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Women on the market:

Marriage, consumption, and the Internet in urban Cameroon

A B S T R A C T
In this article, I show how dramatic social changes in Yaoundé, Cameroon, are the product of women applying long-standing cultural schemata in a changed economic context. Marriage rates are falling precipitously, and growing numbers of relatively elite women are looking beyond the nation's borders for husbands. Yet, as these women seek foreign husbands, their models of marriage are largely transposed out of older forms of bridewealth: E-mail-mediated marriage draws as much on local history as on global politics. [*Africa, marriage, gender, honor, modernity, consumption*]

Since 1998, several thousand young Cameroonian women have sought European husbands on the Internet, advertising themselves as potential lovers, wives, and mothers on French- and U.S.-registered websites. Given rising global inequality and new technologies that make individual mobility across borders theoretically possible, this development may not seem surprising. Victims of the same global forces, Cameroonian women are perhaps merely responding to altered circumstances in the same way that eastern European and Southeast Asian women have done. I argue, however, that the rise of Internet romance as a social form in Cameroon is not only a consequence of late capitalism on the margin. Belying the Benetton-like e-catalogs juxtaposing images of women from Cameroon and Russia, the Philippines and the Ukraine, the meaning and motivation of e-mail-mediated marriage in the Cameroonian capital of Yaoundé derives more from local history than from global politics. Cameroonian women are seeking foreign husbands to fulfill local conceptions of proper womanhood and legitimate marriage.

Women's respectability in southern Cameroon has long depended on proper marriage, but marriage is increasingly vexed. Marriage rates have fallen, the rituals marking the transition to marriage have been altered and reordered, and women's expectations of marriage have changed. Over the last two decades, transformations in cultural meanings and in population rates in southern Cameroon have reinforced one another, and marriage has gone from a prerequisite for female adulthood to a sign of pecuniary honor (see Johnson-Hanks 2006). Nonetheless, marriage retains its symbolic centrality, and marriage to a European man has come to be viewed by many women as a viable "modern" substitute—perhaps even the best substitute—for what is locally construed as "traditional" bridewealth marriage. Schemata that link marriage to honorable forms of self-mastery and honorable forms of consumption have been transposed onto the dream of Internet-mediated marriages.

Since the early 1980s, anthropologists have increasingly come to see culture as incoherent, contradictory, and lacking clear boundaries. As

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transnational flows of commodities, people, and symbols increase, so do references to cultural pastiche, simulacra, and fragmentation (Baudrillard 1988; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Jameson 1991; Kearney 1995). This trend has been a significant intellectual advance, making possible the exploration of questions that were previously precluded by structural and functional holisms. Yet the resonance chambers of culture—in which a gesture reflects gender relations, which reflect myth, which reflects architecture—have not gone away. Cultural production can be polyvalent and innovative, but it cannot be completely unmoored from local practices and modes of meaning making. We need an analytic language that makes room for both contradiction and coherence, seeing social reproduction neither as mere simulacrum nor as the inevitable product of a cultural grammar.

In this article, I show how dramatic social changes in contemporary southern Cameroon are the product of people applying long-standing cultural schemata in a changed economic context. Marriage rates are falling precipitously, and growing numbers of relatively elite women are looking beyond the nation's borders for husbands. Nevertheless, cultural representations of what marriage is, how it works, and why it is important have changed only marginally. As certain women seek foreign husbands on the Internet, their models of why and how to marry are, for the most part, transposed out of bridewealth marriage. Young, educated Cameroonians knit together long-standing conceptions of honorable adulthood with new, global consumer aspirations in a context of economic retrenchment. What might appear to be disordered fragmentation is, instead, a series of permutations of a single underlying structure.

The structure I have in mind here inheres in the recurrent cultural patterning of social life—the system of institutions, expectations, assets, symbols, and paradigms that provide the context in which events occur and through which social actors can interpret those events. To say that structure is a system implies neither internal simplicity nor fixed borders. Rather, following William Sewell, I treat societies as "the sites of a multitude of overlapping and interlocking cultural structures" (2005:209), each of which arises out of the interplay of schemata and resources over time (2005:133–137). For my purposes here, the salient structures concern, first of all, gender and gendered stratification, but also family organization, consumption, and social ranking. Given these concerns, I build on several strands in feminist ethnography (esp. Abu-Lughod 1986; Brennan 2004; Constable 2003; Inhorn 1996; Mahmood 2005; Moran 1990; Rebhun 1999) and on recent contributions to the study of modernity and consumption (Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Farrer 2002; Gondola 1999; Ma 2001). In particular, following Jennifer Cole 2004, Mary Beth Mills 1997, Karen Kelsey 1999, and Priti Ramamurthy 2003, I suggest that the intersection of gender, identity, modernity, and consumption offers particularly fertile ground for analysis of structure and change.

Focusing on the life experiences of a group of young, educated women in Yaoundé who call themselves "yoyettes," I examine the content and reciprocal consequences of marriage and "modernity" through a gendered cultural history. Being *moderne* in Yaoundé is very important as part of a system of social ranking: an economy of honor.[1] (Throughout this article, I use the term *modern* in this emic sense.) Although enacted in a variety of domains, women's modern honor is most clearly visible in the social organization of food and sex, particularly as they articulate through marriage. Thus, bridewealth, canned peas, "sugar daddies," and the prospect of transnational Internet marriage are interrelated sites in which a gendered social ranking is worked out. Although they emerged in interaction with specific products, technologies, and potential futures associated with the rich West, the kinds of marriage and honor that many women in Yaoundé consider modern have deep local antecedents. Below, I trace the meanings of marriage as they move from conjuncture to conjuncture.

Although the women on whom I focus are educated and urban, they are not the most elite. I am not concerned here with the daughters of the grand ministers or large industrialists, who are sent to boarding schools in France or the United States, but, rather, with the class of women who have barely succeeded in attending high school for some period—just long enough to count them in the most educated 20 percent of women in the country and to give them hopes of white-collar jobs or of marriage to men with such jobs. Specifically, I focus on the yoyettes, unmarried women who were in their late teens and twenties in 1998 and who are literate and oriented to French and U.S. styles of dress, music, and food. The term *yoyette* and its masculine counterpart *yo* are derived from the interjection "Yo!" in U.S. rap music, and yoyettes for the most part consider the identity an international one, marking membership in a global youth community (cf. Farrer 2002). Many of them grew up dividing their time between the capital city, Yaoundé, and its hinterlands and speak French and the primary local language, Ewondo, equally well. The yoyettes are schoolteachers, store clerks, high school or university students, and businesswomen. Most residents of Yaoundé, and most yos and yoyettes, belong to the Beti ethnic group;[2] as a result, much of the cultural repertoire of *yoyisme* relies on a Beti sense of what makes a proper marriage or a viable husband. I, thus, refer to three partially overlapping social communities: residents of Yaoundé, Beti, and yoyettes.

Over the last century, the Beti have gone from independent, kin-based compounds to national elections and from swidden horticulture to incipient e-commerce. Catholicism has largely replaced local religious practices. French-language literacy has become commonplace. Yaoundé has become first a city, then a cosmopolitan center, with French and U.S. hotels and banks, two universities, and—since 1998—a flurry of cybercafes. The yoyettes were born between

1970 and 1980; they were the first generation born into a Cameroon where high school was a realistic hope for girls in the Central–South provinces who were not from the most elite families. These women were caught between rising aspirations, as women's schooling became more commonplace, and the economic crisis that gripped Cameroon from 1987 through the late 1990s and the resulting social crisis that, arguably, continues to this day. With the crisis, the poverty and uncertainty that were already widespread have acquired a name and a new urgency. Salaries are paid late or not at all; water, electricity, and telephones function erratically; and medical facilities are understaffed and have few supplies.

At the same time, residents of Yaoundé are acutely aware that the situation elsewhere is different, even though they do not necessarily know how. From CNN and *Beverly Hills 90210* on television, picture novels, and the images on CD covers, urban Cameroonian youth have well-developed ideas about distant places, and these ideas substantially shape their hopes, intentions, and self-descriptions. As elsewhere in urban Africa (cf. Heaton and Hirschl 1999), marriage rates have declined markedly; women have high hopes for marriage but little respect for its presently available forms. In a social field oriented to honor, respect for form matters intensely. Here—as so often—cultural representations and demographic patterns have been mutually constitutive: As the kinds of marriage that are possible fail to conform to cultural ideals, marriage rates decline. As more and more women reject undesirable marriages, the importance and cultural legitimacy of the ideal are symbolically reinforced.

I draw here primarily on fieldwork I conducted in 1996, 1998, and briefly in 2001. The original project focused on the relationship between schooling and fertility in Yaoundé and its hinterlands, and the fieldwork included classroom observations, open-ended life-history interviews, a formal demographic survey, time-use studies, and participant-observation with young, educated women in a variety of contexts. Marriage was an important topic of that research; Internet romance, however, was something that I stumbled on while in the field in 1998. I supplemented the fieldwork with a study of website postings by women from Yaoundé, primarily in 2002, 2003, and 2005.

True men and modern honor

> Young African girl with a very cool nature, 25 years, single without children, nice and kind, of profession: secretary, seeking a serious man of any continent, French or foreign, to establish a loving relationship in view of marriage. If you are not serious, stay away. Thank you.
>
> —Personal ad of "Martine" from Yaoundé, on coeuracoeur.com[3]

When certain yoyettes assert that they must now look abroad to find husbands who are "serious," they are—paradoxically—drawing on a set of assumptions about marriage, men, and honor that have long local histories. The figure of *l'homme serieux*—the dignified man, honest, calm, handsome, and capable—evokes the *mfan mot,* or "true man," of a previous era as much as it does the Hollywood stars whose pictures adorn the walls of hair salons, cafés, and *téléboutiques*. Among the Beti, the mfan mot was an autonomous man, lord of his wives and children, and bearer of pecuniary honor (cf. Veblen 1899) and a set of embodied dispositions that I have called "self-dominion" (Johnson-Hanks 2006).[4] Complete male adulthood consisted of the establishment of a new extended household and, with it, a new community. Philippe Laburthe-Tolra (1981:270) describes how the mfan mot built a house, married, fathered children (*bonde nda bot,* lit. found[ed] a house of people), and cleared virgin forest for his wives' fields (*bonde afub,* lit. establish[ed] a field).

Before the institutionalization of German colonial authority around 1900, there were no political authorities higher than the extended-household community; each mfan mot was, therefore, his own highest authority. Honor—a central category in Beti social ranking—inhered in the socially legitimated power for a free man to do as he pleased.[5] The ethnographer Vincent Largeau argues that, at the time of his research in the 1890s, Beti men perceived any threat to their autonomy as a direct assault on their honor, noting that "a self-respecting Pahouin [Beti man] does not take orders from anyone" (1901:22; see also Tsala 1985:219). Historically, then, honor was an element of male adulthood, consisting of the right to respect, autonomy, and privacy accorded to the mfan mot and, in principle, inaccessible to women. Women could not be said to have honor; Jeanne-Francoise Vincent (1976) describes how, in their subordination to men, wives were "like sheep." Thus, in the early 20th century, a man's dominion over women partially constituted his prestige vis-à-vis other men (Laburthe-Tolra 1981:356): Gender stratification was an important basis of social stratification.

Following Sewell (1992, 2005), I think of the early-20th-century social structures regarding honor as the product of schemata and resources. Schemata are habits of thought or representation, paradigms that orient action and interpretation. They may be deep or shallow, widely shared or idiosyncratic, but in every case schemata are the means through which people experience and respond to the world. Schemata are instantiated in the world of objects as resources; however, resources also have a material existence outside of schemata. Resources are material forms or reserves of value including not only forms of capital but also institutions, rituals, and authority. Among the Beti, long-standing schemata linked male honor to material success and dominion over women. These schemata supported—and were supported by—resources in the form of normalized postmarital neolocality and polygyny, along with an acephalous political system.

A critical aspect of Sewell's model—and one that he shares, for example, with Pierre Bourdieu—is that schemata and resources are in part mutually constitutive, both synchronically and diachronically. At any point in time, resources can only be mobilized in relation to some schema, and their value follows from the schema that they embody. The forms taken by institutions, resource distribution, and social networks depend, in part, on cultural schemata. Conversely, schemata cannot float free of resources, or at least not for long. Cultural schemata cannot develop or persist on their own: Social institutions, the distribution of material resources, and the structure of social networks all maintain and diffuse particular cultural representations while inhibiting the development and flow of others. As the physical incarnation of structure, resources ground schemata in the world. Although resources and schemata are interdependent, they are not perfectly mutually determined. The tensions or misfits between them are one source of social change. Because people necessarily make sense of the world through schemata (categories, paradigms, metaphors, typologies, etc.), new phenomena require us either to stretch and transform available schemata or to develop new ones. In either case, however, our schemata change in response to the world.

This process of stretching and transposition is clearly visible in the gendering of Beti schemata about marriage and honor. Over the course of the last century, the resources of postmarital neolocality, polygyny, and political acephaly were transformed through the expansion of school, market, church, and state. This produced new social conditions, to which available schemata did not fit. And so, honor stretched. In particular, it stretched to include women. As they became religious converts, teachers, and nuns—autonomous actors with self-dominion—women increasingly came to be seen as potential bearers of honor. Because of its relation to the institutions of Christianity and formal education, the honor of women is necessarily a partial product of colonial and postcolonial history and differs somewhat from that of men.[6] Nonetheless, its form also draws heavily on long-standing Beti conceptions of the honor of the mfan mot.

Both women's "modern" honor and the "traditional" honor of men weld together pecuniary and dispositional aspects. With the term *pecuniary,* I follow Thorstein Veblen in referring to the elements of the honor system related to the control of wealth. In the case of the mfan mot, the usage follows Veblen (1899:69) almost exactly: An honorable man achieved his position in part through control over land, women, and children (see also Trigg 2001). The pecuniary component of male honor was closely linked to a set of embodied dispositions, of structured and structuring ways of being in the world, particularly including a measured slowness in gesture and speech balanced with temporary, explosive ferociousness (Escherich 1938:53; Tessman 1913, vol. 2:241–242). I call this "self-dominion." It consists of self-control and freedom from the control of others and may be demonstrated in deliberate speech, in the careful guarding of secrets, or in the coordination of life-history events (see Laburthe-Tolra 1981:305). The value of self-control, and the autonomy of action that self-control indicates, must be seen in contrast to the radical uncertainty of almost everything else in everyday life. Today, as in the past, most Beti live in uncontrollable and unknowable circumstances: from violent weather to the timing of paychecks, the arrival of buses, and the functioning of offices. As throughout poor countries, death is common and disease more so, and both are expensive for the extended family. As these circumstances are perceived as uncontrollable and unalterable, the only honorable response is to endure them. In fact, the sympathetic response to a story of hardship is "patience."

The honor of educated women relates to that of men, although its grounding in a partially distinct set of institutional resources has required a series of partial schematic transpositions. In particular, the relationship between the embodied and pecuniary elements of honor has changed. In the eyes of the yoyettes, an honorable woman in contemporary Yaoundé is discreet, sexually restrained, educated, and financially successful. She is proud of herself and her achievements and respects herself. She is poised, calm, and serious. Perhaps most importantly, she is master of herself—of her desires, gestures, and even emotions. That is, in contrast to many well-known honor systems, a Cameroonian woman's honor is not merely a reflection of that of her husband or lineage but is something that she claims herself (cf. Hatch 1992:11; Stewart 1994:107). The self-mastery is achieved through rigorous discipline, especially the disciplines associated with schooling and Catholicism. Waking up at three in the morning to pray and then study for the public school exams is not only a method for achieving a good grade or entry into upper secondary school but is also a practice of instilling in the self a set of right dispositions. Sexuality and sexual self-mastery also play important roles in claims to honor; however, it is critical to point out from the beginning that complete sexual abstinence and bridal virginity are not the measure of female virtue, as in certain other honor systems (see Boddy 1989:76; Kressel 1992; Schneider 1971). Rather, it is wisely managed restraint, good judgment, and self-dominion that matter (Alexandre and Binet 1958:66; Laburthe-Tolra 1981:124).

I intentionally use the term *dominion* again here to draw attention to the fact that the honor of both men and women relates to control over women, but there is a fundamental difference between the objects of dominion in the two cases. A man must control women and children, but any woman or child will do. For a woman, by contrast, it is her mastery of herself—of her own desires, reproduction, aspirations, timing, and so forth—that is central to her status. This self-dominion is necessarily corporeal and is achieved through

explicit acts of self-formation, especially restraint vis-à-vis food, sex, and even sleep.[7] Such behavior illustrates how the system of gendered stratification implied by Tessman's ethnography has been transformed but has not dissolved: Women's claims to honorability remain secondary to those of men.[8] As Mary Moran (1990, esp. p. 169) has argued for the Glebo, women's status is more vulnerable than men's. Unlike those "civilized women" of southeastern Liberia, however, the Beti women who claim a modern honor are not entirely subordinated to husbands or lovers. Self-dominion does entail self-denial but also a certain autonomy.

Young Beti women, such as the yoyettes, talk about their practices of self-dominion as "discipline," meaning by that term something close to Bourdieu's concept of "habituation." Women say that nightly prayer, constrained food consumption, and the regular practice of sexual continence imbue them with habits and attitudes, the "systems of durable, transposable *dispositions,* structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (Bourdieu 1977:72) that Bourdieu calls the "habitus." Rather different from Bourdieu's representation, however, is the explicit and conscious manner in which young women in Yaoundé approach the reforming of their habitus. The yoyettes intentionally seek to be remade as disciplined, modern, and honorable women through the regularization of their practices; this is hardly the "practical knowledge not comprising knowledge of its own principles" (Bourdieu 1977:19) that the habitus classically encompasses.

Instead, these practices resemble how participants in the Cairo mosque movement analyzed by Saba Mahmood (2001, 2005) seek to attain piety through the intentional shaping of their desires, actions, and wills. This is a pedagogy of sentiment through which members of the mosque movement acquire proper exterior forms through the structured acquisition of specific emotional states (Mahmood 2001, esp. p. 843). Similarly, yoyettes seek to train their tastes and intuitions—such as their preferences for certain foods, ability to concentrate on homework or in prayer, or their "hunger" for sex—by rigorous practice. The process of achieving the honor sought by the yoyettes partially resembles the path to piety of the mosque movement. In both, "the role of conscious training in the acquisition of embodied dispositions" (Mahmood 2001:838) is central; women perform physical behaviors associated with specific intentional states to cultivate the inclination for those states. By performing the purportedly outward sign of an interior condition, members of the mosque movement and urban *petites bourgeoises* develop the habit of that condition.

Like men's honor, the modern honor of women is also—very deeply—pecuniary. As Jennifer Cole so expertly analyzes for the *Jeunes* in Tamatave, for the yoyettes, "consumption of consumer goods marks status quite explicitly" (2004:579; see also Mills 1997, esp. p. 43). Veblen (1899) proposes that conspicuous consumption of time and goods first represented honorable or distinguished characteristics, especially success in hunting and war, and then later came to be seen as itself honorable.[9] Thus, conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption may become admirable even when they do not indicate past efficiency, diligence, or success. As a first approximation, one can draw on the framework of conspicuous consumption to think of the social stature that the yoyettes ascribe to the woman who earns her own money through clean work, who dresses well and in a French style, and who is eventually married with a lavish bridewealth or to a European man. This model, however, leads only to a first approximation because of its inadequate approach to gender. Veblen argues (as do most scholars of honor; see Abu-Lughod 1986 for a notable exception) that honor is an attribute only of men. When women are adorned in luxurious clothing, he argues, they serve as stand-in consumers for their husbands. The fine dress of women marks the privilege—and therefore prestige—of men (Veblen 1899:171). This aspect of the model is not incidental: Men's control over women and women's labor is the basis of class inequality for Veblen, who therefore offers no direct way to theorize women's financial success or consumption as markers of their own honor.

Like their dispositional honor discussed above, the pecuniary honor of the yoyettes rests on an inherent contradiction related directly to the novelty and ambiguity of women's honor in southern Cameroon. On the one hand, young women in Yaoundé seek to earn their own money and to be financially independent of their husbands and boyfriends in a way that goes beyond the "separate purses" for which West African marriages have long been famous (e.g., Clark 1994:338ff.; Fortes 1949:102). Similar to the honor of men, the honor of Beti women rests partially on the sovereignty of a competent, independent individual.[10] On the other hand, husbands and boyfriends should express their emotional commitments in financial ways, buying women clothes, beauty products, and—later on—baby supplies. A Beti woman who is not thus cared for risks losing standing, as would a Bedouin woman who refused marriage and rejected the "honorable mode of dependence" described by Lila Abu-Lughod (1986). Almost every woman I knew in Cameroon in 1998 expressed a commitment to both aspects of women's honor, sometimes in the same conversation.

Talking about the respect that accrues to an independent woman who maintains herself without economic assistance from a man, one woman said, "I think that it is a question of self-respect first of all [that distinguishes certain women]. . . . They are very proud of themselves. They are honorable and so, because they are proud, they are not dependent. They work, and they love to be financially independent from their husbands." Another said, "I think that when a woman is honorable it means first that she restrains her sexual activity and second that she can earn a living all

alone, without waiting for the help of a man." These two quotes—the first from a teenager still attending high school, the second from a 56-year-old mother of seven children—are examples from literally dozens of instances in my interview and field-note corpus in which women equated female honor with their own labor and the concomitant economic independence from men. But just as consistently, the same women would talk about the honor of being in the care of a man who gives lavishly on a woman's behalf, particularly at the bridewealth ceremony, who supports a woman so that she is not reduced to selling cooked food in the street, and who ensures that everyone knows whose wife she is:

> For me, a respectable woman is one who keeps her image clean. When she passes, you know that this person here has to be respected. And then it is good to be [married and therefore] called Madame Such and Such. When someone says, "Here is Madame Such and Such who is passing" you have weight. But when you are unmarried, someone looks and calls you Miss. Even if you are 50 years old, they cannot call you Madame. They call you Madame, but you live with whom? They are going to say Madame Who? They are obligated to call you Miss.

And again: "A woman who has not had bridewealth paid for her in her village, her mother is not respected. Her relatives are not respected. She herself is not happy. So bridewealth, when someone pays bridewealth for a girl before marriage, it is a great joy for the family." These quotes illustrate that Beti women's honor—necessarily tied to colonial and postcolonial institutions and history—is also internally contradictory. Women must be both independent and taken care of, both in possession of self-dominion and possessed by a good man. Both parts of this fundamental contradiction resonate in historical echo chambers—the former as the honor of the mfan mot, the latter as the lesser distinction of the proper wife in a bridewealth marriage. Yet, as I discuss below, both also reflect international capitalism as it reaches into Yaoundé. Finally, the contradiction—irresolvable and basic to Cameroonian women's experience—directly affects how yoyettes think about sexual relationships and marriage and the kinds of husbands that they hope to find.

True marriage

The schemata through which contemporary Cameroonian women think about marriage are largely transposed out of bridewealth marriage. According to the older women I interviewed in 1996 and 1998, as well as the classic ethnographies (Alexandre and Binet 1958; Guyer 1984; Laburthe-Tolra 1977, 1981; Largeau 1901; Ngoa 1968; Tessman 1913), a Beti man's first marriage, called "mfan aluk," or "real marriage," should, according to tradition, be contracted in the following manner. When a young man begins to clear forest on his own behalf, his father and uncles will find him a bride. Senior men from the family of the young man approach the father or paternal uncle of the hoped-for bride, and after some deliberation, the two families agree on the amount of the bridewealth and on the time horizon over which it should be delivered. Although, in some cases, the couple would already have known each other and might even have been lovers for some time, when the two families agree on the bridewealth, the young man's nighttime visits to the woman's compound become an open secret. On some appointed date, the young man and his family come in procession, bearing gifts for the family of the bride. The bride remains hidden while her father or his representative evaluates the gifts against the previous agreement. If all is in order, the bride is given over to the groom's family, and the two families celebrate with a lavish feast and dancing late into the night. The extravagance of this feast can hardly be overestimated: Literally dozens of dishes, often including both roast goats and pigs, and imported wine, whiskey, and local palm wine are considered essential, and many families go deeply into debt to pay for the food for a bridewealth celebration. At some point, late in the night, the bride returns home with her new in-laws, most likely to the compound of the father of her husband, as, prior to marrying, her husband would not have established a fully independent household.

In the following days, the young bride is given a supply of pumpkin seeds, called "ngwan." Ngwan grows best (and, ideally, only) as the first crop on newly cut, virgin forest. It is a prestige crop par excellence, temperamental and demanding the best soil. Clearing such a field, called an "esep," is an essential part of a young man's transition to honorable adulthood. Not only is it the prerequisite for marriage and a first stage of establishing an independent compound but it is also symbolically important and does not have the same social effect if the work is hired out. Clearing an esep is also the most intense physical labor that Beti men perform.

On receiving the ngwan, the young bride begins the laborious process of cracking each seed and removing the soft kernel inside. The new bride then grinds the kernels on a low, long, and narrow stone mortar with rounded ends. To grind, a woman hikes up her skirt and crouches over one end of the mortar, holding it tight between her thighs. A sexual reading of these mortars is not at all foreign to rural Beti women, who may teasingly call their grinding stones "nnóm" (man or husband). Neither is it foreign to young men, at least some of whom consider watching a woman grind through the spaces in the wattle-and-daub of the kitchen walls to be frankly erotic. The ground pumpkin kernels are blended with water and spices, wrapped in banana leaves, and steamed over a fire. This is now *nam ngwan* (the dish of ngwan), and it should ideally be the first meal that a bride prepares for her husband. From then on, he will eat what she prepares, rather than eating from his mother's cooking pot.

Nam ngwan is the essence of conventional bridewealth marriage. Not only is its preparation extremely labor

intensive—an attribute that many women express as the basic nature both of local food and of honorable marriage—and, similarly, indicative of the skill of the cook but also it shows the partnership of the man and the woman. For nam ngwan to be successful, the labors of the man and woman have to be coordinated and reciprocal: The man clears the field and "plants the seed" while the woman gestates and cooks (cf. Delaney 1991; on the reciprocal nature of marriage, more generally, see Fortes 1949).

Young, educated Beti women now often say that they hope for a "modern" marriage, by which they mean a marriage that is monogamous, based on love, and eased by financial security. In addition to the various attractions that this form of marriage may have in and of itself, many women argue that modern marriage is the only option now: A proper bridewealth marriage is no longer possible, as the gendered reciprocity based in esep and nam ngwan has been lost. It is not that educated women want to marry farmers—they do not—but, rather, that the gendered exchanges embedded in nam ngwan provided an ethical framework for marriage, a framework that has not been fully replaced.

Marriage means eating

The conspicuous consumption of the bridewealth ceremony offers a first way to think about the honor of marriage for women. The centrality of food to notions of pecuniary honor is transparent: "Consumption" itself is a food metaphor, as is the "taste" that lies at the heart of Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of distinction, and, throughout West Africa, corpulence is one of the clearest signs of financial success. Eating is equally corporeal and thus relates to the embodied dispositions of the eater. Southern Cameroonian readings of honorable eating, then, integrate the elements of pecuniary and dispositional honor. Here, marriage means eating in at least three ways. The first is the literal eating of the bridewealth feast itself, whereby the abundant—even excessive—food that is widely shared both indicates and constitutes the prestige of the families involved, as Marcel Mauss (1967) has analyzed for potlatch. The second is the symbolic exchange materialized in the nam ngwan. Finally, eating and sex, which parallel each other as the prototypical loci for both aspects of women's honor, join in the institution of marriage.

The benefits of the conspicuous consumption associated with marriage accrue most of all to the parents of the bride, who receive lavish gifts from the family of the groom and partially redistribute them in the form of feasting. For the parents of a young woman, bridewealth may bring considerable financial advantage, an advantage that is also described as "eating," as in the following account that one young woman gave me of her friend's greedy father:

> When she was in 9th grade, she was going out with this boy. . . . One day the boy came to her house in the village during the school vacation. Her father knew that he was perhaps a boy of some means because . . . they had cacao trees and lots of other things in [their village]. He said: "Why does the boy come here with nothing in his hands? Why doesn't bring any presents at all?" The father was angry because he told himself that the boy was already her fiancé. He wanted to eat *(bouffer).* . . . Her father began to cause problems for her all the time. He said, "You eat the food he brings you all alone. You do not want to bring me the bridewealth. You do not want to have him come give the bridewealth for you." Me, I say that the father is perhaps a sorcerer! That is the first deduction that I made. That he must be a sorcerer, because . . . he wants to sell his daughter in the village.

In this passage, eating, marriage, and witchcraft come together. Improper eating is equated with witchcraft, in contrast to the healthful, proper eating of marriage. This resonates with common usage in both local French and Ewondo: *Bouffer* (Camfrançais) and *ad'i* (Ewondo) have similar ranges of meaning and metaphor. Both refer not only to literal eating but also to witchcraft, Catholic communion, and corruption and are important linguistic elements of bridewealth marriage and symbols of marital union. Unlike most Bantu languages (Rowlands and Warnier 1988), Ewondo uses *ad'i* to denote the consumption of healthful food that sustains the lineage, of kinsmen as part of a witchcraft initiation, and of communion wafers. This range of resonances makes eating a critical conjuncture in the formation of contemporary identity.

Marlyse, a 17-year-old woman, explained that she had grown up in Yaoundé and had been raised eating canned peas purchased from the elegant food-import stores in which European expatriates also shop. Then came the economic crisis, and her father lost his white-collar job. As often happens in such a case, the father had then sent his wife and children to his natal village, where they could farm and, therefore, live cheaply. Staying in the village, Marlyse explained, was not so bad, except that she had steadily lost weight, being unable to digest the available foods. Regarding *kpem,* the local mainstay prepared from manioc leaves, palm oil, and peanuts, Marlyse said, "It does not correspond with my organism, because I was raised with modernity," whereas the canned peas that she had eaten as a child "go better with me. They do not cross me, because I am already habituated to them." Marlyse's description of herself was of a modern girl of the most concrete, physical kind: a modern princess, whose true nature is revealed by a pea. As Michel Rowlands argues, here the consumption of modern goods performs both pecuniary honor and optimism about future advantage and is "deeply rooted in the anxiety generated by the desire for modernity as success" (1994:149).

Canned peas are construed as modern because of their provenience (shipped from France), their expense, and their

association with new, innovative forms of cuisine: light, quick, and simple. All of these attributes stand in opposition to kpem, which takes hours to prepare and is praised for being solid food. The new cuisine is particularly important to the educated yoyettes, as it relates to fundamental changes in the marriage bargain. Easily prepared and free from much of the symbolic weight of kpem or nam ngwan, canned peas—alongside crepes, omelets, pasta, and frozen chicken—can be prepared quickly after work or made by a hired domestic without danger of witchcraft or adultery. Easily prepared food plays an important role in the making of modern marriage. With the dissolution of the system of cutting esep fields and men's withdrawal from farm labor, men can no longer make their primary contributions to the labor exchange of an earlier ideal of marriage and—symbolically—to the preparation of nam ngwan. In response, some yoyettes argue that a woman's obligation to prepare the traditional, labor-intensive dishes has gone as well. Many young women agreed with my interlocutor who said that "today the woman cooks and the man just eats." This set of social changes provides some of the background for the following exchange in a 12th-grade philosophy class:

Teacher: But now you are free, with modernity. You can even give the keys to the kitchen to your little son. But there! That means divorce!

Student: But Madame, the yoyettes don't cook.

The teacher begins by equating modernity with changing gender roles, particularly with changes in who may cook. But because women regularly give cooked food to the men with whom they are having sex, the wife's giving up the keys to her kitchen might be read as refusing sex. The student sees the relations differently. Modernity should offer women freedom from Veblen's "irksomeness of labor." For this student, as for many, feminine modernity is expressed in a life of consumer comforts shared with a devoted husband. Canned and prepared foods, along with the chance of hiring domestic help, mean that the yoyette might look forward to a life of relative ease. Thus, modern marriage replaces with shared leisure the labor exchange that characterized bridewealth marriage (see also Ramamurthy 2003:538). In this way, marriage remains both a central social aspiration for young women and a key locus for the making of women's honor, even as its forms are changing.

The routinized state of crisis

As men gave up felling and farming and moved to the city, cultural schemata of marriage as labor exchange were replaced by aspirations of marriage as shared leisure. Men's cash incomes became both structurally and symbolically important to their status as bridegrooms and husbands. Although bridewealth cannot be paid exclusively in cash, all of the commodities necessary for a suitable ceremony can be bought; although men no longer clear virgin forest, the most successful build extravagant homes in which to found their families. Because of the centrality of economic success to men's role as husbands, the economic crisis of the late 1980s and 1990s mattered for marriage.

In 1986, Cameroon earned over 800 billion CFA from exports.[11] In 1987, that value scarcely exceeded 500 billion (Asuagbor 1994:41). Between 1986 and 1993, both household expenditures and the GDP per capita fell more than 40 percent, as shown in Figure 1. From this grew *la crise,* a disintegration of socioeconomic order that persisted long after the official indicators of economic decline had reversed. Civil-service salaries were cut twice, and the currency was devalued by 50 percent in 1992 as part of structural adjustment. The effects of la crise, however, are as much social as economic. In 1998, many Cameroonians spoke of a generalized distrust caused by "la crise morale" (for excellent discussions of the effects of economic crisis in Africa, see Ferguson 1999 and Vavrus 2003). In both 1998 and 1999, the nonprofit international watchdog Transparency International declared Cameroon the most corrupt country in the world.[12]

The extreme volatility in economic and social life associated with la crise extends almost everywhere, from the most mundane to the most intimate. To some degree, the forms of radical uncertainty that Cameroonians attribute to the crisis are simply endemic to all poor countries and certainly existed before the crisis. Still, all of these forms of insecurity or ambiguity are culturally represented as resulting from the crisis and contribute to the lived experience of a "routinized state of crisis" (Mbembe and Roitman 1995). Prices for schooling, health care, and housing are unpredictable as are wages; even government employees are not paid reliably. Most employment opportunities are filled through social networks or kin relations, rather than according to formal skills or job experience; few people have access to formal credit. Buses do not run on schedule. Electricity and running water go out regularly, even in Yaoundé. In the rainy season, roads wash out, the electricity fails, and sewers back up. Insect-borne diseases like malaria seem to strike more or less at random, the water-borne and sexually transmitted ones, from cholera to HIV/AIDS, only marginally less so. Mortality rates at all ages are high, and death is often unpredictable. In addition to shifts in education, corruption, and prosperity, marriage and fertility patterns have also changed. Many Beti women claim that la crise has made it more difficult to contract an honorable marriage, as fewer and fewer men are able to assemble the requisite bridewealth. Others assert that the moral crisis has made men less trustworthy or less sincere in love. Either way, Cameroonian women looking for good husbands feel that they have to look longer and harder than in the past.

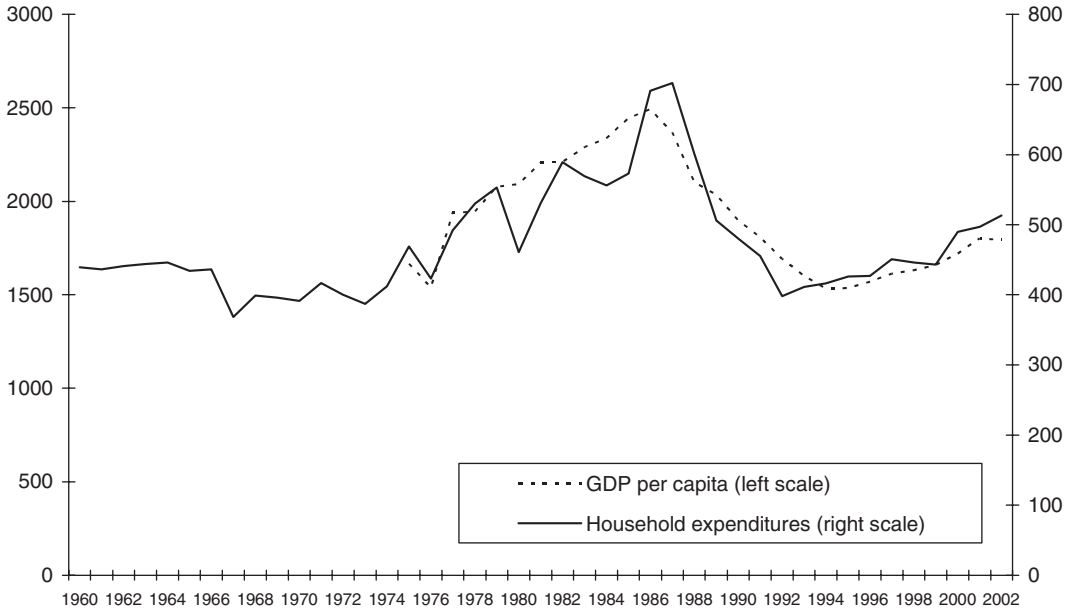

Figure 1. GDP per capita and final household expenditures in purchasing power parity constant 1995 dollars. Source: World Bank WDI Online; http://publication.worldbank.org/WDI. [subscription required]

What makes a good husband?

> My name is Moline and I am 24 years old. . . . I have a modern allure and smile often. Many things interest me: music and reading. I would like to meet someone active. My great desire is to discover France. . . . My skin is the color of chocolate. I speak French fluently. I read it. I write it. I am looking for a man 26 to 45 years old, sincere and honest, elegant and sweet. I like romantic walks and I love family.
>
> —Personal ad of "Moline" on providence.com

What kind of men do the yoyettes hope to marry? Like women's honor, the ideal characteristics for prospective husbands are hybrid, incorporating both dispositional and economic considerations and both long-standing local and modern elements. Most critically, men should be prosperous and moderne and love their wives without hesitation. Most of the complex hopes that young women have for potential husbands can be seen as some combination of these elements. The paradox of female honor—resting both on economic independence from men and on receiving lavish gifts from male admirers—has no direct counterpart in the kinds of men that women hope for. It might be very hard for a yoyette to find a man who fulfills her consuming dreams, but his imagined characteristics contain no internal paradoxes. Still, different women do focus on different aspects of the ideal. Some women particularly stress that men should be sophisticated and urbane, with the same cosmopolitan style and sensibilities that they strive for themselves. One young woman explained that

> I love him [her boyfriend] . . . because he presents himself in front of me like the man I have always dreamed of. Because when I was a little girl, I always made for myself the image of an ideal boy in my head. I saw him as black, tall, elegant, clean, and intelligent. He is someone who knows how to dress, even if he has only two garments, he knows how he is going to wear them. He knows how to express himself in French, and is not too hypocritical.[13]

Another similarly emphasized that fluency in the global language of French made a man attractive, equating men who speak Ewondo with effeminate men and—by implication—with men bewitched by *tobassi* (lit. Sit down! a form of witchcraft whereby a man is made subordinate to a woman):

> For me, it is important that he not be too effeminate because I do not like effeminate boys. I hope that you understand what I mean; I mean when he has the style of a girl, or when he only speaks Ewondo [instead of French]. And so he must be tall, and not too ugly, but also not too handsome, because when a man is too handsome it leans toward danger.

The danger lies in the likelihood that the man would not be faithful: A man who is too handsome could easily entice other women. Men's infidelity is a constant source of concern for young women in Yaoundé. Cameroonian men cannot—or will not—be faithful, they say. Again and again, Beti women, whether looking for European husbands on the Internet or married to Beti men, explained to me that

male infidelity is common or even inevitable. That does not mean, however, that the yoyettes do not hope for faithful husbands. To the contrary, fidelity, trust, and "true, true love" vie with economic security as the most important attributes that my informants hoped for in men. For example, one young woman answered my question regarding potential husbands by saying, "I would like to marry a man who doesn't love other women too much. But that is impossible here in our country. When you have a husband here, you cannot tell yourself that you are the only one. There were others before you, and after you, there will be others still."

Fidelity and generosity come together in many women's explanations of the kind of men they hope to marry. A man will be trustworthy if, first of all, he truly loves a woman: "It is necessary first of all that he loves me as I am. . . . He cannot be the kind of person that is concerned with himself but not with his wife and his children. [He should be] someone who is generous, and someone who perhaps believes, who is a Christian." In contemporary Cameroon, as in many places, Christianity is explicitly a sign of the modern (see also Keane 2007; Lester 2005; Moran 1990). Thus, for the young woman quoted above, love, generosity, and Christian modernity make a good husband. Another high school student had very similar hopes: "Me, I would like to marry someone I love, first of all. And someone in whom I can find trust. If I find that he could be a good father for my children, and a good husband as well, and also that he contributes for his own family, good. I'll know that he will do the same for my children and me."

Whereas most women agreed that a good husband must be financially generous, some men considered women's insistence on gifts and money a shocking, even immoral, recent development. One young man explained that he was not yet married because "the women of today marry men according to their [financial] resources." As he was poor, he said, he could never find a wife. Another man expressed a similar sentiment: "Even feelings are materialized today. If a woman is with a man, it's to get something." According to these men, women cannot be trusted because they are always seeking financial advantage.

In fact, many women in Southern Cameroon do expect some financial benefit from their relations with men. But this does not mean that their primary motivations are economic ones or that they are untrustworthy as partners. Instead, these women are reasoning from the social structure of marriage exchanges centered on bridewealth, in which a man's commitment to a relationship is measured in the frequency and extravagance of his gifts (see Ngoa 1968). A man who does not give clothes, pocket money, or presents to his female partner thereby indicates that his intentions are not "serious" and that the relationship is unlikely to lead to marriage. Although giving such gifts does not constitute a promise as such, women usually interpret a man's generosity as an indicator of his qualities as a potential spouse.

Marriage is increasingly postponed

As women's expectations of men as marital partners have risen and men's ability to meet them—particularly economically—has declined, age-specific marriage probabilities in southern Cameroon have fallen markedly. Of course, there are many reasons for this decline; however, the disjuncture between aspirations for marriage and real-life opportunities plays a central role. The decline began as early as the 1960s and has accelerated since about 1985. The postponement, or even decline, of marriage can be seen in the declining proportion of women married by a specific age across subsequent birth cohorts. Figure 2 shows the proportion of Beti women married by age 18 (lower, solid lines) and age 25 (upper, dotted lines) for cohorts born from 1945 until 1984, with 95 percent confidence intervals. The thinner, plain lines represent all women, and the thicker lines with square markers represent women who have attended at least some high school—that is, the class of women on whom this article is focused. The declines have been large, particularly for marriages at young ages: Only some 40 percent of women in the most recent cohort were married by age 18, as opposed to about 60 percent of the earliest cohort represented here.

This pattern is common across most of urban, sub-Saharan Africa: Women are increasingly postponing marriage, and some are even deciding not to marry altogether (Tabutin and Shoumaker 2004:469–470). In southern Cameroon, this postponement often takes the form of waiting to "observe" a boyfriend, to be certain that he is the right one. Thus, it is not necessarily union formation, or even cohabitation, that is being postponed but, rather, formal marriage. One young woman who had been living with her boyfriend for over a year explained that she was still unsure whether marriage was in their future.

> We tell ourselves that this might [lead to] marriage . . . but you have to first stay together a long time to know his true comportment, to see what he likes and what he doesn't like in order to avoid problems. Because when you realize that he has some faults, you can say no. You can leave. If you don't have children, you are free. . . . But sometimes you can do five years and you do not see too many black spots; so you say "good." If he proposes marriage, you accept.

Many women agree that it takes five years to really know someone, to recognize whether the match will be a good one. One of my research assistants argued that

> marriages after two months—you meet someone and after two months you marry—that never lasts. I think you need at least five years. The people who are in a big hurry, they can do three years. But for three years, someone can hide his true face from you. You have to have five years of experience, that way you will really know each other.

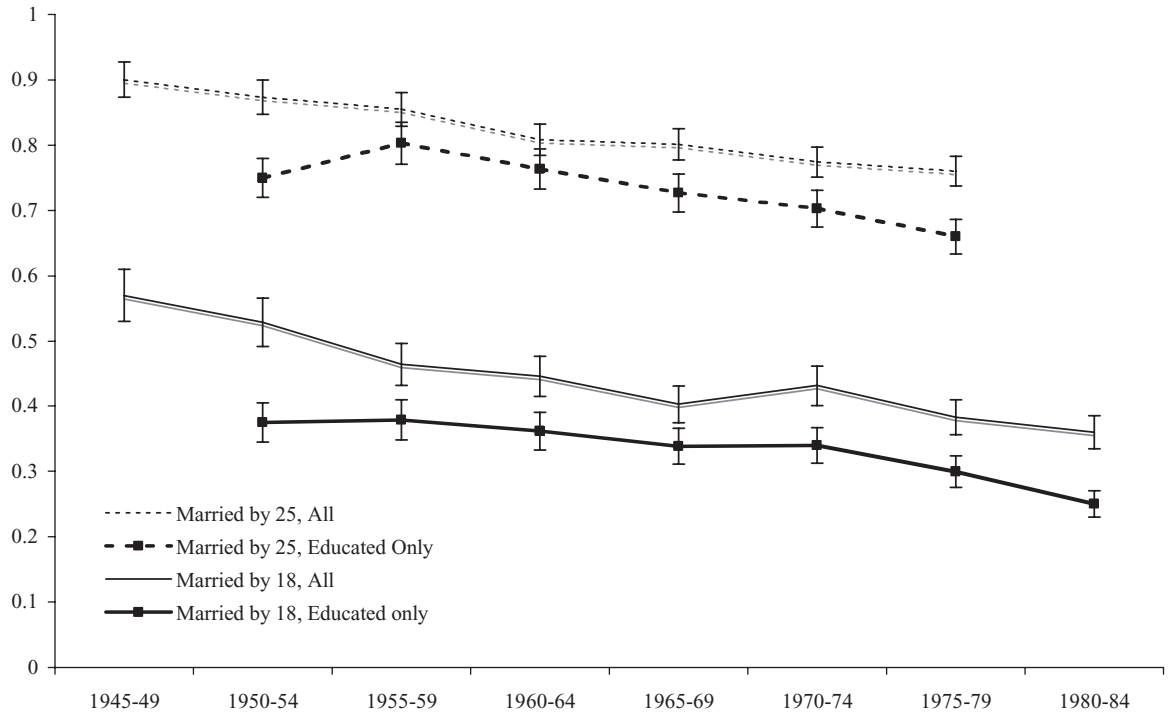

Figure 2. Proportion of Bulu-Beti-Fang women married by age 18 and 25, by education and birth cohort. Source: Demographic and Health Surveys 1991, 1998, 2004; http://www.measure dhs.com. [subscription required]

Both of these quotes emphasize that young women must choose husbands carefully, particularly because men may deceive them as to their true nature. Thus, in addition to the elements of dispositional and pecuniary honor discussed above, to make a good husband, a man must prove himself over time and in a variety of contexts. What is more, the waiting and observing are differential: Most women, especially the educated, do not marry the first man with whom they have a significant relationship. Participants in a survey of 185 high school–educated women I conducted in 1998 had had an average of 2.5 partners; of those not married when they had their first child, fewer than half eventually married the father of that child (see Johnson-Hanks 2006).

Why is it so important to know that the man one chooses is the right one? In part because marriage continues to serve a key arena of women's honor. Although many elements of marital honor have been transposed, the right marriage remains a powerful resource for women. In some ways, one might argue, marriage is more important now than ever before. Under the "traditional" marriage system, as described, for example, by Michael Houseman, Beti women are "attributed, from the outset, subordinate and instrumental roles" (1988:52; see also Alexandre and Binet 1958; Laburthe-Tolra 1977, 1981; Ngoa 1968) both in their natal families and in their affinal ones: Men's pecuniary honor derived in part from the subordination of their wives. Today, by contrast, women may receive respect for the kinds of consumption that accompany a good marriage. That is, marriage rates are declining not because marriage is becoming irrelevant or because it is less systematically valued than in the past. Rather, marriage is becoming more rare precisely because it is so terribly important to women's status that it be done well.

A second reason that women postpone marriage and observe their would-be husbands concerns the importance of love and mutual trust. Surely, women in the past loved their husbands and expected to be loved by them; however, love—and, particularly, fidelity as a sign of love—has taken on new centrality in women's representations of a good marriage. This sentimentalizing of marriage has numerous foreign sources, including both *Beverly Hills 90210* and Bible stories. In August of 1996, a priest lamented in his sermon that men today no longer love their wives unconditionally, as Joseph loved Mary. Echoing the angel's insistence that Joseph take the pregnant Mary as his wife (in the Gospel of Matthew), women often cited men who abandoned their pregnant girlfriends as evidence of "la crise morale" that gripped the country.

Internet romance

Marriage is a central part of what yoyettes construe as modern honor, both pecuniary and dispositional. Unable to find suitable men at home, around the turn of the millennium they turned in large numbers to the Internet.[14] Why and how did this happen? Like so much in contemporary Yaoundé, the emergence of Internet romance demonstrates

both continuity with the past and recent innovation; it integrates a new kind of commodity—Internet access—into a conception of romance and marriage already dense with consumption. Throughout the early 1990s, a small number of urban women had sought European husbands using catalogs and glossy magazines sent from Europe. In early 1998, the Internet came to Yaoundé, and, as one informant explained, "Everybody saw their path." Despite long lines and high prices for computer use, the Internet replaced the magazines within a matter of months. Since 1998, private providers have made a lucrative business of offering Internet access by the hour to the largely literate, although not necessarily computer-savvy, Yaoundé public. By 2001, even small *quartiers* had cybercafes, and the price for computer time had fallen from about $10.00 per hour in 1998 to just about $1.50 per hour. Having an e-mail address, surfing the web, and speaking fluently of chat rooms are increasingly part of the distinction of educated youth of some means, superseded only partially by the more recent arrival of cell phones. Although television programs, advertising, and consumer products are still the primary modes through which yoyettes and others learn about France and the United States, it is through the Internet that they have some hope of speaking back to these foreign places. One of the things that they most want to say is that they are interested in marrying white men and moving to Europe.

In the spring of 1998, there were three Internet access points in Yaoundé: the post office, the Hilton Hotel, and a French–Cameroonian joint venture called "Ditof." Each had a distinct character. The Hilton was the most expensive and most comfortable access point and was frequented primarily by men. The post office was the least private, and its clientele tended to be mixed. Ditof, in a small storefront on one of the main downtown streets, served women almost exclusively.[15] I came into the city once a week to run errands and use Ditof's service and would often see the same women. We quickly came to share our stories, and eventually I gained some credibility as an authority on the habits of white men.

The line at Ditof was usually long. There was only one computer, and most women had to dictate their e-mail messages to an employee who could type. Some women wrote out their letters longhand and read them to the typist; others composed on the spot. Usually I waited in line for an hour, occasionally two. But that time was very productive, not only for me but also for the women in search of husbands abroad. Collectively, the assembled women had quite an extensive knowledge of the benefits of alternative portals for posting their messages (e.g., coeueracoeur.com vs. providence.com) and of the writing habits of European men. They would read and comment on each other's letters and sometimes collectively craft responses. One day, there was a heated discussion about how to interpret the lyrics of a song by Francis Cabrel that a man had quoted in his letter; another day, the topic concerned whether a man who did not want to come to Cameroon to meet his correspondent was seriously looking for marriage or just amusing himself. In her compelling analysis of Internet-mediated transnational romance, Nicole Constable argues that the canonical image of the "mail-order bride" is "flawed and misleading because it defines women solely as victims and . . . neglects the local voices and the insider's perspectives long called for by ethnographers and feminists" (2003:29). Insofar as this means that prospective Asian or African "pen pals" are not mere dupes of transnational structures of human trafficking, Constable is exactly right. The structural context of Internet-mediated romance, however, shapes it in important ways. For the yoyettes, the Internet offers a new resource through which to pursue long-standing values in a changed structural context.

The websites that women in Yaoundé use to establish relationships with European men—sites such as african-princess.com or providence.com—differ in their visual presentation but share a basic business model. Without paying, women can post their profiles and men can search them. To contact any of the women, however, men must pay the site (on the order of $5 per address in 1998). Men do not post their own profiles on the websites. They send messages to women they find attractive, who may then share their private e-mail addresses with them. Usually, women send pictures of themselves (or, occasionally, of their younger sisters!), and sometimes they also ask the men for photographs. Some women have as many as a dozen correspondents at any one time, although most have only one or two.

Many of the women with whom I became acquainted at Ditof were looking for husbands after having been disappointed or deceived by a local partner. Adele explained that she had been living for over three years with a man when she learned that he continued to date other women and give them expensive gifts. Reluctant to leave him, she sought advice from friends and kin. They were unanimous that his behavior would get worse, not better, if Adele married him. So Adele moved out and decided to try her luck with European men, instead. Hélène had two children by two different men. In each case, the man said he loved her and promised to marry her once the child came. In each case, once the child came, the man disappeared. Hélène spoke adamantly that the Cameroonian men of today could not meet the minimal criteria for a viable spouse: "With the men such as we have here," she said, "marriage is nothing."

Claims such as this—that local marriage is nothing—explicitly show the interplay between gender and international hierarchies of power and privilege. As Karen Kelsey describes in the very different context of Japanese transnational workers, "This is the point at which the West becomes gendered, for it is the Western male who is made to embody Western modernity and to stand in contrast to the 'backwardness' of the [local] male" (1999:238). By casting European men as the preferred—or only possible—partners in a

modern marriage bargain, some yoyettes reproduce racialized inequality. By classifying men who "speak only Ewondo" as effeminate in comparison with those who speak French, they reproduce global hierarchies of privilege. When women act autonomously in their own interests, the consequences are not necessarily libratory.

Beti women seeking husbands on the Internet use many of the same criteria that they do in seeking local husbands. Many of them have turned to the Internet partly because they feel that Cameroonian men can no longer fulfill their part of the marriage bargain. Husbands—local or foreign—should display the traits of "modern honor": They should love their wives, have self-control, and contribute generously to the maintenance of their wives and their families. These values appear clearly in some of the personals ads, in which women say that they want a man who is serieux, meaning both honorable and committed to the relationship. Yolande, for example, specifies in "her message to you" that "if you're not serious, stay away," and she writes that she is "seeking a man 28 to 45 years old, serious, respectful, having the [necessary] values for a sincere and lasting relationship for marriage, French-speaking, and living in Europe or America." Similarly, Andze says that she "wish[es] to get in contact with someone serious for strong and durable relationship, marriage." Solange writes, "I am searching for a man who is good, serious strong, responsible, happy, generous. I know that I demand a lot, but that is the man of my dreams. Kisses!" Florence is looking for a "man who is serious, understanding, responsible, intelligent, hard-working. In brief, a man who is good for a serious relationship and even for marriage." Occasionally, women even instruct their potential interlocutors on proper courtship behavior. Atia writes (in English), "They should continuously be good to their correspondents, that is keep collaborations with single counterparts in order to build long lasting relationship."

My casual conversations while in line waiting to use the computer, and eventually my interviews outside of Ditof, with women engaged in the search for husbands further reinforce the interpretation that these women are transposing a set of expectations about gender, honor, and consumption out of local forms of marriage onto their prospective European partners. Echoing both a lavish bridewealth and the gifts that women expect from their local boyfriends, my interlocutors regularly cited financial generosity as a key sign of men's potential as husbands. Very few men sent money spontaneously, and women developed ways of asking, usually related to specific kinds of expenses: a hospital bill, a funeral, or school fees. When asked for money, many men stopped writing, demonstrating that they would not provide their wives with the consumer comforts that contemporary marriage should bring (cf. Brennan 2004, esp. pp. 111–112). Men's dispositional honor—their self-mastery—was equally important to the Ditof women, although it was harder to determine on-line. As the practice of "observing" men over time to learn their natures was transposed onto Internet relationships, as is so often the case, the practice was transformed.

In addition to offering access to a wider range of perhaps more suitable partners, in the eyes of some yoyettes, the Internet provides an excellent means of learning about the true character of a man and thereby avoiding disappointment later. One woman explained that she preferred the Internet to meeting in person because she is shy, but in e-mail, "I can put there what I think about any little thing. And so I can see if he really loves me, because I observe what he writes as a response." This concern about whether men are true in their love is equally important in face-to-face courtship, as I have noted, and, indeed, is often cited as one of the reasons for delaying marriage. Because the Internet allows all kinds of tests and trials that are not possible in face-to-face courtship, yoyettes hope that Internet romances can progress a little faster. And indeed, much of the correspondence is a kind of testing—trying to put the man into a range of different situations to see how he reacts. Still, drawing on conventional Beti practices of courtship, and especially the importance of a long period of mutual observation, yoyettes interpret e-mail romance as a chance to learn the "true face" of prospective partners.

Why should e-mail correspondence be a better way to learn about a potential partner than face-to-face interaction? For women in southern Cameroon, reasoning out of long-standing concepts of self-mastery and the ubiquity of deception, the mediation of print and time offer two advantages. First, written communication requires a degree of explicitness that face-to-face communication does not. Although insinuation and oblique language are commonplace, no sentence is as oblique as a glance or a certain set of the shoulders or a tiny pause in speech. Thus, in writing, men must commit themselves more firmly than in speech. Second, the mediation of e-mail correspondence, at least as it was conducted in 1998 in Yaoundé, makes interactions very slow, giving interlocutors ample time to sit and reflect. When they talked about sex and contraception, women often spoke of being "swept up" in the moment by physical and emotional arousal and of doing things that they later regretted because they were not able to master their physical demands. Similarly, in a face-to-face romance, women can find themselves overwhelmed by attraction or arousal, rushing into sex or marriage instead of making the judicious decisions that mark honorable Beti comportment. Here, Sewell's (2005) argument about the stretching of cultural schemata to cover new social possibilities is apposite. Beti women, determined to constrain their passions and act carefully in the domain of romance, have made Internet correspondence into a technology of self-restraint.

"Observation" may be difficult over the Internet, but it is not impossible. The young man from a suburb of Paris who wrote that he was unemployed probably did not imagine that this admission would become the topic of speculation

among a dozen or more women for at least two weeks. Was what he had written true? One interpretation was that he was just very truthful and transparent, a good trait, and that even if he was unemployed, he was a good man. A second interpretation was that he was not really unemployed but was, rather, testing his long-distance lover's sincerity and love for him—that is, he was not being honest, but his subterfuge took a recognizable form of "observing" and was not grave. A third reading was that he was actually married and so did not have any extra money and was using the claim of unemployment to justify why he would not behave properly—that is, why he would not send money or gifts on a regular basis. This is precisely the sort of deceit that waiting five years before marrying ought to ferret out.

On the surface, these would-be "e-mail–order brides" resemble other women of the global south who seek security through relationships with European and North American men. But the cultural schemata that underlie their practices are profoundly different. For instance, a woman's emphasis on discerning an interlocutor's character, whether he loves her, and whether she could truly love him stands in stark contrast to the "performance of love" for foreign men and potential husbands by sex workers in the Dominican Republic described by Denise Brennan. She notes that "the words *romance* and *love* are noticeably absent from the female sex workers' and female resort workers' discussions of the 'ideal' relationship with foreign tourists" (2004:107), including those tourists the women marry. Indeed, Brennan argues that the "Dominican sex workers often see the men . . . as readily exploitable. The men are all potential dupes, essentially walking visas, who can help the women leave the island" (2004:24). My interlocutors want more than visas. Although shared leisure and consumer comfort do constitute an important part of the marriages to which contemporary young women in Yaoundé aspire, they are only one part. The relationships that yoyettes seek on the Internet are honorable marriages, with the richness of emotional complexity and ethical obligation that implies.

In addition to their concern to find good men, the women who sought husbands through Ditof's service wanted to consolidate their own claims to honor. There is something ironic about this use of the Internet, arguably the most disembodied of media, as a means to honorable marriage: Both the self-structured dispositions of self-dominion and the prestige of consumption are profoundly corporeal. Perhaps one should view Beti women's many attempts to inhabit the Internet—with provocative photographs, onomatopoeic language, and evocations of chocolate skin and romantic walks—as ways of overcoming this disembodiment. At the same time, the recurrent patterns of life at Ditof inscribed on those who used the service a certain kind of honorable modernity. The temporality of the mediated conversations—women would print out their messages and prepare replies at home, usually returning a few days or even a week later to send the response—made them formal and stilted, echoing the "measured slowness" of the mfan mot. The waiting in line, too, served as a self-disciplining practice, resonant of the waiting women do at church and school and in maternity wards, those great institutions of contemporary subject formation. Beti women put a similar value on waiting per se as evidence of female self-dominion and honor in reference to periodic abstinence, also known as the rhythm method (Johnson-Hanks 2002). Women who were too eager or too desperate would not have the patience to wait: by constraining interaction, the Internet both demands and enforces the deliberate, judicious behavior that defines women's honor.[16]

Conclusion

Cameroonian women seeking foreign husbands on the Internet are doing something counterintuitive: using a new, transnational technology to achieve old, local aims when the old, local methods for achieving those aims no longer suffice. Although the prospect of "modern marriage" emerged in part through globalizing processes—urbanization, the Catholic Church, an economic crisis caused by global commodity prices, and transnational flows of people and ideas—it also has deep, cultural roots in the honor of the mfan mot and the gendered labor exchange of bridewealth marriage. Although profiles of would-be "e-mail–order brides" from Cameroon appear on the Internet alongside those of Filipina and Russian women, the motivations of the Cameroonians are distinct. This example points to the continuing importance of theories of culture as a system, in which even radical change takes place through the transposition and transformation of available cultural categories and practices.

Indeed, the emergence of Internet-mediated transnational romance in Yaoundé rests on two transpositions of structure in the sense intended by Sewell (2005). In the first transposition, a cultural schema of honor stretched from applying only to certain men to including those women whose engagement with school and church offered them a certain self-dominion. Because of this stretching, the schema of honor itself became increasingly oriented to European categories and accomplishments. The second transposition concerned marriage specifically. Marriage remains equated with consumption, but the content and character of that consumption have shifted. Recent cohorts of educated Beti women not only marry later than earlier cohorts but they are also less likely to marry at all. But the decline of marriage does not indicate that marriage is less important or respected than in the past. To the contrary, what is locally understood as modern marriage, based on true love and shared leisure, is a fundamental part of women's claims on honor, and an inadequate marriage is worse than none at all. Among the lesser elite of Yaoundé, marriage is therefore less common than in the past precisely because its form is so important

and "good" marriages are so hard to find. Transnational romance mediated by the Internet is a recent phenomenon in southern Cameroon, but its practice is grounded in old structures of gender, honor, and marriage.

Notes

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1. I mean here *economy* in the sense of a domain in which a particular form of value circulates according to specific rules. Of course, honor and shame have a complex history in anthropological writing. For a discussion of why this specific system of social ranking is best described as "honor," see Johnson-Hanks 2006:ch. 3.

2. The Beti classification includes a variety of clans, such as the Eton, Manguissa, and Bene. Of these clans, the Ewondo is the largest, and its dialect—also called Ewondo—serves as something of a lingua franca alongside, and subordinate to, Cameroonian French.

3. All but one of the websites mentioned in the text were active as of June 2007; the exception (providence.com) was active as of October 2003.

4. The term *Beti* means "honorable ones," and it has only in the last century come to refer to an ethnic group, rather than distinguishing free men from slaves (pl. *bolò*). The singular form of *Beti, nti,* serves as the standard translation for "Lord" and today refers only to the Christian God, as in *Nti Zamba wan* (the Lord our God). In seeking to find an acceptable translation of the term *Beti,* Philippe Laburthe-Tolra suggests that "the concept most exactly corresponding . . . would be that of the 'non-barbarian.'. . . The Beti are the Civilized" (1981:48).

5. The Beti system of honor differs in notable ways from the classic anthropological cases, as described, for example, in Campbell 1974, Péristiany 1966, and Péristany and Pitt-Rivers 1991. The similarities and differences are explored in some detail in Johnson-Hanks 2006:ch. 3. In this article, I mostly ignore the wealth of comparative cases, in keeping with Michael Herzfeld's (1980) call for culturally specific research on local forms of honor.

6. As Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff write, "The European colonization of Africa was often less a directly coercive conquest than a persuasive attempt to colonize consciousness, to remake people by redefining the taken-for-granted surfaces of their everyday worlds" (1991:313). The reorientation of cultural values that I describe in this article was the result of such a colonizing and Christianizing project, although the reorientation was not always or exactly of the form intended by Europeans.

7. For a compelling discussion of self-denial as a mode of feminine self-formation, see Bordo 1993.

8. The inherent contradiction in Beti women's honor—that it is through self-denial that a woman attains prestige—is more dramatic than in the case of men but not fundamentally different. The status of mfan mot also demands self-restraint and self-denial. Compare Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:62.

9. Veblen's history is conjectural and almost surely wrong. Still, the conceptual relationship between a putatively literal prestige of worthy consumption and a second-order, tropic one is useful.

10. In southern Cameroon, concepts of "autonomy" and "individualism" were not by-products of the colonial project or simply imported from the West. The idea, however, that everyone, including women, could have equal standing as autonomous individuals was, indeed, new.

11. In the mid-1980s, 600 CFA was roughly equivalent to $1.

12. For 1998 figures, see Chicago Tribune 1998. For 1999 figures, see Transparency Deutschland e.V. n.d.

13. This is the only instance in my interview corpus in which a woman explicitly links blackness with attractiveness. The corpus also contains only two cases in which my interlocutors explicitly equate whiteness with attractiveness. In the racial politics that infuses the practice of seeking European husbands on the Internet, women regularly treat race as a marker of class, cosmopolitanism, modernity, or trustworthiness but rarely as a defining feature of sexual attractiveness per se.

14. Since 2003 or so, the number of Cameroonian women registering on the largest of these websites has fallen considerably, even as the total number of such sites is rising. I suspect that this occurred as women came to recognize that the hoped-for bonanza of foreign marriages was not materializing.

15. When the storefront first opened, this was not the case. For several months, Ditof ran on an antiquated French military system that made most of the web inaccessible and was incompatible with my laptop, but it had nearly a dozen computers providing limited access. At that point, the clientele was gender mixed. When Ditof switched to a single PC computer with full Internet capabilities, manned by an employee who did the actual typing, most men left, leaving the women behind.

16. Here again, this case echoes the one described by Mahmood (2005), wherein certain women generate situations that will entrain them into the dispositions that they desire.

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