Being Young in Old Town: Youth Subjectivities and Associational Life in Old Town

By Jude Thaddeus Dingbobga Fokwang

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the ways in which young people in the neighbourhood of Old Town in Bamenda negotiate the predicament of blocked opportunities and ‘arrested adulthood’ occasioned by the decline in the nation-building project and prolonged socio-economic and moral crisis in Cameroon. I investigate how urban youth in Old Town construct their moral and socio-cultural worlds through involvement in associations. The main finding suggests that faced with growing uncertainty, young people in Bamenda are positioning themselves as important social actors by drawing on local cultural resources such as associations to construct their social worlds that aim to circumvent their exclusion and marginality. In this light, I analyse youth associations as central although not exclusive to negotiating young people’s predicament by focusing on a range of practices through which they seek respectability and claim social adult status.

Drawing on the concepts of transition, subjectivities and personhood, I show that young people straddle the worlds of ‘youth’ and social adulthood, statuses that are not only cultural constructions but also the products of differential power relations and social positioning. I contend that the processes of positioning and the production of personhood are largely experienced through involvement in associational life. The study focuses on three associations,
namely the Chosen Sisters, the United Sisters and the Ntambag Brothers Association (NBA). Organised on the basis of seniority and gender, I argue that these associations, while negotiating claims to adult status for their members, tend to challenge state-centric notions of citizenship as they simultaneously position themselves as moral actors upon whom society can count on for regeneration. Through a range of social projects, pursued on behalf of and sanctioned by the community, young people in Old Town reaffirm the centrality of interdependence and the situated understanding of social adulthood predicated on the redistribution of one’s success or achievement. This study points to the re-emergent role of associations in negotiating everyday life in the face of crisis. It is a significant contribution towards understanding voluntary and communal associations in general and young people’s modes of transitions into social adulthood.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Youth and the Crisis of the Postcolony in Cameroon

In the last two or three decades, the world has grown ‘younger’, probably more than at any time in human history.¹ This claim is particularly true of Africa which ranks as the most ‘youthful’ continent in the world with approximately 50% of its population below 18 and a significant number between 18 and 25. That young people constitute the continent’s numerical majority reveals the enormous challenge young Africans and state actors face in translating the latter’s dreams and aspirations for a fulfilling and meaningful citizenship. This is a major challenge because young Africans live in very perplexing times, characterised by the end of uncertainties or the disappearance of what Andy Furlong (2000) has termed ‘old predictabilities’², tremendous economic fluctuations, the diminishing capacity of the postcolonial state to control its resources and destiny, the failure of the nation-building project once popular in the early post-independence period, the ravages of AIDS and large-scale unemployment, to name just a few. Young Africans of the 21st century paradoxically face harder times compared to the generations that came of age in the 1960s and the 70s. Unlike those today, young people in the 1960s were often perceived as the hope of the emergent African nations – a status that enjoyed tremendous ‘cultural prestige’ in the words of Mamadou Diouf (2003) on account of their perceived role as the chief agent of the transformation of recently decolonized African societies.

² By this term, Furlong is referring to the erosion of transitional pathways that characterised the lives of many young people in the 1960s and 1970s for whom the completion of school entailed a more or less smooth transition into the job market. Thus, the reference to old predictabilities is applicable to mostly educated youth whose chances of white collar employment upon completion of schooling have diminished substantially during the past two decades.
Today, being young in Africa has different meanings compared to the values attached to ‘youth’ four decades ago. Youth is undergoing significant redefinitions as it assumes new meanings shaped by class, gender and generation. Structural dependency seems to play a crucial role in defining the position of youth in contemporary Africa. This is evident in the sense that unlike the generations of the 1960s who were concerned with filling society’s niches, young people today are busy ‘navigating perilous waters’ and negotiating their way through seas of uncertainty (Evans and Furlong 1997) – socio-economic uncertainty in particular. In fact, young people’s capacity to navigate these perilous waters is often associated with the degree of risk one is capable of or willing to take (cf. France 2000). Young people’s social class determines to a large extent their capacity to provide for themselves and families and to a certain degree, their status as youth. This means that young people among the urban poor tend to see their youth protracted compared to their counterparts in the lower-middle classes.

A major challenge facing young people the world over and Africa in particular is the question of unemployment. For instance, in 2004, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) reported that youth unemployment worldwide had risen to 88 million3 - a figure predicated on its definition of youth as persons between 15 and 24. Perhaps, if the ILO was flexible enough to accommodate the African Youth Charter’s definition which refers to youth as persons between 15 and 354 the number of unemployed would have been well over 150 million. Perhaps, more than in other parts of the world, youth unemployment is most acute in Africa and not even South Africa that seems to enjoy some level of exceptionalism is spared from this. For instance, some analysts maintain that ‘South Africa’s biggest security threat is the “time-bomb” of social conflict driven by a permanent underclass of educated but unemployed youth who face a bleak

4 The Charter also makes a distinction between youth and minor, where the latter consists of young people between 15 and 17 years. See African Youth Charter (2006).
future. While this assertion speaks patently of contemporary South Africa, its implications are true of many African countries, and Cameroon in particular where unemployment is relatively high although there are no reliable statistics that measure current rates.

Faced with massive unemployment, many young Africans feel their youth is protracted and accession to social adulthood delayed. This is specifically true for a lot of young people in their 20s and 30s who remain jobless, unmarried and uncertain of their future, yet they are continuously reminded by the leadership to ‘wait for their turn’ or called upon to remember that inevitably, ‘youth are the leaders of tomorrow’. This extended transition or what James Côté (2000) has termed ‘arrested adulthood’ seems to be the defining experience for many young people who struggle to find or give meaning to their lives.

A second problematic with respect to young people concerns the attributes attached to youth in the contemporary era. Unlike the cultural prestige attached to youth in the 1960s, today it is constructed as a ‘threat’ following the ‘dramatic irruption’ of young people in the public and domestic spheres in the post-1990 era (Diouf 2003). According to Diouf, a major concern for adults is young people’s ‘behaviour, their sexuality and their pleasure’ (2000:3). They are perceived to be sexually loose and disrespectful of elders compared to previous generations – perceptions that have provoked moral and civic panic among adults. Perhaps this makes sense because the AIDS pandemic is often construed as a disease of the young and some have even explained the tragic ravages of the disease as an expression of God’s wrath on a permissive generation. Thus perceived

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6 President Biya’s address to the youth on the occasion of the 32nd Youth Day in Cameroon, 10 Feb, 1998. In his speech, he reminded young people to wait for their turn, supporting his call for patience as follows: “In reality - and you must have certainly noticed it - this new era for the youth has already begun. The National Assembly has been injected with young blood. So it is with the Government. Why would these young Members of Parliament and young Ministers not stand by you? They who, not long ago, were amongst you? Follow their example. Participate in public life. Make your contribution to the great task of democratisation in your country. The day will come when you yourselves will hold public office” (emphasis mine).
and constructed as morally immature, young people are also represented as prone to violence (cf. Al-Kenz 1995) – a basis for their exclusion and victimization by state agents and other sources of repression (see Abbink and van Kessel 2005; Samara 2005; Sharp 2002).

Politically, young people tend to feel marginalised. Unlike the generations of the 1960s, they are often exploited and abandoned by those in whom they have entrusted their hope and aspirations. It is no accident then that many feel they are either a ‘lost generation’ (Cruise O'Brien 1996) or have been ‘sacrificed’ (cf. Sharp 2002) for reasons that are not always apparent to them. This is particularly true for many young Cameroonians who actively participated during the clamour for democratic reforms in the early 1990s but found themselves excluded from critical conferences aimed at charting a course for the future (cf. Mbaku and Awasom 2004) (see Chapter Four). For many of these young people, political and economic citizenship are irrelevant to their lives as they are forced to look for alternative avenues of political participation and to redefine citizenship in accordance with their experiences and aspirations. Clearly, many young Africans who have already reached adult age aspire to social adulthood through full participation in the socio-economic and political life of their communities but this status seems unattainable.

This study explores young people’s responses to socio-economic and political marginalisation and the kinds of individual and collective agencies employed in negotiating transition to social adulthood. It is an ethnographic investigation about what it means to be young through the eyes and experiences of young people themselves. It is based on 15 months of ethnographic research with groups of young people in Bamenda, the capital of the North West Province of Cameroon. The study seeks to investigate how young people in urban Cameroon perceive their subjectivities and identities against a background of socio-economic crisis, the bankruptcy of the ambitious nation-building project and a stalled democratic transition. This
study responds in part to Abbink’s (2005) call for theoretically informed ethnographic studies that explore and account for the ways in which younger generations of Africans experiencing blocked mobility deal with their predicament in the face of older generations’ continuous cling to power and resources. Through a case study of youth in Cameroon in the city of Bamenda, this dissertation is a contribution to this intellectual conversation.

Cameroon has experienced acute economic crisis since the mid-1980s, which led to the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and more recently the Highly Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC) – both programmes of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Plagued with economic and political crises since the mid 1980s, Cameroonians have tended to define their lives as structured by *la crise* – the French term for economic crisis which has come to mean moral, social and economic breakdown. Angered by the poor economic climate and the excesses of monolithic dictatorship, Cameroonians clamoured for democratic reforms in the early 1990s and a return to multi-party democracy. However, soon after the first multiparty presidential election of October 1992, heavily rigged in favour of the incumbent, Paul Biya, Cameroonians realised they had fought for and obtained only a cosmetic democracy, deprived of substance (Mbu 1993; Monga 1994; Nyamnjoh 1999, 2002a; Mbaku 2002; Takougang 2003; Mbaku 2004a; Mbaku and Takougang 2004b). *La crise* conjures more than simply the spectres of economic and political doom – it also denotes a fundamental moral crisis. *La crise* in Cameroon, Johnson-Hanks (2005) observes, has been elevated ‘to an inevitable force that accounts for incompetence, graft, sexual infidelity, school failure, and even witchcraft’ (Johnson-Hanks 2005:366). Indeed, almost all aspects of national life are interpreted through the prism of *la crise* inflected occasionally to convey a sense of *madness* or moral bankruptcy.\(^7\)

\(^7\) In this sense, an unusual association is drawn between *la crise* and the English word, craze or craziness. Thus, *la crise* becomes a metaphor for the country’s state of folly.
pidgin phrase – *kontri don spoil* – (the land has gone bad) captures this dimension of contemporary Cameroon. Corruption in both the public and private sectors has worsened over the years and anti-corruption programmes have yielded little or no progress. The German-based anti-corruption watchdog, Transparency International ranked Cameroon twice in succession as the most corrupt country in the world (1998 and 1999) and since then the country has remained at the bottom of the most corrupt countries. In 2006, Transparency International ranked Cameroon at 138 out of 163 countries.⁸

Cameroon’s reputation for corruption has spread over the years, thanks partly to the emergence of a new generation of swindlers and con artists popularly known as *feymen* (singular *feyman*), the practice described as *feymania*, (cf. Malaquais 2001; Ndjio 2006) and quite similar in striking ways to the popular Nigerian 419 scam (cf. Apter 1999). Some have observed that the practices of feymania complement corruption in the private and public sectors – processes that have led to the criminalization of the state in Cameroon (cf. Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999).

Commenting on corruption in Cameroon, Nyamnjoh (1999) observes that ‘to many people in or seeking high office, Cameroon is little more than a farm tended by God but harvested by man.... Everyone is doing it at his own level, from top to bottom - the only difference being that those at the top have more to steal from...’ (1999:111-12). It is common practice that young people bribe their way into the *grandes écoles*⁹ (government professional schools), and shockingly, even into some elementary and secondary schools. Bribery is often justified with the popular expression - ‘a goat eats where it is tethered' and few are held accountable, except in circumstances that aim at winning political capital. The National Episcopal Conference of the Catholic Church, which has consistently represented itself as the voice of conscience and moral authority in the country

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⁹ Some of these schools include the Ecole Normale Supérieure, Ecole Nationale d'Administration et de la Magistrature, the Faculty of Medicine, University of Yaounde I, just to name a few.
has regularly expressed deep concerns about the fact that ‘corruption bolts every door...wherever you may need a legitimate service.’ The bishops also composed a prayer against corruption although the heavens are yet to smile favourably on Cameroon. Thus, corruption thrives unabated in very creative ways and some have cynically described it as fundamental to the national character of contemporary Cameroon. Clearly, the state in Cameroon has failed its young in more than the obvious institutions or economic domains. Increasingly privatised and instrumentalised in favour of the ruling oligarchy thanks to the support of its international partners, the state in Cameroon enjoys less and less legitimacy and relevance to a majority of its citizens.

The main finding of this study suggests that faced with growing uncertainty, young people in Bamenda are positioning themselves as central actors by drawing on local cultural resources to negotiate their exclusion and marginality. Voluntary associations constitute key cultural resources that organise and shape young people’s lives while allowing for individual decision-making and agency. I analyse youth associations as essential although not exclusive to negotiating young people’s marginality by focusing on a range of practices through which they seek respectability and claim social adult status. Through these associations young people straddle the worlds of ‘youth’ and social adulthood, without belonging fully to either. This pattern, ambiguous to the observer has considerable internal logic for many young people in Bamenda as they seek social adulthood. Their daily struggles involve redefining marginalization through collective involvement in a range of social projects. Hence, it is fitting to describe this thesis as a study of young people’s subjectivities constructed through their involvement in voluntary associations. Three youth associations are at the centre of this study, two exclusively...
female and one entirely male. These associations are the Chosen Sisters, the United Sisters and the Ntambag Brothers Association (NBA) – all three based in the neighbourhood of Old Town in Bamenda (see Chapter Five).

Theoretical Framework and Concepts

a) Transition, Liminality and the Life Course

Contemporary debates on youth tend to focus on the paradigm of transition as the definitive framework for understanding young people’s predicament. In this light, youth is seen as a phase on a journey to adulthood. This model has been quite popular in scholarship that focuses on youth in the Western world – precisely because it tends to assume that transition from school to the job market marks the end of youth and the beginning of adult life. This view is clearly summarised by Wyn and Woodman (2006) who note that ‘the concept of youth as primarily a process of transition from school to the workplace has held a powerful sway over research and thinking in the field of youth studies’ (2006:495).

Dissatisfied with this framework for its narrow focus on economistic models (graduation from school to work), Wyn and Woodman (2006:500) propose a shift from “transition” to “generation” because the latter examines ‘subjectivities that are anchored in the political and material conditions of young people’s lives.’ Other researchers of youth are equally critical of the transition paradigm. Soares (2000) for instance maintains that transition ‘is often used as an excuse to justify situations of chaos and inequality which favour a small minority, stave off

11 Although there are many ethnic and religious associations that consist of both sexes, voluntary associations, especially those commonly referred to as ‘quarter associations’ tend to be highly gendered – that is, based exclusively on a particular sex. In Chapter Five, I explore some of the reasons that led to the emergence of single-sex associations in Old Town.

12 The idea of transition has also been applied to African youth where the educational system is seen as the medium that negotiates the transformation of youth into full adults and citizens. This assumption is highlighted by Aguilar (1998) who, writing about youth in Kenya, observes that ‘it is through education that children become adults, boys are transformed into Kenyans, and girls into women, and Kenyans as well’ (1998:17-18).
criticisms, and demand sacrifices for the sake of an age where transition will come to an end and peace will again reign over the face of the earth’ (2000:209). However, Soares observes that transition makes sense if conceptualised as embodying processes, differences and particularities rather than a linear development (2000:209). Ken Roberts (2007) notes that scholars do not need to move away entirely from transition in order to understand young people’s predicament. To him, operating within a transition paradigm involves primarily, ‘charting the routes via which young people from different ports of departure reach different adult destinations’ (2007:264). Importantly, it is critical to understand that youth is not a homogeneous category (cf. Cruise O'Brien 1996) and that generation ‘lacks the demographic precision of gender, and, to a lesser extent, ethnicity. Nor do generations appear to always share the same material interests’ (Burgess 2005:viii). Thus, a perspective that combines the strengths of transition (as process) and generation (as a category) can illuminate various aspects of young people’s lives – informed by an understanding that the experiences and structural positions of young people today are dramatically different from those of their parents who came of age in the 1960s and 70s.

Often associated with the notion of transition is the concept of liminal, drawn from the pioneering work of Arnold van Gennep (1960) on the rites of passage. Arnold van Gennep identified the rites of passage as a special category which can be subdivided into ‘preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation’ (1960:11). According to this framework, the human life cycle is characterised by rites of passage that delineate and create social time that begin with birth and end with death. Rituals mark out social time as specific phases in one’s life which signify the transformation of social status and role in accordance with the expectations of a given culture. Hence, in the human life cycle, youth
is perceived as that transitional or liminal phase which ends with the incorporation of the initiate into the adult world – making him/her a full adult person.

Victor Turner is credited for having elaborated on the notion of liminality in his classic work, *The Ritual Process* (1969) in which he maintains that the liminal phase in every rite of passage is characterised by ambiguity. According to Turner, ‘liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial’ (1969:95). Elsewhere, Turner asserts that during the ‘liminal period, neophytes are alternately forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain them’ (Turner 1967:105). He sums this up as ‘a stage of reflection’.

Thanks to the works of van Gennep and Turner, anthropologists have long been sensitive to the significance of liminal positions and persons and their potential to disconcert or threaten (Hall and Montgomery 2000:13). It is largely against this background that scholarship on youth has tended to associate youth with liminality (see for example de Boeck and Honwana 2000; Johnson-Hanks 2002; Hoffman 2003; Maira and Soep 2004; Moyer 2004; Durham 2004; Burgess 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; Northcote 2006).

While liminality indeed captures and articulates the predicament of many young people, it eludes the lives and experiences of those who straddle the worlds of ‘youth’ and ‘social adulthood’ simultaneously – in other words, those who exist ‘here and there’ without necessarily belonging fully to either. In fact, the notion of liminality is predicated on an understanding of transition as movement – that is, rooted in the notion of the life course characterised by predictable stages. However, anthropologists increasingly recognise that ‘liminal states between stable statuses are rare. Most vital events - such as marriage, motherhood, and migration - are instead negotiable and contested, fraught with uncertainty, innovation, and ambivalence’
Thus, contrary to popular trends, I do not equate youth with liminality. Instead, I show that the experiences of young people in this study are characterised by *iliminality* or (failed liminality). I demonstrate that instead of undergoing smooth transitions into adulthood, young people (as individuals and as members of groups) navigate unpredictable paths in their search for stability and meaningful lives. These young people, despite being adults, are positioned and occasionally position themselves as ‘youth’ but claim and celebrate social adult status. They embody both identities of youth and adulthood – an embodiment not fully captured by references to ‘liminality’ (understood in this context as neither here nor there).

Furthermore, I perceive the young people under study as straddlers of diverse positions in movement. By drawing on the notion of transition as process I hinge my analysis on a navigational framework which explores the different biographic trajectories undertaken by young people. This framework acknowledges the multiplicity of identities and the agency inherent in their subjectivities. It combines ambiguity with predictability, agency and subjection. Hence, I seek to explain the experiences of young people in Old Town by exploring how through various moral practices and social projects, they claim social adult status and negate their positioning as youth. This framework is discussed further in the next section by incorporating the concepts of personhood and social adulthood as understood in the Cameroon grasslands.13

b) Personhood and Social Adulthood in the Cameroon Grasslands

Ethnographers of the Western grasslands of Cameroon have identified the composite nature of personhood in this region of the country characterised by different rites of initiation and incorporation (discussed in chapter three). Modern personhood in the grasslands has been shaped

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13 A term used to describe the area known today as the North West Province including the neighbouring French-speaking Western Province of Cameroon. Originally used by German explorers to describe the vast savannah region, this coinage has been adopted by ethnographers. A variant of the term is the ‘grassfields’.
and transformed by successive colonial and postcolonial influences. Despite these changes, most chiefdoms in the grasslands reject the idea of ‘the autonomous person’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001b) in favour of the intersubjective or interdependent person, epitomised by the proverb - ‘a child is one person’s only in the womb’ (cf. Nyamnjoh 2002b) – meaning that a person belongs to the community rather than to his/her household or specific lineage. Most cultures in the grasslands also subscribe to the principle of personhood as a mode of *becoming*, rather than a mode of *being*. In other words, full personhood is hardly perceived as an end product but characterised by continuous negotiation, flexibility and adaptability. It is in brief, as the Comaroffs describe for the Tswana – ‘a work in progress’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001b).

Thus, full personhood is commonly associated with social adulthood – itself a contentious status and subject to relativity, for in most languages of the grasslands, a person is always a child (*mu*) under varying cultural contexts (cf. Warnier 1993a:305). The status of child or *mu* means that one is always implicated in relations of subjection and obligation to one’s kins and clansmen.

Thus, youth as a cultural construct cannot be fully understood in isolation from the cultural universe in which it is produced and employed (discussed further in chapter three). Based on the foregoing, youth in the Cameroon grasslands is currently experienced as a structural position of dependency or to make use of Warnier’s (1993) metaphor, an empty vessel unable to fill itself. Many young people in the grasslands in their 20s and 30s aspire to full personhood and social adulthood through employment and marriage. They desire to establish an independent household, provide for themselves and their families and enjoy the symbolic capital of respectability, acquired through the redistribution of one’s success. It needs to be emphasised that the desire to establish an independent household does not necessarily imply an endorsement of the ethos of the ‘autonomous person’. In the Bamenda grassfields, individual creativity or self-
fulfilment (such as establishing an independent household) constitutes a form of domesticated agency where ‘individual or group goals exists within a socially predetermined frame that emphasises conviviality with collective interests’ (Nyamnjoh 2002b:115).

In contrast to youth – understood in this study as a status of structural dependency, social adulthood in the Bamenda grassfields is commonly perceived as the attainment of full personhood. It is a status that combines marriage and reproduction – that is, the ability to transmit ‘vital life substances’ and entails the redistribution of one’s resources within one’s kin network and community at large. In other words, it entails the exercise of moral and material responsibility towards one’s self and kinspeople. It is a status legitimised not only by one’s ability to partake in certain aspects of communal and customary affairs but also by one’s positioning in local hierarchies (underscored by one’s membership in certain institutions and associations).

For the majority of young people in Old Town, social adulthood is a status yet to be fully attained, a claim supported by the experiences of many other young Cameroonians. Unlike their African counterparts, many young people in the West do not consider their ‘youth’ as a status of entrapment or privation. In fact, James Côté observes that whilst the period of youth has become increasingly prolonged in Western countries, certain features of this prolonged youth are increasingly preference based (Côté 2002:117; also see Westberg 2004). These differences validate Burgess’ claim that youth ‘varies widely according to time and place; it tends to emerge out of local idioms and languages, and is lost or gained through the aging process and a variety of personal decisions and life events (2005:viii). Thus this study does not attempt to explain youth as a universal or transhistorical experience but as a specific kind of experience that defines the way human beings see themselves at a particular point in their lives (cf. Soares 2000:210).
Citizenship and Adulthood in Cameroon

The idea of citizenship deserves to be addressed briefly in this introduction precisely because it is one of the central concepts that informs this study. Citizenship has emerged as one of the most contentious issues of the 21st century in both academic and political circles. As an ideal, citizenship transcends difference, defining all individuals within a political community as equal before the law. However, critics have argued that such claims are ‘false’ (Werbner 1998:2) and that citizenship is a mediated relation determined at least in some measure by social positioning (1998:7). Globally, citizenship has been subjected to profound contestations in part because of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the global refugee problem, the growth of the European Union, the intensification of migrant labour, the rise of religious fundamentalism and ostensibly, right-wing appeals for exclusionary policies (cf. Turner 1993; Urry 1999; Werbner 1998). In many African countries, xenophobia, the weakening of state authority and declining economic fortunes constitute some of the decisive factors that have accounted for new contestations over citizenship (Bayart, Geschiere, and Nyamnjoh 2001; Comaroff and Comaroff 2003; Nyamnjoh 2006). Thus although most Africans live as citizens in nation-states, this citizenship tends to be conditional, partial, and situational (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001a). For many young people, citizenship is either deferred or accessed by proxy – experiences that reverberate with the notion of what Côté (2000) has referred to as ‘arrested adulthood’. In other words, the crisis of citizenship has strong resonance with the crisis of youth. In Cameroon, disaffection with the postcolonial state has led to new imaginings and experiences of citizenship forged around local issues such as an emphasis on autochthony (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000)( also see Chapter Six).

Hence, this study does not frame citizenship either within the liberal approach that emphasises rights or the civic republican viewpoint that privileges duties (Heater 1999:4).
Instead, I conceptualise citizenship as a status broader than the political which straddles the private and public realms. I see it as a ‘social status which specifically acknowledges the non-instrumental, basis of association between persons in a political community, and articulated through a diversity of practices’ (Prokhovnik 1998:85). In this thesis, I intend to draw attention to the moral dimension of citizenship as conceived and articulated by young people in Old Town through a ‘diversity of practices’.

**Subjecitivity and Associations**

Also central to this study are the concepts of subjectivity and association. Subjectivity broadly defined refers to the personal experiences of an individual. In other words, it deals with how actors endowed with agency perceive and relate to a given social structure. In this study, I draw on Holland and Leander’s (2004) conceptualisation which explains subjectivities as ‘actors’ thoughts, sentiments, and embodied sensibilities, and, especially, their senses of self and self-world relations’ (2004:127). They state further that ‘subjectivities are created by experiences of being positioned and, in turn, contribute to the production of cultural forms that mediate subsequent experiences’ (op. cit. 2004:127). According to Bretell and Sargent (2004), individuals or subjects can occupy multiple subject positions, some of which they define for themselves and others which are defined for them. It is in this sense that an individual’s subjectivity can be understood as moral, political, economic and otherwise. ‘Subjectivity involves making choices about identity as well as resisting those identities that are imposed by others and outsiders’ (Brettell and Sargent 2006:4). Thus, power relations play a significant role in shaping individuals’ sense of self, identity through acts that categorise, distinguish and treat a person as gendered, classed, raced or other sort of subject (Holland and Leander 2004:127). In
this sense, youth can be understood as a sort of subjectivity. As a cultural construct, it is the product of power relations and thus experienced differently across time and space. It is specifically against this background that one can understand youth as positioned and as positioning (cf. Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006:11; also see Durham 2004). Thus, I consider positioning as predicated on the agency of subjects. The notion of positioning ‘directs attention to how positions are produced in particular historical periods and to the social coordination necessary for successful positioning to be achieved, and it problematizes the subjective consequences of experiences of positioning for those who participate’ (Holland and Leander 2004:130). Thus a study of subjectivity and positioning embodies the potential to reveal the importance in the historical production of persons and personhood.

In this thesis, I show that the processes of positioning and the production of personhood are largely experienced through involvement in associational life. The African urban landscape is filled with an assortment of associations – home village associations, voluntary, improvement or welfare associations, cultural, religious and political associations to name just a few. According to Ottenberg (1955), these associations tend to ‘carry out various economic, educational, political, social, and general improvement activities directly related to changing cultural conditions’ (1955:1). Kenneth Little (1965; 1972) maintains that the emergence and proliferation of voluntary associations is directly linked to urbanization precisely because the modern town offers fresh opportunities for young men and women. Central to the discourse of these associations is the notion of ‘development’ by which they mean the socio-economic and cultural improvement of members and the areas or region they claim to represent (cf. Lentz 1995:395). Against this background, welfare and voluntary associations are not novelties in urban Africa evidenced by the academic interests shown in the study of these urban formations by sociologists
and anthropologists (cf. Wallerstein 1964; Hooker 1966; Soen and Comarmond 1971a, 1971b, 1972; Kerr 1978; Skinner 1978; d'Almeida-Topor and Goerg 1989; Barkan, McNulty, and Ayeni 1991; Trager 1998; Simone 2001; Tostensen, Tvedten, and Vaa 2001b). Associations have been shaped and transformed by changing social, economic and political conditions, factors taken into account in this work (see Chapter Five). However, relatively fewer works have been devoted to the study of young people’s associations whose objectives and activities sometimes complement or differ significantly from those of adult groups.

Thus, I argue in this study that urban youth in Bamenda, in their quest to attain social adulthood, make use of associations to negotiate their exclusion from socio-economic and political issues. I explore young people’s associations as a central although not an exclusive strategy employed to negotiate and navigate the urban world – thereby inscribing their agencies on public space and making strategic claims on social adult status by carrying out a range of actions (e.g. hygiene operations, donating material items to disadvantaged persons and policing members’ moral lives). By posing as moral vanguards, they indict adult society and assert themselves as alternative moral actors upon whom society can count for regeneration. Consequently, young people position themselves not as empty vessels but rather as half-full containers or as complete for the time being. Associational life places premium on intersubjectivity, drawing on cultural resources and customary idioms of interdependence and personhood. It is through this medium that young people empower themselves, straddling the world of youth and social adulthood. Through associational life, young people articulate a kind of dialectical relationship between the fields of youth and social adulthood. Youth is negated in preference for adulthood – reflected in the choice of the associations’ names which bear only attributes of kinship and comradeship – that is, as brothers and sisters (see chapter five). It is
based on this straddling of both worlds that I conceptualise the young people under study as navigators.

By studying the subjectivities of young people as individuals and members of formal and informal groups, the study draws attention to debates on individual and collective action and rule following. Their actions also illuminate contemporary debates on citizenship – especially those that question the state’s monopoly of defining citizenship. This is a study of how young people seek to make meaningful lives in unpredictable circumstances. It bears the hopes and anxieties of those that have resisted yielding to despair, thanks to the conviviality and positioning that associational life offers.

Outline of Thesis

This study is organised into nine chapters. Chapter Two details the methodology employed in this study. Drawing on 15 months of fieldwork, I show how I chose and gained access to the field site and the ambiguities I experienced as a Cameroonian from Bamenda doing research on young people in my home town. As simultaneously an outsider and a native, I reflect on the challenges of doing research in one’s home area and the need to adjust one’s identity to one’s positionality in the field and in relation to research participants. I describe my first encounter with the groups recruited for this study and their initial reactions to my requests to carry out research among them. The chapter also describes the details of participant observation and how research objectives were accomplished.

Chapter Three reviews the literature on youth in Africa. It is divided into two broad sections – first, a historical perspective on the study of youth in Africa and secondly, a review of the literature relevant to this study. The chapter shows that colonialism radically altered the
economic and socio-cultural basis on which ‘youth’ as a life-phase was defined and experienced. This was achieved by the imposition of new models of organisation and behaviour. It also identifies gaps in the study of youth in urban Cameroon, particularly with respect to the role of youth associations in negotiating young people’s exclusion. The chapter demonstrates the need to complement existing studies of youth in Cameroon that have tended to focus on student strikes and political involvement with a detailed analysis of how young people make sense of their positions in urban contexts and the ways in which they strive to assert themselves and to attain social adulthood.

Chapter Four provides a detailed background of the social, economic and political history of Bamenda in particular and Cameroon in general. I highlight the challenges young people in Bamenda face – unemployment, poverty and political marginalisation – whose histories need to be unravelled. As this is a study of young people in an urban context, I also provide details on the population and household characteristics, the economy of Bamenda and the North West Province in general, society and local politics. With respect to the last point, I show that Bamenda is known as the nerve centre of opposition politics in the country and for over a decade has consistently supported Cameroon’s leading opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF). Also central to political activism in Bamenda is the question of Anglophone marginalisation in a Francophone-dominated state – a trend that appeals to young people who see in this an opportunity to voice their marginalisation and assert their desire to partake in the political process.

In chapter Five, I focus on a detailed description of young people’s associations in Old Town. First, I tackle the question; why do young people join associations? Through several case studies, I show how young people are recruited into associations and the factors that drive them
to consider becoming active members in voluntary groups. The chapter also explores the origins of youth associations in Old Town and shows that associational life has long been part and parcel of town life among young and old people in Bamenda. However, voluntary associations such as the ones considered in this study began to flourish in the wake of the introduction of democratic reforms in the early 1990s. Prior to this period, only religious, cultural and student associations could operate legally. The chapter also introduces each of the associations studied in this project – establishing the circumstances under which they were founded and the characteristics of their memberships. I also present the structure and organisation of the associations and conclude with a brief exploration of the functions and activities of youth associations.

Having established the nature of the associations under study, I proceed in Chapter Six to examine in detail young people’s involvement in hygiene operations – one of the important activities of youth associations in Old Town. This chapter shows how young people in Old Town, acting through associations, respond to urban decay and local government neglect. By organising regular clean-up operations, fabricating trash cans, rallying residents to keep their toilets clean and maintaining roads within the neighbourhood, young people define and inscribe their agencies on urban space in the quest to rehabilitate their neighbourhood. The actions adopted by young people to restore the neighbourhood of Old Town reveal their disillusionment with the postcolonial state as it simultaneously articulates their dreams of a renaissance. Involvement in the modernising project of hygiene operations also permits us to appreciate youth inter-associational competition and how this leads to the production of gendered identities and what I refer to as emergent forms of citizenship.

Young people’s hygiene operations mirror their campaigns against ‘social ills’ which is the focus of Chapter Seven. Here, I examine the ways in which young people in Old Town
construct a moral community drawing on local notions of respectability in a bid to make legitimate claims on social adulthood. This moral community is premised on young people’s shared desire to root out social ills, epitomised by ‘youth delinquency’ and to affirm their collective will to social adulthood through active involvement in practices perceived to bring respect and honour. Having failed to secure full membership with respect to economic, social and political citizenship, marginalised young people seek to appropriate respectability and honour, notions vital for social worth and recognition as full members of society in the Bamenda grasslands of Cameroon. The chapter details the various activities of young people and the moral dimensions embedded in these practices. I conclude by contrasting individual attitudes against associational standards of moral behaviour.

Young people’s attitudes and participation in the political process constitute the focus of Chapter Eight. I analyse their disillusionment with the Biya regime and attempts to imagine their citizenship within a global context. At issue is the claim that they are doubly marginalised – as Anglophones and as youths. Faced with economic and political uncertainty, many young people opt either not to vote or to express overt support for the prominent Anglophone nationalist movement, the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) which advocates the restoration of Anglophone autonomy for the two English-speaking provinces in Cameroon. Other responses to marginalisation include the desire to migrate abroad – a trend quite popular with young people who anticipate a better future for themselves and their family through migration. For many young people in Bamenda, migration promises the possibility of a rapid transition into social adulthood which allows them to provide for their needs and those of their immediate and extended family. I analyse these attitudes and subjectivities as crucial for understanding young people’s citizenship in Cameroon.
Chapter Nine is the conclusion. This thesis examines what it means to be young in Bamenda in particular and Cameroon in general. I observe that the key challenge for most young people in Old Town is to attain social adulthood – a status that remains elusive due to *la crise* and the structural violence that undermine and threaten their dreams. I focus on the decisive role of associations in negotiating young people’s livelihoods on a range of issues – importantly as a form of sociality that gives voice to young people. I also show that their voices and activities have implications on a range of issues such as gender, local morality and citizenship. I contend that various forms of associational engagement allow the construction of gendered identities by the male association in opposition to their female counterparts through which they seek to salvage their masculinity. I also explore the potential of youth as a revitalizing agent and contend that by posing as moral vanguards, young people aspire to construct a new social order in which their voices count. Finally, I argue that being young in Cameroon is full of tremendous challenges characterised by improvisations and ingenuous activities as well as uncertainty and unpredictability. Despite their uncertain economic potential and the sense of betrayal felt towards those in power, they remain hopeful that a better future is attainable. In the next chapter, I address questions of methodology.
Chapter Two

Outsider and Native: Doing Fieldwork in Bamenda

‘How do you intend to make sure that people speak the truth?’
President of the United Sisters, Old Town

‘A focus on structures often obscures the fact that humans are active agents of their own history, rather than passive victims. Ethnographic method allows the “pawns” of larger structural forces to emerge as real human beings who shape their own futures’ (Bourgois 2003:17).

Research Site and Participants

In this chapter, I provide a detailed account of my fieldwork methods and experiences in Bamenda in which I show that being a Cameroonian, I was simultaneously an insider and outsider and had to negotiate my positionality in changing contexts and conditions. I also present a detailed account of the specific kinds of evidence collected during fieldwork. I should note at this point that all the names employed in this study are pseudonyms intended to protect the identities of the research participants. However, I retain the names of the associations and other formal organisations widely known in Bamenda and beyond.

My research objective was to understand urban youth responses to la crise or socio-economic crisis that has plagued Cameroon during the last two decades. I was curious to explore how young people coped with the bankruptcy of the nation-building project that had dominated nationalist discourse from independence until the 1980s. In particular, I was keen on investigating the predicament of Anglophone youth in the light of changing socio-economic and political conditions and their citizenship experiences as a political minority in a Francophone-dominated state.

Fieldwork for this study was conducted in the neighbourhood of Old Town in Bamenda, a city with a population of about 500,000. Bamenda is the key urban centre in the North West
Province and emerged during the German colonial period as a trading and administrative centre (see Chapter Four).

Figure 1: Map of Cameroon, showing location of Bamenda
Figure 2: Map of the North West Province, showing seven administrative divisions.

The choice of Old Town was serendipitous. I had set out to study youth politicized associations conceptualised broadly as ‘social groups’ whose members interacted with one another on an ongoing basis (Amit 2000) such as the President Biya’s Youths (PRESBY) and the Southern Cameroons Youth League (SCYL), which I had identified during my previous studies of youth in Cameroon. It was my assumption that these associations were not rooted in any particular space, but rather that their activities consisted of a set of discourses, relationships and engagements that I could observe and analyse. However, these expectations took a back seat when I soon discovered that PRESBY no longer commanded a good following and that its activities had declined over the years since its emergence into the Cameroonian political landscape in 1996. More compelling was my discovery that none of the popular youth associations were officially registered with the local administration.14

14 Many of these associations were off-shoots of the main political parties or nationalist movements. The Socialist Youths, for example, was considered unofficially as the Youth wing of the SDF, although it was less visible than its political rivals like the youth wing of the ruling Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (YCPDM) and the
As a matter of fact the early period of the study involved hanging out with a number of Anglophone nationalist youths - Southern Cameroons National Council Youths (SCNC)\(^{15}\) and a few PRESBY members in the vicinity of T-junction in Bamenda. A mutual friend told me of a computer shop that was also a social centre. He introduced me to Bill whose brother, Donald owned the shop. Donald was a leading member of the provincial executive of PRESBY and I soon based my interactions and observations at his shop.

The shop was located at the intersection of Cathedral Street and the Commercial Avenue. The Commercial Avenue is probably the busiest street in the city. Every now and then, a heavy vehicle drove by transporting bottled drinks, construction materials or general merchandise and the noise produced by these vehicles often interrupted our conversations. Directly opposite the shop, on the south side of the street, a group of women sold fresh fruits on a daily basis. One of them sold roasted plantains and corn, peanuts and avocados. Others sold oranges, sugar cane and bananas. Overlooking the women was a huge billboard advertising Guinness Smooth, a new brand of Guinness beer that had just been introduced to the market. On it was boldly written: *Découvrez la vraie douceur* (Discover real smoothness – my translation). There was no English translation despite Bamenda being an English-speaking city.

Donald’s shop was by every means one of the most popular shops at T-junction, although there were two “off-licences”\(^{16}\) adjacent to the shop. The shop provided a range of services that included typing and printing, photocopying, the sale and repair of cell phones, as well as telephone call services. It was staffed by two computer-skilled female secretaries, each with a

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\(^{15}\) Members of the SCNC youth are different from the SCYL which operates as a movement independent of the SCNC. SCNC youths were young men who organized themselves as informal neighbourhood associations aimed at learning about the SCNC cause and sensitizing their peers. These young men also attended the regular think tanks of the SCNC at Cow Street in Bamenda.

\(^{16}\) Pubs are popularly known in Anglophone Cameroon as “off-licences”.

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It was here that many unemployed young men in their twenties came to hang out. Thus, the shop provided an initial site where I anchored my observations while interacting with the young men. With time, I realised the futility of focusing on these young men or the politicised groups partly because they were available irregularly and their stories monotonous.\(^{17}\) It became obvious with time that the influence and credibility of youth associations such as PRESBY belonged to the past. However, before I could give up on this site and the few friends I had come to know, I got a useful lead that was to change the bearing of my fieldwork. Through my interactions with Donald and his circle of friends I met Manu, a member of a local youth association in Old Town who insisted that I visit his association to which I readily accepted. Without his knowledge, Manu’s invitation held the promise of a new direction in my fieldwork as my visit to Old Town convinced me of the suitability of the site and the association for further research.

On Sunday 1\(^{st}\) May 2005 Manu led me to the Ntambag Brothers Association\(^{18}\) (NBA) in Old Town, a relatively new association in the neighbourhood that had already caused tremendous sensation on account of their donation of trash cans to the Bamenda Urban Council (BUC). The NBA met every Sunday after church and in principle, started its session at 12 p.m. although in practice the meetings often commenced ten minutes or so later. Upon our arrival, Manu

\(^{17}\) Most of those who acknowledged being members of PRESBY stated that they had joined the association in anticipation of finding a way to access government jobs or gain entry into government-run professional schools where they hoped to be recruited as civil servants upon graduation. Their dreams had not materialised and they were disenchanted with PRESBY.

\(^{18}\) Ntambag refers to the name of the neighbourhood in which the association is based. The origins of this association amongst others are discussed in Chapter Five.
introduced me to some members hanging outside as a friend interested in carrying out research with young people. When I arrived at the meeting venue, the room was vacant and dull except for the furniture that was arranged in an orderly manner in anticipation of the meeting. Carlson, the president of NBA pulled me aside and assured me that I had come to the ‘right’ place because they were a friendly association and willing to work with anyone interested in them. He recounted a brief history of the group and emphasised that the formation of the association was the collective dream of young men in the quartier or neighbourhood. While we waited for the latecomers, he brought out the association’s album for a quick look. I then explained my interest in attending their meetings and readily provided him with an information sheet which he glanced at before filing in a folder. More members had arrived by now and someone beckoned us to come in.

The building was visibly old and in a state of dilapidation. The paint on the walls had faded beyond recognition and the room was cold and damp. The opened ceiling betrayed the possibility of a regular leakage when it rained. Several benches were arranged against the walls of the three by four metres room and directly opposite the door were two chairs and a table reserved for the chairman and the secretary.

The meeting began with a Christian prayer followed by the reading of an outline of the day’s programme. At this point, my presence was acknowledged and the chairman suggested I would be given an opportunity to address the association towards the end of the meeting. When my turn came, I rose from my seat and addressed the association. I explained to them that the purpose of my visit to Bamenda was to investigate how young people were coping with the difficult socio-economic circumstances they found themselves in. I then expressed my wish to

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19 Guests are often welcomed in Cameroon by the showing of a photo album—this repertoire of cherished family memories and persons. It is a sign of openness and willingness to incorporate the ‘stranger’ into one’s inner circle of trust.
attend their meetings and interact with them as individuals and as a collectivity. Many nodded their heads, probably out of curiosity or perhaps interest. Carlson on behalf of the association then rose and thanked me for honouring them with a visit. He expressed the association’s readiness to work with me, and as president of the association granted me official permission to observe, and at my will participate in their indoors and outdoors activities. As a professional intruder, I was reassured of their willingness, when after the meeting several members of NBA approached me and expressed interest in participating in my study by giving me their cell phone numbers.

Thus began my interaction with the NBA. However, I was interested in studying young people, both males and females whereas NBA was an entirely male association. I needed to widen my scope. Upon further enquiry, it came to my knowledge that there existed two prominent female associations in the neighbourhood; the Chosen Sisters and the United Sisters, the former consisting of older young women compared to the latter. It was at this point that I learnt that the female associations had existed for much longer than the male associations. Contrary to popular opinion, especially among young men that their female counterparts could not run and maintain an association, the female associations had existed for at least four years, whereas one of the male associations in the neighbourhood, the Able Brothers (AB) had disbanded less than six months after its creation.

Unlike the NBA, the Chosen Sisters met every Wednesday evening in the living room of a respectable old woman in the neighbourhood. This schedule had been chosen to suit many of its members who worked during the day or had other meetings to attend on Sundays. The Chosen Sisters was made up of 35 registered young women, most of them unmarried, between the ages
of 25 and 38. Membership was composed of persons from different ethnic groups and educational levels.

During my first visit to the association, I was accompanied by Carlson, the NBA president. He offered to introduce me to the ladies as a fellow NBA brother. In fact, he had informed the leadership of the association of our intended visit. When we eventually showed up, Sirri, the president of Chosen Sisters welcomed us at the entrance and ushered us into a poorly lit living room. I was pleasantly surprised to recognise the president, whom I had known as a student at the University of Buea. She had read law and was a minor in the department of Sociology and Anthropology where I majored. There was a power outage, a regular occurrence that the inhabitants of Bamenda had become accustomed to particularly since the privatization of the state electricity company, Société Nationale d’électricité (SONEL). In place of a light bulb, the room was lit by several candles and the lone torch of a member who sat at a remote corner chatting with her friends. The ladies were dressed beautifully in their uniform, which I came to learn was the norm. At the centre of the room was a table and a chair. I was offered a chair next to a man, who looked like someone in his thirties – whom I later learnt was a patron of the association.

Before the meeting commenced, Sirri rose and introduced me, after apologising for the lack of electricity in the house. She explained to the association that I was a student researcher interested in investigating young people’s associations and activities in the community of Old Town. She then gave me permission to address the association which I did with alacrity. I thanked them for permitting me to visit and speak to them. I then explained the nature of my research, emphasising my role as a learner, rather than an expert. They too, like the brothers,

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20 The privatization of the national electricity corporation in 2000 has led to rampant power cuts and huge hikes in the electricity price. Officially bought by an American company, AES, popular disaffection with its services has led to the corruption of its acronym as Always Expect Shortage (AES).
appeared curious. Sirri then thanked me for coming and exhorted the sisters to assist me in
whatever way they could with the research. I was also granted permission to attend their weekly
meetings and participate in all their activities at my will.

In July 2005, I approached the United Sisters for the first time. The group consisted of
younger women between the ages of 20 and 28. Membership, like in the other associations was
drawn from diverse educational and ethnic backgrounds. By July 2005, I had already earned the
confidence and friendship of many NBA members and was often seen hanging out with the
young men in the neighbourhood. One of them was Claude, an NBA member and patron of the
United Sisters who offered to introduce me to the latter. He was also one of the first NBA
members to have opened up to me and had given me his cell phone number during my first visit
to the NBA. He and I stood on the side-walk chatting as I listened to his concerns about the
NBA. The young sisters, he remarked, would commence their meeting late as usual, despite the
use of fines to deter lateness among members. Eventually, he consulted with a young lady who
confirmed that the meeting had effectively started. He then led me into the room where the
meeting was taking place which turned out to be the same house used by the Chosen Sisters.

Attendance was comparably poor. It consisted of just a handful of persons, in fact, 7
young women. One of the ladies was busy cleaning a bench while another was addressing the
house. We then sat on the dusted bench where I observed the proceedings in silence as the young
women went about their business. Two members who sat on a sofa, directly opposite the door
attracted the rebuke of the others on account of the noise they were making. A lady near the door
(whom I came to learn was the association’s chief whip) warned the noise makers to discontinue
their chit-chat, otherwise she would write their names for rowdiness; an option which seemed to
have punitive consequences. When there was sufficient calm in the room, the meeting continued without further interruption.

‘Matters arising’, the lady at the desk with an exercise book said. She was probably the secretary, I thought. Everyone stared at each other and not a single word was uttered for a while. Then a lady in blue sought permission to speak and just before she rose from her seat, Claude whispered to me that she was the president of the association. ‘I disagree with those who take excuse on Sundays on the grounds that they’ve gone to do their hair’ she began. ‘I think I could also choose to do my hair on Sundays, and consequently stay away from the meeting but because we love this association, we decided to attend despite our other commitments. I don't know about you, but we should henceforth consider such excuses as invalid’ she concluded. It seemed her suggestion was in response to a series of written excuses that had been made by members to explain their absence from the meeting. No one said anything or reacted to her suggestion. Now seated, she then asked again if they agreed with her view whereupon a few voices spoke up and agreed that henceforth, permission shall not be granted to members who sought leave on the grounds of doing their hair during meeting hours. An uneasy silence fell upon the house again.

‘We’re still on matters arising’ the lady at the desk reminded the house. Then the lady in blue raised her right hand, an indication that she wanted to speak again. ‘I think we should do something about those who did not show up for work.’ (Work, in this context referred to a clean up or sanitary operation carried out collectively by the association). Immediately, a lady who sat about three feet from me sprung from her seat, as if bitten by a bee and began speaking. ‘Yes, many of us came back with blisters’ she began, showing her palms to the house. ‘We need to give heavy fines to those who did not show up because the usual fine is nothing compared to the amount of labour we put in’ she remarked and then took her seat. To my amazement, Claude also
rose and supported the last speaker’s suggestion while showing his blistered palms to the house. When he sat down, he confronted a late-comer who had just arrived and had sat next to him. I overhead him accusing her of not having shown up for the manual work but the lady defended herself by claiming she was ignorant of the association’s plan to carry out such an activity.

Another wave of silence fell on the house for several seconds. No one uttered a word and then the lady in blue finally spoke. ‘Now that no one has anything to say, I see that brother Claude has brought a stranger. We’ll like to know what his mission is and if he has anything to tell us he is welcome.’ Claude then rose and introduced me as a researcher working with youth associations in the community. He stated that I had expressed interest in working with the United Sisters and if given the opportunity to speak, I would explain the purpose of my visit even better. The president then rose and welcomed me and asked me to introduce myself and the object of my visit. I reiterated Claude’s statement, explaining that I was interested in working with young people’s associations in Old Town. I stated that I had come to seek their permission to observe and participate in their activities. The president wanted to know the end result of such an enterprise whereupon I explained that information obtained from my interaction with the group will contribute towards writing an academic book. I then regained my seat and waited for further questions but no one spoke for a while.

Claude then submitted to the group that I should be given opportunity in future to attend several meetings whereupon they would get accustomed to me and possibly ask any questions they might have. He remarked that even though I had been attending NBA meetings for a couple of months I had not interviewed most people because I needed to get used to individual members. ‘Yes, I think it will be difficult to have a good interview with someone you don't know, and maybe people will give you wrong information due to the lack of trust’ the president
interjected. ‘Maybe if you asked someone if she's married, the person might say no, whereas the contrary is true. How do you intend to make sure that people speak the truth?’ she quizzed. Before I could respond to this Claude was already up to answer on my behalf. He explained that once they became used to me, they would find it difficult to give me wrong information especially as I would be around for a long time. ‘Ok, when more members arrive, we will discuss this issue and will let you know our decision next Sunday. I am speaking on behalf of the group, but I think individuals will make their personal decisions if they are interested’ declared the president thus bringing my introductory visit to a close. I was subsequently granted permission to participate fully in their activities and several months later was co-opted as one of the patrons of the association.

**Researcher’s Positionality and Data Collection**

As shown above, the recruitment of research participants was a gradual process. It began with my introduction to the NBA and eventual access to the two female associations in Old Town. Once I had gained an insider position, I began to participate in various activities of the associations, some of which brought all the associations together formally or informally (e.g. seminars, visits to sick members or patrons, parties etc). Besides attending weekly meetings and writing down field notes, I accompanied the associations to communal gatherings and activities such as anniversary celebrations, excursions, hospital visits, funerals, death celebrations, football matches, seminars, prize award ceremonies, and many other places. During these activities, I observed as much as I could and where necessary participated as any regular member. Upon my return home, I wrote down as many details as I could recall about my activities in the field.
Access to the various groups was not a problem for me, partly because of my status as a citizen of Bamenda but also as a young person, having turned 30 during fieldwork. There is a longstanding debate in the anthropological literature on the positionality of the field researcher, which perhaps, needs to be addressed briefly with respect to my fieldwork experience. At issue is the question of the researcher’s power in negotiating access to the field and his/her interaction with participants in the research process. Some scholars have questioned the extent to which one’s race, gender, or sexual orientation can determine or influence the quality of data obtained. For instance, questions have been raised if white people can gain as much insight about black people’s experiences or women, men’s (Marks 2001:9-11; Merriam et al. 2001) compared to ‘insider’ perspectives? In my case, the question could be asked if older people can gain profound insight into the lives of young people? Early discussions in anthropology contended that the field researcher was either an insider or and outsider – a binary opposition or distinction that has little relevance to contemporary debates on this issue (cf. Narayan 1993). Rather, there is an understanding that one needs to continuously reconstruct one’s insider/outsider status in terms of one’s positionality as concerns race, class, gender, culture among other factors (Merriam et al. 2001:405).

In my case, I initially approached fieldwork as an insider, given my native status to Bamenda and its cultural world. As a young black male, I assumed that access to the field would not be a major challenge and in fact it was fairly easy. However, I was concerned less about my gender than with my social status as someone with a different educational level and social status compared to my research participants. The fact that I was coming from abroad, particularly from North America, could potentially shape participants’ expectations and perceptions of me. Generally, Cameroonian are ambiguous about their own ‘people’ researching their lives, given
the long-standing notion which associates research with ‘whiteness’ and financial endowment. Hence, despite my status as a ‘student’, research participants in Old Town generally perceived and expected me to support them or the associations financially – an expectation I met when I had the means. This claim is validated for example by the fact that the United Sisters appointed me as a ‘patron’ of the association. However, their expectations or perceptions of me did not determine the quality of my access to them or the sort of information gathered.

Thus, in many ways, I was both an insider and outsider and negotiated my positionality as fieldwork unfolded. I was an insider insofar as my identity as a native of Bamenda was concerned. Having attended secondary and high school and lived in Bamenda, I shared the social world of my participants and understood their everyday challenges. However, coming from abroad and being of a different education level, I was seen as an outsider regardless of my status as a young man. To most, if not all participants, I was seen as more privileged in life than they were and as such could not claim to share their challenges and daily struggles.

Furthermore, I could not claim as much insiderness in certain female spaces compared to young men’s spaces. Whereas I could hang out freely with young men in their bedrooms, in palm wine bars and off-licenses, the same was not true for the most part with young women. Hanging out with young women in private spaces was perceived as inappropriate and could be mistaken for something else. This meant that most interviews with young women took place in the living rooms at their homes, job sites and off-licenses. This notwithstanding, I enjoyed insider status in female associations during weekly meetings as with time, I slipped into “invisibility” by refusing to be drawn into the discussions despite initial attempts by the leadership of the associations – intended to help me ‘feel at home’ and be incorporated as the only regular male in the associations. Once the female associations understood my preference for observation, regular
deliberations went on as if a male intruder was beyond their sight. This was evident in some of
the issues that were addressed during their meetings, issues that were considered girl-talk and not
to be disclosed in the presence of males. My insider status was confirmed at public functions
when for example, the Chosen Sisters introduced me as the only Chosen brother or when I
reluctantly accepted the status of ‘patron’ in the United Sisters. These experiences drove home to
me the gendered nature of fieldwork and the articulation of gender with other aspects of the
ethnographer’s self (Bell 1993:2).

As with many anthropological experiences, familiarity and rapport with participants was
established over several months. Understandably, some individuals were more willing to open up
than others. Sometimes, a fieldworker is fortunate to witness a spectacular encounter,
reminiscent of Geertz’s Balinese experience that serves as a turning point in the field. A less
exotic but significant event occurred a few weeks after I began attending NBA’s Sunday
meetings. The occasion was a born house
21 ceremony organised by the NBA to celebrate the
birth of a new born into Pius’ family, an active member of the association. In many ways, it was
also a celebration of his accession to fatherhood. Initially planned to take place at a neighbour’s
veranda, the occasion eventually unwound in the neighbour’s living room following a tropical
storm that dealt a blow to our plans. Cramped into a good neighbour’s small living room, a gift
of two boxes of soap was handed over to Pius and his girlfriend, Miranda, amidst songs of
thanksgiving. Then a variety of dishes was served and members granted the freedom to choose
from Cameroon’s exhaustive menu of beers and imported Spanish wine. The stage was thus set
for merriment. On television, a Dutch football league was being broadcast – a game that

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21 A born house is a customary ritual performed in the Bamenda grasslands to mark the birth of a new child into a
family. Its modernized version is performed by various social associations to celebrate the birth of a new child into
the family of a member. For first time parents, it is perceived as a rite of passage, usually characterized by
ceremony, music, food and merriment.
Cameroonian claim as theirs. There was much to talk about; Carlson’s speech on behalf of NBA, fatherhood, success and adulthood, food, and of course, football. People who had hardly uttered a word to me now felt the urge to do so given the convivial atmosphere. A young man who sat opposite me sought to know why I had chosen a soft drink instead of a beer. ‘That’s uncameroonian’ he remarked, echoing the widely held opinion that Cameroon is a nation of committed drinkers. He then went on to explain that he was no friend to alcohol but suffered from a different addiction – women. The young men around me laughed at this remark. Someone next to me wanted to know how long I intended to spend in the neighbourhood. Another person sought to know if I could assist in procuring documents for him to travel abroad. It was at this event that I established connections with many NBA members, which consequently facilitated my ability to build rapport and trust. Thus in many ways, I benefited from partaking in this ritual and experienced firsthand, the powerful effect that rituals have towards galvanising participants into a communion of trust.

**Interviewing**

Data collection entailed participating in the activities of the three associations and hanging out with individual members where and when it was deemed safe and appropriate. In order to map out a general idea of my target population, I collected biographic data by administering a short questionnaire aimed at eliciting information on a range of issues such as voting attitudes, age, educational level and religious affiliation. I also organised a series of structured and unstructured interviews with individual members of the respective associations during which I obtained life histories and attitudes or opinions on a set of issues.
In general, interviews sought to collect information on family background, educational level, employment status, political and religious affiliation, ethnic origin and attitudes towards the socio-economic and political dispensation in the country. Where it was difficult to hang out with participants, perhaps due to their schedule, I arranged to have a formal interview with them and collected information on their life histories and experiences. In this respect, I sought information on issues such as their marital status, subsistence sources and strategies, household size (number of siblings or children etc). Evidence for educational level included number of years spent in formal schooling, schools attended (public or private) and parents’ educational level. I also sought to identify individuals’ ethnic affiliation by establishing their parents’ village (ancestral home) of origin and membership in ethnic-related associations either in town or elsewhere. Given the pre-eminence of ethnic cultural associations in Cameroon as a whole (cf. Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000) and specifically in Bamenda, I saw it fit to assess its significance in the lives of young people, granting that these associations are often dominated by elders. Most of these urban-based ethnic associations are known to play important roles in citizenship formation, socialization of the younger generation and negotiation of socio-economic opportunities for members. Some of my research participants were also active members of home-village associations (ethnic-based associations), as were many residents of Old Town.

During my interviews and interaction with young Old Towners, I sought to identify participants’ economic activities or subsistence strategies. It needs to be emphasised that most young people were involved in economic activities of some sort and tended to combine several opportunities (where possible) in order to meet basic needs.\textsuperscript{22} Persons known to juggle economic activities in this manner were often referred to in Cameroon as \textit{débrouillards} – “resourceful

\textsuperscript{22} Persons who carried out economic activities in the informal sector also had their own associations aimed at protecting their interests and assisting members in various aspects of life.
persons” (a French term that has gained currency in Pidgin, the lingua franca spoken predominantly in the Anglophone provinces). During interviews, young people who perceived their youth as protracted tended to emphasise their search for economic independence as a crucial step in attaining social adulthood.

Furthermore, I explored individuals’ level of political literacy on a range of current and past issues, voting history and the perception of their role or impact in formal and informal socio-political processes. As stated earlier, I had set out to investigate how young people in politicised groups in Bamenda negotiated their citizenship but redefined my focus upon realizing that these associations had become moribund or lost legitimacy in local political issues. This in no way entailed that young people were uninvolved in politics or held no political views of some sort. A useful approach in studying youth politics consists in investigating what young people understand and define as ‘politics’ instead of focusing on conventional or national politics. Drawing on this conceptual approach, I sought to uncover young people’s voting habits, opinion on local political leaders and issues and their perception of socio-political processes in the country and Bamenda in particular.

Participant observation and interviews facilitated the collection of life histories of research participants. Life histories provide data that enable the researcher to contrast between persons of different gender, social class, age and stage in the life cycle. For instance, young people at 20 had different perceptions and experiences from those at 30, although they all defined themselves or were positioned as youth, underscoring the claim that youth is a differentiated category, rather than a homogenous entity. Life histories provide cases from which different sub-categories can be compared with those obtained from the general population. Thus, I expanded my sample population to include a few middle-aged men and women in an attempt to
obtain generational perceptions on the predicament of youth. These individuals were recruited from the families of young people already involved in the study.

A final domain of field research was the files of the Bamenda provincial archives where I obtained data on the origin and evolution of the National Youth Day in Cameroon. Archival research underscored the claim that colonial ethnographers paid scant attention to youth. Secondary data obtained from the archives reveal that the question of youth emerged most profoundly during the late colonial period and at the dawn of independence. Throughout the tenure of field research, I also collected materials both published and unpublished from local citizens, private researchers and activists about youth issues in Cameroon and Bamenda specifically.

Conclusion

Anthropological fieldwork is often shaped and influenced by the researcher’s positionality which requires constant adjustment as the circumstances demand. While carrying out this study I realised the gendered dynamics of fieldwork which determined the extent to which I could access certain spaces. Nevertheless, as both an insider and outsider, I enjoyed the opportunity to access participants’ introspective meanings and non-verbal communication while maintaining a distance—in both spatial and metaphoric terms given that I lived in a different neighbourhood about 10km away from Old Town. Immersion in the various activities of the associations permitted me to gain access to the circulating ideas and discourses on the predicament of youth, from young people themselves and to weave an ethnography that bears and articulates the multiple perspectives of their voices and experiences. Hence, I make no authoritative claims to objectivity because to acknowledge particular and personal locations is to
admit the limits of one’s domain from these positions and ‘because from particular locations all understanding becomes subjectively based and forged through interactions within fields of power relations’ (Narayan 1993:679). In the next chapter, I examine the multiple dimensions from which youth has been researched and how this study contributes towards understanding youth subjectivities in Africa.
Chapter Three
Themes and Perspectives on Youth in Africa

‘Young people may be burdened – but – not beaten…” George Lipsitz (2004:xi).

‘Youth as a sign of contradiction, as the figuration of mythic bipolarity, is enshrined in the foundations of the modern collective imaginary’ Jean & John Comaroff (2005:23-24).

This chapter is a critical appraisal of the existing literature on youth in Cameroon and Africa in general. It explores two major issues;

- It presents a brief history of ‘youth’ in Cameroon and Africa by unravelling the ways in which youth has been shaped and transformed by the colonial encounter and subsequently by the early postcolonial state, predicated on the nationalist discourse of nation-building and economic modernization.

- It examines some of the major perspectives from which young people have been studied – particularly those relevant to this study.

This review arrives at the following conclusions;

i. that anthropological studies of youth in Africa stand to be enriched by the incorporation of gender perspectives –increasingly perceived as imperative in the study of cultural life and practices.

ii. That research on youth in Cameroon has been focused predominantly on university students, which narrows the definition of youth to elite students and as such reveals the need to widen the scope of youth research beyond the category of ‘students’.
iii. That although studies of young people have acknowledged their agency, many of these studies have tended to focus on individuals (as autonomous or dependent persons) but hardly as members of groups and whose actions are intersubjective. Thus, the study highlights the relevance of understanding young people’s lives through their involvement in formal and informal associations.

A Short History of Youth in Colonial Africa

The past decade has witnessed an unprecedented boom in the study of youth in Africa, a category that was often ignored by anthropologists in favour of ethnographic topics or themes such as chieftaincy, kinship, witchcraft and subsistence strategies. It is probable that recent interest in the study of African youth is not unrelated to the irruption of young people into the public sphere in the 1980s and 1990s (Diouf 2003; Bayart, Mbembe, and Toulabor 1992; Seekings 1993; Bazenguissa-Ganga and MacGaffey 1995; Reynolds 1995; Richards 1996; Wise 1998). Prior to this era, the story was different. In the Cameroon grasslands, like in other parts of Africa, colonial ethnographies tended to be constructed from the view point of local hierarchies (chiefs and lineage or household heads). Thus, ‘speech’ was monopolised by the hierarchy while young people and women ‘constituted a category of persons reduced to silence’23 (Warnier 1996:116), that is, a muted group as it were, whose members could hardly be heard by the ethnographer.

23 Warnier (1996) further identifies other reasons why youth was relegated to a position of irrelevance by colonial ethnographers. According to him, three more points can be advanced to explain this trend; a) the dominant theoretical interest, especially since the 1940s – was in political systems, the consequence of which meant greater attention was paid to hierarchy. Second, in the 1960s and 70s, Marxist anthropology was more interested in identifying and analysing the relationships of production than giving voice to dominated groups such as youth. Finally, there was a profound disciplinary bias which undermined other sources of data such as those of missionaries, traders, colonial officers, schoolmasters, converts, etc. in favour of the anthropologist’s first-hand experience on the field.
There are a few exceptions of course in the broad anthropological literature such as Margaret Mead’s pioneering study of adolescence and patterns of socialization in New Guinea (Mead 1928, 1963); and Evans-Pritchard’s brief analysis of the songs and names of young people in his classic ethnography *The Nuer* (1940). Little doubt then, the category of youth has been perceived as doubly marginalised – first in the anthropological literature and second, in the societies to which they belong – hence the conceptualisation of youth as ‘anthropology’s silent “others”’ (Caputo 1995; Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995). Indeed, it is now evident that ‘youth’ only played a supporting or secondary role in colonial and early post-independence ethnographies (Durham 2000). Against this background, this chapter critically reviews the significance of early and recent literature that has focused on African youth since the colonial era to date. It examines the conceptual/ theoretical, and methodological positions that have shaped the study of African youth in general and Cameroonian youth in particular.

The question could be posed if prior to the colonial encounter, youth was a distinct social category in Africa or was it a product of colonial invention that has since been legitimised as an element of African culture? Hall and Montgomery among others have asserted quite strongly that youth and childhood are ‘essentially Western social categories related to age and notions of social majority, and as such they are culturally and temporally specific’²⁴ (Hall and Montgomery 2000:13). This view is echoed by Jeffrey Kaplan who contends that in many non-western societies, the concept of adolescence or youth was often non-existent. He illustrates this claim by drawing on an example from India where young girls supposedly did not experience adolescence but moved from childhood to motherhood because they were married off in pre-arranged

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²⁴ It is worthy to note at this juncture that the rise of industrial capitalism in Europe created conditions for the emergence of ‘youth’ as a semi-autonomous category. Left on to their own devices, the children of working class parents created their own worlds bereft of parental control. This became the category known as ‘youth’ – a term that conjured up images of delinquency and unruliness.
marriages during childhood (Kaplan 2004:xiv-xv). Similarly, others have pointed out that adolescence as a period in the life stage emerged in Africa during the colonial period due to structural changes in the society, the consequence of which adolescence is now ‘associated with going to school and trying to get a job in the modern sector of the economy’ (Caldwell et al. 1998:141). These views are misleading and limited, indeed reminiscent of colonial discourses that propounded the inexistence of “history” in non-western societies, especially Africa (cf. Mudimbe 1988). There is evidence that Europe was not alone in marking out ‘childhood’ (cf. Ariès 1962; Postman 1994) and ‘youth’ as phases in the human life cycle. Many age-based societies in Africa (especially the age-grade societies of Eastern Africa) marked out ‘youth’ as a distinct stage and often tapped their ‘liminal force…for the collective good’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005:22). Richard Waller reminds us that a common theme in pre-colonial tradition was the need to control youths’ energies in ‘socially productive ways’ (Waller 2006:77), one which is still pervasive today as it were many decades ago. Anthropologists have insisted that although youth could be understood as a universal phenomenon, it is not a transhistorical or transcultural category – namely that ‘the cultural meanings and social attributes ascribed to ‘youth’ have varied a great deal across time and space’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005:19).

If youth was constructed and privileged as an important stage in the life cycle, what then were its markers prior to the colonial encounter? Most chiefdoms in the Cameroon grasslands tended to distinguish between infants, children, youth (sometimes referred to as adolescence) and

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25 Postman has equally shown the conditions that led to the emergence of ‘childhood’ as a distinct social category in Europe. According to him, ‘the printing press created a new definition of adulthood based on reading competence, and, correspondingly, a new conception of childhood based on reading incompetence’ (Postman 1994:18, italics original).

26 In pre-colonial East Africa, youths were often mobilized into warriors groups and charged with protecting the boundaries of the village or kingdom (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2005:22).

27 It needs to be emphasised that the pre-colonial grassfields hierarchy was underpinned by the subordinate positions of male youth who were often debarred from marriage and served as a primary source of surplus value (labour) for the notables and chiefs.
adults – categories marked by rites of initiation and incorporation (cf. Mbunwe-Samba et al. 1993). Mzeka for example maintains that in traditional Nso society, one of the biggest chiefdoms in the grasslands, people differentiated between; wan (infancy), wanle (childhood), wanle nsum/nggon (youth or adolescence), lumen/wiy (manhood, womanhood or maturity stage) and tata/yaya (old age). Although these distinctions were predicated on biological age, transition from one stage to the other was often marked by elaborate rites of passage and depended on a range of negotiated factors. This was particularly true of the transition from youth to adulthood (determined more by the acquisition of what Jean-Pierre Warnier has called ‘vital substances’ necessary for social reproduction) than simply on biological maturity.

In this regard, Warnier identified two categories of adult status in traditional grassland society, pertaining particularly to men – ‘first, unmarried cadets perceived as children irrespective of their age … seen as void of transmissible life essence, as symbolically impotent. Second, married men who are coopted into the line of descent of a notable, and who can engender by transmitting the life essence received from the latter’ (1993a:305). According to Warnier, unmarried men and young women generally constituted what he refers to as “social cadets”. It needs to be highlighted at this juncture that unlike some African societies, most chiefdoms of the grassfields did not perceive youth as a category for social mobilization or specific kinds of actions. Instead, their labour and loyalty were highly coveted by titled men and lineage heads, whose prestige and authority depended on the size of their subordinates or social cadets.

Drawing on the metaphor of the container, Warnier contends that many cultures of the grasslands perceived the social cadet as ‘an empty vessel lacking the means to fill itself’ (1996:121) and as such remained in a position of dependency and submission. According to this
principle, marriage could boost one’s status but not eliminate one’s social cadetness. Reproduction – the transmission of life thus played a crucial role in enhancing one’s status in a hierarchical world dominated by titled men and lineage heads. In this order of things, social adulthood or full personhood was often perceived as a work-in-progress, structurally determined and sometimes, contested. Few persons, especially men such as the fon or chief and notables could claim full personhood – precisely because they were destined for ancestorship (cf. Jindra 2005). Michael Jindra contends that the adoption of Christianity in the grasslands has significantly altered notions of death, the afterlife, ancestors, and ultimately, hierarchy and personhood in the Cameroon grasslands – perhaps, leading to what I may call the democratisation of ancestorship – meaning that the Christian emphasis on the uniqueness of each human being (created in the image of God) means every individual has the potential to become an ancestor ‘a status attained previously mainly by titled men’ (Jindra 2005:357). Other factors that have led to redefinitions of personhood are education and greater exposure to Western influences (See for example Rowlands 1994, 1996).

Thus, full personhood, commonly associated with social adulthood is no longer the preserve of titled men and chiefs. Social cadets who in the past served as foot soldiers of adult hegemony or as a source of surplus value to paraphrase Comaroff and Comaroff (2005), can potentially achieve full personhood drawing on a combination of traditional, Christian and modern logics of identity and success. Today, social adulthood denotes a status of relative success based on an assortment of factors – marriage, parenthood, employment, the ability to establish an independent household and provide for one’s needs and those of one’s kin. According to Rowlands (1994), individualised success in the Cameroon grasslands is often believed to have been achieved at the expense of others. He maintains that ‘personal success is
essentially destructive unless seen to be acting for the good of all and this ensures that such achievements should be accompanied by egalitarian redistributory mechanisms’ (Rowlands 1994: 17). Thus, social adulthood is tied powerfully to an individual’s ability to redistribute his/her success or achievements. Nyamnjoh (2002) validates this claim when he asserts that in the Cameroon grasslands, ‘achievement is devoid of meaning if not pursued within, as part of, and on behalf of a group of people who recognise and endorse that achievement’ (2002b:115). Thus, it is evident from the above that youth is a product of social positioning. One was considered a youth if he or she did not have authority to make decisions for him/herself or on behalf of others and was unable to establish a separate household from his/her parents (d'Almeida-Topor 1992; Cruise O'Brien 1996; Fokwang 1999).

The path to maturity or adulthood, Waller (2006) reminds us, tended to follow the processes of social reproduction rather than a period of time defined in years, although one should add that this transition was experienced differently by men and women. For young women, adulthood was recognised by the attainment of reproductive maturity and eventually, marriage, while for young men the achievement of independence as household heads was emphasised. However, young men generally experienced a protracted youth, marked by a series of initiations of which marriage was but one stage, which ended eventually with the achievement of controlled and responsible masculinity. In general, elaborate rites of passage were organised to mark the different stages of youth transition to adulthood and of distinguishing one age-group from the other. Its ordered progression marked out in very visible and symbolic ways a person’s generational position which conferred upon him/her the privileges and

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28 A young man could be married and yet living in his father’s compound and as such was still considered a dependent. In the Cameroon grasslands, it was not enough to be married in order to be considered an adult. Warnier maintains that a young man remained symbolically impotent until he was able to participate in procreative reproduction.
obligations that accompanied a given phase.\textsuperscript{29} Thus, in many pre-colonial African societies, youth was hardly an ambiguous status. It was also a metaphor for socio-economic dependence and social minority. For instance in some societies, full grown men who failed to undergo the rite of circumcision were often perceived and treated as social minors or “boys” (cf. Heald 2001). Youth was also a period of waiting, restraint and preparation for entry into the world of authority, which was mainly the preserve of the elders. While the future belonged to the youth, the past was the preserve of the elders and it was from mastery of the past that authority was anchored and legitimised (Waller 2006:78; also see Aguilar 1998).\textsuperscript{30}

Colonialism radically altered the economic and socio-cultural basis on which ‘youth’ as a life-phase was defined and experienced. This was achieved by the imposition of new models of organisation and behaviour,\textsuperscript{31} which discounted the ‘past’ as a symbolic source of authority. Besides, colonialism altered the boundaries and erased the erstwhile markers of youth, thus leading to dramatic redefinitions on the status of young men and women. In other words, when and how boys became men and girls women was gravely transformed (Waller 2006:81) and of course, with consequences that are evident to date.\textsuperscript{32} One of the accomplices of the mission civilisatrice, the mission church, contributed significantly in undermining pre-colonial society by

\textsuperscript{29} Upon completion of the rite of circumcision for example, boys became men, after having undergone a symbolic death – that is, death to their boyhood or childhood. Such stages in life are marked by communal celebrations, individual changes in social roles as well as one’s rights and obligations (Aguilar 1998:15)

\textsuperscript{30} Many African communities recognise the past as a strategic resource that the old hold over the young, including young educated functionaries (Cole 1998). The ‘past’ in other words, is a powerful resource manipulated by elders over the relatively ignorant young to secure advantages for themselves, and possibly maintain the status quo. The following proverb from the grassfields epitomises this principle - what an old person can see sitting on the ground, a young person cannot see even from the vantage point of a tree top. The old are revered for their wisdom and knowledge because they have lived longer (cf. Aguilar 1998:21).

\textsuperscript{31} New ideals of responsible behaviour were introduced such as the novel view of productive masculinity, which was achieved through employment in the colonial service, proper citizenship and marriage (Waller 2006:78)

\textsuperscript{32} Thus, it is evident that colonialism marked a new beginning for youth. It didn’t create youth, it simply altered the socio-economic conditions in which youth was defined and understood. Starting from the colonial period, the formal educational system constituted the modern arena for the transition of young men and women. By going through the formal educational system, boys became men and girls women. But this was limited to those who enrolled in schools, and even then, it did not guarantee a smooth transition from school to the job market.
reshaping maturity especially for young women. Missions tended to ban rites of passage such as female circumcision and replaced them with new Christian rites – even though some of the old rituals continued to co-exist with the newly introduced ones. Similarly, male maturity was reshaped by colonial expectations of law and order and through education and the labour process (Waller 2006:81-82). For example, warrior bands, militias and initiation groups, ‘important spaces for the socialization and self-determination of young men and the proving of manhood, were disbanded or severely curtailed…’ (Waller 2006:82; also see Aguilar 1998; Ly 1988).

As noted above, some pre-colonial institutions of socialization and initiation were soon replaced by the educational and labour systems and young men became employed in the colonial service as messengers, translators, clerks, teachers and general labourers (Waller 2006:78; see Warnier 1996:116 for parallels in colonial Bamenda). This had major consequences for many African societies because through their employment, the young acquired financial power which encouraged their alleged arrogance and defiance. Thus, armed with ‘literacy’ and dressed in western ‘fashion’, African youths threatened to provoke the elders who, despite all, still controlled the resources of the land and traditional labour. Such provocation, if allowed to prevail, colonial officials agreed, could spell doom for their territories. So colonial officials sought to strengthen the ‘domestic authority of African elders and forged alliances with local

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33 For the controversy surrounding this terminology and the ritual itself, see (Njambi 2004b, 2004a; Davis 2004).
34 The colonial economy encouraged young people to leave their homes to work in various sectors of the economy. In Southern Africa, migrant labour became a principal source of income in many households as men travelled to the mines in Kimberley and Johannesburg to seek employment. Migration also became a rite of passage in consequence, a trend that has become entrenched in some cultures to date. Upon their return from the urban areas or the mines, young men were recognised and granted adult status and rights (see for example Schapera 1970).
35 Particular histories of various African societies seem to bear testimony to this claim. For example in 1901, armed young men who had broken away from authority (variously known in the Bamenda grasslands as Kamenda boys, Tapenta boys or Free boys) held the region to ransom. Some of these young men had been recruited into the German colonial Schutztruppe to undertake punitive expeditions into Mankon and Bafut – chiefdoms that were perceived as resisting German colonial rule. A missionary who witnessed the activities of these young men wrote the following account: ‘The youths in particular who form the tail of the troop, are the bane of the country. Corrupted by the magic of the Whites, they attack men, women and children like wild beast. They steal anything that isn’t nailed down – fowls, goats and footstuff. Their organisation has ramifications everywhere. When they are checked, they cry: Lef mi, mi big boy, mi be Tapenta boy’ (cited in Warnier 1996:117).
gerontocracies to create, define and manage ‘tradition’” (Waller 2006:79) in a bid to stem potential rebellion among the youth.

During the late colonial period, maturity was compromised and reshaped and ‘youth’ came to acquire a new definition and set of meanings constructed on the basis of age and gender. Colonialism did not ‘invent’ youth, but reshaped and redefined its meanings by discounting and disbanding the structures on which it owed its legitimacy prior to colonial rule. Colonialism reshaped ‘youth’ and the connotations of the concept continued to change following the independence of African countries.

**Reconstructing Youth in Early Postcolonial Africa**

The tremendous socio-economic and political changes in the newly independent states that began in the 1960s, culminating in the dismantling of the apartheid system in South Africa in 1994 marked the end of *direct* foreign domination in the African continent. Decolonisation was a critical historical process of taking back Africa’s destiny into the hands of her sons and daughters. This period, especially the first decade of independence (1960-70) ushered in a new era of optimism founded on the predictable dreams of nation building and economic prosperity. At the heart of these lofty dreams was the youth, partly because ‘youth’ is often associated with the ‘future’ (cf. Soares 2000:212) but also because an increasing number of young people who had acquired formal western education (during the colonial period) were perceived as bearers of the two-fold project of modernity and African cultures (Diouf 2003:4), that is, as those who would blend the ways of the past with those of the modern state. Africa’s hope in its youth was not ill-founded given the role of youth movements in the anti-colonial struggles in many regions of the continent. In fact, the anti-colonial machinery was driven predominantly by activists who
often identified themselves as youths as seen in the prominence of youth organisations that sought to accelerate decolonisation. In Cameroon for instance, the *Jeunesse Camerounaise Française* (Jeucafra), founded in 1938 and the Southern Cameroons Youth League (SCYL) founded in 1948 in the former French Cameroon and British Southern Cameroons, respectively, played prominent roles in the struggle for independence (cf. Abbink 2005; Marks 2001; Onana 2000).

Nation building was predicated on a set of ideologies, one of which was the ‘generational and sexual division of labour and … social and economic mobilization’ (Diouf 2003:3). Furthermore, the nationalist project in many African countries sought to reinforce the boundaries between young people and elders (which had been undermined by colonialism) but also to maintain youth at the heart of its economic and cultural development. This was articulated through the provision of schools and higher institutes of learning, scholarships to study abroad, access to health care, jobs in the civil service among other amenities. This era (the first decade of independence) can no doubt, be termed Africa’s ‘golden’ era.³⁶ If this was true of Africa in general, then this was even truer for the ‘youth’ because of the ‘cultural prestige’ attached to their status as the chief agent of transformation during that period (Diouf 2003:4).

A certain contradiction also characterised the first decades of independence. Jon Abbink observes that youth leaders were carefully screened and contained by elders – probably as part of the strategy of reinforcing the boundaries between young and old. Many young leaders were lured with lucrative positions in the civil service (based on the ideas that they will take over from the elders), or were set against each other (Abbink 2005:13). Co-optation became even fiercer as monolithic rule tightened its grip on society and dissent or alternative voices were effectively

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³⁶ There is evidence that compared to contemporary socio-economic standards, Africa was better off at independence than it is today.
silenced. Youths were educated on their position in society and their moral responsibility to obey elders and wait for their turn. In Zanzibar for example, President Aboud Jumbe made the following remarks to the Young Pioneers, a youth organisation:

When we cook we use three cooking stones to support a cooking pot . . . There must be three cooking stones if you want your pot to bubble up. In a similar manner, any nation must have, figuratively, three cooking stones, namely, the elderly women, the elderly men, and the youth. These three groups must work together in order to get the nation, figuratively, well cooked. (Jumbe 1975, quoted in Burgess 1999:29)

Thomas Burgess further observes that in Zanzibar politicians and the bureaucratic elite encouraged young citizens (even adults) to think of themselves as youth, ‘an identity which they actively attempted to associate with discipline, volunteerism, and obedience to Zanzibar’s political elders’ (Burgess 1999:30). Similar strategies were employed in many parts of Francophone Africa with similar results (cf. Mbembe 1985).

By the late 1970s, the optimism that had characterised the early postcolonial era turned sour. The disappearance of what Andy Furlong has termed ‘old predictabilities’ marked by graduation from school to the job market became symptomatic of the emerging economic crisis which palpably, exacerbated the ‘crisis of youth’ (Furlong 2000:133).37 In many African countries the ‘bankruptcy of the nationalist project’ was experienced by youths through their growing exclusion from the ‘arenas of power, work, education, and leisure…’ as well as in the ‘physical and intellectual collapse of the institutions of supervision and education, the absence of health coverage’ which contributed inevitably to the ‘massive and aggressive presence of young people on the streets…’ (Diouf 2003:4-5). Thus between the 1970s and the 90s, youth has

37 The crisis includes among other things, growing unemployment among young people on a worldwide scale and what has been termed the protraction of youth, witnessed by the increased length of time young people spend in school and as dependents of their parents. It is also reflected in the growing uncertainties that characterise the lives of many young people worldwide, coupled with high levels of unemployment, which in 2003 reached an all-time global high of 186 million.
undergone dramatic reshaping. Today, it is often represented in negative notions as a menace, dangerous, decadent and criminal. In other words, there is a direct inversion of the prestige attached to youth in the 1960s to notions of youth that emphasise their vulnerability and marginality in the political and economic spheres.

Young people’s predicament permit us to appreciate the dynamics of social change in Africa precisely because they are often ‘positioned at the leading edge of many aspects of contemporary social change, and experience acutely the risks and opportunities that new social conditions entail’ (Hall, Coffey, and Williamson 1999:501). In her insightful introduction to a special edition of Anthropology Quarterly dedicated to youth in Africa, Deborah Durham observes that young people ‘are particularly sensitive to transformations in the economy as their activities, prospects, and ambitions are dislocated and redirected. New forms of political participation and authority exclude and include youth in novel ways, and debates about these forms are debates about the nature of citizenship, responsibilities, and the moral, immoral, and amoral nature of social action, issues particularly acute for youth, whose memberships are rapidly changing and multiple’ (2000:114). Durham’s observations foreground some of the critical issues covered in this study – namely the nature of citizenship, morality and social action. These issues are examined through young people’s associational life in Bamenda.

Urban Youth Identities in Africa

An important feature of the postcolonial state in Africa in the post-1990 era (characterised by the triumph of neoliberalism) is what Comaroff and Comaroff have described as ‘the explosion of identity politics’ (2001a:634). This explosion is manifest in the domains of ethnicity, sexuality, race, age, religion and life-style, just to name a few. Indeed, the proliferation
of identity politics has led scholars to investigate its multiple dimensions, often taking as their basis the structures and contexts within which identities emerge as well as the ways in which they are ‘multiplied, transformed and put into circulation’ (Mbembe 1992:3; also see Werbner and Ranger 1996; Werbner 2002b; Mbembe 2001; Geschiere and Gugler 1998; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 2001a; Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003). Youth identities have also captivated scholarly interest, following what Diouf describes as their irruption into the public and domestic spheres – identities that are often constructed and circulated in the domains of popular culture, music, sport and politics.

Popular culture represents a key arena where young people’s identities are produced and put into circulation. According to Charles Gondola, popular culture represents ‘the new frontier of African studies research’ where focus is placed on the ‘realms of sociability, the spaces of self-representation and collective representation, where the dramatization of daily life is enacted, and where the principal actors are often found among urban youth’ (Gondola 1999:24; also see Diouf 1996; Zegeye 2004). For instance, in his study of popular culture among Congolese youth, Charles Gondola observes that the urban environment delays the accession of young people into adulthood in two specific ways - delaying their entry into the professional world (salaried formal economy) and the world of matrimony, commonly perceived to grant adult status to younger members of society. In response to their marginalisation, Gondola argues, Congolese youths have appropriated certain forms and symbols of popular culture, which allow them to build a “dreamlike order”, otherwise unreachable. Gondola maintains that central to their identity constructions is the Sape (Société des ambienceurs et des personnes élégantes) – a loose organisation consisting of young men obsessed with expensive designer labels (griffe) and fashion in general. By embracing or inventing aspects of popular culture underscored by an
almost fanatical obsession with *la griffe*, the young men (Sapeurs) dramatise their identities in the urban sphere through song and dance. Gondola sees the ‘*saped body*’ - a sort of ‘social skin’ as an egotistical surface that allows the *sapeur* to define the boundaries that separate him from the *Other*, as well as defining a social territory that distinguishes one group, the *sapeurs*, from the rest of society (1999:26).

Besides fashion, music and dance also constitute popular domains in which young people’s identities are formulated and put into circulation. In Cote d’Ivoire for example, at a time when the myth of the Ivorian miracle was crumbling youths re-appropriated reggae and reinvented *zouglou* and *mapouka*, new forms of local expression of popular music, which gradually became a voice for the voiceless and a mouth for the speechless (Akindes 2002:86). Similarly, Deborah Durham (2005) has shown that youth choral music among the Herero in Botswana has disruptive potential to the social and political spheres just as youths in the chiefdom of Oku in the Cameroon grasslands enact forms of resistance against the authoritarian state through their performance of traditional dance (Argenti 1998, 2005). Thus, scholars are generally interested in the spaces and contexts in which young people create, perform and transform their identities. These spaces or sites have been described by Maira and Soep (2004) as *youthscapes* – sites that are not just ‘geographic or temporal but social and political as well’, that is, places that are ‘bound up with questions of power and materiality’ (2004:2).

An example of a youthscape is evident in Nyamnjoh and Page’s (2002) study of young people’s social imaginaries and identities in Cameroon. This study explores the ways in which youths construct and express their identities through practices of fantasy and imagination, informed by the view that fantasy is a social practice, that is, imaginative acts materially grounded in social activities (Weiss 2002:93). Nyamnjoh and Page are interested in young black
Cameroonian’s construction of whiteness, convinced that both white and non-white alike are active contributors and makers of the meaning of whiteness (2002:609). According to the authors, young black Cameroonian’s perceive whiteness as the embodiment of ‘abundant material comfort and power’ but also as characterised by exploitation and disingenuousness. Young black Cameroonian’s ideas of whiteness draw attention to their imaginations of economic prosperity and material comfort – or as pathways to consuming modernity. They also express consciousness about the exploitative West which seeks to project itself as the ultimate judge of the good and the beautiful. Despite the ambivalence of youths’ representations of whiteness, Nyamnjoh and Page contend that these representations matter because they are used to ‘articulate expressions of personal and national identity and are a reflection of the local political context. They are an expression of the desire for Cameroon to be more than it is, but also of a stoicism about the internal possibilities of political transformation’ (Nyamnjoh and Page 2002:632).

The authors further observe that most young people in Cameroon aspire to whiteness because of their disenchantment with the elite, thus the image of the West provides an alternative to the existing system of social and political organisation in Cameroon. So, association with whiteness, they conclude, could be perceived as an exit option, that is, as ‘a way out of their individual or collective predicament’ (Nyamnjoh and Page 2002:632).

While the above account contributes significantly to our knowledge of youth identities in Cameroon, its scope of study is limited to university students, some of whom, the authors concede, are influenced by anti-colonial writers such as Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney and Samir Amin. Thus, it is inconclusive if these views are those of educated youths only or are held across the young generation in Cameroon. Hence the authors call for studies that ‘examine the representations of whiteness produced by other social groups in Cameroon, either other young Cameroonian’s with
different personal experiences...or with different age groups’ (Nyamnjoh and Page 2002:610).

The present study fills this lacuna by exploring urban youth imaginaries and identities through their association with whiteness, expressed through their desires to migrate to the West in search of better lives (see Chapter Eight).

One of the central paradoxes of youth identity concerns the very definition of youth itself. There is little doubt that youth is often understood in relation to biological age but as seen earlier, it is primarily a socio-cultural construct whose meanings and attributes vary from culture to culture. Youth cannot be understood exclusively on the basis of age or biology because it is at the same time, entangled with diverse legal, political and cultural uses (Kürti 2002:5). This enigma has been rendered even more acute in the postcolonial context where the boundaries of youth have frequently shifted and increasingly subject to negotiations, manipulations and contestations. Hence, central to this problematic is ‘who’ qualifies as youth and how this identity is put into circulation. This crisis of definition and identification is not peculiar to Africa but characteristic of current global transformations (cf. Jones and Wallace 1992; Wyn and White 1997, 2000; Soares 2000; Furlong 2000; Côté 1996, 2000; Pais 2000; Westberg 2004) although in Africa the protraction of ‘youth’ is closely linked to the crises of underdevelopment facing the postcolonial state (Ly 1988). Thus, scholars researching youth in Africa tend to be preoccupied with the changing definition of youth (particularly as a social and political identity) and the uses to which it is put (cf. Bazenguissa-Ganga 2001; Burgess 1999, 2002, 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; Durham 2000, 2004; Gore and Pratten 2003; Hoffman 2003; Jua 2003; Mbaku and Awasom 2004; Ramphele 2002; Soudien 2003; Vigh 2006).
Urban Youth and Political Involvement

A growing number of studies have explored how young people in Africa see their political identity as well as their active engagement in political processes. In contrast to young people in Western countries who are perceived as having withdrawn from conventional politics (cf. Wallace 2003; Henn and Weinstein 2006), the poor economic and social conditions of African youth are perceived as motivating their opposition to many postcolonial regimes. The study of youth politics, Cruise O'Brien (1996) contends, is the study of politics ‘from below’ (le politique par le bas) following Bayart’s classic distinction between ‘high politics’ and ‘low politics’. The realm of low politics, Cruise O’Brien observes, is occupied by marginalised groups including social minors such as women, children and youth. Hence, the focus on youth politics denotes the study of the ‘politics of the powerless’. It is this state of apparent powerlessness that enables young people to engage in the formation of political identity – commonly perceived as a ‘natural opposition’ on account of their angst against the ruling elites. Despite their assumed natural opposition, Crusie O’Brien observes that they are ‘poorly equipped to make their opposition effective’ because they have limited access to resources and are often manipulated by political elders and the elite (1996:55).

This notwithstanding, youths have become conspicuous political actors in their own right and have been at the forefront of national struggles for democratic transformation and the reconfiguration of the state (see for example Arnaut 2005; Dorman 2005; Fokwang 2003; Kagwanja 2005; Sharp 2002, 2003; Naidoo 1992; Seekings 1993; Adebanwi 2005; Sall 2004). This claim is evident in some of the growing body of literature on youth political involvement in Africa.

University students in Cameroon, like in other regions of Africa played leading roles in their nation-building processes as brokers of tradition and modernity and many saw themselves

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38 This claim is contested by Quéniart and Jacques (2004) in their study of the political involvement of young Quebecois women. They contend that studies of youth involvement in politics tend to focus on institutional and formal spaces despite the fact that young people could be involved in politics in non-formal patterns.
as elites-in-waiting. This leadership role was particularly true in the early decades of independence, but by the 1980s their fortunes had declined on account of the economic crisis that plagued many African countries. Living and study conditions on campus and the bleak prospects of finding employment upon graduation were indicators of this change in conditions. Universities lacked the infrastructure to cope with substantial growth in student population, in part a consequence of the negative effects of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) which many African countries implemented in the 1980s and 1990s (cf. Nyamnjoh and Jua 2002; Cruise O'Brien 1996; Mbembe 1985; Klopp and Orina 2002; Konings 2002; Lebeau and Ogunsanya 2000). Thus a major consequence of the economic crisis was a decline in academic standards. It is against this background that university students became important actors in the political process of their respective countries either on the side of the ruling governments or with the opposition.

In Cameroon specifically, Anglophone students felt even more marginalized than their Francophone compatriots because of the minority status (and supposedly second-class citizenship) of English speakers in a Francophone-dominated country (Konings 2005:162). Hence, students tended to be involved in Anglophone nationalist movements and increasingly asserted and took pride in their Anglophone identity as part of the collective drive among Anglophone activists to demand a reconfiguration of the postcolonial state. While existing literature on this topic has highlighted the vanguard role of Anglophone students in Anglophone nationalist struggles (Konings 2005:172; also see Nyamnjoh 1996b), no studies have explored perceptions and attitudes about Anglophone identity among non-student populations – a gap filled by the present study.
In *Youth and Identity Politics in South Africa* (2005), Dlamini examines the socio-cultural practices that shaped youth social identities in South Africa during the period of transition from apartheid to democracy. At issue is how Zulu ethnic identity was constructed and negotiated by young people in KwaZulu, one of the many homelands created by the apartheid state (Dlamini 2005:6). This study was set against the background of violent and political conflict between the un-banned African National Congress (ANC) and the Inkatha (then a Zulu cultural movement) – this, at a time when membership in the ANC or overt support for it was perceived as a betrayal of Zuluness and the Zulu nationalist and cultural movement, Inkatha, headed by Chief Mangosothu Buthelezi, a traditional ruler and the then Chief Minister of the homeland of KwaZulu. Dlamini, herself a Zulu and supporter of the ANC, trod on dangerous ground as she investigated how youths negotiated and constructed Zulu identity through language and history and how they navigated township lives during this period of political reconstruction and transition in South Africa. Most youths sympathized with the ANC despite being Zulu. Youths challenged interpretations of Zulu history and ethnicity by both the apartheid state and anti-apartheid organizations while simultaneously creating their identities. Dlamini maintains that youth practices mirrored the negotiation of ethnicity in everyday life and that youth practices at the time presented an alternative view of Zuluness and an alternative definition of Zulu identity (Dlamini 2005:183).

Unfortunately, Dlamini’s analysis of youth identity in KwaZulu does not compare this phenomenon to youth in other South African ‘homelands’ nor does she problematize the very notion of youth and how it is used by social and political actors in KwaZulu. This gap in her study fails to provide us with a critical understanding of the ways in which various political and ethnic movements construct and reshape ‘youth’ in their drive for political pre-eminence.
Nevertheless, this work resonates with the current study which examines Anglophone youth subjectivities in Bamenda and how young people grapple with their political and cultural identities in a context of national marginalisation.

In *Young Warriors* (2001) Monique Marks provides a profound ethnographic portrayal of the ways in which South African youths created their identities during the struggle for national liberation. She focuses on the ‘Charterist youth movement’ in Diepkloof in Johannesburg and argues that youths tended to see themselves as soldiers of peace and justice and as ‘comrades’ in the ANC-led struggle for liberation (Marks 2001:5) through their involvement in social movements. Her study departs from those that perceived youth at the time as a menace and tended to depict black youth as a ‘lost generation’ with poor future prospects. Furthermore, she contends and rightly so that very little has been written about the role of gender in relation to youth politics and especially with respect to youth violence. In her analysis of the politicised youths of Diepkloof, she observes that ‘comrades’ were usually portrayed as males who used violence as an overall sense of their masculinity. In this regard, she maintains that ‘while youth politics and organisations have been, and remain male dominated, young women have been active too – albeit in small numbers’ (Marks 2001:103). While her observation on this issue is significant, it fails to recognise the claim that female participation in ‘politics’ tends to be outside the framework of institutional politics (Quéniart and Jacques 2004:182) or even outside of social movements, a factor that probably accounts for her inadequate attention to female youth politics.

**Youth Responses to Urban Marginalisation**

Although ‘there are startling similarities in the current situation of youth the world over, similarities that appear to arise out of the workings of neoliberal capitalism’ (Comaroff and
Comaroff 2000:307), it needs to be emphasised that the predicament of youth in Africa is comparatively acute (cf. Argenti 2002; de Boeck and Honwana 2005). Young people make up the numerical majority of the African population and population growth rates remain relatively higher, despite the limited ability of the postcolonial state to facilitate their integration into social adulthood (see the UNFPA 2006; United Nations 2005). It is also evident that Africa south of the Sahara remains one of the ‘poorest’ regions in the world despite its vast material and human resources – see the World Development Report 2007 which calls for renewed emphasis and opportunities for youth (The World Bank 2006). The general literature on African youth reveals that in recent decades, young people have resisted their marginalisation and emerged at the forefront of struggles for survival, acting in various capacities as hawkers, street children, onlookers, entrepreneurs, community activists and so on. Their multiple positionalities have attracted scholars and scholarship on youth survival strategies and the ways in which they navigate the socio-economic, political and cultural domains in order to challenge their marginality and attain social adulthood.

In the mid 1980s and early 90s for example, Senegalese youth in Dakar responded to their alienation in the postcolony by positioning themselves as important actors in the urban landscape. They accomplished this by creating autonomous youth organisations (athletic and cultural) and undertook various activities such as clean-up operations, building of playgrounds and provision of vocational training for children. In some dangerous quarters in Dakar, young people took over control of the local space by setting up militias for self-defence and in extreme cases even organised raids on thieves and drug addicts (Diouf 2003:8). Diouf contends that by focusing their activities on the level of the neighbourhood, ‘cultural and athletic associations challenge, to a certain extent, residual colonial institutions, and sometimes even national ones’
(2003:8). There is also evidence that youths in South-eastern Nigeria have held local political
officials to account for their action as part of their struggle for resource control and community
security in the wake of the oil boom in Nigeria (Gore and Pratten 2003; Pratten 2006).

Few studies have been carried out on urban youth responses to their marginalisation in
Cameroon – a country that has experienced acute economic crisis for over two decades, leading
to the extension of the period of ‘youth’ for many Cameroonians. High unemployment rates,
especially for a growing number of university graduates has led to deep disillusionment with the
government of President Paul Biya who has been in power since 1982 – given that the
government bureaucracy remains the most attractive and chief employer since independence in
the absence of a vibrant private economic sector. Thus, popular disenchantment with the elite
and the postcolonial state has driven young Cameroonians to adopt diverse and ‘differential
responses to disappearing transitional pathways’ (Jua 2003), mechanisms that have been the
subject of most of the studies on youth survival strategies in Cameroon (see Fokwang 2003).
Some responses include the involvement of young people in pro-government youth movements,
(a trend that has become increasingly unpopular), the setting up of criminal economies
epitomised by the practice of feymania (cf. Malaquais 2001; Ndjio 2006).

Konings’ (2006) study investigates the involvement of young men in the informal
transportation sector in Douala, Cameroon. Through the innovation and appropriation of
bendskins (motorcycle taxis) and pousse-pousse (hand-driven carts for the transportation of
goods), young men demonstrate their determination to fight off economic marginalisation.
Konings contends that although the young men are divided by ethnicity, they ‘appear capable of
overcoming group boundaries and mutual competition when outsiders threaten their individual
and common interests’ (2006:37), especially Cameroon’s self-serving police force, known for
their brutal and corrupt dispositions. The study demonstrates not only the spaces in which young people deploy their agencies but also the issues that circumscribe them in the face of state oppression and marginalisation.

Other studies have explored the challenge of navigating the urban landscape –both spatially and socio-economically. Most of these studies reveal that young people experience urban life simultaneously as exclusion and inclusion. The assumption behind this focus is that although many African cities play marginal roles in the global financial circuits, transformations in the global economy have had significant consequences for African cities and thus the lives of its inhabitants (cf. Eyoh and Stren 2007; Simone 2001; Tostensen, Tvedten, and Vaa 2001a). In recent decades, many young people have come to experience the city as more hostile and exclusionary compared to the experiences of their parents’ generation. For many young people, the city plays a vital role in the protraction of their ‘youth’ a claim that is evident for most young men compared to their female counterparts (Hansen 2005:5).

In Zambia for instance, many young people express their alienation in spatial terms, that is, in relation to ‘where they are’, a metaphor which does not primarily refer to physical space as such, but to their living conditions, articulated in the language of space, money, and social relations (Hansen 2005:10). Thus, for many young people, cities represent local versions of the globalized world to which many are called but few are chosen (cf. Nyamnjoh 2000). In such conditions of uncertainty, Simone (2005) observes, urban residents tend to ‘circulate amongst each other’ by which he refers to the ‘practices that enable residents to navigate and engage diverse spaces, actors, sensibilities and activities across the city in its entirety, or at least across domains larger than the quarters where residents work and/or live’ (Simone 2005:519). Thus, in Douala, Cameroon, Simone remarks, youths employ a multiplicity of strategies and discourses to
circulate, such as the view held by young men that to ‘become someone’ one needs to ‘move around’ (Simone 2005:520).

**Youth Formations and Associations**

Scholarship on urban associations in Africa has tended to focus on adult or cultural groups to the detriment of youth associations. Formal youth associations emerged during the colonial era – perhaps as successors of the age grade systems in societies where they had prevailed prior to their disbandment. Early studies of youth associations tended to limit themselves to recording and classifying types of youth associations with respect to their membership and functions (Goerg 1992; d'Almeida-Topor and Goerg 1989; Mignon 1984). For example, an association could be classified as a youth formation if its name or title carried the word – ‘youth’. Most associations were classified into religious, student, athletic, ‘tribal’, and professional groups and scholars sought to establish the origins of these associations and the length of their existence.

Youth associations are not a novelty in Bamenda. However, their numbers have increased almost geometrically in the last decade, evidently, a development not unrelated to the liberalisation of political space in 1990 (see Chapter Four). In his study of youth formations in Francophone Africa, Mignon (1984) shows that the precursors of youth associations in Cameroon were the student cultural unions that surfaced on the campus of the University of Yaounde in the 1970s and 80s, some of which still survive today. For instance, in 1976, eight university students of Meta origin in the North West Province founded the Meta Students’ Association (MESA) with the objective of ‘consolidating solidarity amongst students, villagers and Meta kinsmen, to revitalise traditional culture and to integrate young people in the national
socio-economic and cultural landscape’ (Mignon 1984:172). Two years later, this association had grown to over 300 members and enjoyed the patronage of several Meta chiefs, military officials and powerful elites from the Meta region occupying influential government positions. Numerous associations like the MESA subsequently spread to other urban centres and eventually to the ancestral villages of its founders. Some of these associations produced annual journals\textsuperscript{39} that covered issues intended to educate young students about the history, culture and customs of their respective villages. Student associations often organised elaborate activities during the long summer vacation in their home villages which included cleaning up of public places, visits to the chief’s palace and other important cultural landmarks. Cultural manifestations also graced young people’s activities, such as traditional dances, theatre and poetry (cf. Fokwang 2003; Mignon 1984). Ethnic student associations such as MESA have played significant roles in the socialization of youth and propagation of ethnic consciousness.

Today, the urban landscape in Cameroon and Bamenda in particular is replete with myriad socio-cultural associations, most of them striving to negotiate the growing needs of citizens struggling to create livelihoods for themselves. As a matter of fact, it is not unusual for individuals to be registered in more than two or three associations, each catering for a specific interest. While youth-wings of home village associations are still part and parcel of the contemporary urban landscape in Cameroon as in many urban areas of West Africa, associations of a non-ethnic character have become even more salient and play a central role in mitigating the impact of youth marginalisation. These associations span every aspect of human endeavour; the

\textsuperscript{39} For example, the youths of Nsongwa (a small village on the outskirts of Bamenda) produced the maiden edition of their journal entitled \textit{Journal of the Nsongwa Students’ Union} in July 1981 covering the migration history of the Nsongwa people, stories, riddles and poems.
most important are neighbourhood associations, athletic and artistic associations, ‘njangi’\textsuperscript{40} or mutual credit scheme associations, traders, religious and political associations.

In many West African countries, membership in most associations tend to be based on ethnic affiliation, educational background, common territory (rural and urban), and common interests (cf. Trager 1998). Some of these associations (both youth and adult) are also known as development associations and often combine the cultural, economic and social development of their members or the communities in which they are located. These associations tend to mobilise their members and surrounding populations for self-help projects and to obtain hearing for local interests in regional and national political arenas (cf. Lentz 1995; Møller, Mthembu, and Richards 1994). Other studies suggest that young people create clubs or groups to demonstrate traditional signs of maturity, through which they assert themselves as moral agents capable of criticising adult society (Gable 2000).

### Youth Transition, Mobility and Migration

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in its *State of the World Population 2006 Youth Edition* (2006) observes that more young people are on the move, more than at any time in history. This report foregrounds the question of youth migration when it states that:

> The dream of better opportunities and demand for their labour from abroad sets many young people in motion. Violence, war, poverty, unemployment, crime or persecution drive many others to escape. Many leave with few belongings, little money and scanty information about their destination; but they take with them the great assets of youth, resilience, resourcefulness and perseverance. But, precisely because of their age, they face obstacles and risks that test their endurance (UNFPA 2006:v).

\textsuperscript{40} Njangi refers to a type of mutual, rotating savings credit scheme that enables creditors to deposit a given amount of money at specific intervals – weekly, monthly etc. Each contributor is then credited with the pool until everyone has had their turn. There are two dominant kinds of njangi groups – those created for financial reasons and voluntary associations that incorporate a mutual savings scheme in addition to other activities or objectives. Njangis are extremely popular in the North West province, mainly due to the unreliability of modern banks. See *The Post*, ‘Northwesterners turn to njangis after collapse of banks’ 23 January 2006, No. 1744, page 8.
An increasing number of studies have focused on young people’s mobility and migration patterns – analysing the ways in which young people make use of migration as a mechanism for social advancement and transition into adulthood (cf. Gabriel 2006; Thomson and Taylor 2005). Indeed, migration has emerged as a potent domain through which young people construct their imaginaries and envision their futures. We know for example that Africa is currently experiencing one of the fastest urban growth rates in the world and that the majority of migrants are young people (UNFPA 2006). Scholars have pointed out that ‘migration occurs in response to a wide range of factors which affect different people in different ways, and to which people do not necessarily respond in an identical fashion’ (Parnwell 1993:72). In some African cultures, migration is perceived as a rite of passage which must be undertaken by young people in order to attain social adulthood. Among the Zaradougou of Mali for example, a young man ceased to be an adolescent — a *bilakoro* - traditionally tasked with activities like catching escaped animals, searching for termites to feed chickens and chasing away crop predators, upon his returned from migration as well as when he married (de Haan, Brock, and Coulibaly 2002:44). Similar recognition is given to young men among the Tswana and Basutho in Southern Africa where labour migration is regarded as an integral part of an adolescent male’s initiation into manhood. According to them a boy grows into a man when he becomes a migrant labourer and is able to provide and ceases being a dependant (Parnwell 1993:31). However, a new pattern of migration has become even more prominent in recent decades, fuelled by worsening socio-economic and political conditions and blocked opportunities for many African youths as well as the intensification of globalization. The principal destinations are Western countries although many young Africans are also heading East.
This phenomenon is particularly under-studied in Cameroon although scholars have identified youth migration trends as a worthy area for research (Fokwang 2003; Jua 2003; Nyamnjoh and Page 2002; Nyamnjoh 2005). During his recent fieldwork in Cameroon, Simone observed that many young people asserted the pointlessness of remaining at home due to the lack of opportunities and that every participant in the 10 focus groups he worked with ‘reported having an immediate family member living outside of Cameroon, and almost all of the participants indicated that they were presently exploring concrete possibilities to leave as well (Simone 2005:524). These claims resonate with those of youths in Old Town in Bamenda – a trend that seems to be intensifying among young Cameroonians irrespective of educational levels and socio-economic backgrounds.

The Gender of Youth

Recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of incorporating gender analysis in the study of African postcolonial subjectivities (Oyewumi 2005; Mama 2001; Goheen 1996). To this end, a growing number of studies are focusing on young people’s attitudes towards gender equality as well as the gendered subjectivities of young people (cf. Chant and Jones 2005; Johnson-Hanks 2006; Prince 2006; Boehm 2006). In her book, *Recycled Inequalities: Youth and Gender in George Compound, Zambia*, Ann Schlyter (1999) frames her discussion on the assumption that gender is the most basic social organising principle of a society, and as such, constitutes the basis on which hierarchies and identities are constructed. Her study identifies the views of youth regarding women’s rights and gender equality as well as their ‘general attitudes regarding how women and men should live together, about respect, parents and family’ (Schlyter 1999:12). She contends that research on youth subjectivities should explore how young people
view their own gender identity and sexuality. Her key finding among young men and women in George Compound reveals profound differences in thinking about gender among youth in school and those out of school. She concludes that ‘school-goers had learned about democracy and rights in a way that affected their views, but what they expressed as their deep beliefs on gender relation were not directly related to knowledge, not even to experience, but to their aspirations and strategies for the future’ (Schlyter 1999:127). For many young uneducated men, whose masculinities were undergoing profound crisis, asserting the idea of male superiority remained the key strategy for building their identities. Even young men in school were ambivalent on gender equality – by acknowledging the equality of men and women in Zambia but insisting that women ought to be barred from entering certain public spheres such as politics (1999:128).

Hansen (2005) calls for investigations that explore whether prevalent constructions of manhood and womanhood (so long associated with gender inequality through household headship and marriage respectively) are yielding to new constructions (Hansen 2005:14) in the face of the socio-economic challenges facing many African societies. Her study in Lusaka, Zambia raises important questions how youth from low-income backgrounds respond to urban life and the significance they attribute to space. The study is set against a background of growing housing gaps between the poor and rich, leading to new urban geographies of exclusion, a consequence of which the majority of the urban population is forced into the informal or illegal housing market (Hansen 2005:7). In such contexts, many young people think they have no future because state and societal institutions no longer provide the means by which social adulthood is achieved.
Expanding Youth Research in Africa

Scholars of youth in Africa acknowledge the paucity of studies sensitive to the role of gender in young people’s lives despite the widely held view that ‘youth’ and ‘social adulthood’ are socially constructed categories that bear particular gendered experiences for young men and women (Hansen 2005; de Boeck and Honwana 2005; Panelli, Nairn, and McCormack 2002; Waller 2006). Abbink (2005) for instance argues that the gender dimension in the study of youth is often relegated to second place. He maintains that while young males are definitely dominant, or rather, more conspicuous in the streets, in criminal gangs and armed movements, young women also face similar challenges such as poverty, customary practices that deny them equality of opportunity among others. My study is inspired partly by Schlyter’s work, Recycled Inequalities which investigates young people’s attitudes on gender equality in urban Zambia. Whilst her study examines young people’s attitudes as individuals, the present study integrates group attitudes, that is, perceptions and norms held and sanctioned within specific youth formations. This study shows the gendered nature of associational life in Old Town which allows us to appreciate how young men and women shape and transform their spaces and identities. A focus on associational activities also reveals how young men, through group practices, construct and project certain masculinities intended to uphold the idea of male superiority, thereby maintaining the gender order (see Chapters Six and Seven). The role of gender in youth issues also stands to be enriched by a detailed presentation of the internal dynamics of youth associations with respect to the hierarchies of power and influence that are constructed in these groups. Conspicuous voices as well as silenced ones need to be uncovered as these issues bear potential to expand our understanding of gender relations and power differentials in youth associations.
Studies of youth political identities in Cameroon have tended to focus on university and high school “students” who exemplify the notion of ‘youth’ (Konings 2002, 2005; Fokwang 2003; Menthong 1999; Nyamnjoh 1996b). Most of these studies have identified that young English-speaking Cameroonians tend to see themselves as doubly marginalised (as youth and Anglophones) in a Francophone-dominated state. No ethnographic studies have explored the breadth of these sentiments among non-student populations, a gap filled by the present study. Previous studies on youth political identities have been based mainly on historical sources rather than primary sources involving extensive interviews and prolonged observation. This study offers a fresh methodological approach based on ethnographic fieldwork allowing us to listen to young peoples’ voices and perspectives on Anglophone identity as well as the factors that shape their attitudes (see Chapter Eight).

With respect to the question of youth involvement in politics, most studies tend to construe politics narrowly as located in the national sphere, in municipal councils, civil society or in social movements. Informed by this perspective, many studies have found that young people’s interest in conventional politics has declined in both developed and developing countries, (Gauthier 2003; Quéniart and Jacques 2004) although it does not translate into a complete lack of interest or apathy in matters political. O’Toole et al (2003) contend that most of the studies are ‘constrained by a narrow definition of political participation and a top-down research methodology, which inhibits the understanding of how people participate, and also why they do not’ (2003:45-46). Studies that bemoan the decline of youth participation in politics ignore or are oblivious to the fact that participation in conventional politics among young people is limited to a minority. Thus, a major gap in the literature on African youth participation in politics is its failure to sufficiently problematise what constitutes involvement in politics given
that participation is not restricted to voting or membership in a political party or civil society organisation. Informed by the above critique, this study analyses young people’s involvement in hygiene operations as constituting political action (Chapter Six). By acting on urban space and interacting with local government authorities to address hygiene concerns in their neighbourhood, young people in Old Town express alternative forms of citizenship and redefine popular understandings of politics. I also pursue alternative understandings of what constitutes the political by exploring young people’s construction of what I term *economies of faux dossiers* (forged documents) and migration (popularly known in Anglophone Cameroon as *bushfalling*).

Migration has often been analysed in the youth literature as characterised by the search for greener pastures and in some cases as a rite of passage. It has hardly been understood as a form of political protest – a perspective I consider in this study (Chapter Eight). There is also a huge gap in our knowledge of how young people negotiate issues around the decision to migrate, how they fund their trips or how networks are constructed and maintained through intended and completed migratory projects. Another dimension of young people’s involvement in migration consists in the sort of identities they construct through imaginings of ‘*whiteman kontri*’ (cf. Nyamnjoh and Page 2002) and the alleged success promised through images of the West. Hence this study analyses young Cameroonians’ dreams about the West, as acts of the imagination, and as concrete possibilities through which they envision a better life for themselves and their families. This exploration of young people’s imaginaries builds on and extends the findings of Nyamnjoh and Page (2002) on the construction of whiteness in Cameroon.
A proper understanding of youth in Africa requires historicizing of the concept, showing the ways in which youth has shaped and been shaped by colonial and postcolonial influences and how youth identities have been transformed in consequence. In pre-colonial Africa, youth was a phase in the human life cycle located between childhood and social adulthood characterised by a position of social minority. It was understood in relation to the processes of social reproduction, not exclusively in terms of biological age. Thus youth was a signifier of dependence, social immaturity and the lack of authority and in the Cameroon grassfields, the metaphor of ‘empty vessels’ was invoked to describe this status. While youth included both young men and women, this chapter emphasises that the ways in which young people experienced ‘youth’ and the transition to social adulthood was manifestly gendered. Whereas young women entered adulthood upon reproductive maturity and marriage, young men experienced a longer transition, marked by a series of initiations of which marriage was but one stage, and ended eventually with the achievement of responsible masculinity. Colonialism radically altered the economic and socio-cultural basis on which ‘youth’ as a life-phase was defined and experienced. This was achieved by the imposition of new models of organisation and behaviour which discounted and undermined the ‘past’ as a source of authority. The transition from colonial to postcolonial regimes made youth a status that led to rapid mobility in the late colonial and early postcolonial socio-economic structure, whereas as the postcolonial system matured, the rate of mobility slowed to a point where it is indiscernible. Hence many postcolonial regimes sought to redraw the boundaries that enforced the positions of elders and the young, a process that has proven to be as ambiguous as the status of youth itself.

This study builds on and is shaped by the growing body of literature that have investigated the ways in which young people organise and make sense of their daily lives,
negotiate their private and public roles and envision their futures (de Boeck and Honwana 2005:1). I focus on the contexts and physical spaces they occupy, thus complementing past studies of associations in Africa and especially Cameroon as seen in the works of Nyamnjoh and Rowlands (1998) and Geschiere and Nyamnjoh (2000). The next chapter provides a detailed socio-historical background of Bamenda, critical for an understanding of the broader issues raised in the study.
Chapter Four

History, Politics and Society in Bamenda

Young people’s subjectivities cannot be understood in a historical vacuum. It is vital to provide the historical and ethnographic contexts that shape their social and cultural experiences. Significant developments have taken place in Cameroon’s history and a lot more “is happening” that have decisive consequences for young people’s life chances and choices. I demonstrate that Biya’s tenure in office has been characterised by the resurgence of youth, especially as a powerful political constituency. I also provide detailed background information on the population characteristics of Bamenda, the economy, local politics, social life and household characteristics.

A Brief History of Cameroon

Various academic and popular sources often cite Cameroon’s independence date as 1 January 1960. This is only partially correct, perhaps suggestive of the half-truths that inform many historical narratives. This date is accurate insofar as it relates specifically to the formerly administered French territory (excluding the British-administered United Nations trust territory known as the British Cameroons). In fact, the evolution of the modern state known as Cameroon began with German colonisation. Kamerun (the German appellation of Cameroon) became a German colony in July 1884, following a treaty of annexation between several Douala chiefs and German explorers led by Gustav Nachtigal41 (cf. Chiabi 1997:2). Prior to German colonial rule, the vast territory known today as Cameroon was comprised of independent polities varying in

41 The above-mentioned treaty restricted the Germans from further expansion into the hinterlands as these territories were beyond the jurisdiction of the Douala chiefs. However, the Germans breached this treaty in 1885 and expanded their colony further north (see Chiabi 1997:3).
size, power and administrative system. Anthropologists have often made a broad distinction
between the predominantly centralised and hierarchical societies of the Bamenda grasslands and
the acephalous societies of the forest zones of south-east and coastal Cameroon (cf. Nkwi and
Warnier 1982; Geschiere 1993). By 1914, the Germans had forcibly amalgamated these disparate
territories into a single polity and even gained the recognition of its boundaries by the other
major European powers in the region (notably the British in Nigeria and the French in Central
and Equatorial Africa).

At the outbreak of the First World War, the British and French forces (with some Belgian contingents) attacked Kamerun, defeated and expelled the Germans by January 1916 and by
March 1916 the German colony was partitioned into British and French territories by Brigadier General Charles Dobell. These areas became two distinct territories under the mandate of the
League of Nations in 1922 and United Nations trust territories after 1945 (Chem-Langhëë 2004:9-10). The greater portion (about four-fifths) of the former Kamerun was granted to the
French who administered the territory as an autonomous entity, although in association with the
already existing French colonies known as French Equatorial Africa. The British on the other
hand, divided its newly acquired territory into Northern and Southern Cameroons ‘each of which
developed separately administratively and economically as integral parts of the various
Provinces or Regions of Nigeria to which they were attached’ (Chem-Langhëë 2004:10).

On 11 February 1961, the United Nations organised a plebiscite in the British Cameroons
aimed at deciding the future of the trust territory. The vote was on two alternative positions–

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42 General Charles Dobell was subsequently appointed the first Administrator of the British Cameroons in April 1916.
43 Northern Cameroons was administered as part of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria, which had a similar demographic (Hausa-Fulani) and culture to those in the Northern Provinces of Nigeria. This area eventually voted in 1961 to join the already independent Federal Republic of Nigeria. The Southern Cameroons on the other hand constituted a different demographic and culture from its Eastern Nigerian neighbours who, despite themselves, were forcefully administered as part of the Eastern Province of Nigeria.
independence by joining the already independent Federal Republic of Nigeria or independence by reunification with the already independent République du Cameroun. The UN rejected a third option which advocated total independence for the Southern Cameroons. Contrary to the expectations of Britain and Ahmadou Ahidjo, president of the Republic of Cameroon, the Southern Cameroons voted for reunification with the already independent French-speaking Cameroon. With the plebiscite over, the stage was now set for the departure of the British and the formal independence of Southern Cameroons on 1 October 1961, a date set by the UN. It was now incumbent on the Southern Cameroons government led by John Ngu Foncha to enter into constitutional discussions with the Republic of Cameroon on the future state of a partially ‘reunified’ Cameroon, partial because only the south-western quadrant of what constituted the former Kamerun had reunited with the French-speaking territory. On 1 October 1961, Southern Cameroons obtained its independence by establishing a two-state federation consisting of the states of West and East Cameroon, West Cameroon being the former Southern Cameroons and East being the former Republic of Cameroun, with Ahmadou Ahidjo as president and John Ngu Foncha as vice-president (Le Vine 1963; Eyongetah and Brain 1974; Fanso 1989; Awasom 2000).

In September 1966, the Union Nationale Camerounaise (UNC) or the Cameroon National Union (CNU) emerged as the only legal party in the country, making Cameroon a one-party state. On 6 May 1972, Ahidjo proposed the dissolution of the federation contrary to Article 47, (1) of the 1961 Federal Constitution which stipulated that ‘Any proposal for the revision of the present constitution which impairs the unity and integration of the Federation shall be

Ahmadou Ahidjo, French Cameroon’s president had expected British Northern Cameroon that was ethnically closer to Northern French Cameroon to vote in favour of reunification and Southern Cameroons to vote for integration with Nigeria. The contrary obtained as British Northern Cameroon opted to join Nigeria despite Ahidjo’s claims that the polls were marred by rigging (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003:40)
inadmissible’ (cited in Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003:64). He expressed his wish for a referendum to be held to fulfil his vision of a ‘peaceful revolution’ for Cameroon. Two weeks later, on 20 May 1972, a powerfully stage-manner referendum was held without any organised opposition from West Cameroonian leaders. According to the government, the outcome of the election was a 99.9% “YES” for the dissolution of the federation.45 A revised unitary constitution was adopted and the name of the country changed to the United Republic of Cameroon. Since this event to date, May 20 is celebrated as Cameroon’s national day.

With the federation dismantled and all opposition parties dissolved, Ahidjo rapidly built a neopatrimonial state based on the principle of presidentialism – that is, ‘the almost total concentration of power around one person and one institution – la présidence (Gabriel 1999:175). This concentration of power around the person of Ahmadou Ahidjo assured him political supremacy over his Anglophone counterparts who had surrendered themselves to the illusion of being equal partners in nation-building, particularly during the era of federation. The dismantling of the federation affirmed and crystallised the position of Anglophone Cameroon as a politically marginal entity during both the colonial and postcolonial periods. Now comfortable with a centralised unitary state, Ahidjo crushed any form of opposition, real or imagined, including civil society organisations and even party barons who failed to pay sufficient allegiance to him. Ahidjo successfully established a dictatorship of terror, permitting no form of dissent. Unexpectedly, he gave up power in 1982 and appointed his then prime minister, Paul Biya as successor. Biya has been in power since 1982 to date.

45 There is overwhelming evidence that the referendum was stage-managed by Ahidjo and his political associates. For instance, at the Cameroon College of Arts, Science and Technology in Bambili only “yes” ballots were provided and when students refused to vote in the absence of “no” ballots, the army was brought in to maintain peace and order and to assure that voting took place. Furthermore, there were areas where no voting took place at all, most people having gone to the farms, yet results from those areas indicated that 99.9% of voters had voted “yes” (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003:65).
Biya’s accession to power on 6 November 1982 initially seemed to be a worthy change, which naturally ushered in fresh optimism, particularly among the Anglophone populations who felt betrayed by their leaders and Ahidjo in particular. During his maiden visit to the Anglophone region, he addressed citizens in English, the first time a head of state had done so since reunification. Biya’s rapport with Anglophone Cameroon was a very short-lived one as in February 1984 he signed a presidential decree changing the name of the country from the United Republic of Cameroon to the Republic of Cameroon – the name borne by the former Francophone state prior to its reunification with Southern Cameroons. The government emphasised that the change of name was a move to consolidate the unity of the country but Anglophones interpreted this as an erasure of their identity and a manipulation of history. Anglophone objections to the change were in vain. A few months later, the government foiled a failed coup d’état in April 1984, popularly believed to have been sponsored by Ahidjo, allegedly nostalgic and disappointed with Biya’s leadership style. In the wake of the failed coup, Biya emerged a transformed person and purged his government of Ahidjo’s associates. In order to consolidate his rule, he also renamed the national party, the CNU to the Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM), which he proudly launched in Bamenda in March 1985. Biya promised Cameroonians a “New Deal” based on the principles of “rigour and moralisation” intended to introduce transparency in the conduct of public affairs (Biya 1987; Mbaku and Takougang 2004a:6).

Contrary to popular expectations, Biya’s first decade in office was characterised by significant reversals in economic growth that had been heavily dependent on oil revenue (Jua, 1993). In fact, Biya’s mediocre performance during the 1980s can be contrasted to the annual growth of 6-7% GNP in the 1970s under Ahidjo (Rowlands and Warnier 1988:119). Economic
decline reinforced the ascendancy of nepotism and regional politics, provoking even fiercer competition for diminishing state resources. Corruption also worsened under Biya as the bureaucratic elite and politicians from his ethnic group publicly contended that it was their turn to monopolise the *dining table* (cf. Jua 1991, 1993; Geschiere and Konings 1993; Friedrich-Ebert Foundation 1999). Rapid economic decline and endemic corruption seriously eroded the legitimacy of the neopatrimonial state prompting further dissent and the demand for democratic reform and political liberalisation (Eyoh 1998, 2004).

Although Biya was reluctant to heed popular appeals for the liberalisation of political space, John Fru Ndi braved the odds on 26 May 1990 and launched the first opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF) in Bamenda (cf. Gwellem 1996). During the launch of the SDF, six Anglophone youths were shot in cold blood by the military but the state-controlled media made desperate attempts to refute government’s involvement in the killing (Nyamnjoh 1996a; Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003:77). This triggered greater demand for democratic reform compelling the government to liberalise political competition and the press in December 1990 (Mbu 1993). Biya’s continuous reluctance to meet the increasing demand for democratic change further provoked over half a year of civil disobedience championed by leading opposition parties and civic movements. This popular revolt was known as the ‘ghost towns’ operation or *villes Mortes*. Eventually, Biya yielded to the pressure and opted to host a ‘Tripartite Conference’, a

46 As implied by the concept, the ghost towns era was characterised by the curtailment of economic activities aimed at subjecting the major towns and cities into a “ghost” economy. This campaign which took place between April 1991 and January 1992 saw economic activities limited to Saturdays and Sundays, permitting citizens to stock up on groceries needed for the rest of the week. The remainder of the week was spent in protest marches, circulation of tracts etc. This period was also characterised by the blockage of streets, refusal to pay taxes etc. A key objective of this popular form of revolt was to force the Biya regime to organise a sovereign national conference which he vehemently opposed.

47 The Tripartite Conference brought together the ruling CPDM government, opposition parties and civil society organisations, including prominent members of the main Christian churches in Cameroon. Youth organisations decried the fact that they were not invited or permitted to participate at this conference, an indication of their marginalisation from national political debates.
flawed mimicry of the Sovereign National Conference organised in several Francophone countries in the early 1990s. Although the talks yielded little dividend, they paved the way for legislative and presidential elections in March and October 1992 respectively.

The first multiparty presidential election since reunification was held on 11 October 1992 and according to government results, Paul Biya of the CPDM emerged victorious with 39.9%, Fru Ndi of the SDF 35.9%, and Bello Bouba Maïgari of the Union Nationale de Développement et Progrès (UNDP) 19%. It is believed that Fru Ndi’s victory was stolen by the Biya government through massive manipulation and rigging (Gabriel 1999:179; Mbaku 2004a:34). Even before the official results were published, the opposition petitioned the government-controlled election commission to annul the election on account of compelling evidence of systematic fraud. Not unexpectedly, the commission ignored the appeals and awarded the victory to Biya. The opposition rose in protest and even the UNDP leader who had come third in the elections acknowledged Fru Ndi’s stolen victory. International observers expressed strong disapproval and reported that the entire process was flawed by severe fraud and manipulation of votes (NDI 1993). When Fru Ndi’s supporters and the opposition in general took to the streets in protest, the military was dispatched to silence the protesters. Biya proceeded to place the North West Province on a state of emergency and Fru Ndi under house arrest until January 1993.

Although often ignored in the academic literature, it is evident that youths played a conspicuous role in the struggle for democracy in Cameroon. As noted above, during the launch of the SDF in Bamenda on 26 May 1990, six youths were fatally shot by soldiers. That same day

48 Sovereign National Conferences were held in countries like Benin Republic and the former Zaire under Mobutu. These conferences brought together the emergent opposition, civil society and the government to debate on the future of their countries. In Benin, this major conference led to the ouster of Mathieu Kerekou from office, but Mobutu seeing that it might yield similar effects in Zaire crushed the conference before it came to its logical conclusion. See Robinson (1994) on the phenomenon of national conferences in Francophone Africa.

49 According to the official results, the opposition scored a total of 60.024% against Biya’s 39.9% indicating that even by official standards, most Cameroonians had voted for a change of president (cf. Nyamnjoh 1999:103).
in Yaounde, Anglophone students at the University of Yaounde demonstrated in support of the SDF and demanded political liberalization, despite accusations from the regime that the students sang the Nigerian anthem and raised the Nigerian flag (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003:77; also see Konings 2002). Subsequently, two dominant student organisations emerged on the campus of the university; the Parliament (Parlement) and Committee for Self-defence (Auto-defense). Both organisations were ferociously opposed to each other with the former composed predominantly of Anglophones and members of the Bamileke ethnic group who championed demands for political liberalization. The latter consisted of students, notably of Beti origin, claiming to support Paul Biya (a member of their ethnic group) and to resist popular attempts to undermine the Biya regime. It is alleged that brutal confrontations between the Parliament and Committee for Self-defence led to the ‘disappearance’ of Parliament members. Dozens of these members were rumoured to have been murdered by para-military forces and their corpses buried in mass graves near the River Sanaga. A government commission set up to investigate the allegations chaired by Professor Augustine Kontchou (the then Minister of Information and government spokesperson) concluded that no Parliament member had died. This earned him the popular nickname ‘Zero-mort’.

The backbone of the ghost town campaigns were predominantly young men who felt betrayed and marginalised by the Biya regime. In fact, the emergence of multiparty politics in Cameroon simultaneously marked the ‘eruption’ of youth into the public sphere. Youth became a potent symbol of the dramatic activism that encapsulated the early 1990s particularly in opposition to the Biya regime. It was against this background that youth came to be constructed by the regime as a threat to public order – a threat that was often confronted with the full force of the state.
The initial democratic reforms notwithstanding, many analysts of Cameroon’s political transition observe that the enthusiasm and momentum for change evidenced by the reintroduction of political parties in the early 1990s was short-lived. The excitement petered out ‘shortly after the presidential elections of October 1992, when the public was made to understand that democracy is not necessarily having as president the person the majority wants’ (Nyamnjoh 1999:114). Cameroonian have come to realise that there is more to democracy than regular elections, however flawed and that without solid democratic structures and institutions to safeguard the participation and contributions of citizens, Cameroon’s progress towards democratic reform is all but nominal. Over the years, Biya has outwitted the opposition and reduced them to mere toothless bulldogs. With over 80% of the parliamentary seats under the control of the CPDM and a similar dominance in municipal councils, the current dispensation is almost reminiscent of the authoritarian and monolithic era of the 1970s and 1980s (Takougang 2004:85). Little doubt, some commentators have described Cameroon’s stalled democratic transition as located between ‘survival’ and ‘reversal to authoritarianism’ (Bratton and Van de Valle 1997:235).

Geography and History of Bamenda

Approaching the Bamenda station particularly in the rainy season, one is unavoidably struck by the rolling hills and greenery of the landscape. With peaks over 1700 ft, Bamenda is well-known for its cooler climate compared to the humid coastal zones of Cameroon. Located about 366km northwest of Yaounde, the country’s capital, Bamenda is well connected by road and air to major commercial cities such as Douala and Bafoussam. As one descends the Bamenda station, a panoramic view of the city gradually emerges, particularly the high modern
storey buildings on the Commercial Avenue, Bamenda’s main business district where the hustle and bustle of life is experienced on a daily basis. Besides the storey buildings, other conspicuous landmarks in the city include the gigantic church buildings of the main Christian denominations in town, namely the Catholic Cathedral just beneath the station escarpment, the Presbyterian Church in Ntamulung, strategically located on a knoll and the Baptist Church in Nkwen. The Ayaba and Mondial hotels are equally prominent buildings that can be spotted from the Bamenda station.

Unlike some rapidly urbanising cities in Africa, Bamenda has no slums and homelessness is not yet an issue. This is partly because the city is bordered by rural villages, linked by modest road networks that provide a buffer to potential urban problems such as overcrowding. With a population of about 500,000, Bamenda doubles as the capital of the Mezam Division and the North West Province. The North West Province has an urban growth rate of 7.95% (compared to the national average of 5.6%). Since the last census in 1987, the North West Province has grown from 1.2 million to about 1.9 million inhabitants in 2006. With a population density of 99 per square kilometre, the province is by far, one of the most densely populated areas in Cameroon, compared with the national average of 22.6 people per square kilometre. Crucial to this study is the growing population of youth in Cameroon generally and the North West Province specifically. For instance, it is estimated that over 62% of the province’s population is below 20. In fact, this estimate echoes a 1996 national survey on the future of youth in Cameroon which projected the 0-30 segment population to double by 2001, constituting about 71% of the total

50 A storey building in Cameroon is more than one storey. In Bamenda, buildings are as tall as five storeys, usually without any lifts.
population of the country, compared to 67.7% in 1976. Hence, it is evident from the prevailing statistics that the city, just like the rest of the province is predominantly ‘young’.

Bamenda itself is comparably a young city in Cameroon. Its story begins with the arrival of the Germans. In 1902 the Germans established a military station in Mendankwe, the area from which Bamenda derives its modern name. As seen at the beginning of this chapter, it is evident that although German colonial rule had been established in the coastal town of Douala in July 1884, it was not until 1889 that the first Germans arrived the grasslands, determined to expand German conquest in the hinterlands. Upon their arrival in the grasslands, the Germans, led by the explorer Dr Eugen Zintgraff, signed a pact of friendship with the powerful chief of Bali, Galega I and eventually established a German station in Bali. It was from here that the Germans waged a fierce campaign against the other powerful chiefdoms of the grasslands, notably the Mankon and Bafut in 1891. The German station was transferred to the hills of Mendankwe (Bamenda) in 1902, about 25km north east of Bali, probably for strategic reasons. It is believed that the highlands of Mendankwe provided greater military advantage to the Germans besides being a relatively cooler area than the plains (Awambeng 1991:4).

The first decade of the 1900s also recorded increased immigration of Hausa-Fulani groups into the Bamenda plateau and sub-regions. These immigrants, especially the Hausa, had maintained a trade route between the Bamenda grasslands and northern Nigeria for many decades (cf. Nkwi and Warnier 1982). These migrants in due course established a small encampment near a stream in Mendankwe where their numbers gradually grew. Apparently, the

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51 Bamenda Provincial Archives, Files NW/Qa/e/1996/1; ‘Survey on the future of Youths in Cameroon by the Year 2000’ pg 3.
52 During the early colonial period, the entire territory known today as the North West Province was often referred to as the Bamenda grasslands. Bamenda eventually became an administrative division during the British colonial period including the subdivisions of Mbengwi, Ndop, and Batibo. Today, Bamenda refers specifically to the urban area including the surrounding chiefdoms of Mbatu, Mankon, Nkwen, Mendankwe, Banja and Nsongwa (Fombe 1983:8). Bamenda is also used in a generic sense by people from the North West Province as a marker of their identity, distinct from other populations or persons from different provinces of Cameroon.
Hausa camp was not far from the German fort. Meanwhile the Germans were forced to flee in April 1915 in the face of impending defeat at the hands of the British from neighbouring Nigeria. The British installed themselves in the former German quarters and once settled, evicted the Hausas out of their settlement. The administrative centre became known as “the station”. It is alleged that the early morning call for prayers by the predominantly Muslim Hausa groups disrupted the peace of the British (Soh 1983:22). The Hausa families then descended to the Bamenda plains and founded another settlement in the Mankon territory of Ntambag which became the nucleus of modern Bamenda. This new settlement was variously known as Hausa village, Abakpa (also called Abakwa), Abakpa-Mankon stranger’s Town, Stranger Settlement of Abakpa etc (Awambeng 1991:5).

Thus, modern Bamenda owes its origins to foreign settlements in the Ntambag area whose initial inhabitants were the Hausa immigrants. Trade activities between the Hausa “settlers” and nearby groups soon prompted the latter to establish their own settlements beside the Hausa traders. Here, they sold local commodities such as palm oil and kola nuts to the Hausa in return for foreign items such as cattle, brass work and jewellery. It is estimated that between 1921 and 1923, this settlement had grown to a population of 753, excluding the British settlement at the Bamenda station. The settlement gradually increased due to the influx of immigrants from Bali, Metta, Wum, Oku, Kom and other chiefdoms from the grasslands. There is also evidence that soldiers returning from the war and newly converted Christians from the coastal areas preferred to settle in the emerging urban environment rather than return to their villages. However, the decade between 1921 and 1931 witnessed a relatively stable population because the popular migration route was still directed towards the coastal plantations (cf.
Ardener 1996; Ardener, Ardener, and Warmington 1960). This period also witnessed a slight decrease in the Hausa population in Abakwa because of the founding of new Hausa settlements in Bamessi, Bamunka and Bamessing – areas now located in the present Ngoketunjia Division, about 45 km east of Bamenda.

Nevertheless, Abakwa continued to grow and became a popular centre of commercial activity. By 1934, the population of the area was estimated at about 1300. Abakwa’s reputation as an emerging commercial centre continued to spread far and wide, attracting even more immigrants from Nigeria (particularly among the Igbo people, renowned for their entrepreneurial skills). By 1953, the population of the town had grown to over 14,000 and although new quarters had emerged, (such as the Ntamulung quarter established in the late 1920s) the majority of the population lived in Abakwa town. By the 1950s, prominent companies such as the United African Company (UAC), the Emmens Textile International, Hollando etc. had established themselves as key commercial actors in Abakwa. In fact, the Barclays Bank International also opened its branch in Abakwa in 1955 although its operation was short-lived. None of the companies above can be found in Bamenda today, most of them having closed down following the reunification of Southern Cameroons with French Cameroon. Nonetheless, the arrival of these prominent commercial actors indicated the growing interest in Bamenda as an emerging market during the 1950s and early 1960s (Fombe 1983:19-20).

Today, Ntambag is just one of over 40 neighbourhoods in Bamenda, an indication of how vast the city has grown over the years – with an estimated population of 500,000. The emergence

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53 The Germans had set up massive agro-industrial plantations in the coastal territories for the production of raw materials.
54 The influx of people from neighbouring chiefdoms such as Bafut, Bali, Mbatu, Kom, Oku, Nkwen and as far as French Cameroon gradually overwhelmed the initial dominant Hausa population. See Bamenda Provincial Archives, Hausa town: Bamenda, File NW/Re/a/1921/1.
55 For a history of the United African Company, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UAC_Nigeria
of new neighbourhoods prompted the renaming of Abakwa to “Old Town” even though government and local municipal records retain the use of Ntambag. Old Town therefore is simply the popular name for Abakwa or Ntambag, and specifically “old” in relation to the newer neighbourhoods that have cropped up over the past 40 years. Located in the heart of Bamenda, Old Town (Ntambag) is now divided into three municipal wards, namely Ntambag I, II and III and still remains the most densely occupied residential quarter in Bamenda with about 112 people per square kilometre.

**Household Characteristics**

Because of its age, Old Town is easily recognisable from its ancient stone buildings and rusted zinc roofs. While a few buildings are dilapidated and abandoned, some have been torn down and modern buildings constructed in their stead. Most households in Old Town, as in the rest of the city have electricity. In fact about 77.1% of urban households in Cameroon have electricity, including those obtained from illegal connections. Despite the availability of electricity, Bamenda experiences frequent cuts, and dissatisfied citizens have nicknamed AES, the American company that manages the country’s electricity as *Always Expect Shortage*. Compared to electricity, fewer households in Old Town and Bamenda in general have pipe borne water in their homes. The national average of urban households with tap water is only 15.3% while about 34.6% rely on public taps. These public taps are often paid for by local municipal councils. In Old Town for example, there are 5 public taps serving a population of about 15,000. Queues at these taps are often very long, especially in the mornings and evenings. Another aspect related to the nature of households is access to toilet facilities. The absence of toilets in

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56 These statistics are obtained from a 2004 survey conducted by the National Statistic Institute in Yaounde (Government of Cameroon 2005).
some households was the subject of tremendous activism among young people in Old Town during the course of my fieldwork and as such deserves to be mentioned in brief. In Cameroon, only 14.1% of urban households have indoor toilets while 42.1% use latrines (pit toilets). The poor maintenance or lack of pit toilets can be at the root cause of communal crisis, particularly in densely populated neighbourhoods where urban planning is either absent or hardly monitored. Such is the case in Old Town where young people have carried out toilet inspection operations aimed at forcing residents to clean up their toilets (see Chapter Six).

The average household in Old Town consists of six persons. Most households include parents and their offspring, cousins or other extended relatives. The notion of a nuclear family as understood in Western kinship is known but hardly practised. A majority of the young people I encountered were born and raised in Old Town and so were their parents. Thus, many were second or third generation families living in Old Town. Even young women who had married and moved out of Old Town still maintain close-ties with their families and voluntary associations in the area. Most households had at least primary level education, although worsening poverty in the community has forced some families to withdraw their children from primary schools. In fact, the issue of poverty in Old Town is a growing concern, which questions government claims on national economic growth and its promise of free primary education to all Cameroonians.

**The Economy of the North West Province**

While other provinces in Cameroon have borne the yoke of over two decades of economic crisis, most citizens in the North West Province insist on having suffered the most and have blamed successive Francophone-dominated regimes for their economic and political
marginalisation. These claims are not completely unfounded. The Anglophone minority population in Cameroon are conscious that although the former Southern Cameroons was economically underdeveloped upon reunification compared to the Republic of Cameroon, their predicament was aggravated by the systematic dismantling of West Cameroonian economic infrastructure by the Ahidjo regime. This phenomenon has been critically documented by scholars and Anglophone activists (Mukong 1990; Atanga 1994; Chiabi 1997; Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997, 2003, 2004) and consequently, does not deserve an elaborate discussion here. What needs to be emphasised is how the economic crisis has been experienced differentially in Cameroon and specifically in the North West Province.

Although the economic crisis began in the mid 1980s, many economists contend that the economy inherited from Ahidjo by the Biya regime was far from healthy (Mbaku 2004b). With the introduction of the infamous structural adjustment programme (SAP), economic conditions only worsened, orchestrated by the closure of state-owned enterprises, a few of which were located in the North West Province such as the Wum Area Development Authority (WADA). This translated into the retrenchment of public workers which contributed to growing unemployment that was already a severe problem particularly as government has remained the main employer since independence partly due to the absence of a viable indigenous entrepreneurial class (Mbaku 2004b:405). Economic conditions were aggravated by about 60% cut in civil servants’ salaries, the non-payment of salaries for about three months and finally, a 50% devaluation of the currency in January 1994. These developments affected every aspect of

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57 By the mid-1980s, the public sector had over 250,000 employees with about 80,000 of them working in state-owned enterprises (see Mbaku 2004b:405). During the past couple of years, the government has uncovered over 40,000 ghost workers in its payroll. Ghost workers apparently have matriculation numbers but are either dead or resident abroad while monthly salaries are paid into their bank accounts. See BBC News Cameroon tracks 'ghost workers', http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/4785721.stm, accessed June 28 2007. Also see - Cameroon ‘Ghost’ Workers, Africa Research Bulletin vol. 43, no. 8 2006, pg. 17074.
life in the country, particularly healthcare and higher education which for the first time since independence saw the introduction of tuition. Prior to this, the state had provided monthly stipends to university students and many families in rural areas depended on these stipends to supplement their meagre incomes. The abolition of stipends and the introduction of tuition were thus perceived as a double blow to university students and their families who depended on them.

With an economy based predominantly on agriculture, these developments only added misery to a general atmosphere of disillusionment. In fact, over 95% of rural households in the North West Province supplement their household needs through farming of some sort. The economic crisis compelled even civil servants both urban and rural to resort to agriculture in order to supplement their household resources. Popular crops grown in the North West Province include rice cultivated mainly in the Ndop plain and Menchum valley. However, the staple crops consist of maize, plantains, cocoyams, beans, cassava and sweet potatoes. Although a small percentage of young people, faced with grim circumstances in the city opted to return to their rural villages to take up agriculture, the dominant trend in the mid-1990s and even today is the abandonment of agriculture by youths in search of non-agriculture-related jobs in the urban centres of Cameroon.

Industry represents only a puny fraction of economic life in terms of the number of persons employed and the quantity of goods produced. Two soap-manufacturing industries are located in Bamenda and dairy manufacturing also counts for a small proportion. A few others are involved in agricultural processing. Other small-scale industrial activities in the province include wood carving, pottery and weaving, and those involved in these activities often supplement their household needs with subsistence farming. This notwithstanding, unemployment is rife in both rural and urban areas but for apparent reasons, unemployment is conspicuous in urban areas and
its consequences more compelling. In fact, the onslaught of the economic crisis has further contributed to the expansion of the informal sector. According to estimates of the National Statistics Institute in Yaounde, the informal economy in Bamenda has registered a slight decline from 90% in 1996 to about 88.1% in 2001. Thus by every indication, an overwhelming proportion of the economy remains in the hands of informal actors represented largely by young people, many of whom are graduates that have failed to find employment in the civil service and private sector.

During fieldwork for this study (2005-2006), Cameroon was frequently caught in the grip of fuel price hikes, increase in the cost of government services and basic commodities, a trend that threw many citizens into deeper despair, particularly because government explanations failed to make sense. The government repeatedly appealed for more sacrifice in anticipation of greater economic benefits in future. Government officials made desperate attempts to explain that the economic difficulties were externally driven because the country had signed a series of multi-lateral agreements with international financial institutions with the objective of reaching the completion point of the IMF/World Bank-sponsored programme known as the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. According to the IMF, the HIPC is a debt relief programme intended for countries overburdened with huge external debts. Countries that subscribe to this programme are expected to undertake certain macro-economic policies as

58 For example, the cost of fiscal stamps increased by 100% and passports by over 40%.
59 ‘The HIPC Initiative was first launched in 1996 by the IMF and World Bank, with the aim of ensuring that no poor country faces a debt burden it cannot manage. The Initiative entails coordinated action by the international financial community, including multilateral organizations and governments, to reduce to sustainable levels the external debt burdens of the most heavily indebted poor countries. Following a comprehensive review in 1999, a number of modifications were approved to provide faster, deeper, and broader debt relief and to strengthen the links between debt relief, poverty reduction, and social policies. In 2005, to help accelerate progress toward the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the HIPC Initiative was supplemented by the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI). The MDRI allows for 100 percent relief on eligible debts by three multilateral institutions—the IMF, the International Development Association (IDA) of the World Bank, and the African Development Fund (AfDF)—for countries completing the HIPC Initiative process’ (see IMF 2006).
recommended by the IMF such as the privatisation of state-owned enterprises and in return, enjoy the reduction of their external debt. Such macro-economic policies in the case of Cameroon entailed the need to increase revenue from the non-oil sector which ironically constituted a driving force behind continuous hikes in commodity prices and the introduction of new taxes. Increases in fuel prices in particular provoked a series of strikes across the country and in Bamenda, this lasted for a week. Fuel hikes prompted increases in taxi fares, interurban transportation, building materials, food products and beer. The strikes yielded nothing and appeals for increase in civil servants’ salaries in order to meet the growing cost of living met with government intransigence.

However in mid May 2006, news spread rapidly that Cameroon had finally reached the completion point of the HIPC programme. For many years, Cameroonians had become versed with the term, HIPC although few knew what it meant or how the programme worked. However, because Biya had repeatedly promised that the economy will improve substantially upon completion of the HIPC programme, Cameroonians therefore received the news with tremendous jubilation. Citizens expected that this will translate into employment opportunities for youths and the reduction of prices for basic commodities. Paul Biya fuelled even greater enthusiasm by delivering a televised speech in which he observed that:

…Cameroon will henceforth benefit from substantial external debt relief and cancellation measures. Some of these measures will have an immediate effect. In general, the debt service which was constraining our development will be considerably reduced….Reaching the completion point is definitely a decisive step towards our economic revival and recovery. This unquestionably creates very bright prospects for the economy.  

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60 See The Post No. 0682, Friday, July 8, 2005, p. 9 ‘Will Cameroonians Accept Another Fuel price Increase?’ by Bouddih Adams
A few months later, a presidential decree recommended the reduction of import tariffs on rice and fish products but nothing more was promised. The decree was received with disappointment by many citizens, who had expected an elaborate plan from government aimed at alleviating poverty and unemployment. Proof that the completion of the HIPC programme was of little consequence to the bulk of Cameroonians was Prime Minister Ephraim Inoni’s speech at the National Assembly in November 2006 in which he appealed to young graduates to return to rural areas and take up farming. This has only increased young people’s sense of betrayal and hostility towards the Biya’s regime.

**Population Characteristics**

If Cameroon is known popularly as Africa in miniature, then the western grasslands of the country represents par excellence this claim, largely due to its ethnic, linguistic and geographic diversity. It is known as the grassfields or grasslands because the vegetation of the area is dominated by the savannah grass. Archaeological evidence suggests that human populations have lived in this area for over 8000 years although most migration histories are fairly recent. The language density in this area counts among one of the highest in Africa (Nkwi and Warnier 1982). The main ethnic groups that inhabit this area include the Tikar, Widekum and Chamba, including other smaller indigenous groups. Western grasslands villages are highly centralised chiefdoms headed by a chief who commands both political and religious authority. In most of the chiefdoms, the chief is assisted by a cult of secret societies and titled men.

Hausa-Fulani migration in the early twentieth century from Northern Nigeria added to the ethnic diversity of the area. Bamenda also has a small population of Nigerian migrants, particularly from the Igbo groups. These migrants have lived in the city for many decades,
principally as traders. There are also neighbourhoods dominated by migrants from the nearby Francophone Western Province who share cultural similarities with inhabitants of the North West. Popularly known as members of the Bamileke ethnic group, these migrants are also renowned for their entrepreneurial skills (cf. Warnier 1993b).

As indicated earlier, the earliest settlers of Old Town were the Hausa/Fulani migrants who still occupy the northern zone of the neighbourhood. In Old Town, this area is known as the Hausa quarter. About four decades ago, the Hausa quarter was almost exclusively occupied by Hausa/Fulani families but today the quarter is host to significant non-Hausa populations. In fact the Hausa/Fulani group represents only about one-fifth of the total population of Old Town. A shallow distinction is often made between two ethnic identities in this area, namely the Hausa and the “graffi”. The latter refers to the broad categorisation of persons who identify themselves as non-Hausa – that is, members of the main ethnic groups from the grasslands. This classification is misleading because today, many of those who pass for Hausa are actually “graffi” by birth and only assume Hausa identity upon conversion to Islam. This is particularly true of many migrants from Nkambe, Banso and other villages surrounding the Bamoun sultanate where Islam has a strong influence. Thus in reality, the difference between these populations lies in religion expressed in ethnic terms. The Hausas are Muslims while the “graffi” are predominantly Christian.

Old Town has four mosques and two public primary schools, one of which is predominantly Hausa, three Pentecostal Churches and a nearby Catholic cathedral. Christianity is the main religion among the non-Hausa groups, divided among the main denominations, notably, Catholic, Presbyterian and Baptist. Of the three, the Catholic church commands a bigger proportion of Christians in Old Town, many of whom are parishioners of the Big Mankon
Cathedral parish located south west of Old Town. Recently, a few Pentecostal churches have established themselves in the community but most of their members come from elsewhere.

**Society and Life in Bamenda**

To most citizens who grew up in other neighbourhoods in Bamenda, the name “Old Town” conjures up very profound negative perceptions about its residents and the neighbourhood in general. In the popular imagination, Old Town is an area with knife-carrying violent youths (often associated with young Hausa men), marijuana smokers, armed bandits, prostitutes and people bereft of any sense of moral composure. When I told a friend I was conducting research in Old Town and working specifically on youth and moral issues, he looked shocked, then laughed out loud and wondered if people in Old Town knew anything about morality. My friend’s opinion echoes the reactions of many other residents of Bamenda, whose negative opinions have fed and continue to reinforce the view that Old Town is a crime-ridden neighbourhood, a danger-zone to polite society, trapped in a vicious cycle of crime and poverty.

Indeed, Old Town has had its share of history of social pathology, poverty and crime. There was a time when it was widely-known for its huge variety of prostitutes. The area in Old Town known as Seven Doors is a stark reminder of that past precisely because Seven Doors had the highest concentration of sex workers in Old Town although it was soon supplanted by another ward (still within the borders of Old Town) known as the Banyangi or Nyangi quarter. In many cities of Cameroon, there existed small pockets of areas known as Nyangi quarters, infamous for their concentration of sex workers, named after the Banyangi ethnic group located in the northern zone of the South West Province. Although it was popularly believed that Banyangi women dominated the sex trade, it is quite probable that women from other ethnic
groups outnumbered them. Today, the sex trade is more or less a thing of the past in Old Town as its service providers have relocated to Nkwen Park where it is believed that business booms.

Nevertheless, the popular perception remains that young women from Old Town are potential sex workers, sexually loose, unreliable and consequently unmarriageable. Its young men on the other hand are believed to be school drop outs, thieves, rioters and users of banned substances. Young people in Old Town are collectively united in their determination to fight the supposedly soiled image of their community by promoting behavioural reforms and activities that would counter the negative perception of Old Towners and the community as a whole.

Although most youth associations in Old Town were created to cater for young people’s socio-economic interests in the face of marginalisation, combating the soiled image of their community constitutes a powerful ideological apparatus for their raison d’être.

**Local Politics in Bamenda**

Since the mid-1980s, Bamenda has been at the centre of intense political activity. The current ruling party, the Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM) was not only founded in Bamenda in March 1985, it was also the cradle of the first opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF) in May 1990. Since then, Bamenda has been known to Cameroonians as the headquarters of opposition politics in the country, for which its citizens take tremendous pride. Since 1990, Bamenda has experienced socio-political turmoil, which began with the launch of the SDF, followed by the ghost town campaigns and subsequently the imposition of a state of emergency on the entire province. These tensions have brought into sharp focus the popular claim that Bamenda citizens are not only conscious of their rights but are also ready and determined to protect them in the face of government oppression. There is a strong
basis for this claim. Nowhere else in Cameroon is opposition to the ruling party and government more evident than in the North West Province and Bamenda in particular. In fact, since 1996 the SDF has emerged in the North West Province as the only game in town despite its dwindling popularity in other provinces of the country. For instance during the 2002 parliamentary and local council elections, the SDF won 20 of the 21 seats allocated to the North West Province. Currently, it has a total of 22 seats in parliament, down from the 48 it held between 1996 and 2002.

One of the contentious issues in Bamenda since 1996 is the position of the government delegate, who, appointed by presidential decree wields supreme power over the SDF-elected councillors. The appointment of government delegates to head particular city councils (in Douala, Yaounde, Limbe and Bamenda) occurred in the wake of the January 1996 council election when the ruling CPDM lost control of most of the city councils to the SDF. The position of government delegate was contested as illegal and revealed the government’s unwillingness to accept the people’s will (cf. Gabriel 1999:179). Hence, the ‘government delegate’ remains at the helm of the Bamenda Urban Council (BUC) and has maintained his control over the council despite several votes of no confidence against him by SDF councillors and repeated demands for his resignation. He has also been accused of embezzling council funds and in 2006 was named among top 100 embezzlers of public funds by a popular French-language Cameroonian newspaper. Bamenda is also the seat of the provincial governor and the Senior Divisional Officer (SDO) for Mezam Division, both appointed by presidential decree.

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62 During the 1992 presidential election, over 85% of the North West Province voted for John Fru Ndi of the SDF whose victory is believed to have been stolen.

For over a decade now, Bamenda has been a popular site of Anglophone nationalism, particularly by the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), one of the leading Anglophone nationalist groups that seeks a separate statehood for the Anglophone populations. In general, Anglophone activism is characterised by demands for the rearrangement of state power from the currently centralised and Francophone-dominated state which, according to the Anglophones, has militated against their interests and aspirations as a distinct political constituency following their reunification with Francophone Cameroon in October 1961. While popular demand for the reconfiguration of the state is widespread in Cameroon, it has a particular trajectory among the Anglophone populations who feel discriminated against and relegated to a second-class citizenship. Government responses to these demands have fluctuated between outright hostility (arrests, torture and imprisonment) and the tendency towards denial. This notwithstanding, Bamenda has played host to different Anglophone activist groups and support is widely believed to be quite strong.

On account of its so-called ‘secessionist’ pretensions, the SCNC is considered an illegal organisation in Cameroon and its members/leaders frequently subjected to arbitrary arrests and detention. Arrests are stepped up during the first week of October when the SCNC and its sympathisers organise events to commemorate the ‘independence’ of the former Southern Cameroons on 1 October. It should be highlighted that although Cameroon recognises 1 October as a landmark date in the history of the reunified Cameroon, it is not granted any political importance. Support for the reconfiguration of the state is widespread, and even greater support is given to the SCNC in the North West Province although it should be underscored that this is often done in guarded ways for fear of police and gendarme intimidation.
In 2004, the SCNC’s cause was given even more impetus when it was admitted to the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO), an international organisation with observer status in the UN. The SCNC also sued the Cameroon government for human rights abuses at the African Court on Human and People’s Rights in Banjul, The Gambia, whose judgement is patiently awaited by both parties. Besides these developments, the SCNC is also involved in building consciousness among Anglophones aimed at enabling them to ‘imagine’ themselves as a nation, through the mass distribution of symbols of its future state including a flag, national anthem and an administrative map. Literature and T-shirts carrying the symbols of the SCNC and the map of the two Anglophone provinces are widely popular and worn by both young men and avid supports of the movement. ‘State’ funerals are held for fallen members, especially prominent members of the SCNC and such occasions are used to re-emphasise the non-negotiability of the struggle for an independent Anglophone state. The topical nature of this matter is revisited in chapter eight where I explore young people’s opinions about the Anglophone problem and the SCNC’s cause in particular. Their opinions, varied as they may be, are suggestive of the ways in which young people participate in political discourse.

Conclusion

It is evident from this chapter that the nation-building project begun during the late colonial and early post-independence periods has all but ground to a premature halt, leaving most of its citizens in a state of disillusionment and uncertainty. The socio-economic and political conditions in contemporary Cameroon are far from what the ‘founding fathers’ of the Cameroon nation anticipated at reunification. In fact, prior to his death in 1999, John Ngu Foncha had made desperate appeals to the Cameroon government and the United Nations to re-examine the legality

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of the reunification\textsuperscript{65} and the federation in particular, whose demise was masterminded by Ahmadou Ahidjo. With Paul Biya having held on to power for over 24 years, Cameroonians are definitely impatient for change, not only in the leadership but also for a complete reconfiguration of the postcolonial state, particularly by means of a process through which the Anglophone minority can guarantee the protection of their rights and cultural legacy. For others, such a dream can be realised only through the creation of a separate autonomous state for the two Anglophone provinces.

Today, Bamenda is well-known for its enterprising and proud citizens. Indeed, Bamenda is a symbolic marker of identity for most citizens from the North West Province, who, as migrants in other urban centres of Cameroon and abroad, often identify themselves as coming from “Bamenda” regardless of the specific location of their ancestral village. Even when they migrate, they tend to create home-village associations in their new areas of residence – thus maintaining important linkages between their ancestral homes and places of residence. In the next chapter, I examine the centrality of associations in organising everyday life in Bamenda.

\textsuperscript{65} See Foncha’s letter to UN Secretary General, Boutrous Boutrous Ghali of 4 July 1996 in which he states inter alia: “I was a signatory to the PETITION AGAINST THE ANNEXATION OF THE SOUTHERN CAMEROONS BY LA REPUBLIQUE DU CAMEROUN. I was also on the 9-man delegation from the Southern Cameroons which filed this petition at Your Excellency's High Office in New York. Having served as Prime Minister of the Southern Cameroons and as Vice President of the Federal Republic of Cameroon, I was on that Southern Cameroons Delegation as the leading personality in the process of the unification of the Southern Cameroons and La Republique du Cameroun. As such it is incumbent upon me to facilitate any work by the UN to reach a just and lasting solution to the problem of the annexation of one UN Trust Territory by another. My present submission therefore, is intended to facilitate such an exercise and enable the UN Secretariat to exploit relevant UN documents which clearly show where things went wrong. Of course and naturally, my secondary purpose is to buttress the case by the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) for a separate independence based on the UN Charter (Article 76)”.

Chapter Five

Young People and Associational Life in Bamenda

This chapter details the ways in which young people in Old Town construct their social worlds through participation in youth associations. It outlines the basis upon which the central argument of this thesis develops, namely that involvement in youth associations permits young people of varying ages to demonstrate signs of maturity and to lay claim on social adulthood. Drawing on interviews and my observation with three youth associations, I explore the motivations for young people’s involvement in associations, the origins of the associations under study, their structure and organisation as well as their roles in shaping youth subjectivities.

Motivations for Involvement in Youth Associations

The three youth associations chosen for this study had a combined membership that ranged between 80 and 95 with an average of 25. These numbers fluctuated because individuals were free to leave at will and could be expelled for unsatisfactory conduct. It is also important to note that not every registered member was equally active. The level of activity was measured by the frequency of one’s attendance of meetings as well as participation in other associational activities. While membership was voluntary, two interrelated patterns of gaining admission were identified: recruitment by founders and admission by means of a formal application. In principle, every potential member of each association ought to make a formal application as a condition for admission. While this was necessary, it was not a sufficient cause for admission because other factors were taken into account. In the Ntambag Brothers Association, for instance, there was a preference for young men willing and able to commit to the concept of ‘development’. The
Chosen Sisters and United Sisters on the other hand, spoke vaguely of their preference for morally upright members; they preferred members who would not bring the association to disrepute with gossip and reckless behaviour. It was not obvious how these qualities were assessed. However, the means by which an individual attained membership had little or no bearing on his/her potential to be elected to an office in the association. Sixty young men and women were interviewed at least once by me, and six of them were considered key actors or participants; Sirri, Claude, Carlson, Simon, Kevin and Manka (all pseudonyms).

What motivated young people to form associations and how were members recruited? Motivations for involvement in associations were diverse; the respective founders all shared a vision and desire to create associations that catered to the needs of young people in Old Town. Founders tended to express motivations rooted in a moralistic desire to engage young people in the community and to change their behavioural patterns. This positioning by the founders resonates strongly with the findings of other researchers who have identified young people as an emerging influence or as critical agents for change in African societies (cf. de Boeck and Honwana 2000; Argenti 2002). The founding members were not homogeneous in thought or action but, despite their varying motives, they all agreed on the need to set themselves apart and to chart a new course for young people in their community.

Manka, 22, (at the time of the research) for instance, was a founding member of the United Sisters of Old Town established in 2001. Born and raised in Old Town, she dropped out of secondary school in Form Five, apparently after failing the General Certificate of Education.

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66 However, there was a perception in the Chosen Sisters that persons who were not native to or residents of Old Town were not treated equally as their counterparts. This was difficult to determine beyond mere ‘perception’ because one of the complainants was herself an office-holder.

67 The educational system in Anglophone Cameroon is modelled after the British. A student spends 5 years in secondary school and 2 years in high school, earning the GCE Ordinary level and Advanced level respectively. Success at the advanced level qualifies a student for university.
(GCE) Ordinary Level in 1998. After leaving school, she enrolled to study hairdressing in a local saloon but it remains uncertain if she completed the course. However, during the course of my fieldwork, she had plans to enrol in a nursing programme, which has become an extremely popular career option for many young people in Bamenda, who pursue this path in anticipation of migrating abroad to work as nurses. Manka had never been employed and did not seem particularly concerned about finding a job. As the last born in a family of 5, she benefited from the financial support of her father and older siblings. In 2001, she and four friends, inspired by the Chosen Sisters, founded the United Sisters. According to her, many of her peers felt the need for an association that would focus on issues affecting them.

Before I became a member of this association, my parents complained a lot about my behaviour. When I had nothing to do at home, I’ll hang out with my friends and sometimes, we found ourselves walking aimlessly in the neighbourhood. I’m proud to tell you that with advice from our elder sisters in the quarter and from fellow friends in our meeting, many young girls have stopped such behaviour.

Susan, 21, another founding member of the United Sisters suggested that ‘it was deemed improper for young girls to live in the quarter without an association of their own. It was like having chicks without mother hen.’ According to her, they were motivated by the quest to fight against social ills in their community, some of which were committed by their peers: ‘we needed to enlighten ourselves on the dangers of bad behaviour, we had to come together to educate ourselves on AIDS, STDs and other issues.’

Once an association become operational, its founders then networked with other young people in the neighbourhood whom they perceived as suitable or potential members. This was a very idiosyncratic and selective process, occasionally based on the preferences of particular individuals. The trend was to invite persons from one’s circle of friends. Ambe, 24, for instance falls under the category of individuals recruited by founders. Born and raised in Limbe, a coastal
town in the South West province of Cameroon, Ambe arrived in Bamenda in 2004. He worked at a local hotel in Old Town until he was dismissed with five others without pay. Ambe became a member of the NBA through invitation from Aaron, a founding member of the association:

You know, we boys were so disorganised in the quarter. Aaron came to me one day and talked to me about Ntambag Brothers and asked if I would like to join. I accepted without any hesitation. He told me it was not good to be by one’s self. I thought that was a smart idea because I didn’t have a lot of friends, especially as I was new to the area. I thought to myself, what if some misfortune befalls me, what would I do, where would I seek help? So when Aaron spoke to me, I saw the importance of being part of a group of young men. Upon fresh reflections, I think someone like myself who came from afar definitely needed to be part of a group and I’m glad the opportunity came up.

Dolly, 22, joined the United Sisters soon after it was founded. Although she lived in Ntamulung, a neighbouring quarter, she had strong ties to Old Town where she had lived as a child. Dolly was recruited by Manka, her childhood friend and neighbour:

Manka told me they had just formed a group in the quarter. She said it was a good idea to belong to a quarter group. I think the association was not up to a month old. She said the group’s objective was to combat some of the immoral lifestyles among young girls. Hmm, she said the group wanted to fight against things like abortion, sexual promiscuity and many other things. At that time, Charlotte’s elder sister who’s now in Germany used to advise us. Even me, my life has changed a lot since I joined the group. Every Sunday, we used to roam about in town and if someone invited us to have a drink, we’d stay. Since I became a member, I’ve tried to change. Besides, the only place I go on Sundays is to church and then to our meeting in the afternoon. There’s no time to roam about.

A second category of members included those who sought admission on their own accord. Musa, 30, the only Muslim in the NBA, joined the association because of his desire to participate in development initiatives. He was convinced that the young men who made up the NBA were determined to bring ‘development’ to Old Town. Musa was not new to associational life; he had been the leader of the defunct Muslim Youth Association (MYA) in Old Town, a group that aimed to mobilise Muslim youths to become involved in community issues. As a strong proponent of development, Musa was keen on seeing his ideas embraced in the NBA.
Like Musa, Jessica, 24, was not new to associations. She was an active member of Mother Care, an association of traders based at Metta Quarters in Bamenda. She joined the United Sisters because of what she described as their ‘co-operation’ and sense of maturity:

I decided to become a member because of the cooperation that exists among the sisters. They are united and I really admired that. I decided to join after learning about some of the activities carried out by the group and although I already had another association, I decided to apply to become a member.

Jessica’s situation was somewhat unique. Her younger sister had been a member of the association until her untimely death in 2004. Her loss brought severe grief to her family and the United Sisters of which she had been an active member. A year after her death, the sisters organised a memorial ceremony in her honour which included the placing of flowers at her grave at the Big Mankon Cathedral cemetery and a visit to her parents’ home, gestures that touched her family profoundly. Jessica was also touched and although she did not admit it, it is probable this might have played a role in her decision to join the association.

Chantal, 34, on the other hand, joined the Chosen Sisters because she did not want to alienate herself from her peers in the community. After completing her first degree from the University of Dschang and lived in the South West Province for a couple of years, she returned home to Old Town and felt a huge gulf had grown between herself and her less educated friends:

I think they looked at me differently or that’s how I felt. I had been away for many years and knew it was going to be a bit difficult to relate with my peers as I did before I left for university. I was not happy about the situation and when I learnt about the Chosen Sisters, I decided to join. In fact, I felt obliged to join because this was a quarter issue and if I didn’t join, I would be alienating myself further from my less educated friends.

Although the above cases reveal only a fraction of the reasons why young people became involved in voluntary associations, it should be underscored that motivations depended on individuals’ specific socio-economic circumstances and aspirations. While certain individuals
were motivated by the idealistic notion of pursuing a moral crusade against youth immorality, others simply desired the companionship of their peers. Although all three associations were open for membership by residents of Old Town irrespective of ethnicity, religion or income level, the leadership of the respective associations served as gatekeepers, reserving the final right as to whom they could admit or exclude. Major reasons put forward included the fear of alienation, the desire to participate in community development and of course, some saw it as a source of socio-economic support. However, these motivations can only make full sense if one understood the nature, structure and activities of these groups. Hence, it is important to begin with an account of the origins of youth associations in Old Town.

The Origins of Youth Associations in Old Town

Before 1990 church-affiliated youth associations were the most popular youth groups besides the youth-wings of home-village associations. Religious associations were unique only to the extent that they mobilised persons of different ethnicities. An example of such a group was the St Benedict’s Youth Association (SBYA), a Catholic youth group attached to the St Joseph’s Cathedral parish. The SBYA was considered the pioneer of youth associations in Old Town, partly because many young people involved in various youth associations today were members of the SBYA until it disbanded in 1999. The SBYA consisted of young boys and girls between 15 and 35 tasked with evangelising fellow youths and the mobilisation of young people’s labour for the mission. Members of this group were often called upon to clean the mission premises, including the cemetery. They also animated at church activities where their singing and artistic talents were highly cherished. Simon, 32, a former president of the SBYA and founding member of the NBA recalled his days in the SBYA:
There was mutual understanding amongst us…. When we had manual work at the mission, everybody turned out and our activities were carried out efficiently. St Benedict also promoted evangelisation in the neighbourhoods and we even succeeded to attract some Muslim youths to worship with us.

The SBYA held its meetings at Mami Lucia’s house, a highly respected old woman in the neighbourhood. She also opened her doors to the Chosen Sisters and United Sisters associations after the SBYA disbanded in 1999.68

SBYA was not the only youth association in Old Town prior to its disbandment. There were at least two popular associations, including an informal group of young men in their twenties and thirties whose primary activity consisted in organising annual parties to which they invited their girlfriends. Two of the popular youth associations were the Ntambag II Youths (N2Y) and the Solidarity Youth Movement (SYM). Both associations aimed to promote solidarity and conviviality among young people in the community despite the disparity in their membership and location. N2Y’s membership consisted of young people in their twenties and thirties and drew its membership from the southern quarter of Old Town whilst SYM included teenagers and attracted persons principally from the northern side of Old Town, especially around the Hausa quarter. Although SYM still exists today, it is more or less nominal, whilst N2Y disbanded in 1999. The collapse of the N2Y created a vacuum in the southern quarter of Old Town, which was later filled by the emergence of the Chosen Sisters in the summer of 1999.

During its existence, the N2Y association included both young men and women. Its activities were specifically ‘social’69 aimed at complementing the religious focus of the SBYA in which most of them were also members. N2Y existed for less than two years. Its demise could be

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68 The principal reason for the disbandment of the association was due to a change of personnel in the chaplainship of the St Joseph’s Cathedral parish. Unlike the former chaplain, the newly appointed chaplain who took over in 1999 preferred to have a single umbrella association of youth in his parish, rather than small groups spread in different quarters. Today, this umbrella association is known as the St Joseph’s Youth Association.

69 The concept of ‘social’ groups as employed in Bamenda refers to voluntary associations that combine a range of activities such as njangi, with the primary motive of providing an environment in which people can socialize and build networks.
attributed to a couple of reasons. Sirri, 30, a former member of N2Y felt the excesses of the young men who ran the affairs of the association led to the collapse of the group:

The boys who ran the group were irresponsible and embezzled the association’s monies. You know, every Sunday, each member contributed 100CFA into a ‘sinking fund’, that is, a fund from which we could withdraw money in the event of some ill-fortune. But we realised with time that the executive members, most of whom were young men instead used the association’s money to buy beer at a popular off-licence. In fact, we discovered that after each Sunday meeting, the boys headed off to a certain off-licence and drank themselves out but we didn’t know they were using our money until much later. Members were enraged when they realised and immediately called the executive to account. In order to stem further embezzlement, the association opened an account at the Bamenda Police Credit Union based here in Old Town. No one knows what happened to the account after the association was dissolved. But I’m saddened to tell you that the only female executive member who was the social secretary also escaped with the association’s finances. During a party we organised to celebrate the first anniversary of the association, she was responsible for collecting money raised from cutting of the cake. She allegedly ran away with some of the money on the grounds that she was protecting it from the greedy male executive members. This angered so many innocent members of the association and precipitated its collapse.

Although the embezzlement of funds instigated the demise of N2Y, the association also suffered from other crises, particularly with regard to the poor attendance of weekly meetings which traditionally took place on Sunday afternoons. According to Sirri, it seemed the association was doomed to fail at its inception because of some of difficulties they encountered finding a suitable venue for their meetings:

We had a problem finding a good venue because the landlord whose house we used for free suddenly wanted us to start paying rents which we couldn’t afford. The fact that the venue was changed discouraged a lot of members and some individuals began to withdraw. It was after this incident that a kind woman in the neighbourhood permitted us to use her living room for our meetings. Two of her daughters were members of the association but most of the time, they failed to attend, preferring to sit outside and pretended to be uninterested in our activities. This snobbish attitude angered a lot of members, some of whom withdrew specifically because of their conduct. They could not understand why the girls behaved the way they did despite their mother’s support of the association.
Meanwhile, an informal group of young men, some of whom were members of the N2Y also ran a parallel group whose activities were largely seasonal. Known as the Yorkaaz, the young men became famous for their ostentatious end-of year parties. Aaron, 31, recalled the arbitrary origins of the name: ‘we chose that name because we wanted to be like New Yorkers, you know, but with a difference, with an Old Town touch. That’s why we spelled Yorkaaz the way we did.’ Aaron and five former members agreed that of all the names that were proposed, Yorkaaz was overwhelmingly adopted because it was considered trendy to associate with the city of New York. The Yorkaaz placed premium on expensive clothes, shoes and fine haircuts. Clearly, their obsession with fashion and emphasis on the public display of expensive clothing as a sign of accomplishment is reminiscent of Gondola’s (1999) depiction of the *Sapeurs* in Congo. Yorkaaz desperately sought recognition and visibility and seemed to enjoy being in the spotlight in Old Town. Carlson, 30, a former Yorkaaz and now president of the NBA spoke of the *pamoress* or prestige they won by throwing lavish parties:

> We simply wanted to win prestige and we felt at the time that indulging in such activities was a sign of maturity. We wanted to be the envy of our community and to distinguish ourselves from other young men who could not meet our standards. We also wanted to raise our prestige among the ladies.

Members of this group were encouraged to adopt trendy nicknames by which they were known and introduced at parties. ‘I remember we had some interesting nicknames like Bao, Turbo, ambassadeur and many more’ declared Carlson. When the first party was organised in 1995, most of the Yorkaaz were in their early twenties and some were university students. Aaron revealed that he tricked his family into giving him money to contribute towards Yorkaaz parties: ‘it was easy to get money in those days. I was still a student at the University of Yaounde, so it

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70 A colloquial French word which enjoys popular usage in Cameroonian French implying skillfulness in winning prestige. It is often employed in Pidgin English to mean prestige.
was easy to visit a relative and tell them I didn’t have tuition and they would give me about 50,000CFA which I used to pay my due for the party. As for the remainder, I bought new pairs of shoes and classy shirts.’ When the first party was organised in 1995, members of the group contributed 5000CFA each and the event was held at the Babadjou Cultural Hall near Mami Lucia’s house. Carlson still had fresh memories of their inaugural party:

Those were good days. But to tell you the truth, the party created problems for some of our friends. You know, we wanted to raise our *pamaresse* [prestige] in the eyes of our girls so we decided not to invite ladies from Old Town. Everyone was shocked, yeah but we did it. Everyone had to ‘import’ and that was an issue because some of our friends had chicks in the neighbourhood. I still remember the MC announcing that there were no girls from Old Town present in the hall but guess what; Simon’s girlfriend was outside fighting to get in. She was yelling, struggling to get in but the bouncers prevented her. I think she heard that Simon had ‘imported’ another woman from somewhere. It became a huge problem afterwards because even the MC knew Simon’s girlfriend and that she was the mother of his child.

The success of the first event inspired the Yorkaaz to dream even bigger as they became determined to host the next party at Ayaba Hotel, a leading three-star hotel in Old Town. The following year, the Yorkaaz increased their contributions to 25,000CFA per member and staged an even more ostentatious party. Carlson later commented that at the time, they were just being ‘youths’.

By the mid-1990s, lavish parties were not unique to the Yorkaaz. As a matter of fact, the organising of extravagant parties had gradually established itself as a coming of age ritual for young people in Bamenda, particularly students who had written the GCE Ordinary and Advanced levels. Each high school in Bamenda tended to distinguish itself by adopting aristocratic names such as, Barons, Ambassadors and Masters in their competition for prestige and supremacy. Along these lines, it is apparent that the Yorkaaz were simply participating in what had become a popular youth culture. This cultural trend eventually faded away when
parents lodged protests with civil authorities and appealed for a ban on further parties. Ironically, this popular youth culture emerged at the peak of Cameroon’s economic crisis, exacerbated by the devaluation of the local currency by 50% in January 1994.

In less than a decade, several associations have surfaced and disbanded for reasons that include the misappropriation of funds, poor leadership as well as ambiguous and unattainable objectives. From their ashes, a new era has been born, characterised by the emergence of comparatively better managed associations, differentiated in part by gender and seniority. These associations include the Chosen Sisters, the United Sisters and the Ntambag Brothers’ Association (NBA). In the following sections, I examine in order of chronology, the objectives and circumstances that led to the emergence of these associations.

a) The Chosen Sisters

The Chosen Sisters association was founded in 1999 by a group of 16 young women, some of whom had been members of SBYA and the defunct N2Y. Although the birth of the association was the collective effort of many impassioned young women, the brain behind the association was Sirri. Born and raised in Old Town where she spent most of her life, she left at the age of 20 to study at the Universities of Dschang and Yaounde respectively between 1995 and 2000, graduating with a postgraduate diploma in environmental sciences. Sirri is not an average young woman; she was by far one of the most educated members of the Chosen Sisters and through the years became an inspiration to many young women in the community. Evidence of this was her selection by the United Sisters as a patroness of the group. Although she was unmarried and had no children of her own, she had the responsibility of looking after her niece, a task she found extremely challenging on account of her limited income. Having searched in vain
for a job suitable to her qualifications, Sirri eventually settled in 2003 for a secretarial post in a small NGO with irregular funding, a factor that undermined her ability to provide for herself and little niece. Without the support of her mother, who ran a make-shift restaurant, things would have been a lot worse.

Despite her limited income, Sirri rented her own room in a compound about half a kilometre from her mother’s house. This was probably a statement about her desire for independence. The single room she rented was in every sense, an all-in-one unit – serving as a bedroom, living room, kitchen and study. The floor was covered with an old plastic carpet and a queen size bed occupying almost half of the room, leaving just a small passage for movement. On the wall opposite the door was a collection of her hand bags and below, about 10 pairs of shoes, lined out carefully. Beside her bed was a 15-inch statue of the Virgin Mary with an inscription at the feet - Queen of Peace. Hanging from the statue was a rosary and scapular, obvious symbols of her attachment to the Catholic Church. She was indeed, an active choir member at the Big Mankon parish just as she took her activities in the Chosen Sisters seriously. In reality, it would be an understatement to state that Sirri was simply a founding member of the Chosen Sisters; she provided the ideological support needed to spur the association into life. By Sirri’s account, the immediate push that led to the formation of the association came from witnessing the activities of the Women’s Day in March 1999:

Some of us had gone to the Commercial Avenue to observe the Women’s Day celebration. The event was a huge success, especially the march past. Everyone was moved by what they saw and we started talking about the possibility of creating our own association in order to participate at future celebrations.

71 The International Women’s Day is celebrated every 8 March. In Cameroon the event is marked by elaborate activities throughout the country. Because of the pomp and pageantry with which the event is celebrated, it is almost unofficially, a public holiday in Cameroon.
In March 1999, Sirri rallied a few friends to a preliminary meeting during which they brainstormed about the future association. They decided to call it, Chosen Sisters:

Not every everyone present at that meeting eventually became a member. We agreed that membership should not be open to anyone below 20. We didn’t see ourselves mixing with teenagers. Most of our members are in their mid-twenties and thirties. We didn’t place an upper limit for membership even though we don’t have any persons above 40. [...] You know, you can’t choose your biological sisters. They are born into your family. You have no choice or control over this and whether you like it or not, they remain your sisters. But we wanted to choose people we could deal with. We wanted people whom we could trust and work with, people who were passionate about similar concerns. These issues made us call our association Chosen Sisters because we finally could exercise the right to choose our social sisters.

In August 1999, the association was officially registered with the civil authorities as a social group, with the following stated objectives:

- To help disabled children in and around our quarter.
- To fight against prostitution and sexual promiscuity.
- To fight against unwanted pregnancies and abortion.
- To guide and help each other when need be.
- To improve on our lifestyles and standards.
- To carry out manual activities in and around our quarter at least twice a year.
- To patronize members in business.
- To enhance and promote the spirit of love and solidarity amongst our members.\(^\text{72}\)

Elaborating on these objectives, Sirri recalled:

We wanted to fight against such evils as abortion, promiscuity among youths and to help the underprivileged. You know Old Town has a bad image. Once you tell someone you live in Old Town, they just have this terrible impression about you. We wanted to change that impression and that’s what we’re struggling to achieve.

The Chosen Sisters scored their first major success in 2000 when they won the first prize for the march past\(^\text{73}\) at the Women’s Day celebration.\(^\text{74}\)

\(^{72}\) Constitution of the Chosen Sisters, Old Town.
\(^{73}\) March past refers to a ceremonial parade.
Figure 3: Certificate of participation at the Women’s Day parade in 2000.

Figure 4: The Chosen Sisters parade during the Women’s Day ceremony in 2005

The prize was awarded on the basis of the group’s orderliness during the parade and the uniformity of their dresses.
This was a major boost to the association and to the community of Old Town in general. Although the association’s fame led to an immediate increase in membership, the numbers fluctuated between 28 and 35. Today, the association consists of young women from diverse ethnic and educational backgrounds. The association had an average age of 28 and 12 of them admitted to having at least a child as seen in the diagram below. About half of them lived with a spouse or boyfriend while the rest lived with their parents or independently.

![Figure 5: Parental Status of Members of Youth Associations](image)

**b) The United Sisters**

The United Sisters was a younger version of the Chosen Sisters. In many ways, the latter served as a model for the United Sisters and its emergence was inevitable precisely because the Chosen Sisters admitted only members older than 20. In practice the Chosen Sisters preferred members in their mid-20s and above. The average age among the United Sisters was 23,
implying that a small percentage were still teenagers when the association was founded. The association officially came into existence in November 2002 with a total membership of 25. Sirri’s 22 year old niece, Angela, was one of the founding members. Unlike her aunt, Angela had dropped out of secondary school and became a mother in her teenage years. She understood the objectives of the association as follows:

We saw what our elder sisters were doing and felt that it was irresponsible not to form our own association. In our community, young girls are ignorant about a lot of things and we realised that some of us can learn from each other. The group helps to sensitize members about AIDS, fights against prostitution, abortion and other social ills. This is why we created the group, so that we can address these issues amongst ourselves.

Manka, a school dropout and Angela’s friend equally felt the need for an association that catered to the specific needs of their age category:

Even though we admired the Chosen Sisters, not everyone felt they could be admitted to the association or would feel free, because you know, they’re our big sisters. But we felt that we have to follow their examples because they had already led the way and all we needed to do was to follow.

Mami Lucia also offered assistance to the girls by permitting them to use her living room for their meetings. The association met every Sunday and has successfully maintained this for the past four years, contrary to the expectations of their male peers who believed the association would not survive a month. ‘The boys said we could not run a meeting. Some said we were wasting our time and I remember they also said similar things about the Chosen Sisters, but see where they are now. Despite our difficulties, we are succeeding but some people criticise us for preaching what we don’t practise’ declared Angela.
Table 1: Educational Levels of Research Participants in Old Town

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Association</th>
<th>Primary School</th>
<th>Secondary School</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chosen Sisters</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Sisters</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

c) The Ntambag Brothers’ Association (NBA)

Unlike the previous two groups, the NBA was a male-exclusive association and historically, the youngest of the three. However, it had the largest membership (42) of all the three associations. Furthermore, the NBA claimed to be at the forefront of development initiatives in the community and therefore represented itself as the pre-eminent youth association in Old Town. Aaron remembers distinctly the circumstances that gave birth to the idea of an association:

We were at the wake of Simon’s mother. You know, it is the custom in our quarter to make financial contributions when a member of the quarter dies. Each household or family contributes something and we keep an exercise book that contains a list of names and their respective contributions. The money is donated to the bereaved family to help with funeral expenses. So, while contributions were going on, someone suggested that if we had our own association, it would be easier for us to organise activities to support our bereaved friend.

In the western grasslands of Cameroon, bereavement is a communally-shared experience and constitutes one of the many practices that highlight cultural understandings of personhood and inter-dependence. Simply put, such moments underscored the extent to which the principle of ‘wealth in people’ was emphasised. Aaron and his friends claimed they felt compelled to create
their own association, after appreciating the unique role associations could play at such occasions. They admired in particular, the moral and material support Manka, (Simon’s younger sister) benefited from the United Sisters of which she was a leading member.

A few weeks after the funeral, Aaron and his friends scheduled a meeting at Capo’s Relaxing Club, an off-licence owned by one of their friends. According to Aaron, the attendance was fairly good:

I think 15 people or so attended the first meeting. The first few months were difficult. Some people were not consistent at all. They would show up this Sunday and only resurface two or three Sundays later although everyone knew we had scheduled our meetings for Sundays. We wanted to limit our members to 40 because we knew that once we opened our doors, many people would like to become members. We also discussed the need to limit or prevent certain individuals from becoming members, especially certain Hausa boys who are notorious for their violent behaviour.

In many towns and villages of the grasslands, Hausa is often used synonymously with Muslim, mainly because most or perhaps all Hausa populations adhere to Islam. Hausa quarters are also perceived by non-Hausa populations as risky and dangerous - perceptions that have influenced relations between the two communities. It was against this background that most youth associations tended to exclude Hausa youths and vice versa.

The nascent association had barely used Capo’s Relaxing Club for a couple of weeks when Aaron and his friends realised they needed a better and quieter venue. Alfred, a fellow member promptly came to the rescue. He invited them to use Subi House, an old room which his family owned and used for the rehearsals of the famous Subi Dance Group, of which he was also a leading member. The next phase entailed clarifying the objectives of the association.

Apparently, most of the founders had envisaged a social group like any other in the neighbourhood but Carlson, an influential member proposed the inclusion of ‘development’ as a

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75 In Bamenda and the rest of English-speaking areas of Cameroon, off-licence refers to a bar or pub where drinks are bought and consumed.
vital objective of the association. In the end, the constitution stated the objectives of the association as follows:

The association in question whose objective is to bring together boys to fight against social ills in our society; like bribery and corruption, banditry and to sensitize the youths about the ramifications of HIV/AIDS. The association is aimed at sharing both in times of joy and sorrow of its members. Human investment is also one of its major objectives.76

The authors also took the liberty to emphasise the following: ‘The above-mentioned association is apolitique (sic) or non-political.’ Reflecting on the objectives, Carlson revealed the following:

We wanted to be involved in the development of our community. To me, development is anything that brings positive change to the face of Old Town. As you know, people are prejudiced against Old Town as a neighbourhood of thieves, prostitutes and social failures. In my opinion, a group of youths devoted to development can shake things around here, we can contribute towards a moral transformation of the community and mobilise other young people to care about the things we consider dear to us, changing public opinion about Old Town.

As a matter of fact, the objectives of the NBA were not radically different from those of the female associations. Perhaps, the key difference was NBA’s insistence on using the term ‘development’ as a marker of distinction from the female associations. Of course, the NBA carried out activities that were unique to the association such as imposing a compulsory sport regime on its members (discussed in Chapter Seven). The female associations were equally concerned about ‘development’ issues and spearheaded a range of activities that included the sweeping of streets and pavements as well as other kinds of hygiene campaigns. Both female associations preferred choral music and tended to invest their finances in the purchase of musical equipment in order to enhance their choral singing – an activity that came to be labelled by their male counterparts as an expression of their femininity. According to this logic, drums were to the female associations what football jerseys were to the NBA. However, whilst all three

76 Constitution of the Ntambag Brothers Association, Old Town
associations carried out ‘development’, the NBA more than the others, positioned itself as the foremost development-oriented association – a claim on which they built and dramatised their masculinities in the face of female ascendancy (Chapter Six).

![Employment Status of Members of Youth Associations](image)

**Figure 6: Employment Status of Members of Youth Associations**

**Structure and Organisation of Youth Associations**

Besides the similarities of their objectives and activities, all three associations shared a similar structure. Gender differentiation and seniority were two salient organising principles. There existed a distinction not only between male and female associations, but also, between junior and senior associations. While this was still evident for the female associations, it was no longer true of the male associations because the Able Brothers, a younger version of the NBA
had disbanded. Junior associations consisted of young people between 18 and 26 while most members in the senior groups were between 25 and 36.

It should also be highlighted that all three associations had a strong Christian influence although each association had at least one Muslim, most of whom have withdrawn over the years. Besides the ambiguous position of the Hausa minority, all the associations were multi-ethnic and in fact, placed no emphasis on ethnic orientation. However, unlike the female associations, the NBA restricted its membership to residents of Old Town only.

The associations also shared similarities with respect to managerial or organisational structure. An elected executive of six or nine persons steered the affairs of each association. Executive offices included the president, vice-president, secretary general, treasurer, financial secretary, organising or social secretary and a chief whip. In the female associations, a choir coordinator was charged with teaching new songs and coordinating singing during private or public functions. The NBA had a four-man disciplinary committee to which exceptional cases of indiscipline were referred. In addition, the NBA had a sports coordinator with an assistant whose functions were to oversee football activities every Saturday morning. Because of its frequent involvement in manual labour and sport, the NBA also kept a first-aid box, contributed by its members, whose discharge was the prerogative of a health coordinator.

Each association had at least three patrons or patronesses; in reality, a combination of patrons and patronesses. The United Sisters for example had three patrons and three patronesses and in November 2005, the association co-opted me as a patron. The NBA on the other hand enjoyed the patronage of two men and a woman. Patrons and patronesses served as advisers and were consulted on important matters affecting the association. They were also expected to attend meetings at their convenience and to contribute financially or materially towards the well-being
of the associations. The selection of patrons was subject to debate and approved by the general assembly. This principle seemed to have been compromised when some leading members of the United Sisters conspired to co-opt a patron who was overwhelmingly resented by most members. At issue was the appointment of Barnabas, a young man (and member of NBA) of questionable moral standards, who had been at the centre of a nasty love triangle between two members of the association. The matter was resolved when the members overwhelmingly voted to relieve Barnabas of his position. The NBA also grappled with the unexpected demands of one of their patrons, a businessman in his 60s who reportedly preferred to join the association as an ordinary member rather than a patron. His application was rejected on the grounds that he was no longer a youth.

Among the Chosen and United Sisters, membership was formally acquired upon complete payment of an annual fee of 1500CFA and 2000CFA for old and new members respectively. The NBA charged a slightly higher amount – 2500CFA and 3000CFA for old and new members respectively. Members were either expected to learn the association’s anthem by rote (in the female associations) or for the NBA to make the following pledge upon admission:

I pledge to Ntambag Brothers my Association
To always be faithful, loyal and honest,
To always serve Ntambag Brothers with all my strength
To defend and protect her unity
And to always uphold her honour and glory where ever the need may arise.
To abide by all the rules and regulations guiding Ntambag Brothers
To always be present and on time in any activities of Ntambag brothers
Upon my honour I stand by this pledge
So help me God. 77

77 Pledge of the Ntambag Brothers Association, Old Town.
An individual could lose his/her membership by withdrawing from the association or by dismissal. Whereas a handful of dismissals were carried out by the sisters, the NBA had lost only a couple of members who opted to withdraw on their own accord.

Besides the Chosen Sisters which met on Wednesday evenings (6-8 p.m.), both the NBA and United Sisters met on Sundays from 12-2 p.m. and 2-4 p.m. respectively. Late-comers were fined a fee of 50CFA and punctuality was often an issue of ferocious debate in all three associations. Advocates of punctuality often insisted that late-comers should be fined, an idea that was popular but which enforcers were generally reluctant to implement.

During the early stage of my fieldwork with the ‘brothers’ I was struck by a practice which allowed each brother an opportunity to chair a meeting through a rotational scheme. The logic was to enable each member to chair a meeting until the circle was complete. I was appointed to chair a session just after my fourth visit and I politely declined on the grounds that I was still new and still learning the ways of the group. The logic of giving each member a chance to chair a meeting, of exercising momentary authority could be seen as a scathing indictment of Biya’s monopoly of power in Cameroon for over two decades. As I see it, this rotational scheme of power-sharing represents young people’s imaginaries of an alternative politics where every citizen is given a fair chance to exercise their citizenship to the best of their abilities.

In all the associations, each meeting began and concluded with a prayer. Anyone could be invited to offer a prayer, Muslim or Christian. I was invited at least once in each of the associations to offer an introductory or closing prayer. Once the introductory prayer was over and members had taken their seats, the chief whip quickly placed a bowl or plate at the threshold of the door. Individuals who arrived after that were considered late. It was a policy among the ‘brothers’ not to allow anyone who failed to pay their fine into the venue.
Sometimes, the president of the association or his/her vice delivered a brief welcome address and then invited the chairperson of the day to disclose the agenda. The chairperson then read out the meeting’s agenda and invited the secretary to read the minutes of the last meeting. If there were no appeals, the minutes were adopted or modified as needed and deliberations proceeded, drawing on the previous week’s minutes or on planned future activities. A typical Sunday meeting can be appreciated from this brief account drawn from my field notes in August 2005:

When I got to Mami Lucia’s house, only five United Sisters were present. It had rained heavily in the morning and now it was simply drizzling, punctuated with frequent bursts of thunder and bright flashes of lightening. Bamenda is well-known for its heavy summer rains and this day was no exception. From the nature of the weather, I had anticipated a low turn out. While waiting for the meeting to formally begin, I joined the sisters who were discussing the rise of new Pentecostal churches in Bamenda. The subject had emerged when Hilda, one of the executive members joked about her membership in a new prosperity gospel church founded by a man named Benson Eni (pseudonym). The man was allegedly notorious for his scams as for his preaching. ‘That guy duped many women here in town’ Hilda exclaimed. Charlotte, a very talkative member also claimed that the preacher drove a woman mad. She recounted how Benson Eni allegedly tricked the woman to part with a huge sum of money. ‘Some people said he had promised to marry her but the poor woman only realised he was a conman after he had disappeared’ recounted Charlotte. ‘Benson Eni tells his Christians not to associate with poor neighbours but with rich neighbours because if you are in need, your best choice is to turn to the rich neighbour’ Hilda added. ‘If he is not a feyman why does he drive a car with dark tinted windows?’ It is a popular belief that most feymen own cars with black tinted windows because when they drive around town, they cannot be seen or recognised. Benson Eni allegedly became extremely rich and established ‘divinely inspired’ companies which he showed to his flock as evidence of his divine blessing. In the course of his ‘ministry’ he declared that he desired a wife and hundreds of young women flocked to his church in anticipation of attracting his attention. ‘I think that was a trick to get more members to his church, because he ended up marrying a certain lady from Holland. People who knew him said he was already engaged so it seems he simply wanted to pull another trick on Bamenda citizens. I suspected all along that there was some fishy deal going on’ declared Hilda.

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78 Feymen (feyman- singular) is a popular term for conmen in Cameroon. Since 1990, feymen have risen to prominence and are believed to wield enormous power and wealth. In cities like Douala and Yaounde, feymen have become the new role models for young desperate men determined to achieve fame and wealth at all cost (cf. Ndijio 2006; Malaquais 2002).

79 Cars with dark-tinted windows used to be the preserve of powerful government ministers and ruling party barons. Today, the appropriation of these symbols of power by feymen reveal interesting shifts that increasingly, are the subject of anthropological inquiries (cf. Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999).
By the time the meeting began, there were about 15 members in attendance. I was called upon to offer a prayer and immediately after, the minutes of the previous session were read out. Once the minutes were adopted, the secretary announced the next item on the agenda – matters arising from the minutes. In response, someone raised the question of unpaid fines. At issue was the concern that some individuals still owed fines and to this end, a resolution was passed urging debtors to pay all outstanding debts to the association. A deadline was set and defaulters were threatened with further fines. Next on the agenda was ‘other matters’. Camilla, who sat next to me then sought permission to speak by raising her right hand. It was considered disrespectful to raise one’s left hand when seeking permission to speak. The chairlady nodded and Camilla rose from her chair, cleared her throat and began to speak. ‘Before I came to this meeting, I met the seamstress who sewed some of our uniforms for the last Women’s Day. She asked me to tell those who owe her to pay their debts before she takes a drastic measure. It is more than 6 months since we celebrated Women’s Day. Those who still owe her should be ashamed of themselves. In all truth, she wanted to accompany me to the meeting today to disgrace the debtors but I begged her to calm down and promised that we’ll discuss the issue. Debtors, please, you know yourselves. Do something about it before the matter gets worse.’ The house was quiet for a while, possibly overwhelmed by guilt or shock.

Someone had concerns about visitations to sick members. It is the association’s policy to visit and donate money to sick members – a healthcare scheme intended to assist fellow sisters with the cost of drugs. Debbie was visibly displeased with the sisters for failing to visit her last month when she fell sick. ‘I heard some members said the association resolved not to visit anyone who lives with a boy. When was such a resolution taken? If such a thing was discussed, then I think it is completely unfair and I deserve an apology from the house’ she said. A couple of sisters took turns to speak, conceding their failure to visit her, not because she was allegedly living with a young man but because they could not locate her exact whereabouts. Apparently, she was not resident in Old Town at the time of the supposed illness.

Yvette, one of the few married members sought permission from the general assembly for future absences. ‘From November, I’ll have to start attending our home village meetings on Sundays and unfortunately, the time overlaps with the meeting here. Because of this, I’ll have to skip some Sundays. The elders in our village meeting have urged me to be more regular because they claim they would like to know me better.’ As Yvette sat down, her friends started joking about her request. ‘Since you’ve started mingling with the elders, no one should be surprised to learn that you’ve become an old woman before your time’ Charlotte joked. ‘You'll be drinking palm wine and eating kola nut with the old people. And don’t forget to dress in your wrapper’ stated Hilda and everyone burst out laughing….

In both female associations, the last Sunday of each month had a slight but significant addition to the customary agenda – a common meal. This day enjoyed special status because the sisters wore one of their uniforms to the meeting and uniforms were reserved for special occasions. It is quite
probable that the United Sisters modelled this event after the Chosen Sisters with minor adjustments. Common meals were organised in a fairly simple manner; everyone contributed 500CFA and a pair of members took turns to cook the meals. Among the Chosen Sisters, it was customary to be paired with one’s ‘friend-in-meeting’, a concept unique to them. A ‘friend-in-meeting’ was the person with whom a new member was paired upon admission to the association. Once paired, each member was expected to exchange visits with her ‘friend-in-meeting’ and be mindful of each other’s welfare. If a member’s ‘friend’ was not present for a meeting, she was expected to explain the reason for her absence. This arrangement did not only facilitate the organisation of common meals but it also promoted friendship and mutual well-being.

Attempts to introduce common meals in the NBA were strongly resisted by a few members who expressed concerns that such a venture would divert the association’s focus from ‘development’ to a mere ‘social’ group. Despite the resistance, its proponents never gave up. In December 2005, one of the members named David raised the issue again:

> I have proposed in this house several times that we should look into the matter of adopting common meals but there are certain individuals here who oppose without concrete reasons. I wish to propose again that if we don’t have enough money to contribute on a monthly basis, we could do so once every three months.

David was expressing a view widely shared by members. But this did not deter Carlson from opposing it as he had done on past occasions:

> If we adopt this idea, some members will attend meetings only when they know food is available. Our focus is development, not feeding ourselves. But don’t get me wrong, I do not oppose the idea entirely. I am of the view that if such a thing should happen, it should be spontaneous because if we make a plan for it, some people will stay away from meetings and only show up on the day food is served.

Isaac, a key member and owner of a photo studio did not find Carlson’s response convincing. ‘Is
it a bad thing for us to eat our own money?’ he asked, his voice quivering. ‘We’ve made countless contributions in this house; we’ve donated gifts to people, cleaned up the quarter, done so many things for other people, why can’t we do something for ourselves?’ Isaac’s concerns did little to change Carlson’s opinion and the other executive members who opposed the idea. When I spoke to Isaac after the meeting, he was deeply disappointed with the leadership of the association. He accused the leadership of intimidating members from speaking honestly about certain issues such as the common meal. ‘When you speak to people outside the meeting, they seem to be in favour of the idea but when it’s inside the meeting, everyone goes mum.’ Isaac held that the executive members were to blame for the association’s failure to adopt common meals, which in his opinion, played a vital function in keeping people together. ‘Look at the young girls in this quarter. They’ve been around for much longer than us and they’re doing fine. Why can’t we learn something from them?’

**Functions and Activities of Youth Associations**

It is evident that the associations examined thus far sought to mobilise young people towards particular practices and causes. Although the operational logic of these associations revolved around the notion of providing ‘social support’ and solidarity amongst themselves, the associations carried out a range of activities that can be classified into three broad but overlapping categories – financial, social and moral. These activities constituted the driving force behind the associations and deserve to be briefly examined.

Without finances, these associations would hardly operate and eventually wither. Except for the Chosen Sisters, the other associations operated on very meagre resources partly because most members were unemployed and tended to depend on family. Membership fees provided the
essential funds for running the associations. Upon registration, about two-thirds of one’s fee was deposited into a ‘sinking or trouble fund’ - that is, a reserve which (as implied by its name) could be drawn only in times of crisis, such as death or extreme financial need. It was in brief, reserved for moments of trouble. Most NBA members referred to this as the ‘development fund’. Besides the membership fees, other financial sources included fines paid by late-comers at weekly meetings, abstentions from associational activities such as manual labour or other public functions and fines accruing from persons sanctioned for acts of indiscipline during meetings (e.g. being noisy or repeated breach of associational protocol). However, as stated earlier, funds obtained from these sources were even less significant.

Despite these limitations, the female associations channelled their funds to two prominent activities - healthcare and njangi schemes. The United Sisters for instance had a policy to donate 2000CFA to sick members. Each member contributed 100CFA to this scheme and the balance was deposited into the association’s coffers. This donation allayed the burden that a member might otherwise have borne. In November 2005, Ruth, one of the leading members suggested the need to increase the contribution from 100 to 200CFA per member:

Although some people say that the 2000CFA we contribute is little, I think there are people here who can testify that it has helped them. But if we really wish to help each other, then we need to increase the amount to 4000CFA because as you will all agree with me, the cost of almost everything has gone up.

This proposal came up against a background of massive price hikes for essential commodities, fuel and medications. Ruth’s suggestion was welcome despite major concerns that not every member had received their entitlements. In fact, a debate erupted when a member complained that the association had failed to keep its policy on the visitation of sick members. Brenda revolted against what she labelled as overt discrimination against her on the grounds that the
association had failed to visit her while she was sick. Six members also complained they had
received only part of the 2000CFA due to them. ‘Discrimination is the last thing we want to be
known for in this association’ declared Ruth. ‘Please, let me beg this house to come together and
contribute all outstanding dues so that we don’t have a similar problem in future.’ As she was
about to sit, someone alleged that a couple of members were abusing the policy by lying about
illnesses that never took place. For instance, Brenda’s claims that she had been ill were
repeatedly dismissed by a selection of members, although the association voted overwhelmingly
to donate 2000CFA to her. Manka then suggested that safeguards should be taken to prevent
future abuse. ‘We won’t tolerate those who have minor stomach cramps and claim to be ill. We
all know these are minor issues. Next time, we will have to visit the concerned either at her home
or in the hospital before making the contribution’ declared Manka, conveying the point that this
was a decision rather than a suggestion.

A second channel of financial activity consisted of a savings scheme popularly known in
the Cameroon grasslands as ‘njangi’. This is a rotating savings scheme whereby each contributor
to a savings pool is allowed to draw or ‘chop’ the sum total of members’ contributions. Funds
from such savings tend to be invested in business ventures or meet family expenses. This scheme
became popular as an alternative banking system drawing on indigenous monetary practices. As
a matter of fact, njangi schemes and Credit Unions have gradually emerged as more credible
channels for financial transaction due partly to the near collapse of the banking sector in the early
1990s. Most voluntary associations in the grasslands, both urban and rural, carry out some sort of
njangi. Indeed, the salience of njangi schemes in the economic life of the western grasslands has
been the subject of scholarly research (cf. DeLancey 1977, 1987).
Among female associations in Old Town, two kinds of njangi schemes were carried out – ‘kitchen’ and ‘soap’ njangi. As implied by its name, the ‘kitchen njangi’ enabled beneficiaries to purchase essential kitchen equipment such as chinaware, utensils, pots, blenders etc. Sometimes, the njangi was insufficient to meet the cost of a particular item. Where this obtained, the beneficiary was expected to top up the amount. Allegations that in the past, some individuals had failed to use their njangi funds for its intended purpose led to the introduction of safeguards intended to curb such practices. To this end, the association appointed someone to accompany the beneficiary to the market who reported back to the association.

The idea of a ‘kitchen njangi’ failed to gain the approval of the United Sisters. The last time someone recommended the adoption of a kitchen njangi, Charlotte objected vehemently:

I don’t have a kitchen and I don’t need modern kitchen equipment. What is wrong with our ordinary plastic plates? I grew up eating from those plates. What is this noise about kitchen njangi? Those who want their kitchen njangi should go ahead and organise it but I’m not there.

Charlotte fancied portraying herself as a rustic young woman which her fellow ‘sisters’ seemed to enjoy. She did not only take pleasure in performing the rustic but also insisted on the supremacy of her opinion. So it came as no surprise when her objections to the ‘kitchen njangi’ brought the discussion to a premature end.

During a subsequent session, someone submitted a motion for the introduction of a compulsory monthly njangi scheme into the United Sisters association. Each member would save 2000CFA for this scheme. Its proponents contended that it was a mechanism to teach young women how to save. The motion was opposed by most members on the grounds that they could not afford the sum while others rejected it simply because it was unusual, indeed unheard of to compel persons to be part of a njangi scheme. According to the opponents, the idea of a
compulsory njangi was contrary to the spirit of njangi since it was entirely voluntary – based on an individual’s ability and willingness to contribute to the scheme. Asked about her opinion on the issue after the meeting, Manka alleged that the idea was crafted by a few married members: ‘They can get money from their husbands, but where do they expect us to get money from? 2000CFA is a lot of money. Sometimes, a month goes by without some of us seeing that amount of money, not to talk of saving it. Those who brought up these ideas don’t have an idea how difficult things are for some of us.’ She then revealed that most members were in favour of a ‘soap njangi’ because it was much cheaper and not compulsory.

Unlike the female associations, the NBA consistently rejected calls by some of its members for the introduction of a njangi scheme. Each time the idea was proposed, Carlson and his supporters rejected it. On a certain Sunday in November 2005, Achiri, a lanky fellow who had a history of irregular attendance sought permission to convince the association concerning the need to introduce a njangi scheme in the association. He began his speech by observing that he joined the association because he admired its objectives. ‘This meeting [association] was created to change the quarter and also to change ourselves. I think many people here have stressed the importance of knowing each other and knowing each other means knowing each other’s problems in order to enable the association to help solve some of these problems.’ Everyone listened keenly. And finally, he landed: ‘this is why I am for the idea that it is good to help people, but let’s not focus only on others. Let’s also look at ways of helping ourselves and upon reflection, the best option is to introduce njangi so that people can benefit from it and solve their problems.’

A wave of silence swept through the room and everyone sat still. Carlson looked uneasy and I anticipated he was about to say something. He rose suddenly from his seat and without
hesitation, expressed his disagreement with Achiri’s suggestions. ‘You are in the wrong place if you have that kind of idea’ he declared. ‘This association was created particularly for the purpose of developing the community. When we develop the community, we are also developing ourselves and each other.’ Although Carlson was a strong opponent of the njangi idea, some of his concerns were shared by most of the brothers who feared that introducing njangi to the association might lead to in-house disputes and could potentially precipitate the demise of the association.

Ntambag Brother’s is not a social group and I don’t think we should divert from the objectives of our association. I know people have personal problems, some of which can be solved by the association and some which can be handled by your families. While I think we can work out a way through which to assist members financially, I do not think njangi is the best way to go about this issue.

He declared his preference for a mechanism through which the association could lend money to members to start a business or solve a personal or family crisis.

I have contemplated this issue before but was reluctant to voice it in the house. It is a serious issue but we must be very careful if we have to introduce it. If we give our money to someone to start a business, however small it is, we should be sure that that person will return our money.

It appears many brothers had reservations about donating money to fellow brothers, particularly ‘bachelors’. It was a common perception that bachelors were irresponsible and tended to spend their money on women. Carlson concluded his speech by arguing that the association needed to work out a mechanism through which they could assist each other financially and be assured that funds borrowed from the association would be repaid.

A second category of activity carried out by youth associations was involvement in what they defined broadly as ‘social’ issues. Social activities included anniversary parties, born-house ceremonies, common meals, funerals/death celebrations etc. Like every other group activity,
members were expected to show commitment by paying their dues. Although the contributions to each activity depended on the scale or importance of the occasion, certain fees were standard and clearly stipulated in the statutes – such as contributions for the death of family. Fees for occasional activities were often debated and adopted by the association and a deadline established. Two social activities worth exploring include the Chosen Sisters’ participation at a wake ceremony and the NBA’s first anniversary party.

In November 2005, Helen, a Chosen Sister lost her brother. As custom demanded, each sister contributed 500CFA to support their bereaved friend. During its meeting of Wednesday, 9 November 2005, news of the loss dominated the meeting’s agenda, despite plans that were already in motion for a forthcoming born-house ceremony. The sisters agreed to congregate at Mami Lucia’s house at 7 p.m. the next day from where they would depart for the wake. They also agreed on the uniform to be worn and shoes to match. It was customary to wear one of their three uniforms to such occasions.

On Thursday 10 November 2005 we assembled at Mami Lucia’s house and waited for more sisters to arrive. This was my first public outing with the Chosen Sisters and I was quite excited to accompany them to the event. Some members had brought the association’s musical instruments - two stout African drums and a hollow-mouth aluminium pot which produced a bass pitch when struck with a spongy pad. The instruments were safely guarded by specific members appointed by the association and were only brought out at singing rehearsals or occasions where the association was expected to animate with song and dance. The sisters were all dressed uniformly – a long dress popularly known as kaba, whose style is borrowed from the coastal Douala. Most had sweaters beneath their kaba and others wore socks which seemed appropriate for the night because of the harshness of the dry season - known for its chilly nights. The socks
were meant to protect them from the dust which always had a way of going through their sandals, leaving one’s feet white and dry. Clara, one of the sisters, remarked that she had named her sandals ‘wake-keeping shoes’ because she wore them only to wake ceremonies. When it became apparent that we had a crowd of over 15, we agreed to leave for Metta Quarters where the wake was to take place.

The compound was slightly out of Old Town, about 20 minutes away on foot. We arrived at our destination just before 8 p.m. and were directed to a house which turned out to be a neighbour’s. A DJ hired for the occasion was busy playing Nigerian gospel music from a make-shift tent on an elevated veranda. Giant speakers were erected at either ends of the veranda and another across the compound. The music could be heard about 10 kilometres away – itself a coded message – that a member of the community had died. Normally, no one would dare play music at such a loud pitch without invoking the wrath of his/her neighbours. Opposite the house were three massive canopies with well arranged chairs and benches. Neighbours had offered their living rooms for the night in view of the fact that a single compound could not contain the growing number of mourners. By my estimates, there were about 500 people at the time of our arrival.

Once in the neighbour’s living room, we were offered seats by five strangers who had arrived earlier. Chairs and benches had been arranged on all four corners of the room and as we entered, the strangers directed us to the right section of the room. It took a while for the sisters to settle down and before long, one of them tuned a song and everyone joined. Then the drums followed and the room vibrated with frenzied animation. Most of the songs were widely known which made it easy for the strangers to sing along. Others clapped their hands or tapped their feet in rhythm with the songs. After singing for about 15 minutes, the sisters took a break and chatted
amongst themselves. The bereaved sister, Helen, came in from one of the side-doors that led into the living room, greeted her fellow sisters and expressed gratitude for their moral support. This was followed by the sharing of snacks and soft drinks. Twenty minutes later, the singing resumed and this time, a circle was formed with the drummers in the middle while everyone danced to the rhythm of the music. As time went by, the numbers grew and the circle expanded. The singing was only punctuated by brief moments of respite and prayers as the numbers gradually reduced with time.

Participation at wakes and death celebrations involved similar activities, which consisted predominantly of singing and dancing. Throughout the period of my fieldwork, the Chosen Sisters took part in three ‘death celebrations’, one wake and two ‘born-house’ ceremonies. The NBA on the other hand participated in one born-house, three wakes and two death celebrations. The United Sisters on their part organised a memorial service in honour of a member who died in 2004. Unlike death celebrations or wake ceremonies, parties were entirely different in structure and content. Parties were meant for fun and constituted the ultimate leisure activity, a forum for socialising with one’s brothers and sisters.

Each association held at least one party during my 15 months of interaction with them. In November 2005, the United Sisters organised a party to celebrate its fourth anniversary and held another one on Women’s Day in March 2006. The Chosen Sisters on the other hand organised a ‘Christmas Cocktail’ in December 2005 and a party on Women’s Day. In October 2005, the NBA organised a massive party to celebrate its first anniversary despite the controversy that surrounded the initiative from its conception to implementation. At issue was the extravagance of the party, criticised by a couple of members for its similarity to those organised by the Yorkaaz. Unlike the female associations that set the party fee at only 1500CFA per member, the NBA
adopted the sum of 10,000CFA per member, a heavy sum for a largely unemployed population. Claude, a fellow member felt this was completely outrageous: ‘if this association is for development as it claims, then why is there no plan to use part of the fee for a development project?’ Claude was not the only critic. Pierre, one of the few employed members thought the amount was extremely high: ‘I have noticed that when brothers are called upon to contribute 1000CFA or 2000CFA for development projects in the community or to contribute small sums in order that we can sponsor a child in primary school, people are generally reluctant. I find it strange that the sum of 10,000CFA was adopted by the association and no one has raised their voice against it.’

Pierre took his criticism to one of the Sunday meetings held to assess preparations for the party: ‘I have something to say which I overheard someone saying. I will not reveal his name, but I think what he said was sensible’ he began. ‘Spare us the details, and go straight to the point’ the day’s chairman blurted. ‘My question is this; can the fee for this party be reduced from 10,000CFA to 1,000CFA?’ he asked. ‘No’ answered the chairman. ‘How can we say we’re a development association? I don’t see how this association will bring development to this community by inviting each member to spend 10,000CFA in one night and yet people drag their feet when Ntambag brothers are called upon to contribute 1,000CFA for development projects. Does this make sense to us?’ Pierre questioned. There was no immediate response to his query. A handful of members felt he was arrogant and thought of himself as the one-eyed in the kingdom of the blind. When no one responded to him the chairman decided to break the silence: ‘this is not a time or place to discuss that issue Mr Pierre’ he said, seemingly oblivious to the irony. ‘The house already made a decision that each person shall contribute 10,000CFA and it stays that way’ he declared. After the chairman had spoken, Carlson sought permission to
challenge Pierre’s criticism:

‘I just wish to correct Mr Pierre’s point. Although we’re calling this a party, it’s not really so. This is a function to celebrate our first anniversary as an association. We have many things to celebrate because in just one year, we have accomplished a lot of things, perhaps more than other associations that have existed for more than two years. I’m sure you know very well that all work without play makes Jack a dull boy. I should also add that we’ll use the function to raise funds for future development projects, and I think we all agree that we need funds for the underprivileged children in the neighbourhood.’

After Carlson’s ‘clarification’ the matter was closed to further discussion. Eventually only about two-thirds paid the requested amount and the party took place at the Babadjou Cultural Hall - the same venue where the Yorkaaaz had organised their first party in the mid 1990s. Contrary to claims that the function would be used to raise funds for development, funds obtained during the event (from the sale of tickets and donations of invited guests) were re-channelled immediately for more beer.

Claude, who did not contribute and consequently failed to attend the party expressed his outrage at the association’s failure to raise ‘development’ funds as previously planned: ‘how could the brothers spend all that money on food and drinks without thinking of the sick, prisoners and the poor in our community? At least, part of the money should have been used to assist needy or desperate persons in our community.’ Contrary to Claude’s insistence on the moral obligation of the NBA towards the development of Old Town, most members of the association fell, like Carlson, that all work without play made Jack a dull boy. An extravagant party such the anniversary event was a rare celebration of their triumph against victimhood and the harrowing forces of poverty. The party was perceived as an occasion to make merriment and to enjoy the company of friends, punctuated with an abundance of food, drinks and music.

Nevertheless, all three associations sought to assist the underprivileged, embark on a moral crusade against social ills in the neighbourhood and improve the lifestyle of fellow
members. I refer to this category of activity as the production of local moralities – explored in
detail in chapter seven. These activities were carried out on two fronts; through the sponsorship
of charitable activities in and out of Old Town and members’ participation in moral formation
discussions at weekly meetings. With respect to the latter, all three associations had slots during
regular meetings differently labelled but similar in content and objective. Known as ‘Something
Useful’ and ‘Formation Time’ in both female associations and the NBA respectively, this slot
attracted spontaneous or pre-scheduled discussions by members on issues such as dating,
HIV/AIDS and sex, respect for one’s person and others, marriage and relationships, as well as
tips on how to get a job. The associations also organised seminars on relevant themes to which
other groups in the neighbourhood were invited. Seminars provided the only forum through
which all three associations came together on a formal platform.

**Conclusion**

This chapter shows that young people in Old Town were driven by a number of factors to
become involved in associations – namely to seek socio-economic support, build solidarity with
friends, exercise the right to choose their social ‘siblings’ – that is, sisters and brothers with
whom they could imagine a new social and moral order aimed at accelerating their transition into
full social adulthood. Founders of the Chosen Sisters, the United Sisters and the NBA,
individually and collectively emphasised that a primary objective of their associations was to
‘develop’ their community through the moral sensitization of members and to galvanize the
community of Old Town in pursuit of this lofty objective. In this respect, members of the above
associations tended to position and present themselves as moral ambassadors to the community
whose actions were intended to inspire the emergence of a new moral order in Old Town. Whilst
the leaders (and most members) of the various associations tended to present their associations as moral vanguards and as potential agents of change, it should be emphasised that the raison d’être of these association was predicated on their social roles – as sources of group solidarity and economic support, particularly for the female associations. Although solidarity remains the crucial factor, Bähre (2007) warns of the ambivalence that tends to characterise claims about social support and solidarity. Indeed, this is evident in the disputes that characterise health-care and njangi issues in the United Sisters and generally, some of the differences expressed by members in the various associations (e.g. Claude’s reservations about the NBA’s anniversary party). This ambivalence simply highlights the fact that groups or organisations are hardly homogeneous.

Involvement in associations permitted young men and women in Old Town to display signs of maturity, thereby laying claims to adult status. The fact that all three associations were structured and carried out similar activities like home-village associations (whose members are adults) indicated their claims to similar adult status. For instance, the United Sisters’ provision of a health-care and credit (njangi) scheme demonstrated their ability as a group to take care of their needs. By providing for their needs and those of their families, the young women displayed signs of independence from their families as well as their interdependence as a group. Hence, associational life enables young people in Old Town to construct their own world, a world not dramatically unlike the universe of their socialisation as young people draw on local idioms and cultural resources to demonstrate maturity and make in-roads into the world of social adulthood.

Involvement in associational life also permitted young people to build and express gendered identities, embodied in specific associational practices such as choral music, football and hygiene operations. In the next chapter, I show how sanitary operations reveal young
people’s struggle for urban renewal – an engagement that permitted young men in the NBA to build certain masculinities and position themselves as the foremost association in Old Town.
Chapter Six

Alternate Sites of Action: Hygiene and Urban Renewal in Old Town

In Bamenda like in other towns and cities of Cameroon, a day is reserved for cleaning up one’s surroundings. The Bamenda Urban Council (BUC) allocates the last Thursday of every month for a city-wide clean up operation which begins at 8 a.m. and ends at midday. During this period, the circulation of taxis and other forms of public transportation are prohibited. Shops and business premises are equally closed while citizens clean their surroundings and public spaces particularly those neglected or beyond the reach of municipal authorities. Each year the Ministry of Towns and Urban planning awards a prize to the cleanest city or town as part of its agenda to promote a clean and healthy urban environment. Thus, hygiene has become part and parcel of national discourse, just as it is a matter of daily concern for citizens and young people’s associations in Old Town. The failure of municipal authorities such as those of the BUC in dealing effectively with urban problems including hygiene and waste management have created room for the appropriation of urban space by marginalized youth, thereby inscribing their actions on the urban landscape and challenging the state’s monopoly over urban space as well as constructing an alternate site of action.

This chapter explores how young people in Old Town, acting through various associations define and inscribe their agencies on urban space in the quest to rehabilitate their neighbourhood. It details young people’s preoccupation with and discourses on hygiene as well as their strategies and operations that seek to redress urgent health and environmental problems in their community. These operations are analysed against the backdrop of young people’s practices that aim to transform the physical and moral landscapes of Old Town. Involvement in
hygiene operations also provides a basis for young people to build and express particular kinds of identities premised on youth associations’ competition for visibility and influence in Old Town.

The Power in Cleanliness

My first visit to the NBA turned out to be a dramatic encounter with the association’s preoccupation with hygiene and cleanliness in the neighbourhood, as part of its agenda to step in where local municipal authorities were perceived to have failed. It turned out that the NBA was not the only association passionately involved with hygiene as I soon realised that all the three associations I worked with carried out elaborate programmes relating to sanitary issues. With time, it became obvious to me that ‘modernity and success’ as aptly observed by Michael Rowlands ‘have elective affinities with hygiene and the removal of dirt in Bamenda’ (Rowlands 1996:208). Rowlands observes that in Bamenda, cleanliness is not only associated with success but that it also enjoys strong allusions to power and modernity. A modern and clean neighbourhood constituted part of the collective imaginary of the youth associations preoccupied with urban renewal. Reflecting on my observations at my first NBA meeting led me to identify traits of Rowlands’ association between hygiene and modernity.

Immediately after the opening prayers, two separate minutes that had been meticulously prepared were read out – the first concerning the last customary meeting and a special one pertaining to the association’s visit to the BUC premises in Ntarikon which took place during the week. While the Secretary General read out the “special” minutes of the trip to the BUC premises, a small pack of photos were circulated - photos of the brothers with important personalities at the municipal offices. Several of the photos revealed an elaborate display of 20
green trash cans freshly painted with the caption – ‘Keep Old Town Clean’ and beneath it – “Donated by Ntambag Brothers”.

My curiosity was roused even more upon seeing the photos, profoundly amazed that a group of mostly unemployed young men should donate trash cans to the BUC. When the secretary finished reading the special minutes, one of the executive members announced that anyone who was absent from the ceremony without prior permission would pay the standard fine of 150CFA. This immediately provoked protests from a member who insisted that he was neither aware of the planned visit nor the date of this activity. His excuses were promptly dismissed as the other members seemed more interested in discussing the substantive issues concerning the visit and its implications for BUC-NBA relations. What I had just witnessed was the culmination of a well coordinated inaugural project of the NBA.

The NBA’s proactive engagement with hygiene began when the association unanimously agreed to produce trash cans for its neighbourhood. It is probable that this initiative was inspired by hygiene lessons delivered by a patroness of the association who worked at the provincial
department of health. She too had been thrilled to learn of the association’s objectives – a factor that persuaded her to readily accept the association’s invitation to become a patroness. Max, 33, an influential executive member observed that the municipal council’s neglect and the growing problem of garbage disposal equally prompted them to sensitize and carry out hygiene operations in the neighbourhood: ‘we wanted to encourage hygiene in the quarter because the surroundings were always littered with garbage. We know from basic education that if garbage is well managed we can avoid mosquitoes and consequently have less malaria in the community.’

Determined to procure and distribute garbage bins in the neighbourhood, the brothers were undeterred by the allegation that producing and/or distributing trashcans not endorsed by the government delegate or his assistant was considered a violation of municipal laws. The association opted to settle any doubts by seeking the permission of municipal authorities:

When we contacted the government delegate, we were surprised that he wanted us to repair some of the council’s garbage bins that had been abandoned. We rejected his request by explaining that we simply wanted to carry out an activity that would benefit our neighbourhood directly. We told him that we simply needed his permission to go ahead with our plans but because we were reluctant to do what he wished, he started making excuses each time we sought an appointment with him. Contrary to the government delegate’s lukewarm attitude, his assistant gave us all the support we needed. You know, he’s from Old Town and as a member of our community, we knew we could count on his support. He has visited our association twice. When he learnt of our initiative, he was very pleased and urged us to complete the project. Looking back at the situation, I think it was thanks to him that we succeeded.

The first step in this direction involved writing a formal request to the government delegate in which the association sought permission to produce trash cans for exclusive use in Old Town. According to Max, the government delegate allegedly declared he did not understand the association’s motive and instead requested further information on the project. ‘I think he was concerned that we wanted to add unnecessary burden to the council especially with respect to the collection of garbage from the interior parts of the neighbourhood.’ It is also probable that the
letter was poorly worded or perhaps failed to state clearly that the project’s aim was to place
garbage containers at strategic areas in the neighbourhood in order to encourage citizens to adopt
healthy practices of waste disposal. Prior to this initiative, residents often dumped their waste
in streams, private gardens, footpaths or small bushes in the neighbourhood. There is little doubt
that these methods of garbage disposal attracted mosquitoes and contributed to the high
incidence of malaria in Old Town as in other neighbourhoods in Bamenda. The NBA’s initiative
was to establish collection points where accumulated garbage would be transported to the BUC’s
garbage containers at the main street. Most people who made regular use of the big trash
containers were those who lived nearest to the main road and therefore had easy access to the
bins. Although the BUC ought to collect garbage from the main street once every week, it hardly
kept to its schedule. ‘So we wrote another letter to the government delegate explaining how we
intended to distribute the trash cans. We stated that users would sign an agreement with the
association in which they will promise to take full charge of the garbage disposal and promise to
handle the trash can with care.’ Max and other members of the association confirmed that the
government delegate eventually conceded to their wishes upon persuasion from his vice who
had taken a keen interest in the activities of the association, himself a resident of Old Town.

Upon approval of the project, the association set to work. Dues were promptly collected
and committees established. Individuals and sub-groups were assigned various tasks such as

80 Several NBA members also insinuated that the government delegate’s reluctance to endorse the project could be
partly attributed to his personal differences with Max, who as a former president of the youth-wing of the CPDM in
Old Town had confronted the delegate over party policy. The government delegate is a leading figure in the Mezam
division section of the CPDM and is alleged to have resented the former youth-president who had dared to challenge
him.

81 The vice, just like his superior, the government delegate, are both government-appointed municipal managers.
Both are prominent members of the CPDM, presiding over an SDF-elected council. Hence, the SDF-elected mayor
(council chairman) exercises little or no power over council policy. Several attempts have been made to unseat the
government delegate by the SDF to no avail. He has also resisted calls to resign, insisting that as an official
appointed by the president of the republic, he would leave office only if the president terminated his tenure. See The
Post, online edition, “B’da Councillors, Gov’t Delegate Draw Swords Again” by Peterkins Manyong accessed on
March 16 2007: http://www.postnewsline.com/2006/01/bda_councillors.html. It is also evident from this framework
that the government delegate is not accountable to the Bamenda populace and does not feel compelled to do so.
those to purchase the required number of barrels commonly known as casks. With the help of a welder, each cask was cut into two equal halves and painted green in and out. Iron rod handles were also attached on either side of the casks to facilitate transportation. The stage was now set for the NBA to dramatise its substance as an association with a difference. Dressed in their best and armed with the NBA’s badge – symbolising the magnitude and official nature of this activity, the brothers hired a vehicle to transport the bins to the council premises where the spectacle was scheduled to unfold. Often excluded from ‘postcolonial munificence and its sites of sociability’ (Diouf 1996) the NBA was determined to join the show rather than remain spectators. This was its first opportunity to apprise the BUC of its existence and aspirations.

Despite the government delegate’s questionable and visible absence from the ceremony his vice and the Divisional Officer (D.O.) or Prefect of the Bamenda Central sub-division legitimised the occasion with their presence. The NBA leader delivered a written speech in which he subtly denounced the BUC’s neglect of Old Town thus highlighting municipal deficiency in Bamenda. The speech also underscored the NBA’s self-assigned role as moral guardians and vanguards determined to give Old Town a face-lift in both metaphoric and practical ways. Excerpts of the speech are quoted as follows:

Today seems to be one of those rare days in the life of a people who seem to have been forgotten, either by design or by deliberate misconception or prejudice. The Association of young Old Town boys, baptized Ntambag brothers, which was formed some eight months ago, had as its objective to bring Old Town to its original status, to make it resemble the area where life in the Bamenda municipality once began. This in a deliberate attempt to inculcate hygiene, sanitation, fight poverty, unemployment, fill potholes, organize seminars on sexually transmitted diseases and related topics on development etc. All these in an attempt to cancel the myth that Old Town is an area of school dropouts and other vices. Furthermore, this association is apolitical and known (sic) profit-making association. Its finances depend on the good will of its 40 members. Therefore, like a newborn baby who depends solely on its mothers Brest (sic), the association has no budget of its own. Ladies and gentlemen, distinguish (sic) guest, to achieve our objective is not an easy task but very possible one and that is why we are here today. The production of these cans to
us has just come in a right time. Right time in the sense that sanitation in our area of Old Town is very poor. This poor sanitation brings ill-health, which might lead to death and other health hazards. Therefore, to fight against these, we have sensitized the residents of Ntambag on the importance of proper disposal of their garbage, and most importantly, to keep their toilets in good conditions. We have struggled to keep all our streets clean by constantly sweeping it. Moreover, we have held Seminars at the Impersonal Life Foundation in Old Town on the importance of good sanitation in our area.

Distinguish guests; the above is not the only objective we have in mind. We have tried in our own little way to maintain our seasonal roads, which are not in good shape, by filing most potholes to our capacity and strength. We also held different seminars to make our young ones know their importance in the society. We have a plan of sponsoring the little poor girls who cannot afford to pay their school needs as from next academic year, numbering of houses, planting of trees around our periphery, just to name a few. These tasks cannot be successful as soon as possible without the help of our people, our community or our council. In this light, we are appealing to the Government Delegate to the Bamenda Urban Council, the administrative machinery for Mezam and people of good will to give us the necessary support we need to achieve these prime objectives.

Following the display of the trash cans to council authorities and the rituals such occasions entailed, the NBA returned triumphantly to Old Town and “installed” five bins in strategic locations in the neighbourhood to the overt cheering and commendation of residents, young and old. This event legitimised the NBA as an influential actor on two crucial counts—first by establishing its credibility in the eyes of the local government and the community of Old Town as an important voice for youth, and second, by circumscribing its own space within the ‘youthscape’ of Old Town thereby elevating the association to a vanguard position in distinction to female associations that were perceived as ‘social groups’ catering to their own internal interests. In fact, by dint of this initiative, the BUC’s hygiene department officially delegated some of its supervisory powers to the NBA urging the association to act as its ‘eyes and ears’ in the neighbourhood.

Not all the trash cans were distributed for public use. The NBA strategically reserved a couple of cans for donation to select government institutions in Old Town such as the Public Security Offices and MIDENO (North West Development Authority), a government agency
tasked with the development of the North West Province. Both located in Old Town, the heads of these institutions had allegedly expressed interest in the NBA’s activities and had informally invited the leadership of the association to their respective offices. When a decision was taken to donate one of the cans to MIDENO and a date set for the trip, I volunteered to accompany the appointed delegation. This move was inspired partly by the imperative to ‘hang out’ with the brothers as well as my desire to witness the anticipated encounter between the NBA and the director of MIDENO, who, being a prominent member of the ruling CPDM and former transport minister was widely known for his association with PRESBY, a pro-government youth association with branches in all ten provinces of the country. It was alleged that he had benefited tremendously from the support of the Bamenda branch of PRESBY to establish himself as an influential political figure.

On Wednesday 8 June 2005, a few minutes after midday I caught up with a small group of NBA members around the vicinity of Subi House – in the area popularly known as Seven Doors. When I arrived, the brothers seemed to be engrossed in a conversation on high speed cars and risky driving. They had arrived about ten minutes earlier and were waiting for Aaron who was eating lunch at a nearby restaurant. Aaron was the person tasked with organising the visit. The discussion soon veered to a topic which initially seemed hard to decode.

‘That secret is dangerous’ Ben said to Achu. ‘You know, my friend derives so much satisfaction just from looking at it. Recently, he told me he won’t use it. Instead, he’s looking for anyone willing to give him 20,000CFA for it.’ ‘What secret are you boys talking about?’ Kevin quizzed just when I was about to do so myself. Ben and Achu burst out laughing, apparently delighted at our inability to make sense of their discussion. ‘It’s a pair of sneakers’ Ben said. ‘Someone in Belgium sent it to my friend as a gift but he’d rather sell it for fear that the stuff will
get damaged when used on our bad roads. He’s a funny guy. Every now and then, he pulls out the shoes from his suitcase, examines it, assures himself that it still looks new and then places it back in his box.’ Then Aaron joined us, wiping the corners of his mouth, greeted us briefly and excused himself. After 5 minutes or so he returned with a lad of about 13 carrying the trash can in one hand. ‘Why don’t you put it on your head?’ Ben asked the little boy. ‘It would be easier for you’ he added but the lad simply ignored him.

Four NBA members including myself were now ready to leave for the MIDENO office located on the western side of Old Town. Because the distance was short, we decided to walk. On our way, the discussion shifted to a popular topic that has enraptured most young people in Cameroon - migration abroad known popularly as ‘bush falling’ (cf. Fokwang 2003; Jua 2003), discussed in Chapter Eight. ‘I have a friend who was trying to hook me up into a certain programme in Switzerland but everything changed when he left for Germany. He said he couldn’t find a job in Switzerland.’ Ben told his friends. He too, like many NBA members nursed the hope of travelling abroad someday. He explained further that the fact that his friend dropped out of secondary school might have accounted for his inability to find a good job in Switzerland but the others disagreed with him. Ben spoke about his friend’s difficulty in adjusting to life in Germany but added that it was thanks to his elder brother that the process seemed less terrifying.

We crossed the main road that separated Old Town into ‘upper and lower quarters’ and continued on a stony path, then descended on a narrow trail which led to Ayaba Street. The MIDENO office could be spotted below as we descended the stony path. It was an imposing two-storey building undergoing renovation and it had been freshly painted. But seeing the number of builders and carpenters moving in and out, it was certain that there was still a
considerable amount of work inside the building. We crossed the road and entered the premises of the heavily fenced building – after identifying ourselves at the gateman’s hut. The young boy who carried the trash can was rewarded with 200CFA and he left promptly, visibly excited.

Parked in front of the building was a brand new green Toyota Prado, a luxurious four-wheel vehicle with brown leather seats. ‘It looks very new’ Kevin commented. ‘Yes it’s about three weeks old’ Ben concurred. In the young men’s minds the car’s owner was unquestionable – it was the director of MIDENO’s, the former transport minister and prominent politician of the ruling party who was disgracefully dismissed from his ministerial position after occupying the office for just several months. He was allegedly fired for his mismanagement of government funds. When he fell from ministerial grace, he simply returned to his position as director of MIDENO, which he had held concurrently with the position of minister. ‘The man is slowly exposing the money he stole during his tenure as minister’ one of my companions whispered. ‘Yes’ agreed another, ‘he could not show off the money immediately after his dismissal; he had to take his time. We pay taxes so that people like him can ride in expensive cars like this. You might not know, but this car costs between 60 and 70 million CFA.’ There was definitely a feeling of bitterness and resentment in the young man’s voice. Nevertheless, it was evident that the director had only lost his ministerial title but not the trappings of power and the ‘tendency to excess and …lack of proportion’ (Mbembe 1992:3) so characteristic of the postcolony’s agents.

Aaron went upstairs to “see” the director but returned sooner than expected to explain that he could not meet him. The director’s assistant descended from the balcony and met us near the gate. One of the brothers still held the trashcan and they all looked exasperated. The director’s personal assistant then apologised for his boss’ inaccessibility and explained that he was in a meeting. ‘Is there anything I should tell him when he comes out of the meeting?’ he
inquired. ‘Not much,’ Aaron responded, handing over the trash can to him. ‘Normally, when we
give out something like this, we expect that the recipient would have some small thing for us.’
The director’s assistant thanked us for our gesture and promised to convey our message to him.
Everyone looked disappointed. ‘He was really keen on meeting us’ Aaron remarked, sounding
consolatory. Aaron had personally negotiated this appointment with the director and was
confident he would receive the delegation with paternal excitement. ‘He was really impressed by
our activities and wanted to know our source of funding. He wanted to know how we’re able to
carry out things like this.’ Our companions urged Aaron to return the next day to enquire if the
director left a ‘small thing’ for the association.

On our way back, Kevin expressed concerns on the dangers of a working relationship
with the director: ‘our greatest fear is that he should not become too close to the association
because he might bring politics into the whole show.’ When Aaron eventually met the director a
few days later, he acknowledged receipt of the trashcan and requested a detailed record of the
association’s members in order to identify potential persons for inclusion in future projects run
by his agency. Aaron also reported that the director had requested the association to submit an
application for funds to his office towards the production and distribution of more trashcans in
Old Town.82

The emerging alliance between the NBA and the MIDENO director, echoed partly by
Kevin’s remarks above, highlights the patron-client relationship that has firmly established itself
in Cameroon’s realm of political orthodoxy. A patrimonial network as defined by Bangura is:

82 In 2005, the African Development Bank awarded the sum of 15 billion CFA towards sponsorship for the
Northwest Grassfield Participatory and Decentralised Rural Development Project, GP-DERUDEP, an arm of the
Northwest Development Authority, MIDENO. The funds were intended to finance socio-economic and agricultural
projects in the Northwest Province. See The Post, online edition, “ADB Disburses FCFA 372 Million For Grassfield
Project” by Chris M bunwe & Peterkins Manyong, accessed on 16 March 2007;
http://www.postnewsline.com/2005/06/strongadb_disbu.html. The NBA anticipated to benefit from these funds
through its trash can project.
a system of resource distribution that ties recipients or clients to the strategic goals of benefactors or patrons. In the distribution of ‘patrimony’, or public resources, both patrons and clients attach more importance to personal loyalties than to the bureaucratic rules that should otherwise govern the allocation of such resources (Bangura 1997:130).

Patrimonial relationships particularly those involving ‘big men’ and youth tend to flourish in “shadow states” (cf. Murphy 2003) or in circumstances of social moratorium (cf. Vigh 2006) where securing entry into a patrimonial network, young men anticipate ‘a way’ out of the foreboding terror of social and physical death. Aaron’s explicit request for a ‘small thing’ in reciprocity for the trash can bespeaks of the NBA’s search for access into a potentially rewarding patrimonial network with the director, even when the association is “non-political” and the director’s reputation questionable. For an association of unemployed young men such as the NBA, the prospect of recruitment in future projects run by MIDENO is an irresistible push.

The potentiality of a patrimonial relationship between the NBA and the director provides only a partial view of the picture. The NBA’s strategic donation of a trashcan to MIDENO displays its munificence, even if only on a diminutive scale as it simultaneously challenges the postcolony’s monopoly of dramatising magnificence. Thus, the NBA’s production and voluntary distribution of trashcans in Old Town not only indicates its concern for hygiene, but it also provides it with the ‘power’ to circumscribe a space for itself within the youthscape of Old Town just as it enables it to seek out the prospect of a reciprocal patrimonial relationship with administrative and municipal authorities in Bamenda. It is also by dint of this practice that the NBA marks its entry and broad scale engagement with sanitary issues particularly with respect to toilet conditions in Old Town, discussed subsequently.
Performing Cleanliness: ‘Work’ and Hygiene in Old Town

The NBA was not the only association preoccupied with hygiene operations in Old Town. In this section, I discuss the different strategies employed by the three associations to promote urban renewal in their neighbourhood. The discussion below highlights two important points;

- That participation in sanitary operations reveals young people’s collective determination to rehabilitate their neighbourhood from its physical and moral impurities. This rehabilitation, real or imagined mirrors young people’s self-assigned role as crusaders against corruption, prostitution and delinquency in Old Town discussed in the next chapter.

- That the involvement of youth associations in sanitary operations are practices that bear unintentional implications for understanding inter-associational competition for visibility and credibility in Old Town – engendering claims to certain identities and qualities.

The salience of sanitary campaigns among youth associations in Old Town emerged the first time I attended the United Sisters’ meeting. At this gathering, frequent reference was made to ‘work’ – loosely translated as a form of human investment or ‘manual labour’. ‘Work’ usually entailed a sanitary campaign of some sort executed with the use of implements such as brooms, mops, machetes, hoes and spades. This could be carried out in private or on public premises and involved clearing small bushes, weeding off wild plants from domestic spaces and sweeping the streets. Such work was undertaken on invitation or by explicitly applying to clean up the area. During my first attendance at a United Sisters meeting, a member submitted a motion for ‘harsh punishment’ to members who had failed to show up for ‘work’ without prior permission. Upon
hearing this, a lady who sat opposite me rose suddenly from her seat, displayed her blistered palms and spoke in support of the motion: ‘we should really give heavy fines to those who did not show up because I think the usual fine is nothing compared to the amount of work we did.’ She was referring to the physically exacting ‘work’ the association had carried out, proof of which could be seen in their blisters. Claude, the patron who introduced me to the association also showed his blisters to the ladies and urged the house to ensure that absentees should pay heavily. At a subsequent meeting, the president of the United Sisters was accused of having stayed away from a clean up operation. She was not absolved of her excuses but fined like any ordinary member despite her protests that she had a mix up and ended up at the wrong site.

Although the United Sisters occasionally organised small-scale sanitary campaigns in Old Town, the above references to ‘work’ involved activities carried out specifically to raise funds for the association’s 4th anniversary celebration. Between July and October 2005 the United Sisters undertook more than a dozen ‘work’ operations aimed at raising funds for charitable donations to mark its 4th anniversary. Each campaign began with identifying potential areas for cleaning up whereupon application letters were drafted and delivered to government offices, business premises, private homes and other sites. If approved, the sisters descended on the premises with an army of implements and sanitized the area to the best of their ability. The girls were often rewarded with cash whose amount was decided solely by the beneficiary of their ‘work’.

Unlike the United Sisters, the NBA gradually established a solid reputation in the community for its frequent and rigorous sanitary campaigns which combined ‘work’ with the inspection of private toilets and domestic spaces. Manual work consisted of activities such as sweeping the streets, maintenance of unpaved roads in the neighbourhood by filling up pot-holes
and clearing bushes. These activities were often executed on Wednesdays, the NBA’s special day reserved for manual work. Every Wednesday, as early as 5:30 a.m., the brothers assembled at Subi House (their regular meeting venue) from where they moved as a unit to the identified site and worked for an average of three hours.

Communal approval and praise for NBA’s operations was shown through verbal expressions or enlisting with the brothers in carrying out prevailing tasks and by financial rewards. For instance, in May 2005, the Police Commissioner for Public Security in Old Town rewarded the NBA with 5000CFA for cleaning up the police station. During one of its road maintenance campaigns, residents of the area chipped in small amounts of money into a plastic bowl at the road side in recognition of the NBA’s efforts. Upon learning of the NBA’s maintenance work in the area, the local councillor for Ntambag II, Oumarou Sanda donated 1000CFA. At the end of the session, the brothers collected a total of 5000CFA. On a separate occasion, someone donated 1000CFA to the brothers for sweeping the streets. While such urban sensibilities, collaborations and forms of reciprocity may appear new to observers of contemporary urban issues (cf. Simone 2005), they are in fact rooted in communal notions of conviviality and interdependence, which contrary to
their anticipated demise, have been strengthened and re-deployed in contexts of uncertainty as obtains in contemporary Cameroon (cf. Nyamnjoh 2002b). By this, I mean the sort of mutual support community members give to each other drawing on the cultural repertoire of promoting collective goals and interests even in urban contexts where impersonal relations are expected to hold sway.

‘Operation Clean Toilet’

Of all the activities undertaken by the NBA, none was as daring as what they termed “operation clean toilet” which generated considerable debate within the association. At issue was the existence in certain parts of Old Town of filled and dilapidating pit latrines whose putrid smell made life unbearable for residents in the vicinity. Kevin, who raised the issue at a Sunday meeting, was particularly concerned with the dreadful smell of a neighbour’s latrine that had compelled him and others to discontinue use of a footpath that led to his home. He roused the brothers to make use of the authorization given them by the sanitary department of the BUC for the common good of the community.

‘Fellow brothers’ he began, ‘we really have to do something about these stinking toilets. Maybe some of you are not affected by this problem but I’m seriously affected and so I urge you to think of what we need to do.’ Max was the first to respond to Kevin’s concerns. ‘I suggest that we should inform the council of this problem and then give deadlines to the owners of these toilets. We’ll inform the owners of such toilets that their neighbours have complained about the state of their toilets and that they must do something about it.’ Pierre rose suddenly from his seat to speak. Because of his confrontational approach to things, most people, like myself expected him to counter Max’s point. He wore a stern look and raised his finger as if it to warn his
We’re not sanitary officers in this quarter. I think there are individuals who are charged with such functions. I would suggest that let’s mount pressure on the councillors who are in charge of this quarter to do their job. They can channel our complaints to the rightful quarters. We cannot carry out this job by ourselves. Never mind the fact that the council gave us permission to carry out certain activities in the neighbourhood. We don’t have any proof or written document which shows that we are permitted to assume such functions in this quarter.

The discussion was getting fierce and although only a few people had spoken, the topic generated a lot of excitement. Perhaps, others were inflamed by Pierre’s doubts about the credibility of the association in heading a campaign to root out ‘stinking toilets’ from the neighbourhood. Others seemed to agree with Pierre, whom could be seen nodding their heads when he spoke. Despite the fact that several hands were up, Max ignored them and rose speedily to respond to Pierre’s commentary:

I wish to differ with you. We produced trash cans to sensitise community members about the need to keep our environment clean. When we went to the council to present the trashcans, the council gave us permission to carry out projects in the neighbourhood that we believe could contribute to better health in our community. They also told us to seek their assistance in carrying out any sanitary activities in the neighbourhood. My advice is that let’s go out during the week and instruct people to do something about their toilets. We’ll tell them that if they did nothing about the state of their toilets, the council would be forced to break down their toilets.

Max’s view initially seemed appealing to a majority of members until Bong, the day’s chairman expressed his reservations:

My fear is that people in the community will question our authority. They would like to know who gave us permission to take the law into our own hands. This might also cause problems for specific Ntambag brothers who might be accused of having identified their toilets for destruction. My fear is that we are neither councillors nor sanitation officers.

Bong’s concerns cast a shadow of anxiety over the brothers. Judging by the whispers around me, it was apparent that the brothers were becoming apprehensive. Kevin, who had raised the issue
rose to support Bong’s cautionary view.

It’s true. I think we should be careful because when people start pointing fingers, you might hear of something else. In fact, you might hear that so and so did this and died because of this matter. I don’t think we should do this by ourselves only. We should invite the councillors or sanitation department to inspect the toilets.

In support of Kevin’s perspective, Pierre took the floor once again. He appeared even more solemn, moved forward from his seat and raised his finger as usual.

Is there any written document which shows that the council has granted us permission to carry out sanitary operations in this community? We cannot go just by ourselves to sensitise people about the state of their toilets. We must take at least one councillor with us.

Chairman Bong agreed and insisted that staff from the sanitation department of the council should be approached prior to further action. Elias, 32, who had been relatively quiet during most of the discussion sought permission to speak. He looked calm but wore an uneasy smile:

No one will show these toilets because of fear. People don’t want to run into trouble with their neighbours because things might turn out differently. I remember we had a problem in my compound. There was a mango tree next to our compound whose fruits used to fall on our roof, sometimes destroying the zinc. We reported the matter to the council. When the council workers came, they simply asked for the owner of the mango tree. They didn’t tell him that neighbours had complained about the destruction caused by his tree. They simply told him that it was council policy to fell tall trees in the city. The council workers did not say so and so reported this matter to us. So it simply looked like the guys were doing their job around the area when they came across the tree. I think we should employ a similar method with this toilet issue. We should see the councillors and push them to take up the matter. We really have to be careful because we all know what people are; you might hear that someone has fallen because of a small issue like this.

Elias’ speech seemed to have brought the matter to a fair conclusion. But before he could take his seat, Ernest’s hand was already up.

In the past, when we were growing up sanitation officers used to move around to carry out inspection of toilets but these days, nobody cares. They’re not doing their job any more. So my suggestion is this; that we should report to the sanitation department that the entire Ntambag area has bad toilets and that we need them to do something serious about
this. If we generalise the issue as a problem faced by the entire quarter, then we have a bigger scope to solve the crisis and many people whom we don’t even know stand to benefit from the project.

Elias seemed moved by Ernest’s suggestion and immediately sought permission to speak. ‘What Ernest has said is true. This is a serious problem’ he insisted ‘even in my compound, I know people who don’t have toilets anymore. You might not believe this, but there are people who relieve themselves in plastic bags and dispose of them in small bushes or by the road side.’ Some members could not contain their laughter upon hearing this. ‘It’s good that we should speak the truth, instead of dying in shame. We need to act urgently on this matter, it’s serious’ he insisted provoking even more laughter. The chairman then recommended the appointment of a small committee to raise the matter with the council.

This issue resurfaced three weeks later when members sought feedback on the delegation’s trip to the council. Contrary to everyone’s expectations the executive had resolved during an extraordinary meeting to sensitize the community prior to seeking the BUC’s intervention. According to the executives, it was resolved that residents and landlords in particular whose properties did not have toilets or whose toilets were far below sanitary standards should be told unequivocally to do something about the state of their toilets. According to this new logic, the NBA would act as messengers by informing residents of an impending crack down by the council on properties that had poor or unsanitary toilet facilities. The executives concluded by requesting members to come out en masse on an appointed date to sensitize residents. It was now universally agreed among the young men that all homes rather than isolated households should be targeted for the campaign. This new logic was expected to be beneficial to all and sundry, first, by providing immunity to NBA members from being identified as ring-leaders and second, by dispelling potential feelings among residents of being targeted.
Once this agreement was arrived at or subtly imposed by the leadership, a date was fixed for the inspection. The brothers agreed to assemble in front of Subi House at 6 a.m. on a certain Wednesday, not with work implements but with their badges – symbolic of an official operation. To facilitate the task, Old Town was divided into about 10 partitions, each constituting about 50 households. They would tackle each partition over several weeks until a full circle was accomplished. On the first day of the tour, a group of about 15 NBA members set out and inspected a total of 15 households. The operation went successfully except at the resident’s home whose dilapidating toilet had ironically prompted the operation. He allegedly asked the brothers to report him to the council and resisted their recommendation to construct a new toilet. He went further to argue that his toilet served many households in the neighbourhood that had no toilet facilities and even embarrassed the association by naming two NBA members who allegedly benefited from his “open-door” policy. Although the campaign for the most part was a success, the NBA saw this as the commencement of a worthy cause whose ramifications were more or less unprepared for. ‘There are at least 3 compounds on this street without toilets’ Simon told me pointing to a set of houses about 100m from Subi House.

Consequent on the initial inspection tour by the NBA, the association began to receive handwritten and verbal complaints from residents urging the NBA to intercede with council authorities on their behalf. One of the complaints concerned a resident’s grievance against his neighbour whose filled toilet was prone to flooding during heavy rainfall. According to the resident, particles of excrement and debris from his neighbour’s toilet often ended up in front of his house, provoking an extremely smelly and unhealthy atmosphere. He alleged that complaints to his neighbour had fallen on deaf ears. Another resident complained about the poor location of his neighbour’s toilet just beneath his bedroom window. He claimed that the stench from his
neighbour’s toilet was making his life miserable. He too had complained to no avail and therefore beseeched the NBA’s assistance in resolving the problem.

The NBA won tremendous credibility on account of its engagement in this potentially cleansing operation. News about the inspection tour spread far and wide and before long, each household anticipated the NBA’s visit. Even elderly women in the neighbourhood commended the NBA’s ‘work’ and urged them to leave no stone unturned. An episode of this nature occurred when Carlson accompanied me to interview one of their members’ mothers. She was busy tending a garden in front of her house and when she saw us approaching, she dropped her hoe and started talking about the toilet problems in the neighbourhood: ‘my children,’ she began, ‘you should really do something about these toilets in our community’. Then she pointed to a small garden across the street which she claimed belonged to her. ‘Each time I plant crops over there I can’t harvest them because of excrement. People use that area for their toilets. The smell keeps me away and that’s how I lose a lot of my crops’ she lamented. Carlson suggested that the tall weeds around the garden should be cleared off in order to render the place ‘open’. ‘No one would have the courage to squat in open view’, ‘except at night’ I added. ‘Seeing that you guys are handling this issue, I would be very happy if you try to solve this problem’ the woman stated.

The weekend after the initial inspection tour, the NBA held its regular meeting to assess the operation. ‘Since we’ve sensitised the people and many already know that something is going on, it is imperative to get the council involved’ recommended Collins, one of the executive members. The meeting’s agenda was dominated by discussions of the inspection tour. Some members expressed disappointment on what they perceived was a low turn out. ‘Those who didn’t show up are the same individuals who hardly show up at other human investment operations’ Carlson complained. But these concerns did not dampen the NBA’s resolve to pursue
the operation to its logical conclusion. In pursuit of its goal, the association resolved to sponsor a trip to the BUC to demand the council’s intervention. To this end, the brothers took with them a formal letter addressed to the director of the Health and Sanitation Department at the BUC:

Our group that was led by the Health Committee [of the NBA] inspected toilets around the periphery of Old Town on the 27th of July 2005. The condition in which we met the toilets calls for a cause of concern from your office which caters for the good health of our people in Bamenda. To start with, there are very many compounds without toilets. It is in this light that people staying in such compounds excrete anywhere they think good for them. With such situations, it is very likely very many people will get sick.

• Secondly, we discovered that most toilets are not built. People passing by can easily see and discuss with another who is easing himself. This system is really deplorable.
• Thirdly, toilets around this area are very stinky. The smell coming out from most toilets makes the quarter unbearable to live in.
• Some toilets are already full. The owners care very little to see how they can dig up another or how they can even empty the toilets.
• Other toilets surroundings are so dirty. This makes it possible for mosquitoes to come out from such places and bite the people living around these places, thus leading to malaria.

Also included in the letter were two specific requests to the council authorities: a) to send sanitary staff to Old Town to collaborate with the NBA in ‘sinking’ toilets that posed a health risk to its owners and the community and b) appealed for chemical substances for distribution in the community aimed at treating pit toilets.

Contrary to their expectations, the NBA met with uncooperative staff at the council. ‘They wanted us to provide them with transport money before they could come’ Carlson reported. ‘But after explaining to them that we are simply a voluntary group without any sponsor, the guys accepted to visit us on Tuesday at 8 a.m.’ He then appealed to members to come out in their numbers to welcome the sanitary staff and to enable them see ‘how serious’ the operation was. ‘I would like that after our discussion with them, they should not hesitate to help us when next we go to the council. That’s why I’m appealing to all members to come out on
Tuesday morning so that the council people can see we are a serious group’ urged Carlson.

Tuesday went by without the anticipated visitors. After several weeks of waiting, the NBA unanimously resolved to contact Pa Njikam, the vice government delegate in anticipation that he would assist the NBA once again as he had done with the “trashcan operation”. This move yielded crucial results, thus vindicating the NBA’s vanguard role in promoting hygiene and the rehabilitation of Old Town.

**Alternate Sites of Action**

The above ethnographic account allows us to reflect briefly on a range of issues that relate to contests over urban space, representations of youth and the political implications of young people’s practices. To begin with, it should be underscored that the appropriation of urban space by youth is apparent in two striking patterns; first, the *implantation* of NBA’s trash cans in public and private spheres of Old Town enabled the group to *insert* itself into the urban landscape of Old Town. The trash cans for instance, articulated in a symbolic and potent manner, their “capture” of urban spaces that previously were perceived to be the exclusive domain of the state and municipal government. According to Diouf, the postcolony has tended to treat urban public space ‘as an adult territory off limits to youth at the same time that it denies them a private space’ (Diouf 1996:226). This exclusionary practice is informed by the logic of tradition that conceives the subordination of the young as a traditional imperative. Thus, by inscribing their activities on urban space, young people in Old Town challenge the postcolony’s exclusionary practice.

Second, young people’s physical presence, their human investment through ‘work’ and frequent clean up operations highlight the appropriation of urban space by youth particularly in a
context where the municipal government was perceived to have withdrawn or abandoned its
duties. Thus, through the implantation of its symbols and ‘work’, youth associations in Old
Town particularly the NBA, positioned themselves at the forefront of communal affairs, posing
not only as vanguards of communal hygiene but also as alternate sites of power armed with the
capacity, real or imagined, to broker communal needs with local government and civil
authorities, even if achieved through emerging or existing patrimonial networks. Such
appropriation of urban space is not unique to Bamenda nor its modes akin to other strategies and
forms of appropriation.

Regular involvement in sanitary operations as witnessed among youth associations in Old
Town also challenges popular constructions of urban youth, particularly the youth of Old Town
who are often stigmatised as decadent and as social and moral failures, perhaps not unlike the
physical atmosphere of decay they inhabit. Often depicted as the postcolony’s *enfants terribles*
and perceived as more prone to breaking than making (cf. Honwana and de Boeck 2005), young
people often find themselves victimized by urban renewal programmes, particularly those
designed and executed by national government or municipal authorities (cf. Samara 2005). This
is partly because the bulk of young people creatively eke out their livelihoods in the informal
sector as hawkers. Urban renewal programmes carried out in Bamenda in the 1990s and more
recently in 2002 attest to this sort of myopia and arrogance when young people were cleared off
the streets as part of the BUC’s programme to reclaim control over the streets. However, the
above narrative reveals how young people constructively challenge the marginalizing practices
of the BUC. As a matter of fact, it is by token of their engagement in the public sphere that we
appreciate the corruption, greed and chronic manifestation of decay that characterise the
Cameroonian postcolony. For instance, the bitter remarks of the young men concerning the
director’s luxurious vehicle, the NBA’s exposure of the government delegate as a liability to the citizens of Bamenda, are just a few examples to illustrate this point. It is therefore not surprising that young people in Cameroon like their counterparts in many African countries tend to interpret their predicament through a moral prism by contending that the “elders” have betrayed or abandoned them (cf. Abbink 2005). But by opting to act differently, young people have also ‘enunciated a new sociability, contradictory to the norms that have presided over the postcolonial compromise’ (Diouf 1996:247). By choosing to act differently, intended to show alternative pathways – young people demonstrate signs of maturity and citizenship, attributes commonly perceived to be missing from their subjectivities.

Young people’s “capture” of urban space and preoccupation with hygiene are practices that have led to unintentional consequences. This has facilitated the construction, not without contestations, of a hierarchy of youth associations in Old Town that places the NBA at the pinnacle, on account of the greater frequency and larger scale of its operations. That it has also won the recognition and praise of many “elders” in the community, is drawn upon by the NBA to highlight its pre-eminence in a hierarchy of credibility and influence. Thus through hygiene, ideas of gender inequality are reproduced as the young men claim greater prestige and visibility on account of their civic engagement in public space. Furthermore, it becomes evident that by assuming more physically demanding tasks such as filling up pot-holes, inspecting private toilets, clearing tough bushes etc., young men in the NBA tend to construct and display ideas of productive masculinity. This sort of masculinity is predicated on the expression of physical strength, endurance and responsibility towards one’s dependants or community (discussed in Chapter Nine). Frequent hygiene operations permitted young men in the NBA (with a huge unemployed membership) to pose as productive citizens – seen to be doing “something” and to
not lose face in a community where their female counterparts seemed to be more enterprising in the informal sector.

Young people’s collective responses to urban decay in Old Town reveal their determination to challenge municipal exclusion and the marginalizing practices of the national government which previously considered urban space as adult territory off limits to youths. In their quest to rehabilitate the neighbourhood of Old Town, young people demonstrate signs of maturity and redefine state-centric notions of citizenship and civic engagement. By substituting the neighbourhood for national territory as the canvas for elaborating the symbolic and the imaginary (Diouf 1996), young people’s local actions assume national significance. The yearning and actions adopted by youths to rehabilitate the neighbourhood of Old Town reveals their disillusionment with the postcolonial state as it simultaneously articulates their dreams of a renaissance. Preoccupation with sanitation in Old Town also mirrors a similar enterprise carried out on a moral landscape which comes under focus in the next chapter.
Chapter Seven

‘Fighting Against Social Ills’: Respectability and Morality in Old Town

This chapter examines the ways in which young people in Old Town construct a moral community drawing on local notions of respectability. This moral community is premised on young people’s shared desire to root out social ills, epitomised by ‘youth delinquency’ and to affirm their collective will to social adulthood through active involvement in practices perceived to bring respect and honour. The ‘fight against social ills’ mirrors in many respects the hygiene campaigns undertaken by youth associations in Old Town to rid the community of garbage and impurities. Just as garbage and a polluted environment undermine the health of residents, so are the social ills that compromise their reputation and honour. Having failed to access economic, social and political citizenship, marginalised young people seek to appropriate respectability and honour, notions vital for social worth and recognition as full members of society in the Bamenda grasslands of Cameroon.

This ethnographic account explores the moral and behavioural practices of young people, drawing on the notion of moral subjectivity – understood as the embodied sensibilities of subjects within a given moral order. In other words, the idea of moral subjectivity relates to an individual’s sense of self and self-world relations (Holland and Leander 2004) with respect to the moral issues that inform one’s surroundings. This sort of subjectivity is premised on the assumption that subjects bear rights, duties and obligation in their personal and intimate relations with others. Their subjectivities are also determined by local discourses as well as personal dispositions (Werbner 2002a:2-3). In this chapter, I conceptualise the moral subjectivities of
young people in Old Town as responses to both their marginalisation as well as Cameroon’s national crisis, that is, a postcolonial crisis that is simultaneously political, economic and moral.

Factors that have shaped the moral subjectivities of young people in Old Town include local discourses that paint a sordid image of the neighbourhood, rooted in its history as the cradle of the modern town of Bamenda. In the popular imaginary, Old Town is perceived as a neighbourhood replete with bandits, prostitutes and delinquent youths. It is perceived as embodying some of the colonial and postcolonial literary representations of the African town as a site of ‘corruption, moral, sexual, and social deviance’ in which Africans have lost their souls and sense of community (Diouf 1996:228). During the early post-independence period, Old Town was glorified as the centre of local modernity and prosperity – notions that contrast sharply with today’s image of the area.

This chapter has three broad sections. First, I discuss very briefly the notion of achievement as it pertains to the grasslands of Cameroon. I argue that young people draw on the idea of achievement pursued on behalf of a group of people (cf. Nyamnjoh 2002b) to express maturity and lay claim to social adult status. Secondly, I examine the ways in which various associations construct and enforce their understandings of morality – in pursuit of their fight against social ills. Last, I look at the personal dispositions of selected individuals, who as members of various youth associations negotiate the expectations of associational life with individual choices. This means that while associations tend to shape and structure members’ attitudes on a range of issues they also allow room for individual agency.
The Collective Basis of Achievement

In Chapters One and Three, I made use of Warnier’s metaphor of the vessel whereby elderly male notables were compared to vessels brimming over with vital substances required for social reproduction (cf. Warnier 1996:121) while social cadets on the other hand, were perceived as ‘empty vessels’ with little to offer besides their labour and loyalty. On account of their possession of vital substances, elders commanded and enjoyed respect while social cadets enjoyed little or none. Changing notions of personhood and respectability in the grasslands have allowed young people to draw on local idioms of maturity to make claims for social adult status. A critical basis for such claims lies in notions of achievement and success – often pursued or claimed to be pursued on behalf of a group. By redistributing one’s success or pursuing a charitable cause on behalf of a group, one demonstrates maturity and in consequence, commands the symbolic capital of respectability. Local discourses in the Bamenda grasslands maintain that ‘achievement is devoid of meaning if not pursued within, as part of, and on behalf of a group of people who recognise and endorse that achievement. For only by making their successes collective can individuals make their failures a collective concern as well’ (Nyamnjoh 2002b:115).

Thus, a strong basis for respect and honour constituted the altruistic actions of individual associations whose activities, local and beyond were perceived to win them respect and visibility. All three associations undertook charitable activities such as visiting the sick in their homes and hospitals, donating food to prisoners and contributing to urban renewal through clean up campaigns. Participants in the study conceded that charitable causes were not only worthy in themselves but also tended to enhance the social standing of young people in particular and the community of Old Town as a whole. In other words, charitable causes were perceived to embody
signs of maturity and achievement, ‘pursued within, as part of, and on behalf of a group of people.’ In the following paragraphs, I discuss in detail, the planning and execution of three charitable events carried out by two of the associations. These events include a prize award ceremony organised at the Government Primary school Old Town by the NBA, an anniversary visit to a hospital for the disabled by the United Sisters and a sponsorship scheme for underprivileged children designed by the NBA.

a) The Prize Award Ceremony

During one of its Sunday meetings in May 2005, the NBA resolved to organise an end of year prize award ceremony at the Government Primary School, Old Town. Many of the NBA members had attended this primary school and therefore felt proud to organise such an event in favour of their alma mater. Although intended to encourage pupils to take their studies seriously, the NBA anticipated that this event would boost the association’s standing in the community and contribute towards transforming the unpopular image of Old Town in Bamenda. A young man who sat next to me during the meeting underscored this sense of optimism when he whispered confidently that ‘after this event, people will know that Old Town has changed’. In order to achieve its objective, the association demanded a contribution of 1000CFA from all members. The unanimity with which the NBA agreed upon this sum initially puzzled me, partly because financial issues often suffered endless arguments especially if the contribution was above 500CFA. In order to emphasise the urgency of the prize award ceremony and encourage members to meet their financial obligation, the NBA suspended other contributions and fines. Besides the customary contribution of 1000CFA, the association also urged individual members

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83 Prize award ceremonies were common in nursery schools and gradually introduced in private primary schools in the 1990s. However, this practice was generally rare in government-run schools. The NBA therefore considered itself as breaking new ground in Old Town for organising the first prize-award ceremony.
to sponsor specific prizes of their choice to be awarded to deserving pupils.

After consultations with the school authorities, the NBA scheduled the event for 10 a.m. on Friday 10 June 2005, which incidentally was the date scheduled for all schools (primary and secondary) to close for the summer vacation. Invited to the event were the patrons of the association as well as the divisional Inspector for Basic and Secondary Education. Upon arrival at the school premises at 9:45 a.m., I met up with a group of five NBA members chatting at the school entrance. Pupils in their blue uniforms were dispersed in every nook and cranny of the school premises, screaming, playing and chasing each other.

Unlike the previous days that had been very rainy, this Friday was a sunny one. Indeed, by 7 a.m. that morning, the sun was already fully visible in the clear blue skies, and when I arrived at the school, it was already scorching and I could see strips of sweat on the young men’s faces whose company I immediately sought. Based on experience, we knew that when the sun shone so powerfully in the morning, it was very likely that a heavy downpour would follow in the afternoon. One of the ‘brothers’ who could not bear the heat any further suggested we move into the school premises where he suspected we could easily find a shade from the blazing sun. Without protest, the group moved into the inner quarters of the school and we eventually sought refuge on the veranda in front of the head teacher’s office. Inside the schoolyard, the population was even bigger and noisier – about 600 or more. It was in brief, a very chaotic sight. Such were the last days of school – the day when pupils received their report cards; and when friends and classmates bade farewell to each other before separating for the long summer vacation.

Attendance at public functions such as this was mandatory for all NBA members. Individuals who failed to attend without prior permission were fined even if they had contributed their due. Although I was confident that a majority of the NBA would attend, I was equally
convinced that they would not be time conscious. Upon arrival at the veranda, I was pleasantly surprised to find a few NBA members arranging the prizes. One of them was Ernest who was the first NBA member to open up to me. He was particularly fond of me and always invited me over to his house for friendly conversations. He was probably the most animated of all the NBA members I knew. From the vantage point of the veranda, we faced the assembly grounds and saw the children playing and having a good time. When I met up with Ernest and Philip, another dynamic member, they were talking about a little boy whom they pointed out in the crowd. I had some difficulty locating the child and once I did, Ernest whispered to my hearing that the little boy’s father was a professional thief. ‘He’s one of those who gives our quarter a bad name’ Philip concurred.

‘I caught that kid and one of his friends smoking marijuana’ Philip whispered. The little boy who looked like 7 or 8 years had a swollen left eye and a wound on his forehead. I was immediately driven to pity upon seeing him. Before I could digest the ill fate of being raised by an alleged professional thief, Ernest added that he was sure the child’s family came from far away. ‘That kid looks like a terrorist, I think he’s a Chadian; there’s no way he can be a child from this area.’ ‘What do Chadians look like? You simply can’t tell who’s from where by looking at them’, I queried. Besides his swollen eye and wounded forehead, his uniform was visibly dirty and it seemed he did not bathe before coming to school. Despite my protests at their prejudice, Ernest and Philip were determined to school me about Old Town, drawing on the lives of some of the pupils they could identify in the crowd.

‘Look at that girl in black clothes,’ Philip said excitedly, pointing to a young girl, ‘if I tell you the sort of things she does, you won’t believe it. She’s only 13. She started secondary school last year but her deeds and experiences are far more than you might ever imagine or her age can
handle.’ He switched suddenly from the girl in black and recalled an incident that allegedly shocked the community a year ago. It was about an 11-year-old girl who became pregnant while a pupil of Government School Old Town. According to Philip, she was forced to leave school.

Ernest and Philip, both of whom are former pupils of this school thought it necessary to brief me on the history of the school. Opened in 1981, GS Old Town had the reputation of being one of the most disagreeable schools in Bamenda. According to them, this reputation resulted from the predominant Muslim population of its pupils, validated by the fact that the school is located in the heart of the Hausa quarters in Old Town. It is also a widely held stereotype among non-Hausa populations that their Muslim neighbours as intrinsically violent and vengeful – an assumption that was repeated several times by my companions. Any attempts to interrogate these stereotypes led to nil. To substantiate their view, Ernest insisted that: ‘In those early days, the pupils were much older than they are today; so pupils used to beat up primary school teachers or fight with them. Some teachers were afraid of pupils and when they realised how difficult it was to work in this environment, they applied to be transferred elsewhere. There were stories of teachers who came to class and found excrement in their drawers. Those Hausa kids use to do terrible things. The worst mistake was for a teacher to beat up an unruly Hausa pupil. On several occasions, children who were punished by their teachers simply went home, brought their friends, neighbours and parents who entered the school premises and beat up the teacher.’

Philip maintained that the incidence of violence against teachers reduced substantially when non-Hausa parents started enrolling their children into the primary school. ‘Today, the Hausa are a minority in this school, so they’ve opened a new school just down there in the valley.’ While Philip and Ernest recounted their stories, one of the patrons arrived. After greeting him, my friends continued with their stories. Philip began to talk about his obnoxious nephew
who was relocated to live with a relative in Foncha Street, an affluent neighbourhood in Bamenda.

It was a few minutes past 11 a.m. by now and the ceremony was finally going to begin. The grey-haired head teacher, dressed in a green suit with black shoes came out of his office and stood at the middle of the veranda. He moved from one end of the assembly line to the other brandishing a cane. From time to time, he threatened to use his cane on the pupils who kept pushing and shoving each other in order to gain a front position. The head teacher wanted them to step back about a metre from the veranda but each attempt yielded the same result because those behind kept pushing their friends. Determined to win their attention, the head teacher instructed the pupils to raise their hands. ‘Clap five times’, he declared and the children clapped. Then a female teacher tuned a song for the kids to sing but the chaos was still evident. The head master yelled instructions at three female teachers to arrange the pupils. Each grade ought to form four straight lines, two for the boys and two for the girls. However, only the older pupils in senior primary could arrange themselves without the intervention of the teachers. The female teachers looked haggard and pathetic in the scorching sun. One of them left defiantly and took up a seat on the veranda. The principal stood still and without saying anything, pretended to ignore the defiant teacher. ‘Raise your hands’, he instructed. ‘Clap five times’ and the pupils obeyed. This trick seemed to work because after repeated claps, the kids became attentive. Finally, he asked them to be quiet. ‘Put your finger across your mouth’ he shouted and the kids placed their index fingers against their mouths.

‘Today is a special day unlike yesterday and unlike other closing ceremonies’, he began, once calm had been established. ‘It is special because you have seated in front here, a group of youths who have come to encourage you to work hard. They will give prizes to deserving pupils
and those who go home with nothing will work harder next time so that they can win prizes in future.’ After speaking for a few minutes, the head teacher gave the floor to the NBA’s organising secretary who came forth and read out the outline of the programme. He then invited the president of the NBA to deliver his speech.

Carlson came forward and greeted everyone. First, he thanked the teachers for performing an excellent job during the academic year and promised to organise a prize award function specifically for teachers the following year. This time, he declared, the association had decided to begin with the pupils. Finally, he urged the Inspector of Basic Education to address teachers’ concerns arguing that the success and aptitude of pupils depended largely on the working conditions of teachers. On his part, the Inspector expressed surprise and delight at seeing what the NBA was doing for its community. ‘If there are more associations like yours, then Bamenda would be a better place. Through you, I hope, Old Town will become New Town’, he declared, and a thunderous applause greeted his words. He then urged the teachers to participate in future seminars organised by his department in order to strengthen their skills.

After his speech, the NBA’s organising secretary invited respective personalities and NBA members to hand out the prizes. Each prize consisted of an exercise book, a ruler and varying numbers of pencils. The best four pupils from each class received a prize each. The NBA donated a total of seventy-two prizes after which, serving as the event’s photographer, I took photos of the laureates with their donors.
b) Charity in Bafut

The United Sisters, like their counterparts in the Chosen Sisters and the NBA undertook charitable activities within and beyond Old Town. To commemorate its fourth anniversary, the young women organised a visit to the St Joseph’s Catholic Hospital (SAJOCAH), a renowned mission hospital specialised in the care of disabled persons located in Bafut about 20km from Bamenda. The event was scheduled for Sunday 6 November 2005.
Although the dry season had just begun, the harmattan winds were powerful and the earth dry and dusty. Susan who was in charge of arranging transportation for the members turned up that morning without a vehicle or offered a credible explanation why there was none. Faced with this unexpected situation, the young women settled for a truck known popularly as “Cargo” – owing to its common use for the transportation of merchandise or cargo. Dressed in their clean flowery uniforms, the ladies mounted the truck and sat on benches brought from their meeting venue. The young women would inevitably be exposed to the hot sun, the dust and wind because the truck’s cargo section provided no shade. Despite this, the ‘sisters’ appeared undeterred by the prospect of a harsh ride to Bafut. Everyone mounted the truck except Bella who was determined to occupy one of the few front seats. Unfortunately for her three of us (two ladies and I) had already squeezed into the passenger seat meant for two persons only. Accompanying the sisters were two young men who served as porters. They assisted in carrying the gifts (a 50kg bag of rice, a box of soap and a 20kg bag of salt). At 12:30 p.m., the truck throttled off from Old Town while onlookers taunted them for dressing so beautifully and dirtying themselves simultaneously in the ‘cargo’. To soothe the harsh ride, the ‘sisters’ burst into song, occasionally accompanied with claps.

Upon arrival at SAJOCAH, we proceeded to the reception hall where Rev. Sr. Cecilia, the resident manager of the hospital welcomed us. Also prepared to sing for us were the disabled— including blind children and adults, amputees as well as persons with various forms of physical disabilities. The president of the United Sisters briefed their host on the objectives of the association – one of which in her own words ‘is to care for the underprivileged.’ Sr. Cecilia thanked the United Sisters for their generosity and most especially for thinking of the poor and the disabled. She urged them to return as ambassadors of SAJOCAH and sensitize people about
the existence of the institution. According to Sr. Cecilia, many families with disabled persons tend to hide them in their homes where they are treated poorly or denied access to medical assistance. ‘SAJOCAH is the place for them’ she declared, emphasising that blind children and those with curved legs should be sent to SAJOCAH where they would receive training in order to adapt and become functional citizens.

Figure 11: Some members of the United Sisters pose for a photo during their visit to SAJOCAH.

c) Educating the Forgotten

The NBA won the admiration of the Old Town community through its sponsorship initiative, which targeted children from extremely poor households. The NBA’s involvement arose from the association’s concerns about the allegedly high rate of school dropouts in Old Town\textsuperscript{84} - a phenomenon exacerbated by sharp economic down turns faced by the country in

\textsuperscript{84} Although education is one of the most valued markers of success in the grasslands of Cameroon, recent developments indicate that an increasing number of households cannot afford to send their children to primary
general and the North West Province in particular. In this section, I discuss how this project was conceived and executed and the respect the NBA won thereof.

A couple of weeks after the prize award ceremony, the NBA designed a small-scale sponsorship programme for female children, on the assumption that certain cultural factors impeded their access to primary education – particularly among the Hausa (Muslim) populations. Many NBA members who knew about the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)\textsuperscript{85} considered this initiative as a contribution towards some of the objectives of the MDG. In its attempt to meet some of these goals, the Cameroon government set the objective of eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005. Thus, the NBA’s project was in line with the national government’s objectives. First, a questionnaire was designed by a small committee headed by Collins, one of the university graduates in the association. The questionnaire elicited socio-economic data from selected households in Old Town. After a month of data collection and analysis, the NBA decided to sponsor a maximum of four pupils. The short-listed candidates included amongst others, children abandoned to their grandmothers by their single-mothers and little Fulani boys pulled out of school by their parents for lack of funds.

Based on the estimates of a member who had sponsored his two children in a local primary school, the sum of 20,000CFA was budgeted for each of the laureates. Because of its limited resources, the NBA eventually settled for only two pupils but this number was raised to three when a self-employed NBA member volunteered to sponsor a third child on behalf of the schools. This downward trend is largely explained by the economic crisis which has affected the country since the mid-1980s. For instance, government records indicate that net primary enrolment rate declined from 76.2% in 1989 to 61.7% in 1997 (Government of Cameroon 2002). Although the 1996 Constitution provides for compulsory primary education for Cameroonians, the government only declared its intention to provide free primary education in 2001 – a promise whose substance remains largely empty as parents still bear the cost of providing their children with uniforms, books and school accessories.

\textsuperscript{85} The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – which range from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education, all by the target date of 2015 – form a blueprint agreed to by all the world’s countries and the entire world’s leading development institutions. They have galvanized unprecedented efforts to meet the needs of the world’s poorest. \url{http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/}
association. With a budget of 40,000CFA, the association purchased exercise and textbooks, a pair of uniforms and sandals for each child. Once arrangements had been made, the association sought and obtained admission for the pupils at the GS Old Town and officially notified the head teacher of their laureates. They also pledged to increase the number when funds became available. News of this initiative spread in the community, winning respect and credibility for the association even amongst those who had had doubts about the feasibility of this project.

Discipline and Punish: Policing Associational Life

One of the first issues that struck me about the Chosen and United Sisters concerned their punitive sanctions against members accused of having transgressed certain rules. For instance, both associations took a very tough stance against abortion—an act perceived by most members to be reprehensible and dreadful. Oriented by a strong pro-life ethos, many argued that abortion compromised the honour and objectives of the associations. Consequently, accused or guilty persons were often punished or expelled from the association. This raises the important but controversial question of policing associational life whose ramifications I discuss in this section. As stated in chapter five, a key objective of all three youth associations consisted in ‘fighting against social ills’. This objective among others had as its ultimate goal, the moral regeneration of young people in Old Town informed by powerful Christian teachings whose precedence was evident in the defunct association known as the St Benedict’s Youths (BYA) (discussed in chapter five).

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86 Cameroon’s Penal Code stipulates that abortion is a criminal act. However, it is widely available through public and private medical facilities, which means that the law on abortion is hardly enforced. Poor persons resort to crude methods, largely because they cannot afford the cost of abortion at formal medical facilities. Opposition to abortion by both the United and Chosen Sisters is largely informed by Catholic teaching, many of whom belong to the Catholic Church, which considers abortion a mortal sin.
In order to meet their objectives, the Chosen Sisters and NBA for instance, clearly outlined behaviours that were punishable by their respective associations. Article 2 of the Chosen Sisters’ constitution for example, outlines a series of prohibited practices with accompanying penalties as follows:

Without being exhaustive, the following acts shall be punishable.

- Gossiping or spying into peoples’ private lives destructively (500CFA).
- Misconduct during in and outdoor activities tarnishing the image of the group (1000CFA).
- Disturbance during meetings. E.g., eating, talking or drinking, unnecessary in and out movement, sleeping, and late coming (50CFA).
- Quarrelling i) during meetings (300CFA). ii) out of the meeting (1000CFA).
- Unceremonious departures (French leaves) from i) Meetings (100CFA). ii) Other activities (500CFA).
- Wearing of group’s uniform at the wrong time (1000CFA).

The article concludes by stating that the ‘embezzlement of group funds will be recollected by proper legal action.’ I was particularly curious by two items under this article—‘spying into peoples’ lives destructively’ which carried a fine of 500CFA and ‘misconducts that tarnish the image of the group’ with a penalty of 1000CFA. According to each association’s statutes, acts that directly or indirectly undermined the honour of the association were punished with a fine and in exceptional circumstances, resulted in the expulsion of the accused from the association.

During my interview with a key member of the Chosen Sisters, I learnt of the expulsion of two members and the suspension of another for acts that allegedly had tarnished the honour of the association. Upon further inquiry, I found out that the expulsion had resulted from an adultery scandal that brought the association’s esteem into serious question. According to the story, a member of the association was allegedly involved in an adulterous relationship – brought to light when the wife of the cheating husband discovered the two lovers red-handed in the boys’ quarters of their house. Gravely offended by this, she reported the matter to a friend who, like her
husband’s lover was a member of the Chosen Sisters. When this scandal eventually found its way into the association, a couple of members were appointed to investigate the matter who established that the accused had indeed been involved in grave misconduct, thereby tarnishing the good name of the association. Initially suspended from the association for two months, the accused eventually lost her membership after she refused to comply with the punishment. Her sister’s objection (also a member of the association) to the punishment led to her dismissal as well.

A second case of suspension and eventual expulsion involved a member accused of having carried out an abortion. ‘We were scandalised by this incident because one of the objectives of our association is to fight against abortion in the entire community’, a member revealed. According to several members of the Chosen Sisters, this incident was considered even more scandalous because the accused had apparently administered herself an unknown potion intended to induce the abortion. Instead of seeking medical assistance when she began to bleed, she reportedly locked herself up in her bedroom in the hope that the bleeding would stop. She eventually screamed for help upon realising her health was deteriorating. ‘We were terrified that she may die’ a member revealed disappointedly. ‘When I got there, she had opened the door and her mother was helping to clean the blood.’ An act, initially conceived to be a private affair had ended up in the public eye, leaving not only the members of the Chosen Sisters but also the entire community appalled. According to a Chosen Sister, people were scandalised by the fact that the young woman was a mother of two and had allegedly resorted to an abortion upon her boyfriend’s persuasion.

A few weeks after the incident, the Chosen Sisters received a letter from an anonymous person calling on the association to discipline the accused member. In a letter dated 8 June 2005,
the anonymous person declared she was a non-member but had deep respect and appreciation for the association especially after the departure of ‘some notorious feel-big members’. She also expressed her admiration of the Chosen Sisters due to the absence of ‘competition as in the United Sisters; no enemies and hatred, low gossiping rate’ although she added that it was impossible to eradicate ‘gossiping’ completely. Referring specifically to the abortion incident, she reminded the association as follows: ‘One of your group’s objectives is to fight against unwanted pregnancy and abortion. What are you going to do about [...] case with the accomplice of [...] your VP? Shame. It is not strange but do the right thing.’

Summoned to a disciplinary hearing, the accused was quizzed during a special session scheduled to discuss the matter. At the end, she was suspended from participating in the association’s activities for two months and further assigned the task of cleaning the meeting venue every Wednesday throughout the period of her suspension. Although she acknowledged she had wronged the association, she allegedly disagreed with the manner in which the issue was addressed. According to Linda, a key member, the suspended member ‘wasn’t impressed with the way they spoke to her’ and consequently, refused to comply with the association’s sanctions. Her accomplice who incidentally was an office holder in the association was relieved of her position and an election organised to fill the position. The suspended member’s refusal to comply with the association’s decision led the Chosen Sisters to take the ultimate decision of expelling her after two warnings. In the letter of dismissal addressed to her, the association states as follows:

Accept the peace and love of Chosen Sisters!
It is rather with a heavy heart that we write to you. As you well know, our sanctions range from fines to suspension and at times to DISMISSAL especially in the absence of cooperation from the person in default.
As you already know, you committed an act contrary to Article 2 of our Group's Constitution. Be reminded that the Constitution in any group stands as a norm to which
every other oral or written law must draw its validity…. 
Since all attempts to bring you to reason failed. You are hereby officially DISMISSED from Chosen Sisters Social Group! We however wish you the best of luck. We would love to part company amicably. We seize this opportunity to exhort you to make sure you settle your debts with us. You still owe 1000frs for the recent uniform as well as Soap for those members who contributed for you. Please be responsible and let them reach us as late as two weeks from this date (emphasis mine).

While most of the sisters agreed with the expulsion of the accused, the demoted executive initially opposed her removal from office and allegedly denounced her successor using abusive language. She was served with a warning by the association and urged to comply with the group’s decisions.

According to Helen an ex-member of the Chosen Sisters, it proved difficult to police individuals’ private affairs, particularly those that supposedly undermined the integrity and honour of the group. Meddling in members’ private affairs was interpreted by some as ‘spying into peoples’ lives destructively’ – a constitutional clause (the dreaded Article 2) punishable by the association. Helen purportedly left the association because ‘people were bringing personal problems into the meeting which generated a lot of misunderstandings. Our initial goal was to love, care and show concern for the welfare of each member and our community as a whole’, she declared. ‘But abortions were rampant and promiscuity fairly common – the two are closely related as you know. When we tried to talk about these issues, people said we were delving too much into people’s private lives and advised that we back off which we did initially.’ However, the association also concluded that it could not turn a blind eye on some of the ills affecting their peers and society. This explains why the association took a strong stance against ‘social ills’ such as promiscuity and abortion and expected members to abide by decisions taken on this matter. Such an objective entailed that the association would ‘spy’ into peoples’ private lives in order to sanction wanton behaviour and maintain the honour of the association.
The United Sisters also took a tough stance against abortion and sexual promiscuity. However, unlike the Chosen Sisters who expelled two members, two separate cases handled in the United Sisters simply resulted in the suspension of the accused for a month each. They were further exhorted to write an apology to the association and to clearly express remorse for having soiled the association’s good name. Attempts to see or read some of the letters proved futile. Besides the suspension of members, the United Sisters also admonished members during Sunday meetings to exercise discretion in their sexual relationships.

Once, I witnessed in astonishment an incident where members took turns during a Sunday meeting to denounce two blood sisters, both of whom were accused of promiscuity. This came to light when Manka, a leading member of the association reported that someone had complained to her about the behaviour of the two sisters. Their behaviours, she alleged, had brought so much shame to the association and as ‘sisters’ they ought to discuss the issue openly rather than behind the backs of the accused. Manka alleged that the two sisters were notorious for chasing after men in search of beer and money. She revealed that one of the sisters in particular was notorious for asking beer from young men who often interpreted this as an indication of her availability for sex. Manka further alleged that ‘a certain person in the quarter has told me that he loved [B...] but each time he invited her for a drink, he realised that other men came up to her asking her to pay for drinks she had consumed.’ The accused sisters sat quietly throughout the accusation while members took turns to voice dissatisfaction with their behaviour.

At the end, none of them opted to respond to the accusations which was interpreted as an indication of their shame. One of the speakers appealed for a strong sense of self-pride and insisted that both sisters should learn to say no to both beer and men. ‘There’s a deadly disease
out there’, she yelled; ‘if you girls are not afraid, I’m certainly afraid’ she declared. ‘How many people in this house can beat their chest with pride and say they’ve lived decent lives? Dear sisters, stop taking beer from men, because it’s not everything that we must accept; it’s not every man who proposes to us that we must sleep with.’ An uneasy calm gripped the room for a few seconds.

On a separate incident in the summer of 2005, a visitor distributed a bunch of flyers among the United Sisters during a regular Sunday meeting. The flyer specifically targeted young teenage girls and young women in their 20s aimed against the phenomenon of sugar daddies, which has provoked profound moral and social panic in Bamenda.87 Referring to this category of young women as ‘yoyettes’88 the flyer unequivocally condemned ‘cross-generational’ sex, arguing that any relationship with ‘sugar daddies’ was doomed to fail. One of the flyers carried the following caption printed in bold: ‘sexual relations between young girls and aged partners are dangerous and they increase the spread of HIV/AIDS’. On another page, it stated; ‘Sugar daddy + Yoyette = A dangerous Mixture’. Contrary to my expectations, this particular incident did not provoke any discussions on HIV/AIDS or the phenomenon of ‘sugar daddies’ which the flyer clearly condemned. Nevertheless, members were encouraged to read the flyers and to direct their questions to 100% Jeune,89 an organisation devoted to youth issues and also responsible for circulating the flyers.

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87 Public campaigns against the phenomenon of Sugar Daddies have included protest marches, public talks amongst other activities. See The Post, D O Bans Protest Against 'Sugar Daddies' accessed on allAfrica.com July 25, 2005. According to the news story, the divisional officer for Bamenda banned a planned protest march organised by the Cameroon Association for Social Marketing on the grounds that its application was late. The newspaper reports further that following the failure of the planned march, over 120 youths met at the Bamenda Congress Hall to listen to public talks on the devastating health, moral and social effects of cross generation sex. Also see Cameroon Tribune, 'North West: Girls Train to End Cross Generation Sex' accessed via http://allafrica.com/stories/200707050282.html on 4 July 2007.

88 The origin of this term is uncertain but it is likely a feminized name for youth. The masculine of yoyette is simply yo.

89 100% Jeune is also the title of an extremely popular youth Magazine, which deals with issues of sexuality, friendship and matters of general interest to youth. Sold at just 100CFA, it is probably one of the cheapest and most widely circulated magazines in the country, especially attractive as it is printed in glossy colour.
Collectively and individually, the United Sisters were conscious of the group’s stance against sexual promiscuity. At least, this was apparent in the rhetoric of those with whom I interacted and interviewed. As if apologetic for the perceived ‘immoral’ behaviour of some members of the United Sisters, a certain member alleged that about one-third of NBA members had had affairs with some members of the United Sisters. According to her, some members of the NBA were to blame for ‘corrupting’ the United Sisters. She also accused certain NBA members of having several girlfriends in the community. The United Sisters expressed their condemnation of promiscuous behaviour when they unanimously rejected an NBA nominee to the position of patron. The nominee was accused of having had multiple affairs with some members of the United Sisters, thus provoking in-fighting among those involved in the love triangle. Susan, who allegedly nominated the disgraced patron was shamed for her proposal. It turned out she was the current girlfriend of the rejected NBA member.

Like the other associations, the NBA was concerned about its honour and public image in the community. According to the rules of the NBA, each new member had to recite the association’s pledge upon formal admission – a pledge that required the member to ‘always uphold her [the association’s] Honour and Glory wherever the need may arise.’ Article 5 of the NBA constitution for instance outlines a series of behaviours discouraged by the association:

- All members are strongly advised to respect one another irrespective of position, education and background, age and other social position. Culprits will face the disciplinary committee.
- Any act of insult and assault by any member shall be reported to the executive who then transfers the matter to the disciplinary committee where the case is handled without any fear or favour.
- Any act of stealing or burglary reported against any member will be dismissed immediately.
- Other acts of misconduct reported against any member shall result in serious disciplinary sanctions.
The above-mentioned disciplinary committee dealt with cases referred to it by the executive. Usually, these were cases that involved severe breach of moral conduct such as fights between members, of which I witnessed a few. Despite a few fights and alleged interpersonal rivalries, the NBA did not have any records of expulsions. This was partly because the NBA was a relatively younger association compared to the Chosen and United Sisters. It is also probable that the disciplinary committee was not as effective as it ought to be. This notwithstanding, I recorded several cases of members suspended from associational activities for owing fines. Such persons could return to the fold upon complete payment of their fines. However, the reality was different because debtors tended to resume normal activities after a few absences without having paid or arranged to pay their fines. In this respect, it is fair to say discipline was weak – a trend many justified by invoking the concept of ‘brotherliness’. Even when members were excluded from Sunday meetings, they were hardly prohibited from playing football with their fellow ‘brothers’ on Saturday mornings – an important leisure activity in the association.

Most members of the NBA adored football, a game universally loved in Cameroon. In fact, the pre-eminence of football in associational life was underscored by the fact that two sport coordinators were appointed to manage sport affairs. Initially introduced as a mere leisure or ‘keep fit’ activity, sport eventually became a key frontier for combating negative stereotypes about youth in Old Town and as a forum for building the association’s reputation.

In the past, young men from Old Town were perceived as ruthless and violent. It was considered extremely risky to invite them for football. One story of recounted to illustrate this claim involved an incident where a ‘gang’ of Old Town youth stopped a football match about

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90 However, there were at least five cases of people who left the association voluntarily or were no longer actively involved in the association.
91 Evidence for this is contained in a letter addressed to the NBA executive by a member of the disciplinary committee accusing its chairman of inertia. In this letter, the member threatens to withdraw from the disciplinary committee if no action is taken against the inactive chairman.
three-quarters to the finish time and escaped with the ball to prevent their defeat. Another story concerns an incident when a group of Old Town youth, certain of imminent defeat during a football match against a visiting team from Ntarikon, stirred up a fight and trashed their opponents in a deliberate show of supremacy. These incidents gave the youths of Old Town such a bad reputation that many athletic associations in Bamenda feared to play against them. Many NBA members acknowledged they had witnessed such ‘wild’ ways while growing up but maintained that things had changed.

It was against this background that the NBA sought to use sport to counter such perceptions by avoiding foul play during football matches or creating any impressions that vestiges of their unruly manners still lingered. Thus each football encounter with visiting social and athletic associations in Bamenda permitted the NBA to not only “keep fit” in their own words but also to network with these groups and counter unpopular perceptions of Old Town youth as unruly and undomesticated. In other words, each ‘friendly encounter’ (as they were often labelled) with a guest team was perceived as an opportunity to project a positive image of themselves. Members who failed to observe the rules and regulations of the game were punished with a fine. It was against this background that sports gradually became an instrument of NBA’s broader goal to ‘fight against social ills’ and to promote their visibility in the community. The NBA also aimed to counter such negative characterisations by encouraging behavioural reforms enforced by disciplinary measures. Persons accused of indiscipline were fined and expected to apologise to the house during regular Sunday meetings.

An incident stood out during one of the Sunday meetings when Claude, who incidentally was the day’s chairman decided to fine himself following sustained criticisms against him for improper conduct during the previous day’s football match against the Brasseries Football Club.
At issue was the claim that Claude had unjustifiably and aggressively tackled a few opponents during the football match at which the NBA was defeated by 8 to 3. Submitting to the barrage of criticisms against him, Claude declared proudly; ‘I find the chairman guilty of the accusations and request that he should pay a fine of 1500CFA’ – a statement that drew thunderous applause amidst laughter and confusion. Although it was fair and indeed remarkable that Claude should fine himself, many considered the amount rather excessive particularly as most members tended to oppose heavy fines in the association.

Normally, acts of indiscipline were punished with a fine that ranged between 200CFA and 500CFA but as far as the records showed, no one had been fined 1500CFA for poor conduct during a football match. Claude’s inability to pay this fine later strained his relationship with the association for which he was suspended for a couple of months. In general, individuals who failed to comply with regulations governing sport activities were fined. This trend notwithstanding, the association had an uneasy relationship with fines. Members were fined for their absence from sports, for staying away from sanitation campaigns, lateness at meetings, improper conduct at outdoor activities and unruly behaviour during meetings. An executive member was tasked with the responsibility of recording transgressions and the names of defaulters were read out at the end of each meeting. Each time this was done, an atmosphere of shock, uproar and protest followed whereupon the accused attempted to deny any knowledge of owing a fine or expressed outrage at how much the amount had been inflated.

The NBA, like the other associations felt the moral conduct of its members determined the extent to which they won respect or felt their honour undermined. However, the associations differed with respect to the sort of behavioural dispositions that led to such breach of moral decorum. In the NBA for instance, nobody cared if a member had a dozen affairs and whether
this tarnished the honour of the association. The female associations on the other hand placed premium on the sexual discretion of its members. Unlike the female associations, the NBA tended to discipline individuals involved in aggressive behaviour whether against fellow members or guest teams during football encounters. However, not every NBA member felt that young men should be indiscreet about their amorous relationships.

Irrked by allegations of sexual impropriety among some members, David, one of the few university graduates prepared and delivered a talk to the association entitled: “Who am I as a Ntambag Brother?” In his talk, he rebuked his fellow ‘brothers’ for having multiple sexual partners whilst projecting themselves as vanguards of moral change in Old Town. ‘One of the objectives of our association is to fight against social ills’ he declared, ‘but we’re the ones who corrupt teenage girls. What social ills do we claim to be fighting? How can we claim to have the moral authority to advise our younger brothers and sisters when we ourselves have failed to lead by example?’ David then appealed to fellow members to endeavour to be punctual at Sunday meetings and to make a commitment to participate in hygiene campaigns in the community. ‘It seems to me we’ve pushed the original agenda aside and taken up other things. In so doing, we’ve dragged NBA into mud. I wish to appeal that during this New Year, let us try to change. Let the executive try to lead by example.’ When he concluded, Simon rose from his seat and addressed a few words to the house. He admitted to have felt a sense of guilt after listening to David’s speech and appealed to everyone present to carry out an examination of conscience in order to improve on their moral behaviour.
Something Useful: Refining the Moral Community

One of the many practices that captured my interest while attending meeting sessions especially among the United and Chosen Sisters was a slot known as ‘something useful’. An equivalent of this activity in the NBA was known as ‘formation time’. The NBA only introduced this slot about six months after I started participating in their activities, which supports the probability that they adopted it from the female associations. This period was generally characterised by spontaneous motivational speeches, moral anecdotes and discourses on topics of varying themes based on the particular disposition of the speaker or on topical issues within the association or community. In all three associations, ‘something useful’ featured at the end of each meeting after the ordinary issues had been exhausted. A slight difference between the female associations and the NBA consisted in the latter’s attempt to assign specific individuals to deliver a talk on a prepared topic, at least one week prior to the meeting. Although members were not consistent, this did not undermine the importance attached to this activity.

The general objective of ‘something useful’ or ‘formation time’ aimed to school young people on certain virtues, provide information on issues such as HIV/AIDS and assist individuals in making morally sound decisions on issues affecting their welfare such as choosing a partner or economic activity. The female associations cherished this activity in particular because members used the opportunity to share their skills with friends on issues such as homemade toiletries, hairdo, personal hygiene, and recipes. In the following paragraphs, I present three topics delivered during ‘Something Useful’ periods, chosen specifically for their relevance and insight into some of the preoccupations of the associations under study.
a) Sugar Daddies and Economic (In)dependence

The vice president of the United Sisters delivered the day’s ‘something useful’ on the HIV/AIDS\textsuperscript{92} pandemic. She began her discussion with a personal testimony stating that during the months she spent in the hospital taking care of her sister, she realised that AIDS was indeed a reality. It was not obvious if her sister was an AIDS patient or if she had simply witnessed a few AIDS patients while caring for her sick sister.

‘Many young people are dying of this terrible disease, especially young women. This explains why I wish to advise my fellow sisters today to abstain from practices or persons that may leave you vulnerable to HIV infection. I say this especially because I know how the phenomenon of sugar daddies has become popular. They come around and flash money and they know we love money. Let me tell you my sisters, money is evil. Yes, I repeat, money is evil’ she declared, her face darkened with fright.

No one stirred or dared to interrupt.

‘I want you to think about your future. Think about your future, not about the ways to satisfy short-term financial needs because you may end up in your grave prematurely. That’s the little thought I had for you today’, she concluded and returned to her seat.

Perhaps, the subject of ‘sugar daddies’ stroke a cord with the girls, many of whom had received literature the previous Sunday, distributed by an organisation staunchly opposed to the phenomenon of sugar daddies. Inspired by the vice president’s discourse, several members took turns to support and contribute to the topic. Most tended to focus on the need for behavioural change. Charlotte, probably the most talkative member made sure she voiced her contribution.

‘Today, I want to discourage this phenomenon of jumping from one man to the next in search of money. You all know me very well’ she declared proudly. ‘For several years now, I’ve been

\textsuperscript{92}Although it is widely believed that the principal victims of the HIV/AIDS pandemic are the young and poor, conflicting studies carried out by the Cameroon government maintain that the rich and educated are the most affected. According to the Demographic and Health Survey of 2004, the national HIV prevalence rate is 5.5, and a majority of those affected are young women between 25 and 29. This study was widely contested by critics who argued that the survey was based on data obtained from two cities only. See The Post, “HIV/AIDS Highest Among Educated, Rich Cameroonians” No. 0693 of Monday August 22, 2005, p. 7.
frying puff puff\textsuperscript{93} from which I make enough profit to buy myself a beer’ she added, provoking considerable laughter among the sisters because she was a notorious drinker. ‘Must you talk about beer?’ someone queried. She simply ignored the question and continued her denunciation of sugar daddies. ‘I was saying that I don’t ask money from anyone before buying myself a bottle of drink. Today, men lure women because of two things, beer and fish. Yeah, that’s what they call us - fish’ she repeated and a few giggles echoed at the end of the room. ‘How did my mother raise us? She used to sell food and still does so today. We survived and we’re still struggling to manage the little we have. So, I just wish to tell my sisters that they should learn to earn their own income and not become the next HIV victim because they were searching for money from one man to the next’ she concluded and sat down accompanied by a few seconds of loud applause.

b) HIV/AIDS and its Malcontents

Aaron gave the day’s talk on HIV/AIDS, which turned out to be a very animated and interactive discussion. His talk focussed on the methods of transmission of HIV and concluded with prevention methods. He stated that HIV was transmitted by blood transfusion or through contact with an infected person, from mother to child at birth or through breastfeeding and lastly, through sexual intercourse. With respect to the methods of preventing infection from HIV, he mentioned only the use of condoms. It struck me that no one had mentioned abstinence or fidelity as alternative prevention methods. Although Aaron’s discussion was explicit, albeit undermined by omissions rather than any false claims, it provoked a major debate in the house about the transmission methods of the HIV. On the one hand, a group of young men argued that a key vector of HIV transmission was by blood contact, excluding bodily fluids, especially

\textsuperscript{93} Puff-puff is a deep fried dough made from wheat flour. It is balled-shaped and widely sold on street-corners.
semen. Aaron and others, including myself maintained that the virus could be transmitted through bodily fluids. Our opponents remained unconvinced and demanded evidence to support our claims. Kevin on his part looked shaken, undecided on who to believe. ‘If it is true that HIV is transmitted through bodily fluids, then we’re all dead’ he screamed. ‘We’re all dead’ he yelled again. He was one of the sceptics who believed that HIV was acquired mainly through blood contact. According to him, one did not need a condom insofar as one’s partner did not have any wounds or sores.

While the discussion unfolded, Mohamed, a young man from the Local AIDS Control Committee (LACC) entered the meeting venue. His visit was entirely coincidental and he was pleasantly surprised to learn that a major debate on HIV/AIDS was underway. Despite attempts by a few NBA members to get him to say something about the debate, he refused to be drawn into the argument. Instead, he insisted on explaining the purpose of his visit: ‘I’m glad to see that young people are taking the HIV/AIDS issue seriously because it concerns us a lot. Today, I’ve come to communicate a programme being run by the Ministry of Health through the LACC in Ntambag. The committee has sent me to invite you to a free voluntary HIV screening event. You won’t have to pay for anything. Just endeavour to be there and you’ll have answers to some of your questions from the experts. We’ll also distribute other materials which you can read at your leisure.’ Simon thanked Mohamed for his message while others nodded in acknowledgement. Simon was also one of the sceptics who had demanded evidence. He requested Mohamed or anyone in the gathering to bring a cure for AIDS as a condition for him to go for a voluntary HIV test. Others expressed fright at the prospect of knowing their HIV status.  

94 The young men’s fright contrasted sharply with my general observations in Bamenda with respect to young people’s participation in voluntary HIV screening events. On several occasions, I witnessed long queues on the Commercial Ave where the provincial health department had set up a temporarily office to test citizens. The North West Province is also alleged to have the highest HIV prevalence rate in the country. Those who accept this
to tie me up first before I would consider doing an HIV test’ a member who sat next to me whispered.

c) On Choosing a good Husband

Mary, 31, gave a talk on the theme of marriage during a Chosen Sisters meeting. Although she sounded incoherent, her talk generated tremendous interest among those present, most of who contributed to the discussion. Mary directed her discourse to all members, both married and unmarried. Being unmarried herself, she urged her fellow unmarried sisters to be careful when choosing a partner for marriage. ‘Learn to be friends with the person and make sure you understand each other very well’ she declared. ‘I should also add that you should ensure that you are compatible because if both of you are so different in many ways, your marriage would be a difficult one. Also learn to take your partners for who they are, and learn to be welcoming, soft and understanding. As many of you know, husbands like a welcoming home, one in which they can look forward to coming to and this home is not the physical structure but the attitude and warmth of the occupants of the house especially the wife.’

Although one member jokingly took exception with Mary for raising a topic about which she knew nothing (because she was unmarried and still lived under her father’s roof), most members used this as an opportunity to discuss and share their individual experiences. A few members criticised Mary for implying that if things did not go well in a marriage, then the woman was necessarily to blame. Speaking in her capacity as a married woman, a member rose to Mary’s defence, stating that indeed, an old adage states that the woman is the corner stone of every household. She maintained that this did not mean women should not voice their concerns.

statistics, however flawed, contend that the rates are allegedly high because the educated population of the NWP tend to attend screening exercises more than other provinces in the country.
when faced with inappropriate behaviour from their men.

Sirri concluded the discussion with a brief illustration of the importance of compatibility by drawing on her personal experience. According to her, she once paid a surprise visit to her fiancé’s one early morning and to her greatest dismay, discovered he had been drinking and smoking in secret. ‘He had a bottle of beer in his hand and the house smelled of cigarettes. I just knew this was a bad case. I knew I would never cope and I walked off that relationship for good.’

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Although “Something Useful” was generally understood as a specific slot during meeting sessions, there were occasions when certain kinds of speeches or activities came under the rubric of “something useful”. This included words of encouragement or criticisms from members directed at a fellow member. Seminars and workshops were also broadly understood as extensions of ‘something useful’ because of the moral and intellectual formation they derived from participating at such events. An incident I witnessed in the United Sisters best illustrates the flexibility of ‘something useful’.

During one of the United Sisters’ regular Sunday meetings, Charlotte, a vocal and active member denounced Carmen, a young single mother for negligence. Earlier in the meeting, Carmen had been criticised for wearing flip-flops and a dirty T-shirt to the meeting. Her critics had argued that she disrespected the association by dressing poorly. According to them, the worth of an association was measured in the quality of its members’ dressing or how they presented themselves physically. This time, Charlotte had strong concerns about Carmen’s qualities as a mother. ‘I believe that when sisters have a problem, they should bring it to the house rather than talk about it behind each other’s back’, she said. Charlotte argued that Carmen
did not care for her son and as a result had left the child to the mercy of disease and dirt;

‘Young girls, your child is your pride. You were not forced to become pregnant. If you don’t want a child, please don’t sleep with men’ she yelled. ‘Even if your child has no father, you have to take care of the child in every way possible.’ She supported her accusation by stating that Carmen often left her 20-month-old son naked and exposed to cold and wind. ‘Even if this should make us enemies for life, so be it. I’m advising you as a sister, that you should show some love to your son. If any of you saw him yesterday, you would have wept. Everyone is complaining. He’s always running to the main road and might be hit by a vehicle; he spends half of the day naked, lacks food and often does not have anything warm to wear’ she yelled, her voice echoing in the room.

Susan, a young single mother herself picked up from Charlotte and made an appeal to all mothers in the house. ‘I wish to thank Charlotte very much for raising this issue in the house instead of taking it outside for gossip. This is the kind of behaviour we applaud and of which I have spoken about before’ she said. She concluded by urging young mothers to provide clothing for their children before thinking of themselves. ‘Give priority to your children before anything or anyone else’ she added.

Seminars and workshops were also classified as “Something useful”. Seminars provided an opportunity for all the three associations to get together and voice their common aspirations of building a moral community by ‘fighting against social ills’ in Old Town. For instance, the NBA organised a seminar entitled ‘The Importance of Women in Society’ to which the United and Chosen Sisters were invited. The NBA explained its reason for choosing this topic by arguing that young men needed to learn about respect for women in a male-dominated society. Although the seminar was held on 13 March 2005, the NBA justified this as its contribution towards the
celebration of the International Women’s day that had taken place on 8 March. In July 2005, the NBA organised another workshop on youth leadership, which also brought both female associations together. All three associations were often invited to seminars and activities organised out of Old Town. When this obtained, the association usually designated a few persons to participate on behalf of the group who normally reported what they had learnt or observed during the activity.

Navigating the Moral Terrain: Individual Trajectories

This section provides a glimpse into the lives of selected participants in the study. Each case offers a brief life history and examines the circumstances under which these individuals became members of the respective associations. Through individual cases, I intend to demonstrate how selected participants understood and articulated the moral objectives of their associations and the sort of choices and rationalisations they made in their personal lives. Through their lives, we appreciate the ambiguities of the moral project undertaken by the respective associations as individuals struggle to negotiate associational expectations with individual choices. Whilst female participants felt that their actions and choices impacted directly on the honour and moral standing of their associations, this was by no means true for most members of the NBA. Thus, the cases below demonstrate how participants negotiated individual agency with group expectations and the ambiguities produced thereof.
Case One

Thelma (United Sisters)

Thelma, 23, was a founding member of the United Sisters. She was the youngest in a family of four, two of whom had died. Her father having passed away, she lived with her mother and her two-year old son. Thelma dropped out of secondary school in Form 2 for no apparent reasons. ‘I guess I had bad company which influenced my performance.’ Although unemployed, she assisted her mother in her small business. ‘My mother used to make fish rolls (pies) and I assisted her in frying. The boys who used to sell the fish rolls left for their village to attend a family meeting or so and never returned. This affected the business; so my mother eventually stopped frying the fish rolls because it was difficult to find a reliable person to sell for her.’

After living with her mother for several years without any formal training or skills, she decided to enrol as an apprentice in a hairdressing salon upon advice from her fellow members in the United Sisters.

‘Before I became a member, I had been at home for three years doing nothing. Some of our members advised that it was not okay for a young woman to have no skills. Some of them persuaded me to learn a trade which I did. When I complete my training, I’ll set up my own salon,’ she once told me confidently.

Thelma explained her determination to do something with her life from the lessons she had learnt in her association. ‘The group has changed me a lot’, she stated proudly. ‘At first, I didn’t have any skills but after becoming an active member of United Sisters, I was made to understand that I can learn a trade and fight for my future. The association gave me a sense of pride in myself and my friends made me feel I could still do something with my life again’, she said. Her self-esteem fell to the lowest point when she became pregnant with her son;

‘I felt bad about the fact that I had a child with someone who didn’t marry me. I would have loved to be his wife, like other mature women but from the current situation, it is
not possible because he’s already married to someone else. I wouldn’t have loved to be a mother without being married’ she said.

Although she regretted not being married to the father of her son, she remained optimistic and strong about her future goals and potentials. ‘I’m no longer unskilled like before. I’m not just staying at home doing nothing. I’m proud of myself and proud of my child. Not all young women today can afford to take care of their offspring or even give birth to a child. I feel proud because I didn’t abandon my child with my mother like other young women do. I have the full support of my mother and my baby’s father.’

Thelma also acknowledged her moral transformation as a member of the association. ‘I think the group has changed my ideas on certain things. I used to depend a lot on men for financial assistance. When I saw my peers doing things to earn their own income, however small, I knew I needed to do the same. The members often warned about being financially dependent on men. I used to date a person depending on the size of the person’s wallet. I had no time for people who had nothing. Now, I know I could start with someone who has nothing and we build together.’

Case Two

Pierre (NBA)

Pierre (27), the first in a family of five was born and raised in Old Town. When he completed his Advanced Levels, he left for Yaounde where he enrolled into the undergraduate programme in geography at the University of Yaounde. However, his real plan was to find a way out to Europe because Yaounde allegedly had hundreds of opportunities and contacts for young people like him determined to leave the country. His enrolment at the university was simply a temporary measure, an excuse to get money from his parents in order to provide for his needs.
Pierre indicated that he was desperate to join his two friends who had already travelled to Europe. But things did not work as planned. His mother became ill and died not long after he moved to Yaounde. His father had already died several years before. The cause of their deaths remains unknown and he did not seem disposed to talk about it. Consequently, he was compelled to quit his studies at Yaounde and returned to Bamenda to fend for himself and his siblings. He also shelved his aspirations to travel to Europe.

‘We grew up in a strict household’, Pierre recalled. ‘We were not allowed to mix with a lot of people around here. My parents taught us not to rely on this uncle or auntie, so we really stuck to ourselves’, he stated, emphasising the reason he had to abandon his university studies to seek employment. He was lucky to find employment as a salesperson in a local firm and gradually rose to the position of branch manager due to the firm’s expansion. ‘I usually don’t like to tell ladies that I’m a manager because they’ll think I’ve got a lot of money’ he said with a chuckle. ‘I just tell them I work for this company.’ Although he sounded modest, he had no kind words for the general population of Old Town. ‘People in this community are not hardworking; they are lazy; they prefer to spend time having fun. That is why you can never see me in the evenings hanging out with the guys drinking beer. I prefer to stay indoors with my siblings’ he declared arrogantly. ‘I don’t interact with lazy people’ he added and proceeded to name a few individuals known to me with whom he associated. One of them was a fellow NBA member who ran a small business. ‘You see, people here are not motivated. Those who are financially handicapped often resort to picking up things in their homes to sell in order to have cash.’ Pierre said he was so disgusted with young people’s behaviour and planned to move out of the area if he had a way. ‘I hate this Old Town, I really hate it; I plan to move out if I have a way. It’s not a
good quarter. When you compare Old Town kids with those that grow up in Foncha Street, you see that those in Foncha Street are smarter.’

Prior to joining the NBA, Pierre reported that he had never been a member of an association. ‘I’m an unusual person, perhaps funny. I’ve never really liked groups, especially those in Old Town.’ He revealed that he was initially reluctant to join the NBA but when a few friends explained the objectives of the association and the potential social benefits, he decided to become a member. ‘When I spoke to a few people, I learnt that some of my friends did not show up for my parents’ funeral because they claimed my family didn’t participate in other people’s funerals in the neighbourhood.’ Pierre admitted that his parents were strict and tended to isolate them from the rest of the community. He thought it was necessary to be more sociable and be part of the community. ‘In my opinion, the most important thing about being a member of NBA is just for company, in order not to feel isolated and stressed. I don’t really go there for friends or to make new friends because I have two dear friends and both of them are in Europe.’

Although Pierre was unmarried and a father of a 20-month old son, he was highly critical of young people in Old Town whom he blamed for their plight. ‘There’s no ambition, no encouragement for young people in Old Town. Every young person wants to leave for Europe or survives on remittances from their relatives already in Europe. Do you know that you can acquire AIDS from stress?’ he said, much to my surprise. He insisted that the lack of motivation and opportunities for young people made them to be stressed, which could result in poor health and eventually to AIDS.

‘Besides, young people here drink too much and many don’t practice safe sex so I think there’s a great danger here,’ he said. In contrast to the young people he openly admonished, Pierre told me he planned to enrol his son into pre-nursery and if he had enough money, he
would marry his son’s mother by the end of that year. ‘I want to legalise everything’ he emphasised proudly. Still interested in talking about AIDS, Pierre maintained that Old Town had a very high incidence of AIDS although he knew only one person living with the disease. ‘Her lifestyle will not leave you in doubt about the fact that this rumour is true’ he said. He said it was only rumoured that the person he knew had AIDS since no one spoke openly about it or admitted to being infected. ‘The thing is that many people are hiding it and nobody wants to talk about it. Those health workers are wasting their time. People are reluctant to do HIV tests and I know many people who have multiple partners. I was born in this quarter, so what I’m saying is true’ he said pessimistically.

Although Pierre was critical of young people in Old Town generally, he was even more critical of the NBA of which he was a member. ‘Our group is not doing what it is supposed to be doing. We cannot develop our quarter without first developing ourselves’ he argued. When I asked if his membership in the NBA has been beneficial to him, he looked surprised and repeated the question to himself. ‘Gained something?’ he asked again, his face unexcited. ‘I’ve just learnt to understand people more, to know how to deal with people elsewhere.’ He said he was not enthusiastic about the sanitary campaigns undertaken by the NBA. ‘I do it to avoid problems’ he said unapologetically. ‘The only thing that has inspired me is the sponsorship project to assist disadvantaged children in the neighbourhood. But it’s a dangerous idea. How can you educate people when you don’t have that education yourself?’ he queried. ‘Does it make sense to you that young men who dropped out of school, and who still hang around their parents’ homes reducing their siblings’ rations, can appear serious to these kids?’ He also insinuated that many young people had lost faith in education because it led them nowhere. ‘The most important
thing for a young man’, he claimed, ‘is independence. Many of our fellow members aren’t independent. A majority of them are unemployed’ he said.

Case Three

Nicole: United Sisters

Nicole, 20, unlike most of the members in the United Sisters, was born in Douala, Cameroon’s economic capital where she lived with her mother until they left for Bamenda when she was 10. She joined the association at 17, a rare occurrence in the association, which often rejected applications from anyone below twenty. Nicole said her case was exceptional because at the time, she was too talkative. ‘I was so mouthy and the president even considered expelling me from the group. It was thanks to her that I was permitted to join in the first place but after second thoughts she allowed me to stay’ she said laughing. It was at this point that I recalled having heard a few remarks by some members about how mature Nicole had grown over the three years of her membership. At the time of her admission, she was notorious for speaking rudely to people and often resorted to invectives if anyone offended her. Despite her ill reputation the time of her admission, the president had thought she was a good candidate for reform and indeed, many often pointed to her as a success story.

Like some of her friends in the association, Nicole dropped out of secondary school and after spending a couple of years at home, her mother enrolled her to study dressmaking in Old Town. During her apprenticeship, she became pregnant and gave birth to a daughter, now 19 months old. She eventually completed her training but had difficulty in setting up her own shop due to the cost of rent and taxes. ‘So in order to make ends meet, I sew clothes at home. People who know me bring their clothes to my house and I deal with them there. I specialise in school
uniforms and other kinds of female dresses. I even sewed some of the United Sisters’ uniforms’, she said.

During my interviews, I often sought to know how individual members understood the objective of their association. This question turned out to be quite insightful as it revealed the different perspectives shared by respective members of the association. For instance, Nicole answered that a principal objective of the United Sisters was to fight against prostitution, by which she meant sexual promiscuity among young women. She later added that the association also fought against unwanted pregnancies and abortion. ‘We are not saying we’ve wiped out that phenomenon but I think we’ve succeeded to reduce it’ she stated confidently. ‘We are not really opposed to abortion as such, but we know it’s bad and we try to educate our members to avoid getting to the situation where abortion becomes an option’ she added. She recalled that the association had felt a deep sense of shame when a member was accused of having aborted her pregnancy of six months. ‘The pregnancy was at an advanced stage and she told us she did not have money to abort much earlier. We thought of expelling her, but reflected on the issue and concluded that an expulsion would not help her. So, we decided to talk to her and she wept bitterly. She confessed and promised she’ll never do it again.’ Nicole said the association was greatly embarrassed by this incident and this exposed them to a lot of ridicule in the community. ‘The boys in the quarter ridiculed us a lot. Some of them once claimed that one of the conditions for membership in the United Sisters was a minimum of five abortions,’ she said smiling.

Nicole thought of herself highly, especially with respect to matters of morality. ‘I’m proud of myself because I don’t move from place to place,’ she said. ‘What does that mean?’ I asked. ‘I don’t date more than one person. I’m not a promiscuous woman like the other girls in Old Town’ she asserted. ‘I’m also confident of myself” she added, meaning she knew her HIV
status was negative. ‘You can never hear my name in any gossip. I don’t gossip and my friends respect me a lot for that.’ Nicole claimed she and two other members of the United Sisters were the few who could hold their heads high because they had proven themselves decent. Nicole was a strong opponent of the use of fines in the association as a disciplinary measure, arguing that it was counterproductive. ‘We are here to change, to become better persons’ she argued. ‘Sometimes, the fines are too much and you find that some people have to prostitute themselves in order to pay their fines’ she claimed.

Like many disillusioned young people in Bamenda and Cameroon in general, Nicole dreams of migrating someday to the USA in search of greener pastures. ‘If I can get enough cash, I’ll get a visa and leave for the USA to work and then return to Cameroon and build a good house for myself and my daughter’ she said innocently but powerfully convinced of the feasibility of her dream.

**Case Four**

**Franklin, (NBA)**

I met Franklin, 27, for the first time at a ‘born house’ ceremony during the early days of my fieldwork. He caught my attention because unlike most of the young men at the function who drank beer, he was drinking a soft drink. He recounted a tragic incident he had witnessed as a child when a drunken man died from a fatal fall in a stream. The memory of this incident has haunted him ever since. ‘But I buy beer for my friends although I don’t drink’ he said. ‘Do you mean you’ve never tasted any alcoholic drink?’ I quizzed. ‘No,’ he insisted, ‘my alcohol is women’ he said jokingly, then added that he had reduced the number of women he dated to 40%. Franklin was born and raised in Old Town. Like most of the NBA members, he lived in a
detached single room in his parent’s home, commonly referred to as the boys’ quarters. Franklin’s room was classy and very modern compared to other rooms I had seen in the area. He had a JVC stereo system, a 14-inch TV, a Video CD player and high quality speakers. The latter were strategically spread in the four corners of the room in order to produce a surround sound effect. At the centre of the room was a large queen-sized wooden bed. This space served as both his living room and bedroom.

Franklin dropped out of school after failing his high school exams. Discouraged by this, he travelled to Douala where he lived with a relative and made two desperate attempts to travel abroad with the assistance of his family. Eventually, he returned to Bamenda and started a small business, which involved supplying customers with home video cassettes, DVDs and accessories. Although he had suspended his business due to very low demand, he still enjoyed the financial assistance of his elder sister who lives and works in Denmark.

He joined the NBA several months after the association came into existence. Although he had attended the preliminary meetings to discuss the possibility of starting an association for young men in the neighbourhood, he was sceptical about its viability. ‘I don’t like rowdy gatherings’ he said, having feared that the proposed association will turn out to be a talking house. ‘When I discovered they were serious, I joined them on the day elections were held’ he said. At the time of our interview, he was a very active member in charge of health and sanitation in the association. ‘I enjoy the company of the brothers in the quarter which is very important,’ he said. With the brothers, he shared ideas and played football. Prior to joining the association he knew very few people in the quarter but thanks to his membership, he now felt like a true child of the quarter. ‘Now, I’m friendly with a lot of people and when I’m on the road, I greet most of the people since the number of persons I know have grown so much.’
Franklin made no secret about his multiple girlfriends. He had three girlfriends at the time of the interview and was trying to recruit a fourth, whom I knew. Without justifying his womanising disposition, he joked that he did not drink or smoke and his only God-given talent was to win over the hearts of women. The last time I met him, he was about to transport one of his electronic gadgets to his ‘main’ girlfriend who lived out of Old Town. He maintained that his private life did not affect his moral standing in the association or community and it was nobody’s business to tell him how he should live his life.

Case Five

Claude (NBA)

Claude 33, was born and raised in Old Town. He was one of the few who first opened up to me when I started attending NBA meetings. The first time I attended an NBA meeting, he walked up to me at the end of the session and gave me his mobile phone number. He eventually became a key participant in the research and considered me his friend. He rented a single-room apartment and lived by himself. He was proud to tell me he had rented his apartment for 14 years and was always regular with his rent. Claude completed his primary school education at GS Old Town but did not proceed to secondary school. ‘I didn’t see the need’ he said but when I spoke to him a couple of days later, he remarked that his father died when he was a child leaving the burden of raising him (and his siblings) to his mother whose means were very limited. After leaving school, he sought employment and started working in a bakery. One day when I sat with him chatting in an off-licence, he showed me a long scar on his hand which he said he got from burns at the bakery. ‘I’ve suffered my friend. You see, my case is different because most of the
brothers still have their parents to whom they can turn in moments of difficulty but I didn’t have anyone.’

When he left the bakery, he ran a mobile restaurant for a couple of years. This entailed transporting food in a hand-pushed cart (popularly known as truck) around town in order to win customers. Being mobile assured him greater visibility and permitted him to sell more than he would if he rented a fixed space. However, he went out of business when thieves broke into his house and took away his money and the cart. After being unemployed for some time, a primary school mate of his who was now manager of a popular bar/casino on the commercial Avenue recruited him as a night watchman. ‘I was paid 5000CFA and with time, I rose to the position of bouncer and my salary was increased to 10,000CFA,’ he said proudly. Before he left the job, he had risen to the position of manager of the casino and earned a monthly salary of 25,000CFA.

Claude often reminisced how lucrative his job as manager of the casino was, because he and his colleagues knew how to ‘manipulate the casino machines’ and as a result earned extra money. ‘I even turned down a job offer to work as a bouncer at Ayaba Hotel although they had proposed a salary package of 70,000CFA.’ Claude revealed that at the casino, he had earned up to 300,000CFA on some months because he knew ‘how to get around things’. It was thanks to his ability to ‘get around things’ that he was able to save and assist his younger brother to travel to Europe. Unlike his brother, his destination of choice is the USA where he hopes to migrate some day. ‘If I go to America, I would like to join the US Army or be a truck driver’ he said, his face beaming with confidence. Realising that time may not be on his side as concerns the possibility of joining the US Army, he often fantasised about being a truck driver and driving cross-country. To achieve his dream, he counted on the future support of his half-brother who has lived in the US for over 30 years.
In early 2000, Claude lost his job when the business was temporarily closed. He then started his own home-based business – producing and selling ice pops commonly known as Alaska.95 He bought a second-hand deep freezer which served as the major asset for this business. He also earned a bit of income from freezing people’s groceries. However, his ice pops were popular mostly during the hot dry seasons when people needed to cool themselves from the scorching sun. Business waned significantly during the rainy season.

Claude claimed he had fathered two children with two separate women. However, he had custody of only one child, whose mother regrettably died soon after giving birth. The child lived with his grandmother in the village and was already in his second year in secondary school. He also sponsored two nephews who lived with his mother in Old Town.

He joined the NBA several months after it was founded. ‘I realised that most of my mates were members and this prompted me to find out what was going on. So I was permitted to attend the meetings for three weeks as an observer and eventually, I applied to become a member.’ I asked what he had learnt or gained as a member of the association. ‘I simply became a member in order to share ideas with my peers so that we can develop our quarter’ he said. ‘Oh, let me add that I’ve also benefited from one thing - I spend less money now on Sundays than I used to do when I was not a member.’ He explained that previously, he went out on Sunday afternoons and ended up buying drinks for his friends. ‘I don’t drink too much, myself. With two bottles of beer, I’m okay.’ He often emphasised how successful the association was in changing certain individuals. ‘We’ve also helped some persons to change for the better. It’s not good to call names, but there was one guy who was a notorious thief in the neighbourhood. We accepted him into the association and fellow brothers advised him on alternative things to do in order to get

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95 The origin of this term is unknown but probably labelled as such due to the cold climate of the Alaska region.
income. He’s changed so much and everyone in the community credits his change to our association.’

He ascribed the delinquency among young people to unemployment. He argued that all the youth associations needed to step up their efforts in sensitizing people about the positive changes in Old Town because most non-residents still had negative impressions about the area. ‘If you’re having a conversation with someone, and they find out you’re from Old Town, that person automatically loses confidence in you. This is also true if you’re chatting up a lady in town. Once she realises you are from Old Town, your chances of winning her heart becomes very slim.’

**Conclusion**

This chapter sought to provide an ethnographic account of the ways in which young people in Old Town construct their moral universe by employing local understandings of respectability and achievement – which in themselves are indicators of maturity. The possibility of such a moral universe hinges on their collective fight against social ills, real or imagined. In pursuit of this objective, youth associations in Old Town subject their members to a moral order, informed by a range of prohibitions and disciplinary measures – a sort of moral subjectivity, shaped simultaneously by local discourses and individual dispositions. In other words, young actors are seen as agents, with the conscience and disposition to make choices in the moral universe carved out by respective associations. Members endeavour to conform to associational rules and regulations because of the importance they attach to their membership as well as the potential benefits they stand to gain from such membership - material and moral.

The chapter also demonstrates that youth associations in Old Town collectively struggle
to negate the ‘extension’ of their youth by generating the will to social adulthood. Although biologically adults, these young men and women are far from independent and do not seek to redefine the meanings of adulthood, but strive to attain and be recognised as social adults by drawing on local notions of seniority and achievement sanctioned within and on behalf of a group. Thus, the achievements of individual associations can be appropriated by their members to point to their maturity and active involvement in the social life of the community.

Thus, the moral project of these associations need to be understood in context, not as an end in itself, but as a means towards winning respectability and recognition as social adults. In a context where the trappings of citizenship have proved to be elusive, young people in Old Town have drawn on local discourses and ethos to give meaning to their actions and interventions. Through associational life, young people construct and redefine their moral worlds in an attempt to qualify and be recognised as fully-fledge members of the community. This point becomes even more evident in the next chapter in which I explore young people’s political subjectivity, which focuses on exclusion and the ways in which they negotiate socio-economic and political uncertainty.
Chapter Eight

Youth and Political Subjectivity: Negotiating Exclusion in Bamenda

The lot of young people in Cameroon today remains ever so distressing – massive unemployment, mental and psychological disorientation, frustration and accelerated aging. In spite of being highly educated and skilled and having the certainty and drive that builds progress, the youths are kept unused….In our towns, there is squalor and filth and deprivation because the same old mayors, the same old parliamentarians and politicians cling to power. We certainly cannot expect these megalomaniacs to lobby for the initiation of youth-oriented programmes in their areas except the token ones aimed at boosting their shady images.96

In this chapter, I focus on the political subjectivity of young people in Old Town, drawing on their experiences, discourses, aspirations and actions that aim to circumvent their marginalisation in the Cameroonian postcolony. I show that young people in Old Town like the author of the quote above, are distressed and frustrated and tend to blame the state for their marginalisation and the ‘protraction’ of their youth. Based predominantly on interviews with young people from the various associations under study, I explore their perceptions and attitudes about Anglophone identity. The key finding suggests widespread support for the reconfiguration of the state in favour of federation or Anglophone autonomy – underscoring young people’s general disillusionment with the current political dispensation. This complements Konings’ (2002; 2005) studies among Anglophone university students who have been very outspoken about their marginalisation in Francophone-dominated higher educational institutions.

O’Toole et al (2003) observe that most studies of youth tend to be constrained by a narrow definition of political participation – often understood as located in the realm of conventional politics. This chapter integrates aspects of both conventional politics (evidenced by an exploration of the lives of a few individuals in formal ‘politics’) and alternative practices.

96 ‘When Will the youths be given a chance’ The Herald No. 272, Friday January 5-7, 1996, pg. 4
broadly conceptualised by actors as political. These practices, I contend are constitutive of what
Comaroff and Comaroff (2000) have termed the counternation.

In their discussion about the triumph of neoliberalism in the new millennium, Jean and
John Comaroff note the emergence of a counternation, inspired and populated by disenfranchised
persons (notably the homeless and the unemployed). According to them, a counternation consists
of ‘a virtual citizenry with its own twilight economies, its own spaces of production and
recreation, its own modalities of politics with which to address the economic and political
conditions that determine its plight’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000:308). Drawing on the idea of
the counternation, I analyse the ‘twilight economies’ of young people in Old Town, characterised
by the illegal production and circulation of forged documents that undermine state authority as it
simultaneously empowers them. Young people’s cynicism about the political process in
Cameroon is also highlighted, characteristic of a broader trend among Cameroonians who feel
that the democratic process has stalled (Nyamnjoh 1999; Mbaku 2002).

There is indeed a strong basis for young people’s cynicism and disillusionment with the
state in Cameroon. In April 2005, the Cameroon government organised a competitive
examination aimed at recruiting young candidates into the military. Strangely, information about
the recruitment was broadcast only three days to the deadline, leaving a huge number of
unemployed and potential applicants with little or no time to compile their documents for
registration. In a process marred by widespread corrupt and discriminatory practices, more than
2500 applications from the North West Province were disqualified on the grounds that the
applicants had presented attestations rather than the original copies of their First School Leaving
Certificate (FSLC). The FSLC is normally obtained upon completion of primary school in
Cameroon, and for this specific examination, it was the minimum qualification required for
registration. Hence, many candidates were devastated to learn that government agents charged with the recruitment exercise had rejected their attestations, irrespective of the fact that the Ministry of Education had stopped issuing FSLC certificates since 1989. Without further information or clarification from provincial government authorities, the distressed applicants and ordinary citizens concluded that the disqualification of candidates from the North West Province was an act of deliberate discrimination. ‘We see the rejection of our attestations as government’s intention to limit Anglophone children from entering the army so that it can flood it with Francophones’, a shocked applicant told a reporter of The Herald newspaper.97

This scandal occurred in the wake of an open letter addressed to the president of the Republic of Cameroon by John Fru Ndi, chairman of the Social Democratic Front (SDF) and the country’s leading opposition leader who enjoys extraordinary support in Bamenda and the North West Province in general. In his letter, John Fru Ndi criticized the government’s conversion of the abandoned Bamenda airport into a military base despite the absence of security threats in the region.98 Fru Ndi outlined a catalogue of discriminatory policies against the North West Province, such as the failure of the government to build a university in the province99 or provide opportunities for young people to assume full social and economic citizenship. John Fru Ndi’s concerns echoed those of many young people in Old Town.

97 See ‘2500 youths disqualified from army recruitment in NW as authorities reject attestations’ in The Herald No, 1637, Friday 29 April - 1 May 2005, page 2.
98 See Fru Ndi’s letter, 3 April 2005 entitled “Worrisome situation in the country” in which he states as follows; “In other countries, military installations are located away from population centres. They are strategically located in such a way that they can easily be used to protect the country’s territorial integrity, human life and property from foreign aggression. But here in the North West, all military installations (Nkambe and Bamenda) are located right in the heart of population centres. An army should be located where it will defend our territorial integrity rather than where it will repress its citizens best.”
99 Op cit. “A University was to be built in the North West immediately after that of Yaounde. The American government sent a USAID mission led by Doctors Vernon Smith and Laired from 1962-1964 with equipment to start the construction of the University in Bambui/Bambili. More than 400,000 hectares of land were expropriated and this land is still lying waste and waiting. Instead of granting this indispensable tool for the education of the youth, as it has been done in other provinces of the country, the Bamenda youth is again served with a military institution.”
Marginal Youth, Marginal Lives and Political Uncertainty

Since the late 1990s, there has been a gradual decline in the active involvement of young people in formal politics, particularly in party politics. In contrast to the vibrant and vanguard role of young people during the clamour for democratic reforms in the early 1990s, the late 1990s was marked by the disbandment of formal youth associations, especially those that had aligned themselves with the ruling regime aimed at negotiating access to scarce and diminishing resources. This trend of disillusionment was partly the result of the failure of the opposition to take over power, exacerbated by its diminishing influence and the corresponding resilience of the Biya regime. These broad processes had strong echoes in my fieldwork. A theme that emerged frequently from my interviews and general interaction with young people in Old Town was their acute sense of marginalisation and exclusion from the formal political process. A majority of participants felt doubly marginalised, first, as ‘youth’ and secondly as Anglophones. Similar sentiments have been recorded by Piet Konings (2005; 2002) among some Anglophone university students who aspire to elite status upon completion of university studies – aspirations that have hardly materialised. This chapter unravels the widespread nature of young people’s disenchantment with the current political dispensation, shaped differentially by ethnicity, employment and educational status and level of political consciousness. I present brief accounts of the views, opinions and discourses of selected members of youth associations in Old Town concerning their perception of the political situation in Cameroon and their involvement or lack thereof in the political process. The material is complemented with data obtained from a survey of the three associations which sought to measure young people’s perceptions and attitudes on issues such as voting, party politics and what is known in Cameroon as the ‘Anglophone problem’ (discussed in Chapter Four).
Before I explore the general trend of young people’s perspectives and attitudes, it is worthwhile to provide relevant context with specific reference to Bamenda on the sort of issues that shape young people’s minds and opinions on political questions in Cameroon. One sunny afternoon as I walked the streets of Old Town, I spotted a poster on an electricity pole. I drew nearer to take a closer look at the contents of the poster and without much surprise, observed that it was an advert by an anonymous youth group targeting other young people in the community about the need to support the struggle for the liberation of the Southern Cameroons. The poster, captioned “Southern Cameroon’s Mandela on Trial for his Country” carried the photo of Nfor Ngala Nfor, the vice-president of the SCNC and country representative of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO). Beneath the photo was the following quote:

Southern Cameroons was never, is not and never shall be an integral part of La République du Cameroun. The march towards freedom and sovereign independence is legal, legitimate and unstoppable. The State Restoration Train (SRT) which has left the abyss of annexation, assimilation, brutal occupation and alien domination under La République du Cameroun will only stop at the gate of FREEDOM.

Beneath the quote and italicized was a brief message addressed to young Anglophone Cameroonians:

_We, the youths of Southern Cameroons, pledge our support, total commitment to the peaceful struggle for the restoration of the statehood and sovereign independence of Southern Cameroons. Now is the time for the youths of Southern Cameroons to demonstrate their commitment and loyalty - mobilise for your future._

Over time, it became apparent that the above-mentioned poster was neither unique to Old Town nor the product of a nameless and faceless group of young people. Throughout the period of my fieldwork, I occasionally came across similar posters on popular streets in Bamenda, most of these out of Old Town. Perhaps, even more salient and relevant to the political consciousness discussed later is the fact that Bamenda remains the most vibrant city in Anglophone Cameroon where activities in support of the SCNC reach fever pitch every 1st October when the
independence of the former British Southern Cameroons is commemorated. During the period leading up to this date, Bamenda is often heavily militarized leading to inevitable confrontations between activists and soldiers. Activists also make use of other events of national importance to spread their message and raise awareness about the struggle for Anglophone autonomy. For instance, 11 February is celebrated in Cameroon as the National Youth Day. The origins and symbolic importance of this national holiday are derived from the former state of West Cameroon, which initiated the celebration of a youth day in honour of the future leaders of the nascent nation. In 1966, the former federal government adopted it as a national holiday. Today, activists tend to represent the Youth Day as a fabrication of the Francophone-dominated regime to distort and annihilate Anglophone history as seen in the tract below circulated in February 2005:

Youths of Southern Cameroons Watch Out!! Watch Out!!
Is 11 February worth celebrating? It is to remind you of the beginning of your second class ‘status’. By declaring 11th February a Youth Day: the intention of the Yaounde regime is to distort History. 11th February is Plebiscite Day. The day the Southern Cameroonians voted to form a Federal Union with La République du Cameroun. The Federation was to be made up of TWO STATES OF EQUAL STATUS. La République du Cameroun had broken away from that Union in 1984 and now compels you to answer their former name of La République du Cameroun, which carries a one star flag as though you are subject to them.

Reference to the above issues demonstrates the pervasiveness of the SCNC in Bamenda, which is considered a vital agent in promoting Anglophone nationalism and consciousness. The

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102 The flag of the former federal state had two stars, indicating the two states that had combined to establish the federation. A one-star flag was adopted following a dubious referendum masterminded by the late president Ahmadou Ahidjo (see Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003).
interviews that follow demonstrate this claim as well as reveal the particular and common issues that inform young people’s angst against the political establishment.

I begin with Clara, 32, an active member of the Chosen Sisters who was married and unemployed despite having completed high school. Her inability to start a business or gain employment in the civil service made her particularly bitter about her predicament. ‘The government does not care for the youth at all’ she said. ‘I’ve voted three times but I was not happy with the outcome of the results because all the elections are rigged.’ Since the introduction of democratic reforms in 1990 – evidenced largely by the organisation of frequent elections, there has been widespread outcry against the ruling regime for consistent rigging of elections in favour of the ruling CPDM party, precisely because the government has played both umpire and contender at every election. Clara’s miserable experience with the rigging of elections convinced her of the pointlessness of participating in future elections. ‘I don’t plan to vote again until I’m sure that my vote counts for something’ she said. She acknowledged the existence of an ‘Anglophone problem’ and expressed her readiness to support the SCNC, which seeks an autonomous state for the Anglophone minority population in Cameroon. ‘I’ve not been following their activities keenly but if they succeed, I’m sure a lot of us will celebrate because right now, this country has no focus.’

Manka, a leading member in the United Sisters also felt betrayed by the national government and local politicians. Although a school drop out, she faulted the government for the high unemployment rate in the country and accused the Biya regime of appointing mainly old people to government positions. Manka’s uncle was a leading member of the SCNC and frequently sent news to her father about developments in the organisation. On account of her connection to an ‘insider’ of the SCNC, she felt it was simply ‘natural’ to support ‘the struggle’ –
as the quest for autonomy is now commonly referred among activists and sympathisers. ‘There is a big Anglophone problem in this country’ she stated. ‘If you look at the present government, you will see that only a few Anglophones are ministers. I’m praying for the success of the SCNC.’ In contrast to her support for the SCNC, she expressed her resentment towards John Fru Ndi, whom she accused of being a *feyman.*

‘Ni John is a dealer’ she insisted. ‘He’s made so much money from politics and sent all his children abroad while poor people remain here suffering.’

Simon, 32, a member of the NBA and father of two worked part time as a salesperson in a supermarket. He was convinced that the government did not care for its young. He was particularly irritated by what he referred to as the government’s nonchalance towards the involvement of children in the labour sector. ‘Everyday, you see little children carrying heavy loads on their heads moving about as hawkers. These children have parents who are responsible for their welfare but due to poverty, the children have to assist their parents economically. We all know their participation in the labour sector at such an early age is not good for their growth’ he said. Simon attributed the plight of young Anglophones to their marginalisation in a Francophone-dominated state. ‘It’s a big problem, and I think the Francophones are undermining us. In terms of infrastructure, we are backward. We have no roads, and few Anglophones are recruited into the civil service. The SCNC has a good point. If we are suffering, then why shouldn’t we be by ourselves? The fact that the Francophone regime is resisting our independence means they have something to gain by keeping us in a subordinate position. My prayer is for the SCNC to succeed’, he remarked. Simon opined that Paul Biya had no genuine interest in the welfare of Cameroonians. However, he argued that despite allegations that Fru Ndi was a sell-out, he had played a major role in bringing democratic reforms in the country. ‘I think

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103 Popular Cameroonian term for con artist or swindler.
he’s opened up people’s minds and eyes. I like him because he is courageous. He doesn’t fear anyone or anything and he doesn’t surrender.’

Nicole, a member of the United Sisters felt that the most devastating aspect of Anglophone marginalisation was economic underdevelopment. ‘We have no economic development in this province. There’s no money here. Even when it comes to jobs, we are not recruited. If you don’t speak French, then there’s no future for you in Cameroon’ she said. However, Nicole had no problem speaking French because she was born in Douala where she had spent the first 10 years of her life before returning to Bamenda with her mother. Nicole also echoed the cynicism with which a growing number of young people in Old Town perceived politicians especially John Fru Ndi. ‘I think Fru Ndi uses people to acquire money and wealth for himself. He’s not a good man, very selfish. I think I prefer the CPDM; at least they distribute rice and other things during campaigns. What has Fru Ndi given us? Fru Ndi has a lot of wealth but he does not help anyone. In fact, I feel sorry for any of his supporters because it seems he has cast a spell over them. Paul Biya is better. I think his collaborators are those ruining the country. Fru Ndi’s children are all abroad, but what has he done to help the youths in Bamenda?’ she questioned.

Awa, 27, a member of the NBA and a professional athlete felt that the government had abandoned the youths. ‘If the government cared about youths, the social ills we have today won’t be so widespread.’ According to him, the perceived rise in crime and delinquency could be easily explained by the inactions of government in finding lasting solutions to young people’s full integration into society. During the entire period of my fieldwork, Awa had been relieved from his Second Division team due to a major injury. He remained unemployed during most of the time. Having dropped out of school after failing the GCE Ordinary level, he studied electronics
at a local workshop in Bamenda before taking up professional football. When he was not playing football, he repaired electronic gadgets and charged a competitive fee for it compared to those who owned workshops. ‘I feel bad when I turn around and realise my mom needs help but I can’t offer it’ he remarked. His mother single-handedly raised him and his siblings following the death of their father while they were still very young. Awa recounted that he voted once at the parliamentary election in 2002 but declined to vote at the presidential election of 2004 because he was convinced that elections in Cameroon were hardly conducted in a transparent manner. ‘Since 1992, there’s been no change. My family’s situation is still the same’ he remarked. ‘If the SCNC succeeds, then maybe we could benefit. I wish them success in their agenda. I give them my full support’ he emphasised.

David, a member of the NBA and holder of a first degree from the University of Yaounde felt young people had been betrayed by the Biya regime. Despite his reservations, he planned to write the competitive exams to enrol into the Ecole Nationale d’Administration et de Magistrature (ENAM), one of the grandes écoles where senior civil servants are trained and recruited into the civil service. If he failed to gain admission into the school, he would try to travel abroad. During the 2004 presidential election, David was recruited as an election observer by the National Elections Observatory (NEO), a government-run organisation with strong partisan support for the ruling CPDM. David was posted as an observer to Widikum – a remote village about 100km south of Bamenda. ‘That job was mere exploitation. The amount of work we did far outweighed the payment. At our departure, we were given only 10,000CFA and when we returned, another 10,000CFA’ he said. ‘Because the roads there are terrible, we had to trek long distances. We were also barred from accepting food from locals because they said we may
be partial if we accepted anything from anyone.’ David counted himself lucky because many young people were not paid. ‘This is exploitation. I don’t know who’s to blame.’

During the last population census in 2005, the government also recruited a huge number of young people but failed to pay them. ‘They employ the youths and send them to remote villages accessible only on foot because they know how difficult it is to go to these places. They make use of the high unemployment rates among youths, assuming that these young people would do anything for even a little amount’ he said. Despite his involvement in 2004 as an election observer, David stated he had never voted in any election. ‘Sometimes, I feel it is needless to vote because it seems the government already has the results ready before the actual polling takes place. So I do not see how my vote can change anything. Maybe I’ll vote next time just to fulfil my civic duty’ he said without much interest. Even though David felt the government had done little or nothing to alleviate the plight of young people in the country, he was opposed to the SCNC’s ambition of establishing a separate statehood for the Anglophone populations. ‘I think the movement is led by some retired civil servants who use the movement as a way of keeping themselves busy. Why didn’t they raise these issues when they were civil servants?’ he quizzed. He said he was in favour of a return to the pre-1972 two-state federation of East and West Cameroon.

Another member of the NBA recruited by NEO during the 2004 presidential election was Felix, 27. A graduate from the University of Dschang, Felix was unemployed and exploring options to travel abroad throughout the period of my research. He had worked as an election observer at a polling station in Bambui, a village 20km north west of Bamenda. ‘We had to check electoral materials and watch out for any irregularities.’ Felix maintained that even though no irregularities were reported at his polling station, he learnt from fellow observers that
elsewhere, police officers had stuffed ballot boxes in favour of the ruling party and even prevented opposition militants from voting. ‘I was dissatisfied with the elections as a whole.’ Incidentally, this was Felix’s first time to vote. ‘Before that election, I never had the spirit; I was never interested’ he said with a sigh. ‘In short, I simply did it because I was an election observer. My brothers were not interested and none of them voted’, he revealed.

Kingsley, 25, a member of the NBA also admitted to the existence of an Anglophone problem. ‘I think it stems from the differences in culture. That is the big problem; the fact that Anglophones have their own ways while Francophones do things and think differently’ he contended. ‘But the problem is compounded by the fact that the Anglophones are a numerical minority’ he added. Kingsley’s parents hailed from the neighbouring Francophone Western Province of the country. In the identity politics of Cameroon, they are categorised as Anglo-Bamileke – that is, citizens who traced their descent to the Western province (which is Francophone) but who had been raised or assimilated into ‘Anglophone culture’.

Although Kingsley was born and raised in Old Town, he perceived and defined himself after his parent’s ancestral home – namely as Bamileke. While growing up in Bamenda, his parents had compelled him to join the youth-wing of their village association in Bamenda. ‘I didn’t like it and left when an opportunity arose’ he remarked. However, he maintained that the fact that he was Bamileke determined the nature of his assessment of the Anglophone problem – which he dismissed as a minor problem compared to his perception of ‘tribalism’. ‘The real problem in Cameroon is not the Anglophone versus Francophone problem, but tribalism. When Achidi Achu was Prime Minister, he appointed a good number of his village people at the Taxation office here in town. If you go there, you’ll find mostly Baforchu people’ he argued. It was on the weight of this perceived ‘tribalism’ that he opposed the ambitions of the SCNC,
which he claimed was represented by a small minority of die-hard Anglophones. ‘This country must remain one. In the past, we tried federation and it didn’t work. Instead of dividing up the country, let us try something else, something new’ he said confidently and then added with a tone of despair – ‘but this may not come easily; there might be a crucial need for bloodshed before things will change in the country.’

According to Kingsley, political parties in Cameroon had lost their importance and he had no reason to vote for any of them at elections. ‘I don’t think there are any serious political parties in Cameroon. They look more like NGOs104 because they’re working for the benefit of individuals; even the SDF has become like the other fake political parties’, he contended. ‘But I appreciate the SDF for the fact that it is a predominantly Anglophone political party. If the main opposition party in Cameroon was Francophone, I’m sure Anglophones would have cried out even louder’. Kingsley stated that he had voted once in 1997 and had refused to participate in elections since then. ‘I felt my votes will mean nothing and there’s been no difference in the way elections are conducted since then. Rigging in Cameroon is a way of life’ he lamented. He stated that he was uncertain about voting at future elections unless things changed in favour of transparent and fair elections. ‘We need change in this country and because it’s so difficult, everyone is tired.’ He counted himself amongst those who had given up hope that things would change. This was understandable in the light of his previous attempts to travel abroad, which regrettably had failed. At the time of this interview, his family was making another attempt to send him to Europe.

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104 He implied that many NGOs he knew of were unreliable and tended to work for the interest of their founders rather than for the good of the target population.
The diagrams below represent the sentiments of 60 participants I interviewed. The diagrams refer specifically to young people’s voting patterns – especially in a context where politicians tend to perceive youth as ‘vote banks’.

![Voting History Chart]

Figure 12: Voting history of research participants according to sex

The table above shows that most young people reported they had voted before. While the reports may not be verifiable and therefore not entirely reliable, it is interesting to observe that contrary to the females (30%) only 5% of young men admitted they had not voted before. Furthermore, young people in Old Town responded as follows to the prospect of participating in future elections as seen in the chart below.
Figure 13: Voting prospects among selected young people in Old Town

Quizzed on whether they would vote in future elections, fewer young men (10%) reported they would not vote, as opposed to 15% of the female participants. Although these figures are comparatively low, they reflect a growing trend, likely to increase as more young people lose faith in government’s promises to organise ‘free and fair’ elections, despite demands for an independent electoral commission. These differences notwithstanding, there was overwhelming dissatisfaction among all participants with the way elections were conducted as seen in the table below. Fifty-nine of those interviewed reported they were dissatisfied with all elections that had been organised in Cameroon since the introduction of multiparty elections.
Table 2: Level of satisfaction with elections in Cameroon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voting History</th>
<th>Not Voted</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Satisfactory</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even the lone person who reported some satisfaction was fast to provide context to his response. He stated that his satisfaction was based on the fact that his candidate won the elections, although he was dissatisfied with government-run elections in general. Since 1992, the SDF has roused the support of citizens to demand the formation of an independent electoral commission – a cause the party has embraced so strongly, exemplified by their boycott of parliamentary and presidential elections in 1992 and 1997 respectively. Popular support for this cause even beyond the ranks of the SDF is suggestive of widespread disenchantment with government’s role in the organisation of elections – often in favour of the ruling party.

Having examined the opinions and attitudes of select young people in Old Town, I wish to focus, in the next section, on the few individuals who were or had actively been involved in conventional politics. In this respect, I examine the lives of three individuals, who had been involved in the following political organisations; the CPDM, SCNC and PRESBY.

**Politicized Youth in Old Town: Individual Trajectories**

All three associations in Old Town declared themselves to be apolitical. The NBA for example had a constitutional clause specifying its neutrality. Being apolitical meant the association would not participate, sanction or endorse any political activity, political party or group of individuals advocating a specific political opinion. The NBA’s stance was tested once
when a group of elderly Hausa men sought its support in a campaign to win legitimacy for the creation of ‘Abakwa village’ – carved out of the existing boundaries of Old Town.\textsuperscript{105} The NBA rejected appeals to support such a cause but refused to oppose the campaign even though individual members expressed their outrage against the initiators of campaign because they believed this was an illegitimate and politicized cause spearheaded by a few Hausa men intended to win recognition from government. Thus, as a collectivity, various associations declared themselves to be neutral even though members were free to pursue any political activity of their choice. In this section, I examine the cases of three young people in Old Town – one from the Chosen Sisters and two from the NBA – who were or had been actively involved in politics and how their involvement shaped their outlook on a range of political issues.

Case One

I begin with Emelda’s story. By local standards, Emelda, 30 was considered a remarkable success – a teacher of English and mother of a five-year-old daughter. Besides being a member of the Chosen Sisters, she was also an active member of her village association in town, the Meta Cultural and Development Association (MECUDA). Before she became a member of both the Chosen Sisters and MECUDA, she had been an active member of the President Biya’s Youths (PRESBY) – a politicized youth movement affiliated to the ruling CPDM party discussed in Chapter Four.\textsuperscript{106} Emelda became involved in PRESBY following her graduation from university.

\textsuperscript{105} The Hausa men who spearheaded this cause argued for the creation of a village with recognition granted to its leader as a ‘traditional ruler’, this, on the grounds that the Hausa first settled the area and consequently deserved recognition as the original inhabitants of the land. The lobbyists needed signatories to support their petition. They had approached the NBA leadership specifically to win their support and to sign the petition. The traditional council of Mankon, led by Fon Angwafo was opposed to this campaign – arguing that Ntambag was part of Mankon territory with a quarter-head appointed by the Mankon palace.

\textsuperscript{106} PRESBY emerged from a defunct ethnic militia, Auto-defense, popular on the campus of the University of Yaounde during the early 1990s. It claimed as its foremost objective, the recruitment of youths for active citizenship and as foot soldiers in defence of President Biya’s ideas of rigour and moralisation enunciated in his book,
When I graduated in 1997, I returned to Bamenda and being unemployed at the time, I decided to explore things. I wanted to know a little bit of politics about Cameroon and there was no other way I could achieve this except by joining a youth group; you know when people of your age group exchange ideas, you get to know things better. I learnt about the existence of PRESBY through some friends and I said to myself, since I’m no longer studying, it’s time I knew something about my country.

Propelled by this quest to ‘know something’ about her country, Emelda became a member of PRESBY, recruited by a family friend who was a respectable journalist employed by the state-radio and the then adviser of the provincial branch of PRESBY. Recalling her days in the PRESBY, Emelda stated that she did not gain anything besides participating at the Youth Day events in 1999. However, PRESBY allegedly promised more than just knowledge about ‘politics in the country’. Many young people tended to join PRESBY in anticipation of getting access to connections and officials who could negotiate access to government jobs (cf. Fokwang 2003; Jua 2003). In a neopatrimonial system as it obtains in Cameroon, access to resources is predicated on one’s networks rather than one’s experiences or qualifications. PRESBY therefore served as a strategic nexus for many young people aspiring to employment in the civil service. In Cameroon as in many West African states, young people ‘remain drawn to the state because, even in diminished circumstances it remains a major source of spoils and one of the only available channels for getting what little there is to get’ (Bratton 1989:414-15).

Emelda’s stay in Bamenda was temporarily ended when she got admission into the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) in Yaounde to study for an advanced diploma in English.

Competition for admission into the ENS is often marred with corrupt practices based almost entirely on clientelistic networks. Relatively few individuals have succeeded on merit. However, Emelda denied any allusion to the possibility that she obtained her admission thanks to PRESBY

Communal Liberalism (1987). According to unverifiable statistics, its national membership (as of 2001) stood at 120,000 including 7900 officials with branches in the 10 provinces of the country.
or ‘connections’ she might have established through her involvement with the youth movement. She credited certain individuals for being her ‘guardian angels’ and insisted that her admission was based on mere luck. Upon completion of her 2-year course, she was recruited into the civil service and deployed to a remote area in the North West province. At the time of the interview, she was exploring ways to obtain a transfer to Bamenda or any of the neighbouring villages which were easily accessible from town.

While a student at the ENS, she had suspended her membership in PRESBY and by the time she returned to Bamenda in 2003, PRESBY had almost disbanded, owing to scandals over financial misappropriation at the national branch (which directly affected provincial branches). Besides this, the local provincial branch had also been rocked by in-fighting amongst members.

Despite her perceived success, Emelda felt disillusioned by Cameroonian politics.

There is a certain class of people in this country who enjoy the resources of the country while another class has nothing at all. I don’t know which of them I belong to. I am somewhere between. Although I am employed I still feel I have benefited nothing from the state. I don’t want to say a lot of negative things about politics in Cameroon. Let’s just put it that I am not satisfied. I have tried to get closer to politics to find out what is happening in Cameroon but I’m not satisfied because I did not see what I expected to see. I just wanted to know how the game is played.

Her disillusionment notwithstanding, she admitted the possibility of joining either the CPDM or the SDF. ‘I have some friends, all members of the CPDM who are trying to influence me to join the CPDM but I really want to join a political party from my personal conviction not because someone pushed me into it’ she remarked. When I insinuated that she sounded like a militant of the CPDM, she responded as follows:

Well if you think that I’m sympathetic with the CPDM, then may be you think so because I’m a civil servant. I am an employee of the state; in Cameroon it has been so fashioned that the government and CPDM are like two faces of the same coin. So I won’t really say with precision that I am sympathetic with the CPDM government. I’m a state employee, but sometimes you get involved not really because you want to but because it has been so arranged that the state and CPDM are one. However, nobody tells me who to vote.
Indeed, in Cameroon, leading CPDM politicians in the North West Province have reportedly blamed their party’s poor performance at elections on their own militants whom they accuse of voting the opposition. It was probably against this background that Emelda stated that she retained the ‘power’ of her vote regardless of whatever political persuasion she may be compelled to identify with. During the period leading to the last presidential election in 2004, Emelda claimed she assisted a family friend (who happened to be a CPDM militant) during the campaign. Concerned that I may conclude she was an active member of the CPDM, she quickly reported that she was not working for the party but simply assisting her friend who happened to be a militant in the ruling party. ‘I was helping this person to distribute T-shirts, making phone calls, putting stickers on cars, yeah, things like that’ she said.

Emelda was not happy with the status of Anglophones in Cameroon. ‘As an Anglophone, I know that something is wrong somewhere. I just know that something is really wrong’ she said. Drawing on her experience in Yaounde, she expressed her shock that out of 40 students in her cohort at the ENS, only five of them were Anglophones. ‘May be it is because of the policy of regionalisation, but in other public exams more than 2000 Anglophones may write an exam and not up to 10 succeed. Even if positions are allocated based on region, you would see that the Anglophone ratio has been cheated. Just take the cabinet of this “great ambition” government, how many Anglophones do we really see occupying real ministerial positions? Very few.’ Although she sympathised with the SCNC on account of her Anglophone identity, she was reluctant to support the organisation because she was uncertain whether the movement would achieve its objectives.
Case Two

Max, a leading member of the NBA had not only been active in party politics but had also risen to the position of the sub-section president of the YCPDM for Ntambag. His political career dates to the early 90s when he recalled participating in the protest marches spearheaded by civil society organisations and the opposition whose general aim sought to force the Biya regime to introduce democratic reforms. ‘I had just finished school and was not employed or involved with anything’ he recalled. ‘A friend of mine who was involved in politics advised me to join him.’ His friend was the regional leader of the Mouvement Progressiste (MP) a small party headquartered in Douala. It was on the invitation of his friend that he formally became a member of a political party. ‘But as you know, the Mouvement Progressiste is a very small party with an extremely small following in Bamenda’ he remarked. Max saw no political future in the MP and joined the Mouvement pour la Défense de la République (MDR) headed by Daikole Daïsala. The MDR was also a Francophone-based party and enjoyed little support in Bamenda. ‘I was interested in an elective position, such as being a councillor for my area and with time, I saw that I could not fulfil my dreams in these small parties.’

Max considered himself a visionary – a keen observer and analyst of Cameroon’s political drama. ‘I had observed the political situation and having realized that change was not going to come easily, I decided to join the CPDM.’ Once again, a friend provided him with the necessary support and invitation to decamp into the ruling party. ‘Although he [the friend] played a role in my recruitment, the ultimate decision was mine to join the party’ he remarked.

In 1994, I joined the cell of the YCPDM and was elected secretary until 1996. I was then elected to the position of education and propaganda secretary for the Ntambag sub-section, which included Ntambag and Ntamulung. In 1998, there was a vacancy in the CPDM which led to my appointment as secretary of the branch. In 2000, the then president of the Ntambag sub-section of the CPDM left for school and I was elected to replace him. I was president until 2002 when I resigned.
Max left the party following a prolonged misunderstanding between him and the central sub-section for Mezam Division. He had alleged that the latter had misappropriated party funds and was not willing to account for it.

After his resignation from the office of sub-section president for Ntambag, he was summoned to the Governor’s office concerning the allegations he made against the leader of the sub-section of the CPDM for the Mezam Division. ‘I was subsequently sent to the company commander of the gendarmerie. While there, I was asked to bring other party members who could support my claims. I brought many militants who validated my claims, but the matter was shelved until today. No further investigation was carried out and I don’t think anyone had any genuine interest in investigating the matter’ he said dejectedly.

Reflecting on almost a decade of active involvement in party politics, Max maintained that the Biya regime was unable to deliver the country from its crisis. ‘Change cannot come to this country through the CPDM’ he said. ‘From my observation of the political situation in this country, one can move up the ladder only if you have a political god-father. I didn’t have any’ he said. ‘Right now, I’m out of politics. Even if I were to resume politics, it would not be on the side of the CPDM.’

Case Three

Damian, 26, of the NBA was probably the most steadfast youth member of the SCNC I encountered during my fieldwork. Born and raised in Kumbo in the Bui Division of the North West Province, he and his parents migrated to Bamenda where he completed his primary and high school education. Without resources to continue his studies, he realised ‘the future was
bleak’ and that there ‘was no iota of hope as far as a Cameroonian youth who speaks this language [English] is concerned’, he said. Damian revealed that his faith in the SCNC struggle was sown while he was still preparing for the Ordinary Level certificate. ‘I was taught by a Southern Cameroonian and he taught me the real history, how they deceived our parents, asking them to vote either Oui or Yes\textsuperscript{107} at the 1972 referendum’ he stated. Damian’s anger towards the Biya regime was also partly founded on his personal experience of discrimination at the hands of government authorities.

After my ordinary levels in 1997, I went to the Government Bilingual High School to write the police concours [competitive exams]. We all sat there waiting for the arrival of the exam questions. The invigilators instructed that we should not look at or turn the papers. So everybody sat still. Then when they finally asked us to turn the paper, we did and realised to our greatest dismay that the questions were in French. Some of us started asking questions; why are the question papers in French? Then one of the invigilators responded arrogantly in French “notre pays est bilingue” - that the country is bilingual. So we asked if fluency in French was the Cameroonian version of bilingualism. No one gave us a convincing response. So we started beating the benches and rioting. The chief invigilator came in and asked why we were causing trouble and we explained what his colleague had told us. He then said he was sorry and that the translated questions in English had not yet arrived; so we ended the show like that and that year, there was no police exam for us but youths in other provinces of Cameroon got their way as usual and we from the North West were excluded.

Unable to enrol into the police school or find a job worthy of his academic qualifications, Damian remained unemployed for some time. His main and irregular source of income came from his parents and sometimes from cab drivers whom he assisted when they needed an assistant.

When I have the opportunity, I work as a taxi driver in town. This is how it works - around the evenings, we go around the petrol stations where most taxi drivers park their cars. We call it ‘secours drivers’. We move around these petrol stations; if we’re lucky to find someone who has a commitment the next day and needs someone to drive for him, he gives us the keys and we do the job for him the next day. Then we work and bring the balance after filling the tank. What is left is yours. That’s how we do it. I enjoy it but not

\textsuperscript{107} Although this claim is unverifiable, there is sufficient evidence that the 1972 referendum which resulted in the dissolution of the federation was staged and its results questionable (see Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003).
much because the police harass us a lot. If we already had a free Southern Cameroon, I’m sure things would be better. The Francophone police that occupy this town disturb us so much. You cannot go through a checkpoint without giving them 500CFA, so at the end of the day you realise you have nothing or that you’ve worked for the police instead for your family or your boss.

Besides being a “secours driver”, Damian was a trained sound technician. He had studied electronics at the Baptist Centre in Nkwen and specialised as a sound technician. He proudly declared himself an ‘audio engineer’. He also made some income from repairing electronic gadgets, especially Video CD players – a popular video machine that has gradually eclipsed the VHS cassette player in most homes.

In 2000, Damian became a card-carrying member of the SCNC. He insisted that he had been an activist even before enrolling formally. With the SCNC, he could see a future for himself and his children. ‘At least now, I can see the future, there is some glimmer of hope’ he remarked. He was also a councillor of the Ntambag area and therefore a member of the Local Government Area of Bamenda (the SCNC’s administrative classification) of municipal areas.

Damian revealed he had never voted in any elections in Cameroon on the grounds that the elections were organised by his ‘slave masters’ and participating at such elections was equivalent to ‘selling your birth right.’ He was also convinced that no Anglophone could rule the country because of some secret pact signed between the French colonisers and their anointed neo-colonial leaders. ‘So, you see many Anglophones are frustrated. We are wasting our time with these guys’ he said, totally convinced of the existence of an alleged secret document. In October 2004, he was arrested by the police at the Commercial Avenue, accused of distributing SCNC tracts. ‘They seized the papers and arrested me and asked some stupid questions which I answered. They also asked my level of education and I told them that it did not matter. I was
taken to Ntarikon and questioned. I was soon released and I returned to the Commercial Avenue. I didn’t cause any rioting while distributing the hand outs’ he insisted.

Damian attributed the increase in moral decadence to the ‘evils’ of the Biya regime. ‘It’s become so bad that Southern Cameroonians are changing their names to sound like those from the South Province in order to get employment in the civil service. I know someone who has changed his name from Atanga (a name from the North West) to Atangana (common among people from the South and Centre provinces). I have two friends who have changed their names recently. I’ve known these people since primary school. It’s terrible’, he lamented. He faulted his name-changing friends for lacking the ‘will power’ to fight for the independence of the Southern Cameroons and saw himself as a genuine activist, committed to the cause with every inch of his being.

**Negotiating Exclusion in Bamenda**

Although I argue that associational life represents a key strategy for negotiating exclusion from the socio-economic and political spheres, it needs to be underscored that young people’s political subjectivities cannot be fully grasped without reference to practices that fall beyond the scope of associational activity. For instance, cynicism about the political process or the deliberate boycott of elections are not views or actions sanctioned by associations but constitute calculated counter actions undertaken by individuals. In this section, I explore two specific ways in which young people sought to circumvent their marginalisation.

I employ the idea of the counternation as enunciated by Comaroff and Comaroff (2000) to make sense of the illegal economies run by a few disenfranchised young men in Old Town whose ‘spaces of production and recreation’ constitute key elements of resistance. I show that
strategies employed by these young men aim to ‘address the economic and political conditions that determine their plight’ and that their actions indirectly undermine state authority. These creative and recreational practices include what I refer to as an economy of faux dossiers employed predominantly to feed the growing demand for documents by young people who wish to migrate abroad.

a) The economy of faux dossiers

A popular topic for casual conversation among young men in Old Town was the emergence of what I have referred to as an economy of faux dossiers (forged documents) – which consists of the illegal but widespread fabrication and trafficking in forged documents (especially alleged government-issued documents) such as passports, drivers’ licenses, visas, police clearances, birth and marriage certificates, etc. Faux dossiers served countless purposes in the local and national economy. However, with the growing trend of migration among young people, faux dossiers have become central to the procurement of visas.

One rainy afternoon in July 2005, I sat with several NBA ‘brothers’ chatting about football and local issues when the theme of forged documents emerged. ‘With the proliferation of computers, one can do anything these days’, Max began; referring to the claim that the illegal fabrication of ‘doki’ as forged documents are popularly known had become easier with the availability of computers. Bernard corroborated this claim and added a little account about his friend who had the rare talent of replicating all sorts of signatures. ‘There are many talented young people around but who don’t get to use their skills effectively’ Awa commented. ‘I know how to make dry stamps’ Max remarked. ‘There was this guy on the Commercial Avenue who used to carve stamps. He even carved government stamps for individuals who used it for their
private ends. He was eventually picked up by the police but guess what happened; they ended up employing him in the government service. Now he carves for the government. He was super’ Bernard commented.

‘Sometimes, these dokis go through’, Max remarked. ‘I know people who have used these [forged] documents and travelled abroad’ he said. ‘Maybe that’s why the British embassy in Nigeria has refused issuing visas to young people below 30’ Max wondered. ‘No, they’re still issuing visas; it depends on your motive’ Achu responded.

In April 2005, Britain imposed a ban on entry visas for young Nigerians aged between 18 and 30 who intended to visit the UK for the first time. The British High Commission in Nigeria claimed it could not deal with the high number of visa applications, which had nearly doubled in a period of two years. Despite these claims, many of the young men in Old Town felt the proliferation of forged documents might have influenced the decision of the British. Although involvement in the twilight economy of forged documents entailed high risks (such as detention), none of the young men felt individuals should be punished. Most of them agreed that it was indeed a desperate means of making a livelihood in the context of widespread unemployment and limited opportunities. Others accused the police of being partners with the producers and only made arrests if they had failed to secure a bribe.

Many have associated the economy of faux dossiers with feymania – the art of swindling similar to the Nigerian 419 scams. Reports abound of applicants who present themselves at various embassies in Yaounde, armed not only with forged documents but also posing as

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109 See Cameroon Tribune, online edition, ‘GCE Certificate Fraudsters Detained In Bamenda’ accessed on December 11, 2006 concerning the arrests of two young people for forging GCE certificates amongst others. Both the accused were them computer technicians who owned computers which allegedly facilitated the production, printing and distribution of forged certificates. [http://allafrica.com/stories/printable/200612111371.html](http://allafrica.com/stories/printable/200612111371.html)
personalities whom they reckon might facilitate the acquisition of visas. Max recounted the story of a young man who appeared at one of the embassies in traditional regalia posing as a traditional ruler from the North West Province. ‘He staged quite a convincing show. I knew this guy but was unaware of the fact that he was faking his identity. So I approached to greet him but he refused to shake my hands’ he said, smiling. Others present themselves as ordained ministers, businessmen, etc. Bernard spoke proudly of the economy of faux dossiers that thrives at the popular student neighbourhood of Bonamoussadi in Yaounde. ‘That’s a dangerous quartier’, he said, ‘really dangerous’ supporting his claims by referring to alleged specialised departments in the neighbourhood that issue forged documents of all sorts even those carrying President Biya’s signature. ‘There are people who make a living out of this. They take the contracts and supply you with any documents’ he said.

The economy of faux dossiers was not something that happened elsewhere, somewhere remote but was embedded in everyday life in Old Town. I knew several young men (although not NBA members) involved in this business. William, 28, for example, nicknamed ‘the inspector’ was considered one of the most reliable entrepreneurs in the economy of faux dossier. A university drop out whose employment status had been unsteady, William once told me he discovered his talent in the production of forged documents while in secondary school. ‘I used to help students with their report cards. I made new report cards for students who had failed their exams. They could use their new report cards to get admission elsewhere. It really helped, you know’ he said innocently. William could forge any signature after a brief moment of practice and had earned his nickname for his ability to forge any government document needed by his numerous applicants. He also provided bank statements and life insurance certificates to needy

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110 Traditional rulers from the Bamenda grasslands do not shake hands with their subjects.
persons, especially those who needed visas. Although he had made many attempts to travel abroad, none of his plans had materialised.

One morning I met Lawrence, an NBA member who had procured documents from William in order to apply for a visa to the USA. During my discussion with him, he pulled out a bank statement, carefully prepared on a Union Bank of Cameroon letterhead stating that he had over 12 million CFA in his account. He seemed disturbed by the huge amount of money. ‘Do you think those guys might be suspicious? Willy had second thoughts about the amount. He thinks the money is too much’ he said. He was also disturbed by the fact that according to supporting documents, he had worked for two years as a sales assistant and the nature of his job could not have enabled him to accumulate such an amount of money in so short a period. ‘I must leave for Yaoundé tomorrow to submit these documents. Willy has promised to do another bank statement for me’ he remarked. Then he pulled out a brown envelope which contained his documents and desperate for some reassurance, requested that I look through and assess the credibility of his supporting documents. Without hesitating, I took the package into my hands and flipped through, stunned by the claims of its contents. One of the documents was a land certificate indicating he owned a piece of land somewhere in town, and another from a company granting him leave for the period of his visit, indicating he would take up his job upon his return. This story introduces us to the issue of migration, which probably represents the most appealing option for desperate young Cameroonians, who perceive in this trend, the possibility of negotiating their transition to full social adulthood while simultaneously embracing global citizenship, thereby by-passing the alleged sterile and “false claims” of Cameroonian national citizenship.
b) Exodus: The Politics in Migration

In pre-colonial southern Africa, like in other parts of Africa, the ultimate form of protest against a despotic chief was desertion or the threat to desert one’s chief (Mamdani 1996). Such threats or desertions were often taken seriously because the adage that ‘a chief is a chief because of his people’ was vital to a chief’s legitimacy and credibility. A deserted chief was not only prone to attack by his rivals or enemies, but it was also an indication of the chief’s failure to meet his obligations to the living and the living-dead (the ancestors).

Migration has often been analysed in the youth literature as characterised by the search for greener pastures and in some cases as a rite of passage. It is hardly understood as a form of political protest – a perspective I add to existing explanations by showing the increased resort to political asylum (real or deceptive) by young Cameroonians. Many young people in Cameroon feel betrayed by their leaders, like the despotic chief from whom they must flee, if only to return at a much later period.

Many young people in Old Town expressed the desire to leave Cameroon, disillusioned by the Biya regime whose 25-year rule has yielded little but promises and a catalogue of political slogans. By voting with their feet to migrate abroad, many young people envisioned the rapid transformation of their lives and the attainment of social adulthood – a status long denied them, deepened by their feelings of being ‘stuck’ in Cameroon. From my interviews with 60 young people in the three associations under study, 91% of them indicated their wish to leave Cameroon if they had the means and opportunity and a majority indicated the USA as their destination of choice as the chart below shows.
Figure 14: Chart showing country of choice among potential young emigrants

Several reasons accounted for most people’s choice of the USA. First, many claimed to know someone already living in the USA (friends, family etc) who could assist them in case of need. Many also considered the fact that they would not need to learn a new language given their fluency in English. Most importantly, the USA represents to many, a country where dreams are rewarded. In the popular imaginary, the USA is the destination of achievers where even the uneducated can allegedly make it with little exertion.

For many young people who grew up in the 1980s when television was introduced in the country, the USA represents the land of the *Cosby Show* and the *Fresh Prince of Bel’Air*, popular TV shows that portrayed and dramatised the prosperity and boundless material abundance that awaited its potential arrivals (also see Mbaku and Awasom 2004). Perhaps, even more than these popular comedy shows, the introduction of the DV (Diversity Visa) programme or lottery in the mid 1990s by the American government has received wide popularity, especially among the Anglophone populations who feel cheated as second-class citizens in a Francophone-dominated state. The DV lottery provides Anglophones, young and old with the rare opportunity to gamble their alleged second-class citizenship in the bazaar of global citizenship. Although there are no
statistics for the number of applicants, the chart below reveals a steady increase since 2004 in the number of winners of Cameroonian nationality.

Figure 15: Chart showing DV winners by Cameroonian citizens between 1998 and 2007.

Based on the statistics above, it is probable that the increase in the number of winners is proof of the fact that knowledge about the existence of the programme is widespread.111

Figure 16: Newspaper front page showing popularity of Diversity Visa programme.

111 Knowledge of the DV programme was also widely circulated in local newspapers, especially in *Business and Marketing*, an affordable monthly newspaper that publishes the results and information on the DV programme. Every month the paper also carries eye-catching front-page headline such as ‘Have a foreign job in 45 days’ or ‘Become an international volunteer today.’ See Issue No. 063, August 2005.
While many have played the lottery every year since its introduction in 1994, most members in the three associations under study had played the DV at least once. In 2003, legislation governing the organisation of the DV programme stipulated that submissions for the 2004 and future competitions would be done exclusively online. This did not undermine the popularity of the programme or diminish aspirants’ hopes of winning. During the ‘DV season’ – between October and December every year, internet cafés register a massive boom in their profits while owners of digital cameras also emerge to cash in on excited applicants. In November 2005, several participants in my study requested my assistance in taking digital photos for them to file with their applications.

The DV programme was indeed one of many options considered by young people for their dreams to travel abroad. Many also explored traditional options such as invitations from family and friends already resident abroad as well as business trips and increasingly, political asylum. A good number of the young men in the NBA for instance, knew of these options and had experience based on their trips to various embassies in Yaounde for visa interviews. During my discussions with them (detailed above), some of them narrated their observations at various embassies in Yaounde.

Max for instance spoke about a certain woman at the American embassy notorious for her harsh treatment of visa applicants. ‘That woman does not care’, he commented. ‘If she speaks to you for a minute, then you could nurse the hope that you might have a visa. What she normally does is this; she looks at your invitation letter for a few seconds, pulls out a certain form and stamps your passport at the back, sometimes without a word.’ Max explained that despite the extremely high rejection rate, few people gave up. ‘These guys are making a lot of money from us because their application fee is non-refundable’ Achu remarked. ‘The sad thing about the
process is that applicants are interviewed to the hearing of everyone. Even those seated in the hall’ he said ‘but the British guys provide some privacy.’ Inspired by the discussion, Achu recounted his observations at the British embassy. ‘You get into a small room in which there’s a desk with lots of paper and a laptop. Then a white man comes in and appears to be in a hurry. They always seem to be in a hurry’ he joked and the rest laughed noisily. ‘He then asks you to answer some questions. “If you don’t understand a question, don’t answer”, the white man advises. While you speak, he’s busy typing away into his sophisticated laptop. If he is satisfied with you, he asks you to return at 2 p.m. If he’s not, he gives you a letter of appeal. It’s a long paper which he inserts into your passport and apologises for not being able to grant you a visa.’

Of all the young men I knew struggling to travel abroad, Kevin’s story was most extraordinary. He did not only have four passports but also revealed that his visa applications to several countries had been rejected six times – a story of hope and rejection which he painfully shared with me.

After completing high school, Kevin was determined to travel abroad with the assistance of his elder brothers and sisters who were already resident in three different European countries. ‘While in school, I had lots of financial difficulties and wanted to begin earning my own money. My brothers were ready to assist me if I could get a way out of the country’ he said, sipping from a bottle of Top Orange, a popular Cameroonian soft drink. He was still recovering from a vicious hangover from a party he had attended two days earlier. ‘Actually, my elder sister in Denmark brought up the idea. She suggested that I should travel abroad and look for a job. I had no plans of continuing school’ he said. Armed with some money from his sister, he left for Douala in search of reliable persons versed in the business of ‘trafficking’ people abroad. ‘While in Douala, I lived with relatives and eventually got employment with a certain doki expert.’ In Douala, he
recounted, there were many young men specialised in the business of furnishing clients with forged documents to travel abroad. ‘It’s big business’ he emphasised. He revealed that most of these doki guys were involved in feymania. ‘My employer, Moukoko was a feyman’ he said.

Moukoko had set up an office equipped with a phone, fax and a computer.

I was paid 3000CFA per day, but as you know, Douala is an expensive city. It was just enough to get by. Moukoko’s company was registered at the Chamber of Commerce in Douala and part of my job was to go there regularly to pick up catalogues of businesses in Europe. At the time, the internet was not yet very popular as it is today. When we got the information we needed, we then communicated with a potential business organisation in Europe and asked them for an invitation letter, expressing interest in establishing a partnership with them. It was a lengthy process to obtain invitation letters for clients.

Although Moukoko’s business was registered as a sales agent for imported products, none of such transactions ever took place. His real business was ‘trafficking’ clients abroad as ‘businessmen’ in return for a huge fee. His network included among others, an agent at the customs department in Douala who was responsible for the rapid supply of passports on demand and bank agents who supplied a variety of traveller cheques.

A typical transaction went as follows: Moukoko’s company writes to company X in Europe, introducing itself as a giant retail company in Douala with Y million of CFA as its capital and interested in a range of products offered by company X. Excited at this potential windfall, company X dispatches its most recent catalogue by UPS. After studying the catalogue, Moukoko and his boys then order a certain quantity of goods - usually, a huge quantity. When the transaction is accomplished except the payment, Moukoko informs his business partners at company X how extremely costly it is to send the money through the formal banking institutions because of administrative fees., He proposes instead to send one of his employees on a business trip to company X who, he claims, would not only bring the payment but also use the opportunity to explore further business partnerships with company X. Invitation letters are then
requested for the prospective business visitors. Convinced by the alleged credibility of
Moukoko’s company, company X proceeds to furnish an invitation letter, which serves as a key
document for a visa application.

Kevin revealed that he was employed at a period when Moukoko’s business had suffered
a major setback owing to the introduction of stringent visa regulations at the French embassy,
which had been his principal port of transaction. Kevin recalled excitedly how he successfully
helped Moukoko to diversify his business to other countries where business was carried out in
English. ‘You know, Moukoko was Francophone and couldn’t speak English. I assisted in
writing letters to these European companies, especially those in the Schengen zone’ he said.

Kevin maintained that he made a total of six attempts to obtain visas from various
embassies - once at the Greek embassy, twice at the German embassy, once at the French and
Spanish embassies respectively. None of his applications succeeded. ‘My brother said I had bad
luck. He could not understand why I could not get a visa.’ Faced with rejection, he sank into
depression and lost a lot of weight. ‘I completely lost focus. I didn’t know what to do with my
life. I started discouraging people not to put all their plans in going abroad’ he said, painfully. He
even insinuated that he would deliver a talk on this during “formation time” so that others could
learn from his experience. ‘That’s how I wasted an entire year of my life’ he said. He revealed
that his pain was aggravated by the fact that most of Moukoko’s clients succeeded while he was
always rejected. ‘After a year of trying and not succeeding, my sister asked me to return to
Bamenda. She said I needed to take a break.’ His employer, Moukoko also advised him to seek
the services of a diviner to ‘find out’ what was blocking his path. ‘I simply laughed when he told
me this. My people don’t believe in those things, so I didn’t bother. They simply told me that
perhaps, it was not yet my time and everyone asked me to exercise some patience.’
Reflecting on his experience, Kevin recalled that Moukoko’s was a very profitable scheme. ‘Clients were charged about a million francs but I can say with certainty Moukoko’s expenditure per case hardly exceeded 400,000 CFA.’ He said a majority of the clients came from the South West Province (one of the two Anglophone provinces in Cameroon). Each month, about eight persons were successfully sent who often travelled as businesspersons in search of new markets or to participate at trade fairs. ‘If I had continued with school, I would have completed my undergraduate studies by now’ Kevin said. ‘Now, I’m not sure what I’ll do and my family is very concerned.’

During my fieldwork, at least three NBA members were involved in arrangements to travel abroad but none had materialised at the time of my departure. For many, the enthusiasm to migrate (perceived as a form of achievement) holds the key to their transition to social adulthood.\textsuperscript{112} This obsession is driven partly by the ostentatious display of returned migrants, popularly known as ‘bushfallers’ (cf. Fokwang 2003) who often convey the impression that migration holds the magic answer to the maze of protracted youth and blocked opportunities.

In the last decade, an unprecedented number of young Cameroonians have sought political asylum in Western countries – now a popular and speedy trend to obtain legal papers in Western countries. Although some of these claims are based on genuine persecution in Cameroon, a growing number of them draw on spurious cases intended to procure the relevant papers that would permit them to remain in these countries. Whether obtained on genuine or spurious grounds, the growing numbers of political asylum applicants significantly undermine

\textsuperscript{112} Even persons with limited financial means have opted to go through the ordeal of crossing the Sahara desert. See \textit{The New York Times}, ‘Migrants reported found in desert’ By Craig S. Smith Friday, October 14, 2005, http://www.iht.com/bin/print_ipub.php?file=/articles/2005/10/14/news/morocco.php accessed on 8 December 2005 in which several Cameroonian youths are reported to be among other West African youths on route to Europe. In 2005, a French photojournalist, Olivier Jobard, documented the death-defying crossing of a young Cameroonian man of 23 through the Sahara desert which is currently available as a documentary on http://www.mediastorm.org/0010.htm.
the credibility and legitimacy of Cameroon’s claims to democratic rule. In the last five years, the
United Kingdom alone has received more than 2000 applications for political asylum from
Cameroonian, especially by alleged SCNC activists who accuse the Biya regime of
harassment and brutal killings. Most of these are young people between 25 and 35. Similarly,
the increased involvement of young Cameroonian women in internet marriage transactions has
provoked a moral panic – leading to campaigns by the Ministry of Women Empowerment and
the Family aimed at curbing ‘cyber-marriages’.

These trends, troubling as they may seem, represent young people’s desperate attempts to escape economic and political exclusion.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the political subjectivities of young people in Old Town based
on their individual and collective consciousness in relation to state authority or rather, state
exclusion. In the eyes and minds of many young Old Towners, the postcolonial state represents
par excellence, a stumbling block to their transition to social adulthood. The current
configuration of the postcolony is faulted for excluding young people from socio-economic and
political domains, thereby leading to the protraction of their ‘youth’ – a category associated with
ambivalence, unpredictability and uncertainty. In Old Town, many young people feel doubly
marginalised – as youth and as Anglophones – profound feelings of disillusionment that have
convinced many to throw their weight behind the SCNC’s cause as a potential alternative to their
present predicament.

114 A growing number of Francophone asylum seekers also allege to be SCNC activists.
115 See ‘Girls Told to beware of Cyber Marriages’ in The Post, No. 0668, Friday May 20, 2005, page 6 and ‘Internet
marriages fuelling prostitution in Europe’ in The Herald, No. 1645, Monday 23-24 May 2005, page 8; also see
Young people in Old Town do not see themselves as completely victimized and excluded by the state; they still retain some amount of leverage - expressed not only in their vibrant criticism of the Biya regime and even John Fru Ndi, the opposition leader, but also in their power to abstain from participating at elections. Many feel that partaking in ‘staged-managed’ elections is a form of legitimizing the rigging machinery of the Biya regime and boycotting it is perceived as an expression of their agency – rooted in the conviction that young people deserve better. Hence many young people do not only report that they have boycotted past elections but also indicate their plans to abstain from future polls.

I show that the refusal of young people to participate in poorly managed elections constitutes just one strategy of voicing their disenchantment with the postcolonial state. Two other options I explore – which have strong political implications, consist of the setting up of a counternation by disenfranchised young men and the unprecedented euphoria surrounding young people’s desire to migrate in search of greener pastures. I demonstrate young people’s preoccupation with the quest to migrate by drawing on individual and collective experiences – many of which have not materialised. The challenges of obtaining visas notwithstanding, I show that the economy of faux dossiers feeds on and in turn is fed by the growing determination of young people to migrate from Cameroon – understood here, not just as an economic quest but also as a political statement of protest. Indeed, the setting up of counternations fuelled principally by an economy of faux dossiers demonstrates a mockery of the so-called legitimate state characterized by limited and exclusionary spaces and opportunities.

Perhaps, even more relevant to later discussions but evident in this chapter is the crisis of the state and postcolonial citizenship. Young people’s predicament as seen in this chapter highlights the ‘inconsistencies and contradictions’ of citizenship, particularly that ‘not all
individuals have equal access to the state, that citizenship is a mediated relation determined at least in some measure by social positioning’ (Werbner 1998:7). In fact, many young people in Old Town and Cameroon in general, are not only excluded from what Jones and Wallace (1992) have termed ‘semi-citizenship’ but are expected to embrace ‘deferred citizenship’ through constant reminders that they are leaders of the future and should wait for their own turn (cf. Biya’s 1998 Youth Day speech). However, this chapter shows that young people are not ready or willing to defer their citizenship but are actively and creatively involved in negotiating their exclusion by positioning themselves at the leading edge of appeals for the reconfiguration of the postcolony.
Chapter Nine

Being Young in Old Town

Dynamic societies, whatever their social or political philosophy maybe, will rely mainly upon the co-operation of youth. As long as there is a will to make a new start, it will have to be done through youth. The older or intermediate generations may be able to foresee the nature of the forthcoming changes, their creative imagination may be used to formulate new policies, but the new life will be lived only by the younger generations. They will live the new values which the older profess in theory only. *If this is true, the specific function of youth is that it is a revitalizing agent. It is a kind of reserve which only comes to the fore if such a revitalization is wanted for adjustment to quickly changing or completely new circumstances*” (Karl Mannheim, quoted in The Canadian Youth Commission 1948, italics mine).

A major challenge for young people in Old Town is to attain social adulthood – a status that remains elusive for a majority of them owing to deep and personal experiences of structural violence that undermine and threaten their dreams. Their individual and collective predicament notwithstanding, young people in Bamenda, like elsewhere on the African continent ‘refuse to yield easily to despair’ (Nyamnjoh 2006:4). Writing about surviving in circumstances of profound uncertainties, Nyamnjoh observes that it is thanks to ‘their ability to manoeuvre and manipulate, and thanks to the sociality and conviviality of their cultural communities’ that Africans have refused to surrender to marginalisation (2006:4). Central, although not exclusive to this sociality and conviviality is the role urban youth associations play in negotiating exclusion and urban marginality – aspects that have been under-studied with respect to young people.

In constructing their worlds through a range of practices and social projects, young people’s actions (both instrumental and unintended) take on various dimensions whose consequences deserve a closer look. Some of these include the gendered implications of associational life, the production and articulation of local moralities, civic activism and its
relationship to citizenship and political action, as well as the predicament of youth in Cameroon which I conceptualise as the product of diverse subjectivities that result from different positionings and power relations. I contend that despite the troubling challenges young people face, their determination to make meaningful lives in situations of profound anxiety and crisis underscores the view that ‘youth’, in many respects is a signifier of possibility.

**Associational Life and Gendered Subjectivities**

Community or voluntary associations in Africa have played vital roles in the socio-economic development, not only of its members but also of the constituencies or areas such associations claim to represent (Wallerstein 1964; Little 1972; Little and Southall 1973; Kerr 1978). Many urban associations such as the three associations under study often seek to contribute to the general welfare of its members by providing socio-economic support for its members (see Lentz 1995 for similarities in north-western Ghana). In Chapter Five for instance, I showed that the Chosen and United Sisters, in addition to their socio-economic projects, also made provision for health-care needs. With limited or no access to similar services formerly provided by the national government, these associations have become self-reliant development agents (cf. Fonchingong 2006; Fonchingong and Fonjong 2002) – a trend that continues to grow in contrast to the state’s diminishing resources and legitimacy. Steeped in the habitus of associational life, these groups draw on local cultural dispositions in the Cameroon grasslands, indicative of what Nyamnjoh (2002b) has termed ‘domesticated agency’. This model of agency sanctions the pursuit of individual or group goals within a socially predetermined frame that emphasises conviviality with collective interests (2002b:115). According to Nyamnjoh, individuals and groups in the Cameroon grasslands place ‘premium on interdependence’ without
necessarily sacrificing individual creativity and self-fulfilment. This sociality of interdependence captures in many ways the experiences of the various youth associations in Old Town – which collectively provide a strategic platform against which young people can dramatise their maturity and consequently make legitimate claims for social majority.

An important dimension, already obvious by now but which needs to be highlighted is the fact that associational life among young people in Old Town is significantly gendered. Youth associations in Old Town were not only organised on the basis of seniority but also on gender. The NBA for instance, consisting at the time of my fieldwork of predominantly unemployed young men, tended to construct and display signs of what Waller has termed productive masculinity, which provided them with a sense of credibility and respectability in the neighbourhood. Productive masculinity is often associated with the world of work and responsible citizenship. It is the kind of masculinity predicated on men’s ability to work, provide for their family and ensure the general welfare of their family and kin-network or community. But unlike most members in the female associations who were self-employed in the informal economy, most young men in the NBA often identified themselves as ‘applicants’ – meaning unemployed. As applicants, they could not easily assume to be “productive” young men unless they redefined their understanding of what it meant to be “productive”. Thanks to their involvement in the NBA, many young men tended to emphasise that the activities undertaken by the association were worthy causes, pursued on behalf of the community and aimed at the ultimate development of the neighbourhood. In this sense, they saw themselves as providers for the community.

Furthermore, some of the activities undertaken by the NBA, and some individual members’ interpretation of these can be understood with reference to notions of hegemonic
masculinity. This form of masculinity legitimates and values among other things, hierarchy, risking taking and physical toughness (cf. Connell 1995; Haenfler 2004). The NBA’s incorporation of a rigorous and frequent hygiene campaign, physically challenging tasks such as the maintenance of road networks in the neighbourhood and ideologically posing themselves as the foremost youth organisation in the community constitute constructions of hegemonic masculinity.

Mathew Gutmann (1997:400) maintains that masculinities have little meaning except in relation to women and female identities, a claim that has strong resonance with inter-associational identities in Old Town. The above interpretations amongst others reveal that young men in the NBA tended to construct and express their masculinity by contrasting their actions to those of young women in the Chosen and United Sisters. In this respect, certain practices were identified as expressions of femininity, which ought to be excluded from the NBA. For instance, the NBA generally opposed the adoption of a uniform for its members, equating the possession of uniforms with female extravagance and contrasting this to their sponsorship scheme of disadvantaged children in the neighbourhood. The absence of sport in both female associations and the fact that both groups placed premium on choral music with assigned ‘choir mistresses’ constituted practices employed by young men to present themselves as distinctly manly and athletic.

Youth associations played a critical role in the formation and articulation of various identities and subjectivities. Through involvement in youth associations, we see that individuals can indeed occupy multiple subject positions some of which they define for themselves and others defined for them. This is particularly evident with respect to the role of associations as sites of disciplinary practices where young people positioned themselves variously as moral
agents and sought to define or police each other’s conduct. By assuming the moral high ground, individuals and associations once again displayed signs of maturity and positioned themselves as decisive agents of change and moral regeneration.

The Paradox of Moral Renewal

As I have shown in Chapters Six and Seven, the position and positioning of youth in society has been as a ‘revitalizing agent’ or a sort of vital ‘reserve’ critical for the renewal of society. We have been accustomed to discourses that portray young people either as ‘errors of the past’ or as ‘terrors of the present’ in the words of Jean and John Comaroff (2005), portraits shrouded in negativity. They are often constructed as a people in crisis, a population to be controlled and contained (cf. Lipsitz 2004:x). This moral and civic panic among older generation owes its recent origins to what Diouf (2003) has referred to as the eruption of youth into the public sphere in the early 1990s. At the core of this panic, he argues, is their sexuality, perceived as ‘unrestrained and threatening for the whole of society’ (Diouf 2003). However, the weight of history reveals that the perception of youth as a threat or rebellious category did not occur only in the 1990s but has precedents in the precolonial and colonial episodes116 (cf. Waller 2006; Warnier 1996).

The negative portraits of youth notwithstanding, young people have also been at the forefront of moral and civic campaigns for renewal – practices that are sometimes fraught with contradictions and inconsistencies. In this thesis, I have shown that young people in Old Town carried out elaborate schemes aimed at the moral regeneration of their community – often conceptualised as fighting against social ills. Unlike the popular uses of ‘morality’ in

116 Waller (2006) contends that ‘the need to control young people and to channel their energies in socially productive ways is a common theme in precolonial tradition’ – an indication of older generations’ attempt to curb the potentially disruptive power of youth.
anthropology that seek to ‘bypass the complexities and contradictions of such traditional social
scientific concepts as culture, society and power’ (Zigon 2007:131), I use ‘moral’ in the sense
employed by the study participants embodying a range of responses to what they perceive as
general moral breakdown or societal crisis. All three associations under study frequently justified
their fight against social ills as critical to their raison d’être and identity. Each group outlined a
series of prohibitions whose most severe sanction was expulsion from the association. Several
individuals met this fate in the Chosen and United Sisters. Transgressions such as sexual
promiscuity or abortion were seen not only as bringing dishonour to the association, but were
also said to undermine its broader quest for moral regeneration. Unlike the female associations,
the NBA did not explicitly associate certain types of immoral behaviour (sexual promiscuity for
example) with dishonour or as contradictory to its agenda of fighting against social ills. By
emphasising a causal relationship between sexual morality and the association’s reputation,
female groups in Old Town reinforced, perhaps inadvertently, patriarchal order and hegemonic
masculinity in particular which values and legitimates men’s sexual prowess (cf. Haenfler 2004).

Given the analysis above, to what extent can youth be considered a revitalizing agent?
Evidence from the activities of the youth associations in Old Town point to their collective desire
and conviction that society or their neighbourhood specifically is in dire need of moral and
physical renewal. Like youth associations in other countries and historical conjunctures that have
clamoured to reclaim and restore society to a Christian social order (see Espinosa 2003 for
Catholic Youth Associations in Mexico in the early 20th century), youth associations in Old
Town perceived themselves as revitalizing agents, as potent forces leading the quest for social
renewal against the backdrop of a decaying moral fabric. Informed by local discourses and
Christian ethos, many were convinced that Cameroon’s crisis was not only economic but
fundamentally ‘moral’\footnote{Similar sentiments were recorded among the Beti of South Cameroon by Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2006). She observes that frequent reference was made to \emph{la crise morale} that had torn the social order apart, a predicament that many often traced to the onset of the economic crisis.} and despite the general atmosphere of disillusionment, they were certain of their proactive and vanguard role in ‘fighting against social ills’ and in constructing a moral community, however refractory and fragmented. Despite the challenges these groups faced, they won communal approval and respectability for not only trying but also for making their voices heard. Indeed, Old Town has achieved tremendous social and moral transformation occasioned by the innovative activities of various youth associations – evidence of which can be witnessed in the association’s disapproval of wanton behaviour, charitable donations and sponsorships and importantly, the integration of ‘formation time’ as a regular feature of weekly meetings. Young people’s proactive commitment to restore social and moral order in Old Town underlines the claim that they are not an ‘inarticulate mass whose needs, desires and dreams can only be fashioned and voiced by more knowledgeable and experienced elders’ (Sharp 2003:76).

Through their involvement in moral campaigns, the associations in Old Town highlight two critical issues worthy of mention; first, they lay claim on social adulthood – a cherished and desired social status that remains elusive for the bulk of young people. Constructions of social adulthood in the grasslands of Cameroon emphasise among other things, self-control, interdependence and conviviality. The position of moral guardians, reformer or adviser is usually the privilege of the elders (people abundantly endowed with wisdom, experience and patience). By positioning themselves as reformers, as moral crusaders, young people assert their claims to social adulthood. This “will” to social adulthood is buttressed by the negation of ‘youth’ as an undesirable status associated with ‘social ills’ and moral incompetence. And through their crusades, they highlight the elders’ failure in restoring social harmony – as well as their
willingness to supplant the elders who have allegedly reneged on their moral functions. Young people’s pursuit of the moral regeneration of Old Town is mirrored by their passionate involvement in sanitary operations that aim at renewing their lived environment. This activity not only displays signs of young people’s claims to maturity but it also reveals an emergent form of citizenship worth exploring.

**Emergent forms of Citizenship**

One of the key activities of youth associations examined in this thesis is involvement in hygiene operations – a sort of social activism which emphasises ‘cleansing’, sanitation and renewal. These activities also have deep moral undertones – that is the fight against delinquency and social ills – (a sort of metaphor of the “immoral” garbage that has littered the environment thus compromising the health and well-being of the neighbourhood). The metaphor aside, sanitary operations undertaken by youth also carry with them, expressions of citizenship. Holston and Appadurai (1999) observe that cities provide the lived space where the ‘uncertainties of citizenship are experienced’ but on the other hand, they constitute the scope against which ‘emergent forms’ of citizenship are expressed (1999:3).

Citizenship is often understood as a social status that derives its legitimacy from the state. Critics have argued that the claims of democratic citizenship are not only false (cf. Werbner 1998) but also that the dominant framework for understanding citizenship remains ‘bounded’ or

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118 The position of moral reformers by young people rose to the extreme in South Africa during the apartheid era. Ramphele (2002) for example notes that the apartheid setting provided context for profound generational struggles between old and young. ‘With the blurring of divisions between men and boys’ she observes, ‘came role reversals and ambiguities. Young ‘comrades’ presiding over ‘people’s courts’ between 1985 and 1988 publicly flogged errant male heads of households who were reported by their wives or children to have been neglectful or abusive…’ (Ramphele 2002:49).
chained to the nation-state (cf. Nyamnjoh 2006) – an association that needs to be interrogated and deconstructed.

Critics have also argued that citizenship should be understood not only as a gendered category (cf. Walby 1994) but also as a social status distinct from both political participation and economic (in)dependence (Prokhovnik 1998:84). Such a conceptualization, Prokhovnik contends, needs a radical redefinition of the public/private distinction to accommodate the recognition of citizenship practices in the private realm. Thus, citizenship needs to be understood as broader than the political or the social/economic articulated through a diversity of practices.

Building on this conceptualisation, young people’s hygiene operations can be analysed as expressions of citizenship – private actions which young people have elevated into public assertions of their right to a clean and healthy environment. These campaigns, as Mamadou Diouf observes on similar trends in Dakar, suggest that ‘youth are redefining the spaces of legal citizenship and erasing their nationalistic attributes and referents, thereby questioning the state’s authority to define citizenship’ (Diouf 1996:248). This vibrant trend also draws on communal notions of conviviality where societal welfare is seen as predicated on both individual and collective responsibility. Seen through their practices, young people highlight the claim that there are many locations of citizenship and that its attributes and practices are diverse. Finally by denying the state its primary role in defining citizenship, young people reject their positioning in a hierarchy of false citizenships that demands of them to defer their accession to full citizenship or to access its elusive benefits by proxy.

Another dimension of young people’s refusal to yield to the illusion of citizenship by proxy or deferred citizenship can be highlighted by the intensity of young people’s efforts to leave Cameroon. I analyse the recent wave of migration as a quest not only for social adulthood
but also as the pursuit of alternative forms of citizenship. In many regions of Africa, migration has been experienced as *a rite de passage* for young people. However, migration assumes more than simply the quest for better living conditions but is also infused with strong material and symbolic meanings. For others, it is seen as an emancipatory endeavour (cf. Timera 2001) as migrants look forward to returning to their homelands ‘to give something back to the elders’ and to win respect and honour, attributes that underline social adulthood. For an increasing number of young people from the grasslands, this perceived emancipation is fraught with ambivalence precisely because relatives back home allegedly make insatiable demands for remittances on the assumption that migrants enjoy superabundant luxuries (cf. Nyamnjoh 2005).

This notwithstanding, many young people in Bamenda and Cameroon in general engage in a growing number of schemes that promise a better future for them beyond the borders of Cameroon. They anticipate that through migration, they may accelerate their accession to social majority and consequently economic and social citizenship. Precisely because of schemes such the Diversity Visa programme run by the US government, Cameroonians in general and young people in particular aspire to what Nyamnjoh (2006) has referred to as ‘flexible citizenship’- that is, the ‘freedom of individuals and communities to negotiate inclusion, opt out and opt in with total flexibility of belonging in consonance with their realities as repertoires, melting pots or straddlers of various identity margins’ (2006:240).

These mechanisms point to young people’s creativity in the face of harrowing circumstances. For instance, the setting up of a counternation by disenfranchised young men has facilitated the trade in faux dossiers utilised in obtaining visas for travel abroad. Whilst these ‘twilight economies’ might be perceived as essentially criminal, its advocates point to its empowering potential as avenues that restore hope not only to its entrepreneurs, but also to the
beneficiaries – most of them, young people faced with blocked or limited opportunities. Through these strategies, young people seek to end the protraction of their youth or what James Côté (2000) has referred to as “arrested adulthood” and to lay claims on social adulthood with its implied or perceived benefits, ambiguities and responsibilities.

**Being Young in Cameroon**

In this thesis, I show that the processes of positioning and the production of personhood are largely experienced through involvement in associational life. Being young in Old Town is a blend of ambiguities, uncertainties, hope, resilience and ingenuity. I have analysed the ways in which young people seek to circumvent their marginality by exploring the intersubjective role of voluntary associations which structures without necessarily determining the course of individual action. On account of its diverse memberships and socio-cultural activities, associational life allows young people in Old Town to make visible and legitimate claims on social adulthood.

Endowed with agency like other human actors, young people are positioned as well as they position themselves in society. Like other socially constructed categories, I understand youth as a position in movement, a social being straddling the world of social adulthood and youth. This specific kind of subjectivity cannot be compared to the liminal phase because it only captures the position of a subject passing ‘through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state’ (Turner 1969:94). The young people encountered in this work embody attributes of both youth and social adulthood without belonging fully to either. As youth, they are social juniors or cadets (not on account of biological age) but the structural positions they occupy. As young people, they consistently make claims on social adult status, sometimes through their marital status or by the range of socio-economic and communal
activities pursued at individual and collective levels. I explain this straddling of both worlds by employing a combination of the transitional model and the concept of personhood and subjectivity – which are products of power relations and different kinds of social positionings. We see that for many young people in Old Town, they are positioned as social cadets while in various ways and at different conjunctures, they make legitimate claims on the world of social adulthood – thanks to the fact that some of them are parents who organise “born house” ceremonies, sponsor disadvantaged children, donate gifts to the disabled, prizes to pupils and regularly carry out hygiene operations to clean up their environment. Their determination to build a moral community of responsible young men and women underscores their positioning as moral vanguards. By controlling fellow members’ sexual and moral lives, they contest the characterisation of youth as sexually loose and delinquent – in exchange for the self-restraint and level-headedness associated with adulthood.

Young people’s citizenship experiences and structural positioning in the postcolonial state lead us, not only to rethink popular understandings of youth but also of state-centric definitions of citizenship. By drawing on anthropological notions of personhood, this study renders intelligible the contradictory and ambiguous position of young people in a postcolonial context that is itself undergoing tremendous strain and stress.

We also see that the position of youth cannot be fully understood without recourse to changing meanings of personhood in the Cameroon grasslands which tend to construct youth as a ‘social cadet’ in the words of Warnier (1996). A social cadet, Warnier maintains, is defined and defines himself as an empty vessel lacking the means to fill itself. Through his or her positioning in the hierarchy of credibility, the cadet seeks to fill and be filled by the vital substances required for social reproduction. Thus, the youth or social cadet, considered as a person – is a product of
various kinds of positionings and negotiations – ‘a constant work-in-progress’ whose complexity is shaded by gender, generation and class (cf. Comaroff & Comaroff 2001). Thus, the status of youth as a socio-cultural construct is understood as a vessel – half-full, half-empty – an ambiguous state simultaneously potent and fragile.

This study also points to the re-emergent role of associations in negotiating everyday life in the face of crisis. It is a significant contribution towards understanding voluntary/communal associations in general and young people’s construction of their world through associations. Previous studies of associations have tended to focus on women, home-village associations and elite associations. Further ethnographic studies of young people’s lives with particular focus on gender dynamics could contribute towards our understanding of what I have referred to as the gender of youth.

Acting as individuals and as members of associations, young people in Old Town, despite themselves, have articulated that indeed, youth does not only look to the future, but is a negotiated status of the present. Living in a world where fantasy is now considered a social practice (Appadurai, 1991:198) young people in Old Town occupy *par excellence* the emergent spaces where the global meets the local. Their fantasies do not often translate into reality but their practices are grounded on imaginative and extraordinary patterns, intended to legitimise their transition from social cadetness to social adulthood. Their struggles constitute a remarkable refusal of victimhood the opportunity of a last laugh.
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