

THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN IMAGINED “VILLAGE” IN AN AFRICAN CITY: THE CASE OF THE BAMILEKE OF CAMEROON

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This paper describes the construction of “village” social space in an African city by examining how Bamiléké migrants in Cameroon’s capital city Yaoundé create and maintain the concept of village. The Bamiléké ethnic group originated from the West Province of Cameroon, where people are divided into over 100 small but highly stratified chiefdoms (villages). Since the beginning of the 20th century, many Bamiléké have migrated and settled in large cities and plantation areas throughout Cameroon. The Bamiléké are known as the “commercial people of Cameroon” and for keeping strong ties with their homeland. Bamiléké migrants return to their homeland frequently, taking part in funeral rites and other activities. They construct houses in their home villages even though they have no plans to permanently return. Moreover, some urban “elites” contribute funds to the superior chief of the village in return for higher traditional status.

Ties between city and village appear strong, but at the same time a dichotomy exists. Although urban Bamiléké may say that someday they hope to return to their homeland to spend their last days, most actually stay in the city. Village development projects undertaken by the urban dwellers tend to be unsuitable for the needs of villagers and have included museums or cultural centers that most villagers do not find useful. Urban contributions also sometimes destroy the traditional hierarchy. This is because the “village” as seen by urban Bamiléké is an imagined locality. In other words, their concept of the “village” does not match the reality of the village. Urban Bamiléké depend on the imagined village to survive urban political, economic, and social situations.

The imagined village is constructed and maintained by everyday practices, such as regular meetings and mutual assistance on the part of the people who originate from the same village, as well as by contributions to the development of the village. This “village” is not only maintained by urban Bamiléké but also by various “others” including villagers, other ethnic groups, and overseas relatives. That is, the social space of the “village” is not a closed but an open space, and it is reconstructed every day through negotiations with “others.”

Keywords: Bamiléké, Cameroon, Homeland, Locality, Urban–rural relationship