

## Kin-Care and Well-Being for Children and Youth in Cameroon's Intersecting Uncertainties

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### Kin-Care Transformed

Care arrangements—by parents, kin, or the state—are central to the well-being and mental health of children and youth (Coe 2012a). Over the past five years, I have actively researched child fostering practices among transnational Cameroonian families. This study of distributed parenting and new ideas about what it means to raise a child properly is informed by over three decades of research among the Bamiléké. Originating in the mountainous Grassfields region straddling Cameroon's Francophone/Anglophone divide, my research includes observations undertaken during my investigations of migrant motherhood and belonging (Feldman-Savelsberg 2016).

Few areas of social life generate as much emotion as caring for children. Caring for children within kinship groups reveals not only the positive emotions of “mutuality of being” (Sahlins 2013), but also the negative emotions associated with jealousy, conflicts, and witchcraft accusations (Geschiere 2013, 2020). Throughout West Africa, practices of distributed parenting such as child fostering generate new ties (Goody 1982; Lallemand 2013) as well as potential conflict among biological parents who entrust their child to another, foster parents who care for another's child, the fostered child, and the biological children of the foster parents (Alber 2018; Kamga 2014). Grandmothers' “spoiling” (Notermans 2004, 2008) contrasts with mothers blowing in babies' faces to prevent exclusive attachment (Gottlieb 2004; Keller, Voelker, Yovsi 2005; Otto, Potinius, Keller 2014) and histories of selling children into pawnship (Argenti 2007; Coe 2012b; Renne 2005). International migration further complicates hopes for the child's future as well as conflicts over the child's care, because family members dispersed between continents live in and orient their lives to vastly different contexts (Feldman-Savelsberg 2020).

Such transformations in how transnational Cameroonian families manage “kin-scription,” or “the practice of assigning kin-work to family members” (Stack and Burton 1993, 157) and the nature of childrearing are further complicated by a confluence of uncertainties. These include emerging attitudes toward hardship engendered by increasing attention to children's rights (Ekwen 2017), armed conflict in Cameroon's two Anglophone regions, increasingly exclusionary immigration regimes, and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Proverbs of the Bamiléké and wider Grassfields region, such as “a child is one person's only in the womb” (Nyamnjoh 2002), and “a child has many mothers” (Verhoef 2005) express adults' shared responsibility and decision-making power over children. When I began conducting participant-observation fieldwork in Bamiléké country, one articulated advantage of child fostering was that children learn resilience through hardship, finding “no success

without struggle” (Bledsoe 1990). Over the past decade, interview-based research<sup>1</sup> revealed that transnational Bamiléké families stretched between Europe, North America, and Africa seek to protect their children from any hardship that could derail concerted cultivation aimed at launching children into a cosmopolitan middle class. Youth pick up on changing discourses about hardship to generate new expectations regarding emotional care.

### Intersecting Uncertainties

Mabuké,<sup>2</sup> a university student who spent her childhood moving between foster care arrangements in Cameroon and her mother’s home in Maryland, still suffers from the frequent disruptions in her life and her troubled yearning to belong. “I recall in the fostering homes I stayed in . . . I wasn’t maltreated. But I wasn’t treated as one of the children at home.” Now, Mabuké’s generation of educated young Cameroonian migrants living in France, Germany, South Africa, and the US circulates new ideas through blogs and Twitter messages about parenting, kinship obligations, and emotional health. As Mabuké explains, “We’re becoming more emotionally intelligent, more ‘globalized’ and throwing off the belief in mandatory responsibility to extended family. . . . An interesting issue went viral in the Nigerian Twitter space recently—people discussing . . . if it matters that we may never have heard ‘I love you’?” Mabuké’s network of young transnational Cameroonians connected on social media interpret separation of children from their biological parents as psychologically harmful.

Crisis situations, however, engender crisis fostering recounted as harmful separation and trauma, contrasting with emotional memories of warm extended-kin reciprocity. Armed conflict in the Anglophone regions<sup>3</sup> since 2016 (International Crisis Group 2017) has led many Cameroonians to seek asylum in European and American countries, subjecting them to danger *en route* and to harsh border controls (Drost 2020; Andersson 2014). Anglophone Bamiléké, caught between their Francophone origins and their generations of residence in and identification with the Anglophone minority, are particularly endangered. Kwachou (2017) speaks to identity issues accompanying physical threat:

For some in Cameroon, you are either Anglophone or Francophone, either a victim or a benefactor of linguistic privilege. However, for . . . ‘citizens of the 11th region’ [meaning Bamiléké and western Grassfields people who several generations ago settled in the South West Region] who straddle the linguistic divide, the last several months have been a period of considering the complex colonial legacy of their identity.

In this crisis, culturally-valued foster care among kin meets involuntary family separation when some children are left behind to facilitate flight, and when other children are separated from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border after a long and complex refugee itinerary. Esther’s family was threatened simultaneously for being Anglophone by Cameroonian military, and for being Bamiléké by the Ambazonia Defence Force, her husband kidnapped, and her young son tragically killed in crossfire. Esther left two children with grandma and fled, pregnant, via South America to the U.S. border. Aided by an NGO, she and her newborn were granted asylum in the U.S. shortly before the COVID-19 outbreak. Other Cameroonians who arrived on the border just a little later were less lucky; the current COVID-19 pandemic makes migrant

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<sup>1</sup> Interview and observational research in Berlin (2010-), Paris (2015-19), South Africa (2018), and Cameroon (2017) utilized site-based sampling (Arcury and Quandt 1999), as well as connections through immigration rights NGOs and a listserv of Cameroon scholars. Email, phone, Zoom, Skype, and the Cameroonian blogosphere have facilitated narrative data collection on effects of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

<sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms, with details slightly altered to preserve anonymity.

<sup>3</sup> A constitutional change in 1996 renamed provinces as “regions.”

detention immediately dangerous to the physical health of children and youth (Human Rights Watch 2020). Esther now fears that her children left in Cameroon may “age out” before pandemic travel restrictions and the backlog of an underfunded ICE allows her family to be reunited (Kanno-Youngs 2020).

## Conclusion

Shaping child and youth mental and physical health, care arrangements among Bamiléké in Cameroon and their diasporic relatives are affected by our uncertain times. Indeed, Bamiléké practices of child fostering as well as ethnopsychological orientations regarding the roles of distributed care, hardship, and separation in child development are being transformed by multiple, interweaving uncertainties. While affective circuits connect transnational families (Cole and Groes 2016), armed violence, restrictive immigration regimes, and the COVID-19 pandemic generate short-circuits, threatening the well-being of children and youth.

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