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

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## **8. Conclusion: Material Culture as a lens to Socio-Political Change**

The houses in Baba I, belonging to the Diaspora elites tell a story about how urbanisation and migration influences the way the villages in the Grassfields developed. The houses in themselves are material culture that speaks. In the documentary that goes with this thesis I show how they speak, through their forms and structures that are often rather exorbitant. It has become clear through the stories of the owners of the houses that for them these houses represent their link to the village, almost their umbilical cord. What they do not realise probably is how their investment in the village is also part of a changing social landscape in which they become a new elite with specific positions in the village. This thesis has attempted vividly to illustrate this point of view.

The approach in this thesis was ethnographic. I spent more than a year with the people in Papiakum also known as Baba I, where I also had the privilege to share the space of the palace for a certain time. My vision on ethnography does also include the visual. I have been trained as a visual anthropologist and the choice to follow material culture is also a fact of life for me. I was one of the first anthropologists to be interested in Baba I. The ethnography of the Grassfields has been centred on Mankon, Kom, Bafut, Bali and Nso just to name but a few. This fact urged me to include a chapter on the imagined origins of the Papiakum people which included also extensive explanations of land issues. In fact we should realise that this thesis is the first thesis written on Baba I (Papiakum people).

In this study I combined the visual representations and ethnography of the Papiakum illustrating how closely knitted they are. Architectural expressions were the central visualization of the problems that I discovered during this ethnographic research. It is important to read the landscape and its visuals. This can be best grasped in photography and film. That is why this study made use of photography and film as research tools for the dissemination of knowledge of this society. The film, *The Papiakum People*, gives us a glimpse into the ethnography and visual representations of some key events of this community.

Through the evolution of the architectural landscape, I had the opportunity to open up the writing of the basic ethnography of the Papiakum people. By tracing their migratory routes, I have also searched to understand the Papiakum and their mobile culture. I have added my voice in showing how mobility, material culture and access to land are intrinsically linked serving as a crucial vector in the development of any society. It is very hard to see that this part of Cameroon has become a conflict region. The Fon no longer lives in Baba I simply because he is a target for the independent fighters. I will come back to this in the afterword of this thesis.

Like other people in Anglophone Cameroon, the Papiakum are very mobile. Already in the early 20th century they moved to the plantations located in coastal Cameroon. Post-colonial migration patterns of the Papiakum show a deviation from what has been described for other groups in the region. Here I introduced the concept of bushfalling as a contested category. Bushfallers, those who search for greener pastures, do not only go far away, beyond national borders, as is suggested in the literature on the phenomenon. Instead the people with whom I interacted and who are the people constructing in the villages were all migrants within the borders of Cameroon. Thus bushfalling is national as well countering the literature that suggests that bushfallers are

only those in Europe, United States and quite recently, China Korea and Vietnam. This finding subscribes the statement made by Landau and Bakewell (2018)<sup>1</sup> that most migration movements are on the African continent and not intercontinental. Consequently, Africa generates its own diaspora.

In the thesis I link the stories of these bushfallers to their itineraries of building houses in the village and the implication this has for local hierarchical relations, access to land. To understand their influence it is necessary to understand the ways hierarchies functioned in Baba I and how the urban elites interfere with that; and it was important to show the land tenure system (chapter 4) to be able to link this as well to the ‘disturbances’ that these elites create in these land tenure and hence hierarchies of the village.

Another core concept that I used in the thesis is belonging. Belonging to the community is the driving force behind the actions of the elites that I describe in the thesis. As I went along with those urban elites, their struggle to belong became even more central in the way I perceived their stories. Participation in village life 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 *Papiakum*. Their investments at home, both in cash, in houses, and emotionally were the centre of their lives. Their houses and community projects have reshaped the village and the life of its inhabitants. This is what I have tried to show in this thesis.



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<sup>1</sup> Landau, Loren, and Oliver Bakewell 2018. “Introduction: Forging a Study of Mobility, Integration and Belonging in Africa,” ([https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-58194-5\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-58194-5_1)). In: *Forging African Communities Mobility, Integration and Belonging*. Editors: Bakewell, Oliver, Landau, Loren B. (Eds.); Palgrave Mcmillan, pp 1-24.



*Figure 8.1: Yoyo's well-tailored compound.*

*Source:* Photo by Author

In my methodology I kept very close to what is called visual ethnography. I combined the collection of life histories, with observation collected in pictures and film that I present in a documentary. From various corroborating stories of my research partners, one is confronted immediately with the notion of urban-rural connection which is an underlining factor in the growth and social changes of the urban elite in the establishment of their rootedness at home as well as for their social security.

In the following I will delve into the main conclusions of the thesis: First, the importance to read through material culture and what changes happen in society; Secondly, how the houses are not just material culture but go with a socio-political regime that changes the village; Thirdly, the importance of the rules of land access to the processes described in the thesis; Finally, the phenomenon of bushfalling as being national. I added a afterword to this thesis to reflect on today's situation and also on the astonishing touristic possibilities that the Fondom of Papiakum could have would there not have been a war erupted in 2016.

As emphasised by most informants, owning a house in the village was a basic requirement of society, to show the maturity of a (wo)man and her/his rootedness. This was also in the past when, as shown in chapter two, the building materials were mostly gotten from the natural environment where they settled. This changed with the availability of imported materials. For instance, the engagement of the Papiakum into long distant trade to Nigeria and coastal Cameroon saw the coming of new building materials like corrugated iron sheets, nails, cement, sand; iron rods just to name a few as shown in chapter three. These building materials did not only change the architectural styles but also introduced other elements as the construction of roads, bicycles, vehicles, bikes, pipe borne water, and electricity due to their contacts with the outside world. However, it did not change the cultural and social signification of the houses for the mobile people that the Papiakum are. On the contrary, the construction of the modern houses, though related to processes of belonging and identity, did introduce or probably better emphasize social hierarchies. The houses do not only attest the maturity and belonging of its members but also create new social classes. The storey buildings for example have their rankings and these houses also put to question their financial stand. This ranking of houses also attests emotions of

belonging of the owners of the houses. Their participation in events of the society is paramount as it confirms and reaffirms their sense of belonging to the community.

Post-colonial migration brought in wealth differences, and such economic distinction brought in a new class in Papiakum society. As Osili (2004) posits, migrants often maintain economic and social ties to their origin communities. The study of migrants' housing investments can inform a broad literature that seeks to understand the economic ties that migrants maintain with their communities of origin. Under the standard investment explanation, migrants invest in housing assets in the origin community because these investments yield high rates of return relative to the return on other assets. It can also be argued that migrants' investment decisions are closely related to their return migration plans as stipulated by most of my research partners.

Important in the processes at stake is the changes in the educational system. With the coming of formal (English) education, a new category of people/social class was created as Papiakum people interested in continuing their education were obliged to travel out of the village to places where these educational institutions were found. It should be noted that the first primary school came to being in 1947 and the first secondary school in 1982. Schooling brought in a 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 refer to here as bushfallers or urbanites. Among them are the main interlocutors for this research. These are people who had or are resident in the urban centres of the country, have not only concentrated in the construction of their private houses at home but have contributed a great deal in bringing urban amenities in the village that I see as the urbanisation process of the rural area.

However, the hierarchical position can never bypass the Palace that is the touching stone of the society. The palace always stands 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 as he talks about the first stone and corrugated roof house in the palace he saw as he grew up. The story of Moh Tanghongho's 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 of the respect of customary and socio-political hierarchy in the society.

Nonetheless, the activities of individuals made it possible for them to be considered as innovators, entrepreneurs and springboards for the urbanisation process. Businessmen and civil servants can be said to be the two main categories of persons found in Baba I whose activities in the village are gradually changing the 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).

This study demonstrated that the construction of these houses and the infrastructures with it are ordered through the land tenure system which is experiencing change as these new social classes are formed and with the coming of urban amenities need land to build. The access and acquisition process of land have 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. Land which was seen at the face value as

masculine is being questioned as gender relations are changing, when it comes to access and acquisition also by women. Today, women are a force to reckon with when it comes to acquiring land and building of houses for their sons or as widows or single parent families.

The construction of these infrastructures are probably laudable, but it also touched on access and acquisition of land, which in Papiakum society is an important part of one's identity. It is clear from the stories of the house builders that they trespass the rules of the village in some cases, which leads to situations in which the position of these elites are challenged. At the same time we also have noted that also other conflicts around land tenure, such as herder-farmer conflicts are intensifying.

The way the houses are constructed in the village and how it differs from the houses that were built in the past can be explained through the presence of more materials, but it should also be related to the mobility and the expectation of mobile people by the Papiakum. People who leave the village are expected to come back with wealth and invest for the good of the society back home. The houses are a sign of the success of the bushfaller. It is important to emphasize again that the notion of bushfaller in this thesis has also been a point for debate with scholars who introduced the concept in the academic debate. This thesis challenges the notion that the quest for greener pastures and bushfalling, for personal enhancement can only be abroad in Europe, America or out of one's country of origin. In Baba I, just two out of hundreds (with a dynamic community of over 50 in Belgium) of bushfallers from Europe, America or Asia have constructed houses and their contributions to the cultural and development association, BADECA has been minimal over the years. In this case, the numbers of in-house or internal bushfallers are much higher in than those bushfallers from Europe, America or Asia. The notion that is generally accepted nowadays that there is return migrants (those abroad) in households in terms of remittances and houses is therefore questioned. In this study I showed 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/house construction and that people have used their home based networks within the state to urbanise the rural area.

On a final note many studies have shown the interest of migrants to invest in houses in their countries of origin. Yet scholarly and political debates have mainly focused on the productivity of these investments, arguing that the money spent might have found more productive uses. These arguments thus forget to take into consideration these two dimensions: social and cultural. This study on the Papiakum has shown the relevance of social and cultural effects of these constructions. For instance as they have been central to socio-cultural and political networking of the community. It is a vivid example to also illustrate that migrants are seldom able to construct their own homes, instead depending on actors in their country of origin and in this case in their home village. Similar to Smith and Mazzucato (2009) this study elucidates the importance of unravelling the relationships involved with migrant investments in houses in order to understand the meaning of these investments as indicators also of socio-political change.

Afterword: A Reflection on Papiakum and the (impossible) Future of Tourism: Postcards from Baba I.

As I was folding up my research mats and putting down my research tent, another challenge to the Papiakum and Anglophone Cameroon was around the corner. It was what has been dubbed as the Anglophone problem which entered a new gear in the second decade of the 21st Century. It has become to be known as the Anglophone War of Independence, or the

Ambazonian War of Independence, that began in November 2016. This was after the ring leaders of the Ambazonia struggle were kidnapped in Nigeria and brought back to Cameroon where they are jailed presently. The arrests appeared to have been the final straw that escalated the simmering Anglophone marginalisation which is assumed by some Anglophones to have existed for more than 50 years since 1961 when the two units (Anglophones and Francophones) came into union to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon. According to most Anglophones, the Francophone dominated government failed to address the issues raised by the lawyers and teachers strike in the 2015/16 strike (Nkwi, 2020). The Anglophones took to armed insurrection as the final resort and turned the demands of the lawyers to the return to Federation which will give the Anglophone regions some autonomy. The Francophone dominated government rather than soothing the rising tensions remained adamant that there was no Anglophone Cameroon. The Ambazonians remained resolute and as the war increased. The ramifications were telling both on the population and traditional rulers and the traditional institutions.

Due to the crisis, the Palace has been left weeping. The Fon and his entourage have escaped the palace for safety in Yaounde and other urban towns in Cameroon for fear of reprisals from the separatist and the Cameroon military. Almost all the informants whom I worked with in the field cannot go back to the village since the start of the crisis. Developmental projects with houses envisaged have come to a standstill. Many people have disappeared as all are running away from the reprisals that are orchestrated by the Amba soldiers or “amba boys” as they are popularly known. The elites especially who come home for construction have not been to Baba I for the past four and half years or so. By extension, Baba I has been deserted as almost all the population has vanished into the cities and escaped into the bushes. The separatist and the Cameroon military are different sides of the same coin when it comes to atrocities committed on the civilian population. Hence the exotic and romantic Baba I has for the past four years or so remained a ‘Wasteland’.

I will dwell on the possibility to develop the touristic sector of Baba I that I was really thinking could become important. However, today this dream is far away. I compiled a series of post-cards from my pictures. The pictures on the postcards were taken when all was “well” and everything was going on smoothly.

However, the touristic potential of the area was brought to light for more studies and entrepreneurial activities to be established in the tourism and hospitality industry giving its location on the ring road. Second home tourism broadens issues of access, mobility and regulation. The photographs are illustrations of rich cultural heritage of the Papiakum people that could serve as pull factor for tourism and more research within this community. Though they are living in precarious times, with the once vibrant village almost empty due to the crisis these potentials are there to spark up the economy once this war is over.

Below are the pictures that can be future postcards representing the landscape and various events that took place in Baba I while I was on fieldwork. These pictures tell their own stories about the society as Pink posit that “...ethnographic photography can potentially construct continuities between the visual culture of an academic discipline and that of the subjects or collaborators in the research. Thus ethnographers can hope to create photographic representations that refer to ‘local’ visual cultures and simultaneously respond to the interest of academic disciplines. To do so involve a certain amount of research into uses and understandings of photography in the culture and society of the fieldwork location”, (Pink 2001:5). These pictures (postcards) do not only illustrate and represent lived experiences but serve as indicators of the cultural potentials of the Baba I people that can be explored by further studies in the field of cultural tourism.











Source: Photos by Author