2. Being Banganté: Social Organization and Identity

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Chapter Two

Being Bangangté: Social Organization and Identity

Vignette 1: Learning to Be Cameroonian or Learning to Be Bangangté

André, a 10-year-old boy living at the royal compound, was chatting with my husband about where various acquaintances were from. They were talking about the familial, village, and national identity of both André’s friends and Joachim’s relatives. Without any prodding, André announced, “I am Cameroonian.” Surprised, Joachim then pursued the issue, reminding André that he is a son of the king. André insisted that he is Cameroonian first, Bangangté second.

André grew up speaking only Bangangté, just like his preschool half siblings and neighbors in Batela’ village. He witnessed and participated in funerals, royal convocations, and tagged along with his mother to tontine (rotating credit association) meetings. He thus took part in some of the daily traffic holding adult Bangangté life together. In his imaginary play, André reenacted contemporary Bangangté household life, building a play house and practicing gender roles with his brothers and sisters. But starting at age three or four, André learned poems and songs in French while attending école maternelle (nursery school). In primary school he sang the national anthem, indicating that the earth cradling his ancestors’ skulls and tying him to his homeland was not just the earth of Bangangté, but of the nation: “O Cameroun berceau de nos ancêtres . . .”

Elderly Bangangté say things have changed more since independence than during the colonial era. They refer to the prestige and power of the mfen, economic relations, missions, schools, and to their grandchildren who, like André, seem to be weakening their identification with the kingdom. Indeed, a significant challenge for Bangangté men and women of all ages is managing the sometimes contradictory demands of Bangangté royal
authority and the centralized Cameroonian state. Within this context, Bangangté are concerned with getting ahead, and sometimes just getting by. Their well-being is closely tied to being Bangangté, both in terms of the effect they believe the spiritual and political strength of the kingship has on their health and fortune and in terms of the use to which they can put ethnic ties when seeking their fortune in Cameroon, and even abroad. Many Bangangté fear that their small kingdom is losing population and power in the midst of Cameroon’s economic and political hardship and increasingly global involvement.

Bangangté worry nowadays about social reproduction, about what it means and will mean to be Bangangté and where they fit in. In particular, rural Bangangté women worry about their ability to contribute to social reproduction through procreation and the socialization of their children. They have a particular vision of what kind of Bangangté individuals and society they would like to reproduce. Their vision of being Bangangté is one among many in contemporary Bangangté, a society with multiple and shifting centers of orientation. To best understand why Paulette was worried about her womb, and why her cowives and neighbors were worried about Paulette, we need to examine rural women’s vision of being Bangangté and to situate their way of being Bangangté in the context of other experiences of Bangangté life.

From rural women’s point of view, kinship, marriage, neighborliness, and actively participating in royal festivals are all part of being Bangangté. Children and food are essential to maintaining each of these forms of affiliation. Raising children and sharing food draw families together and are the purpose of family life among the living. Children (having descendants) and food (making offerings) please the ancestors and establish ties between generations living and dead. Children and food also draw the kingdom together, in a homologous polity-family relationship. The king, through his initiation and coronation ceremonies, becomes procreator- and provider-in-chief. In the context of shifting and multiple centers, in which identity systems are unclear and complex, the relative weakness of the divine kingship has been experienced in terms of an existential threat to provisioning the family with food and children. Thus, this structured set of relations that makes people Bangangté also promotes a particular understanding of procreation and frames women’s high fertility goals.

This chapter is about these multilayered aspects of experience that make people feel “Bangangté” and how these individuals—in all their variety—who identify themselves with Bangangté are organized to constitute Bangangté society.¹
Bangangté’s Context: Cameroon and the Bamiléké

The contemporary sense (or senses) of being and feeling Bangangté is embedded in a web of practical relations among kin, neighbors, villages, and the hierarchy of the system of royal titles and promotions. These relations only make sense in a wider setting, placing Bangangté of the 1980s and 1990s within the context of the historical, political-economic, social, and cultural changes confronting the Bamiléké peoples and Cameroon.

The Republic of Cameroon is an ethnically and geographically diverse country on the “hinge” between west and central Africa (see fig. 3). Numerous peoples have passed through and sometimes settled in its territory over the past two thousand years of African history and population movement. One of the most historically dynamic regions of the territory is the Bamiléké highlands of the eastern Grassfields, a high plateau region wedged between dry savanna and sahel to the now predominantly Muslim north and rain forest to the now predominantly Christian south. It is currently one of the most densely populated areas of Cameroon, whose 167 inhabitants per square kilometer in parts of the Western Province in 1966 (Koenig 1977:58) contrast with Cameroon’s average population density of 16/km² at the time of the 1976 census (Dongmo 1981:21). Together the circa one hundred Bamiléké kingdoms comprise about 25 percent of Cameroon’s population. Bangangté is one of the most prominent of the Bamiléké kingdoms, and one of the five Bamiléké administrative centers in the Western Province (see fig. 4).

The earliest Bamiléké kingdoms were formed during the sixteenth century, a result of a complex dynamic of conquest, ruse, and shifting allegiance when population movements in Adamoua pushed the “pre-Tikar” Ndobo into the Bamiléké plateau (Notué and Perrois 1984:10–14). This epoch is portrayed in the “hunter-king” legends of the founders of many of today’s rulers, including Bangangté.²

Succession disputes, the search for new hunting grounds, and demographic pressure led to the emergence of new kingdoms from the first core polities. The number, size, and shape of Bamiléké kingdoms continued to change until European colonization, when interkingdom warfare was curtailed and the limits of territories were frozen at borders partly determined by the colonizers (Dongmo 1981:45; Tardits 1960:17; interviews). This history of shifting borders, alliances, and the influx of refugees from neighboring kingdoms makes each kingdom a political composite of diverse peoples owing allegiance to the king (mfen in Bangangté, fo or fon in other kingdoms) and established royal institutions (Notué and Perrois 1984:10).

Relations among kingdoms included economic exchange and cooper-
Fig. 3. Map of Cameroon

Fig. 4. Map of Bamiléké kingdoms, showing the kingdoms of Ndé Division, of which Bangangté is the administrative capital (adapted from Dongmo 1981:46)
ation as well as territorial belligerence. In the seventeenth, eighteenth, and
nineteenth centuries, regional trading networks linked the Grassfields polities, including Bangangté and other Bamiléké kingdoms, to parts of what would become Cameroon and Nigeria (Warnier 1985). Ivory, palm oil, wood, iron implements, and slaves flowed through these networks and on to Europe (Koenig 1977:77; Warnier 1985). The slave trade in the Grassfields was surrounded by mystification, “medicine,” and deception, as heads of households, occasionally overwhelmed by obligations, allegedly sold their young relatives in secret (Warnier 1985). The cultural legacy of insecurity is evident in fears of population decline and of secret wealth and power gained, through sorcery, at the expense of one’s own kind. In fact, this trope of forces draining the wealth, health, and population of the kingdom organizes Bangangté and other Grassfields peoples’ collective memories of colonial rule, civil war, independence, and multiparty strife.

European contact with what is now Cameroon began with the arrival of Portuguese traders in 1472. The colonial period began on July 12, 1884, when the Duala kings made a treaty with the German Empire. Between 1914 and 1916 the German colony of Kamerun was conquered by French and British forces. It was divided between the two nations by League of Nations mandate, and continued as a UN Trusteeship after World War II. The division between French and British Cameroon ran through the Grassfields; Bangangté and most other Bamiléké kingdoms were on the French side.

The early colonizers found a rich and cultivated territory, maintaining multiple commercial relations as evidenced by paths and markers, as two German colonial officials, Strumpell and Müller, reported from their 1902 and 1904 expeditions into Bamiléké territory (cited in Tardits 1960:66). Then, as now, women were the primary producers of food crops (maize, beans, and peanuts). Men’s cash crop cultivation of coffee and cocoa, shopkeeping, and taxi and truck driving have replaced precolonial involvement in animal husbandry and war. Oral and archival evidence shows Bangangté, among the Bamiléké kingdoms, to be a relative latecomer to the production of coffee.³ Mfen Njiké II, who reigned from the end of the German colonial period until 1943, discouraged the production of coffee; he feared cash crop production would loosen his control on the fortunes of his subjects and distract labor from politically and symbolically important food production. French agricultural policy from 1920 through 1950 also favored production of food crops (Tardits 1960:77), but with different intent than that of Njiké II. Aiming to feed the growing cities and commercial plantations, French agricultural policy encouraged the small-scale commercialization of women’s food crops, starting in the 1930s.
The confluence of colonial and indigenous policies contributed to changes in gender relations and household economies that had begun at the turn of the twentieth century. Both German and French colonizers used forced labor for public works, officially ending only in 1946. The Grassfields was a major labor recruitment area for road, railroad, and plantation work (DeLancey 1978; Rudin 1938:324–27; Tardits 1960). Responding to an expanding need for cash, and seeking to escape restrictions imposed by the kings, young Bamiléké men increasingly migrated to southern commercial centers during the French colonial period. The Bamiléké area continues to be a largely agricultural region from which large numbers of youth emigrate in search of work, sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently (Dongmo 1981:44). This long history of labor migration has demographic consequences and also poses a challenge to a Bamiléké cultural identity based on ties to the land and to one’s king. In the late 1980s, the overall population of the Bamiléké was approximately two million, only one million of whom resided on the Bamiléké plateau. Since the 1950s, Bangangté kingdom has remained one of the most consistent sources of labor migration from the Bamiléké region to other parts of Cameroon.

The comparative absence of young men facilitates the polygynous marriages of older men (about half of rural Bangangté marriages are polygynous) and means that wives are often considerably younger than their husbands. As we shall see in chapters 3 and 4, male labor migration leaves many rural women as de facto heads of households, at least temporarily. It increases the repertoire of tasks women must do and may give them more independence, but also renders them more vulnerable. The impact of colonial and postcolonial regimes in Cameroon on rural women’s lives endures.

Political steps toward independence, especially the outlawing of the trade union–based Union des Populations Camerounaise (UPC), led to civil war in the years surrounding independence (gained in 1960), concentrated first in the Bassa and then in the Bamiléké area (Joseph 1977). Personal and political scars from these “troubles” are still visible in the Western Province today. Ndé Division, of which Bangangté is the capital, remained at least through 1986 officially in a state of emergency. But more importantly for our subject of fear of infertility, many believe that the civil war of 1958 through 1972 gave potential witches “the taste for blood.” The memory of the vindictiveness of the times, combined with the recent political turmoil since 1990, contributes to mistrust of the state and a sense of vulnerability to mystical attack. Women in particular fear attacks on their reproductive capacity.

Cameroon’s colonial history left a legacy of official bilingualism and dual legal and educational systems. This complexity combines with further
heterogeneity in religion, ecology, demography, and ethnic affiliation. Approximately 250 ethnic groups reside within its borders. Its variety of ethnic groups, forms of local political organization, and heterogeneous colonial heritage faced the politicians of newly independent Cameroon with the challenge of forging national unity out of diversity. A solution was found via Cameroon’s one-party government with power centered in the president. Ahmadou Ahidjo, president from independence in 1960 to 1982, pursued a policy of regional balance. Paul Biya, his successor, developed a philosophy of “communal liberalism” and national integration during the first five years of his rule (Biya 1987). During this time he introduced some democratic innovations. Recently coronated mfen Nji Monluh Seidou Pokam benefited when his faction won in the first multiple-slate municipal elections, held in 1987. A constitutional change in December 1990 permitted the formation of new political parties, which grew in number from one in 1990 to 123 in 1995 (Nkwi and Socpa 1997:138). In January 1996, a new constitution codified the resulting ethnicization of politics (Nkwi and Nyamnjoh 1997:9).

Biya’s constitutional innovations did not change authoritarian practice and were not enough to prevent major unrest when economic recession and the fall of eastern bloc dictatorships coincided in the early 1990s. The “Ghost Town” or “Villes Mortes” movement, a long-lasting general strike, forced the convocation of the first multiparty elections for the National Assembly in March 1992. In Bangangté, the immediate economic results of the strike, however, have interrupted the mfen’s plans for economic and cultural rejuvenation. And despite denials by the king (Nji Monluh, personal communication, June 1997), most Bamiléké associate their kings with Biya’s party, the Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement. In the analysis of Cameroonian social scientists:

The state manipulates traditional authority so as to convert chiefs into clients capable, in turn, of legitimating state action and contradictions; their financial needs have turned them into political beggars and once honoured [they] can now be treated shabbily by the political elite and by their own disaffected subjects. Traditional rulers are no longer sacrosanct in their powers, as they are subject to the same deficits of legitimacy suffered by those who manipulate them for support. (Nkwi and Nyamnjoh 1997:11)

Political as well as economic constraints limit the king’s effectiveness. Rural Bangangté women perceive this weakening of the divinity of the king and the ambivalent respect he is afforded as a threat to their well-being and fertility.
Bangangté town has slightly over 12,000 inhabitants (Boog 1986), most of whom are ethnically Bangangté or from the surrounding and closely allied “villages” or chiefdoms owing allegiance to the king of Bangangté.4 As the capital of Ndé Division and of Bangangté Subdivision it contains offices of the prefect, subprefect, mayor, representatives of the ministries of labor and agriculture, a party building, a divisional hospital, and a preventive medicine center. The rural area of Bangangté Subdivision, 923 km² has a population estimated in 1984 as 45,519 (Boog 1986).5

Rural Bangangté residents frequently talk about the “push factors” (lack of agricultural, educational, and employment opportunities) that encourage them sometimes to leave their kingdom to seek their fortune elsewhere. They most often mention the lure of wage labor and urban life as part of numerous drains on the demographic, political, social, and spiritual strength of their kingdom. In the context of the push and pull between the rural kingdom and the cities, Bangangté worry about cultural authenticity and cultural survival. Rural Bangangté women voice these concerns in terms of the procreation and socialization of children. They understand all too well that being and becoming Bangangté is a matter both of being born and of becoming enmeshed in the webs of affiliation (Simmel 1964) that tie kin, neighbors, the king, and the ancestors together.

These sets of relationships formed among the living are crucial to understanding how pairs come together to reproduce, and how this process is regulated by social and cultural practices. Since women worry not only about having biological offspring, but also about having properly socialized offspring who will honor them in old age and ancestorhood, these sets of relationships that make people Bangangté are of central importance. Relations among the living and the dead illuminate the intergenerational dimension of reproduction as well as the spiritual source of protection and threat to reproductive health. Two aspects of governing Bangangté subjects relate directly to reproductive issues. First, ideas about the strength of the mfen, including his reproductive vigor, figure into women’s concern about their own fertility. Second, the Cameroonian state helps to shape health-care alternatives for women with reproductive problems through its relations with the kingdom and its traditional healers, and by creating hospitals and clinics.

Arenas of Social Connection and Identity

Bangangté value being “with” others. The highest expression of this is nchu’ ntu’, being of one heart. Bangangté describe nchu’ ntu’ as a spiritual quality fostered by sharing a meal. Commensality connotes a plethora of meanings for Bangangté, including quieting the pangs of hunger and
calumny that reside in the belly and implying trust that one is feeding and being fed rather than poisoning another. Bangangté also achieve togetherness by exchanging gifts and visits, working and trading together. Paulette’s inability to achieve or maintain such togetherness contributed to her misery and early departure from her marriage to the king.

Bangangté recognize that their connection to others is the essence of their identity as persons. They explain the multiplicity of names each person has in reference to various forms of social connection. A person’s ndap (praise name) indicates one’s parents’ village identity; one’s given Bangangté name commemorates a relative, chief, or friend of one’s father; and the father’s name, now used as a second surname, identifies patrisiblings. Pronouncing lists of names indicating knowledge of a conversation partner’s real or fictive kinship relations and village membership is the best way to honor a person; forgetting them is an insult. Learning names and ndap proved to be an awesome task during the early months of my fieldwork, and a proud accomplishment toward the end. A person who cannot state his or her own social connections is suspect of being untrustworthy at best, a witch at worst. Coming from outside the Bamiléké world, I was given fictive kin and village connections. I was instructed in how to identify myself to other Bangangté, “so they won’t be afraid.” I used the ndap Nteshun that I shared with my “older sister” Claude, the king’s French wife.

Bangangté speak readily about the importance of four interrelated arenas essential to Bangangté social life and identity: kin and ancestors, house and compound, neighborhood and village, and the kingdom. I discuss each of these social arenas in turn.

Kinship Ties among the Living and the Dead

Vignette 2: Melon Vines

I have two daughters, aged eight and ten. They attend the école primaire at Batela’. Their ndap is So’nyu, that is, they are daughters of Bangangté. Their father is mfen of Bangangté, so all the kings of Bangangté are their ma’ ngut nze’ [“melon vines”], their ancestors. They are daughters of Bangangté, the kings are their fathers.

I am happy that I have two daughters. I can tell you why. My own mother has only one daughter, and that is me. Of all my mother’s children, only I am a girl. Only I can be her heiress. My brother is part of my pam nto’ [uterine group] and also part of my mother’s lineage. But only my children can continue the pam nto’, and since they are girls, their children continue it too. Yes, my mother and her line, her ancestors, are also ma’ ngut nze’ to my daughters. Everyone has two lines.
Pam nto’ is different from lines; it’s not ancestors, but being from the same womb. That’s why I am happy to have my two daughters.

(Marguerite)

When telling me about her daughters, Marguerite showed me once again how readily Bangangté can identify and put into practice rules of descent, alliance, and uterine relation. These rules are part of “law” (kan), and Bangangté refer to them constantly to explain who they visit, who they marry, who they name their children after, and who they call upon in times of trouble.

Descent. Marguerite referred to the two “lines” with which her daughters were affiliated, their two sets of ancestors. These two sets of ancestors constitute Bangangté’s system of dual descent. At the center of descent groups are lineages (referred to as ntún nda, the “foundation” of the house) of heirs and heiresses who inherit the property, titles, and skull custodianship of their ascendants. Each lineage head chooses a single heir or heiress, who “becomes” that person in terms of titles in customary associations, and rights and duties toward all dependents (his or her noninheriting siblings and, in male inheritance, the father’s widows). For example, Jeanne, the young king’s wife and mother of two who shared Claude’s house, explained that she followed her brother’s marriage advice because, as her father’s heir, he was simultaneously her full sibling and her father.

Bangangté individuals invoke their two lineage affiliations in different social settings. Patrilineal descent determines village membership and the inheritance of titles, land, compound, and wives. In recent times, it also determines one of a person’s many names. Matrilineal descent determines inheritance of titles, movable property, and moral and legal obligation to lineage members.

Because only men head polygynous compounds and have house sites that can be inherited, patrilineal descent is more visible than matrilineal descent. Patrilineal descent groups tend to be localized. Young men often try to set up their compound near that of their father or his heir. Marriage is virilocal, giving men more control over their choice of residence than women. By contrast, members of a matrilineage may owe allegiance to different villages or even different kingdoms. The dispersal of matrilineal ties and the ideal localization of patrilineal ties casts doubt upon the long-standing descent–residence dichotomy guiding African kinship studies. This now questioned framework may have contributed to anthropologists’ misunderstanding of Bamiléké kinship and the ways it affects reproductive goals and ideas about misfortune. Perhaps because of their greater visibil-
ity and importance in inheritance, most anthropologists have focused on agnatic relationships in Bamiléké kinship. Bangangté themselves concentrate on agnatic links when discussing inheritance, but emphasize matrilineal links when discussing supernatural sanctions, and uterine links when discussing solidarity, personality, and witchcraft potential.

Ancestors. Like Marguerite, Bangangté call ancestors *ma’ ngut nze’,* literally, “melon vines,” graphically linking the living and the dead and the influence they have upon each other. Bangangté believe that both their matrilineal and patrilineal ancestors act upon the fortunes of their descendants. It is the ancestral skull (*tu*) that can “seize” a descendant with illness, and it is to the ancestral skull that descendants perform their propitiary rites (talking to, feeding, and sheltering the skull from the elements). Ancestors influence the lives only of those descendants who are morally obliged to sacrifice to their skulls (Hurault 1962; Tardits 1960). Likewise, the living only sacrifice to the skulls of those ancestors who can influence their lives (see figs. 5 and 6). For nonheirs, the obligation to sacrifice to patrilineal skulls ceases after two generations. In theory, the obligation to sacrifice to matrilineal skulls does not diminish with structural distance (that is, with generational distance from a direct heiress). In practice, facing misfortune often motivates people to renew their obligations to matrilineal ancestresses.

Ancestors are omniscient; Bangangté say they “know” or “see” all that their descendants do, how children act toward their parents, whether one steals, defames a sacred grove of trees, or breaks marriage and inheritance rules. Ancestors are quite sensitive about how they are treated by their descendants, and jealous if they feel shortchanged in relation to another ancestor. They do not like to suffer in the hot sun or feel chilled in the damp of the rainy season. They like to eat special foods. Thus heirs and heiresses exhume the skulls of their ancestors within a few years of burial, protect them in clay pots or specially built tombs, and “feed” them offerings of specially prepared food. Bangangté say ancestresses are particularly “complicated,” a trait that combines contrariness and sensitivity with spiritual power (kings, witches, medico-ritual specialists, and sacred land are all likewise “complicated”).

Ancestors angered by their treatment or by the behavior of their descendants may bring misfortune to the perpetrator of the bad act, or more likely to the perpetrator’s close kin, “so he can see the effects of what he has done.” These misfortunes include illness, accident, a business loss, failed bid for promotion or failed school exam, and infertility. The ancestors send these troubles either as simple punishment, or as warnings of
more to come if a pattern of behavior continues. Offenses against marriage rules almost always result in misfortune affecting the couple’s offspring (sterility, stillbirth, stunted growth of children).

Bangangté use their belief in the effects of ancestral wrath as one of several interpretations of unhappy events. Like Zande witchcraft, the action of the angered Bangangté dead upon their errant descendants is one of the most important elements in “a natural philosophy by which the relations between men and unfortunate events are explained and [that provides] a ready and stereotyped means of reacting to such events” (Evans-Pritchard 1937:18).  

**Marriage.** Knowing about one’s ancestors, and thus principles of descent, is crucial in determining potential spouses. When parents arrange a marriage, or more recently when a couple decides to marry, lineage elders are asked to review the genealogies of the couple, often in consulta-
tions with a diviner or spirit medium. Marriage is exogamous, preventing all matrilineal kin and any individuals with patrilineal links up to the fourth generation (i.e., as far back as the grandfather’s ritual obligations) from marrying (Hurault 1962).

Two forms of exchange govern relations between wife-givers and wife-receivers. In bridewealth marriage, the groom gains reproductive, sexual, and domestic rights by giving gifts of palm oil, goats, and money to the bride’s father, giving blankets and clothes to the bride and her mother, and performing services such as gathering firewood for the mother. Bridewealth payments may continue years after the couple has lived and even borne children together. The wife gains a legitimate father for her children, a house, and the right to cultivate a particular plot or plots of land.

In ta nkap marriage, no exchange of bridewealth occurs between father and groom (Brain 1972; Hurault 1962; Tardits 1960). In this form of marriage, which Bangangté describe as “when my father did not pay nkap
[bridewealth; literally, “money”] for my mother,” the husband only gains rights to the woman’s domestic duties (in uxorem). The bride’s father retains rights (in genetricem) over the marriage and patrilineal identity of his daughter’s daughters, thus becoming their *ta nkap* (“father by money”). The rights of a *ta nkap* can be accumulated through inheritance, or through transfer to whoever pays bridewealth for a woman married in this system (see fig. 7). The French regarded this way of capitalizing on matrimonial rights as leading toward economic abuse and uncontrolled concentration of power, and outlawed it in 1927 and 1928 (Tardits 1960:22). Nonetheless, it continues in Bangangté, although no one seems to be able to identify the powerful marriage lords who hold rights over a large number of women as described in past accounts (Brain 1972; Hurault 1962; Rolland 1951; Tardits 1960).

Bangangté follow the rules regulating marriage closely because they fear the supernatural consequences of breaking them (infertility, stunted growth of children, illness). Solutions to reproductive illness are often sought by completing bridewealth payments, or paying bridewealth to a troublesome *ta nkap*. Many cite stories of greedy fathers who have asked for a daughter’s bridewealth even though he had not paid bridewealth for her mother; such fathers bring misfortune upon their daughters, who often are ignorant of the circumstances of their mother’s marriage. We have already witnessed the havoc wrought upon Paulette’s marriage by her unintended incest.

**Uterine Solidarity.** Expressing her joy over her two daughters, Marguerite mentioned that only her girls could continue the diffuse uterine group of those from the same womb, the *pam nto*. This group encompasses one’s own matrisiblings, one’s mother, mother’s mother, and mother’s matrisiblings (see fig. 8). The *pam nto* group differs from the matrilineage because it does not involve the inheritance of property, custodianship of skulls, or succession to office. Instead, it involves sentiment and the idea of genetic linkage through shared blood and shared origin in one belly or uterus. Uterine kin help each other in the face of adversity and are the most reliable members of support and therapy management networks when someone falls ill. For example, when one of Marguerite’s daughters fell out of a tree and cracked her skull, Marguerite called on her brother for help because she and her daughters were part of his *pam nto*. *Pam nto* members can also take each other’s place in ordeals to prove guilt or innocence in witchcraft accusations. Full siblings (“children of one mother”) show support and affection for each other vis-à-vis their half siblings (“children of one father”). This solidarity is extended to the
mother’s matrisiblings, just as affection and moral obligations to one’s mother are extended to the mother’s mother.

The experience of growing up together around the same “hearth” provides much of the basis for uterine solidarity. Sharing a hearth means sharing stories, companionship, and especially food. As we shall see in the next chapter, the hearth is a key symbol within the cluster of cooking metaphors through which Bangangté explain procreation. When talking about ties that bind, Bangangté use the hearth as a symbol to evoke both the nurturing warmth of matrifocal ties and the solidarity of pam nto’ groups. Uterine solidarity is also promoted by the moral obligation one has toward one’s mother. Bangangté often talk about “the mother who has borne me” and express the wish to honor her with grandchildren or goods.11

The Bangangté system of kinship and marriage affects the ways people think about offspring. Women have children to please ancestors, to be able to become ancestors themselves, and to continue the multiple links between the living and the dead constituted by a system of dual descent and uterine solidarity groups. Women gain pleasure from their sons as well as their daughters. Sons can become the patrilineal heir of their fathers.
Daughters insure matrilineal continuity and bring bridewealth to the family. Bangangté relations with their ancestors shape the ways they think about marriage and sex, the usual prerequisites to procreation, and the ways they conceive of misfortune, including reproductive illness.

Bangangté notions of kinship are held in common across all social ranks. Regardless of their status within the promotional system of the royal court, as commoners, or as descendents of slaves, all Bangangté belong to patrilineages, matrilineages, and uterine solidarity groups. They all make distinctions between lineage heads and noninheriting dependents. They all venerate their ancestral skulls. With the exception of kings who pay no bridewealth, they all practice both bridewealth and ta nkap marriage, and include both monogamists and polygynists in their midst. Ideas about the rights and obligations of kinship tie together the sociospatial categories of household, neighborhood, village, and kingdom that are essential to a multilayered Bangangté identity. The emotions of solidarity and competition bound up in Bangangté kin relations extend, through notions of the shared hearth, to relations of people sharing residence, people of the same house and compound.
Bangangté experience the household at two distinct levels, the polygynous or monogamous compound (la’, same term as used for village), and the matrifocal household (nda, house). The segments of a compound at these two levels operate semiautonomously in some fields of activity, but coalesce in others. There is thus no such thing as a “household” as an undifferentiated, solidary decision-making unit in Bangangté (Guyer 1981:100).

Nda means house; it refers both to the structure and to the people within it. In polygynous compounds, a house is a domestic unit, the kitchen-hut of a mother surrounded by her children. Its members share day-to-day subsistence activities, affective ties, and the socialization of children. The mother organizes daily subsistence activities, assigning tasks to her children with an eye both to getting things done and to training them in household roles and skills. Household members rise at or before dawn, heat up yesterday’s food or buy baguettes for breakfast, fetch water, sweep the yard, and feed any livestock before moving on to fields or school. On school holidays, children help in the fields and gather firewood. Older children watch after their younger siblings, and older girls may sometimes cook the evening meal in the mother’s place.

Children are very mobile within the compound (between different matrifocal households) and in and out of it. Bamiléké consider child fostering an appropriate strategy to deal with scarce resources and to help teach the child to interact with a variety of personalities. When a child is between six and ten years old, he or she may be sent or may ask to live in another household where more resources are available, a school is near, an old person needs help and company, or a favorite playmate lives. Foster children are never as close to other household members as those sharing uterine group ties, but their treatment may range from the doting affection of a grandmother to the exploitation of a nonrelated shopkeeper (den Ouden 1987:16–17). Because fostering is so common, resources for child rearing rarely figure into women’s overall reproductive decision making.

The compound (la’), or the composite household (den Ouden 1980:43), is a jural, political, and spatial unit. Relationships within the compound are held together by jural ties of descent (between the male compound head and his children) and alliance (between the compound head and his wife or wives). The larger the compound, the greater is the compound head’s prestige and political power. Having a sizable, polygynous compound is a requirement for some titles of nobility. In the largest compounds, politics complement kinship in deciding residence, as the compound head may gather clients about him, giving shelter and gaining the labor of the clients or their children.
The spatial characteristics of the compound contribute to the shape of daily interactions and thus to the experience of being Bangangté from different social “locations.” Seen from the point of view of the male compound head, his house is in the center, facing the road. Behind or next to the man’s house is his wife’s kitchen. In monogamous compounds, the wife and children sleep in the man’s house. In polygynous compounds, each wife has her own kitchen-house where she lives with her own children. These wives’ houses are clustered around the man’s house, and in larger compounds they are divided into two rows or quarters “belonging to” the first and second wives, as we have seen for the royal compound. In fact, many of the features of household organization and daily life in the royal compound, described in chapter 1, apply to other polygynous compounds on a smaller scale.

A set of contrasts gives the space between and around this cluster of buildings meaning for its Bangangté inhabitants. In the cleared and inhabited space surrounding the buildings, where everyday activities take place, the earth is beaten and swept, under control. It contrasts with the “complicated” wooded space behind the compound, the sacred groves and uncontrolled bush. The cleared area is generally toward the public road and higher than the bush behind the compound. Its height is associated with dryness and sterility, the lowness of the bush with moisture, coolness, and fecundity. The closed space in the women’s quarters (in the past fenced in) contrasts with the open space before the man’s house, a place to receive guests. The often ostentatious graves of antecedents are usually in front or directly to the side of the deceased’s house, in the open, public area of the compound. The open, public space, as well as the man’s house, is dedicated to male activities, while the closed space of the women’s quarters is the venue of women’s activities where even the husband rarely makes an appearance.

In polygynous compounds, male and female spheres are highly segregated in economic as well as in social and spatial terms. In addition, the household of each wife is largely economically independent from those of her cowives, despite some food-sharing. Nonetheless, implicit and explicit contracts of rights and duties link household members economically.

The husband is responsible for buying palm oil, salt, dried fish, and meat for his wives and children, as well as paying for clothing, school fees, and medical care. He earns the money to do this through coffee or cocoa cultivation, selling small livestock, wage employment, commerce, or occasionally by practicing special skills such as healing. The husband also assigns plots to his wives from the land allocated to him by the quarter king. Both women and men in Bangangté deny the competition for land described for more densely populated Bamiléké regions (den Ouden.
1980:52) and do not intercrop.16 “How can I be angry with my husband if he plants coffee on my plot and I have to start a new one,” asked one Banganté woman in 1983. “After all, he gave me the land.” Nonetheless, women often must walk long distances to their fields when their husbands take over fields nearer to the compound for coffee, and they do complain about the distance. The wives may work on their husband’s coffee farm,17 but their main responsibility is to feed their husband and children with foodstuffs they have cultivated themselves. They also prepare and serve food to receive the husband’s guests. Women’s agricultural, cooking, and serving skills become evident on the grandest occasions on which the entire household cooperates, festivities commemorating the dead.

In practice, husbands often do not meet their economic duties. Women sell produce and sometimes sell prepared food at the weekly and biweekly markets to earn cash for oil, salt, clothing, and school fees. They show their disapproval to their impoverished or irresponsible husband, however, by preparing the husband’s food without the necessary palm oil. Banganté associate foodstuffs, cooking, and full bellies with procreative ingredients, pregnancy, and houses full of children. As we shall see in chapters 3 and 4, complaints about irresponsible husbands and empty cooking pots constitute a discourse on threats to reproductive health.

Neighborhood and Village

Food is simultaneously the basis of solidarity and an arena of conflict not only within households but also in the local community. Sharing food and drink while visiting is the epitome of neighborliness; refusing it is an open statement of mistrust. The neighborhood and village crosscut kinship to draw people together to share information, work, and food. The quartier, quarter or neighborhood, is both an informal designation that Banganté use to talk about nearby people and establishments, and a territorial unit (tan la’) of royal governance. Quarter and village are also units of Cameroonian state administration. But most importantly, the neighborhood is the arena of daily, extrafamilial interaction. The village is the touchstone of origin, the most readily available marker of identity. These localized, territorial connections contribute centrally to the multilayered sentiment of being Banganté.

Roads, courtyards in front of compounds or clusters of compounds, and markets are the main arteries through which Banganté people pass, meet, and socialize. These arteries of neighborly interaction are also communication conduits through which information about community affairs flows. Critical for women of reproductive age, this information concerns who might be suspected of witchcraft against pregnant women and what...
health-care options are available to prevent or cure witchcraft and reproductive maladies. Gossip about who has had what, consulted whom, and experienced which results is the main way women learn about and evaluate the health-care alternatives available to them. This gossip, as well as goods and money, is exchanged in small neighborhood groups, at gatherings around a respected plantain seller’s stall at a central market corner, and at meetings of voluntary associations.

As a member of a quarter or village, one is expected to participate in at least one voluntary association. Nobles and royal retainers take part in title societies concerned with royal administration and ritual. Manjo, an age-grade association organizing male youths into work and military parties for the king, is proudly referred to in life histories by men in their late fifties and sixties, but appears to have ceased functioning by the early 1960s. The most significant voluntary associations for women are rotating credit associations, which function as savings, credit, and mutual aid societies. A number of people belong to dance societies, groups drawing their members from one specific quarter and specializing in a particular dance. Members of both dance and rotating credit associations gather together to share work, dance, and money, and travel together to honor and enliven the death celebrations of members’ kin. “Modern” voluntary associations include task-oriented committees, headed by social workers from a variety of government agencies, such as the community development program of the Ministry of Agriculture.¹⁸

Village membership, determined by the father, is the basis of pride and creates a sense of kinship among strangers, similar to the institution of namesake kin among the Ju/Hoansi of the Kalahari (Lee 1984). One of the first things a Bamiléké asks when meeting a new acquaintance is ndap su ba we? (what is your praise name?). Ndap, thanking or praise names, indicate the village origins of the bearer’s mother and father. The ndap given a man or woman from a particular village alternates from generation to generation, stressing village continuity in a cycle where grandparents and grandchildren are equated in wordplay.²⁰ This wordplay is also used by nonkin, who refer to their ndap-sharing acquaintance as parent, child, or sibling. Younger, urban Bangangté who may be unfamiliar with the intricacies of praise names ask simply, “what village are you from?” Both village origins and their expression in ndap create a sense of connection between strangers originating from the same local community within the kingdom.

**Kingdom**

The fourth arena of social connection and identity in Bangangté is the kingdom (ngo), a territory with set boundaries, the land where one’s ances-
tors rest and where one’s king rules. Bangangté subjects are unified by their allegiance to the mfen, despite their diverse origins as noble, slave, refugee, and children of mothers from other kingdoms. Bangangté are also drawn together by common allegiance when living outside the territory of their kingdom, operating rotating credit associations and collecting funds for the emergency repatriation of their members in case of illness or death (den Ouden 1987:15). The mfen frequently visits these associations to oversee the affairs of his urban subjects and sometimes to ask them for money for his projects.

The Palace. The king’s residence, nchwed, the royal compound, is central in Bangangté consciousness. It is the locus of collective and individual rites assuring the well-being of Bangangté subjects. These rites, including funerals, coronations, and convocations of “the children of Bangangté,” link living Bangangté subjects to their deceased rulers, just as private rites link the living to their immediate ancestors. Bangangté subjects are called to the royal compound to pay tribute to the mfen in labor or cash, to pay taxes, and to demand the king’s services as justice of the peace, a state function.

Bangangté subjects also spend much of their conversations contemplating palace developments. They perceive that what happens in the palace affects their well-being in direct and indirect ways, from its role in settling land tenure disputes to its spiritual guardianship of the country. The royal compound is the focal point of concerns about threats to procreation within the kingdom and thus the focal point of this book. The royal wives fear their fertility to be more threatened than others’. This is due to a number of perceptions as illustrated in chapter 1, including co-wife jealousy and competition to produce an heir among the royal wives, and the “bad” and “unhealthy” ways of the mfen. Bangangté who do not belong to the royal family also perceive the royal wives to be at a higher risk of depressed fertility than other Bangangté women. Some even express their impression that the overall birthrate of Bangangté is increasing while the royal compound has “too few children.” In traditional Bangangté cosmology, as in many symbolic systems of societies ruled by divine kings, the wealth, health, and reproductive vigor of the mfen and his household is closely tied to the well-being of his subjects and the land. Therefore, even nonroyal households satisfied with their reproductive success are worried when the reproductive vigor of the royal family is threatened. Because of its importance for reproductive issues in Bangangté, we describe the royal compound in detail.

The royal compound of Bangangté is the administrative, religious, and cultural center of the kingdom. The web of relations among its residents is simultaneously full of the mystique of things royal and considered
the exemplary polygynous compound by most Bangangté subjects. For this reason, Bangangté worry when news of the many altercations among the king and his wives leaks out.

The spatial organization of the royal compound of Bangangté resembles all Bamiléké royal compounds (Hurault 1962; Notué and Perrois 1984). One can best read the complex map of the Bangangté royal compound by imagining oneself on a walking tour of the palace grounds (see fig. 9). Visitors enter through a tall gate of decoratively worked spines of raffia palm fronds resembling bamboo, topped with a seven-peaked corrugated tin roof. The gate is located at the top of a hill, which for over fifty years has carried the traffic of the old Yaoundé–Bafoussam road. A wide double avenue leads down the hill toward a second gate. Wooden palisades and thirteen square “bamboo” structures with thatched roofs flank this avenue, shielding the two quarters of the mfen’s wives from public view. The second gate at the foot of the avenue separates the three districts of activity within the royal compound: the two wives’ quarters above the second gate, the residence of the king beside it, and mâfen, the sacred forest below it. Mâfen, the “complicated” area below the second gate, contains structures housing the royal skulls, secret society meeting places, offering sites, and the king’s secret water source. Rituals are performed here to resolve disputes and to protect the well-being of the king, the kingdom, and the fertility of its populace.

Royal Authority. Traditional Bangangté government is highly centralized, with authority concentrated in the institution of kingship. The mfen’s official rights in the past included taking any unmarried woman for his wife, exacting tribute and labor from his subjects, receiving payments from nobles who buy titles, displaying royal insignia (leopard skins, copper bracelet, necklace), and deciding on the life and death of his subjects. In the context of the Cameroonian state, he still receives wives as gifts from his subjects and from fellow kings, but can no longer demand them. He can request funds and labor from his subjects, but they are not required by Cameroonian law to comply. He continues to have the right to display royal insignia and receive payments for titles of nobility. He still hears cases from his subjects, but his status as judge is curtailed by the state. Officially he may only hear civil cases, while in practice his subjects continue to come to him for a variety of complaints. He no longer has the right to decide over the life and death of his subjects. His duties include not only judging disputes among his subjects, but also general responsibility for the physical and spiritual well-being of the kingdom. In the modern context, he is justice of the peace, signs all birth, marriage, and death certificates of his rural subjects, and supervises the collection of tax by his deputies.
Kingship in Bangangté embodies ideas of the mutual dependence of the wealth, health, and reproductive vigor of king, kingdom, and subjects. The king (mfen) in Bangangté is divine in a limited sense. He is not considered a god (*Nsî*), but through his inheritance of the kingship and initiation into office the mfen gains sacred, supernatural powers (*kà*) and a combination of religious and secular authority shared by no other individual. This authority is transmitted from father to son through the extended initiation and enthronement ritual. The mfen’s right to govern is considered a legacy of the ancestors. The idea of royal history and descent is very important to Bangangté kingship, and dynasty lists are displayed at royal enthronement ceremonies. His religious and secular authority, now specified into separate duties by the Cameroonian state, were hardly distinguishable in traditional Bangangté. Part of a divine king’s divinity is his “strangeness,” or his distinction from his subjects.23 The mfen is made “strange” through his fearful possession of *kà*, which can be used for good or bad, and through installation rites that transform the mfen-as-individual into the representative of his enduring, legitimate office.

*The King’s Men.* Because the mfen is one of many brothers who share equal patrilineal links to the predecessor, not only kinship but also rules of impartible inheritance are necessary to legitimize his succession. Nonetheless, Bangangté appreciate strength and do not condemn the usurpation of power (confirmed by den Ouden for other Bamiléké groups, 1987:13). Thus the mfen has to have something to do with his royal relatives, potential challengers to his succession to the throne. As Richards describes for the Bemba (1961), some royal relatives cluster around the office of kingship to display the size and strength of the royal dynasty at events such as funerals and receive special titles of nobility that include particular duties in royal rituals. Contrary to Richards’s description (1961:144), the mfen will appoint his otherwise eligible noninheriting brothers to posts as quarter chiefs of distant quarters, chancing secession of these areas. In the past, this was a risk, although the greater risk was war with neighboring kingdoms and the sultanate of Bamoum. Nowadays, kingdom boundaries determined by the state prevent secession. In addition, royal nonheirs now seek their fortunes outside the kingdom, where educational and economic opportunities are much greater.

Forming no potential threat to the mfen’s succession, queen mothers (*mamfen*) are significant supporters of the mfen’s rule. They receive their high office through the mfen and are therefore interested in keeping him in power. They are important advisers to the mfen and attend meetings of the *nkam be’e* (council of nine, the highest group of nobles). They are very visible leading dances and in women’s social and economic groups, commu-
Fig. 9. Map of the royal compound of Bangangté
1 palace
2 ndogo', courthouse
3 former garage
4 mfen's sleeping house
5 site of ir'kam
6 niam lo', mfen's kitchen
7 pigsty
8 po'lu, skull house
9 bwopu', former palace
10 burial house of mfen Tchatchoua
11 "maison douala," house of Njike II, where Egerton stayed in 1937
20 nse'de bankam, nobles' meeting house
21 nda nsi, the house of god
22 unused meeting house
23 kum nowala', nowala' meeting house
24 meeting house
30 mba', sacrifice site
31 * * *
32 * * *
33 * * *
34 site of mabanup's burial
35 site where royal wife's skull exhumed
36 banana grove toilet area for poglax' mabanup
37 toilet area for poglax' nzwikam

Houses of Royal Wives
aa mabanup
ab Marguerite's kitchen
ac Marguerite
ad Claude and Jeanne
ae Sanke'
af abandoned
ag Calu'
ah Nyombab
ai Nteshen
aj Jeanne's kitchen
ak construction site
al anthropologist, formerly abandoned

KEY
- house (mud brick)
- house (traditional "bamboo")
- house (ruin)
- small tree
- large tree
- tree trunk
- clay bowl for sacrifices
- hedge
- stockade fence
- kum secret society (royal regulatory + title holder) meeting house
- site holder) meeting house
- site with ancestral skulls
nicating royal affairs and acting as mediators to interpret news and steer opinion. Although there is only one mfen, there are many mamfens. The mother of each past mfen in the dynasty has her own line of heiresses, who are referred to as mamfen plus the name of the original queen mother (e.g., mamfen Peto’, mamfen Kemajou). One reason royal wives are so concerned that their son become mfen is that the stakes are very high; mamfen is the highest office a woman can achieve.

The royal wives do not participate directly in the governing of the mfen’s subjects. They support the mfen’s rule, however, in a variety of ways. They are responsible for the smooth functioning of domestic life in the royal compound, and for the protection of the mfen’s powers by observing special dietary rules. They act as model subjects, displaying elaborate deference to the mfen in the presence of nonroyals. Royal wives grow the surplus and prepare the food that the mfen distributes to his subjects to cement their loyalty. Perhaps most importantly, they are responsible for producing an heir and demonstrating the mfen’s potency by bearing children.

Besides royal relatives, others help the mfen rule and balance his powers. These are the nobles, sometimes royal relatives but often not, holding a variety of ranked, inherited titles (e.g., nkam, tâ mfen, sop), members of secret societies (e.g., Ku’nga, ngwala’, bandansi), and royal retainers (che’ mfen, the hats of the king). The highest ranked nobles are the nkam be’e, the council of nine who are the only subjects with the right to speak to the mfen as an equal. They not only act as his most important counselors, but are crucial in the initiation and enthronement procedures of royal succession.

The secret societies are associations (kum) with limited entry and closed meetings. Some, like Ku’nga, are masked societies, acting in the past as the mfen’s police of the night by making nocturnal raids on the concessions of wrongdoers. Many more secret societies were active in the past, all meeting in structures in the sacred forest in the depths of the royal compound.

Royal retainers range in function from manual laborers for the king to his trusted guards and emissaries. They are recruited at a young age, and in the past were often given a wife and some land after some years of service and residence in the royal compound. Currently, few young men wish to be royal retainers, and the corps of che’ mfen has diminished considerably. No more retainers sleep in the palace, and most are quite elderly. Some royal retainers now live in cities far from the royal compound.

Further away from the royal compound, the mfen is aided in governing by a variety of hereditary and nonhereditary nobles. The kingdom is divided into subkingdoms, quarters, and subquarters in a highly centralized hierarchy of spatial and administrative divisions. The most important
division is the quarter, which is administered by committee. The position of quarter chief (nkam tan la’) is originally appointed by the mfen and then inherited by the dignitary’s successor. The mfen always retains the right to replace him with another, however. In practice, a committee of quarter members may choose a new quarter chief upon the death of a nkam tan la’. Quarter chiefs are responsible for keeping the peace, collecting taxes, and allocating land. The land is considered land of the mfen and of the kingdom, managed by the quarter kings who allocate rights to its use to patrilineages and to nonheirs just starting out.

Two developments during the colonial era disturbed the quarter system and led to land disputes sometimes in the guise of witchcraft accusations. Hurault describes how colonial census takers reconstituted quarters as they pleased, breaking them up into smaller units that had nothing to do with the traditionally legitimate quarter system. Those made quarter heads by the actions of the census takers did not want to give up their newfound posts to kingly quarter heads. This led to hard feelings and imprecise borders, disrupting royal attempts to govern. Hurault cites Bangangté as the worst example, dislocated into 58 quarters (1962:101–2). The second development was the resettlement of hamlets along the roadside to ease security and surveillance during the civil war preceding and following independence. Because of this resettlement, the nkam tan la’ were further away from the farmland they had allocated to their constituents and less able to supervise land use and prevent disputes. These disputes sometimes led to witchcraft accusations (Feldman 1984).

In the past, Bamiléké lived by their farms, dispersed in the countryside. Since the civil war of 1955–65, populations have been regrouped along roadsides. This means that cultivators, particularly women, must walk long distances to their fields. This recent pattern of settlement may also contribute to land disputes, since regulatory bodies are now far from the disputed land parcels (see Feldman 1984). The land is the property of the entire collectivity (citizens of the kingdom) and is managed by the king (mfen) and his representatives, the quarter chiefs (nkam tan la’) (Tardits 1960:69). Some private ownership of land began with the introduction of coffee (Tardits 1960:70). These gradual changes in land tenure are still under way.

The mfen’s ability to govern is affected not only by those who surround him, but also by the double nature of kingship. Like many divine kings, the mfen has “two bodies,” an everlasting, sacred body and a temporal, mortal, human body. The first sacred body is gained through a period of investiture that makes the mfen “other,” powerful, and capable of changing himself into a panther. The second body is that of the mfen as a human individual, a product of his times, containing human fallibilities.
Because of this second, temporal nature, the hold of kingship and of some ancestrally sanctioned customs is weakening. Subjects find other paths to wealth and honor than traditional titles and constant allegiance to the mfen. Currently, allegiance is situational. The mfen needs new wealth acquired in modern ways, with the help of his subjects, and must relate to the Cameroonian state.

*The Kingdom and State.* Managing contradictions between the traditional Bangangté kingdom and the modernizing Cameroonian state is one of the greatest challenges facing both the mfen and his subjects. Relations between the state administration (prefect, subprefect) and the mfen have not always been easy, as they demand a double allegiance from their constituents. Mfen Njiké Pokam wished to modernize, but did not have the scholastic education to make his case heard by the administration. As a result he was caught between critical Bangangté nobles, who worried he would ruin the dignity of the kingship, and the local administration backed by the force of the state. His successor, mfen Nji Monlüh Seidou Pokam, during his initiation from February to May 1987 promised to improve relations on both fronts (Ndonko 1987a). Director of the parastatal coffee cooperative, and since October 1987 second deputy mayor of Bangangté, this mfen is himself highly placed in the local state apparatus. At the same time he plans to rejuvenate defunct secret societies and other palace associations to “restore tradition.” His plans have been impeded by economic recession and general strikes calling for democratization in the early 1990s.

Bangangté subjects must deal with both the kingdom and the state administration, even for state-ordered bureaucratic acts. While the mfen, as justice of the peace for Bangangté Subdivision, must sign all birth, marriage, and death certificates, records for these documents, essential to attend school or to obtain wage employment, are kept in the various offices of the state bureaucracy in town.

When subjects seek legal means to settle disputes or are charged with a crime, they may have to present themselves both before the mfen’s court and at the divisional courthouse. If they do not come of their own accord, they may be fetched by the mfen’s emissaries or by the Cameroonian police. The mfen’s legal jurisdiction is ambiguous, and he is not even president of the tribunal coutumier (customary court), an interim state institution hearing civil cases. The state (or parts of it in the court system) clearly intends to gradually do away with traditional dispute settlement procedures. Nonetheless, rural Bangangté in particular are mystified by and mistrustful of state legal process, which encourages the success of the mfen’s dispute settlement.27

Bangangté experience other, perhaps less intrusive, aspects of the...
Cameroonian state that do not directly contradict royal power. Children attend schools, which are run by the state, by the Protestant and Catholic missions, and as private lay enterprises at the secondary level. For rural residents, state primary schools are the main contact with educational institutions. The Ministry of Agriculture presents Bangangté cultivators with a variety of extension services and a community development program, seeking to modernize the community from above. Women’s groups, teaching knitting, crocheting, and food preservation techniques, introduce new visions of women’s role in modernizing Cameroon, visions not always supportive of women’s traditional independence.

Finally, Bangangté villagers’ health-care options are significantly shaped by the state. Not only are government hospitals and clinics widely available in Ndé Division, the government differentially supports private health-care alternatives. Mission hospitals and private clinics are officially approved. In recent attempts to organize traditional healers, attempts encouraged only by limited members of the state apparatus, herbalists have received more attention than practitioners utilizing less empirically based healing methods. The latter are denounced by most government officials as charlatans. This puts the legal status of a large body of practitioners treating women’s reproductive ailments at risk.

**Concluding Remarks: Social Cohesion, Exclusion, and Shifting Centers**

In this chapter I have discussed various contexts in which Bangangté interact with their living compatriots, with their ancestors, and with those who govern them. I have emphasized forms of association that draw Bangangté together. But the flip side of social connectedness is exclusion; for each group of affiliates some are in and others are out. The forces that push Bangangté apart are an important aspect of everyday life.

At the level of kinship, the distinction between heirs and nonheirs creates bitterness between brothers and even cuts ritual ties. In addition, although wife-givers and wife-takers are drawn together through marriage alliance, the differences in wealth and prestige thus created are sometimes insurmountable. At the level of the compound, intense competition between cowives often leads to accusations of thievery, calumny, and witchcraft. This strife, particularly in later years, often extends to their children, pushing half siblings apart.

At the level of the quarter or village community, differences between heirs and nonheirs, peasants and salaried employees make themselves felt through differences in wealth (in capital, land, and in the labor of many wives). This yields disparities in privileges and prestige in both traditional
and modern terms. Titles of nobility must be bought, and initiation involves expensive gifts to all previous members of the same rank (Hurault 1962:102). Wealth can pay for formal education, allowing one to use rather than be used by the state bureaucracy. Concrete houses, gilded with fanciful iron bars and even surrounded by a wall, serve as badges of prestige and physical reminders of difference in fortune. Highly differentiated opportunities to promote one’s interests (den Ouden 1987), as well as strife between heirs and their disinherited brothers, literally push people apart by urging many to migrate.

While migrants vary widely from each other in wealth and power, they are nonetheless drawn together by common allegiance to the mfen and kingdom of Bangangté. The hold of the mfen on his subjects, however, was slipping in 1986. The mfen is now only one of a number of shifting centers of reference, especially for Bangangté migrants whose daily experience is in the urban world of wage labor. Migrants are also drawn back to kingdom territory by the pull of the ancestors. These ancestors draw shallow kinship groups together in their need to placate ancestral wrath, but having to sacrifice to one’s ancestors through the solitary heir once again serves to underline the exclusiveness of descent.

The extremely hierarchical nature of traditional Bangangté government, with its system of ranked titles among men and women, clearly submits Bangangté subjects to a strict discipline of knowing one’s place. This is somewhat countered by new opportunities for wealth, prestige, and power in commerce and state bureaucracy. Rather than alleviating inequality, however, these developments add a new hierarchy to the old one, where educational achievement and wealth are used as measures to render large numbers of individuals ineligible for positions of advancement.

What remains at all levels of Bangangté social life is an intense consciousness of status differences, based on prestige, privilege, and wealth in traditional and modern terms. A marked area of difference is gender. All scholars of the Bamiléké have noted the high degree of gender segregation in economic, spatial, and social fields. Den Ouden, in his exploration of notions of importance, complicatedness, and dangerousness, cites evidence indicating that “the world of women is quite puzzling for men” (1987:8). Bangangté have very specific notions of different rights and duties for men and women, as well as their different “natures.” Hierarchical divisions within and between the categories of men and women are highly articulated. This is true for all of the shifting contexts within which Bangangté live their lives—in the royal compound, in their local communities, and in the commercial and bureaucratic institutions in which they work or receive services. The next chapter explores these issues of gender difference in the context of beliefs regarding procreation.