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REDEFINING WOMEN'S SPACE IN CONTEMPORARY CAMEROON THROUGH LITERATURE

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A look at Cameroon pre-independence reveals a rich history influenced by matriarchal and matrilineal peoples among various ethnic groups. Long after the infiltration of German, French, and British colonial influences, matriarchal and patriarchal social structures coexisted in villages among many of the over 200 ethnic groups in Cameroon, and many traces of matriarchal systems remain evident today. Matriarchal social structure has traditionally accorded a status to the African woman that its patriarchal alternative has not. 'Matriarchy' is a term which is commonly misunderstood in the West as the antithesis of patriarchy or as a mythological amazonism. It is neither. In the traditional sense, matriarchal social structure in Africa is based on the reciprocity of the sexes and denotes an interdependent system whereby men assumed authoritative roles which were assigned to them by women. Once their respective roles were established, men and women were held to their responsibilities through the aid of an intricate system of checks and balances. This system allowed for action to be taken to rectify an abuse of power which would negatively affect the welfare of the entire group.[1]

In other words, women in matriarchal social structures abided almost unconditionally by the authority that they themselves had delegated to male group members. The only exception developed when a man exhibited an abuse of this authority which was judged to be detrimental to all group members. In such a case, the women

would come to a consensus and assume authority from all male group members with the intention of reorganizing the group's power structure. Audrey Wipper, for example, explains how the Kom women of Cameroon were organized in a dual political system, a structure which was also observed among Gikuyu women of Kenya, and Igbo women of Nigeria:

> The women's organizations generated their own methods of protest and sanction, which their menfolk had learnt to fear and respect. There was unity of purpose. The women had economic, ritual, and political power. Where they did not own land outright, they worked that land and controlled the markets and subsistence economy. (1982)

However, men were not the only group members punishable for an abuse of power. Although a matriarchal society depended ultimately upon the solidarity of all group members, the unity of its women was particularly crucial. Without the aid of other female group members, a woman greatly diminished her chances for success if she attempted to correct an abuse of power single-handedly since she alone had no true authority. Furthermore, she ideally would have no reason to act alone, for her goal was not to usurp authority for herself, but merely to correct an injustice potentially detrimental to her entire group. Therefore, a penal system was also in place to prevent an abuse of power on the part of the women as well. It was not uncommon in such societies for women to swear their loyalty and solidarity before village shrines, demonstrating their commitment to unity and common enterprise (Amadiume 1987, 28).

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[1] For further discussion on matriarchal social structure, see Schneider and Gough's landmark study, *Matrilineal Kinship*, listed among the works cited for this paper.

Given this brief description of traditional matriarchy in Cameroon, it is certainly clear why Cameroon's feminist writers may be intrigued by the idea of applying matriarchal principles to urban society in Africa as a way of redefining women's space in contemporary Cameroon. As Ifi Amadiume writes in her book, *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, and Culture*, ". . . despite its colonial heritage and subsequent distortion of history, African matriarchal heritage is still present in the deeper structures of the kinship systems: in women's rituals, women's institutions and indigenous women's organizations" (163). African writers, male and female, have consistently been called upon to propose solutions to their society's problems using elements from within their own culture instead of looking to Western ideals for answers. Thus, the concepts of interdependence and solidarity in particular espoused in traditional matriarchal societies would certainly be useful in analyzing and correcting oppressive situations experienced by the African woman in contemporary society. This approach to writing is clearly embraced by Cameroon's leading feminist writers today. Although one may find evidence of this in virtually every work by a Cameroonian woman writer, this paper will focus specifically on the works of Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury, Calixthe Beyala, and Philomène Bassek. This study takes a look at several excerpts of Cameroonian feminist literature, identifying customs and traditions which undoubtedly influenced contemporary writers seeking to infuse African culture into their work in order to redefine women's space. Some of the seemingly ironic events which occur in the literary works cited here are more readily understandable when subjected to a direct comparison with specific matriarchal traditions.

Matriarchal social structure was common in agricultural societies among polygamous groups. As Cameroon modernizes, matriarchal tradition cannot be maintained unless it is adapted to contemporary urban societies that are economically more complex and furthermore, increasingly monogamous. The first woman writer of Cameroon and of Francophone Africa, Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury, speaks precisely of this necessary transition from traditional matriarchy and the problems associated with such a transition in her novel, *Essential Encounters* (*Rencontres essentielles*), first written in 1956. In a 1994 interview, Kuoh-Moukoury labeled this transition process as 'matriarcat nouveau'. Through reading *Essential Encounters*, one notes that 'matriarcat nouveau' maintains the idea of interdependence and solidarity from the original tradition, yet calls for women to look beyond their traditional role in an attempt to regain some of the power they have lost in the transition from rural to more urban lifestyles.

Another important tenet of 'matriarcat nouveau' is that men are to be included in such a plan. The concept of woman as the complement of man in traditional matriarchy is still espoused in 'matriarcat nouveau'. Since 'matriarcat nouveau' acknowledges an increasingly monogamous society, there is a new focus on the couple that is not found in traditional matriarchy. This idea is strongly emphasized in the novel which appropriately begins with the words, "Nothing is more beautiful than a couple."

Due to the emphasis on community embraced in traditional matriarchy, men and women alike could not have afforded attention to the spouse at the expense of other group members for whom they were also responsible. However, the harmonious dualism that was expected in traditional matriarchal society is no less desirable in 'matriarcat

nouveau' and in fact, it is a way to combat the potentially oppressive nature of marriage often experienced in patriarchal social structure. As Kuoh-Moukoury explains:

> Under traditional matriarchy, women were often leaders in areas which men knew not to be their domain. However, the disadvantage of this society was that man and woman could never form a true couple due to the bifurcation of this history. On the other hand, woman always had means to express herself and a way of imposing matriarchy on her society. In contemporary society, woman must come to the realization that she can no longer attain these advantages in the same manner, for matriarchy cannot function as before. However, 'matriarcat nouveau' reminds man that a woman's heart exists and not only her arms for work. (1994)

Marriage and the idea of man and woman joined as a couple have a meaning in 'matriarcat nouveau' which was not found in traditional matriarchy. Ironically, the very same idea of marriage which was once considered detrimental to traditional matriarchy is sought as a means for demonstrating interdependence under 'matriarcat nouveau'. In a society which is becoming less and less communal in nature, woman's only hope for maintaining the positive aspects of African matriarchy is by establishing them in the home first and foremost through forming an interdependent relationship in her family.

Essential Encounters therefore highlights African matriarchy in transition. The novel shows that there can be no absolute return to traditional matriarchy, and it also demonstrates that one cannot always apply matriarchal traditions to patriarchy and hope for successful results. However, many elements of matriarchal tradition do offer an authentic voice to Cameroonian feminist literature, and certain customs and beliefs do

provide a realistic prescription for change that is derived from the very roots of African culture itself.

To illustrate how matriarchal tradition comes into play, one need only look at the central issues of *Essential Encounters*. One such issue is the infertility of the novel's protagonist, Flo. In Flo's society dominated by patriarchal values, woman has been defined in terms of her role as a mother and her relationship to man as his wife. Thus, one understands the origins of Flo's sentiments when she states that she will cease to be a woman if she loses her husband, Joel, in addition to being infertile (21). However, one can find evidence that infertility is viewed differently in an African matriarchal social structure. In fact, Joel's indifference towards his wife's infertility is a credible response if interpreted in reference to matriarchy. To apply the idea to an actual cultural context, one can consider the issue of infertility among the matriarchal Fali of Cameroon—a perspective which is not exclusive to this particular group. Among the Fali, infertility can be explained through religious beliefs as the deliberate choice of a Fali god. Therefore, in the Fali culture, an infertile woman is never considered dishonorable to her family as she is often perceived in a patriarchal social system. Guilmain-Gauthier explains the Fali perspective in her study, "Le jeu de la femme":

> Any union of man and woman is similar to that of God and Earth. But in this case, it is woman who is predetermined by God to continue creation; man plays only an adjunct role here. Giving life is a potentiality granted by God to all women or to almost all women. For this reason, a woman is never blamed or criticized for her infertility; it is considered one of God's chosen path from which one can never deviate. So the

> infertility of a wife is never a source of repudiation. On the other hand, a husband who neglects his wife will always be judged at fault as it is viewed as an outright defiance of God's plan of reproduction (42)

Furthermore, as a hierarchy of roles does not exist in the Fali community, this leaves other options for Fali women which are regarded as equally important as motherhood. An acceptance of infertility is Kuoh-Moukoury's first mediatory remedy borrowed from matriarchal tradition which she encourages to be integrated into society in an attempt to alleviate patriarchal oppression.

A second issue in the book that is multi-faceted if analyzed from a matriarchal perspective is polygamy. Blinded by the demands that her society makes on women, Flo reasons that Joel inevitably will seek a mistress who will give him what she cannot provide. Flo decides she must assert some control over the matter before she is excluded entirely. In an attempt to secure her marriage, Flo takes rather unorthodox measures by creating a pseudo-polygamous situation involving Joel and her best friend, Doris:

> In any case, I had to lure Joel back to me, or at least retain him. I was hoping to use Doris, this strong, invincible creature, to help me. This was the decision I had made. From that moment on, the command with which I carried out my plan still astonishes me. (36)

However impractical Flo's decision may seem initially, one realizes that she is actually resorting to matriarchal tradition to solve a problem created by patriarchy. She rationalizes that she is merely following matriarchal tradition whereby a woman commonly chose the second spouse for her husband:

> People accused me of having thrown my husband into the arms of my

> friend. Actually, I was far from thinking about it in that way.
>
> "Even if this were true," I said mockingly to Zimba, "isn't this a good thing? According to African tradition, is it not the wife herself who chooses a new wife for her husband?" (37)

Returning once again to the example of the matriarchal Fali, one finds that Flo's plan is not all that improbable. In fact, according to Guilmain-Gauthier's study, Flo's plan is identical to one custom practiced by Fali women in similar situations. Of course, Doris never becomes a co-wife in the legal sense, but her perceived role in Flo's plan is definitely analogous to that of a Fali co-wife. Such a reference to a polygamous matriarchal custom reflects how matriarchy has been forced to adapt to an increasingly monogamous society influenced by patriarchy. It also foreshadows why Flo's plan will ultimately not work. It is interesting to note, however, the similarities between the Fali matriarchal custom and Flo's plan. As Guilmain-Gauthier describes:

> The creation of a polygamous marriage can be initiated by the man which is the most frequent case, or by the woman which is not as rare as one may think. . . Fali husbands mischievously claim that the arrival of a new wife is the best remedy for the "nasty vice of adultery" . . . This reason is equally the most common cited by women and it is often they who look for another wife for their husband. In fact, they would prefer to see him tranquilly at home than perpetually on a quest for adventure. Polygamy is often the key to a peaceful household . . . It is for this reason that the wife or first wife among the co-wives looks for another wife for the husband. . . a co-wife has a better chance of being well-received if she is

> chosen by her predecessor(s) instead of being imposed on them. She may even find herself in the midst of a veritable coalition of friends led by the first wife. (51-52)

The idea of the co-wives forming a 'coalition of friends' is notable here, for not only does it stress the importance of solidarity among women in traditional matriarchal societies that are polygamous, but it also helps to clarify why one must not view Flo as merely using Doris for her own gain. African women in matriarchal societies depended on solidarity with other women in order to overcome the most difficult of circumstances. The same was nonetheless true as African societies became more and more patriarchal. As Amadiume points out:

> If African women were the economic backbone of the continent (and still are today in the subsistence economy and informal sector), they must have been well organized in very effective women's organizations, institutions, rituals and religions. If women were used to defending their economic position and fighting the ever-present, controlling and oppressive forces of patriarchy, they must have developed a very strong sense of female solidarity. (1997, 163)

The cordial relationship common among co-wives in a traditional matriarchal society is diametrically opposed to the way in which co-wives often perceive each other in patriarchal societies. In this respect, Doris is not to be considered competition for Flo, rather a support who is able to assist her. Buchi Emecheta has supported this assertion as well, emphasizing that "African feminism is free of the shackles of Western romantic illusions". She further explains, "The beauty in sisterhood is when women reach the age

of about forty. The women who cultivated sisters either through marriage or through the village age-group start reaping their reward" (177).

Of course, it is troubling that Flo does not reveal her plan to Doris, but this silence merely reflects the constant struggle between matriarchal and patriarchal traditions in transition within African society. Flo is attempting to integrate a solution possible in traditional matriarchal society, yet this plan is considered dysfunctional and scandalous in a patriarchal society. This opposition explains why the friendship between Flo and Doris suffers, not flourishes. This event foreshadows more conflicts that occur in the novel, and also indicates that further adjustments to the tradition are warranted.

There is no mistaking, however, that the solidarity crucial to women in a matriarchal social structure is what Flo is seeking. Curiously, having realized that she has paid for her scheme through the loss of her dearest friend, Flo states:

> I was no longer a true woman. I no longer had any sense of pride. I would almost have preferred that he had met someone I did not know, a girl in a nightclub who would have known to avoid me when she spotted me at the market, or at Printania, or in the street--but not my friend. Certainly not my friend! (45)

Flo's definition of womanhood has obviously changed from the time when she first initiated her plan. Whereas Flo's relationship with Joel once defined her as a woman, she now discovers that it is really her sisterhood with other women that gives her the primary strength and support that she needs.

Although Doris and Joel's relationship continues to unfold as Flo had planned, her "victory" is of relatively little consolation to her as time passes. It becomes apparent

that the matriarchal perspective of polygamy can no longer be adapted to a patriarchal society and still engender the same sentiments of solidarity among women. In fact, polygamy seems to have no place in contemporary 'matriarcat nouveau' since a couple is now considered sacred, and the idea of communal living is all but lost. As Flo states in the novel, "A life of sharing—how low. No one has the best piece, the whole person, the essential part, rather only momentary freedom, bits and pieces—the leftovers, if you would." (49).

Although solidarity through polygamy no longer works in contemporary society, Kuoh-Moukoury emphasizes that solidarity must be maintained in 'matriarcat nouveau'. As Flo confronts Doris and accuses her of stealing her husband and betraying their friendship, Doris is quick to put Flo in her place. Doris reminds Flo that a troubled couple must look within themselves to identify the source of their marital problems, and not to the "other woman" (46). Doris's words to Flo imply that a weakened solidarity among women is precisely what keeps the oppressive bonds of patriarchy strong. If Doris and Flo are led to believe they must compete for Joel, Flo will focus on this competition and not the problems already existing in their marriage which, in this case, led Joel to pursue Doris.

It is important to note that Doris is French. In the early stages of the novel's development, Kuoh-Moukoury considered making Doris African, but ultimately wrote the character as French to add yet another "essential encounter" to the story (2000). The fact that Doris is French conveys a significant message about the universality of women's struggles. Kuoh-Moukoury emphasizes that one of the positive outcomes of the global society that we have become is the realization that the events in the novel are human

experiences that transcend race (2000). In this regard, Kuoh-Moukoury demonstrates that the positive aspects of matriarchal tradition can successfully be applied to cultural contexts outside the African diaspora. Thus, what appeared to be a prediction in 1956 has indeed come true as interracial friendships and marriages are increasingly more common. Western women can indeed borrow the ideas of solidarity and community espoused in African matriarchal tradition to combat their own issues of oppression. Curiously, fellow Cameroonian, Calixthe Beyala, adopted a similar idea in her 1988 novel *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*, which follows the friendship of an African (Tanga) and a European Jew (Anna-Claude). Their connection to German history shows that their oppression has a common link. Of Cameroon's three colonizers, German rule is considered to have imposed the most hardship and brutality, and the fact that Anna-Claude is Jewish links her to the atrocities suffered at the hands of the Germans during the holocaust. In a larger sense, these friendships show that both writers see the universal nature of women's issues and that the advantages of African matriarchal tradition are not necessarily culture-specific. Solidarity among women can and must transcend racial lines if unjust elements of patriarchal systems are to be eliminated.

Some Western feminist scholars have questioned (which can be asked of Beyala's novel as well) whether Kuoh-Moukoury is implying that a homoerotic bond exists between Flo and Doris. That is, given the failure of Flo's heterosexual relationship, the introductory statement of the novel ("Nothing is more beautiful than a couple.") could be considered ironic. This irony was not Kuoh-Moukoury's intention, however, for the subject was taboo at the time the novel was written. Nevertheless, one could argue that such a physical relationship between Flo and Doris was never realized because the

internalization of societal values prohibited such an intimacy from even from being considered. We have already noted how such an internalization of these values prevented Flo from accepting a lifestyle outside the traditional role of wife and mother. Kuoh-Moukoury's perspective on the subject is thus:

> Her attachment to Doris and the admiration of her physical beauty may allude to homoeroticism, but nothing in the text confirms this. Flo, like Doris, must be a liberated woman to have come as far as she has. However, Flo's love for Joel eclipses that progressiveness. Flo may consider such a bond with Doris, but such a relationship could never be consummated. (2000)

While the possibility of a homoerotic encounter is very subtle in *Essential Encounters*, explicit examples in Calixthe Beyala's early works, *The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me* (*C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée)* and *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*, provoke open debate. Yet critics argue whether such "friendships" between Irene and Ateba in the former novel and between Anna-Claude and Tanga in the latter are really homoerotic relationships or highly symbolic representations of women's solidarity which are reminiscent of the sisterhood in African matriarchy. As Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi states in *Gender in African Women's Writing*:

> Women-to-women bonding and networking has been specific to African women's existence and agency for millennia; so too, has been the complementarity of gender roles between African men and women. When a woman writer questions the repression of homoerotic bonding among women, when these writers critique marriage, motherhood, and male use

> of economic and political power to control women's sexuality and lived experiences, I contend that their texts are, within the context of African and postcolonial literature, doing within the canon something comparable to what radical feminist writings did for the feminist movement starting in the 1960's. (30-31)

Although Calixthe Beyala's writing at times seems militant, there are numerous references in her many novels that suggest that she supports the idea of the complementarity of man and woman that is the very foundation of African matriarchal social structure. In *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*, the protagonist Anna-Claude invents 'Ousmane' to be her complement. Ousmane becomes so real to Anna-Claude that she can describe his character, his idiosyncrasies, and even his scent. In her imagination, his words come alive for her, "Remember us, woman, before history, when I was neither you nor I" (13). The bifurcated "history" to which Beyala refers is undoubtedly Africa's introduction to patriarchal values—a history from which woman was essentially erased. Before "history" then can easily be interpreted as traditional matriarchy—a time where man and woman could be separated at most into complements of one another, as both were needed to attain wholeness. Similarly in *The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me*, Beyala begins the novel by saying of Africa's children in particular:

> I wanted them to learn how the confusion of values, ideas, feelings, memories, had ended up by killing history all the way back to its beginnings. . . I have a terrible urge to talk about that sad dawn, about those hours that fled by before the arrival of man. (2)

With these excerpts in mind, the seemingly homoerotic encounters between female protagonists in the novels take on a more symbolic interpretation than a literal one. In *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*, Anna-Claude offers her complete solidarity to Tanga so that they truly become one. Beyala illustrates this idea using a seemingly homoerotic encounter as a means of showing absolute solidarity. To prove that such an approach does not symbolize a total rejection of men, Anna-Claude does not see herself engaging in intercourse with Tanga, rather with Ousmane whom she imagines to be her complement. Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi emphasizes, "There is an active pursuit of sensuous relationships between women, but there is also a tolerance for women seeking pleasures with men, if only the women are not objectified in the process" (92). If female separatism or homoeroticism were Beyala's intended solution to patriarchal oppression, Anna-Claude's fantasy would not have substituted a male in Tanga's place:

> (Anna-Claude to Tanga) – We have to live the dream. Tonight, you will be Ousmane, my dream . . . Their bodies lock in a sensual embrace, Anna-Claude cries. Tanga traces furrows of tenderness along her neck and side. She tells her not to cry, that although they had just lived a nightmare, that their embrace was now the reality. She tells her that they will rub away their despair and that the most maternal love will surge from them. (72)

Eloise Brière equates such encounters in Beyala's novels to a matriarchal tradition among the Beti known as the *mevungu* (239-242*)*. Once labeled by the European missionaries (considered to be the first Western observers of the custom) as "ritualized homosexuality", the *mevungu* is really a practice among women which is believed to chase away evil, returning the village to a period of prosperity (Laburthe-Tolra 240).

Beti men recognize the power of the *mevungu* but never participate in or even observe the ritual. The 'mother of the *mevungu*' who will lead the other participants is chosen precisely for the large size of both her vagina and clitoris which symbolizes ultimate power and fecundity (237). At the start of the ritual, she will appear nude before the other participants who are all married women, inviting them to imitate her. The all-night ritual involves participants massaging and stretching the clitoris of the 'mother' or "nourishing" it by applying a mixture of herbs and plants believed to have medicinal qualities (Laburthe-Tolra 238). As Brière states:

> Excluding the men, bonding women to one another by celebrating their fecundity, the *mevungu* was the key example not only of solidarity among women, but also of the desire for autonomy, for feminine self-importance. It is from this gynocentric celebration, this affirmation of the ties that bond women, that society would be reborn, cured of its ills thanks to female solidarity. (241)

Brière then compares the traditional *mevungu* with the sexual encounters in Beyala's novels. "The desire to fuse with the body of another, so characteristic among the protagonists of Beyala, is a way to recreate the feminine network which, at one time, embraced the women initiates" (242).

It is indeed ironic that it is precisely Western feminist scholars, apart from Brière, who tend to interpret the relationships between an African and a European woman in these novels as homoerotic while African feminist scholars do not. As Ifi Amadiume explains, Western feminist scholars misinterpret such relationships because of their own experience with patriarchy:

> As European feminists, locked in the production-reproduction debate, seek possible ways out of their historically oppressive patriarchal family structure, inventing single-parenthood and alternative affective relationships, I argue that in the African case we do not have to invent anything. We already have a history and legacy of a women's culture—a matriarchy based on affective relationships—and this should be given a central place in analysis and social enquiry. (1997, 23)

Kuoh-Moukoury and Beyala emphasize very different angles in the transition to 'matriarcat nouveau'. Kuoh-Moukoury profiles a young woman whose newly acquired independence is so overwhelming that she unconsciously adheres to traditional patriarchal values to avoid exploring the unknown territory of this independence. Beyala's protagonists are among the most destitute, with economic challenges posing the biggest obstacle in the transition to 'matriarcat nouveau'. Yet a third Cameroonian writer, Philomène Bassek, adds to this discussion of redefining women's space in her 1990 novel, *La tache de sang*.

Unlike the aforementioned works, female protagonists in the most recent novels by the women writers of Cameroon are often professionals who take considerable risks all in the name of solidarity. They are seen taking a commanding role over their situation, even if they must conspire strategically against men to accomplish their goals. They struggle not only to help themselves, but they seek to raise the consciousness of others as well, regardless of age or social class. Like Flo's plan in *Essential Encounters*, however, the approach is somewhat controversial but can be explained through the analysis of certain customs and traditions common among matriarchal groups. In this

respect, perhaps no author captures the essence of 'matriarcat nouveau' better than Philomène Bassek.

Bassek's work focuses on a 55-year-old woman, Mama Ida, who is pregnant for the eleventh time by her husband, Same, who has incessantly abused her, both physically and emotionally, throughout their lives together. Despite this foreboding introduction, Mama Ida's story does not end tragically and by analyzing certain aspects of her life from childhood to adulthood, one can ascertain that African matriarchal tradition can withstand and survive even the most oppressive of patriarchal societies. However, the true catalyst of the novel who will shape matriarchal tradition into a contemporary model is Patricia, the daughter of Same and Mama Ida. Bassek describes Patricia's physical features as resembling those of the Peuls, "As the little girl grew up, her resemblance to the Peuls became more and more obvious" (92). One cannot help but think that Bassek's choice was deliberate, allowing her to connect Patricia with the matriarchal history of the Peul people. The Peuls were able to maintain their matriarchal social structure despite the fact that the breakup of ancient Egypt forced them to give up their communal, agricultural lifestyle for a nomadic one (Diop 124-125). Although nomadic life, like colonialism, is not generally conducive to a matriarchal social system, Peul matriarchy managed to overcome both obstacles in many respects. Thus, linking Patricia's ethnicity to the Peuls is highly symbolic, emphasizing that a contemporary model of traditional matriarchy can survive in African society.

Ironically, the childhoods of Patricia and her mother are very similar with one exception. Although Mama Ida was raised with certain matriarchal traditions, she was nonetheless resigned to the fact that she was destined to be a wife and mother without any

other options. Patricia, conversely, accepted the traditional tasks designed to "train" her for these roles, but also found the motivation to change within her own family the perceptions of traditional roles assigned by gender. For example, Patricia laments the fact that she must be burdened with chores which take time away from her studies while her brothers are left aimlessly roaming the streets of the city. Mama Ida attempts to justify the brothers' idleness by blaming it on consequences of living in an urban society:

> It's not their fault that in the city, there is practically no man's work for them, no fields to clear, no wood to cut. . . In any case, I'm not the one who will ask them to behave like women. (46)

With even her mother adhering to beliefs on traditional gender roles, Patricia must attempt a transformation on her own. Being an elder sibling facilitates matters, but Patricia devotes years to change behaviors instilled in her brothers by their parents and society. Nonetheless, she eventually achieves a fair amount of success:

> Miraculously as time went on, they began to participate effectively in household tasks to the great astonishment of their mother. They took turns washing the floor and doing the laundry. The only thing to which they were still adverse was cooking, having been already sufficiently warned that their mother would never permit it in any case. (46)

Patricia's actions are reminiscent of Kuoh-Moukoury's belief that 'matriarcat nouveau' must first be accepted in the home before it can be embraced by society. By allowing her young sons to remain idle while her daughter, in turn, labored at home simply because it was her assigned task by virtue of being female, Mama Ida was exacerbating the problem for women by perpetuating restrictive gender roles. Patricia

managed to change the mindset of her brothers which would undoubtedly positively affect their relationships with women into adulthood. Later in the novel, Patricia's ideas as an adolescent are consistent with her choice of a husband who is not opposed to performing household tasks for himself. In fact, Patricia could not tolerate anything less:

> Patricia condemned the games of the so called "modern man" who, just like his elders, seemed to harbor a cynical pleasure seeing his wife slave away. (110)

With 'matriarcat nouveau' established in her own family, Patricia is more empowered and thus able to introduce the elements of a 'matriarcat nouveau' more overtly in society. Patricia accepts a government position in Social Services as the chief director of Family Wellness--an ideal position with which she can channel her ideas to other women (92). Furthermore, she is extremely active in the women's movement in her country. Her particular women's group, as Patricia explains to her mother, seeks financial support to fund projects which will cause others to reflect upon the status of women in the family as well as in society and to study ways to transform those conditions which have not yet been successfully adapted to the demands of contemporary lifestyles (89).

As previously mentioned, Mama Ida's childhood is indeed influenced by matriarchal elements but she still finds herself within an oppressive marriage as an adult. As a child, Mama Ida's schooling is just as important as that of her brothers (10). There appears to be little hierarchy in the family, as her Uncle Mbeck insists that male and female family members take meals together as a way of promoting strong family ties and sentiments (11). She is also encouraged to provoke open debate with males, although her

mother warns that when seeking serious advice, women should be her main source of support (10). Thus, Mama Ida learns early that women must be united in solidarity in order to be on an equal playing field with men. Mama Ida's adult experiences differ from those of her daughter, however, because of her physical isolation from these matriarchal traditions instilled in her as a child. Due to this isolation, Same is able to wield more power over his wife. This is essentially what causes patriarchy to be a more oppressive social structure for women: As Schneider acknowledges:

> A woman's alienation from her own group is proportional to the degree to which she can be subordinated. The stronger her tie to her own group, the weaker the control that can be exercised over her. (20)

By isolating Mama Ida from her family and community, Same thus ensures his role as patriarch:

> Mama Ida had not benefited from the communal structures in the cities where her husband had worked. Alone and shut up in her relatively tiny house, she had to take care of the children and their upbringing, her domestic chores alienating her from the outside world. (133)

Through her separation, Mama Ida loses not only the emotional support of her own family and native villagers, but she also inevitably develops an economic dependence on Same which further tightens his control over her. As Schneider elaborates:

> Where a woman's tie to her own unit is greatly weakened or nearly severed, she may become largely if not wholly dependent on her husband

> and his patrilineal descent group and the stability of the marriage may in such a case be a direct function of the degree of her dependency. Her severed or weakened tie to her own unit means, in such a case, that she is not free to return to her unit in divorce. When a woman's tie to her own unit is so severed, her husband and his patrilineal descent group may gain a considerable degree of control over her, thus enforcing her bond to her husband and her dependence on him and his patrilineal descent group, regardless of her own inclinations. (17-18)

Thus, Mama Ida has only her memories of her native village on which to rely as Same does not allow her to return to visit her family, fearing that the "conjugal hierarchy is at stake" (47).

As in Kuoh-Moukoury's *Essential Encounters*, there is a controversial element in *La tache de sang* which has an equivalent in matriarchal tradition which is dependent on women's solidarity. As mentioned previously, Mama Ida is confronted with a pregnancy that she cannot carry to term without risking her own life. Mama Ida and Same are both aware of these dire consequences, but Same stubbornly rejects the "dishonorable" idea of contraception or abortion, and thus, Mama Ida sees no choice but to accept her fate in order to abide by Same's wishes. It is Patricia who then decides for her mother to seek the help of a female physician and friend, Modi. Patricia hopes that Modi will be able to alert her mother to the gravity of her situation. However, Mama Ida's commitment to Same is impenetrable. She can only reiterate her husband's wishes to Modi, who in turn responds, "You talk as if you yourself don't exist" (130).

Because of the fear Same has instilled in his wife, Patricia and Modi realize that Mama Ida is simply incapable of making a rational decision in this matter. Therefore, Patricia and Modi arrange for a drug-induced abortion of this eleventh child, without consulting Mama Ida, nor Same, and without even discussing the matter first with their own husbands with whom they both have successful marriages (147). As a sign of their ultimate solidarity in this matter, Modi assures Patricia, "Don't worry, Patricia, your ordeal and your struggle are my own" (131).

One could argue that this solution to Mama Ida's problem cannot rightfully be considered a victory for women, since Mama Ida was still not in control of her own body. The choice was merely taken away from Same and put into the hands of another woman. However, one must remember that Patricia's decision exhibited no selfishness or cruelty, unlike the father who was ignoring the reality that his wife would most likely die in childbirth, due to the foreseen medical complications. Patricia and Modi, in fact, have taken the biggest risk of anyone by placing their own professions and lives in jeopardy, all in the name of solidarity. Abortion is illegal in the province of Cameroon in which they reside, except in a case where the mother's death is certain and immediate. In addition, the physician is required to have the written consent of the husband (Bassek 131). Mama Ida herself admitted no choice in the matter, and vowed to abide by Same's wishes. However, Same's selfishness and addiction to power has rendered him incapable of maintaining his role of authority on this issue. Therefore, Patricia and Modi have merely assumed authority from males, both Same and a biased legal system in this case, who have demonstrated an abuse of power, a right accorded to them through matriarchal tradition.

To further justify Patricia's decision, it is relevant to point out that traditional matriarchal systems required special limits on the authority of husbands over wives (Schneider 19). Although women delegated authority to male members of their group, a husband's power over his wife was restricted in a matriarchal system (Schneider 17). This was so in part because wives delegated authority to other males besides their own husbands. Secondly, since life was highly communal and polygamous marriages were common, man's paternal relationship with his own children was minimized, for there were actually several individuals responsible for all of the group's children. Thus, the father had very little authority over his wife and children (Schneider 24). Therefore, if we apply this social system to the particular situation in the novel, Same would technically have no rights concerning his children and a decision to abort is not even his to be made. Patricia, who has inherited power through her mother, actually has more of a right to decide the fate of her unborn sibling than her father.

Although Patricia indeed exercises this right, it is not without profound contemplation on the part of both Patricia and Modi. Both realize the unorthodox and controversial nature of their actions, but feel they have no choice in light of the factors of patriarchy which are working against them. As for Patricia, she tries to see beyond her mother's facade of loyalty to Same, in hopes of discovering her true feelings on the matter:

> At the very heart of her soul, Patricia remained indecisive. The decision to abort involved her very own mother, and her true feelings counted for her in this matter. (131-132)

As for her partner, one learns that this is not the first time that Modi has resorted to such methods. Modi considers her work to be "revolutionary" but she finds herself asking if it is wise to continue in such a direction, using such clandestine methods. Specifically she recalls incidents where she was almost "taken in by her own game", or things had not gone as planned (147). Modi's words imply fear. She questions if she has kept her true cause in focus, or if she has merely become lost in the power that her position has created for her. In the guise of working for women's issues, could she become as corrupt as the system she is trying to dismantle? Modi and Patricia feel they are seeing the situation clearly, but the checks and balances of the matriarchal system which would prevent such an abuse of power are absent.

However fictional in nature the account in *La Tache de sang* is, it can nonetheless be linked to a ritual within Cameroonian culture. The events in Bassek's novel are analogous to a practice called the 'anlu', a custom common among the matrilineal Kom of Western Cameroon. In the article entitled "Traditional Female Militancy in a Modern Context", Paul Nchoji Nkwi describes the 'anlu' in terms of the Kom's power structure:

> Curious enough, even in the matrilineal societies, the exercise of effective authority rests in the hands of men. The relative position of women within the power structure might suffice in normal circumstances but when there is an abuse of women, their rights and person, the power structure might be disrupted. This study attempts to show in a concrete way how and when women can take over the power, or can displace the men and rule in their own way. Among the Kom of the Western Grassfields of Cameroon, there is a female practice called 'anlu'

> which is a disciplinary technique designed by women to seek redress for particular offenses omitted by men against womanhood.. . . .On the whole it is the men who administer, control, restrain, and rule persons.
>
> But this does not mean that any man can maltreat a woman. Women have specific rights and obligations. Their position in Kom is well defined. (181-182)

Without specifically naming the actions of Patricia and Modi as an 'anlu', Bassek illustrates how women engage in this custom in contemporary society. Same is the recognized authority figure of his family--Patricia does not deny this. However, his frequent beatings of his wife even during her pregnancy coupled with his mental abuse are inexcusable, and this is reason enough for him to be stripped of this authority. Patricia therefore does not usurp his power but appropriates it. Although there are many circumstances which may lead to an 'anlu', Nkwi ironically gives us the identical situation as one finds in *La Tache de sang* in his description of the custom:

> If a man had beaten his pregnant or nursing wife, it was considered an abomination by the village or tribe as a whole on the ground that "fertility or the chid" was one of the things or values that tribal rituals protected and to see a person maltreating a pregnant woman or a nursing mother, was considered worth the action of 'anlu'. The women could take over full control and deal with the individual in the way that they wanted. . .
>
> Only women are involved and no men or any tribal judicial institution can step in. Any attempt by a man is treated seriously and he could also be ostracized for supporting the culprit. During this period the entire social

and political life of the village is in the hands of women. (184-185)

Therefore, according to 'anlu' rituals, Patricia and Modi were within their jurisdiction when they decided to take Mama Ida's case into their own hands. Furthermore, the fact that men assume no role in the 'anlu' would explain why Patricia would not discuss the matter with her own husband, Mandika. For Patricia, this was the most difficult, for Mandika was Mama Ida's own son-in-law. Especially with the emphasis on the couple in 'matriarcat nouveau', Patricia was torn between informing Mandika of the plan, or violating the sacredness of the 'anlu'

As we have seen thus far, Cameroon's feminist writers are in the process of redefining woman's space in the family and society with the help of African tradition. Bassek uses the same process to attack certain legislation and national issues which have proved problematic for women. When Patricia and Modi consider abortion as an option for Mama Ida, Modi points out, "The legislation of Kama prohibits any kind of abortion except when the mother's life is at risk" (131). In fact, Article 337 of the current Penal Code of Cameroon states on the subject of abortion:

> (2) Whoever procures the abortion of a woman, notwithstanding her consent, shall be punished with imprisonment for from one to five years and with fine of from one hundred thousand to two million francs.
>
> The penalties prescribed by subsection (2) shall be doubled where the offender--
>
> (a) Engages habitually in abortion; or
>
> (b) Practices the profession of medicine or an allied profession.

It is interesting to note, however, that such a practice deemed dishonorable by Same and unlawful according to Cameroonian law was openly considered in traditional medicine. It is Mama Ida's sister who still lives in the matriarchal village of their youth who apprises her of the history of such practices in Cameroon:

> She (Mama Ida) was astonished to learn that such practices of contraception and abortion had ever existed traditionally. Once again, she became aware of her level of ignorance. Female villagers therefore used to resort to such practices? (58)

Whereas the solidarity exhibited between Patricia and Modi is quintessential, Bassek blames various feminist groups in Cameroon for their idleness caused precisely by their lack of solidarity. The solidarity between Patricia and Modi ultimately brings closure to Mama Ida's problem. As seen in traditional matriarchy, solidarity is key to the success of female group members. Bassek criticizes the absence of a common platform among Cameroon's feminist groups and associations which cause such groups to experience opposition and a struggle for power similar to the very patriarchal institutions against which they are fighting. During one meeting in particular in the novel, Bassek writes:

> Voices were raised, points of view diverged and constantly opposed each other. The absence of a common ideological platform, the foundation of any effective collective action, became yet another cause for members to desert the association" (103).

Bassek also criticizes the fact that these groups often do not represent the concerns of all social classes in Cameroon. In terms of the feminist association in the

novel, certain women seemed "to be happy with the more obvious signs of freedom and were satisfied with the increasing material wealth of a minority of women to which they claimed to belong" (99). Still other women supported the group's objectives but "domestic chores and raising children paralyzed them" (99). In a 1991 interview in *Amina*, Bassek was questioned precisely on the reason why she depicted such failures within the feminist association:

> This failure simply expresses the long and difficult road left to travel in the struggle. Woman confronts more than one obstacle: men (parents, friends, in-laws, husbands, lovers), societal institutions, illiteracy, ignorance, and the absence of concrete means to continue this struggle. The current generation of women would love to free themselves of all of these constraints. But do they possess, do they look for the means? (85)

Through Kuoh-Moukoury, Beyala, and Bassek, we have seen conflict and misinterpretations of matriarchal tradition, but these failures are not the focus of these works. Such obstacles are inevitable in the transitional period leading to 'matriarcat nouveau'. If we compare Kuoh-Moukoury's first contribution to Cameroonian feminist literature with Bassek's addition in the 1990's, we see that Patricia and Modi certainly possess a frame of mind which was absent in *Essential Encounters*. As the literature progresses, protagonists gain self-esteem, exhibiting the courage needed to dismantle an oppressive patriarchal structure.

All of the novels discussed in this study are still pertinent since their protagonists "exist" in some capacity. As Kuoh-Moukoury points out about her own novel, *Essential Encounters*,

> "Flo still exists today in Africa and elsewhere. As long as there are women in the process of transition to contemporary society, the novel will continue to have relevance" (2000).

One cannot underestimate the importance of focusing on elements of matriarchal tradition in Cameroonian feminist literature. Not only does this approach provide a sense of empowerment for African women, but it allows for solutions to come from within African culture itself. The words of a traditional healer in *Essential Encounters* emphasizes the importance of finding value in positive aspects of tradition:

> You younger generations reject such traditions, but you are wrong. If our ancestors accepted them, it's because they are worthy. You others, you want to destroy the "things" whose virtues have been proven for countless generations. (23)

In addition to all of its aforementioned attributes, the allure of Cameroonian feminist writing lies in the fact that it is a literature that provides insight into certain African traditions while also transcending differences in culture and gender, addressing universal issues such as relationships and struggles. Redefining woman's space in contemporary society is one of the most valuable contributions of this literature.

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