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The story of houses in the grassfields: mobility, belonging and hierarchies in urbanising North-West Cameroon

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Abstract

The central argument of this thesis is to establish the link between mobility, material culture and urbanisation in Africa with special focus on the urban elite of Baba I in the North West Region of Cameroon. The study lies within an intricate political system and topography. The thesis questions the effects of material culture on landscape transformation of the society through mobility. Over the past decades, the use and acquisition of land have changed greatly with increased geographical and social mobility. This has caused tremendous effects on the lives of people be it politically, economically and socially and above all in the dynamics of land acquisition and development. The changes on the landscapes are not only physically visible but also socio-culturally with the way people carry themselves around through their daily interactions. Thus, the thesis attempts to study these transformation processes in the form of an ethnography of mobility and belonging of the Papiakum people of Baba I. An extra contribution of this thesis is that it is the first to tell the story of the Papiakum who have been glossed over by the early colonial ethnographers and anthropologists of the North Western Grassfields of Cameroon. The research focused on a specific group: the urban dwellers of Baba I who are constructing at home. I tried to understand the meaning and importance of land and houses (home) within the Baba community in which these elites invest. The study of these changing infrastructural landscapes gave an insight into the socio-political and cultural settings and challenges as well as the role of the elite in development.. The construction of these houses and other infrastructure are an expression of this elite's belonging as required by Papiakum cultural tenets. Methods: Data were obtained mainly through the life histories of some research partners. Interviews were also used in addition to field observations. In order to enhance the understanding of this study, the use of photos served as ice breakers while the Participatory Learning Action (PLA) enabled the researcher to immerse herself into the community.

This thesis has been structured into seven chapters. Chapter One focuses on the general introduction of the conceptual framework of the study. Material Culture and Migration/Mobility are the main concepts that stand as the guide post through which the development of proceeding chapters will ensue to attain the objectives of the study. Chapter Two examines how I gained entry and went about collecting data and what I know about Baba I. It will further examine the methodology of data collection that were used as well as the photographs and films, other media through which societies are presented and represented; a deeper reflection on the film involving the process of production will be handled in chapter seven. The methodology chapter will be an independent and integral part of the thesis elaborating more on the reflexivity and subjectivity of the central problem. Chapter Three goes to situate and trace the history of the Papiakum people. This will unfold the basic ethnography of Baba I paving way to go into the materiality and changing socio-political landscape of the people. It also delves into the basic land tenure system of the Cameroon in general and Baba I in particular in Chapter Four. Houses are constructed and before you construct land is imperative. Land acquisition has not been static therefore the demand has been changing as migrants return to acquire it. Above all the chapter contributes to the relationship between the chapter and urbanisation thesis.

Chapter Five handles the core questions on mobility focusing on the literature on migration and mobility. History of mobility from and in Papiakum; relation to literatures on the Grassfields; elaborate on the dire need of most migrants to remain connected with those left behind in their various mobilities. By expanding on the meaning and use of material

culture, it illustrates how belonging is gained, maintained or lost amongst the Papiakum as identities are questioned to attest belonging especially by those living and working in various urban centres. Following the discussions in chapters three and four, Chapter Six examines the transformation process of the architectural landscape and infrastructure which is the crux of this study. Our discussions here bring out the meaning and significance of Nda (house) among the Papiakum and how the development of these Nda through mobility are changing the landscape thus ushering in the process of urbanisation. It further explores the central discussion of the thesis on material culture which is both tangible and intangible. The pith of the discussion here is on how through material culture we will gain insight into character and community structure which reveals emotional qualities. This involves examining utilitarian constructions, houses, to determine the values they embody among the Papiakum. Delving into these houses will inherently expose drives and aspirations in this class structured community bringing about transformations on the landscape through textual and visual forms.

Chapter Seven dwells on the summary and significance of the film; how it contributes in answering the central question of the thesis. The process of the production of the film will be elaborated which binds the visual systems of the Papiakum people. Chapter Eight serves as the concluding unit of this study. It is the synthesis of the conclusions of the various chapters showing how mobility in all its forms stands out as a key vector in the process of transforming landscape in the communities. This thesis has established that through mobility the actions/activities of those migrants who left for greener pastures are having implications on their lives and those of the others in the community. This is so because whatever project they are carrying out does not just look at the nuclear family but opens up to the whole community as their participation cannot be ignored be it in kind, cash or moral. The constructions (houses) do not only attest the maturity and belonging of its members but also creates new social classes with the type of houses built by the Papiakum people. Social hierarchies are created, reinforced or even lost with the coming of these changes brought in as a result of mobility. It has therefore made it very difficult for one not to participate or be involved in the rural community developmental projects as it is an expectation of the community. Participation forms the kernel of acceptance and belonging in the community which is visibly displayed during socio-cultural and political gatherings as portrayed in the film “THE PAPIAKUM PEOPLE”.

The cultural/material culture in Papiakum is not just housing. Through the house one shows his, her position in society. In that sense the Palace, where the Fon (king) lives with his wives and children is exemplary. It is the cultural seat of traditional government. The palace has been quite central in setting the pace for most of the things that happen in Papiakum. It has always stood out as the focal point for innovations and development. The expectation is that every new thing is brought in, made known and validated by the palace. The Fons have been the main drivers of this transformation and validity process. This is corroborated by Yoyo, one of my main informants, as he talks about the first stone and corrugated roof house in the palace as he grew up and the validation of the construction of houses by Moh Tanghongho, the Fon. The story of Moh Tanghongho father’s house being knocked down mysteriously because it was thought of being in competition with the palace demonstrates the importance of the approval for construction from the palace as they say ‘fog lah mbue nthi’ meaning wealth is not power. By this there is a constant reminder for the respect of socio-political hierarchy in the society.

The urban elites who built the houses are mainly businessmen and civil servants, who are the two main categories of persons found whose activities in the village helped shape the changing architectural landscape. The Fons, close collaborators and their carrier boys have been seen to have spearheaded the evolution of houses through their different trading routes and activities that exposed them to the consumption of foreign object (ostentatious goods).

On the Other hand with the coming of formal education, a new social category was created as Papiakum people interested in furthering their education were obliged to travel out of the village to places where these institutions were found. It should be noted that the first primary school came into being in 1947 and secondary school in 1982. Schooling brought in the next category of persons who aspired to be civil servants. Through their travels these persons experienced and brought back home new ideas for the enhancement of themselves and the society at large. A new class of people came out from these groups whom I will refer to here as 'bushfallers' or 'urbanites'. These are people who had or are resident in the urban centres of the country. They have not only concentrated in the construction of their private houses at home but have contributed a great deal in bringing urban amenities to the village which is seen as the urbanisation process of the rural area. These modern infrastructures are changing daily in the mobile urbanising world as people and ideas are constantly on the move leaving its impact on society.

Related to the building of houses, or changes in infrastructure is the access to land. Land apparently plays an important role in belonging, identity construction. Chapter four dwelled on the different access mechanisms, gender relations and conflicts calling to question the identity of persons. My study shows that identity is fluid as it is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated to bring forth complex gender relations. The construction of these infrastructure are ordered through the land tenure system which is experiencing some changes as new social classes are formed as well as the coming of urban amenities that need land. The access and acquisition process has moved from being handed down from father to son on family plots to the re-appropriation and purchase depending on the vision of the community or the entrepreneur's project. The concept of land being attributed to the male is being challenged with the increasing gender awareness and is called to question when it comes to access and acquisition. Women are a force to reckon with when it comes to land acquisition and construction of houses for their sons or as widows or lone child of the family.

This thesis challenges the notion that the quest for greener pastures, bushfalling, for personal enhancement can only be abroad. This research has gone contrary to this believe by exposing the fact that urbanites within the national territorial boundaries are championing the development of their communities. Baba I is a glaring example that remittances from abroad are not the driving force behind development and that people have used their home based networks within the state to urbanise the rural area. Through the evolvment of architectural landscape I had the opportunity to open up the writing of the basic ethnography of the Papiakum people. By tracing their migratory route I am contributing towards the development of more studies have added my voice in showing how mobility, material culture and urbanisation are intrinsically linked serving as a crucial vector in the development of any society. Touristic potential of the area has been brought to light for more studies and entrepreneurial activities to be established in the tourism and hospitality industry given its location on the ring road. Second home tourism broadens issues of access, mobility and regulation.

Short Summary of the Thesis

Migration either vertically or horizontally; rural or urban; national or transnational; internal or international, is undertaken for diverse reasons. In this book we meet people who migrated from their homes to find better opportunities elsewhere. We focus on a specific area in Africa, North west province of Cameroon that is especially known for the mobility of its people. The history of this part of Africa is coloured by the plantation economies in the Southwest that were developed by the Germans and later other colonial powers and the elites of the post-colonial period, attracting labour from the North West Region. But then also people became mobile from this area to work in urban areas, and even to join the European and USA diaspora's. Part of this story as I will show in this book is the relationship that these migrants, or mobile people have with their Home. By investing in their home villages they have become part of the urbanisation history of this part of Cameroon. Especially the mobile people who do not per se leave to go to Europe but who are diasporic in Cameroon are the people who invest most in their home villages.

Before choosing Baba I on the Ndop plain as my case study for this research project, a reconnaissance trip was undertaken. This village found along the ring road of Cameroon looked always quiet whenever we drove by as students going to boarding school in Nso. The visit into the village turned out to be intriguing as the village laid on an undulating topography with connecting network of roads. These roads linked families and quarters through landed infrastructures (houses and farms) on the landscape. Visiting some of these structures expanded my fields of study to various urban centres in Cameroon where the owners were resident. Thus, the methods below acted as guiding steps in the process of data collection for this research. This chapter will be structured as follows: Multi-Sited and Connectivity; Visuals (photographs and videos); Life Histories and Interviews and Observations. The film involving the process of production will be handled in chapter seven.

Crucial to this book is the new houses constructed by the migrants. From the corrugated and houses of stone to storey buildings there is a history and a story to tell. Position within the material culture and belonging literature this book is walking down the lane to appreciate these houses, land and the mobility of the people. The book questions the effects of material culture on landscape transformation of the society through textual and visual forms. Over the past decades, the use and acquisition of land have greatly changed with increased geographical and social mobility. This has caused tremendous effects on the lives of people politically, economically and socially and above all in the dynamics of land acquisition and development. The changes on the landscapes are not only physically visible but also socio-culturally with the way people carry themselves around through their daily interactions. Thus, the book attempts to study these transformation processes in the form of an ethnography of mobility and belonging of the Papiakum people of Baba I. An extra contribution of this book is that it is the first to tell the story of the Papiakum who have not received adequate attention either by the early colonial ethnographers or the anthropologists of the North Western Grassfields of Cameroon. This is the gap which this book attempts to fill.

My research interest was predicated on the fact that, although much work has been done on mobility in Anglophone Cameroon. These studies have recently focused on the movement of people from this region to Europe, America and recently China. In this book I diverted from this conventional narrative to research on those who never went to Europe, America and China as portrayed in studies and their effects on their home societies. In my

research which has resulted in this book I focused on those who have left the Papiakum but did not go out to Europe. They went to other cities in Cameroon and while back they have changed the landscape of Baba 1 through the type of houses they have been constructing. What lies beneath these houses is a long story that can only be narrated through the lenses of belonging and land. The very big houses have changed the landscape remarkably