

Marriage and Memories of the Slave Trade Among the Ejaghams of Cameroon's Cross River Region

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Abstract

Using interview data collected from communities in Cameroon's Cross River region, this study examines the experiences of "slave descendants" in their marriages/attempted marriages with "freemen." Using theories from Mary Douglas and Erving Goffman to analyse their stories, I demonstrate that while "slave descendants" are legally permitted to marry members of "freeman" origin, in practice, some cultural privileges are stripped from those who choose to intermarry, especially impacting those of "freeman" origins. Among "freeman" individuals, beliefs exist that marrying a "slave descendant" can limit their social and cultural potential. For example, they believe such marriages will contaminate the purity of their bloodline. Correspondingly, I discovered that many "slave descendants" aspire to unions with "freemen," despite discrimination and rejection, to give their children a "half-pure" blood identity. They believe that giving their children this "half-pure" blood identity helps improve their future prospects.

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Keywords

Cameroon, gender, marriage, social memory, discrimination, culture

Introduction

During the transatlantic slave trade, an estimated 9 to 20 million Africans were taken to the Americas, while many more were internally enslaved (Argenti and Röschenthaler, 2006: 35). Today, embodied memories and veiled discourses of slavery continue to haunt contemporary generations of people along the old trade routes of the African hinterland (Argenti and Röschenthaler, 2006). Many enslaved Africans never left the continent's shores for the Americas; instead, they remained enslaved on the continent, including in the coastal regions of Cameroon and in the Cross River region, where cult-like agencies and associations such as Ekpe society were used to subjugate them (Röschenthaler, 2007). In Cameroon, these enslaved Africans who never left the shore of Africa were later integrated into different communities after the abolition of the slave trade. Despite this integration into communities occupied by their people of the same race, "slave descendants"¹ are still treated poorly by "freemen" due to prejudices persisting from the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The legacy of the slave trade did not just affect Africans' social, political, and economic lives, but also the cultural values held for years before the coming of (Western) slave traders. The introduction of this "foreign" culture to Africa has led to identity crises within various African communities.

One of the historical powers slaveholders wielded over their slaves was the ability to decide whom they should marry and under what conditions (Quirk and Rossi, 2022). Thus, the slave trade perpetuated marriage enslavement by forcing women and girls into intimate relationships in which their sexuality and reproductive capacity were at the disposal of their husbands/masters. Dos Santos Gomes (2010) has shown that the marriage rate among slaves appears to have been unequal (in terms of numbers and frequency) and that, in some areas, there was a decrease at the turn of the twenty-first century in unions between slave couples that the church blessed through the sacrament of marriage. The disparities in these rates were thought to result, for example, from both slave practices and domination policies. Today, "freemen" draw upon the memory of these slave practices by instituting regulations and cultural norms that prevent marriages between "freemen" and "slave descendants."

This study contributes to the contemporary discourse on how the memories of the slave trade affect "slave descendants" in their marriages/attempted marriages with "freemen" in the Cross River region of Cameroon. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2021–2022, I look at the mechanisms underlying and sustaining these marriages. The research contributes to existing knowledge on the topic by investigating why "slave descendants" continue to seek union with "freemen" despite discrimination and rejection. It provides a sociological perspective through the analysis of narratives about marriage.

Notes on Terminology

Although I employ the terms “slave descendant” and “freeman” (in quotes to emphasise their manufactured character) throughout this study, it is essential to note that other labels are used to differentiate the two categories of people who live in these communities. “Freemen,” “sons of the soil,” “blue blood,” and “freeborn” are terms used to describe the original or early settlers of the land who never served as slaves. According to the research participants, their names define them as those born with the right and ability to choose and live freely, as well as those accountable for establishing cultural laws and regulations that govern their communities. For persons whose ancestors served as slaves before being absorbed into these communities following the abolition of the slave trade, names such as “slave descendants,” “asung,” and “strangers” are used. As people whose ancestors were slaves and who arrived in their communities as strangers with new identities, they are required to abide by the cultural conventions imposed by “freemen,” who, as I will demonstrate in the coming sections, discriminate against them. Furthermore, as my participants have indicated, the various terminologies used to designate each group have established the groundwork for, or aided, in the perpetuation of cultural practices that have discriminated against slave descendants.

Existing Literature and Theoretical Framework

Existing research has clearly established that cultural beliefs and practices have justified the prejudicial treatment of “slave descendants” within the context of Africa (Suh, 2020). The issue of marriage between a “slave descendant” and a “freeman” is a societal problem plaguing African communities. Anyacho and Anyacho (2016), for example, documented Igbo traditional customs that characterised the complex relationship between the Osu or the (outcast) and the Diala (free-born), which has maintained social (marital) inequality in Igbo communities. His work was based on the idea of “cleanliness constraint.” That is, the Osu are not ritually clean and, as such, should not be granted the same liberties and privileges as other Igbo (Diala), particularly regarding sexual and marital relationships. Another recent study in Madagascar by Regnier (2020) verified the notion of the “slave descendant” being deemed “contaminated” or “unclean” and, as such, “freemen” refuse marriage with them. These investigations have revealed that “slave descendants” face discrimination and are barred from marrying “freemen.” They provide strong evidence of their experiences and how these encounters impair their fundamental human rights. What is not discussed is why “slave descendants” continue to advocate for marriage with “freemen,” despite serious prejudice, and further, how slave descendants deal with these restrictions and forms of exclusion.

Moving to the context of Cameroon, studies have confirmed how the memories of the slave trade still affect people in different areas of life (Okech, 2016). Suh’s work reveals that cultural practices fuel the marriage restrictions placed on “slave descendants” in the Cross River region of Cameroon, where they remain victims of harmful prejudices such as those related to intermarriage with “freemen.” Chm-Langh and Fomin (1995) have

focused on the exclusion of “slave descendants” from kinship (citizenship) in the Bayangi area. They contend that “slave descendants” are deemed “aliens” without kin and that their descendants, regardless of generation, continue to live a slave-like and alien existence. Similarly, Fomin and Ngoh (1998) concentrate on the establishment, organisation, and functioning of slave villages. They revealed that, in Banyang society, descendants of slaves are often richer than “freeborn” but that this success can never erase the stigma of slave origin. However, in saying that “the Banyang slave settlements were the most prominent structural organization of slavery in Cameroon,” these authors neglect to provide a comparative viewpoint to back up their assertion. Nkwi (1995) investigates the existence of social categorisation in Cameroon’s Western Grassfield. He establishes that slavery was a transitory social category in Kom and that it was a temporary state. Because the owner could marry female slaves and give wives to male slaves, the children of such unions were not born as slaves. Children born to slave parents were either incorporated into the “master’s” bloodline or established a separate independent lineage. He demonstrates that freedom was a fundamental right of every Kom society citizen born into it. Though Nkwi has presented a strikingly different perspective on how descendants of slaves in these regions of Cameroon have successfully assimilated into the various systems by obtaining certain prestigious social statuses and identities, he does not investigate how slaves acquired through methods deemed dishonourable and who were restricted to performing hard, unpleasant jobs have changed their social circumstances and successfully assimilated like the others.

As demonstrated above, the topic of discrimination against “slave descendants,” particularly regarding marriage with “freemen,” has been addressed in several regions of the world. In Cameroon, however, the research has concentrated on disparities, social categorisation, political exclusion, and the structural organisation and function of “slave descendant” communities. The issue of marriages between “slave descendants” and “freemen” and why slave descendants continue to seek unions with the “freeman” has received very little attention. My research examines the experiences of “slave descendants” who have married or attempted to marry “freemen.” Through the experiences of “slave descendants,” I look at how the slave trade, abolished centuries ago, still has a strong influence on contemporary lives. While investigating these social dynamics, I also utilise sociological theories to explore why “slave descendants” continue to push for marriage unions despite discrimination and frequent rejection. I further explore the repercussions experienced by those who choose to intermarry despite the stigma attached to such unions. In particular, I call upon theories from Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* (1966) and Erving Goffman’s (1963) exploration of stigma, adopting an explicitly sociological perspective, conceptually distinct from other scholars. In doing so, I open a new research direction for examining this topic.

Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* (1966) looks at primitive religion from the nineteenth century, motivated by filth and hygiene, on the one hand, and fear, on the other hand. She examines the symbolism of dirt with regard to religious practices, social and sexual taboos, and a wide range of ancient and contemporary civilisations, to demonstrate how these practices convey a society’s values regarding itself and the cosmos.

Douglas claims that what constitutes filth has nothing to do with hygiene or bacteria (as in “modern” culture) but a person’s social position within a culture (as in “primitive” culture). She defines dirt as a thing, or persons, present where they should not be. The word “danger” in the book title relates to the evil that exists in “unclean” things and, consequently, the adverse effects that are thought to result from transgressing the established morality. These danger-beliefs function both as threats that one person can employ to exert pressure on another, and as a fear of what one may experience due to their own moral failings. Using the concept of pollution, she argues that a person or society can become defiled by interacting with certain filthy things, substances, or social groups. Pollution, such as sexual danger, is better understood as a mirror of society’s functions, reflecting patterns of hierarchy or symmetry in the more significant social structure. She demonstrates that in contexts of social hierarchy, interaction with one group can be said to pollute another. That is, contact with someone in an impure state can render the higher category impure. As such, impurities, taboos, and sources of pollution are always considered a danger that needs to be avoided.

The term stigma, according to Goffman (1963), refers to something society deems unacceptable. In Goffman’s opinion, stigma is linked to an identity that has been damaged. It results in those stigmatised being rejected by the larger social group, which he called “normal.” To that end, analysis of stigma can take place at the level of attribute and audience (pp. 6–7). In the first case, it will be associated with something wrong the person did, whereas in the second case, the stigma is in the observer rather than the stigmatised person. In this case, the concept of stigma will be found in people who have done nothing wrong. Thus, the idea of stigma exists in the audience or group of people who consider themselves “normal” rather than in the stigmatised person. The stigmatised individual can also attempt to correct the condition indirectly by devoting much private effort to mastering activity normally perceived as representing a shortcoming on incidental and physical grounds (p. 11). This attempt seeks acceptance within the larger group – the “normal.” According to Goffman, lack of “acceptance” is the main component of the stigma attached to stigmatised persons. When they do not gain the acceptance that they crave, their experience is always characterised by pain, loss, and the feeling of rejection and discrimination.

Using Douglas’ concepts to examine marriages and the purity of “freemen’s” bloodlines in these communities reveals the reason or basis for discrimination and restriction of “slave descendants” in community affairs, such as restrictions on marriage with “freemen.” In line with Douglas’ conceptualisation, the “freeman’s” primary motivation for the constant discrimination and restriction toward “slave descendants” is influenced by the concepts of “pollution” and “fear.” First, according to “freemen,” a union with “slave descendants” will contaminate the purity of their bloodline, which their ancestors fought hard to protect. Secondly, as my analysis demonstrates, “freemen” fear that if they give “slave descendants” the same opportunities they enjoy, “slave descendants” will use both their economic and educational capital to seek revenge for betraying and enslaving their ancestors to Westerners during the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

I apply Goffman's theory to examine the experiences of "slave descendants" (as people with a tainted identity) in their daily interactions with "freemen." The focus is on how the tainted identity of "slave descendants" inherited from their forefathers has led to the way "freemen" view "slave descendants" and how the spoiled identity has led to restriction from land ownership rights, political exclusion, and restrictions on social groupings/marriages. According to Goffman, society develops methods to classify people based on their actual social identity. Accordingly, the communities in this study use memories from the past to reclassify people in their communities into two groups: "slave descendants" and "freemen." This division has served as the foundation for slave descendants' ongoing struggle to renegotiate their identities in order to be accepted by "freemen." This study fills a gap in the literature by exploring why "slave descendants" seek to marry "freemen," a topic that has not received scholarly attention. The focus has been on "freemen's" refusal to marry "slave descendants," without exploring in-depth the dynamics between the two groups.

Methods, Positionality, and Research Context

I explored contemporary relationships between "freemen" and "slave descendants" alongside their social repercussions primarily by combining multi-local ethnographic interviews (Hannerz, 2003; Marcus, 1995) in the Cross River region of Cameroon with documentary and archival sources, which allowed for an in-depth case study of issues related to marriage and memories of the slave trade in the region. The data for the analysis in this article were collected from a sample of thirty-five research participants, consisting of ten semi-structured interviews and five focus group discussion sessions with a total of twenty-five people. The topics for the interviews and the focus groups concerned the social lives of "slave descendants" with respect to marriages with members of "freeman" origin.

The interviews for this work were collected from seven different villages in the Cross River region of Cameroon, where discriminatory practices against "slave descendants" are very visible, even within the sight of visitors, especially during festival periods. In some of the communities, the "slave descendant" settlement pattern is different from that of the "freeman." The "slave descendants" live near the main entrance of the village and are excluded from participating in some social ceremonies such as the *okongo* dance (dance of identity). With these prominent differences, it is easy for even a stranger to understand that there are two groups of people living in these communities.

Interviews were conducted with both older men and women, and with young people (married and unmarried). My method sought to make sense of different individuals' life experiences, focusing on what happened and how those events affected interviewees. I probed into each individual's experiences at different stages in the life cycle. Through the interview and focus group responses, I make inferences about social changes that have taken place over time, in this case, before and after marriage for "slave descendants" fortunate enough to marry into the "freeman" lineage. These inferences act as a window

through which we can understand the effects of the past into the twenty-first century. “Gatekeepers”² (usually the oldest men in a community) were interviewed, as well as a few young men. Respondents were recruited through purposeful sampling. Sampling decisions in qualitative research focus on specific people, situations, or sites because they offer specific – “biased” or “information-rich” – perspectives (Patton, 2002). I started with the gatekeepers of the communities. They were accommodating in telling me who the “descendants of slave families” were and where they live. From there, I made decisions on which families to begin with. Respondents were free to leave the interview session whenever they wanted, and any concerns they voiced were addressed before the interview began. Individuals were also given pseudonyms to avoid identifying a specific respondent in a given community due to the small population size. Interviews were conducted face-to-face using the local dialect, pidgin English, and the English language. I am a native speaker of the local dialect, as well as fluent in pidgin English and English, and did not need anyone to interpret.³

I used Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) software, NVivo 12 plus, to analyse and compare themes across cases utilising the electronic management strategy in data coding. After the data had been transcribed, I coded them and identified the main themes and the sub-themes before closely interpreting the data, thereby uncovering the meanings of the responses and the observation notes. These meaning-based approaches to marriage and the relationship of culture to social structure and power follow a cultural sociological lens, showing a new way of seeing and demonstrating social facts. Cultural sociology is concerned with meaning-making in human actions, in other words, the cultural meaning in the cultural context in which an action is embedded (Spillman, 2020).

Position as an Insider

My position as an insider allowed me to learn more about the communities and the people being interviewed. Though I am a native of one of these communities, I did not have deep knowledge about the topic and the people under study because I did not grow up there. However, I made regular holiday visits, which gave me a different level of foundational knowledge compared to an outsider. Furthermore, I am only a native of one of the seven communities under study and this does not give me a complete picture of what is happening in the other six communities. I knew that these communities discriminate against “slave descendants,” but I did not know precisely why or how. One of the advantages I had as an insider was that I already knew some members of slave origin in my community and a few neighbouring villages. Combined with help from gatekeepers, I easily recruited my first participants. Furthermore, I was already, at least somewhat, familiar with the subject. First, I knew these communities were gendered, with men dominating. Accordingly, I divided all focus groups into men and women, allowing each group to express itself freely. Moreover, my identity as a “freeborn” interested in their predicament facilitated interactions with participants and encouraged them to be open and

accommodating. Some saw it as a step towards complete integration. Further, coming from a patriarchal community in which women, regardless of social status, are viewed as the timid or naïve sex gave me an advantage. Many of the men saw it as their responsibility to “teach” me about their traditions, allowing me to gather information quickly and easily.

Research Context

The Ejagham people live in the Manyu Division of Cameroon’s southwest region – a hotbed for capturing and transporting human beings of various ethnic origins during the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Aubrey, 2013). The estimated population of the location for my study is 46,771 people, who belong to one ethnic group (Ejagham) divided into three clans: Central Ejagham, Ejagham Njemaya, and Obang. Unfortunately, official statistics for the numbers of “slave descendants” and “freemen” are not available, but according to research participants in these localities, “freemen” make up the majority of the population, while “slave descendants” are in the minority. The Eyumojock municipality contains sixty-six localities (sixty-one villages and five urban areas). Residents of this municipality are divided into three groups: farmers, business people, and civil servants. Farmers account for roughly 60 per cent of the overall population. The remaining 40 per cent of the population works in other fields, such as administration, small business, teaching, and transportation. Ejagham communities are divided into age groups that serve different purposes. Specific age classes may be assigned to tasks contributing to the community’s growth and overall well-being. Elders are highly regarded and contribute to the community’s administrative policy in many roles. These communities speak “Ejagham,” but as a former British mandate territory, they also speak English (Research Key, n.d.).

With agriculture as the primary source of income for people in these communities, they place a high value on land ownership rights. The local culture holds that only the first settler, or the heirs of the first settler, can own the land. Land cannot be bought even if its owner’s family has possessed it for 100 or more years; strangers can only purchase the right to settle (Africa: 101, n.d.). Thus, possession of land is significant in their society, not only to grow crops or for building, but to show that they are the first settlers or descendants of the first settlers.

In terms of religion, before the introduction of Christianity, the Ejaghams were polytheistic, with several gods related to their agricultural activities – gods of fertility, sea, rain, and thunder. Today, like many other Africans, they can be considered “syncretic Christians.” They worship both their ancestors and a monotheistic God simultaneously (see Pemunta, 2008). The people’s discomfort and ambivalence with both tradition and modernity can be vividly captured in the following quote: “We pray at the church in the day and visit the *sangomas* [medicine man] at night” (King, 2012: 1173). There are three conventional churches in the municipality: Catholic, Baptist, and Presbyterian. In addition, the Ejaghams emphasise rituals and spiritual (Christian) healing more than scientific treatment procedures. They have many different types of ritual medicine known as

njom, meant to prevent and cure diseases and other misfortunes from evil spirits, particularly witchcraft (Sasaki, 1995).

Findings and Analysis

Marriages/attempted marriages stand among those social dynamics (alongside land ownership rights, settlement patterns, chieftaincy, and social activities) that create visible relationship barriers between “freemen” and “slave descendants.” In the first section of the analysis, I explore the meanings of marriage and identity, and how they play out in everyday life. I, then, introduce four themes through which these meanings come to life and affect, not only marriage, but also other social interactions.

Meanings of Marriage and Identity among “Freemen” and “Slave Descendants”

According to data collected from research participants, the societies under study can be labelled as patriarchal. That is, men dominate almost all aspects of society. Children are socialised about how to be and what to do from an early age. For example, home tasks, such as cleaning and cooking, are taught to girls. In contrast, men’s daily responsibilities appear more “gratifying” than women’s. The male children are trained to be the heads of the household and to be financially responsible for the rest of the family, among other things. In addition, through cultural norms and laws, men are economically empowered, for example, through the right to land ownership and property rights inheritance. As a result, gender roles influence the types of opportunities available to men and women and define their social identities in these communities. It is important to emphasise, however, that not all men of slave origins enjoy these benefits and rights. Only men with “half-pure” ancestry (with a “freeman” father) are eligible. These gendered aspects will become clearer as I proceed with the analysis. Due to these powers and privileges conferred upon men, they are free to marry as many women as they wish, with or without the consent of their first wives. Some male participants with “half-pure” identity elaborated:

Due to cultural expectations that only men can own land and property and be members of prestigious social groups like the Ekpe and Okongko, we [men] are expected to be the heads of our households and to look after our wives and children on a day-to-day basis. It is only normal for men to take in as many wives as possible. Tradition allows that; the same tradition has made us the head of the house and ensures we are responsible for caring for the rest of the family. (Estimba, farmer, FG)

My father took me to the farm at an early age to familiarise me with how lands are cultivated and to advise me on the concepts of dedication to obtain high yields to take care of our families as heads of the house. My sisters and mother on the other hand, usually ensure we return home to a clean house with food already prepared and served. (Ndep, farmer/small business owner, FG)

The above passages focus on tradition and how it empowers men and leaves women dependent upon them. These narratives illustrate that cultural norms are deeply ingrained and perpetuate gender roles that allow men to be financially stable and to take in as many wives as they desire.

Women are sometimes “given away” as second or even third wives by their families to help buttress their family’s standard of living. Most individuals in these communities believe that once a woman marries, it is the husband’s responsibility to care for her and the rest of her immediate and extended family. Women’s dependence on their male counterparts has put them in a position where families have utilised them as a means of survival. As a result, many poor people rely on their daughters’ marriages to survive.

My father died when we were still children. Despite being the youngest, I was compelled to marry at a very young age since my mother could not afford the bills. Our father was a freeman, but when he died, his family grabbed almost everything, leaving my brothers with very little. My mother had to utilize what little money she made from the farm to send them to school, and my husband also contributed to their schooling and took great care of me and my mother. My husband has provided us with a beautiful life, and we are content. (Ayamba, homemaker, “half-pure” identity, FG)

Not every poor family forces their girl child to marry someone who can help the family. I chose to become a third wife to a man I knew could help my family and raise our standard of living. My father was a diligent worker, but he became ill. My mother did her best, and I had to do something to help our situation. Most girls here would do the same thing if given the opportunity. (Egut, homemaker, “slave descendant,” FG)

These extracts show that, while some girls are pushed by their families to marry in order to raise their standard of life, other girls choose to marry for the purpose of assisting their families. The argument here is that cultural practices and legislation have rendered women nearly wholly dependent on their male partners, leaving them with the option of marriage as a means of survival. Some consider marriage to these men an “opportunity” that needs to be taken for the purpose of improving their daily lives because they lack economic empowerment.

In short, regardless of socioeconomic background, men are in a more favourable economic position than women. Although my focus is on “slave descendants,” my study also reveals women as struggling for survival and essential opportunities. While women, on the one hand, struggle to intermarry with men who can help them in bettering their lives, “slave descendants” (regardless of gender), on the other hand, seek marriage with “freemen” to offer their children a “half-pure” identity as well as other opportunities.

Giving our children the opportunity to enjoy certain societal privileges and the partial identity is significant. We hope through them, there might be a positive change in the next generation of “slave descendants.” (Ma Ashu, homemaker, “slave descendant,” interview)

Looking deeper into the interview and focus group responses, “slave descendants” also contend that exclusion of and discrimination against “slave descendants” by modern “freemen” are prompted by the question of a “spoiled” identity and fear of revenge for betraying their ancestors to the colonial overlords. While “slave descendants” are discriminated against because of the heritage inherited from their forefathers during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, respondents reported that “freeman” are also concerned that if they give “slave descendants” the same opportunities that they have, “slave descendants” will be reminded of how their forefathers were abused and abandoned by their own people (“freemen”). As a result, “slave descendants” may seek vengeance and exert dominance over them. This claim echoes Douglas’s argument that people (in this case, “freemen”) employ danger-beliefs as threats to exert pressure on others (in this case, would-be transgressors), yet that the dangers they fear may be due to their own moral failings (1966).

The two excerpts below are representative of the claim that “freeman” fear the results of more equal treatment of “slave descendants.”

What we thought at first was punishment (education, learning craftwork and agricultural production) turned out to be beneficial to our forefathers and us. For these reasons, the “freemen” have decided to use culture as a barrier to stop us from using all we got to fight against them for betraying our forefathers. We don’t want to fight them. We want to live as one people in peace. (Nkom, farmer, FG)

They [“freemen”] claim that they are the original owners of this community and that their ancestors had fought hard to maintained their identities throughout the slave trade. According to them, total integration would eradicate the sense of self identity as a “freeman” that their forefathers sacrificed so much to preserve. (Atta, farmer, FG)

The first excerpt demonstrates that while being enslaved under Westerners during the transatlantic slave trade, many individuals obtained knowledge through schooling, craftwork, and agricultural production (which was eventually passed down to their descendants), increasing their human capital. The respondent argues that the “freeman” is afraid that if “slave descendants” possessed all these intellectual and economic resources and were given equal rights, they would become subjugated by them. The excerpts further contend that “freemen” are concerned about the tainted identities of “slave descendants” because, according to “freeman”, a union with a “slave descendant” would contaminate the purity of the [“freeman”] bloodline their ancestors fought to maintain. Indeed, this bloodline is the most important thing that distinguishes them from “slave descendants.”

“Slave descendants” also provide accounts indicating that to maintain power over “slave descendants,” and maintain their social identities, “freemen” use stigmatisation to limit the social opportunities of “slave descendants.” According to Link and Phelan (2001), power plays a role in forming stigma. Instead of perceiving stigma as a singular event, Link et al. (2004) suggest that it is a process established by cultural, economic, and

political power to demonstrate supremacy. In the accounts of “slave descendants,” we see “freemen” using cultural power to establish supremacy over “slave descendants.”

When a person of freeborn origin joins a prestigious dance such as the Okongo, the crowd will cheer him and hit the drums even harder to show that he is a son of the soil. However, if one is not freeborn, they will stop drumming, and the whole community will know where that person belongs, and some will never stop laughing. Sometimes, fines are levied on the individuals who even show up to dance because we [slave descendants] are not expected to join such social groups. (Atom, farmer, FG)

In my mother’s village, slave descendants live at the village entrance, and the freeborn live inside the village. Each group has social activities like church, market, and town hall. They (slave descendants) are put at the entrance of the village because, in case of an enemy attack, they (enemies) will start with the slave descendants. A freeborn can go to the social gathering of the enslaved people, but people of slave origin cannot go to their gathering because they consider it their land. They call people like us the “other people.” (Oben, farmer/cocoa merchant, FG)

These excerpts show how discrimination against “slave descendants” occurs in a variety of contexts, including limitations on land ownership, which not only reduces their prospects in life but, in some instances, humiliates them in public (as described by Atom) and puts them in dangerous environments (as illustrated by Oben). The claim here is that “freemen” impose cultural norms that deny “slave descendants” access to essential human opportunities. By categorising them as people with “spoiled” identities, “freeman” limit slave descendants’ chances in life. Restrictions (in marriages, ownership of land, exclusion from cultural groupings and leadership positions such as chieftaincy) are put in place by the freemen to hinder any escape by ‘slave descendants’ who see marriage and offspring with the “freeman” as an opportunity to renegotiate their identities.

How Meanings Concerning Marriage and Identity Come Alive

In this section of the analysis, I explore the experiences of “slave descendants” in their marital interactions with “freemen.” Through their experiences, I examine how gaps are formed and show how some people of “freeman” heritage have intermarried regardless of socioeconomic concerns, while the majority still maintain a strong stance on maintaining purity. In this section, I present four narratives based on purity and stigma, with each a storyline focusing on a different theme. The first theme is a lack of social connection. This theme demonstrates how the marriage of “slave descendants” and “freemen” is rejected because “freemen” seem to wish to preserve the purity of their bloodline. They may fear that marrying a “slave descendant” would taint the purity of their bloodline. The second theme investigates connections derived from mobilisation. It demonstrates how a “freeman” might agree to marry a “slave descendant” after women of “freeman” origin have rejected them due to their lack of empowerment. They marry “slave descendants,” build their socioeconomic status, and then return to their fellow “freeman” community to maintain the pure bloodline. The third theme illustrates how, often for religious reasons,

marriages between “freemen” and “slave descendants” are successful because Christians believe that all humans are equal before God irrespective of their social status. The final theme looks at benefit-based connections. It demonstrates how “freemen” agree to marry “slave descendants” because of material benefits they receive during their marriage from their partner.

Marriage Experiences and the Lack of Social Connections

A lack of social connection is the first set of characteristics the research participants express in their attempted marriage encounter between a “slave descendant” and a “freeman.” The participant Agi’s narrations conclude that attempts at marriage between a “slave descendant” and a “freeman” typically fail because of a lack of social connection. The absence of social connection arises from the “freeman’s” perception of “slave descendants” as socially ineligible to become wives or husbands. Based on Agi’s recollections, it is clear that concerns held about such marriages extend beyond the immediate family to include others of the same social group who believe they must preserve the overall “freeman” lineage. The following narrative from an individual interview with a primary school teacher of slave descent illustrates this finding.

Agi: When we got there, I greeted his family (father, mother, grandfather, and siblings). I can assure you that they were delighted to see me from the start. The mom asked me to sit down while the father broke some kola-nut. I didn’t go there with my family because my boyfriend just wanted me to meet with his family for the first time to talk about the wedding. I gave the siblings the present I got for them, then the father’s inevitable question came. He asked me: “My daughter, where did you come from because, from all indications, you are not from this community, even though children these days grow like those eating fertilizers.” I told him I came from Ayoke, specifically from Pa Etim’s family. At the mention of my family’s name, his face dropped. He pulled back and said in our local language that “today’s children would disgrace you,” while looking at his son.

Interviewer: How did you feel within that short period of mentioning your family’s name and the village you came from?

Agi: Oh, I was helpless, confused, and at a certain point, I froze.

Interviewer: Why? Didn’t you know about such a tradition?

Agi: Of course, I knew, but my boyfriend assured me that his family was open-minded and always agreed to whatever he said because he was their only son, and you know how sons are glorified in these communities.

Interviewer: Okay, so what happened next?

Agi: The father sent one of my boyfriend’s siblings to go and call their neighbour. When he came in, the father said, “my son has decided to change our family bloodline.” The neighbour looked at me and

asked. "Where are your parents? Did you tell them what you came here to do? Didn't our son inform you of his background?" At this point, I couldn't answer any of their questions. I got up in shock to go outside and get some air, then his mother shouted, "You forgot something." It was the gift I had earlier given his siblings. At this point, I knew this was it, because even my boyfriend could not say anything. I left the village and a few weeks later, my boyfriend came to my village and told me he was very sorry for what had happened, but he couldn't go against his family because his father had vowed to disown him if he continued with the marriage.

The interview extract depicts a lack of social connection between Agi, who comes from a socially undesirable background, and the boyfriend's parents and their neighbour, who are adamant about protecting their pure bloodline. The attempt to marry from outside is perceived as contamination of the family blood, a form of contagion. Their reaction provides evidence that "freemen" view "slave descendants" as unclean and believe that marrying them will pollute the purity of their bloodline and pose a threat to their social group. Agi's "slave descendant" social identity clearly limits her pool of potential marriage partners. When Agi was first introduced by her boyfriend to the family, there were some exciting gestures from both parents; as she notes: "I can assure you that they were delighted to see me." As soon as her social information/identity was revealed to her boyfriend's family, her chances of becoming a wife collapsed. Goffman (1963) would argue that the drama of the introduction and rejection was made possible, because the signs of stigma are not always immediately apparent to all persons with whom an individual has contact.

Connections Based on Mobilisation

A connection based on mobilisation is the second theme derived from the participants' narrations of their marital experience with "freemen." The experiences shared by the participants show how "freemen," through relationships with "slave descendants" might gain power and improve their social status in society. Research participants claim that male "freeman" may consent to marriage with a "slave descendant" when they have been rejected or cannot select a partner from their own social group. These men consequently intermarry with female "slave descendants" to advance in social class (through being aligned with the spouse's capacities and resources) and then resume looking for another spouse from a "freeman" background to carry on the pure lineage. The following excerpt from an interview session with sixty-three-year-old Ma Agbor, a homemaker of slave descent, is revealing.

When I got married to my husband, he was a nobody. He was like the black sheep of the family. He was too lazy to cultivate a small piece of farmland, even with all his family's

farmlands. Within his age group, he was never respected, and no woman from their kind wanted to be with such a man who could not provide for his family. So, when he asked my hand in marriage, there was no hesitation from the mother, especially as she needed grandchildren. In my 30 years of marriage with him, I built him into a wealthy man, respected by his own family and clan. I worked morning and night at the farm to make sure we build a good life for our children. Since the distance from the farm to the house is far, sometimes I slept at the farm for a whole week to make sure we worked fast and effectively. But the moment he became a proper “man,” other women started coming, and he started cheating on me openly. But I decided to stay for the kids. We have two boys. Then, one day he told me he wanted to get a second wife, then a third, and then came his family’s discrimination. I could not access what I had worked for my whole life (farmland and produce). His mother even said it would be better for her son to have children with a pure blood who can uphold the family’s name because my children will never fully represent the family. I had to leave him and fight for myself and my kids. Staying with that man any longer would have sent me to my early grave, and what would have become of my children?

According to Ma Agbor, the husband had lost the respect of his community because of his laziness and inability to cultivate a piece of land. Women prefer a man who can take care of the family, and due to her husband’s failure to take on such family responsibilities, he could not find a partner among “pure” bloodlines. As a result, he had to turn to Ma Agbor, a “slave descendant” who otherwise would have faced rejection. Ma Agbor reveals through her narration that the union provided a chance for the husband to mobilise social and economic capital and then marry the women from his “freeman” social group who had rejected him when he was nothing. She notes, “But the moment he became a man [...] other women started coming, he started cheating on me openly, until one day, he told me he wanted to get a second wife, then a third.” One can argue here that becoming “a man” in this context means one who has built himself and can take on a partner and family responsibilities.

The discrimination against Ma Agbor by her husband and mother-in-law creates a significant barrier for Ma Agbor and her children, who cannot uphold the husband’s family’s reputation. Ma Agbor had to leave her home to avoid being ostracised by the new wives and the mother-in-law, who quickly turned on her though she had worked so hard to push her husband to become a respectable member of the society.

Religious Connections

The third theme uncovered during the discussions with research participants involves religious connection, which plays a vital role in successful marriages between “freemen” and “slave descendants.” Douglas (1966: 20) explores the argument that “religion [does] not exist for the purpose of saving souls but rather for the maintenance and well-being of society” using Durkheim’s notion of “primitive religion.” That is, religion can be seen as a mechanism through which one’s position and well-being as a member of an institution can be assured. The interview narratives reveal that some of the “freemen”

use a Christian worldview to accept intermarriages with “slave descendants” regardless of their cultural beliefs. The logic is that they are all members of the same religious institution serving a God who sees all humans as equals. Ma Eli and Orang talk through the complexities and problems with such logic.

A few of us are very lucky to have married into a family that loves us beyond explanation. Before Christ, we all are equal. That is how my husband and his family have always seen the children and me. The truth is when you look in terms of culture, there are certain ceremonies our children can never perform, like the identity dance or become chief, but it doesn't bother us because we don't believe in all these cultural norms. My children and I only face challenges during our daily interactions with the communities. Most of the time, I hear my fellow women from the other side saying I have bewitched my husband and the family; that is why they will do anything to protect the children and me. They call me all sorts of names, but I find peace with my family at the end of the day. The most challenging part is during our peer meetings. They see me as an outcast but can't tell me to leave the group because it's my right as my husband is from their side and within the same peer group with their husbands. But they make sure they remind me of who I am at any given opportunity. It is draining, but what can we do? (MaEli, homemaker, “slave descendant,” FG)

When I was about to get married to my wife, I brought her to my community to see my parents. My father is of blue-blood, and my mom is of slave origin. When she got here, people started asking her if she was aware of my slave background. My wife is an educated woman, and she is well-exposed. Whenever she comes across such people, she smiles and says thank you for the information. They even went to locate her family in her community to tell them about my background. Fortunately enough, my wife's parents are deep-rooted Christian[s]. Though this same practice is still carried out in their community, they gave us their blessings because of their religious beliefs. (Orang, warder, FG)

This interview excerpt demonstrates how religion has shaped the cultural identity of some “slave descendants,” and has shaped the behaviour of certain “freemen” towards “slave descendants,” as they are all considered equal before God. According to Olorunda, religion as a social institution has paved the way for unity, peace, and progress among some communities in Nigeria (2019). Religion has been used as an escape to live a life free from stigmatisation. This orientation explains why Ma Eli's husband's family do not see her and the children based on who their ancestors were in the past. Similarly, for Orang, whose wife's family did not hesitate to give their daughter to him because of their religious beliefs. The “slave descendant” status did not affect Orang or Ma Eli's spiritual status as they are members of a religious group that consider themselves one before God. “Slave descendants” are considered unclean and a threat to the pureblood of “freemen” only when society places them in a category that makes them dirty or impure. In this light, Christian “freemen” have decided to remove “slave descendants” from the place of impurity that society has placed them to a place of purity through

religious purification where everyone is equal before God and can interact and intermarry freely.

What is crucial here is that Ma Eli appears to have found love and tranquillity from her husband's family, despite the opposition she receives from her peers. From her narration, we see a connection between her and her husband and his family. It is fascinating to observe that even freeborn women, who are viewed and treated almost like "slave descendants" themselves, have the same attitude towards treating other women with contempt. Given that they are treated unequally, one might have anticipated that the women of freeborn heritage would have demonstrated more empathy. Orang also can be said to have found love as the wife's family accepted him despite knowing his social identity and without any ulterior motive.

Benefit-Based Connections

Although participants in most of the interview sessions acknowledge that some marriages are successful for religious reasons, others are simply connections based on a desire for certain practical or material benefits. Most study participants claim that because the "slave descendants" had developed human and educational capital due to that group's historical exposure to slavery by Westerners, some "freemen" were willing to intermarry with them because of the benefits the union would bring them. "Slave descendants" had often acquired knowledge of how to grow crops using Western tools and techniques, enabling them to produce large quantities of crops for themselves and the market. This skill capacity generated earnings and raised their living standard. Some of these advantages for the "freeman" are highlighted:

Everybody in this village knows how hard-working I can be. Even my wife agreed to marry me because of the good life I could give her. I didn't get any hesitation from her family when I asked for her hand in marriage. I am delighted to give my children at least half of what I could not have. Though they cannot perform some cultural rites per our culture, they at least have half pure blood. My only problem is what my wife's family is turning me into. I have become their money-making machine; yet they don't treat my children as they do my wife's sisters and brother's children. I support her family to the fullest. I pay fees for the little ones, giving them access to my farmland to get the foodstuff, but my father-in-law will hardly identify with me outside, especially when he is with his kinsmen. On the other hand, my wife doesn't attend the same peer groups as my sisters or women from [our] background. Instead, all her group meetings are with people of her kind. It might look like nothing, but it disturbs me a lot. I feel like she has accepted to be my wife but not everything about me, especially my people. (Pa Atem, "slave descendant" farmer, interview)

When I wanted to ask for my wife's hand in marriage, my wife's father openly said in the heat of a discussion: "Even though he cannot sit on that chair [becoming a chief] or dance the dance [Okong, a dance of identity performed during burial ceremonies], he is at least recognized as a government official. For this reason, he can take her hand in marriage".

I felt embarrassed. I was there with some friends and a few trusted colleagues who respected me, but I was happy they could not understand the language my father-in-law was using. (Effim, "slave descendant" civil servant, FG)

There is much reflexivity in this passage. The research participants stress the benefits "freemen" see before accepting a union with people of slave origin. For Pa Atem, he felt that his wife and her family were using him. According to him, the wife and the family accepted him as a husband only for the good life he could provide for them as he notes, "I support her family to the fullest. I pay fees for the little ones, giving them access to my farmland to get the foodstuff." Effim, in contrast, is accepted as a potential husband because of his status as a government official. The excerpt demonstrates that just because a "freeman" marries a "slave descendant," it does not mean they accept everything about the "slave descendant," as in the case of Pa Atem, who noted, "my father-in-law would hardly identify with me outside, especially when he is with his kinsmen," and "my wife does not attend the same peer groups as my sisters or women from [our] background." Although Effim's colleague had no idea what the father-in-law was talking about, he was publicly humiliated; it was embarrassing for him that his father-in-law had spoken in such a manner to his face. Goffman (1963) argues that the lack of "acceptance" is a main component of prejudice for the stigmatised person. When they are not respected and do not get the acceptance that they crave, their experience is always characterised by pain, loss, and the feeling of rejection and discrimination. Happiness is mentioned by Pa Atem with respect to his belief that he had given his children what he was not fortunate to have, which is the half-blood identity.

Conclusion

Using theories from Douglas (1966) and Goffman (1963) to analyse the narratives of "slave descendants," the study has established that the "slave descendants" are not entirely accepted in the communities in which they were integrated after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. These mechanisms include discrimination with respect to intermarriage between "slave descendants" and "freemen." The study has illustrated that there are four main themes present in the findings. The first theme identifies a lack of social connection in the attempted union of "slave descendants" and "freemen." I demonstrate that most of the "freemen" are more concerned with preserving the purity of their bloodline and, as a result, do not want to contaminate it by intermarrying with the "slave descendants." The second theme illustrates connection through mobilisation. It demonstrates how some "freemen," often due to their lack of skills and social status, agree to marry "slave descendants" after failing to find a partner of "freeborn" origin. As a result, they intermarry with "slave descendants," build their social capital, and then resume searching for a "freeborn" partner to continue the pure bloodline. The third theme examines religious connections. It contends that due to spiritual practices, some "freemen" have accepted intermarriages with "slave descendants" because they believe that everyone, regardless of social status, is equal before God. The final theme looks at

connections based on benefits. It contends that some “freemen” agree to a union with “slave descendants” because of the material and financial benefits that “slave descendants” could provide. It reveals a group of “freemen” who are more concerned with material wealth than the purity of their bloodline.

This study, through its investigation of interview narratives, reveals the attitudes of “freemen” towards marriages with “slave descendants.” It illustrates that most of the people of “freeman” origin do not support such unions; they see such marriages as a potential means of stripping them of their “blue-blood” heritage. This attitude aligns with Douglas’s (1966) argument about dirt and purity. Douglas argues that sacred things and places are to be protected from defilement and that impurity and holiness are diametrically opposed. Similarly, a “freeman” regards his origin as pure. As a result, the “freeman” heritage must be protected from being defiled by unions with the “slave descendants,” who fall under Douglas’s classification of unclean, taboo, and threat. For the few who have accepted such matrimonial union, it is often for exploitative motives and what they could gain in the union. Few people have genuinely accepted these unions, mostly due to their religious background.

According to Goffman (1963), society establishes the means for categorising people. While some people are labelled as stigmatised, others are treated as “normal.” Goffman examines that the concept of a “normal human being” may have its origins in the medical approach to humanity or in the tendency of large-scale bureaucratic organisations, such as the nation-state, to treat all members as equal in some ways. In a similar way, drawing from this concept of Goffman, this study also has demonstrated how culture plays a role in the way “slave descendants” are treated and how it reflects on their society. It illustrates how society has stigmatised “slave descendants” as unfit to intermarry with “freemen” they consider “normal.” It shows how more significant social and historical forces influence how the communities act towards “slave descendants.” The stories and experiences shared all confirmed to the framing of intermarriage between “slave descendants” and “freemen” as a social problem.

This study’s key sociological conclusion is that the politics and culture of these communities are intricately entwined with the memories of the slave trade and shape the experiences of “slave descendants.” “Slave descendants” aspire to marry “freemen” despite discrimination to bolster the prospects of their children by granting them partial identity and the right to ownership of properties such as land. This push by the “slave descendant” group is necessary to fight against discrimination in the institution of marriages within these communities.

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Notes

1. “Slave descendants” are those whose ancestors were taken captive and sold into slavery. These captured slaves experienced the shame and humiliation of enslavement, and thus, many of their descendants are stigmatized for being “different” (Klein, 2009). A “freeman” (or “freeborn”) is a person of “pure” descent who functioned as an intermediary in the Cameroonian slave trade. There exist gradations within the groupings, signifying wealth and position within Duala society (Austen, 1995).
2. Interviews with gatekeepers are not included in the analysis. They were meant to help me identify “slave descendant” families.
3. All ethical standards outlined by Masaryk University were followed during the interview and focus group processes.

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Heirat und Erinnerungen an den Sklavenhandel bei den Ejaghams in Kameruns Cross-River-Region

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht die Erfahrungen von „Sklavennachfahren“ bei ihren Ehen bzw. Heiratsversuchen mit „Freien Personen“ mittels Interviewdaten aus Kameruns Cross-River-Region. Anhand der Theorien von Mary Douglas und Erving Goffman wird gezeigt, dass die Heirat zwischen Nachfahren von Sklaven und von „Freien Personen“ gesetzlich erlaubt sind. In der Praxis aber verlieren vor allem die „Freien Personen“ einige kulturelle Vorrechte. Unter ihnen herrscht der Glaube, dass die Heirat mit einem „Sklavennachfahren“ ihr soziales und kulturelles Potenzial einschränken kann. Sie glauben z.B., dass solche Ehen ihre Blutlinie verunreinigen würden. Es streben jedoch viele „Sklavennachfahren“ trotz Diskriminierung und Ablehnung eine Verbindung mit „Freien Personen“ an, um ihren Kindern eine „halbreine“ Blutidentität zu geben. Sie glauben, dass diese „halbreine“ Blutidentität ihren Kindern zu besseren Zukunftsaussichten verhilft.

Schlagwörter

Kamerun, Geschlecht, Heirat, soziales Gedächtnis, Diskriminierung, Kultur