URBAN YOUTH AND FUTURE-MAKING IN CAMEROON

Anna Wölki, Jonathan Ngeh, and Michaela Pelican (eds.)

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Editor INSTITUT FÜR ETHNOLOGIE, UNIVERSITÄT ZU KÖLN
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITIY OF COLOGNE
Address Albertus Magnus Platz
D 50923 Köln
Phone 0049 (0) 221/470 - 2274
Fax 0049 (0) 221/470 - 5117
Email ethnologie@uni-koeln.de
URL http://ethnologie.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de/kae.html

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In memoriam of Ute Röschenthaler (1960–2024)

A colleague and friend, with a great sense of humor.

Devoted to tracing the journeys of objects, practices, and people across the globe,

Cameroon was always close to her heart.

Acknowledgements

This publication is the outcome of a collaborative research and teaching program organized by Michaela Pelican and Deli Tize Teri that brought together students and lecturers from Cameroon and Germany based at the Universities of Bamenda, Cologne, Dschang, and Yaoundé 1. *The project Urban Youths' Perspectives on Making a Future in Cameroon and/or Abroad* was carried out in the summer of 2018. Over six weeks, twelve students and five supervisors from Cameroon and Cologne jointly conducted fieldwork in Cameroon's capital, Yaoundé, on the subject of future-making. Working in German-Cameroonian tandems, the teams explored a variety of perspectives: the future-making strategies of young artists and journalists; the labor market experiences of female university graduates; the contributions of migrant investors and hometown associations to youth development; the challenges faced by (un)successful return migrants; and the educational and professional trajectories of Mbororo and Montagnard urban migrants, two marginalized minority groups in Cameroon.

The project aimed to foster collaboration and joint knowledge production between students and lecturers in the Global South and North. The collaboration comprised three phases (Appendix: Schedule of Collaborative Research and Teaching Program). Preparatory lectures at the partner universities introduced students to the project's theme of future-making. In Yaoundé, a one-week intensive seminar was followed by four weeks of joint fieldwork in German-Cameroonian tandems. Finally, data were analyzed and disseminated through an internal workshop, a public conference at the University of Yaoundé 1, and a feature on the national TV program "Hello Cameroon." Although collaboration slowed after the German partners' return, it continued and ultimately culminated in this joint publication.

The completion of this volume has taken longer than expected, partly due to the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic and partly because of the subsequent professional and personal trajectories of the participants. Many students developed their bachelor's or master's theses from the research conducted in the project and, on the basis of their successful studies, have since embarked on new chapters in their lives.

Consistent with the project's collaborative and inclusive approach, it is important to us to showcase the contributions of both junior and senior scholars and to make their work accessible to a wider audience. Importantly, we remain convinced that the findings from 2018 continue to be highly relevant. As we bring this publication to a close, we cannot fail to observe that in Cameroon today, gerontocratic political structures endure while structural violence and the marginalization of youth persist.

This project would not have been possible without the support of many individuals and institutions. First, we extend our gratitude to all students and lecturers who participated in the collaborative research and teaching program, namely Isa Adamu, Afu Isaiah Kunock, Alawadi Zelao, Hamza Dabo, Deli Tize Teri, Dana Elena Harms, Wendon Gillian Mbuh, Johanna Merz, Lotta Luna Schütt, Brice Stapelfeldt, Awah Kum Tchouaffi, Eugene Tingwey, Anna Wölki, Guylaine Nzouenkeu Yaanou, and Chancelyne Wulseh Yein. While not all project participants were able to contribute to this publication, their involvement has significantly shaped the program and its outcomes. We also appreciate the support provided by the colleagues at the University of Yaoundé 1, including Prof. Dr. Lucyen Ayissi, Prof. Dr. Paschal Kum Awah, Prof. Dr. Christine Djouckoua, Prof. Dr. Mbonji Edjenguèlè, Prof. Dr. Antoine Socpa, Prof. Dr. Godfrey Tangwa, and Mathias Donfouet from DAAD Yaoundé. Importantly, we thank the research participants who generously shared their views and experiences with the researchers.

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Cologne, 20.2.2026

Anna Wölki, Jonathan Ngeh, Michaela Pelican

The Editorial Team

Abstract

This special issue brings together contributions from students and lecturers who participated in the 2018 collaborative research and teaching program Urban Youths' Perspectives on Making a Future in Cameroon and/or Abroad, linking four universities in Cameroon and Germany. The program pursued both methodological and thematic objectives. Methodologically, it adopted a horizontal collaboration in teaching and research across the Global North and South to challenge power asymmetries that undervalue knowledge from the Global South. Thematically, it explored how young people navigate structural barriers to build meaningful futures. The articles in this issue examine how educated youth in Cameroon strive for personal and collective advancement amid persistent political and economic stagnation. Following an introduction and a collective methodological reflection, the contributions are grouped into three thematic sections: making a future at home; migration and future-making; and minority groups and future-making. The findings highlight migration, education, and social networks as central strategies for making a future. Across the articles, three recurring dimensions stand out – economic achievement, family responsibilities, and commitment to community well-being. Together, they offer new insights into youth agency and future-oriented aspirations in Cameroon.

Key words: youth, future-making, education, migration, minorities, Cameroon

1. Introduction: Urban Youth and Future-Making in Cameroon

Jonathan NGEH, Michaela PELICAN, Anna WÖLKI*

Figure 1: Group picture in front of Faculty of Arts, Lettres and Social Sciences (FALSH), University of Yaoundé 1. © Michaela Pelican, 2018

* The authors are listed in alphabetical order. Contact of corresponding author: mpelican@uni-koeln.de

This publication emerged from the collaborative research and teaching program *Urban Youths' Perspectives on Making a Future in Cameroon and/or Abroad*, which brought together students and lecturers from four universities in Cameroon and Germany.[1] The program pursued two main objectives, reflecting both a methodological and thematic focus. Methodologically, it sought to adopt a collaborative and inclusive approach that actively confronted power asymmetries in the research process and centered the perspectives and agency of those under study—namely, Cameroonian youth. Thematically, it aimed to contribute to a better understanding of how young people in Cameroon navigate structural barriers and social constraints to make a future.

Framed by this approach, the contributions in this special issue study how young, educated Cameroonians pursue successful futures for themselves and their communities. This question emerged from the observation of Cameroon's political and economic stagnation since the 1980s. By the time of our research in 2018, several generations of young people—particularly in remote regions—had been profoundly affected by government neglect and structural violence, pushing them to seek alternative ways of making a future. Since the early 2000s, migration has gained particular prominence in this regard.

Key findings from our project suggest that, methodologically, a collaborative approach underscores the ethical imperative of centering the perspectives of those being studied. Thematically, the research demonstrates how Cameroonian youth navigate structural constraints, pursue migration strategically, and leverage education and social networks as concrete pathways for making a future. Across the contributions, three recurring dimensions of youth's future-making in Cameroon stand out: economic achievement, strong family ties and responsibilities, and a commitment to giving back to the community.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: We begin by outlining Cameroon's socioeconomic and political developments since the late 1980s before turning to the project's key objectives and selected findings. We then discuss the theoretical approaches that frame the study and show how the individual contributions engage with and contribute to these frameworks. The chapter concludes with a summary of the papers in this special issue, grouped into three main themes: making a future at home; migration and future-making; and minority groups and future-making.

Cameroon's Socioeconomic and Political Context

Africa is experiencing rapid demographic growth and urbanization accompanied by profound social, political, and economic transformations. It has the world's fastest-growing youth population, with 62% under the age of 25 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2019). In Cameroon, children (those aged 0–18) comprise 49% of the total population (UNICEF Cameroon, 2025).

Yet opportunities for this young population remain scarce. Official unemployment is recorded at 3.5%, but this conceals widespread underemployment, with many earning below minimum wage or working fewer than 40 hours a week (Botea & Del Bono, 2022). Cameroon ranks 155th out of 193 countries on the Human Development Index (HDI) (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2023), well below the global average. About 40% of the population lives below the poverty line, a situation further worsened by ongoing violent conflicts in the Far North (since 2013) and the Anglophone regions (since 2016) (The Vatican, 2021).

The economic crises of the late 1980s—triggered by falling prices for Cameroon's main export commodities (oil, coffee, and cocoa) and later exacerbated by structural adjustment programs introduced to address the downturn—radically reshaped the country's labor market. Hiring freezes in the public sector, the collapse of state and private companies, and growing unemployment pushed many into the informal economy (Cogneau et al., 1996; Deli, 2009). Women increasingly took up petty trade and other activities to

[1] Partner institutions: University of Bamenda (UoB), University of Cologne (UoC), University of Dschang (UoD), University of Yaoundé 1 (UoY1).
Student participants and their university affiliations in 2018: Isa ADAMU (UoD), Hamza DABO (UoD), Dana Elena HARMS (UoC), Wendon Gillian MBUH (UoY1), Johanna MERZ (UoC), Lotta Luna SCHÜTT (UoC), Brice STAPELFELDT (UoC), Awah Kum TCHOUAFFI (UoY1), Eugene TINGWEY (UoC), Anna WÖLKI (UoC), Guylaine Nzouenkeu YAANOU (UoB), Chancelyne Wulseh YEIN (UoB).
Supervising lecturers and their university affiliations in 2018: AFU Isaiah Kunock (UoY1), ALAWADI Zelao (UoD), DELI Tize Teri (UoY1), Jonathan NGEH (UoB), Michaela PELICAN (UoC).

support their families, altering traditional gender roles (Fosso, 2012; Sindjoun, 2000). Youth were particularly hard hit, often describing themselves as a "lost generation." Many turned either to illicit activities such as scamming and internet fraud—locally known as *feymania* (Jua, 2003; Ndjio, 2008, 2012)—or to migration abroad, commonly referred to as *bushfalling* in Anglophone Cameroon (Alpes, 2012, 2017; Gärtner, 2025; Nyamnjoh, 2011; Pelican, 2013).

Politically, Cameroon represents a case of (neo)patrimonial rule and personalized power, centered on President Paul Biya and his inner circle (Mehler, 2022). Power distribution remains opaque, structured through networks of dependency and loyalty along ethnic, regional, and elite lines (Bayart, 1979). Gerontocratic and patriarchal structures continue to dominate both politics and society, and the political system has proven remarkably resilient. Biya has held power for over four decades, backed by an ageing cohort of men in their 80s and the loyalty of the military, while the opposition is fragmented (Lekunze et al., 2025; Voice of American English News [VOA], 2021). Security forces have contained internal conflicts and external threats, including the altercations in the Anglophone regions and cross-border violence in the Far North. Cameroon's stability is considered vital for the regional balance in the Lake Chad Basin, which has secured international support for the regime. Yet this stability comes at a high cost: The political elite monopolizes domestic and external resources while neglecting peripheral regions and suppressing dissent. Marginalized groups—including youth, women, and ethnic minorities—remain excluded from decision-making, with civic freedoms heavily restricted (Freedom House, 2024).

We thus characterize the situation of youth in Cameroon as shaped by *structural violence* (Murrey, 2015), a concept coined by Galtung (1969) to describe persistent harm produced by the interplay of social, political, and economic institutions that limits the well-being and flourishing of individuals and groups.

Since 2013 and 2016, violent conflicts in the Far North and the Anglophone regions, respectively, have intensified the challenges facing young Cameroonians in shaping their future. Both Boko Haram and the Anglophone conflict have severely disrupted the educational sector in the affected regions, depriving the younger generation of a solid foundation for their future careers (Kendhammer & Adama, 2019; Folefac, 2024; Pelican, 2022). Ongoing violence and civilian casualties have displaced many people, with some 584,000 internally displaced by the Anglophone conflict (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2025). Most have relocated to urban centers such as Yaoundé, Douala, Buea, Bafoussam, and Maroua in search of jobs and education, adding pressure to local economies (Adama, 2022; Bang, 2024; Kinang, 2022; Sunjo & Sunjo, 2025; Wolter, 2023). At the time of our fieldwork in 2018, these dynamics were still emerging but have since intensified, further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic (Djoumessi, 2021).

Migration and Future-Making

Since the early 2000s, migration has emerged as a key strategy for making a future (Alpes, 2012, 2017; Atekmangoh, 2017; Fleischer, 2012; Gärtner, 2025; Nyamnjoh, 2011; Pelican, 2013). Cameroon has experienced steady rural-to-urban migration, with 56% of the population now living in cities, alongside outward migration (The Vatican, 2021). Preferred destinations include wealthier African countries, such as Gabon and South Africa, as well as countries both in the Global North and elsewhere in the South. In 2015, 1.6% of Cameroonians lived abroad—far below the global average of 3.6% (The Vatican, 2021), reflecting the fact that while migration is a dominant aspiration, relatively few can afford it. Highly skilled migrants are disproportionately represented: Cameroon scores 7.1 on the Human Flight and Brain Drain Index compared to a global average of 5.25 (The Vatican, 2021). This mirrors a common perception: Even with education, the country offers few prospects for making a future. Migration thus functions both as an escape from deprivation and as a means of enhancing individual and collective capabilities through remittances and transnational networks.

Experiences of earlier migrant cohorts continue to shape contemporary imaginaries. Success stories—such as footballer Samuel Eto'o—serve as aspirational models, while stories of exploitation—e.g., Cameroonians stranded in Libya or trafficked to the Gulf States (France 24 English, 2017; Ngeh, 2024)—serve as cautionary tales.

At the same time, remittances and diaspora investments in housing, businesses, and community initiatives have visibly transformed local landscapes (Atekmangoh, 2017; Deli, 2015; Mercer et al., 2009; Ndjio, 2009; Page & Sundjo, 2018). Such investments are often understood as acts of collective future-making. For example, one interlocutor encountered by Jonathan Ngeh and Michaela Pelican in Dubai invested in establishing a boxing club in Bafoussam, offering local youth opportunities to pursue professional sports careers. These cases highlight the dual role of migration as both individual and community-oriented strategy of future-making, a theme explored throughout this volume (e.g., Afu & Tchouaffi; Alawadi; Wölki; Yein).

Aims of the Teaching and Research Collaboration

The collaborative research and teaching program from which this publication emerged pursued two interconnected goals: Methodologically, it sought to give voice to the junior researchers involved—who themselves are youth—and strengthen their research skills, thereby opening up new pathways towards possible academic and professional futures. Thematically, it aimed to (re)evaluate the situation of Cameroonian youth and examine the strategies they employ to shape their futures.

Fostering Collaborative and Inclusive Research

The project followed a collaborative research approach that challenges unequal and externally-driven methods and centers the perspectives and agency of Cameroonian youth. It aimed to ensure that all research partners—particularly student researchers, half of whom belonged to the demographic under study—had equal opportunities to shape, conduct, and contribute to the research. This objective grew out of a long-standing partnership between Michaela Pelican (University of Cologne) and Deli Tize Teri (University of Yaoundé 1), evolving from collaborations dating back to 2007 (Pelican et al., 2008). At its core, the project embodied an ethical and reflexive research practice attentive to global power dynamics and epistemological hierarchies, as highlighted in decolonial and postcolonial critiques (e.g., Smith, 1999; Mbembe, 2016).

By engaging student researchers as co-creators of knowledge rather than research assistants, the project challenged dominant paradigms that portray African youth as passive subjects. In doing so, it foregrounds youth agency and addresses their structural exclusion from academic, economic, and political life. This collaborative approach represents both a methodological commitment and a means of generating actionable knowledge with potential for transfer in the contexts of North–South research partnerships and collaboration across status groups.

Understanding Future-Making in Cameroon

Thematically, the project explored three key areas of future-making: the strategies Cameroonian youth employ to build a future at home; the role of international migration for future-making; and the particular situation of marginalized minorities. In the following, we briefly outline some of the guiding research questions and highlight selected findings which are explored in more detail in the contributions to this special issue.

1. What strategies do Cameroonian youth employ to make a future at home?

In a debate on youth perspectives in May 2018, a representative of the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Civic Education (MINJEC) argued that the challenge in Cameroon is not a lack of jobs, but a lack of access to information. While from a European perspective, it may seem obvious how to find information about employment opportunities, this is often not the case in Cameroon. Dana Elena Harms' chapter on the contingencies of social relations in pursuing future opportunities identifies two intertwined factors shaping job prospects in Cameroon: educational attainment and embeddedness in influential social networks. She argues that education not only enhances employability but also facilitates access to social and professional networks, whose recommendations can be decisive in securing employment.

2. Is international migration still the dominant pathway for young Cameroonians to build a successful life?

Since the early 2000s, migration has been a prominent strategy for young Cameroonians seeking "greener pastures." This trend, first observed during a collaborative study by Pelican, Deli and colleagues in

2007 (Pelican et al., 2008), has been consistently confirmed by subsequent research (Alpes, 2017; Atekmangoh, 2017; Deli, 2013; Fleischer, 2012; Gärtner, 2025; Ngeh, 2011). In this special issue, the paper by Afu Isaiah Kunock and Awah Kum Tchouaffi on Cameroonian health professionals revisits the "greener pastures" narrative, showing that while migration abroad remains a strong aspiration, long-term success often depends on the dynamic interplay between migration and return. This finding complicates the "greener pastures" narrative in migration debates. Afu and Tchouaffi show that while elite Cameroonian

medical professionals pursue training and opportunities abroad, their decisions to return (even when remaining abroad is possible) challenge linear models of migration and the assumption that better economic prospects automatically ensure a better life. Similarly, the chapter by Anna Wölki highlights how premature return—whether through assisted voluntary schemes, individual initiatives, or deportation—can challenge the "greener pastures" ideal, revealing the risks and sacrifices involved with migration and how many migrants return without having achieved their goals.

3. How do urban migrants from minority groups confront challenges in the city and create futures for themselves and their communities?

Ethnic and indigenous minorities who predominantly live in Cameroon's peripheral regions, such as the Montagnards and the Mbororo, have often been portrayed as "backwards" and conservative, bound by cultural traditions, and limited to farming and cattle herding. Over the past decades, however, increasing numbers of Montagnard and Mbororo youths have migrated to cities in the country's more affluent south—a trend further accelerated by violent conflicts in the Far North and Anglophone regions, as confirmed by Alawadi Zelao and by Deli Tize Teri and Wendon Gillian Mbuh in this volume. Indeed, the two contributions focusing on the Mbororo (Deli & Mbuh; Merz) indicate that Mbororo women in Yaoundé grapple with religious norms and social expectations while also asserting agency in pursuing new opportunities. Taken together, the three papers concerning minorities (Alawadi; Deli & Mbuh; Merz) underscore the determination of minority youth and women to carve out new educational and professional trajectories for themselves and future generations.

Theoretical Framework

In the following section, we outline the theoretical approaches that formed the analytical framework of this collaborative research and teaching program and that run across the chapters of this volume. Central to our analysis are debates on the concepts of *youth* (Christiansen et al., 2006) and *future-making* (Pelican & Heiss, 2014). These are complemented by discussions on *social capital* (Bourdieu, 1977), *vital conjunctures* (Johnson-Hanks, 2002), *capabilities* (Sen, 1992), and the *capacity to aspire* (Appadurai, 2004). We also highlight how the contributions in this volume engage with and advance these debates.

Youth as a Social Category

Youth culture studies often treat youth as a fixed age group or developmental stage based on Western norms (Durham, 2004; Christiansen et al., 2006). Anthropologists have long challenged such universal definitions of childhood and youth as purely biological (Mead, 1928; Evans-Pritchard, 1940). According to Durham (2004), an essentialist view of youth neglects the question of who is considered a youth, under what circumstances, and with what implications. Based on her study in Botswana, Durham (2004) argues that "youth" is not a fixed or stable identity but rather a socially constructed and contextually deployed category that reflects shifting power relations, moral judgments, and political strategies (see also Twum-Danso Imoh, 2019).

Following Durham (2004), the edited volume of Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh (2006) highlights the fluid and contested nature of generational categories like youth. In their introduction, they argue that youth is not simply age-based but a transitional social position—both a state of being and becoming. While *social becoming* emphasizes how youth are shaped by external forces—such as norms, power structures, and generational hierarchies—*social being* focuses on their subjective experiences, agency, and aspirations (Christiansen et al., 2006). This perspective balances youth agency with the structural constraints they face, offering a nuanced alternative to studies that either overstate their autonomy or overlook their capacity to shape their futures (see also Ungruhe et al., 2019). To understand youth's social role, it is crucial to examine

their self-perceptions and future aspirations as well as their interactions within larger societal frameworks (Christiansen et al., 2006).

Fokwang (2016) shares a similar definition, highlighting the structural dimension of youth. According to him, youth refers "to a category of structurally dependent persons—that is, individuals who have been unsuccessful in setting up independent households and therefore are somehow dependent on parents or extended kin for socioeconomic support" (pp. 212–213). While emphasizing structural dependency, Fokwang (2016) clarifies that this does not equate to powerlessness; rather, it denotes a relational status of dependence on "social adults," who are defined as individuals with decision-making power and the ability to meet both their own and others' material needs. Fokwang's (2016) emphasis on structural dependency complements Christiansen et al.'s (2006) view of youth as simultaneously social beings and becomings, shaped by constraints yet capable of meaningful action. This argument is echoed in other studies that highlight youths' ability to actively carve out spaces for agency and engage strategically with structural constraints, transforming them into opportunities (Macamo, 2017; Steuer & Engeler, 2017).

In this special issue, we build on these insights and approach youth not as a fixed biological or chronological category but as a socially constructed, context-dependent, and transitional position marked by both structural dependency and generative agency. This approach moves beyond universalist life-stage models and instead focuses on the fluid, negotiated, and contingent nature of youth in the Cameroonian context. The article in this volume by Chancelyne Wulseh Yein further contributes to the theoretical discussion on youth and adulthood by illustrating how return migration serves as a pathway to socially recognized adulthood in Cameroon. Drawing on Erikson's (1963; Erikson & Erikson, 1998) psychosocial development model and Christiansen et al.'s (2006) concept of youth as both social being and becoming, Yein shows that adulthood is not simply a matter of age or economic independence but is achieved through investing in local development, particularly in the capacities of youth struggling to make a future. Through detailed case studies of return migrants and their youth beneficiaries, she demonstrates how returnees use their transnational experiences to transfer not just financial capital but also social remittances—skills, values, and aspirations—that empower youth in Cameroon. These returnees serve as role models and development actors, helping local youth envision and pursue future trajectories. In doing so, Yein reframes successful return migration as not just economic mobility but also a social and moral passage into adulthood, offering a powerful example of how generational categories are contextually constructed and negotiated.

Making a Future

The papers in this volume draw on the conceptual framework of future-making developed by Pelican and Heiss (2014), which also underpinned our collaborative research and teaching program. In their introduction to the special issue "'Making a Future' in Contemporary Africa," Pelican and Heiss (2014) have argued for shifting attention from "the future" as a static object to "future-making" as an ongoing process; as they note, "[…] people all around the world have a past, live in the present, and head into a future" (p. 7). Hence, future-making is a universal human task. Moreover, they emphasize that the future is not merely imagined but "[…] confronted and constructed through action, in a back-and-forth process between actors and their environment" (Pelican & Heiss, 2014, p. 7), with the environment here understood broadly. How people envision and pursue their future is informed by socioeconomic, cultural, and historical conditions and involves cognitive processes of planning and decision-making. To capture these dynamics, Pelican and Heiss (2014) devised an analytical grid that has guided several contributions to this volume, especially in relation to conditions of uncertainty, the role of different forms of capital, and cognitive processes.

Similar to Pelican and Heiss (2014), Steuer and Engeler (2017) examined future-making in Africa, focusing on young university graduates. They distinguish two general approaches: a positive perspective that foregrounds actors' creative capacities by focusing on aspiration, imagination, and hope (Appadurai, 2004; Crapanzano, 2004; Kleist & Thorsen, 2017) and a more pragmatic perspective that highlights the challenges of planning a future under conditions of poverty and

extreme uncertainty (Bourdieu, 1977; Johnson-Hanks, 2005). This distinction is particularly instructive as it resonates with Pelican and Heiss's (2014) framework by showing that envisioning and constructing a future are not separate processes but closely interconnected. At the same time, the two approaches differ in emphasis: whereas Steuer and Engeler (2017) describe futures as "elusive," foregrounding university graduates' hopes and life plans, Pelican and Heiss (2014) place greater emphasis on the pragmatic dimensions of future-making, such as mobilizing resources, overcoming obstacles, and acting under uncertainty. The contributions in this volume engage with both aspects, addressing the interplay of aspiration and constraint in the context of future-making.

Since the launch of our collaborative research and teaching program in 2018, new studies in the anthropology of the future have emerged (e.g., Bryant & Knight, 2019; Haug, 2020; Aalders & Müller-Mahn, 2025). Several of these works pay closer attention to the role of the environment or emphasize hope as a key element of future-making. While these contributions significantly enrich the broader debate, they are less directly relevant to the research underpinning this special issue.

Acting Under Uncertainty and the Role of Social Capital

In contexts of uncertainty, such as in Cameroon, where resources are scarce and unevenly distributed, social action, including planning and decision-making, tends to be more opportunistic and less coherent than in more stable environments. This has also been demonstrated in Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) studies on the effects of capitalism on 1960s Algerian society and in Jennifer Johnson-Hanks's (2002, 2005) research on motherhood and marriage strategies among educated Beti women in southern Cameroon.

Drawing on these works and the case studies presented in the special issue they edited, Pelican and Heiss (2014) emphasize that the ability to confront one's future is contingent on the economic and social means available—resources that depend on one's position in the social structure. As several contributions in this special issue highlight, social capital plays a particularly crucial role. Defined by Bourdieu as the value of belonging to a group and gaining recognition through social ties, social capital must be actively maintained through exchange and investment (Bourdieu, 1986). Its worth depends on access to networks and the capital—economic, cultural, or symbolic—embedded within them. In contexts lacking formal social security systems, social networks become vital.

Lotta Luna Schütt's article in this volume highlights the pivotal role of social capital in the future-making of Cameroonian youth. Her research contributes to the discussion of resources for acting under uncertainty by showing how civic engagement in Home Town Associations allows young Cameroonians—especially students and recent graduates—to access and accumulate social, cultural, symbolic, and human capital.[2] In a volatile context with limited formal employment opportunities, Schütt demonstrates how youth strategically participate in the Home Town Associations' activities—taking on leadership roles, managing projects, and making their contributions visible—to gain recognition from senior members. While a minimum level of economic and, crucially, cultural capital is often required to enter these spaces, Schütt shows that sustained engagement enables youth to expand their resource base over time. By focusing on local civic networks rather than international migration, her work underscores how young people navigate uncertainty and scarcity by investing in community-based structures that provide both material opportunities and pathways to socially recognized adulthood.

Extended family relations constitute a crucial form of social capital that can both enable and constrain young people's capacity and autonomy to make a future. Individuals act within community networks, performing roles, sharing values, and making decisions shaped by collective norms (Pelican & Heiss, 2014). These relations can either support agency by providing resources and guidance or limit it through obligations and potential sanctions. In the African context, people constantly negotiate their social ties, balancing personal

[2] Home Town Associations (HTAs) are cultural associations whose members belong to a specific ethnic group or place of origin and together form a translocal community. Their activities typically focus on preserving cultural traditions while also supporting the social and economic development of their home regions or communities.

aspirations with moral duties and deciding whom to support or disappoint. This tension is especially pronounced in contexts of scarcity and volatility (Pelican & Heiss, 2014).

Dana Elena Harms's contribution deepens the discussion on social capital by focusing on family and social relations, which include both nuclear and extended family as well as broader social networks. She argues that access to the labor market and to positions of power are often mediated through these networks. However, she emphasizes that such relationships are governed by a logic of reciprocity. While social ties offer critical support in achieving long-term goals, continued access to this support requires ongoing investment, which in some cases (notably in extended family relations) can become burdensome. This dynamic creates a system of mutual dependence, which has been described by von Benda-Beckman and von Benda-Beckman (2007) as a "vicious cycle" of social security.

The findings by Harms resonate with the chapter of Anna Wölki, which also highlights the dual role of the family as both a resource and an obstacle in the process of future-making. Through the case of Cedric, a deported migrant, Wölki shows how family dynamics shape reintegration experiences. Initially, Cedric's return to Cameroon was met with disappointment from his family, who perceived his failed migration as a blow to their social status. However, as Wölki illustrates, some family members later mobilized resources to help restore Cedric's reputation and standing within the community—demonstrating how familial support can shift in response to collective interests tied to status and social recognition.

Despite focusing on different demographic groups and distinct turning points in their life trajectories, these studies reveal a shared insight: familial influence—both supportive and constraining—plays a pivotal role in how people navigate critical life decisions. This marks a significant contribution, as much of the existing literature tends to treat future-making as a predominantly individual pursuit (Alber, 2016). Families provide material and emotional support that facilitates future-making but their expectations can also restrict autonomy. These dynamics surfaced across all three contributions (Harms, Schütt, Wölki), though their forms vary with context.

Cognitive Processes and Vital Conjunctures

Pelican and Heiss (2014) emphasize the importance of cognitive processes in future-making. These processes shape how people reflect on uncertain circumstances and devise suitable strategies to cope with risks. Earlier studies provide useful perspectives on this dimension. Pierre Bourdieu (1977), for example, differentiates between more or less coherent forms of planning, while Johnson-Hanks (2005, 2006) shows that in contexts like Cameroon, where social structures are fragile, women often abandon deliberate long-term planning in favor of what she calls *judicious opportunism*. This mode of decision-making enables actors to remain flexible and respond tactically to emerging opportunities when faced with uncertainty (Johnson-Hanks, 2005).

Brice Stapelfeldt's article in this volume contributes to the discussion on cognitive processes in future-making by examining how Cameroonian musicians and performing artists navigate an artistic field shaped by state neglect, postcolonial dependencies, and the repression of critical expression. Through case studies of artists at different stages of their careers, he shows how success hinges on the ability to manage uncertainty and reconcile conflicting expectations in both local and global art fields. Stapelfeldt introduces the metaphor of "walking the fine line" to describe how artists tactically align with dominant national conceptions of art and professionalism—often temporarily—to avoid political backlash while pursuing long-term goals such as international mobility and the aspiration to return as art educators or development actors. This strategy highlights the importance of flexibility, timing, and calculated engagement with power structures in a context where institutional support is limited and norms and standards of "good" art conflict among local and international stakeholders.

Building on Johnson-Hanks' (2002) concept of *vital conjunctures*, what it means to make a future can unfold across different temporal horizons, whether short- or long-term. Vital conjunctures are moments of transition in a person's life—such as motherhood, education, marriage, graduation, or migration—when new possibilities arise and life-altering decisions must be made. Marked by uncertainty and potential, they constitute key moments in young people's lives, requiring strategic responses. During such moments,

imagined futures and identities not only guide and motivate action but also shape the horizon of the conjuncture itself (Johnson-Hanks, 2002). What counts as a "good" or "better future" may vary across individuals and groups. Yet under conditions of uncertainty, the distant future often appears too difficult to predict. Thus, coherent future-planning is more feasible in stable environments and with access to sufficient means.

The paper of Johanna Merz engages directly with Johnson-Hanks' (2002) concept of vital conjunctures. While the latter developed the model in relation to Beti women—who often occupy relatively privileged positions due to their close alignment with the ruling elite—Merz applies the concept to Mbororo women, whose life experiences are strongly shaped by ethnic and social marginalization. For Beti women, key decisions typically concern education, marriage, and employment and result in trajectories that may diverge from Western assumptions of linear and predictable life courses. While Merz confirms Johnson-Hanks' (2002) analysis, she also introduces a fresh angle. Unlike the relatively privileged Beti women, Mbororo women confront restrictive religious and cultural norms that constrain both their autonomy and mobility. As Merz as well as Deli and Mbuh in this volume demonstrate, the pursuit of education, employment, and socioeconomic independence place Mbororo women at vital conjunctures, compelling them to make choices with far-reaching consequences. Although these situations resemble those described by Johnson-Hanks (2002), Mbororo women devise strategies that break with established pathways, pushing beyond conventional aspirations in ways that are at once challenging and novel.

Cultural Norms and the Capacity to Aspire

Future-making strategies are deeply shaped by cultural norms and practices, which can both enable and constrain action. Pelican and Heiss (2014) illustrate how cultural frameworks—such as magic, divination, or values that promote risk-taking—help actors anticipate outcomes and take decisions under uncertainty. Such practices operate as cultural tools that inform social action by providing a sense of direction, anticipation, and orientation toward desirable futures. At the same time, cultural norms can be restrictive, requiring actors to navigate competing individual goals and community expectations.

Appadurai (2004) captures this dynamic through his concept of *the capacity to aspire*, understood as a socially conditioned and culturally informed ability to envision and pursue desired futures. This capacity depends not only on having aspirations but also on access to navigational resources—knowledge, experiences, and norms—that enable individuals to map pathways that go beyond the known. Appadurai (2004) makes clear that the capacity to aspire is culturally embedded and future-oriented, thereby challenging the notion of culture as inherently backward-looking.

Based on his analysis of slum dwellers in urban India, Appadurai (2004) argues that those with greater social and economic capital can more effectively translate aspirations into long-term strategies, while the poor may lack the experiential ground to imagine and pursue alternatives. Drawing on Macamo (2017) and the findings of the studies featured in this volume (e.g., Schütt, Yein, Wölki), we hold that what sustains the capacity to aspire and practices of future-making under uncertain conditions is not just access to resources but the very act of navigating uncertainty through situated, meaningful action. It is this ongoing practice of making sense of and responding to risk—grounded in cultural knowledge, social positioning, and cognitive strategies—that enables actors to imagine and pursue aspirational futures. In this sense, action itself becomes the condition for further action and aspiration, confirming Macamo's (2017) insight that it is through ongoing action in the present that new futures are made possible.

The three papers in this volume on minority groups (Alawadi, Deli & Mbuh, Merz) extend these debates by examining how urban migrants from minority communities in Cameroon, specifically the Montagnards and the Mbororo, actively shape their futures. These contributions highlight how migration and education serve as preferred strategies of future-making, particularly among marginalized women and youth. In line with the arguments of Heiss and Pelican (2014) and Macamo (2017), the papers demonstrate that Montagnard youth and Mbororo women are not

passive recipients of change. Rather, they actively engage in shaping their own and their communities' futures by pursuing new, often risky pathways—frequently in defiance of entrenched cultural norms and moral expectations.

The chapter by Alawadi Zelao provides a particularly compelling analysis of how Montagnard youth invest in education as a future-oriented navigational capacity—something their communities have historically been lagging behind yet which they see as key to unlocking personal fulfilment and collective advancement. Drawing on Sen's (1992) capabilities approach, Alawadi illustrates how migration and education intersect to expand opportunities and enhance aspirations. For Montagnard youth, urban migration—temporary or permanent—creates access to freedoms often unavailable in rural areas. They view education not only as a means for individual advancement but also as a strategy to transform their home regions into environments that support well-being and future-making.

The Contributions

The special issue comprises methodological and thematic contributions.

It opens with a collective methodological reflection that integrates the perspectives of students and lecturers involved in the collaborative research and teaching program *Urban Youths' Perspectives on Making a Future in Cameroon and/or Abroad.* The authors critically examine the possibilities and challenges of collaborative knowledge production across different institutional and national contexts. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's (2004, 1990) concepts of *hybridity* and *Third Space*, the paper explores the positionalities of the diverse research team members, the power dynamics between them, the tensions that arose during the research, and how they were resolved. It also reflects on how these processes shaped the research outcomes.

The methodological reflection presents separate accounts from students and lecturers, highlighting the importance of acknowledging and negotiating power asymmetries within collaborative research. By combining auto-ethnographic insights with engaged fieldwork, the contribution demonstrates that joint knowledge production is both possible and productive when participants actively communicate, negotiate, and co-create understanding. The outcomes underscore that methodological reflexivity and sustained interaction are essential for generating knowledge that is socially relevant, ethically grounded, and capable of challenging conventional hierarchies in research collaborations.

The thematic contributions are organized into three clusters. The first examines the role of social capital and professional networks in accessing urban job markets. The second focuses on how migration pathways can expand or diminish opportunities and shape future-making at both individual and collective levels. The third set investigates the strategies of minority groups, who face long histories of marginalization compounded by ongoing violent conflicts in their regions.

Theme 1: Making a Future at Home

The first thematic section focuses on future-making at home. It explores how youth based in Yaoundé navigate uncertainty and limited state support by engaging in grassroots initiatives that foster agency, social mobility, and future-making. Across the contributions in this section, youth emerge not as passive recipients of development but as active participants who negotiate professional and social expectations, drawing on the support of social networks, family ties, and broader community relations. Many also engage in artistic, civic, or transnational activities, including voluntary work, as ways of acting in the present to prepare for the future. Together, the articles highlight the diverse strategies through which young people create spaces of possibility, reshape local development, and cultivate meaningful lives by leveraging their networks and negotiating power relations.

The paper of **Brice Stapelfeldt** (chapter 3) examines the future aspirations, strategies, and grassroots innovations of musicians and performing artists in Yaoundé as they navigate decades of state neglect and the authoritarian suppression of critical artistic expression. Despite the significance of these constraints, the challenges and strategic responses of artists in Cameroon have remained largely under-explored—a gap this article addresses by offering a rich and nuanced account of artistic agency and the power relations that define the art field in postcolonial Cameroon.

Through case studies of three artists at different stages of their careers—poetry slammer, musician, and writer Free-T; dancer, singer, and rapper Felicité; and jazz musician and record label founder Ruben Binam—alongside interviews with national and international institutional actors, the article illustrates how artists strategically pursue recognition, resources, and autonomy.

Drawing on the notion of *elusive futures* (Steuer & Engeler, 2017), which foregrounds future imaginaries and uncertainty, as well as the concept of the *global field of art* (Buchholz, 2016) and an understanding of youth as both social being and becoming (Christiansen et al, 2006), Stapelfeldt argues that success significantly hinges on the artists' ability to navigate conflicting institutional conceptions of art and professionalism as well as achieving some form of international mobility and adopting the role of an arts educator and/or development actor upon return. This strategy, which he describes as "walking the fine line," requires artists to either temporarily align with or simultaneously respond to the divergent artistic norms and standards of the local and global field of art. A second key finding of the article is that grassroots initiatives, such as Binam's *Alizés Équateur Records* and other artist-led associations, are essential strategies for countering local institutional neglect and the competitive demands of the global art scene.

Lotta Luna Schütt (chapter 4) explores how young, educated Cameroonians navigate the uncertainty of their futures through active participation in Home Town Associations (HTAs). Moving beyond traditional portrayals of HTAs as domains for elite adult members, Schütt foregrounds the agency of youth—particularly high school and university graduates—as they engage in civic life to build their futures.

Through case studies of the Kom Cultural and Development Association (KOMCUDA) and the Boyo Student Association (BOSTAS) alongside accounts of the experiences of youth members, Schütt offers valuable insight into the organizational structures, power dynamics, and developmental activities of HTAs. Her research sheds light on how young members leverage HTA engagement to accumulate various forms of capital (social, cultural, symbolic, and human), including access to scholarships and job opportunities made available by senior HTA members.

While HTAs are often analyzed within transnational or migration-related frameworks, Schütt's article shifts the focus to their significance for youth agency, civic participation, and future-making within local contexts. Drawing on Pelican and Heiss's (2014) concept of future-making, Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital forms, and the concept of *human capital* (Cornali, 2017) as well as the understanding of youth as social becomings (Christiansen et al., 2006), she argues that HTAs enhance the future-making capacities of young Cameroonian graduates and serve as key platforms where youth "do adulthood" by engaging in community development—a responsibility often associated with transnational elites.

A key finding of the study is that by managing projects, finances, editorial work, and events and by taking on leadership roles, young Cameroonians not only gain valuable professional and interpersonal skills and experiences but also forge pathways to social mobility and personal growth—even in the face of uncertainty and limited opportunities. Schütt's work makes an important contribution to youth and development studies, challenging narrow, economistic views of development and emphasizing the transformative potential of grassroots civic engagement.

Dana Elena Harms's paper (chapter 5) explores the future-making strategies of university-educated Cameroonians navigating uncertainty in urban contexts. The paper contributes to the growing literature on uncertainty and social action in contemporary Africa by asking: What does it mean to hold a place in society, and how does one attain it? How do young, educated individuals secure futures for themselves and their families in the face of economic and social instability?

The paper draws on the theoretical frameworks of future-making (Pelican & Heiss 2014), particularly vital conjunctures (Johnson-Hanks, 2002) and judicious opportunism (Johnson-Hanks, 2005, 2006). Responding to recent calls to integrate social relations into these frameworks, Harms incorporates the role of social capital and relational dynamics into her analysis. Based on 24 in-depth interviews, primarily with women, the paper offers rich empirical insight through two detailed case studies.

A key finding is the contingent and ambivalent nature of social relations in Cameroon's uncertain landscape. While family and social networks provide critical support, they can also shift unpredictably, transforming from sources of security into obligations or risks. The study further highlights the unique pressures faced by women, who often must juggle both short- and long-term planning to secure not only their own futures but also those of their children. Economic instability and limited social protections often necessitate a prioritization of immediate survival strategies over long-term aspirations.

Theme 2: Migration and Future-Making

This section brings together contributions that focus on the role of migration in future-making, examining how individuals navigate life-changing decisions and transitions. Across the studies, (return) migration—whether voluntary, involuntary or cyclical —emerges as a key mechanism through which (young) Cameroonians seek to enhance their social mobility and positively shape their futures. The first paper focuses on healthcare professionals who decided to return after gaining specialized training and work experience abroad. In contrast, the second paper focuses on young male returnees in their twenties and thirties who returned prematurely through assisted voluntary schemes, individual initiatives, or deportation, often following disrupted migration trajectories. Together, these cases highlight the various challenges of international migration and the differing impacts of "forced" versus "voluntary" return on future aspirations. The third paper shows how return migrants contribute through their investments, knowledge, values, and skills, playing a vital role in local human development and youth empowerment. Across all contributions, the outcomes illustrate how physical mobility is closely interrelated with social mobility, functioning as complementary strategies through which young people navigate the transition to adulthood and actively engage in making a future at home.

The first paper by **Afu Isaiah Kunock** and **Awah Kum Tchouaffi** (chapter 6) explores return migration among Cameroonian health professionals who initially relocated to high-income Global North countries and economically prosperous states in the Global South, such as Saudi Arabia. It examines both the drivers of these health professionals' return and its effects on Cameroon's healthcare sector. Employing a qualitative, anthropological approach, it uses Pelican and Heiss's (2014) making a future framework alongside the locally rooted concept of bushfalling (Alpes, 2011; Gärtner, 2025; Nyamnjoh, 2011) to capture how returnees envision and enact better futures at home. The study makes two important contributions:

First, by focusing on returning medical professionals, the study directly challenges the conventional brain-drain narrative; these individuals, having acquired specialized skills and experience with state-of-the-art medical technologies abroad, return as more capable practitioners whose expertise is critically needed in Cameroon. This demonstrates that skilled migration is not inevitably a one-way loss for the origin country.

Second, through the "making a future" lens—which emphasizes concrete actions toward life-goals beyond mere economic gain—the research shows that returnees prioritize self-actualization and family well-being, both of which they believe can only be fully realized in their home context. This finding problematizes the notion of "greener pastures" abroad, instead suggesting that, for some migrants, true opportunity lies in the interplay of migration and return. Moreover, their deliberate return with enhanced skills and resources exemplifies the local bushfalling ethos, reinforcing migration as a cyclical strategy for personal and national development.

Anna Wölki's paper (chapter 7) examines the complex realities of premature return migration among Cameroonian male migrants, focusing on those who return due to deportation, assisted "voluntary" return programs, or of their own initiative. It explores the strategies they employ to navigate the aftermath of failed migration attempts as well as the family's perspective on their failed migratory attempt, addressing a significant gap in the literature. While few studies have investigated this issue in Cameroon (see Wanki et al., 2022, 2023), this article contributes by specifically focusing on the Francophone region, complementing earlier research such as Alpes's (2012, 2017) work, which centered on female returnees from the Anglophone region.

Using the theoretical lenses of making a future (Pelican & Heiss, 2014), bushfalling (Alpes 2011; Gärtner, 2025; Nyamnjoh, 2011), and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), Wölki demonstrates that the social status of return migrants is fluid and largely shaped by their position within social networks. Among different forms of capital, "social capital" emerges as the most influential as it amplifies the value of other resources, including economic capital. This finding challenges conventional assumptions that prioritize economic capital and often overlook the importance of social networks and family ties, especially within assisted voluntary return programs of international organizations and governments.

A second key finding highlights the interdependence of individual and family reputation. Through the case study of Cedric, Wölki shows how his return affected not only his own social standing but also that of his family. In response, Cedric's family collectively worked to preserve their social status and counter the stigma of deportation. This illustrates that making a future is not solely an individual effort but a collective process involving extended family and social networks. Support from both his family and friends, as well as his involvement in a youth association that provided a context for meaningful action within the community, played a crucial role in fostering solidarity and resisting social exclusion.

Chancelyne Wulseh Yein (chapter 8) offers a compelling analysis of how Cameroonian return migrants contribute to development in their home communities, particularly by shaping the aspirations and expanding the opportunities available to young people. She draws attention to the often-overlooked significance of social remittances—the transfer of skills, knowledge, and values—which she argues are just as essential to development as financial remittances.

Through case studies of returnees such as Flora, Oliver, and Evelyne, and youth beneficiaries like Henry and Dickson, the study addresses a notable gap in migration research and policy, which has traditionally prioritized economic remittances (Nkongho, 2019). Yein vividly demonstrates how migrant investments, particularly in education, healthcare, and charitable foundations, create tangible opportunities for young people, who often see their present positions as stepping stones toward their desired futures and these returnees as role models.

Drawing on Erikson's (1963; Erikson & Erikson, 1998) psychosocial model of development, Pelican and Heiss's (2014) making a future framework, and the concept of judicious opportunism (Johnson-Hanks, 2005), Yein develops a striking metaphor: return migrants as individuals who have completed the transition to adulthood. This process, she shows, involves navigating and overcoming significant socio-economic and cultural challenges both at home and abroad, seizing available opportunities, and ultimately returning as responsible actors who invest in others—an essential marker of adult status in Cameroonian society.

In this way, Yein argues that migration is not only a route to economic betterment but also a pathway to upward social mobility and recognized adulthood. A key finding of her study is that return migrants' contributions—through their investments, knowledge, values, and skills—play a vital role in local human development and youth empowerment.

Collectively, the articles provide a nuanced perspective on how Cameroonian youth and return migrants contribute to local transformation through creative and civic initiatives, demonstrating that grassroots agency plays a vital role in shaping both individual futures and broader developmental trajectories.

Theme 3: Minority Groups and Future-Making

In the concluding section, introduced by Michaela Pelican and Anna Wölki (chapter 9), we turn to the migration experiences and future-making strategies of members of marginalized minority groups who have moved to urban centers in southern Cameroon in pursuit of education and employment. Among them are the Montagnards from the Far North and the Mbororo from the North West and South West regions. Both are ethnic minorities whose ways of life, economic activities, and religious affiliations differ markedly from those of the majority populations in their regions and whose histories have been marked by enduring social exclusion and political marginalization.

As the chapters in this section show, youth and women view migration and education as vital strategies for

navigating economic, ecological, and social challenges, opening pathways previously unavailable in their home contexts. Yet urban life introduces new hardships: rising living costs, linguistic and cultural barriers, and tensions with family and community expectations. By negotiating these challenges, many embrace their journeys as collective endeavors to broaden community horizons, inadvertently driving social change.

At the center of the chapter by **Alawadi Zelao** (chapter 10) are the Montagnards, a group of ethnolinguistic communities residing in the Mandara Mountains, a remote and harsh border region with Nigeria. Largely Christian and adherents of African traditional religions, they have experienced long-standing social exclusion and marginalization by the predominantly Muslim Fulani majority population and the Cameroonian state. In recent years, their region has also been affected by the Boko Haram insurgency, further exacerbating their vulnerability.

In his chapter, Alawadi focuses on Montagnard youth who have migrated to cities like Yaoundé and Douala in search of work. Their migration is facilitated by pre-existing ethnic and social networks, including support from community associations and church groups. Drawing on Sen's (1992) concept of capability and Appadurai's (2004) capacity to aspire, Alawadi analyzes how these young migrants invest in adult education and mobility as ways to overcome the structural disadvantages they face. He also highlights how Montagnard migrants invest not only in their personal advancement but also in their home communities—particularly by supporting local educational facilities. Alawadi interprets this as both a form of resistance to state neglect and a central component of their individual and collective future-making strategies

The subsequent two chapters focus on Mbororo women who have migrated to Yaoundé for educational and economic reasons. They highlight not only the challenges these women face in pursuing aspirations beyond traditional gender roles but also the transformative impacts of their trajectories on social relations and gender norms within Mbororo society.

The paper by **Deli Tize Teri** and **Wendon Gillian Mbuh** (chapter 11) explores the experiences of Mbororo women who have relocated from rural areas predominantly in the North West region to Yaoundé, where they engage in economic activities to support themselves and their families. Similar to the Montagnards, the Mbororo are an ethnic minority who generally stick to themselves. Traditionally, they are cattle pastoralists with a long history of seasonal mobility. While Mbororo women initially contributed to the household economy by selling milk and dairy products, these economic activities subsided when the Mbororo started to settle down and began to emphasize their Islamic religious identity. As the pastoral economy shifted focus from milk to meat production, women's roles transitioned more towards domestic responsibilities, including childcare and household maintenance.

However, as Deli and Mbuh show in this chapter, this trend has changed with Mbororo families moving to the city, where they are faced with rising urban living costs. To help themselves, their husbands, and their children, Mbororo women have re-entered the public and economic spheres and engage in small business activities, such as preparing and selling ethnic foods, tailoring, or trading in African fabric. They often target ethnic niches, catering to customers from their own communities who value their cultural specificity. With the advent of the Anglophone conflict in the Northwest and Southwest regions in 2017, Mbororo mobility to nearby urban centers has increased. Amid displacement and loss, an increasing number of Mbororo families depend on the income-generating activities of women to sustain their livelihoods.

Deli and Mbuh note that many of the women interviewed for this chapter have received encouragement and practical support through community organizations that promote women's economic empowerment via training programs. Yet these women continue to face the weight of religious and cultural expectations that constrain their economic strategies and aspirations. In navigating these boundaries, they create new pathways, gradually reshaping gender roles and expanding economic opportunities for themselves and future generations.

Building on this theme, **Johanna Merz** (chapter 12) focuses on a distinct but growing group: Mbororo women with secondary or higher education who have moved to Yaoundé to pursue further studies and professional careers. Using Johnson-Hanks' (2002)

concept of vital conjunctures, Merz examines two key transitional moments in their lives—graduating from high school and from university—when women must navigate competing pressures to pursue education, seek employment, or marry. Given the Mbororo's long-standing reluctance to formal education, these women are pioneers. Since the 1990s, the Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association (MBOSCUDA) has actively encouraged Mbororo parents to send their children—both boys and girls—to school through promoting Anglo-Arabic schools and offering educational and professional scholarship programs for Mbororo girls. Several of the women Merz interviewed were beneficiaries of these initiatives.

Merz argues that the women's educational success often depends on the understanding and support of their parents, which is not always guaranteed. Furthermore, by moving to the city and pursuing a career, many have developed a growing desire for autonomy from patriarchal authority—an aspiration that has intensified after university graduation. Merz highlights that education functions as a double-edged sword for Mbororo women. On the one hand, it broadens their horizons and expands their scope for action by providing knowledge and empowerment. On the other hand, it creates new barriers, including cultural constraints, religious conservatism, and negative stereotypes. In particular, higher levels of education can complicate the prospects of marrying within their community and of building lives that reconcile personal aspirations with communal expectations. As a result, these women explore new models of family life, sometimes delaying marriage or marrying outside their ethnic group.

Through her analysis of Mbororo women's vital conjunctures at high school and university graduation, Merz demonstrates how they redefine what it means to be a "modern" urban woman, working to normalize educational and professional careers for Mbororo women and setting important precedents for the future. ■

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2. (A)symmetry in Collaborative Research[1]

Jonathan NGEH, Michaela PELICAN, AFU Isaiah Kunock, Dana Elena HARMS, Brice STAPELFELDT, Eugene TINGWEY, Anna WÖLKI, Guylaine Nzouenkeu YAANOU, Chancelyne Wulseh YEIN

Figure 2: Group picture in front of Anthropology Department, University of Yaoundé 1. © Michaela Pelican, 2018

Abstract

Academic research plays a significant role in knowledge production, and universities and funding organizations are central to this process. An underlying goal in the 2018 "Making a Future" collaborative project – involving students and staff from four universities in Cameroon and Germany – was to achieve symmetry in research and knowledge production. Our aim in this chapter is to revisit this goal. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of *hybridity* and *Third Space*, the paper explores the positionalities of the diverse research team members, the power dynamics between them, the tensions that arose during the research collaboration, and how they were resolved. It also reflects on how these processes shaped the research outcomes. By emphasizing reflexivity and collective authorship, this paper advances an approach that frames difference not as a barrier but as a productive space for dialogue and learning, supporting symmetrical collaboration and the co-production of knowledge.

[1] This article is a revised and expanded version of an earlier piece originally published as "Towards Parity in Knowledge Production within the Framework of North–South Collaboration" (Pelican & Ngeh, 2025). The current version includes substantive revisions and incorporates the perspectives of additional co-authors.

Academic research holds a near monopoly on knowledge production, making it essential to scrutinize not only research findings but also the institutional and methodological conditions that shape them. The project *Urban Youths' Perspectives on Making a Future in Cameroon and/or Abroad* embraced a collaborative approach aimed at confronting power asymmetries and centering the voices of Cameroonian youth. Building on a long-standing partnership between the universities of Cologne and Yaoundé 1, it sought to ensure that student researchers—many of whom belonged to the demographic under study—could meaningfully shape the process. Guided by the principle of "researching with and for people rather than on people" (Mitlin & Thompson, 1995), this approach resonates with decolonial critiques of global power dynamics (e.g., Smith, 1999; Mbembe, 2016).

This paper offers a collective methodological reflection that brings together the perspectives of students and lecturers. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's (1990, 2004) concepts of hybridity and the Third Space, the authors examine how positionalities, institutional contexts, and team dynamics shaped the research process, including moments of tension and their resolution. The separate accounts by students and lecturers underscore the need to acknowledge and negotiate power asymmetries in collaborative work. Combining auto-ethnographic reflection with engaged fieldwork, this co-authored paper demonstrates that joint knowledge production is both possible and productive when project members communicate openly and co-create understanding. We suggest that the insights generated through this collective reflection offer guidance for future student–lecturer and South–North partnerships seeking symmetry and inclusion in research collaboration.
The chapter proceeds by outlining the conceptual framework, then presents the project members' methodological reflections, and ends with concluding remarks.

Homi K. Bhabha's Hybridity and Third Space

In this methodological reflection, we draw on Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of *hybridity* and the *Third Space* as an analytical lens to retrospectively assess our efforts to foster symmetry and inclusion in research collaboration. It is important to emphasize, however, that during the project's conceptualization and implementation, our explicit aim was not to reach the Third Space – a concept we were not consciously engaging with at the time. Rather, the goal of our collaborative teaching and research project was to guide students through the process of developing and conducting a research project, while fostering mutual learning and cultural exchange among students and lecturers – and across universities in the Global South and North.

Hybridity refers to the mixing of cultures, while the concept of Third Space concerns the space developed between two poles or binarities—self /other, colonizers/colonized, etc. (Bhabha, 2004). Bhabha explains that the notion of hybridity derives from the idea of translation, understood as "a double process of decontextualization and recontextualization, first reaching out to appropriate something alien and then domesticating it" (Burke & Hsia, 2007, p. 10). Cultural translation therefore opens up the possibility for something new, while in the same process it "denies the essentialism of a prior given original or originary culture" (Bhabha, 1990, p. 211). This optimistic assessment of hybridity has been linked to the Latin American concept of *mestizaje*, which similarly celebrates processes of mixture (Wade, 2004). The concepts of Third Space, hybridity, and mestizaje have been lauded as the antidote to essentialist ideas of "race" and culture (Fernandez, 1992; Ghasemi et al., 2018).

However, both the concepts of hybridity and mestizaje have been criticized for assuming the existence of hitherto undifferentiated cultures or knowledges, which is the problem that the authors of these concepts initially sought to counter (Howell, 1996; Wade, 2004). Furthermore, Bhabha has been criticized for assuming that the Third Space consisted of symmetrical relations (Zhou & Pilcher, 2019). Zhou and Pilcher (2019) note that what eludes the conventional interpretations of the Third Space is the inherent potential for dissent and conflict in intercultural dialogue and collaboration. They conceptualize the Third Space as a "moment of intervention" (p. 5) that addresses power relations and treats conflict as a productive moment – not only to overcome, but to learn from one another. Similarly, Wolf (2000) considers reflexive ethnography to be relevant to practices of intervention in the Third Space.

A reflexive ethnography, as he explains, calls for an ethnographic writing that is open to a plurality of voices, allowing for a collective construction of knowledge.

In light of the discussion above, our analysis draws on the Third Space as a moment of intervention that is critical, participatory, and emancipatory. This allows for an intervention in the process of knowledge production at both individual and intercultural levels. The individual level refers to a moment of critical reflection that allows us to interrogate assumptions about cultural differences of self and others. The intercultural level builds on an intervention strategy that involves interrogating hierarchical structures and dominant discourses that otherize and silence postcolonial subjects and minority groups (Aijazi et al., 2021; Martin & Dandekar, 2021; Zhou & Pilcher, 2019).

The challenge here, as we also experienced in our collaborative project, is that power struggle remains an inescapable and often uncomfortable facet of intercultural dialogue and collaboration. According to Zhou and Pilcher (2019), reaching the Third Space is intricately linked to the willingness of those involved to "'descend' into the instability of the 'third space'" (p. 5). On the one hand, intercultural dialogue can unfold without crossing uncomfortable boundaries that produce otherness, allowing participants to remain in their comfort zones and thereby stay within the essentialist and polar ends of the Third Space. On the other hand, participants may choose to actively engage with dissent, descend into instability, and eventually transcend or dissolve essentialist boundaries, leading them toward the non-essentialist version of the Third Space (Holliday & Amadasi, 2019; Zhou & Pilcher, 2019).

In hindsight, viewing our research collaboration through the lens of the Third Space, we contend that, for project members to open up to one another and engage willingly with uncomfortable experiences and divergent perspectives, such openness must be established from the outset as a shared objective and a collectively endorsed way forward. In other words, aspiring to the Third Space must itself be articulated as a project goal, along with the methodological commitments this entails. This was not the case in our collaboration. As the subsequent methodological reflections by the project members show, it is therefore unsurprising that we neither pursued nor ultimately reached the Third Space.

Collaboration in North-South Research Partnership

The project informing this methodological reflection was realized in the summer of 2018. For six weeks, 12 students and five lecturers from Cameroon and Cologne conducted fieldwork in the capital Yaoundé on the subject of future-making under conditions of uncertainty. While the students formed German-Cameroonian research tandems and tackled the subject from different angles, the lecturers acted as project supervisors.[2] The student research projects focused on the strategies of young artists and journalists; the experiences of female university graduates in the labor market; the gendered trajectories of women and youth of the Mbororo and Montagnard ethnic minorities; the challenges faced by (un)successful return migrants; and the contributions to youth development by migrant investors and home town associations.

The project grew out of an initial partnership in 2007 between Michaela and colleagues of the Department of Anthropology of the University of Yaoundé 1. In 2017, Deli (University of Yaoundé 1) and Michaela (University of Cologne) developed the idea of a collaborative research project involving students from the two partner universities to conduct research in two sites: the capital Yaoundé in the francophone Center region and the city of Bamenda in the Anglophone North West. However, due to the political crisis in the Anglophone North West and South West regions, which started in 2016 and took a violent turn in October 2017 (Pelican, 2022), conducting fieldwork in Bamenda was no longer feasible. In response, Deli and Michaela decided to limit the fieldwork to Yaoundé and to open up the project to students and lecturers from other parts of Cameroon in order to accommodate different perspectives. In a back-and-forth process, they invited colleagues from the

[2] The institutions involved were the Universities of Bamenda (UoB), Cologne (UoC), Dschang (UoD), and Yaoundé 1 (UoY1). The students who participated were Guylaine Nzouenkeu Yaanou and Chancelyne Wulseh Yein (UoB); Dana Elena Harms, Johanna Merz, Eugene Tingwey, Lotta Luna Schütt, Brice Stapelfeldt and Anna Wölki (UoC); Isa Adamu and Hamza Dabo (UoD); and Awah Kum Tchouaffi and Wendon Gillian Mbuh (UoY1). The lecturers were Jonathan Ngeh (UoB), Michaela Pelican (UoC), Alawadi Zelao (UoD), and Afu Isaiah Kunock and Deli Tize Teri (UoY1).

Universities of Bamenda (Jonathan Ngeh), Dschang (Alawadi Zelao), and Yaoundé 1 (Afu Isaiah Kunock) to jointly refine the project design and bring in students from their respective institutions. The project management rested with Michaela and Deli.

The research theme of future-making was further developed based on the shared interests of the scholars involved in the study. While the project aimed to capture some of the past decade's policy changes to understand their impact on Cameroonian youth and their perspectives on the future, the study also sought to understand current role models and notions of success among urban youth in Cameroon, and their impact on return migrants and migrant remittances to the country. Importantly, the project aimed to promote collaboration and shared knowledge production among students and lecturers based in the Global South and North.

The project consisted of three phases: The first phase happened remotely and comprised preparatory seminars at the partner universities, which were adapted to their respective curricular requirements. While the students at the University of Cologne had the opportunity to attend two seminars geared towards regional, thematic, and methodological preparation, the Cameroonian partner universities could not accommodate the research preparation in their curricular structures. The supervisors and students thus had to make time beside their regular coursework to discuss selected readings and develop research ideas. To build a joint basis for the research collaboration, students in Cameroon and Germany were asked to write summaries of selected readings and share them in the group. They were also required to develop their research ideas in the form of a proposal and share it with all project members. Furthermore, students were encouraged to read all the proposals, identify possible research partners, and explore possibilities of working together through one-on-one exchanges via email and WhatsApp. Importantly, German students were encouraged to seek research partnerships with their Cameroonian peers and vice versa.

In the second phase of the project, the students and lecturers teamed up in Yaoundé for a period of six weeks to finalize their project ideas, conduct empirical fieldwork, analyze the data collected, and share their preliminary findings with academic audiences and key stakeholders. This phase kick-started with an intensive five-day seminar that enabled Cameroonian and German students and lecturers to get to know one another, engage with the project's thematic and theoretical framework, advance discussions on an intercultural level, and finalize organizational arrangements for practical fieldwork. The seminar was followed by a four-week period dedicated to ethnographic fieldwork, during which the students worked in Cameroonian-German research partnerships. They had the opportunity to meet with their supervisors on a regular basis and sometimes be accompanied to the field. After the fieldwork phase was completed, the data collected was analyzed in a five-day workshop. Students and lecturers discussed and synthesized their research findings and prepared a joint research report. The student projects' preliminary findings were presented at a public conference organized at the University of Yaoundé 1 and also disseminated on national TV through the participation of selected students in a popular TV show.[3]

Importantly, the project enjoyed the support of the Faculty of Arts, Letters and Social Sciences (FALSH) of the University of Yaoundé 1, which acted as the host university. They facilitated the German partners' visa procedures, welcomed project members, and continuously provided infrastructural support, such as halls for seminars and the public conference. Funding for the research collaboration was provided by the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Cologne. The funding covered all research expenses for the Cameroonian and German partners, including transport, accommodation, and fieldwork allowances. All students received the same fieldwork allowances, a decision that aimed at ensuring that they had equal financial resources. The lecturers received a moderate honorarium for their supervisory work. Due to

[3] Thanks to one of our student's personal connections to the Cameroon radio and television station (CRTV), we were invited to present the topic and preliminary findings of our collaborative research project in a live broadcast of the morning talk show "Hello Cameroon" on 30.08.2018. Interviewed by the talk show moderator Gwendoline Egbe, Lotta Luna Schütt (UoC) and Hamza Dabo (UoD) discussed Cameroonian youths' perspectives on making a future.

bureaucratic requirements, the project's accounting responsibility rested with the German partner.[4]

Project Members' Positionalities and Methodological Reflections

As it is typical of academic research projects, ours went through different phases starting with the conception of the project through its execution to the completion process. While Michaela and Deli initiated the collaboration and were involved at the earliest stage, the other project members joined the team at different points in the process. The presence of some project members at the start of the project through to its completion placed them in a position to exert more influence on the research and subsequent outcome. Similarly, the University of Cologne and the University of Yaoundé 1 had more influence than the other partner universities by virtue of the oversight responsibilities which they enjoyed as funders and hosts of the project. Finally, the relationship between students and lecturers was also hierarchical because of the very different roles that universities in general assign to students and academic staff. For example, the reports of students were evaluated and graded by their supervisors, an indication of the influence they have over students.

In terms of perceived power and privilege, our social positions as lecturers or students differ because of our ascribed racial backgrounds (European and African), citizenship, gender, sexual orientation, age, and academic status (professor, associate professor, lecturer, instructor, and student). The circulation of power within the project took different forms, some overt and some less obvious, as we shall see later.

In the account that follows, we examine the project's power dynamics and some of the tensions we encountered. We also consider how our collaborative research approach influenced the goal of symmetry and inclusion in knowledge production. The project members' reflections are organized thematically: they begin with structural inequalities, move to tensions and risks within the project, and then address intercultural team dynamics and expectations in North–South collaboration.

Structural Inequalities

Jonathan

I was an instructor at the University of Bamenda when I joined this project in 2018. In relation to my colleagues on the project, Michaela (professor), Alawadi (associate professor), and Deli and Afu (lecturers), I was by far the most junior scholar. The positions of lecturer, associate professor, and professor in Cameroon are permanent (long-term), while that of an instructor is short-term and very insecure. I had known Michaela for a long time, which also influenced my responsibilities and the power dynamics in the project. The University of Bamenda was not initially part of the project, and my role was limited to mediation between students and the local community in Bamenda, one of the proposed field sites. About a month after my invitation to participate in the project, I suggested the inclusion of my students. I was pleased that no one objected to my suggestion, which demonstrated the flexibility of the project organizers, Deli and Michaela. Accepting it meant that the universities of Yaoundé 1 and Dschang would have to relinquish some of their student places, as the number of participants in the project was fixed: six German students and six Cameroonian students.

My late invitation to the project and the much later decision to allow students from the University of Bamenda to participate meant little time for us to prepare, select students, and review relevant literature. We could not properly integrate the project into our study program as we might have been able to do if we were present at its inception. After a discussion with my colleagues and the head of department, we agreed that the participation of our students in the project should count as their internship course—a compulsory requirement for graduation. However, my work with the students faced some roadblocks as the University of Bamenda refused to fully support our participation in the project. While my head of department endorsed the project, our application to formally participate was rejected by the university office responsible for this kind of partnerships on the grounds that the selection of the students was not transparent. This was absurd because the applications were reviewed by all five lecturers in the project and I worked closely with my head of

[4] There is a growing literature paying attention to the limitations on symmetry in research imposed by funding structures and institutional barriers; see e.g. Ayelby et al., 2022; Flint et al., 2022; Skupien & Rüffin, 2019.

department throughout the process. My head of department refused to give up and decided to let our students participate as interns in the project, a decision that was within his authority. Officially, this meant that I was allowed two visits to Yaoundé to assess the work of the students. In actuality, I needed to be present in Yaoundé throughout the duration of the project and later was berated for this by an official at the University of Bamenda.

Power asymmetry in the above example played out on two levels that affected me and my students in a negative way. As a latecomer to the project, there was very little I could do to alter it, especially in a way that could accommodate some of my needs and those of my students. This is very typical of a collaborative partnership whereby the more powerful actors set the agenda and goals and lead the process. Obviously, this was not the motive of Michaela and her students who did their very best to ensure mutual respect and symmetrical collaboration between partners throughout the project. The power asymmetry played out at the institutional level. The University of Cologne, like any other university, was primarily concerned with the interests of its students and staff and not necessarily those of the students and staff at the University of Bamenda who participated as partners in the project. Otherwise, a funding requirement for the project would require the collaboration of all partners starting at the level of inception. Internal power asymmetry within the University of Bamenda made my job in the project more difficult by creating additional challenges for me and the students. By rejecting our application to participate in the project, the university also did not acknowledge my supervisory work.

Anna

At the time of the fieldwork phase, I was an undergraduate student of Social and Cultural Anthropology in my second year at the University of Cologne. My research project focused on the strategies and challenges of unsuccessful return migrants. Based on thematic overlaps, Awah, a graduate student of Medical Anthropology at the University of Yaoundé 1, and I teamed up in a research tandem. His research project focused on successful return migrants, specifically medical staff. Afu was assigned as our supervisor during the fieldwork phase. This section reviews the success of this Cameroonian-German partnership, focusing on the collaboration between my supervisor, Afu, and me.

Although Afu's specialization in international migration and development in migrant communities of origin as well as his experiences in conducting fieldwork equipped him with the right expertise and knowledge to be a resourceful supervisor, I ended up working more closely with Michaela and Jonathan, seeking out their advice whenever I needed it. This was partly because I was more familiar with Michaela as my lecturer from the University of Cologne. Because she was responsible for the grading of my research outcomes, it was important for me to make sure that I would meet her expectations and requirements. Moreover, Jonathan and Michaela stayed with the German and Cameroonian students (who were not based in Yaoundé) in the same accommodation throughout the entire project. I believe this promoted familiarity and exchange among us. My supervisor, Afu, did not stay with us because he lives in Yaoundé, and the project provided accommodation only to members from outside the city. Consequently, I saw him less frequently after our intensive five-day seminar, which limited the collaborative relationship we could build. Although I had been told I could discuss issues related to my research project with my supervisor, I did not actively seek his advice; instead, I turned to Michaela, Jonathan, and other students with whom I had already established relationships. Nevertheless, there were a few instances of collaboration and joint knowledge production between my supervisor and me. For example, we jointly conducted an interview with a communication staff officer at IOM, which was instrumental to the overall success of my research project. Thus, the success of collaboration between Afu and me was limited and rather took the form of research facilitation.

Afu

As with Jonathan, I was also invited to participate in the project. At the time, I was a lecturer at the University of Yaoundé 1 and a colleague of Deli, who co-organized the project with Michaela. Consequently, the University of Yaoundé 1 was represented by two lecturers in the project. As an invited participant, I was attentive to the

internal power dynamics within the team and allowed Michaela and Deli to make the final decisions. The result of this approach was that I avoided contentious discussions, even on issues raised by students from the University of Yaoundé 1 who came to me with their concerns. These students had already been working under Deli's and my supervision prior to the start of the project and continued to do so during its implementation. It was therefore understandable that they felt comfortable bringing some of their concerns to our attention.

As mentioned earlier, during the main phase of the project in Yaoundé, accommodation in the same location was provided for visiting students and colleagues from the universities of Cologne, Bamenda, and Dschang. The rationale for this arrangement was to facilitate interaction and collaboration among project members. However, the students from Yaoundé 1 expressed frustration that they felt excluded from this setup. They lived with relatives in homes where they were often expected to assist with domestic chores—responsibilities that, they noted, interfered with their work on the project. One student explained:

> The other team members might not understand that living at home with your parents and family confers extra responsibilities on you, as you are not entirely in control of your time when it comes to doing household chores. You organize your time for chores, project activities, or academic work, but things do not always go as planned. Parents might interrupt when they need your help with certain activities, which might not fit within your schedule. If we had the privilege of staying at the same venue with the other students, we would have had more time to work on the project and to interact more with team members.

In my position as both a supervisor to the students and an invitee to the project, I tried to tread carefully. I was genuinely concerned about their frustrations but could not raise the issue with the organizers. I knew that funds were limited and did not have the courage to bring it up again, fearing it might offend them. The students themselves also chose not to voice their concerns directly to the organizers. They worried they might be seen as lazy, ungrateful, or difficult to work with and risk being excluded from future opportunities. Understanding their situation, I explained to them that there simply were not enough funds to accommodate everyone in the hostel. I encouraged them to do their best regardless, reminding them that this was only the beginning of a long-term relationship that could bring more opportunities in the future.

Looking back, and through the lens of the Third Space, I can see that I was more focused on avoiding conflict with the organizers, Michaela and Deli, than on addressing the students' concerns. In truth, I might have raised the issue without upsetting anyone. But my fear of causing tension led me to downplay what the students were telling me. This shows how the internal power dynamics within the team worked to the disadvantage of the students. It also illustrates how, despite our efforts to work collaboratively and on equal terms, entrenched hierarchies and my own fear of conflict created an unintended outcome: we avoided open discussions about difficult issues. Without such openness, it is hard to achieve true symmetry and parity in collaborative research.

Similarly, as supervisors of the Yaoundé 1 students before and during the project, Deli and I held positions of authority that shaped these dynamics further. We were also responsible for evaluating and grading the students' work, which made it even harder for them to express their frustrations freely. As Anna discussed above, instead of working closely with me as her supervisor, she ended up collaborating more with Jonathan and Michaela because they lived in the same location and already knew each other through Michaela's teaching. A similar pattern emerged with my own students from Yaoundé 1. Their familiarity with me as their lecturer created trust and confidence, but it also reflected the broader hierarchies that shaped how collaboration unfolded during the project.

Michaela

Being in charge of managing the project finances put me in a position of power but also came with responsibility and extra work. The project funding was provided by the University of Cologne and required a detailed accounting of each and every expense, which posed formidable challenges given the widespread unavailability of receipts in Cameroon. Furthermore, the budget was rather limited, as it is usually intended to cover only the expenses of the Cologne students, but in

our case, it was extended to include the costs of the Cameroonian collaboration partners. Making ends meet while accommodating unforeseen or changing expenses was a challenging task that absorbed more energy than planned.

Another challenge that affected the power balance was the regulations and expectations of the partner universities in Cameroon that differed from the status quo in Germany. These included, for example, that academic staff in Cameroon are remunerated separately for all extracurricular activities, including student supervision, extra classes, and participation in conferences. Given our limited budget and the different regulations at German universities that treat such activities as part of academic staff's job obligations, I had to navigate a messy middle ground that accommodated both sides' contradictory rules and expectations. In the absence of remuneration for their participation in the project, I had to appeal to my Cameroonian partners to value the intrinsic benefit of promoting their students and to invest in this collaboration in view of possible future material or intellectual benefits. It worked out in this particular case because we could look back on a long history of collaboration that had produced benefits for all of us in the past. However, there were differences in the commitment of the partners, which was also due to the fact that some of us had been collaborating much more closely in the past, while with others, the relationship was rather instrumental.

As a general note, I acknowledge that all project members, lecturers and students alike, were highly committed to the project and to collaborative knowledge production. Also, I wish to acknowledge the significant support provided by the University of Yaoundé 1, which resulted from the intense lobbying and follow-up of my collaboration partners. However, as Jonathan's discussion of his struggle with the university administration in Bamenda and Afu's reflections on the power dynamics with students in the project indicate, there are often structural constraints. The success or failure of collaboration is not necessarily an indicator of the partner's strong or weak commitment to the joint endeavor.

Besides personal relationships, institutional limitations also weighed heavily on the participants' commitment to the project. As Jonathan explained, the refusal of the University of Bamenda to act as an institutional partner complicated the collaboration. A practical solution was found on the level of the Department for the students to participate in the project by way of a required internship. However, this solution did not cover Jonathan's role as a supervisor in the collaborative research project, resulting in negative consequences, such as reprimands from the university hierarchy. Similarly, while the majority of the students based in Bamenda, Cologne, and Yaoundé were able to write their BA or MA theses on the basis of the collaborative research, students from Dschang encountered difficulties in this regard due to their different disciplinary backgrounds and institutional limitations, which ultimately impacted their motivation and performance. While it was never our intention to disadvantage or exploit some students over others, I realized that students from the different universities were unequally positioned in the way they could benefit from their participation in the research project. However, accounting for these differences was out of my reach, as I had to rely on my Cameroonian partners to mitigate the regulations and risks of their respective institutions. Furthermore, as indicated by Afu, institutionalized hierarchies in academia weakened the students' positions and discouraged them from initiating debates on issues that mattered to them.

As the above methodological reflections illustrate, our team tended to avoid forceful or openly confrontational discussions when disagreements arose. This strategy aimed to contain tensions and prevent any escalation of problems. It rested on the assumption that conflict is inherently negative and must be avoided at all costs (for a critique of this stance, see Galtung, 2004). This understanding of conflict also underpins dominant approaches to intercultural exchange, where respect for cultural sensitivities is paramount. In practice, this orientation kept us within our respective comfort zones and hindered critical reflection on our own prejudices and on the hierarchies that shape collaboration among actors occupying different social positions or coming from diverse cultural backgrounds (Aijazi et al., 2021; Zhou & Pilcher, 2019).

Facing Tension and Risk

As Homi K. Bhabha (2004) suggests, everyone enters the Third Space with their own background. Yet collaboration requires moving beyond these starting points, often by first acknowledging them, in order to create something new together. In what follows, Jonathan foregrounds minority–majority dynamics in his analysis of tensions within the research team, whereas Brice offers an introspective account of the experiences and risks of being a first-time researcher.

Jonathan

The fieldwork started in Yaoundé with a five-day workshop. We rented accommodation in a gated compound where all visiting project partners (lecturers and students) stayed throughout the program. The initial arrangement was to provide students with a research allowance to cover fieldwork and living expenses. Under this arrangement, students from Cameroon were responsible for their accommodation. A few days before we convened in Yaoundé, Michaela became convinced that there was enough money to cover the accommodation for all the visiting students from Cologne, Dschang, and Bamenda, and that it would also facilitate our work if we stayed together. This was good and welcome news to all of us. The students and colleagues from Yaoundé stayed in their homes but met with us regularly on campus, at our residence, and in the field.

About a week before the project began and the visiting students arrived, four of the lecturers, including Michaela and me, met in Yaoundé to finalize arrangements for accommodation, seminar halls, transportation, and other logistics necessary for a smooth start. It was frustrating that our host colleagues did not handle these things in advance, but I was not surprised because of the difficulties in Cameroon to get things done in the absence of key stakeholders and advance payment, which only became possible with the arrival of Michaela. After the arrival of the students, I found myself in the role of helping German students to navigate their new environment and reminding the Cameroonian students to approach differences with respect. I slowly stepped into this and other unassigned roles to ensure the best outcome and avoid conflicts. As we moved forward in the project, it became clear that the workload was uneven between the supervisors, not by design but because some were overwhelmed with other obligations outside the project, thereby pushing their responsibilities onto others. I ended up supervising more students than the number assigned to me and so did some of the colleagues in the project. We politely discussed this problem a number of times, but very little changed.

My effort to help the students settle in seemed to have had the effect of making them feel comfortable in discussing their concerns with me. They expressed some of their dissatisfaction with the team and suggestions for improvement with me in private. A German student complained about the structure of the workshop, noting that it was more of a lecture and students were given very little time to contribute to discussions. The student also complained that a Cameroonian supervisor spoke in a sexist and homophobic manner in the workshop. I raised these points to my co-supervisors and we agreed to caution everyone to be careful with their language and be respectful of difference. In hindsight, and echoing Afu's reflections on power dynamics among the project members, we missed the opportunity to openly discuss pressing issues and to involve the students in those conversations. At the same time, I recognize how challenging it would have been to hold an open discussion on sexual orientation in Cameroon, where same-sex relationships are criminalized.

Students' dissatisfaction with the team was not only directed at the supervisors but also extended to fellow students. Two of the Cameroonian-German student tandems did not work well because the students did not have a productive working relationship. They resolved the problem by joining different groups. Even among those who got along well, we observed instances when the partnership fractured before eventually getting mended. None of the tensions between students ever got out of control and the supervisors never got directly involved. A few students complained to me about specific issues with their research partner or another student in the group, but they brought the issue to me mainly to seek advice on how to handle the situation. I remember discussing one of those complaints with Michaela after finding out that she had heard about the problem from the student who brought it to my attention.

Brice

Coming into the project, I was an undergraduate student based in Cologne, dealing with the inner turmoil that many people experience in their early twenties—questions of identity, uncertainty about the future, and a host of insecurities. I was, in many ways, "figuring myself out" while being placed in a role that was supposed to "figure out" the social networks and relationships I had just encountered, all within an environment that initially felt unfamiliar and different to me. True to the fashion of many young white European men, I tried to suppress my insecurities and instead rigidly focus on the theoretical framework that I had been building my fieldwork around. I sought safety behind a professional identity, the kind of identity I imagined a white anthropologist in Cameroon ought to have: flexible yet organized, always taking notes yet never ceasing to listen, respectful yet inquisitive, and sociable yet deeply private.

For my research topic, I chose to focus on the future aspirations of young writers, artists, poets, and musicians. In my mind, they were the ones who would most resemble me—educated, from academic backgrounds, and, most importantly, eager to tell me their stories. Reflecting now on the notion of a Third Space that differently positioned people create through authentic interaction, I realize that my decision to hide behind a veneer of professionalism may have limited my ability to connect genuinely with others. It also hindered critical reflection on the beliefs and preconceived notions that led me to prioritize my professional identity as an anthropologist over other aspects of myself. As Zhou and Pilcher (2019) explain, such limitations make it difficult to enter the Third Space. Let me be clear: I do not blame myself for that decision. But looking back now, through the lens of the Third Space, I see how my academic endeavor and the results I ultimately produced were constrained by my own rigid imagination. I clung to the role of "the anthropologist" in an effort to feel secure. It makes sense: the anthropologist occupies a powerful position vis-á-vis the research participants, amplified in my case by race and gender. I was the one who determined who was of interest, whose stories should be told, how they should be told, and who should listen to their stories. I posed questions from behind my shield, never fully revealing myself, often hiding behind my laptop or a questionnaire.

My approach at the time and the professional identity of an anthropologist that I embraced deeply shaped my interactions in the field and the research output. People responded to the persona they perceived me to be, and I was left wondering why I felt so much distance and disconnect. Yet when I think now about my research in Yaoundé, the moments that stand out most are those when I was able (or forced) to embrace my own positionality in the field—as a young, insecure European man in over his head. One such moment was an evening spent in an underground queer bar, where I watched bodies secretly touching, voices whisper under their breath, and flamboyant drag performers give their all on a small stage with "Avec toi" by Marthe Zambo playing in the background. No preparatory course, no text, no theory could have prepared me for the intense wave of emotions that hit me that evening, of witnessing and momentarily sharing in the lived realities of people navigating "illegality." Earlier that night, an interviewee I had met with pointed to a man dressed in women's clothing and asked, "Tu aimes ce genre de choses?" ["Do you like this kind of thing?"]. I nodded, not realizing that I had just agreed to follow her into the bar a few houses down the road.

From that evening on, I knew that nothing I produced within the existing framework of my research could fully capture the sense of reality I experienced that night. And yet, for the remainder of my fieldwork, I continued to follow that framework—a strict professional identity and the theories that informed my approach. Only now do I fully understand what I sensed back then: that in that moment, I had allowed myself to be authentic. My interlocutor (and friend) had invited me in, despite (or maybe because of) the insecurity that I felt. When I look at the academic results I produced, I see that they reflect how I felt and who I was during my research: fractured, incomplete, and held together by the force of a rigid theoretical structure. I engage with those results much more critically today. I recognize now that my identity and positionality are not hindrances to reliable anthropological data—rather, an awareness of them is a prerequisite for producing meaningful and honest research.

Intercultural Team Dynamics

At the outset of the project, our understanding of symmetrical and inclusive collaboration was limited, informed mainly by general notions of intercultural communication and standard guidelines of good research practice in anthropology and the social sciences. Looking back through the lens of the Third Space, we can more clearly see where our approach succeeded and where we might have been braver in listening and learning from each other. The following section focuses on the dynamics within the Cameroonian–German research teams.

Guylaine

As an undergraduate student in Communication and Development Studies at the University of Bamenda in 2018, I was excited to participate in the project and to work with students from another country. However, I was also unsure of what to expect. I was paired with Dana, a German student with whom I shared a similar research topic. Our working relationship was good, and we connected instantly. We conducted most of our interviews together, but it soon became evident that there were cultural differences between us. During some of our interviews, I found myself relating more closely to the comments and reflections made by the interviewees because they reflected our shared local reality in Cameroon, something that was not always the case for Dana.

The interviewees also made comments that were not explicitly stated but were easily understood by me or anyone from Cameroon. For example, it is common in Cameroon for people not to express their thoughts directly on certain topics, expecting the listener to infer the intended meaning from subtle hints. Consequently, we had different ways of understanding and interpreting our interlocutors' responses. While I inferred meaning from what was implied, my tandem tended to take comments at face value. This difference in interpretation was sometimes challenging for both of us.

To address this, I consulted one of the research supervisors, Jonathan, who was also my lecturer at the University of Bamenda. He explained that such cultural differences were normal and suggested that my tandem might simply need more explanation from interviewees, especially on cultural nuances. We discussed these issues and worked through them together. Over time, we came to appreciate that our cultural differences brought distinct perspectives and interpretations to our research, which ultimately proved to be a valuable asset. In conclusion, my experience of collaborating with a student from abroad on research was deeply enriching. Despite encountering some cultural differences, we were able to navigate these challenges successfully and learn a great deal from each other.

Dana

Having been a German second-year master's student in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Cologne, I felt well prepared for this research project at the time. But I came to realize soon enough that all the theoretical preparation was not enough to sharpen my own research focus. While the other students had very specific topics from the outset, I was unsure which direction to take and how to narrow down my focus. As a result, my research topic remained somewhat open during this first research stay. I was trying to understand the diverse situations that young educated Cameroonians found themselves in and the challenges they encountered. Our research stay was rather short, and every day was filled with interviews, transcription, and organizing further meetings.

I worked with Guylaine, with whom I connected instantly. In this reflection, I would like to respond directly to her account of the challenges we encountered in our collaboration. What Guylaine describes as cultural differences, I would like to enrich by adding another dimension: unequal preconditions, which reinforced potential power asymmetries between us. At the time, Guylaine was an undergraduate student of Communication and Development Studies at the University of Bamenda, while I was a master's student of Social and Cultural Anthropology, trained in in-depth and qualitative research methodology. I was very eager to ensure that I properly understood the information entrusted to us and preferred to let our interlocutors elaborate on their narratives, rather than jumping to premature conclusions or assumptions that were not supported by actual quotes. For Guylaine, this may sometimes have seemed unnecessary, as she often

already understood (or thought she understood) what our interlocutors were talking about.

Another challenge I perceived in our work was linked to the nature of our research focus. While my research interests were rather broad, I added many general questions about future-making and its challenges to our joint questionnaire. Guylaine, on the other hand, had a much more specific research interest: she explored the ambiguous role of sexuality as both a tool for advancement and a source of potential degradation, particularly for women. I realized that this intimate research focus could pose challenges, given the very limited time we had in the field. As Guylaine rightly mentioned earlier, Cameroonians are cautious about whom they entrust with sensitive or personal information. The necessary basis of trust, and the time to build it, was simply not available, which made some interviews difficult. I could see how female interlocutors were extremely careful in answering some of her questions, while men, the dominant gender in Cameroon's deeply patriarchal urban context, tended to respond more openly. I sometimes found Guylaine's questioning slightly intrusive and pushy, worried that she could "scare off" the interlocutors by asking indirect yet insinuating questions on a very sensitive topic. As an "outsider," I was more careful about drawing conclusions from some of the subtle and indirect responses. At the same time, I often felt that I dominated the interviews, as I tended to ask more questions than she did.

Returning to my personal challenge of narrowing down a concrete research topic during our short field stay, I now recognize that this was hardly possible under the circumstances. Those five weeks were marked by intense qualitative and quantitative interviews, with little or no time to reflect on the data being collected. I was only beginning to understand the dynamics at play. A year later, I returned to Cameroon for another four to five months to work with a local NGO and continue my research. This time, I had the opportunity to process the data, revisit the literature, and develop a deeper understanding of the context. I was also able to build new relationships and strengthen old ones. Some interlocutors even became close friends. Based on the knowledge I was entrusted with and the observations I made, a clear research focus finally emerged. After writing the field report in 2019, I developed a more concrete and nuanced argument, which I later presented in my master's thesis. Overall, the research project was an invaluable opportunity to gain first-hand experience in conducting qualitative research in a supervised setting and to learn about the challenges and potential pitfalls that come with it.

Expectations in North-South Collaboration

In this final section, we critically examine North–South collaboration from the perspectives of student members from Cologne and Bamenda, the expectations it generates, and the complex, often conflicted positionalities it can create for those situated between the North and the South.

Eugene

With the aim of fostering North–South collaboration, participating in this research project offered me the opportunity to experience the challenges faced by students from both contexts and to identify potential positive outcomes. As a Cameroonian international student in Germany, I found myself in a dual position where I was at the same time part of the North and the South. As a student of the University of Cologne, I was both an "outsider," living and studying in Germany, and an "insider," being originally from Cameroon and familiar with the research environment. I was sometimes described as being "in and between." This in-betweenness proved to be both an advantage and a challenge during my participation in the project. On the positive side, although I was a student from the University of Cologne, I was paired with a tandem partner from Cologne, Brice. Even though we had different target groups (Brice's study group was artists, while mine was journalists), we worked well together. I brought local knowledge that helped us navigate challenges and understand the realities of the Cameroonian context. This proved especially useful when identifying interview partners, as I already knew several young journalists and musicians who were willing to participate. As a result, we were able to schedule and conduct interviews more efficiently. Brice's motivation, research skills, and analytical ability also contributed greatly to the strength of our results, outcomes that might have been different had I been paired with a fellow Cameroonian student.

However, being an insider on the Cameroonian side also came with its own difficulties. As mentioned earlier, although I was part of the Cologne group, I was not paired with a student from the Cameroonian group, which sometimes reinforced the perception that I was a part of the Cameroonian project team rather than a member of the visiting team from Cologne. This occasionally created tension in our collaboration. While my tandem (Brice) was eager to conduct more interviews, meet new people, and attend cultural events, I sometimes felt a sense of déjà vu and hesitation. I knew my country and its social dynamics well and at times felt there was little new to discover, yet I had to maintain the neutrality expected of a researcher, which was not always easy. Joint interview sessions also presented challenges, as I was often seen as the Cameroonian who "understood things better" and could simply explain them to my German tandem.

Despite these difficulties, occupying this dual position ultimately became a valuable asset. It allowed me to approach the research from multiple perspectives and bridge cultural understandings between the two groups. Drawing on my professional skills as a young researcher, and with the support of a diverse team and our professors' guidance, I was able to contribute meaningfully to our shared objective—understanding the major challenges that young journalists face as they build their futures in Cameroon.

Chancelyne

The asymmetry in North-South collaborative research can have implications for the expectations of students from the South. These expectations may stem from the perception that Northern institutions have more resources and expertise (Sawyer & Crawford, 2017). Students from the South often have high expectations regarding the support they will receive, including administrative support, equipment, training, and supervision (Woodzicka et al., 2015). However, the reality is often different. Personally, I envisioned an organized and coordinated sequence of events. I anticipated that the study's findings would be published at the University of Cologne within a year after its completion. As of the time of writing this reflection, it is the summer of 2025 and the findings from the collaborative research conducted from July to September 2018 have yet to be published.

As I had expected, the University of Cologne covered the participation costs for the Cameroonian students. I had also anticipated that the University of Bamenda would eagerly support its students' involvement in this collaborative research. However, this was not the case. The university was not fully supportive of its students participating in the project, and it was only through the support of the department that we were able to take part in the study. This contrast between the support from the University of Cologne and the limited backing from the University of Bamenda highlights the differing levels of commitment and institutional influence among the partner universities. As I reflect on my experiences in this North-South collaborative research, it becomes evident that the complex interplay of varying expectations and support is deeply entwined with not just resource discrepancies, but also a myriad of cultural, social, and academic divergences between the collaborating institutions.

My initial expectations were rooted in the assumption that the collaboration would unfold seamlessly, with extensive support and a clear pathway towards achieving our research goals. However, the realities of navigating this dynamic environment have provided me with a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in such partnerships. The notion of hybridity has also played a significant role in shaping my perspective. The idea of hybridity, where cultural, academic, and institutional elements intersect and evolve, has highlighted the need for flexibility and adaptability in navigating the expectations and challenges of North-South collaborative research. In light of this, I have come to realize that the timeline for publishing our findings may not align with my initial expectations. Instead, I have learned to appreciate the value of the collaborative process itself, recognizing that the journey towards our research goals is as important as the eventual outcomes. With a deeper understanding of the complexities at play, I am committed to embracing the collaborative research experience with an open mind and a willingness to navigate the inherent asymmetries with resilience and adaptability.

Conclusion

By foregrounding reflexivity and collective authorship, this paper proposes an approach that treats difference not as an obstacle but as a productive site for dialogue and learning. It underscores the need to create spaces within research collaborations where unequal power relations can be openly discussed, negotiated, and transformed. To illustrate this, we revisit the collaborative research and teaching project *Urban Youths' Perspectives on Making a Future in Cameroon and/or Abroad.* Using the Third Space as an analytical lens and drawing on a dialogical process of co-authorship and critical reflection, we assessed the extent to which the project's aspiration toward symmetrical and inclusive collaboration was realized in practice. Our reflections show that structural, institutional, and interpersonal hierarchies continued to shape the process, even within a framework explicitly committed to reducing them. Engaging with the Third Space enabled a critical reassessment of what collaboration meant in our context – especially since, during the project itself, our understanding of collaboration was guided more by general research ethics than by a clearly defined conceptual model. This retrospective analysis thus illuminates both the advances made and the barriers encountered in striving for genuine collaboration and knowledge co-creation.

Key advances included early collaboration between Global South and North partners in designing and implementing the project, supported by complementary contributions from both institutions. Equal participation of students from both universities and the reallocation of resources originally assigned to the Cologne team helped further reduce inequalities. These measures – aimed at reducing the dominance of the better-resourced partner and fostering more symmetrical participation – align with the Third Space as a "moment of intervention" that challenges existing power structures (Zhou & Pilcher, 2019, p. 4).

Yet, our analysis also revealed barriers that impeded co-creation. Hierarchies persisted within the team, particularly between students and lecturers. Key decisions were often taken by lecturers with limited or no input from students, including on matters directly affecting them. Conflict, moreover, tended to be seen as something negative to be avoided. Reinterpreted through the Third Space, this aversion to disagreement appears counterproductive: while avoiding conflict may preserve surface harmony, it constrains openness, frank discussion, and mutual learning – conditions essential for meaningful collaboration.

We conclude this methodological reflection with Anna's outlook on her future work, which illustrates how engaging with Homi Bhabha's Third Space has meaningfully transformed her understanding of collaborative research and representation.s

Anna

When I developed my research project, I was unaware of the concepts of Third Space and hybridity. However, thinking about its aim to promote collaborative knowledge production by "researching with and for people rather than on people" (Mitlin & Thompson, 1995, p. 238), I now realize that my research project does reflect some of the Third Space criteria. From the very beginning, the politicization of irregular migration and the vulnerability of my focus group - (un)successful return migrants – prompted me to question my assumptions and biases and to reflect on research ethics, particularly questions of representation and reciprocity.

Inspired by the ethnographic writings of Jill Alpes (2012, 2017), who analyzed her findings using local Cameroonian concepts and discourses to counter dominant migration discourses, I committed myself to understanding the perspectives of return migrants themselves, using their local concepts and understandings to develop an alternative view beyond dominant societal and state discourses on irregular migration. This meant I had to interrogate the hierarchical structures and dominant irregular migration discourses affecting my target group, which are the kind of critical reflections needed in the Third Space. My decision to present my findings via ethnographic life stories enabled me to solve two issues: the practical issue of finding enough return migrants I could interview and, more importantly, the ethical issue of representation (a term I learned later in my studies). By narrating their life and migration trajectories and infusing them with direct quotes, I hoped to highlight their voices in my writing and do my interlocutors justice. Reflecting on this decision now, I believe that my writing style contributes to giving my interlocutors a more active role in the construction of knowledge about

them.

On an individual level, the critical literature on migration categories and especially my field encounters with so-called "return migrants" challenged me to interrogate my assumptions and biases towards "irregular" migrants. These "migrants," unlike their media representation and to my surprise, were mostly young, educated men more or less unable to fulfill the societal expectations placed on them. Hearing about their deeply personal dreams for the future, their family backgrounds, their often traumatic migration experiences, and the precarious situations they faced after returning made me conscious of my privileges as a female German citizen. It also led me to question my prior assumptions and to think more critically about extractive research practices. In an effort to do things differently, I now try to share their stories with the public and to draw attention to their specific obstacles, perspectives, and needs. ■

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THEME 1: Making a Future at Home

3. Walking the Fine Line: How Young, Urban Artists Navigate Institutional Framings and Individual Interests in Yaoundé, Cameroon

Brice STAPELFELDT

Figure 3: Goethe-Institute Cameroon, Yaoundé. © Anna Wölki, 2018

Abstract

Young artists in Yaoundé, Cameroon grapple with the restrictive confines of a folkloristic state definition of art that inadequately represents the diverse social and artistic realities of artists today. Notably, state institutions such as the Ministry of Arts and Culture wield considerable influence within the Cameroonian art sphere, exemplified by their authority to issue artists' attestations facilitating visa acquisition for international travel—a goal of many young artists. However, the prevailing notion of art among artists themselves and within the global art field reveals itself to be far more diverse. Consequently, young artists find themselves navigating disparate expectations and appealing to diverse conceptions of art, often concurrently. This study seeks to elucidate the strategies employed by young artists in negotiating the conflicting discourse surrounding art and professionalism, while also offering an analysis of broader institutional frameworks and global interdependencies. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Yaoundé during the summer of 2018, and informed by the theoretical frameworks of the "global field of art" and "elusive futures," this paper investigates the future aspirations of young Cameroonian artists and the strategies they employ to negotiate the tensions between national and global discourses on art and professionalism. It argues that the artists "walk a fine line" in building sustainable careers, particularly when seeking international opportunities. This often involves negotiating restrictions on artistic freedom while simultaneously appealing to multiple, and at times conflicting, conceptions of art

In recent years, African art has once again entered the global market of cultural consumption as African artists—especially musicians—have achieved significant success in their respective countries as well as abroad. Afrobeats artists, such as Nigerian musician Wizkid have occupied billboard charts in the UK and USA for weeks at a time and have contributed to the global recognition of African Art (Ngeh & Pelican, 2022; Adedeji, 2023). In Cameroon, the predominantly young art scene is suffering the consequences of decades of state neglect and the authoritarian restriction of critical artistic expression (Schemmel, 2015; Nyamnjoh & Fokwang, 2005). Recently, the Cameroonian state has developed a political and economic interest in developing an artistic industry of its own. In the context of the Cameroonian postcolonial state that prioritizes national unity and ethnic identity, artistic expression becomes both a tool for control and a space for negotiation (Nyamnjoh & Fokwang, 2005). The Cameroonian Ministry of Arts and Culture (MINAC) has adopted rhetoric aiming to professionalize the sector by improving art education, creating opportunities for global market access, and promoting professional work ethics. However, while the state aspires to bolster the artistic infrastructure, the impact on individual artists has remained marginal, reflecting disconnects between state rhetoric, policies, and the realities of artistic expression in contemporary Cameroon, as this study reveals.

Research on contemporary art in Cameroon, including music, remains limited, with significant contributions only beginning to emerge in recent years. Annette Schemmel's (2015) study on grassroots initiatives of visual artists in Yaoundé and Douala between 1976–2014 highlights their critical role in informal art education and the development of a new generation of artists. Nyamnjoh and Fokwang (2005) offer an important analysis of the complex relationship between musicians and political power, showing how Cameroonian Makossa musicians, such as Manu Dibango and Lapiro de Mbanga, shift between complicity, critique, and survival. Recent scholarship by Michaela Pelican and Jonathan Ngeh (2022) has shown how young West African tech entrepreneurs and musicians, faced with difficult political and economic conditions, respond with innovation and transnational networking. Röschenthaler (2023) underscores the impact of streaming platforms and copyright reforms in reshaping Cameroon's music industry in the digital era following a piracy crisis in the 1990s and 2000s. Inspired by the insights of these works, this study examines the future aspirations, strategies, and grassroots innovations of musicians and performing artists in Yaoundé as they navigate the challenges of the Cameroonian art sector.

The paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the summer of 2018 with a range of stakeholders in the Cameroonian art scene, including representatives from MINAC, the Cameroonian Cultural Center (CCC), and artists at various stages of their careers. It pursues two central aims. First, it investigates the divergent conceptions of art articulated by state and foreign institutions, such as the Goethe-Institut, which constitute one of the major challenges Cameroonian artists face in becoming successful. Second, it explores artists' future aspirations and strategies in navigating and reconciling conflicting conceptions of art and professionalism. The analysis is further enriched by media-reported cases of internationally recognized Cameroonian artists—such as rapper Valsero and award-winning novelist Patrice Nganang—who have faced state backlash for their dissent against the Paul Biya regime (BBC, 2017; PEN America, 2019).

Framed through the theoretical lens of "elusive futures" and its focus on "future imaginaries" (Steuer & Engeler, 2017), the concept of the global field of art (Buchholz, 2016), and an understanding of youth as both social *being* and *becoming* (Christiansen et al., 2006), the paper highlights how young Cameroonian artists navigate structural marginalization, postcolonial power dynamics, globalized pressures of professionalism, and their own aspirations for the future. The discussion also addresses the legacy of foreign cultural institutions which, while fostering artistic opportunities, have contributed to the imposition of external artistic norms and values (Schemmel, 2015).

Due to the more general neglect of local art infrastructure by the Cameroonian state, limited opportunities for art education and training for aspiring artists, and the restrictive definition of art imposed by the government alongside its overall suppression of freedom of artistic expression, this paper argues that the economic and societal success of Cameroonian

artists hinges significantly on what I have termed "walking the fine line." This concept refers to a strategy, prevalent in the Cameroonian context, that involves navigating conflicting definitions of art and achieving some form of successful circular or return migration, often necessitating the former as a prerequisite. Through case studies of two women artists, Free-T (musician, poetry slammer, and writer) and Felicité (dancer, singer, rapper, and illustrator), I will illustrate how "walking the fine line" can involve either temporarily adhering to Cameroonian "culture" in artistic expression or incorporating aspects of Cameroonian "culture" while asserting one's own artistic freedom in a manner that does not challenge existing social and political norms. Through the case studies of jazz musician Ruben Binam, founder of the local record label Alizés Equateur Records (AER), and aforementioned artist Félicité, I show how the journey to becoming a successful artist in Cameroon often relies on professional experiences abroad which are later used as valuable lessons and tools for assuming roles as educators. I also examine how grassroots initiatives like Binam's label and other artist-led associations serve as key strategies for navigating state neglect and the challenges of the global art scene.

The paper is structured as follows: It begins with an overview of the theoretical framework, followed by a description of the research sample and methodology. The third section introduces the first analytical focus, examining national and international discourses on art and their restrictive effects on artistic expression. It also explores the strategies artists employ to navigate these constraints. This is illustrated through the cases of Free-T, Valsero, and Patrice Nganang. The fourth section critically analyzes MINAC's efforts to promote a professionalized cultural industry and its underlying assumptions about art and artistic value. The fifth section turns to the future aspirations of emerging Cameroonian artists, focusing on their views of opportunities within the local art scene as shaped by both state and international institutions, including the Goethe-Institut. Through the cases of Felicité and Ruben Binam, the section also reflects on the dominant model of migration to the West (i.e., circular and return migration) as a perceived pathway to success as well as assuming the role of an educator and/or development agent upon return. The sixth section explores grassroots forms of artistic organization and their perceived benefits. The paper concludes by synthesizing the key findings.

Theoretical Framework

Christiansen et al. (2006) argue that youth cannot be solely defined by biological or age-related criteria. Instead, youth is characterized by a fluid duality: both a state of *social being* and *becoming* (Christiansen et al., 2006). The state of *social being* highlights the subjective experiences, agency, and aspirations of youth or, in other words, how they interpret their lives, create meaning, and seek to move toward their goals. This aspect foregrounds the phenomenological and experiential aspects of youth. In contrast, the state of *social becoming* focuses on how youth are positioned by external forces such as societal norms, power relations, and generational hierarchies. This perspective emphasizes the structural constraints and social expectations faced by youth, including the ways young people are situated within families, communities, and larger sociopolitical systems. (Christiansen et al., 2006; see also Durham, 2004). To grasp the social implications of youth, it is thus essential to explore young people's self-perceptions and future aspirations as well as their interactions within larger societal frameworks. This perspective is equally relevant to young urban artists, who navigate diverse internal and external notions of art and professionalism. Through these negotiations, they envision pathways of social becoming that facilitate their transition into social adulthood, often marked by the accumulation of economic or symbolic capital.[1]

Young artists in Yaoundé operate within a socio-political and economic environment marked by structural neglect and global inequalities. The concept

[1] As Bourdieu (1996) specifies in "The Rules of Art," the genesis of a literary field in France had resulted in the development of an autonomous ideology, materialized in beliefs such as l'art pour l'art, the principle of producing art for no other purpose than its inherent aesthetic value, the adherence to which would lead to the accumulation of symbolic capital. This self-legitimizing mechanism was later defined in opposition to economic or public success. This distinction is relevant to this day and is also expressed by some of my interlocutors who uttered the fear of "selling out" their art. Nevertheless, I believe that in the context of neoliberalization of global art markets and m
usic businesses as well as the volatile context in which I conducted research, symbolic capital rarely suffices as proof of success within the art sphere. The accumulation of other forms of capital, such as economic or social capital, play a relevant role here.

of *elusive futures*, as articulated by Steuer and Engeler (2017), offers a valuable theoretical lens for examining how individuals envision and pursue their aspirations within systems of structural inequality and uncertainty. Elusive futures are characterized by the tension between personal ambitions for success and the social, political, and economic conditions that render such goals difficult to achieve. Examining future imaginaries thus provides insight into how individual aspirations interact with and are constrained by broader structural forces. This dynamic becomes evident in the analysis of the case studies of the two young women artists, Felicité and Free-T, presented in this study. Both navigate the discourse surrounding art and professionalism from their own unique standpoints, while also engaging with institutional frameworks in ways that balance conflicting viewpoints and personal interests - a strategic negotiation I refer to as walking the fine line.

By examining the strategies young Cameroonian artists use to imagine and reconfigure their elusive futures, this study reveals the interplay between structural barriers and individual agency. It also highlights how these artists engage creatively with both local and international frameworks, to pursue their ambitions while addressing broader societal and cultural challenges in the global field of art.

I use the term *global field of art* as proposed by Larissa Buchholz (2016) who, building on Bourdieu's (1993, 1996) cultural field theory, has developed a transnational framework that allows for the analysis of global dependencies on institutional macro- and meso-levels as well as on an agent micro-level. By expanding Bourdieu's national model, Buchholz theorizes vertically autonomous fields (e.g., national, regional, or urban) that are interconnected through global institutions of cross-border exchange. A resulting global discourse surrounding art and institutional practices of classifying and assessing artistic recognition and value in global terms (such as international rankings or awards) then open local art scenes to global possibilities and inequalities. This global field of art is created through the interplay of relatively autonomous artistic fields. Within it, international dependencies frequently arise due to the unequal distribution of capital and opportunities across these spheres.

Description of the Sample and Methodology

To collect data on the discourse surrounding art and professionalism in Yaoundé, a total of 25 semi-structured, qualitative interviews, including group interviews, were conducted with a total of 40 research participants.[2] In addition, my colleague, Eugene Tingwey, and I held several informal conversations with artists at concerts, rehearsals, and while journeying through the city. The sample consists of 12 women and 28 men. Among these 48 individuals, 31 are artists, some of whom own recording studios or have partially assumed roles as educators. Additionally, eight interlocutors are representatives of MINAC and one is a representative of the Goethe-Institut. The gender disparity in the sample is partly explained by the underrepresentation of women state representatives at MINAC, where I encountered few women and could not interview any. All 12 women were interviewed in their role as artists. It is important to keep in mind that women in contemporary Cameroon face a multitude of gendered challenges that are also mirrored in the art sphere, which, based on my impression, is heavily male dominated. Nonetheless, the art sphere is a space where women can and do act in empowered and independent ways.[3]

The data collected through interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation was analyzed using a "perspectival dualist analysis" as proposed by Christiansen et al. (2006) for studying African youth. In the context of this paper, perspectival dualist analysis is employed to examine how young artists in Cameroon navigate the competing discourses of art, professionalism, and success. This approach allows for a balanced exploration of two interconnected dimensions: the structural forces that position artists within socio-political and global frameworks and the experiential agency through which artists interpret, challenge, and negotiate these positions.

[2] Conventionally, names of research participants are anonymized in anthropological research. However, more attention being directed towards artist's careers was deemed advantageous by many of my interlocutors. For that reason, I decided to not anonymize certain interlocutors. This was done after careful deliberation and consultation with the respective persons.
[3] For an account of how young single mothers in Yaoundé navigate gendered challenges and imagine better futures see Harms (2025, this volume).

On one hand, the analysis focuses on how the Cameroonian state, through institutions like MINAC, imposes definitions of art that prioritize folkloristic styles, cultural diversity, and national unity. It also examines the unequal distribution of opportunities in the global field of art and the influence of international institutions, such as the Goethe-Institut, in shaping perceptions of artistic professionalism. These external forces constitute the possibilities of becoming a successful artist in Cameroon, shaping the positioning of youth within broader power structures. On the other hand, the paper highlights how artists exercise agency to create meaning and pursue their aspirations. Through individual strategies, young artists reinterpret and appropriate these imposed discourses to suit their personal goals. Some blend folkloristic styles with subtle social commentary to align their work with state expectations while maintaining artistic freedom. Others align themselves with global northern norms and ethics, contemplating circulatory migration to achieve their career aspirations, particularly in light of the state's failure to provide sufficient opportunities for artistic development.

Walking the Fine Line: Balancing Institutional Framings and Individual Aspirations

When it comes to the conceptualization of art and the role of artists within Cameroonian society and beyond, I have encountered two politically motivated positions on the institutional level. One is the state's position that an artist's most important role is to represent their respective ethnic background(s) through their art. This position also promotes that art in general should serve as a link between the different ethnic groups of Cameroon. The other position is put forward by the Goethe-Institut, which states that "good art" should entail political critique and subtle commentary on societal problems.

In many West African countries, the development of the artistic industry has been closely linked to Ministries of Arts and Culture. In many cases, this resulted in art professionals being intellectually and financially dependent on the state, but it also fostered great artistic developments in the respective centers of art, such as the École Nationale des Beaux Arts in Dakar, Senegal or the University of Nigeria in Nsukka (Kouoh, 2013). However, the emergence of artistic industries, especially in relation to the music industry in Nigeria, has significantly changed this dynamic in favor of a more self-reliant artistic sphere (Adedeji, 2023). In Cameroonian schools, arts education was practically abandoned by the state in the 1970s in favor of the promotion of crafts which were considered to be more "authentic" representations of the ethnic diversity in the newly founded United Republic of Cameroon. To this day, the notion of authenticity and ethnic representation is inherent to state discourses surrounding art (Schemmel, 2015). To put it in the words of the director of the CCC:[4]

> Through the dances one could recognize an ethnic group. Or a tribe. Concerning theater, one could see the figurations of Cameroonian society in its plurality. Lastly cinema. Because it is possible to do film projections here. This allows us to see the films that Cameroonian directors have produced in their respective ethno-cultural spaces. (CCC director)[5] [6]

In this statement, the director refers to the reasons why certain artistic domains were included in the CCCs' offers to the public. Note how every artistic domain he states is interpreted in a way that links artistic expression to ethnic representation. This link can be exemplified by a story told to me by the head of the Department of Visual Arts at MINAC. He recalled a painter from the coast of the South Region whom he regularly invited for exhibitions until the painter suddenly vanished for about a year. When he returned, he had changed his artistic outlook and style of expression. He presented an artwork that the head of the department could only recall as "strange" and "repulsive." The painter had assembled a large abstract sculpture made from tree bark and other natural materials. Only after the artist had explained the symbolism behind his work, which was meant to represent the spiritual aspect of a disaster

[4] The Cameroon Cultural Center is an institution of MINAC which takes on the role of the link between artists and the bureaucratic organization of MINAC.

[5] Quotes of conversations that took place in French were translated into English by me. The original quote is provided in the footnotes. If no footnote is present, the original conversation was held in English.

[6] *« […] à travers les danses on pouvait reconnaître une ethnie. Ou une tribu. (...) Ensuite, au théâtre (...) parce que par le théâtre, on pouvait voir des figurations de la société Camerounaise dans sa diversité, dans sa pluralité. (...) Et enfin le cinéma. Parce qu'on peut faire des projections cinématographiques ici. Elles permettent de voir quelques auteurs, réalisateurs Camerounais, qui avaient fait des films dans leurs espaces ethnoculturels.»*

that happened in his village, was the head of department ready to accept the piece as a work of art.

Aside from representing a restrictive view on art in terms of freedom of expression, the folkloristic approach to art commits to rather problematic notions of community and ethnicity, as the following story of the young woman musician, poetry slammer, and writer Free-T illustrates. After one of her shows at a cabaret in Mvog-Ada, a quarter of Yaoundé, we talked about her past and her family's origin. Free-T had just sung a song in her mother tongue, Fulbe, which had religious undertones, praising Allah and the value of family. Free-T revealed that she was born in the Far North region of the country and as a child was sent to live in Yaoundé with a foster family. After her mother had died, her father and a few other family members moved south to join her in the capital. In this context, Free-T talked about the challenging aspects of her origins:

> It's difficult to stay a part of the community when you move away. People back in the village don't see you as one of their own anymore. They think that you lose your culture, that you forget the language. But it's not true. I learned the language and I use it on stage. I want to spread my culture! (Free-T)

When I asked if they were proud that she was promoting their culture, Free-T replied: "They like to stay among each other. When you move to the city, they say that you aren't part of them anymore." This conflict illustrates a core problem with MINAC's folkloristic definition of art: defining art as the representation of ethnic communities begs the question of what is meant by the term "community." Following Anderson (1983/2006), the notion of community is not an empirical category but rather a social fabrication. As Free-T's story shows, what is and should be a community and who is or is not part of it varies greatly even among supposed members of the community. MINAC's representative's position negates the plurality of social realities within communities and commits to a rather problematic and one-sided notion of ethnic community.

Later in the interview with the CCC director, he stated the conditions under which artists are allowed to use the CCC as a location for concerts, exhibitions, or lectures, revealing a second aspect of the CCC's policy towards artistic expression:

> We don't allow all spectacles. They need to be in accordance to the rules of ethics. And of security. And of public order. We won't create a spectacle that will promote social turmoil or conflicts between our communities! This is not our mission. No, this is not our mission. (CCC director)[7]

Two things become apparent from his statements. Firstly, the CCC seems dedicated to promoting ethnic identities and interethnic mediation through the means of art. Second, by contrasting notions of ethical rules, security, and public order with social explosion and inter-group conflict, he reveals that the CCC views art as conforming to and reproducing state values, such as national or cultural identity and ethnic diversity. While this notion is not completely unjustified and certainly fits some artists and artworks in Cameroon, it ignores some very important aspects of contemporary artists' expressions which often deal with societal issues such as migration, globalization and social anxieties.

Free-T, who sometimes receives work opportunities from MINAC, recalls a MINAC competition at the very beginning of her career:

> I was discovered at the ministry during a national competition. And I won it. Its themes were national unity, peace and cultural diversity. So, I stood out through the quality of my text. I wrote in English, in French, in Douala, in Fulbe. So, these four languages came together in one text; that was what singled me out from the other contestants. You see? This is why I won! That's why the people at the ministry call me when they have some small events. (Free-T)[8]

Free-T often emphasizes the strong representative function of her songs and texts. Born in the Far-North Region of Cameroon, her ethnic background and heritage are frequent themes in her work.

[7] *« Nous ne laissons pas n'importe quels spectacles. Ça doit quand-même respecter les règles d'éthique. Et de sécurité. Et d'ordre public. L'ordre public. Nous n'allons pas créer un spectacle qui va venir [euh], favoriser des explosions sociales ou des conflits entre nos communautés, ce n'est pas notre mission. Non, ce n'est pas notre mission. »*

[8] *« Au ministère on m'a découvert dans le cadre d'un concours national lancé. Et j'étais lauréate. C'était issu sur l'unité nationale, la paix et la diversité culturelle. Donc je me suis démarquée par la qualité de mon texte. J'ai écrit en anglais, en français, en douala, en fulfulde, donc ces quatre langues se sont retrouvées dans un texte, c'est ça qui m'a démarqué des autres. Voyez un peu? Donc c'est pourquoi j'ai été lauréate. C'est pourquoi donc, au ministère, quand il y a des petites cérémonies, on m'appelle. »*

Although the themes favored by the MINAC play a large role in Free-T's work, it is not limited to them. During a fairly large musical event near the center of the city, where several musicians and bands took the stage and which was televised on state media, Free-T again sang in Fulbe, dressed in traditional festive clothing from the north of the country and playing an African harp. After the song was finished, she had time for one more. She chose to perform a piece with the name "mon bon grand" [my good big man], which problematizes the daily struggle of an urban youth without future perspectives. In the song, the expression "bon grand" [big man] refers to many young men who are stuck in their living quarters in Yaoundé, failing to live up to societal expectations. While his peers enjoy the fruits of hard labor or went on an adventurous route abroad, he is left behind. Failing to pose as a *big man*, a term used to refer to a successful man or someone with power to influence an outcome (Alpes, 2017), he is reduced to an emasculated beggar, which ends up earning him the somewhat ironic and condescending nickname "mon bon grand." During this performance, Free-T still wore the traditional gown and played the harp, representing her northern origins while at the same time providing subtle social commentary. This goes to show that Free-T moves in between folkloristic elements and unconventional ideas, navigating the fine line between state framings and her own artistic expression.

Overstepping this fine line can bear drastic consequences as is illustrated by the following cases. Valsero, referred to as "le Général" [the General] by his fans, is a rapper and political activist. His numerous songs address the difficulties of life in urban Cameroon. Some, such as "Lettre au president" [Letter to the President] and "Valsero réponds" [Valsero answers], are directly addressed to the president of Cameroon Paul Biya and request he "do his job" and listen and answer to the cries of the youth. In his song "Resistance," Valsero, usually rapping in French, addresses the Anglophone crisis in the western regions, asking in Cameroonian Pidgin English: "Oh, he go kill we tired, how many people this man go kill?" [Oh, he will kill us all, how many people is this man going to kill?]. "this man" implicitly referring to Paul Biya. During the presidential elections in 2018, Valsero openly supported the opposition candidate Maurice Kamto. His outspokenness about his political views comes at a cost: Valsero is currently banned from many ventures and broadcasting stations in Cameroon and was arrested in January 2019 for participating in a political protest. He was only freed in October of the same year following international outrage (Schultz, 2019). Even more concerning is the case of the Cameroonian novelist Patrice Nganang, who in his work often problematizes the postcolonial state and addresses ethnic relations from a critical and historic perspective in his writings (Clavaron, 2012). After publicly attacking Paul Biya's presidency, Nganang was arrested and forced into political exile. Although Valsero and Patrice Nganang suffer consequences from openly expressing dissent in public, it must be said that due to their international reputation and economic stability they are not to the same extent dependent on the state as many younger and less well-known artists, making them less vulnerable to state sanctions. Nevertheless, the two examples show that MINAC's definition of art not only fails to accurately address the social plurality of ethnic communities but also the plurality of artistic realities in Cameroon, which extend far beyond the state's narrow definition.

While some artists such as Free-T chose to pursue artistic freedom by walking the fine line between folkloristic representation and social commentary, others temporarily commit to artistic styles that are in line with the state's definition of art to escape the repressive state politics in the long-term.[9] Felicité,[10] a young woman dancer, singer, rapper, and illustrator with international ambitions, is one of the few people I met who have received an artist attestation from MINAC. According to many artists who failed to receive it, the process of obtaining the attestation seems to entail complicated and non-transparent administrative steps. However, getting an attestation can reduce struggles when obtaining visas or travel permits before international journeys. Traveling abroad for concerts and competitions is a goal of many of my interlocutors,

[9] It must be emphasized that escaping the state's repressiveness does not necessarily imply a rejection of folkloristic themes in general. Many of my interlocutors were critical of the state's way of interacting with them but were nevertheless proud to act as representatives of their social group, be it their ethnic background, their region, their nation, or other types of communities. It is the state's instrumentalization of folkloristic themes that I criticize in this paper, not the artist's usage of it nor the existence of folkloristic themes in general.
[10] Pseudonym

almost all of them indicated they would benefit from an attestation because it allows them to take part in international projects and exchanges and thereby participate in the global field of art. At the start of her career, Felicité was involved with patrimonial dances. Playing this to her advantage, she filed for an artistic attestation. After an uphill struggle to file the necessary paperwork and navigate the bureaucratic administration, she finally received the attestation in 2017. She now actively takes steps to internationalize her career by taking part in international workshops and projects as well as working with internationally known artists within the country, such as Stanley Enow. This way, Felicité invested some of her time and energy to navigate the state's narrow viewpoints and used them to her gain in the long run, now moving on to other styles and improving her career in the way she deems fit.

This goes to show that "art" is a politically contested term. It must be stated that MINAC's definition is not unchallenged on the institutional level. The person responsible for the cultural programs at the Goethe-Institut in Yaoundé formulates a view on art that is contrary to the state's folkloristic approach:

> The Goethe-Institute in Cameroon and elsewhere promotes art that is based on social and political issues of the environment. Art for art's sake is good, but "intelligent" art that provokes reflection is even better. Concerning the state, specifically the Ministry of Arts and Culture that has funds at its disposal to support certain initiatives, (…) I think that the more art is free, the less it interests them. Because art that is free means critical art. And critical art in Cameroon would be a critique of the regime, which would put the ministry of that regime in difficulties. At least they would face difficulties supporting these kinds of creations. That's why they can be seen more actively alongside of popular musicians instead of creators that are critical and intelligent, (…) as art should be. (Goethe-Institut employee)[11]

The employee contrasts the Goethe-Institut's stance on art with the attitudes held by state institutions. In his eyes, art should solicit reflection. In this sense, the artist should be an observer and critic of society. Thereby, he proposes an alternative venture for artists to realize artistic freedoms that could be problematic in state ventures. Every year, the Goethe-Institut organizes competitions for local artists, such as writers, singers, and poetry slammers. The winners receive special support (e.g., technical help with producing an album or access to international collaborations). Although initiatives like this are very well received in the artist community, the demand greatly exceeds the supply, making it difficult for young artists to benefit from those programs.

The Ministry of Arts and Culture's Desire for the Development of an Artistic Industry in Cameroon

During one of my visits to MINAC, I encountered the head of the Department of Development and Promotion of the Arts.[12] During a spontaneous interview, he outlined MINAC's outlook on the role of art for the country in the future. He disapproved of the current situation in which the art and culture sector makes up less than one percent of Cameroon's GDP. According to him, developing an artistic industry could contribute considerably to the economic growth of the country, e.g., as a tourist attraction. He argued that some of the improvements that need to be made to create an artistic industry include better formal arts education and efficient protection of authors' rights. Interestingly, one of the problems he identified in achieving that goal is the lack of professionalism among today's artists, a sentiment echoed by many of his colleagues and subordinates I talked to.

According to Schemmel (2015), the imagination of the professional, economically driven artist/entrepreneur is part of a larger neoliberal trope of art that is gaining meaning in many African countries, including Cameroon, and which is promoted by neoliberal agents such as the World Bank. The following words by a

[11] *« Le Goethe institute au Cameroun comme ailleurs est très sensible que la création artistique soit dossé sur préoccupations sociales et politiques de l'environnement. L'art pour l'art c'est bien, mais l'art "intelligente" qui a une- une- qui suscite de la réflexion est encore mieux. […] En ce qui concerne l'état, notamment le Ministère de la Culture, qui a des fonds pour soutenir certaines initiatives, [euh] (...) je pense que plus l'art est libre, moins ça les intéresse. Parce que l'art libre signifie l'art critique. Et l'art critique, au Cameroun, ce serait la critique du régime, et le ministère de ce régime aura des difficultés, ou au tout cas sera embêté à soutenir ce type de création. Donc c'est pourquoi d'ailleurs [euh] qu'on les voit plus active au côté des musiciens populaires, plutôt que des créateurs, critique et intelligent, comme (...) l'art devrait, quoi. L'art devrait susciter la réflexion. »*

[12] Original title in French «Directeur du développement et de la promotion des arts »

World Bank official at an exhibition opening in 2007 illustrate this perspective:

> Today, Painting, visual arts and the cultural industries in general are a considerable source of wealth and opportunity for employment; a display case for a country with positive outcomes for other sectors such as tourism and services in general. Like in other countries, the cultural industries in Cameroon can contribute at least 6 % of the total national wealth and 3% of employment. (Dibangtchou 2011, as cited in Schemmel, 2015, p. 305)[13]

"Professional" artists, as defined by the ministry, are legitimized by receiving an artist attestation. The MINAC discourse surrounding the attestation underscores the problematic aspect of the ministry's notion of "professional art." In an interview, the head of the Department of Visual Arts at MINAC explained why the attestation is rarely handed out: Artists who apply often do not meet the ministry's requirements of professionalism. Such requirements include a rather vague notion of producing "good art" that is linked to a discourse of ethnic representation, high production value of the artistic product, and adherence to work ethics such as discipline and punctuality. Artists' criticisms of the high threshold to receive the attestation were dismissed as a sign of artists lacking understanding about the meaning of professionalism.

In light of the economic interest in the professionalization of art, MINAC's definition of art can be viewed from a new perspective. MINAC promotes art that is representative of ethnic origins or an expression of national unity, in short something that is Cameroonian in essence (at least in the way the state imagines it). This may seem simplistic, but it fits within the framework of the economization of art within a global market, where "culture," especially "African culture," is a marketable brand. In a publicity pamphlet for one of the largest festivals organized by MINAC, the former minister of Arts and Culture, Narcisse Mouelle Kombi, writes:

> The FENAC [National Festival of Arts and Culture], is also about significantly bringing into the limelight the visibility of the arts and culture of our country, about establishing the basis for the development of an endogenous cultural policy, and about confirming the position of Cameroon as a beacon of excellence in the domain of arts and culture, which it has always been. Considered "Africa in miniature", Cameroon must make the most of its rich artistic and cultural potential […]. Many of our talents regularly win prizes throughout the world this international recognition of the artistic and cultural quality of Cameroon brings out the necessity for a constant organization of FENAC, which will make it remain an ideal place for operators of the arts and culture sector." (Mouelle Kombi, 2018, p. 7; official translation)[14]

As becomes clear from this statement, the FENAC serves to attract national and international attention to Cameroonian artistic and cultural products. Later in the pamphlet the goals of the festival are stated, one of which is the augmentation of touristic offers. This is also expressed by the director of the CCC, who emphasizes the importance of distributing African, specifically Cameroonian, art abroad. This exoticism of Cameroonian artists as "authentically African" is reminiscent of colonial imaginaries of Africa and should rightly be criticized.

Imagining the Future: The Standard Path of Becoming a Successful Artist

As I have demonstrated above, the artistic scene in Cameroon faces changes due to the state's new economic and political interest in art. MINAC aspires to professionalize the artistic sector on the structural level, e.g., by ameliorating state arts education and global market accessibility, as well as on the individual level of the artist. However, the impact of this new state interest on Cameroonian artists' career pathways has so far been rather marginal. On the surface, the state's aspirations resemble the desires uttered by young

[13] *« La peinture, les arts plastiques et plus globalement les industries culturelles représentent aujourd'hui une source considérable de richesse, d'opportunités d'emplois, une vitrine pour un pays avec des externalités positives sur des secteurs comme le tourisme et les services en général […] A l'instar d'autres pays, les industries culturelles au Cameroun peuvent ainsi contribuer au moins à 6% de la richesse nationale et 3% de l'emploi. »*

[14] *« A travers la FENAC [Festival National des Arts et de la Culture], il s'agit aussi de mettre en exergue de manière signifiante la visibilité des arts et de la culture de notre pays, d'asseoir les bases du développement d'une politique culturelle endogène, de réaffirmer la position du Cameroun comme pôle d'excellence des Arts de de la Culture qu'il n'a jamais cessé d'être. « Afrique en miniature », le Cameroun se doit de capitaliser son riche potentiel artistique et culturel […]. Beaucoup parmi nos talents récoltent régulièrement de nombreux prix à travers le monde. Cette reconnaissance internationale indique au FENAC, la nécessité de la constance qui lui permettra de demeurer ce lieu de rencontre idéal des opérateurs du secteur des Arts et de la Culture.»*

artists, such as the dire need for more art education and formation, more structures to build their careers upon, and the need for more professional work ethics. On a deeper level, however, I have illustrated that the state's notion of art is not representative of the realities of artistic expression in today's Cameroon. This raises the question as to which ways the future imaginations by the state and young artists differ. In the following section, I will analyze young artists' future imaginations and how the state's neglect manifested in young artists' future aspirations.

Interrogating young artists about their aspired future life path, a pattern emerged. Most artists referred to their aspired future as some variation of a back-and-forth model of international migration. The lack of art formation and educational opportunities in Cameroon leads to many artists searching abroad. Here, formation has a twofold meaning. Firstly, it refers to learning the technical aspects of performing, playing an instrument, or writing prose. Secondly, "forming oneself" or "learning" abroad signifies the adoption of attitudes and values that are associated with perceived cultural and psychological differences between the Global North and Cameroon. After potentially acquiring a formation, artists aspire to return to Cameroon as fully formed, professional, and ideally successful artists. Interestingly, artists do not necessarily aim to foster the continuation of a purely artistic career upon their return in Cameroon. Rather, there is a strong feeling of obligation to pass on the newly gained knowledge and take on the role of an educator. I wish to illustrate this pattern through a conversation with Felicité, who gave the following answer when asked about her career path:

> It will be much easier for me to work over there. Because I already have learned their culture, their way of being. Their way of living, their way of working. It won't be complicated for me to work with them. Discipline, it's with them that I learned to be disciplined. Here, maybe work begins at nine o'clock, someone will come at ten. With them it's not like that. Nine o'clock means that you are there at eight thirty. So I already have a certain culture of discipline. I already know how they are. So it won't even be a problem for me to adapt. (Felicité)[15]

Felicité sees her "own culture" as prone to unprofessionalism and failure. Because she worked in international projects with art professionals from Europe and the USA, she expresses a strict dichotomy of "us" versus "them." "Us" or "here" represents undisciplined and unprofessional behavior, whereas "them" or "over there" ("là-bas") refers to the wealthy Global North, representing notions of high professionalism, punctuality, reliability, and discipline. This dichotomy was not without exception given that she attributed herself to the sphere of unprofessionalism but also emphasized her otherness, her cultural and psychological proximity to the "over there." Interestingly, this was a strategy many of my interlocutors applied when explaining their plans of migrating north. Many of the conversations I participated in with young artists felt like a conversation between an applicant and a potential employer, the implication being that I, a European, am associated with positive cultural values and need to be convinced that the person I am talking to is willing and ready to adopt my perceived cultural dispositions. The state's neglect in the field of arts education and structural support of artists only reinforces this dependency, as artists need to orient themselves towards international ventures.

As my colleague, Eugene Tingwey, continued the conversation, he asked Felicité: If you had the opportunity to travel, would you do it?

> Of course, I need other openings for my art! And I will always come back! Because me, my first objective it's - I don't want to be like everyone here in Africa, going to Europe and stay there. For me it's going there, learning, making some new acquaintances, see how things work elsewhere, then bring all of that back here, to be able to introduce it to certain persons. That's it. You can go and work with other people but come back! Build structures where you are from! Try to develop your

[15] *« Ça sera plus facile pour moi de travailler là-bas. Parce que j'ai déjà une certaine culture de leur façon d'être. De leur façon de vivre, de leur façon de travailler. Ça ne sera pas vraiment compliqué pour moi de travailler avec eux. La discipline, c'est avec eux que j'ai appris à être discipliné. Ici, peut-être un travail commence à neuf heures, quelqu'un vient à dix heures. Avec eux ce n'est pas ça. Neuf heures c'est que huit heures trente tu es là. Donc j'ai déjà une culture de la discipline. Je sais déjà un peu comment ils sont. Donc ce ne sera même pas un problème de m'adapter.»*

> own country! So, like this, this is my objective. (Felicité)[16]

Felicité's ideal path of social becoming seems to be achieved through migrating north and contributing to national development. Note how Felicité's self-perception changes as she talks about two future steps on her path. The stay abroad is imagined as the sphere of professionalization, learning, and networking—in short, the path to becoming a successful artist. Returning, on the other hand, is much more connoted to the role of an educator. In this sense, her stay abroad could be interpreted as a perceived *rite de passage* [rite of passage] that leads to an empowered state of being (van Gennep 1909/2011), whereby she is able to contribute to development on a national level.[17] The roles of the educator and the artist are geographically bound to Cameroon and abroad, respectively, and can be assumed through change of location, although the change is repeatable:

> Over there is the work. But I'll come back, you have to come back for your family, for your life, to develop the country. That's how I see it. In my mind, an artist should be free! An artist shouldn't go somewhere and stay. An artist should travel, travel, travel, come back, travel, travel, come back. An artist pauses to take care of his own life and then he continues to travel and to come back. (Felicité)[18]

If the artist successfully transitions from an aspiring artist to a successful artist, this is acknowledged by the public back home.

In a different conversation this was emphasized by Free-T, who answered to the question if she was willing to "take the road:"

> I will take it because I'm sure that – with the proof of many things that I have seen – that when you are outside, and you start to shine, […] your government, your people will say: 'Oh, she's Cameroonian! She's our child!' You see? (Free-T)

In fact, the idea that the state will re-appropriate and legitimize migrated artists was expressed by the CCC director himself:

> To say the truth, an artist is well known in their milieu, but they are not well known to the larger public. But when people who buy large spectacles, for example, broadcasters, arrive here and discover that an artist has quality, they will promote him. They give his communication more reach. In this moment the country says: "Ah, see, that's one of us!" That's why I say we need to profit from this possibility. We need to distribute African artists, especially Cameroonian artists in the western world. (CCC director)[19]

Returning to the conversation with Felicité, I asked her what she thinks about artists who migrated to Europe and did not come back:

> I will approach this question from two sides. It can happen that an artist travels over there and cannot return. Alone the conditions we suffer here. Those are unfavorable conditions. Life is so difficult. Artists are sometimes not paid the full value of their work. Here, artists are often wronged. Of course, they are frustrated. When they arrive elsewhere, they realize they may not earn millions, but they are treated so well– they are valued! So, they decide to stay over there. In another sense, it's not good. Why? Because artists are like demi-gods. Artists are the reflection of society. When an artist acts this way, those who are behind him automatically follow him. His follower knows: 'If I follow this track, if I leave just like him, I stay over there, I will find a way to make

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[16] *« Donc si aujourd'hui vous avez l'opportunité de voyager, vous n'allez pas hésiter? »*
« Bien sûr, il me faut d'autres ouvertures par rapport à mon art! Et je reviendrais toujours chez moi! Parce que moi, mon principal objectif, c'est- je ne veux pas comme tout le monde ici en Afrique aller en Europe et caller, quoi. C'est aller, apprendre, aller me faire certaine connaissances, aller voir comment ça se passe ailleurs, remmener ça ici et pouvoir introduire ça dans la tête de certaines personnes. Voilà. Vous pouvez aller travailler avec des gens, mais revenez chez vous! Formez des structures chez vous! Essayez de développer votre propre pays! Donc, comme ça, c'est mon objectif, quoi. »

[17] Of course, the ideal of the successful migrant who returns to his home country as a more powerful and wealthy person is not specific to aspiring artists but is a larger societal phenomenon (Alpes 2013). Since migration, especially if illegal, can entail many risks and challenges, migrants returning from the north sometimes fail to adhere to this ideal. For an account of the social consequences of failed migration, see Atekmangoh (2017), Wölki (2025, chapter 7). For an account of successful return migrants' contributions to national development and employment of young people see Yein (2025, chapter 8).

[18] *« Là-bas, c'est le travail, mais je reviens, il faut revenir pour sa famille, pour sa vie, pour développer son pays. Donc, c'est comme ça que je vois dans les deux sens. Mais seulement pour moi, un artiste est libre. Un artiste ne doit pas aller caler quelque part. Un artiste doit aller voyager, voyager, voyager. Revenir, voyager, voyager, revenir. Il pause pour sa vie et il continue à voyager et à revenir. »*

[19] *« Donc à vrai dire, un artiste est connu dans son milieu de vie ici mais n'est pas connu au grand public. Mais quand des gens qui sont des acheteurs de grands spectacles, parfois des diffuseurs, arrivent ici et ils découvrent un artiste à qualité, et le font sortir. On lui donne plus d'espace de communication autour de lui, c'est à ce moment où le Cameroun ou l'Afrique dit: "Ah, tiens, c'est un des nôtres!" Alors, moi je dis, pour l'instant, il faut que cette voie soit exploitée. C'est de distribuer les artistes Africains, en particulier les Camerounais, donc, [euh], en occident.»*

> a living over there […]. And just like this, everybody who follows will say: 'I need to leave as well!' And finally, who will stay? Really, who? (Felicité)[20]

Her response to my question reflects how controversial this issue is for many young artists. Being all too familiar with the lacking infrastructure in the Cameroonian art sector, she is very empathetic towards artists who decide to stay abroad, very carefully phrasing her critique. Foremost, there seems to be a moral obligation that is fulfilled by coming back, the obligation to tend to family affairs or to develop the country. While this could be said about almost any Cameroonian migrant, Felicité emphasizes the role of the artist as a role model for society, who does not only influence others through art but also through action performed as a public person.

The association of "professionalism," "success," and related values with the Global North is certainly connected to general Cameroonian migration discourses and the attributions made by young Cameroonians towards Europe and Europeans broadly (Nyamnjoh, 2011; Gärtner, 2017, 2020). It should be noted that, from my perspective, young artists' motivation to migrate is not a response to the expectations of the state to be "more professional" and to "develop the country" but rather a response to a more general state failure to invest in Cameroonian art infrastructure. The predominant aspired future pathway I encountered follows a progression from aspiring artist to successful artist and ultimately to educator. In this model, both the initial stage of aspiring artist and the final role of educator are situated in Cameroon, while the phase of becoming a successful artist is envisioned as taking place abroad. This international stage is often followed by a return to Cameroon, marked by a commitment to strengthening the local art infrastructure and nurturing emerging talent. Many of my interlocutors who already built a professional career in Cameroon attributed their success largely to their previous experiences gained through migration. The case study of the artist Ruben Binam is a case in point.

Ruben Binam, a founding member of the band Macase and director of Alizés Equateur Records (AER), migrated to Europe alongside his band in the early 2000s. Once in Europe, they soon realized that the music business they sought to take part in required them to adapt to European norms and work ethics to attract the interest of labels, managers, recording studios, and publishing houses: "We were a group, we were friends, but we had no proper structure. Because we were not properly structured, we were faced with prejudices for the development of our project over there, on the other side" (Ruben Binam 2018 [Interview]).[21] This experience triggered in him the desire to build structures in Cameroon that would meet the "professional" standards of the production companies that rejected the loose organization of his band, Macase. Building on the newly found knowledge, Ruben Binam founded AER in Fouda, a quarter in Yaoundé. Today, the location hosts a recording studio, a publishing house, and a broadcasting service as well as offering training for musicians, singers, and actors. While he still identifies and prolifically works as a musician, he acknowledges that his role has also shifted to that of a coordinator and educator. Success stories like his serve as inspiration to aspiring artists.

In the next section, I will reflect on the power of collective grassroots organizing among Cameroonian artists as a complementary pathway to building an artistic career for oneself and other artists in Cameroon beyond the route of international migration to the West and back. In doing so, I will refer to the opportunities provided by Ruben Binam's Record Label AER and other artist associations.

Cameroonian artists were not only confronted with the European values and norms of the art business through migration and media but also through the work of NGOs and foreign institutes, such as the Goethe-

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[20] *« Et qu'est-ce que vous pensez des artistes qui vont en Europe et qui ne reviennent pas? »*
« Bon, je ne vais m'approcher de deux sens. Ce qui peut faire en somme qu'un artiste part là-bas et il ne veut plus revenir ici. C'est déjà les conditions qu'il y a ici. C'est les conditions non-favorables. La vie est tellement difficile. Parfois il n'est pas rémunéré à sa juste valeur. Ici, l'artiste est un peu- ici l'artiste est assez laisé. Donc du coup ils sont frustrés. Quand il arrive ailleurs, ailleurs il se rend compte qu'il n'a pas peut-être le million, mais il est tellement bien traité, il est tellement bien- il est mis en valeur! Du coup il veut rester là-bas. Dans un autre sens, ce n'est pas bien. Pour quoi? Parce que l'artiste c'est comme un demi-dieu. L'artiste c'est l'image de la société. Quand un artiste réagit comme ça, ceux qui viennent derrière, le suivent automatiquement. Il sait dans sa tête: "Si je suis cette trace, si je pars aussi comme lui, je pars caller là-bas, je vais aussi m'en sortir là-bas. Sur tout que je reviens ici-là". Et c'est comme ça que tout le monde ici qui vient derrière va se dire: "Non, il faut que je pars aussi". Et finalement qui va rester ici alors? Vraiment, qui?»

[21] *« Nous étions un groupe, nous étions des copains, mais nous n'étions pas structurés. Et donc le fait de ne pas être structuré nous portait préjudices là-bas, de l'autre côté, pour le développement de notre projet. »*

Institut. While many art professionals I encountered in the field referred to the Goethe-Institut in only the best terms, it is important to remember its historically ambiguous role in the development of the local art scene. The coordinator of the cultural program recalls a time in the history of the Goethe-Institut which he describes as follows:

> There was a period, in which the Goethe-Institut but also other international institutions had an approach that was rather colonial. They imposed a point of view, a way of creating, a way of speaking, a way of thinking, a way of producing on the countries that hosted them, notably African countries. Personally, I have observed it. During that time, I wasn't yet employed at the Goethe-Institut but approximately fifteen, twenty years ago, the Goethe-Institut did an incredible number of concerts of classical music. In Africa, in Cameroon, I saw it, the Goethe-Institut regularly organized concerts of classical music which may be good because it is beautiful music, but in terms of actual benefit to the society they were highly debatable. They were very debatable because the classical music scene in Cameroon is very weak. It is not part of Cameroonian culture. It isn't part of mass music consumption in Cameroon. So, it was a bit like: "This is what we can do, listen and appreciate it." So it was—it was of little relevance and productivity. (Goethe-Institut employee)[22]

Although it is important to acknowledge the positive impact foreign institutions like the Goethe-Institut have on the Cameroonian art scene, one must not forget the (post-)colonial history Cameroon shares with Germany. Even after the attitude described by the employee changed for a somewhat more aware and reflected view on its role, the Goethe-Institut cannot detach itself from this shared past. Peter Anders, who became the director of the Goethe-Institut in 1994, played an important role in building a visual art scene in Cameroon by providing exhibition spaces and fostering promising visual artists, such as Salifou Lindou and Koko Komegné. Anders introduced knowledge and values important in the global art world to his protégés. As a person with high artistic expertise and international connections, he promoted German-Cameroonian art collaborations with high-profile German artists (Schemmel, 2015). As Annette Schemmel (2015) concludes:

> However, considering Anders' powerful position as director of the Goethe-Institut, it could be argued that his advocacy for the imported Rules of Art left little choice for his protégés but to adapt if they wanted to show their work at the Goethe-Institut. (p. 202)

While his work indubitably had a positive impact on individuals in the visual and applied arts during his time as director of the Goethe-Institut, his efforts to foster and internationalize the local artistic scene also subjugated it to global dependencies and post-colonial inequalities. The colonial legacies of international institutions like the Goethe-Institut remain to this day and are important to keep it in mind when discussing the current discourse around the Cameroonian art scene.

The Power of Organizing

While my research was focused on the level of individual responses to structural pressures, the power of grassroots organizing in the face of institutional neglect cannot be overstated.[23] The multitude of expectations and challenges facing young Cameroonian artists today can be overwhelming when faced alone. Considering state neglect and the lacking infrastructure for arts education, many young artists turn to grassroots organizing to build opportunities for education, networking, and knowledge sharing. In the field of visual arts, Schemmel (2015) describes a "système de grands frères" [systeme of big brothers] (p. 118), a type of artistic self-help that consists of educational

[22] *« Et effectivement il y a peut-être une période où […] l'institut Goethe, mais où les instituts Européens avaient une démarche un peu coloniale. En venant imposer un point de vue, une façon de créer, une façon de parler, une façon de penser, une façon de produire au pays d'accueil, notamment aux pays Africains. […] À titre personnel je l'ai observé parce que [euh] à l'époque, je n'étais d'ailleurs pas à l'institut Goethe, il y a quinze, vingt ans, les instituts Goethe faisaient énormément de […]concerts, de musique classique, en Afrique. Au Cameroun je l'ai vu, l'institut Goethe organisait régulièrement des concerts de musique classique qui sont peut-être bien, parce que c'est une belle musique, mais qui en terme d'apport étaient très discutables. Étaient très discutables parce que la scène de musique classique au Cameroun est très faible. Ce n'est pas une culture Camerounaise [euh], ça ne fait pas partie de la consommation massive musicale au Cameroun. Donc c'était un peu: « Voilà ce qu'on sait faire, écoutez et appréciez », donc c'était un peu- c'était assez peu pertinent et productif. »*

[23] For a detailed account of the many resources found within community organizing, see Schütt (chapter 4).

relationships between elder artists and aspiring artists, who can be considered as youths.

Speaking of his past after his migratory experience to Europe, Ruben Binam recalls taking on a similar role:

> In the period that I am talking about, 2005, we already represented a lot for the African youth. We were a fairly well-known group, so we started to get a lot of people knocking on our door for help, support, advice and so on. We were like *grands frères*. But it was during this period that I said to my colleagues and friends: "Maybe we need to start taking some responsibility" And to assume our responsibilities, we had to get better organized. (Ruben Binam)[24]

AER has become a vital platform for nurturing emerging talent, providing opportunities and resources that are otherwise difficult to access. Young artists benefit from AER's comprehensive support, which includes job opportunities, musical education, and practical experiences in both studio recording and live stage performance. As discussed, one of the most significant challenges faced by aspiring solo musicians is obtaining the state-issued artist attestation. By associating with AER, these individuals gain not only practical skills but also the ability to leverage AER's name recognition and its official status as a *Petite et Moyenne Entreprise* [Small and Medium Enterprise]. This association helps them navigate bureaucratic hurdles and gain access to opportunities for international exposure. Beyond its individual support, AER provides a structural framework that strengthens the broader artistic community. By offering networking opportunities and fostering connections with both local and international stakeholders, AER enables artists to envision and pursue pathways toward professional and social mobility. In this way, the AER stands as a critical example of how grassroots organizing can counteract institutional neglect, offering young artists the tools and confidence to create meaningful futures within and beyond the arts.

AER is by far not the only organization in the Yaoundé art sphere that provides opportunities for young artists. For instance, the collective 237 Paroles plays a vital role in supporting young poetry slammers, offering them access to international platforms by leveraging its recognition by MINAC. This recognition enables individuals who do not possess the official artistic attestation to benefit from the organization's status when traveling abroad for performances or competitions. Beyond facilitating mobility, 237 Paroles fosters a sense of community among emerging poets, providing a network of peers who share ideas, feedback, and encouragement. Additionally, the collective creates job opportunities for its members through events, workshops, and collaborations.

Organizations like AER and 238 Paroles exemplify the important role grassroots initiatives play in supporting young artists and addressing the structural gaps left by institutional neglect.

Conclusion

Artists in Cameroon must navigate a multifaceted and often contradictory discourse surrounding art and professionalism, balancing institutional expectations with their personal aspirations. The state frames art as a tool for fostering national unity and commercializing ethnic identity, pressuring artists to adopt folkloristic styles and adhere to "professional" work ethics. Simultaneously, power imbalances in the global art field link the notions of professionalism and success to the wealthier global north. Foreign institutions, such as the Goethe-Institut, provide much-needed structural support but also reinforce these dynamics, complicating the pathways of artistic development. At the same time, grassroots organizations like AER and 237 Paroles play a crucial role in creating opportunities for young artists, offering alternatives to state and international frameworks. Young Cameroonian artists engage with these discourses in diverse and non-deterministic ways, crafting individualized strategies to navigate the complex institutional landscape. For instance, Free-T blends subtle social commentary with folkloristic elements, maintaining artistic freedom while securing work opportunities from MINAC. Conversely, Felicité aligns strongly with work ethics associated with the

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[24] *« Mais nous quand nous sommes arrivés à cette période dont je parle, 2005, nous représentions déjà beaucoup pour la jeunesse africaine. Nous étions un groupe assez connu, et qui donc commençait à avoir pas mal de gens qui frappaient à la porte pour être pris en main, pour être accompagné, conseillé, etc. Nous étions des grands frères. Mais c'est dans cette période que j'ai dit à mes collègues, à mes amis : "Il faudrait peut-être que nous commencions à prendre des responsabilités." Et pour prendre des responsabilités il fallait qu'on s'organise mieux. »*

Global North, envisioning a model of circulatory migration to harmonize her career goals with discourses of development and mobility. It is important to underscore the heterogeneity of young urban artists' lived realities. While this paper cannot provide a comprehensive catalog of individual strategies, it highlights the agency of Cameroonian artists as they respond to the repressive and neglectful practices of the state and reconcile competing framings of art. By doing so, it sheds light on the interplay between institutional constraints and individual creativity in shaping the trajectories of social and artistic becoming. ■

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4. Doing Development as a Way of Future-Making: Youth Engagement in Home Town Associations in Yaoundé

Lotta Luna SCHÜTT

Figure 4: Football tournament for the youth in Eba'a, Yaoundé © Anna Wölki, 2018

Abstract

Young people are often regarded as embodiments of a society's future. The future of Cameroonian youths is defined by instability and uncertainty. Due to a combination of socio-economic and political crises, many young people struggle to find appropriate employment, start their own families, or become respected adults; they lack resources and opportunities to make a future. This paper explores how young Cameroonians with high school or university education cope with the uncertainty of their futures through their engagement in Home Town Associations. The analysis is based on six-weeks of ethnographic research during August and September 2018 in the capital city Yaoundé with students and members of four different Home Town Associations. Drawing on the concepts of "future-making", "doing adulthood", and "capital forms", the paper argues that civic engagement in Home Town Associations has the potential to contribute positively to the future-making capacities of young Cameroonians graduates because Home Town Associations equip their members with a minimum of different forms of capital. The findings of this study suggest that despite facing difficult circumstances, young Cameroonians can forge new paths toward their future and (partially) transition into adulthood by actively engaging in the activities of Home Town Associations. These associations offer a basic level of social and cultural capital as well as opportunities to build further cultural, social, human, and symbolic capital through active engagement.

When I became a member of BOSTAS [Boyo Student Association], I was that kind of a person that was very shy. I didn't participate in any social activities. But now that the impact has been there, I can do many things. I can do many things thanks to [being] a member of BOSTAS. Cultural wise, I could not even dance or sing but now I can do all. Educational wise, at least, I had the courage to develop leadership skills thanks to BOSTAS. You cannot minimize the impact when you can benefit from a scholarship thanks to BOSTAS. If you come to the conference of BOSTAS and you are able to socialize and have friends, it is thanks to BOSTAS. […] So, when you are a member of BOSTAS you should say this in your CV. […] When you are a member of BOSTAS and you participate in all what we do, that will help you in your CV. The positions and what you have been able to do will help you. (Interview, Benjamin, 27.08.2018)[1]

The above quote from one of my student interlocutors, Benjamin, relates to several arguments I make in this article. Firstly, it shows that associations like the Boyo Student Association (BOSTAS)—the student wing of the Yaoundé chapter of the Kom Cultural and Development Association (KOMCUDA), a Home Town Association for people belonging to the Kom ethnic group—can contribute to the future-making processes of young people by equipping them with a variety of skills and opportunities. Secondly, it describes the impact of membership in such associations. Benjamin mentions different levels of impact: the ability to socialise, the improvement of cultural practices, the development of skills, and the opportunity to get a scholarship. By mentioning the curriculum vitae, he stresses that those impacts will help members in finding a job. Benjamin is the president of BOSTAS and, like most other members, a student[2]. He holds a B.A. degree in English from the University of Yaoundé 1. At the time of our interview, he was pursuing a master's programme in Social Sciences. Benjamin is 30 years old, was born in the anglophone part of Cameroon (Boyo Division), and is single.

In light of the above, Benjamin falls under the category of an African, urban, educated youth. Confronted with various challenges, African youth have gained much scholarly attention in anthropology and the social sciences broadly in the last two decades (Christiansen et al., 2006; Fokwang, 2008, 2016; Johnson-Hanks, 2002, 2005, 2016; Steuer & Engeler, 2017; Ngeh & Pelican 2022; Harms, 2022; Chipenda & Tom, 2022). While young people are often regarded as the future of society, nowadays most African youths cannot see their future at all. Unstable and weak economies (Harcourt et al., 2025), social and political crises (Roitman, 2016), environmental catastrophes (Macamo, 2017; Toreti et al., 2025), and high unemployment rates, especially among sub-Saharan African youth (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024), turn many African societies into volatile environments. Their future is defined by instability and uncertainty (Pelican & Heiss, 2014; Johnson-Hanks, 2016). This is especially true for Cameroon. Due to a socio-economic crisis, many young people struggle to find appropriate employment, start their own families, or fulfill their responsibilities towards their parents (Pelican & Heiss, 2014; Fleischer, 2012; Honwana, 2012; Durham, 2004; Roth, 2014). In the African context, being viewed as an adult is highly dependent on the aforementioned achievements (Twum-Danso Imoh, 2019). Many Cameroonian youths thus struggle to become respected adults and to make a future. Even highly educated youths, like Benjamin, face this problem, as holding an academic degree no longer guarantees employment. In fact, "university graduates have become those often described as only waiting for adulthood" (Steuer & Engeler, 2017, p. 10).

Aside from academic interest, policy makers saw the need to improve future perspectives of young Africans, too. In 2006, the African Union agreed to develop the "African Youth Charter."[3] This charter sets its goals to "empower young people through meaningful participation and equal partnership in driving Africa's development agenda" (African Union, n.d.). The charter engages with several key themes in which youths should be integrated, such as education and skill development, socio-economic participation, sustainable livelihoods, development, and employment. While

[1] All names mentioned in this article are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the research participants.
[2] While BOSTAS is primarily a student organization, membership is not strictly limited to students; non-student members are also involved.
[3] https://au.int/en/treaties/african-youth-charter

member states of the African Union should bring in strategies to achieve youth empowerment and participation in the public sphere (e.g., Article 10-16), the charter also highlights the youth's responsibility to empower themselves, engage in development endeavours, and not to wait for the state to bring development to them (e.g., Article 26). Although the charter was drafted to improve the current precarious situation of many young people in Africa, most African governments failed to develop structures and opportunities that enable young people to exercise the rights and duties that would give them the opportunity to make a future for themselves as described therein. Rather, local organizations and associations like BOSTAS take action to create opportunities for young people to participate in the public sphere, to empower themselves, to develop skills to confront their individual futures, and to contribute to the development of their societies (Wamucii, 2012).

African associations like BOSTAS and KOMCUDA were long analyzed as places where ethnic identity was reproduced, linkages between rural and urban areas were established, or political followers could be generated (Fokwang, 2008). More recently, their translocal and transnational character and their interplay with their development attempts has gained attention (Mercer et al., 2008). However, much of this research tends to focus on adult members, most often wealthy elites. Only a few studies have analyzed the role of young, marginalized people in such associations. While Gable (2000) explores how young people use associations to criticize adult society, Fokwang (2008) sees youth associations as an opportunity to negotiate and "circumvent their exclusion and marginality" by positioning themselves as moral and social actors (Fokwang, 2008, p. ii). This article contributes to this body of research by investigating how Home Town Associations contribute to the future-making processes of young, educated Cameroonians.

As mentioned above, the quote shows that associations can contribute to the future-making processes of young people by equipping them with a variety of skills and opportunities. The following paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between September and August 2018 in the city of Yaoundé. It draws on case studies of student members of BOSTAS and KOMCUDA as well as participant observation at a football tournament organized by both associations. I argue that Home Town Associations like KOMCUDA and their associated student/youth wings such as BOSTAS have the potential to contribute positively to the future-making processes of young Cameroonians because their activities and projects provide contexts of action. Furthermore, I will illustrate how associations of this nature are places where young people can empower themselves and meaningfully participate in the public sphere as demanded in the African Youth Charter. This is possible because membership in such associations equips young people with a minimum of social and cultural capital. Through their active engagement, young members can accumulate (further) cultural, social, human, and symbolic capital. Due to the reciprocal exchange of the capital forms, they reinforce each other and create additional value. This again leads to new contexts of action and opportunities to make a future and (partially) enter adulthood.

The article is structured as follows. First, a brief overview of the methods and sample is given, followed by two sections on youth and future-making and the different resources that can be used in making a future. Both sections outline the key theoretical concepts relevant to the analysis of this article, such as future-making by Pelican and Heiss (2014) and the different forms of capital by Pierre Bourdieu (1986). Before, delving into the analysis of how active membership in a Home Town Association contributes to the future-making processes of young Cameroonians and to becoming a respected adult, the organizational structure of the two associations under study as well as their different kinds of "development" activities will be described.

Methods and Sample

The data was collected during a six-week research phase in August and September 2018 in Cameroon's capital, Yaoundé. I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with members of four Home Town Associations, namely KOMCUDA, BOSTAS, the Cultural and Development Association of Oku (OCDA), and *Jeunes Dynamique d'Eba'a* (JDE). I also conducted interviews at two connected organizations, the Integrated Health for All Foundation (IHAF) and the Unity Foundation Cameroon (UFC). The research participants were between 25 and 60 years old; 12 were

men and three were women. The underrepresentation of women can be explained by the fact that most members of the organizations, especially in leadership positions, were men. Additionally, I conducted (participant) observation at activities and meetings of the associations.

I spent most of my time with KOMCUDA and its subgroups. KOMCUDA has branches in all ten regions of Cameroon, but my research only focused on the Yaoundé chapter. In addition, I visited three matches of a football tournament organised by KOMCUDA Yaoundé. In addition to observing the general atmosphere and ongoing activities, I held a few informal conversations with visitors, organizers, and members of the associations. Despite my focus on KOMCUDA, 3 of the 15 interviews I conducted were with members of other associations. These observations and interviews, as well as several informal talks with institutions and ministries, are not explicitly mentioned during the following analysis but had the function of validating my findings.

Youth and Future-Making in Cameroon

While people all over the world are confronted with future uncertainties, volatile contexts and circumstances of instability are more common and extreme in Africa and Cameroon in particular (Pelican & Heiss, 2014; Harms, 2022; Roitman, 2016; Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2024). Pelican and Heiss (2014) argue that the way actors look at and act towards their futures is highly influenced by the social and environmental conditions in which they are situated. In Cameroon, these conditions are highly uncertain; Roitman (2016) characterizes this as "la crise," a constant condition of crisis that makes it difficult for young Cameroonians to live their lives self-determinedly and independently. Without employment, they are not able to provide enough income to get married and care for their own families, both of which are specific markers of entering adulthood in many African societies (Twum-Danso Imoh, 2019). Honwana (2012) relatedly discusses the notion of "waithood," a period which precedes reaching adulthood and "goes beyond securing a job and extends to other aspects of life, such as access to learning opportunities, household formation, and civic participation" (p. 4). Uncertainty manifests itself not only in the most concrete level of employment but is coupled with changing patterns of how to, and if at all, become a respected adult (Christiansen et al., 2006).

Although notions such as "waithood generation" (Honwana, 2012) or "arrested adulthood" (Côté, 2000) may position youths as passively waiting for their futures to come, this is not generally the case. What distinguishes the future from the past is the influence of people's actions in the present. Therefore, the connection between the future and the present cannot be overestimated. For example, Christiansen et al. (2006) and Steuer and Engeler (2017) contend that African youths actively cope with the uncertainties they are confronted with and exercise strategies to make a future. Other authors went even further and characterized uncertainty as a resource of productivity, a benefit rather than impediment (Cooper & Pratten, 2015). In this volume, Dana Harm's (chapter 5) article on the different modes of planning of young educated single mothers is a strong example of how facing uncertainty does not automatically mean that young people do not direct their actions and aspirations towards a successful future. By looking at the future through the lens of the present in this way, we can think about the future as a process:

> We speak of making a future, because a future is not only conceived of, it is not only a product of imagination, but it is also confronted and constructed through action, in a back-and forth process between actors and their environment. (Pelican & Heiss, 2014, p. 7)

To capture the dynamics of this process, youths need to be conceptualized simultaneously as *social beings* and *social becomings* (Christiansen et al., 2006). This underscores African young people's aspirations "to become respected adults" (Steuer & Engeler 2017, p. 15) in the future. Seeing youths as *social becomings* opens the way to explore their strategies of future-making and to "achieve adulthood" (Vigh, 2006, p. 46). While the exercised strategies can differ in kind and method, what they have in common is that they are actively carried out. To "promote their social becoming," young people engage themselves in a multitude of spheres (e.g., work, education, family, religion, politics) in which they are "doing adulthood" (Steuer & Engeler 2017, p. 11). However, to be able to

act and to confront one's future, access to some minimum degree of capital is necessary.

Bourdieu (1986) states that it is capital that makes "the game of society […] something other than simple games of chance" (p. 245). With this game metaphor, he describes that the accumulation of capital is not something arbitrary but consists of constant labor and action. It is the possession of different kinds of capital that determines the agency and social status of a person and which organizes social life. Therefore, the existence and acquisition of capital determines one's ability to navigate the future. For Bourdieu, capital exists in three fundamental forms, presenting itself:

> as economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and as social capital, made up of social obligations ("connections"), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 247)

Economic capital is the most straightforward of the three, but both cultural and social capital warrant further explanation. Cultural capital refers to an individual's social status and power rooted in accumulated cultural knowledge and often demonstrated via social assets, such as education, speech dialect, and fashion (Barker, 2004). It can be acquired unconsciously (e.g., through being raised in a particular social milieu), but can also be acquired through "the appropriating capacities of an individual agent" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249), such as a given person being the first in their family to attend university and thereby attaining cultural capital not only in the form of a degree, but also through the adoption of social assets (e.g., the use of an academic register). Turning to social capital, Bourdieu (2005) more concretely defines it as a resource based in belonging to a specific group that results in social relations, being known, and social recognition. We can thus imagine social capital as the "the social networks available to people to access and mobilize resources" (Rao & Walton, 2004, p. 16). The worth of a person's social capital is thus dependent on both the networks available to them as well as the amount of capital within said networks (Bourdieu, 2005). Like economic capital, both cultural and social capital are not static, requiring work, exchange, and investments to (further) develop and maintain. Also of note is that these fundamental forms of capital are not entirely distinct, instead mutually-reinforcing one another. For instance, increases in cultural capital can grant access to new social networks, access to economic capital can provide opportunities to acquire cultural capital, and so on.

In addition to the three foundational forms of capital outlined above, Bourdieu identifies a fourth form of capital that exists at their nexus: symbolic capital. This form of capital is immaterial in nature and has been described by Bourdieu (1984) as the manifested symbolic effects of economic, cultural, and/or social capital in the form of "a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honorability" (p. 291). In this sense, symbolic capital is the embodiment of other forms of capital as soon as they are known and recognized by others in society (Bourdieu, 1997). For instance, attending university may increase one's cultural capital (through education), one's social capital (through gaining access to new, potentially elite networks), and even one's economic capital (through post-graduation employment). The symbolic capital that emerges from the nexus of these would be academic prestige and the benefits it entails even in the absence of the other forms of capital (e.g., an unemployed graduate may still benefit from reputation despite low economic capital).

Important to this study is a fifth type of capital that exists outside of the above framework: human capital, generally defined as a person's "capacities, skills, and knowledge" (Cornali, 2017, p. 4). The concept of human capital evolved over time but is most commonly attributed to Theodore Schultz (1961) and Gary Becker (1964), both of whom significantly advanced the idea in the 20th century. Schultz (1961) explicitly introduced the term, emphasizing that human skills and knowledge constitute a form of capital. Becker (1964) expanded upon Schultz's work, analyzing how education, training, and healthcare enhance economic productivity. It should be noted that Bourdieu (1983) criticized the concept of human capital because it understands educational success to be result of the naturally given

capacities of an individual; for him, the concept thus fails to account for how the opportunity and thus ability to accumulate knowledge is itself determined by cultural and social capital (274f). This is certainly true in the Cameroonian context, where the introduction of tuition fees in 1993 limited access to education for families with less economic capital (Fonkeng & Ntembe 2009, p. 244). Nonetheless, human capital's focus on individual capacities is suitable for the analysis of an individual's educational success because these capacities have the potential to increase "employment rates and earnings" regardless of one's initial social or economic capital (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2001, p. 3). In other words, even one's ability to gain new capacities and skills is mediated by other forms of capital, the capacities and skills in question still serve as a form of capital that can offer benefits regardless of other capital deficits.

Now turning to the Cameroonian context, Pelican and Heiss (2014) identify economic and social capital as important factors in the future-making processes of youths. Particularly, where economic capital is lacking, like in Cameroon, efforts to build social capital become the most important resource for future-making because in "the absence of formal social security systems, support is obtained through social networks" (Frei, 2013, p. 216; see also von Benda-Beckmann & von Benda-Beckmann, 1994/2007). In reference to symbolic capital, Harms (2022) similarly demonstrates that the social position of Cameroonian youth generally comes with a lack thereof, again necessitating investment in and drawing from other forms of capital. This maps onto work elsewhere on the continent, such as Roth's (2014) work with urban youth in Burkina-Faso that shows that, in most cases, it is the combination of different forms of capital, such as cultural, social, symbolic, and human capital, which enables people to act, create contexts of agency, and open possibilities for future action. In the following sections, I analyze how youth navigate the uncertain social and environmental conditions of the Cameroonian context through turning to civic engagement, especially with Home Town Associations, as a strategy to accumulate different forms of capital and to create new contexts of action.

KOMCUDA and BOSTAS – Home Town Associations in Yaoundé

Home Town Associations are the most prominent form of civic engagement in Cameroon. Associations that "bring together indigenes of a place living away from their perceived common home" are a widely spread phenomenon in Cameroon and West Africa in general, and members form a "translocal community" (Evans, 2010, pp. 397-398).[4] Often, they aim to preserve the culture of an ethnic group; thus, members usually speak their native language, wear traditional dresses, sing, dance to traditional music, and eat traditional food. Aside from this more cultural aspect, Home Town Associations also engage in the development domain. Their development attempts are often, but not exclusively, directed towards their communities of origin. The following section will illustrate the explained nature and organizational structure of Home Town Associations based on the case study of KOMCUDA and BOSTAS.

KOMCUDA is the Cultural and Development Association of Kom. Kom is a fondom in Boyo Division of the Northwest Region of Cameroon.[5] It is situated 30 kilometers south of Bamenda. KOMCUDA is established in all ten regions of Cameroon and beyond. KOMCUDA's subgroups are diverse. There are manifestations of the Valley Development Unions, village associations, and associations concerning the current places of residence, such as urban districts and quarters in the cities. In addition, there is also a students' wing (Boyo Student Association: BOSTAS), women's wing (Boyo Women), and sports groups.

With 500 registered members, KOMCUDA Yaoundé is the biggest KOMCUDA in Cameroon. It is important to say that members of the sub-associations are not necessarily members of KOMCUDA. In this way, the associations function independently and are only loosely tied under KOMCUDA. One of those independent but loosely connected groups is the Boyo Student

[4] The term "translocal" refers to the movement, migration, and connections between places that aren't limited by national borders. Since the mid-1990s, researchers have started focusing more on the local side of international migration (Ley 2004), which looks at how global and local factors come together in places like cities, neighborhoods, homes, and families (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013, pp. 373-376)

[5] A "Fondom" is the Cameroonian term for kingdom or local ruling unit, led by a monarch or traditional ruler known as a "Fon." These institutions are common in the west and northwest regions, especially in the Grassfields and Anglophone areas (Ngwa, 2023).

Association (BOSTAS). BOSTAS arose from the Boyo Students Union in Buea, which was founded in 1995. In 2000, the name was changed to BOSTAS. In total, BOSTAS has almost 3000 members.

BOSTAS was created to bring together Boyo students of all levels of education. Its aims are summarized in the association's motto: "Togetherness, culture, education and sustainable development" (Constitution BOSTAS 2008, Article 3). Among other things, BOSTAS wants to ensure and promote education among Boyo youths, promote and preserve Boyo culture, ensure the socio-cultural and economic development of the Boyo Division, and ensure a cordial relationship between the elites of Boyo and the students (Constitution BOSTAS 2008, Article 5). Those elites are an important factor in social life in Cameroon:

> In Cameroon, the term elite is used to refer to men and women presumed to be relatively wealthy or known to possess high qualifications in formal, Western-style education, and to those who occupy positions of power within the public bureaucracy or private corporations. (Orock, 2015, p. 541)

The social category of elites comes along with prestige and social recognition, but also with the responsibility to help and support less well-off members of their community (Nyamnjoh & Rowlands, 1998). Elites build the foundation of Home Town Associations such as KOMCUDA and BOSTAS. Commonly, elites obtain high-ranking positions in Home Town Associations because they are expected to "do development." In this regard, Home Town Associations "serve as platforms for co-ordinating elite interventions for local development" (Orock, 2015, p. 535). Orock (2015) states that elites and non-elites have a mutual relationship. On the one hand, the engagement in developmental work and the capacity to improve life at the community level create the social category of elites. On the other hand, elites are generally expected to carry out developmental work and support their community: They are "held accountable by their local village or ethnic-regional communities. These social expectations about development are central to what it means to be elite" (Orock, 2015, p. 536). Development is also one of the main aims of BOSTAS and KOMCUDA. This is reflected in projects carried out in Kom, like the construction of the palace or career sensitization in high schools.

As a cultural and development association, the interconnection of culture and development is inscribed in KOMCUDA's objectives. KOMCUDA's national president, Philip Njoh, described the aim of the associations like this:

> Our association is a developmental association whose aim it is to bring all the Kom people together, participate and carry out all the work together and support each other in the times of problems. (Interview, Philip Njoh, 2018).

It is through this quote that one can begin to see the strong focus on sociality. To bring Kom people together is the main aim of KOMCUDA. The same is true for BOSTAS as well as for the projects they are carrying out. This sociality is mainly created through cultural activities. Similarly, Mercer et al. (2008) observed that welfare and social support are very important factors of KOMCUDA. Home Town Associations draw the connection between the improvement of the lives of their members and the development of their homeplace. Mercer et al. (2008) call this concept "the wealth of a place is in its people" and argue that the impact of Home Town Associations does not lie in poverty reduction but in how they improve the lives of their community members (pp. 23, 230). As a result, cultural and developmental activities often fall together and are inseparable.

The "KOMCUDA Yaoundé Football Tournament Maiden Edition 2018," which took place from the 29th of July to the 26th of August 2018, is a good example of this interconnectedness. The tournament was organized and structured like a regular tournament with a pre-round, a semi-final, and a final. In total, eight teams participated in the tournament, often constituting different sub-divisions or groups of KOMCUDA. During the tournament, cultural activities and developmental potential fell together. Cultural manifestations were common during the tournament. So-called "fun clubs" from the villages entertained the audience and cheered for their teams by playing the drums, singing, and dancing, embedding the whole event with a shared cultural basis. On the level of development, the event provided an opportunity for small businesses to sell their products to visitors. On the level of the visitors and the players, two things became apparent to me. Firstly, sociality: The football tournament is an occasion for Kom people to gather. Secondly, the football

tournament was supposed to prevent the youths from getting involved in wayward activities. The tournament was declared as an activity for the youth. Most of the players were students 30-35 years old and younger. Participating in the tournament as a player or as a visitor was supposed to keep them off the streets and give them something to do during the holidays. Moreover, the players had the opportunity to showcase their talents in public. It created the potential opportunity to be spotted by external talent scouts or be internally selected for a new team that the Kom elites were willing to sponsor. Each team had to contribute money to KOMCUDA Yaoundé for registration. In total, each team had to spend 48.000 FCFA[6] (73,18€)[7] to participate in the tournament. To get this money, the teams themselves were sponsored by different stakeholders. A KOMCUDA member from Germany sponsored the team of the KOMCUDA sub-division Djichami Development Comittee (DDC) because he was born in this village, an official executive of KOMCUDA sponsored the team of his quarter in Yaoundé, and a non-governmental organization (NGO) that partners with BOSTAS sponsored the team of BOSTAS with equipment, money for transport, and the registration fee. The money was then used for the development projects of KOMCUDA, like the construction of the multi-purpose hall in Yaoundé and the renovation of the palace in Kom.

To conclude, the case study of the football tournament gives many insights into how KOMCUDA and BOSTAS are organized, what kind of activities they carry out, and how they aim to impact their community. Using the tournament as a starting point, the following sections will analyze how KOMCUDA and BOSTAS contribute to the future-making perspectives of young Cameroonians.

Home Town Associations and Future-Making: Membership in BOSTAS

As outlined above, most activities of KOMUCDA and BOSTAS target the members of the associations themselves. However, most members of KOMCUDA are not youths since one needs a certain level of economic capital to become a member. Thus, young Cameroonians have to explore other strategies to make use of the benefits of membership and access the resources available in KOMCUDA. By analyzing the interplay of KOMCUDA's structure, activities, and membership requirements and those of its student wing BOSTAS and other partnering developmental organizations outside of KOMCUDA —as well as the ways students engage with BOSTAS —I will show how active membership in Home Town Associations or their student wings can contribute to future-making opportunities for young Cameroonians. Here, the distinction between passive and active membership is important:

> I want to think, that the impact has really been there, it has really been felt by members. And here we are not talking about passive members […]. A passive member will obviously tell you that the impact was not there […]. I think that for those who are actually members of BOSTAS and have participated in almost all activities, they have the impact. (Interview, Benjamin, 27.08.2018)

The quote shows that it is active membership that impacts the opportunities of youths to make a future. Considering this, it becomes clear that the main beneficiaries of the associations are the active members and not outsiders affected by their projects.

The following sections will analyse how projects of KOMCUDA and BOSTAS, as well as active membership, can provide young Cameroonians with resources for future-making. For this purpose, the accumulation of cultural, human, social, and symbolic capital is analyzed. Along with that, a focus is put on how the reciprocal nature of these capital forms creates contexts of action in which young people can situate themselves as adults and confront their future.

Cultural capital: getting access to resources

As outlined above, cultural belonging and capital are the foundation for membership in KOMCUDA and BOSTAS. It is cultural capital that first gives members access to the association's social network and activities.

[6] Central African CFA franc – the currency used in several Central African countries including Cameroon.
[7] All euro values mentioned in this article reflect the exchange rate as of 2025. Differences from the 2018 exchange rate may apply. The currency values refer to the exchange rate of 2025. Deviations from the exchange rate in 2018 are possible.

To receive solidarity and support from KOMCUDA, members must be from Kom and pay the registration fee of 1,000 FCFA (1,52€) and the annual development fee of 6,000-1,2000 FCFA (9,15-18,29€) to claim membership. Most students and young people do not have the financial means to become a member of KOMCUDA, as more than half of employed Cameroonians (58 percent) earn below the national minimum wage of 3,6270 FCFA per month (roughly US$55,28) (Botea & Del Bono, 2022, p. 7). It is for this reason that other forms of capital, such as cultural capital, become important if one wishes to gain access to KOMCUDA. The aforementioned fees can be avoided by joining a youth wing as for example BOSTAS, with lower fees or participating in youth activities that are open to non-registered members, such as the KOMCUDA football tournament described above. In this way, the barrier of a lack of economic capital can be overcome.

Another form of cultural capital that young people can acquire through their engagement in BOSTAS is institutionalized cultural capital in the form of a position. Holding a position in BOSTAS, especially a high-ranking one like the presidency, declares a "cultural competence that confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 264). Like the academic titles Bourdieu uses as an example, the title of the president of BOSTAS provides the holder with a foundation of symbolic capital that is independent of the actual capital of the person. As the following chapters will show, holding a position also creates possibilities to develop human capital and mobilise social capital.

I demonstrated in this section how cultural capital and/or economic capital in the case of KOMCUDA serve as pre-conditions for participation and membership in the association and how such capital is reproduced and manifested through the association's activities. Based on the accounts of my interlocutors, the next two sections explore how cultural capital exercised or gained through the association legitimizes and provides access to other forms of capital like human, social and symbolic capital.

Human capital: advantages for the job market

In this paragraph, I will show that Home Town Associations have the potential to develop the human capital of their members. It is important to note that the creation of human capital is embedded in the cultural and developmental activities of KOMCUDA and BOSTAS. To be able to foster human capital, members have to draw on a minimum of cultural capital as described in the section above. This extends beyond those members who hold a position, gain skills therefrom, and thus hold a form of institutionalized cultural capital. Namely, through participating in special activities or projects, ordinary members have the opportunity to gain skills. If an individual can do this, whether they hold a position or not, it opens the way to accumulate different forms of human capital which they can use to approach their future. The engagement in the association creates the context in which those skills can be acquired. While these skills can be diverse, they all can be used as an advantage in the labor market.
To illustrate the argument, I will give the example of Jackson. He is a high-ranking member of BOSTAS Yaoundé and around 30 years old. He started studying mass communication in 2016 and is an aspiring journalist. Aside from his position in BOSTAS, he is also a member of the editorial team of the associations' magazine *Voice of BOSTAS*. The magazine was conceived to be published annually, but after the first edition in 2014, they had to stop for four years due to a lack of funds. The second edition was released in 2018 and was published with 500 copies. While BOSTAS encourages every member to write an article for Voice of BOSTAS, there is one editorial team that keeps track of the articles, corrects and reworks them, and edits the magazine. Jackson has additionally worked for two professional magazines, although without (or with very low) payment. How those experiences can contribute to opportunities to make a future becomes more explicit when seeing them as advantages in the job market. Even though my informants emphasize that no one joins the association because of the possibility of getting advantages in the job market, it turns out that they think their work in the associations can be beneficial or can lead to specific opportunities. Jackson, for example, is very certain that he will get a job after graduation. Concerning his work and engagement for *Voice of BOSTAS*, he says:

> When I want to look at my profession, to be a journalist, it will help me. Because if I want to apply for the job, I will use it as work experience. I will have experiences in writing plus being […] a publisher and an editor. I will put it in my CV that I am the publisher and editor of such a magazine. So, it helps. (Interview, Jackson, 28.08.2018)

The work for the magazine allows him to obtain a responsible position in the editorial team and enhances his professional skills such as writing, editing, and organizing. His statement clearly shows that he thinks the work for the magazine provides him with advantages in finding a job.

Even without participating in specific projects, involvement in an association can develop a wide range of professional skills and knowledge. Often, those skills are linked to performing specific positions in the association. Paul is an executive member of another student association which is very similar to BOSTAS. In his student association, he served as treasurer since 2012. Holding this position for such a long time implies that he has gained notable skills in financial management.

When he applies for a job, he will list a selection of his positions in several associations in his CV: "It is important to employers because they [can] have an idea about my experience" (Interview Paul 31.08.2018, Yaoundé).

Year	Position	Group
2017 till date	**President**	**Champions Teachers Association (CHATA)**
2015 till date	Vice Coordinator	Shiloh Literacy Program Etoug-ebe Baptist church
2015 till date	President and Treasurer	Humble brothers
2012-2014	HOD and Biology Teacher	GCE Success Evening School
2012-2014	Taught Anatomy and Physiology PEPS	Group Major INJS
2013-2017	Biology Teacher (Bio 103 and BA 211)	Anglophone Academy University of Yaounde I
2013 till date	General Secretary	Oku Teacher`s Association Yaounde Branch
2012 till date	Treasurer	Oku Student Union National and Yaounde Branch
2012-2017	President	Manchok Oku Cultural and Development Association Yaounde Branch
2010-2012	General Secretary	Manchok Oku Cultural and Development Association Yaounde Branch
2008-2009	Part-time Biology Teacher of form 5	G.H.S Elak-oku
2007-2008	Senior Prefect	G.H.S Elak-oku

Table 1: Paul's CV: Overview of positions exercised in various associations, source: author.

BOSTAS has these types of positions, too. Among other positions, they have a treasurer, a financial secretary, a

public relations officer, a socio-cultural officer, and a sports officer (Constitution BOSTAS 2018, Article 13). All these positions come with specific tasks and responsibilities. Some of them, like managing finances, drafting budgets, taking minutes during meetings, or publicizing important information, can easily be considered professional skills. Others can be named "soft skills," interpersonal skills, and what the OECD (2001) calls "other skills and attributes."

Interpersonal skills, such as leadership, organizational, or teamwork skills, were often mentioned as achievements by members of BOSTAS. Those skills are practiced and performed by active members through their work for the association. Especially those who maintain an official position within the association gain these kinds of experiences and skills. For example, the president is responsible for drawing up the agendas for all meetings, signing documents, and ensuring the proper execution of approved projects and policies of the association (Constitution BOSTAS 2008, Article 15). Because new executives are elected every two years, every active member has the opportunity to benefit from the described accumulation of skills (Constitution BOSTAS 2008, Article 16).

Adeline, who occupies a high-ranking position in BOSTAS, states that she improved her organizational skills and her ability to work with people. She is responsible for preparing food and for taking care of those who cook for the meetings of the association. Furthermore, she organizes the practice sessions of their traditional dance and takes care of the dancing materials when they are booked for an event. The task of "organizing people" comes with problems, like low rates of contribution and participation in cultural events (Interview Adeline 08.09.2018, Yaoundé). Confronted with those problems, Adeline was forced to think about solutions. She established a new way of communicating by frequently sending reminders to the association's WhatsApp group. Considering Adeline's example, one can see that she has to draw on and develop teamwork skills, problem-solving skills, and her "facility in using information and communications technology" (OECD, 2001).

Mobilizing social capital for future opportunities

The elites of KOMCUDA hold resources that can help young students make a future for themselves. The students aim to incorporate those elites into their social network and maintain good relationships with them. Therefore, they need to invest in these relationships. Only when the elites know them will they potentially support students in their future-making processes. Thus, the youths exercise various strategies to become potential beneficiaries of scholarships, job opportunities, and other kinds of moral or financial support.

Being a member of KOMCUDA could be the first step to accessing that information, but mere registration is not enough. At a minimum, attending the association's meetings is necessary to be informed about possible jobs. As outlined above, entering KOMCUDA is not affordable for students due to the relatively high fees that members must pay. This means that young people must find other strategies to improve and mobilize their social capital. The first challenge is to get in contact with the elites and the second is to mobilize that social capital to get employment and scholarship opportunities. Consequently, to be able to draw on the resources that elites can offer, the youths have to be known (or "seen") and gain social recognition (Jackson, Interview 28.08.2018, Yaoundé). One professor described this as follows: "I have very few Boyo students who visit me. They are the ones I call on phone, because once I know you, I come closer to you" (Kum, 2014, p. 9). The KOMCUDA Football Tournament provided a good opportunity for young people to be seen by the elites. The elites always had prominent seating positions and watched the tournament. The tournament provided the players with the opportunity to expose their talents in public and be recognized by the elites. One of the executives of KOMCUDA explained: "If you don't play in the public nobody will ever know you are a player" (Interview Peter, 31.08.2018, Yaoundé).

Besides participation in the tournament, active engagement in BOSTAS can also generate social capital and future opportunities such as scholarships. Benjamin explains that the elites "need to see a member very active and very present in BOSTAS before one has such opportunities" (Interview Benjamin 27.08.2018, Yaoundé). A way to get access to KOMCUDA's social

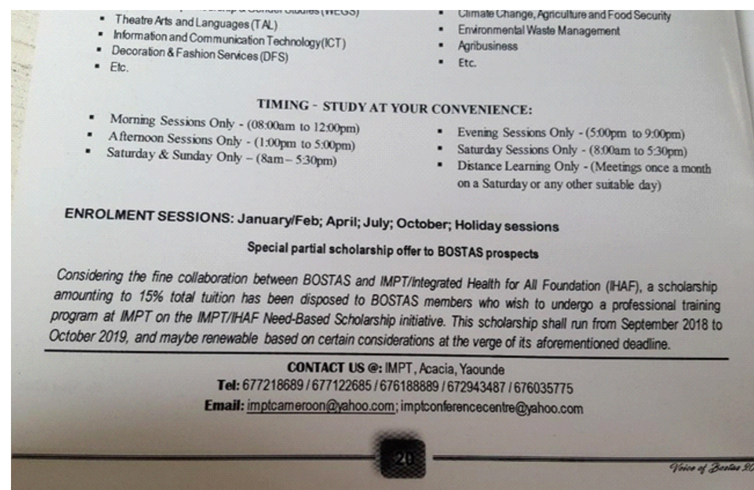
capital without being a member is thus to seriously engage oneself in BOSTAS. Holding the position of the president in the student association is one such way. Every president of a subgroup is automatically an executive in KOMCUDA itself and therefore also in touch with and known by the elites.

Adeline, the BOSTAS executive member, developed the strategy of attending every meeting of KOMCUDA even without being a paying and official member. When asked for the difference between being a member of KOMCUDA or just attending the meetings, Adeline explained that KOMCUDA only provides financial support to members. Yet, she sees the possibility that KOMCUDA would help her in times of distress even without her paying the membership fees:

> They can consider me a member because they know me. When they are organizing conferences or cultural events, I am often playing the part of a hostess there. At least they know me from BOSTAS. (Interview, Adeline, 08.09.2018)

Being known in the association and being seen as an active member of a subgroup opens possibilities for Adeline to benefit from KOMCUDA without fulfilling the official requirements of membership. The examples of the football tournament and Adeline show that young people can translate their cultural capital into social capital through their active membership and engagement in an association. Holding positions or being known by important members within the association leads to social recognition and thereby qualifies them for scholarships or job opportunities.

In addition, members of BOSTAS can also acquire and mobilize social capital outside of KOMCUDA. In their standing as a development association, BOSTAS established contacts with other local organizations. They partnered with two Cameroonian organizations called Integrated Health for All Foundation (IHAF) and Unity Foundation Cameroon (UFC), which, unlike BOSTAS, understand themselves as development organizations and not as cultural associations. The partnership of BOSTAS with these organisations has different facets. Firstly, BOSTAS carries out developmental projects with both IHAF and UFC. Secondly, due to the social recognition BOSTAS gained through these partnerships, the organizations also provide scholarships to members of BOSTAS. These scholarships have a strong aim of promoting education and professionalization. IHAF offers a partial scholarship for professional courses like project planning and management, information and communication technology, or environmental waste management. BOSTAS members are automatically approved to get the scholarship, which covers 15 % of the course fee, without applying. Again, it is simply being a member of the association that opens up educational perspectives that can contribute to future-making processes of youth.



- Theatre Arts and Languages (TAL)
- Information and Communication Technology(ICT)
- Decoration & Fashion Services (DFS)
- Etc.

- Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security
- Environmental Waste Management
- Agribusiness
- Etc.

TIMING - STUDY AT YOUR CONVENIENCE:

- Morning Sessions Only - (08:00am to 12:00pm)
- Afternoon Sessions Only - (1:00pm to 5:00pm)
- Saturday & Sunday Only – (8am – 5:30pm)
- Evening Sessions Only - (5:00pm to 9:00pm)
- Saturday Sessions Only - (8:00am to 5:30pm)
- Distance Learning Only - (Meetings once a month on a Saturday or any other suitable day)

ENROLMENT SESSIONS: January/Feb; April; July; October; Holiday sessions

Special partial scholarship offer to BOSTAS prospects

Considering the fine collaboration between BOSTAS and IMPT/Integrated Health for All Foundation (IHAF), a scholarship amounting to 15% total tuition has been disposed to BOSTAS members who wish to undergo a professional training program at IMPT on the IMPT/IHAF Need-Based Scholarship initiative. This scholarship shall run from September 2018 to October 2019, and maybe renewable based on certain considerations at the verge of its aforementioned deadline.

CONTACT US @: IMPT, Acacia, Yaounde
Tel: 677218689 / 677122685 / 676188889 / 672943487 / 676035775
Email: imptcameroon@yahoo.com; imptconferencecentre@yahoo.com

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Figure 5: Information on partial scholarship for BOSTAS members in the magazine Voice of BOSTAS, source: author.

While the IHAF scholarship is open to every BOSTAS member, UFC only provides their scholarships to hand-picked students (both members and non-members of BOSTAS) who have shown significant commitment and engagement. These scholarships aim to bring more students into higher education by, for example, sponsoring them to take competitive exams for the Advanced School of Mass Communication (ASMAC), the state's school for journalism and mass communication. As of the time of this research (August-September 2018), three students had received the scholarship, one of whom was from BOSTAS. The organization got to know her because she reported and commented on the annual football tournament of her association. Because of her passion and talent in doing so, she was picked for the scholarship to go to ASMAC. Again, it was her engagement in BOSTAS that made the

organization aware of her and prompted them to consider her for the scholarship.

Creating and interpreting contexts of action: the reciprocal exchange of capital forms and "doing adulthood"

The following section will use the findings of my case studies and connect them with the theoretical framework of future-making strategies as examined in this volume and article. Based on that, I argue that the accumulated capital as described above is mutual reinforcing and constantly creates new contexts of action. Moreover, through the gained symbolic capital, members can partially enter adulthood. Both arguments show that active membership in Home Town Associations enables young Cameroonians to actively confront their futures and partially overcome their status as youths.

With reference to Bourdieu's (1977a, 1977b, 2008) studies on the economic and social effects of the

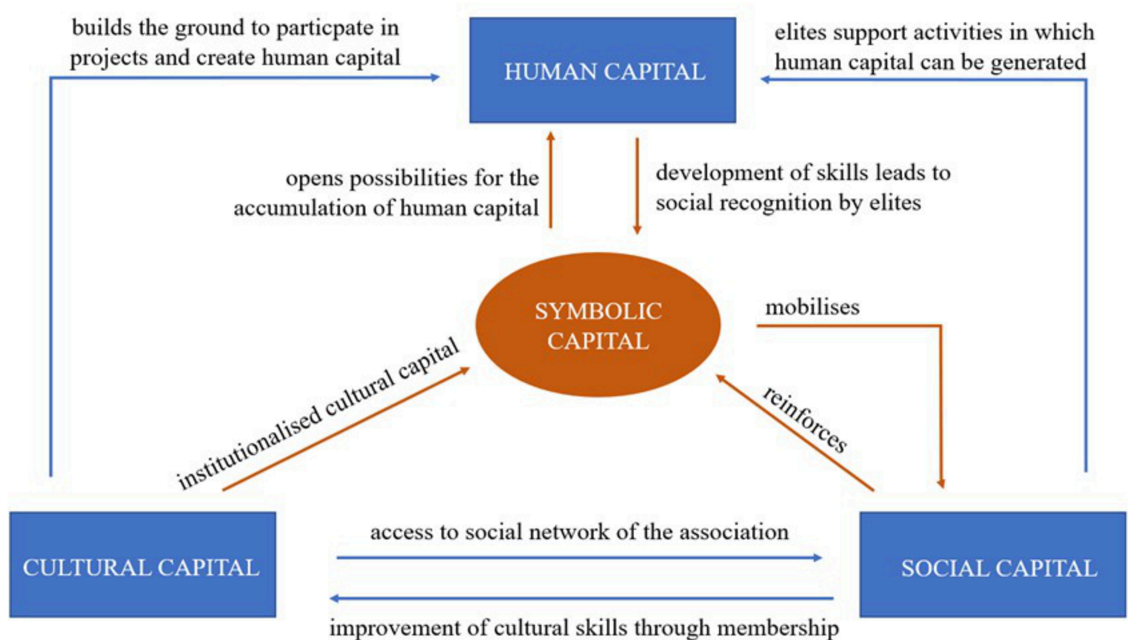

Figure 6: Reciprocal exchange of capital through the engagement in BOSTAS, source: author

of work even if it is voluntary work. This gives them the opportunity to (partially) enter the sphere of adulthood and to to gain social recognition or status. Because social recognition is an integral part of adulthood, those factors are of mutual influence and reinforce each other.

Drawing on Roth's (2014) and Macamo's (2017) findings, it can be argued that every action the youths exercise in the present enables future actions. Their engagement jointly produces additional capital in a reciprocal exchange. Here, it is important to note that the capital forms are not simply exchanged or translated but are rather mutually reinforcing. These forms of capital enable future-making and broaden youths' perspectives on potential futures as they have the potential to open future opportunities.

The graphic above shows the mutual influence of capital forms and how they can reinforce each other. Lacking financial and social means, my informants draw on their cultural capital, which provides potential membership in KOMCUDA and BOSTAS as well as access to the social network of the association. Through the association and its members, cultural skills are, in return, improved. On the ground of this cultural capital, members hold positions in BOSTAS. This institutionalized cultural capital comes along with basic symbolic capital. In addition, the cultural capital allows the youths to carry out or participate in activities and projects of BOSTAS and KOMCUDA. Through active engagement in BOSTAS and participation in its projects and activities, the members can create human capital in the form of skills and professional knowledge. These skills and knowledge enable them to take on leadership

transition to Industrialization in Algeria in the 1960s and more recent studies on navigating uncertainty in the African context (e.g., Macamo, 2017), the anthropologist Claudia Roth (2014) observed in her study on Burkinabe youth that while paid jobs are rare, young people tend to reinterpret their activities into meaningful actions. The same is true for my informants. My analysis of the accumulation of human capital showed that young Cameroonians view their activities in the Home Town Associations as work. The capital and skills my informants develop vary, but all of them have in common that they support the process of their social becoming. This is because they engage in spheres commonly reserved for adults by developing leadership skills, organizational skills, cultural skills, and skills they can use for their future profession. By carrying out projects, doing volunteer work, managing finances, or organizing events, the youths create contexts of actions for themselves. As Steuer and Engeler (2017) would put, they are "doing adulthood" by entering the sphere roles or improve the association with their work. Through this, they can "be seen" by elites and, e.g., external organizations and, thereby gaining respect and social recognition. It is thus through their human capital that they can access symbolic capital. With growing recognition and trust, the youths can mobilize and make use of their social capital. The elites and other social relations are more willing to invest in activities of the association by, e.g., giving financial or moral support for activities like the magazine *Voice of BOSTAS* or the tournament as well as to individual members via employment and scholarships. This shows that the ability to mobilize social capital creates new contexts of action for the youth, in which they can create more cultural, human, and social capital again.

In addition, the analysis showed that every action bears new "conditions of possibility" (Macamo, 2017, p. 85). Through the reciprocal exchange of capital forms, young members constantly create new contexts of action that enable them to make a future. For example, an important feature of the ability to mobilize their social capital is the youths' symbolic capital. Symbolic capital, respect, and social recognition are inherent parts of all other capital forms and can be achieved through them. Social capital in particular can only be mobilized when the youths have a minimum of symbolic capital. By carrying out voluntary work or holding positions, the youths show their value to society and their symbolic capital rises. Rising symbolic capital opens more possibilities to invest in, create, and maintain cultural, human, and social capital. Besides resources, the engagement provides them with learning opportunities and the opportunity for civic participation. In a second step, I will connect the term "doing adulthood" with the notion of "doing development" as an elite activity. In the sections above, I showed that members of BOSTAS gain symbolic capital by carrying out developmental work. Here, I will show that this is due to their engagement in an activity that is a central determinant of elite status. As noted earlier, elites derive their status from their capacity to carry out development initiatives—an expectation that is both a marker of their identity and a social obligation. Communities hold elites accountable for "doing development," reinforcing the idea that such engagement is central to elite status (Orock, 2015).

BOSTAS understands itself as a development association. BOSTAS' aim is to develop their home area and support young people with better future opportunities. This objective is also an integral part of the so-called elite associations. I showed that those elites mainly constitute the high-ranking members of the associations. Hence, when my informants hold a high position in an association, such as BOSTAS, they portray themselves in the same way "elites" are portrayed. They consider themselves as leaders, as "going ahead" (Interview Adeline 08.09.2018, Yaoundé), and see the developmental work they are doing as "an obligation, a task that has been handed over" (Interview, Benjamin 27.08.2018. When asked about the voluntary work she is doing with BOSTAS, Adeline said:

> It is very good to do some voluntary work especially about the community. To help those in the community in general. It is the community that we share. It is good that those who are going ahead or those who have the means should try to go back to the community to see how they can help. (Interview, Adeline, 08.09.2018)

The quote shows that Adeline explains her engagement in BOSTAS with the same arguments with which the elites are held accountable by their communities. The capacity to improve life at the community level raises

the social standing of the members. Moreover, the members interpret the development work and the support of their communities as an obligation because it is central "to what it means to be an elite" (Orock, 2015, p. 536).

The analysis in this article showed that active membership creates contexts of action in which cultural, human, social, and symbolic capital can be created, maintained, and mobilized. Besides resources, the engagement provides them with learning opportunities and the opportunity for civic participation. By doing development and through the accumulation of different capital forms, they constantly create contexts of actions for themselves. Those actions give them the opportunity to create more capital and to partially overcome their status as youths. It gives young people the possibility of continuing action, which is an integral part of the definition of future-making (Pelican & Heiss, 2014).

Conclusion: Doing Development as a Way of Future-Making

The above analysis examined how Home Town Associations contribute to the future-making processes of young Cameroonian graduates. In accordance with Mercer et al. (2008), I showed that KOMCUDA and BOSTAS positively impact their active members and that active members are the primary beneficiaries of the associations. For this reason, it is often difficult to separate the cultural and developmental activities of the Home Town Associations because their contributions foremost benefit the well-being of their own communities and members and often take on cultural forms. Yet, the impact of their activities can be considered development because the wealth of a place is defined by the well-being of its people (see also Sen, 1999). In developing the home place and promoting cultural activities, associations support and help their members, which includes improving their future-making opportunities.

Linking my empirical findings with the theoretical framework examined in this article, I argued that the active engagement in Home Town Associations contributes to the social becoming of young Cameroonians. The analysis demonstrated how active members benefit from the associations as these associations help them create, mobilize, and reinforce cultural, human, social, and symbolic capital. Cultural belonging and capital build the foundation for membership and provide first access to the association's social network. Through active membership and participation in cultural activities, students can foster their cultural capital. It is this cultural capital that gives them the opportunity to create human capital and mobilize social capital. When members actively engage in these associations, i.e., their development projects and cultural activities, they gain human capital. Participating in special activities or projects also allows ordinary members to gain skills. While these skills can be diverse, they can be used as an advantage in the labor market. The analysis showed that members who hold a position in these associations develop professional skills that they may be able to leverage in the job market.

Furthermore, I argued that BOSTAS provides students with social capital and social relations to other students and elite members of the umbrella association KOMCUDA. The value of social relations is defined by the resources the individuals in a social network can mobilize. Since all members of the student association have similar backgrounds and resources, the students under study aim to create more "useful" social capital. Here, the connection to the umbrella association KOMCUDA comes into play. Being recognized by the elites and being able to mobilize the social capital provided by the Home Town Associations and use it for future-making processes requires students to first invest work and commitment to these associations. Since social relations are of mutual interest, it is not enough for students to simply know the elites. Only when the elites become aware of them can they access and use this capital in confronting their uncertain future. Therefore, student members explore various strategies to be recognized and to come into personal contact with the elites. These strategies involve investing into the social relations via their engagement in the association. This involves making use of one's cultural and human capital to gain the respect, trust, and social recognition of the elite members. If this investment is successful, elites contribute to the future-making processes of young Cameroonians by providing them with information about employment or scholarship opportunities. The same is true for external relations to other local organizations. Thus, BOSTAS and

KOMCUDA provide young people not only with access to different forms of capital, but with resources to confront their futures.

To conclude, my informants create, maintain, mobilize, and reinforce resources such as cultural, social, human, and symbolic capital through their active engagement in BOSTAS. The possession of this kind of capital enables them to act and approach their future because it creates contexts of action. The analysis revealed that every step towards the student's future, every action with the potential to open new opportunities, is the result of previous actions. Integral to this string of action is the accumulation and usage of cultural, human, and social capital, all of which have the potential to provide opportunities, like employment or scholarships, and thus to actively confront and make a future. In addition, the created contexts of action provide the youths with opportunities to exercise and contribute to their social becoming. By doing development and acquiring new skills, which results in the accumulation of different forms of capital, students constantly create contexts of action for themselves. Those created contexts of action allow them to create more capital and to partially overcome their status as youths. This is true for their self-perception as well as public perception. They are "doing adulthood" (Steuer & Engeler, 2017), on the one hand, by interpreting their activities in the association as work. On the other hand, they assume similar societal responsibilities as the elites by seeing development work as one of their societal obligations. This becomes evident as they use the same arguments as the elites concerning community accountability in order to explain their engagement in BOSTAS. Thus, the students' civic engagement in youth and Home Town Associations can be interpreted as negotiating and already performing their roles as potential adults and elites. By "doing development," they engage in an activity that is an integral part of being an elite. Thereby, they simultaneously contribute to their social becoming and to making a future. ■

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5. Exploring the Contingence of Social Relations in the Pursuit of Potential Future Horizons in Urban Cameroon

Dana Elena HARMS

Figure 7: Students leaving the university campus, University of Yaoundé 1 © Dana E. Harms, 2018

Abstract

Life in urban Cameroon is marked by precarity and uncertainty, shaping how people plan for their future. This article examines how young, university-educated single mothers in Yaoundé seek to "make a future" for themselves and their children in such conditions. It asks what influences their decision-making and which modes of planning they prioritize. Recognizing that individuals are embedded in social networks, particularly salient in African contexts, the study explores how contingent social relations shape orientations toward the future. The study draws on the theoretical literature on future-making and is based on qualitative interviews conducted in Yaoundé over six weeks in 2018. The findings highlight the dual nature of familial and social relations in conditions of economic precarity and uncertainty: they can provide security and support at some moments, while becoming sources of constraint and pressure at others. I argue that while investment in social relations is a crucial strategy of future-making in Cameroon, it also generates new vulnerabilities, as one can never be certain whether such investments will ultimately yield social resources or instead become burdens.

Uncertainty is part of everyone's life since one cannot foresee the future. However, it varies in scale and intensity and therefore does not affect everyone equally. Life in Cameroon is shaped by an uncertainty that permeates all aspects of (social) life and has a big impact on thinking and doing. The overall goal for most young educated Cameroonians, as noted by a key informant, is "to have a place in society." But what does it mean to have a place in society and how does one get to have it in the first place? How do young educated people make a future for themselves and for their families in urban Cameroon? These questions serve as a guideline for this article. In order to understand how the future is being tackled and approached, I focus on social action in the present. This paper seeks to call attention to the future enabling strategies of young, aspiring Cameroonians in an uncertain environment and explores how social relations and their contingent dynamics impact them.

In the early 1990s, an endemic economic crisis became a steady condition and daily reality for most people in Cameroon, as well as many other African countries. It affects the way young people reason and plan for their life and make decisions. Simply writing applications and hoping that one of them will lead to a job interview and later to a job itself is not enough. This is when social capital comes into play. Knowing many (powerful) people means having more opportunities at hand. I was told: "In Cameroon it depends on the certificates, not on the skills. And [on] questions like: 'Which person has sent you? Who is your godfather?'" Stanley, one of my key informants, told me that certificates and titles are crucial in Cameroon: "People will treat you differently with a PhD, they will respect you more" (Fieldnotes, 11.03.2019). Hence, education not only serves as a potential qualification for a job opportunity but as a way to raise one's status within a network and act within a more "exclusive" and enabling network of social relations.

Social capital plays a tremendous role for making a future and is the key for getting access into the labor market or positions of power, as the above quote suggests. However, it should be noted that social prestige is relational and depends on a social network, which will attribute certain values towards a person because of their achievements or attributions. In the Cameroonian context, someone who has invested in the community, the family, or their personal network is admired and often seen as a role model. For young educated Cameroonians, a desired future thus entails not only economic security but prestige and respect, too. This can be summarized as social security, which entails both material and social preconditions (see von Benda-Beckmann & von Benda-Beckmann, 1994/2007). To be able to provide and invest, one must have already built up something, such as a successful career. But to achieve a successful career in a precarious and uncertain environment, one depends on social relations.

Von Benda-Beckmann and von Benda-Beckmann (1994/2007) described the above dynamic of mutual dependence as a vicious cycle (pp. 21-22). Subsequently, social relations can constitute stimulating social capital and at the same time can pose a burden that one needs to take care of. Such burdens play out according to existing hierarchies, which put men at the top but also charge them with the sometimes impossible task of being the provider. Providing does not only include the nuclear family, but can also include nieces, nephews, godchildren, cousins, parents, and the like. Within this article, I use the term "social relations" as an umbrella term which focuses mainly on kinship, private networks, and, to a certain extent, also professional networks. However, the main focus lies on informal social relations, such as kin and friendship, which become an important source for social security once public institutions fail to provide it (von Benda-Beckmann & von Benda-Beckmann, 1994/2007, p. 8).

In the last two decades, youth and, more recently, university graduates in Africa became a new popular focus in anthropology and African studies (Christiansen et al., 2015; Fokwang, 2006, 2008; Johnson-Hanks, 2002, 2006; Steuer & Engeler, 2017; Ngeh & Pelican, 2022). In this contribution, I would like to shift the focus from young graduates, who just received their degree and might not yet have taken any concrete step in a certain direction, to see what happened to those graduates a few years later, when they already entered the labor-market and possibly can look back on some (failed) attempts to create a family.

This article aims to add enriching insights to the existing body of literature on uncertainty and social action in contemporary Africa by focusing on the dimensions of

social relations and their influence on decision-making processes, coping-strategies, and social action. To investigate how young educated Cameroonians engage with their future horizons, I focus not on the visions and imaginaries they express but on the social action they take to "make a future," an expression coined by Pelican and Heiss (2014). I am using the plural term, "future horizons,"[1] to stress that it is common to always chase more than one pathway, engaging in a multitude of different forms of social action that can lead to the realization of different future horizons. One does not limit oneself to following only one pathway that might eventually become a dead end. It is common to follow different pathways simultaneously to enlarge the chances of achieving future-goals and thus eliminate uncertainty. Johnson-Hanks (2005) has termed this way of approaching the future "judicious opportunism," a key concept in this article. As Johnson-Hanks (2005) has argued, the attitude of seizing opportunities as they emerge is mainly addressing short-term objectives. But, as we shall see, long-term objectives still play a role because the concept enables one to stay open and flexible towards as many different futures as possible and thus also addresses the distant future.

Short- and long-term objectives constitute subjective temporal horizons. My research indicates that short-term objectives refer to objectives that are to be realized in the very near future or even in the present, while long-term objectives focus on some distant future visions, which are therefore less urgent but can be equally important. I therefore pose the questions: Under which circumstances do young people focus on long or short term objectives and why? How do social relations inform reasoning and coping strategies? I want to take Johnson-Hanks's (2005) theory a step further and add the dimension of social relations, as many scholars have suggested in response to her (see Alber, 2016; Notermans, 2005; Pelican & Heiss, 2014). Individuals who act in the present to enable a future are always embedded in a social network that they depend on: "The future, even when it concerns the individual, always has a social dimension: it depends on others" (Augé, 2014, p. 2). Social relations can constitute support and stability on the one hand, but they can also create new uncertainties and obstacles, as Cooper and Pratten (2016) stated (p. 2). I aim to look deeper into the effects of social relations on an individual level in the context of uncertainty and precarity.

The research is mainly based on 24 qualitative interviews, which were conducted within 5 weeks. Key concepts I drew from in my analysis are the aforementioned theories of judicious opportunism and vital conjunctures from Johnson-Hanks (2005, 2002), Pelican and Heiss's (2014) understanding of "making a future," and Steuer and Engeler's (2017) concept of social action in "elusive futures." I also worked with Claudia Roth's (2012) paper "Entre mégalomanie et pragmatisme: les jeunes du milieu urbain au Burkina Faso," drawing from Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of social and economic capital. The paper is structured as follows: After this brief introduction, I elaborate on the research design before introducing the theoretical framework this research is based on. I then introduce two case studies of single mothers living in Yaoundé, Christina and Stacey, and detail their future horizons. Each case study is followed by a brief analytical discussion which then leads into the overarching analysis in which I bring the two case studies together with theory. The results of my analysis are then summarized in the conclusion.

Research Design

During my research in Yaoundé, I worked together with Guylaine Nzouenkeu Yaanou, a bachelor's student of communication and development studies at the University of Bamenda. We each had our individual research topics which were embedded in the general research project. Since our projects were related in many aspects, we conducted most interviews together. In total, we conducted 24 semi-structured and unstructured interviews, including group-interviews and follow-up interviews with 27 informants over a period of five weeks. We spoke to 15 female and 12 male informants. Eight out of the 15 female informants were (mostly single) mothers.

I am focusing my analysis on Cameroonian university graduates in their early thirties who, despite their educational achievement, are still struggling with the

[1] This term is inspired by Johnson Hanks (2005): "Horizons are specific to a time: what looks like a hopeful prospect now may be closed down without warning tomorrow, and another potential future may open up" (p. 872).

enduring quest for certainty and "social becoming" (Christiansen et al., 2006). My sample reflects a certain diversity in sex, age, social and economic background, current personal situation, and life trajectory. I am basing my argumentation on the in-depth study of the life stories of two key informants, Stacey and Christina (pseudonyms). Both women are single mothers in their early thirties, trying to make a life in the present while pursuing bigger dreams for the future. The two case studies do show specific differences but at the same time share some commonalities, which makes them very interesting. I assume due to my sex as a female researcher, it was easier for me to form closer relationships and friendships to women, contributing to the focus at hand.

Theoretical Framework

I adapted an enabling and agency-based theory which takes the engagement of young educated Cameroonians with their future(s) as a focal point. It highlights a productive and empowered way of dealing with particular challenges posed through economic hardship on a structural level and the complex interplay between an individual and their social relations on a micro level. I adopted the expression *making a future,* which was termed by Pelican and Heiss (2014). It emphasizes that the future is not just an abstract concept and an ideal in one's imagination, but is "confronted and constructed through action, in a back- and forth process between actors and their environment" (Pelican & Heiss, 2014, p. 7). The contributions of the volume "Making a Future in Contemporary Africa" demonstrate that future-making in Africa is shaped by a high degree of uncertainty and a volatile environment that does not allow precise assumptions and planning for the future (Pelican & Heiss, 2014). Pelican and Heiss (2014) provide a useful analytical grid to research future-making activities of young Cameroonians. I aimed to understand the role of social responsibilities and mutual dependencies in future-making and to which extent they are shaped and reshaped by social networks and kinship. It became evident that social relations cannot be seen as just a fruitful resource that becomes all the more essential when the state fails to provide for its citizens. Social relations also bear room for conflict and dispute, manifested, for example, through high expectations or dominant restrictions from relatives (Pelican & Heiss, 2014, pp. 16-17). I would like to highlight the ambivalent aspect of the role of social relations in future-making for young educated Cameroonians and hence follow up on Pelican and Heiss's (2014) call for more in-depth research on the many nuances and types of future-making in Africa and the factors that underlie them.

The contingency of social action when approaching potential future horizons in Africa has been illustrated in the volume "Elusive Futures" edited by Steuer and Engeler (2017): "Social action in the present amounts to the construction of the future, but this future is one that does not necessarily respond to one's plans" (p. 21). The emphasis on the contingent aspect of social action that is directed to the future reveals the elusiveness of the latter; one can never know with certainty which action leads to which outcome. In this contribution, Steuer and Engeler (2017) portray different future-creating activities of young graduate students in Africa and reveal their dreams, hopes, and imaginaries about the future. They argue that graduates, who were mostly perceived as a "waithood generation" (Honwana, 2012), are actually "already doing adulthood in different spheres of social life" (Steuer & Engeler, 2017, p. 21). Acting in the present enables further action in the future, thus the present always bears a promise of the future (Macamo, 2017, p. 4).

The social dimension of future-making gains special attention in Ammanns's (2017) paper in the above volume in which she depicts the interwoven layers and nuances of young graduates' agency and how it is informed by their social environment. The bridging element of the quoted papers is the agency of young graduates. It becomes evident that acting in the present in different spheres of social life which are not obviously and directly devoted to the future still can be seen as a way to approach the future. These future-oriented activities are termed as a "social becoming" (Steuer & Engeler, 2017, p. 22). This understanding of young educated individuals as active agents of their own destiny served as a great inspiration during my research.

In line with Steuer and Engeler's (2017) argument, which focuses on a future-orientated agency, Cooper and Pratten (2016) go even a step further and describe uncertainty as a fruitful social resource and an engine

for productivity and agency. It is used to negotiate insecurity and existing social relations, create new relationships, and open up opportunities. They conclude that uncertainty is a product of social contingencies. They draw on Bledsoe's (2002) notion of the term contingency, which equally provides a fertile ground for this paper; on the one hand, it implies uncertainty, risk, and randomness, but on the other, it opens room for agency and the creation of new social ties. Such contingency permeates all aspects of life (Bledsoe, 2002, p. 25). Hence, the future is a contingent outcome of social action in the present. Cooper and Pratten (2016) describe uncertainty not as an autonomous external condition that is always coming from "outside": Uncertainty is produced and reproduced in the public sector and the private sector as well as at macro and micro levels. Social relations, for instance, are highly contingent and unpredictable: "In some situations social relations create uncertainty, while at other times social relations alleviate uncertainty and often the equilibrium is held in suspense" (Cooper & Pratten, 2015, p. 2). Thus, the contingent aspect of uncertainty is both a powerful resource and an unavoidable burden. My aim is to investigate the contingency of social relations and uncertainty, how these two notions are intertwined and interdependent, and how they inform the everyday life of young people in Cameroon whilst making a future.

My research is largely based on and inspired by Johnson-Hank's (2005) theory of judicious opportunism. Having researched how young Beti women in south-west Cameroon approach marriage and reproduction, she argues that social action and decision-making processes are informed by the current environment: Under conditions of uncertainty and the absence of institutional social security, young people do not develop calculative and well- organized long-term planning strategies to relate to the future. Instead, they seize opportunities as they emerge:

> Under extreme uncertainty, when all the rules are changing, what works is not the best strategy but the most flexible one – the one that takes every present in the subjective, that keeps every alternative open as long as possible, and that permits the actor to act rapidly and flexibly to take advantage of whatever opportunities arise. (Johnson-Hank, 2005, p. 377)

Instead of pursuing, investing in, and relying on only on one career path, it seems more reasonable to always have a backup plan at hand in case the current trajectory suddenly becomes a dead end. Therefore, it is necessary to be constantly alert and flexible in response to other promising opportunities. The sad reality that dreams often continue to be dreams has informed the way people reason and act. The future remains a mystery. Therefore, one must anticipate that the social action of today might have a different outcome tomorrow. Hence, the safest strategy is to seize opportunities as they come and to remain attentive and flexible towards the environment one is surrounded by. Stanley, a father in his early thirties, described this phenomenon and its institutional background precisely:

> So, the unemployment is really driving the youth in Cameroon crazy. They often don't end [up] with the passion which they followed earlier; they can just end up doing anything. So, you can train as an anthropologist and you want to become a researcher and you end up working in the bank. Whatever comes along. Cameroon becomes a society where just the least opportunity you have, you will grab it. Not that you must think you build a career. I don't think it works here, it doesn't. (Interview, Stanley, 18.06.2019)

Johnson-Hanks (2002) discusses how the western concept of life-stages is not linear and one-dimensional despite being presented as such by many scholars. Rather, life is fluid and flexible and does not subscribe to a particular order in which one stage is closed after the other. After overcoming a certain life-stage, one can still go back to the former stage. For instance, a young single woman who attends university and becomes pregnant can face a vital conjuncture. It is a moment in time which constitutes a "nexus of potential futures" and a zone of possibilities (Johnson-Hanks, 2002, p. 871). She could decide to go back to her own family and leave the child to a relative so that she can continue her education, or she could join the family of her husband and dismiss her education to stay with her child. But in the latter scenario, she could eventually resume her studies and return to being a student and therefore switch back and forth between being a student, a mother to her daughter, maybe a daughter to her own mother, and then a student again.

A vital conjuncture constitutes one moment in life which composes different potential future-scenarios and openings and hence a lot of contingencies. It is a determining moment in which everything is at stake and a certain direction can lead to a completely new trajectory. But what happens if this vital conjuncture dilates in time and a step into one direction or another is never made? Johnson-Hanks (2016) states: "When conjunctures dilate in time, the state of exception becomes normal, producing a potentially different modality of action. This modality can be described as waiting in a state of suspended action, of interstitial pause, of persistent temporariness" (p. 9). Whether this still constitutes a vital conjuncture is questionable, as Johnson Hanks (2016) notes. Against this backdrop I would like to investigate what happens to those who are constantly in a state of anticipation, some sort of grey zone which they actively try to shape and reshape with rather subtle modes of social action to escape the situation of precarity and transform into a state of full capacity to act.

According to Roth (2012), Burkinabe youth are able to develop a new context of action in an environment of precarity if two components are present: a minimum of economic capital and social capital, ergo social relations. It enables young people to reinterpret their situation and to take another turn in their trajectory. A minimum of economic capital is necessary in order to achieve other forms of capital, especially social capital, and vice versa. Roth's (2012) argumentation is mostly based on Bourdieu's ethnographic research on 1960s Algerian society and the impact of a steady income on planning for the future (Bourdieu, 1977/2000a). He stated that a discrepancy between the means that are available and the visions made for the future emerges because the present seems to be too difficult to overcome: Those who are overwhelmed by the present lose reference to the future and aim for something that seems too unrealistic to achieve (Bourdieu 1977/2000a, pp. 87-90). This suggests a certain passiveness when scarcity and uncertainty are dominating life. However, Roth's (2012) ethnographic fieldwork in Burkina Faso showed a different result and is in line with Steuer and Engeler's (2017) theory of social action: Even in circumstances of precarity, it is possible to create new contexts of action and reinterpret the present. Roth (2012) indeed suggests a more empowering and action-based theory on the relation between poverty and future-orientated action than Bourdieu (1977/2000a) did. Essential for the ability to act and keep acting are social relations, which can provide vital support in times of need, as we shall see in Christina's story.

Case Study 1: Christina

Christina is a 33-year-old woman from the anglophone region of Cameroon. She is the mother of two girls and shares her home with three children of her younger brother who lives in the village. To my knowledge, Christina is not married and does not have a boyfriend. She is a determined and self-confident woman who seems to stand with both feet on the ground. She is working as a diplomat and hence has a professional title. She is admired for this in Cameroonian society. Her job in the public sector guarantees her a stable income and a certain degree of flexibility. It allows her to dedicate some of her time to her role as a mother, which is often difficult for women who pursue a career. Although she already has a master's degree in international law, a post-graduate diploma in international relations from IRIC (International Relation Institute of Cameroon), and a job as a diplomat, she still longs for more: She wants to build on her career and become a renowned female diplomat, which is very rare in Cameroon, and at the same time finalize her PhD which she already registered for two years ago.

What constrains Christina from realizing her plans is a lack of financial means and her social responsibilities towards her mother, her own children, and the children of her brother: "It's around two years now. But as I can tell you, to be sincere, my work has not been advancing because of lack of finance. Because the workload now is really much on me and at times… It's not easy. To handle family, book work and extended family" (Interview, Christina, 21.09.2018). A job in the public sector is popular for those who seek social security, but the payment is rather poor. I was told various times that it is only the private sector that pays well. At the same time, it offers no secure income and is dominated by nepotism, short term contracts, and long working days. Thus, in Christina's case, it was her various social responsibilities that pushed her decision to try her chances on the job market in the public sector, which gave her the stable income she needed.

But to fully comprehend her decisions and her attitude, it is helpful to look at her family background and her past experiences: Christina grew up in a small village in the anglophone region. Her father, who was a policeman, passed away when she obtained her Ordinary Level in school.[2] That same year she fell pregnant. Christina told me that this pregnancy was not planned or desired at the time. The father of the unborn child, who was a student himself, feared the consequences and punishment of both of their parents and decided to leave Christina alone with her pregnancy. Her mother, who was a farmer, had no financial means to support her. This left Christina with no choice other than dropping out of school and staying home for two years. She did not want to put more burden than necessary on her mother who was, like herself, a single parent. So, Christina resorted to working very hard and doing menial jobs to make ends meet. She sold dresses, sheets, and underwear on the street and in shops. 16 years old, at the time, Christina learned at an early age to be responsible and that responsibility came with her relatives being dependent on her. Being aware of it, she realized that she had to do whatever it takes to move forward in order to meet her family's expectations, which were all on her:

> So, after two years I have raised a bit of money and I decided to go back to school. So, I went to school. [Pause] So, to be sincere, I have never been to lower sixth because I went back to school and even in school it was not a day-school.[3] Yeah, because I had to get up in the morning, go, move around and do my business, see how I can raise some money, because I was taking care of my mom, taking care of my child and at the same time taking care of my junior brother. So, I had to do everything at once. After that, I had my advanced level. And when I had my advanced level and when I saved some money, that is when I told my mother that I want to further my education. Yes, and I discussed it with her because I wanted her to support me like… If I can't pay my fees, then she should be able to give me foodstuff. So, from time to time she could sent me some food from the village. I could pay my house rent, I could pay my fees. (Interview, Christina, 21.09.2018)

Christina, who had a lot of responsibility and many social obligations towards her relatives, was at the same time profiting from those social relations when it was possible. The fact that she wanted her mother's blessing to further her education indicates that she was aware of the reciprocal character of the social responsibilities she was involved in.

Her pathway finally led her to Yaoundé, where she started to study law, as she always dreamt of. Her daughter lived with her cousin in Yaoundé. She shared a cheap apartment with two other students and lived from the food supply her mother sent her from time to time from the village. That way she had little expenses and could live from the money she had put aside the last few years. What was most expensive were the school fees of her daughter. She sent her to a private school instead of a public school in order to provide her with the best education possible. After receiving a *maîtrise* (Master 1) in business-law, her financial savings were nearly finished, so it was time to look for a job. Together with a friend, who was in the same situation, she went to drop off her CV at different firms and institutions. With their combined knowledge, they could identify many more possible job opportunities than would otherwise be the case if they searched individually. After a while, she managed to get a well-paying job in a call center. The contract was for four months. With the money that she saved while working there, she was able to register for her master's degree. Just when she had finished and validated all her courses, her employer at the call center called again to employ her for another four months. She gladly accepted the offer. Just as before, the saved money enabled her to finish her research for her master's thesis.

Christina told me that there was one lecturer who strongly encouraged her to continue with her education. He told her that she had the potential to do a PhD and become a lecturer. She has always liked teaching and was flattered and motivated by the

[2] In the Cameroonian schooling system, Ordinary Level (often shortened to O Level) refers to the first public examination students take at the end of the five-year secondary cycle in the English-speaking (Anglophone) sub-system of education.

[3] Cameroon has two separate educational systems, divided between anglophone and francophone Cameroon. High school in the anglophone system takes two years. The first year is also called "lower sixth," while the second year is called "upper year." After the second year, one has to pass the A-level exams, a university entrance qualification. Since Christina had to work during the day, she took some preparatory classes for one year in an intensive evening school.

teacher's encouragement. After her contract in the call center finished, she was offered some small assistance work by her lecturer at the university. Since there was no better option available, she accepted the offer. Who knows what doors would open next? The lecturer gave her some small tips, as she recalled. With the little money she had saved up, she was now able to open the next promising door that presented itself to her: An entrance exam into the International Relations Institute of Cameroon (IRIC) was launched and she decided to take it:

> I needed to have a permanent job, for the sake of my mother, my daughter and my brother. You see? And then secondly, because I knew having a job, if I want to follow my education, I don't have any problem. Because from the job I can pay my fees now. If I want to do my PhD, I can be able to buy a book for myself, I can be able to go and do some research, because research entails spending money. So, those were the reasons why I decided to write a concours. (Interview, Christina, 21.09.2018)

The past jobs she had were enabling her to save some money and go forward, but they were only temporary and thus did not give her the security she needed to fulfill her responsibilities towards her family. A job in the public sector was going to change that. That was also the moment when she decided that it was time to settle down and create her own family. At the time, she was in a relationship with someone who claimed to be a lawyer and thus seemed to be a possible pathway to a promising future horizon. It was only after she got pregnant again that she found out that he betrayed her and, in reality, was unemployed. That was the end of the relationship. With all the responsibilities and workload on her, she did not want a partner who was dishonest and dependent on her. She said: "Let me just pay my bills and see what the future has reserved for me" (Interview, Christina, 21.09.2018).

Preparing for Various Future Horizons: Social Investments and the Seizing of Promising Opportunities

Christina's family background and her early experiences in life, such as the loss of her father which coincided with an unplanned pregnancy, clearly had a big impact on the choices she made later in life as well as the way she reasoned. She learned to be responsible from an early age and experienced indirect social pressure to fulfill her obligations towards her family. She repeatedly told me: "To know where you go, you must know where you come from" (Focus Group Discussion, 22.08.2018). For Christina, the experience of growing up in a polygamous, rather destitute, low-income household—which she had to take care of instead of receiving financial support from—was the main driving force to focus and long for something better for herself and a more solid foundation for her children:

> I can say that whatever thing I am doing; I always think of where I am coming from [repetition]. You see? That is why I am looking at my family setting. I came to realize that my parents, just like my father's siblings and my mother's siblings, they did not actually invest in education. You understand? So, these things have actually shaped the way I behave […] and the kind of decisions I take. That is why one of my priorities now is to invest in my family. To bring them to a certain level, where I can be proud that tomorrow, if you come to my family, you will meet a lawyer, you will meet a magistrate, you will meet a doctor, you understand? So, families like, if you go there, everybody has a title. Everybody has a position. And together they grow and do big things. You understand? […] There are some things that I don't take into considerations. Because if you look at me now, I'm a diplomat since four years, I don't have a car. I don't have a house. Because I think that my main priority now is to invest into the education of my children. (Interview, Christina, 21.09.18)

There are several interesting points raised in this quote that illustrate Christina's way of reasoning and approaching the future. For Christina, to have a place in society can solely be achieved through a "title," a certificate that enables one to "do big things." The fact that she prioritizes investing in the future of her children suggests that she will eventually benefit from this investment, one way or another. Her children will depend less on her and will be able to compensate for what she, and the rest of her family, were not able to fully achieve. They will thus add to her social standing. To have a social and kinship network that is socially and financially potent reduces social contingencies to a certain extent and is thus worth investing in. Though, it needs to be stressed, that the investment in the future

of her children being her main priority does not mean that she is giving up on her own career. She equally forges opportunities that she can benefit from. For example, she told me that she had applied for a diplomat training abroad in which she had already invested money.

Regarding Christina's life trajectory, her own parents were not able to provide her with adequate financial capital nor did they seem to see the relevance of motivating her to follow up on an academic career. This is rather unusual these days in Cameroon. According to my re-search, the most promising strategy for parents is to invest in their children's education and to motivate them to follow up on an academic career. In Cameroon, a high academic degree has a value in itself and is more than just a guarantee for a secure income, as people describe it. But Christina's case was different since her mother could not support her financially nor motivate her mentally to follow up an academic career; she had to achieve everything by herself, as she proudly recalled. Her situation, which required a lot of responsibility, demanded the use of different strategies which address both the near and distant future at the same time. She learned that taking any promising opportunity that presents itself to her (thus acting in accordance with the theory of judicious opportunism) while also focusing on the distant future by saving resources and investing in potential future horizons (in her case education) is what works best. Consequently, she makes use of both short- and long-term planning strategies. Instead of envisioning one particular future horizon, she stays flexible and has many different visions concerning her own future in mind; she is working on her PhD to become a lecturer while still investing into her career as a diplomat by applying for training programs abroad to become a renowned female diplomat, which is rare in Cameroon because the key-positions are usually taken by men. She also dreams of working for the UN.Her ways of approaching the future address different temporal future horizons simultaneously and entail both opportunistic and foresighted planning. To work towards her PhD and to invest into her children's education can be identified as long-term planning strategies and demonstrate her engagement with the distant future. At the same time, she is constantly looking for opportunities in the present, such as training programs abroad, which confirms the theory of judicious opportunism but can also be seen as an investment into the future at the same time. Looking at her life trajectory indicates that she has combined strategies ever since she lost her father and became a mother herself. She had goals in mind which she invested in, but always stayed flexible and seized promising opportunities, such as the job at the call center or her training at IRIC. The investment into her educational pathways has already paid off:

> That's why I tell my friends that this going to IRIC, for me is just like a stepping stone. It's just like an open door. Through this platform, I can be able to meet some kind of people. For example, meeting you now. Because if I was not a diplomat, Dr. Aliou would not have brought you to my office. You see? I would not have the privilege to have you in my home. Thanks to the title that I'm having! You understand? So, it can actually... It is really helping me [repetition] because [pause] when you stand somewhere and you tell people: I am a diplomat, they look at you and they are like "this is a big man. You are a great woman". But it's just a name. In Cameroon here, it's just a name. (Interview, Christina, 21.09.18)

When talking about "some kind of people" that she meets due to her job as a diplomat, she means people that have a certain social standing, a position of power, which she could possibly profit from. For her, going to IRIC serves two purposes: Firstly, it would lay the ground for a job in the public sector which guarantees her a stable income and hence allows her to take care of her family. Secondly, it serves as a "stepping-stone" for her to get closer to her distant future horizons. She is able to meet people of power, who constitute social capital and thus can open up new opportunities for her. However, Christina stresses that a title is ultimately just a name. It does not necessarily come along with affluence, but it can certainly help to establish some social security.

Christina's story illustrates that due to her family background, her social position, and her stable economic standing, she focuses on investing into her children's education and thus engages in coherent planning while still being attentive and open to any promising opportunity that reveals itself to her, which correlates to the theory of judicious opportunism. The

humble background that she comes from has motivated her to aspire "more" from an early age. The relative social security (a stable income and a high social standing) she has already established for herself allows her to focus on her long-term objectives and to approach the future in an anticipatory way. The next case study I would like to introduce is much more conflict-laden and reveals a story in which plans have mostly not worked out, which demands another way of relating to the future.

Case Study 2: Stacey

I met Stacey in a Pentecostal church. From that day on, we met several times and she became one of my closest informants. Yet, she was somewhat reluctant to speak in detail about certain periods in her life at first. She mostly referred to God and avoided straightforward answers. For example, it was God who decided that she would live with her father instead of her mother when her parents got divorced. God would reveal his plan regarding her future to her eventually. As I saw it, referring to God pointed to her send of life's arbitrariness and to a certain extent her own powerlessness.

Stacey is in her early thirties and a single mother of two children. She is the oldest of five siblings. Her parents, who are both teachers, got divorced when she was 12 years old. This seemed to be an important turning-point in her life: Being the oldest, it was on her to take care of her younger siblings while living with her father. Like Christina, she had to act responsibly from an early age on. The difference in the two cases are the expectations of their families. While both had similar responsibilities towards their kin, Stacey was charged with another burden: As she explained to me, her parents saw potential in her and wanted her to pursue a career. She was not able to meet those expectations and instead of studying medicine, as her parents wished, she registered for environmental science because this was what she got accepted for at the University of Buea. It was not her first choice, but since her parents paid her school fees, it sounded more appealing than staying at home where she had little freedom, as she told me.

She was 17 years old when she moved out of her father's house to study in Buea. She was all by herself, did not know anyone, and had little financial means. It was a difficult time for her, as she recounted. Sometimes she found herself without any money and could not ask her parents for help as they would shout at her and insult her. Instead of helping, they put more pressure on her, she explained to me. She had to turn to friends. Within the first year, she was not very passionate about her studies and had rather poor or average results in class. After a couple of failed exams, she realized that she needed to stand up to the task. So, she started to look at her studies in a different way: "How can environmental science profit someone? [...] And then I started asking questions. What can I do with environmental science? How can it be beneficial in one's career? Then I took interest" (Interview, Stacey, 29.08.2018). She realized that this study field is very open and covers a wide range of disciplines. She would not be limited to certain jobs, but instead could go into many different directions. She saw all the potential doors that could open up. Her grades became better and she started to enjoy her studies.

After finishing her first degree, she became pregnant. Her boyfriend and father of her daughter made a living from some small business projects and could not contribute much economically. Despite the odds, she had high hopes to marry him and create her own family, yet he never proposed to her. Three years later, she decided to go further in her education and pursue a master's degree in geology and started her master's degree. The relationship with her boyfriend started to crumble: He was violent towards her and they fought a lot. One year later, she fell pregnant again and gave birth to another little girl. This posed a vital conjuncture for her: Suddenly all her futures were at stake. She no longer wanted to be with her boyfriend who was not a good influence on her children. But breaking up would pose other challenges for her as she would be all alone with her responsibilities. Despite the difficulties, she eventually decided to break up with him and she had to drop out from school again. She had to do something else and try again. She decided to take the *concours*, the entrance exam into the public service in Cameroon, which would enable her to have a stable source of

income.[4] However, she failed the examination. With some money she received from her father, she was able to start a new master's program in environmental science in Yaoundé after she had given up her previous master's degree in geology. She could stay at a friend's family home.

Disappointed by the father of her children and pressured by her parents, she found another source of strength to carry on: religion. The church community was a social network which gave her hope, social security, and a new perspective. God would take care of her future if she followed his guidance. The other support system, which she developed over the past ten years, was her private social network (e.g., friends and people she encountered in her day-to-day life). Having failed to obtain employment in the public sector, she turned to the private sector. To get jobs in the private sector, it is useful to have a well-established network of social relations. Being well aware of this, Stacey, who was good at making new friends, began talking to people and thus expanded her own social network at every opportunity. It became an essential strategy for her future-making. This was apparent in most of the conversations we had: "I am that personality who keeps relationships and friendships due to beneficiaries in the future" (Interview, Stacey, 26.04.19). She engaged in different projects and business ideas with friends even though the majority of those projects eventually led to a dead end. By helping friends and being offered help and by engaging with different kinds of people from diverse professions, she has the ability to increase her social capital and the possibility of new emerging future horizons. Not long after she broke up with her boyfriend, it seemed like her prayers were heard. She got into an internship at an international NGO. It was well paid and was the type of work she wanted to get involved with on a long-term basis. It even gave her the opportunity to travel to West Africa for training:

> Things were fine. I had money to take care of myself, take care of my children. And my parents too were satisfied. They were like, "okay something good is coming out from your life". Because they [the organization] sponsored a training program in West Africa on qualitative research. So, we went. And I knew if I come back, my parents are also happy. You have pictures to show and you know that wow, there is something good coming out of your life. […] So, they were relieved. (Interview, Stacey, 26.04.19)

The internship was scheduled to end after six months but was extended to eight months When it ended, she had to start looking for other job opportunities again and make ends meet with her "small small business."[5] Today, Stacey lives together with her two daughters who are still going to primary school and her 14-year-old stepsister who is helping her out at home. She is still looking for a stable job and a husband. They live in a good and sophisticated neighborhood of Yaoundé. Living in this particular neighborhood was a deliberate choice:

> So, when I was looking for a house... It's not that my house is expensive, but I want an environment that made me not stay poor. […] It inspires me to work hard. And the image that my children see, it will help them to not see themselves low. Because I want to work on their image. Yes, my house is behind there… But when they leave, they see bigger houses. (Interview, Stacey, 26.04.19)

In order to get to Stacey's apartment, one has to walk down a small pathway that runs behind houses and several compounds. The apartment itself is small and very plain. Walking everyday through this middle-class neighborhood where respected people such as high-level government officials live shall give her children and herself an image of success—albeit a success that is yet to come. For the same reason, she put her children into an expensive private school instead of a public school, so that they would be surrounded by children from a wealthy background. To complete this image, Stacey always dresses in a very fancy way which gives her an aura of success and confidence. She told me that she did not have to buy those kinds of dresses as she mostly gets them from friends. She makes sure that her daughters know as little as possible about her economic struggles, which is not always easy to hide, especially on days when there is not even food in the house.

[4] The majority of young Cameroonians dream of working in the public sector due to the relatively good pay and, more importantly stable and secure income. Unlike the private sector, social benefits and a permanent job position makes the public sector an attractive target for young people which promises social security.

[5] Local expression for informal business, such as selling food or fabrics on the street or at the market.

She is constantly trying to make ends meet by taking any promising job opportunity that she can. Whenever she sees a job opportunity that suits her expectations, which are mostly short-term contracts she encounters through her social network, she goes for it without hesitation. But those jobs are hard to find and she most often ends up just doing her "small business," such as selling fabrics or baked cakes. The scarcity of job opportunities leaves her with few choices beyond recognizing and seizing opportunities as they come while praying and preparing for an unknown future for herself and her children.

The Contingence of Social Relations in Times of Uncertainty

Stacey learned to be responsible for others from an early age. It was only later that she also learned to be responsible for herself, for her own life, and for her future. She was not able to fulfill her parents' expectations and become a medical doctor, so she went along with the opportunities that presented themselves to her, in line with the theory of judicious opportunism. Her parents' disappointment did not make it easier for her. Stacey was dependent on her father –and, to a lesser extent, her boyfriend for most of the time. Nowadays, she is independent of her parents, as she told me, and she is single. Expectations are still there, nevertheless:

> I know the expectations are there. But it cannot be that intense on my mother's side because she didn't really put in into my education. […] My dad has paid my school fees, taken care of my feeding, every other thing. So, on my mother's side, she has expectations, but it cannot really come out with so much authority. Unlike my dad, at some point he might call and say "what are you doing now? (Interview, Stacey, 27.04.19)

This quote illustrates that demands can only be made when (economic) support has been flowing. Being able to make demands due to earlier investments into the future of one's children suggests to have power and to have a say in their decision-making. Whether this say is accepted and decision-making is subordinated to the parents' will cannot be taken for granted and can lead to conflict and dispute. Stacey is aware of her parent's expectations, but she has learned to live with them without being bothered by them too much. Stacey's parents might equally depend on Stacey's success in the future and therefore put pressure on her. It is taken for granted that they will profit from her success too. With time, Stacey has learned how to navigate through life without being (too) dependent on anyone, such as her father or her ex-boyfriend. Instead, she takes any small job opportunity to get by and at the same time she invests in her future by engaging in a diverse circle of social relations and surrounding herself and her children with an aura of success and wealth. This strategy mitigates dependence and, to a certain extent, it also reduces uncertainty in her life because she prepares and plans for many eventualities. Different to Christina, she has no stable income which would guarantee her a minimum of economic (and social) stability.

Concerning the future, Stacey differentiates between short-term and long-term objectives. Her short-term objectives are rather urgent and need to be realized as soon as possible. The long- term objectives are less pressing and can be realized in the distant future. In our first interview, she told me about the following three short term objectives which need to be realized simultaneously: the first objective she named was *a stable income,* which would guarantee her social security. She would be less dependent on her parents as well as other social relationships and have more personal freedom. It would enable her to take better care of her children (economically) and fulfill the expectations of her father by letting them partake in her new affluence and thus re-establishing the balance of reciprocity by finally giving back the support she once received from them. *To get married* is another important short-term objective for Stacey. Firstly, it would ensure some social and emotional security. Marriage would give her an assurance to a stable and serious relationship and therefore a lasting support from her spouse for herself and her daughters. Secondly, it would raise her symbolic capital and thus her social status. A married woman, especially one with children, has a higher social status than an unmarried one. She would be taken more seriously by her parents and by society in general. Marriage is one of the determent factors in Cameroon which indicates that someone is an adult and not a youth anymore (Christiansen at al., 2006; Vigh, 2006). Marriage as an objective is also part of the strict guidelines of the Bible that she follows.

Religious guidelines which she can simply follow provide a stable component in her life which is otherwise dominated by arbitrariness and volatility, therefore giving her a sense of social security (see Leutloff-Grandits et al., 2009). By praying and going to church, Stacey is actually doing something in order to move forward. When everything seems hopeless and there is no future horizon in sight, what is left is to have a positive mindset, to pray, and to act according to God's will. Therefore, her third short term objective is to *invest more into her church community* in order to give back some of the (mental and spiritual) support she has been receiving and to prove her dedication to the church community.

Her long-term objectives have far less priority in her life at the moment. She told me that she would like to eventually get a PhD. Furthermore, she would like to either work for an international organization or create her own innovative and unique business. These are vague dreams without any concrete attachments. Her current situation does not really permit her to focus on such dreams. She has to be focused on the today in order to have a tomorrow (not to speak of next week or next month). Her agency is therefore dominated by an attentive and foresightful grabbing of any promising opportunity in sight (see Johnson-Hanks, 2005) while carefully preparing for her future.

Over the years, Stacey seemed to realize that she had to adopt another strategy to cope and to move forward, a more future-orientated strategy. If she wanted to be successful in the future, she had to invest actively into the present and hence act in order to be able to keep acting (Macamo, 2017). Instead of being passive and just hoping for things to get better or change eventually, Stacey focused on investing into the future and carefully planning for it while remaining attentive to any opportunity that might come up. In order to be able to do so and to establish some degree of independence, she had to draw on her social relations.[6] It remains the most important source of support to restore some degree of social security (von Benda-Beckmann & von Benda-Beckmann, 1994/2007) and to enable her to invest in the future, and therefore actively shapes it.

Social capital becomes vital when job opportunities become scarce and the welfare system of the state fails to provide social security. Knowing many people of power from diverse professional backgrounds means having many potential (job) opportunities in the future. Opportunities in the labor market increase when one has a more diverse network of social relations. As the weak tie theory (Granovetter, 1973) suggests, social relations which are not part of the close circle of family and friends (so-called weak ties) can bring in new information, ideas, and perspectives, all of which are vital for future-making. Accordingly, established relationships are most effective and useful when they exist in quality, quantity, and variation. If that is the case, they can provide a sense of social security for an individual. The price for the mitigation of insecurity in the present is a constant investment into social networks and relationships by offering help and talking to people. Consequently, the more an individual invests into a diversified network of social relations, the less dependent they are on specific relationships which might eventually turn into rather demanding relationships.

Apart from a short period in which she completed an internship for an international organization, Stacey can barely make a living for herself, not to mention her children. Consequently, the relationship with her parents is ambivalent and tense. She must rely on other relationships, too. It can be concluded that in an environment which is informed by uncertainty, social relations always bear a contingent and ambivalent aspect: They pose the most important source of support, but it is a capricious support which can sometimes backfire and hence produce new risks and uncertainties. As Bledsoe (2002) states, "a sense of vulnerability applies even to intimate social relations, despite the security these relations appear to offer" (p. 21). To reduce this dynamic, one must invest into as many relationships as possible and therefore reduce the dependency on specific ones, such as relationships with one's parents, partners, or friends. In order to keep the balance between giving and receiving, she constantly tries to support and give back when it seems reasonable and possible. That can happen through the passing on of interesting job opportunities which are not fitting for

[6] Stacey receives different kinds of support from friends; some give her beautiful dresses, another one made her aware of an online-program which was designed to help to "plan for the future," and others send her job opportunities or even ask to work with her directly.

herself or other related favors. Uncertainty permeates the way of knowing and planning: Stacey navigates carefully through life and makes use of her social relations to mitigate insecurity and invest into her future.

Stacey uses a combination of thoughtful reasoning and social investments to approach her future horizons and demonstrates flexibility and openness to whatever comes along in order to make a future. She remains attentive towards any opportunities that arise, mostly through her social network, and therefore acts according to the concept of judicious opportunism. But it is not enough for her to stay alert since she has certain expectations and responsibilities to fulfill. Therefore, she adopted a strategy of foresighted planning, reasoning, and investing into her future within her means. Her social relations were at times harmful and strenuous and in other times supportive and played a major role in her future-making.

The Influence of Social Relations and Uncertainty on Decision-Making Processes

Christina and Stacey are both educated women of a similar age and single mothers. They both were charged with great responsibility after a determining life event when they were young. Yet, there are some differences which navigated their pathways into different directions. Christina was burdened with the responsibility of taking care of her mother, her daughter, and her younger brother, which constituted a major driving force for her to focus on her education in order to be a competent provider. As soon as she achieved a level of economic stability, she decided to focus on investment in her children's education. She wanted to do things differently and provide a more fertile ground for her children than her own family could in terms of education and career chances.

Stacey, on the other hand, was charged with high social expectations to climb far on the educational ladder and become someone respected with a high income. Hence, her parents might have invested into her education with the hope that they could eventually benefit from her success. This success is yet to come. Beside parental expectations, what seems to dictate her way of reasoning and planning, she is most impacted by social insecurity and overall uncertainty As Roth's (2012) discussion of social and economic capital as a necessary condition to act and keep acting shows: When economic capital is scarce, social capital becomes all the more important. While there are less opportunities to focus on long-term objectives, the main priority is to install such regular and secure income in the first place. However, due to her responsibilities towards both her children and her parents, she does not lose sight of her future visions and at the same time invests into the future of her children as well as her own whenever she has the chance and acts in line with the theory of judicious opportunism. Christina does exactly the same, but is granted more opportunities and never hesitates to make use of them. One can derive that even in situations of all-encompassing uncertainty, a seemingly never-ending vital conjuncture (as Stacey has experienced multiple times in her life), people most often remain active on a lower scale and keep making small social investments into the future with the constant hope for things to get better and moving closer towards the desired future horizons. Whether social relations constitute a source of security and support or rather a burden one needs to take care of can change multiple times during a lifetime (see von Benda-Beckmann & von Benda-Beckmann, 1994/2007), as both case studies revealed. This contingent aspect of social relations is present in both cases but more so in Stacey's case: In her current life-situation she is more dependent on social relations and therefore needs to invest constantly, without really knowing if they will ever become potent social capital or rather demanding social relations. In Christina's case, her dependence on her social relations is less present as she is already in an economically stable position, decreasing her dependence on them.

Another important outcome from the two case studies is that social responsibilities, social (in)security, and familial background (both social and economic) influence the reasoning and decision-making process in uncertain environments tremendously. The linking factor between the two case studies is that, due to their social obligations, both women have to act responsibly and, to a certain extent, with foresight. The social position of women, who hold the role of mothers and daughters at the same time, demands to engage with short- and long-term planning strategies simultaneously in order to enable possible futures for themselves and

their children. Which strategy is prioritized depends on their economic means and level of social security. If one does not know how to provide and pay the bills for the next weeks, as in Stacey's case, short-term planning becomes the priority and a necessity.

Once a minimum of social or economic security is guaranteed, one can focus on activities which simultaneously target long-term objectives. This does not necessarily refer to direct and straightforward action that leads to the fulfillment of certain goals. This social action is characterized by an attentive attitude of seizing opportunities (judicious opportunism) as well as taking small steps that serve as an investment (coherent planning) into the future and can provide for the fulfillment of distant desired future imaginaries. Thus, judicious opportunism is not the only tactic for young educated single mothers in Cameroon to make a future. It is rather combined with coherent planning through social investments and a constant acting, as suggested by Steuer and Engeler (2017). It is the combination of both that constitutes an effective tactic for individuals in a position of responsibility in an uncertain environment.

Conclusion

Countless informal conversations and many interviews that I conducted during my stay in Cameroon pointed out that people always remain active, even in circumstances with little hope for a better future. This unshakable agency displays that young people in Africa are not passive and resigned to an overwhelming present. They recover from times of crisis and precarity and adapt to their circumstances by diversifying coping strategies to address the direct and the distant future.
Being in a position of responsibility and charged with high social expectations, such as many young single mothers are in urban Cameroon, demands an opportunistic and at the same time foresighted way of approaching the future. Since well-organized plans can hardly be realized due to the unpredictability of many determinants, the most effective way of navigating through life is to engage in judicious opportunism, which relates foremost to the present while at the same time preparing for the near and distant future by investing into social relations and kinship. But social relations are equally contingent and somewhat arbitrary. One cannot foresee whether the investment into social relations will actually bear fruits and what kind of future horizons such relations might address. The role a person plays in one's life can take unforeseeable turns in every direction. At the same time, a social position within a network is not always clearly defined and remains sometimes blurry and ever changing. Most often, one holds various roles at the same time: the role of a provider and the role of a recipient, which creates complex dependencies. Therefore, it can be of favor to invest and engage in as many social relations as possible to maximize the chances of success and hence getting a bit closer to a desired future. Social relations should therefore not be seen as either simply positive or negative for making a future. They are most often both at the same time.

As has been argued by many scholars, agency needs to be seen in its social context in order to be fully understood in its complexity and nuances (White & Wyn, 1998; Lawless, 2017; DeJaeghere et al., 2016). In the Cameroonian context, social relations hold a particularly important role in the life of an individual. That is even more the case when institutional social structures are weak. But as I have illustrated, the impact of social relations is always multidimensional and can change various times in a lifetime. For example, a relationship can develop from a dependent to an independent or a mutually dependent relationship and vice versa. Social relations can pose a burden and a blessing at the same time and are thus highly ambiguous and contingent. In order to understand the future-making of young educated Cameroonians, it is essential to take the individuals present social context as well as the social history of individual life stories into account. ■

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THEME 2: Migration and Future-Making

6. Return Migration and Health in Cameroon: An Anthropological Perspective on Making a Future among Health Professionals

AFU Isaiah Kunock and Awah Kum TCHOUAFFI

Figure 8: "I love my country Cameroon" rounadbout in Yaoundé © Casey_Nyce, 2018

Abstract

The migration of health professionals from low-income to high-income nations has frequently been oversimplified as a linear "brain drain" from "poor" to "rich" countries. However, as this study demonstrates, the issue is more complex and nuanced than that. This publication brings much-needed evidence and clarity to the changing patterns of migration of health professionals over time. Namely, it considers migration from high-income nations to low-income nations and the varied and changing reasons why health workers may choose to return to their countries of origin as a means of achieving a better future for themselves, their families, and Cameroonian society as a whole. This study examines the future-making experiences and perspectives of Cameroonian healthcare professionals who became return migrants after period spent abroad. A qualitative study was conducted in the Cameroonian city of Yaoundé using in-depth, in-person interviews guided by a standardized interview protocol. The sample consisted of 10 health return migrants and 15 individuals dependent on them for their livelihoods. The findings reveal that although the migration of health professionals from Cameroon has a negative impact on the healthcare sector through labor shortages, this problem is only temporary. In the long run, these professionals contribute significantly through the direct transfer of skills and community development upon their return to Cameroon. Moreover, the findings indicate that "making a future" is an ongoing process in which material accumulation, self-actualization, and close family ties are the ultimate goals.

In recent years, brain drain within healthcare systems has garnered increasing attention and concern globally. Migrant health professionals play a crucial role in the health workforce of migration destination countries, addressing shortages and enhancing the quality of care (Misau et al., 2010). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2014), the migration of health professionals is influenced by a complex array of factors, including better quality of life, higher salaries, and access to state of the art medical facilities in the receiving nations (Chikanda, 2011).

Migration, particularly of health professionals, can be viewed from various perspectives. It often involves the voluntary movement of workers seeking better working conditions (Martineau et al., 2004). Lowell (2001) and Findlay (2001) describes this phenomenon as the permanent departure of skilled human capital in search of better returns for their expertise. In receiving countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, migrant health professionals comprise 20% to 30% of the health workforce (Toyin-Thomas et al., 2023). These professionals, typically medical graduates from low-income countries, migrate for further education, specialization, and improved living conditions (Campbell-Page et al., 2013).

In Cameroon, there has been a consistent outflow of health professionals to the Global North, driven by the pursuit of a better life, advanced training, and higher education (World Health Organization, 2006, 2014; Banchereau, 2024). Despite extensive research on migration, the phenomenon of return migration, particularly among health personnel, has received limited attention; this is especially true in much of Africa, including Cameroon (Lokotola et al., 2024). Interestingly, alongside the high rate of migration from Cameroon to Europe, the United States, and Canada, there is a growing trend of health professionals returning to their home countries (Efendi et al., 2021). This return migration is increasingly seen as a hopeful symptom of positive change in the home country, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of the complex decisions leading to this phenomenon (Bilecen, 2022).

The primary objective of this paper is to explore the recent trend of reverse migration among health professionals in Cameroon, investigating the factors driving this return and its impact on the Cameroonian health sector. Additionally, the paper aims to provide an anthropological perspective on how returning health professionals contribute to building a better future in Cameroon.

Cameroon's health sector faces significant challenges in retaining health professionals, with migration threatening the availability and quality of service delivery. The country has experienced a substantial loss of doctors and nurses to migration, contributing to a critical shortage of health professionals (World Health Organization, 2013). According to Haour-Knipe and Davies (2008), well-managed return migration of health professionals can be a powerful tool for strengthening health systems in their countries of origin. This return migration benefits not only individual returnees but also the state, making it a productive and positive development strategy (Co et al., 2000).

Researchers in migration studies have indicated that successful return and reintegration of health professionals can enhance the human, financial, and social capital of their home countries, contributing significantly to development (Haour-Knipe & Davies, 2008; Co et al., 2000; Adzei & Sakyi, 2014). Given these potential benefits, this study adopts an exploratory case study approach to investigate return migration and its implications for the Cameroonian health sector.

By focusing on the lived experiences of returning health professionals, this research seeks to understand their perspectives on return migration and its impact on their efforts to build a better future in Cameroon. Through this exploration, the study seeks to provide valuable insights into the dynamics of health professionals' migration and return. The analysis is guided by the following research questions:

- How is the migration of health professionals to countries in the Global North geared toward making a better future in Cameroon?
- What are the reasons or motivations of Cameroonian health professionals to return to Cameroon?
- What are the benefits and challenges of return migration?
- What are the future strategies of healthcare professional returnees?

After discussing the sample, methods, and theoretical framework, the article begins with an analysis of return migration's role in making a future and a consideration of the contributions of returnees in Cameroon. Next, the article presents some reasons for the migration of Cameroonian health professionals and determinants of their return. This is followed by detailing the benefits of health professionals' return migration as well as the challenges they face and how their return is facilitated. Finally, the article describes the strategies and coping mechanisms of return migrants before concluding.

Sample and Methods

The study adopts a qualitative exploratory case study approach, which is particularly appropriate given that return migration remains an understudied phenomenon, especially in the Cameroonian context (Wanki et al., 2022; Adzei & Sakyi, 2014). This method sheds light on the reasons for the return migration of Cameroonian health professionals and their strategies for reintegration and future-making in Cameroon. It provides flexibility, allowing researchers to adjust the study focus during data collection to explore returnees' experiences and perspectives comprehensively (Yin, 2003; Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

The sample was purposively selected using the snowball technique, which is well suited for accessing hard-to-reach populations. A total of 25 health professionals participated in the study, including 10 return-migrant doctors, two return-migrant nurses, and 13 non-migrant doctors and nurses working with return migrants. The sample comprised 10 women and 15 men.

Interviews were conducted in both French and English in Yaoundé. The tight schedules of health professionals during the research period made it challenging to arrange interviews. Data was analyzed using Mayring's (2000) sequential model of qualitative content analysis, focusing on summarization, explication, and structuring. The analyses revealed recurring themes reflecting the perspectives of health professional return migrants on their return and making a future in Cameroon. Additionally, content analysis was performed to understand the causes of emigration, reasons for return, and the professional situation of interlocutors both abroad and after returning to Cameroon.

Theoretical Framework

To lay the groundwork for the analysis, this study employs the theoretical framework of making a future as articulated by Pelican and Heiss (2014). This concept implies that the future is not merely a product of imagination, but is actively confronted and constructed through actions in a dynamic process between actors and their environment (Pelican & Heiss, 2014). While everyone strives to "make a future," the methods and thoughts surrounding this process are specific to a given environment, society, culture, and historical moment. In the African context, social actions are often shaped by a volatile environment, scarcity of resources, and uncertain circumstances (Pelican & Heiss, 2014).

For Cameroonian health professionals, the process of making a future is influenced by their professional skills and the resources they possess, which offer them more control over their migratory trajectories compared to other professional or low-skilled migrants. Despite facing challenges such as limited opportunities for personal development, low remuneration, minimal job satisfaction, and poor working conditions in Cameroon, these health professionals experience less uncertainty regarding employment both within and outside Cameroon. Therefore, they are not merely imagining their futures; they already have the capability to enact and make their futures.

Migrating abroad is perceived as the first step in this process, with returning home being the ultimate goal. This dual-phase journey can be understood through the local concept of *bushfalling* (Alpes, 2011; Nyamnjoh, 2017). *Bushfalling* refers to a form of mobility where migrants venture abroad to "hunt" for opportunities and resources which they are expected to bring back and share with their communities upon their return (Alpes, 2012; Jua, 2003; Pelican, 2013). This concept frames the migration and return of health professionals as part of a broader strategy to achieve social status, acknowledgment, and contribute to their community's development.

Making a future is thus not limited to seeking greener pastures or acquiring additional skills abroad. It is also

about pursuing exciting and fulfilling opportunities that seem possible only upon returning home, where return migrants can give back to their communities (see also Wanki et al, 2022; Wölki, chapter 7). Financial resources play a crucial role in this process, as well as community-defined goals and actions, as this study demonstrates. Bourdieu's (1977) distinction between *more* and *less coherent forms of social action* explains how individuals with varying degrees of resources make life-altering decisions. Having enough economic, cultural, and social capital enables individuals to approach their future in a well-organized and calculative manner (i.e. more coherent strategies). Conversely, limited resources constrain the ability to anticipate and shape future outcomes, resulting in less coherent strategies, such as *judicious opportunism* (Johnson-Hanks, 2005) – a mode of decision-making, which allows actors to remain flexible and respond tactically to emerging opportunities when faced with uncertainty (see also Harms, chapter 5). Bourdieu's notion of more coherent social action sheds light on how individuals consciously subordinate aspects of their life to achieve specific aims. Health professionals, for instance, exemplify such coherence when they invest in projects, build health facilities, and contribute to community health, thereby demonstrating an organized approach to making a future.

This theoretical framework will guide the analysis of the case studies, highlighting how the concept of bushfalling and the structured, calculative actions of health professionals influence their migration patterns and the resulting impacts on the Cameroonian health sector. By integrating these anthropological perspectives, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of health professionals' migration and their strategic efforts to build a better future in Cameroon.

Return Migration and Making a Future

Making a future is a process and, importantly, involves making decisions and taking action to get there. It can be argued that the ultimate goal of future-making is well-being, which includes the accumulation of capital (economic and cultural), giving back to the community, and close family ties upon return. But how do these health professionals manage to make a better future when they return? We draw on case studies, presented below, to answer this question. The narrations navigate the motivations and experiences of Cameroonian health professionals who have returned to their home country. They provide insights into how health professionals manage to make a better future when they return to Cameroon.

Case Study 1: Pursuing Personal and Professional Fulfillment in Cameroon

Dr. Jean,[7] a medical doctor and lecturer in Cameroon, shared his experiences of working in France and his decision to return to Cameroon. Despite his successful career in France, he felt unfulfilled compared to his peers who had returned to Cameroon and made significant achievements.

> I worked in France for years, but after years of practice, I discovered that I had achieved little compared to those who had studied and gone back to Cameroon. Some got married and had children, others had made a name for themselves in the medical field in Cameroon. Others had positions in medical school to teach others. After so much reflection, I decided to go back home and achieve something for myself. Though I did not know where to start, I was still bent on going back and starting wherever I could. (Interview, Dr. Jean, 2018)

This part of Dr. Jean's narrative addresses the benefits of return migration, highlighting his motivations to return to Cameroon to achieve personal and professional fulfillment. His return reflects the broader social expectations and the concept of bushfalling, where the end goal is to contribute back to one's community (Alpes, 2011; Nyamnjoh, 2017; Pelican, 2013). Dr. Jean's story illustrates how health professionals leverage their skills and experiences acquired abroad to create better futures for themselves and their communities in Cameroon.

Dr. Jean also had a successful career in France but felt unfulfilled compared to his peers who had returned to Cameroon. Despite his achievements abroad, he

[7] All names used are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the research participants.

realized that many of his peers had established significant careers and family lives back home.

In Dr. Jean's narrative above, he highlights his motivations to return to Cameroon, addressing part of the second research question regarding the benefits of return migration. His decision was influenced by the desire to achieve personal and professional fulfillment, which he felt was lacking abroad.

Case Study 2: Family Obligations and Establishing a Health Facility in Cameroon

Dr. Paul, a pathologist and toxicologist, had an extensive educational journey, including obtaining advanced degrees in the United Kingdom. He worked in several countries, including the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia, but ultimately decided to return to Cameroon to be with his family and establish his own health facility:

> I left a wife and two kids in Cameroon. I thought of them every day as I saw happy families coming into the hospital with their kids. They were like a magnet pulling me to come back home as whenever I called, my eldest kid always asked the question: “Daddy, when are you coming back?” I did not want to deprive my children of growing up with a father. Knowing very well what I would face back home as a doctor, I came back intending to open my health facility where I could practice without discontent with the working conditions and also merit the pay from the services I offered. (Interview, Dr. Paul, 2018)

Dr. Paul's decision to return was driven by familial obligations and the desire to create better working conditions for himself. His narrative addresses the second research question by highlighting the motivations for return and the third research question by discussing the benefits and challenges he faced. By establishing his clinic and laboratory, he not only improved his own life but also contributed significantly to the local health system and economy, providing employment and essential services. This aligns with the concept of making a future through meaningful contributions to one's community and family.

Case Study 3: Investing in Cameroon’s Health Sector

Dr. Edward, a retired medical doctor, had a distinguished career in the United States before deciding to return to Cameroon. He saw the need to invest more and make a name for himself in his home country: "I had gathered enough cash and I had been investing in Cameroon so I saw the need to return to invest more and make a name for myself in Cameroon like many others."

Dr. Edward's motivation to return was partly driven by financial stability and a desire to reinvest in his home country. His experience highlights the economic and social benefits of return migration. By investing in healthcare facilities and education, he contributed to the local health infrastructure and provided opportunities for the next generation of health professionals.

Case Study 4: Appreciating the Contributions of Returnees

Sarah, a nurse working in a clinic owned by a health professional return migrant, shared her perspective on the contributions of returnees:

> Going out there as a health professional is an important step in the profession, especially looking at our Cameroonian context. Those of us who never traveled cannot ignore the contributions made by our health workers who have returned home. They are a blessing not only to us in the field but to the community at large. (Interview, Sarah, 2018)

Sarah's perspective highlights the positive impact of returnees on the local healthcare system. She acknowledges the skills and knowledge that returnees bring back and how they help to ameliorate the health situation in the community.

Etiologies of Bushfalling: Health Professionals' Migration from Cameroon

According to scholars who have studied international migration within the Cameroonian context, the causes of migration are largely characterized by general feelings of disappointment with the economic and political situation in Cameroon and disillusionment with

realizing a decent future in their home community (Alpes, 2011; Jua, 2003; Nyamnjoh & Page, 2002; Pelican & Tatah, 2009). Given this situation, the mobility of health professionals out of the country can be viewed as a strategy to make a better future. As the narrations of Cameroonian health professional returnees demonstrate, decisions to migrate abroad were pragmatic choices made in the context of individual circumstances, informed by larger structural constraints posed by the economic and political situation in Cameroon. The health professionals interviewed noted the following reasons for leaving Cameroon:

Limited Opportunities for Personal Development and Low Remuneration

Cameroonian health professionals face limited opportunities for personal development and low remuneration compared to destination countries. One female health professional who came from an economically disadvantaged background noted:

> My basic salary was very small. I come from a poor background and I had to do something. I had to travel if I was to make any headway in life. I also needed to see into it that my parents, siblings, and other family members can improve their living conditions. (Interview, Dr. Dorothy, 09.08.2018)

This reflection is a combination of personal and familial motivations for migration. Dr. Dorothy's basic salary in Cameroon was insufficient to significantly improve her life or support her family, prompting her to seek opportunities abroad. Coming from a poor background, she felt the pressure and responsibility to enhance not only her own living conditions but also those of her parents, siblings, and extended family members. Traveling abroad was seen as a necessary step to achieve financial stability and provide a better future for herself and her loved ones.

This decision highlights the economic constraints faced by many health professionals in Cameroon, where low remuneration and limited opportunities can push individuals to migrate. This narrative underscores the interplay between personal ambition and familial obligations, illustrating how migration is often driven by the desire to uplift one's family and escape economic hardship.

Limited Professional Skills and Specialization

Specialization abroad is more recognized than at home, making it a crucial factor for those seeking to advance their careers. A medical doctor from a wealthy family background remarked:

> After graduation, only limited people were content with being general practitioners. When I graduated, almost everyone with whom I graduated had plans for specialization. Even those who never expressed their desires to leave the country for specialization in a specific field happened to leave before some of us could even realize that they left. (Interview, Dr. Elisé, 12.08.2018)

This quote highlights the strong desire among Cameroonian health professionals to specialize in specific medical fields rather than remain general practitioners. It reflects the broader trend where specialization is highly valued and seen as essential for career advancement. Many of his peers, driven by the pursuit of advanced education and better career opportunities, chose to migrate abroad for specialization, even if they had not initially expressed this desire.

The term "limited" here has a dual implication: it refers to those who were content with remaining general practitioners and those whose professional skills and opportunities were curtailed by their decision not to pursue specialization.

Poor Working Conditions and Stress

The stressful working conditions and low salaries in Cameroon push many health professionals to migrate. A non-migrant doctor working in the Central Hospital and part-time in some clinics shared:

> Immediately after medical school, it takes a year or more before you are integrated and your stipend goes through for those who are being integrated. Before then, you live a life of a beggar, merely surviving to provide your basic needs. Even when your pay goes through, it is not worth the seven years of sacrifice in medical school. It is not so different from being a slave because you work for practically little or no pay in a difficult working condition. You have to pick up part-time work in

> some clinics owned by return health professional migrants. (Interview, Dr. Fabrice, 20.08.2018)

The above quote vividly illustrates the harsh realities faced by newly graduated medical professionals in Cameroon. His words highlight several critical issues like delayed integration and salaries after completing medical school. New graduates face a lengthy wait, often a year or more, before they are officially integrated into the healthcare system and start receiving their salaries. During this waiting period, they struggle to meet their basic needs, living in a state of financial precarity akin to "a life of a beggar." Even once the salary begins, Dr. Fabrice points out that the compensation is far from adequate. It does not reflect the seven years of rigorous medical education and sacrifices made. The phrase "not worth the seven years of sacrifice" underscores the deep sense of undervaluation and frustration among these professionals. The working conditions described by Dr. Fabrice are challenging, likened to the experience of "a slave" due to the low pay and demanding environments. This harsh metaphor indicates the extent to which medical professionals feel exploited and unappreciated. To supplement their insufficient income, many medical graduates are compelled to take on part-time work in clinics owned by health professionals who have returned from abroad. This additional workload not only adds to their stress but also reflects the systemic inadequacies within the Cameroonian healthcare sector.

Another non-migrant doctor highlighted the risk of work fatigue:

> It is also very frustrating when you have to tussle and shuttle between health facilities to administer health care because what you receive is not what you wish to earn. Thus, making you put yourself and people's lives at risk due to work fatigue. (Interview, Dr. Eric, 12.08.2018)

Dr. Eric's quote reveals the significant challenges and frustrations faced by healthcare professionals in Cameroon. His words highlight several key issues like financial dissatisfaction and frustration over the discrepancy between the compensation he receives and the effort he puts into his work. This dissatisfaction with earnings is a major source of frustration, driving the need to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. The need to "tussle and shuttle between health facilities" indicates that many health professionals must work in several places to supplement their income. This constant movement between jobs is physically and mentally exhausting. The phrase "put yourself and people's lives at risk due to work fatigue" underscores the serious consequences of excessive workloads. Fatigue can lead to mistakes, impacting the quality of care provided and posing risks to both the healthcare workers and their patients. Dr. Eric's experience points to broader systemic problems within the Cameroonian healthcare sector, such as inadequate pay, poor working conditions, and the resulting need for healthcare professionals to overwork themselves. This environment contributes to high levels of stress and burnout among medical professionals.

Peer Pressure

Peer pressure also plays a significant role. One medical doctor shared:

> I was not comfortable with what I had here but I was okay. I had friends who motivated me. But it happened that all my peers who left the medical school at the same time, before, and after me were leaving the country for one reason or the other. This made me want to leave as I didn't want to be the odd variable among my peers. (Interview, Dr. Keng, 05.08.2018)

This quote reveals the influence of social dynamics and peer pressure on the decision to migrate. Despite feeling alright with his situation in Cameroon, he was motivated by his peers who were leaving the country for various reasons. The desire not to feel like the "odd variable" among his peers highlights the significant role of social conformity in migration decisions. His experience emphasizes how the migration decisions of peers can create a ripple effect. Seeing his contemporaries leave for better opportunities abroad, he felt a strong inclination to follow suit to avoid being left behind socially and professionally. Even though he was "okay" with his situation, he was not fully satisfied. This ambivalence underscores the tension between being content with the status quo and striving for better opportunities. His peers' decisions to migrate likely intensified his ambitions and made staying behind less appealing. The pressure to conform and not stand out

negatively among peers is a powerful motivator. For his case, this social pressure was a significant push factor, influencing his decision to seek opportunities abroad despite being relatively content at home.

Higher Income and Better Living Conditions

Higher-income in beneficiary countries was found to be the most prominent pull factor. One health professional migrant shared:

> I envied the life my peers who graduated the same year or the year before me as they had left the country and were earning better and having a great life wherever they were. My basic salary was very small. I came from a poor background and I had to do something. I had to travel if I was to make any headway in life. This prompted me to look for a way to leave the country and the only way to do so was through leaving for further studies. (Interview, Dr. Flobert, 08.08.2018)

Dr. Flobert's quote reveals the profound impact of economic and social disparities on his decision to migrate. He experienced envy as he observed his peers enjoying better earnings and a higher quality of life abroad. This comparison heightened his awareness of the limitations of his circumstances in Cameroon. Coming from a poor background, he faced significant financial constraints. His basic salary in Cameroon was insufficient to achieve economic stability or progress, compelling him to seek better opportunities elsewhere. The necessity to improve his living conditions and achieve upward mobility was a strong motivator. He felt a sense of urgency to take action to secure a better future for himself and his family. Recognizing that further studies abroad could open doors to better career prospects, he saw education as a viable pathway to migrate. This decision underscores the role of advanced education in facilitating international mobility for health professionals. His choice to leave for further studies highlights the strategic nature of migration decisions. It reflects a calculated move to leverage educational opportunities abroad for long-term benefits.

Specialization and Recognition

The opportunity to further education and specialize in specific fields is another significant pull factor. Specialization abroad is more recognized and valued, which can lead to better career prospects. A health professional migrant highlighted:

> One of the major reasons I decided to pursue further education and specialization abroad was the recognition it brings. Specializing in a specific field in countries like the UK or the USA not only enhances my skills but is also highly valued. This significantly improves my career prospects and opens up opportunities that simply aren't available at home. (Interview, Dr. Anicet, 13.08.2018)

Dr. Anicet's quote emphasizes the significance of recognition and the value placed on specialized qualifications obtained abroad. He highlights that further education and specialization in countries like the United Kingdom or the United States provide opportunities to enhance his skills. This specialized training equips him with advanced knowledge and techniques in his field, improving his professional competencies. The recognition that comes with international credentials is a crucial factor in his decision to study abroad. Specializing in a specific field at prestigious institutions abroad is highly valued and respected, both within the global medical community and back in Cameroon. Obtaining specialized qualifications from reputable institutions significantly boosts Dr. Anicet's career prospects. It opens doors to higher positions, better job opportunities, and the potential for career advancement that may not be available in his home country. He acknowledges that certain opportunities and resources for specialization are simply not available in Cameroon. This lack of access to advanced training and recognition at home drove his decision to seek education abroad, where he could receive the credentials and experience needed to excel in his career.

Another health professional migrant highlighted:

> This desire to specialize and gain advanced qualifications abroad is driven by the fact that such credentials are more recognized and respected. It leads to better job opportunities and a more rewarding career path, which is why many health

> professionals, including myself, choose to take this route. (Interview, Dr. Humbert, 12.08.2018)

He highlights the significant role that recognition and respect for international qualifications play in the decision to pursue specialization abroad. He emphasizes a strong desire among health professionals to specialize and gain advanced qualifications. This desire is fueled by the recognition that specialized training abroad offers significant career advantages. He highlights that possessing internationally recognized qualifications leads to better job opportunities. This is a major pull factor, as it opens doors to higher positions, more challenging roles, and greater career advancement opportunities that might not be available with local qualifications. The narrative underscores that the pursuit of advanced qualifications abroad results in a more rewarding career path. This encompasses not only financial rewards but also professional satisfaction, career growth, and the ability to make a significant impact in one's field. The decision to specialize abroad is portrayed in the above narratives as a strategic choice. It is a calculated move to improve one's professional prospects and achieve long-term career goals.

In all, the reasons for migration are closely related and often work together. While factors in Cameroon – like low remuneration, poor working conditions, and stress – drive health professionals to seek opportunities abroad, factors in the destination country – like higher income, better living conditions, and the chance to specialize – attract Cameroonian health professionals. These factors collectively influence the decision to migrate and the continued stay of health workers abroad.

At their destinations, Cameroonian health professionals' aspirations and hopes for a better life are translated into concrete actions through the acquisition of skills and knowledge. These efforts are intended to yield dividends that guarantee a decent life and a self-contained position in society. Engaging in activities that involve training and skill acquisition helps them secure a better future when they return.

Determinants of Return Migration of Cameroonian Health Professionals

This section analyzes the factors influencing the decision of Cameroonian health professionals to return to their home country. Unlike irregular migrants, these professionals were able to plan their return, mitigating the risks associated with abrupt or forced returns. The analysis explores the motivations and inherent conflicts surrounding their decision to return, the cultural significance of building a legacy, and the broader social implications within their communities.

Accomplishment of Projects

Making a future is crucial for most health professionals in Cameroon. Many perceive migrating abroad as the first step toward making a future, with returning home being the ultimate goal. Working abroad enables health professionals to complete significant projects, such as building their own homes or clinics, which symbolize success and stability. This cultural significance is deeply ingrained in the notion of bushfalling, where building a house or business back home is seen as a major achievement (Alpes, 2011; Nyamnjoh; 2011; Wanki et al., 2022). Dr. Samuel, a medical doctor and owner of a clinic, shared:

> I have been able to complete my projects like building and opening a clinic. I see no reason why I should continue to stay abroad. I'm sure to make it happen here even more than those who are still out there. I have come back with all that I need to build a future. (Interview, Dr. Samuel, 12.08.2018)

Opportunities Back Home

Some health professionals return after specialization because of better opportunities offered in Cameroon than in the countries they resided in. Returning home allows them to leverage their skills and take advantage of lucrative positions that align with their field of specialization. Dr. Rachel, an epidemiologist, explained:

> A few months after finishing my specialization, I was jobless, working part-time in a library. One evening, I saw an opportunity posted on a website by the CDC. They needed an epidemiologist for research in Cameroon, and it was my field of specialization. The

> pay and service advantages were better than what I could have abroad, and it was in Cameroon. I applied and got the position. This gave me the opportunity to have what I left the country looking for. (Interview, Dr. Rachel, 18.08.2018)

Investment and Legacy

For many health professional returnees, the desire to leave a legacy is a significant motivator. Building a business or clinic back home allows them to achieve a sense of fulfilment and contribute to their community. Dr. Emile, a medical doctor and clinic owner, remarked:

> At some point, you feel the need to have something of your own back home. You want to leave a legacy. I had the life I wished for abroad, but I didn't feel achieved. I decided to come back and create my own health facility. Here, I can supervise others and let them gain experience under me. (Interview, Dr. Emile, 15.08.2018)

Philanthropic Desire

Many health professionals return to give back to their community. The desire to help those left behind and contribute to the development of their home country plays a crucial role in their decision to return. Dr. Justine, a medical doctor and non-governmental organization founder, shared:

> Living abroad and moving from place to place became tiresome. I couldn't think of a better place to settle down than home. I wanted to give back to the community that helped me grow. This motivated me to apply for a research grant, which I received. I returned and opened an NGO to help those I left behind. (Interview, Dr. Justine, 17.08.2018)

Family Attachments

Family ties and the desire to be close to loved ones are powerful pull factors for return migration. Health professionals often feel a strong sense of responsibility toward their family and community, motivating their return. Dr. Jean-Pierre, a medical doctor, expressed:

> It is very difficult being away from family. I had a whole community depending on me. At some point, I considered bringing my family to the US, but I realized it wasn't the best decision. Seeing teenagers wasting themselves on drugs made me think of my children. I didn't want them to grow up in such an environment. (Interview, Dr. Jean-Pierre, 15/08/2018)

The motivations for return migration among Cameroonian health professionals align with Pelican and Heiss's (2014) theory of "making a future," which includes the social dimension of acting as part of a community. Making a future involves not only individual achievements but also contributions to the community. This social dimension is evident in the desire to leave a legacy, invest in community development, and support family members.

Return migration offers health professionals the opportunity to fulfill their personal and professional goals while addressing the needs of their community. By planning their return, they can mitigate risks and strategically position themselves to make a meaningful impact in Cameroon. This interconnected process of migration and return highlights the complex interplay between individual ambitions and collective responsibilities.

Benefits of Health Professionals' Return Migration

Numerous benefits arise from the migration of health professionals from countries of the Global South to the Global North. This study identified three main types of benefits arising from return migration: human benefits, social benefits, and financial benefits.

Human Benefits

Health professionals returning to Cameroon bring with them a number of critical skills that were previously unavailable in the country's health sector. The dominant skills acquired by these health workers include proficiency in in-vitro fertilization, neonatal abnormalities, dialysis, gastrointestinal surgery, hematology, pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, and anesthesia. Other reported specialties include otorhinolaryngology (i.e., ears, nose, and throat), post-

partum care, geriatrics, cardiothoracic surgery, oncology, nutrition, and instrumentation.

Health professionals place significant emphasis on the skills they have acquired through training and practice in countries of the Global North. Notably, the skills mentioned by the interlocutors were predominantly medical, with fewer mentions of management and teaching skills. Additionally, some nurses highlighted their ability to treat complicated medical situations thanks to the skills they acquired in patient care and human relations abroad.

A midwife explained the importance of such patient care skills:

> I can now address very complicated issues such as postpartum bleeding and that is very important. For me, timeliness in solving emergency situations is very important and indeed necessary to save lives. (Interview, Dr. Justine, 17.08.2018)

These experiences and skills reflect how the work ethics, sensibilities, and competencies of Cameroonian health professionals improve after working in the healthcare systems of the Global North. This is indicated by another medical doctor:

> We acquire some new experiences and skills which we bring back to enrich service in Cameroon. On the wards, you see that the returnee is clearly different, punctual, courteous, and very professional in his or her approach. We are passionate about medico-legal issues and how in this part of the world we do take things for granted. (Interview, Dr. Jean-Pierre, 15.08.2018)

Another major human benefit is that the return of these health professionals helps alleviate the negative effects of staff shortages in the Cameroonian healthcare system, which result from the larger "brain-drain" migration trend. One medical doctor and clinic owner stated: "Now that I am here and working, I have solved a human resource factor by one health professional, and I hope many will return to help with the human resource problem" (Dr. Emile, 15/08/2018).

Social and Financial Benefits

For many returnees, the decision to come back to Cameroon has been rewarding. They believe their return is contributing to the betterment of the health sector. Additionally, they are happy to reunite with their families and offer them social and economic support through job opportunities in their clinics or by meeting their health needs. This signifies that the future is not just an individual issue but also a matter of family and community progress. A medical doctor who left his family behind when he migrated to the United States shared:

> I am so happy to see my family and be reunited with them. It has been such a long time. Success is not only recorded in terms of money and skills but the fact that you are together with your family is also an aspect of success in life. (Interview, Dr. Emile, 15.08.2018)

Other social benefits include founding and building charitable organizations that help community members. Some healthcare professional returnees teach prenatal classes or counsel young doctors for free. Almost a quarter of the interlocutors have established clinics, diagnostic centers, laboratories, and daycare centers in addition to investing in business ventures and the stock exchange. They see their contribution in offering employment to people and contributing to the financial economy through taxes on their businesses and investments.

Many returnees view their return as worthwhile because it enabled them to occupy prestigious positions in Cameroon that they would not have achieved abroad or without migrating. One doctor expressed: "I am happy that I came because I now occupy a bigger platform" (Interview, Dr. Jean-Pierre, 15.08.2018).

Gaining experience or skills abroad prepares Cameroonian health professional migrants to make a better future in their home country. Some have secured lecturing positions in universities and nursing training institutions, while others train people from their villages or communities to improve their prospects for a better life.

Overall, this study elucidates the significant development impact that health professionals returning from abroad have on the Cameroonian health sector, economy, and society. Their investments economically, socially, and health-wise demonstrate the broad benefits of return migration for both individuals and the broader community.

Challenges and Facilitation of Return Migration for Cameroonian Health Professionals

The objective of this section is to analyze the challenges experienced by Cameroonian health professionals upon their return to Cameroon. These challenges are largely institutional but also include interpersonal issues at work.

Lack of Support and Bureaucratic Hurdles

Institutional challenges include insufficient support from governmental agencies and the Cameroonian health sector. Many returnees face long waiting times for job interviews and work letters coupled with the absence of a competent liaison to guide them through the re-engagement process. Some returnees experience administrative failures, such as misplaced application letters and difficulties in obtaining approval to start private clinics or offer free prenatal lessons. High import duties on health service equipment and poor human relations with the Ministry of Health, Cameroon Health Service, and Nurses and Midwives Council also pose significant challenges.

One medical doctor explained:

> By the time one is done going through an interview and getting an appointment letter, your colleagues who went to the private sector would have moved ahead and already settled in. (Interview, Dr. Roxanne, 15.08.2018)

Interpersonal Challenges at the Facility Level

Interpersonal challenges often arise from colleagues who feel intimidated by returning health professionals. Some administrations may have returnees start from where they left off, which can be discouraging. In some cases, colleagues and managers may create a hostile work environment, making it difficult for returnees to reintegrate. A medical doctor shared:

> When you return, of course, your colleagues would also have moved on to higher positions, but they still feel intimidated by you and would want to frustrate you. Some administrations would even have you start from where you left off, which to me is a discouragement to return. Sometimes at work, you may get an understanding manager; you may also come across the one who will make things difficult for you and make you feel alone. (Interview, Dr. Paul, 15.08.2018)

Strategies and Coping Mechanisms

In the face of these challenges, returning health professionals develop strategies and coping mechanisms to navigate their way to a better future. The phrase "become like a Cameroonian" is a local expression meaning to achieve one's goals by all means necessary. Dr. Paul, a medical doctor, narrated:

> I could not make my way through. It was difficult and many people told me that you have to become a Cameroonian if you want to do what you want to do. They were some people that I knew before leaving, even when I got there, I still kept the network. (Interview, Dr. Paul, 15.08.2018)

Networking and relationships with friends and family members play a crucial role in overcoming bureaucratic hurdles and facilitating reintegration. It has also became apparent that social capital is the most relevant resource, rendering all other forms of capital more effective and valuable among returned health professionals. Dr. Emile, a clinic owner, shared:

> My friend who worked at the ministry actually helped me to sign my documents. He is a friend I knew before leaving for the US. Without him, it would not have been signed. Another friend was helped by a family friend who knew someone at the ministry. (Interview, Dr. Emile, 15.08.2018)

The road to making a future is not always straightforward but involves navigating various challenges and taking strategic actions. The reasons for migrants to return to their country of origin are complex, vary between individuals, and are influenced

by cultural backgrounds and personal circumstances (Afu, 2019; Pelican, 2013). Despite these obstacles, return health professionals leverage their networks and local knowledge to achieve their goals. This process underscores the social dimension of "making a future," as described by Pelican and Heiss (2014). Making a future involves not only individual efforts but also contributions from the community and support systems.

By understanding and addressing these challenges, Cameroonian health professionals can better navigate their return, ultimately contributing to the development and improvement of the healthcare sector in the country.

Conclusion

Moving abroad can be a significant juncture in the lives of Cameroonian health professionals. As has been shown, it can foster self-initiative, introduce new ideas about professional pathways, and shift their perspectives on both Cameroon and other countries. This implies that gaining experiences abroad can be crucial in finding a pathway and making a future in the country of origin.

Making a future among health professionals is relative and often determined by the environment in which they find themselves. While some healthcare returnees interviewed in this study were content with making a future by providing health assistance to their families and communities, others found satisfaction in training other health personnel to provide adequate medical care. Additionally, many have provided employment opportunities to numerous Cameroonians through their own nongovernmental organizations and health facilities.

Therefore, making a future from the perspective of Cameroonian healthcare professionals who return from abroad is a lengthy process which might not have been determined from the outset. This journey may begin with migration, but it continues as migrants acquire resources that enable them to continue making a future in their home country. This demonstrates that the discourse of brain drain is overly simplistic. While it is true that the migration of professionals from the Global South to the Global North can be detrimental to the economy and development of the South, this problem appears to be temporary. In the long run, migrants contribute to the development of their home communities through remittances and the direct transfer of skills when they return.

The study has established the causes and effects of migration on the health sector and the benefits of return migration for the development of the country and the well-being of Cameroonian health professionals and their families. Economic push factors, such as low remuneration and poor working conditions, weigh more on the decision to migrate abroad. In contrast, pull factors such as the desire to impart knowledge and skills, complete personal projects, seize opportunities back home, and reunite with family dominate the decision to return.

The perspectives of the return migrants conveyed in this study are an important addition to the ongoing discussion surrounding the global health workforce. Our findings highlight the positive effects of the return and reintegration of Cameroonian health professionals who worked in the Global North for an extended period and gained valuable skills, experiences, and economic resources. These return migrants have real, measurable impacts not only on their own lives but also on the lives of their immediate family members, the quality and availability of Cameroonian healthcare services, the economy, and Cameroonian society as a whole.

In terms of making a future, this article reflects the idea that future-making is an ongoing journey with the ultimate goal of well-being, which includes the accumulation of capital, giving back to the community, and maintaining close family ties. Making a future for these health professionals returning from abroad is an individual construct that relies on their own circumstances and the support of their community. ■

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7. Collectively Making a Future: The Role of Social Capital and Family in Navigating Return Migration Challenges in Urban Cameroon

Anna WÖLKI

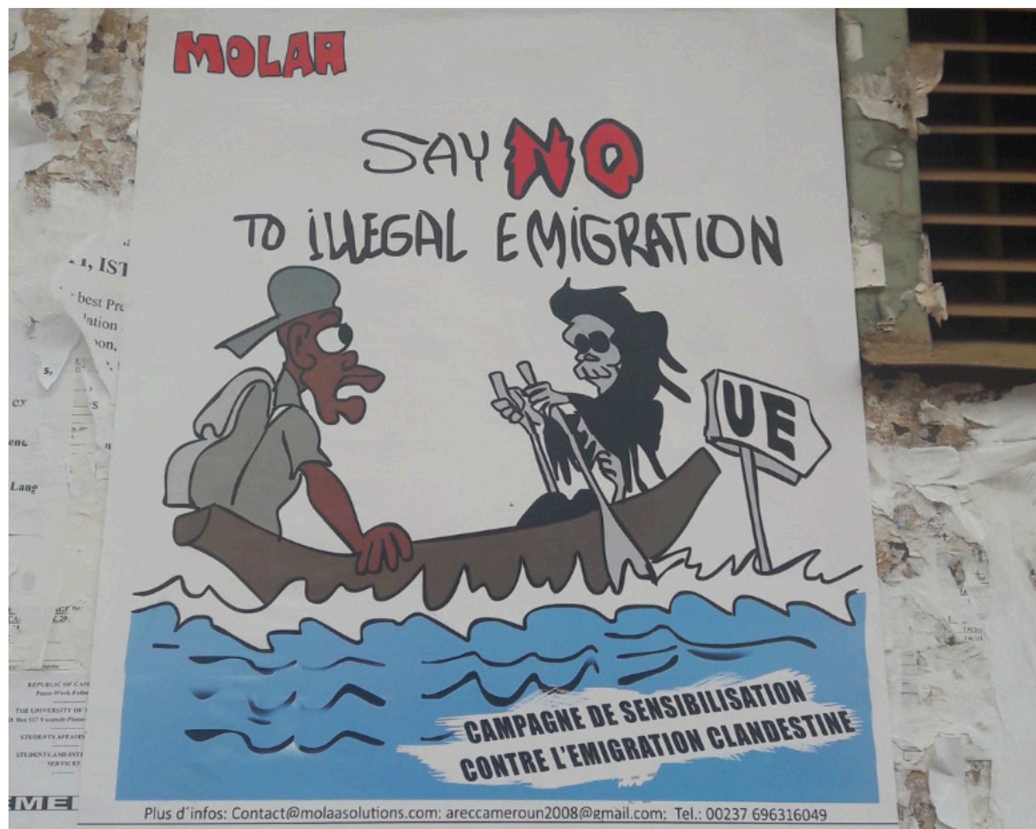

Figure 9: Ilegal Emigration Sensitization Campaign by German Federal Foreign Office © Anna Wölki, 2018

Abstract

Since the 1990s, economic and political instability in Cameroon has driven many young people to seek better futures through migration to the Global North. However, increased border restrictions have made this journey more perilous, pushing many to rely on informal routes. The dangers encountered led some to abandon their migratory journey and return to Cameroon prematurely. Those who do succeed often experience legal and economic instability, with some ultimately facing deportation. Focusing on the case study of Cedric and his family, this article examines the challenges of deportation and the strategies deportees use to navigate the aftermath of failed migration attempts. The study is based on four weeks of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Yaoundé and Douala between August and September 2018, focusing sprimarily on eliciting the views of francophone male returnees, their families, institutional actors, and community members. Building on the conceptual frameworks of making a future, social capital, and bushfalling, I argue that deportation does not necessarily mark the ultimate failure or the end of migration aspirations. However, a forced return introduces significant socio-economic and psychological challenges. Moreover, I argue that social capital and the family are crucial in navigating these challenges and facilitating the reintegration process of return migrants in Cameroon.

To "take the road" or *aller en aventure* [to go an adventure], as my research participants referred to their migration experience, is not an easy journey and demands a lot of courage, determination, and strength from young Cameroonians. On their journey, migrants have to cross several national borders, the Sahara, and the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe and fulfill their dream of a "better life." But young Cameroonians migrating at any cost are not just in the pursuit of illusions and dreams. In a context in which everyday life is experienced as a state of abjection (Ferguson, 1999), migrating at any cost is also a quest for global belonging (Ferguson, 2006; Nyamnjoh, 2011).

Since the 1990s, Europe's intensified restrictive immigration policies and border control have affected migratory routes. The journey is expensive, and migrants must spend large sums of money on bribes, smugglers, transportation, and daily necessities (de Haas, 2008). Many African migrants temporarily settle in Saharan migration hubs along their journey. Depending on conditions in their home countries, some remain permanently in major cities along the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts, often because of failing to reach Europe (de Haas 2008, 20). In countries like Libya and Algeria, African migrants frequently face racism, violence, sexual abuse, and even murder. Many are also intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard and detained in overcrowded and inhumane detention centers (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCR], 2017; Zandonini, 2018; UN News, 2022). Those who feel their lives are threatened and believe that life in Cameroon is better may choose to return on their own or with the support of humanitarian and human rights organizations, such as the International Organization for Migration (International Organization for Migration Regional Office for West and Central Africa [IOM RO WCA], 2022).[1] Meanwhile, those who make it to Europe often end up without legal residency or work permits, which creates new obstacles to fulfilling their prior goal of earning money and improving life for themselves and their families back in Cameroon. The familial and social expectations these migrants face, such as to provide for the family or to enable the migratory projects of family members, can create pressure and lead to accusations of laziness, selfishness and individual failure due to local perceptions of life in Europe (Alpes, 2017a; Wanki et al., 2022). Thus, many migrants fear deportation as it would prevent them from fulfilling these responsibilities and meeting the expectations of their families and communities back home. Instead of being welcomed by a happy family, unsuccessful return migrants often have to justify their return vis-à-vis disappointed family members who hoped to profit from their financial success in Europe. As Cedric once put: "[…] you were the one in Europe, so you have to do something. And when you came back, because they deport you everybody is just sad" (Interview, Cedric, 10.08.2018).

Due to the forced nature of deportation, migrants cannot prepare for life after return. First, they are unable to gather the necessary financial and social capital (i.e., contacts, relationships, and skills) that are crucial parts of "return preparedness." Second, they lack the willingness to return (Cassarino, 2008). Combined, this means that upon returning to Cameroon, many deported individuals have to rely on the assistance of family and friends for survival. Those migrants who decide to return prematurely on their own or with the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) program of IOM face a similar situation (except for their willingness to return). However, in the case of deportation, the social stigma can be higher because deportation is associated with either individual failure to secure a residence permit or "bad behavior" of the migrant. After all, for a migrant to be deported requires them to be intercepted by the police (Alpes, 2017a). Thus, deportation can be considered the most detrimental form of return migration to a migrant's well-being and whether a migrant returns "voluntarily" or "forcedly" creates new socio-economic and psychological challenges and risks of debt, trauma, depression, and social exclusion. Such risks of return arise from familial and societal expectations, responsibilities, and obligations; namely, an unsuccessful return from abroad, particularly from Europe, can bring into question the credibility and

[1] IOM globally runs an Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) program, providing "[…] administrative, logistical and financial support, including reintegration assistance, to migrants unable or unwilling to remain in the host/transit country and who decide to return to their country of origin" (IOM, 2018, p.1).

status of a return migrant within their familial and social environment, thus complicating their return (Alpes, 2017a). Furthermore, the success of reintegration is largely dependent on the social and economic capital of family and friends, which is either the result of a prior investment into social relations or the family's active engagement in activities that generate social and economic capital (Cassarino, 2008). As the cousin of the return migrant Cedric, Louise, shared:

> […] the environment is not going to receive you with open arms. The people will no longer respect you, you will lose all your contacts, if you would like to do for example business. When you return the people do no longer trust you, you lose their trust and there is also trauma that you received on the road. The people who take the road, they stay traumatized. This depends on all the injuries that you suffered on the road […][2] (Interview, Louise, 15.08.2018)

The significant role of social capital for reintegration became apparent when comparing the different situations of the return migrants I interviewed. While the nature of their return (i.e., "assisted voluntary" or "deported") did not significantly influence their reintegration process in their community,[3] the analysis indicates that the success of reintegration and making a future back in Cameroon depends on the return migrants' family background and capacity to mobilize social and economic capital to cope with the challenges of return. Building on the theoretical framework of *making a future* by Pelican and Heiss (2014), I argue that social capital is crucial in tackling the challenges associated with return migration and making a future in Cameroon. Yet, whether one can mobilize social capital depends on one's prior investment into social relations before return and/or the family's investment into available social relations and networks. However, the role of social relations in making a future in Cameroon can be ambivalent: On the one hand, return migrants must draw on social relations to further their economic aims. On the other hand, they must manage others' expectations which can be very difficult.

While return migration is often an inherent part of migration trajectories in Cameroon, it has largely been understudied (Wanki et al., 2022). The work of Jill Alpes (2012, 2017a) on anglophone female migrants and more recently Presca Wanki, Ilse Derluyn and Ine Lietaert on changing societal expectations of Cameroonian (return) migrants (2022) and on the role of the family in negotiating return and its impact on the reintegration of return migrants (2023) are exceptions. This article contributes to filling this research gap by exploring the socio-economic challenges faced by Cameroonian male migrants forced to return due to the absence of legal residency along with the strategies they employ to overcome obstacles and build a future. Through the case study of Cedric and his family, insights into both the migrant's experiences and the family's position within their community are provided. By focusing on the case of a male migrant from the French-speaking region of the country, my research introduces a new gendered and regional perspective to the discourse on the challenges of return migration in Cameroon. Furthermore, this article moves beyond the state's perspective on irregular and return migration, offering an alternative viewpoint. It is important to note that return migration, particularly deportation, is a highly politicized and sensitive topic. States have a vested interest in controlling the mobility of both their nationals and foreigners as a means of demonstrating their sovereignty, enforcing the return of irregular migrants, and dominating the discourses and knowledge production on migration (Alpes, 2017a; Cassarino, 2008; De Genova & Peutz, 2010). As a result, conceptual confusions, the unreflective use of legal categories, the neglect of structural constraints in the migrants' destination and home countries, and a disregard for lived realities occur frequently, sometimes legitimating harmful and/or inefficient migration management policies (Cassarino, 2004, 2008; de Haas, 2012; Turton, 2003; Holmes & Castañeda, 2016).

The article is structured as follows: following the introduction, the sample and research design are presented first. Next, the theoretical framework of *making a future* is outlined. The third section

[2] « […] l'environnement ne vas pas t'accueillir à bras ouverts, donc les gens ne vont plus te respecter, tu vas perdre tout tes contacts si tu faisais par exemple le business, quand tu reviens, les gens ne vont plus te faire confiance, tu perds la confiance des gens, et aussi, il y a le traumatisme que tu as vécu sur la route par exemple pour ceux qui prennent la route, tu restes traumatisé, ça dépend de tous les préjudices que tu as subi sur la route. […] » (Interview, Louise 15.08.2018)

[3] In this study I use the definition of community by Wanki et al. (2022), who defined community by the following the characteristics: (1) a common location, (2) social support and interaction during lifecycle events such as birth, marriage, and death, and (3) interdependencies involving an incentive to reciprocate, which include but are not limited to the sharing of resources and ideas with each other.

summarizes the historical and cultural dimensions of migration from Cameroon and their implications for return. Finally, the research findings are discussed in detail.

Sample and Research Design

My research was conducted in the cities of Yaoundé and Douala. Yaoundé, as the political capital, benefits from the presence of a considerable government apparatus and international institutions, both of which provide employment and business opportunities. It is a university town and has long been the centre of higher and professional education in Cameroon. Although the living standard and infrastructure are much better than in the periphery, there is still no guarantee of employment in Yaoundé after completing university or professional education (Pelican, 2013). Douala is the economic capital and most populous city of Cameroon. With its international airport, factories, companies, and markets, Douala is an attractive crossroad for potential migrants (Fleischer, 2012).

Over four weeks of field research in both cities, I conducted a total of nine semi-structured interviews with various informants. Five of these were conducted with francophone male return migrants between 21 and 37 years old. Out of the five return migrants, two were deported, two decided to return with the IOM AVRR program, and one returned on his own initiative. All return migrants interviewed described themselves as coming from economically less privileged backgrounds. Moreover, all of them aimed to achieve economic success abroad. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a Communication and Awareness Raising Consultant from the IOM as well as with the director of the local NGO *Solutions aux Migrations Clandestines* (SMIC). The final two interviews were conducted with a female cousin and an acquaintance/neighbor of a key return migrant. In addition, other methods, such as several informal conversations and participant observation, were undertaken.

Due to difficulty in getting access to return migrants and the importance of trust when discussing a sensitive and often shameful topic, I chose to work closely with a key research participant at the outset of my research. I conducted one interview with him interviewed a female family member and a male acquaintance of his, and conducted participant observation at his home and a local youth association in which he was involved. This approach provided valuable insights into family dynamics, relatives' perspectives on return migration, and societal perceptions. These insights form the foundation of this study.

Theoretical Framework: Making a Future and Return Migration

Analyzing the challenges and strategies of return migrants, I draw on the theoretical framework of *making a future* by Pelican and Heiss (2014). According to them, making a future implies that the future is not only a product of imagination, but it is "confronted and constructed through action, in a back-and-forth process between actors and their environment" (Pelican & Heiss, 2014, p. 7). Although everyone has to make a future, the way people think and go about doing so is specific to an environment, a society, a culture, and/or a historical moment. In the African context, social action is largely shaped by a volatile environment, the widespread scarcity of means, and uncertain circumstances (Pelican & Heiss, 2014, p. 8). The same volatile context of action applies to the process of return and reintegration of return migrants in their home communities in Cameroon. In fact, return migration creates new challenges, and return migrants often lack the economic and social capital to plan the process of return and reintegration and cannot predict some of the possible outcomes.

The decision to migrate at all costs needs to be seen in relation to the chances for success and failure available in Cameroon, the context in which migrants make their choices (Alpes 2012). The same applies to the process of reintegration and the development of new travel aspirations. The economic crisis of the late 1980s in Cameroon, often referred to as *la crise,* and the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) agreement with the World Bank in 1988 decreased the possibilities of Cameroonian youth to find employment and to master the transition from youth to adulthood (Johnson-Hanks, 2002; Konings, 1996; Fokwang, 2016); a transition which in the African context is highly dependent on economic achievements (Durham, 2004; Twum-Danso Imoh, 2019). A key feature of the SAP was the downsizing of the state to

reduce the budget deficit which was one of the features of the SAP. Given that the the state was the main employer, employment opportunities became rare, resulting in high unemployment rates, limited growth, the marginalization of youths, and the reduction of their chances of a sustainable livelihood (Jua, 2003). Before the economic crisis, it was believed that higher education would give access to a professional career and means to earn a living in the formal sector. However, this was no longer the case (Steuer & Engeler, 2017). As a consequence, many workers turned to self-employment or tried to make a living in the informal sector (Fleischer, 2012). Consequently, many youths designed and adopted new, more promising pathways, such as educational and economic migration—commonly referred to in the English-speaking region of Cameroon as *bushfalling* (Alpes, 2012; Pelican & Tatah, 2009)—or swindling, locally referred to as *feymania* (Jua, 2003; Ndjio, 2012; Fleischer, 2012; Pelican & Tatah, 2009).[4]

The social environment in the case of return migration also accounts for many of the difficulties return migrants face. This is also because African actors are embedded in a network of social relations with kin, friends, neighbors, associates, etc. (Pelican & Heiss, 2014). Although since colonialism African actors have started to undergo a process of individualization and they have taken distance from collectively held ideas, norms, and interests, they cannot escape the community's grasp (Marie, 1997). On the one hand, social relations can be a vital asset, providing assistance or engendering opportunities. On the other hand, social relations can be restrictive because of social expectations and the threat of sanctions and conflicts when actors cannot fulfill those expectations. Thus, Africans and especially return migrants find themselves in a situation of continuous bargaining of social relations (Pelican & Heiss, 2014).

Another important precondition for action is access to economic and social capital (Pelican & Heiss, 2014). Access to such capital is selective and depends on the position of an actor in the social structure. Those who lack access lack the ability to confront their future. Claudia Roth (2014) has shown in her study on youth in urban Burkina Faso that social capital is crucial to being able to act in situations of uncertainty. Young people who were blocked due to the lack of financial capital had to fear social exclusion. They were able to overcome their closure and "tame their fate" by positioning themselves in a social network and securing their social status and solidarity via camouflaging their poverty through appearance. Importantly, by "translating threats into risks" on the basis of previous experiences, some were able to develop an imagery of the future and, thus, a context for action. As Macamo (2008) noted in his studies about civil war and environmental hazards in Mozambique, "[…] [humans] act in order to be able to act" and a context for future action is created through continuous action in the present "to act again and again and again" (pp. 250–253).

Understanding Local Discourses on *Bushfalling* and Deportation

One of the goals of this article is to develop an alternative perspective beyond that of the nation-state. That is why I employ local notions of international migration. Since the 1990s, international migration in Cameroon, in particular in anglophone Cameroon, has been referred to in the terms of *bushfalling* (Alpes, 2012, 2014; Pelican & Tatah, 2009; Nyamnjoh, 2011). *To fall bush* means the act of going out to the wilderness (i.e., bush) to hunt down meat (i.e., money) and bring the trophies back home (Alpes, 2014: p. 5; Nyamnjoh, 2011). This implies trying against all odds to leave the country to go (i.e., fall) and earn money to send back to the family in Cameroon. A person who has successfully travelled is called a *bushfaller*. The most attractive destinations are Europe and the US (Pelican & Tatah, 2009; Nyamnjoh, 2011), but many bushfallers end up in other destinations because of the increasingly restrictive visa requirements of the EU and the US (de Haas, 2008; Pelican & Tatah, 2009; Nyamnjoh, 2011). Bushfalling is a form of mobility that explicitly requires the migrant to return to his place of departure to share the money or goods that have been hunted down in the wilderness. In the context of anglophone Cameroon, mobility is in a sense to become responsible (Alpes, 2012; Jua, 2003; see also Pelican, 2013). While

[4] *Feymania* is a Cameroonian term for a phenomenon that started in the 1990s in Cameroon, but is also popular in other African countries, in particular in Nigeria, under the local term 419 scam. Feymen are con artists or professional tricksters who dupe their clients, usually through the Internet (Ndjio, 2012).

bushfallers, at least in anglophone Cameroon, are greatly admired, public discourse on international migration in Yaoundé is very much shaped by the views of International Organizations such as the IOM, the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the UNHCR as well as local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's), such as *Solutions aux Migrations Clandestines* (SMIC), that aim at sensitizing youth against the risk of irregular migration. In contrast to the positive connotation of the anglophone term *bushfalling*, the francophone complements *aller au front* [to go to the front] and *aller se battre* [to go to fight] refer to the risks and dangers of international migration. Former French terms such as *faire l'aventure* [to do adventure] *aller en aventure* [to go on adventure], or *se débrouiller* [to cope] come closer to the meaning implied in "bushfalling" (Pelican, 2013, pp. 246, 248).

Before the 1990s, people who travelled outside the country were called *America Wanda* and *been to*. While the former referred to people who travelled to the United States to study and permanently integrate into American society, the latter was used to refer to elite members of the postcolonial era who studied abroad and, after returning, worked in white-collar jobs within the Cameroonian government or international organizations (Wanki et al., 2022). While these notions were mainly associated with educational achievements, bushfalling is associated with adventure and self-enrichment (Pelican & Tatah, 2009; Jua, 2003). While educational achievements are still valued by Cameroonian youths for their capacity to raise one's social status and to open up more exclusive social networks (see Harms, chapter 5), Alpes's (2012) research indicates that when a person with no education goes to bush, their level and status will be higher than that of a person who has spent the last ten years studying in Cameroon (p. 105). More recent research on the educational migration of anglophone Cameroonians by Henrietta Nyamnjoh (2021) highlights that education is often not the primary goal but rather a pathway to traveling abroad, with the main aim being financial gain. Therefore, the emergence of the bushfalling metaphor also represents a shift in cultural values and understandings of cultures of success (Jua, 2003). Furthermore, bushfalling has equalized opportunities for individuals of various backgrounds to influence their families and communities (Wanki et al., 2022). Thus, bushfallers are actively engaged in challenging the monopoly of the state-class and falling bush becomes an entrance into adulthood, a status which has been denied to many youths since 1987 in Cameroon due to the absence of employment opportunities (Jua, 2003).

In the 1990s and 2000s, returnees could attain and maintain the status of a bushfaller by displaying symbols of success, such as expensive Western-brand clothing, the latest consumer goods, and luxury cars. This performance of success often provoked ambivalent and complex attitudes toward them, both while abroad and upon their return home (Jua, 2003; Nyamnjoh, 2011). Today, being recognized as a bushfaller (i.e., a successful return migrant) depends on having a visible developmental impact on one's family and community of origin (Wanki et al., 2022). This is also why some Cameroonians are quick to label migrants without a visible developmental impact as *tourist hustlers* or *hush puppies*—a term derived from feymania. The underlying assumption is that their money earned in the bush was obtained through fraudulent means (Wanki et al., 2022).

To understand evaluations of migrants' success and failure in Cameroon – particularly the risks associated with return – Alpes's (2017a, 2017b) concepts of the *moral economy of departure* and *the moral economy of deportation* serve as valuable analytical tools. She developed these concepts in response to misleading and incorrect state-centric media and policy discourses on irregular migration, (il)legality, migrant smuggling,[5] trafficking,[6] and deportation. Within the moral economy of deportation in Cameroon, deportations are referred to through the expression of "being sent back." Distinctions between different types of forced returns are not relevant. What is relevant are the visible outcomes from the time spent abroad (Wanki et al., 2022). Returning with empty hands is likely considered an individual failure and to be a sign of laziness or

[5] According to the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, the smuggling of migrants refers to the facilitation of a person's illegal entry into a country of which they are not a national or permanent resident with the intent of obtaining financial or material gain (UN General Assembly, 2000b).

[6] The Palermo Protocol defines human trafficking as the act of recruiting, transporting, or harboring individuals through force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of exploitation (UN General Assembly, 2000a).

uselessness because the success of others is so visible and tangible that an individual case of failure cannot bring into question the profitability of bushfalling (Alpes, 2017a). However, it should be noted that evaluations of success and failure of (return) migration can differ slightly depending on the gender of a (return) migrant (Wanki et al., 2022). While both Cameroonian male and female migrants are expected to provide financial support to their families, men often face greater economic pressure due to traditional gender roles that define them as primary providers. In contrast, the status of female (return) migrants is more commonly assessed through different social markers, particularly marriage and childbirth (Wanki et al., 2022; see also Alpes, 2017a). A failed migratory experience, as I will demonstrate with Cedric's case study, is obvious and can easily be seen by neighbors and relatives. The social stigma of deportation is very harmful to the returnees' social status and mental health as it puts into question the migrant's credibility in the family's and local communities' eyes. This is because deportation is often regarded as the moral sanctioning of a migrant due to their criminal or morally bad behavior or is viewed as an individual's failure or weakness in obtaining a residency permit (Alpes, 2017a). Since the status of a bushfaller reflects positively on family members, migrants and their families often try to camouflage a forced return (Alpes, 2017a). However, not everyone can mask a forced return and maintain the status of a bushfaller as this largely depends on the migrant's ability to mobilize economic and social capital. Those who will be judged for their failure may face social exclusion (Alpes, 2017a).

The Case of Cedric and his Family

Cedric[7] is 34 years old, unmarried, and has an eight-year-old son with a woman with whom he is no longer in a relationship. He was deported from Italy in December 2016. He traveled for one year and four months. Now he lives together with his son at his aunt's house in Eba'a, a quarter of Yaoundé with high rates of youth unemployment and criminality. Cedric grew up in Eba'a. He is the youngest of nine siblings and, in his words, comes from a poor family background. At the time of the interview, he had been back in Cameroon for about one year and eight months. I got to know Cedric through my Cameroonian tandem partner, who knew him personally because they both grew up in the same quarter.

In the following section, I will narrate Cedric's migration experience, from the decision-making process to the difficulties he encountered along the road in Italy until his deportation, and after his return to Cameroon. The following section, called "the risks of Cedric's return," deals with Cedric's situation and the risks he encounters after his return. Cedric's navigation of these risks will be illustrated in the section "strategies to overcome the risks of return," based on the concept of making a future by Pelican and Heiss (2014) and the research findings of Claudia Roth (2014). The following section, "the family's perspective on Cedric's return," again deals with the strategies of Cedric and his family, but from the perspective of his cousin, Louise. I will represent not only her and Cedric's family's perception, but a more general view of young Cameroonians on opportunities in Europe and on the difficulties that mark their daily lives. Moreover, I am going to show that social capital, which was made available through Cedric's previous investments in friendships and family relations alongside the family's investments into social relations within the closer social environment, is the key factor, although at times ambivalent, in managing the risks of Cedric's return and in influencing his reintegration process.

Cedric's Situation Before Return

Before Cedric traveled, he ran his own business as a *fixer*—a sort of mediator who helps aspiring politicians refine their public image. He had a business partner, a strong network, and many friends. His financial situation was stable, and people in his community regarded him as a hardworking and economically successful man. However, he was not satisfied with his economic standing. Particularly after his mother's passing, he felt a deep responsibility to not only support his son, but also his extended family. In his words: "I'm coming from a poor family. It means that I'm not the one to ask my family, but my family is the one to ask me things" (Interview, Cedric, 10.08.2018). Being ambitious and diligent, he had seen others from his

[7] All names used are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the research participants.

neighborhood achieve financial success in Europe. As mentioned earlier, migration success in Cameroon is largely associated with being ambitious and determined enough to be successful in life and not as the result of fulfilling the criteria for legal travel and residency (Alpes, 2011). Confident in his abilities, he believed he could follow in their footsteps and become even more successful abroad than in Cameroon. In 2015, he decided to travel. Through his work as a "fixer," Cedric was able to finance his journey. Believing he could find a better job in Europe, he hoped to return to Cameroon with enough financial capital to start a new venture. Initially, he planned to go to France or Germany. He explained his reasons for traveling as follows:

> […] like I told you I'm 34 years now. After my mother's death, I think I have many, many things to do. I'm a junior brother of my family. I'm the last one of my family, but the real thing is that I'm like my 'family fighter'. My mother's family is also [poor], I have to provide for everybody, so everybody counts on me. So, I have one son, and he is 8 years old now. At that time in 2015, I just think I have to cross, to have a good job there, a good career, and make good money, and to come back and try something. (Interview, Cedric, 10.08.2018)

Before he crossed the Mediterranean Sea from Libya to Italy, he had spent nine months working as a pharmacist in Algeria and six months in Morocco. Finding work was difficult for him as a sub-Saharan African in Algeria and Morocco. Therefore, he sold goods through the Internet to be able to send back money to the mother of his child and to continue his trip. On the road he crossed a lot of countries, such as Nigeria, Benin, Niger, Algeria, Morocco and then Libya. He preferred traveling together with other Cameroonians because the local people did not treat him well. Even in Nigeria, he traveled together with other Cameroonians. Along the journey he experienced a lot of traumatizing events, including violence, murder, crime, and the rape of women. When he arrived in Libya, they spent eight days in the country before they took the boat to Italy. Cedric paid around 500€ for the boat ride. When he arrived in Italy, he stayed in a refugee camp. There, he got 100€ per month, food, a bed, and clothes, but he was not allowed to work. Therefore, he tried to leave Italy and continue to France with a Burkinabé. Cedric's return came unexpectedly that evening. After they started a fight with another Nigerian migrant (Cedric does not know why they were fighting), the police arrested all of them. At the police office, they interrogated them and asked them for their travel documents, which they did not have. He then was told that he would have to travel back to Cameroon in the next 32 hours. Instead of calling his family, he called his friend to pick him up from the airport: "I felt like there was many, but I called him and told him that he has to come and pick me up" (Interview, Cedric, 10.08.2018). That evening he did not really think about his family's or friends' reactions and could not imagine what a return without money would mean for his future life trajectory and that of his family.

The Risks of Cedric's Return

When Cedric arrived on the 8th of December 2016 in Cameroon, his family reacted angrily and sad and asked him many questions concerning why he had to come back. But Cedric felt happy to be back after experiencing horrible things on his journey. Not only had he experienced racism and violence, but the pressure from his family to send back remittances was at times unbearable, as he was struggling to find work along the road.

> My family was angry […] Asked me questions. What happened that made you come back? But I was happy, because I have. There are many people that try to cross from Libya to Italy and it is not easy. […] (Interview, Cedric, 10.08.2018)

After arriving in Eba'a, he realized that people's attitudes towards him had changed. He had not only lost a lot of money and contacts through his absence; he had also lost his previous social status and people started to mock him (I will return to why Cedric's family was upset about his return):

> […] the real thing is that it was not easy, very hard. Everybody started mocking me, because there are many that went to travel, so I always think about shame, about… craziness. It was just something to work. I was like somebody who just disappointed people, but I came back. You know it is true that you do not have any choice, you have to go back. […] (Interview, Cedric, 10.08.2018)

He felt that people were disappointed in him because the success of others was too visible in his community and his single case could not put into question the profitability of migration (Alpes, 2017a). Failure in migration is not a rare phenomenon due to restrictive visa requirements and risks along the route (Alpes, 2017a). Nevertheless, in Cameroon it is attributed to the individual and his/her lack of determination and ambition (Alpes, 2011, p. 222). Another reason why failure is attributed to the individual stems from the overly positive image of Europe, which is highly visible and promoted in movies and on social media (Tazanu, 2012). Additionally, migration stories about the difficulties in Europe of more privileged Cameroonians who return from a temporary stay abroad are met with skepticism, as they are perceived to have the opportunity to obtain a new visa at any time. Less privileged Cameroonians who voluntarily return are likely to be judged as foolish, selfish, and irresponsible (Alpes, 2017a). Subsequently, Cedric found himself in a blocked situation. He felt that he could not do much to change his situation. He lacked the economic and social capital to act according to his role as a bushfaller and to respond to people's requests for money while he was in a situation where he needed assistance. Even his family kept accusing him of coming back without anything. That is why, at times, he turned to a friend for financial and emotional support. The friend was willing to help because Cedric had supported him before his departure:

> It is really difficult that your family helps you to integrate. Every time they say, you have come back without anything. […] I can say, I have friends. I have one friend that always talks with me, always discusses with me, always protects, always tells you that everything will be okay. (Cedric, 10.08.2018)

Cedric, like the young people in Claudia Roth's (2014) study, is stuck. It is very difficult for him to start something, because in order to do something, you need contacts, and you get contacts through financial investments or behavior that makes people respect you. When I asked about his future plans, he said he no longer wanted to work as a fixer because he did not want to depend on others again. Instead, he preferred to start his own business. But right now, he does not know how to do that. He has a business plan, but no concrete project going on because he would lack the social capital to realize it: "The problem is that I don't have a contact. I don't have any contact. I don't have any contact" (Interview, Cedric, 10.08.2018). His wish to depend on his own business and not to depend on others reflects the ambiguous role of social capital and an attempt to restore his dignity. When I finally asked him what one would need to start something in Cameroon as a young person he said: "I wanted to say contacts, but now I would say money" (Interview, Cedric 10.08.18). This shift from "contacts" to "money" shows that economic capital and social capital are interconnected. As Saskia Brand (2001) also noted in her study on fertility and demographic change in Bamako, Mali, social capital would be the only relevant factor in times of hardship because all other forms of capital, including economic capital, become meaningful through social relations: "The single most important rule is that one is to whom one is connected: a person can only be identified by means of her or his relations" (p. 24). However, in order to be able to generate social relations and to benefit from them, a minimum of economic investment is required as well. Thus, relationships in times of hardship are based on previous financial investments (Roth, 2014; see also Vuarin, 2000)

Despite the risks of migration and the difficulty of attaining a work permit in Europe, Cedric still would like to travel, although his perspective on the benefits of irregular migration has changed. He would always advise his younger brothers to stay and to not "take the road" because it is dangerous. This does not mean that he would not travel again. His aspiration to travel still exists but not taking the same road as last time. This time he would travel via airplane.

> In fact, I cannot talk to somebody and advise him to cross the desert. But the very point is what to propose to people that don't have to go somewhere? What can I propose to them? (Interview, Cedric 10.08.2018)

The new travel aspirations need to be placed in relation to his situation right now and the opportunities available for him in Cameroon. If Cedric is not able to start something sustainable in Cameroon and to regain the solidarity and respect of his neighborhood, it is very likely that he would try to escape the situation and

migrate out again, provided he can mobilize the financial means.

To summarize the findings of our first meeting, Cedric's return created new risks, such as trauma, depression, social exclusion, and debt. Not only did he have to deal with his traumatizing experiences, but he also had to justify the reasons for his return vis-à-vis his family. His financial situation, due to the expenses during his trip, did not allow him to live up to his family's expectations. Also, his social status dropped, and he lost many contacts and friends. The lack of financial and social capital made his return a challenging and shameful experience and limited his space for action to maintain the respect of his community and friends. Thus, the question arises, what did he do to overcome his daily struggles?

Strategies to Overcome the Risks of Return

The second time I met Cedric was a few days later on a sunny Sunday. He had invited me and my German colleague, Lotta Schütt (see chapter 4), who was interested in the activities of hometown associations in Cameroon, to participate in a meeting of the youth association *Jeunes Dynamique d'Eba'a.* When he picked us up from the junction, he seemed more optimistic and livelier than the last time. He had dressed up and was wearing bright yellow sneakers. On the way to his aunt's house, he greeted people of his neighborhood and bought us local mandarins. We also chatted a little about the association. He told us that he had been a member before his journey, but during his absence, the group lost a lot of members and was not active. Now they meet regularly and they have a lot of ideas. However, much like Cedric's situation, the association lacks the financial means and contacts to realize their projects.

The meeting took place in Cedric's aunt's home, which consists of two houses, a big compound, and a garden. The meeting is highly formal yet relaxed, with everyone seated in a circle and given the opportunity to speak. After the meeting, Cedric's female cousins serve everyone food and two of Cedric's friends join us for a drink. From the meeting, I learned that the association aims to develop the neighborhood by constructing roads to allow taxi access, installing streetlights and cameras to enhance security, improving access to water, and much more. On that day the association had organized a football tournament for the youth in the quarter and we visited. Cedric explained the funding challenge to me as follows: To encourage people to donate to the association's activities, they first need to make a visible contribution to the neighborhood's infrastructure. Without tangible results, residents would be unlikely to trust them or support their initiatives financially (Fieldnotes, 12.08.2018).

The Family's Perspective on Cedric's Return

To better understand Cedric's situation and his family's perspective, I interviewed Cedric's cousin, Louise, who lives with him at his aunt's house. Louise's take is interesting as she does not only talk about the family's perspective, but also explains some of the societal difficulties Cedric faces and talks about the simultaneously restrictive and enabling role of social capital in making a future. Furthermore, she discusses how many young Cameroonians perceive migration to Europe or the US. In doing so, she highlights the broader context of these decisions by also shedding light on the everyday challenges and fears faced by young Cameroonians from less privileged backgrounds.

Louise is 27 years old and studied animal biology. She would like to continue with her master's degree but lacks the financial means to do so. Currently, she has no job and is helping her family in the household. As most young Cameroonians, she would like to travel because she thinks that life in Europe is better. In TV documentaries, Louise saw nice buildings, and she heard from others that everybody can survive in Europe because people would get money from the state when they are jobless. In contrast, there is no social welfare state in Cameroon to support those in need and one must struggle alone. The only difficulty she can think of in Europe is to get official documents, such as a residence permit. She would not "take the road" because it is dangerous, as she learned from Cedric's experience. But if she had the financial means, she would do a German language course and apply for a study visa. However, the lack of financial resources stops her from doing so.

When Cedric decided "to take the road" he did not tell anybody. Louise is convinced that nobody could have stopped him from leaving even if they tried because

Cedric was too convinced that he would achieve more in Europe than in Cameroon, as he had seen many successful migrants in his quarter. The family was happy when they found out that Cedric travelled, believing he would provide financial support and improve their economic situation. Louise hoped he would help her fulfill her dream of traveling. Now this seems very unattainable. When Cedric came back, she was very disappointed, she told me. However, when she heard about the horrible things Cedric witnessed on the road, their relationship became closer, and she was happy to see her "brother" (cousin) alive. The family was disappointed that Cedric returned empty handed, and they began questioning themselves: "[…] why did he come back? Why? Why? Why? How did he come back? What did he do to come back?" (Interview, Louise, 15.08.2018),[8] assuming Cedric must have done something bad that caused the Italian authorities to deport him. Moreover, they assumed that if he had succeeded in his journey, he would have been able to support them financially. Despite their frustration, they tried to find a solution and help him start a business. This was challenging, especially with an additional mouth to feed, the need for official approval, and the taxes required to avoid engaging in illegal street trading:

> […] you always need an approval when you want to open a building, you need approvals, you need capital, you need money, you need a lot of things. You need a really big capital, unless you are doing street vending, but this is illegal.[9] (Interview, Louise, 15.08.2018)

In addition to finances, Cedric's status in the neighborhood is a big problem for the family as it downgrades the whole family, who previously had experienced some kind of upward social mobility from Cedric's stay in Europe: "[...] but now that he returned, we are all at the same level. Thus, it is like you were advancing and you return to the same level again" (Interview, Louise, 15.08.2018).[10] Concerning their engagement in the youth association, she explained to me that those family members who are not working are active in the association, trying to occupy themselves and improving the infrastructure of the quarter:

> He was respected and now this is not the case anymore. Therefore, it is respect and trust he is trying to win from the people. It is the same in the association. You have seen why on Sunday. We are trying to develop the quarter a little, to win the trust of our neighbors and to show that we are able to do something good.[11] (Interview, Louise, 15.08.2018)

To occupy oneself constitutes an attempt to work with the aim of securing social recognition and self-esteem (Roth, 2014). It also serves as a justification vis-à-vis the community because one can only hope for the community's solidarity when one's situation is not the result of ones' own laziness or inability but of objective conditions. Thus, Cedric's and the family's engagement in the association is a strategy to secure social status and to position themselves in a network as valuable community members. This also means to master the "intimate connection between being, giving and belonging" and to let others participate in one's own success (Chabal, 2009, p. 73; Roth, 2014). At the moment, Louise did not know how to help Cedric financially because her situation did not allow it; however, she cooked for him and tried to support him emotionally. She also thought that Cedric's situation now was much more difficult than before he travelled. Before his travel, his financial situation was good, and he had the reputation of a "working man." But now that he was back and the nature of his return was obvious to everybody, his friends and the neighborhood no longer felt that way towards him. This is because, in their view, returning from Europe should be connected to success and personal improvement, whereas any indication to the contrary gives rise to assumptions of deportation:

> […] when they see his situation, it becomes obvious that he got deported, because there are a lot of families in the environment [neighborhood] with members who went abroad and came back, but

[8] « […] pourquoi il est rentré? Pourquoi? Pourquoi? Pourquoi? Comment est-ce qu'il est rentré ? Comment il a fait pour rentrer ? (Interview,Louise, 15.08.2018)

[9] « […] il faut l'agrément surtout quand tu veux ouvrir une structure, il faut les agréments, il faut le capital, il faut l'argent, il faut beaucoup de choses. Il faut vraiment un gros capital à moins de faire le commerce ambulant mais, d'abord c'est illégal. » (Interview, Louise, 15.08.2018)

[10] « […] mais maintenant qu'il est revenu, nous sommes tous au même niveau. Donc c'est comme si tu étais en train d'avancer et tu reviens au même point. […] » (Interview, Louise, 15.08.2018)

[11] « Il était respecté et maintenant ce n'est plus le cas. Donc c'est le respect là qu'il essaie encore de vouloir faire gagner aux gens, la confiance, pour que les gens lui fassent encore confiance, c'est même d'où l'association, pourquoi tu as vu dimanche. Nous on essaie un peu de faire évoluer un peu les choses dans le quartier pour que les ainés nous fassent confiance. Que nous sommes capables de faire quelque chose de bien. » (Interview, Louise, 15.08.2018)

> who are not in the same situation as him. So, even if he does not tell everybody, due to his financial situation and the fact that he is at home all the time, it is perceivable. Thus, the people know, he does not have to tell them.[12] (Interview, Louise, 15.08.2018)

There are even people who mock Cedric, which means that he has lost the respect and trust of the community (except that of his cousin, aunt, and friends), which is not only difficult but also dangerous in a volatile environment such as Cameroon, where you are close with your neighbors and need the solidarity of the community to be protected. When you lose respect, society is likely to not just distrust you but also exclude you:

> […] when you are respected, your head is calm, you can walk with your head up, but when you do not have the respect of everybody it gets difficult, because when you lose respect, you lose their trust. When you have respect, the people would trust you easily. So, it is an essential thing.[13] (Interview, Louise, 15.08.2018)

> "In Africa in particular, when the society points at you or when the society accuses you it is dangerous. Very, very dangerous, because we live together with our neighbors, the neighbors; the moment when your neighbor does not respect you anymore, does not trust you, it becomes difficult.[14] (Interview, Louise, 15.08.2018)

In contrast, Louise believes that maintaining one's appearance and avoiding shame and social exclusion is much easier in Europe. She assumes that securing the community's solidarity would not be a challenge, as one could earn enough money for food and clothing, allowing them to move through the streets without difficulty. The consumption of goods, hairstyles, and especially clothes are signs of wealth which enable one to camouflage poverty (Roth, 2014). To have a good appearance secures respect and social relations. To have a "sense of security," which results mostly from social relations but also past experiences, promises encapsulated in existing mechanisms, entitlements, and the availability of resources, all of which allow some estimation about future developments, is crucial in creating a context for action (von Benda-Beckmann & von Benda-Beckmann, 1994/2007). When I asked Louise whether Cedric had changed, she told me that after his return, he became more open to people since he was trying to regain his credibility and the trust of the community. She thought that Cedric could change his situation but needed an opportunity. She did not know about his future plans but assumed that he would try to travel again, especially if he did not find an opportunity in Cameroon: "But I think that usually when someone already tried one time, two times, it is maybe the third time that he can give up" (Interview, Louise, 15.08.2018).[15]

Cedric's case illustrates how the status of a return migrant is fluid and can be shaped by their position within a network. It has also shown that social capital is the most relevant resource and helps to make all other forms of capital (including economic capital) more effective and valuable. However, participation in social relations and reciprocal exchange requires a minimum level of economic capital (Roth, 2014). Compared to other return migrants who participated in this research, Cedric was still lucky as he received emotional and financial support from friends and family. The fact that Cedric could rely on his family and, at times, the support of his friends for necessities enabled him to create a context for action and to counter social exclusion. This was possible due to his previous investment in his friendships and his family's investment in social relations.

However, Cedric's return did not only affect his financial situation and social status but also the reputation of his family, prompting them to work together to show that they are valuable and trustworthy members of the community. This highlights how Cedric's future and the future of his family members are closely intertwined.

[12] « […] quand on voit sa situation, sa s'explique facilement qu'il a été rapatrié parce que, dans beaucoup de famille dans l'environnement, il y a ceux qui partent et qu'ils reviennent, mais pas dans la situation dans laquelle il est. Donc même s'il ne dit pas à tout le monde, ça se ressent facilement, vu sa situation financière, le fait qu'il soit toujours à la maison, donc les gens savent, on n'a pas besoin de leur dire. » (Interview, Louise, 15.08.2018)

[13] « […] quand tu as le respect, ta tête est un peu tranquille, tu peux marcher avec la tête haute, mais quand tu n'as pas le respect de tout le monde, ça devient difficile parce que ce que quand tu perds le respect des gens, tu perds leur confiance ou, quand tu as le respect, les gens te font confiance facilement, donc c'est une chose essentielle. […] » (Interview, Louise, 15.08.2018)

[14] « […] En Afrique particulièrement, quand la société te montre du doigt ou bien quand la société t'accuse c'est dangereux. Très, très dangereux parce que, nous vivons avec les voisins, les voisines, du moment ou ta voisine ne te respecte plus, n'a plus confiance en toi, ça devient difficile. » (Interview, Louise, 15.08.2018)

[15] « Mais je pense que d'habitude quand quelqu'un a déjà essayé une fois, deux fois, c'est peut-être à la quatrième fois qu'il peut renoncer. » (Interview, Louise, 15.08.2018)

The social relations of his family and his engagement in the youth association helped him and the family to establish solidarity within the community and to challenge the social stigma of deportation. The engagement of the family in the association should be seen as a strategy to secure solidarity in times of hardship. Therefore, Cedric's case also highlighted the important role of family and friends in "making a future" in an economically and politically volatile environment such as Cameroon and demonstrated how "making a future" is not merely an individual but rather a collective endeavor involving an extended network of family and friends.

Conclusion

From the analysis of the case study, the following findings emerged. To return after a failed migratory experience is not an easy task, as return creates new risks, such as debt, trauma, depression, and social exclusion. Not only do return migrants face economic hardship, they also have to face social stigma due to familial and social expectations related to the promising travel project (Alpes, 2017a). In overcoming the risks of return, social relations to family and friends play an important role. Before Cedric returned, he used to be the "provider" of the family, and he had a good reputation in the quarter. When Cedric returned without money, his family was disappointed and his position in the family changed. On his journey, he had not only lost financial capital and contacts, but the obvious nature of his return (i.e., deportation) made him lose "trust" and "respect" in his community. Some people even started to mock him. Through the relations of his family and his actions in the youth association, Cedric was able to create a context for future action, saving him from social exclusion. By doing something "visible" for his community, he showed his worth despite failure and tried to restore trust and solidarity. Thus, Cedric's case has shown that return migrants are able to influence the outcome of their return through social relations and personal efforts. To be dependent on social relations is not always easy as one has to continuously bargain ones' position, which is only possible through a minimum of economic capital. Despite all the risks of return, it does not constitute ultimate failure or the end of migratory aspirations (Alpes, 2017a). Also, Cedric would still like to travel, which can be seen as a way of escaping his situation in Cameroon. Nevertheless, the likeliness that he would travel again is lower in comparison to other return migrants I interviewed given that he has family and friends who help him reintegrate.

The capacity to reintegrate back into the society of origin or to make a future back in Cameroon is dependent on the establishment of a "sense of security" and the capacity to create a context of future action (von Benda-Beckmann & von Benda-Beckmann, 1994/2007; Macamo, 2008). Having access to both social and economic capital is the precondition for future action and security. The availability of social and economic capital after return is dependent on one's family background and one's financial situation before and after the journey (Roth, 2014; Cassarino, 2008; Pelican & Heiss, 2014). Social capital, as illustrated by the case study of Cedric, plays a special role and is the most relevant factor in overcoming the risks of return and reintegration. That is why Cedric and his family tried to develop new social capital and regain the trust and solidarity of their social environment through their activities in the association. Nevertheless, one cannot separate economic capital from social capital because in order to be able to use social relations in times of hardship effectively, a minimum of previous economic investment is needed. Moreover, for participation in social relations, the capacity for reciprocal exchange is needed, which can also impose psychological pressure on return migrants. Cedric could only benefit from his family's and friends' financial and emotional support because he used to emotionally and financially support them before and during his journey. Due to the position and acknowledgement of his family in their neighborhood and his efforts, he could establish a sense of security that allowed him to participate in social activities. It thus becomes evident how social capital available through one's previous investment, or through that of family and friends, can compensate for a lack of economic capital. I therefore argue that it is the most relevant resource for reintegration and "future-making" after a failed migratory experience in a volatile environment such as in urban Cameroon. ■

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8. Migration, Investments, and Youth Aspirations: A Study on Cameroonian Return Migrants' Contributions to Local Communities

Chancelyne Wulseh YEIN

Figure 10: Osmond Innovatory Bilingual Nursery and Primary School, Yaoundé © Chancelyne Wulseh, 2018

Abstract

Based on four weeks of qualitative research conducted in 2018 in Yaoundé, this paper examines the role of Cameroonian return migrants in fostering local development and shaping the aspirations of young people in their communities. While financial remittances are widely recognized as crucial for low- and middle-income countries, this study expands the discussion by exploring the broader concept of social remittances, including knowledge transfer, entrepreneurship, and sociocultural change. Through case studies of return migrants and youth beneficiaries, the paper illustrates how the return migrants' contributions serve as stepping stones for young Cameroonians striving to create their desired futures. Drawing on Erikson's psychosocial developmental model (Erikson, 1963; Erikson & Erikson, 1998), as well as the concepts of making a future (Pelican & Heiss, 2014) and judicious opportunism (Johnson-Hanks, 2005), this study argues that migration is not only a means of economic advancement but also a pathway to upward social mobility and adulthood. The research highlights how return migrants' investments in agriculture, healthcare, charitable foundations, and education empower young Cameroonians to navigate socio-economic challenges and reshape their futures. Despite persistent structural barriers such as economic instability and political uncertainty, the findings suggest return migrants play a significant role in local development, influencing both the aspirations and opportunities of young Cameroonians.

According to Stojanov et al. (2013), there has been an increase in the amount of remittances sent back home by migrants from USD 59 billion in 2000 to USD 243 in 2008. Remittances have overtaken the amount of official development assistance (ODA) provided to low- and middle-income countries. Several authors argue that, given the persistent economic crisis in many African countries, remittances from migrants constitute a significant source of relief for these countries and their citizens (e.g., Anyanwu and Erhijakpor, 2010; Chitambara, 2019). Yet, the contribution of migrants to the development of their home countries goes far beyond financial remittances. It includes the transfer of skills and knowledge, entrepreneurship, trade, investments, network building, bridging of cultural divides, and breaking down of gender stereotypes (Mercer et al., 2009; Vullnetari & King, 2011; Levitt, 1998; Nkongho, 2019). The term "social remittances" was introduced by Levitt (1998) to emphasize that, in addition to money, ideas and practices circulate between sending and receiving communities. Although these social remittances are equally important in contributing to development in Cameroon, the focus of research and policy has been foremost on financial remittances (Nkongho, 2019, p. 37). Drawing on the case studies of successful return migrants (Flora, Oliver, and Evelyne)[1] as well as two young Cameroonians directly benefitting from financial and social remittances (Henry and Dickson), this study contributes to filling this research gap by examining the impact of social remittances on the development of local human capital and the future aspirations of young Cameroonians.[2]

For the return migrants interviewed in this study, the notion of development means different things, including financial remittances and economic growth, but also social remittances and investments in other spheres of life that help to expand human capabilities. Mary, the owner of a poultry farm growing a variety of crops, said that "if you can produce 20-30,000 chickens per month, it is development." Evelyne, the owner of a clinic and charity foundation, stated that "development is when somebody does something in your community that no one has done, and that helps the society." Josephine, a laboratory technician working at Evelyne's clinic, believed "the first thing about development is to know Jesus." As we can see, the different definitions of development do not only entail physical development but pertain to societal, political, economic, religious, and social transformations. These different definitions are reflected in Amartya Sen's (1999) view of development as a process of expanding the fundamental freedoms that people enjoy. According to him, the lack of fundamental freedoms relates directly to economic poverty, which robs people of the freedom to satisfy hunger, achieve enough nutrition, and obtain remedies for treatable illnesses.

In countries with limited access to fundamental freedoms and economic development, migration is often seen as a way out. The literature on migration with respect to Cameroon and, more generally, Africa indicates that a combination of worsening economic opportunities, political instability, and exclusion of minorities are pushing African youths to migrate to other countries with the hope of having a better life in the new destinations (Alpes, 2017; Ngeh, 2011; Ngeh & Pelican, 2018; Pelican & Tatah, 2009). Authors like de Rosny (2002) and Pelican and Tatah (2009) depict the lives of Cameroonian youths as being overshadowed by general feelings of disappointment and disillusionment rooted in the economic and political situation in Cameroon and the perceived (im)possibility of a decent future in their home country. According to this narrative, aspiring Cameroonians consider migration to North America, Europe, the Near and the Far East, and Africa to be a preferable alternative to social immobility and failure at home (Pelican, 2013). While these publications may seem dated, unfortunately, little has changed, and many young Cameroonians continue envisioning their future abroad.

Since independence, many African countries have been faced with the challenges of educating and employing their youthful populations. Many newly independent states tackled the issue by creating higher learning institutions and employing graduates in public services (Mosha, 1986). Today, many African youths, find it difficult to get jobs that can ensure their economic independence after graduation from higher institutions of learning. This has been a fundamental issue in

[1] All names used are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the research participants.
[2] Human capital is generally defined as the capacities, skills, and knowledge of a person (Cornali, 2017, p.4).

Cameroon. For example, Waage's (2006) work on how young Cameroonians cope with the unpredictability of life in the city of Ngaoundéré highlights some of the economic and social challenges they face as they struggle to transition into adulthood. Most notable are unemployment and the community's rejection for not being economically successful.

In recent years, increasing resources have been devoted to higher education. However, very few resources have been devoted to creating economic opportunities for graduates after they leave school.[3] As I learned during my research, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and even private individuals have tried to solve this problem. However, the issue persists. At the same time, there are indications that the remittances of migrants are providing some degree of relief to local communities. The existing literature on the impact of migration on development in Cameroon highlights a shift in migration patterns from elite, education-driven mobility to economically-motivated movements, especially following the economic crises of the 1980s (Yameogo, 2023). Migration's impact on development is multifaceted, encompassing remittances, return migration, and diaspora engagement, with a growing body of empirical evidence emphasizing its potential to contribute to socio-economic transformation in Africa (Andersson & Siegel, 2020). Return migration, referred to locally as "bushfalling," plays a significant role in aspirations for upward social mobility, with expectations in origin communities tied to migrants' success abroad and upon return (Wanki et al., 2022, 2023). Given these social expectations, this paper explores how Cameroonian return migrants contribute to the development of their local communities and, in turn, how these efforts shape the aspirations of young people seeking a better future. Comparing the migration trajectories of return migrants to the psychosocial developmental stages youths pass through to become adults (Erikson 1963; Erikson & Erikson, 1998), I argue that viewing return migrants through the metaphor of the transition from youth to adulthood helps to understand the close connection between migration and development in Cameroon. That is, as soon as migrants succeed in achieving a better life for themselves, they become adults who must invest back home, creating opportunities for others in the community to climb up the social status ladder. The questions guiding this study are: How do Cameroonian return migrants contribute to development in their local communities? What role does the state or private sector play in this process? How do the contributions of Cameroonian return migrants to development help young people in the country achieve their life aspirations?

After this introduction, the sample and research design are presented, followed by an outline of the conceptual and methodological framework that underpins the case study analysis. A contextual section then examines the economic and political crises that create uncertainties for young Cameroonians in their pursuit of a better future. The next two sections analyze the case studies. The first focuses on the migration trajectories of two return migrants, Oliver and Flora, demonstrating how migration serves as both a future-making strategy and a pathway to upward social mobility and adulthood. The second explores the contributions of return migrants Flora and Evelyne to local development, as well as their impact on the future aspirations and "progress" in pursuing those aspirations, of the two beneficiaries of their investments, Henry and Dickson. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the study's main findings and arguments.

Methodological and Conceptual Framework

The research was carried out in Yaoundé for four weeks (06.08.2018 – 31.08.2018). I worked in a research tandem with Lotta Schütt (chapter 4) whose research closely aligned with mine. While Lotta focused on the contribution of migrant associations to development, I worked on how individual return migrants contribute to the development of their home country and to solving the challenges faced by Cameroonian youth. We collaborated closely during fieldwork, jointly conducted interviews and participant observation, and collected secondary data (reports and statistics from institutions).

[3] In an interview with senior officials in the "Francophonie Unit" at the Ministry of External Relations in Yaoundé (28.08.2018), one of them pointed to the Cameroonian state's dilemma. According to the official, the state spends a lot of resources on the education and professional development of its youthful population. However, it invests much less in creating jobs for the youths after graduation because of limited resources. As explained by this official, the state is aware of this problem and believes that if less investment is made in education and the training of youths because there are limited job opportunities for youths after graduation, this will create other problems.

Among the interviewees were six return migrant investors (four females, two males) and nine youth beneficiaries (five females, four males). Semi-structured interviews and (in)formal discussions were conducted with officials of state and private institutions concerning the job situation in Cameroon. Investors and beneficiaries were interviewed to understand the perspectives of both types of actors on how return migrant investments benefit youths. In total, we conducted 27 interviews, six observations, and four (in)formal talks. This article analyzes 15 interviews, two observations, and four (in)formal conversations.

The authors Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh (2006, p. 14) in the Introduction of their co-edited volume *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood Social Becoming in an African Context* remark that youth in the cultural and social sciences has traditionally been studied from a psychological developmental perspective in which the concept of youth is often equated with adolescence and defined in relation to hormonal, physical, and psychological maturation. Among others, they cite the influential work "Childhood and Society" (originally published in 1950) of the German psychologist Erikson (1963), who described adolescence as a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood during which individuals explore and experiment with social roles in the process of identity formation. Although adolescence is widely recognized as a biological phase, there is no universally defined threshold for the transition to adulthood. Instead, youth is a fluid and context-dependent category shaped by social and cultural factors, and individuals may shift between generational positions depending on their circumstances. As the authors argue, this was demonstrated as early as 1928 by anthropologist Margaret Mead in her study "Coming of Age in Samoa" (Christiansen et al., 2006, p. 14).

This fluidity of youth is particularly evident in African contexts, where youth is not solely a biological reality but also a social construct signifying a subordinate power position in society (Durham 2004, p. 591; Christiansen et al., 2006, p. 11). Furthermore, the transition to adulthood in African societies is not merely a matter of reaching a specific legal age but is instead defined by other factors, such as a person's social responsibilities, independence, authority, and achievements (Twum-Danso Imoh, 2019, pp. 170, 181). Due to ongoing armed conflicts in the northern and anglophone regions of Cameroon, a protracted economic crisis, and limited opportunities for education—often seen as a gateway to well-paying jobs and a desirable life—many young Cameroonians feel trapped in a marginal social position and seek to escape it (Waage, 2006; Christiansen et al., 2006, p. 13). Similar sentiments have been identified among African youth more generally (e.g., Honwana, 2012; Finnström, 2006; Vigh, 2006). However, as Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh (2006) emphasize, African youth are not passive subjects of societal structures but rather agents who navigate, resist, and redefine their socio-generational positions in response to volatile and precarious circumstances. They argue that young people should be seen as both *social beings* and *social becomings*—individuals who actively shape their lives while also being shaped by broader societal and generational forces (Christiansen et al., 2006, p. 11; see also Durham, 2004). They advocate for a dual-perspective approach to analyzing youth that views the social and experiential dimensions as inherently connected. This approach emphasizes both the meanings young people create and their position within the broader social landscape they navigate (Christiansen et al., 2006, p. 11). Applying this perspective to the context of this study, my focus is on young Cameroonians between the ages of 20 and 40 years who, despite being beyond the traditional adolescent phase, are still in the process of striving to achieve their desired futures, including becoming respected adults.

The previous conceptual discussion on youths ties in with the notion of *making a future* introduced by Pelican and Heiss (2014) which highlights the active role of youth in shaping their future. They emphasize that a future is not only "conceived of, it is not only a product of imagination but it is also confronted and constructed through actions, in a back-and-forth process between actors and their environment" (Pelican & Heiss 2014, p. 7). In this paper, I examine how the investments of individual migrants help young Cameroonians create a future for themselves, enabling us to see how actions in the present can lead to the desired future.

To gain a better understanding of the nature of the actions that migrants take in the present, their motivations, and the impact they may have on the realization of future goals, I will employ the concept of *judicious opportunism*, introduced by Jennifer Johnson-

Hanks (2005) to explain the life choices of young Beti women in Cameroon at the crossroads of schooling, marriage, and motherhood. Her study suggests that under conditions of lasting uncertainty—which has been a pertinent feature of economic and political life in Cameroon since the 1980s—actors tend to seize promising opportunities and readjust their desired futures flexibly rather than executing a well-planned strategy to achieve fixed goals.

The Effects of Cameroon's Prevailing Crises on Youths and the Way Forward

As previously discussed, life in Cameroonian society is far from a proverbial bed of roses; instead, young people must continually prove their worth and navigate significant challenges to secure their place in society. They face a landscape of uncertainty and struggle, where daily efforts shape their aspirations for a better future. Johnson-Hanks (2005) underscores the pervasiveness of crisis in everyday life in Cameroon, linking it to the economic downturn and political upheavals of the 1980s. However, today's social and political climate is marked by even deeper crises, including widespread corruption, the fight against Boko Haram in the Far North, and the ongoing anglophone conflict in the English-speaking regions. The following section outlines some of the key challenges young Cameroonians face in the process of making a future.

Corruption has been a long-standing problem in Cameroon, highlighted already in the 1990s (Gerddes-Cameroon, 1999) and reflected in Cameroon's repeatedly high ranking in the Global Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International, 2023). For instance, sometimes before an employee renders any service in the public or private administration, they expect to receive extra payment from the person requesting this service. Various gifts are offered, mostly money but sometimes even sex (Titi Nwel, 1999). Corruption hollows citizens' trust in the government and renders the state incapable of playing its role toward its people (Mgba Ndjie, 2018).

The growing development of terrorism in Cameroon's Far North remains a very troubling phenomenon. The first incursions of Boko Haram, the terrorist group operating in northern Cameroon and neighbouring Nigeria and Chad, date back to 2012 (Bokeriya & Omo-Ogbebor, 2016). Boko Haram has been responsible for kidnappings, extortion, and suicide bombings, while state security forces fighting the terrorist group have been accused of violence against civilians suspected of aiding the extremist organization (International Crisis Group, 2018). The fallout of terror attacks has contributed to a downturn in the regional economy and a significant decline in fiscal revenue (Bokeriya & Omo-Ogbebor, 2016).

Similarly, the anglophone regions have been affected by a civil conflict between Cameroonian state forces and anglophone separatist groups (Pelican, 2022). Two of the ten administrative regions of Cameroon are English-speaking and host about five million of the country's 24 million inhabitants. The conflict started in 2016 with teachers' and lawyers' peaceful protests against the deployment of francophone colleagues with limited knowledge of English to the anglophone regions (ACAPS, 2021; Agwanda et al., 2020). While the protests attracted broad grassroots support, the crisis subsequently morphed into an armed struggle (Roger, 2018; Willis et al., 2020). According to the World Bank Group (2021), as of September 2019, the crisis had resulted in the loss of over 3,000 lives, the destruction of more than 170 villages, and the displacement of more than half a million individuals.

Given all of these crises, youths in Cameroon today face several challenges regarding making a future. Even after completing high school or undergraduate studies, their pathways are uncertain. The youths I talked to in my study have various dreams in life: becoming renowned accountants, auditors, lecturers, and employers, and migrating either to further their education or to work. But in the process of achieving their dreams and making a future, they are confronted with challenges owing to the uncertainty and the unpredictability of the society in which they find themselves.

The Trajectory of Return Migrants: From Youths to Adulthood

The desire for a better future is believed to be one of the driving forces for the migration of young people from Cameroon. The result of this research confirms this point. Young Cameroonians travel out of the country for two main reasons: either to make a living for themselves or to study. While out of the country, they

get involved in various activities to make a living. When returning home, they strive to make investments that accrue them a meaningful position in society.

Based on the findings of this study, those who travelled abroad to make a living stayed out of the country for a long time (5 to 20 years), whereas those who went for studies, especially on scholarships, stayed for less than five years. In either case, the respondents' main reason for migration was to pursue the goal of a better life. Once out of the country, they embraced any opportunity that presented itself to achieve this goal. Those who went out to study had more of a well-planned strategy for achieving their future aspirations, whereas those who went for work tended to accept any opportunity that came their way.

A case in point is Oliver, a 40-year-old investor from the Northwest Region who is married and a father of three. After obtaining his Advanced Level certificate (high school diploma), Olivier spent some time at home doing nothing productive. He decided to relocate to China to make a future for himself. While in China, his first job was teaching English. He spent five years teaching before resigning when he got an opportunity to become a D.J. at night clubs. After a period of working as a DJ, he resigned to become a businessman and a translator (English to Chinese and vice versa). As a businessman, he supplied sports equipment from China to schools in the Northwest Region of Cameroon. Before travelling out of the country, Oliver had no well-planned process that could provide him with a future. He adopted the strategy of seizing promising opportunities as a means to a desirable future (Johnson-Hanks, 2005). This strategy enabled him to make and save enough money that he invested in a Cable Television Company and in opening a school with a nursery, primary and high school section on his return to the country. The steps Oliver took to create a future while out of the country ensured that he became an adult on his return.

Let us now turn to the example of Flora who migrated for study purposes and acquired the capabilities to make a prosperous future upon her return. Flora is from the English-speaking Region of Cameroon and is a lecturer. After completing her B.A. and M.A. studies in Cameroon, Flora received a scholarship to study in Europe. She graduated with a PhD in performing arts. On her return to Cameroon, she was employed in a foreign office. In 2013, she participated in a training program organized by the association for female entrepreneurs. Two years later, she opened her own language center with two partners.

The path which return migrants like Oliver and Flora took to build a future can be compared to the developmental stages youths move through to become adults. Here, I draw on the psychosocial developmental model of Erikson (1963; Erikson & Erikson, 1998) who defines youth as a life stage in which young people experiment with the opportunities and possibilities of social roles in constructing their adult identity. He contends that children and youth have to successfully master specific psychosocial challenges and crises depending on their age and the social and institutional requirements they are confronted with to build a "healthy" psychological functioning identity, which enables them to have fulfilling relationships, effective decision-making capacities, and ultimately to contribute to society.

If we apply this developmental model to the case of Cameroonian migrants, we may argue that migrants here are seen to play with opportunities and possibilities judiciously in their attempt at making a future. The challenges and crises they have to go through are at the same time the precondition to achieving adulthood. According to Pelican and Heiss (2014), making a future is a back-and-forth process whereby migrants interact with their environment and progress through various steps to create it. This process can be compared to Erikson's idea of transformation from youth to adulthood. As youths have to pass through developmental stages by overcoming psycho-social challenges to become adults, so do return migrants have to overcome several socio-economic and cultural challenges to create a socially meaningful future and become respected members of Cameroonian society (i.e., adults).

Contributions of Migrants to the Development of their Local Communities

Individual migrant investments directly or indirectly contribute a great deal to developing local communities and helping youths solve the challenge of making a future. These investments go beyond businesses and

financial support, also including social remittances and investments in the strengthening of youths' capabilities. Take the case of Evelyne, a 59-year-old woman from Yaoundé who is married with four children, trained as a nurse and midwife in Nigeria, and opened a clinic and maternity home in Yaoundé. Evelyne's investment in a clinic and charitable foundation qualifies as development because it transforms the community in which it is situated. Her charitable foundation sponsors children in schools, especially orphans and children from families who cannot support them. The foundation educates children on career choices, teaches them about God, empowers widows, and redirects the attitude of young people in prison through counselling and prayers. Her clinic also employs young graduates and offers internships to students. Henry, for example, is a beneficiary of Evelyne's foundation. Henry is 27 years old, from the Northwest region, married, and a father of one. After completing high school, Henry lacked the money to attend university and could not pass recruitment into a government position either. Luckily for him, there was an opportunity to be trained as a health worker at Evelyne's foundation. He benefitted from it and was trained as an assistant pharmacist. Henry says he appreciates the assistance he received from the foundation, as he is from a poor home and had no means of educating himself. Despite that, Henry is not happy with his present condition. His goal is to travel out of the country, pursue his studies, and become a full-time pharmacist.

The investments of migrants have a great impact on individuals. The assistance they provide to youths helps in creating job opportunities for them. This alone reduces the financial difficulties they face and also provides them with work experience, which is good for their resume. Furthermore, the findings portray that through their investment, migrants serve as role models and orientate youths on career choices. An example of an investment that provides individual benefit to youths is the language center established by our informant Flora. The language center assists youths by training them to take internationally recognized English language examinations like the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), which are prerequisites for studies in many European and North American universities. The center also prepares youths for interviews and trains them to be bilingual in English and French.

A beneficiary of the language center, Dickson, a 29-year-old male from the Northwest Region, is presently studying a master's degree program and is a graduate of *École Normale Supérieure* (ENS) of the University of Yaoundé I. As a teacher who just graduated from ENS in early 2018, it will take approximately a year and a half of unpaid work for him to start receiving his salary. Dickson works with the government but also does part-time teaching in the language center. Dickson appreciates individual migrants' investments in society because they create job opportunities for youths, diversify the economy, and fortify the private sector. However, he thinks the payroll they receive does not reflect their work. Flora confirms this by saying that the center faces the difficulty of encouraging its employees with pay packages equivalent to those in governmental institutions due to financial challenges. However, despite the low pay package, Dickson and other young employees at the language center consider their present positions as stepping stones they need to achieve their desired goals and objectives for the future. Dickson says he continues to work with the language center to gain the foundation needed to work for a more prestigious international language center. Also, the little money he gets from there helps him to take care of his personal needs since his salary as a government teacher has not started coming. Here, we see that the remittances of migrants go far beyond financial remittances, also including "social remittances" like in the case of Flora.

These circumstances and processes the Cameroonian youths go through in making a future have also been captured by Pelican and Heiss (2014, p. 7) who explain that making a future "is not only a product of imagination but it is also confronted and constructed through actions." Although Dickson is a trained government teacher from ENS and employed by the state, he does not imagine his future to begin when he starts receiving his salary. Instead, he gets involved with teaching in private institutions to make ends meet and build a teaching career profile in the private sector, which he believes will enhance his chances of getting a high-paying job in an international language center, a major dream he pointed to earlier. Looking at the language center, we see that it is a type of development

that foregrounds empowerment, capacity building, and financial independence.

Henry and Dickson's situation is not different from many Cameroonian youths who benefit from the investment of migrants. They are often not entirely comfortable with their present positions and have different dreams and aspirations for their futures. They use their present positions as stepping stones towards realizing their dreams since they have few choices due to the society in which they find themselves.

Conclusion

As demonstrated, development means different things to each of the study respondents. However, one thing that runs through all definitions is development as "progress" from one level to another. Individual migrant investments play a crucial role in fostering community development and empowering Cameroonian youths, extending beyond just financial contributions to include social remittances and capacity-building initiatives. I revealed that young Cameroonians migrate abroad primarily to seek better opportunities for themselves either through work or education and are driven by a strong desire for a more promising future. Upon their return, they strategically invest in their communities. These investments contribute specifically to the development of other young people. I argue that these migrants who return home from abroad after making a future were, at one point, youths struggling to overcome the challenges of making a future and who chose migration as an option. They experienced the challenges of being placed in volatile environments characterized by scarcity and uncertainty and adopted the strategy of seizing promising opportunities, which enabled them to make a future for themselves and thus become adults. In turn, Cameroonian youths in the city of Yaoundé still struggling to make a future are considered youths judiciously making use of the opportunities and benefits the investment of return migrants provide them despite structural conditions of uncertainty such as prevailing crises that undermine their possibilities of planning their ideal future; once they achieve their desired future, they become adults. Thus, there is a significant impact of migrant investments and social remittances in contributing to youths' "progress."

In addition, I have shown that (return) migrant investment directly and indirectly contributes to the socio-economic development of communities. Their investments, such as language centres, poultry farms, clinics, maternity homes, and charitable foundations, contribute to solving unemployment, allow community members to become fluent in different languages, and attract money to the community. ■

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THEME 3: Minority Groups and Future-Making

9. Introduction to Special Section: Minority Groups Making a Future through Migration and Education

Michaela PELICAN and Anna WÖLKI

In the final section of this special issue, we focus on the future-making strategies of members of marginalized minority groups who have moved to urban centers in southern Cameroon in search of employment and educational opportunities. These include the Montagnards from the Far North as well as the Mbororo from the North West and South West regions. Both are minority groups whose lifestyles, economic activities, and religious affiliations differ markedly from those of the majority populations in their regions. They have long histories of social exclusion and political marginalization.

While the chapter of Alawadi Zelao focuses on Montagnard youth who have migrated to southern cities, the subsequent two contributions shift attention to Mbororo women in Yaoundé: Deli Tize Teri and Wendon Gillian Mbuh examine the economic strategies of Mbororo women with little or no formal education, while Johanna Merz analyzes the future-making practices of educated Mbororo women—a group that forms a small minority within Mbororo society.

Figure 11: Mountain landscape of Tchere (Meri) © Alawadi Zelao, 2021

As the chapters demonstrate, migration and education are viewed as crucial strategies to navigate the economic, ecological, and social challenges these minority groups face. These avenues open up new educational and professional pathways that were previously unavailable in their home regions. Yet, as the contributions also show, urban life brings its own set of hardships: rising living costs, linguistic barriers, unfamiliar cultural and social environments, and an overall lifestyle that diverges significantly from their rural backgrounds. The young people and women featured in these chapters must also contend with the expectations and moral judgments of family and community members, which often no longer align with their new urban realities. Many of them embrace this challenge as a personal and collective endeavor to expand community horizons and serve as role models for future generations. By carving out new futures for themselves and their communities, they (sometimes inadvertently) contribute to social change.

Taken together, these three chapters provide compelling insights into how urban migration and education shape individual agency, collective aspirations and capabilities, and processes of social transformation within marginalized communities—particularly among young people and women.

Who are the Montagnards?

The term *Montagnards* – French for "mountain people" – refers to the diverse ethnolinguistic groups inhabiting the Mandara Mountains in Cameroon's Far North Region bordering northeastern Nigeria. These communities, which include groups such as the Mafa, Mofu, Kapsiki (Kamwe), Podoko, and Mandara, are distinguished by their geographic isolation, historical trajectories, and cultural practices. They speak related languages and are mostly organized in kinship-based farming communities. Religiously, the Montagnards are diverse. Some communities have adopted Islam or Christianity, while others maintain or integrate traditional religious practices. Christianity has become a salient factor that is also relevant in the migrant context, as outlined by Alawadi in his contribution (see also Alawadi, 2017).

The Mandara Mountains historically served as a refuge for these groups from Fulani-led slave raids and Islamic expansion during the precolonial period, particularly in the era of the Sokoto Caliphate of the 19th century (Njeuma, 1978; Chétima, 2024). While several groups experienced enslavement, many Montagnard communities resisted both Islamization and later colonial domination under German and French rule (Boutinot, 1999; Seignobos, 1982). This legacy of dominance and resistance, coupled with their geographic remoteness, contributed to their longstanding marginalization by the post-colonial Cameroonian state, where they have often been stereotyped as "backward" or "traditional" in contrast to the lowland, often Muslim Fulani populations that dominate regional political and economic life (Alawadi, 2015; MacEachern, 2011). Despite their internal diversity, the Montagnards share common experiences of political neglect, economic hardship, and limited access to state services.

The Far North is among the poorest and most underserved regions in Cameroon, with significant deficits in infrastructure, education, and healthcare (Machikou & Linjuom Mbowou, 2016). In recent years, the region has also been affected by the Boko Haram insurgency spilling over from Nigeria. While most violence has been concentrated in the lowlands, mountain communities have not been spared, facing displacement, militarization, and disruptions to their livelihoods (Chétima, 2020; MacEachern, 2018; Seignobos, 2014). Environmental pressures, including deforestation, land scarcity, and the effects of climate change, have further compounded their vulnerability (Awazi, 2025).

Academic interest in the Montagnards dates back to the colonial period, with anthropologists, geographers, and historians documenting their material culture, architecture, religious practices, and social and economic organization (e.g., Boutrais, 1973; Hallaire, 1991; Seignobos, 1982; van Beek, 2012). More recent studies have shifted toward examining identity politics, mobility, and the evolving relationship between mountain communities and state and religious actors (e.g., Alawadi, 2012; 2015, 2017; Chétima 2018, 2023; MacEachern, 2011, 2018). Most academic studies on the Montagnards have been published in French. Thus, Alawadi's contribution in this special issue is a welcome addition, further exposing the Montagnards to a wider readership.

Historical transformation of Mbororo society (in a nutshell)

The Mbororo are a pastoralist group with a long-standing focus on cattle rearing and a history shaped by pastoral mobility. They belong to the Fulbe ethnic group, which is dispersed across the Sahel-Savannah belt and is also known as Fulani (in English) or Peul (in French). Their history of movement dates back to the 19th century, when they gradually migrated southward from Northern Nigeria into various parts of Cameroon that supported cattle pastoralism, including Adamawa, the Far North, the North West, and later the South West regions. Along the way, they encountered other population groups, most of whom were concentrated in agriculturally productive zones, leaving large stretches of potential grazing land unused.

In the North West Region, the Mbororo found both favorable ecological conditions and a politically accommodating environment (Awasom, 1984; Boutrais, 1995; Pelican, 2015). This enabled them to establish semi-permanent settlements in the first half of the 20th century, combining sedentary life with seasonal transhumance. This shift was reinforced by the onset of national independence and the introduction of border controls, which curtailed long-distance mobility,

confining it largely to short-range, seasonal movements. During this period, Mbororo communities experienced significant economic growth, marked by expanding herds and increasing family sizes. This prosperity coincided with growing alignment with Islamic values, which reshaped household structures and gender roles (Pelican, 1999, 2004). Until the mid-20th century, women played a central role in household economies, particularly by marketing milk and dairy products. However, as the pastoral economy shifted focus from milk to meat production, women's roles transitioned more towards domestic responsibilities, including childcare and household maintenance. In the second half of the 20th century, demographic pressures and declining soil fertility disrupted the ecological balance. Rising competition over fertile land with neighboring farming communities, combined with shrinking herd sizes, led to growing social tensions and economic difficulties (Dafinger & Pelican, 2006; Pelican, 2015). These challenges prompted Mbororo families to begin contemplating alternative economic pathways—a process that gained momentum in the 1990s with Cameroon's democratic transition.

Closely tied to their pastoralist economy, Mbororo communities remained spatially and socially distant from political centers, settling in remote grazing zones rather than congregating in rural towns. This geographical isolation contributed to their political marginalization and limited engagement with state infrastructure, including formal education. While a few individuals entered government service—particularly in veterinary fields—the broader community showed little interest in schooling or political participation (Pelican 2015). This dynamic began to shift in the 1990s. Spurred by democratic reforms and new legal openings, a group of young Mbororo activists emerged, promoting civic engagement and a renewed ethnic consciousness (Davis, 1995; Hickey, 2011; Mouiche, 2011; Pelican, 2008). These youth-led initiatives led to the formation of Mbororo development associations, which aligned their objectives with international development discourses. Most prominent was the Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association (MBOSCUDA), founded in 1992 and later followed by other Mbororo organizations across the country. They advocated for children's education and women's empowerment through socioeconomic activities—efforts aimed not only at alleviating economic pressures from dwindling herd sizes and land scarcity but also at reimagining the community's future and social possibilities for its youth.

It was during this same period that new forms of spatial and social mobility emerged, extending beyond traditional patterns of seasonal or long-distance pastoral movement (Chiwo, 2014; Keja, 2009; Pelican, 2011). Increasingly, Mbororo individuals started to venture into nearby rural and urban centers, seeking employment, training, business opportunities, and education.

While systematic research on Mbororo rural-to-urban mobility and employment trajectories is lacking, long-term ethnographic observations by Pelican suggest certain trends. Many Mbororo youths have found work in the transport sector as taxi, motorcycle, bus, or lorry drivers. Others have established small businesses, such as clothing shops or mini-markets. Some individuals have become successful translocal and transnational entrepreneurs, running major businesses such as fruit or car import companies. Those with an educational background have often ventured into the development sector, finding jobs in NGOs and advocating for the rights of the Mbororo as a minority and indigenous group in Cameroon (Pelican, 2009, 2011, 2013). Today, with a growing number of Mbororo youths attaining advanced or higher education, they hold professional roles across the public and private sectors. They work as development practitioners, doctors, journalists, lawyers, teachers, veterinarians, and in various administrative positions. This growing presence in professional spheres reflects a significant transformation in the community's social and economic orientation.

More recently, the ongoing Anglophone conflict, which has affected the North West and South West regions since 2017, has added new dynamics to Mbororo mobility (Pelican et al., 2022). Many families have been displaced and relocated to neighboring Francophone regions. Preliminary research in the nearby city of Bafoussam suggests that Mbororo families are adapting by taking up a range of informal or precarious jobs, striving to establish a foothold in the urban economy—often beyond what they had originally envisioned for themselves.

The two articles in this special issue (Deli & Mbuh; Merz) contribute to the still underexplored field of Mbororo rural-to-urban mobility with a particular focus on Mbororo women and their strategies of future-making. Similar to Keja's (2009) study on Mbororo place-making in Bamenda, these contributions examine not only the economic and professional trajectories of Mbororo women, but also contextualize them within the social and cultural constraints that shape their lives. Moreover, they explore how these exceptional careers foster broader processes of social transformation and serve as sources of inspiration within and beyond the Mbororo community.

Selected findings

All three papers in this section engage with the special issue's overall theme of future-making, but apply slightly different theoretical frameworks. They highlight how migration and education are intertwined as preferred strategies of future-making, particularly among marginalized population groups, such as women and youth.

In line with the arguments of Pelican and Heiss (2014), the papers demonstrate that Montagnard youth and Mbororo women are not passive recipients of change. Rather, they actively engage in shaping their own and their communities' futures by pursuing new, often risky pathways—frequently in defiance of entrenched cultural norms and moral expectations. Education, in particular, is viewed as vital cultural capital—something their communities have historically been lagging behind, yet which they see as key to unlocking personal fulfillment and collective advancement.

Importantly, the contributions also engage with and extend theoretical frameworks of future-making. Alawadi's paper (chapter 10) on Montagnard youth draws on Amartya Sen's (1992) capabilities approach, which centers on the idea that people should have the freedom to pursue lives they value—lives that meet basic standards of well-being and are shaped within specific cultural contexts. For Montagnard youth, migration to urban areas, whether temporary or permanent, creates access to such freedom, which is often unattainable in rural settings. Furthermore, Alawadi highlights the transformative role of education by building on Arjun Appadurai's (2004) notion of "the capacity to aspire," namely the ability to envision possible futures beyond the status quo. Education, in this context, is not just a means to individual advancement but also a strategy for transforming their home regions into places that promote and sustain well-being.

The paper by Deli and Mbuh (chapter 11) is more of a descriptive nature, highlighting the crucial role of Mbororo women's economic activities in shaping both their own and their children's future. Their study confirms the argument made by Pelican and Heiss (2014) that actors' approaches and mindsets towards future-making are deeply influenced by their environment, society, culture, and historical context. Both papers, by Deli and Mbuh and by Merz illustrate how Mbororo women carefully negotiate cultural values and religious norms that impact their agency, and how their future-making strategies contribute to changing social and gender norms.

Merz's paper (chapter 12) engages with Johnson-Hanks' (2002) concept of *vital conjunctures*, referring to critical moments in a person's life that demand consequential decisions and shape future trajectories. While Johnson-Hanks developed this model in the context of Beti women, who often come from privileged backgrounds both individually and collectively, as the Beti are closely aligned with the ruling elite; Merz extends the concept to Mbororo women, whose experiences differ significantly due to their ethnic and social marginalization. Johnson-Hanks (2002) argues that Beti women's lives center on the choices between education, marriage, and employment, which can result in different, not necessarily linear life trajectories, which deviate from Western ideas of rather foreseeable and well-planned life trajectories.

Merz's paper confirms Johnson-Hanks' (2002) analysis but contributes a new perspective. In contrast to the relatively privileged Beti women, Mbororo women navigate strict religious and cultural norms that limit their autonomy and mobility.

As both Merz, and Deli and Mbuh show, the pursuit of education, employment, and socio-economic independence places Mbororo women at vital conjunctures where they must make life-altering choices. While these situations resemble those described by Johnson-Hanks (2002), the options

available to Mbororo women often lie outside culturally sanctioned pathways, making their choices especially precarious and novel.

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10. Building Capabilities and Future-Making Strategies of Montagnard Migrant Youths[1]

ALAWADI Zelao

Figure 12: Motorcyclists at gas station in Douala © Anna Wölki, 2018

Abstract

This study examines the migratory practices of the Montagnards, a group of ethnic minorities in the Far North of Cameroon, through the lens of making a future. In the urban centers to which they migrate, Montagnard youths develop a set of strategies to accumulate resources and capital, which in turn enable investments in the development of their communities of origin, particularly in the field of education. Over time, migration becomes a means for this minority group to enhance their capabilities and foster conditions conducive to community development. Furthermore, by investing in education, Montagnard migrant youths reinforce both their own capacities and those of their communities, enabling them to envision pathways toward futures that extend beyond the constraints of the status quo.

[1] The original article was written in French and translated into English by the editors with the assistance of ChatGPT. The editorial team then made manual language adjustments to improve the automated translation.

How people in different parts of the world who face challenging circumstances make a future has become a key subject for researchers in the social sciences (Aalders & Müller-Mahn, 2025; Appadurai, 2013; Pelican & Heiss, 2014; Steuer et al., 2017). This is justified by at least three reasons, all related to challenges rooted in the contemporary (Piot, 2010): the constant societal reconfiguration prompted by modernity (Balandier, 1971); the constraints and opportunities of globalization (Appadurai, 1996); and the reinvention of identities and cultures that were long approached by scholars as static, immobile realities (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012). Today, migration is a key phenomenon to which researchers and international organizations, like the International Organization for Migration (IOM), pay increasing attention. This contribution seeks to understand the place and significance of migration in the lives of ethnic minority groups who use it to change their future in a viable way.

The study focuses on the *Montagnards* (literally "mountain people"), a group of ethnic minorities living in the Mandara Mountains of the Far North region of Cameroon. Social scientists have been interested in these communities for some time, particularly given that their minority status has been accentuated by processes of domination as well as their relative isolation from centers of political, economic, and social power both locally and nationally (Alawadi, 2012, 2015; Hallaire, 1992; Seignobos, 1982). This study thus aims to determine the extent to which migration serves as a strategy for these groups to build their *capabilities* (Sen, 2009). It also demonstrates how investment in education is viewed as a pathway to strengthening the *capacity to aspire* (Appadurai, 2004) and thus broadening the horizon of *future-making strategies* (Pelican & Heiss, 2014).

While the notion of capabilities has gained significant analytical value since Sen's (1992) work (see discussion below), it is important to note that migratory processes often produce diverse outcomes that transcend mere relations of cause and effect. This paper aims to highlight the strategies developed by Montagnard youths to navigate the constraints they face in their immediate environment (Alawadi, 2012). Their condition of poverty is rooted in the history of Northern Cameroon during the early 19th century, marked by the Fulani conquest and the Sokoto Jihad, which resulted in the enslavement and domination of local populations (Chétima, 2024; Njeuma, 1978). Since that period, the Montagnards have been embedded in a political order that consistently excluded them from access to power and resources (Alawadi, 2017; MacEachern, 2011).
The challenges faced by Montagnard youths in the Far North are complex and multifaceted. Beyond the history of marginalization, they grapple with contemporary insecurities. The threat of Boko Haram, with its explicit opposition to education, creates an environment of fear and disrupts schooling, further hindering opportunities for advancement (Kendhammer & Ousmanou, 2019; MacEachern, 2020). Climate change also exacerbates existing vulnerabilities, impacting agricultural livelihoods while increasing competition for scarce resources (Awazi, 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic further strained already fragile systems, impacting access to healthcare, education, and economic opportunities. These intertwined challenges underscore the urgency for strategies that empower Montagnard communities to make a more secure and prosperous future.

Methodology

The data for this article was collected through fieldwork conducted in the Far North region of Cameroon and in the cities of Yaoundé and Douala between 2017 and 2019. The fieldwork involved semi-structured interviews with migrants from various Montagnard ethnic groups, community leaders, and members of community associations. Interviews were conducted in local languages or in French, and the excerpts included in this article have been translated into English. Observations of community meetings and activities were also conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of migration and future-making strategies.

Migration and Capabilities Framework

The notion of capability owes much to the work of Sen (1992) who argues that capabilities are the set of material, immaterial, spiritual, intellectual, political, normative, institutional, and cultural resources a society utilizes to establish its members' quality of life. Furthermore, for Sen, freedom is one of the foundations of human action, allowing individuals to decide the direction of their existence. The non-acquisition of

capabilities is thus an obstacle to the expression of freedom for both individuals and entire groups.

It is evident that access to these capabilities, which enable the pursuit of a meaningful life, varies across social strata with some individuals and groups being deprived more than others, such as the minority groups under study. Those at a disadvantage will consequently formulate strategies to escape the conditions of deprivation and dispossession imposed on them by dominant social groups or environmental constraints. It is for this reason that migration can be understood as a strategy through which minority groups seek to access capabilities.

Going to the City for a Better Life

Migration is closely linked to the history of the mountain peoples in the northern regions of Cameroon (Beauvilain, 1989; Alawadi, 2009). Beginning in the 1950s, French colonial authorities forcibly moved the Montagnards to serve as forced laborers in areas intended for the cultivation of cash crops, such as cotton and peanuts (Boutinot, 1999; Boutrais, 1973). When Cameroon gained independence in 1960, this policy did not change but rather gained traction, particularly with close and controlled management of the mobility of mountain farmers (Levrat, 2010; Alawadi, 2009). While the Montagnards were long reluctant to leave the mountains, they were now encouraged to move far away for both agricultural and economic reasons. It is for this reason that many Montagnard ethnic groups found themselves in the plains and later in the cities.

Towards the end of the 1980s, migration from the mountains increased in scale. In the villages and within ethnic communities, a real migrant spirit developed, leading people of all ages and marital statuses to take the road to the cities to seek a better life and freedom—both of which were lacking in the villages (Alawadi, 2012). The Montagnards, who have been migrating since the 1990s, have largely been driven by a pressing awareness that acquiring resources through migration would likely open up better futures for them.

A survey of young Montagnards who have lived in Yaoundé for more than a decade allowed us to appreciate this future-oriented attitude. Mandlaw, a young Podoko interlocutor said:

> If I left my village Godigong, it's because it was difficult for me to thrive and provide for the needs of my small family and even my community. I decided to come to Yaoundé to pursue a more profitable economic activity from which I can support my family without difficulty. Since I've been in Yaoundé, I've been taking good care of my nuclear family, but also of my two younger siblings who came to the university three years ago.

For some young people whose parents could not afford to keep them in school, going to the city is also about catching up educationally. Young mountain people urban centers thus alternate between making a living—for instance, as security guards, street vendors, or domestic workers—and pursuing school activities, such as evening classes. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among Mofou, Podoko, and Kapsiki youths who live in cities like Yaoundé and Douala. During a discussion with a young Mofou interlocutor in Yaoundé, it became clear that:

> The need to catch up on their education is real. Because education is the key to the future. And we will not thrive tomorrow if we have not acquired a certain level of education. The city offers us this opportunity to reconnect with education, which was interrupted due to a lack of means.

Of course, migration outcomes are not always positive and do not necessarily lead to better futures. There are many young Montagnards who, after extended stays in the city, fail to improve their standard of living. However, the fact that young people from the mountains nonetheless continue to migrate to urban centers highlights the enduring and decisive character of migration and, above all, underscores the significant stakes it carries for future-making.

Strategies of Urban Integration: Ethnic and Religious Networks

Because the urban environment presents itself as a "closed shop" (Antoine & Diop, 1995), settling there is a formidable challenge. For this reason, rural-to-urban migrants generally head to cities and neighborhoods where individuals from the same ethnic, linguistic, or

religious group have already settled. It is with their "village brothers and sisters" that they learn what living in the city means. Associations, churches, or professional networks further facilitate the integration of new migrants. Particularly regarding the mountain people from the Mayo-Tsanaga and Mayo-Sava departments, ethnic networks and the church serve as primary points of welcome. The Union of Evangelical Churches of Cameroon (*L'Union des Eglises Evangéliques du Cameroun* [UEEC] in French) in Yaoundé has approximately 3,000 to 4,000 members and receives 20 to 30 newcomers per week. On average, eight to 10 of these migrants come for a long-term stay.

Most Montangard groups entertain community associations whose mission is not only to promote cultural identity but also to facilitate the urban integration of community members. Indeed, it is with members of ethnic associations that newcomers gradually acquire the "ways of living" in the city and subsequently master its challenges. Faced with urban adversities – for instance, access to employment or housing, exposure to a diverse and multicultural setting – associations function as locales where members can acquire the information, resources, and capabilities needed to take advantage of the opportunities the city offers. Out of 10 respondents, seven claimed that it is thanks to the community network that they were able to get a job in Yaoundé. A migrant, having spent five years in the Ngousso neighborhood, made this statement:

> Before arriving in Yaoundé in 2013, I was aware of the existence of an association of people from my village, Oudjillah. It was this association that welcomed me when I came to Yaoundé. After two weeks, one of the brothers informed me of a watchman position with a private individual. He took me to this person, and, after discussion, I accepted the offer. Two days later, I started work. That's what I have been doing since I have been here. I am thinking of bringing my family from the village, maybe in a year.

While ethnic networks do offer the possibility for migrants to integrate into the city, it is not always without trials or difficulties. There are migrants who struggle to find work despite being welcome by their community and putting in great effort.

Beyond its evangelical mission, the church also fulfills social responsibilities. The announcements that conclude Sunday services address matters of daily concern (e.g., marriages, births, deaths) but also the job opportunities that church members can benefit from. The church thus acts as a support structure for the integration of migrants and also serves as a bridge in the search for employment. A migrant originally from Mokong told us:

> Our church helps many people settle and find employment in the city. I benefited from its action through the mediation of one of its leaders who helped me find work in an embassy. I am convinced that without the church, I would not have had this opportunity. The church supports migrants who come from my locality.

It is evident that ethnic relations and religious affiliations play important roles in the possibility of urban integration for Montagnard migrants. However, life in the city remains marked by competition and the struggle to access resources, even for those being involved in associations and churches. Moreover, some migrants choose not to take advantage of such networks. For this reason, it is essential to consider the strategies that migrants develop at the individual level. These youths go to the city fully aware of facing a different life with its difficulties, its unforeseen events, and its unknowns; they create an entire imaginary of what migrating to the city entails in terms of improbability and ambiguity. Once in the city, they do not immediately and spontaneously orient themselves towards the community, but rather test their ideas against the harsh realities of the city. Even if the outcome is uncertain, it can still lead to success. As this respondent in the Madagascar neighborhood says:

> When I left the village in 2009, I knew it wouldn't be easy, because the people from my village who came back from time to time told me about the difficulties of living in the city, especially in Yaoundé. At first, I thought it was to discourage me, but after I arrived in Yaoundé, I felt it in my skin. However, I didn't give up. I did everything to occupy myself with something. First, I sold on the street, then I pushed at the Mokolo market, and today I have managed to

> set up a small counter that earns me 10,000 francs [15.24 EUR] a day.[2] And for this to be the case, I didn't ask for anyone's help, and I didn't go to any association or a brother. I developed my own abilities to adapt to the city.

Investment in the Local

Rural-to-urban migrants maintain relationships with their communities of origin, often in the form of remittances. While several sectors benefit from migrants' investments, it is important to highlight those that contribute to long-term future-making. Respondents emphasized that sectors such as health, education, infrastructural improvement (e.g., the construction of churches, schools, boreholes), and support for village associations receive significant support from migrants living in urban areas.

However, not all ethnic groups show the same willingness to invest in social sectors within their communities of origin. This means that the trends presented here must be understood within their context. This paper takes education as a case study of migrants' remittances. This sector was chosen for three reasons: First, 85% of our respondents, distributed across different ethnic groups, identified education as a key factor that positively influences future-making. Second, all communities emphasized the promotion of education in their villages as a collective goal. Third, education appears to be a bridging variable that opens pathways to other resources (e.g., health, boreholes, roads). In this sense, education is an increasingly decisive factor for communities that were once presented as resistant to modern schooling (Martin, 1970).

Education and the Capacity to Aspire

Education plays a pivotal role in the future-making strategies of Montagnard communities and their individual members. It emerges as a recurring theme in personal investments, the activities of community associations, and the allocation of remittances. Investment in education also constitutes a key pathway for strengthening what Appadurai (2004) terms the capacity to aspire, namely a culturally informed ability of individuals and groups to envision, articulate, and work toward desired futures. Crucially, this capacity involves more than simply having aspirations; it requires navigational resources—such as knowledge, experiences, norms—that enable people to map pathways toward possible futures that go beyond the status quo. Appadurai (2004) further emphasizes the normative and political dimensions of this concept: enhancing the capacity to aspire of marginalized groups is a means of amplifying their voice and agency, and ultimately, of advancing their capabilities and freedom in Sen's (1992) sense and their prospects for making better futures.

For the Montagnard migrants in this study, investing in education is a concrete strategy towards strengthening their individual and collective capacity to aspire. Their strong emphasis on education reflects a deep-seated understanding of its transformative potential. Education is seen as a crucial tool for overcoming historical marginalization and building a more equitable future. By investing in education, both personally in the cities where they migrate and via remittances sent to their home villages, Montagnard communities are actively challenging the historical narrative of exclusion and asserting their agency in shaping their own destinies.
Associations play a vital role in this educational endeavor. They serve as platforms for collective action, pooling resources and knowledge to support educational initiatives in their home villages. This includes providing financial assistance for school fees, building and maintaining school infrastructure, and advocating for improved educational opportunities. These associations demonstrate the collective commitment of the Montagnard diaspora to the educational advancement of their communities.

Furthermore, education is not just about acquiring formal qualifications; it is also about fostering self-esteem, enhancing job opportunities, and empowering individuals to take care of themselves and others. In the long run, education equips individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the complexities of modern life, both in urban settings and in their rural communities. It provides them with the tools to participate more fully in broader Cameroonian society,

[2] Conversions made from FCFA to EUR using Wise on 20.08.2025.

to advocate for their rights, and to contribute to the overall development of their communities.

Education's urgency is further underscored by the contemporary challenges posed by Boko Haram, which actively opposes formal education (Kendhammer & Ousmanou, 2019). In this context, the pursuit of education becomes an act of resistance and a reaffirmation of the value of knowledge and learning. Despite the risks and challenges, Montagnard communities continue to prioritize education as a cornerstone of their future-making strategies.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the importance of education. The disruptions caused by the pandemic have underscored the need for resilient and adaptable educational systems. Montagnard communities have responded by finding innovative ways to continue learning, demonstrating their commitment to education even in the face of adversity.

Conclusion

The question of the future is especially pertinent in African societies, which since the colonial period have experienced profound upheavals and enduring uncertainty in their social, cultural, economic, and political spheres (Steuer et al., 2017). Today, migration has become one of the most common avenues through which Africans envision and pursue a future full of promise. Africans increasingly set out, willingly or unwillingly, in search of "greener pastures" even though their journey's outcomes are uncertain (Pelican, 2012). Migration thus shapes the imagination of many Africans as a strategy for escaping the hardships of life in their regions or countries (Abdelkhah & Bayart, 2009).

In this text, I focused on the Montagnards, a group of ethnic minorities in the Far North region of Cameroon. Their region and the communities that live there have long faced structural neglect alongside economic, political, and cultural constraints that have hindered their endogenous development.

For a long time, the Montagnard minorities have been excluded from spaces of power, which has significantly constrained their capacities and capabilities to shape their own futures. Relegated to the margins of society, they have not passively endured their marginalization. Instead, they have turned to migration as an escape and a pathway to accessing new resources. To understand the relationship between migration and future-making among the Montagnards, it is essential to consider the meaning they give to their movement to the city. In their eyes, migration is not merely the act of relocating from the village to the city, nor is it an expression of spontaneous or unreflective mobility; rather, it is a deliberate choice guided by the goal of seizing new opportunities and opening up new avenues for making better futures.

Importantly, as our analysis has shown, the rural-to-urban migration of Montagnard youths is closely connected to investment in both their own development and that of their communities. By setting up cultural associations in cities, supporting local development initiatives, and channeling resources back to their villages, Montagnard migrants strengthen their capabilities (Sen, 1992)—namely, the resources, skills, and freedom needed to shape their own destiny, preserve their cultural distinctiveness, and confront the challenges of the future.

Among these investments, education occupies a particularly central role. More than just one sector of support, education emerges as a fundamental pillar of Montagnard future-making strategies. By prioritizing education, they not only enhance their own and their communities' capacities to aspire (Appadurai, 2004), but also open pathways to other resources and opportunities that expand the horizon of possible futures.

In this sense, migration and education are deeply intertwined: migration creates the conditions through which new resources can be mobilized, while education translates those resources into long-term capabilities and aspirations. Together, they form complementary strategies through which Montagnard communities strive to actively construct a more promising future for themselves, their communities, and future generations.

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11. Mbororo Women and Making a Future: Engaging in Small-scale Business Activities in the City of Yaoundé

DELI Tize Teri and Wendon Gillian MBUH

Abstract

This paper looks at the social and economic changes among Mbororo women in Cameroon, an ethnic minority traditionally engaged in cattle herding. In recent years, a growing number of Mbororo families have moved from rural areas to cities such as Yaoundé. This migration has forced them to adapt to new urban settings and economic conditions. While Mbororo women were historically limited to domestic roles and dependent on their husbands, they are now increasingly involved in small-scale informal business activities to support their families in times of economic uncertainty. This study examines the informal business activities of Mbororo women in Yaoundé and their impact on traditional gender roles and power dynamics within their communities and households. Using qualitative and ethnographic methods, the research highlights the strategies Mbororo women employ to make a future for themselves and their families, and the challenges they face in balancing cultural, religious, and societal expectations. This investigation aims to fill a significant research gap by providing insights into the economic contributions and evolving status of Mbororo women in the urban setting of Yaoundé.

Figure 13: Mbororo women snacks in Yaoundé © Wendon Gillian Mbuh, 2018

The Mbororo are considered an ethnic minority in Cameroon (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2006, p. 10) and are descendants of the West African Fulbe ethnic group (Keja, 2009; Pelican, 2015). They are unevenly distributed across the country, with significant populations in the Western (Southwest/Northwest), Adamawa, and Eastern regions. For most Mbororo families living in the rural areas, cattle herding has long been their primary livelihood and source of income. Over the course of the 20th century, favorable climatic conditions for pastures led them to settle increasingly in the highland areas (Boutrais, 1995). As explained by one of our conversation partners, a Mbororo lady who heads an NGO in Yaoundé that supports Mbororo and other minority women, Mbororo women were nomads alongside their husbands in the early days. Their roles within the community were allocated according to gender. Women were responsible for milking the cattle daily, using some milk for food, and making butter, but they did not have the authority to sell the cattle like their male counterparts. They also handled household tasks such as fetching firewood, carrying water, cooking, and child-rearing. With growing sedentarization and Islamization, Mbororo women's economic roles became increasingly confined to the domestic sphere (Pelican, 1999). Limited access to capital rendered them dependent on their husbands, and they were considered subordinate to them (Deli, 2008; Guilmain-Gauthier, 1985; Njeuma & Awasom, 1989). When venturing outside, they were required to cover their faces with veils and be accompanied by a male relative. In Islamic legal traditions, women have often been positioned as legal minors (e.g. Badawi, 2015), a conception also reflected in the gender norms adopted by many Mbororo families as they embraced perspectives on gender roles informed by Islam.

The 1990s marked a turning point with the opening of political space at the national level and the creation of MBOSCUDA, the Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association (Hickey, 2011; Pelican, 2008). Through the promotion of educational initiatives and community-based professional training programs, MBOSCUDA significantly influenced the social position of Mbororo women and girls. It actively encouraged Mbororo families to send their daughters to school and provided women with training in income-generating activities compatible with Islamic norms (Keja, 2009; Pelican, 2008). In the following years, additional NGOs and community-based organizations emerged—often in cities with larger Mbororo migrant communities—providing similar support programs to strengthen the economic and social prospects of Mbororo and other minority women. As we will see in the following, several of the women interviewed for this study had participated in such professional training programs, and highlighted them as a source of inspiration for envisioning livelihoods and futures in the urban context of Yaoundé.

The Mbororo women in this study have experienced rural-to-urban migration, most often moving to Yaoundé in the context of marriage. This move entailed a shift in lifestyles and ways of doing things, forcing them to adjust their original lifestyles in order to succeed in their new environment. This article examines how Mbororo women participated in small business activities in Yaoundé.[1] Specifically, it aims to identify the informal economic activities undertaken by Mbororo women, analyze the impact of these activities on their future prospects, and explore the resulting changes in household power dynamics between men and women.

Theoretical and Methodological Approach

Similar to the other articles in this special issue, the paper draws on the theoretical framework of *making a future* by Pelican and Heiss (2014), who argue that "people all around the world have a past, live in the present, and head into a future" (p. 7). Hence, future-making is a universal task. They further argue that the future is not merely a product of imagination but is actively shaped and constructed through actions, in a dynamic interplay between individuals and their environment (Pelican & Heiss, 2014). In the African context, and particularly in Cameroon, environments are often volatile, marked by a widespread resource scarcity, ongoing political crises, and general conditions of uncertainty (Johnson-Hanks, 2005; Pelican & Heiss, 2014; Steuer et al., 2017). Importantly, the approach

[1] For a more detailed description of Mbororo women's informal activities in Yaoundé, see Mbuh (2022).

and mindset employed by people in making a future are deeply influenced by their specific environment, society, culture, and historical context. At the same time, the strategies available to them depend on the economic and social capital they can mobilize (Pelican & Heiss, 2014). In this article, we pay special attention to the role of economic capital for Mbororo navigating the challenges of city life, as well as to the social and cultural dimensions—such as social expectations and religious norms—that they must negotiate as part of their future-making strategies.

The research, on which this chapter is based, was conducted in summer 2018. To collect the data, we used a mix of qualitative and ethnographic research techniques, such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, life histories, and focus group discussions with our major interlocutors: Mbororo women. To avoid bias, we also interviewed some Mbororo men on their views of gender roles, in particular the ideal of men as being the sole providers and on women's contribution to the household. In total, we conducted a total of 33 interviews with 33 different interlocutors. Out of these 33, 20 Mbororo women doing business served as key informants for this study. All these women shared commonalities in their activities and either did not go to school at all or were school dropouts. In addition, we interviewed three of the women's husbands, and 10 other Mbororo men, both educated and non-educated. Our informants varied in age, sex, marital status, religious background, and level of education. They were also located in different quarters in Yaoundé, such as Tongolo, Ecole de police, Nkomkana, Mvan, and Soa. Informants were reached using a snowball sampling approach.

During our fieldwork, we collaborated closely with a translator proficient in Fulfulde, as most Mbororo women primarily speak Fulfulde and have limited proficiency in French or English. Some participants also spoke Cameroonian Pidgin English. Having a translator who understood Fulfulde was essential for obtaining comprehensive responses and fostering collaboration. This enabled us to translate data from Fulfulde to English and facilitated more effective analysis. Consequently, this approach allowed us to gather more extensive and accurate data. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms, applied to protect the privacy of our interlocutors.

Examples of Mbororo Women's Informal Business Activities

Our major findings revealed that Mbororo women in Yaoundé rely on a variety of informal activities to make a future for themselves and their families. These include tailoring as well as the production and sale of traditional food items, such as *folere* (hibiscus tea), *kossam* (fermented milk), *pap* (maize porridge), and *ndakere* (maize-based muesli). Mbororo women became involved in such activities following the rapid shift from their pastoralist lifestyle in the hills to a more sedentary life in smaller towns and cities. The new urban environment prompted Mbororo migrants, especially women, to adapt and diversify their economic activities. Many pursued new economic ventures that were in some way related to their preexisting religious beliefs and cultural practices. Below, we detail a few of these informal activities.

Tailoring

Mbororo women traditionally wear what is known as a *goudel* in Fulfulde (also called a wrapper in English), a modest style of dress influenced by Islam and consisting of a skirt, blouse, and head tie, all typically made from African print fabric. For Mbororo women, the goudel symbolizes decency, beauty, and respect. To support Mbororo women in achieving economic and social independence, the regional MBOSCUDA office in Yaoundé opened two tailoring workshops under the leadership of the head of the association's women's wing. These workshops provided Mbororo women with the opportunity to learn how to sew goudel and other garments and use their tailoring skills to generate a basic income. One of our informants, a Mobororo woman and tailor, said:

> I started my tailoring training and did it for the next two months, but could not continue because I became pregnant and was obliged to stop. Afterwards, I went to continue and, after some time, I became pregnant again [laughing] and that is why I stopped with training. I decided to learn on my own and kept practicing in the house [...] So when [the children] all go to school, I will sit back and cut my materials and sew. That is how I got better [...]. Someone can come and give me her dress, and I can sew it for 5,000 francs [7.62 EUR] or

> create a skirt and blouse set.[2] (Interview, Zuhira, 17.12.2018)

Zuhira principally sews for her own household, but also for others who bring her various materials and designs. As she explained to us, she began her training in a tailoring workshop, although she could only complete half of the course due to pregnancy and taking care of her children. With the skills she gained, she later continued with her tailoring practice at home. Presently, she earns an income of approximately fifty thousand FCFA [76.23 EUR] a month, an economic advantage.

In addition to tailoring, some Mbororo women are involved in the sale of fabric. The colorful, cotton-based fabrics used to make goudel are held in high esteem by Mbororo women, making their sale potentially lucrative. Women, like Zakia, buy materials from their main suppliers and then resell them in different places at a markup:

> I chose tailoring when I was still at Essos. I did two years there and later started with the business of selling wrappers where I gained a business project with a woman who was working at the ministry and schools at Essos and Elig-Essono [quarters of Yaoundé]. I also have a contact from FEICOM [a public economic and financial establishment] where I propose my products and it helps me a lot. And that's how we live in town…you do small commerce and big commerce…like I did, going to the ministries. (Interview, Zakia 27.08.2018)

Zakia's business model relies on personal networks, particularly among Mbororo and Hausa women in middle- and high-income positions, who form her trusted customer base. Familiar with their individual styles and preferences, she selects fabrics tailored to their tastes and presents them during visits to their homes or workplaces. By offering unique selections not typically found in the market and delivering them directly, Zakia spares her clients the time and effort of navigating crowded market spaces. The markup on these fabrics allows her to reinvest in purchasing more materials and expanding her business.

The Sale of Folere

Folere is a type of drink made from *zangual* (or hibiscus in English). *Zangual* is cultivated on large pieces of land, predominantly in the Northern part of Cameroon. After the soil has been tilled, zangual seeds are planted. The plant's leaves are used to prepare soup while the flowers are used to make the hibiscus drink known as *folere*. The leaves are also dried, and then sold in the market.

Considering herself good at producing folere, Talatu was motivated to start a folere business because her husband's income was not sufficient to take care of their many children. Her folere is recommended by many because of its taste and her cleanliness. Talatu told us about her beginnings and experiences:

> I am a Hausa woman who got married to a Mbororo man. I was the kind of lady who loved school a lot. And my father did all he could do for me to go to school, because he loved me so much and he wanted me to be educated. But my mom, on the contrary, didn't want that for me. She always wanted me to sell her things, to go to the farm, you know, things that were not inclined to school, and this brought divergence between my mom and dad. So, I decided that rather than sit and not go to school and just be helping my mother with her business and selling every day, it was best for me to get married and have a home of my own where I would be able to be free. That's how I dropped out of school and married my husband…
>
> Being married, with limited education, and the living conditions not being that easy in Yaoundé, I had to start doing business. Before I came to Yaoundé, I sold *kossam* [fermented milk], but now in Yaoundé I sell folere. The ingredients I use to make my folere are sugar, pineapple flavor, vanilla, and folere flavor (the liquid one). I started selling folere for 500 FCFA [0.76 EUR]. I soak and boil that quantity in 6-7 liters of water, for instance, in the evening. Then, I boil my sugar and all the different aromas or flavors in 4 liters of water and mix it into the already drained folere drink. After that, I sieve the drink and allow it to settle for 30 minutes so that the solids inside sink to the bottom. While it sits, I go about doing other

[2] All currency conversions in this chapter were made using Wise on 20.08.2025.

> things. I come back and put it inside the bottles and sachets. I sell a bottle for 100 FCFA [0.15 EUR] and a sachet for 25 FCFA [0.04 EUR] […] Per day, I can sell from 3,000 to 5,000 FCFA [4.56 to 7.60 EUR]. (Interview, Talatu, 09.12.2018)

Talatu, who married a Mbororo man, became a Mbororo by right of marriage. She told us that she wasn't doing any business when she got married to her husband. It was only later when they started facing financial challenges, that she was obliged to pursue business ventures. From the sale of folere, she was able to assist her husband in supporting the welfare of their home. She also played a major role in the purchase of the land on which they built their house in Tongolo. She also contributed financially to the building process, assisting her husband with money gotten from a *njangi* (savings group). In the literature, njangi is also known as a Rotating Saving and Credit Association (ROSCA) and refers to a form of microfinancing through which members contribute to a common fund at regular intervals, with the fund being allocated to each member in turn (see, e.g., Ardener & Burman, 1995). At the time of research, Talatu and her husband were in the process of refurnishing their home.

The Sale of Kossam

Kossam is a milk-based drink from Northern Cameroon that holds great symbolic and social value for the local population. In Fulfude, fermented milk is known as *pendi*. Kossam is a drink derived from the fermentation of milk for a period of 24 hours. Mbororo women get involved in its production and sale in Yaoundé because of their cultural background as pastoralists rearing cattle. The sole difference in the cities is that they primarily use imported milk powder from the markets due to a lack of fresh cow milk. In rare instances, fresh milk is used from the cattle market in Etoudi, Yaoundé. As on informant shared:

> I came to Yaoundé—it's been a long time now—with my husband and I was not really doing something. With the difficulties here in town, it was not easy. Yaoundé is tough. So, I decided to make kossam and sell it from my house. I sell it in different sizes; in the plastic containers I will sell it for 50 francs [0.08 EUR]. Or in the bottles, I will sell for 300 [0.46 EUR] or 500 [0.76 EUR], depending on the bottle…
>
> Seeing that milk [powder] is very expensive, I started with a half kilo and then I increased it bit by bit. When I buy things like that in the market, I come back home and, depending on the quantity I bought for the day, I add an appropriate quantity of water to make it lukewarm. Then, I mix my milk in. Personally, I also put a bit of an already fermented kossam inside the mixed one, and I cover it [the mixture] to ferment for 24 hours. When it sleeps like that, I then mix it again and add water. I do that because the fermented milk gets so thick that I have to add water to dilute it. So I dilute it to the texture I want, but this time with normal water. I then add sugar and some flavor I buy for kossam and then put it in plastic containers and bottles to sell. (Interview, Aicha, 10.12.2018)

Living in the Tongolo neighborhood in Yaoundé, Aicha sells kossam in her house. She prepares it with milk powder, which she buys from the market and mixes with other ingredients. Aicha is conscious of her gains from selling *kossam* and invests them into a njangi (Rotating Savings and Credit Association).

The Sale of Pap

Pap is a porridge produced from soaked and ground corn. Maize, also called *butaali* in Fulfulde, is one of Cameroon's most widely consumed staple crops and is prepared in various ways: It can be fried, roasted, or made into pap. Pap is sold in the market and frequently eaten during Ramadan. Within Mbororo communities, there are different practices of processing corn:

> I am called Halima and I am from Banso. It's been five years since I started this business. I buy corn from the market, I go and clean it, then remove the peels […] and when I come back home, I wash it and soak it. I leave it for two days in water, and then I grind it in the machine. I come back home, I sieve it well and drain it with a clean cloth to squeeze out the water and make a thick paste. I then do my bundles which I sell for 50 francs [0.08 EUR]. (Interview, Halima, 09.12.2018)

Halima and her husband hail from a village in the Anglophone part of Cameroon. She followed her husband to Yaoundé after he paid her dowry. Before beginning this business activity five years ago, she had not pursued any economic ventures. At the time of research, she sold *pap* in the neighborhood of Tongolo which helped her maintain the well-being of her family. She sells approximately 2,000 FCFA [3.05 EUR] of *pap* every day, which has greatly improved her independence from her husband. Moreover, she is now able to financially assist him, which was not the case in the past.

Informal Business Activities and Making a Future

Coming from a background of economic dependence where their livelihoods were tied to their husbands' cattle herding, Mbororo women who have migrated to Yaoundé are exploring new pathways that sometimes go beyond their traditional cultural, social, and religious roles. Several factors–including rapid economic change, shifting living standards in cities, and the initiatives of associations such as MBOSCUDA, which have promoted women's education and professionalization–have shaped Mbororo women's perceptions of work and the future. Specifically, many now view making a future as engaging in one or more income-generating activities, enabling them to support themselves and their households while also securing opportunities for their children. How Mbororo women in Yaoundé perceive work and the future naturally varies from person to person. For instance, there are differences between those with and without formal education (see also Merz, chapter 12). Our analysis shows that many women recognize the positive impact of informal economic activities on their lives and futures. And they do believe that this stands in contrast to the past, when women were more dependent.

One of our informants believed that the income she earned helped her husband and family, as she no longer had to depend solely on him for every small personal need. "By the help of Allah," as she put it, her income had a positive impact on her life and the lives of her immediate family members. It gave her a sense of independence, as she was now able to meet her own needs with the earnings from her sales. She shared:

> I do not want my body lotion to run out and I start begging [my husband] that, please, my oil is finished. Then, he will tell me that I should wait until tomorrow when my body lotion is finished. I will take my bath, then come and shake the bottle, and there is nothing inside. It's better that I had to struggle so that I would not ask again. Now, once my body lotion is finished, I will go and get it at once with my money […], the money I make from sales and save bit by bit. I will not have to ask him or have to wait for his own time. The little profit I have has helped me. I have children that I help too, and when you do it like that, it helps. It helps your husband, as when he does not have [money], I do. I can also help the children. […] Yes! It helps. […] We can't deny that. (Interview, Balkisa, 24.08.2018)

According to Balkisa, her informal business greatly supported her, as it enabled her to meet most most of her basic needs without relying on her husband – something she had found uncomfortable. Apart from her own needs, she was also able to contribute to the household and support her children. She emphasized that, no matter how little income, she always added something to the household and believed that her efforts helped to ease her husband's stress and responsibilities.

Similarly, Mairama explained how her business of selling *ndakere*, a type of maize-based muesli, helped her solve her problems in the city:

> I live alone, and I am from Sabga. I came here to do business in 2016. With [my business] I can pay my rent, my children's school fees, take care of their food and health, etc. I manage it like that because I am not educated. It is not enough for my future, but I need to work hard for my children. So, I sell like this every day and save the money so that at the end, my children will have something to eat and I will manage and pay their school fees in the public government school. You see how it helps me, right? I will not need to depend too much on people. […] Mbororo women are very strong women! [Laughs] (Interview, Mairama, 11.08.2018)

Mairama, a widow who lost her husband several years ago, came to Yaoundé to fend for herself in the wake of the Anglophone crisis, which since 2016 has disrupted peace and public life in the Northwest and

Southwest regions and strained relations between Mbororo and non-Mbororo communities (Pelican, 2022; Pelican et al., 2022). To make a living, she prepared ndakere alongside rice, which she sold daily on the street. The profit enabled her to pay her children's school fees, provide food for the household, and cover the rent for her home. Although her daily struggles were considerable, she believed that her efforts would secure better living conditions and a brighter future for her children. Ultimately, her business allowed her to avoid depending on others for help.

Some Mbororo women also developed large projects on their own with little or no financial support from their husband. Let's return to the case of Zakia who sold fabric to selected customers:

> Me—I built the house you see like this. [Pointing at the house] I forced it to be built. I am telling you. I said I am no longer going to be a tenant. […] With the money I got from my business [we built the home]. I have independent rooms [for rent] and though it's not very good, they pay me well. 25,000 [38.11 EUR] per month for one, and the other 18,000 [27.55 EUR] per month, and I am the one taking the money. […] And if I wasn't doing business, I wouldn't have had that money. So, it helps. I have a daughter who is a journalist and there is also my son who is a gendarme major. […] Well, all of this is because of me forcing with the help of my wrapper business—not my husband. (Interview, Zakia, 27.08.2018)

According to Zakia, the business of selling fabrics generated enough income that she was able to build a house with little or no help from her husband. She rented some of the rooms to tenants, providing another source of independent income. With this money, she was able to sponsor her older children and was still sponsoring the younger ones to go to school. This made her independent from her husband, demonstrating that women's businesses can be more than just a small addition to the husband's income.

Changing Gender Relations and Household Power Dynamics

A number of our informants reported that their husbands were tolerant if not supportive of their informal businesses:

> You have to respect him. [...] Respect is a part. […] Mbororo women do respect their husbands. I do respect my husband. Everything he wants you to do, you do it. If he does not hinder you to sell your things and does not say anything, you will have to respect him. […]. I even sell boiled eggs. Sometimes, I sell *kossam*, *sucette* [biscuits], and all of that in my house. I don't have any problem with him. […] I go to the market and all that. He doesn't have a problem with that. For nine years now, I have sold *folere* and *kossam*. He has never had a problem. […] For me, my husband has never refused me from selling anything. I sell anything I want in my house. (Interview, Balkisa, 24.08.2018)

The case of Rasida provides another example of a husband who not only supported but encouraged his wife's business. A retired civil servant who spent most of his time at home, he explained: "All this [her work] does not disturb me. […] When there is a case of sickness, she helps the family. Yes, a Mbororo woman has to work under the condition that she doesn't do bad things." His only concern, as he noted, was if his wife were to use the money for purposes he did not approve of. At the same time, he still expected her to respect him.

The husband of another informant shared a similar sentiment: "I am happy, the day that my wife went to bring the fridge, I was here in the house. I told her: Well done, my dear! [While clapping] That's good, you even merit a medal. That's good" (Interview, Ibro, 25.08.2018).

Others shared that their husbands were less supportive. In the words of Zakia—the businesswoman who sold fabrics and built her own house—some husbands still considered their wives "as slaves" and did not want them to leave the house to do business:

> He just wants me to sit in the house [… and] wait for him to return and then bring his tea to him and give him food. Then, after you clear it up, you go to have your bath and come back to him. […] It's

> always like that with children who have no limits. […] And he doesn’t even have the money to sponsor them. You see your children suffer. […] I had seven children and lost two. He has abandoned me with five children. [Silence] And sometimes when I ask him, he says he doesn't have money. […] And now I am obliged to take care of them. I sold my cows in the village to pay their school fees, so I have to do business. […] When I tell him I want to go out, he asks me where am I going, so it’s not that easy. (Interview, Zakia, 27.08.2018)

Her husband's expectations that a woman should remain at home made it difficult for Zakia to pursue her business, earn money, and make a future for herself and her children. At the same time, she reflected that her entrepreneurial activities may have contributed to her husband’s withdrawal from his economic responsibilities as head of the household, thereby shifting the balance of obligations within the family.

We were also told that some men invoked Islamic ideals of women’s subservience and believed that “any woman working or involved in business is a devil” (Inerview, Buba,17.08.2018). Such views resonate with broader fears that changing norms and values may lead to social decline. In this context, when Mbororo women become primary providers, they not only add to the household income but also challenge male authority, established power relations, and the moral order of the family (see also Merz, chapter 12).

Regardless of the support they received, most informants carried out their work from home. This arrangement was generally more acceptable to their husbands and the Mbororo community in general, as it enabled women to engage in economic activities while adhering to Islamic norms of modesty and respectability. As a result, women’s work remains partly situated within the gendered domestic sphere, combining traditional expectations with new economic roles.

At the same time, some women reported that engaging in business has brought them social recognition. Mairama explained that she was viewed with respect because she supported herself in a morally acceptable way, unlike others who might have resorted to means forbidden by Islam. She also stressed that her financial contributions were appreciated: “The community is happy with me because I am working, and I aid them” (Interview, Mairama, 11.08.2018).

This recognition highlights how Mbororo women’s economic activities, when aligned with cultural and religious norms, can enhance their social standing while strengthening their autonomy and future-making aspirations. It also resonates with the initiatives of associations such as MBOSCUDA, which have actively supported women’s economic participation, encouraging them to shape a future for themselves and their children.

Conclusion

Using a qualitative approach, this article examined how Mbororo women in Yaoundé engage in small-scale business activities. It highlighted the nature of their informal economic practices, their impact on women’s visions and strategies of making a future, as well as men’s and women’s perspectives on changing gender roles and household power relations. The findings show that while Mbororo women in Yaoundé continue facing challenges in reconciling economic activities with established social and religious expectations, they have gained greater independence from their husbands and developed new means of securing a future for themselves and their families. ■

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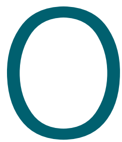
12. Planning Life Among Educated Mbororo Women in Cameroon: The Interplay of Education, Marriage, and Employment

Johanna MERZ

Figure 14: Classroom of Faculty of Arts and Lettres and Social Sciences, University of Yaoundé 1 © Anna Wölki,2018

Abstract

This article examines critical moments of decision-making in the lives of educated Mbororo women in Yaoundé, with a focus on high school and university graduation. Drawing on Johnson-Hanks' (2005) concept of vital conjunctures, it analyses how the spheres of education, marriage, and employment intersect to shape women's life trajectories. At the same time, it explores the role of economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) for negotiating decisions across different life spheres. The paper highlights the transformative potential of education, especially for minority women historically excluded from such pathways. It suggests that education expands women's future horizons and enhances their scope for action by providing knowledge and empowerment that can be mobilized in these decisive moments. Finally, the article explores the challenges and opportunities that arise in each vital conjuncture and how these evolve over the life course, including strategies to balance independence, career aspirations, and family expectations.

ver the past three to four decades, education and migration have gained traction within Mbororo society, marking a period of profound social transformation. The Mbororo are a subgroup of the Fulbe ethnic group, and have been recognized as an ethnic minority in Cameroon. They trace their origin to a pastoral nomadic lifestyle that revolves around the rearing of cattle (Boutrais, 1984; Keja, 2009; Pelican, 2015). The gradual shift toward more sedentary ways of life, sustained interactions with neighboring ethnic groups, and the initiatives of development associations, like the Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association (MBOSCUDA), have all contributed to reshaping social structures in the past decades (Pelican, 2008; Keja, 2009; Hickey, 2011). Nevertheless, the influence of individual actors should not be neglected. Educated women, in particular, stand at the forefront of these transformations, both affected by them and actively shaping them.

Young Mbororo women today, living in urban centers, walk on the paths first carved out by the previous generation of Mbororo women. In Cameroon, education is generally regarded as a prerequisite for upward social mobility and as a means of expanding opportunities and future-making strategies (see Harms, chapter 5). However, among minority groups such as the Mbororo, education had long been met with skepticism.[1] Many parents were critical of formal or "Western" schooling, fearing that it would divert their children—especially daughters—from established cultural values and religious norms (Njieassam, 2020). It was only in the 1990s, through the concerted efforts of MBOSCUDA and other organizations, that community perspectives on education gradually began to change, with more parents considering the option of sending both boys and girls to school.

While a trend toward greater acceptance of formal education can now be observed, social change remains a gradual process (Pelican, 2015). Many of the young Mbororo women who participated in this study continue to face significant challenges in their educational or professional trajectories. These often become apparent after graduation from high school or university. These pivotal moments – when they must decide the direction of their lives – are filled with hopes, dreams, and aspirations, but also with uncertainties and fears. Each decision made at these junctures carries far-reaching consequences across different spheres of life. Drawing on Johnson-Hanks' concepts of a *vital conjuncture* and *future horizons* (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 2005; Sieveking & Dallywater, 2016), as well as Bourdieu's (1986) notions of social, economic, and cultural capital, this article examines two specific vital conjunctures commonly experienced by the women I encountered: high school and university graduation.[2] Those moments demand decisions about the future and entail the possibility of major changes across various spheres of life. I argue that seemingly similar vital conjunctures in a woman's life differ depending on the capital available to her, particularly in reference to education. Such resources shape women's position as social actors and form the basis for negotiating other spheres of life. This paper focuses on the intersections of education, employment, and marriage. It demonstrates that higher education expands women's scope for action through knowledge and empowerment, which can be strategically mobilized in vital conjunctures.

The first part of this article examines the future horizons that emerge after graduation from high school and the challenges of city life. As the data suggests, Mbororo women can typically decide between entering marriage or pursuing higher education as the first step toward a professional career. These decisions are largely shaped by the available financial capital and their parents' preferences. The second part of the article focuses on university graduation and the related prospects. The emerging future horizons typically include further education; becoming a single, working professional; or pursuing new forms of marriage and family life. The article highlights changes from one vital conjuncture to the next and discusses the factors driving these shifts.

Research Methods

The research for this article was conducted over a six-week period from August to September 2018 in Yaoundé and formed part of a research and teaching

[1] See also Alawadi (chapter 10) on the Montagnard minority groups and their approach to education.
[2] See also Ammann (2017, p. 97) for further discussion on graduations as vital conjunctures.

collaboration between the Universities of Bamenda, Cologne, Dschang, and Yaoundé 1. My fieldwork was supported by MBOSCUDA, which provided an initial point of contact and connected me to further interlocutors. In total, I met twenty-one research participants, including seventeen Mbororo women of different age groups who became the primary focus of my study. Among them, eight women were still studying and planning their future trajectories, while seven had completed their studies and made certain life decisions. Two women had studied in the 1990s and were already retired; they were among the founding members of MBOSCUDA and were considered pioneers of educational pathways for Mbororo women. With these seventeen interlocutors, I conducted at least one semi-structured interview, meeting them in their homes or offices. In addition, I was able to carry out participant observation during the period I lived with a Mbororo family on the outskirts of Yaoundé. I paid repeated visits to their neighborhood and also visited some Mbororo settlements in the countryside.

Conceptual Framework: Vital Conjunctures

Johnson-Hanks (2006) argues that in times of uncertainty, the consecutive stages of the life cycle no longer serve as a guideline for life-planning decisions, as these stages typically are supported and enforced by stable institutions. In her study among young, educated Beti women in southern Cameroon, she introduces the concept of *vital conjunctures*, defined as "structures of possibility that emerge around specific periods of potential transformation in the lives of one or more participants" (Johnson-Hanks, 2006, p. 3). Such a moment may arise, for example, when a schoolgirl is confronted with an undesired pregnancy. Each decision she makes in response can have long-lasting consequences, potentially transforming her social status from girl and student to woman, mother, and/or wife. The analysis of vital conjunctures hinges on the notion of *future horizons*—the possible trajectories an actor can envision. These imagined futures are evaluated according to their (perceived) feasibility and desirability. They can also provide general guidelines for action. In the Beti case, the most desired and socially recognized future horizon is that of the "honorable mother," who gives birth only when she is able to provide for her child economically. This and alternative future horizons shape decisions made at the vital conjuncture of pregnancy.

To generate insights into the impact of education, one of my main methods was to elicit the biographies of my interlocutors and identify interlinkages of different spheres of life, such as education, marriage, family planning, career choices, and migration. I argue that graduation from either high school or university constitutes a vital conjuncture that requires decisions about the further course of life. Graduation opens up manifold pathways, which women evaluate in light of various future horizons. These horizons are informed by both prevailing social norms and the women's personal aspirations and imaginations. Decision-making at such moments is thus informed by these horizons as well as by the resources available to each woman in her specific situation. In particular, economic and social capital are crucial in confronting one's future, as pointed out by Pelican and Heiss (2014). A change in social or economic capital thus alters a woman's position in society and thereby expands or constrains her scope for action in a vital conjuncture (Bourdieu, 1986).

My analysis shows that in vital conjunctures, not only the horizons envisioned by the actors themselves play a role, but also those informed by broader societal expectations. In Mbororo society, for example, the ideal of the "traditional housewife and mother" is frequently projected onto women, regardless of their level of education. Such externally imposed horizons influence decision-making processes, as women are compelled to classify them as either desirable or undesirable, or at the very least negotiate their choices in relation to them.

One horizon has to be chosen as the guideline for concrete action, thereby dismissing all other possible horizons. The mode of action can range from what Johnson-Hanks (2005) terms *judicious opportunism*—making decisions based on the opportunities that arise in a given moment, while still being informed by cultural norms, aspirations, and available resources. At the other end of the spectrum is rational planning, which in Bourdieu's (1977) framework is based on calculated decision-making but also shaped by the *habitus*, that is, the internalized dispositions of a person or group formed through past experiences and social structures.

I argue that the socioeconomic position of the women under study shifts from high school to university level, as they gain cultural capital in the form of degrees,

qualifications, and cultural knowledge (Bourdieu, 1986). However, such shifts in position do not correlate in a linear way with increases in capital. The specific influence of different forms of capital on each sphere of life must therefore be assessed separately. In the analysis, it is thus important to examine how different forms of capital shape the scope for action and how they are interlinked with future horizons and the different spheres of life.

The First Vital Conjuncture: Graduation from High School

The situation young Mbororo women find themselves in after they have obtained their advanced level presents a good example of being caught in a vital conjuncture. The options they have are various and have different implications for their future. But since they are usually between the ages of 16 and 21, they are still young and dependent on their parents. For most of my informants, their parents' influence played a crucial role in their decision-making. Generally, it is the father who sponsors his daughter in school and provides her with the necessary finances, should they agree that she will pursue further studies. On the one hand, it is an economic question for the family. On the other hand, a lot of parents are concerned about whether their daughter will find a husband in the future if they do not marry right away. Sourette,[3] who had just finished high school at the time of research, talked about the expectations of her father:

> No, he [my father] will want me to get married. At a certain age, he is afraid that if I go to university, I will not get married. Men will be scared of me. I will already be a big woman with work. So, he said he will not go beyond the level of upper sixth [year 13]. God will ask him why his girls are not married. I will go on my own, so God will not judge him. (Interview, Sourette, 27.08.2018)

While some parents, like Sourette's father, were afraid that the chances for marriage decreased with age and education, others were determined to see their daughters educated and earning a proper income. As I will show in the following, marriage and university studies are the two future horizons that emerge at the vital conjuncture of high school graduation and will be discussed in the context of urban living conditions.

The Future Horizon of Marriage

Conventional understandings of the Mbororo family – shaped by pastoralist practices and Muslim religion – play a significant role in defining future horizons at vital conjunctures. In rural areas where everyday life largely revolves around cattle pastoralism, a Mbororo girl is expected to marry at an early age, as is customary in Islam and widely practiced among Mbororo families. The timing of marriage is often arranged so that "her first period should be in the husband's house," as many of my informants stated while referring to the Qur'an. The husband is regarded as the head of the family and forms it according to his wishes and imagination; decisions concerning the household are generally taken by him (Riesman, 1998). Polygamous marriages are common, and following Islamic norms, a husband can have up to four wives. The number depends on his financial capacity to support them. The co-wives within a household typically divide daily chores among themselves. For instance, one wife may cook for the entire family on a given day, with another wife taking over the same responsibility the following day (Pelican, 1999). The workload is lighter this way. There is a general division of labor between male and female household members; each couple may negotiate its specific arrangements. While the husband provides for the family through productive work and thereby ensures the household income, the wife is primarily responsible for reproductive labor, such as childcare and domestic tasks. Although large-scale farming is rare among Mbororo pastoralists, wives are generally expected to maintain a small garden for soup ingredients (Pelican, 1999). Whether a wife pursues additional activities, such as running an informal business, like selling milk or working for an NGO, depends on her husband's permission (see also Deli & Mbuh, chapter 11).

It is through the pathway of marriage and childbirth that Mbororo women traditionally gain the status of adults. Only at the birth of a second child does a woman enter full adulthood (Riesman, 1998). While Johnson-

[3] All names have been changed for anonymity.

Hanks (2002) has argued against clear-cut life stages such as "adulthood"—a model that has been so predominant in anthropology—Alber (2016) makes an important addition to the discussion: life stages "are shared assumptions about how life should be" and, as normative concepts, they influence the evaluation of a person's position in society (p. 20). The emic understanding of adulthood thus impacts Mbororo women's decision-making processes after graduation, since it is projected onto them by their community.

Some of the women interviewed evaluated the pathway of marriage as boring, while others evaluated it as discriminatory. Most wished for more flexibility and the possibility to decide for themselves. Nonetheless, parents often preferred the horizon of marriage and the traditional family model. For those Mbororo women who sought greater autonomy, understood here as "the ability to shape [one's] own [life] and to live authentically rather than being directed by external forces that manipulate or distort [one's choices]" (Veltman & Pilper, 2014, p. 2), the traditional family model and the social restrictions it entails were undesirable. This was especially the case in retrospect, after women had already achieved some level of higher education and distanced themselves from what they considered the "traditional way of life." More specifically, the women in this study often understood autonomy in economic terms. As social actors, they mobilized their available social and economic capital to explore new and different future horizons, such as education and employment.

The Future Horizon of Higher Education

For many of my interlocutors, more desirable than marriage was the continuation of an educational pathway, as education was seen as broadening one's chances in life: "Education means a lot because with education, you can do anything you want. You can work where you want, change careers the way you want. You can empower people. You can empower yourself" (Sarifa, 27/08/18).

Education is valued in two main respects. First, it is regarded as a means of personal growth and empowerment. Second, it is seen as a way to improve living conditions within the community and to foster broader social change. Gaining access to basic education and literacy had a major impact on the lives of my interlocutors. Reading and writing, in particular, were repeatedly mentioned as essential skills for navigating everyday life. Several women recalled that their parents were illiterate and that, as children, they had to assist them whenever something needed to be read. Literacy is also crucial for medical care, where adequate knowledge of French, English, or Pidgin English is often required to communicate effectively, as doctors rarely spoke Fulfulde, the language of the Mbororo. The following quote illustrates the aggravating consequences of illiteracy:

> Take the case of us, even in our birth certificates. The mayor made a mistake and my father just collected it, not knowing that there was a mistake, because he could not read. Now I have a wrong name in my birth certificate, which makes it hard sometimes. Education therefore helps in all aspects of life. (Interview, Aishatu, 09.08.2018)

By the time of high school graduation, literacy has already been obtained, yet is continuously mentioned as the primary motivation for pursuing education. Still, there are other reasons as well. Education is often seen as a pathway to "become someone in life" and as an opportunity to move beyond a rural lifestyle. Role models frequently mentioned in conversations with my interlocutors included educated women from the Mbororo community, from their schools, and from the political sphere: "I was aiming high. I really wanted to be like those big ladies, who have big posts" (Amina, 28/08/18). The reference to "big ladies" can be interpreted as an aspiration to gain status and power through education and a professional career. Many women envisioned themselves in government service or in prestigious NGOs—positions that would set them apart from those with less education.

MBOSCUDA initiated training programs for Mbororo youth in Yaoundé in order to provide income-generating opportunities outside the framework of higher education. One such program offered women the chance to become seamstresses. However, the initiative proved less successful than its organizers had anticipated, expecting it to have the same positive impact as in the rural areas. The reasons for the relative failure in the urban context still needs further investigation; but it seemed that my interlocutors

envisioned different forms of employment when thinking about their own futures. For them, the pathway to employment or a meaningful career was inseparably tied to higher education, since the positions they aspired to (in government or prestigious NGOs) demanded university degrees.

At the same time, the future horizon of employment was restricted by limited cultural, social and economic capital. My interlocutors' most tangible asset was a high school certificate; yet this carried little weight in Cameroon's competitive job market and could not secure long-term prospects without additional skills or classifications. Pursuing higher education therefore appeared particularly attractive, as it promised to increase their cultural capital in the form of knowledge and academic credentials. Many women practiced judicious opportunism, seeking to diversify their options. To keep several pathways open, they typically applied to at least one of the professional schools that offered training for government jobs. The entrance exams to these schools (in French: *concours*) are immensely popular, and chances to be recruited are slim. Consequently, it was more common to search for internships or training programs with NGOs, which provide additional skills and practical experience. In some cases, an internship could even lead to employment after a few months. Nevertheless, if the opportunity to pursue further education presented itself, this was generally regarded as the more secure pathway to stable employment.

This notion of education as a secure entry into the job market and positions of power connects to what Ndijo (2008) has described as *évolués* (developed in French). The *évolués* formed an elite class in colonial and post-colonial Cameroon who gained access to positions of power and state resources through Western education. While this trajectory no longer represents the only route to success in contemporary Cameroon—as government positions are filled and education no longer guarantees entry into civil service—its symbolic resonance remains strong Alternative models of success have since emerged, mostly notably the *feymen* (conmen), who achieve wealth and influence through scam and deception (Ndijo, 2008). Yet, despite such shifts, the figure of the educated elite continued to embody a desirable horizon for the young Mbororo women I spoke with, for whom education still signified both social and physical mobility.

The decision between the future horizons of marriage or further education was influenced by the available social and economic capital, parental expectations, and the structural conditions of the Cameroonian job market. Another criterion was the value they placed on independence—a dimension that has so far been mentioned only in passing in this paper.

For the women I interviewed, independence could take different forms: freedom from parental control, from social restrictions in the village, and from stigmatization of the Mbororo as a backward and uneducated indigenous group. Framed more positively, independence entailed the aspiration to become a self-determined, empowered woman who leads her life according to her own wishes. Within this value framework, the prospects of becoming a housewife appeared undesirable, while it strengthened the wish for university education. By the time I met them, most of my interlocutors had already realized this aspiration. Yet, from what I could gather, only a small number of Mbororo women get the chance to pursue education, while the majority continue to pursue marriage to make a future.

Life in the City

If women decided for university education, this usually entailed migration to the city where the university was located. It is important to mention that nearly all of my interlocutors migrated from rural areas, villages, and small towns to Yaoundé in order to expand their opportunities. Only three of them were born in different cities in Cameroon. Many of them have connected with Mbororo organizations in the city, such as MBOSCUDA, to get support or keep in touch with other Mbororo. Many women also already had kin or acquaintances living in the city, offering a useful social network upon arrival.

Yaoundé is one option among several possible study destinations. Usually, the change of setting brought about challenges for the women, among which three were highlighted as predominant. First, when migration involved a move from anglophone to francophone regions, the women sometimes struggled with

communication and study requirements due to differences in language and educational systems. Especially the transition from English to French was repeatedly described as a barrier that hindered academic performance and often made it necessary to pay for extra tutoring in English. Second, organizing one's own life was desirable since it offered independence, but it also came with challenges, such as the need to manage limited financial resources that had to cover all living expenses. Third, life in an ethnically and culturally heterogeneous city exposed the women to new sets of norms and practices, which in turn provoked a re-negotiation of what it meant to be Mbororo. Their socialization as Mbororo in a rural setting had equipped them with a set of norms and values that continuously influenced their identity formation. Yet in an urban context, they encountered new forms of life represented by colleagues, friends, and neighbors, which may have expanded their imaginable future horizons. At the same time, adopting cultural identifications or lifestyles that were considered at odds with Mbororo culture could generate conflict with one's family members or the broader Mbororo community.

The Second Vital Conjuncture: Graduation from University

The second vital conjuncture in my interlocutors' lives, which I address in this chapter, is graduation from university – a moment that again confronted them with life-changing decisions. Their situation since high school graduation had changed tremendously. By this stage, the women not only held a new degree and the knowledge that came with it, but many had also acquired additional skills through NGO programs and adapted to city life. They were older, and most remained unmarried. Yet the most striking change was their heightened sense of empowerment. They now felt better equipped to react to the stereotyped role expectations that Mbororo society projected onto them:

> There is a lot of stigmatization up to now. They [Mbororo society] are always looking at us, thinking that if a girl has gone to school, she will not respect her husband or follow the normal rules of a normal family. All those things. We are really trying to fight it, especially we women. My role as a learned and educated Mbororo girl is that I have to promote those qualities, those principles [meaning education], so that the future generation will not face the same challenges. (Interview, Rugayaitu, 13.08.2018)

In the following sections, I discuss in more detail the future horizons that opened up after university graduation. These are the horizons of pursuing further education; becoming a single, working professional; and getting married. The marriage horizon has two distinct directions: on the one hand, the traditional family ideal, as described earlier; the other, the vision of a working wife and mother.

The Horizon of Further Education

With their bachelor's degree in hand, some women aspired to continue with a master's program or even aim for a doctorate or lecturer position in the future. The focus was to secure a better position in the job market, but an academic career was equally considered. The Cameroonian job market offers limited opportunities for university graduates, and with a higher degree, they hoped to broaden their chances for employment. At the same time, women sought to diversify their career options by preparing for the highly competitive entrance examinations for public service jobs (in French: *concours*) and applying for various university programs. If the *concours* were successful, recruitment into government service was regarded as one of the most desired career trajectories, offering both lifelong employment and social security benefits.

After graduation from university, pressure from parents and other community members generally intensified. Their wish was for the women to find a husband and start a family in order to become adult members of society, as it is the norm. The parents' opinion was still valued, but not necessarily embraced. Amina offered an example of her negotiations with family members. Having just completed her first degree, she was the only sibling in her family to have reached this level of higher education. In recounting her situation, she described the differing attitudes of her father and mother separately:

> I really want to do my master's, not only my master's, maybe a PhD. It is just that I want to be

> independent. I want to be on my own. But my father has been sponsoring me for many years now and he still has some people, my younger siblings, to sponsor, so I want to liberate him from my own burden. I want to work and send myself to school from now on. (Interview, Amina, 28.08.2018)

What emerges from Amina's quote is the desire to be independent. Her father drew a line, refusing to finance her education any further. With this decision, he influenced her scope of action, and she had to react to the vital conjuncture she found herself in. Her wish to earn money to support herself was a common strategy among the educated Mbororo women I met. The problem they faced was the scarcity of jobs, so some degree of judicious opportunism was necessary to seize employment opportunities as they arose. Her mother, by contrast, was clearer in what she wanted for her daughter instead of further education:

> For her [the mother], the best thing is to get married and start my own family, even though she has never discouraged me. She has been there and made sure I have what I need if she can provide it. What she really wants is for me to get married. That is her dream, to see me get married. […] Marriage is something nice, but I know if I get married my dreams will maybe be shattered. (Interview, Amina, 28.08.2018)

Especially the last sentence shows Amina's discontent with the situation and the pressure she faced. To avoid her dreams being shattered, she tried to achieve as much as possible before marriage. A phrase often used by the women I encountered was "education is my first husband." It captured their determination to secure their position as educated women before marriage might constrain it. Although the future horizons of education and marriage were often presented as mutually exclusive, the women's strategy to achieve education before marriage and assign each horizon its own time frame made it possible to realize both. This temporal negotiation also served to appease critics who pressed for marriage, since marriage could be envisioned as part of the future – just not as an immediate trajectory.

Amina was not the only one whose mother urged her to get married. Rugayaitu, another woman, put it this way:

> She talks about it every day. And, at times, she is even angry with me, and she asks why I have not gotten married up to now; [saying] you are already a big girl, so you have to get married, you have to get a family. […] And she was saying that maybe you don't want to get married to a Muslim, because you are so modern. (Interview, Rugayaitu, 13.08.2018)

Generational differences as well as the contested notion of "modernity" (versus "tradition") entered into the accusations. The term "modernity" was also invoked by the Mbororo women living in Yaoundé when they wanted to distance themselves from rural ways of life. A similar finding has been mentioned by Alber (2016) about Baatombu living in Benin's cities, where "the rising socio-economic differences between close relatives go hand in hand with deep differences in the lifestyle, the future aspirations and the normative ideas about life trajectories" (p. 23). Similarly, in Cameroon, the pursuit of education and a professional career seemed to trigger these differences. For the women I spoke to, education was desirable and a source of empowerment. Yet, this perspective was not always shared by their communities. This tension was felt most acutely by the first generation of educated Mbororo women who were confronted with frequent prejudices and social disapproval:

> Most of the people said we are a lost generation because we will know nothing culturally and will not be able to fit in the community since we have decided to study western education and nothing good can come out of it. They said nobody can get married to this kind of women, one with powerful western education. (Interview, Sarifa, 27.08.2018)

Several of the pioneering women in my study recalled that, in the past, girls had to cut off their hair and wear a school uniform to enter the school system—a rule applied to all pupils, irrespective of their ethnic or cultural background, and which provoked strong reactions within the Mbororo community. It was generally frowned upon if girls cut their hair or failed to adhere to the Islamic dress code when attending school. In more recent years, however, many families have negotiated exceptions for their daughters or enrolled them in Anglo-Arabic schools, many of which were

established by MBOSCUDA (Pelican, 2015). Nonetheless, the decision to send girls to school was often accompanied by quarrels with the community, as another member of the first generation of educated Mbororo women recalled:

> There was so much resistance. When we had to go to secondary school, first we had to have a low cut, which was against the tradition and it was like a whole problem. Now, my father has sent the female children to go to school: Look at how a female child is looking like a boy. There was a lot of resistance in the family and now we don't dress like Muslims or wear skirts. Our traditional dressing is different so at some point there was a family disagreement, but my father was defending us. They would approach him, and he kept us away. […] We were not into the community that much. Yes, we were always in school, and when we were not in school, we were back home, and we were in the house. And we didn't visit family members and things like that. The family members who could visit us (and they came to us in the house at that time), they could not attack us directly, so they would attack him instead. Yes, because he was the one responsible for sending us to school. (Interview, Fadimatu, 01.09.2018)

To confront social prejudices and disapproval, almost all Mbororo women I met were very consciously showing their Islamic roots by following the dress code and praying five times a day. Ammann (2017), in her study on the agency of university graduates in Guinea, argues that "women, especially well-educated young graduates in Kankan and elsewhere, understand the rules of the game and know how to play it. And sometimes they imagine new or slightly different rules" (p. 105). A similar form of strategic behavior was evident among educated Mbororo women in Cameroon. By emphasizing their identity as "good" Islamic women, they created space for negotiation in other domains, namely marriage, as will be discussed later. Yet, as marriage is often perceived as entailing a loss of personal freedom and confinement to the role of a housewife, some women decided to stay single for a long time.

The Horizon of the Single, Working Woman

The horizon of becoming a single, working woman with a sufficient income, who is not dependent on her parents or a husband, was especially appealing to women who desired autonomy. This future horizon offered the greatest degree of independence. Yet, it was usually seen as a temporary state, since marriage was still considered the "normal" route into adulthood, only delayed by a period of independent, unmarried youth. Remaining single while earning an income represented a future horizon in itself. At the same time, it could also be the unintended outcome for women who did not find a husband to marry. The ambivalence between striving for independence and still wishing to marry becomes obvious here. When I asked Hajara about the issue of not finding a husband, she recalled a MBOSCUDA conference on why Mbororo women who pursue schooling often do not get married. This is how she confronted the exclusively male audience:

> I asked them: Are we the ones to pick a man and then get married to him? It is the man who does that. The second question I posed: We all went to university together, then you went back to the rural communities to get a woman. You never came to us. You judged us without even knowing us. It means that you are afraid of us. You want someone to impose your rules and regulations on without the person expressing their rights or telling you this is wrong. They were unable to answer those questions…
>
> They were complaining about us going to school and going against our culture, tradition, and religion. They were complaining about the dress code and changing our mentality, about accepting modernity without preserving our culture. It is not true. Going to school does not mean I don't respect our traditions, culture, and religion. But if there are negative aspects, I have to change them, because I believe we need to bring something positive. […] Only some went wrong, you cannot generalize it for everyone. They all had nothing to say. It just stays [an open] question. Less than ten are married, the others not. They work, they are emancipated, life goes on. (Interview, Hajara, 24.08.2018)

The issue of not finding a husband when a woman is educated was a frequently discussed matter among the

Mbororo in the city. The dividing lines informing different opinions often ran between male and female, rural and urban, and "traditional" versus "modern." For single women during or after university, not finding a husband was a persistent concern. Since being an adult woman without a husband and children was considered only as a transitory state, the deliberate choice to remain single was equivalent to stepping outside the accepted paths of Mbororo society. Only a few women maintained this choice over the long term, while many explored alternative pathways for marriage and family life.

The Horizon of the "Modern" Family

For most of my interlocutors, having a family remained a desired future horizon. However, since they viewed the conventional model of marriage and the role of housewife as limiting and undesirable, new models had to be generated, often inspired by their urban environments and their personal achievements. Most women established a clear set of conditions for any future marriage. They were explicit in their refusal to be confined to the home, as this would undermine the freedom that they had earned and experienced during their university years. To strengthen their point, they often distanced themselves from rural ways of life and stressed both the necessity and desirability of social change. Many positioned themselves as "modern" women who not only participated in change but actively furthered it:

> [Mbororo] women suffer double discrimination in the community: as women [in relation to men] and they are marginalized by the community [as Mbororo in Cameroon]. They have to sit in the house, get married, have children. The women have no voice. I cannot be like those women […] I can come back and tell them that that is not how they have to live their lives. This is how you can come out of all of this oppression. (Interview, Sarifa, 27.08.2018)

For many women who aspired to marriage, it was important that their position and agency would be acknowledged by a potential husband. A key condition was that the husband would not impose his own vision on the family; rather, the founding of the family should involve negotiation between both partners. The women wanted to be accepted for who they were, supported in their personal plans and choices, and recognized for their achievements. Education, as one of those achievements, was to be valued and put to use, not wasted. Securing employment or continuing existing work was also a central condition for marriage. A woman's income was seen as beneficial for the family, alleviating some of the financial burden on the husband, who would no longer bear sole responsible for providing for the family. At the same time, such arrangements could lead to conflict if a husband felt that he had failed his role as the primary breadwinner. Nonetheless, women sought to maintain economic autonomy by managing their own income. They could use it to pay their children's school fees or to send remittances to their own families. This stood in contrast to women without independent income, who had to ask their husbands for every expense.

In general, the women I spoke with also expressed a preference for monogamous marriage, contrasting the polygamous norms common in rural areas. On the one hand, higher living costs in the city made supporting a larger family less sustainable. On the other hand, urban family models – conveyed through media or observed in surrounding households – may likely have influenced this perspective. In rural areas, polygamy could offer practical advantages, such as sharing household chores among multiple wives (Pelican, 1999). In the city, however, it was more common to employ an unmarried person or a relative from a rural area to assist with household tasks, including child care. In return, these helpers were paid and sometimes had access to training or education. When the family's daughters grew old enough, they could also contribute to daily chores, such as cooking, washing, and cleaning, when their mother was at work.

The conditions emphasized by educated Mbororo women are not widely appreciated by their male counterparts. As Hajara noted above, most educated Mbororo men preferred to marry a younger, less educated, less empowered woman from rural areas to start a family. To navigate this demographic dilemma, several of the Mbororo women I met in Yaoundé broadened their pool of potential husbands to include non-Mbororo Muslim men. While marrying a non-Mbororo still required family negotiation and was

relatively uncommon, it was generally more acceptable than marrying a non-Muslim or remaining single.

As I have outlined, the vital conjuncture of graduating from university entailed three possible future horizons, all of which were considered viable options by the Mbororo women in this study. Whether a woman chose to continue her education, pursue life as a single, working professional, or explore alternative forms of marriage ultimately depended on her individual preferences, her social and economic capital, and the opportunities available to her.

Conclusion

Using the analytical frameworks developed by Johnson-Hanks (2002, 2005, 2006), this paper has focused on two vital conjunctures in the lives of educated Mbororo women—graduation from high school and university. Both moments presented the women with the need to make life-altering decisions, often oscillating between the pursuit of further education and the prospect of marriage.

The first vital conjuncture following high school entailed the future horizons of either pursuing university studies or entering marriage and assuming the role of a housewife. Being dependent on their family's economic support, most women were influenced by the attitudes and financial capacities of their parents. Choosing higher education often required migrating to an urban setting, which brought both challenges and a range of opportunities. In contrast, the vital conjuncture after university was clearly marked by a higher degree of independence. The women were relatively distanced from their families, had experienced different ways of life in the city, and had increased their cultural capital.

Nevertheless, the future horizons after university differed only slightly from those after high school. First, further education could still be pursued while simultaneously diversifying options to gain skills or employment. Second, finding employment allowed some women to stay single—either by choice or by circumstance, if a suitable husband was not found. Third, the conventional model of marriage and the role of housewife was often seen as undesirable and increasingly replaced by new forms of marriage characterized by greater negotiation between the spouses.

It thus appears that the primary difference between the vital conjunctures after high school and after university lay in the resources available to the women. Higher education broadened their scope for action and strengthened their ability to negotiate separate spheres of life. While challenges persisted, the Mbororo women in this study actively countered these difficulties, aiming not only to shape their own futures but also to influence opportunities for future generations.

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13. The Authors

Figure 15: Group picture behind Hôtel de Ville Yaoundé © Michaela Pelican, 2018

Authors' bios

AFU Isaiah Kunock holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology of Development and currently serves as an associate professor in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Yaounde I. His research centers on migration, mobility, conflict, and media. His latest publications engage with the intersections of the Anglophone crisis, mobility, and future-making in Cameroon. ORCID: 0009-0002-9455-3118. Email: afisaku@yahoo.com

ALAWADI Zelao holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Yaoundé I. After serving as Vice-Dean at the University of Dschang, he is currently working at the University of Yaoundé II where he is the scientific coordinator of the Research Group on Social and Political Dynamics GREDYSOP (Groupe de Recherche sur les Dynamiques Sociales et Politiques). His work focuses on governance (democracy, elections), security (terrorism in the Sahel), development, and cultural issues (minorities, multiculturalism). He is also a consultant for several international organizations (Red Cross, UNDP, UNICEF). Email: alazelao11@yahoo.com

DELI Tize Teri is an associate professor and lecturer of development anthropology at the University of Yaoundé I. His research focuses on health, gender-based violence, cross-border insecurity, migration, internally displaced persons, and refugees. He also serves as a consultant for several international organisations (WHO, IOM, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNAIDS, UNWOMEN, etc.). ORCID: 0009-0001-1237-622X. Email: dtizeteri@yahoo.fr

Dana Elena HARMS holds a Master's degree in Social and Cultural Anthropology from the University of Cologne. Her Master's thesis, "The Social Making of Futures: Planning for Uncertainties," published in Kölner ethnologische Beiträge (2022), forms the basis of her chapter in this volume. She currently works in the Department for Integration and Migration at the Caritas Association RheinBerg, where she serves as a diversity officer promoting inclusion and equitable participation. Email: harms.dana@outlook.de

Wendon Gillian MBUH holds a Master's degree in Anthropology of Development from the University of Yaoundé 1. Her Master's thesis "Mbororo women and informal activities in Yaoundé Cameroon: An anthropological Perspective" served as the basis for this chapter. She further carried out research on mental health and substance use abuse (K01) among people living with HIV with CRENC (Clinical Research Education) and is currently pursuing a course on Labor History. Email: aniontedgillian@gmail.com

Johanna MERZ holds a Bachelor's degree in Social and Cultural Anthropology and Educational Sciences from the University of Cologne. Her article in this volume draws on her Bachelor's thesis "Changing Future Horizons: Decisions between education, work and family among Mbororo women in Yaoundé". She currently works with people with disabilities in Cologne. Email: johanna_merz@outlook.com

Jonathan NGEH is a postdoctoral researcher at the Global South Studies Center (GSSC) of the University of Cologne. He also serves as the speaker for the GSSC Thematic Group "Co-producing Knowledge". His work focuses on social inequalities—particularly labor exploitation, migrant exclusion, and epistemic inequality—and on practices of collaborative knowledge production. He is currently co-authoring a monograph with Tu Huynh and Michaela Pelican, titled "Parity in Research: The Third Space of Knowledge Production", which examines the challenges and potentials of inclusive, co-produced research. ORCID: 0000-0002-5159-748X. Email: jngeh@uni-koeln.de

Michaela PELICAN is a professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Cologne. She currently serves as the rector's representative for international affairs and is the speaker of the Global South Studies Center Cologne (GSSC). Her research focuses on migration, inequality, conflict, indigeneity, and research methodology, with a regional emphasis on West Africa, the Gulf States, and China. Her recent publications include the co-edited special issue "The Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities: Perspectives from the Global South" (Zanj 2025), as well as the co-edited volume Decolonising the Future Academy in Africa and Beyond: Institutional Development and Collaboration" (transcript 2025). ORCID: 0000-0002-3173-2410. Email: mpelican@uni-koeln.de

Lotta Luna SCHÜTT holds an M.Sc. in Anthropology and Development Studies from Radboud University in Nijmegen, Netherlands. Her chapter in this publication builds on her Bachelor's thesis, "Doing development as a way of future making: hometown associations in Yaoundé" (University of Cologne). She currently works as a communication specialist at the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, where she is responsible for the strategic communication of a global energy access programme. ORCID: 0009-0005-0550-8756. Email: lottaschuett@web.de

Brice STAPELFELDT is a researcher and sign language interpreter based in Cologne, Germany. In his academic work following the „Making a Future" project, he mostly focussed on colonial continuancies, specifically ableism and audism, and the creation of third spaces. ORCID: 0009-0009-5873-0819. Email: brice.stapelfeldt@protonmail.com

Awah Kum TCHOUAFFI holds a Ph.D. in Medical Anthropology from the University of Yaoundé I and serves as a lecturer in the Department of Fundamental Education, University of Yaoundé I. His work examines the intersections of culture, health, education, and resilience among vulnerable populations, with a particular emphasis on displaced women and children affected by crisis. He conducts mixed-methods research on non-communicable diseases, sexual reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence and abuse, neglected tropical diseases, food security, and climate change across clinical and community settings. ORCID: 0000-0001-8031-1113. Email: awahkumt@yahoo.co.uk

Eugene TINGWEY is a researcher and development practitioner specialising in climate governance, WASH systems, and environmental sustainability. He holds an M.Sc. in Environmental Risks and Human Security from the United Nations University (UNU-EHS) and an M.A. in Culture and Environment in Africa from the University of Cologne. His work spans climate-action research, voluntary carbon-market governance, and environmental risk analysis, including contributions to IDOS and New Climate Institute studies on global climate action. He has managed WASH and development cooperation programmes across Africa and Southeast Asia with Sign of Hope e.V., and conducted field research on energy efficiency and climate-adaptation practices in Cameroon and Rwanda. His research interests center on climate resilience in the Global South, migration–climate interactions, and governance frameworks for equitable and sustainable development. Email: tetingwey@yahoo.com

Anna WÖLKI is currently completing her B.A. in Social and Cultural Anthropology and Educational Sciences at the University of Cologne. She gained experience as a student assistant at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology and in the Volkswagen Foundation–funded research unit "The Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities", supporting a project on human trafficking in Cameroon. As lead editor, she coordinated the development of this joint volume. Her chapter in this volume serves as the basis for her Bachelor's thesis. ORCID: 0009-0004-8446-5450. Email: anna-woelki@posteo.de

Guylaine Nzouenkeu YAANOU holds an M.A. in Communication and Development from the University of Bamenda. Combining skills in development and communication, she leads projects focused on women's empowerment and social change at the Organisation Local Youth Corner Cameroon (LOYOC). Notable projects include "Using Arts to Strengthen the Resilience of Communities against Gender-Based Violence", the "Photovoices project", and "Michel's Project." Email: gyaanou@yahoo.com

Chancelyne Wulseh YEIN holds an M.Sc. in Rural Community Development from the American University of Beirut (AUB), Lebanon, and a BSc in Communication and Development Studies from the University of Bamenda. Her Bachelor's thesis "Migrant's Contributions to Solving Challenges Youths Face in Making a Future and the Development of Their Home Country (Cameroon)" served as the foundation for her chapter in this volume. She currently works at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Rome, Italy, where she supports the monitoring and reporting activities of the Global Environment Facility portfolio of about 450 projects. ORCID: 0000-0002-8230-087X. Email: chancelynewulseh@gmail.com

Appendix

Schedule of the Collaborative Research and Teaching Program *Urban youths' perspective on making future in Cameroon and/or abroad*

Yaoundé, 30.7.-9.9.2018

Partner institutions	University of Bamenda (UoB)
	University of Cologne (UoC)
	University of Dschang (UoD)
	University of Yaoundé 1 (UoY1)
Organizers	Prof. Dr. Michaela PELICAN (UoC)
	Dr. DELI Tize Teri (UoY1)
Local partners	Dr. AFU Isaiah (UoY1)
	Prof. Dr. ALAWADI Zelao (UoD)
	Dr. Jonathan NGEH (UoB)
Student participants from Cameroon	Isa ADAMU (UoD)
	Hamza DABO (UoD)
	Wendon Gillian MBUH (UoY1)
	Awah Kum TCHOUAFFI (UoY1)
	Guylaine Nzouenkeu YAANOU (UoB)
	Chancelyne Wulseh YEIN (UoB)
Student participants from Germany	Dana Elena HARMS (UoC)
	Johanna MERZ (UoC)
	Lotta Luna SCHÜTT (UoC)
	Brice STAPELFELDT (UoC)
	Eugene TINGWEY (UoC)
	Anna WÖLKI (UoC)

6-Week Research Stay, Yaoundé. 30.7.-9.9.2018

Week	Date	Activities	Location
1	30.07. - 03.08.2018	Intensive seminar	University of Yaoundé 1
2-5	06.08. - 31.08.2018	Research phase	Yaoundé
	24.08.2018	Half-day workshop (internal): discussion of preliminary results	University of Yaoundé 1
6	03.09. - 09.09.2018	Data analysis and public presentation of research results	University of Yaoundé 1

Intensive Seminar

University of Yaoundé 1, Faculty of Arts, Letters and Social Sciences (FALSH), 30.7.-3.8.18

	Monday, 30.07.18	Tuesday, 31.07.18	Wednesday, 01.08.18	Thursday, 02.08.18	Friday, 03.08.18
9.00-10.30h	Welcome and thematic introduction by organizers	Lecture by Prof. MBONJI Edjenguèlè, Head of Department of Anthropology on Research Methodology	Group work I (in research tandems): - research questions - access to the field - research methods - practicalities	Group work II (in research tandems): - research questions - access to the field - research methods - practicalities	Group work III (in research tandems): - research questions - access to the field - research methods - practicalities
11-12.30h	Campus Tour	Theme 1: Youth perspectives (Bamenda group)	Theme 3: Migration in Cameroon (Yaoundé group)	Lecture by Prof. Godfrey Tangwa on research ethics, Informed consent form	
Lunch break		Visit to DAAD office on campus			
14-16h	Self-introduction of participants	Theme 2: Making a future (Cologne group)	Theme 4: Migration and development (Cologne group)	Discussion on research methodology	Presentations of research prjojects (in tandems), feedback, general research questions
16.30-18h			Excursion to Palais de Congrés, Bastos	5. University education and job opportunities (Dschang group)	Workshop dinner

Introductory Elements · Thematic Discussions · Group Work · Social Events

Data Analysis Workshop

University of Yaoundé 1, Faculty of Arts, Letters and Social Sciences (FALSH), 3.-7.9.18

Date	Time/Activity	
Monday 03.09.18	9-13h	4 Students' presentation of findings - 1 hour per student (30 minutes presentation, 30 minutes discussion)
	14-17h	Group work I: research reports
Tuesday 04.09.18	9-13h	4 Students' presentation of findings - 1 hour per student (30 minutes presentation, 30 minutes discussion)
	14-15h	Presentation of Marlene Gaertner, PhD student, University of Konstanz
	15-16h	Group work II: general research questions
	16.30-18h	Presentation and discussion of answers to research questions
Wednesday 05.09.18	9-10.30h	Presentation and discussion of answers to research questions
	11-14h	4 Students' presentation of findings - 1 hour per student (30 minutes presentation, 30 minutes discussion).
	15-17h	Group work III: writing of reports
Thursday 06.09.18	9-16h	Preparation of presentations for Friday Work on general report by supervisors
	18h	Workshop dinner
Friday 07.09.18	9-13h	Presentation of preliminary findings to the public, University of Yaoundé 1, FALSH. See detailed programme

Introductory Elements | Thematic Discussions | Group Work | Social Events

Public Presentation of Preliminary Research Results

University of Yaoundé 1, Faculty of Arts, Letters and Social Sciences (FALSH), 07.09.18, 9-13h

Workshop Chair: Prof. Dr. Lucian AYISSI, Dean if the FALSH, University of Yaoundé 1

Workshop Rapporteurs: Dr. DELI Tize Teri, Dr. AFU Isaiah Kunock, University of Yaoundé 1

9 -9.30h	Opening ceremony – chair Prof. Dr. Lucien AYISSI, Dean of the FALSH, University of Yaoundé 1
	Welcome address by Prof. Dr. Alphonse TONYE, Vice Dean in charge of Research and Cooperation, FALSH, University of Yaoundé 1
	Official opening by Prof. Dr. Lucien AYISSI Dean of the FALSH, University of Yaoundé 1
9.30-10h	Presentation of the collaborative research programme by Prof. Dr. Michaela PELICAN and Dr. DELI Tize Teri
10-10.30h	Word from the Head of Department of Anthropology Prof. Dr. MBONJI Edjenguèlè, University of Yaoundé 1
10.30-12h	Preliminary research results, presented by student researchers
	Lessons learned, presented by Prof. Dr. ALAWADI Zelao, Dr. AFU Isaiah Kunock, Dr. Jonathan NGEH
12-13h	Q&A session
13h	Closing remarks – chair Prof. Lucien AYISSI Dean of the FALSH, University of Yaoundé 1

Editors

Anna Wölki, Jonathan Ngeh,
Michaela Pelican

Editorial Support

Nico Wilkins

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Halima Kamara

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