

# **New family ties in a diaspora context: the case of Cameroonian migration in Italy**

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## ***Introduction***

This paper will analyse what is going on about the concepts of family among Cameroonians of diaspora in Italy. How is the composition of Cameroonian migrated families changed according to the traditional patterns? How do culture and ethnicity affect people's relationships? How have gender roles changed among migrants? How are these changes felt within the couples and the communities of migrants? How are these new families considered by relatives in Cameroon? How are relationships between families of origin and new families for migrants?

During a meeting organized by the association of Cameroonians in Varese, a small town in the North Italy, I met some Cameroonian migrants and their families. It struck me that families are composed by Cameroonians only: there were not any Italians. I was talking with people in their thirties, who have lived in Italy for the last ten years, studying in Italian universities and working with Italian colleagues, but without having a deep relationship with them.

The few who have had relationships with Italians told me they had been unsuccessful. One of my informants, a twenty-eight-year-old engineer who had broken up with his Italian boyfriend after a eight-year love-story, explained: "*When you love someone, maybe you do not agree, but you understand him. He can understand you, as well, but you cannot expect his friends and his parents will do*". Relationships with Italian partners and their family represent a great problem for Cameroonians, and in fact they prefer not to marry Italians. For example, there are only two mixed couples out of the forty adults of the Cameroonian community in Varese.

Nevertheless, Cameroonians have the same problems also with partners coming from other Cameroonian ethnic groups: in fact, families in Cameroon would prefer a marriage within the same ethnic group. Kinship pressure from relatives in Cameroon can become stronger and stronger as far as the relationship goes on: a Bamileké<sup>1</sup> informant, who was engaged to a Beti<sup>2</sup> young man, has

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<sup>1</sup> Bamileké are the most important Francophone Grassfields ethnic group. They live in the West Province, around Bafoussam. They are known all over the Cameroon for their entrepreneurial skills. For this reason, a lot of Bamileké families live in Douala, the economical capital of Cameroon.

received more than five phone calls in a day from all her relatives in Cameroon, when they had known about the person she was going out with.

A marriage with an Italian is complicated but a marriage with a Cameroonian from a different ethnic group can be even more complicated. It seems the main problem about relationships of Cameroonians is not a cultural question but a familiar one. Family is the main issue which has changed by migration. Different economic conditions and a different life-style according to Cameroonian standards have changed the composition of the migrated Cameroonian families, the relationships between husband and wife and the masculine and feminine perspective about gender roles. All these changes are not always welcome by families in Cameroon. Notwithstanding the geographical distance, at certain times parents and relatives' opinion can deeply affect the life of a couple.

### *Methodology research*

This is a multisituated research and it has developed both in Bamenda (NW Cameroon), a town in the Anglophone Grassfields, for three months (end of 2002), and in a small Italian town in the Northern part of the country, Varese, for one year (2005). Field experience in Bamenda has been useful to observe the daily life of Cameroonian families. I have analysed men's and women's concepts of male and female duties through direct interviews and informal speeches as well as participating observation.

Archives data have been great part of my research, especially about Varese community. In fact there are no studies about Cameroonian migration in Italy. Archives' data helped me to know the history of Cameroonian community in Varese and in Italy in general.

Both towns of my field-research, Bamenda and Varese, are not linked by a migration flux from Cameroon. It is not easy finding an unitary migration movement from Cameroon towards the same towns or regions in Europe, because it is directed by study reasons and not by familiar or work reasons. But to understand completely Cameroonian migration we should surpass individual choices of migration to consider both Italian and Cameroonian backgrounds that lead to migration movements.

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<sup>2</sup> Beti live in the South of Cameroon and in the nearby Gabon. This is the ethnic group of the current President of Cameroon, Paul Biya.

### *Cameroonian migration to Italy*

As other European countries, such as Greece or Spain, Italy became a land of immigration rather recently, at the beginning of the Nineties.

In the same years in Cameroon there was a time of great political and economical crisis. According the World Bank's measures to solve the external debt, the Cameroonian currency, CFA franc, underwent a devaluation of 50% (1994)<sup>3</sup> and governmental funds were cut about public and social services, like schools, health, street cleaning. Moreover, from the mid-Nineties onward, coffee price fell down<sup>4</sup>, so producing the collapse of one of the main cash crops of Cameroonian exportations: Cameroon is the main African country exporting coffee and this crisis stroke the economy of entire regions, like the Grassfields.

All these situations brought to a great economical collapse that still strikes the living conditions of Cameroonian people. Usually Cameroonians talk about "*la crise*" as something that begun and still has not ended, neither anyone knows when it would do. This brought lots of Cameroonians to think about migration and to realise it, as soon as they have money to afford it.

In the meanwhile the World Bank promised the debt reduction for the African countries that would adopt new democratic measures, and facilitations for residence permits towards the creditor countries. For these reasons, after 1992's first multiparty presidential elections and the introduction of a sort of free press, Cameroonian migration towards Europe and U.S grow.

Always in the same years, the former colonial countries of Cameroon, that is to say France and United Kingdom, began some restrictive measures about immigration. These countries had received immigrants from colonies and former colonies for the previous three decades, so they started to close their boundaries when the West-European economical standing slowed down (Pugliese, 2002).

This coincidence of many factors explains why Cameroonians moved towards Italy in the early Nineties, even if their favourite counties for migration remain France and United Kingdom<sup>5</sup>.

Sub-Saharan immigration is not the main one in Italy, and Cameroonian communities in Italy are a minority out of a minority. There are almost 4,700 Cameroonians all over the country, 0.2% out of the total number of foreign people in Italy<sup>6</sup>. They come from all over the Cameroon but mainly from the Francophone zone. The majority of them are Beti and Bamileké, the most

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<sup>3</sup> On 11<sup>th</sup> January 1994 thirteen countries using CFA franc met in Dakar and decided this hard devaluation to stop the runaway inflation.

<sup>4</sup> It happened because Vietnam did not enter in the coffee trust and sold coffee at competitive prices (cfr. Mezzanotte, 2002)

<sup>5</sup> Cameroonian migration towards European countries started in the the Thirties, especially from the Anglophone part of Cameroon. The British indirect rule needed an educated local *élite*; so young Cameroonians from important local families went to study abroad. The process increased in the independence period, the early Sixties. The newborn countries need a local ruling class, educated according to the Western culture.

<sup>6</sup> Update to 31.12.2005 (source: Caritas. 2006).

numerous and rich ethnic groups of Cameroon. They have formed heterogeneous communities with an equal sex ratio.

Cameroonians are a particular type of immigrants: almost all firstly have a residence permit for studying. Generally, migrated Cameroonians in Italy are students. They have reached their high-school diploma in Cameroon and have begun their university studies in Italy; they seldom have already enrolled at the university in Cameroon. They come from families in good financial standing in their country but not enough to support completely their children's studies abroad. This implies that Cameroonian students become workers as soon as they can, to pay by themselves rent, books, university fees and their living in Italy<sup>7</sup>.

Most of the times they choose scientific faculties such as Medical science or Engineering. This choice is related to their view of their project of migration: Italy is considered by Cameroonians a transit country. Having a scientific degree is what enables them to look for a job elsewhere, after their graduation, even to go back to Cameroon. In fact, once studies are finished, Cameroonians try to move mostly to France or to United Kingdom; seldom do they go home. Italy is the first step to live permanently in Europe or in the United States.

This means that most of the Cameroonians in Italy are young transit students, from twenty up to thirty years old at the maximum. Elder Cameroonians in Italy are in their forty-fives, they arrived in the early Nineties and they decided to stop and live in Italy. Cameroonian communities are permanent in the Italian towns but people that form them change very quickly. This can be a first reason for the lack of interaction between Cameroonians and Italians; in fact this type of migration does not imply a long-lasting mingle with the Italians. Moreover, Cameroonian communities are rather closed. People live and work in the Italian society, but their private life and their spare time are spent with other Cameroonians only.

### *Cameroonians in Varese*

Varese is a town of 82,000 inhabitants in the North-West of Italy. It is placed in one of the richest parts of the country. The wide possibilities to get a job and the closeness of Switzerland make this town and its area an important place for migrants. However, foreign people are just 27,000 out of 685,000 inhabitants in Varese and its province. All the immigrants from sub-Saharan African are only less than 2,000 people<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Cameroonians change as soon as they can their residence permits for students into residence permits for workers: the latter allow them to have full-time jobs and higher wages. A student's permit allows just getting a part-time job, but this is not enough to make a living.

<sup>8</sup> These data were kindly given to me by the Questura of Varese (updated to August 2005).

Cameroonians are just 40 adults with approximately ten children. This is a small Cameroonian community but it is quite representative: in fact it has got the same characteristics as the other Cameroonian communities in Italy. They are ethnically heterogeneous (mostly Beti, Douala and Bamileké); most of them are students and have gone to Varese to study in its long-standing faculties of medicine and pharmacy. The majority of them are not married. The few who are married live in the province with their families, while most part of the Cameroonians live in the town, close to the University and to their job-places. They are doctors, working in the local teaching hospital, or chemists, working in chemistries or in university research institutes.

The smallness of Varese town, the smallness of Cameroonian community, the habitual visits at the same Cameroonian people and even the continuous contacts in the job-places or in the university have reinforced networks inside the community but also its character of closeness towards non members. These are what Putnam calls “*bonding linkages*” (Putnam, 2000, p.22-23): these linkages help to strengthen identity and solidarity in small groups.

Cameroonians are not interested to find an Italian partner. Italians can be good friends or mates but hardly are they considered appropriate husbands or wives. It seems that problems could come mainly from both the families. Italian families are scared by the continuous money-sending they suppose to be a part of their duties as new relatives of an African family. On the other hand, even if Italian families are considered potential good relatives-in-law because they are richer than Cameroonian families, Cameroonian people fear that Italians do not give their goods to the relatives-in-law.

Furthermore, the high qualified jobs Cameroonian people get after the ending of their university studies have brought to a sort of closing towards other African immigrants in town such as Senegalese and Ivorians. Cameroonians find few similarities with the latter because of their lack of education. Senegalese and Ivorians came to the town in the same period and got a job as hawkers, but have not changed their occupations since then. Cameroonians have become an ethno-immigrant enclave<sup>9</sup> both for Italians and other sub-Saharan migrants.

### *Interethnic families*

To understand the new Cameroonian families, life-style and perspectives we should first consider how these families form. Most of the Cameroonian families are composed by two Cameroonian partners. Living in a small community and in a small town does not always make easy to find an appropriate Cameroonian partner. In fact, choice is limited, and moreover, as my

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<sup>9</sup> An ethno-enclave is an ethnical group relatively closed and separated from the rest of the society.

informants say: *“We know too deeply each other to fall in love. There are no more news among us”*. Even if the sex ratio among the community in the town is equal, Cameroonians of Varese look for a partner outside their community, that is to say, among the larger Cameroonian communities of other nearby towns such as Milan or Pavia<sup>10</sup>. But for lots of Cameroonians, a journey to Cameroon is the last possibility to find a partner. In fact in these cases, families in Cameroon mobilize their networks looking for some people to be introduced to their children.

Not every Cameroonian fits to be married. Families in Cameroon hardly accept even a Cameroonian partner coming from a different ethnic group. This is because of the different way of redistribution of goods among Cameroonian groups<sup>11</sup>. Redistribution is a fundamental concept when we talk about marriage and about relationships between in-laws. Both Beti and Bamileké, the most numerous ethnic groups in Cameroon but also among Cameroonian migrants in Italy and in Varese, practice the traditional marriage with the brideprice, which involves a gradual and continuous exchange of goods from the groom’s family to the family of the bride.

Warnier underlines how Beti and Bamileké have a radically different view of redistribution, and also of the brideprice: there is an “economy of retention”, typical of Grassfield area, that generates a more ranked society, and an “economy of consumption”, typically Beti, as a social mechanism to level people’s status (Warnier, 1993, p. 112). Bamileké are scared by Beti radical system of redistribution of goods, and Beti are worried about the excessive Bamileké parsimony in redistribution. Marriages among people from these ethnic groups are not easy, especially about the issue of brideprice payment.

Marriage is the legalization of sexuality. With the brideprice marriage, economy and sex are linked together. It is the same Warnier that equalizes these two fields<sup>12</sup>: he shows how Bamileké parsimony in economical and marriage choice is the main step that leads to accumulation of goods. In the first times of their career, Bamileké entrepreneurs do not get married, or at least they have a wife only, because they can not afford the brideprice payment. For Bamileké, retention from spending money means also a retention from marriage and legitimate sex. This first accumulation of goods and money is what permits to a man to spend later his money, also to get married.

The equalization among these fields takes also to a parallel series of prejudices. Grassfield people are believed have a general ethic of retention that touches also the sexuality. In the meanwhile, Beti, who are commonly known as unable to keep money, are considered unable to have a regulated sexual life. Marriages between these two ethnic groups, even when they are migrants in Italy, recall all these reciprocal prejudices.

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<sup>10</sup> Cameroonian associations have an important role about the instauration of contacts among immigrants.

<sup>11</sup> For example, between Bamileké and Beti, as I will show later.

<sup>12</sup> In Warnier, 1993, chapter four is entitled “Le désir”. It refers to both sexual and economical desire of richness.

The prejudice strikes particularly those people that, in a patrilineal system such as the Beti and Bamileké one, go living in a foreign compound without being a member of the family, that is to say women when they marry. Marriage does not broke the relationship of a woman with her father's lineage and so women are always strangers in their husbands' family.

Even if Grassfield women have the reputation to be more retentive about their sexual life, there are a lot of sexual taboos that involve also Beti women's life. For example, women should not have pre-marital relationships, neither have sex while they are breastfeeding, nor when they are menstruated, nor after the menopausal period (Vincent, 2001). As one can see, these taboos have occurred for the whole woman's life. These sexual taboos are also present among other Cameroonian ethnic groups, like the Bakoko and the Basaa (Buhan, 1986; Ombolo, 1990).

Reciprocal sexual prejudice between Beti and Bamileké striking women hides a different point of view of the economy and life in general. Nevertheless such marriage is not a problem per se and it is well accepted by the Cameroonian community in Italy, but it is not so for lots of families in Cameroon. Parents in Cameroon are very worried and try to discourage inter-ethnic marriages, as far as they can. They can practically do nothing because their children are economically independent and far away from the family, but they imply lots of these prejudices or defamations in the ears of their children through phone calls and letters. *Congossà*, the pidgin word to say gossips, is a powerful strategy to change one's mind about the others.

Nevertheless, the majority of couples in Varese are inter-ethnic.

### ***Marriage perspectives***

As Johnson-Hanks shows, there are several types of marriage in Cameroon, each of these displaying a particular level of rights and obligations for the couple:

*“Three ceremonies -the bridewealth, legal or civil marriage, and Christian marriage- each confer specific rights and obligations on the bride and the groom. (...). In addition to these three binding ceremonies, three other transitional events- the onset of cohabitation, the formal presentation of the groom to the parents of the bride, and the engagement ceremony- might also be considered forms of marriage”* (Johnson-Hanks, 2006, p.177)

Johnson-Hanks explains that traditional marriage with bridewealth is becoming rare because it is very expensive. Also Christian marriage is very expensive. So most of the couples choose to

marry with a civil ceremony<sup>13</sup>. This is particularly true also for Cameroonians in Italy: as they are foreign people, a marriage can guarantee facilitations about residence permits more than cohabitation, both for individuals and for a couple. For this reason, cohabitation is not as largely practiced among couples in Italy as it is in Cameroon.

If a Cameroonian who lives in Italy has a fiancé(e) in Cameroon, they used to marry there and to wait for some months to have papers to move the partner legally to Italy. In these cases, most of the times families know each other, and groom and bride have the same ethnical origins. Sometimes it can happen that a relative has introduced the bride or the groom to his/her respective partner.

Cameroonian couples, who both live in Italy, also get married in Italy; usually they go back to Cameroon later to do the formal presentation of the groom to the parents of the bride. This is something that in Cameroon usually happens before having the civil marriage, and not later, as it happens in Italy. According to the local tradition, having an affair with someone, without anyone else is aware, is a proof of responsibility and maturity. But when the relationship goes on and respective families are excluded from it, it is perceived as something wrong. “*Who are you?*”, “*I do not know him/her*” is what literally parents say to the partners of their children when they are introduced. When they particularly disagree a marriage, parents ask continuously these questions.

Days of the official presentation are the last ones during which both of the families see each others: hardly they knew before the marriage and hardly they will go about with them later. Families do not feel linked to each other because there will not be a constant exchange of goods in future. It lacks the complexity of gift exchanges and the correspondant relationships that characterize every type of marriage in Cameroon, not only traditional marriages, and that lasts longer than a wedding day. Moreover, origin families of bride and groom can live in different regions of the country, far away from each other.

Parents in Cameroon are not friendly with their children’s partners of different ethnical origin, especially with brides. As I said above, according to the local concepts of patrilineal kinship, brides are always strangers in their husband’s family and they should prove their loyalty to the family, their disponibility to do hard works and their skills to menage a large family. For the first times, they are continuously tested in their domestical and reproductive skills by the whole of the husband’s family (Feldman-Savelsberg, 1995 and 1998). Geographical distance avoids these direct tests for new Cameroonian families living in Italy, so they are concentrated all in one during the official presentation of the new couple to the rispective parents. Or they are directed to their own children, proving his/her marriage choice. Marriage is not an act, as it is in the Western culture, but

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<sup>13</sup> All the three forms of marriage can be celebrated, also in a very long course of time. Johnson-Hanks reveals that the total set of binding marital transitions is extremely rare and expensive.



it is a process. All along this process families from Cameroon do not stop to interfere, testing the validity of the initial choice of their children.

### *Demographical and social aspects of the new Cameroonian families*

Cameroonian families in Italy are strikingly different from the average families in Cameroon. First of all, families have a minor numbers of components in Italy. Beti and Bamileké are polygynic ethnic groups, but in Italy polygamic marriages are not legal. It is true that polygyny is decreasing also in Cameroon, because the economical crisis does not allow to maintain a very large family. Obviously the Cameroonian couples who marry in Italy are only monogamic, but also the couples who marry in Cameroon choose this option, if one of the partners has any perspective to live in Italy. When a Cameroonian man has a residence permit in Italy, it would be dangerous to take another wife: the second wife hardly could come to Italy according to the family-reconjunction permit. As a second-wife, she will be not recognized as a member of the family. So Cameroonian men in Italy have only a wife.

In Cameroon, also nowadays, having more than a wife and a great number of children is a sort of status symbol that shows the financial and reproductive power of a man. In fact only traditional chief and very rich men can afford to maintain such a large families. Migrated Cameroonian men can not show their power to their origin family, displaying the number of their wives and children.

Moreover, the number of children of every migrated Cameroonian couple is decreased. In Cameroon on average, every woman has four children<sup>14</sup>, instead Cameroonian families in Italy are just nuclear ones with two children. Cameroonians' birth-control is mainly due to the increasing cost of living, employment instability and the low salaries that affect also Italian families<sup>15</sup>.

Another factor that explains the decreased number of children in Cameroonian families is the raising of the women's age at their first birth. Cameroonian migrated women's age at their first child is definitely higher in Italy than in Cameroon: about 25 years old against 19 years old<sup>16</sup>. My informants say that they prefer finishing their university studies before having a child. However, as Jennifer Johnson-Hanks points out, the same behaviour is shared also by Beti educated women in

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<sup>14</sup> Precisely 4.49 children born alive per woman. This is 2007 esteem, source: [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index/html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index/html).

<sup>15</sup> Italy is one of the countries in the world with less newborns per year and where every woman has less than one child in the whole of her reproductive life on average (0.8 children per woman). This average is grown up from 0.8 child per woman to 1.3 child per woman in the last two years. This is due to immigrants that usually have more children than Italians.

Italy is the European country with the lowest salaries

<sup>16</sup> Data about women's age at the their first birth in Cameroon is taken from Johnson-Hanks, 2006.

Cameroon (Johnson-Hanks, 2006), even if having a children during the university years is not considered by girls something that could restraint their careers.

This introduces a social difference among composition of the families in Cameroon and in Italy. In Italy Cameroonian men and women have a more equal position both about educational level and about financial standing. Both of them go to the university and later find a good job, that gives them a very similar salary. Women do not depend from men's cash, as often happens in Cameroon, where women practice subsistence economical activities, like subsistence agriculture or/and small trade in the local markets of what they cultivate; even if they work hard, they menage less amount of cash money than men, as Goheen pointed out about women of the Grassfields and Henn about Beti women (Goheen, 1996; Henn, 1985). This makes women dependent from their husbands's money for the major expences (school fees, rent, medical cares).

We can notice the same attitude respect the profession, which is considered by Cameroonian women in Italy as source of personal satisfaction and economical independency. Working is not finalized to the maintenance of the nuclear family as women do in Cameroon, but to be independent. It is not just a necessity but it a way to gain social advancement and authoritativeness.

Cameroonian family's outline is radically changed through the migration. All of these changes have been well accepted among the Cameroonian community in Italy, also because they have risen from the adaptation to a new socio-economical context. Men are happy that women have a salary as good as their own, and they feel comforted by the decreasing of women's requests for money, that is something that Cameroonian men I interviewed in Cameroon bear hardly.

Despite the changes about gender roles, conflicts are not between men and women among the migrant community, but between families in Cameroon and in Italy. In Cameroon there are the families of migrants' parents, that is to say , the families of the former generation. In Italy, in a new socio-economical context, there are the families of the new Cameroonian generation.

Generally conflicts between generations are melted by the distance. However, during visits of Cameroonian parents or relatives in Italy (up to six months, according to the immigration law), or when migrated Cameroonians go home visiting their parents during the job-licence (one month), these close contacts bring to a greater possibility to rise conflicts. In fact these reciprocal visits often involve cohabitation of more than a generation under the same roof for a relatively short time, encouraging the meeting of different life-styles.

Moreover, migrated Cameroonian families hardly will go back to Cameroon all together: a flight-ticket to Cameroon costs at least 1.000 euros per person. Travelling with a four people-family can be really expensive, also for a couple of high-qualified workers. Parents take advantage of these

occasions, when one of the couple goes alone in Cameroon visiting the family. They start remembering why his/her marriage is considered wrong and so on. My informants say they feel comforted when they leave their family and all their critics.

Relatives in Cameroon are not always aware of the necessity of these changes for their migrated children, and often blame them. New gender roles migrated Cameroonian families assume are often one of the main issues that produce conflicts among the new and traditional families. Nevertheless, even if gender is deeply involved in these conflicts, conflicts are not based on gender, but on generation.

### *Conflicts about migrated women's role*

The new role of the women has produced new balances among the Cameroonian community in Italy, inside the single families living there, and inside families in the origin country. Women and their new independence are often struck by the elders' complaints in Cameroon: in fact women are not only strangers within their husbands' family, often coming from a different ethnic group, as it happens often among Cameroonians in Italy, but they are the ones who mainly have changed their living conditions and their roles.

I think the life-story of S., a Bamileké girl (Temgoua, 2004-2005), is very meaningful about conflicts that new outlines of Cameroonian families produce with their origin families. S. is not a member of the community of Varese and her story about familiar conflicts is quite extraordinary. Nevertheless, it shows clearly the main reasons of conflicts and the symbology displayed behind them.

S. had gone to Italy to go to the university, she maintained herself doing lots of jobs; she fell in love with a Beti boy, and some time later they got married and have had two children. S. is a student, a worker, a wife and a mother. With the birth of her second child, she really felt overwhelmed by the huge amount of duties she had. Since her mother had died, she asked to her husband to invite his mother to live with them. She bitterly regretted her decision: the mother-in-law constantly rebuked her, telling she was unable to be a good mother, or a good wife, and that she could not clean properly the house or cooking a good meal. Moreover, she did not agree that S. went to the university: according to the mother-in-law, she should rather take care of her family. The mother-in-law decided to not help her, but to behave like a guest, to force S. to leave her university studies. S. found herself with a person more to take care of. She could not ask to her husband to chase his own mother, neither she can be unkind towards an elder and, moreover, towards her mother-in-law. As far as I know, S. waited her mother-in-law's residence permit ended.

For S. they were six months full of stress and repressed anger, even towards her husband who does not defend her, but finally the mother-in-law went back to Cameroon.

The situation of S. is one of the worst conflict I have never heard about Cameroonian migrants' families. Generally conflicts are not so direct, also because parents come seldom visiting their children.

The case of S. shows all the characteristics that conflicts among traditional and new Cameroonian families have. Conflicts are not based on gender, but on generation. In the case quoted above, it seems there were not any conflicts between S. and her husbands before his mother's arrive. When there were later, they were produced by the stressfull situation the mother-in-law's arrive had generated.

One of the main issues of the conflict is about interethnic marriages. These involve different conceivings about culture and life-style, such as the management and redistribution of money, but in the meanwhile they bring to the rise of a lot of prejudices, especially in the sexual field. When the mother-in-law told to S. she was unable to cook, she symbolically recalled the duties of every good wife, which are cooking and making sex.

Moreover, in Cameroonian cultures, cooking and sex are not conceived as simple female duties. As Feldman-Savelsberg about Bamileké and Johnson-Hanks about Beti show, cooking and sex are symbolically joined. In the Grassfields there is a metaphore about human reproduction which tells about new human beings "cooked" in the "pot-womb" of their mothers, where male and female "ingredients", that is to say sperm and menstrual blood, are mixed together (Feldman-Savelsberg, 1995 and 1998).

Also among Beti food and sex are linked together, as Johnson-Hanks explains:

*"(...) since women regularly give cooked food to the men with whom they are having sex, the wife's giving up the keys to her kitchen (or badly cooking, I add) might be read as refusing sex"* (Johnson-Hanks, 2006, p.177)

So, when the mother-in-law accuses her daughter-in-law to not be a good cooker, she also means she is not a good reproducer.

We should also remember S. is Bamileké and her mother-in-law is Beti: the accuse of the mother-in-law also hides the prejudice about the scarcity of sexual activities among Bamileké, who are considered too much retentive. According to the mother-in-law's perspective, this accuse is proved by the fact that S. has got *only* two children. As Feldman-Savelsberg points out, in Cameroon a woman who has only one or two children is believed having fertility problems

(Feldman-Savelsberg, 1998). Despite her two children, the mother-in-law considers S. as unable or, worse, unwilling to generate

This takes us to underline how this life-story also shows conflicts concerned about new migrant women's conditions. Western lifestyle Cameroonian women assumed hardly encourages them to assist a family as large as in Cameroon. The concept of femininity of these migrant women is not only linked to the biological maternity. Women's social presences in the job places and in the Cameroonian community's public life, like associational life, are becoming the "new" way for women to conceive womanhood. In fact, in Varese there are an all women tontine, or a saving and credit association, and a general association for all the Cameroonians in Varese, where women have important roles and where they work actively to organize parties and presents for every new-born of the community. Also in Cameroon women spend lots of their time in activities external to their domestic job: they work for many hours in a day, and dedicate almost all their spare time to associational activities (Luraschi, 2004). But in Cameroon motherhood is still a central strategy to gain social consideration, even if it is not the first step to reach it. In fact, as Johnson-Hanks's studies evidence is that also educated Beti educated women in Cameroon are trying to improve the importance of their social roles *before* becoming mothers (Johnson-Hanks, 2006). What is new in Italy in comparison with the Cameroonian situation is that women have important social roles *even* if they have not fulfilled their reproductive role.

In the same way, S. is looking for her social affirmation as a woman, for example completing her education attending at the university studies, and not only as a mother, like her mother-in-law suggested, instead. Femininity is becoming to be separated from maternity. This has not still happened in Cameroon, where every woman must fulfill her reproductive duties, especially if she cares to have any social role.

### ***Cameroonian men and the problems of redistribution***

When we consider the change of gender role of Cameroonian migrated men within their families, we can particularly notice how the focus of the conflicts between traditional and new Cameroonian families is age and not gender.

In Cameroon, there is the shared perspective that manhood is based on redistribution. Redistribution is a specific male duty because men are the ones who heir goods, money and lands, according to the traditional Beti and Bamileké customs. For this reason men have to provide for their family and their women through redistribution system. Men who do not redistribute are considered greedy, selfish and anti-social; moreover, they are often accused to be witches.

The change of men's role among migrated communities is represented by the scarcity or even the lack of redistribution. It is clear, for example, about the wedding ceremony. As I said, brideprice marriage, which is a form of redistribution between families, is almost completely dismissed and gifts and goods redistribution among families is definitely limited with other forms of marriage.

The importance of redistribution for men is also shown from a symbolical point of view. As Warnier pointed out, in the Grassfields there is a specific image of maleness linked to redistribution: containers (Warnier, 1993). In the Grassfields there are lots of statues of men with bowls and horns and other types of containers symbols of both manhood and redistribution. These containers are always represented open: they are things where people can take something from inside. In the same way, men should be always be able to redistribute.

Whoever redistributes is himself a sort of vital container that is never empty. The same body of the redistributor is a container. This image comes directly from the attributes of the *fon*, the traditional chief of every Grassfields chiefdom (Warnier, 1993). Warnier defined the *fon*, as a "vital piggy-bank" (Warnier, 1992; 1993). In fact the *fon*, according to his status of leader, is the first goods and land redistributor within a community. He is a redistributor of material richness, but also of a vital substance that gives power and wellness to the people: the *sëm*. That is because the body of the *fon* contains a high-quality *sëm*.

Not only does the body of the *fon*, but also the body of every human being is a container of a vital substance. Grassfields are highly hierarchical and ranked societies both in the political structure and in the household structure: for this reason a head of the family does in a smaller dimension what a *fon* does in a larger one. *Fon*'s attributes are not only royal, linked to the power: many characteristics of the *fon* are congruent with common men, especially attributes linked to manhood. *Sëm* is in blood, saliva and sperm of common people, men and women. People are called to redistribute their *sëm* through reproduction and sex: in fact, according to the Grassfields tradition quoted above, sperm and menstrual blood are the main "ingredients" to generate new human beings (Feldman-Savelsberg, 1998), and they are full of *sëm*. Having many children is important per se in African culture but in the Grassfields it represents a form of *sëm* redistribution.

Migrated Cameroonian men and women avoid this form of redistribution, because they have few children. Even from a symbolical point of view, men reduce their redistributive duties.

Not only the main points of the conflict among generations about redistribution are involved in the symbolical issues of redistribution, such as the type of marriage or the number of children. Conflict among generations are based on social distribution of power, linked to the redistributive process.

Redistribution is an equalizing mechanism within the society but it is rooted in a strong inequality. It is not a question of giving and taking: in fact every one involved in the redistribution system gives and takes in different times. Rather, inequality of redistribution lies in the difference between who decides time and people to whom redistribute and in which proportion, that is to say the heir, and who accepts his decisions, that is to say men who do not heir, called cadets.

Meillassoux and Warnier underlined lower-ranking condition of cadets (Meillassoux, 1975; Warnier, 1993). The fruits of their work are exploited according to heir's will and hardly can they profit by heir's redistribution: in fact they cannot get married up to a different opinion of the heir himself, because they have no money to pay the brideprice. Heir's redistributions privilege the heads of families and just because cadets have not got the responsibility of maintaining a family, they are the last ones to enjoy the heir's redistribution.

Differently from western culture, where becoming adult means becoming independent from one's own family, for Cameroonians becoming adult involves to be linked to each other by a debt chain. As Sarthou-Lajus points out:

*“Debt is in fact at the origin of a fundamentally asymmetrical social relation, which breaks the logic of parity in exchange”* (Sarthou-Lajus, 1997, p.2).

It is the same debt that structures unequal relationships between who leads the redistribution and who is a part of it. This aspect of redistribution is fundamental in ranked society like the Grassfields ones, but it is also evident among Beti. Redistribution is a *“funding mark of social relations”*, as Roitman underlines (Roitman, 2003, p. 2), because it structures precise social roles. Roitman further comments:

*“debt breaks with the logic of exchange not because it subverts it, but rather because it induces deferred exchange, or intervals of time, (...)”* (Roitman, 2003, p. 2).

Redistribution is a giving that waits for its coming back in a future time: this is the way that redistribution and debt are linked to.

Among migrated Cameroonian communities there are no cadets. Moreover, cadets who migrate to Italy become soon independent and far from the debt with the origin families, once they have repayed their families because of the initial sum of money they gave them to go abroad. A forty-years old man in Cameroon has hardly reached the economical independence as a Cameroonian man of the same age who migrated to Italy has. Migrated Cameroonian men call

themselves out from the chain of redistribution as soon as they can. For this reason, they try to be avoided by any other economical issues with their families of origin: no more help, no more debt. Migrated Cameroonian men have accepted the Western concept of adulthood based on the independence, which is radically opposed to the traditional one.

For migrated Cameroonians independence is not only a lifestyle: it is a choice of power. Cameroonian communities in Italy are communities without elders, where hierontocracy has been replaced with the importance in the arrival order. Generally the first arrived are also the elder ones (nowadays they are in their forties), but this does not necessarily make them powerful people: social power is given by the adaptation skills to the new socio-economical milieu. Not only do Cameroonian migrated men accept a very different life-style, but through their independence they are challenging the base of Cameroonian society: hierontocracy.

### *The challenge of the traditional social system*

From a certain point of view, all the changes intercoured among the Cameroonian communities have been obliged passages: European life-style (money, job-time) does not allow to live in an African way.

The passage from lineage to nuclear family, as well as the improvement of women's social role, the parity of cash with men, and the choice of both men and women to limit the number of children have been well accepted by migrated Cameroonians, but not by their families of origin in Cameroon. Not only do these conflicts involve cultural and symbolical questions about different lifestyles, but mainly issues about the legitimacy of the power status-quo in Cameroon, that sees at the top of the social systems elder men.

The context of migration does not help the rise of a hierontocratical system and it has established a more equal condition between men and women. This questions indirectly the hierontocracy and macho-chauvinism that still there is in Cameroon, especially among Beti and Bamileké, and that is based upon traditional families.

While gender roles are a great topic of the conflict, the heart of tensions is between old and new Cameroonian generations: new Cameroonian generations are no more submitted to the elders. Young migrated Cameroonians, men and women, are building a community which is challenging hierontocracy, the traditional basis of the Cameroonian power establishment. That is what really hurts and worries families in Cameroon, questioned by their children at the root.



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