity. From the side of her husband, one wonders to what it remains hardworking, virtuous and fruitful. It is this perspective that the *nziku* (The *Nziku* are one of the Teke ethnic groups) say that a good tree produces good fruit.

The functions of the wife

Lydie Dooh Bunya mentions the following: "*the woman came into the world to be essentially a wife and a mother*. Joseph Itoua adds that:

The woman considered as a source of life, takes care of sowing. In addition, the maintenance of the fields, the harvesting, the transport and the transformation of the products, come back to her (Itoua, 2006)

This amounts to saying that the *Nziku* woman in her marital home, in her status as wife had the task of advising her husband, educating the children, making provisions, producing what is useful in the home and transforming food products. In the same sense, the *Nziku* woman must have had good relations with her neighborhood and the husband's family as well as his relatives.

As we can see, this conception of ancient times exists until today, this is justified by the fact that the woman is considered above all as the first educator in a home. She also plays the role of counselor for her husband and supervises and reframes the home. Indeed, she educates, advises and "discipline" not only her family, but her husband, hence the slogan: "*To educate a woman, you educate a nation*". On this subject, Likambo quoted by Daniele Sassou N'Guesso maintains that:

For me, housewives are mothers! We replace the mothers, the sisters of our spouses. So the woman has all the roles in the house. When the husband is absent, it is the wife who does everything, whether it is to make decisions concerning the children or all that concerns the house. She helps children in learning lessons, in their exercise (Gusso, 2016)

Unfortunately, women were still underemployed compared to men, in the various sectors of economic activity in the country (Poaty, 1990).

In the same context as Jean Pierre Poaty, Julienne Manckassa revealed inequalities from which women suffer despite their numerical importance (Manckassa, 1991).

Indeed, in the matrimonial home, the biggest task of the woman in the Teke kingdom was based on the household and domestic work. She was the one who did the shopping, the housework, the cooking, the dishes. She also draws water regardless of the distance between the house and the water source. Considered the first counselor to her husband, the Teke woman has a large-scale role in the home. The role of adviser did raise several women in the Teke kingdoms to the high office of the kingdom, for example the queen *Ngalifuru*.

As part of since polygamy exists in the kingdom Teke, most women loved several advantages that other women in the marital home. She is not only a wife and is also called to procreation to ensure and play her role as a mother.

The Teke woman and procreation

As Teke society is a matrilineal society, women are responsible for procreating in order to broaden their lineage. Therefore, the table that life offers daily from mother had regard to that of her husband made her a real instrument of development lineage. Children from one woman are more considered in the teke. Also, the Teke tradition is established during the marriage ceremony in *nziku*, a saying that says ' ' *outi or nvie waboura* ' '. This means that a good tree produces good fruit.

Very often, the married woman is observed from very close, since his arrival until to the arrival of the first child by the parents especially the family in law. If no hope of maternity is manifested after a certain delay, everything will be done to find out whether there is sterility from the wife as well as on the side of the husband.

As in any conjugal relationship, children are the primary goal of a woman in the Teke kingdom. The maternity therefore has a place in marriage among the Teke. Formerly among the *nziku* when a woman was pregnant, the family was in mourning then, on the other hand, a woman who did not give birth was the object of mockery and even insult. This phenomenon often led to divorce or to polygamy. The sterile woman is the object of mockery within her own family, and is considered a loss since the latter will bring no benefit to the family.

Clearly, it is the children who make marriage valid. The problem of sterility is a phenomenon that affects humans on a lasting basis, especially in Africa.

The functions of mother

The big problem here is not only that of having children, but also of knowing how to take care of them. This amounts to saying that women have a very heavy responsibility for the lives of children. In Teke as everywhere, after delivery, the mother must know how to take precautions for her baby, because the baby is a fragile being that must be treated with a lot of minutia.

Indeed, for a baby boy `` *ngalibo* '' the mother must be extremely careful not to drop breast milk on the penis of the child so as not to make him suffer from sexual impotence all

his life. The boy child is considered as the guardian of the temple, of the family, because it is him who perpetuates the name of the family. It is in this sense that the father shows great joy when he hears of the birth of a male child. To protect it from bad weather and evil spirits Eugenie Mouayini Opou says the following:

To protect the newborn from the evil eye, the snake's tooth and a *lidji* (shell) were worn on his wrist (Opou, 2005). For the daughter, there are not enough problems, however, the mother must massage the child well to make her beautiful. The girl *ntsouono* covers her hair a *lidji* protection. As a mother, the woman's main mission is the protection and education of children, since from an early age, children are more attached to their mother than to their father.

In the Teke civilization, the woman takes care of the nutrition of the children. This is why, she never stops cultivating the land to feed her offspring. She also practices picking and picking up by supplying various and varied products. In the Teke countries, there is a division of human labor. The men cut down trees and are clear while women do the sowing, the planting, and weeding and harvesting (Nzoussi, 2009). Hunting products are provided by the husband as well as those from fishing.

Clearly, the Teke economy being based on subsistence activities whose varied products are mostly taken from the ground and consumed by the family. In this context, the woman takes care of sowing and the rest of the agricultural activities. From then on, she had the power to take care of gastronomy. This activity was very essential in the Teke kingdom, because it revealed one of the values of women (Kiba, 2015).

The role of women in the education of children

As we said earlier, children are the primary objective of marriage alliances. It is on them that the perpetuity of the lineage and its vital chances rest. As a mother, her greatest responsibility was to teach children family ethics, respect for parents, especially that of the father and mother, but also that of the elders and elders. The woman also educated the children in obedience, humility, solidarity and patience. Theft, adultery, violence and lying were prohibited. Basically, the child benefited from special supervision.

Indeed, it is around her little *ike* hut (kitchen) that the Teke woman gathered every evening, around the fire or during meals all her children by providing them with advice, lessons and tales that relate to past stories, lived and sometimes invented for a just cause. Don't we say that stories are the reservoir of tradition ? (Opou, 2009)

As it can be seen, the education of the girl apart from that of the boy depends entirely on the mother. Thus, the mother's first concern was to educate and train the young girl so that she became a good wife but above all a good mother. This is why, the latter learns all trades from her mother by imitating her at work. It will serve as a large workforce and aid. The Teke children shared common games and games based on their gender, based on their own invention intended for training their intelligence, cooperative spirit and learning their role as husband and mother. Which determines that Teke was not barbaric, but rather a well-organized society. However, the god who can change is the reality that his transformation may or may not occur (Luyaluka, 2020).

In this practice of raising children according to ancestral customs and civilizing norms, in the Teke civilization, female children received more praise compared to male children. Many women mothers looked more upon daughters and their grandchildren. The reason is quite simple. The Teke civilization being a matrilineal civilization, the girl's children therefore belong to the maternal lineage (*nbana-ike*). The Teke child could also be educated by anyone provided that the latter enjoys a good moral character. The child is an

adult in miniature, he wants to learn everything through play according to the environment around him (Ndembani, 2008).

The cultural and political role of women in the Teke kingdom

The cultural role

Despite her investment in socio-economic activities, the Teke woman also attached herself to the cultural values that made her a true lullaby or dancer.

1. The woman and the scarifications

The Teke tradition has instituted indelible signs in recognition of its people. These signs are real cultural identities that ancestors have bequeathed are the Teke to create a distinction between Teke and other peoples.

Indeed, these signs are called scarifications (*antsio*), considered as the canon of beauty of the Teke people. On this subject, Oviessio says the following:

In the past, any Teke who did not bear these signs was mocked or even insulted and very often was insulted in these terms aba nkobo ouga ibiele outwa . Which means having bare cheeks resembling the thigh of a pygmy (Oviessio, 2001).

Scarifications are not only reserved for men, but also for women. During the course of these, women played a large-scale role. The woman played the role of lullaby while the operation was taking place. In this sense, they are moved from one village to another with the husband to turn role. She played the role of lullaby while the husband tattooed the subject to alleviate the pain that the candidate felt.

Despite her role as a lullaby, the woman also invested in scarification practices on the basis of initiations. But, she was more concerned with the simple signs that made up the aesthetics and beauty of the Teke woman. This is the case of *Apopo* and *Awa* which were done on both cheeks and the *antsio* said *nziele* which were done on the back to make the girl more attractive.

2. Woman and widowhood (*ounfili*)

As in almost all African societies, the disappearance of a parent or a spouse leads to the observation of mourning. On this front, women are the first victims and generally respect the facts of tradition. Among the Teke when a woman loses her husband and vice versa, the mourning of the spouse begins the same day of the death of the latter.

Indeed, during this time the woman leads a life of seclusion characterized by many prohibitions. From the first day, she shaves her head, she is taken care of by her in-laws who spills the ashes (*outo a mba*) on her body and makes her undergo some rituals necessary for *ounfili* (widow).

Placed at the corner of the wall, a storm lamp behind the back, facing the floor, speaking in a low voice, she was deprived of all domestic work and personal hygiene for several months. Shirtless, the widow wore only two loincloths, one of which was attached just at the level of the breasts and the other did not exceed the calves. Whatever the weather, she was accompanied by two widows who were part of her in-laws (mother or sister). She ate only once a day and at a specific time.

As we see, it is for widowhood that the woman proved to her in-laws love she had for the respect of the deceased. Among the *nziku*, for example, it is said that *ilili ouke ounfi li ifouo azia liouna ndze kouka oulon*. This means that a widow's tears show the love she had for her husband. If this love was true or hypocritical, it is during widowhood that truth triumphs. This is why, the family in law always tended to want to manipulate the widow, especially if this one behaved very badly with regard to her

husband. The woman thus had this mission to mourn her dead husband very much. This means that the wife has to pay for everything she ate and received from the husband through her tears using an instrument called *outsari* which had to accompany her in her rhythmic rhythm.

After several months, it was the in-laws who had the decision of the first outing materializing the end of the mourning, necessary for the field and domestic work. The second exit concerned in particular the withdrawal of mourning. This phase consisted in breaking the bond of marriage by paying a special tax or fine. As a result, the woman took a symbolic bath (*ousouo*) from the in-laws. This washing gives to the widow freedom. But this freedom was conditioned: either the widow married the youngest or the nephew of the deceased, or she returned to her parents to raise her children. When she chose the second case, she had to repay first the pledges of alliances from the previous marriage.

3. Woman and twin rites (case of twins)

The phenomenon of twins includes several rituals which are practiced before during and after the birth of the twins. This is to show the role played by the Teke woman in this phase of twin births.

In fact, the phenomenon of twins takes the value of a myth in the Teke tradition and is distinguished family or the twins were born in other families. Among the Teke the birth of twins was announced in all the village and was the subject of a festive event. The twins' exit was not random, but depended on a few principles. One chose a day of the week between *otsora* or *okwe* which corresponded to a definite celestial influence. In a context of duality and unification, the *audience* formed a large circle called *oyala* where penetrated the twin mother. During this outing, the woman played a significant role in the outing of this mother and the whole family. The make-up was done with the ashes provided by a blacksmith who was to accompany him during the whole ceremony. The whole village was invited. It is after the outing of the family that the father of the twins was named *tara bwole* and mother *Maa bwole*.

It should be noted that in the Teke tradition only could the already twin invest in the practice or the feast of twins. He was responsible for looking after the newborn twins until their release. The first twin is called *ngambou* and the second *ngampio*.

However, after the appointment, the woman was responsible for attaching to the wrists of the children a shell bracelet inside which are blown and placed specific herbs (sign of protection of children by the ancestors, that is to say a wristband braid with herbs and these herbs served to protect children against evil spirits or the evil eye. the little twins are surrounded with peace and cheer. no one should have the feeling of anger against them.

Clearly, apart from these cultural investigations, the Teke woman also had heavy responsibilities in traditional political matters and in the management of the kingdom's territory.

The political role of the Teke woman

The history of the Teke kingdom strongly reveals that women played a major role in the constitution of the Teke kingdom. At the arrival of Europeans on the territory of Central Africa particularly in the realm of Teke, the people were well organized since time immemorial.

Indeed, the Teke kingdom had at its summit a king and well organized chiefs without forgetting able-bodied women who held royal power. They have waged a relentless fight

against all forms of sexist and traditionalist discrimination. This is the case of Queen *Ngalifuru*,

1. Women in her status as queen

Ngalifuru by a real name is *Ngatsie*. She belongs to the *ngaatsibi* family, the holders of the *nkwe-mbali shrine*. She was married to *Onko* (Iloo 1st), and was not yet called queen *ngassa*, since it is not in front of the king's wife that one immediately becomes *ngassa*. This title in the Teke tradition is awarded to the one who deserves it after going through certain stages.

During the enthronement of the king, he may or may not have a wife. His enthronement lasts 9 days, question of giving him all the magic power of the kingdom and the windfalls of the ancestors to govern well. After his enthronement, the king is called to live with *ngatsie* who must accompany him in his royal functions. The latter courageously performed the act despite all the difficulties and constraints that flow from it. It was after this ceremony that she would be a real queen or *ngassa* (Opou, 2010).

In this regard, Eugenie Mouayini Opou states that

After this passing exam, Ngatsie was enthroned queen. The government officials (inkilompou) hold royal ceremonies . The first vassal and his college crowned Ngatsie and officially recognized her as queen by virtue of the nkwe-mbali . The subjects must refer to their queen, guardian of the temple by tradition. She is elected and adorned by the different attributes and dignitaries of the court.

Indeed, *Ngassa* or queen in the Teke is not just any woman. She is a woman of great value, sincere and discreet. She is very respected throughout the kingdom and occupies a place of choice. She is therefore considered to be the mother of all in the kingdom. On a per a lmost the oral Teke *ngalifuru* is not a proper name, it is a name attributed to the wife of the king after the death of her husband. It is therefore a widow's name and not a title. It was after the death of her husband Illo first that *Ngassa* inherited this name since as a widow, she was no longer to be called by the Queen during this period of widowhood. This is why, she lost the name of *ngassa* to inherit that of *ngalifuru*. However, this name is composed of *Nga* meaning one who possesses material goods or human, or in other words, a fetish priest who is in communion with the world of spirits or invisible. *Lifuru* which means what relates to the ashes. *Ngalifuru* is therefore the owner of the ashes.

The title of *ngalifuru* continues therefore to pose problem within the kingdom and is interpreted differently by the ones and the others. Despite all that has been mentioned, the queen played a large-scale role with her husband who is Teke King.

2. The role of the queen with the king

As queen of the kingdom, the queen was a serious and virtuous woman. She plays the role of advisor to her husband. She is an avant-garde woman who motivates her husband to take all the risks so that his elevation can materialize and become reality. She used this title to prevail not only her rights, but also those of the kingdom and its people.

Indeed, *Ngassa* was more young, she is the only woman who takes up the side of his husband, the task incumbent on her was not easy in the court of the kingdom. This is why, despite the fact that she must demonstrate what she is capable of, she must impose herself. She is a woman who did not wait for someone to order her to speak.

Obviously the queen is forced to overcome all the difficulties she faces. Her character requires a firm attitude if she wants to go far. From the demonstrations of evil

forces that surround her, the queen must act very rigidly and triumph. It is in this sense that she is considered the queen of the kingdom.

Finally, the queen takes to heart her role as advisor of her husband. She works with her husband and does not hesitate to go up to the battlements for the triumph of the ideals of her March. As a girl belonging to the *ngatsibi* family, she takes advantage of this position to assert herself and show her presence within the firm milieu of men and the royal court.

By her wisdom and virtue, she already prepared, the following reign of King since the latter after having undergone the smooth ritual not last long on the earth. His days were limited according to the Teke tradition.

In the Teke kingdom, the queen is also the guardian of the *nkwe-mbali shrine*. The kingdom's strength and power thanks to this spiritual entity. In fact, *Nkwe-mbali* is neither a religion nor a cult. It is an energy and a spiritual power which allowed the Teke kingdom to cross all the dark pages and to resist ipso facto the tests of time. In breast kingdom, the king plays the role of pivot and embodies the power of *Nkwe-mbali*. However, the queen is the guardian of the sanctuary of the *nkwe-mbali* as well as the adornments of the king after the latter's death.

Ngatsibi has the duty and the responsibility to demand the designation of a new king by the intermediary of *ngailinon* to the great voters (the twelve *kobi*). She is the one who gives the red cover spotted with black (*mboulou a ngwo*) *ngandzion* in order to cover the new king. It is also *Ngatsibi* who is responsible for bringing all the insignia and ornaments to the new sovereign.

CONCLUSION

The present Article was intended to show the role played by the woman in the history and organization of the Teke kingdom. The Teke company recognizes that women are at the base of the widening of lineages through their marriage and maternity, whose mission is it is to educate, nurture and raise. Her investment in culture and art makes her a true artist and actress of societal life. The Teke woman also has a significant role in the political arena in the sense that she is the closest adviser to the king. In this study, ambiguity was also raised about the confusion many people made about *ngassa* and his widowhood (*ngalifuru*). However, with the contribution of modernism, the Teke tradition undergoes the miasmas of globalization and gradually collapses.

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