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Produce in Santa, 1986-2016**



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Women in the Production and Commercialisation of Agricultural Produce in Santa, 1986-2016

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the evolving roles of women in agricultural production and commercialization in the Santa Sub-Division, Northwest Region of Cameroon, between 1986 and 2016. It explores how economic crisis and demographic changes shaped women's transition from subsistence farming to central actors in the agricultural value chain. The research argues that the collapse of coffee prices in the late 1980s and civil service retrenchment triggered a gendered agricultural transformation. While scholarship acknowledges women's contributions to African agriculture, localized longitudinal studies remain scarce. This study addresses that gap by tracing women's agencies in the Bamenda Grassfields, highlighting their shift from laborers to managers, traders, and exporters.

Methodology: A multidisciplinary approach was employed, combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Primary data was collected through oral interviews with female farmers and traders, alongside archival sources such as personal record books. Secondary data included scholarly publications and reports.

Findings: Women in Santa pioneered large-scale cassava cultivation and intensive market gardening (carrots, leeks, cabbage), supported by cooperative labor groups known as "working bees." They penetrated commercial networks as roadside vendors, wholesalers supplying Douala and Yaoundé, and exporters to neighboring countries. Their economic participation improved household welfare, particularly in education and healthcare, while reinforcing community resilience.

Contribution to Theory, Practice, and Policy: The study contributes to agrarian and gender studies by demonstrating how women's agency reshaped agricultural economies under structural adjustment. It recommends strengthening women's access to credit, extension services, and market infrastructure to consolidate gains and promote inclusive, gender-responsive agricultural development.

Keywords: *Women, Agriculture, Santa Sub-Division, Commercialization, Food Crops.*

Introduction

Agriculture remains the foundational pillar of rural economies across Sub-Saharan Africa, facilitating food security and providing livelihoods for a vast majority of the population. Within this agrarian framework, women are pivotal actors in both the upstream production and downstream commercialization of agricultural commodities. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2011), women constitute approximately 43% of the agricultural labour force in developing nations; however, their contributions are frequently marginalized by systemic structural inequalities.

In the Cameroonian context, the agricultural sector is a primary engine of employment, particularly in rural zones where subsistence husbandry and small-holder farming prevail. Women are integrally involved across the agricultural value chain, performing critical tasks such as planting, weeding, harvesting, and post-harvest processing. Research indicates that women are responsible for 60-80% of food crop production in many African states (World Bank, 2012). Despite this intensive participation, they confront significant institutional bottlenecks, including restricted tenure rights to land, limited access to credit, and a lack of modern inputs and asymmetrical market information (Doss, 2018). In the Northwest Region of Cameroon, specifically the Santa Sub-Division, agriculture serves as the predominant economic driver, characterized by the cultivation of staples such as cocoyams, beans, maize, and sweet potatoes. Women in Santa navigate a dual role, blending primary production with petty commodity dynamism to bolster household resilience. The FAO (2011) posits that closing the gender gap in access to productive resources could augment agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5% to 4%. Furthermore, Kabeer (1999) highlights that economic empowerment is a prerequisite for enhancing women's agency and holistic well-being. Notwithstanding these global observations, a distinct lacuna exists in localized historiography regarding the specific contributions of women in Santa. This study addresses this gap by analyzing the evolution of female-led production and marketing to inform gender-sensitive rural development policies.

From 1986 to 2016, the engagement of women in the production and commercialization of agricultural produce in Santa was characterized by a dialectic of continuity and change, precipitated by macroeconomic reforms, evolving market linkages, and shifting socio-cultural paradigms. Women provided the essential labor for the entire crop cycle and managed specialized sectors such as market gardening and livestock husbandry (Nwana 2024).

This study examines the transformative role of women in the Santa Sub-Division, emphasizing their agency in agricultural development and allied sectors. A central thesis of this research is that women have been instrumental in the intensive cultivation of market gardening products, cereals, and tubers, notably maize, beans, and cassava, alongside livestock rearing. A key feature of their involvement is value addition; for instance, the processing of raw cassava into *garri* and waterfufu to enhance shelf-life and marketability in both domestic and cross-border circuits (Moma

2014). The following analysis first delineates the shifts in production patterns before evaluating the dynamics of female-led commercialization.

Women in the Production of Agricultural Produce in Santa

The involvement of women in food crop production shifted from a subsistence focus to a commercial orientation following the onset of the Cameroonian economic crisis in the mid-1980s. This period was marked by a drastic depreciation in the global prices of primary commodities like coffee and large-scale retrenchment in the public sector. To mitigate these exogenous shocks, women in the Northwest Region, and Santa in particular, intensified their agricultural output.

This transition signalled a fundamental shift in land-use patterns: subsistence plots were expanded, and in many instances, coffee plantations, traditionally a male-dominated cash crop, were cleared to make way for food crops with higher market liquidity. Women effectively took the vanguard of this agricultural pivot to ensure household survival (Abondeh, 2017). The following oral testimony from a local farmer encapsulates this transition from "prestige" cash crops to high-demand food crops:

I intensified the cultivation of beans and maize for commercial purposes due to the fall in coffee prices. My husband had an extensive coffee farm... When the prices fell, we faced a serious financial crisis. I convinced my husband to cut the coffee and cultivate beans. He was skeptical, thinking beans would never yield what coffee did. Together with my children, we cultivated the farms and harvested ten bags of maize and six bags of beans. That was when my husband's eyes opened. I sold the produce, paid the children's school fees, and relieved my husband of his debt (Muluh, 2024).

I intensified the cultivation of beans and maize for commercial purposes due to the fall in coffee prices. My husband had an extensive coffee farm where we used to harvest about seven to ten bags of coffee. When the prices of coffee fell, we were unable to make up for our expenses. We faced a serious financial crisis, which made me convince my husband to cut the coffee and cultivate beans on the farmland. My husband was very skeptical about it and accepted reluctantly, as he thought beans and maize would never give him what coffee did. We cut down the coffee plants and cultivated beans and maize. Together with my children, we cultivated the farms, planted them, and harvested ten bags of maize with six bags of beans. That was when my husband's eyes opened. I sold the produce and was able to pay my children's school fees and relieved my husband of his debt. Since then, I have been cultivating beans and maize extensively for commercialization (Muluh, 2024).

To encourage the production of food crops, women formed 'working bees' which were geared toward the production of food crops like Irish potatoes, beans, and maize for commercial purposes. One of such groups was the "Together We Stand" group in Akum, created in 2001. This group went around working on the farms of members. As time went on, the group developed different

strategies and objectives. The members agreed to contribute the sum of 50,000frs each to start this new project. They were ten in number, and this gave a total of 500,000frs each. They concentrated only on the production of beans and corn, as they were products that were not perishable. (Gwabee, 2024).

In most villages in Santa *Achu*, which is the staple food was derived from cocoyam. This caused many women to engage in the production of cocoyam for commercial purposes. Cocoyam was seen almost everywhere around most compounds in the subdivision. While the women concentrated on the production of cocoyam, the men took care of their bananas and plantains that grow above the cocoyam. Mono-cropping was practiced alongside the cultivation of cocoyam. Different types of cocoyam were cultivated by women in great quantities for home consumption and for commercialization (Nwana, 2024).

Corroborating this view, Bikisu noted that women produce 60-80% of the world's food, and they are inherently better stewards of the environment than men. Frequently repeated, such "truths" about women in agriculture are increasingly being debunked. The myth of the noble and responsible rural woman still permeates many development initiatives. Within this narrative, all rural women have unwittingly been appointed the caretakers of not only the household but also farms and landscapes (Bikisu, 2011).

Also, women engaged extensively in the production of cassava, a crop that is becoming a cash crop in most parts of the Bamenda Grassfields, including Santa. In places like Baligham and Pinyin, women are greatly engaged in the production and processing of cassava for commercial purposes. Cassava, which used to be cultivated alongside other crops in the same piece of land, was cultivated in a mono-cropping manner. Cassava became one of the main crops due to its high demand as it was processed into many food items like *garri*, *water fufu*, *miondo*, *acrra*, among others. Many women took part in its cultivation in Santa due to its high economic value. According to Sah Shella, she had a big cassava farm where she cultivated cassava in large quantities for sale. (Sah, 2024). In her words, she said,

I cultivate cassava extensively, and I also process it into *garri* and water fufu for sale. At first, I used to minimize cassava and often removed it from my farms as I believed it was disturbing my corn and beans from doing well. With the passage of time, the importance and impact of cassava were revealed to us. We were given different species of cassava that could mature in just a few months and be harvested. This made the cultivation of the crop very easy. We dedicated some of our farmland to the cultivation of cassava. We had a specific cassava for boiling and eating, while there was another species we used for processing (idem. 2024).

Crescence observed that the cassava sector in Cameroon, where women are primarily farmers, generates an important share of family income. According to him, women provided labour in activities such as cleaning, burning, sowing, tilling the soil, and creating mounds that house the

stem-cutting from which cassava is grown, 1st and 2nd weeding, harvesting, and processing for both household consumption and market sale. Processing begins with peeling the root, which is laborious and time-consuming. As the most reliable and major source of income for most female farmers in Bityili (Ebolowa), cassava production and processing are fast becoming an integral part of the culture of the people. It serves as the mainstay of the present-day economy of Bityili. Cassava production has employed the women, raised the income levels of the population, and changed local consumer preferences. Women's income from cassava production has an overall impact on household income. The incomes of these women have a positive and significant effect on household maintenance and feature prominently in terms of expenditures on children's education and health. It was observed that money raised from cassava production has been very instrumental in the education of children, as indicated by 80% of the respondents (Crescence, 2014). Women in market gardening in Santa will comprise the next focus area of this work.

Women in Market Gardening

Market gardening is a highly specialized form of agriculture. Evolving from subsistence farming, the practice of market gardening has been around for centuries, and over time has become an important aspect of agriculture (environmental and socio-economic). Among various economic and social benefits, market gardening has a vital and multifaceted role in providing food security, meeting the demands of consumer markets, utilizing labour, and generating income. In Cameroon, market gardening is highly practiced on the Bamboutos highlands, the slopes of Mount Cameroon, the Mungo and Benue depressions, the Foubot plains, the Bamenda highlands, with Santa subdivision inclusive. The principal crops include green beans, carrots, lettuce, cucumber, cabbage, spices, tomatoes, potatoes, and vegetables under ample precipitation conditions. Market gardening became significant in Cameroon and in North West, in the early 1990s, after the fall in prices of cash crops (coffee) in the world market (Mengdze, 2010).

In Santa Sub-Division, women played a leading role in the market gardening sector; they acted as laborers on farms and ensured the effective use of inputs and the profitable disposal of their products. Santa is well known in the Bamenda Grassfields for the cultivation of market gardening products for commercial purposes. Women cultivated extensive hectares of land where potatoes, cabbage, carrots, green spices, and huckleberries, among others, were planted. Considering that Santa is a rural area where the main occupation of the people is farming, women embraced these activities wholeheartedly, driving the growth of this sector (Keyong, 2024). The economic viability of these ventures is best illustrated by the financial records of individual practitioners. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the expenditures and revenue generated by a female farmer, Mbensen Sonia, specializing in Irish potato production.

Table 1: Analysis of Mbensen Sonia's Profits from the Cultivation of Irish Potatoes (2008–2013)

S/N	Year	Input (FCFA)	Output (FCFA)	Profit (FCFA)
1	2008	50,000	185,000	135,000
2	2009	67,000	170,000	103,000
3	2010	55,000	223,000	168,000
4	2011	105,000	357,000	252,000
5	2012	88,300	321,000	232,700
6	2013	203,500	431,350	227,850
Total		568,800	1,687,350	1,118,550

Source: Mbensen Sonia Record Book, by Khan Valorine, 23rd December 2024.

The data presented in Table 1 highlights the fluctuating yet consistently profitable nature of market gardening for women in Santa. Over the six-year period, there was a noticeable expansion in investment; for instance, input rose significantly from 50,000 FCFA in 2008 to 203,500 FCFA in 2013, indicating a shift toward larger-scale production. Despite variations in annual profit, driven by the changing costs of fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides, the total net income of 1,118,550 FCFA demonstrates that market gardening served as a reliable source of capital accumulation. The absence of losses throughout this period, even during years of high input costs, underscores the resilience of female farmers and the high market demand for Irish potatoes. This financial stability motivated practitioners like Mbensen to sustained and increase their agricultural output, further cementing women's roles as central economic actors in the Santa Sub-Division.

Beyond the financial success seen in potato farming, other women in Santa diversified their ventures into more perishable but equally lucrative vegetables. This diversification is evidenced by the experiences of other practitioners who focused on year-round production cycles. For instance, in an interview, one informant explained that she had been cultivating cabbage and huckleberries on a large scale for several years, specifically for commercial purposes. To manage this intensive production, she utilized a labor force consisting of herself and her children, whom she had "well drilled" into the rigors of farm work. Her agricultural expertise extended to variety and seasonal adaptation; she cultivated both red and white cabbage species and gained a reputation for providing huckleberries throughout the entire year. This year-round supply was made possible by her strategic use of the local environment. While the rainy season allowed flexible cultivation across various plots, the dry season necessitated a shift to river banks and areas with an abundant

water supply. Ultimately, her success reinforces a fundamental principle of market gardening in Santa: the absolute necessity of water. As Mbensen (2024) notes, the secret to the successful cultivation of these crops lies in consistent irrigation, without which the plants are bound to dry off and fail.

The reliance on seasonal water sources and traditional family labor was further augmented by the professionalization of the sector, as some women sought formal training to refined their techniques. This transition from experiential learning to technical expertise is exemplified by a graduate from the Regional School of Agriculture in Bambili. After acquiring specialized skills in market gardening, she transitioned into self-employment, engaging in the large-scale production of green spices and vegetables such as leeks, celery, parsley, beetroot, and okra (Nahouno, 2024). Her formal education provided her with a sophisticated understanding of soil fertility management, particularly the strategic application of organic fertilizers. Unlike farmers who applied general methods, she possessed a nuanced knowledge of which specific types of manure best suited different crop varieties. Reflecting on how this academic background transformed her approach to commercialization, she stated:

I was encouraged by my mother to go to the regional school of agriculture in Bambili after I completed my advanced level. I never liked the idea as I wanted to go where I would not be working on the farm. My mother told me that if I studied professional agriculture, I would benefit a lot from it. I went there just to please my mother. When I meet my age mates in school, I calm down and study. I did crop production, where I learned so much about market gardening. After my graduation, I went back to Santa and engaged massively in the production of spices and other market gardening crops, as my father had much land where I could cultivate. I also help educate other people on how to better manage their crops and the effective use of pesticides and insecticide. Also, I nursed seedlings and sold them to farmers (Idem, 2024).

Vegetables are cultivated using different methods. However, the following procedure of cultivation was common to market gardeners in the Santa subdivision. Apart from potatoes and carrots, the cultivation of vegetables in Santa subdivision usually passed through two main stages but one will be discuss (Mengdze, 2024). This stage involved the preparation of land by ploughing and applying manure organic or inorganic. Farms are cleared using cutlasses and beds are constructed using hoes. Thus, there is absence of mechanized market gardening in Santa subdivision. Most of the farms are located far away from homes. After the construction of ridges, planting, ongoing weeding and spraying with chemicals (pesticides, insecticides, and fungicides) is then followed. At this stage, farmers do not have any uniform activities on the farm; each farmer follows the growth of his crops and determines which activity to undertake. Crops are then harvested after a certain period and taken to the market for sale or home for consumption or short-

term storage, depending on the vegetable type. Crops which usually take between 1 month (huckleberry) and 4 months (cabbage, tomatoes, carrots, and potatoes) to mature. This is relatively short-term compared to cereals and cash crops, which could take from 6 months (maize) to 10+ years (cola nuts) (Idem, 2024).

In many parts of the developing world, women play an important role in agricultural production, such as, farm owners, managers, sales agents, and field workers. Too often, their role has been overlooked, resulting in reduced impact or even total failure of programs related to agricultural development. Consequently, the System must give explicit attention to the role of women wherever relevant to its work. In particular, Agricultural centers should review their programs, particularly those on farming systems, to ensure that the role of women is specifically considered and that the possibility of differential benefits to men and women is analyzed (Nwanyanwu, 2014). The study proceeds to examine women in livestock production in Santa.

Women in Livestock Production

Just like in the production of food and market gardening crops, women's activities in the livestock sector in Santa occupied a crucial slot in the economy. The women engaged massively in the keeping of livestock, and some assisted their husbands in livestock activities. In the past, livestock in Santa and in the Bamenda Grassfields was solely in the hands of men. Although the women assisted in rearing the animals, the animals were considered men's assets. With time, women started owning livestock and taking good care of them for commercial purposes. Mbororo women in Santa assisted in the rearing of cattle in diverse ways. Informants reveal that the dominant livestock in Santa in the past was goats and sheep, which were kept for commercial purposes. The Mbororo came in with their cattle, and cattle were mostly considered as Mbororo livestock until the passage of time, when community members started rearing cattle for commercialization. Women became more elastic in their activities and took up tasks that were formerly reserved to men. women reared goats, pigs, poultry, among others (Gaminse, 2024).

In an interview, Gaminse said that she started rearing goats when her husband died. According to her, her husband's main occupation was the rearing of goats for commercial purposes. They used to have about thirty goats, and her husband also bought and sold goats on market days. With the death of his husband in 2012, she continued with the activity. In her words, she postulates:

I am well known in Baligham for keeping goats; this was a business I inherited from my late husband. The business was very lucrative and greatly improved our standard of living. When my husband dies, only ten goats were left since he was sick and could not engage in the business as he used to do. In 2014, I added the goats and had about twenty-five goats in my compound. Every morning, with the assistance of my children, we carried the goats to the fields where we graze them, and we brought them back in the evening. It was tedious work keeping these goats, but the profits from the sales of the goats encouraged us (idem, 2024).

Also, Bih said that she had a poultry farm where she kept fowls for sale. According to her, she had both chicks and mature fowls in her poultry. Due to the diversification of her poultry, she built a two-room house where she operated her poultry. The corn from her farm also served to feed the fowls. She made sure the poultry farm was clean by sweeping it every morning and also making sure there was no congestion of fowls in the room. The chicks were separated from the mature fowls (Bih, 2024).

Fowls produced in her poultry farm were not only consumed in Santa but exported to other areas out of the subdivision and even out of the North West Region. Worth noting was the fact that most women in Santa were not into modern livestock keeping or rearing for commercial purposes. Most of these fowls were reared to be used by the family during traditional activities and also during death celebrations as per their culture (Ngeniform, 2025). Women in the commercialization of farm products in Santa will be the next focus.

Women in the Commercialization of Farm Products

As part of the agricultural chain, women also participated in the commercialization of farm produce. The increasing urbanization of cities in Cameroon has caused an increase in the demand for food and vegetables. In response to this urban growth, there has been a growth in vegetable production within and around Santa Sub-Division. Given that these vegetables were not only a source of livelihoods but also contain valuable nutrients like vitamins, which are highly required by the body, many women have found themselves in the trade (Nkaimo, 2025). The demand for market gardening products has been one major reason for the increasing involvement of women in market gardening in Cameroon and Santa in particular. The rapid urbanization in Santa, Bamenda, Bafousam, Douala, and Yaounde has led to the increasing nature of market gardening (Apiapuh, 2014).

Also, one of the women said that she was a very vibrant woman from Santa but settled in Bamenda. According to her, she used to buy Irish potatoes from Santa and transport them to Bamenda town, particularly in the food market, where she was known as *Mami Irish*. She had customers in the food market who always waited for her to deliver them Irish potatoes. She also owned a shop where she sold Irish potatoes in different quantities, both retail and bulk sales. She sold in three liters, five, ten, fifteen, and twenty liters and half and full bags. According to her, she also engaged and expanded the business by buying cabbage from Santa and selling it at the food market (Ntangi, 2024).

In Baligham, women processed cassava into *garri* in great quantities for sale. Baligham was well known in Santa for the production of *garri*. *Garri* had a steady market in nearly all parts of Cameroon. *Garri* produced in Baligham was transported to Bamenda, Yaoundé, Douala, Baffoussam, and other major towns in Cameroon. One of the women who was an expert in buying *garri* said that. She greatly encouraged women in her community to buy *garri* that *garri* was having a ready market in and out of Cameroon. Some of the *garri* produced in Cameroon and Santa was

transported to Chad and Equatorial Guinea. According to her, some of the women used to give her *garri* to sell, and after selling, she gave them back their money. One woman could fry about five bags of *garri* in one week (Ghemem, 2024).

Most of the women in Santa acted as roadside vendors and hawkers. They sold their agricultural products to people who traveled into and out of the North West Region since Santa Central was at the borders. Women arranged their food items, especially market gardening crops, and sold them to travelers along the roadside. Mostly women and youths were engaged in this activity. Ngong Claudia said that she reared her goats and sold them in the nearby markets, and traders and people came to her house whenever they needed goats. According to her, she had a driver who took his goats to the market every market day. In the market, she sold in large quantities to his customers who bought them from her and took them to other places outside the Santa sub-division. She went further to say that most of the time, she was forced to run around the village buying goats, and this always happens when the customers demanded more than she could provide. Many people already knew her business line and always contacted her whenever they wanted to sell their goats since she always provided a ready market for them (Ibid, 2024).

Women took part in the commercialization of livestock by-products. They sold manure, which constituted animal waste, to the farmers who used it in their farms. In this dimension, one of the women said her husband owns a pig farm. According to her, they used to have like thirty pigs, and what she did was sweeping the pig fence, gathering and drying the pigs' droppings for further sales. The selling of the waste was done by her without the interference of her husband. She used to gather the waste in bags and sold the bags at 2500 to 3000frs. She used to gather at least half a bag a day, and there was a ready demand for it due to the high engagement of the Santa people in farming activities (Ibid, 2024).

Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of the pivotal role played by women in the production and commercialization of agricultural produce within the Santa Sub-Division from 1986 to 2016. The findings underscore that women were not merely peripheral participants but the primary architects of a resilient, market-oriented agrarian economy. Their transition from subsistence-based farming to intensive commodity production acted as a vital buffer against the economic shocks of the late 20th century. This shift catalyzed a profound socio-economic transformation across Santa's communities, manifesting in enhanced household revenues, improved access to healthcare and education, and an elevated social status for women through economic empowerment.

The research further reveals that the sustainability of the agricultural sector in Santa was predicated on female-led innovation and diversification. By pivoting toward high-demand market gardening crops and value-added processing, such as transforming cassava into *garri*, women successfully navigated shifting market linkages. Furthermore, the emergence of "working bees" and

cooperative labor models demonstrated their agency in overcoming the structural and physical rigors of farming, effectively streamlining the agricultural value chain.

Recommendations

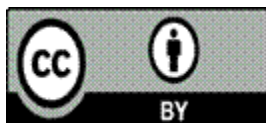
In light of these findings, this study proposes several policy interventions aimed at consolidating the socio-economic gains observed in the Santa Sub-Division and ensuring the long-term sustainability of its agrarian economy. Principally, it is recommended that the government implement gender-sensitive agricultural subsidies specifically tailored to lower production costs through the provision of improved seedlings, high-quality animal feeds, and modern inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides.

Furthermore, to mitigate rural unemployment and enhance sectoral stability, deliberate institutional support must be extended to graduates of regional agricultural schools via technical mentorship and the provision of start-up grants. Such efforts should be complemented by the enhancement of rural infrastructure and the formalization of credit facilities for female-led cooperatives, which would facilitate large-scale commercialization and minimize post-harvest losses. Ultimately, by formalizing support for these pivotal actors and integrating indigenous knowledge with scientific interventions, policymakers can foster a more resilient, inclusive, and ecologically sustainable future for Cameroon's agricultural heartland.

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