

# MEN STAY AT HOME WHILE WOMEN MOVE OUT: NEW TRENDS OF MOBILITY TO CHINA AMONGST BAMENDA GRASSFIELD WOMEN (CAMEROON)

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**Abstract:** This article examines the mobility of women from the Bamenda Grassfields to China. Prior to the improvement in road and air transport, men had always been seen as those who move out and thus the breadwinners in the family. However, there is an increasing shift from this paradigm and recently with advancement in road and air transport female migrants have in many ways become the breadwinners of their families thus changing the socio-cultural norms hitherto unknown in the region. Women's mobility in the past was linked to spousal reunions or for family reasons. Drawing from archival and secondary sources, oral interviews, and secondary sources this article argues that the new wave of mobility of women from the Bamenda Grassfields to China has altered previously perceived notions of men as breadwinners of the family and has led to a new dynamic in this region with women becoming more assertive. These women have come to represent what is known as "China Women" and they have fundamentally challenged patriarchal roles and control in the cultural fabric of the sub region. What accounts for this new wave of migration to China? To what extent does this phenomenon impact on the existing notion of men as breadwinners? The article concludes that the stereotypical view that conceives women as sedentary to stay at home and look after the livestock and children while their husbands move in search of family incomes has been challenged by the women of this region.

**Key words:** *women migration, Bamenda Grassfields, Cameroon, China, Bamenda*

## Introduction

Migration the world over is not a new phenomenon. Yet women do not seem to have taken centre-stage in academic discourses with regards to migration. The traditional pattern of migration within and from Africa which was male-dominated, long-term, and long-distance is increasingly becoming feminized. Anecdotal evidence reveals a striking increase in the migration of women. A significant share of these women is made up of migrants who move independently to fulfill their own economic and social needs; they are not simply joining a husband or other family members. They move in pursuit of their independent ambitions as well as to improve the standard of lives for their families. This process has been dubbed as the feminization of migration.

At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century we are witnessing a rapid feminisation of migration, especially at the transnational level (Bjeren 1997; Buijs 1993; Chant and McIlwaine 1995; Knorr and Meier 2000; Almquist 1994; Barker and Feiner 2004; Bottomly 1975; Gabaccia 1994). This has seen the movement of female maids from South East Asia to the Middle East and from Latin America to North America (Chant and Radcliff 1992; Castles and Miller 2003). Women professionals from West and Southern Africa, such as nurses, to the United Kingdom and Middle East, as well as internal and regional migration of women within West Africa for commercial purposes (Adepoju 2006). Yet the movement of women from Africa to South East Asia has not yet been the subject of any significant research; a gap which reflects the dearth of work on south-south relations more generally. This paper aims to contribute to this much needed research.

The literature on women's geographical mobility has shown how this form of migration came much later than that of the male. Clifford (Clifford 1992: 183), observes that 'Good travel (heroic, educational, scientific, adventurous, ennobling) is something men should do. Women are impeded from serious travel. *Some of them (women) go to distant places but largely as companions...*' In other words, women were always believed to have travelled in conjunction with men. There is evidence, however, that European women, at least, travelled alone as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the geographical mobility of African women sketched here suggests a different picture. The mobility of women as independent agents as demonstrated by the women of the

Bamenda Grassfields resonates with other women in Africa and has occupied some space in research landscapes. For instance, Barnes (Barnes 2002: 87) studied the migration of women in Southern Africa, especially between South Africa and Zimbabwe during the colonial period. She employed statistical, documentary and oral evidence to critique the dominant paradigm that women were silent observers of migration in colonial Southern African historiography. She stated that ‘when historians follow the dominant model and consider mobility, travel, and migration *a priori* as male preserves, African women are automatically consigned to mass immobility. They are barred from centre stage and frozen in perpetual economic childhood’.

Using the concept of ‘navigation’, Both (Both 2006) has sought to understand girl migrants and young women in Ndjamena, Chad. The work aimed to contribute to a ‘broader understanding of the positions of girls and young women in Chad’. Both concludes among other things that ‘the girls are not only being shaped by the urban structures, but partly shaped themselves...’ Kihato (Kihato 2009) has also researched the migration of women from different parts of Southern Africa to Johannesburg. She concludes that these women used different methods to find themselves in different locations in Johannesburg.

Thus the movement of women to China in as much as it paints a different picture also contributes to the literature on women as independent migrants who moved without being dictated to by the men. Their mobility was not mostly informed by economic imperatives as the case of Barnes and Both has shown. While some earlier studies in Ghana draw attention to the effect of women’s migration on their lives and reproductive roles, most current studies emphasize the economic and social independence and reproductive role of women and young females. The changing labour market trends and the rising participation of women in the global workforce have increased opportunities for skilled female migrants. In the area of health care, women dominate the nursing sector and have formed a large part of the skilled labour migration out of Ghana. Nurses and midwives form the majority of health worker migration in Ghana. Although several studies have been undertaken on the migration of skilled healthcare workers from Ghana and its impact on the health care sector, very little has been done in terms of a gender analysis of the Ghanaian health workers. However, research on this topic is still quite rare and scanty with special focus to

the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. The Bamenda Grassfields has most often been considered as a peripheral context, but this article wants to highlight and place it within a context of global processes that have a long history. The people of this region had been involved in the trans-Atlantic slave trade as well as long distance trade since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Warnier 1981).

In Africa South of the Sahara, rural to urban migration has been historically held as a male-dominated affair dating back to the period of long distant trade/bush trade. The restrictive colonial policies and socio-political patriarchal controls which were embedded in most African societies (Manchara 2003) were assumed to have seriously curbed female migration. Colonial labour policies, for example, whether German, British, French or Portuguese resulted in the mobility of men into urban and semi-urban areas of Africa in search of paid jobs while women were expected to stay behind in rural areas to care for livestock and look after the children and farm the land. (Boserup 1970; and Khasiani 1995). The improvement in Information Communication Technology (ICT), the increase in the educational opportunities and in “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (Giddens 1990: 63-78). All these happenings have triggered the mobility of women from their areas of origin to areas which could provide their daily needs. In a broader perspective this article also fits into the historiographical debates on global history and historical processes on different levels: trans-regional history and interconnectedness. Drawing from Patrick Manning’s (Manning 2006: 175-195) article on “Interactions and Connections ....” in which he describes and analyzes interactions forms the backdrop through which I position this article. The article will then take up the discussion on migration more generally prior to migration to China. It would be imperative to review migration trends in Cameroon in general and the Bamenda Grassfields in particular in order to understand China as a new destination and a domain which women have competed successfully with their male counterparts. The dynamics of such migrations will be discussed further taking empirical evidence from the women who were implicated in the process.

## Methodology

Several methods were used to gather the data for this paper. Although a much more contemporary topic it was imperative to historicise it. Consequently, I found the archives quite relevant. The Buea National Archives situated in Buea, Cameroon was used. Although with much difficulty, because some of the files were destroyed by termites and rats, I made use of files which showed statistics of people who have been migrating from the Bamenda Grassfields to coastal Cameroon. The gaps which existed in the archival documents were filled by two methods: First, I conducted interviews with the women who were implicated in the process. These interviews were more unstructured than structured because with this method questions were not pre-arranged and through this I allowed spontaneity to prevail. Consequently, questions were allowed to develop during the course of the interview. Secondly, I used a method which is closer to social sciences-personal observation. I observed some of these women who had migrated to China and back and how they differed with their peers in what they had accumulated. The inequalities were striking in terms of the houses and cars which they ran in direct contrast to those who had not migrated to China.

In a broader spectrum, the article challenges the widely shared stereotyped image of African women that while men moved they were sedentary. The case of female migrants from the Bamenda Grassfields of Northwest Cameroon going to China recently has altered this perceived notion of sedentary women in migration literature thus providing new binoculars to look at this form of migration and thus adds to the debate. The article becomes more relevant as these women have gradually become breadwinners of their homes - something which was long held by men. Apart from becoming breadwinners these "Chinese Women" have also embarked on building modern houses, owning "putsch" cars which in itself is a novelty in the historicity of migration in the region. This new form of mobility and new found wealth is liberating women from the shackles of male domination, the corollary being a disregard for patriarchal controls which for a long time restricted them from mobility.

## **Migration in Bamenda Grassfield History**

The area of concern, the Bamenda Grassfields of Northwest Cameroon, is a marginal area as regards to its infrastructure and economic development. This situation has partly led people to move out of the region, hence a long history of mobility developed since the pre-colonial, colonial and post-independent epochs. The everyday life of many Cameroonians in this area is inextricably linked to mobility. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century this sub-region received new aggressive people who were described by early anthropologists that they were fleeing from the North of Cameroon. Once in the Grassfields they embarked on building very strong centralised states which incorporated some weaker states and consolidated the stronger ones. The area therefore experienced much migration as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

That was not too unique to Bamenda, it was a process that was going on elsewhere in Africa. Besides, the socio-cultural oecumene of this region is central in the explanation of their ever-mobility, a point which was first touched by Warnier & Rowlands (Warnier & Rowlands 1978) and later developed by Nyamnjoh (Nyamnjoh 2002). This mountainous area was both a refuge area for people fleeing the wars of the big empires in the Sahel-Sudan zone of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, as it was an area where kingdoms were vested. These kingdoms settled in valleys but only after they had been itinerant for a long time. These kingdoms are notorious for their wars and multiple displacements. The mountains offered protection to the people and a good vestige for the kingdoms that in the course of an itinerary history settled there. Under the German rule which lasted from 1884-1914, a plantation complex was developed in the Southern coastal part of the area, transport developed at a snails-pace, roads were best suited for wagon drawn carts. After the First World War the British took over this region and administered it as part of the Eastern provinces of Nigeria and as a result, English was the lingua franca. That explains why the name of this region today including Bamenda is known as Anglophone Cameroon.

Pre-colonial Cameroon experienced tremendous migrations. The trend of migration was generally from the north to the south. The Islamic jihads which were launched by the Islamic cleric, Usman don Fodio to purify Islam in Northern Nigeria directly affected the Northern part of Cameroon and consequently forcefully pushed many people

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from the north to the south of the country (see Njeuma 1978; Fanso 1989, Nkwi & Warnier 1982; Ngoh 1996). Besides, the slave trade of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century also forced many people from this region who were sold into slavery. They moved from this hinterland to the coastal part of the country where they were shipped for the American plantations (Rowlands 1978; Chilver 1961; Nkwi 2011).

Furthermore, trade in the Bamenda Grassfields was one of the main factors which influenced the migration of people. Chilver (Chilver 1961: 233-258), Warnier (Warnier 1980a: 79-92), Kopytoff (Kopytoff 1981: 371-382) and Rowlands (Rowlands 1979: 1-19) studied the region with regard to trade and migration. This trade was regional and long distance. The direction of the movement of people from the Bamenda Grassfields was towards the coast which included the Cross River basin, the Wouri estuary and Bimbia (Kah 2009: 220). Most of the articles of trade included amongst others, palm kernels, palm oil, mats, blacksmith equipment like knives, spears, dane guns and cutlasses. Reversed migration to north is rare and usually takes place when people prefer to commune with family friends or take holidays. The rare situation of any mass migration to the north can be explained from the harsh Sahelian conditions. Secondly, the north is predominantly Muslim as compared to the Christian south. However, government policies of transferring public civil servants from one region to another for balanced development have also occasioned people migrating towards the north from the south. This notwithstanding, traders also migrate to the northern areas to buy commodities which they in turn sell in the south. These commodities include amongst others groundnuts, onions and cattle which are in demand in the south.

The perennial south migration needs further explanation. Within the littoral quadrant of Cameroon there is a heavy concentration of different economic activities which include amongst others industry, trade and commercial agriculture. Migration to this region is often by young male youths from rural areas in search of job opportunities or to set up petty trade. Recently young girls have also undertaken such migration as housemaids, baby sitters, prostitutes and bar attendants (Nkwi 2014).

## Women Migration from the Bamenda Grassfields to Coastal Cameroon

In order to fully appreciate and understand female migration from the Bamenda Grassfields to China it is relevant to locate the problem in history. Readings in the migration literature in Africa seem to suggest that it was male dominated. This trend of events was partially true until recently when it was challenged. Initially, in colonial Cameroon which was accompanied by the opening of a plantation complex in the coastal part of Cameroon, labour was attracted from the hinterlands. Yet women were never given the opportunity to migrate. This was as a result of the recruitment policy which was put in place by the colonial system. The policy excluded women from being recruited to work in the plantation because they would act as detractors to the males and as a result minimised production (Konings 2012). Consequently, everything was done to exclude women from migrating to the coastal plantation. Measures put in place colonial overseers to control labour, enforced by messengers deterred women from migrating to the plantations. Perhaps, another deterrent was the high death rate recorded in the plantation that instilled fear in women migrating to the coastal plantation or any towns in Cameroon for labour purposes.

However, the absence of women in migration to the plantations did not go on *sine die*. In 1954 and 1957 respectively, two tea estates were opened - one in the littoral quadrant of Cameroon and the other one in the Northwest region of Cameroon (Konings 2012: 7). From a purely gender perspective the opening of the tea estates was to open a new caveat in the migration history of the Bamenda Grassfields women. While plantation labour continued to rely on male labour, the tea estates constituted a radical break with the *status quo ante* and the old tradition of holding women back at home (Konings 2012: 8). From the very start, a large number that was recruited to pluck the tea was predominantly women (Konings 2012: 9).

The colonial gender discourses have tended to describe paid labour outside the home as being masculine and it gradually started to define men as the 'breadwinners' and women as 'dependent housewives'. Several authors have also rightly and arguably suggested that colonial officials and employers were initially inclined to support resistance by male elders to female migration and wage employment that could



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undermine the latter's control over women's vital productive and reproductive labour (Obbo 1980; Moore 1988; Gordon 1996) Some of the authors have also added that colonial employers promptly recognised that keeping women's productive and reproductive labour in their communities would serve capital accumulation by reducing male labour costs (Meillassoux 1975; Safa 1979; Wolpe 1980). Although such arguments have combined to exclude women from the world of migration the situation appears to be more complex and dynamic than was previously thought.

Its complexity is simply explained on the grounds that neither male opposition nor colonial ordinances did completely prevent women from migrating especially to the commercial urban areas. Urban centres became cynosures for females to escape rural patriarchal domination and build up a relatively autonomous existence following a personal crisis in their family status, such as widowhood or divorce and deteriorating economic conditions in rural areas (Konings 2012: 10). Everywhere in Africa migration had a painful consequence for women as they had to endure the stigma of being branded as prostitutes or loose women for the rest of their lives (Obbo 1980; Stichter 1985). Colonial reports indicate, as Ruel was to argue (Ruel 1960: 236-237), that women who attempted to migrate were pursued and forcefully brought back to their rural villages<sup>1</sup>. Ruel showed that some of the Upper Banyang chiefs of Cameroon travelled to the coastal towns of Cameroon in 1953 to round up, with the help of the police, women from their own ethnic group who had been found loitering and to repatriate them. The chiefs sooner or later discovered that even when they succeeded these women simply went back to the cities.

The failure to keep these women in check indicated a radical reverse of the traditional way of looking at female migration. Quite recently, women are recruited mostly from the Bamenda Grassfields to work as housemaids and some as baby sitters in homes in most Cameroonian cities. Some have moved to Yaounde, Douala, Victoria and Buea to

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1 File Qe (1926) 2, Labour and Industrial Conditions, National Archives Buea (NAB); Qe (1929) 1, Labour Ordinance no. 1 of 1929 (NAB); File Qd/a (1932) 11, Plantation Labour Inspections: The General Subject; (NAB); File Qd/a (1940) 5, Plantation Labour Inspection: Reports Victoria Division; (NAB); File V, 787, Sf 1938/1, Measures against Prostitutes; (NAB); File 929, Sf (1943) 2, Child Prostitution in Lagos 2, Prostitution General, (NAB); File 1020, Sf (1941) 1, Traffic in Women to the Gold Coast, (NAB); File 730, Sf (1939) 2, Traffic in Girls to the Gold Coast, (NAB); File 2374 vol.111, Ca (1942) 1, Provincial Annual Report 1944.

start petty trade in a variety of items like pepper, huckleberry, corn, beans, and groundnuts. The introduction of mobile phones and the opening of call boxes (telephone booths) or kiosks also led to the mass migration of young girls from the Bamenda Grassfields to the major cities of Cameroon to seek employment and work inside these call boxes. Through that they improve the standard of living back in the Grassfields (Nkwi 2009).

Female traders engaged in petty trade have significantly contributed to the family income. They assist their husbands not only in the provision of basic necessities but also help to contribute to the school fees of the children and pay hospital bills when need arises. One of the informants, Marianna is a renowned business woman who deals in Irish potatoes and pepper. She buys from markets in Bamenda and sells in Douala and Buea. She confirmed in an interview that she makes three trips per week and her net gain per month is between 250,000 and 300,000 CFA Frs (euro=500). According to her, this money augments the meagre income of the family who depends much on the husband's income as a hawker.

Another woman, Julia deals exclusively in huckleberry. She has been doing this business since 2002. She said:

*“When my husband died in 1999 he left me with five children to take care of them. I had no means of income to feed them, pay their fees and provide medical attention when it was needed. I started following my neighbour Beatrice in this trade. In our group we use to be sometimes fifteen and sometimes twenty moving down to the South (Douala, Buea and Limbe) with different goods to sale. With that I raised money and now the children are big.”*

In the 1980s and 1990s with the introduction of the neo-liberal reforms and the economic reforms which affected Cameroon and Africa, women were to face new challenges and difficulties. However, with the emergence of China as the new economic hub as well as the improvement in air transport led women to turn to China timidly for economic salvation. As the demand for Chinese goods increased, it also witnessed a rise in the number of women that redirected their line of trade towards China.

## China, the New Destination

Several dynamics appear to explain and justify this recent trend in the feminisation of migration more especially to China. The general argument here is that women migration to China represents a new type of migration. Historiography has failed to take into account the earlier less visible movement of women which shows that the migration of women to China does represent a shift in scale of movement from before. Cross et al. (2006) suggest that the trend is sparked by increasing poverty at the household level, creating the need for more women to move to look for work to supplement the meagre salaries of their husbands. In the same vein, Adepoju (Adepoju 2006) maintains that fragile ecosystems make subsistence farming risky, and the economic crisis that has caused many men to lose their jobs, resulting in women finding ways of supporting the family hence migration from rural to urban areas, often in pursuit of self-employment in the commercial sector. Making a further case as regards to female migration Adepoju (2010) opines that the rise in proportions of women migrating is partly due to improved access to education and training opportunities, making women more employable both locally and internationally. Furthermore, Casale and Posel (2002) support the contention that there is an increasing need for women to enter the labour force, however, they also highlight changes in household composition and the reduction in marriage rates as factors in the feminisation trend.

The motives of migration in history have been discussed a lot. These factors are grouped into economic, social and political. These aspects contribute to female migration to China as China has come a long way from the authoritarian state and is more friendly towards foreigners (blacks). The domestic industrial growth of China as well as the socio-economic situations in Cameroon have added to the above to make China a destination of choice. Cameroon and China established diplomatic relations in 1971 and following the agreement Cameroon imported trucks, textiles, farm and agricultural products such as rice. From Cameroon, China imported mostly cocoa and coffee. Sino-Cameroon relations were cordial and sometimes actually benefitted Cameroon. For instance, in 1975, a Chinese medical team arrived to Mbalmayo in Southern Cameroon and within a short time, the team's medical expertise and dedication had transformed the relatively obscure Mbalmayo hospital into a major hospital as patients from all

over the national territory flooded to Mbalmayo to receive medical attention. In 1986, the Lagdo hydro-electric complex was completed at a huge cost of 41,000 million CFA Francs. With that electric plant Cameroon became the second largest producer of electricity in Africa South of the Sahara. In terms of trade Cameroon and China recorded startling statistics between 1971 and 1982.

Table 1 below shows some of the trading statistics between Cameroon and China in millions of francs:

**TABLE I**

**TRADE RELATIONS BETWEEN CAMEROON AND CHINA**

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>CAMEROON IMPORTS FROM CHINA</b>	<b>CAMEROON EXPORTS TO CHINA</b>
1971	5, 680 Million Francs CFA	2,375 Million Francs CFA
1976	3, 373 Million Francs CFA	473 Million Francs CFA
1980	6, 217 Million Francs CFA	320 Million Francs CFA
1982	6, 500 Million Francs CFA	480 Million Francs CFA

**Source:** Ngoh 1986: 291

A look at Table I shows that in 1971 when the agreement went operational Cameroon imported goods from China worth 5, 680 Million Francs CFA and exported goods worth 2,375 Million Francs CFA. In 1976 alone, Cameroon imported goods worth 3,373 Million francs CFA from China and exported 473 Million francs CFA worth of goods to China. In 1980 Cameroon imported 6,217 Million francs CFA worth of goods from China and exported 320 Million francs CFA worth of goods to China. Generally, the trading figures show that it was not in the favour of Cameroon. However, it also suggests that China was economically viable and attractive to migrants.

While the Chinese economy was buoyant that of Cameroon was degenerating. By the mid 1990s the economy of the Cameroon state was ailing. This was aptly described by the headlines of *La Nouvelle Expression*, February 24-27, 1995, ‘La Banque mondiale prévoit: encore un demi siècle de misère pour les Camerounais’ (The World Bank Forecasts: Another Half-a-Century of Misery for Cameroonians).

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Between 1988 and 1992, Cameroon's productivity was the worst among forty-one African countries from which statistics were collected (Takougang and Krieger 1998). The public service sector was in fragments as salaries were not paid regularly despite salary cuts from 70 to 40 percent. Retirement age was enforced at 55 years of age with pensions as problematic as salaries. The 100 percent devaluation of CFA Franc in 1994 took an additional toll (Nkwi 2006: 97). Unemployment was at 25 percent especially amongst university and professional school graduates. There was real misery. As a result in the boom in Chinese economy and a downturn in that of Cameroon, Cameroonian women from the Bamenda Grassfields seized the opportunity to migrate to China for trading purposes in order to ameliorate the worsening social and economic conditions in which most families found themselves. This was done with largely unforeseen consequences on the region of departure.

Trade appears to be one of the factors which has led to the migration of women from the Bamenda Grassfields to China. The women of the region have been quite enterprising since the economic downturn in the mid 1990s. They travel to China and purchase goods of various kinds which includes amongst others, dresses, artificial hair, shoes, household goods and cosmetics just to name but a few. Official statistics are missing but during the research a head count suggests that out of two hundred women traders around Bamenda metropolis ninety were mobile traders who had been going to China. One of these women who gave her name as Juliana deals in cosmetics and artificial hair. Her husband went on voluntary retirement as a result of the devaluation of the Communauté Franc Afrique (CFA), making life more difficult. He could not meet the childrens' fees and their health bills. Julia who before then was just a seamstress got a loan and started going to China. She owns a very big shop employing workers in the shop and housemaids at home. She had eventually taken over what the husband used to do as she could pay the children's school fees and even foot their hospital bills. According to her "I think that I am lucky because through my efforts I can cater for the family at a time when my husband is unable. Of course he used to do it when everything was fine."<sup>2</sup>

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2 Interview with Julia, Old Town, Bamenda, 23 July 2012.

Another woman in the social class of Julia was Beatrice. She has been going to China thrice every year and deals in all assorted types of Chinese ceramics. She recounted that she had been introduced to the business by her elder sister. Importantly, the income she makes a year is in the neighbourhood of 2.5 million or €2,500. With this amount of money she has been able to build a two apartment house and also runs an Lexus jeep.

The connection between trade and mobility is well-known to students of Africa and has been well documented. For instance, Dike (1956) in his *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* has shown how through trade the Niger Delta was peopled by waves of migrants. Curtin (1972) wrote a critique of the slave trade which was essentially and ultimately about trade and mobility. In a similar vein, Meillassoux (1971) established the connection between markets and indigenous trade in West Africa. Zeleza (2003) has shown how pre-colonial trade was conducted in North, West, South and Central Africa and the nodal points as well as goods which were traded. All of these studies, directly or indirectly link trade and migration in Africa. Andersson (Andersson 2006: 375-397) has shown how the trade led to the migration of people from the Mzimba district of Malawi and how the traders were responsible for bringing in South African goods into Malawi. Van der Laan (Van der Laan 1992: 531-547) traced how trade led to the migration of Lebanese traders to the West African coast. Eades (1993) did similar work on enterprising Yoruba traders from Western Nigeria who established successful trading networks throughout the Gold Coast. In a similar way, Pfaff (Pfaff 2007: 61-88) has demonstrated how she followed two Zanzibari traders on their journeys. The nuances and differences with the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon are unique. Women have taken the frontline in trade in this sub region.

In the Bamenda Grassfields, scholars have also carried out some excellent works. Trade in the Bamenda Grasslands and Kom was one of the main factors which influenced the geographical mobility of people. Chilver (Chilver 1961: 233-258), Warnier (Warnier 1981: 79-92), Kopytoff (Kopytoff 1973: 371-382) and Rowlands (Rowlands 1979: 1-19) studied the region with regards to trade and migration. Neither the literature on Africa nor the Bamenda Grassfields have adequately positioned women. These women prefer China because through it they will likely make a quick turnover and also because Chinese goods

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are comparatively inexpensive and there is high demand in the sub-region. Margaret is one of the trading women who lives and owns a shop in Bamenda, the capital of the Northwest Region of Cameroon. She started going to China in 1995 and they were 15 in their group. As time went on the number increased and as by 2000 there were close to 100 women going to China from the Bamenda Grassfields alone as traders. The Bamenda Grassfields' experience of trade was similar to that elsewhere in pre-colonial and colonial Africa. As Pfaff points out these traders not only transported goods but more importantly newness and new ideas into the home region. As makers of new wealth and bearers of new ideas they were bonded as a new class with a new identity and formed a new social stratum.

These 'new women' or Chinese women have fundamentally altered the cultural norm which used to be the domain of men and have given rise to apprentices or 'boy boy' category. Although this has been an ongoing issue since the colonial period, it has taken a new twist now. A new twist in the sense that it is usually the privilege of men to have apprentices and 'boy boy' but now it is women. They are mainly recruited by these women to help out in the family chores and business places as well. After working for an agreed number of years they are given a lump sum amount of money which they call "settlement". The female 'boy boy' now could open up her own business and also start going to China provided she had accumulated enough capital. In certain instances some of the apprentices became part of the 'family' of the trader.

Another factor which has been responsible for female migration to China has been education. Following China's global emergence, the country developed a new curriculum that emphasizes the teaching of English Language to the 'new Chinese youth'. This led to the active recruitment of English teachers to China. This recruitment drive further gave opportunities for more women to migrate to China as teachers. Clementina was born in 1978 in Kom, Bamenda Grassfields. After her elementary and high school she went to the University of Yaounde, Cameroon where she read English literature and modern languages. She got married to Nicholas Mbi in 2000. In 2004 she migrated to China where she taught the English at a high school and later at the University. While in China, Clementina regularly sent 650,000 CFA Francs (1,000 euros) to her husband every month. Clementina's case

was not an exception as a similar communication with Beatrice, Judith and Caroline revealed the same situation.

Apart from migrating to China for education and/or trading purposes there are also other women who occasionally go to China only to purchase household goods not for retail. Such women accumulate money or take loans and travel to China with their fellow peers. They purchase household equipment which includes refrigerators, gas cookers, window and door blinds and tiles. The reason which they gave to me was simply that the things are cheap when they are bought from China than when they are bought in Cameroon Grassfields. Angelina put it graphically but in a creolised pidgin language “I di go China because ting them over dear for dis kontri” (“I go to China because things are very expensive in Cameroon”). Equipped with this social visibility as shown in the new household goods, these type of women could easily be differentiated from their friends who had no opportunity to travel out.

## **Conclusion**

Physical mobility of people from place to place as individuals or as groups is essentially horizontal, potentially limitless, and generally motivated by the desire and ambition to take advantage of new opportunities for self or group advancement. Between 1990 when the economy of Cameroon and most African states experienced a downturn, and 2000, when there was a marked improvement in communication technologies the number of women travelling out of the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon to China have steadily increased. This spatial mobility was greatly facilitated and accelerated by ‘modern’ transportation and communication technologies like the internet and mobile phones and a reduction in airfares. A good number of women took advantage of this and have become the breadwinners of the family. In addition, they were the first women to become familiar with the building of new houses, possessed flat screen television sets, acquired and owned new cars and new cosmetics thus further distinguishing themselves as women of newness and the new ways. Restless and ambitious, through their mobility and by their daily encounters with the wider world, they did not only form a new status and identity when they returned home from ‘abroad’. With their outlook changed



they formed a new social strata and hierarchies in the society that enjoyed enhanced prestige and social status. Since Ester Boserup's (1970) seminal work on women and economic development in the Third World, studies have continued unabated to confirm her findings that women are not equal beneficiaries with men to the spoils of modernization and development.

As indicated in this article, there has been abundant literature to show that women are and have been moving as companions to their husbands. For instance, in Africa South of the Sahara, rural to urban migration has been historically held as an affair of men dating back to the period of long distant trade/bush trade. In other words it was male-dominated. This was partly justified by colonial policies and socio-political patriarchal controls which were embedded in most African societies (Manchara 2003). This article has shown that the migration of women to China from the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon has altered the perceived way of life of the people of the region that saw women as sedentary. The movement of women therefore and the accumulation of wealth by them in their own right could start pointing to a new understanding of women's mobility in trans-national migration literature. This is more crucial as it has shown changing mobility patterns from intra-national to transnational. That is from Northwest to Coastal Cameroon and later on to China. If well scrutinised the empirical data adds to knowledge on gender dynamics on migration especially in Cameroonian historiography. The Clementinas, Margaretes, Beatrices, Judiths, Julias and Carolines are representatives of the society dynamics and could also thus show the way to the new theorization of women's migration. Working very closely with them has so far shown that unlike in the past when men were the breadwinners and migrants, their movements to and from China have largely altered that conventional reasoning. Thus the debate on women and migration has moved to a new level.

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