



*Demographic Research* a free, expedited, online journal  
of peer-reviewed research and commentary  
in the population sciences published by the  
Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research  
Konrad-Zuse Str. 1, D-18057 Rostock · GERMANY  
[www.demographic-research.org](http://www.demographic-research.org)

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## **DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH**

**VOLUME 16, ARTICLE 13, PAGES 413-440  
PUBLISHED 08 MAY 2007**

<http://www.demographic-research.org/Volumes/Vol16/13/>

*Research Article*

### **Family, obligations, and migration: The role of kinship in Cameroon**

**Annett Fleischer**

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## **Family, obligations, and migration: The role of kinship in Cameroon**

**Annett Fleischer<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to investigate the influence of family and kin networks on the individual decision to migrate. The study is based on qualitative ethnographic data collected during field research in Cameroon and shows the considerable impact of the extended family on the migrant's decision to leave Cameroon for Germany. Migrants do not necessarily set out to pursue individual goals. They are often delegated to leave by authority figures in their extended family. The individual is part of an informal reciprocal system of exchange, which is based on trust, has social consequences, and includes duties and responsibilities for both sides.

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<sup>1</sup> Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, Rostock, Germany. E-mail: fleischer@demogr.mpg.de

## 1. Introduction

This paper investigates the role of family and kin in the process of migration. The article focuses on family networks, strategies, and their influence on the motivation and decision of individuals to migrate from Cameroon to Germany. The research is based on qualitative ethnographic data collected in Cameroon<sup>2</sup>, specifically in the country's largest cities (Douala and Yaoundé) and in its western provinces, an area from which many migrants originate. Although I conducted field research at both ends of the migration stream (Cameroon and Germany), this article concentrates on empirical findings from Cameroon, the sending country.

Three main reasons warrant interest in the migration stream from Cameroon to Germany. First, Cameroon's migration is relatively large compared with streams into Germany from other sub-Saharan African countries. With an official estimate of 14,100 in June 2005, Cameroonian migrants constitute the third largest group from sub-Saharan Africa; they are thus just behind Ghanaians and Nigerians<sup>3</sup>. Further, Cameroon's stream has steadily increased in the last five years, whereas the number of other sub-Saharan migrants has declined<sup>4</sup>. Second, migrants are predominantly young, in sharp contrast to the aging German society. A large percentage of them are registered as students. In 2003, there were 5,300 Cameroonian students enrolled in German universities, and the number is increasing. Around 1,000 Cameroonian students enroll each year in a German university (DAAD, 2005). They represent the largest sub-Saharan African group of students studying at German universities. Because of their young age and educational profile, their adaptation and economic contribution to Cameroonian as well as German society are likely to be different than one would expect from other migrants. Hatton and Williamson (2003) argue that the number of young migrant adults will be even larger in the future and that they will look for employment

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<sup>2</sup> The data collection is part of a doctoral research project undertaken as part of an interdisciplinary project, "Transnational vital events: Birth, law, and migration". The dissertation investigates the relation between migration, vital events such as marriage and birth, and the legal framework. This paper, however, aims to explore the social patterns of migration decision-making as they bear on forms of obligations and duties related to international migration. The study is derived from an explorative field work, including 8 in-depth interviews with potential migrants and 12 interviews with their relatives, as well as participant observation and various informal conversations.

<sup>3</sup> Other major destinations of Cameroonian migrants are France (1999: 20,436), Italy (2003: 3,313), Belgium (2004: 2,432), Spain, the UK, and the US ([www.migrationpolicy.org](http://www.migrationpolicy.org)).

<sup>4</sup> Official statistics on Cameroonian migrants in Germany do not consider unregistered migrants living and working in Germany. Furthermore, people of African origin but with German citizenship or a passport from another European country (e.g. Africans from the "second generation") are not officially registered as immigrants in Germany. Overall, it is estimated that the "real number" of African immigrants in Germany is about 50 per cent higher than statistical reports suggest (Lentz, 2002). This would mean that around 20,000 Cameroonian migrants in Germany are living registered or undocumented in the country.

opportunities in an aging Europe. Indeed, many Africans hope and expect to improve their standard of living through temporary international migration. Third, little is known about these migrants. Literature on sub-Saharan Africans in Germany is rare and concentrates on African students and various experiences of Afro-Germans. To fill this empirical gap, I seek to investigate the profile and motivations of Cameroonian migrants, focusing on the role of the extended family on migration behavior. The research is organized around two central questions: How does migration as a key life event fit into the larger dynamics of family? Conversely, how do family dynamics, and notably the influence of relatives, affect migration decision-making?

The paper starts by reviewing some of the literature on migration motivations and intentions. Next, I explore the concept of the extended family in the Cameroonian society and its influence on the individual family member. I then describe the data and research methods, followed by the main empirical findings. The description of findings focuses on the role of the family in the migration decision-making of individuals. The paper concludes by developing ideas for further research and by outlining the relevance of this project to the broader literature on international migration from Africa. In analyzing this broader relevance, two unique features of the research must be kept in mind. The first, Germany's colonial past in Cameroon and how it may influence the "migrant's choice" of destination<sup>5</sup> and the responses given by the interviewees. A second consideration is my emphasis on the impact of the social and cultural institutions (such as the family, the household, the community, and local associations) in migration decision-making. Although there is a growing interest in the social and cultural determinants of international migration from Africa to Europe, most articles still classify migration as primarily constituting a micro-economic issue (e.g. Zimmermann, 1996), with the cultural and social embedding remaining relatively unexplored. Applied to the African context, I argue that it is not the individual's choice that counts but rather the obligations and responsibilities towards the extended family and kin. For this reason, social networks and strategies need to be considered and explored. Authority figures in the family are likely to influence the decisions about who is going, who is staying as well as the timing and spacing of migration.

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<sup>5</sup> Cameroon became a German protectorate following the German-Douala Treaty in 1884, but during the First World War in 1916 it lost its influence to the French and British (Echu, 2004).

## 2. Migration intentions and motives

Many migration experts attribute the massive movement out of Africa to the poor employment prospects in Africa. Hatton and Williamson (2003), for example, argue that one of the main reasons of migration is the large wage gap between sending and receiving countries. Low salaries, low saving rates and slow economic growth cause people to leave their places of birth. Demographic growth is also a factor. High fertility combined with reduced child mortality has been fuelling rapid growth in the number of young adults. Given the prevailing high rates of unemployment in sub-Saharan Africa, migrating young people look for alternatives abroad. An illustration of the micro-economic approach is provided by Van Dalen and his colleagues (2003), who analyzed micro-level data from a survey on seven different countries<sup>6</sup>. They focused on the structural ‘push and pull factors’ that trigger migration: Based on their migration surveys, the authors argue that the “typical African migrant is young, male and someone who has modern values” (van Dalen 2003: 29). This person is mainly driven by his or her expectations about Europe i.e., a mix of economic motivations, an optimistic view of finding a job and to improve one’s financial situation. This approach focuses on the migrant as an individual actor who is following primarily personal purposes. The social and cultural structures at the local level are often not taken into full consideration.

Olwig (2001) criticizes the emphasis on ‘push and pull factors’ since they

“...give the impression that migrants are pushed out of their place of origin because of extraordinary conditions, or pulled away by attractive opportunities abroad. When examining migration from the point of view of the life stories related by members of the family networks, quite another picture emerges” (Olwig 2001: 17).

Instead, Olwig stresses the significance of the social, cultural, and historical aspects of migration. Adepaju (1991: 209) explains that the direction of migration has always been to countries that have historical or political links, e.g. African francophone countries to France. The US and Germany are very interesting for scientists, technical, and professional staff. Migration must therefore be analyzed in its contextual complexity, with an emphasis on the cultural and social domain. The analysis in this paper of the decision-making processes of Cameroonian migrants considers economic, political, cultural and social influences, but perhaps more importantly; it examines the incentives and motives of individual migrants and their extended families.

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<sup>6</sup> The investigated countries include: Spain, Italy, Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, Senegal and Ghana.

## **2.1 Family in Cameroonian society**

Extended family systems and strong kin and lineage relations remain important in most regions of Cameroon since they provide a sense of belonging, solidarity, and protection. However, they also involve expectations, obligations and responsibilities (Tiemoko 2004: 157). They play a crucial role in social control. Economic, social and demographic behavior in African societies cannot be analyzed without reference to the extended family and its involvement in the decision-making processes. Therefore, to fully understand family involvement in the decision to migrate, it is useful to analyze the influences of extended family and kin in Cameroonian society. The task is complicated by Cameroon's cultural diversity, a country that has more than 200 different ethnic groups (Calvès 1999: 294). However, all of them are organized around the extended family model (Locoh, 1988, Feldman-Savelsberg, 1999).

A characteristic of the Cameroonian family system is the high importance that marriage plays, although conjugal union is increasingly postponed and premarital births are becoming more common (Calvès, 1999). Despite urbanization, an economic crisis and increasing international migration, marriage remains one of the major key life events (Bledsoe and Cohen, 1993), mainly because the conjugal union secures the socio-economic status of both women and men.

A gendered division of labor, the separation of responsibilities and the partition of financial means are identified as other attributes of the Cameroonian family system, although profound differences are found between rural and urban areas. The descent is mainly patrilineal and the father remains the acknowledged head of the family even when absent, for example due to migration.

Evidence for the importance of the extended family system in the Cameroonian society can be found in the high prevalence and common practice of fosterage<sup>7</sup> (Eloundou-Enyegue and Shapiro, 2004). Child rearing is a collective and social duty in which not only the biological and nuclear family is involved, but also the extended family and kin including social parents, older siblings and other relatives (Bledsoe and Isiugo-Abanihe, 1989). In contrast to nuclear families, extended family systems allow access to resources and enable the exchange of children across nuclear family units (Eloundou-Enyegue and Shapiro, 2004), but they also entail obligations and responsibilities. To take fosterage of children as an example, there are long-term benefits of exchange, such as the distribution of child rearing costs and the transfer of educational training, but there are also reciprocal kinship obligations for each individual family member. Decision-making on fostering children may be compared to the

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g. Fleischer (2003): Fosterage and social parenthood: "The socio-economic situation of housemaids in Ségou, Mali" (2003): [www.grin.com](http://www.grin.com). Master thesis.

decision-making process on migration: who is going, who decides and what consequences will follow the family member's departure? While previous studies have amply documented the importance of extended families in supporting education and internal migration throughout sub-Saharan Africa (Bledsoe and Isiugo-Abanihe, 1989; Eloundou-Enyegue and Shapiro, 2004), this paper extends scholarship in this area by documenting the influence of extended families in international migration.

## **2.2 The influence of family on migration decisions**

To date, few studies have analyzed the impact and involvement of the extended family and related kin on international migration decision. Research by Tiemoko (2004) based on a survey of some 600 West African return migrants argues that families play an important role in the decision about return migration and remittances. The decision of migrants to return to their country of origin or not is strongly affected by their families and kin. In contrast to neoclassical economic theory, the new economics of migration considers the importance of the family and the household as the "relevant decision-making unit" (Massey et al. 2005: 53). The family and the migrant often enter a mutually beneficial "contractual arrangement" (Stark and Lucas 1988: 466). The approach views migration as a strategy that shifts the focus from individual independence to mutual interdependence. The family supports the migrants before and shortly after leaving home and expects remittances in compensation. Migration decisions are explained by an "intrafamilial implicit contract" based on an unwritten understanding about the obligations and benefits of the two parties (Stark and Lucas 1988: 478). Decisions are not taken by an isolated actor, but rather by families and households in order to maximize the expected income and minimize risks to the entire family. Adepaju (1995: 329) emphasizes the role of senior members in the household who often decide who should migrate and who should not do so. The person with the greatest potential of supporting the entire household in terms of remittances is chosen. Gerontocracy strongly influences the migration decision in order to guarantee the family's living.

Anthropologists and African social scientists do not question the importance of family and kin networks in migration, but few scholars have drawn attention to the importance of other practices, most notably *Nyongo* (e.g., Jua, 2003, Nyamnjoh, 2005). *Nyongo* (also called *Famla* or *Kong* in other areas of Cameroon) is a popular form of witchcraft employed mostly between relatives of the extended family. It is believed that people possessing *Nyongo* are able to destroy and even kill others and use their bodies to work for them in a foreign country (Nyamnjoh 2005: 242). *Nyongo* can be used in a metaphorical sense when describing situations where young Cameroonians are forced



by relatives to leave their country, seek employment abroad and send remittances to support relatives. Migrants from the Bamenda Grassfields (North West province) increasingly perceive themselves as being victims of *Nyongo*; they experience enormous pressure from their relatives to leave the country and to fulfill the demands of sending remittances. "...families and communities sacrifice sons and daughters to forage for opportunities both for accountability and opportunism" (Nyamnjoh 2005: 243). High expectations of modernity and the prospects of consuming imported foreign goods have increased the influence and pressure of kin on individual migrants. Witchcraft or, (metaphorically) social pressure, remain in many ways the long arm of family and kin seeking to achieve modern conveniences through their children (Nyamnjoh 2005: 244).

### 3. Background and setting

Cameroon is one of the most diverse countries of sub-Saharan Africa in terms of geography, language, ethnicity and religious affiliation. Cameroon's total population was estimated at around 16.3 million people in 2005 and the country's annual population growth rate is about 2 per cent (World Population Prospects, 2004). The fertility rate (4.65 children born per woman) remains high. Almost 42 per cent of the population is under 15 years of age and only 3.7 per cent are over 65; the median age is estimated at around 18 years (World Population Prospects, 2004). To a large extent, Cameroon's population consists of adolescents who often look for opportunities abroad when local opportunities are limited.

Cameroon is rich in agriculture and has some oil resources, but the country has not yet recovered from the delayed, but abrupt economic crisis of the mid 1980's (Eloundou-Enyegue et al., 2000). For instance, wages were cut twice in 1993, first by 25 per cent and by 75 per cent later in October (Adepoju 1995: 327). This development produces adverse effects on the population: Families' incomes have declined, the costs of education have risen, and the unemployment rate has grown<sup>8</sup>. Despite the difficult economic situation, the literacy rate has increased enormously in recent years. Around 65 per cent of all Cameroonian women and 81 per cent of all men were able to read and write in 2004 (Demographic and Health Survey, 2004), possibly owing to the fact that public primary schools are free of charge and that they are mandatory. Cameroon's first university was founded in 1962 in Yaoundé. Since then, in the mid 1980s, six new state universities have been established throughout the country.

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<sup>8</sup> Overall, economic growth declined to about 3.8 percent per annum during 2001-05, mainly due to the rapid decline in oil production ([www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)).

The country has a long internal migration history. Many people move from the northern regions to the south and from the western part of the country to Douala and Yaoundé for reasons related to the economic and agricultural crisis. Cameroon has one of the highest rates of internal migration in Central Africa (Schrieder and Kerr, 2000). Moreover, recent conflicts in the region (e.g. in the Sudan, Congo or Chad) have caused rising immigration to Cameroon. The country witnesses a high rate of international migration mainly to Europe and North America (Schrieder and Kerr, 2000). According to the OECD, the total number of registered expatriates in 2005 was estimated at 57,000, of which 42 per cent are highly skilled (Dumont and Lemaître, 2005). The results may be seen as strong evidence for “brain drain”.

#### **4. Data and methods**

The study uses qualitative research techniques to examine the decision-making process and forms of obligations of potential migrants. The first period of field research in Cameroon took place from March to April 2005 and the second one from January to April 2006. The respondents were identified using snowball sampling and previous contacts from my field work in Germany. The in-depth interviews were held with family members (mainly closer kin) of migrants living in Germany, but also with potential migrants and their relatives.

My field research focused on areas in which most potential migrants are living before they leave the country: the two main cities of Douala and Yaoundé. The highly populated western regions of the country and its larger cities Bamenda, Bafoussam and Buea were additional main locations for my interviews. Although many families under study were living in Douala or Yaoundé at the time of interview, they originated from other parts of Cameroon, mainly the North-West, the South-West, the South and the Extreme-North. The respondents are from diverse ethnic backgrounds, pending on the region of origin, mainly Christians and often with secondary education at least.

Since the study aims to understand the family dynamics, networks and strategies behind migration, it was essential to spend some time with the families studied. Spending several hours up to two weeks with informants and applying different methods (in-depth interviews, informal conversations, focus groups and participant observations) helped analyze the underlying structure of rules and beliefs in which the decision-making process was embedded. Only with the help of such qualitative methods was I able to create a confidential and relaxed atmosphere.

Applying qualitative research methods helps to explore attitudes, motivations, and intentions, but also opens new perspectives and enables the exploration of the family-level causes of international migration. Nevertheless, there are some disadvantages in

using these methods. A main problem of intensive field work is to keep emotional and “scientific” distance between the researcher and the informants. I started my field research as a stranger, new in the country and unknown to most respondents, but after having lived with them and having spent most of my time with them, I became well acquainted with their families. While this built rapport and trust, it also caused problems since I am not simply seen as a researcher, but also as a friend or even as a family member, with expected duties and responsibilities. Moreover, being German and coming from one of the intended destination countries may have affected responses and may even have changed migration plans. To give an example, family members kept telling me about the glorious German colonial time and how many wonderful and useful improvements the Germans colonists have made to Cameroon, such as building streets, railways and the port in Douala. These statements may be due to my German background. In contrast to quantitative surveys, however, I was able to react to and interact with respondents, to ask further questions, and explore the intentions and meanings of assertions.

## **5. Empirical findings: The role of family and kinship in the migration process**

The topic of migration is widely discussed in the daily life of Cameroonians since it is strongly connected to the economic, political, cultural and social situation in the country. When talking with family members about migration, everyone was willing to contribute something. The Cameroonians I met who do not have relatives in Germany did not hesitate to talk about detailed migration ideas and plans - for themselves or for their children and younger relatives.

Asking people about their understanding of family, who belongs to their family and who may be involved in the decision-making process, the answers were uniform. Family in the African context involves not only biological and social parents, and siblings, but also uncles, aunts, cousins, grand parents, nephews, the family members of the spouse and in many cases “people with whom you can identify” such as friends and other non-relatives. All of these people are usually involved in the decision-making process of potential migrants:

“The decision for someone to go to Europe is often taken by the entire immediate family. One can hardly decide for himself what to do in the future. There are always others involved and you depend on them.”  
(Cameroonian man, 30 years old)

Who is deciding on who is going to migrate? The decision-makers are in the main the persons who are “investing” in the migration project of the family member. Sponsoring is not only restricted to financial means, but also includes investing time in the upbringing of children and putting energy into the development of prospective contacts and relations necessary for a successful future. Parents and/or older siblings exert the main influence on the child for most of the time, but also cousins (often declared as older brothers), uncles, aunts or non-relatives who are strongly connected to the family can be involved.

Table 1 shows the key individuals who participated in the decision-making process on the migration studied and the kinship ties with the migrant. Fathers, mothers, older brothers and cousins - authority figures - often are the most influential decision-makers. They are able to raise enough money to finance the trip and the documents necessary<sup>9</sup>, but they are also the ones who provide potential migrants with information about travel practicalities and the country of destination and who build the essential networks. The estimated costs vary strongly, pending on whether the entire migration process is financed or whether only part of it (e.g. German classes or visa) is paid. Family members contribute from several hundred Euros up to almost 5,000 Euros. In exchange, the family places various demands on the migrant and expects improvements to their own socio-economic situation. The migrant is placed under strong pressure once s/he arrives in Germany. She/he is supposed to complete his or her degree study with high marks and search for a good employment position afterwards. Despite a good education and career, remittances are demanded that are claimed to be used for different purposes: payment of school fees and health care, investment in land or business or simply improvement of the family’s living standard. Moreover, migrants abroad are expected to take care of other relatives (especially younger siblings) in helping them to migrate to Europe.

The ways of deciding which family member is going abroad seem to be complex and strategic. There are key characteristics a person should have in order to migrate to Germany. Potential migrants should be smart, mature, self-dependent, talented (this may mean being an excellent football player), good in languages, diligent and “*good in handling white people*”. According to my informants potential migrants should be able to deal with foreigners in a polite and inoffensive manner. They need to know how to treat “*those white people*”, how to communicate with them and how to approach them in order to make contacts and develop relationships with the wanted society. Moreover, they are expected to work hard and concentrate on their goals to successfully complete education and find adequate work.

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<sup>9</sup> In some cases, property or houses were sold (in part) to pay for the costs.

**Table 1: Source and nature of family influences in the migration process**

MIGRANT	Kin relation	Contribution (type)	Contribution (costs)	Expectations
<b>High school student, 19, male</b>	Mother, older brother <sup>10</sup>	Air ticket, passport, visa, money for the first half a year of stay (rent, food, fees)	3.110.000CFA =4.741€	Good education in Germany, finding an adequate position in Cameroon
<b>University student, 22, male</b>	Mother, two fathers, but also older brother	German classes plus exams	First course: 52.000CFA=79 € Second course: 78.000 CFA=118 € Exams: 100.000CFA=152 €	Good degree and well paid temporary job in Germany
<b>University student, 28, male,</b>	Aunt, uncle and older brother, teacher	Paying for education until university degree completion (books, internet, etc.)	Additionally around 800.000 CFA =1.219€, sold part of the family land	Financial support from abroad and future contacts for further migration of relatives
<b>University student, 19, female</b>	Mother and father	Financing education, so as to enable the student to concentrate on the studies	Monthly payment for books, transport, internet	Remittances for school fees of younger siblings and health care
<b>Self-employed, 27, male</b>	Father and uncle	Money for visa, documents <sup>11</sup> and flight ticket	Around 600.000 CFA =914 €	Investment in business
<b>Employee, 29, female</b>	Older brother	Good networks to Germany, financial support	Flight ticket	No concrete expectations
<b>Teacher, 26, male</b>	Father and male cousin, own decision	Good relations to administration at embassy, finance for visa and necessary documents	200.000 CFA =304 €	Improvement of personal situation and living conditions of the family
<b>Artist, 30, male</b>	Older brothers, home association (tontine)	Providing information about visa, travel practicalities, customs in Germany	No financial aid, but information, contacts and relations in Cameroon and Germany	Formation of a business, future contacts

<sup>10</sup> An older brother does not necessarily mean a biological brother. The term is expanded in the sense that the “older brother” and the potential migrant are very close and that they are bound with similar ties e.g., kinship or friendship ties.

<sup>11</sup> Visa documents include: the birth certificate, the passport, the personal identification card, the curriculum vitae, proof of accommodation, parental admission for minors, 4 photos, 65.000CFA=100€ fee.

Future migrants who are “selected” to move to Europe need to fulfill many criteria before relatives are willing to invest money and energy to support the person. Moreover, once the person is migrating, she or he is expected not to disappoint his or her “investors”. The migrant is obliged to meet the expectations and requirements of the relatives.

The reasons for migrating as mentioned by my informants are diverse and follow different purposes. All of them agreed that political and economic uncertainty has been one of the main driving forces. The economic crisis starting in the late 1980’s in Cameroon reduced the chances of sustainable livelihood, and did so especially for the young. Employment opportunities shrunk and even highly educated young Cameroonians now find it difficult to find work<sup>12</sup>.

Three main categories of migration reasons are identified: education, employment, and family reunion<sup>13</sup>. Other types of Cameroonian migrants exist (e.g., refugees or business people), but this paper focuses on the above three motives for migration as they are mentioned most often by potential migrants and their families.

## **5.1 Education as a motive for migration**

It is in the main parents and older siblings<sup>14</sup> who want “their children” to move to Germany<sup>15</sup> for educational purposes<sup>16</sup>. There are specific hopes and expectations connected with the possible migration of a family member. First, they want to improve the educational status of their children and provide them with more employment and career opportunities, but they also hope and wish to benefit from the migrant finding a good job following education completion in the West. The idea is to send their children to Germany for educational purposes and to hope that they will find work there –

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<sup>12</sup> The unemployment rate estimated by EESI in 2005 is 17.9 per cent in the city of Yaoundé and 16 per cent in Douala (EESI = Survey on employment and the informal sector conducted by the National Institute of Statistics in 2005: [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)). The hiring freeze especially in the public sector in the early 1990s has raised the levels of graduate unemployment. Even higher educated Cameroonians increasingly face unemployment (<http://www.saga.cornell.edu>).

<sup>13</sup> The three main motives (education, employment, and family re-union) are in line with results of other studies, such as by Massey et al. (2005).

<sup>14</sup> When siblings are much older, they regard their younger sister or brother as their own children and treat them as such.

<sup>15</sup> The terms “Germany”, “Europe”, “the West” and “abroad” are often used interchangeably. In many cases, respondents did not distinguish between them.

<sup>16</sup> Reasons for choosing Germany as country of destination: the German education system that is free of charge, the strength of the German economy and of German technology, German as one of the languages that potential migrants learnt (or are still learning) in school, historical ties of the country with Germany and the often mentioned antipathy against the former colonial power France.

temporarily - and earn some money to support the family back home. Some people have precise plans to achieve their goals. Starting from the early childhood of their children, they invest a large amount of money in the education and training of the future migrant. There is a common agreement that the secondary education or even some years at university are accomplished in Cameroon before starting advanced studies in Germany.

“I want him to go. I know it will not be easy in Germany, but I want him to go. He is mature enough to handle this big step and he has already finished part of his education. He is willing to work hard.”

(Cameroonian man, 32 years old – older brother of potential migrant)

In a few cases, Cameroonian students obtained a scholarship from a European university. Respondents said that stipends were common in the 1980's, e.g. in the era of the German Democratic Republic. In my field research, I observed only one case where one student was able to obtain a scholarship to study at a university in the US. Nevertheless, the influence of the family was not diminished since the student needed money in advance, support and time-off from house work in order to apply for and deal with various documents and papers necessary to migrate.

Often mentioned is the fact that families try to send their older children abroad, so that they can take care of the education of the younger ones. The respondents did not distinguish between their daughters and sons. The child's gender seems to be less important than the characteristics mentioned above. Another important prerequisite is that they not be married or have children before they depart to Germany. Marriage and childbearing still are very significant events in the life-course of Cameroonians, not only for young people, but also for their parents. Nevertheless, in many cases migration seems to be accorded priority over other vital events, at least for young adults. After successful migration (meaning that education has been completed and the migrants have begun to earn money), they can start thinking about getting married or having children. Migration becomes an integral component of the life-course:

“My daughter should finish her basic studies before doing her Masters in Germany. I told her not to get involved in any love affairs or anything like that since it is better for her if she is not married before going abroad. If she will be married, her husband has the responsibility and he can decide that she is staying in Cameroon and she is not finishing her education. Then all the effort was for nothing.”

(Cameroonian woman, 48 years old)

According to most respondents the path of life preferable and desirable for a young potential migrant in Cameroon is the following: complete secondary education or the first years of study at university in Cameroon, then move to Germany to obtain further education (Master degree), after having finished university in Europe to work there for a couple of years before returning to Cameroon in order to have a successful career, to get married, have children and support the family.

Where education is the main reason behind migration, the potential migrant or the one who is encouraged to leave is often not older than 25 years, he or she is unmarried and has no children. Because many international migrants are young and their numbers are increasing, Cameroonians call the phenomenon “*bush falling*” to express their worries that whole groups of young and often adults with a good education leave the country, not only for educational reason but also in order to find work and earn money. Jua (2003: 6) explains that the term “*bush falling*” mainly is used to apply to migrants to the West. Its source and literal meaning are not entirely clear. “It can only be assumed that it is informed by lived realities in Africa, where one goes to the bush so as to return with food or game to nourish the family” (Jua 2003: 6). Young people especially are lured by the presumed paradise-like conditions in the “industrialized West”. They are leaving their country for technical advances, much better developed facilities and chances to be economically independent. Corruption, the difficult political situation in the country and the fact that diplomas and certificates obtained abroad are said to be more valued than those achieved in Cameroon are accelerating a large migration wave of young people.

“*Bush falling*” is also affecting the remaining family members, both positively and negatively. On the positive side, the families receive financial support – remittances from migrants who help them to organize their life, to improve their economic situation, to pay for the education of their younger children or to secure health issues. On the negative side, young adults are increasingly becoming less in number in the Cameroonian society, with adverse effects not only on the general economic and social development of the country, but also within the extended families, where children are expected to take care of the elderly and/or younger siblings and to take over the “family business” once the parents have died.

## 5.2 Finding work and earning money as motives for migration

Cameroonians who plan to migrate to Germany primarily for reasons of finding work differ from those who migrate for educational reasons. They are typically male, in their 30's, married and already have children in Cameroon. The problem is that they can not find work and see no chances to earn enough money to support their family and provide



their children with an adequate education. The man, still often the head of the family and of the household, is the one who plans to go abroad; he is supported by the extended family, since it is assumed that he is more likely to find work and since his wife needs to stay in Cameroon to take care of the children. The idea is to leave

### **Case study I**

Part of the family I focused on is living in Douala and the other part in residing in the Northwestern province. The parents divorced ten years ago and both of them remarried. The father, 62 years of age, has a small business, allowing him to support his new wife, their common children and the children of the previous union. The mother, 52 years of age, lives with her new husband in Douala and is selling vegetables on the central market

Both parents pay proportionally for the education of their son. He is 24 years old, unmarried and studies electrical engineering at the university of Douala. The mother wants her son to complete his studies in Germany. Therefore, he needs to take German classes in a private school and has to do final German examinations at the Goethe-Institute. The father is not willing to finance the additional expenses involved in such examination. The older brother of the mother (the uncle) agrees to pay part of the classes instead and brings his influence to bear. He knows some ministers in the education department who may have useful relations. The funds will be raised via business and with the help of a regional association in the western province.

The mother and her older brother observed the son over several years to assure that he is the “right choice”. While talking to them, they said that of the family, he should be the one to leave for Europe, since he is the most diligent, reliable and ambitious. The evidence is provided by his role as a leader in a youth group (supporting the youngsters from the original village), his engagement in the extended family (e.g. taking care of younger siblings, being responsible to do household chores etc.) and his sideline as a teacher. All of these activities plus his adequate behavior (e.g. not drinking, not hanging around with girls etc.) convinced his sponsors. The family agreed to pay for extra expenses such as the visa, the flight and money for the first few months.

The mother expects her son to enroll in a German university within the next year, but the pressure of the family on him as the “chosen one” already is very high. Succeeding in Germany is mandatory, as is fulfilling the expectations of the family, including remittances and providing support for the younger siblings. The family calculates a five-year stay in Germany (including completing his education and working to earn money) and an immediate return afterwards.

Cameroon for a certain period of time, find a job in Germany and support the family from there before coming back<sup>17</sup>:

“If you have a bus here where it is written that it leaves for Germany, everybody would try to get in there. Even people who have a job here, e.g. teachers want to go. Many workers in the public sector did not get paid since more than two years. How are we supposed to live like that?”  
(Cameroonian man, 35 years old)

“Going to Europe is the only chance I have to support my family and to give my children opportunities. I can not find work here and I have heard it is much easier in Europe and once I have a job, I can work hard and earn lots of money.”  
(Cameroonian man, 32 years old)

The Cameroonian men I talked to are aware that it will not be easy to enter and stay in Germany. They often apply for tourist visas or cross international borders with faked papers. The preparation and the actual process of migration are strongly supported by family members living in Cameroon and Germany. Relatives help to organize papers and documents, to finance the trips to the embassy and to the consulate, to collect money to pay for the plane ticket and to get in contact with Cameroonians already living in Germany, but for this category of migrants the involvement of family members in the decision to migrate seems to be less strong than for the younger ones.

Out of necessity, wives and children left behind often agree with the decision of the husband and the extended family to migrate. They accept and even support the migration of their husbands since they expect to receive remittances and hope that the migration will improve their socio-economic situation in Cameroon in the long run. In the meantime, they often move back to their family of origin:

[While he does this,], “...there is nothing that I can do. I do not have another choice. I will move back to my parents place together with my children. There is no other option.”  
(Cameroonian woman, 26 years old)

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<sup>17</sup> The reality in Germany looks quite different. Although many Cameroonians are well educated, they have serious problems finding work. If they do find a job, women often work undocumented as a nurse for the elderly whereas men usually work without papers or with faked documents on constructions sites or in restaurants.

### **5.3 “Family reunion” as a motive to migrate**

The third category of potential migrants includes family reunion. The migrants differ in age, education level, employment status and kinship relations. Those who leave Cameroon are mainly female. The reported reason for their migration is to take care of family members in Germany. To provide an example, a relative is living and working in Germany. She or he got married and has children; however, it is difficult to combine work and child rearing in Germany. For this reason, a younger child who has finished school, or an older woman who is no longer working, is going to Germany in order to take care of the children. Even if there are no children in a household, a relative may come to Germany and help in the household and to support the family to enable the migrants to concentrate on work and earning money. For some migrant families in Europe and North America, financial well-being and a moderate living standard imply the need for help in the household and they often bring relatives from Cameroon for this reason.

Usually, the migrants enter Germany following an invitation letter and a tourist visa valid for three months. After this time has been completed, the relatives stay in the country undocumented, or they try to enroll in university, or find work.

“I want my daughter to go to Germany to help my older daughter in the house and take care of her children since she has a good job and needs to work a lot. When my grandchildren are old enough, my daughter can enroll in university and finish her education in Germany.”

(Cameroonian woman, 52 years old)

Young Cameroonian women are often strongly encouraged by their parents and other relatives to follow their older siblings to Germany and stay with them for a few months until they have found something to do for themselves. Having relatives in Germany facilitates the migration process and makes it less expensive for the entire family. The siblings abroad, who are mostly older, are not only obliged to send remittances, but also to assist younger siblings in the migration process.

Another possibility to enter Germany and obtain legal residence is the “family reunion visa”, mainly used by Cameroonian men who got married to a German woman in Cameroon. Many of them met their wives in Germany while staying there for purposes of education or work, but they had no opportunity to get married in Germany. Binational weddings are increasingly difficult in Germany, e.g. due to legal and bureaucratic barriers and owing to a procedure to get married that is time and money-consuming. For this reason, many couples marry in the country of origin of the future husband and apply for a family reunion visa. The following process can take up to

several years before they finally arrive legally in Germany and have the right to work and live there. Networks and contacts already existing are one of the main reasons for choosing Germany as country of destination. Furthermore, it emerges from the following case study that once a migration destination is established, family members encourage other relatives to join them. Transnational family networks play an important role in the migration process.

Most potential Cameroonian migrants and their kin share a common perception: the desirable “West”. The media have led many to believe that life in Europe and North America is a true fairy tale (Appadurai, 1996). The young migrants see their migration as a window of opportunity to seek better education or employment, whereas their relatives and kin are expecting remittances or western consumer goods in return. The belief in the western paradise persists despite the difficult experiences reported by previous migrants in finding accommodation, in legalizing their status, in finding employment, and sending money and consumer goods back home.

### **Case study II**

The family I refer to is living in Yaoundé, Cameroon’s capital, but originally comes from the Northern Province. The father died three years ago, with the result that the 52-year old mother and the older siblings plus their families now are mainly responsible for the family and especially for the younger children still living in the household. Several of the older children live in Germany, for different reasons.

The oldest son was the first one to migrate to Germany, for educational purposes. He studied environmental engineering in Germany for seven years and is now looking for work. His mother asked him to come back to Cameroon in order to take over as household head, a position previously held by his deceased father. He is currently applying for several positions both in Germany and Cameroon. Because he is the oldest son and the first one to complete his university education, he has special responsibility towards the entire family.

The oldest daughter recently has been participating in an advanced education program at a university in Germany. She is married to a German man and they have two small children. Since it is difficult to combine work, education and child care, her mother, living in Cameroon, visited them several times over the last years to take care of her grandchildren and to help in the household.

Another son is working part-time and is married to a German woman who is much older. They have no children together, but the wife has one daughter from her

previous marriage. The son plans to stay in Germany for a relatively long period of time. His family financed his visa and travel costs and he is sending remittances, mainly in the form of money, but also electronic equipment such as radios and CD-players in return. The family members and friends often discussed the substantial age gap between the son and his German wife, since it is relatively uncommon in Cameroon to have an older wife. That the woman already had a daughter of the same age as her current husband and that this daughter is living in the same apartment confused many relatives. They suspected that the son married the older German woman in order to gain a permanent residence permit and that he may even have an affair with the daughter. They were complaining about what they regarded as “western marriage practices”, but acknowledged that it was not unusual that an older German woman marries somebody younger from Africa. They have heard about “these stories” from other people in the neighborhood.

Another son is studying and working in Belgium. Several family members supported him and financed his expenses. They hope he will be diligent and hard-working and that he will achieve a good employment position in the near future so that they will have yet another connection to Europe.

Of the children remaining in Cameroon, one daughter got married in the extreme-north and is living there with her three children. Another daughter got pregnant while still enrolled in school; she got married before the child was born. Her husband works for a petroleum company in Nigeria and she stays home looking after the child. Under these circumstances, there are few opportunities for her to finish education and find a satisfactory job. She wanted to continue with school, but it is difficult for her to collect money to do so, since the people involved expect her husband to pay for the expenses and her family would rather invest in an unmarried child. The remaining four children, three girls and one boy, are still living with their mother and other relatives at home. The neighboring compounds, too, are somewhat involved in the family. The children are either going to school or working in the informal sector. One of the daughters is expected to follow her sister to Germany. The idea is that she will take care of the children and help in the house for a couple of years until the children are old enough. Then she can look for training or employment. She applied twice already for a tourist visa, but the administration responsible for issuing visas is suspicious because of her young age and they suspect that she will not return from Germany. Meanwhile she is taking private German classes, financed by her older sister, who is living in Germany.

## 5.4 Reciprocity

The whole process of decision-making on migration involves a complex and reciprocal social system that also affects other family matters, such as fostering or marriage arrangements. Biological and/ or social parents and siblings are responsible when it comes to financing the migration procedure, be it the collection of money for the purposes of obtaining a visa, to cover costs arising from travel documents or to cover the first few months of stay in the country of destination. Other relatives are involved, too. In many cases, the extended family is responsible for raising money and paying for these expenses since it is primarily them who want their children to migrate. They either have the money themselves or they “go around” and ask other relatives and community members for money to borrow. Some families even sell parts of their belongings to sponsor one of their members. This investment, which involves many different people, is made only for family members who have proved to be responsible and reliable persons. In return, the parents expect that the migrants will later financially take care of them and other family members e.g., their younger siblings. Families have high expectations towards a migrating close relative and expect a flow of transfer<sup>18</sup> in return<sup>19</sup>:

“The entire family, including uncles, brothers, aunts, sisters, nephews, nieces, grand parents and even cousins, decides about who is going. All of them may also be involved in sponsoring the trip to Europe. The entire family joins to finance the trip, because if the person going to Europe eventually succeeds, he will in turn help other members of the family, irrespective of whether they are close or distant relatives. While it is often obligatory for well to-do members of the immediate family to participate in sponsoring the trip, distant family members are not obliged to do so. Distant relatives participate in sponsoring if they think that the person going is hard working and loves the family. If he succeeds in Europe, he can in turn help other children and members of the family.”

(Cameroonian woman, 29 years old)

Many Cameroonians, both in rural and urban areas, are organized in so called “*tontines*”, as are individual members of the population in many other West and

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<sup>18</sup> In many cases, remittances form a large portion of the household’s income and entire families live on the money sent from Europe.

<sup>19</sup> Respondents estimated that in Germany it takes five years to earn enough money to return to Cameroon for good.

Central African countries. *Tontines* are informal saving and loan associations. They have social as well as financial functions and the people participating are usually connected in some ways as relatives, neighbors or people from the same village. These family and community “banks” are also sources of financial support if a family member is in need of money for special purposes. Sometimes, the expenses for travel, visa, first accommodation, or university, etc. are paid through “*tontines*”.

“The fact that the family will help depends on how serious the person is. If the family trusts the person they will invest their money knowing that they will somehow get this money back and they will have a better life. All members of the family and some of the community meet once a month to speak about how to develop the village or other structures and sometimes they speak about personal projects. And in such congregation they put money together and the government does not have any control on that money. The person who will have the money of the month can realize his projects or help his children to realize their projects.”

(Cameroonian man, 30 years old)

Family members and relatives invest money in “the chosen one” and expect a tangible return at some undefined future date. This informal system of exchange is based on trust and has social consequences. If a person disappoints the sponsor(s), there will not only be consequences for the individual itself, but also for the entire family.

“If I make it to Europe, I do not intend to come back with empty pockets. I can not. It is impossible. My family expects me to return successfully; otherwise they would say I am a loser and spent their money for nothing. That would be a painful encounter for both of us.”

(Cameroonian man, 26 years old)

“Once in Germany, I will send money to finance the education for my three younger sisters and my two younger brothers. I am the only one who is able to take care of them. Everybody expects this from me.”

(Cameroonian female, 19 years old)

For a migration to proceed, relations to the “right people” and networks are sometimes more important than money. Knowing somebody who holds a position in the Administration, in a ministry or who holds a public office can sometimes be the decisive factor. Connections and networks within Cameroon are crucially important.

“It is always good and helpful to have a brother in the Administration or in one of the ministries. This makes things much easier, less expensive and often faster.”

(Cameroonian man, 30 years old)

### **5.5 Family or individual decision?**

The triggering of migration depends strongly on the family and a wider circle of relatives. The individuals move not only for their own benefits, but also to contribute to the welfare of the extended family back in Cameroon. The decision-makers and the persons moving do not need to be the same.

Most of the people who plan to migrate to Germany are willing and happy to do so. Nevertheless, in some cases the parents make the decision and the child in question has little choice other than to follow the parental decision. Some children are “pushed” from different corners: they are expected to learn German in a private school or they are forced to enroll in boarding schools far away from their parental home in order to get used to the distance between them and to living alone. Children and students talked to me about strong pressure from their parents and family to learn and to develop contacts with “white people” on the streets or on the internet. Sometimes I had the impression that the extended family desired the individual person to migrate more so than the individual himself or herself. Asking students about their migration plans, some of them told me that they are afraid of going and if they were able to decide for themselves, they would prefer to stay with their families and friends in Cameroon. Especially younger migrants may feel obliged to migrate to Europe:

“I do not really want to go. I am afraid of Germany. I do not know anybody there except for my brother, but he is already married. My parents want me to go in order to get a good education and make future contacts, but I would like to stay with my friends. Here I do know the language and I have my people. In Germany I do not know anything and I am totally alone.”

(Cameroonian girl, 19 years old)

Many young Cameroonians do not know a lot about Europe. Most of their knowledge is derived from television, newspapers or stories from “successful return migrants”<sup>20</sup>, but they can not imagine how the “real living and working situation” looks

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<sup>20</sup> I observed many cases of migrants temporarily returning from Germany and other European countries who had to pretend that they have been successful although their situation abroad looks different. Some



like and what to expect. In a focus group discussion with youths from a village close to Bamenda, the young adults asked me many questions on how to enter Germany, how to find and obtain work and whether they as students will be treated equally to German students. These questions show their insecurity and uncertainty. For older migrants, the situation is slightly clearer. They are going abroad to earn money and this is their only goal. They seem more aware of the difficulties of entering and staying in Germany: from applying for a passport and the visa to organizing the trip and planning the first few days in Germany, and finally finding work or other ways of gaining legal status in their country of destination. For migrants joining other family members in Germany, the situation seems to be more relaxed. At least, they have a first contact in their country of destination. For some migrants, however, migration remains an obligation they are expected to meet.

In most cases, neither an individual nor a family decision, but rather a continuum between family support and individual preferences can be identified. Everyone in the family tries to balance the advantages and disadvantages of migrating alone or with the support of the family. An individual migration appears to be risky, expensive and dangerous, but partially liberates the migrant from the enormous social pressure to send remittances and be dependent on further family decisions. A migration with family support, however, provides finances to cover leaving and arriving, it offers transnational networks and contacts, but also obliges the migrant to serve the family interests and makes her/him strongly dependent on the arbitrariness of relatives and kin.

My two case studies illustrate the important role of the family in the migration decision-making process and the obligations and duties the individual has to meet. Family networks and individual behavior are influenced by discrete rules, cultural and social norms and beliefs, but also by practical considerations of different family members, each of whom wants to see her/his individual needs met. Both parties invest in the migration project and aim to achieve their purpose. Therefore, they need to fulfill different conditions and obligations. In both examples, migration to Germany is regarded as temporary. The sponsored migrants are expected to return to the country of origin after having met the requirements. None of the respondents talked about staying permanently in Germany.

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Cameroonians returned for one or two months and during that time spent all of the money they had been saving from two years of hard work. They arrive with cars, electronic equipment, mobile phones and golden necklaces, but they pay a high price for a short period of “glorious success” at home.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper examined the decision-making process of migration from Cameroon to Germany, focusing on the role of the extended family. The results of participant observation, informal conversations and in-depth interviews show the way in which migration decisions depend on the decisions taken by their kin. Decision-makers and migrants do not need to be the same persons. Migrants do not solely move to pursue their own goals and fulfill their own purposes, but also those of their extended family. Therefore they - the chosen ones - have the chance to achieve better personal life conditions. Despite this, they are subject to performing many duties and responsibilities towards their relatives who enabled them to migrate.

The basic decision-making unit is the extended family rather than the individual. Without the help, support and financial investment of many relatives, the migration process would often not have been possible. Potential migrants rely on national and transnational kinship networks that guarantee access, assurance and safety, but also involve sanctions, strong dependency and often are highly hierarchic in nature. In most cases, families see migration as an investment strategy in human capital that involves specific obligations in return. They are willing to finance parts of the education and costs for visa, travel requirements, etc. and in response they expect future regular remittances, consumer goods and long lasting reliability. The migration of family members as well as investments into one single migrant often is a decision of the extended family and sometimes the community even rather than of the individual migrant. It is an attempt to augment the chances of successful and sustainable livelihood of all parties involved.

To conclude, two dimensions are relevant. First, migration decision-making in Cameroon (and I assume also in other parts of West and Central Africa) is strongly affected by social and cultural institutions such as extended families, communities and local associations such as *tontines*. The individual migrant depends strongly on the arbitrariness and the goodwill of certain family members.

Second, in many cases the decision-making process is motivated by a desire from economic improvement or security, whether via a better education, a better-paying job, or family reunion when one attempts to extend transnational networks. In this sense, then, the findings may be partially seen as supporting the theory of the new economics of migration, which sees migration as a strategy of both parties involved, leading to mutual interdependence. The unwritten contract includes obligations and responsibilities, but also promises benefits and gains. Although economic conditions at the global and national level play an essential role in triggering migration, the decision to migrate is affected by local cultural and social institutions. My research proved that the family unit strongly influences the decisions as to who is moving, where he or she is

moving to and for how long the member is moving. The study highlights the importance of family networks and their influence in motivating, as well as funding international migration. Therefore, it extends previous literature on kinships and internal migration.

## **7. Acknowledgements**

I especially thank all the Cameroonians who provided me with interesting information and supported me during my stay in the field. The support for this research was provided by the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in Rostock. I am grateful for critical comments and valuable suggestions from Caroline Bledsoe, Gerda Neyer, Gunnar Andersson, Katja Koeppen and Nuria Empez. Finally, I thank Susann Backer for her helpful editorial comments.

I am grateful to Laura Bernardi and Inge Hutter for organizing the workshop on "Anthropological Demography" at the Max Planck Institute in Rostock that provided me with the opportunity to exchange ideas and to present my study.

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