



Traditional Education and Behavior of Bamileke Women of Cameroon

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Abstract

Today with the education girls receive in schools, they learn to trust laws implemented in the country. And their environment is enlarge to the whole country. They can talk about love, talk about pleasure, and even about the sexual identity, for those who live in towns. For those who are still in the village, even if they are going to school, the traditional education is still strong and also poverty condition them to stay close and attached to the tradition. Talking about Bamileke girls or women of Cameroon, they are well known and appreciated specially for their behaviour which is the consequence of a mixage of traditional education and “modern” one, with a strong influence of the traditional one. The traditional education she received, in contrary of the “modern one”, prepare her from her young age to get married and assume the roles of mother and spouse. This paper questions this traditional education, the consequences on the behavior of bamileke girls and the dangers of such education. as far as marriage is concern.

Keywords: Traditional education; Bamileke; Girls; Marriage

Introduction

Dealing with education in Cameroon, especially with the west part of the country, we find ourselves confronted to many problems. There is a huge difference between education of girls and boys and the fact that women change their behaviour when they change environment seems to show the weaknesses of such education.

Bamileke girls or women are well known and appreciated specially for their behaviour which is the consequence of a mixage of traditional education and “modern” one, with a strong influence of the traditional one. The traditional education of the young bamileke girl, in contrary of the “modern one”, prepares her from her young age to get married and assume the roles of mother and spouse. She then learn, through taking care of her youngers how to

take care of others and of her future children, how to be a good a good housewife. She learns through her mother how to take care of farms in order to feed her family.

Authors seem to agree that bamileke women do not have the same rights as men. According to Tardit et al, bamileke women are not different from labour. They have nothing to say or do when it comes to applying traditional rules, especially when it comes to marriage. An idea that seems to share Phillis M. Kaberry et al. Who are really the bamilekes of Cameroon, what is their tradition and believes, how does it impact education in general, and women education in particular and does that education impact women behavior as far as marriage and/or sexuality is concern? And what are the dangers of this behavior, when it comes to abuses, both physical and sexual?

To answer these questions, this paper is organized into three parts. The first part will discuss the issue of the bamilekes of Cameroon: their origin, their history their traditional organization and their beliefs. It is important to know the culture to understand the role given to women inside that particular society. Through the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky et al, I will identify in the second part, the cultural tools provided through education to the young girl that allow her to build her personality in a way that is adaptive to the culture. I will take the example of marriage [1].

The last part of this paper will discuss the dangers of such education as far as sexuality and personality are concern.

Locating the Bamileke

Generally speaking, the bamileke belong to the Cameroonian western highland is the western part of the country with more than a hundred ethnical groups linked to each other by some cultural similarities and their common origin. These similarities led scholars to identify three main populations in that area namely: the Tikar who are descendants from the merchants of the Borno region that settled in the Mbum. Their various traditions set their origin in the Mbum. The migration of the people probably began in the 16th century. When they reached the Bamenda region, the Tikar met the Ntumu to whom they first of all allied with and finally conquered. The price of that victory was the adoption of the language of the conquered and their institutions by the conquerors.

The foundation of the Bamun Kingdom was the work of a group of emigrants coming from the royal dynasty of the Tikar of Nso. The founder of that kingdom, is Nchare. Nchare was a conqueror who subdued almost 18 rulers. He created the city Fouban then known as Mfonben. He created a kingdom of institutions inspired from the Tikar's model. He formed two secret societies: Ngiri only for Princes, and Mitngu was open to the rest of the population, irrespective of their social status.

The Bamileke have an old history very close to that of the first two groups. All of them came from the North from a region now used by the Tikar. Their migrations which were progressive are said to have started in the 17th century: they have first of all settled in the Bamun kingdom where they created many villages before being chased. Those who stayed were subdued. Within those who managed to escape, the Balengs were the first to cross the Noun River at the beginning of the 18th century. They were thereafter followed by the Badeng, the Bapi and the Bafoussam. Those groups migrated a lot before their settlement where they live today; these movements,

being for the most part, to flee from razzias, slave trade and the expansion war [2].

Although several authors are interested in this part of Cameroon, many seem to recognize that it is difficult to trace the history of the peoples of grass field in general and bamilekes in particular, before colonization. The reasons were many, among which we can mention the essentially oral tradition, the lack of archaeological excavations in the region, the problems of dating of Works, However, these authors seem to agree on some key points: before its occupation by the present groups, this part of the country was occupied by pygmies whose presence is proved by two factors, according to Currey.

The first is the vegetation. Indeed, though it has been a forest, today it is a savannah. This savannisation, whose chronology is not yet established, is the result of slow and gradual action of human groups:

« These relatively fertile grasslands were probably settled very early. There are at least two indications of this early settlement. The first is vegetation, which is today wooded savannah but was once dense forest. This savannahization (the chronology of which is not established) might equally well be attributed to the slow and brutal action of compact human communities, to the sudden and brutal action of a small number of immigrants, or to climatic influences.”

The second reason advanced is the presence of stone tools which, according to the same author, may belong to the second half of the first millennium:

« Second, the presence of numerous stone tools testifies to settled human occupation which probably occurred in the second half of the first millennium. But it remains impossible to identify these first inhabitants. They may have been pygmy hunters, a few of whose descendants still survive on the banks of the Mbam.”

Ghoms, points that it would probably be from the nineteenth century that the country will witness the emergence and polymerization of the grass fields, per say. New chiefdoms are born from the collapse of the former and several hypotheses have been advanced in order to justify the creation of these new chiefdoms. Those that seem most appropriate are:

The hypothesis of non-princes heirs

Several chiefs owe their existence to the action of non-princes heirs who, dissatisfied with the desire of their late father, tried to appropriate the throne by force. When defeated, they retreat with their families and supporters,

and seek their fortune elsewhere. It could happen that, with some strong personality, they manage to create a new chiefdom or appropriate an existing one. In that aim, they had two main advantages:

Cunning: Typically used by hunters who do not have a very large number of supporters? They begin by coaxing people and especially local leaders by providing more meat and one day use the same way to poison them all. This is the case the Foto chiefdoms, Bagangté, Others, like Badjoun, use it to create a powerful army and go to conquer other villages.

Strength: Several chiefdoms were taken by force and others created from territories taken by force. It is the case of Bangoua, Balengou [3].

Hypothesis of revolted notables and adventurous hunters

It could happen that the notables, once too powerful take their independence and the sector they ran became a new village. Also, some villages have their origin in the action of adventurous hunters who left in search of game and emerge in a strong community full of game. There they brought their families and, little by little, the group grew, giving rise to a new group. It is the case of Batoufam, Balessing.

Assumption of administrative action

Under different administrations experienced by Cameroon, especially German and French, several sub-chiefdoms were erected in independent chiefdoms. Hence, an affiliation network grew between chiefdoms. Concerning the organization of the traditional administration, everything is made around the chief or "Fon", who is the center of life in the village. To be able to rule, he has many groups of men organized into secret societies and all the power belong to them. The legislative power belongs to the chief and to the group made of 7 notables. These 7 titles belong to families since the foundation of the village and are given inherited. No women can inherit one of those titles because women are not considering strong enough to handle the powers that are transmitted with the titles. Also, they are not considering pure enough. Notables and the chief are the one making rules in the village and all of them are favorable to men.

The judiciary power belongs to the chief alone. He can seek help from notables but generally, the chief use tortoises to determine the liar and take the right decision. The executive power is the one of secret societies. All the notables belong to secret societies according to their

totems. This is to say that notables and the chief are the one to make the rules and the same notables are the one to witness the execution of them [4].

Tradition and Beliefs of Bamileke

Generally speaking, bamilekes are considered as animists. Because of that, some scholars taught that the belief in a unique God does not exist, while others saw there the existence of a unique and inaccessible God. However, the bamilekes believe in one unique God. They address their prayers to him through secondary gods and ancestors. They believe that their happiness depend on the type of relation they have with those secondary gods and with their ancestors. Relations that they nourish through rites and believes. Among those rites and believes, three have caught my attention.

Totemism

Duchamp pointed that in Africa, men are mingled with nature. They are the representation of the world and build their life in order to adapt to the nature. They can even change themselves into animals or grasses. Totemism is the belief in the possibility for men to appropriate the strength and weaknesses of an animal through a particular alliance. Totems are attributed after a long initiation period. The alliance is so strong that if a totem is killed, its owner will die also. They are used for protection, for war and to cut medicinal plants far in the forest. Each animal is taken according to its aptitude or specific character. For example, lions, panthers, buffalo are taken for their strength and power, gorillas are taken for their power and their aptitude to climb, antelope are taken for their endurance, and so on. Antelope are generally given to women so that they should be able to work very large farms while lions, buffalo, and so on are totally forbidden to her.

Vampirism

Vampirism is the belief in this strange power, considered as mysterious and dangerous energy, known in various ways in many black African societies. It is materialized at the level of a specific organ whose existence is verified after death by ritual autopsies. It is a dangerous power and those holding it have the capacity at nightfall, to penetrate the body of the living and 'drink' their blood or 'eat' a specific organ within their body. They use the same technique to cure the sick who come to them. Originally, only men were allowed to use them but some of them, seeing how bad their sisters were treated by their husband and the wives, shared the power with them.

Today, it is assumed that that power is transmitted from the mother to the child through the umbilical cord.

The ancestors

This is the belief of the actions of ancestors on the life of the living. It has given birth to different rites. Each family has his own priest or skull guardian. The skull house is generally a very small room, near the family house. Inside, there are skulls of different members of the family since the founder. Skulls can also be found in the outdoor kitchen, especially skulls of women.

Education of Bamilekes

There is a difference between boys and girl's education among bamilekes. At a certain age, boys are taken away from their mother for a period of 9 weeks. During that period, they will receive lessons concerning the village and its foundation, the tradition and its evolution and sex and marriage. During that period of initiation, they will be circumcised and prepared to assume different tasks in the society. At the end of their period of traditional 'education', a feast will be organized and the whole village will welcome them as real members of the society. Therefore, their status will change. They can inherit, they can join a secret society, they can start to think of marriage and even get married because during their initiation, they receive sexual education.

The first directive that girls receive as education is the traditional name they are given. Women and girls are called "M'Djui", depending on the village but the reduction is the same. During my research, I realised that it was a contracted form of the sentence "Me be Djui" which means: "the man whose role is to decrease". And all the education she receives is the expression of that sentence. In the village, the woman with the greatest influence is called "mafo". There are 3 of them in the village. One is the mother of the chief; the second is the wife who gave birth to the first son of the chief. The "mafo" we are talking about is a woman or a girl who is trained and initiated with the chief to be his guardian angel. She can have children, but she is not allowed to get married. Even with her position, she cannot influence any of the decisions taken by the chief and the 7 notables.

From their young age, girls are prepared for marriage. With their mother, they mean how to take care of farms, family and Youngers. But the sexual education they receive is not given by the mother, nor the father. Sexual education is given to them by the mother of her mother or the best friend of her mother. She is brought up to bear children and be a perfect house girl. The concepts of love

and sexual pleasure are not taken into account in their education.

Marriage is at the center of her life. For bamileke, marriage is what people live for. A man can have as many wives as he want, the more they are, more prosperous will be the man and he will also acquire more responsibilities in the society. When she is married, she is protected by the husband. But if she lost the husband, she will be given to her husband's brother as wife without her consent and her children will be shared among the husband's family members. Only the one who are still breastfeeding will stay with the mother. There are some cases where women did not see her own children again after that. And generally, those children are sold by the people they are send to as wife, house help, etc.

Silence, submission, hard work is the principal tools given to girls from their young age. Therefore, discretion, submission and hard work are the main characters of their behavior. The dangers of developing those characters are that it opens to abuses both sexual and physical. Women are physically abused by their husband and for some women, the abuses are frequent. Despite the institution of laws which condemn those acts, in the country, bamileke women rarely complaint causes they are not supposed to, they have been trained not to. When the violence is too much, they go back to their family who will convoke the husband, talk with him and give the girl back to him. After that, violence generally increases [5].

Another danger is the sexual abuses. When girls are shared among family members, those who are sent to the brothers generally experienced sexual abuses either from their uncle, or from their cousins. To run away from that situation, girls generally accept the first person who wants to marry them. Also, this education is so strong that even in school, young bamileke girls rarely complain, especially against boys.

Sexually, they had the reputation of being frigid. They were married essentially because they are good mothers, good wives. There is no need to even think about sexual identities. A girl can be nothing than straight. If she discovers that she has different sexual orientation, she will dig a hole and it inside. And if she dare make any coming out, she will completely ban from the family and from the village and a bamileke without a family and a village does not deserve to live, according to the education received.

Today with the education girls receive in schools, they learn to trust laws implemented in the country. And their environment is enlarging to the whole country. They can

talk about love; talk about pleasure, and even about the sexual identity, for those who live in towns. For those who are still in the village, even if they are going to school, the traditional education is still strong and also poverty condition them to stay close and attached to the tradition.

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