



The Buttocks of the House: Matrilineal Succession Among the Aghem of Wum, North West Cameroon – Ancestral Logic, Social Function, and the Challenge of Contemporary Reform

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ABSTRACT

The Aghem of Wum in Menchum Division are among the most ethnographically distinct groups in the Cameroon Grassfields, due in part to their long history of matrilineal succession – a method of determining descent and transferring property and leadership through the female line. The Aghem term for the matrilineage, 'seeh'ndugu', means 'buttocks of the house' – a bodily and cosmic metaphor that encapsulates the logic of the entire system. This article seeks to explain this system by exploring three interrelated questions: Why did the Aghem ancestors choose and maintain matrilineal succession despite the predominance of patrilineal logic in the greater Grassfields? What were its social, ecological, and political roles in a pre-colonial community shaped and reinforced by conquest? And today, has it become obsolete in the face of statutes, missionaries, urbanization, and the ongoing Anglophone crisis, or does it still retain some value? The author draws on records from ethnographers, colonial reports, comparative studies of kinship in the Grassfields, and new empirical social surveys to argue that Aghem matrilineality was not a random choice, nor was it necessarily old-fashioned, but rather an intelligent coping strategy for life on the highlands frontier that remains relevant today, although its practice requires community-based adaptation.

Introduction: the buttocks of the house

An elderly man in Aghem-Wum can name his grandfather's grandfather, not through the grandfather's son or the grandfather himself, but through the grandfather's sister. He traces a line of belonging that extends back five or six generations, running not through fathers and sons but through mothers, their brothers, and their sisters' children. When asked why the line runs this way, he does not refer to policy or abstract tradition. He simply says, "All people come out from there."

This image of bodily origin, of the mother as the ground from which personhood grows, lies at the heart of the Aghem concept of *seeh'ndugu*: the matrilineage, named for the buttocks, the house, the generative seat from which all life proceeds. It is both a biological metaphor and a cosmological claim. Identity, property, and authority flow from the place of origin; the place of origin is the mother's body, the mother's line, the mother's house. Chilver and Kaberry (1967:74), in their foundational ethnographic survey of the Bamenda Grassfields, recorded that *seeh'ndugu* is closely related to *sa'endo* in Kom and *sasseendee* in Fungom village, all deriving from words for "buttocks" and "house" – a shared conceptual heritage linking the Aghem to their Tikar-related neighbors across the region.

The Aghem, also known historically as the Wum – a name that appears throughout British colonial

government reports – are the dominant inhabitants of Wum Subdivision in Menchum Division, North West Region of Cameroon. They are a migrant people. Their oral tradition records origins in Munshi or Munchi land (the territory of the Tiv in present-day Benue State, Nigeria), a passage through Esu in Fungom, and eventual settlement on the Wum tableland, about 4,000 feet above sea level. Kopytoff (1981), in his analysis of Aghem ethnogenesis within the wider Grassfields ecumene, showed that this migration history shaped not only genealogical legend but also the specific social architecture the Aghem built in their new environment. Migrants constructing political authority without autochthonous territorial roots needed social technologies capable of binding people together, ensuring leadership continuity, and resisting fragmentation. Matrilineal descent was one of these technologies, arguably the most fundamental.

At the heart of Aghem social organization is a system of tracing kinship, transmitting property, and legitimating political authority through the female line. Most chiefdoms in the wider Cameroon Grassfields operate on patrilineal or dual-descent principles, which makes the Aghem, alongside the neighboring Kom people and five Fungom villages of the North-Western Federation, a distinctly positioned minority (Vubo 2005). How deeply embedded is this minority position? The story handed down by oral tradition has it that a nephew of the Fon of Zonghokwo would not agree to his uncle's instruction to go to a neighboring village to fetch for a dog necessary for the preparation of medicine for the ailing Fon. His cousin, a son of the Fon, seeing the deteriorating condition of his father, agreed to perform the errand in place of his nephew. As the Fon lay dying, he decided to pass on his signs of office – the buffalo horn known as the *sughu* – to his sons rather than to his nephews. The son who had exhibited this concern was named Mih and that is the origin of the title of *Mihsughu* for the clan of the paramountcy at Aghem. The nephews were extremely disappointed with this apparent act of betrayal, left their uncle's compound and went to establish a separate Fandom at Maagha considered by many, to be more spiritually powerful than the father's compound at Zonghokwo. The *Dengkeghem* is a recent addition to titles of leadership and is mostly a creation of educated elites to consolidate power at Zonghokwo; the truth is that *Dengkeghem* holds merely a *primus inter pares* position among the other Fons and chiefs and in reality the internal governance and affairs of the neighboring villages hold nothing of significance for it. Not one other village followed his lead (Chilver and Kaberry 1967). The rupture was noted; the tradition held.

The author of this article is from Wum town, at the heart of the Aghem clan, and writes not only as a scholar but also as a member of a family in which matrilineal succession has been practiced within living memory. That proximity shapes the questions asked here and the seriousness with which they are pursued. It is one thing to read about the *seeh'ëndugu* in an ethnographic monograph; it is another to have grown up within it.

Three interconnected questions drive this article. First, why did the Aghem ancestors adopt and sustain a matrilineal system across generations of migration, conquest, colonial encounter, and missionary pressure? Second, what specific social and political functions did the system serve in its pre-colonial context? Third, does matrilineal succession still serve a purpose today, with Cameroonian statutory law, a monetized economy, urbanization, Christian mission influence, and the Anglophone crisis all affecting Wum? These are not merely theoretical questions. As Pemunta (2017) has documented for Cameroonian women more broadly, the relationship between customary property norms and women's material welfare is among the most consequential governance issues in the country's rural areas. The answers reach into the daily lives of widows whose late husbands' families claim compounds their children will never see (Besin-Mengla 2024; Women's eNews 2012), of young men torn between obligations to maternal uncles and to their own children, and of community institutions – Fons, chiefs, women's associations, diaspora bodies – caught between customary legitimacy and the statutory framework of the modern state.

The Aghem in history: migration, conquest, and social architecture

To understand Aghem matriliney, one must begin with the conditions under which Aghem society was formed. Kopytoff's (1981, 1987) broader theory of African frontier societies is illuminating here.

He argued that migrant communities establishing themselves in new territories faced a distinctive political problem: how to build authority and social cohesion without the deep territorial roots enjoyed by autochthonous peoples. The Aghem, who arrived on a highland plateau above the forested valleys of the Menchum River, were precisely such a community. Their social structure – the 14 villages under the paramount Fon, the fons, the age-grade and regulatory secret societies, and the ancestral skull cults – was constructed in response to the specific demands of frontier life. The matrilineal principle was not just one feature among many; it was the structural spine.

Before the arrival of German colonial forces at the end of the nineteenth century, the Aghem had established a role in the North West Region comparable to that of Bali in the South West: an expansionist polity that subdued neighboring forest peoples, including the Befang and the Esimbi (Chilver and Kaberry 1967). Unlike Bali, however, they did not develop a highly centralized system of government. Political life was organized around the lineage as the primary unit of land tenure, labor exchange, and loyalty, and the lineage, crucially, ran through the mother.

Ngolim's (2015) study of cultural boundary dynamics between the Aghem and the Mbororo Fulani in Menchum from 1950 to 2013 reveals a dimension of this structure that earlier ethnographic surveys could not fully anticipate: how deeply the Aghem self-understanding as "host" and "custodians of the land" is rooted in matrilineal logic. Land is held in trust for the lineage, not owned by individuals, and custodianship passes through the *seehëndugu*. To understand who has rights in Aghem Wum is, above all, to understand who belongs to which matrilineage.

By the time colonial administrators arrived in the early twentieth century, this system was already established. The villages, the paramount Fon, and the interlocking institutions of age-grade, secret society, and skull cult constituted an integrated social world developed over generations. Goheen's (1996) broader study of gender and power in the Cameroon Grassfields makes clear that this institutional world was never politically neutral. It encoded assumptions about who produced, who protected, and who transmitted the community's essential resources. The matrilineal principle did not merely reflect those assumptions; it gave them structural expression, anchoring them in the most visible and verifiable of social facts: the identity of the mother.

Why the mother-line? The logic of the Aghem ancestors.

Why do some societies trace descent through the mother rather than the father? This question has occupied anthropologists since Richards's (1950) landmark essay in Radcliffe-Brown and Forde's *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* introduced the concept of the "matrilineal puzzle." Subsequent scholarship, such as Schneider and Gough's (1961) *Matrilineal Kinship*, Douglas's (1969) provocative "*Is Matriliney Doomed in Africa?*," and Peters's (1997) revisitation of the puzzle, has refined and in several respects overturned the early structural-functionalist answers, moving toward more contextual, historically grounded accounts of how and why matrilineal systems emerge and endure (Johnson 2017). The following discussion draws on that literature and applies it directly to the Aghem case.

Certainty of maternity as a social foundation

The most basic explanation begins with biology, or more specifically, with the differing social certainty of biological parenthood. In virtually any human community, a child's mother is a nearly incontrovertible social fact. The identity of the biological father is always, to some extent, a matter of social inference (Richards 1950; Schneider 1961). A kinship system based on the maternal line therefore rests on verifiable ground in a way that patrilineal descent does not. For the Aghem, a migrant people establishing political authority without the genealogical depth of indigenous communities, this was crucial. Lineage membership needed to be unambiguous. The matrilineage, grounded in the certainty of maternal connection, provided exactly that foundation.

Recent economic history offers unexpected empirical support for this theoretical claim. Lowes (2022), using a geographic regression discontinuity design along the African matrilineal belt, finds that matrilineal kinship produces measurable effects on household cooperation and intergenerational resource allocation – effects that persist long after the original conditions that created the system have disappeared. Nathan and Voth (2024), examining the relationship between the Atlantic slave trade and the origins of matrilineal kinship across sub-Saharan Africa, argue that matrilineality emerged, in significant part, as an adaptive response to demographic vulnerability in which paternal identity could not be reliably assumed. The Aghem frontier context shares enough structural features with these conditions to suggest that the Aghem choice was part of a broader adaptive logic – not a local peculiarity, but a historically intelligible response to recognizable challenges.

Women's agricultural centrality and the economic logic of matriliney

There is a longstanding empirical observation in the comparative literature: matrilineal descent tends to be associated with agricultural societies in which women are the primary producers of subsistence crops (Douglas 1969; Peters 1997; Lowes 2022). Among the Aghem, as in most Grassfields communities, women are the primary cultivators of food crops. They work the farms, manage the food supply, and sustain the backbone of local subsistence economies. Kaberry's (1952) ethnographic study, *Women of the Grassfields*, documented the centrality of women's agricultural work across the North West Region – its relationship to social authority, its daily rhythms, and its political significance – with a rigor that later scholarship has extended but not displaced. Goheen's (1996) study of the Nso' chiefdom captured the dynamic with characteristic directness: "men may own the land, but women control the crops through their labour." The same formulation applies to Aghem.

A system that places the transmission of productive resources in the hands of those whose labor generates them is not merely a cultural arrangement; it is an economic one. It aligns social structure with productive reality. It grounds moral claims to land in the observable fact of who works it. When the Aghem ancestors established matrilineal succession, they encoded in social structure a recognition that women's labor was the foundation of community survival. Recent continental data reinforce this point: African women produce approximately sixty percent of the continent's staple food while owning only a fraction of its registered land (World Rainforest Movement 2016).

The cultural evidence from Aghem society is equally significant. Women have historically exercised authority far beyond what a strictly patriarchal interpretation would suggest. Organized groups of women could scatter elephant grass across a man's compound and refuse to remove it until he fulfilled his obligations. In documented cases, collective female action succeeded in expelling a community and village leader who had violated cultural norms (Thormoset 2000). The institution of the Nahtum, or queen mothers, gave senior women formal roles in village governance. These are not isolated incidents; they are the institutional remnants of a social order in which the female line and female productive agency occupied a central structural role.

Political stability and the prevention of dynastic fragmentation

A third explanatory strand addresses the problem of political succession in polygynous societies. In patrilineal systems, all of a ruler's sons are potential heirs. When a chief or king has wives from multiple lineages, as was common among Grassfields rulers, this could lead to ruinous factional conflict, civil war, or the permanent division of a chieftaincy into competing successor units. Matrilineal succession avoids this problem by transmitting authority not to a man's sons but to his brothers or his sister's sons – members of his own matrilineage. Leadership thus remains within a bounded descent group (Richards 1950; Schneider and Gough 1961; Schlegel 1972).

For the Aghem, who expanded through conquest and needed to maintain a diverse highland polity against powerful neighbors, this anti-fragmentation function was indispensable rather than incidental. The matrilineal principle kept the authority of the Fons and chiefs vested in defined descent groups, rather than

dispersed among the offspring of multiple wives from competing lineages. The most striking evidence of the system's perceived superiority is its near-universality: across all the villages in Aghem, only a single Fondom ever broke with the tradition, and his experiment attracted no imitators (Chilver and Kaberry 1967).

Vubo's (2005) analysis of the Cameroon Grassfields provides a regional context for this observation. His work on Ring Group communities shows that the Aghem and their matrilineal neighbors maintain what he calls a "cohabitation equilibrium" between matrilineal and patrilineal principles – a dynamic accommodation that serves both social solidarity and political stability. Goheen (1996) makes a related argument for the Nso' chiefdom, where the interplay between women's reproductive labor and male political authority produced a system of gender relations that was both exploitative and stabilizing. Neither arrangement was accidental.

Spiritual continuity and the ancestral skull cult

None of the preceding explanations is fully intelligible without reference to the Aghem spiritual world. The skull cult is central. Skulls of deceased lineage members are held by the eldest living male of each lineage group, and all members of the lineage share a relationship with the same ancestral remains, recognizing them as the spiritual foundation of their collective identity (Chilver and Kaberry 1967). The matrilineage is the unit within which this cult is organized, performed, and transmitted across generations.

This means that the integrity of the *seeh'ëndugu* is not merely a social convenience but a spiritual necessity. To belong to the lineage is to share its ancestors. To break the lineage line is to risk severing that connection and forfeiting the protection it confers. The Aghem commitment to matrilineal succession is, in this light, both a social choice and a theological imperative – a point that has been relatively undertheorized in the broader anthropological literature on African matriliney (Richards 1950; Douglas 1969). Thormoset (2000) is among the few scholars to treat it with the seriousness it deserves, noting in her cultural ethnography that the intersection of ancestral spirituality and material social organization runs through virtually every dimension of Aghem life, from birth to farming, to dispute resolution, and to death (Table 1).

How matrilineal succession worked in practice: The Aghem model

Abstract principle and lived reality are not always the same. The *seeh'ëndugu* organized residence, labor, inheritance, marriage, and political authority simultaneously, but in ways that have consistently confused outsiders, who tend to conflate matrilineal descent with matriarchal governance (Richards 1950; Johnson 2017). This confusion is understandable, and clarifying it is essential.

Matrilineal descent and matriarchal rule are not the same. The Aghem system is matrilineal: descent, inheritance, and succession flow through the female line. It is not matriarchal; authority is exercised by men, specifically by the senior men of the matrilineage, above all the mother's brother. Schneider (1961:3) put it plainly: "You are related to both male and female kin, but matrilineal kinship only continues through females." The maternal uncle, not the biological father, is the axis of male authority. Goody's (1959) analysis of the mother's brother in West African social organization remains useful here: the authority of the avunculate is not patriarchal by another name but a structurally distinct form of relational governance, one in which power derives from matrilineal membership rather than individual ownership.

What happens when a man dies? His property does not pass to his sons. His sons belong to their mother's lineage, not his. His estate passes to his brothers or, in the next generation, to his sister's sons. Residential arrangements reflected this logic flexibly rather than rigidly. Colonial-era surveys found that many men in the matrilineal Aghem, after marriage, chose to reside with their fathers, with in-laws, or with friends, waiting, so to speak, until the time came to inherit the maternal uncle's compound. A survey of thirty-three male householders in Zongefu Village found only six living near a mother's brother, while fourteen lived near their fathers (Chilver and Kaberry 1967:76). Peters (1997) and Vubo (2005) have identified this pattern – pragmatic individual strategies operating within a matrilineal structural

framework – as characteristic of Grassfields matrilineal communities generally.

The lineage head performed sacrifices, maintained the skull cult, and held the right to a portion of game hunted by lineage members. He was consulted on marriage negotiations, though without the absolute authority over bridewealth found among some Tikar counterparts (Chilver and Kaberry 1967). The exogamous unit was a lineage roughly four generations deep. Most striking, perhaps, is the right that women held in this system: a woman could veto the marriage of her own daughter. It is a detail easy to overlook, but Kaberry (1952) rightly emphasized it as characteristic of the broader region's gender dynamics – a small window onto a social order in which female agency was structurally embedded, even where formal authority remained with male elders.

The author observed this logic at work in his own family in Wum town. When his father died, it was not the children of the deceased who inherited the compound, the farmland, the personal property, or the community role their father had held. These passed, as custom required and as the family fully expected, to his father's nephew – a son of his father's sister – the rightful matrilineal heir. What is perhaps most telling about that succession is not what happened, but how it happened: without drama, without dispute, and without any sense that an injustice had been done. The children of the deceased had grown up knowing how the system worked. The nephew understood his responsibilities. The wider family recognized the arrangement as entirely proper. It was, in the words of those present, simply the custom – the *seeh'endugu* – operating as it always had. That quiet, unremarkable acceptance is itself a form of ethnographic evidence; it speaks more directly to the system's living coherence than any colonial administrative record.

Aghem matrilineality in regional and comparative context

The Aghem are not isolated. Their matrilineal system is part of a distinctive sub-cluster within the otherwise predominantly patrilineal Cameroon Grassfields, and comparing it with others clarifies both its uniqueness and its underlying logic. Vubo's (2005) analysis of Ring Group Grassfield Bantu speakers shows that matriliney and patriliney in this region coexist in a "cohabitation equilibrium" rather than as mutually exclusive alternatives. Table 2 places the Aghem within this framework (Table 2).

The Laimbwe case, documented in Kah's (2015) monograph, is particularly instructive. The Laimbwe matrilineal system survived explicit rejection by both colonial administrators and Christian missionaries, who regarded it as incompatible with European norms of patriarchal family structure. Its survival is a testament to something important: the persistence of Aghem matriliney is not passive inertia but the result of active community choices, generation after generation, to sustain a social architecture perceived as genuinely worth maintaining.

The empirical comparison between Kom and Oku widows in Tambo's (2021) study of climate vulnerability in the Bamenda Highlands complicates any assumption that matrilineal systems straightforwardly benefit women. Tambo found that widows in the matrilineal Kom community were, in practice, more constrained in their access to land than widows in patrilineal Oku. This uncomfortable finding deserves to be taken seriously rather than explained away. It reveals not that the internal logic of matriliney is flawed, but that the gap between that logic and its implementation in contemporary practice can be considerable. Pemunta's (2017) broader documentation of women's property exclusion across Cameroon confirms that neither matrilineal nor patrilineal communities have resolved the tension between customary inheritance norms and gender equity.

The system under pressure, statutory law, widows, and modernity

Statutory law and the inheritance gap

Cameroon's bi-jural legal system, shaped by both French civil law and English common law traditions, does not recognize matrilineal succession as the default rule of inheritance. Family law provisions assume

nuclear-family inheritance, with the deceased's spouse and children as the primary beneficiaries (Njieassam 2019; Besin-Mengla 2024). When a man dies in Aghem, his statutory legal heirs are his wife and children. If a matrilineal elder then asserts that the compound and farmland properly belong to the deceased's sister's son, he is making a claim that courts applying national law may simply refuse to uphold.

Besin-Mengla's (2024) sociological study sets out the consequences in unsparing detail: widows dispossessed by their late husbands' maternal relatives, children growing up in homes that will eventually pass to an uncle they barely know, and men who deliberately avoid accumulating property because they know it will bypass their immediate families at death. The study concludes that direct matrilineal succession, in its current unreformed practice, discourages economic investment and contributes to intergenerational poverty in affected communities. That is a serious charge, and appeals to cultural heritage alone cannot answer it.

The Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) has specifically flagged the disjuncture between Cameroon's proposed Code of Persons and the Family and existing customary inheritance practices, calling on lawmakers to ensure that widows receive legally protected inheritance rights rather than remaining dependent on the goodwill of matrilineal relatives (CHRDA, as cited in Land Portal 2021). The World Rainforest Movement's (2016) overview of women's property rights in Cameroon documents how the coexistence of customary and statutory law creates a "problematic and unresolved" situation for rural women. The 1974 land ordinance, which makes registration the only legally recognized proof of ownership, is particularly punishing for communities where land has always been held customarily rather than individually registered.

The matrilineal puzzle revisited, women's position in practice

Richards's (1950:246) original formulation of the matrilineal puzzle identified a structural tension at the heart of such systems: "men are torn between their roles as fathers and as mothers' brothers," a tension that structurally disadvantages the nuclear family in favor of the wider matrilineage. Johnson's (2017) reassessment in the *Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology* is more pointed. He argues that all three dominant anthropological understandings of matriliney – that it is an alternative configuration of male authority, that it is inherently puzzling, and that it is inevitably doomed by modernity – rest on unfounded gender-biased assumptions. The present article accepts that critique. It does not, however, follow from Johnson's theoretical argument that the empirical findings from Cameroonian communities can simply be set aside.

The Kom–Oku comparison (Tambo 2021) is again instructive. The problem it exposes is not that matriliney is inherently bad for women; in principle, the logic runs the other way. The problem is that its implementation in the Bamenda Highlands, without adequate protections for the nuclear family, produces outcomes for widows that are measurably worse than those produced by the local patrilineal alternative. Lowes's (2022) econometric work points to the same conclusion from a different angle: matrilineal kinship produces distinct effects on intra-household cooperation, effects that can be either enabling or constraining depending on the institutional context in which the system operates. Context, in other words, is everything.

Christianity, urbanisation, and the nuclear family ideal

The Basel Mission arrived in the North West Region with a clear agenda. Catholic and Presbyterian churches followed, sharing similar preferences for patrilineal, nuclear-family-oriented social structures, with the husband-wife-children unit at the center of social life and the lineage displaced as the primary unit of obligation (Kah 2015; Njieassam 2019). Colonial administrators also shared these preferences, finding matrilineal land tenure arrangements administratively awkward and intellectually suspect. Goheen (1996) documented the consequences for the Nso' chiefdom: the colonial encounter systematically privileged male land rights in ways that eroded pre-existing female authority, without providing women with equivalent statutory protections in return. The loss was real; the compensation never arrived.

Education and urbanization reinforced these pressures. Aghem men who moved to Bamenda, Yaoundé,

or Douala found themselves in environments where matrilineal obligations could feel like extraction – demands made by relatives they barely knew, on property they had worked hard to accumulate. Gough's (1961) prediction that modernization would erode matrilineal descent groups was shaped by this reality. However, the Aghem and Laimbwe evidence reveals something more complex than simple disintegration. Vubo (2005:180) describes it well: "the drift towards patrilineal practices does not imply a change of system but implies adaptations that leave the system intact." The matrilineage persists as the framework of ritual obligation, land tenure, and community identity, even as individual practices shift in ways that would be unrecognizable to pre-colonial Aghem society. This is not a collapse; it is a transformation.

Is matrilineal succession still relevant? A critical assessment

The question of relevance requires precision. It concerns not the system as an abstract cultural form, but the specific functions it performs and the institutional arrangements through which those functions are currently expressed. Not every function remains equally relevant in the twenty-first century, and not every institutional arrangement is worth preserving unchanged.

Personal observation reinforces this point. Growing up in Wum, the author saw the matrilineal network functioning not as an abstract principle, but as a daily social reality: the practical obligations between lineage members at funerals and celebrations, the quiet authority of the maternal uncle in family deliberations, and the taken-for-granted understanding, shared across generations, that the *seeh'endugu* was the primary framework within which belonging was defined and duties were owed. These arrangements do not survive by inertia; they persist because people find them genuinely useful.

What remains genuinely valuable

First, consider the community solidarity function: the creation of binding mutual-obligation networks that extend beyond the nuclear family. In a region where the state has consistently failed to provide adequate social safety nets, and where the Anglophone crisis since 2016 has further eroded the institutional infrastructure of communities, such networks are enormously important. Fonjong, Fombe, and Sama-Lang (2013) show that women in Anglophone Cameroon continue to play significant productive roles in rural economies precisely through the kinds of collective and kin-based arrangements that matrilineal social structures support. When an Aghem man loses his livelihood, the matrilineal kin network – lineage members who share the same skull cult, who have obligations to contribute to each other's bride wealth, and who are bound by the logic of the *seeh'endugu* – remains, in many community settings, the most reliable source of support.

The spiritual and cultural continuity function is equally enduring. Kah's (2015) documentation of Laimbwe matriliney surviving decades of colonial disapproval and missionary pressure through active community commitment, not passive inertia, speaks directly to what happens when a community truly values what it has inherited. The Aghem skull cults and the ritual practices of the lineage head are not relics of a vanished world; they are living dimensions of a community's understanding of itself.

There is also the recognition of women's centrality, structurally encoded in matrilineal logic even when not always realized in contemporary practice. In a context where women remain the primary food-crop cultivators, the principal managers of household food security, and the backbone of rural economies (Kaberry 1952; Fonjong *et al.* 2013; Njieassam 2019), a kinship system that, at its structural core, acknowledges the female line as the foundation of community life has a cultural logic better aligned with economic reality than any system that places productive land primarily in male hands.

What requires reform

The case for reform is as clear as the case for retention. What the system urgently needs is not abolition but targeted reform – specifically, legal and community-level protections for widows and children that prevent dispossession while preserving the lineage as a cultural, spiritual, and mutual-support institution.

Besin-Mengla (2024), Njieassam (2019), and Fonjong *et al.* (2013) each reach this conclusion independently from different disciplinary perspectives. They argue that hybrid frameworks can grant the nuclear family legally protected rights to property accumulated during the marriage without dismantling the lineage as a social institution. This is not a contradiction but a practical synthesis.

The anthropological literature provides historical precedent. Peters (1997) demonstrated that African matrilineal systems have always been more flexible than structuralist typologies suggest. Holy's (1986) detailed study of the Toka of Zambia showed that matrilineal societies possess internal mechanisms for adaptation, which structuralist frameworks consistently underestimate. Vubo (2005) showed that the Grassfields cohabitation equilibrium already involves dynamic household-level negotiation between matrilineal and patrilineal principles. Formalizing widows' and children's rights within the matrilineal framework would not betray the system's logic; it would apply that logic to conditions the ancestors did not live to see.

The Aghem community has the institutional capacity for this kind of deliberation. The Aghem Cultural and Development Association (ACADA) and the Aghem Language Development Committee (ALDEC) bring together village elders, the urban diaspora, women's groups, and educated professionals – precisely the multi-stakeholder forum in which cultural reform can be negotiated with genuine legitimacy (Thormoset 2000). The Aghem Paramouncy's decision to practice patrilineal succession at his own palace, securing his sons' inheritance through private choice rather than community deliberation, is a cautionary example of what happens when reform is unilateral rather than collective (Cameroon-Tribune 2017). The community as a whole can do better.

Theoretical contributions: what Aghem Matrilineality teaches us about family lineage.

Three broader theoretical contributions emerge from this analysis.

The Aghem case challenges evolutionary assumptions about kinship transition. From Morgan (1877) through Bachofen (1861), the early anthropological tradition treated matriliney as a "primitive" stage that societies naturally moved beyond on their way to patrilineal structures (Richards 1950; Johnson 2017). The Aghem evidence clarifies why that framework fails. Matrilineality was not a failed patriarchy waiting to be corrected; it was a sophisticated adaptive response to conditions that made it the rational choice. Johnson (2017) articulates the theoretical point well: the direction of kinship change "could be carried out in both directions depending on various external and internal factors." Nathan and Voth's (2024) finding that matrilineal kinship emerged partly in response to specific demographic shocks – conditions not unlike those of the Aghem frontier – provides empirical support for that argument.

The case also contributes to the reassessment of the matrilineal puzzle. Richards's (1950) original formulation asked how men can exercise authority in a system where women are the structural center of descent. The Aghem case resolves that puzzle not by accepting the paradox but by reframing the question. The mother's brother exercises authority precisely because his authority is constituted through his matrilineal membership, which passes through his sister. Power in this system derives from connection rather than individual ownership – a fundamentally different model from both patriarchal and matriarchal governance. Johnson (2017) argues that the puzzle was always puzzling mainly because of "the privileging of the male" in structural-functionalist theory, rather than any genuine incoherence in the matrilineal model. Goody's (1959) analysis of the avunculate shows why that authority is internally coherent rather than paradoxical.

Finally, the case advances the debate on matrilineal persistence under modernization. Gough (1961) predicted gradual disintegration under modern economic pressures. The Aghem and Laimbwe evidence presents a more differentiated picture: selective hybridization, functional reorientation, and community-driven adaptation, not simple collapse (Kah 2015; Vubo 2005). Holy's (1986) Toka study showed that

internal flexibility, not external pressure, is typically the mechanism through which matrilineal systems survive modernization. The Aghem case adds a specifically Grassfields dimension to that global debate and suggests that the conditions for meaningful community-led reform are available even in one of the region's most severely disrupted sociopolitical environments.

Conclusion: the buttocks of the house are still standing

There is a reason the Aghem ancestors chose the word they did. The buttocks are not the most visible part of the body. They are not the head, the face, or the hands. But they are the foundation; they bear weight, keep the person grounded, and make both rest and movement possible. Without them, neither stability nor motion is secure.

The *seeh'ëndugu*, the matrilineage – the buttocks of the house – has carried the weight of Aghem social life across generations. It held communities together through migration from Munshi, the conquest of the Befang and Esimbi, colonial administrative pressure, missionary disapproval, postcolonial disruption, urbanization, and now the violence of the Anglophone crisis. It did so because it rested on genuine social logic: the verifiable certainty of maternal connection (Kopytoff 1981; Lowes 2022); the recognition of women's agricultural labor as the economic foundation of community survival (Kaberry 1952; Goheen 1996); the stabilizing function of keeping political authority within bounded descent groups (Vubo 2005); and the requirement of spiritual continuity with the skull-cult ancestors (Thormoset 2000).

To ask whether this system is still relevant is, in part, to ask whether any of those foundations have crumbled. They have not, though the conditions under which they must operate have changed enormously. Women in Wum remain the primary cultivators of food crops. The need for solidarity networks beyond the nuclear family is, if anything, more acute in a conflict-affected region than in peacetime (Fonjong *et al.* 2013). The spiritual relationship with lineage ancestors is a living dimension of Aghem identity, not a museum exhibit.

What has changed are the surrounding conditions: a statutory legal framework that gives widows and children rights the matrilineal system does not always protect; a monetized economy in which men accumulate property that traditional inheritance rules were never designed to handle; the dispersal of community members to cities where lineage obligations can feel like extraction; and the demographic rupture of the Anglophone crisis. These changes call not for the abolition of matrilineal succession but for its reform – a community-led deliberation, drawing on ACADA, ALDEC, women's associations, and traditional governance, asking honestly what the ancestors were protecting and how best to protect it now.

The ancestors had a reason. They built a matrilineal system because it served the community they were making: a migrant people on a high plateau, forging political coherence from scratch, encoding the centrality of women's labor, maintaining connection with the dead, and keeping authority from fragmenting into dynasties of competing sons. None of those purposes is obsolete. The house still stands. The buttocks still hold. It is the people of Aghem, with their long institutional memory and living cultural associations, who are best placed to carry it forward.

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Tables

Table 1: *Ancestral rationales for Aghem matrilineal succession, a synthesis*

Rationale	Mechanism	Aghem evidence	Key sources
Certainty of maternity	Lineage is built on a verifiable maternal connection rather than a social inference of paternity	The migrant community needs an unambiguous lineage membership in the new highland territory	Kopytoff (1981); Chilver and Kaberry (1967)
Women's agricultural centrality	Property passes through those who produce with it; social structure is aligned with economic reality	Women as primary food-crop cultivators; Nahtum authority; collective female protest power	Kaberry (1952); Goheen (1996); Thormoset (2000)
Political stability / anti-fragmentation	Succession stays within the matrilineage; it prevents rivalry among sons of polygynous rulers	Ten sections maintained matrilineal succession; only one Batum defected and attracted no imitators	Chilver and Kaberry (1967); Vubo (2005)
Ancestral spiritual continuity	Matrilineage is the ritual unit of the skull cult; maintaining the line preserves the ancestor relationship	Skull cults held within matrilineage; <i>seeh'endugu</i> as cosmological foundation of Aghem identity	Chilver and Kaberry (1967); Thormoset (2000)
Social solidarity and mutual obligation	Creates binding support networks between maternal kin across generations	Lineage head as mentor and ritual specialist; mutual labour obligations; advisory function in marriage decisions	Kopytoff (1981); Vubo (2005)

Source: Author's synthesis based on Chilver and Kaberry (1967); Kopytoff (1981); Kaberry (1952); Goheen (1996); Thormoset (2000); Vubo (2005); Richards (1950).

Table 2: *Descent systems in selected North West Region communities*

Community	Descent system	Key feature	Women's position	Source
Aghem (Wum)	Matrilineal	<i>seeh'endugu</i> ; sister's son inherits; skull cult within lineage	Veto over daughter's marriage; Nahtum; collective protest authority	Chilver and Kaberry (1967); Thormoset (2000)
Kom	Matrilineal	<i>sa'endo</i> lineage; parallel to Aghem	Widows found to be more resource-constrained than patrilineal Oku widows in an empirical study	Chilver and Kaberry (1967); Tambo (2021)
Oku (Nso area)	Patrilineal	Son inherits from father	Widows empirically found to have more land autonomy than Kom widows	Tambo (2021)
Laimbwe (Menchum)	Matrilineal	Sacred forest; <i>isaa'enduoh</i> lineage; survived colonial and missionary pressure	Women central to lineage identity	Kah (2015)
Nso' (Bui)	Patrilineal / dual	Women control crops; men own land; Fon's female court is central	Significant ritual and economic agency alongside formal male dominance	Goheen (1996); Kaberry (1952)
Bamileke (West Region)	Dual descent	Patrilineal for land/titles; matrilineal for movable property	Heiresses and heirs both recognized; a complex dual-track system	Vubo (2005)

Note: The Aghem Paramountcy practises patrilineal succession at the palace level, a noted anomaly in a predominantly matrilineal clan (Cameroon-Tribune 2017).