



**UiT** / THE ARCTIC UNIVERSITY  
OF NORWAY

**BEYOND STIGMA?  
A CASE OF A DISABLED FEMALE ENTREPRENEUR  
FROM THE BAMILIKE ETHNIC GROUP OF WEST CAMEROON**



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## **DEDICATION**

To my whole family and friends especially my husband Leopold Jiolie and my sons Jiolie Metsa Caleb, and Tsopgni Demanou Skylover.

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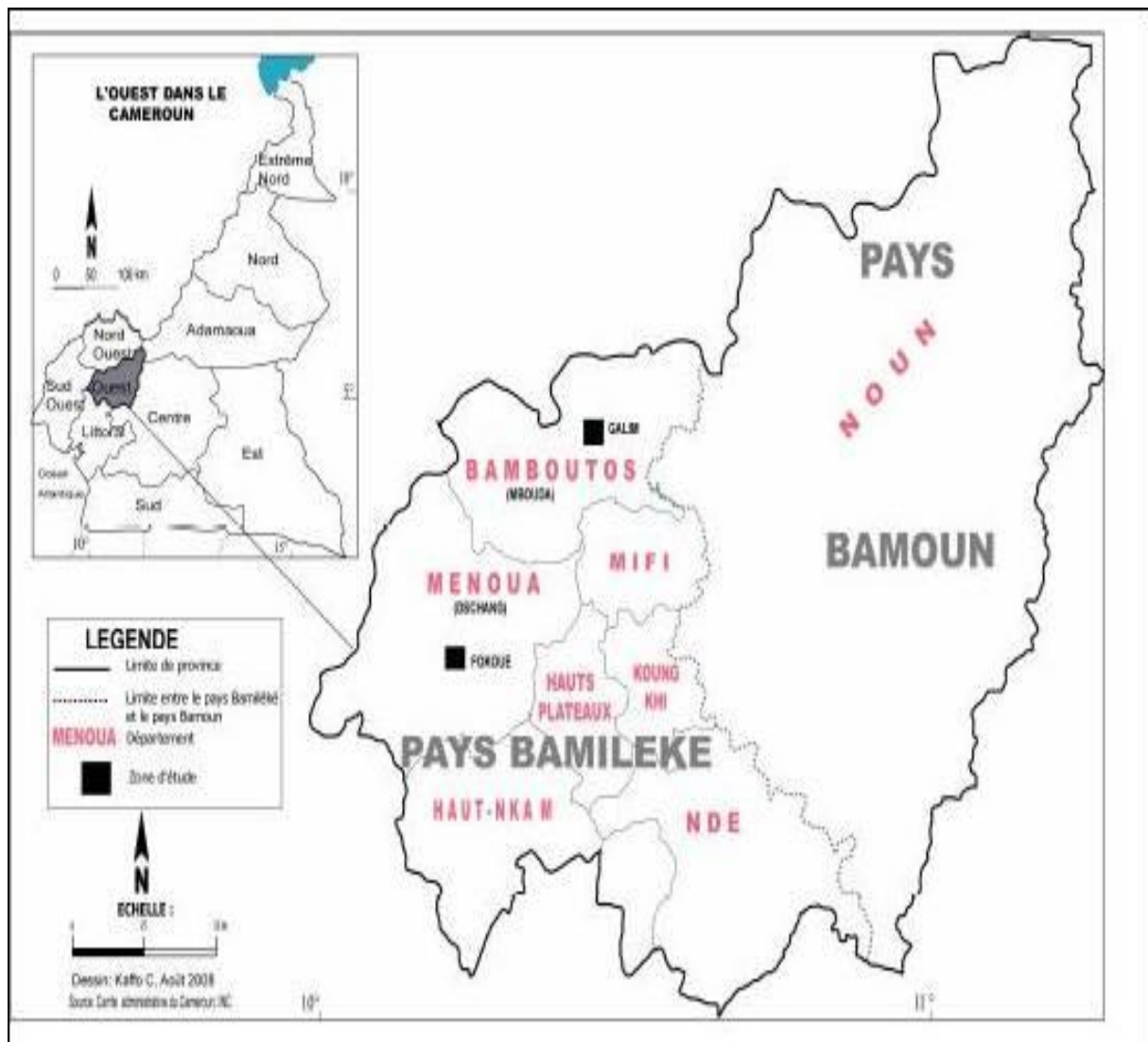
## ABSTRACT

This work was carried out among the Bamileke in the Menoua Division in the West Region of Cameroon. It presents my main informant, Kenfack Tsopmo Cecile, a handicapped woman of 44 years who uses entrepreneurship as a means to break the social rejection that many people face because of their handicap.

Despite her handicap, Cecile is very active and present on various social arenas. She is engaged in many different entrepreneurial activities. Thanks to her lifestyle she is well integrated in her society and regarded by many people around her as a courageous and hard worker. However, in spite of her capacity to progress in business, Cecile still finds it difficult to be taken as spouse, because of her physical appearance. While working with Cecile I learned not only about her particular case, but also about many issues that she shares with other handicapped women in Bamilike society. Many handicapped women in the Menoua Division have common traits like their cultural background and their handicap condition. Their cultural background makes them capable of undertaking business. But marriage is generally a serious problem for handicapped women, because in Menoua community, there are people who consider woman's physical appearance as the sole proof of her beauty. As a result of such opinions, handicapped women are widely excluded from the marriage social field. As victims of social exclusion, some of these handicapped women have established an association to support one another and fight for their rights.

My decision to research on the issues of handicapped women among the Bamilike stems from a belief that the handicapped women are important actors of social, economic and cultural development, who have much to give to the society.

**Keys words:** social stigma, disability, entrepreneurship, Bamileke, Cameroon, gender, woman.



SOURCE: <http://afrique-solidarite-emploi-format.webnode.fr/news/les-bamilekes-cameroun/>

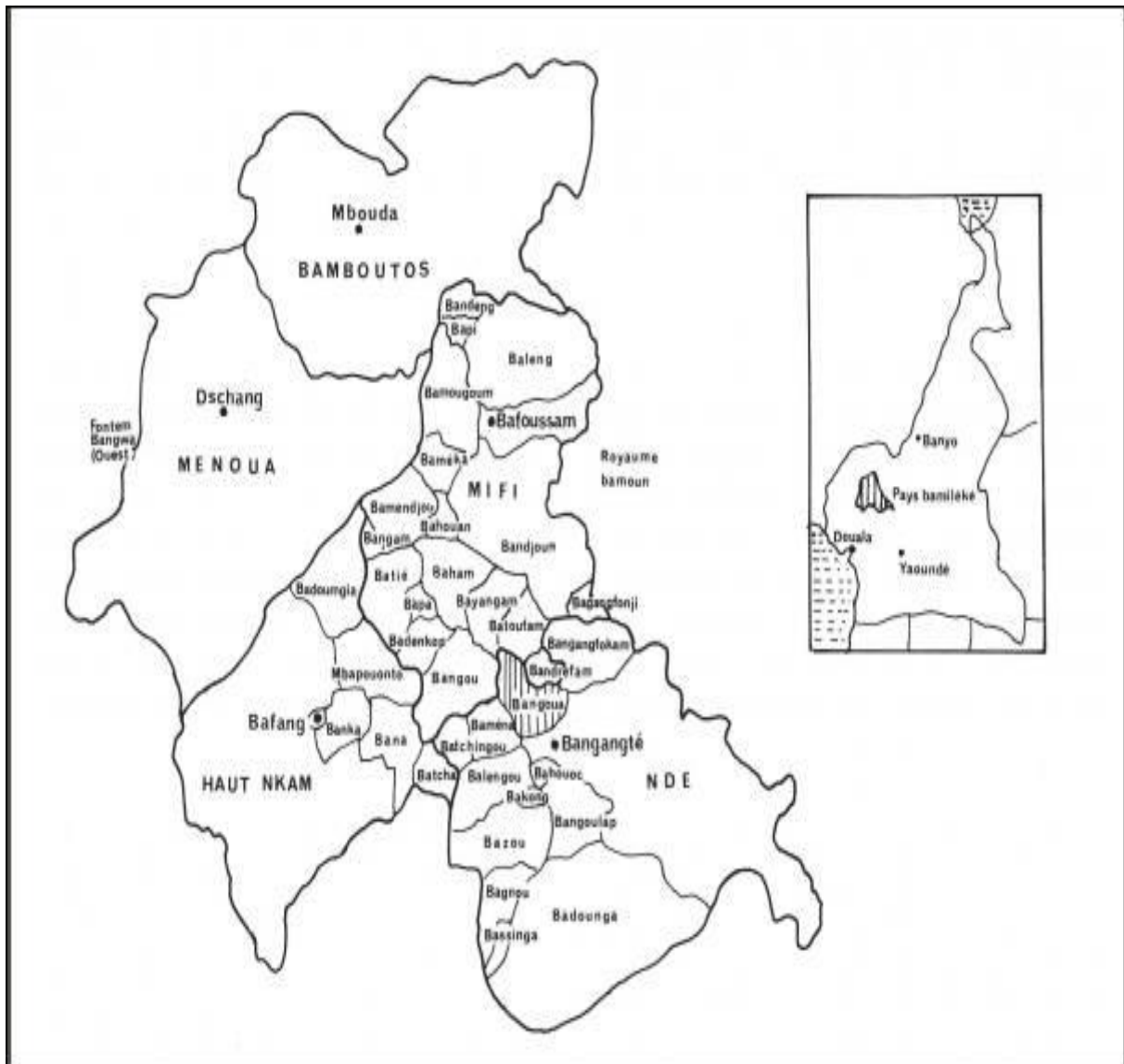
Figure 1: Location of West Cameroon





**SOURCE:** <http://afrique-solidarite-emploi-format.webnode.fr/news/les-bamilekes-cameroun/>

**Figure 2:** Location of Bamileke in West Cameroon



**SOURCE :**Planche 1. Les départements Bamiléké d'après J Champaud – Avril 1971

**Figure3:** Location of Menoua in the Bamileke land.

## Chapter I. INTRODUCTION

Focus here is on the research problem and the hypotheses. In order to ease understanding, a brief presentation of women's problems around the world will be done. Following will be a comment on the Bamileke people, and then the various reasons why I chose to work on the Bamileke hard working handicapped women in the Menoua Division.

### 1. 1 Women's problems

Nowadays, women's problems are among those demanding more and more attention. All over the world, laws are being voted day by day, associations for the defence of women's rights created and conferences held. These have culminated in the declaration of an International Women's Day. Equity and equality between genders are the order of the day everywhere. Nevertheless, there is a peculiarity that needs to be mentioned: the situation of the handicapped women. They are the victims of a double discrimination, both as women and as handicapped persons. In the West Region of Cameroon, many women agree that being handicapped adds more to the discrimination of which they are already victims. Handicapped women suffer a lot of pain struggling to get integrated into their society. Quite often, they are marginalized in fields like education, training, employment<sup>1</sup> and sexuality, in addition to stereotypes and social representations. (Demain 2007: 8) In Dschang, in the West Region of Cameroon, handicapped women try to develop several businesses. Despite their numerous efforts the reject of society remains a problem. These women however constitute a force which could contribute to the development of their country.

### 1. 2 General presentation of Bamileke ethnic group

According to Sali (2012), the Bamileke are a very hard-working people, settling in the West Region of Cameroon. They are socially well organized, and are one of the most important tribes in Cameroon, as concerns population density and representation across the country. They occupy the territory between the latitude fifth and sixth degrees north of the Equator. The population of Bamilike people is estimated at about 1 720 047<sup>2</sup> and the surface area they occupy

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<sup>1</sup> Olivia DEMAIN, 2007, « le vivre ensemble au Cameroun » Mémoire présenté en vue de l'obtention du Master professionnel 2ème année en Déficiences et activités physiques adaptées, UNIVERSITE MARCH BLOCH DE STRASOURG, p8.

<sup>2</sup> The recent population census, 2005, final report, (Central Bureau for Census and Population Studies)

is 13 892 km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>3</sup> Although the Bamileke represent only 17% of the country's population, they have control over between 35 and 90% of Cameroon's wealth, depending on the sector. They are often migrants and integrate easily into new environments; qualities, which have helped them, build up a powerful urban diaspora. Sali Bouba, thinks that the Bamileke's perception of life, desires and behavior are backed by their deep belief in their civilization. Their success is largely attributed to their cultural background. From childhood, parents initiate their children into petty trade, which, most often, gears them into opening up prosperous businesses. Although accused by the Cameroonian public opinion to use mystical practices called Famla<sup>4</sup>, which are used to enrich themselves more, both Bamileke men and women are renowned to be in constant fight for autonomy through their hard work (Ibid 2012). It's in such a context full of zealous people that Cecile, my main informant, single handicapped woman of 44 years lives. The environment incites her towards working quite hard, despite the difficulties she encounters. She is determined to improve on her revenue, thus striving towards a better financial autonomy. This is the reason why, from day to day, she goes for more and more profit-making activities, which help her cater herself and her children, and to ameliorate her health and living conditions.

### **1.3 Problem statement, researched question and assumption.**

My research into daily challenges of handicapped women described by many authors combined with my own experience and observations led me to see that the issue of daily challenges of disabled women are actually quite complex and nuanced. At the beginning, I wanted to carry out a research on the small-size Bamileke women in Yaounde. But, once in the field, I had to change my informant and I worked on a handicapped Bamileke woman in my native village in the Menoua Division. So, once in the field, instead of exploring the life of the dwarf Leopoldine, I followed Cecile, a leg-handicapped person, single mother of three children, two boys and one girl. During my research, she was only with one child, her first boy. Her second child who is a girl was on holidays and her last child doesn't live with her. Cecile is a hard working woman, just like Leopoldine. They are all from the Bamileke ethnic group and they both have a visible handicap in their life: small size in case of Leopoldine and a leg-handicap in case of Cecile.

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<sup>3</sup> The Final report of the recent population census from, 2005, final report, (Central Bureau for Census and Population Studies).

<sup>4</sup> Kaptue Florian, 2015, la sorcellerie au Cameroun, <http://africarootmondoblogkaptueflorian.mondoblog.org/>

With the above mentioned similarities, my problem and research questions haven't undergone changes.

At the beginning when I chose Leopoldine as my main character, the problem was about the daily challenge of handicapped women and the questions were: - What does being a handicapped woman mean to Leopoldine? - Are you affected by your handicap? If not, why? If yes why? - What are the reasons behind her entrepreneurship?

Having chosen to concentrate on Cecile, my focus shifted towards the daily challenge of handicapped women. I have been exploring following questions: - What does being a handicapped woman mean for Cecile? - Is she affected by her handicap? If not, why? If yes why? - What are the reasons behind her entrepreneurship?

It is important to note that it is not only what my informant says, and my cultural background that will help me in this case. But as an anthropologist, analysis of my discovery on the field will be the base of answers to these questions.

In order to discuss these questions, I will present the following assumptions: Cecile accepted her disability. Her identity allowed her to increase her fields of interaction and evolve in the interior of these. My informant has problems in her field of interactions with men. She is a single mother. This leads me to the following sub questions: 1-What helped Cecile to accept her disability? 2- What are the aspect of her identity, which allowed her to increase her fields of interaction, to create many businesses and progress with each of them? 3- Is she accepted in her community despite her disability? 4- Why Cecile is not married?

#### **1.4 Personal motivation**

I am a Bamileke woman from West Cameroon. My mother taught me to sell in her store when I was still a little girl. That is how the apprenticeship towards petty business started. And when I was around 7 years old I got involved into doing my own business. Therefore, entrepreneurship is a very important part of my background. My skills in entrepreneurship developed after the death of my father in 2004. I had to struggle in order to make ends meet, as my sister was the only one helping me to pay for my tuition.

But some years later, it became difficult for her to continue to support my studies. Thus in 2008 I was sure that I will not go to school anymore. And in my heart I said to myself that if I have one opportunity to be at school, I will do all my best to succeed because usually my performances at school were poor. That year my sister gave me another chance. It was a surprise

for me. I was very happy, and I said to myself that because I got another opportunity to be at school that year, I will succeed. I started to study with a big determination. At the end of the year, I got my bachelor's degree; and I also got an admission into the Higher Institute of the Sahel at the University of Maroua (Cameroon). The following year, I drafted a document entitled: *The true stars of tomorrow, you can go from nothing to become excellent: Excellence is not magic*. The difficulties, which I had in 2008 about paying my tuition, had pushed me to get to work very hard and by means of work, I discovered that success was at hands. So, I became very attached to the people who face challenges in life and who struggle very hard day and night to overcome their difficulties. I usually encourage them never to give up. I started to go into some secondary schools in Maroua and Yaoundé to sensitize students about academic success and to sell the little document that I had earlier drafted. Moreover, this was another circumstance, which attracted my attention toward the disabled person.

In 2014 as I was in the *Acacia* market in the capital city of Yaoundé, I found a handicapped seller (man) who really impressed me. He had lost his two feet. But he was very happy and it looked like he did not have a problem in his life. That helped me to think about handicapped people and entrepreneurship. Though I am a female artist who uses ox horn to create art objects, I thought that, this could be an interesting opportunity to explore entrepreneurship of handicapped female artist within the framework of my thesis.

## **Chapter 2. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL APPROACH**

In this chapter, I will write about how I collected the data for this work. I will then give a glimpse of some aspects of my research and their impact on the knowledge created. The same chapter will deal with the different theories that I used to conduct the research and to analyze the data.

### **2.1 Methodology**

#### **2.1.1 How Cecile became my main informant?**

After deciding to do my research on handicapped women, I asked my husband to help me find an informant, since I was not in Cameroon. It was easier for him to find one in Yaounde, since he lived there. He then met Leopoldine, a short Bamileke handicapped woman. She was a secretary and had her office in the Yaounde central market. Leopoldine was a musician, and at the same time president of an association for small-size people. She did not refuse to be my main informant. At that moment, my husband started to visit her in order to be familiarized with the field and to collect some preliminary information. A while later, he put me in contact with Leopoldine, when I was still in Norway, before I left for the field. I thus communicated with her to make sure that she really accepted to work with me. In the meantime, my husband continued to visit her. Before I left for the field, he started drawing my attention on a few things concerning Leopoldine. He found that some pieces of information she gave him were not clear. For instance, as to the question when their association met, she responded that the secretary is the person who knew the date. She even went further to affirm that my husband could summon a session thereof, on the condition that he paid each member's transport fare. This prompted me to ponder whether the association really existed. If so, why would she not know when their meeting sessions were held? Why did she tell my husband that he could summon sessions, instead of telling him when and where they met, in case he would like to visit them? In addition, Leopoldine asked money which had to be paid for the research because it implied a modification of her schedule, and that I should bring her a cell phone from Norway while coming for the field. I asked myself if I could succeed to satisfy all these requests. How could she ask for a telephone when we had not even met and when the work had not even been done? All these realities discouraged me from working with Leopoldine. I then thought it wise to find another person, so I asked my husband to do so.

The idea of choosing a second option cropped up at the moment my husband was taking care of my elder sister's husband, Mr. Edouard, a sick handicapped who uses a tricycle to move because of his sick legs. Though Mr. Edouard lives in Dschang, he had moved to Yaounde at that moment to meet a specialized medical doctor, and my husband had decided to accompany him in his transactions during his stay. In the midst of their discussions, my husband informed Mr. Edouard that I would be coming home for some research. He also told him the purpose and theme of the research, about Leopoldine and about our worries concerning her. Mr. Edouard did not hesitate to tell him about Cecile, a beautiful and hard-working Bamileke woman living in Dschang. When my husband gave me the feedback of their communication, I did not hesitate, and immediately felt to work with Cecile. But I had to inform my supervisor, who luckily gave me the green light to work with Cecile.

Since my husband lived in Yaounde, he sent news to Stephanie, my elder sister who was a student at the University of Dschang, to go and meet Cecile, following the directives Mr. Edouard had given him. Thanks to the fact that Cecile is very famous, finding her was not difficult for Stephanie. When asked if she could be the main informant for a scientific research on the handicapped women in the Menoua Division, Cecile agreed without any hesitation. From then on, Stephanie visited her time and again in order to hold warm the relationship, till the time I arrived.

When I arrived in Dschang, Stephanie accompanied me to Cecile, because I did not know her, and had never even met her. For the first time, we met by the roadside where Cecile roasts maize, near her house, opposite MC<sup>2</sup>, and my first impression was good. I explained the project to her afresh, even though Stephanie had already done so, and Cecile's sense of understanding was high enough. At the end of my explanation, she agreed I could follow and film her at any moment I desired to. But I chose not to start immediately, and to take some time to discover the field before starting the work.

### **2.1.2 Participant observation**

Participant observation has been a widely used method of data collection in social anthropology. With participant observation, knowledge is no longer a stolen secret, it is the result of an exchange between the anthropologist and the informant/collaborator. (Arntsen and Høltedahl 2005). Throughout the research, my informant was my collaborator. The veracity of this affirmation can be proven by the scene in which Cecile told me about her life and I too did tell her about mine. But sometimes my informant behaved like my teacher. At such moments, I had to keep quiet, listen and observe her. During the research, I observed and took part in Cecile's



daily life. I generally used the local language, the “Yemba” as means of communication with people. During one of the trips to Cecile's village to meet her mother, I roasted and ate some maize. I also transported the food that Cecile and her handicapped friend had prepared for the meeting in the center for the handicapped people. These are few among many other situations in which I observed as a participant. This method permitted me to access my informants’ daily life in order to gather clearer information and to be able to film them in their real daily life situations without any major obstacles.

### **2.1.3 Camera and film**

It is challenging to try to understand a social situation with a camera. When the camera is aimed at other people, the filmmaker can disturb the life he is recording. Some people may get scared, and some others adjust their way of speaking and of looking. It is what happened during my field work with some of my informants. But Cecile was rather serene, she behaved very natural contrary to what I may have thought. This was my first time to use a very professional filming equipment on a search field. The beginning of the filming was not at all easy for me. I was frightened by all the equipment I had to use. But gradually, fear disappeared. The use of camera allows to make film which helps to have a good understanding of informants’ life. The film plays a very important role in the production of anthropological knowledge. One of the manifestations of that role is in the film language, which helps to have a good understanding of culture. The film “brings people and cultures alive on a screen, capturing the sensation of living presence, in a way that neither words nor even still photo can. The accumulation of successive film frames evokes the sensation of movement over time quite literally through movement over time. Film language is the language of motion, sight and hearing. More than any other medium or art form, film uses experiences to express experience”. (Barbash and Taylor 1997: 1). Scenes I gathered during my field research confirm the veracity of thought expressed by Barbash and Taylor. A single motion can express a large variety of information. For example, shots situating the town of Dschang can guide a watcher who has never been to the Menoua Division to have a clear idea of what it looks like. And this can help him/her grab a better understanding of many realities of the people living in the given locality. In one of such situating shots, one can see traders selling their products so close to the road that the pedestrians have difficulties finding their way. Such an image/shot can make the viewer question the role played by the public authorities, as well as the local people’s mentality. Also, when we see the scene where my main informant is doing promotion of crafts products and many persons are listening to her, we can have a lot of information. Through Cecile gestures, movements and facial expressions, it seems

that she feels very well to be with people who are not disabled like her. Such a situation shows Cecile as a valiant entrepreneur accepted by Menoua society.

#### **2.1.4 Sketch (comedy)**

Among handicapped people in Cameroon, especially among those at the center of our study, the “Bamileke” organizations use art, theater and sketch (comedy) to create dialogues among handicapped or between handicapped and other members of their society. Artists use humor to provoke and express the society’s stereotyped attitudes, in order to promote the sensitization of the populations on these stereotypes and their devastating effects.

In anthropology, it is required to take into consideration the informant's perspective when studying a society. This is certainly the reason why Spradley affirms that “Instead of studying people, the ethnographer learns from them... When subjects become teachers who are experts in understanding their own culture, the relation between investigator and informant becomes quite different. The investigator will ask those he studies to become his teachers and to instruct him in the ways of life they find meaningful.” (Mc Curdy and Spradley 1972).

Anthropologist can use sketch (comedy), as mean of communication to obtain responses from informant who becomes his teacher. During my field research, I had difficulties accessing Cecile’s sentimental life and I was afraid of hurting her. But luckily, the theatrical sketch with comedians who dramatized our informant’s sentimental life helped me to solve that sensitive problem:

The two comedians performed a sketch entitled: “The stigmatization of the handicapped woman”. The sketch was about a man who, after making a handicapped woman pregnant, wants to escape from his responsibilities. Because he is ashamed of the public opinion about his act, he won’t like anyone to know about it. At the same time, the handicapped woman is searching for him. Advised by a friend to stop running away, the man refuses to bear the consequences of his act.

This funny sketch helped me to indirectly ask Cecilie a series of questions on her sentimental life. While watching the sketch, she could not hold back. She started reacting by her facial expressions, gestures and even words. For instance, she exclaimed, “When you were playing with her, it was sweet, and now you call her that short thing”. She was very shocked to see that a man had made a handicapped woman pregnant and did not want to take charge of the pregnancy. She probably felt concerned, as a handicapped, single mother of three children.

A good number of questions flowed from this sketch, as to her relationship with people of the other sex; as to whether her children were accepted by their fathers; whether they were all of the same father; whether she was in a love relationship; if not, why she wasn't. After watching the sketch, Cecile continued that it was very difficult for a handicapped woman to get married, mentioning the fact that it was easier for handicapped men. She progressively moved from the general topic to talk about her personal case. She declared having had a lover with whom everything was so good, until the day, that lover visited her with his brother. The said brother, in a mocking manner, asked Cecile's lover whether he was off his senses to be dealing with such a person as lover. He further asked his brother whether he could be bold enough to take Cecile to a public event. Frustrated by this reaction of his brother, Cecile's lover put an end to the relationship. Cecile added that she decided to love only a person who will have courage to deal with her during the day.

During our field research, the comic play served as a way into Cecile's sentimental life. As my teacher, she gave me much information from her personal perspective, and her sentimental life stopped being for me a mystery.



**Figure.1 Cecile is watching the sketch**

Photo: Tsopgni Mireille Laure



**Figure.2 comedians are playing the sketch**

*Photo: Tsopgni Mireille Laure*

### 2.1.5 Screening of rushes

Screening is another part in the process of knowledge creation. In this process, informants help us to better understand their life situation by reacting to our representation of them. The comments that we receive from them direct the further research process. By screening the rushes to our informants, we know and understand what they like, what they do not like and why. When I screened the rushes to my informant, she was satisfied; and I thought that maybe she did not say that my presentation of her and her society was wrong because she is Bamileke woman, and a mother as me. We have many similarities.

The screening of rushes to the audience which in the case of this work were the staff and students of VCS has also been an opportunity for me to observe other people's reactions and get feedback. Screening rushes enables the audience to participate in the creation of social-scientific knowledge. As Bjørn Arntsen and Lisbet Holtedahl proposed in their article: “We think it is necessary to widen the anthropologist’s perspective to include the role of the recipient as well. By recipient, we mean the person who is supposed to acquire the knowledge created by anthropologists in collaboration with their informants (the third man)” (Arntsen, Holtedahl 2005, 67). The article of Altern and Holtedahl on Women in Niger is an example of the

participation of audience in the building of social-scientific knowledge. Their misrepresentation of their characters lead to some critic from the part of the audience. *“The crux of the criticism was that, by imitating the Manga women’s body codes in a Norwegian context, the anthropologists had compromised and ridiculed their informants. Therefore, the behavior of these anthropologists, and their communication of knowledge were unscientific. Accordingly, Mette and Lisbet’s message was not communicated because the reaction of the recipients is what determined the caliber of knowledge, and the knowledge presented was not considered scientific”* (Altern and Holtedahl 2000). A new understanding is created in our encounter with the audience in the sense that the audience takes an active part in the creation of the meaning of the film. The aim of screening the rushes will surely influence the way we edit the final film. So, the reaction of audience leads me to new reflection which implicitly tell me that the way of approaching social situation has always been a real learning process.

#### **2.1.6 Reflexivity**

The reflexive method was of great help to me. Many situations in my personal life geared my interest towards the handicapped people. Just like theirs, my life had been difficult. But I solved many difficult situations like these handicapped people who solve several societal problems through their entrepreneurship. In the field, I happened to recount part of my experiences to my informant. She paid much attention because she found it closer to hers. To be concrete, by the end of my research, there was a bad and shocking incident. Cecile’s son was arrested and accused of stealing a motor bike. When I called Cecile over the telephone as usual, someone else took the call. She was so bad and had given her phone to a friend. Her son was in the cell. Later on, Cecile called me for the research to continue, but I refused, for her son’s case was still pending, and she was still under shock. I thought it wise to wait for some time, but the situation was worsening, as time went on. I was lost and didn’t know what to do in such a situation, for Cecile had become hard to deal with, and I needed to act wisely with her. She was getting out of her senses because, according to her, her son was on his way to prison for no good reason. One evening, I went to Cecile, and she was so down. Her son’s matter had been transferred to court. She was so much in tears and I was embarrassed, not knowing what to do or what to say. I started to tell her about my life and some hard experiences I’d been through and was still going through. I realized that listening to me was doing her so good. She understood that it is not only her who have problems and even if you have problems, you must not give up. She too started to open up and talk to me more about her life. This was a new turn in my research. We spent

the whole evening and the night together. Our relationship had grown deeper. We ate together that night, I interviewed her and we slept together in the same room, on the same bed.

### **2.1.7 Dialogue (Interview)**

During my field research, my informants' daily life provided many elements of response to our research problem. Despite this fact, many questions remained unanswered. The interview helped me gather as many responses as possible, I had to think about what to interview my informants on: their ideas, acts and projects, and to keep video and audio records of their responses. Because Cecile was my main informant, she was naturally asked more questions than the others. These questions helped her to better understand my expectations and provide more satisfactory answers. The interview equally helped me gather information from informants I could not have followed every day, like Cecile's son who was generally absent and whom I couldn't follow in his numerous interactions. The interview thus appeared as the best way to gather information from him. I had to negotiate with him in order to find some time on his schedule. This permitted me to interview him on his relationship with his mother: I asked the questions and he responded.

## **2.2 Theoretical approach**

### **2.2.1 The interaction theory**

Goffman uses the term "face" to talk about the positive social value that someone claims through a set of actions, supposed by others to have been adopted during a particular contact (Goffman 1973). "Face" = positive social value + someone + claim + series of actions + other people + adoption + contact. From this definition of the term "face", emerges the interaction, for when someone claims a positive social value through a set of actions adopted during a particular contact, he immediately get into direct interaction with the contact. For Goffman, the core of an interaction is based "nearly" on the reciprocal influence that partners exert on their various actions (Goffman 1973). The approximate character "nearly" that Goffman uses in his definition shows the difficulty in clearly defining the concept of interaction. This "nearly" doesn't mean a lack of precision, but through such an expression, Goffman intends to show his constant desire to reach for the highest possible degree of precision. Talking of partners, he means that each of the persons who intervene in the interaction is not only engaged in their personal actions, but also in the whole interaction. In addition, when he makes mention of the reciprocal influences between the actors, Goffman means to clearly present the idea that in the course of an interaction, the actions of each partner are no longer isolated, but are completely

determined by the situation of interaction. Thus, it become easier to understand that acting in an interaction, truly speaking, is interacting. The fundamental rule that each individual must respect during an interaction process is to preserve their “face” and the “face” of their partner (Goffman 1973).

### **2.2.2 Identity**

According to Erving Goffman, individual identities are the off springs of social interactions. The idea that the actor have about himself flows from constant negotiations with other persons. (Goffman 1992).

The various processes of attribution and identification that build culture and identities take place during interactions. (Barth 1998). Interaction is thus presented here as a very important element in the construction of identities. As such, the identity issue takes place in a continuous way, throughout a lifetime, and depends not only on the context, but also on the various experiences of the actors. (Subor 2000). Identity is not perceived as a fixed reality, but as the fruit of a process, that undergoes constant changes.

Erving Goffman showed the importance that the individuals give to “one’s look” on their personal identity, for one of the unavoidable objectives of human relationships is the “face” that we strive at making others to recognize in us. For Goffman, the term “face” is the positive social value that an individual claims. The “self-presentation” that takes place through our various behaviours is geared towards giving about ourselves an image that we want to get others accept and respect (Goffman 1973). Life in society thus becomes like a play in which each person plays a role of “face”. This brings the concept of “social rituals”, which prompts everyone in performance.

### **2.2.3 Stigma**

Stigma is the partial or total non-acceptance of an individual or a group of people in a given society, according to a misjudgement carried upon the said person or group of people. The said misjudgement can be related to their character, their identity or their physical appearance (Goffman 1963). Verily, Goffman classifies stigmatization into three types:

- The stigmatization of the character traits;
- The stigmatization of a group’s identity;
- The stigmatization of the physical appearance.

Even though Goffman defines each of these, emphasis will be laid here on the stigmatization of the physical appearance. He perceives physical stigmatization as being linked to a physical malformation of the body. This sociologist defines a stigmatized person as one who is not fully accepted socially. This person is seen as an abnormal one, is believed to possess certain traits contrary to social norms and is not totally accepted by the others (Ibid, 1963).

Goffman presents a number of solutions that can be adopted by the victims of stigmatization. Amongst these, he posits that the said victims can draw attention on another part of their body, get well trained for a job, or get closer to other stigmatized persons (Ibid, 1963).

#### **2.2.4 Reidar Grønhaug: social field**

The “social being” is not only the product of the local culture, but of the social field too. The social field is a domain in which the social being is built up through the various interactions, which have codes and objectives. These codes and objectives affect and shape individuals’ habits, and eventually also ambitions and visions. This process leads to the production of the “social being” (Grønhaug 1975). Each time an individual moves into a new field, they are implicated in the interactions therein, which necessitate a certain behavior. Trying to understand how a social being can be a member of different social fields, one can understand how he is produced and reproduced. (Grønhaug 1975).

#### **2.2.5 Analysis of theories**

The social field is the place where the various social interactions take place. Stigmatization comes from the social interactions, which are also a very important element in our identity because certain elements of our identity are known to all while some are unknown, until they are discovered when we get into interactions with other persons. In addition, our identity is the fruit of all the interactions that we indulge in, in the various social fields. (Grønhaug 1975) Consequently, it is worth noting that the interactions that hold us in the different social fields are, on the one hand, the manifestation of our identity, and on the other, that the social interactions help discover aspects of our personality which were unknown till then.



### Chapter 3. MY PROJECT AND ME

The relationship between my project and myself is at the core of this chapter. Like Cecile, my main informer, I am a Bamileke woman from the Menoua Division. As a woman doing research on women, I will present the implication of this particular element.

#### 3.1 Being a researcher at home, what does it imply?

I am from the West Region of Cameroon, precisely from Dschang. Though, I was born and brought up in the East Region, in a town called Nguemendouka, where my parents lived. I always went to spend the holidays with my grand-parents in the West. This helped me grab some elements of our Bamileke culture, even though I kept feeling like a stranger at home. During my field research, since I had not grown up in Dschang, I had a poor knowledge of the town. For this reason, I had to get assisted by some people who mastered the town better than I did, and who could supply me with the various information I needed in the scope of my research. For example, I was advised by a local photographer to exploit the site of the University of Dschang for nice images of the town. Not knowing the town could prompt me to pay more for transport fare, since most motor-bike drivers always ask for more when they realize that the customer is new to their town and has a poor knowledge thereof.

My father had imposed my mother tongue on my brothers and me when we were still kids. I don't recall having ever communicated with him in French or another language before his death. That helped me to mainly speak local dialect during my research. This mother tongue was quite helpful. He drew me closer to my informants. Cecile's mother, for instance, was very delighted when informed that I was from the same village as them, and that I spoke Yemba, the dialect spoken in the Menoua Division.

In Bamileke culture it is a shame to be single mother of many children and this shame is doubled when the children are of different fathers, as was the case with Cecile's children. Because I knew that aspect of our culture, I knew what I could hurt her if I ask the questions about her sentimental life, therefore I used the sketch to indirectly approach that sensible domain.

Sometimes, I decided to behave like a stranger to my informant's culture. In order to further explore my informant's daily life sometimes I asked questions despite knowing the answer to them. For instance, there is the « tontine », which is a well-known system of money contributions practiced by our people. My mother is one of the people who take part in this practice, just like I myself used to do when I was still in Cameroon. However, in the field, I had

to behave like someone who knew nothing about the « tontine », asking a maximum number of questions with an external look. As such, I parted with my previous knowledge on « tontine » in order to better explore my informant's field. Thanks to these transactions, I understood that it is not easy to do research in one's own milieu.

Certainly, there are always implications when one does research at home. But the impact is never the same in all cases, because human beings are different, and each person has a unique and specific personality.

### **3.2 What it means to do research in women's milieu as a woman?**

In the field, it was easy for me to tie links with Cecile, who took me as her kid sister, and had confidence in me. To her, I was not just a researcher in search of information, but the relationship went deeper. Similarly, I no longer considered her simply as an informant, since there was much more friendship between us. We happened to spend nights together in her house. Among the Bamilike people, it is normal for friends or sisters to sleep together on the same bed. It is also believed that when two women are together, it becomes difficult to separate them because they will always have things to tell one another. These factors certainly eased collaboration between my informant and myself, making my data collection a fluid process. In return, I also told her much about myself, still in a quite friendly way: the more she told me about her, the more she heard of me. The data collection was clearly eased by the fact that both of us were women. She felt freer to tackle some of the private aspects of her life with a female researcher than with a male researcher.

## Chapter 4. THE BAMILEKE SOCIETY

Here, the Menoua society will be presented on the following aspects: the ethical and esthetic criteria of seduction, the perception of handicapped women by the Menoua people. This could help understand why these women find it difficult to get married.

### 4.1 Criteria of seduction

Nowadays, the body beauty of the Bamileke woman is an important factor in her seduction strategies. Seduction is expressed by a number of criteria and codes, which directly or indirectly influence the traditional community's daily life. (Bring 2006: 32) According to the Dictionary Encyclopedic, a criterion is a point to which one refers in order to make a proposal, to make a judgment, or to distinguish between objects and notions. It is thus an element established by the traditional society in order to determine the potential daughter in-law. As such, talking of the seduction criteria among the Bamileke in the Western Region of Cameroon, mention will be made of the ethical and esthetic elements.

#### 4.1.1 The esthetic criteria

The esthetic criteria are based on the physical appearance. Physical beauty is determined by norms which have to be respected by individuals desiring to be seen as beautiful. It has to do with measures, harmony and combination of characters. (Nguedia 2015: 4) These norms vary with time and space. Beauty criteria thus vary with cultures, with individuals or with continents. The beauty ideal in the West Region of Cameroon in general and in the Menoua Division in particular is that the woman has to be fatty, with abroad waist. Since her presence has to impose itself from her looks, she uses many objects to boost her physical appearance. These objects include clothes, hairstyles, and body care, among others. The presentation of the body and the role assigned to it varies from society to society.

Meanwhile, it is worth noting that nowadays, it is more and more difficult to define the Bamileke women's body beauty. In fact, with the end of the Cold War symbolized by the fall of the Wall of Berlin in 1989 and the total disintegration of the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) in 1991, the « world got unipolar » that is, became a « planetary village » centered on the USA which became the world's model. Globalization deepened with the coming of new technologies of information and communication (television, cinema, computers, and internet) and population movements (tourists, migrants, refugees, exiled and invited workers).

« Ces éléments qui concourent à modifier les habitudes quotidiennes en un mélange homogène jouent un rôle essentiel dans les reconfigurations identitaires et

ont des effets directs ou indirects sur les individus, constituant même une réelle menace sur les identités de ces derniers »<sup>5</sup>.

As such, the profusion of the information and communication technologies provoked a real change in our society. The introduction of television and cinema in the Cameroonian society is seen as a factor of alienation and subjugation of the subject, which lures him away from his own realities, alters his personality, imposes him another manner of being in the world, other feelings, other scale of values, other languages and speaking manners, another perception of the reality, shattering his own Cameroonian heritage and all the autonomy and responsibility he had. Many women want to be blonds or brunets, thin, with long legs, thick lips and provoke with slightly round buttocks. With the upsurge of South American and Hollywood movies, the African, women as a whole, lost their focus and models. From then on, they have the tendency to identify with the women in the Western hemisphere, putting aside their own original beauty norms which happened to receive much praise from African poets like Léopold Sédar Senghor in '*Femme noire*'.

« Femme nue, femme obscure

Fruit mûr à la chair ferme, sombres extases du vin noir, bouche qui fais lyrique ma bouche

Savane aux horizons purs, savane qui frémissent aux caresses ferventes du Vent d'Est

Tamtam sculpté, tamtam tendu qui gronde sous les doigts du vainqueur

Ta voix grave de contralto est le chant spirituel de l'Aimée

Femme noire, femme obscure

Huile que ne ride nul souffle, huile calme aux flancs de l'athlète, aux flancs des princes du Mali

Gazelle aux attaches célestes, les perles sont étoiles sur la nuit de ta peau.

Délices des jeux de l'Esprit, les reflets de l'or rongent ta peau qui se moire

A l'ombre de ta chevelure, s'éclaire mon angoisse aux soleils prochains de tes yeux.

Femme nue, femme noire

Je chante ta beauté qui passe, forme que je fixe dans l'Eternel

Avant que le destin jaloux ne te réduise en cendres pour nourrir les racines de la vie. »<sup>6</sup>(Senghor

1945). In this poem, Senghor honors the African woman. He enumerates her qualities, praises

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<sup>5</sup> Mattelart, Armand (no date), *Mondialisation. La culture globale, entre rêve et cauchemar*. Dossier l'explosion de multimédia : un défi pour la francophonie, Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie, Paris, p.13 <http://www.auf.org/vieuniversitaire/publicaztions/multimed/mm10.htm/>>

<sup>6</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor, 1945, *Chants d'ombre*, Paris, Seuil.

her beauty and sensuousness. He makes mention of the natural woman's beauty without any make-up. Almost all senses are appealed upon in order to feel the African beauty: sight, taste « *sombres extases du vin noir* », touch « *caresses ferventes du Vent d'Est* », hearing « *tamtam tendu qui gronde sous les doigts du vainqueur / Ta voix grave de contralto est le chant spirituel de l' Aimée* ».

Gone are the days when loins, the « *Kabagondo* », beautiful bracelets and necklaces, palm kernel oil, beautiful hairstyles, camwood and Kaolin powder made the women's skins shiny under the sun.

#### **4.1.2 Ethical and functional criteria**

The Western Cameroonian traditional society has set up criteria defining the ideal woman. She must be respectful and submitted to her husband. She must be entirely devout to her husband, first, then to her children, and finally to her homestead, in order to remain hailed by her descendants. She must be morally upright and hard working. However, at present day, the general expectation is woman's physical appearance and her ability to cook well and to make love. All other criteria have been neglected and setback in most cases. Because the physical appearance is one of the expectation today, the disabled woman does not have all the elements it needs to be considered as an ideal woman. It can therefore be difficult for her to find a partner for life.

This chapter focuses on the disappointment linked with the handicapped women in the Menoua society. The criteria of seduction do not consider the handicapped women, so she does not fulfill the conditions necessary to be considered attractive and thus deserving a husband.

## **Chapter 5: CECILE: A SOCIAL PERSON**

In this chapter, I will present and then explain the various fields of interaction in which Cecile, is engaged. These numerous fields make her a social being, since they are in a society and in each, Cecile meets other human beings with whom she interacts.

### **5.1 Description of Cecile's present situation**

Despite her handicap at the level of the legs, Cecile is a very beautiful woman. Her dark complexion appears to be well taken care of. She is generally well dressed and her hair well catered. Her physical appearance shows a clean and always smiling happy woman. This seems to explain why she is acquainted to many people. My informant seems to be a good companion, and her house is a home for many visitors, where everyone is welcomed. Cecile also shares much food and advice with youth in the neighborhood. For instance, I had an interview with one young football player who decided to follow Cecile's advice, and he is very attached to her.

Cecile is a very relaxed woman who successfully accepted her handicap. The city authorities know her, probably because she likes going out and taking part in ceremonies and other major events in Dschang. She even won the best prize in a dance competition during the celebration of the World Handicap Day in 2015. During another ceremony, on March 8th, Cecile won the third prize for the Miss competition (that was during celebration of the International Women's Day). She was also the spokesperson for the Women of the Menoua during the best wishes occasion to the First Lady (the wife of the prefect, the highest authority of the city of Dschang).

### **5.2 Presentation of the social fields in which Cecile is involved**

Presenting the various social fields Cecile is involved in, is important for the understanding of her opportunities and difficulties in her daily life. When I identify her behaviours /roles in the different social fields, I can discover/describe how they promote or hamper her possibilities as a woman and mother in Menoua society. I can also discover how one role (woman, handicapped, mother or daughter) 'impacts' on another role.

### **Cecile's social fields**

Association (APROFHAM)
Partner
Single mother
Business field
Family
Bamileke community

#### **5.2.1 The APROFHAM (association for the promotion of the Menoua handicapped women's living conditions).**

The objective of the interaction with other handicapped women is to find some well-being.

Meeting other handicapped women permitted Cecile to understand that she is not alone in her condition. She thus joined this association so that, with its other members, she could think of, and set up mechanisms capable of bringing about a betterment of the handicapped women's living conditions. Therefore, mutual help is one of the main objectives.

#### **5.2.2 Partner**

None men accepted to take my informant as life partner or as wife. The men who come up to her are only interested in having sex with her.

#### **5.2.3 Single mother**

Cecile is a mother of three children, whose three different fathers have, ran away from their responsibilities. For this reason, she has to act as mother and as father at the same time. She is the one who pays the rent for their household and all the other bills. The children's nutrition, school fees and dressing are her duty, in addition to their health. She is the one who has to respond, whenever one of her children does something bad, like when her son was accused and arrested for stealing their neighbour's motorcycle. This inflicted much pain on Cecile, who spent many days in the police custody to follow up with the problem. Cecile said that if the child's father was present, he would have been the one to take care of such a problem, and they would have shared the pain together. Another situation that caused Cecile to cry so much was when her son failed the exam. She thought of all the pains she had gone through, all

alone, to pay his school fees and other needs. This is a good example of how her role as handicapped women had an impact on her role as partner. It also shows that her role of ‘mother’ and “head of household” is much wider than it is usually the case for other Bamilike women.

#### 5.2.4 Business

Cecile is indulged in numerous profit-making activities. She is a roaster, hairdresser, telephone credit seller and she does her own handicrafts. Apparently, her handicap “role” does not have an impact on her business.

##### 5.2.4.1 Roasting

My informant roasts maize, plums and plantains opposite the MC2 microfinance institution near her house. She is well known to the Foto market traders because it is in this market that she buys her maize, plums and plantains. She is helped either by her children or by the neighbours in the transportation of her roasting materials (charcoal, wire mesh, chair, umbrella...) and the goods to be roasted from the house to the roadside. Most of her customers are people who live in the neighbourhood, and some are passersby. Many of her friends often visit her while she roasts, and they chat together. Many youths also come to her for advice.



**Figure. 3** Cecile is roasting corn

*Photo: Tsopgni Mireille Laure*



#### 5.2.4.2 Hairdressing

Cecile is a well-known hairdresser in the city of Dschang. She claims that she is gifted with hairdressing, something she did not learn to do. When Cecile was young, during the breaks time at school, she was doing hairstyles on the grass. My informant does not have hairdressing shop, she does the hair in her house. Despite this fact, she has many customers. She can even do hairstyles for great ceremonies and marriages. She is very flexible in her pricing, and many students from the University of Dschang get their hair done by her. Knowing the hardships they face, she always reduces the prices for them. During the hairdressing sessions, Cecile often initiates discussions, which animate the atmosphere and draw her customers closer to her. At times, she equally advises them in a friendly manner. This is probably the reason why one of her customers told me that she could not go anywhere else to do her hair, as long as Cecile is in Dschang.



**Figure. 4** Cecile is making hair

*Photo: Tsopgni Mireille Laure*

#### 5.2.4.3 Crafting

Cecile uses pearls to make numerous objects like bags, earrings, bracelets, caps, rings, necklaces. The handwork is done at home, since Cecile has no workshop. She makes the objects either when someone orders them, or for exhibitions. On the chicken distribution day at the

Center of promotion of Women's and Family, she brought some of the said objects for exhibition, since she was sure to meet many people there, who could be interested and could buy some of them. She is ready to train in handicraft, on the condition that a person who need training accept to pay for that.



**Figure. 5** Cecile is presenting her craft product

*Photo: Tsopgni Mireille Laure*

#### **5.2.4.4 Telephone credit**

Cecile is a telephone credit seller. She sells the credit everywhere. One day, as we were going back to her house from the market, we met a young girl to whom she sold some telephone credit. She generally sells the telephone credit, at home or by the roadside, where she roasts. Her working method is simple: she is in contact with other telephone credit sellers, from whom she buys on wholesale. She in turn sells to her customers, who are simple callers. She uses a cell phone to do the transfer. When customers give her their telephone number and tell her the amount that they need, she does the transfer; they pay and receive the demanded amount in their telephone.

#### **5.2.5 Family life**

Cecile's brothers were her bodyguards in school. They defended her when she was insulted or hurt in any way. As she grew up, her mother grew happier to see her work as hard as the other

children. For instance, she could get into the barn to pick some corn, clear the grass around the house, and even cultivate the soil in the farm.

When Cecile gave birth for the first time, her father was very happy, and since the baby's father had ran away from his responsibilities, he joyfully took charge of every need. He demanded his name to be put in place of the newborn baby's father while issuing the child's birth certificate. He is the one who went on taking care of Cecile and of the baby.

#### **5.2.6 Bamileke social field**

Cecile belongs to the Bamileke ethnic group. Public opinion in Cameroon holds that the Bamileke are a hardworking people, who like being independent. The public believes that they are great traders, affirming that if a Bamileke becomes Head of State in Cameroon, they will transform the Presidency into a market place. It is also believed that the Bamileke are always thinking about how to develop strategies to gain more money in their businesses and grow from one business to another.

## **Chapter 6: CECILE'S PHYSICAL HANDICAP**

At first sight, a physical handicap is quite a difficult situation to bear. Some would rather kill themselves than live with a visible handicap. In this part of my work, I will describe Cecile's handicap and try to understand the things that helped her accept the situation.

### **6.1 Description of Cecile's physical handicap**

Cecile was born with a physical handicap. She has shorts legs, and that makes her too short. In order to move from one place to another, she is transported either by a motor bike or by a car, if she doesn't creep. Creeping is not easy for her: she wears a slipper on her right leg and another on the left hand. The left leg wears no slipper, but the right hand holds one, on which the left leg lands when she creeps. My informer's legs are weird. At first sight, they don't resemble a human being's legs. While in the field, I happened to keep an image, which showed her legs in details: her toes and nails. But I did not find it respectful to present such an image in the film, for fear that she could be hurt. For such legs, my informer is obliged to put on open shoes, which are not advised for the rainy season, due to the bad state of roads.

Hence, Cecile meets serious problems to move from one place to another during the rainy season. Between her house and the roadside, there is a little hill. For this reason, even if she should be transported by a car, she needs to go up to the roadside, and it is not an easy task. From time to time, her son or neighbors help her. During her baptism, it rained while Cecile was in church. After the mass, Bienvenu, her first son, carried her home on his back. My film 'Beyond the Stigma' presents my informant's handicap better than writing.



**Figure. 6 Cecile is walking**

*Photo: Tsopgni Mireille Laure*

### **6.2 Cecile's parents accepted her despite social rejection**

In the Menoua Division, it is a great challenge for a parent to have a child with a physical handicap like Cecile's. Generally, society tells many negative stories about such children, which affect much parents, and often makes them reject children. These children are often considered as wizards, serpents or apes, as Mr Kenfack of the Dschang social affairs office affirmed during my field research. Also, when I was a kid, I would hear stories of children who had such handicaps. They were always portrayed as a nuisance to the society. It was believed of a handicapped child that he used to transform into a snake to steal food at home. Such a social belief does not make things easy for parents who find themselves with handicapped children. Most often, they are made to feel helpless, stigmatized by the society and prompted to regret. This situation caused many parents to isolate or kill their children. Cecile's mother informed me that at the moment she gave birth to Cecile, another woman, who had also delivered a handicapped child, did not bear the shock and had to do away with her own baby.

As opposed to some parents, Cecile's parents accepted her situation, despite society's judgment. On the research field, Mr. Kenfack affirmed how necessary it was for such children to be

accepted by their families, for that would help them accept themselves<sup>7</sup>. This has been Cecile's parents' position, as they broke social barriers to perceive and consider their daughter differently. While public opinion held her for a witch, a serpent or an ape, they viewed her as a precious gift from heaven. They did not give in for the social beliefs, but kept to their personality. As such, instead of isolating or killing their daughter as many parents before them had done, they showed her much affection, thus making her understand that she was a child like all others, and that she was simply a particular model designed by God. Cecile's parents also helped her brothers and sisters to accept and love her. For that reason, as she rightfully said, her brothers were her guardians. Her parents remained strong, facing the problem of social stigma. But that was not the only proof.

### **6.3 Cecile's parents' acceptance despite the difficulties attached to the fact of having a handicapped child.**

Apart from social hostility, it is not easy to cater a handicapped child. In addition to ordinary care including feeding, dressing, education and health, they require much more. Moving from place to place is quite difficult in localities like Cecile's, where taking care of a handicapped person is difficult to bear. This transforms many of these people into burdens for their relatives because they lack appropriate means of locomotion. As concerns my informer, since she did not have an adequate tool for displacement, her mother had decided to bear her on her back to accompany her to and from school in the mornings and afternoons, to show her love.

Cecile's mother thinks that when you get pregnant, you can't guess what God will give you. When she gave birth, she also said that she will take care of her child until God shows her why she is handicapped.

After analysis, I realized that it is maybe in the religion that Cecile's mother found the strength to accept her handicapped daughter despite the difficulties. And that acceptance helped Cecile to see her situation differently. Through the love of her parents, my informant certainly understood that despite her handicap, she is worthy to be loved and she has not lost her dignity as a person. All this helped her to accept her disability and to do her best so that she can be accepted in her community.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Mr. Kenfack in social affairs ministry of Dschang, 2015.

## **Chapter.7 THE EVOLUTION OF CECILE'S IDENTITY**

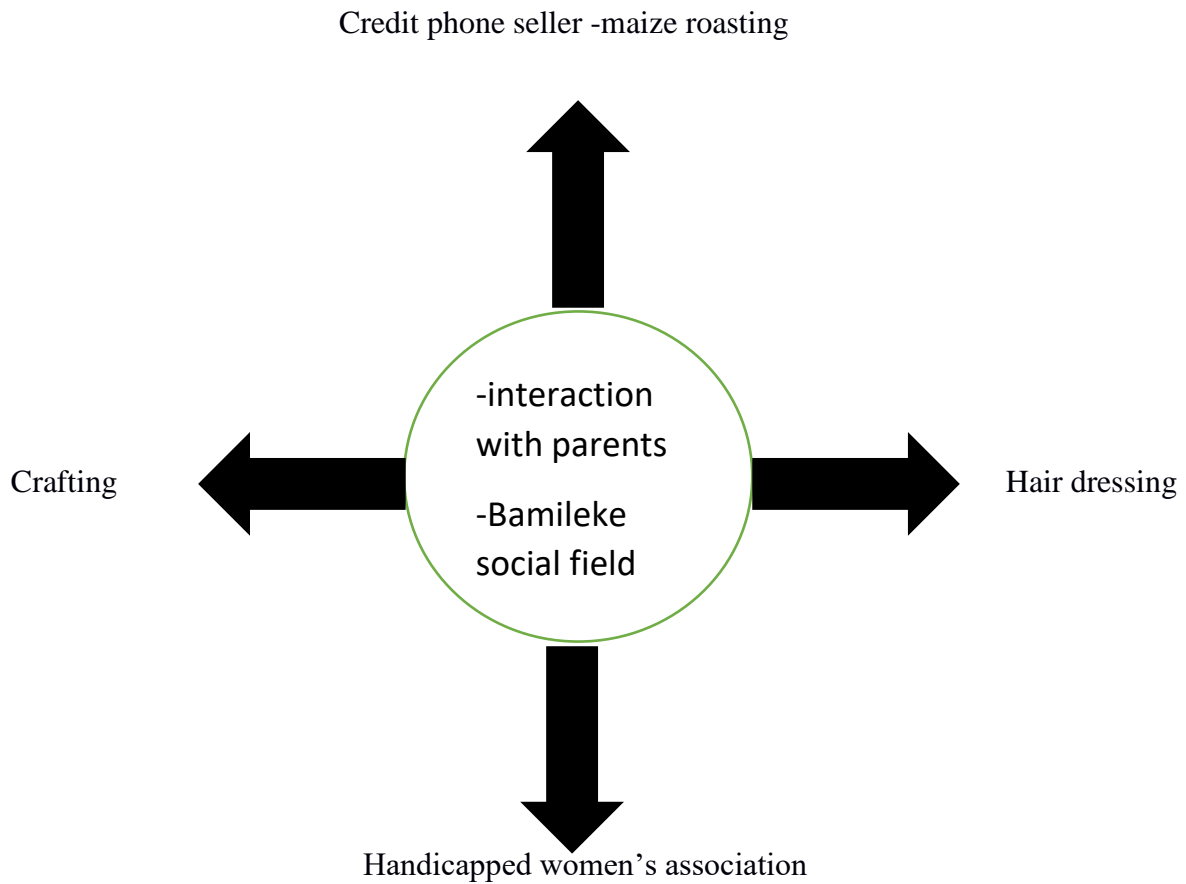
This chapter deals with the evolution of Cecile's identity. I will start by presenting her identity at the beginning, how she was, from childhood. The evolution of her personality will be shown on the basis of this previous identity. This demonstration will be done with the use of the fields of interaction or social fields.

### **7.1 Cecile's family and cultural background**

In her interactions with her parents, Cecile received the elements that she needed to face the various life realities. Her parents showed her much love and taught her not to view her handicap as a problem, but as an advantage. They equally made her to understand that she was an important person who deserved to be respected by all the others. This education gave to Cecile the taste of life and the willingness to go ahead. At the beginning, Cecile was a handicapped girl who had acquired from her parents the necessary values to tackle life with assurance. But in addition to her parents' work, the Bamileke ethnic group to which she belongs also played an active role in the construction of Cecile's identity from the beginning.

### **7.2 Cecile's family and cultural background helped her to expand her fields of interaction**

Beyond the fact of belonging to the Bamileke ethnic group which made it more natural for her to set up money-making businesses, her parents' brothers' and sisters' affection and support helped her to accept herself, to have a taste of life and to move ahead. This gave her the courage to tackle life and to interact in other social fields. Thus, she became a trader, a credit phone seller, a maize roaster, a craftswoman and a member of the Menoua handicapped women's association. This takes us to the realization that our main informer's initial identity, which was constituted by relatively few roles, helped her develop a wider role repertoire, a more complex identity.



**Figure 4:** Cecile's expanded fields of interaction

### 7.3 A field of interaction which Cecile's family and cultural background have not been able to create: marriage

However, my informant's cultural and family background didn't help her to have a husband. Cecile is not and has never been married. But she had known many lovers. None of these men accepted to take her as life partner or as wife. She has kept on going from one man to another, hoping to meet one who could accept her in her condition, but in vain. The men who come up to her are only interested in having sex with her at night, in the dark because they are ashamed to be known for having a relationship with a handicapped woman. Cecile expresses the same logic when she says that, for a handicapped woman to marry an able-bodied man is very difficult. Able-bodied men don't understand that they can marry a handicapped woman and live with her in the same house. Very few are those who understood that.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Tedonsong

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<sup>8</sup> Cecile, 2015, "cecile comment of sketch"



Ferdinand, one of the comedians who did the sketch for my research on the field, said that, there is a very beautiful disabled woman, who became pregnant when they practiced sexual relation together. And she's been looking for him. He hides every time he sees her.

This is encouraged by the fact that in Cecile's society, the respect granted to someone also has to do with the type of partner they have. So, for fear of being underestimated by the members of the community, her partners prefer to deal with her in hiding. But Cecile came to decide that if a man is not capable of showing up with her in the day, she couldn't build a love relationship with them. She has also decided that if a man comes up to her and claims to love her, she will demand that they conceive a child. As such, she will know if the man is serious or not, for if he is serious, according to her, he'll accept to have a child or even many children with her. But if he is not serious, he will simply run away. She further declared that another alternative was surprising her partner that she is pregnant, to see in his reaction whether he really loves her or whether he just wants to use her up as a sex tool. Presently, Cecile has no partner, but keeps hoping to find one someday, who will love her despite her handicap and the society reactions. So the role that she is attributed as a handicapped woman has a very important impact on her opportunities as a woman (wife and mother).

#### **7.4 The family and cultural background guaranteed Cecile's progress in each expanded fields of interaction.**

The respect of "faces" is a very important element of interactions in social fields (Goffman 1973). It participates in the actors' development or progress.

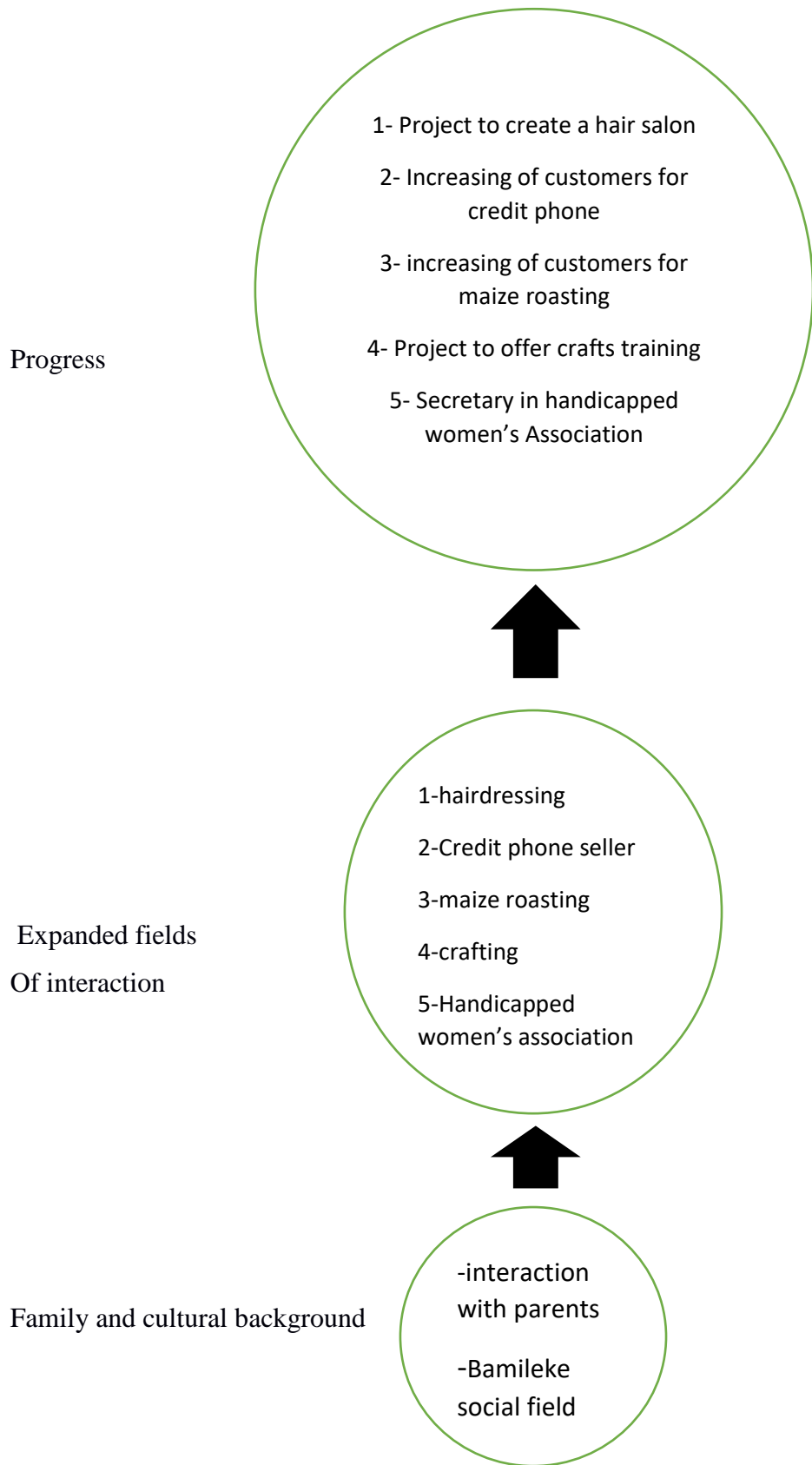
My informer's parents taught her to see herself as an important person. For this reason, during her interactions in the various fields, she bothers much about the respect of her face, knowing quite well that this quest must be preceded by her respect of the other actors' faces too. Cecile also learned from her parents the basic requirements on how to interact in the domain of business. For instance, let's see into her interaction in the hairdressing domain. In this context, we have two partners: Cecile, the hairdresser, and one customer. We will use X for the hairdresser and Y for the customer. X's action consists in doing the hairstyle, while Y's consists in paying the price for the hairstyle. But in the course of the interaction, both partners are engaged in the entire situation of interaction, their actions are no longer isolated but rather converge towards the interaction situation. X's action of doing the hairstyle, acts on the partner

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Y and prompts her to do her own action, which is paying for the hairstyle. In addition, the partner X acts because she's paid for it by Y. Thus, doing hairstyle or paying for hairstyle is interacting in a hairdressing interaction situation. When X makes hairstyle to Y, she receives the pay from Y, who is made beautiful. Y gives the pay to X because she's plaited by the latter. In this way, X preserves her "face" and Y's, and Y does same, during their interaction. Because of the respect of this game of faces, Y will always be pretty every time she comes to X for her hair to be done. X will evolve because thanks to the success of her interactions with Y, Y could bring along other customers.

It is important to note that Cecile has many customers. I had the opportunity to discuss with a customer who told me that Cecile is the best hairdressing in their neighborhood. Mr. Kenfack, a worker in the ministry of social affairs, equally informed me that he had advised his friends who were about to get married to get their brides' hair done by Cecile. They had been satisfied by Cecile's work. By the good game of faces, which was produced thanks to her background, Cecile succeeded to fashion herself a good reputation in the hairdressing field, for which she is renowned in Dschang. This is the reason why she would love to have a hair salon, where her customers could be served, instead of her house where she receives them for the moment.

Cecile's progress is remarkable, not only in the hairdressing social field. As concerns crafting, she has a project to train ones who is in the need. In the domain of maize roasting and phone credit sales, there is a rise in the number of customers. In the handicapped women's association, Cecile rose from a simple member to become secretary, a member of administration.



**Figure 5:** Progress in the expanded fields of interaction

### **7.5 Consequences of Cecile's involvement through time in the social fields (social interaction)**

Cecile's progress in the various social fields multiplied her profit and broadened her field of action. We can take example of the handicapped women's association (APROFHAM) where my informant is secretary while she was a simple member in the beginning. This association's main objective is to guarantee the handicapped women's wellbeing in the Menoua Division, of which Dschang is the headquarters. Solidarity between members and the collaboration with external groups are two key points on which the association focuses to attain their objectives.

In the mentioned association, there are support systems such as the "tontine" or sharing, which consists in collecting a fixed amount of money and handing it to one member of the association for the realization of one personal project; they equally collect soap and hand to one member on each meeting occasion. If a member of the association is bereft, the others are bound to show their support, not only financially, but also by accompanying them when a funeral will take place. There are also contributions for the school reopening and for the end-of-year festivities. Members are encouraged to spare some money, which could help them buy school furniture, pay their children's school fees and organize the end of year festivities in their homes. In addition, if a member is in urgent need of money, money could be handed to him on condition to pay back with a low rate of interest.

These women have decided to move out of darkness, to be known and to express their needs to the members of the government and various organizations. The members of APROFHAM are in close collaboration with the Ministry of Social Affairs, and always take part in the educative meeting sessions organized by this ministry on the International Handicapped People's Day. On this occasion, they receive advice from the administration and present their wishes and petitions.

On the other hand, when the association needs financial aid for the realization of a project, they get closer to organizations that give them assistance. But this procedure remains difficult because the association, till present day, has never had an organization wishing to sponsor their activities well.

In the association, members have almost the same interests as earlier mentioned. But the staff members as Cecile have a little more interest than the others. Staff member have the possibility to better oversee their contributions, and bears no risk losing due to an accountancy error. They are equally privileged when they want to borrow some money. For instance, if an ordinary

member of the association is competing with a staff member to borrow a given sum of money, preference will be shown to the staff member.

My informer's interests are not only broad in the field of the association, but in those of the sale of telephone airtime too, as well as in roasting, since there is an increase in the number of customers and consequently in her income. As for hair dressing and crafting, one realizes that there is some progress, for a rise in activities brings an increase in revenue.

We realize that a large part of Cecile's gain in the various social fields is financial, and we know that she is in need of money to cater herself, her family and all their needs. The proceeds of her businesses help Cecile solve the various problems she meets in her daily life, and prevents her from constituting a burden for other people.

At the end of this part, it is worth noting that the identity Cecile had at the beginning helped her to explore other socials fields and to progress inside of them. This has helped her to meet with acceptance and contributed to her well-being. Nonetheless, the fact that Cecile doesn't have a husband seems to be solely due to her handicap. Acceptance is thus limited. So, Cecile's family and cultural background was unable to promote her full acceptance in her community.

## CONCLUSION

In this work, I focussed on the stigmatization of the handicapped women among the Bamileke ethnic group in the Menoua Division. My main research partner was Cecile, a 44 year old handicapped woman, mother of three children. The research question was as to what helped Cecile to accept her disability, what are the aspects of her identity which allowed her to increase her field of interaction, to create many businesses and progress within them, how she is regarded in her community, and why she is not married.

The first contact with my main informant was relaxed, as she was so open. My task was to visit her milieu and ask her some questions related to her daily life. Cecile presented me her daily and monthly schedules and provided me with further explanations. This contact helped me in planning my fieldwork. I started following Cecile in her house; while she was doing, some clean up. She progressively introduced me to her family, activities, friends, other handicapped, the handicapped women's association and the handicapped center of the Menoua division. In order to broaden my sources of information about the handicapped women's life, I also interviewed some members of the administration in the ministry of social affairs and the ministry of women and child empowerment.

My film and the analysis of the data collected in the field permitted me to draw some conclusions. Cecile accepted her handicap. This was facilitated by the fact that she benefited much from the love of her family members. Her parents were the first to accept her as she was, making her to understand that she was God's marvelous creature, and that someone's value is not determined by their physical appearance. All these efforts geared Cecile towards the conclusion that despite her physical handicap, she was an accomplished human being. However, in spite of her background, many members of Cecile community put 'the stamp' on her. For them, she is 'abnormal' because she has a visible 'mark' that distinguishes her from 'normal' members of society. But thanks to her family and cultural background, she did not sit back to lament about her handicap. She was courageous and determined enough to explore many fields of interaction the most relevant are: phone card credit sales, maize roasting, hairdressing, crafting, and the handicapped women's association, in which her progress is remarkable. Through the interaction in these social fields, she made for herself a place in society and therefore she solved the problem of rejection caused by her disability. Instead of being perceived simply as a handicapped woman, Cecile is seen as an active and hard working person in Dschang.

However, it is worth noticing that her background did not help her avoid stigmatization in her society where for many people, a woman's physical appearance counts much in the criteria of beauty. In Menoua division, some people think that it is 'abnormal' to have handicapped woman as girl friend or wife. For them, the notion of masculinity do not allow for physically handicapped female partners. So it is a shame for man to be lover of that particular woman and that can lead to a breakdown of relationship like it was in the Cecile's case. One day, a former love partner of my informant presented

her to his brother who did not accept Cecile as her brother's lover. Thus, he tried to convince him that he will lose his dignity and respect in society because of his relation with a handicapped woman. Cecile told me that her lover has not been able to resist in front of his brother and he decided to stop their relation.

Through the study of Cecile's particular case, we realize that in the Menoua Division, many handicapped women have the same cultural background which makes them capable of undertaking business activities. Entrepreneurship and social mobility protect them from being rejected by society. But in several cases, disability remains an obstacle to marriage. As victims of exclusion, some have chosen the way of association to support one another and fight for their rights.

Meanwhile, it should be noted that among these handicapped women, some are more hardworking than others. The most active and hardworking, in addition to their belonging to the Bamileke cultural background, certainly had much love and affection from their families, which strengthened them enough to face life and join other fields of interaction confidently. Another reason could simply be natural, some of these women appear to be naturally more active than others and desire to multiply their social fields. So these handicapped women did not constitute a burden for other people. However, in light of difficulties they face with marriage, I asked myself if in Menoua division there are marriages between able-bodied men and disabled women. If yes, how do such couples face their daily challenges?

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