From Buenos Aires to the Bamiléké
Foreign Narrative and Gender Dynamics in Cameroon

by

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Class of 2008

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in French Studies

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2008
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jeff Rider for his tireless patience, support, and guidance; Ma’a Vé and Papa JC for the stories lived and told; Forty Fountain for more than just table space; and Sam for everything else I needed to know.
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Introduction

In April of 2007, while studying in Cameroon, I was lucky enough to attend the inauguration of the chief of Fossong Wenchen, a Bamiléké chiefdom in the West Province of Cameroon. Everyone from the village, including those who had moved to bigger cities, arrived in the late morning wearing the special *pagne*, the printed fabric that was made for this occasion. The ceremonies were held outside the chief’s compound in an area that was slightly smaller than a football field. In order to view the festivities I perched myself precariously on the side of an eroding hill and prepared to stand in the sun for the rest of the day. It was rainy season, but my friend from the village, Gaston, had assured me that it wasn’t rain going to rain that day because the chief and his *guérisseurs*\(^1\) had taken special measures to guarantee sunshine.

The festivities began with a few men on stilts wearing bright costumes of pink and green feathers, who danced through the crowd to the performance space. Gaston

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\(^1\) *Guérisseurs*, or traditional healers, are responsible for the health and wellbeing of the community, which includes religious and spiritual practices.
explained to me that a few weeks before, these men had spent an entire night lying on a single stick of bamboo along with others who had wanted to dance on stilts for the ceremony. Those that didn’t fall off were allowed to participate in the inauguration. After the men on stilts came several “spirits” wearing large wooden masks and covered in dried vines. They were all tied together with a rope that was controlled by two people on either end. After these “spirits” a few more people wearing costumes appeared in the crowd and followed the others down to the performance area, but instead of wooden masks they were wearing plastic Halloween masks and costumes. The mass-produced plastic contrasted greatly with the bulky and textured wooden
masks. Instances like these, which clearly demonstrate the availability and incorporation of foreign products in traditional culture, influenced significantly how I focused my research on the evolution of storytelling during the last two months of my time in Cameroon.

I decided to study storytelling partly because of a great interest in folklore, and partly because it was a great excuse to meet people. Before I began, I imagined myself roaming through Dschang, a city of about 800,000 people, with a tape recorder, collecting stories from fruit vendors, students, people at the market place, servers at restaurants, and anyone else I happened to meet. But after a few days of searching for stories I realized that collecting stories would be rather difficult. Many of the adults whom I asked to tell me stories told me that they had forgotten them, and most of the kids didn’t know any. The people who did tell me stories had spent a significant amount of time in small villages. In the evenings I came home to my host family with stories to tell, either stories people had told me, or stories I had read in books. My host parents and siblings asked me to tell the stories I had learned that day, and after a while they began to ask for their favorite stories over and over again. My host parents had already heard many of the stories I told, because after all, I was simply recounting their traditional tales that they had heard growing up, but they had not heard them for quite some time and they were grateful for the distraction it provided for the kids. Storytelling became a part of the usual evening activities of finishing homework, cooking, eating, and watching television.

By the end of April, I had gathered enough information and stories to put together a small project about transitions in storytelling in Cameroon, with the
intention of continuing my research for a senior thesis. During the summer, as I researched folklore and thought about my time in Cameroon, I became increasingly interested in gender issues and representations of women in the traditional narratives, and how they compared to my experiences living with a family. The dynamics of my host family in Dschang had sometimes surprised me, and occasionally made me somewhat uncomfortable, especially in the beginning when I didn’t understand all of the historical or cultural meanings behind my host parents’ actions. My host father, Papa JC (Papa Jean-Claude), was a gentle, friendly librarian at the local Alliance Franco-Camerounaise. My host mother, Ma’a Vé (Mama Véronique), was regal, confident, and initially terrified me with her booming voice and inclination to tell everyone exactly what she thought. Her presence filled the tiny house so completely that the first time I hugged her I was surprised to learn that she was at least six inches shorter than I.

Papa JC seemed small and even-tempered compared to Ma’a Vé. In the evenings he usually brought home avocados or bananas or some other fruit to accompany the meal. On one occasion when he had brought home avocados, he slapped Ma’a Vé’s hand as she reached for one and told her “J’ai acheté les avocats pour mes enfants, pas pour ma femme.” Ma’a Vé said nothing in response. After few similar instances occurred I asked Papa JC about what his role as husband and father meant to him. Papa JC understood cultural differences very well and without judgment; he was always open and willing to answer any questions, and I felt comfortable mentioning specific instances and expressing surprise or discomfort with the way he sometimes treated Ma’a Vé. He explained to me that his role as husband
and father was very much defined by specific actions and responsibilities that were appropriate for men. He controlled the house, and Ma’a Vé cleaned the house. He earned money to buy food and pay for school fees, and Ma’a Vé cooked and cared for the children. Similar dynamics of husband and wife are present in many communities around the world, but specific cultural interactions and historical circumstances differentiate this community. What shocked me most about the evening when Papa JC forbid Ma’a Vé to eat the avocados was the physical act of slapping Ma’a Vé’s hand and his refusal to let his wife eat fruit he had purchased for his children, but the duties they assume as husband and wife are not foreign to me. I am familiar with many aspects of the gender dynamics present in my host family, such as women cooking and men leaving the house to work, and I suspect that these situations can be found in many places, but there are differences, such as the cultural significance of cooking or braiding hair, that make it impossible to judge these differences without understanding the context. Work loads are broken down in a familiar way in many societies, but historical and cultural differences distinguish Bamiléké gender dynamics. Storytelling and narrative is a way to uncover and understand these differences.

During the fall semester my research on the evolution of storytelling and gender dynamics transitioned to focus on the impact of specific foreign narratives. As I reflected on the time spent with my host family, images of Ma’a Vé and her friends packed into the small house to watch television kept coming to mind. It was hard to find people who could tell me a Bamiléké story, but I often heard people discussing television programs. Television not only reflects social or cultural changes
through narrative, the medium of television contrasts directly with the oral form of
storytelling. Just like the plastic Halloween masks that can be found in a chief’s
inauguration in Cameroon or on a child in the United States, television shows are
widely distributed and known throughout the world. Twice a week my host mother
and four or five neighbors gathered enthusiastically to watch *Muñeca Brava*, a
popular Argentine telenovela. Because of its popularity and because I had viewed the
show with Ma’a Vé and her friends, I decided to use *Muñeca Brava* as a specific
event example of a foreign narrative to compare to a traditional tale. Events such as the
chief of Fossong Wenchen’s inauguration and the evenings devoted to *Muñeca
Brava*, along with the important relationships I developed with my host family,
sparked my interest how transitions in narrative reflect historical and cultural changes
in the gender dynamics of the Bamiléké in Cameroon.
Chapter One

Context and Culture

Location and History

The Republic of Cameroon is a geographically and ethnically diverse country on the “hinge” of west and central Africa.² It is often referred to as “Africa in Miniature” because it has all of the major elements of African wildlife (plants and animals) and landscape (coast, rain forest, plateaus, desert, savannah, mountains, plains, grasslands…). Bordered by Nigeria, Chad, Gabon, Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, and Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon is home to over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups, each with distinct customs and languages. The diversity of the population is due to Cameroon’s central location, which has witnessed the constant migration and settling of numerous peoples over the past two thousand years.³

Although the entire country is officially bilingual, two of the provinces that border Nigeria, the North-West and the South-West, are primarily English-speaking, and the eight remaining provinces are French-speaking. The Adamaoua, North, and Extreme

North provinces are comprised largely of Muslims, Christians, and Animists, while the rest of the country is primarily Christian and Animist. With a population of around eighteen million, Cameroon covers an area of over 475,000 square kilometers, slightly larger than the state of California. The capital, Yaoundé, is the second largest city in Cameroon, and is centrally located in the Centre province. The largest city is Douala, an industrial capital on the coast of the Littoral province. 

Portuguese traders arrived on the coast in 1472, and European trade of ivory, palm oil, wood, and slaves began to have a critical impact on the area from the early seventeenth century through the end of the nineteenth century. German and French traders arrived at the Cameroonian coast by the early 1840s, and on July 14th, 1884, Kamerun became a German colony when Douala kings signed a treaty with the Germans. According to Martin Njeuma, “there was no particular reason why Cameroon should become a German colony, except that the Germans made the first move.” British traders were more numerous than Germans in the Douala estuary and numerous French merchants also worked in the Cameroon coast. Kamerun remained a German colony until the First World War, when British and French forces conquered the area in response to German activity in Europe. On February 20th, 1916 the League of Nations divided the colony between the British and the French.

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8 Njeuma, *History of Cameroon,* 85.
Some scholars describe the British administration of Cameroon post German-occupation as “disinterested” and “lazy,” and some go as far as to accuse it of “blatant neglect.” Due to their lack of interest in British Cameroon, also known as the Southern Cameroons (what are now the North-West and South-West provinces), the British tried to annex it to Nigeria, where they had already established solid administrative procedures. According to Emmanuel Chiabi, “British disinterest in Cameroon left a legacy of confusion and uncertainty that is felt even today.” The League of Nations granted Britain’s request to administer Cameroon as part of their colony in Nigeria in 1922. The British used indirect rule; “they relied quite heavily on traditional rulers even though these rulers were accustomed to a particular life style and system of rulership and by nature were quite conservative.”

While the British are often criticized for passive governance, the French approached administration aggressively and relied heavily on military force. The country’s geographic and economic importance contributed to France’s interest in the region; after World War II “France seemed to be at the peak of its power due to the wealth of its colonial empire, and Cameroon was one of the countries in which it had a significant interest.” European companies arrived to profit from the rich economic potential of the region, using forced labor to construct roads and buildings, and to work in European factories and plantations. The French rarely put Cameroonians in positions of authority, and by 1921 they had suppressed much of the

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12 Chiabi, The Making of Modern Cameroon, 11.
13 Chiabi, The Making of Modern Cameroon, 22.
authority of the chiefs by destroying traditional leadership structures and creating new
French governance and infrastructure.\textsuperscript{15} Many Cameroonians lost their land, wealth,
social influence, and lives working for the European companies established to profit
from the wealth the land offered. The Germans had establish Protestantism as the
primary European religion, but the French Catholic missionaries quickly surpassed
the Protestant effort and established Catholicism as the primary European religion by
the 1920s.\textsuperscript{16}

In schools, churches, and everyday life the French made every effort to
assimilate Cameroonians to French lifestyle and culture by inhibiting traditional
customs and languages. Everyone was required to learn French and “French voices
and actions permeated French Cameroon.”\textsuperscript{17} To aid assimilation, the French
established communities of French families, \textit{les colons}, who were of European
descent but considered themselves Cameroonian. Cameroon was considered an
extension of France, \textit{France d’outre mer}. Albert Charton, the Inspector-General of
Education is Francophone Africa, described French intentions in Cameroon clearly in
a report written in the 1930s:

\begin{quote}
When it is a question of dealing with backward races bound up in a
primitive economic and social system…colonization comes to mean
the absorption of the native into a remouled scheme of life, a large-
scale evolution of the native people as the white man has found it
already in existence, but in clear-cut and sympathetically chosen
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} Chiabi, \textit{The Making of Modern Cameroon}, 30.
\textsuperscript{16} Chiabi, \textit{The Making of Modern Cameroon}, 31.
\textsuperscript{17} Chiabi, \textit{The Making of Modern Cameroon}, 26.
stages. Through education, conquest and domination become a kind of moral annexation.\textsuperscript{18}

The French used force to assimilate Cameroonians to French culture, which, as Charton’s writings reveal, was considered superior to the “Negro African’s… elementary civilization and rudimentary economic system.”\textsuperscript{19} According to Chiabi, “it looked to these Cameroonians as if Cameroon was a zone of military occupation… by being this aggressive, the French would impinge upon the rights of Cameroonians, engender their resentment, and contribute to their sensitization and radicalization.”\textsuperscript{20}

In response to internal strife the French appointed Amadou Ahidjo, a traditional Muslim leader from the north of Cameroon, as Prime Minister in 1958. On January 1\textsuperscript{st}, 1960, French Cameroon became independent. The Cameroonian Assembly elected Ahidjo as president in April, and the French to continued to be closely involved in Cameroonian politics. Resistance to the administration continued after independence, especially in the Bamiléké area of the West Province.\textsuperscript{21}

According to Andreas Eckert, “decolonization in Cameroon was extremely violent and was followed by one of the most repressive post-colonial African regimes.”\textsuperscript{22} Under Ahidjo’s administration, “military and police forces as well as the secret service were omnipresent, any form of political opposition was brutally repressed, and any form of expression censored.”\textsuperscript{23} The troubles felt during colonization and after independence continue to affect the lives of Cameroonians, as “the memory of

\textsuperscript{19} Charton, “The Social Function of Education in French West Africa,”97.
\textsuperscript{20} Chiabi, \textit{The Making of Modern Cameroon}, 33.
\textsuperscript{21} Feldman, \textit{Plundered Kitchens, Empty Wombs}, 46.
\textsuperscript{23} Eckert, “African Rural Entrepreneurs and Labor”, 121.
the vindictiveness of the times, combined with the recent political turmoil since 1990, contributes to mistrust of the state and a sense of vulnerability.”24

On October 1st, 1960, ten month’s after Cameroon’s independence from France, Nigeria became independent. The United Nations urged The Southern Cameroons to join one of the two nations, and “that choice was made in February, 1961, when the Southern Cameroons, in a plebiscite, voted for reunification with French Cameroon.”25 British Cameroon and French Cameroon officially “reunited” on October 1st, 1961. Although the Southern Cameroons voted to reunite with Francophone Cameroon, many Southern Cameroonians felt and still feel that Ahidjo’s administration simply annexed Southern Cameroon, especially because they only had two options and were not presented the opportunity to become a sovereign state.26 The different colonial experiences caused a difficult transition to unification, and the “Anglophone Problem” continues to influence life in Cameroon. Many English-speaking Cameroonians in the North-West and South-West provinces still preferred to be called Southern-Cameroonians, and believe that the French-speaking majority in the administration prioritizes the Francophone region.

The Bamiléké

While some of the two hundred and fifty distinct ethnic groups in Cameroon share the same values and beliefs, they are clearly distinguishable and ethnocentrism plays an important role in contemporary politics. For example, the current president,

Paul Biya, comes from a Beti group of the East province and most of his administrators are also Beti and come from that area. My research was conducted in the city of Dschang in the West Province, home of the Bamiléké, one of the major ethnic groups. The Bamiléké traditionally reside on a high plateau region in the west between dry savannah and sahel (semi-arid tropical savannah), and they account for about 25 percent of the population in Cameroon.27

The Bamiléké are primarily animist and although a minority has converted to Christianity (both Protestantism and Catholicism), those who do follow European religions usually continue to participate willingly and faithfully in traditional ceremonies and practices.28 For example, my host mother was catholic and my host father was animist, but she, as well as he, carried out the duties expected by Bamiléké animism.

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This form of animism, sometimes referred to as “La Culte des Crânes,” is based on devotion to the skulls of ancestors: “it is the ancestral skull that can ‘seize’ a descendant with illness, and it is to the ancestral skull that descendants perform their propitiatory rites (talking to, feeding, and sheltering the skull from the elements).”\(^\text{29}\)

Ancestors know everything about the lives of their descendents, which allows them to punish or warn descendents with illness or other misfortunes.\(^\text{30}\) Their omniscience also allows ancestors to help descendents in time of need, provided that the descendents have fulfilled traditional duties towards the skulls, which are kept in \textit{La Maison des Crânes} in rural villages.

Today in Cameroon the Bamiléké are known for their strong work-ethic, perseverance, and their business-skills.\(^\text{31}\) They cultivate manioc, maize, macabo, taro, bananas, plantains, coffee, and other main agricultural products that are distributed throughout Cameroon. During my stay I heard several Bamiléké proudly say “les Bamiléké nourrissent le Cameroun entier.”\(^\text{32}\) Due to their agricultural production and business dexterity, the Bamiléké have a strong economic and cultural presence in Cameroon.

In Bamiléke families the traditional duties of a woman are to marry sensibly, bear children, maintain a clean house, and provide food to her husband and children.\(^\text{33}\) In general, the ideal woman is “warm like her hearth”; she is “a mother, a preparer of food, sweating over her cooking pot and gathering her children around her

to eat and tell stories.”

Bamiléké fathers are often described as doting on young children while being somewhat more authoritarian. Women are responsible for cultivating land to produce food crops for the family while men are responsible for buying salt, dried fish, meat, and palm oil to supplement the food crops. Women are in charge of cooking and the way food is prepared is very important in Bamiléké ceremonies and daily life. Women must know all of the rules of food preparation and their traditional

Mme Safotso cooking couscous maïz in her kitchen in Dschang, March 2007.

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beliefs about witchcraft determine these rules. For example, if a person steps over a pot or container of food it must be thrown out right away for fear of contamination or poisoning through witchcraft. Under these circumstances cooking becomes a great achievement for women and “women’s agricultural, cooking, and serving skills become evident on the grandest occasions on which the entire household cooperates.”

The terms used to describe marriage underscore the importance of food preparation and having children in Bamiléké families. The term for marriage in several Bamiléké languages is cooking inside, as the wife’s marital duties are to grow crops and cook food for her family while “metaphorically ‘cooking’ babies within the bounds of the nuptial kitchen.” Marriage brings the wife, who typically comes from a different village, into the husband’s family, his patrilineage, and the kitchen that he has built. While some of the wealthier families in urban areas have indoor kitchens that use gas and electricity, the majority of women cook on fires in mud-brick huts or some kind of shelter. The wife becomes a part of her husband’s family, but children have specific duties to both their matrilineal and patrilineal relatives and ancestors. Daughters as well as sons are appreciated. While descent is primarily patrilineal, “most people maintain close ties to maternal relatives” and these relatives play an important role in political, ritual, and economic lives of the Bamiléké.

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36 I use the term witchcraft as a direct translation of “la sorcelleire”, the term French-speaking Cameroonians use in reference to supernatural or spiritual occurrences and practices that can be either beneficial or harmful.
37 Feldman, Plundered Kitchens, Empty Wombs, 59.
38 Feldman, Plundered Kitchens, Empty Wombs, 4.
39 Goheen, Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops, 35.
Bamiléké villages are traditionally centered around the *chefferie*, where the king or chief, the *mfen* or *fon*, lives with the royal family. Before he dies the *mfen* and a council of nine nobles select one of his sons to take his place, and after his death these nobles announce the new ruler. Although these rulers have less influence than in the past, every village and town still has a *mfen* who “is viewed as possessing sacred attributes bestowed by the office he occupies. It is the office not the person, which is sacred.”40 The Bamiléké *mfen’s* official rights in the past included “taking any unmarried woman for his wife, exacting tribute and labor from his subjects, receiving payments from nobles who buy titles, displaying royal insignia, and

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40 Goheen, *Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops*, 27.
deciding on the life and death of his subjects.”

41 Mfen, still receive wives as gifts, but can no longer demand them. A mfen can still receive payments for titles of nobility and display royal insignia, such as leopard skins or necklaces, but he can no longer decide over the life and death of his subjects. 42 Nonetheless, the position of mfen retains much authority and respect in his community, as “he is the intermediary between the living and the ancestors, and is responsible for negotiating and ensuring the health and well-being of the people.” 43 The mfen generally owns and distributes most of the land in his kingdom, but private ownership of land began with the introduction of cash crops (coffee and cocoa), and continues to spread.

While villagers might try to get the mfen’s attention by presenting him with gifts that could range from palm wine to a daughter to be his bride, they were not expected to pay any sort of regular taxes in pre-colonial times. The mfen accepted gifts in exchange for land or positions in noble councils, but the mfen’s household was expected to feed the village regularly. In Bamiléké chefferies the mfen’s wives are responsible for cultivating extra food to feed the village during feast days and for special ceremonies. 44 Thus, the villagers entrust the wellbeing of the community to the chief and his household.

In the traditional Bamiléké governmental structures the hierarchical nature promotes personal advancement, but in the general family setting the Bamiléké have collectivist tendencies. 45 Through his research published in Collectivism and

41 Feldman, Plundered Kitchens, Empty Wombs, 62.
42 Feldman, Plundered Kitchens, Empty Wombs, 62.
43 Goheen, Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops, 27.
44 Goheen, Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops, 34.
45 Feldman, Plundered Kitchens, Empty Wombs, 70.
Mothers who have given birth to twins, who are known as Les Magnes, perform a special dance to bless the mfen at his initiation ceremony in Fossong Wenchen, a Bamiléké village near Dschang. April, 2007.

Individualism\textsuperscript{46} Harry Triandis has found that many cultures in West Africa have more collectivist tendencies than most European cultures. His research also identifies the United States, Australia, and Great Britain as the most individualist societies. While traditional Bamiléké government places importance on individual ranks within the chefferie, the Bamiléké are generally inclined towards collectivism; that is, they tend to identify with and rely on the group rather than placing importance on individual goals and being unique within a community.\textsuperscript{47}

Triandis has found that collectivist societies are more likely to raise large families that contribute to rapid population growth, while individualist societies tend

\textsuperscript{47} Triandis, \textit{Individualism and Collectivism}, 35.
to have smaller families and static population growth. Large families in rural and agriculturally based societies are able to produce more food and therefore help prevent poverty and hunger. As Hillman points out in his book Polygamy Reconsidered, “a large number of offspring is regarded as a matter of socio-economic urgency in an area where subsistence food production depends on the labor force that each family provides for itself.”

This was true of many communities in the United States before the urbanization and industrialization of last few decades of the nineteenth century, when the United States was predominantly a rural society and most adults and children lived and worked on family farms. During this era marriage was essential to create a network of support that determined the welfare of individual family members and the larger community. In tropical Africa, where mortality rates are among the highest in the world, large families capable of producing more food support the entire community.

Big families not only produce more food, they establish large social and familial networks that can provide support in times of hardship. The network of relationships and alliances that large families and marriages create enables them to take care of everyone; “those who have many relatives in other regions know that they have not been permanently impoverished; nor do orphans, widows, and grandparents ever suffer the trauma of being without a family to sustain them.”

Under these conditions few people suffer from hunger, homelessness and poverty when they have numerous relatives who can potentially help them.

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50 Hillman, Polygamy Reconsidered, 72.
51 Hillman, Polygamy Reconsidered, 118.
In Dschang, a relatively stable area of Cameroon, people seldom suffer from hunger; if they need something they can find it with a family member or friend and people are expected to give everything they can. If a family is experiencing a time of hardship, they often send a child to live with “foster” parents, typically a relative such as a grandmother in need of company, but often a close friend or “sibling” from their village. They consider “child fosterage an appropriate strategy to deal with scarce resources and to help teach the child to interact with a variety of personalities.”

Within a year children may live with several different families, for financial reasons, because of the proximity of schools, or in some cases young girls act as caretakers for younger children in households with many children.

The Bamiléké do not restrict whom they consider part of their family to actual blood relatives. Their idea of family is primarily based on actual kin, but it also includes those who are close to the family or from the same village. Each member of a village “is to many others in some degree a brother, or sister, or mother, or father, son or daughter; for each one belongs to the same ethnico-cultural family, often with the same legendary common ancestors.” The Bamiléké conception of family often confused me in the beginning of my stay in Cameroon; my host father introduced me to so many of his “brothers” and “sisters” that I initially thought he had over thirty siblings that lived in Dschang. While at first I wanted to know who his actual relatives were and who were his friends, I eventually realized that it didn’t matter, that although they might not be related these people fulfill the same role and responsibilities.

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53 Goheen, *Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops*, 79.
The terms people call each other reflect Bamiléké notions of family and community. My host father always introduced me as “ma fille” and their young children called me “Tata Laure” from the beginning. In the Bamiléké context Tata means “older sister.” I was expected in turn to call my host parents Papa JC (short for Papa Jean Claude) and Ma’a Vé (short for Mama Véronique). Three other Cameroonian students from the University of Dschang frequently came to our house to eat, help prepare food, and just spend time with the family. They called my host mother Tata my host father Papa JC. I naturally assumed that they were relatives, but learned that they had met my host family in Dschang when they had begun school. They were simply from villages near my host parents’ village that spoke the same language, Gromala. While these students were not technically related to my host parents, they interacted with them as if they were members of the same family and used familial terms when speaking to them. The way Bamiléké address each other demonstrates their inclusive concept of family.

The interactions that I witnessed between “family” members draw attention to the concept of family in Bamiléké cultures, and they also underscore the responsibility my host family felt towards people from similar communities. When I asked Papa JC how these several university students had become so close to his family he told me that students are poor, and that he felt a responsibility to feed members of his “family,” members of his kin-group. According to Feldman, the Bamiléké “recognize that their connection to others is the essence of their identity as persons.”

Trandis’ research shows that members of collectivist societies like the

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Bamiléké tend to value their connections to others, rather than their individual goals. Hillman’s research on polygamous families also finds that:

in societies that are held together by strong kin relationships, individuality is rarely, if ever, asserted as an explicit value in itself. The person is not generally seen in isolation from the community. Rather, his personal individuality is affirmed and fulfilled only in relation to the good of others; and this is explicitly recognized as normative, to the extent that the individual is expected to follow the socially established patterns.

The Bamiléké strive ideally to think in terms of their connections to others rather than personal success.

One way that the Bamiléké show support for others, as shown in previous examples, is through food. They often share meals as a way to demonstrate their connections to one another, which makes women important because of their involvement in food preparation and their knowledge of tradition. Women prepare food to serve to guests and wives must always have something on hand to feed frequent unannounced visitors. Food is simultaneously the “basis of solidarity and an arena of conflict not only within households but also in the local community. Sharing food and drink while visiting is the epitome of neighborliness; refusing it is an open statement of mistrust.” They believe that people who wish to do harm to someone will poison him or her through food, either with actual poison or through witchcraft, and eating and preparing food therefore implies trust between cook and

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57 Hillman, *Polygamy Reconsidered*, 111.
consumer. For example, the inability to have children and difficulties with childbirth are often attributed to poisoning. Because being poisoning is a common fear, people express their trust in each other by preparing and receiving food; “commensality connotes a plethora of meanings…including quieting the pangs of hunger and calumny that reside in the belly and implying trust that one is feeding and being fed rather than poisoning another.” Even though she was required to give guests food, which I considered to be an economic burden on a struggling family, my host mother complained that I did not bring enough people to the house for her to meet and feed. She thought it was necessary to fatten me up and sulked when I didn’t eat a huge amount, because to eat was to show connection, trust, and appreciation.

Food is not the only way people connect in Bamiléké communities. The multiplicity of names also reveals the importance of family members in daily life. Bamiléké may have a name for a specific ancestor, a name or two for their village of ancestry, a personal name, one or two nicknames, and sometimes their father’s surname. The names of ancestors keep their spirits alive and show them respect, and the village names tie them to their origins. The personal name is often a common French name, and they receive nicknames as they grow older or in reference to certain characteristics they display. The father’s surname places them in their father’s family, but this is not a requirement and has only recently become popular. These names are not necessarily placed in any specific order. For example, my host sister was officially named Meta Yolaine Nzugem Onella, but was called Yolaine. Meta is her mother’s village, Nzugem is her father’s surname, and Yolaine and Onella come from the names of her ancestors. Someone who is named after a specific person is

59 Feldman, Plundered Kitchens, Empty Wombs, 49.
often referred to by the position that the ancestor held, regardless of gender. For example, if a baby girl is named after her grandfather, the mother might call her “mon père.” The way the Bamiléké name their children exemplifies how “personal relationships are always regarded as more valuable than the possession of things, and where a large number of well-brought-up children is looked upon as the greatest of human achievements.”

Remembering ancestors shows connection to the community and is traditionally more important than standing out from others.

Polygamy

In communal societies that value interconnectedness and depend on social networks for aid in times of need, which ensure the continuation of their society, polygamy is often a favored form of marriage. According to the largest sociological database available, 78 percent of the 742 identified ethnic groups of sub-Saharan Africa accept polygamy as a form of marriage, although the incidence of polygamy was different in each group.

When polygamy exists in a society it is often considered superior to monogamy, but regardless of the desirability of polygamy, monogamous marriages almost always outnumber polygamous ones in any given community.

Because polygamous families need to have enough resources to support many people, social prestige is often associated with polygamy. Each new relationship

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61 Hillman, *Polygamy Reconsidered*, 94.
gives the family access to more support, and it also confirms the family’s ability to help others and the community, which is highly valued in collectivist societies.  

Because the number of wives is associated with success, the Bamiléké *mfen* are required to have more than one wife, although the number of wives is diminishing. This helps insure that the *mfen* will not be financially disgraced, as “each marriage contract multiplies the number of mutually helpful relatives.”  

Polygamous men are usually older, socially recognized, and have established themselves in the community, and therefore parents of brides-to-be, and perhaps the brides themselves, consider them more desirable as husbands than men who have not been married. Polygamous men have already revealed how they act as a husband, and are generally financially capable of taking care of a large family. “Where leadership qualities are developed only through the good management of large families,” polygamy may lead to more competent leadership.  

Polygamy potentially benefits the community by preparing men for leadership positions, and lower fertility rates for women in polygamous marriages have been found to benefit women’s overall health. Wives in polygamous marriages tend to have fewer children than women in monogamous marriages, most likely because they tend to follow post-partum restrictions regarding sex and breastfeeding more often. It has been argued that this phenomenon is due, in part, to the tendency of polygamous families to follow cultural guidelines. This insures that women do not have more than one child every two and a half to three years, and Hillman argues that these rules

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have developed due to “a concern for the health of the mother and the existing child
in an economic situation where food supplies are apt to be relatively short and
sometimes precarious.” 67

Monogamous marriages often become polygamous when the wife is infertile.
Because having a large family and producing children is extremely important to the
Bamiléké, “the favorable solution to the problem of an infertile wife is simultaneous
polygamy. To all concerned, this is normally preferable to divorce.” 68 Feldman and
Hillman report that wives may urge their husbands to marry another woman when
they are unable to bear children. 69 Because infertility can cause severe suffering for
women, polygamy has been shown to dull the distress of infertile women:

In the traditional African social context, barrenness is surely the
most severe psychological trauma that a woman can suffer. But
the sharp edge of this suffering may be dulled through her active
participation in the larger family life of the polygamous
household. Here she may occupy herself with, and bestow her
affection upon, the children of co-wives. Among the Masai it is
normal procedure to give a barren wife one of the infants of a co-
wife who has had several children, and this is done with the full
consent of all concerned. 70

67 Hillman, Polygamy Reconsidered, 123.
68 Hillman, Polygamy Reconsidered, 122.
70 Hillman, Polygamy Reconsidered, 119.
According to Hillman’s research, polygamy is an alternative to divorce and can potentially soothe the burden of infertility in areas where children are vital to a woman’s identity.

Feldman’s research of a traditional polygamist family explains the power dynamics between wives of polygamous men in the Bamiléké kingdom of Bangangté. In this kingdom the highest ranked wife controls sexual access to the king by choosing which wife “works the palace,” that is, who cooks the king’s meals and sleeps with him. In neighboring kingdoms it is the first wife, the first two wives, or “an inner circle of older wives” who have this responsibility. By controlling sexual access to the mfen the Bamiléké wives are able to choose the women who will bear the sons who could become the next mfen. Thus, the royal wives “play a central part in the physical reproduction of the royal household, the social reproduction of power, and intrigue among the king’s wives.”

Because abuse of wives’ influence regarding sexual access to the king could easily lead to conflict between wives, “it is the formal responsibility of the wives with third and fourth ranked titles to mitigate conflicts” between wives, and older women in the royal compound are often called upon for help. Feldman also found that strong sentiments of appropriate behavior encourage the first and second wives to rotate equally the wives, and that polygamous marriage “did not entail entering a wasp nest of jealousy.” In the royal family, which serves as a model family for the kingdom, women rely on themselves to settle disputes and control the king’s sexual practices,

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71 Goheen, *Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops*, 63.
72 Goheen, *Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops*, 34.
and therefore they have much influence in the wellbeing of the community by determining who will bear the next ruler.

While women have traditionally played an important role in Bamiléké communities, they have also been excluded from many of the important decision-making bodies. It is the *mfen* and his inner-most council of men that have control over many aspects of the community, such as land distribution and titles of nobility, but Goheen reports that “although the hierarchy was clearly gendered, women were not without power either singly or as a group.”76 For example, in the Bamiléké village of Nso’, “when they feel their rights have been trampled, women have been able to reprimand the *fon*77 publicly without fear of reprisal.”78 Women had the right to protest without punishment, yet they are excluded from the highest governing bodies. Goheen observed contradictory portrayals of women during her time in Cameroon. The women in her village were referred to using terms of divinity, adoration, and worship, yet the men took care of most commerce and the government and exclude women from official positions of authority.79 In a traditional *chefferie* men may have more access to public authority, but Goheen and Feldman’s research suggests that women’s involvement in the community is often acknowledged and appreciated, and women’s voices are heard.

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76 Goheen, *Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops*, 62.
77 *mfen*
78 Goheen, *Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops*, 32.
79 Goheen, *Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops*, 72.
Chapter Two

Development and Technology

Money and Economy

Before contact with Europeans, the Bamiléké were subsistence farmers and traders. The chief or king had the authority to make decisions regarding the land in his territory, but it was cultivated and owned collectively by the community, which “insured that families or individuals had access to land on which they built and from which they obtained their food.”80 Extended kin groups controlled areas of land as long as families used the land in accordance with local customs. In the Bamiléké region, “long before Europeans arrived, the ecological diversity and a high population density encouraged the development of well-organized and lively commercial networks.”81 The insured access to fertile land gave everyone a means to produce food, and consistent contact between villages established active trade routes.

Within the system of subsistence agriculture and local trade women were the primary cultivators while men were in charge of trade, hunting, warring, and animal

80 Chiabi, The Making of Modern Cameroon, 164.
81 Goheen, The Making of Modern Cameroon, 36.
husbandry. Charlton argues that when everyone depends on women to produce enough food for the family, women generally hold active leadership roles in the family, as seems to be the case in areas of the world that still function in this way; “men need their cooperation for the successful operation of the family’s farms. This economic interdependence between spouses gives wives a partner rather than a dependent status, which results in relatively egalitarian decision making in most farming matters.”82 Hence, when women and men share responsibilities and depend on each other equally for survival, women contribute significantly to household leadership.

The primary economic impact of colonialism in Cameroon was the transition from subsistence agriculture to a cash-based economy. As Chiabi explains, “the colonial economic structure created a new class of people who based their rank in society on wealth instead of royalty or lineage.”83 In Bamiléké communities young men increasingly moved to commercial areas in response “to an expanding need for cash” and by the 1980s only half of the total Bamiléké population of about two million people lived on the Bamiléké plateau.84 Men were needed to fill commercial and labor jobs around the country, including plantation labor and cash-crop cultivation, while women retained food-crop cultivating and domestic responsibilities. The drastic changes in traditional economy due to European influence altered heavily the preexisting gender dynamics of the Bamiléké. The colonial administration was entirely male, and according to Charlton, these French administrators had primarily “been raised to believe in the traditional Western values regarding the ‘proper’ roles
of men and women.”\(^{85}\) That is, women were expected to be caretakers and housewives and men were expected to provide financial income for the family. Because warring and hunting, traditionally men’s responsibilities, were drastically diminished, they had time to become involved in growing cash crops and other means of gaining income. As Goheen explains, “women’s labor now freed men to participate in work in the cash economy.”\(^{86}\) Women continued to cultivate food for families, while men found ways to earn money. Under rule of a male-dominated European government the gender dynamics of Bamiléké communities experienced drastic transitions.

The transition to a cash-economy began with the introduction of cash-crops during the French colonial era, and has been widely criticized for impacting women more negatively than men, especially in rural areas. The cultivation cash crops, (cocoa, coffee, tobacco) was delegated to men and produced more income than women’s food crops (maize, beans, manioc, peanuts).\(^{87}\) Along with cash crop production, agricultural training and education were also reserved for men, just as men in France had more access to education than women; “in education, as in many areas, women received the lowest priority.”\(^{88}\) Education and training provided men more employment opportunities. Catholic missionaries, who founded and administered the majority of schools in Cameroon, taught girls to become mothers and housewives, while they trained the boys in agriculture, regardless of women’s former agricultural responsibilities. The missionaries, basing education on European


\(^{86}\) Goheen, *The Making of Modern Cameroon*, 66.


notions of labor division, deemed domestic responsibilities proper for women and agriculture proper for men. The restrictions placed on women’s education, along with their inability to earn money through commercial crops in a society that was increasingly dependent on money, obliged them to depend on their husbands to survive. Art Hansen and Anita Spring studied this process in a small rural community in Zambia:

The association of women with subsistence and men with cash crops is made by policy planners, and, consequently all education and training which is geared to commercial production has been earmarked for men. Women’s cash incomes have declined relative to men’s since the 1950s because agricultural markets have diminished and no income substitute, training or credit facilities are available for women, even though they are for men.89

The French notions of gender are present in the methods of economic development they introduced to Cameroon, which gave Cameroonian men more opportunities to make money through agricultural and educational opportunities. The evolving economic situations have, in many cases, deteriorated the conditions of living for rural women.

Growing up, Papa JC experienced the consequences of the transition from subsistence agriculture to cash economy. He explained to me that because his father did not make enough money to support his thirty children and three wives, he and his siblings relied on what his mother could produce with her small parcel of land. With

the help of her ten children she sometimes cultivated enough food to feed her family, although they often looked to their neighbors and family when they had nothing to eat. Constantly busy with the care of her family and production of food, she did not have time to train in or practice a specific trade in order to gain income. Papa JC relied on his aunts and uncles for school fees because his mother had no means to earn money. In her article “Third World Women Speak Out,” Perdita Huston quotes a Kenyan woman who describes a similar situation: “My life is very different from my mother’s. She just stayed in the family until she married. Life is much more difficult now because everybody is dependent on money. Long ago, money was unheard of. No one needed money. But now you can’t even get food without cash.”90 The need for money has significantly altered the means women have to feed their families.

The inability to make money in a society that depends on cash income increases women’s dependence on men as it restricts women to the home. While men were trained and educated to find jobs outside of the house and make money, Bamiléké women often remained home; “as men become more involved in production for exchange (rather than for immediate consumption), the work the women do is increasingly restricted to the domestic sphere.”91 Goheen’s research also reports that during colonialism, “women became associated with the domestic, private sphere, while men now occupied virtually all public roles and occupations.”92 In the city of N’Goundéré in the north of Cameroon, where women generally

91 Charlton, Women in Third World Development, 25.
92 Goheen, Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops, 66.
participate less in public life, I witnessed a surprising interaction between a husband, who was employed, and a wife, who cared for her children and took care of domestic responsibilities. The woman was sick with a serious strand of malaria, but she could not go to the hospital because her husband was on a business trip and she needed his permission to leave the house. The wife waited in her house for four days with a severe illness until her husband returned. Charlton cites a number of scholars who have argued that “the greater the involvement of women in the nondomestic, or public, sphere, the greater their status in their culture and the greater their influence in community matters.”93 This woman’s involvement in her community was greatly restricted. As women take an active role in the community through employment opportunities they attain recognition and influence in societies that value money. Colonial economic development in Cameroon inhibited Bamiléké women more than men from participating in their communities.

*Mon Livre Unique de Français*, a text that was used in all public schools in Cameroon until 2007, was written and published in France in the 1970s and supports the domestic image of motherhood.94 It teaches “lecture, récitation, élocution, orthographe, vocabulaire, phrase, grammaire, et conjugaison” and is organized around specific themes such as “Nos Travaux d’Ecolier,” “Les Bêtes Sauvages,” “En Train et en Auto,” “Les Métiers,” “Les Vêtements,” and “Les Parents.” Each section is comprised of two or three short narratives that are followed by questions and writing exercises. The section on “Les Parents” outlines specific duties for mothers and fathers. The narrative about mothers is addressed directly to mothers;

Maman, vous êtes travailleuse. On dirait que vous n’êtes jamais fatiguée. Vous lavez, vous raccommodez, vous repassez nos habits…Maman vous êtes une bonne cuisinière. C’est vous qui confectionnez les bons plats que nous aimons tant. C’est pour nous encore que vous allez aux champs, retournant la terre, plantant le manioc, sarclant les arachides.⁹⁵

The subsequent narrative describes how a father feeds his family; he finds a pair of shoes on the ground and exchanges them for a sack of flour from a man who has no shoes. The mother feeds the family by cultivating the fields and cooking, while the father makes a business transaction; shoes for flour, which his wife will use to make a meal. This old school book, which is still used by missionary schools to teach Cameroonian children, noticeably reinforces women’s domesticity in a cash-economy.

Mothers are expected to work hard and constantly for their families, but due to their restricted access to money, they depend on their husbands for survival. Goheen reports that although rural women produce ninety percent of the food crops in the Cameroon grasslands, a primarily Bamiléké region, their labor has only “continued to support a male hierarchy within the context of the modern state. Women’s political power, virtually ignored by the colonial state, has become almost nonexistent.”⁹⁶ Men became the primary producers of goods for exchange, while the women produced food for immediate consumption and relied on their husbands for consumer products. The increasing desirability of consumer products, instigated by a capitalist,

⁹⁵ Barre, Macaire, and Baud, Mon Livre Unique de Français, 55.
⁹⁶ Goheen, Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops, 70.
cash-based economy, has been found to increase dependence on those who have steady income. As Spring and Hansen explain, “people no longer are content to exist on locally produced goods, and women have become increasingly dependent on their husbands and male relatives for these purchased items.”97 Money and the importance of buying and having possessions give those that make money more control in household dynamics.

The immigration from rural communities to urban areas, which has happened naturally as people begin to look for employment, has also impacted gender dynamics. According to the Committee on the Status of Women in India, as people move from rural agricultural communities to urban areas “the traditional division of labor ceases to operate, and the complementary relationship of the family is substituted by the competitive one between units of labour. The scarcer the jobs, the sharper is the competition.”98 Technological development has led to a need for job training and education to which women do not always have access, and “they find their traditional productive skills unwanted by the new economy.”99 Women trained in subsistence agriculture have no means to succeed in urban areas.

Technology and Narrative

Every few weeks I receive an email from a friend in Cameroon inviting me to join an online network, so that I can meet people and stay in contact by posting on

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their walls and reading their profiles. Although none of the students I met at the University of Dschang has a personal computer, they are all internet experts and some of them go to the internet café several times a day. They have stopped asking me why I don’t use MSN or Yahoo instant messaging, despite the fact that I own a computer, but they still question why I don’t always answer the phone when they call; they always have their cell phones by their side. My family in Dschang collects their water in buckets from a stream and Ma’a Vé prepares meals on a fire under a small tin roof, but they all have cell phones and frequently email and telephone me in the United States. Television is also quite popular. The first week we arrived in Cameroon, before the homestays began, our program director thought it was important to educate the American students about the frequent viewing of television in many Cameroonian households. The TV was always on in my house, beginning at dawn. One afternoon when I was home by myself catching up on some reading, Papa JC came home and immediately asked me why I hadn’t turned on the television. If people were home and if the electricity was working, the TV was on, even if no one was watching. During my experience in Cameroon I witnessed a heavy reliance on communications and media technology.

Watching television has been identified as one replacement for the typical story time described by people who have spent time in rural areas without electricity. My host parents and the neighbors who had lived in villages spent evenings when they were growing up listening to and telling stories. As I set out on a project to collect as many traditional stories as I could in Dschang, people told me that I needed to go to the village. When I asked Papa JC to tell me a story he said “je les ai
oubliés.” He had grown up listening to and telling stories every evening, but after five years in the city he found it hard to remember them. When Anni, a neighbor from the same village as my host parents, came over to tell me stories, Papa JC ended up singing the choruses to all of the narratives she told me, and ultimately remembered a few stories himself. On the other hand, very few of the students from the University of Dschang were able to tell a story. Most of them had grown up in cities, and when I finally did find a student who said he could tell me a story, he ended up bringing me a book of Cameroonian stories.

Urban life offers many activities other than story telling that can fill the time storytelling used to occupy. In Dschang my host siblings, who were four and five years old, sat at the coffee table writing letters and practicing the alphabet every night. When I asked my host father in N’Goundéré if he told his children the stories his parents had told him he replied, “les contes sont des bêtises.” He explained to me that he wanted his children to learn in school, not from his stories. In the introduction to her collection of traditional narratives, Nzuh explains that the “traditional form of education has come under increasing pressure as a result of social and economic circumstances. Fireside story telling has been replaced by television and radio…It is with this picture in mind that I was motivated to write these tales.” The difficulty of finding people who could tell stories demonstrates how the traditional narrative has become scarce in urban areas that have access to technology and education. These narratives have been replaced by a number of things that modern life has to offer, including television and homework.

Chapter Three

Functions of Narrative

Narrative and Storytelling

Although scholars do not agree upon the definition of narrative, the following discussion assumes the simple definition Gérard Genette offers in the beginning of his essay “Boundaries of Narrative”; “the representation of an event or sequence of events, real or fictitious, by means of language…”\(^\text{102}\) That is, the written or oral portrayal of a series of occurrences.

By stimulating the imagination and providing examples of consequences following specific actions, narratives suggest behavior that will lead to successful or desirable outcomes. The results of actions in narratives provide the reader, listener, or viewer opportunities to “find his own solutions, through contemplating what the story seems to imply about him and his inner conflicts.”\(^\text{103}\) Although many narratives contain fantastical elements that do not occur outside of the realm of storytelling, Descartes, among others, pointed out that “fictions make us imagine a


number of events as possible which are really impossible.”\textsuperscript{104} Thus, the bear who
talks can exemplify behavior in actual life. Narrative provides a framework to guide
decision-making.

One way narrative effectively grabs our attention is through its solicitation of
our identification with characters. The listener or the reader “identifies with the hero
in all his struggles…because of this identification the child imagines that he suffers
with the hero his trials and tribulations, and triumphs with him as virtue is
virtuous.”\textsuperscript{105} As Bettelheim explains in \textit{The Uses of Enchantment}, narratives teach
behavior in a given situation through the connections we develop with the characters:
“the question is not ‘do I want to be good’ but ‘who do I want to be like?’”\textsuperscript{106} The
fairy tale hero is perfect and by identifying with the hero one can compensate for real
or imagined personal deficiencies. Connections with characters, whether they stem
from desired or actual similarities, strengthen the impact narratives have on decision-
making processes.

Not only does character identification increase the role narratives have in our
lives, scholars have suggested that narratives successfully impact our thought
processes because we understand ourselves in narrative form. According to Oatley
and Jenkins, “the principal way in which we become conscious – at least conscious of
ourselves – is in giving ourselves and others accounts in narrative form.”\textsuperscript{107} As
Bettelheim suggests, narratives affect the way we view our lives beginning in
childhood: “the form and structure of fairy tales suggest images to the child by which

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{104} Mink, Louis. \textit{Historical Understanding}. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987, 42.
\item \textsuperscript{105} Bettelheim, \textit{The Uses of Enchantment}, 9.
\item \textsuperscript{106} Bettelheim, \textit{The Uses of Enchantment}, 9.
\end{itemize}
he can structure his daydreams and with them give better direction to his life.”

Similarly, in his essay “Historical Understanding”, Louis O. Mink argues that “it is from history and fiction that we learn how to tell and to understand complex stories, and how it is that stories answer questions.” Because we interpret our lives in narrative form, we learn how to structure our thoughts and understand our lives from the guidelines set in narratives.

Narratives do more than provide basic guidelines for how to view one’s life; folkloristic narratives are culturally specific and present the attitudes of a given group to help people function in their society. They can explain why things are done as they are. For example, a common Bamiléké narrative tells the story of a boy who told too many stories during the day when he was supposed to be working in the fields. He talked so much that his parents had to work extra hard, and didn’t come home at night to feed their children. This is used to explain the Bamiléké work ethic and why the Bamiléké do not tell stories during the day. Cultural narratives convey information about oneself, where one is from, what is important to one’s culture, and how to function socially in the culture.

Narratives not only explain how to behave in a given society, they often explain the reasons behind the behavior and they give meaning and value to actions. According to Bettelheim, the impact of parents and cultural heritage are the two things that serve most to endow life with meaning. When children are young, narratives successfully convey culturally specific information; “it is literature that

108 Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment, 7.
109 Mink, Historical Understanding, 60.
110 Noupa, Personal Interview, April 26th 2007.
111 Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment, 4.
carries such information best."112 While schoolbooks are designed to teach specific skills irrespective of meaning, “nothing can be as enriching and satisfying to child and adult alike as the folk fairy tale.”113 Telling a story conveys cultural information and provides an opportunity to spend time with family; narratives educate through socializing. Culture itself can be defined as “a system of concepts by which human beings communicate and develop their knowledge about attitudes toward life.”114 Thus, culturally-specific narratives teach individuals how to communicate and understand group perspectives.

By transmitting cultural knowledge and providing culturally-specific behavioral guidelines cultural narratives can preserve tradition. Narratives “embody the cumulative experience of a society as men wish to recall past wisdom for themselves and transmit it to future generations.”115 Because they are culturally specific, folklore maintains communal values and passes on culturally specific wisdom that preserves traditions. This is exactly what Ngoh Agnes Nzuh strives to do in Tales from the Grasslands, a collection of traditional folktales: “it is my wish that through these stories cultural norms and values will be handed down from one generation to the other.”116 Narratives provide one way to conserve culturally-specific customs, attitudes, and perspectives about life.

Narratives and fiction also teach us how to relate to people and function in society by showing us how to express our emotions and what emotions are

112 Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment, 35.
113 Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment, 5.
116 Nzuh, Tales from the Grassland and the Forest, 8.
appropriate for any given situation. Because emotions are “constructed and performed,” they enable us to communicate and relate with each other. Identification with others assists the development of communal dynamics and promotes understanding. As a form of communication, emotions are adaptive and functional for fulfilling goals. Through his extensive work with young children Bettelheim found that as children develop and learn from stories how to understand themselves better, they “become more able to understand others and eventually can relate to them in ways that are mutually satisfying and meaningful.” This is one way in which they find meaning in life, as “it is not as instances of a theory but as centers of concrete relationships that we understand ourselves and others.”

Narratives socially educate by demonstrating and supporting existing behavioral and emotional norms.

Bamiléké Narrative Context

While most of my research was conducted with the Bamiléké culture of Dschang, many of the same characteristics of story telling and similar stories can be found all over Cameroon. According to Professor Gabriel Kuitche, professor of Folklore at the University of Dschang and the Minister of Secondary Education in Cameroon, there is no such thing as a Bamiléké story, only a story “recueilli chez les

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119 Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment, 3.
120 Mink, Historical Understanding, 93.
Common themes, plots, methods of storytelling, and characters are found throughout Cameroon.

The African story conjures images of children listening to their wise grandparents, covered in old blankets by the fireside. Until very recently, this stereotypical image was not far from the truth. As Gilbert Safotso, a high school English teacher in Dschang, explained to me, “Dans les années 70, on n’avait pas beaucoup de technologie comme maintenant, on se réunissait à la cuisine, allumait le feu de bois. Les soirs étaient de cette manière réservés pour l’éducation déguisée de la fantaisie des devinettes et des contes.” In his book *Les Contes noirs de l’Ouest Africain*, Roland Colin explains that the night is the best time to tell stories because l’imagination peut facilement changer la dimension des choses sans que leurs contours réels s’imposent aux sens et rompent le charme.

Le monde nocturne est peuplé d’êtres fantastiques et toutes les bêtes de la brousse rôdent et chassent dans les terres proches : la galerie des personnages de conte est là, présente et vivante, dans les parages de la veillée.

While there are many practical reasons to reserve story telling for the end of the day, Colin romantically identifies the uncertainty of darkness as a catalyst for the imagination. At the end of the day, after work, people have time to gather and entertain each other with old and new stories.

In Dschang and the surrounding area the children compete in story-telling ability and in introducing stories from neighboring communities. Anni Kambou, a

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neighbor and masters student of the University of Dschang, described the competitive nature of storytelling when recounting her experience in Baham, her village. Kambou, explained “les enfants s’entraînaient pendant la journée, parce que parfois, le soir, les parents donnaient mêmes de petits cadeaux à celui qui a le mieux raconté.”124 I found that everyone I spoke with who had lived in a village with their extended family, as opposed to living in a larger city, had experienced this type of story telling around the fire at night. The practice of borrowing stories from nearby communities prevents redundancy while spreading the tales to other villages. The adults encourage the children to find new stories and practice the art of telling the story. While adults correct the children when they tell stories, children also have “le droit de parler. Ce sont les enfants qui commencent à raconter, et les adultes écoutent et interviennent quand il faut corriger.”125 The Cameroonian narrative lives in the village where it is transferred to younger generations.

“The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace”

A number of Cameroonian folktales about women center on life in a polygamous household. These stories address how wives should behave when there is more than one wife in the family. In her collection of stories, *Tales from the Grassland and the Forest*, Ngoh Agnes Nzuh recounts a traditional story about family in “The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace.” Transcribed directly from oral versions of the story and used as an example of traditional Cameroonian folklore in other scholarly works, “The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace” represents a typical Cameroonian story. In their article “Unmasking Women’s Rivalry in Cameroonian Folktales,” published in the *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, for example, Susan Weinger, Lotsmart Fonjong, Charles Fochingong, and Roberta Allen use Nzuh’s published version as an example of a typical narrative about women and

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Similar narratives are known throughout Bamiléké villages. During my stay in Cameroon a neighbor, Anni Kambou, a Bamiléké woman from the village of Baham, told me a similar story that she called “Les Deux Amies,” referring to the two wives in the tale who struggle against each other for the attention of their husband. “The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace” and “Les Deux Amies” both begin with a childless, monogamous family into which a second wife is introduced. In Nzuh’s story the introduction of a second wife for the sake of children causes disputes and disrupts the initial serenity of the family and the community.

In Nzuh’s published version the couple, Ma Yango and Pa Sango, live a happy life in their rural village although they have not been able to have children. Desperately desiring a child, Ma Yango begs her husband to take another wife. She finds a woman named Kirka and Pa Sango reluctantly accepts Kirka as his wife only after Ma Yango refuses to speak to him for several days. When Ma Yango brings Kirka into their lives she does everything to please the new wife; she cooks for Kirka, cleans, and works her fields. When Kirka eventually becomes pregnant Ma Yango refuses to let Kirka work in the fields at all. While Ma Yango shows nothing but kindness and compassion towards Kirka, the second wife becomes jealous of Pa Sango’s affection towards Ma Yango and wants to be the only woman of the household. In an effort to expel Ma Yango from the house, Kirka tells Pa Sango that Ma Yango beats her and refuses to give her food. Pa Sango takes no heed of Kirka’s words, and for a while they live in relative peace. When Kirka gives birth to a

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daughter Ma Yango gives the child a gold necklace during the naming ceremony, in which the village elders announce that the child shall be named after Ma Yango.

Although Pa Sango does not initially believe Kirka’s lies, she eventually convinces him that Ma Yango should be kicked out of the house by telling him that she fears Ma Yango will harm the baby and threatens to leave unless he forces Ma Yango to leave. While Ma Yango is busy working in the fields Pa Sango and Kirka throw out all of Ma Yango’s belongings and uproot a yam growing near her house (each wife typically has her own house in polygamous families). Ma Yango returns and refuses to leave until they return the necklace she gave to the baby during the naming ceremony, but the child has grown too fat to remove the necklace. Meanwhile, the neighbors, aware that Ma Yango’s expulsion is rooted in Kirka’s lies, notify the village elders of the situation. The elders arrive and declare that Pa Sango and Kirka must return the necklace to Ma Yango without damaging it. When the chief and the villagers suggest cutting off the baby’s head instead, Kirka and Pa Sango ask for forgiveness from the villagers. The chief expels Kirka from the village, gives the baby to Ma Yango, and charges Pa Sango a fine of fifty goats and one thousand yam seedlings. Pa Sango must also apologize to Ma Yango. The baby grows up knowing Ma Yango as her mother and they live “happily together ever after.”

The lives of the characters in “The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace” typify those in a collectivist society in their dependence upon interactions between family members and familiar people in close settings. The villagers are invested in the welfare of Ma Yango and Pa Sango, and they help one another as if they were one
large family. Although they have no children of their own, Pa Sango tells Ma Yango “many children help us fetch water and firewood whenever we are in need.” They do not need their own children: Pa Sango expects the children of the village to automatically help the couple when they are in need even though the children may not necessarily be related to Pa Sango or Ma Yango. Pa Sango and Ma Yango accept and expect help from their neighbors simply because they are part of the same community, which indicates the intrinsic responsibilities the villagers feel towards one another.

The villagers exhibit their communal responsibilities in their physical duties towards each other and also though their interest in the welfare of one family. The neighbors are the first people to question Kirka’s behavior: “Neighbours felt sorry for Ma Yango. They knew Kirka was telling lies. Neighbours tried to tell Pa Sango the truth about Kirka, but Pa Sango refused to listen.” The neighbors quickly identify Kirka’s villainy and use their strength as a group to stop her. The village and the chief work together to overcome one family’s misfortune; they have great influence in the personal lives of one family. In a small rural village subsisting mainly on food crops, each family has an important role in the welfare of the community. Because the villagers depend on one another for survival, and their personal relationships become extremely important.

The communal involvement in family life not only reveals the dependence and responsibility people of an intimate rural community have towards one another, it also suggest that, as a group, the villagers, nobles, and the chief possess innate

128 Nzuh, Tales from the Grassland and the Forest, 79.
129 Nzuh, Tales from the Grassland and the Forest, 81.
wisdom that Pa Sango and Ma Yango do not have individually. The neighbors know that Kirka is lying from the beginning, and when Pa Sango and Kirka drive out Ma Yango and uproot the yam the neighbors act as a single, unified and omniscient entity to right the situation. When the villagers threaten to harm their baby rather than damage the necklace Pa Sango and Kirka “begged the villagers to forgive them. The villagers refused to listen. ‘You have been very wicked to this old woman…Kirka has told a lot of lies about Ma Yango. We cannot forgive you,”130 Kirka and Pa Sango initially “begged the villagers” for forgiveness, apologizing to the villagers rather than Ma Yango, the individual whom they have mistreated. The villagers respond, in turn, as a single group; “we cannot forgive you.” In his essay “Historical Understanding” Louis O. Mink states “knowledge is essentially public and may even be distributed through a community; we know collectively what no one individually could possess.”131 The villagers share knowledge that Pa Sango, Kirka, and Ma Yango lack as individuals. The actions and involvement of the villagers demonstrate their power to resolve difficult situations as a wise, cohesive group.

While the neighbors exemplify a collectivist society through their interactions and involvement in Ma Yango’s family life, the initial childlessness of Ma Yango and Pa Sango also underscores the need for an interconnected community and family. Although the couple live “happily in their lovely thatched house,” Ma Yango strongly desires a child, to the point where she refuses “to greet and talk” to Pa Sango unless he agrees to marry a second wife. The neighbor children help Ma Yango and Pa Sango, but she wants a child to keep her family going so that it doesn’t end after she

130 Nzuh, Tales from the Grassland and the Forest, 88.
131 Mink, Historical Understanding, 55.
and her husband die. In a collectivist society importance is placed on producing children to maintain a lasting family that can contribute to the evolution of the community through reproduction.\textsuperscript{132} Ma Yango and Pa Sango need to reproduce to in order to preserve the community.

Although Pa Sango finally marries another wife, it is Ma Yango who wants a child, which highlights the importance of having children for a woman’s identity. Pa Sango values Ma Yango’s companionship; he is happy with a barren wife. As mentioned in the first chapter, the fear of infertility among women is one of the leading causes of anxiety for many Cameroonian women. Anxiety produced by barrenness denotes how important it is to continue a family and to contribute to the continuity of a society. In Ma Yango’s case her desire to have a child is so strong that it creates a new character, Kirka. Ma Yango’s angst divides her, in a sense, into two wives, one good and one bad. Her refusal to speak to her husband and her split personality clearly demonstrate how motherhood fulfills her role as a woman. Although Ma Yango wants a child because it fulfills her personal duty as a woman, this responsibility stems from an overall desire to contribute to the community.

Although she cannot have children, Ma Yango exemplifies a woman’s role by her work ethic and her relationship as caregiver to Kirka and the baby. Ma Yango’s skills and responsibilities as a domestic caretaker model the behavior expected of an ideal mother and wife. She conducts herself in this way when Kirka arrives; feeding her, cleaning the house, working her fields, and cooking for her, not only for herself and Pa Sango. In short, “Ma Yango did everything for Kirka”\textsuperscript{133} and never fails in

\textsuperscript{132} Triandis, \textit{Individualism and Collectivism}, 48.
\textsuperscript{133} Nzuh, \textit{Tales from the Grassland and the Forest}, 80.
her domestic duties. She pays special attention to Kirka when she’s pregnant, refusing to let her work in the fields. The chief pronounces Ma Yango the mother of the child after Kirka proves herself an unworthy mother through her villainy. Ma Yango, the virtuous wife, excels at fulfilling her domestic responsibilities as a wife by continuing to carry out her daily chores and taking care of the family despite Kirka’s malicious efforts to get rid of her.

Ma Yango’s desire for a child and efforts to take care of the family contrast directly with Kirka’s wish to have Pa Sango for herself. While the second wife fulfills the first wife’s desire for a child, Kirka’s lies and deception stem from her own desire “to be the only wife,”\(^\text{134}\) to have all of Pa Sango’s attention. Kirka’s eventual expulsion from the village punishes her for mistreating her co-wife in an attempt to have her husband to herself, and also for uprooting the yam plant, which distresses the entire community by symbolizing waste. In a small rural society everyone depends on each other in times of hardship, and therefore “the gods of the land could punish the land with drought”\(^\text{135}\) for unnecessarily destroying crops. When she uproots the yam plant the villagers understand that Kirka is concerned only with herself, not with the wellbeing of the village. The group ultimately triumphs over individual achievements: Ma Yango works hard to take care of her co-wife and maintain a happy family, while Kirka strives for individual fulfillment. Kirka is expelled from the village for disrupting family peace while Ma Yango is rewarded for her efforts to get along with Kirka and maintain a stable family.

\(^{134}\) Nzuh, *Tales from the Grassland and the Forest*, 80.

\(^{135}\) Nzuh, *Tales from the Grassland and the Forest*, 86.
Although Ma Yango triumphs over Kirka in the end, it is due to the collective response of the neighbors rather than finding her own solutions to the problem. Ma Yango, the ideal wife, does not stand up for herself when Kirka lies to Pa Sango about Ma Yango’s behavior because “Kirka spoke very fast and Ma Yango found it difficult to talk at the same time.”\textsuperscript{136} Overwhelmed by Kirka’s obvious lie, Ma Yango cries helplessly instead of defending herself. Ma Yango controls the household initially, as it is under her influence that Pa Sango marries another woman, but Kirka’s lies overpower Ma Yango and reveal her inability to overcome deception personally. She relies ultimately on the village to help her, which demonstrates the influence and concern the community has for the individual. Although Ma Yango’s failure to outwit Kirka may suggest that ideal women are unable to overcome difficult situations, Pa Sango also fails to see through Kirka’s lies, which further highlights the importance of the community in this story.

The stereotypical nature of the characters in “The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace” also deemphasizes the importance of individual problems and goals. The characters are simple, straightforward, and although they have personal names they can be categorized as husband, good wife, bad wife, chief, and so on. Their desires are clear: Ma Yango wants a child, Kirka wants to be the only wife, and the villagers want harmony and justice. Their actions are also simple: Ma Yango takes care of her family, Kirka lies to get what she wants, and the villagers intervene when Kirka goes too far. Nzuh rarely presents personal characteristics, except to note that Kirka is “young,” which serves as a contrast to Ma Yango, and to note that the baby

\textsuperscript{136} Nzuh, \textit{Tales from the Grassland and the Forest}, 81.
is “lovely.” The simple, austere characterizations highlight the importance of the actions in the story rather than the individualized histories of specific people.

As the husband, Pa Sango demonstrates his influence in the family through his role as mediator between the two wives. Because Kirka causes strife between the two women, Pa Sango is in a position to negotiate between them. Although he has the authority to make the final decision to throw out Ma Yango, the villagers identify him as culpable in the situation because he didn’t listen to his wife. While Kirka instigates the disputes and manipulates Pa Sango into believing her lies, the villagers also find him guilty of mistreating his wife and uprooting the yam plant, which suggests an expectation that he should maintain harmony in his family fairly and wisely.

In the preface Nzuh expresses her wish that “acceptable social norms and values” ¹³⁷ be transmitted through her collection of traditional stories to counteract foreign influence in Cameroon. These stories, “embedded with moral values,” portray an idealized community, and state specific cultural expectations: wives should strive to get along with co-wives and care for the family, husbands should manage a household fairly, the interests of the community should come before individual pursuits, and the community should have a great impact on family matters. Men and women have traditional responsibilities; women cook, work in the fields, and care for children, while men help with other chores and have authority over disputes. Although the Pa Sango makes the decision to cast out Ma Yango, she brings the new wife into the family because of her own interests to have a child. Gender roles are specific, but the husband does not dominate the women. In an ideal and idealized

¹³⁷ Nzuh, Tales from the Grassland and the Forest, 7.
setting “around a fireplace or a lit oil lamp”\textsuperscript{138} all of these traditional values would be absorbed, including a general sense of justice to every member of the community to promote a harmonious collective atmosphere.

\textsuperscript{138} Nzuh, \textit{Tales from the Grassland and the Forest}, 7.
Chapter Five

Contemporary Narrative

Telenovelas

Although they are similar to soap operas, telenovelas are a distinct genre of television show produced in Latin America that are known for their addictive melodrama. A study of *Los Medios y Mercados de Latinoamérica* in 1998 study reported that 53% of Latin Americans between the ages of 12 and 64 regularly watch telenovelas. Their greater popularity in Latin America, in comparison to the popularity of American soap operas in the United States, stems from structural differences in the entertainment industry. Roland Soong explains that:

In the United States, the pinnacle for an entertainment worker is to reach Hollywood and hence achieve fortune and worldwide fame; by comparison, television work, and daytime drama in particular, is typically not esteemed as much. In Latin America, the movie industry

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is small, whereas telenovelas form a booming multi-million industry with a Latin American entertainer.\textsuperscript{140}

While actors from soap operas rarely gain international success, telenovelas are quickly gaining recognition and popularity around the world.\textsuperscript{141} Unlike American soaps, which can run for decades, telenovelas have definite endings, written before the filming process begins, which according to John Hecht makes them “more attractive for viewers who wish to move from one story to the next.”\textsuperscript{142}

Although novelas are popular with all age groups, women report more consistent viewing then men. According to \textit{Los Medios y Mercados de Latinoamérica}, women in South America between the ages of fifty-five and sixty-four watch telenovelas the most frequently, with as many as 71\% of this population hooked on novellas. Men between the ages of fifty-five and sixty-four watch the least, about 33\% of the population.\textsuperscript{143}

According to Martin-Barbero, just as people identify with the characters and situations in a traditional narrative, telenovelas and television in general assist “the transformation of memories and sensibilities and the construction of the cultural imaginary within which people recognize themselves and through which they represent what they are entitled to expect and hope for.”\textsuperscript{144} Whereas viewers may identify with the brave hero in a fairytale, they recognize themselves in the narratives

\begin{reference}
\textsuperscript{143} Soong, “Telenovela Garden,” 1999.
\end{reference}
they watch and learn to “expect and hope for” the same challenges, opportunities, and
treatment as those fictional characters. Attractive characters perform “successful
behaviors [and] can serve as role models for others to follow.” Just as oral
narratives help the listener function in his or her community by explaining how a
culture receives and reacts to certain behaviors, soap operas and telenovelas provide a
narrative in which to view oneself as part of a particular society.

Muñeca Brava

Evenings with my host family in Dschang were spent eating, socializing, and
watching television. Neighbors and friends would often drop in to say hi and grab a
few bites to eat. The kids, the neighbors, and the TV created a loud and lively
atmosphere, but when the Argentine telenovela Muñeca Brava was on, everything
stopped for half an hour. My family’s small television was perched on top of a
bamboo cabinet in a room that was barely large enough for two small bamboo sofas, a
coffee table, and a few small wooden stools. The sound on the TV occasionally
malfunctioned, which made silence mandatory for the children and for all of Ma’a
Vé’s friends that squeezed themselves around the coffee table when they came over
to watch the program. Ma’a Vé was usually in the middle of preparing a meal when
the show came on, and she would rush outside to tend the fire or stir the couscous
during the commercials. Muñeca Brava was certainly the most popular show at my
host family’s house and at the neighbors’, and I often heard people talking about it in
the market or on the street. Eventually, several of the American students in my

program became hooked on the telenovela and we began to discuss the series among ourselves. My father and my host siblings also followed *Muñeca Brava* seriously, and it became an important routine twice a week.

*Muñeca Brava* was released in Argentina in November of 1998 and is comprised of 270 episodes. Produced by Telefe International, one of the major telenovela companies in Latin America, *Muñeca Brava* has become popular all over the world. In Cameroon it is called *Muñeca Brava* in both English and French speaking provinces, which in Spanish literally translates to *Brave Doll*, although the official English title is *Wild Angel*. In Cameroon the telenovela is dubbed in French in the Francophone provinces and in English in the Anglophone provinces. During my stay in Dschang in April of 2007 *Muñeca Brava* was almost halfway through the first season.

The series begins with the di Carlo family, a very rich, well-known, and respected family in Buenos Aires that resides in a mansion named “Solitude.” The majority of Argentines are of European descent, and therefore an Italian family name is not uncommon. The matriarch of the di Carlo family, Angelica, is ill and her family believes that she needs a full-time maid to take care of her. Luisa, the wife of Angelica’s son Federico, goes to a nearby convent to look for a maid. The priest suggests Milagros, one of the orphans residing at the convent. Milagros does not want to leave, but she is about to turn eighteen and will soon be too old to stay at the convent. Milagros has been told that her mother, Rosario, died while giving birth to

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her at the convent, and that Rosario never revealed the name of Milagros’s father before her death.

The people of the convent and the local community teasingly call Milagros ‘Carlitos’ or ‘Cholo’ due to her habit of dressing like a boy and her talent as a soccer player. But Milagros has a very feminine side as well. She loves to sneak out of the convent to go dancing at night, and she usually drags along her more timid friends. On one of these occasions, before she leaves the convent to work as a maid, she goes out wearing a short red-leather skirt and heavy make-up. At the club she dances on stage and dazzles everyone around her with her beauty and sex-appeal, especially Ivo di Carlo, Angelica’s grandson and Federico and Luisa’s son. Although Ivo fails to talk to her that night, he can’t stop thinking about her and vows to find “the girl in the red skirt” someday soon.

Several days before Milagros is due at the di Carlo residence Ivo and his friend Bobby go to watch a soccer game near the convent. The priest is a well-known supporter of the Boca Juniors Football team, and Milagros often tries to use her connections with the priest to join the team. Despite her persistence, Milagros is forced to sell refreshments instead because she is a girl. The day that Ivo and Bobby watch the match Ivo complains that he’s hot, and Bobby, who knows that Carlitos is Milagros wearing men’s clothing, tells him to buy a soda from Carlitos. Ivo walks over to Milagros, thinking all the while that she is a boy, and buys a soda. When he says “Gracias, Carlitos,” Milagros responds by saying “Carlitos las pelotas!” (Carlitos my balls!) and throws the soda in his face. Confused and unaware that he has just offended a woman, Ivo returns to the game where he is informed that Carlitos
Milagros as ‘Carlitos,’ and Ivo is indeed female, but he does not know that she is the girl in the red skirt from the nightclub.

Milagros shows up at the di Carlo household to begin work wearing her ‘Carlitos’ outfit: a baggy t-shirt, a red baseball cap, and baggy jeans. The women and wait-staff of the residence admonish her for her appearance and Bernardo, the head servant, tells her to put on a uniform right away, which she refuses to do. Ivo comes home to see Milagros in her man’s attire and says, “Hola Carlitos,” to which Milagros responds “Carlitos las pelotas!” and storms off. Angelica and Bernardo eventually manage to convince Milagros to wear her maid’s uniform, but when she’s off duty Milagros promptly switches to her ‘Carlitos’ outfit, unless, of course, she’s going dancing.

Ivo falls in love with Milagros before he realizes that she is the girl from the nightclub, but his love for her only intensifies after this is revealed. Milagros,

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sticking to the stereotypical role of female protagonists in telenovelas, naturally falls in love with Ivo, a sexy and successful young man. Their struggles to be together are dramatized by constant obstacles, usually involving other sexual partners, until the final scandal at the very end when their birth origins are discovered. Angelica and Bernardo are the first to realize that Milagros is the daughter of Rosario and Federico. Rosario is Bernardo’s sister and former maid of the di Carlo’s. Furthermore, Ivo is not Federico’s son; Luisa, who comes from another wealthy family, married Federico after she had become pregnant outside of marriage in order to save her reputation, and in order to save the di Carlo fortune, which was dwindling. Thus, Milagros is Federico’s illegitimate daughter, and Ivo is Luisa’s illegitimate son. In the last episode these two form the perfect couple and finally get married.
The structure of *Muñeca Brava* follows the pattern of a typical fairy tale.

Vladimir Propp’s structuralist work on fairy tales argues that although there are many different characters or *dramatis personae*, in narratives, there are a limited number of actions, or functions, in which the *dramatis personae* partake. The functions Propp discusses can be applied to *Muñeca Brava*. In the beginning there is a lack and a quest; Angelica needs a caretaker and Milagros is forced to leave the convent, her home, to seek love and fortune. When she meets Ivo the obsession Ivo and Milagros quickly develop for each other implies that they are meant to be together, and getting married becomes the goal of her quest. After Milagros conquer various villains and overcomes numerous obstacles, which often take the form of seductive women or center around her lower-class status as an orphaned maid, they finally marry. Though many stories lie within this basic framework the overall structure follows a simple

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narrative pattern, much like that of fairytale, which has a definite beginning and end.
In this way, a telenovela is much like a fairytale, whereas a soap opera lasts as long as
it makes a profit.

Not only does the basic narrative structure highlight the fairytale nature of
_Muñeca Brava_, the stereotypical nature of the characters in the telenovela is similar to
the generalized characters of fairytales. Although television and films show actual
individuals and settings, the stereotypical characters function much like the characters
of a traditional narrative. The audience can predict what will happen; as Hecht
explains, “telenovelas feature archetypal - or stereotypical, - characters that earnestly
act out familiar tales of love, loss, tragedy and redemption.”

Milagros wears a short, red-leather mini-skirt and makeup when she goes to a nightclub, reinforcing
common beliefs about beauty and sex-appeal: minimal clothing and heavy makeup

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are attractive and identify Milagros as a sexy woman. Ivo falls in love with her at first sight and is not at peace until he marries her. They are both young, attractive, and destined to fall in love.

The last words of the series directly link *Muñeca Brava* to a fairytale. As Milagros shoots a goal, playing soccer in her wedding dress, her voice tells viewers:

> They say that story-book princes and princesses don't exist. It is not so easy to see them, but it is possible to find them and get to know them, because they are in our souls. They can be encountered on the football field, in the store, or on the street while sitting behind the steering wheel of a car - they are everywhere.

> They do not exist, but they can be found. Believe it. All you need is to love very, very deeply, and you will then see that love is not a myth.\(^{152}\)

The language of the final words identifies the relationship between Ivo and Milagros as something from a fairytale, and implies that love is the ultimate achievement and ultimate desire. A fairytale is idealistic by nature; according to Bettelheim, fairytales “answer the eternal questions: What is the world really like? How am I to live my life in it?”\(^{153}\) If the goal of life is to obtain love, what does love mean to Milagros? An inspection of the interactions between the men and women of *Muñeca Brava* and what they do “for love” reveals a connection between wealth and happiness for women, and between sex, wealth, and happiness for men.


\(^{153}\) Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 45.
Milagros and Ivo are destined to be together because of true love, yet they marry only after Milagros’s social position is revealed, identifying her as a compatible mate for a man of high class. The discovery of her paternal origins classifies her as an authentic member of the wealthy class. Though the family is wealthy, much of their internal strife stems from greed. They never struggle financially; they always have more than enough money to continue their luxurious lifestyle, yet they constantly bicker about money, demonstrating their obsession with material wealth. Luisa wants Ivo to marry Pilar because she’s rich, but when Luisa suspects that Milagros has money she tells her son to marry Milagros. Federico married for financial reasons; Luisa’s inheritance helped maintain the di Carlo fortune. Although Ivo and Milagros marry for love, part of the perfection of their

Federico walking Milagros down the aisle, Ivo and Milagros at the altar.  

love stems from their mutually financially successful backgrounds. Their love depends on material wealth and position in society.

While the women of *Muñeca Brava* often worry about money, the men control most of the financial transactions of the family. Damien (Luisa’s brother), Federico, Luisa, and Ivo handle the family business. Although Luisa has some influence in business matters, Damien and Federico often over-rule her decisions and occasionally partake in illegal transactions unknown to Luisa in order to supplement their personal income. Despite his age, Ivo has as much control as his mother in business matters. Because Federico, Damien, and Luisa consider Angelica too old and ill to make appropriate decisions, Ivo represents Angelica in the family business meetings. Although Angelica never acts sick except in moments where she has a headache and must take her pills, she selects Ivo to represent her over Victoria, his sister. The representatives from the other companies with whom they work are always male. While Damien and Federico take into consideration Angelica’s wishes through Ivo and Luisa’s contributions, they hold their own separate meetings and control a disproportionate amount of business matters while the women simply desire money.

The men assert their influence through their roles as business men, which also allows them to attract women due to their financial stability and the women’s portrayed desire for money. Neither Damien nor Federico are particularly attractive; both are average-looking, balding, middle-age men, yet they often sleep with beautiful, young women. Federico even attempts to seduce Andrea, his secretary, who dates Ivo right after she fails to convince Federico to leave Luisa. Damien also
has sex with many young beautiful women including Marta, the maid. Although Federico and Damien lack attractive physical features, at least according to stereotypical conceptions of beauty, they sleep with attractive young women because they have money. Men, Muñeca Brava tells us, do not need or necessarily desire to be physically attractive; money gives them access to sex and therefore a sense of personal fulfillment.

Though the men don’t need to worry too much about their physical appearance in order to succeed socially, the women of Muñeca Brava need to be beautiful in order to gain money and power through their relationships with men. All of the available women on the program are exceptionally beautiful. When Federico tries to seduce Andrea, she tells him that she will not “play the sneaking around game”; she wants their affair to be public so that she gains social recognition for her relationship with Federico. She then turns to his son, the next best thing, in an attempt to rise from her position as secretary. Marta, a young, beautiful, and self-seeking maid, also tries to seduce the di Carlo men in order to obtain more social influence and autonomy. She has an affair with Damien, who promises “to get you out of that uniform.” The double entendre of getting her “out of that uniform” refers both to having sex with her and financially supporting her so that she will no longer have to work as a maid: he wants sex in exchange for job promotion. Women’s beauty gives them access to wealth and social influence. Sexual relationships on Muñeca Brava link money directly to sex; just as money makes men attractive and gives them sexual access to beautiful women, physical beauty makes women attractive and leads them to financial success.
The efforts of the women to achieve control through men leads to constant competition among them. Andrea promises Luisa that she will keep an eye on her husband, Federico, and let Luisa know if he’s cheating on her, while simultaneously attempting to seduce him for money. When Milagros joins the di Carlo family as a maid Marta immediately gives her the cold shoulder, threatened by the presence of another young attractive maid who will diminish her chances to snag the di Carlo men. Marta assumes that she will have to compete with Milagros for the attention of the di Carlo men, and with good reason. Marta soon finds out that Ivo desires Milagros, and the discovery makes her more determined to capture Damien’s attention and make life hard for Milagros. Marta constantly teases Milagros and tries to find ways to get her in trouble. Their efforts to obtain independence and recognition in a money-hungry society through their sexual associations with men cause strife and competition between the women in Muñeca Brava.

Both the women and the men of Muñeca Brava blame the women more frequently than they blame the men for the adulterous affairs that all parties experience. When Milagros discovers that Ivo has made a bet with Bobby about sleeping with her she punishes him by pulling a similar trick on him; she tells Ivo to come to her bed at midnight, but she has convinced a nun from the convent to sleep there in her stead. Ivo takes off his clothes and caresses the nun before realizing the figure under the covers is not Milagros. In this instance Ivo is entertainingly punished for playing games with women, but in most situations the women are held responsible. In the final episodes Ivo must choose between marrying Pilar and Milagros. While the viewers clearly know that Milagros is the right choice, he has a
brief affair with Pilar before he decides to marry Milagros. Although Ivo hesitates indecisively between these two women, sleeping with Pilar before he can be sure that Milagros is the real thing, Pilar becomes the villain in the situation. She devises a plan to kidnap Ivo before the wedding, which, in comparison to Ivo’s spontaneous promiscuity is more deceptive and harmful: kidnapping is pre-meditated manipulation and therefore completely intentional and evil, while Ivo’s promiscuity is more easily excused as a typical man’s behavior. It is only after his “trials” with other women that Ivo attains his one true love. While Ivo is sometimes held responsible for some of the affairs he has, the blame is regularly put upon the women for seducing him. The women plan their affairs with deliberation and consideration about their financial future, while the men are excused for their “natural” inability to control their sexual desire.

The different treatment that Milagros and Ivo receive despite their parallel situations further demonstrates gender inequalities that stem from a desire for wealth. Although Federico and Angelica know that Luisa conceived Ivo in an affair with another man, they accept Ivo, raise him as part of the family, and give him a significant amount of control in family business because Luisa has money and his birth brought wealth to the di Carlo’s. On the other hand, Milagros must prove her place in the family despite the fact that her father is the patriarch because they will be forced to share their wealth with her. When Angelica discovers that Milagros is her granddaughter, Milagros remains a maid because Angelica fears that the rest of the family will not accept her. Angelica has hired fifteen detectives to search for Federico’s illegitimate child with Rosario, whom she assumes to be male, but when
she finds out that her grandson is really her maid she conceals the secret. When the family learns that Milagros is Federico’s daughter they chastise her and attempt to kick her out of the house. Victoria even attempts to frame Milagros for stealing money when she learns that Milagros is her sister, believing that she will now receive Victoria’s share of the inheritance. Luisa, also believing that Milagros will receive more money than her children, refuses to acknowledge Milagros as a member of the family. The di Carlos accept Ivo as a legitimate heir, but they ostracize Milagros despite her heritage until the very end. The marriage between Federico and Luisa, initiated when Luisa became pregnant with Ivo, brought money to the family and therefore his presence financially benefits the family. If the di Carlos acknowledge Milagros as a legitimate heir their wealth will have to be shared with one more person.

In a world run by sex and money, Carlitos is Milagros’s attempt to control her life through financial means without using her sexuality to reach men. As Carlitos she sells sodas, stamps, and devises various ways to earn money, but when she becomes a maid she can only gain capital through sexual relationships with men. The last scene shows Milagros scoring a goal wearing a wedding dress, restored to one person with both masculine and feminine traits. This imagery suggests that Milagros has succeeded financially using both identities. Milagros develops a male counterpart in order to make money in a way to which women do not have access.

Through the character of Carlitos, Milagros demonstrates the importance of individual achievement and self-reliance in the telenovela. The final words of the series imply that the individual alone is responsible for his or her happiness or
condition of living. Milagros says that although fairy tale princes and princesses do not exist, “it is possible to find them and get to know them, because they are in our souls. . . They do not exist, but they can be found. Believe it. All you need is to love very, very deeply, and you will then see that love is not a myth.”\textsuperscript{155} According to her words it is the individual responsibility of people to “believe” and “love” deeply enough in order to be happy. Without love, which is directly correlated to money, one cannot be happy. This love is not a myth, it can be obtained, and individuals who fail to obtain love (or money) are personally responsible for their unhappiness.

The characters of Muñeca Brava are cloaked as individuals who have authority over their lives and distinct personalities, but their predictable actions, appearances, and behavior support common stereotypes and therefore take away their individuality. The character of Milagros is supposed to be different from the other women because she is defiant, but her actions and appearance follow gender stereotypes; when she wears a short red-leather mini-skirt she is feminine and sexy, when she wears a baseball cap and baggy pants she is masculine and confrontational. The attempt to paint the characters of \textit{Muñeca Brava} as unique individuals demonstrates the importance of uniqueness in individualist societies. Triandis calls this the phenomenon of “false uniqueness”\textsuperscript{156} in individualist societies, alluding to the fact that although people in individualist societies strive to be different from the crowd, they ultimately become different in the same way as everyone else, and therefore their ‘uniqueness’ is only imagined. Milagros wants to be successful in a way defined by her society, so she acts and dresses in expected ways.

\textsuperscript{155} Telenovela World, 2003.
\textsuperscript{156} Triandis, \textit{Individualism and Collectivism}, 73.
Chapter Six

The Influence of Foreign Narrative in Bamiléké Culture

“The Old Woman with the Golden Necklace” and Muñeca Brava

The popularity of television shows such as Muñeca Brava in Bamiléké communities reflects contemporary social transitions in wealth and individualism linked to Western contact. The displayed wealth of Muñeca Brava is like a fairytale to many Bamiléké; for a majority of the population the lavish lifestyles of the di Carlos are just as unreachable or perhaps fantastical as animals talking, yet these narratives are replacing traditional stories as the evening activity of choice. Their popularity reaffirms the importance of and reliance on individuality and money that the introduction of cash produced in Cameroon. A comparison of “The Old Woman with the Gold Necklace” and Muñeca Brava reflects the changes in gender dynamics produced in the Bamiléké culture by the introduction of a cash-based economy. The different portrayals of success, communal involvement, marriage, women’s bodies, and sexual interactions expose cultural and social transitions in

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157 I use the term Western with recognition that, as Shohat and Stam articulate, “the ‘West’ is a fictional construct embroidered with myths and fantasies” (Unthinking Eurocentrism, 13) and the concept is geographically relative.
Cameroon that stem from economic development and lead to a devaluation of domestic labor.

Success means different things in these two narratives: in “The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace” wealth is associated with children, while in Muñeca Brava wealth is purely financial. The primary purpose of children reflects this difference: in “The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace” Pa Sango states that children are there to “fetch water and firewood,” and help the entire community survive, while in Muñeca Brava children inherit money. As Taylor Layne and Wozniak describe, “in patriarchal ideology, the child is the extension of the man. In capitalist ideology, the child is the repository of wealth.” The different ways in which the two narratives depict the functions of children demonstrate how the transition to a cash-economy can change the family dynamics of agricultural communities. Success, in the telenovela, is indicated by money rather than children.

The similar initial circumstances of the two female protagonists demonstrate the differing attitudes towards success. While they both begin with a lack in their lives, Ma Yango’s lack stems from her inability to have children while Milagros’s lack stems from her inability to make money as a woman. Both women desire personal satisfaction and social recognition, but Ma Yango needs children in order to become a true woman for herself and her village, and Milagros needs money in order to succeed as a person. Money is not gender specific, but women earn money in different ways from men.

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Both women characters split in order to remedy their situations, but Ma Yango divides into two separate women, good wife and bad wife, while Milagros develops a male persona. Ma Yango does not alter her gender identity in her quest for a child and social recognition. She fulfills her personal goals and contributes to her society without taking on male characteristics. Carlitos allows Milagros to participate in money-making activities reserved for men the control that the men have over money in *Muñeca Brava* obliges Milagros to develop a masculine character. The need to be masculine in order to gain access to money is mirrored in the gender dynamics in Bamiléké regions that hinder women from succeeding financially, which, in turn, inhibits them from participating in their communities by restricting their activities to the house.

The shift from communal involvement in personal matters in “The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace,” compared to the importance of privacy in *Muñeca Brava*, also reflects cultural and social changes. In “The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace” the village elders, who hold the wisdom of the community, punish Pa Sango for mistreating his virtuous wife by fining him fifty goats and one thousand yam seedlings, and they require him to apologize to Ma Yango. In *Muñeca Brava*, on the other hand, Ivo’s promiscuous and deceptive behavior towards women is rarely questioned. He has sex with many women throughout the telenovela and tries to sleep with Milagros and Andrea within the same week to win a bet, yet one of the few times Milagros finds out about one of his affairs she simply plays a silly trick on him, nothing more. While Ivo can choose whom he sleeps with and how he treats them without worrying too much about the consequences, the village keeps Pa Sango

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159 Nzuh, *Tales from the Grassland and the Forest*, 89
in check. Pa Sango’s personal life is a matter of public concern, while Ivo’s personal life is not public, regardless of its impact on others. In *Muñeca Brava*, just as money is a personal asset rather than belonging to the community, behavior is a personal responsibility.

The idea that children are the wealth of the family and the larger concept of communal involvement in personal life in Nzuh’s narrative reveals different attitudes toward marriage than one finds in *Muñeca Brava*. The ultimate goal of marriage in “The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace” is to have children, while for Milagros marriage is a personal and financial fulfillment independent of the community. In his work on marriage in the United States, Popenoe describes a shift from the emphasis on communal or familial obligations to individual needs:

Traditionally, marriage has been understood as a social obligation - an institution designed mainly for economic security and procreation.

Today, marriage is understood mainly as a path toward self-fulfillment…No longer comprising a set of norms and social obligations that are widely enforced, marriage today is a voluntary relationship that individuals can make and break at will.160

For Milagros, marriage solves her individual financial problems and is very much centered on her personal relationship with Ivo. The idea of sharing Ivo leads to constant strife between Milagros and other women, yet Ma Yango wants desperately to share her husband with another woman so that they may have a child. As Hillman explains, “romantic love, a dominant feature in the current Western conception of marriage, is not very notable - or at least it is rarely dramatized - in traditional

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polygamous societies.”161 Children and social obligations outweigh Ma Yango’s personal relationship with her husband.

In *Alone Together*, Amato, Booth, Johnson, and Rogers describe how marriage in the United States is changing as it has become increasingly individualist. They identify two distinct perspectives about the advantages and disadvantages of the changes produced in marriage. According to the Marital-Decline Perspective, marriage is weaker because of excessive individualism, and this has negative consequences for society in general. This perspective argues that the “relentless pursuit of happiness” and personal gratification has eroded the moral base of marriage. On the other hand, the Marital-Resilience Perspective acknowledges the changes in the institution of marriage, but does not necessarily consider the increased individualism as harmful. It emphasizes the importance of accepting all types of families, not just married hetero-sexual couples with children.162 Regardless of the value of the changes in marital relations, these perspectives demonstrate how increased individualism goes hand in hand with transitions from public life to private life, and from communal interests to personal satisfaction, in the institution of marriage.

The difference in what is considered desirable in women in Nzuh’s narrative and *Muñeca Brava* also demonstrates social and cultural transitions from communal interests. Ma Yango works hard to grab Pa Sango’s attention, while the women of *Muñeca Brava* use their bodies to seduce men. Kirka tries to turn Pa Sango against Ma Yango by telling him that Ma Yango is not working hard, which makes her

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undesirable. Once she has a child, Ma Yango is the ideal wife because she cooks, cleans, grows food, and takes care of her family. Working hard and having a baby make her a desirable woman.

They ways in which women use their bodies in the two narratives further demonstrate cultural and social transitions initiated by economic development. In the “Old Woman and the Golden Necklace” Kirka’s body produces a much sought-after baby; in *Muñeca Brava* women’s bodies produce money. In “The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace” women’s bodies produce different kinds of wealth in different ways; because children are important to the entire community, more people are invested in Kirka’s body as a source of communal stability. Women’s bodies’ produce babies and food through cultivation, and therefore the community has interest in determining the rules governing her body.

The women of *Muñeca Brava* use their bodies as a financial resource in their struggle for social influence and money. The women have control over their own bodies and sexualities, no one forces sexual relationships upon anyone, yet they use their bodies to earn money, and therefore their bodies become an object of commerce. In their work on motherhood in capitalist and consumerist societies, Taylor, Layne, and Wozniak argue that “in capitalist society, where the emphasis is on private ownership, the body is viewed not as a resource for the community or the society, but as private property, a personal resource.”163 Women in the telenovela have individual authority over their bodies, and they use them as a personal commodity to make money. As Taylor, Layne, and Wozniak point out “viewing the body as property, privately and individually owned, protects each of us from all of us, protects us as

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individuals from the power of the state."\textsuperscript{164} Milagros has complete authority over her body, but because capitalism motivates individuals to make money and own goods, and because men often control money, the women use their bodies as a personal commodity to produce material wealth for themselves, rather than food and children.

In Nzuh’s narrative women’s lives are directly linked to communal wellbeing and values that regulate everyone’s behavior, while in \textit{Muñeca Brava} the women either use their body as a personal resource to make money or develop a male alter ego that gives them direct access to money. Despite the change in emphasis from public to private interests and goals, however, women’s work has remained largely the same. Women in both narratives clean, cook, and have children, but the value placed on their work has changed. Only the maids of the telenovela clean, cook, raise children, and care for the sick and the elderly. The way that women and men interact on \textit{Muñeca Brava} implies that women can earn more money and enhance their social status by using their beauty and sexuality to attract men than they can through domestic work or caring for the family.

The inability for maids to produce much money initiates an additional split in Milagros’s character; as a maid she earns simply a wage, but as “the girl in the red skirt” she attracts Ivo’s attention and therefore potentially gains access to his wealth. The desire for money not only causes her to develop a male alter-ego, it also splits her into a domestic character and into a sexual character. The division of classes produced by access to financial resources relegates women’s work to the lower class. Women have individual authority over their bodies, yet class distinctions create a

\textsuperscript{164} Taylor, Layne, and Wozniak, \textit{Consuming Motherhood}, 23.
hierarchy of the use of their bodies; sex is hyper valued, but domestic work only earns wages and therefore provides no opportunities to accumulate capital.

Because of class distinctions, access to great wealth, for women, depends not only on their sexual attractiveness, but also on their heritage. Women, if they are not born into money, must make money by using their bodies. Marta, the other young attractive maid for the di Carlos family, ultimately fails to amass the wealth that Milagros accumulates. Although she attempts to seduce rich men, she is from the lower class and ultimately fails to amass great wealth, while Milagros’ success is revealed to be linked to her birth origins: children of wealthy people should be wealthy. As maids, Marta and Milagros are restricted to the minimal wage income that domestic work produces. While they both attempt to gain money through sexual relationships with men, Milagros’s genetic background explains why she succeeds. The world of Muñeca Brava is not merely a meritocracy based on gaining access to money by seducing men: a genetic predisposition reveals fixed class hierarchies. Marta’s lower class parentage restrains her from becoming rich, while class Milagros’s mixed background an additional push in a society that depends on money, and that devalues domestic work.

The devaluation of domestic work and Muñeca Brava reflects the historical transitions in Bamiléké gender dynamics since the introduction of a money-based economy. Women’s work has remained the same; women have the same duties that they have always had, but what has changed is how society values their work. New economic systems do not reward women for their accomplishments, and their inability to earn money creates a dependency on those that can do so. As Michelle
Rosaldo cites in her work on *Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding*,

“woman’s place in human social life is not in any direct sense a product of the things she does (or even less, a function of what, biologically, she is) but the meaning her activities acquire through concrete social interactions.”\(^{165}\) Mohanty similarly notes that “women are not subordinate because of the fact of exchange but because of the modes of exchange instituted and the values attached to these modes.”\(^{166}\)

Comparisons of Nzuh’s traditional narrative and *Muñeca Brava* reinforce the impression that the modes of exchange instituted by a cash-based economy in Bamiléké communities have changed gender dynamics and devalued women’s work, thereby establishing their subordination to those who have access to money.

### The Influence/Reflection of Narratives and Cultural Values

The shift in gender dynamics in Bamiléké communities and the congruence between the new dynamics and what is portrayed on *Muñeca Brava* suggest a high correlation between narrative and culture, but does *Muñeca Brava* import or reflect cultural values? In other words, does this foreign narrative help create new values or reaffirm existing values, or does it work in a different way to help people grasp and think through existing values? On the one hand, Bettelheim argues that “whatever our age, only a story conforming to the principles underlying our thought processes

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carries conviction for us.” 167 Similarly, in “Texts of Female Desire and of Community” Madill and Goldmeier state that “the genre of social realism requires that the text conform to the conventions used to understand everyday life and hence resonates with the clusters of the meanings with which its audience is familiar.” 168 If this theory is true, a narrative of any kind must imitate established cultural values, or “the principles underlying our thought processes,” in order to be understood by and gain favor with the audience. According to this way of thinking, Muñeca Brava entices and grabs people because it reflects existing values, which suggest that the accumulation of wealth is the ultimate achievement in life. Muñeca Brava, therefore, is successful because it conforms to social conventions that the audience understands, and the continued desire to watch telenovelas despite their redundancy stems from the reaffirmation of cultural values that they provide.

While Madill and Goldmeier argue that telenovelas attracts an audience because they reflect pre-established cultural values, Gunter, on the other hand, suggests that “regular exposure to television, with its stereotyped and often exaggerated portrayals of behaviors, can affect viewers’ conception of the prevalence of similar behaviors in the real world.” 169 According to this idea, television has the power to change society because it exaggerates actual life, and therefore the media transforms society and creates new values out of pre-existing values. Television influences viewers’ values and “conceptions of social reality by displaying certain patterns of behavior on screen, especially when these portrayals are credible and

169 Gunter, *Media Sex*, 84.
relevant to the lives of viewers."\textsuperscript{170} Narrative, in the form of televised entertainment, has the capacity to alter cultural perceptions through the exaggeration of already established behaviors or values.

According to these ways of thinking, \textit{Muñeca Brava}, even though it is a foreign narrative, both propagates values that were established by the introduction of a cash-based economy, and creates new values based on exaggerations of these established values. Madill and Goldmeier discuss how cultural knowledge is “perpetuated” and “evolved” through television;

From the perspective of discursive psychology, watching television is considered to be an active process in which viewers draw on their store of cultural knowledge to interpret the texts presented. Hence, as a popular institution, television is a prime medium through which cultural meanings are perpetuation, challenged and evolved as viewers recognize, dispute and debate what they see.\textsuperscript{171}

\textit{Muñeca Brava} is a medium through which values are both reaffirmed and adjusted. The telenovela both reflects and exaggerates cultural values about wealth (money means happiness) and gender (domestic and family work is devalued) that began with the transition to a money-based economy. By exaggerating and linking the values of money and sexual desirability and individual happiness, \textit{Muñeca Brava} reinforces established values.

The attractiveness of the foreignness of the telenovela also helps to perpetuate the depicted values. The popularity of foreign items makes the lifestyles of the

\textsuperscript{170} Gunter, \textit{Media Sex}, 81.
\textsuperscript{171} Madill and Goldmeier, “Texts of Female Desire and of Community,” 473.
characters on *Muñeca Brava* desirable. Just as brand names gain value simply because of a name, foreign items gain value simply because they are foreign. Wearing a foreign shirt simply to display the brand name is popular because it displays an understanding of a global community that perpetuates the desirability of money and wealth. Not only does foreignness make *Muñeca Brava* attractive, familiarity with the telenovela implies access to electricity and therefore a certain economic and urban status. Villages without electricity, where traditional oral narratives are still common, do not have access to television, while in the ever-growing urban areas the ups and downs of Millagros’s love life are well-known. The desire for money, while concretely established in Bamiléké communities, is popular and foreign when transmitted through Argentine television. The value placed on money on *Muñeca Brava* is simultaneously foreign and familiar, which makes it seem universal.

According to Mohanty’s definition of colonialism, the perceived universality of the values on *Muñeca Brava* act as a colonial force as “colonialism almost invariably implies a relation of structural domination and suppression- often violent- of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question.”\(^{172}\) Using this definition, the propagation of values through television ignores the specificity of culture by reinforcing the demand for foreign products and discounting traditional systems. The implementation of these ideals encourages the desire for wealth and the desire to consume products that previously did not exist in the region. Because it reaffirms values about money and gender instigated by the European introduction of a cash-

\(^{172}\) Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 18.
based economy, *Muñeca Brava* represses Bamiléké culture by suppressing differences and emphasizing the similarities between multiple cultures.

Television encourages the assimilation of Bamiléké culture to a global culture, and those who choose to watch television participate in this assimilation. Theorists such as Mattelart acknowledge that local subjects are not “passive receptacles” that involuntarily participate in cultural suppression. Viewers have agency, telenovelas are not forced upon anyone. While the Bamiléké decide what to watch, the desire to have wealth, a value that *Muñeca Brava* ardently supports, was instilled during a period of colonization that included much violence and bloodshed. The transition to French rule and French values was not without forced assimilation. Viewers actively participate in the suppression of cultural differences, but the initial steps that imposed the similarity of values, which stemmed from an introduction of a cash economy and the colonist’s desire to make money in the colonies, were forceful.

If suppression of heterogeneity constitutes colonialism through homogenization, then “The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace,” also colonizes through suppression of cultural differences. In her preface, Nzuh argues that because media and technology have replaced traditional story telling,

> rudimentary cultural values are thwarted instead of being handed down…It is with this picture in mind that I was motivated to write these tales, in order to transmit moral codes which are agents of social

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conformity. It is my wish that through these stories cultural norms and values will be handed down from one generation to the other.\textsuperscript{174} Nzuh clearly explains that her purposes for writing down stories she grew up with are to “transmit codes which are agents of social conformity.” Her intention is to conform to “cultural norms” and therefore emphasize cultural similarities. The move to transition back to an earlier state of “moral codes” assumes the inherent purity or truth of past culture. As Grewal and Kaplan point out, “every cultural formation [is] a hybrid of something, cultural formation is not ‘pure and unchanging.’”\textsuperscript{175} With over three-hundred ethnic groups in Cameroon, contact with many cultures is inevitable, and therefore culture could never be static. If “The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace” functions according to its author’s intentions, then it homogenizes culture by suppressing differences. While “The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace” emphasizes cultural similarities and ignores the complex elements of Bamiléké culture that make it multicultural, \textit{Muñeca Brava} suppresses cultural differences and ignores cultural specificity by reinforcing established and foreign values.

Not only do Nzuh’s intentions ignore cultural specificity, the printed medium of delivery is unchanging, while oral narratives allow for and reflect change and evolution. The narrative elements of “The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace” cannot change because the story is written down, just as the narrative elements of \textit{Muñeca Brava} will never change. Oral narratives, on the other hand, never remain the same because no two people tell a story in exactly the same way. There are

\textsuperscript{174} Nzuh, \textit{Tales from the Grassland and the Forest}, 8-9.
different oral versions of “The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace” throughout Cameroon, but Nzuh’s written version is fixed.

Written and televised narratives differ from oral narratives in their inability to change, and also in their distribution and consumption. Urban Bamiléké, as previously noted, watch television and imported entertainment much more than they tell stories, either from books or memory. Television and publication allow for widespread distribution of stories that can be consumed by individuals. Watching television can be a solitary activity, while oral narratives need at least two people, if not a group, to be realized. The distribution of oral narratives is more work intensive than watching television, and the increasing access to television allows more and more people to watch unchanging narratives.

Although “The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace” supports social conformity, if the narrative acts according to Nzuh’s intentions, the wide distribution of the telenovela and the attraction of foreign Eurocentric models empower *Muñeca Brava* with more influence than “The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace.” In *Unthinking Eurocentrism* Shohat and Stam define Eurocentrism as “the procrustean forcing of cultural heterogeneity into a single paradigmatic perspective in which Europe is seen as the unique source of meaning, as the world’s center of gravity, as ontological ‘reality’ to the rest of the worlds shadow.”

Even though it is Argentine, *Muñeca Brava* transmits Eurocentric ideals because it portrays Western values and ignores the world outside of a white upper class. In addition, Eurocentrism is widespread, while Bamilékécentrism has yet to harm significantly even Bamiléké regions, let alone the world. Although the homogenizing effects of

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“The Old Woman and the Golden Necklace” are not insignificant, they pale in comparison to the homogenizing effects of *Muñeca Brava*.

Shohat and Stam argue that multiculturalism is a way to address the problematics created by Eurocentrism. Multiculturalism is “seeing world history and contemporary social life from the perspective of the radical equality of peoples in status, potential, and rights. Multiculturalism decolonizes representation not only in terms of cultural artifacts—literary canons, museum exhibits, film series— but also in terms of power relations between communities.”

*Muñeca Brava*, although it is foreign, does not support multiculturalism; it reinforces dominant colonial values. Because it suppresses the heterogeneity of Bamiléké culture by reinforcing values established by French colonialism, *Muñeca Brava* is a tool of auto-colonialism that inhibits multiculturalism.

*Muñeca Brava* effectively denies Bamiléké culture its unique culture and histories. Moreover, if poor, oppressed women are established as a homogenous group by implicit comparison to the successful women of *Muñeca Brava*, then their position is understood to be universal and not historically and culturally specific. Mohanty argues that when a homogeneous notion of oppressed women as a group is assumed, it, produces the image of an ‘average Third World woman.’ This average Third World woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexual constrained) and her being ‘Third World’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I

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177 Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 5.
suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions.\textsuperscript{178}

Thus, if \textit{Muñeca Brava} clearly distinguishes Milagros as a rich, “modern,” woman, and thereby implicitly identifies non-Western or traditional women as “ignorant, poor….etc.,” \textit{Muñeca Brava} (implicitly) marginalizes poor women in developing countries by grouping them together and assuming the homogeneity of their cultures, races, incomes, and oppression. The distinction between modern and traditional women is also based on conformity to a model of beauty and seduction; a woman must be analogous to Milagros, in terms of their ability to seduce men, to be successful and modern. Moreover, this binary opposition assumes that it is desirable to be “modern” women, that Western women have better lives. \textit{Muñeca Brava}, by implicit comparison, establishes traditional women as oppressed, poor, uneducated, not white, and unable to seduce men.

By ignoring complexity and specificity, binary oppositions such as modern and traditional cannot address problematic gender interactions. If “what binds women together is a sociological notion of the ‘sameness’ of their oppression,”\textsuperscript{179} regardless of historical and cultural distinctions, the universal notion of the oppressed woman implies that the position of traditional women is always that of the oppressed; “men exploit, women are exploited. Such simplistic formulations are historically reductive; they are also ineffectual is designing strategies to combat oppressions. All

\textsuperscript{178} Mohanty, \textit{Feminism without Borders}, 22.
\textsuperscript{179} Mohanty, \textit{Feminism without Borders}, 22-23.
they do is reinforce binary divisions between men and women.”\textsuperscript{180} By ignoring cultural and historic specificities and the complex way in which gender dynamics and culture form, binary divisions do not solve inequalities. To universalize the experience of Bamiléké women as “Third World Women” by comparison to modern, wealthy, and educated women both posits that they are inherently susceptible to gender, racial, and class inequalities, and suggests that there is no way to overcome them.

\textit{Muñeca Brava} does not simply act as an oppressive cultural force, nor are the Bamiléké simply oppressed by foreign narrative. Many theorists have noted binary oppositions such as these remain within paradigms of colonial discourse, and because of the complex nature of global systems, such relationships are in fact impossible to classify or define in simple terms. Grewal and Kaplan note that terms such as colonizer-colonized or oppressor-oppressed “often overlook complex, multiply constituted identities that cannot be accounted for by binary oppositions.”\textsuperscript{181} Arjun Appadurai’s “model of disjunctive flow” provides a method to look at the complex way in which different aspects of global systems, or “landscapes,” interact. Brazeil and Mannur summarize Appadurai’s “imagined world landscapes as,”

\textit{ethnoscapescapes} (people who move between nations, such as tourists, immigrants, exiles, guestworkers, and refugees), \textit{technoscapescapes} (technology…), \textit{financescapescapes} (global capital, currency markets,

\textsuperscript{180} Mohanty, \textit{Feminism without Borders}, 31.

stock exchanges), *mediascapes* (electronic and new media) and *ideoescapes* (official state ideologies and counter-ideologies).\(^{182}\)

*Muñeca Brava* has components that function in all of these categories. Although the characters do not physically interact with viewers, the characters are present in households through their images. They do not function or interact in the same way as a person who is physically there, but their differences and similarities as human beings are seen and have a significant narrative effect. As people “who constitute the shifting world in which we live,”\(^{183}\) the characters of the telenovela fit into the category of *ethnoscapes*. Secondly, *Muñeca Brava* acts as a *technoscape* because it uses technology, television, and electricity for transmission. Thirdly, *Muñeca Brava* is a *financescape* in that it portrays matters of money and finances within a capitalist framework. Fourthly, a telenovela, as a form of media, is unmistakably a *mediascape*. And lastly, *Muñeca Brava* imports non-native ideals and ideologies, specifically financial ideologies, as an *ideoescape*. *Muñeca Brava* inhabits all of Appadurai’s imagined worlds, or landscapes, that influence global cultural flow.

*Muñeca Brava* works within a framework of the intricate relationships of different components of globalization. The telenovela transmits values by participating in various levels or landscapes of cultural flow that all influence Bamiléké culture. In terms of gender dynamics, these values have established money as the ultimate signifier of success, which, combined with gender roles, impede women from succeeding unless they use their bodies as commodities or are born with

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money. But these influences and values, which are perpetuated by *Muñeca Brava*, also came from another complex process of global cultural flow in Argentina, which has its own complicated history of various cultural influences.

Homogenization is not restricted to foreign influence. As Appadurai notes, the simplification of the “forces (and fears) of homogenization can also be exploited by nation-states in relation to their own minorities, by posing global commoditization (or capitalism, or some other such external enemy) as more real than the threat of its own hegemonic strategies.”[^184] Local institutions can use the fear of foreign homogenization to encourage a new set of homogenizing principals. What needs to be understood in order to prevent homogenization is that cultural evolution is not necessarily a loss or a gain, but that a reduction of differences within a culture decreases the possibilities and choices available to its members. Both Nzuh’s narrative and *Muñeca Brava* decrease diversity individually, but together they provide more options and cultural information. Narratives, as components of an intricate global system, provide as many choices as possible. Stuart Hall argues that, the homeland is not waiting back there for the new ethnics to rediscover it. There is a past to be learned about, but the past is now seen, and it has to be grasped as history, as something that has to be told. It is narrated. It is grasped through desire. It is grasped through reconstruction. It is not just a fact that has been waiting to ground our identities.[^185]

Maintaining traditional oral narratives, without valorizing them, increases the amount of available choices by creating ties to the past. If the Bamiléké lose their traditional narratives, they, and the world, lose the opportunity to consider the specific values of those stories. Narratives are a way to both preserve past values as possibilities and circulate new ones, and therefore ensuring the preservation of oral narratives is necessary in order to achieve multiculturalism and diverse opportunities.

While someone watching an addicting soap opera might prefer to continue watching television rather than read a book of traditional oral narratives, the possibility to access oral narratives that are no longer told must exist, and these narratives must be addressed and studied in academia. There will be a time when oral Bamiléké stories are no longer transferred to younger generations, but it is necessary to keep them in existence, either as museum pieces or written in books, in order to have a complete picture of historical and cultural transitions and evolutions. The ability to study traditional narratives, in written form, will insure the existence of different ways of thought and different lifestyles. The narratives will subsist in an unchanging format, no longer evolving with each storyteller, but to loose them completely would make it impossible for scholars, students, or anyone to reach the historical and cultural specificities of Bamiléké culture that are found within oral narratives. History must be told, must be narrated, in order to circulate as many modes of thought as possible. The more numerous the possibilities the more likely it is to find solutions to the innumerable and complex challenges that the Bamiléké face as members of an intricate global community.
Bibliography


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