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# MATRILINY AND PATRILINY BETWEEN COHABITATION-EQUILIBRIUM AND MODERNITY IN THE CAMEROON GRASSFIELDS

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**ABSTRACT** The paper explores the principles in the kinship structure of the cluster of speakers of the Ring Group of Grassfield Bantu, who are at once matrilineal and patrilineal, living in the south-western edge of the western Cameroon highlands. Although operating in an inverted mirror image, the seemingly opposed kinship structures have a common logic where the basic kinship unit is residential (household). There is an attempt to strike a balance between descent groups without constituting double descent and women occupy positions that stress symmetry rather than subordination, although there is patriarchy. The impact of modernity on matriliney in a context of generalised patriliney is also examined with the conclusion that the drift towards “patrilineal” practices does not imply a change of system but implies adaptations that leave the system unmodified.

**Key Words:** Kinship; Symmetry; Status; Household; Modernity.

## INTRODUCTION

In the central group of speakers of the Ring Group of Grassfields Bantu<sup>(1)</sup> situated in the North West Province of Cameroon (Fig. 1), one can observe

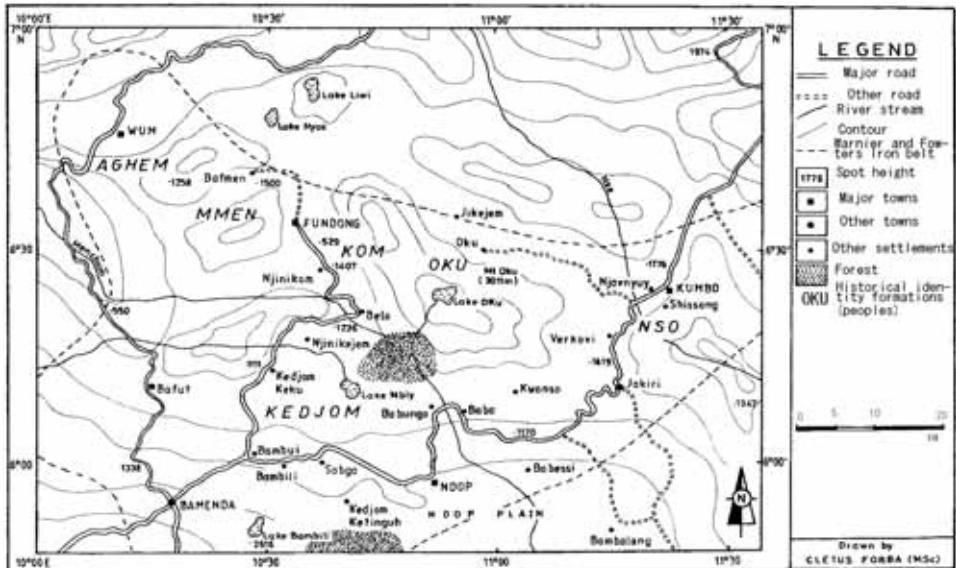


Fig. 1. Ring group of Bantu languages and surrounding area

a juxtaposition of two unilineal kinship systems, the patrilineal and matrilineal kinship systems. In the 1960s, Chilver and Kaberry (1967a: 31) noted “the existence of matrilineal institutions among people speaking languages belonging to the Central Nkom [Ring] cluster and at the same time their juxtaposition with villages speaking closely related languages but with patrilineal institutions.” Later Nkwi (1973: 81) observed that the “presence of matrilineal institutions in the Central Grassfields juxtaposed with patrilineal institutions and within the same cultural area... posed a fundamental puzzle to historians and ethnographers of the Central Grassfields.” Arguing within the earlier and now largely discredited theory of Tikar ethnogenesis, Chilver and Kaberry (1967a) and later Nkwi (1973: 81-85), more concerned with the issue of genesis and following an evolutionary/diffusionist path, posited that the Kom were a patrilineal people who only adopted a matrilineal system much later. Chilver and Kaberry (1967a: 31) also argued that the Kom were a patrilineal people (as some of the Bamenda Tikar), who only adopted matrilineal institutions when they settled among peoples with matrilineal institutions. Nkwi (1973: 85) was very categorical in stating that the fact that “rights and duties derived from the father preponderate over those derived from the mother, ... leads me to assert that Kom was formerly a patrilineal society.” This did not solve the puzzle because such speculations did not inform of factors which were likely to lead to the adoption of one system or another and the *modus vivendi* of cohabitation of apparently opposed poles within the structure of kinship.

Researchers have not paid sufficient attention to the processes at work in the contact between the two kinship systems within the same cultural space, namely the processes of adaptation, the conflicts and the mechanisms for resolving conflicts, in short, the mode of accommodation for seemingly contradictory models of social organization. For instance, in the Aghem and Kom polities one can find a strong presence of patrilineal institutions amidst generalised matrilineal kinship systems. One also finds strong co-operation ties between a people with matrilineal kinship structures such as the Kom and their predominantly patrilineal neighbours such as the Kedjom, Babungo and Oku, with some of the exchange relations involving women and rituals. The puzzle then is more of how the matrilineal peoples coped within a cultural area largely dominated by institutions and peoples with patrilineal how they cope with *de facto* patriliney in a context of generalised systems of patriliney in the modern context as one would find within the confines of the nation state. On the other hand, it would be interesting to understand how patrilineal peoples managed relations with their matrilineal neighbors, and more specifically, how patrilineal groups, which found themselves within an environment dominated by matrilineal institutions, managed their relations with matrilineal groups. These questions are of importance in understanding the originality with which people cope with apparently contradictory and thus seemingly illogical puzzles, but also how human groups live their universality by adapting to each other without giving up their originality. I define kinship in the paper as the network of people with relationships and ties around parenthood (Keesing, 1975), and also treat such relationships as a “system

of terminology” (Lévi-Strauss, 1963: 37).

This paper is based on first hand data collected during field work<sup>(2)</sup> from 1997 to 2002 and complemented with secondary sources. I also re-read data from literature. I present the background of the area under study, followed by a description of the kinship systems and narratives (myths) about origins as a way of interpreting the logic of the genesis of the system. I will then discuss the strategies of cohabitation and the strategies of coping that are at work in the modern setting concerning matriliney because of the peculiar place of the latter.<sup>(3)</sup> I then conclude with the hypothesis that the occurrence of this kinship complex is the result of segmentation (decomposition) of a once proto-Ring group and the choice of patterns of social relations under multiple imperatives of affection and property without compromising the advantages of each system. In this regard the matrilineal system will not only share the same characteristics with patriliney but will also be interspersed with vestiges of the patrilineal system. The reverse is also true. In describing these systems and how they operate I will start by indicating that they are unilineal whatever the type of system under this topic. I will also affirm that overt claims often obscure clear references to elements of the other system.

The results obtained from this study would be of heuristic value towards understanding the similar situations of cohabitation among kinship systems although one may not claim the power of extrapolation.

## BACKGROUND

The area under study is situated in the Western highlands of Cameroon, referred to in some colonial administrative reports and anthropological literature as the Cameroons Grassfields. The cultural unity of this area, stretching from latitude 5° 30' N to 7° N and longitude 10° E to 11° 45' E, albeit the rich diversity in individual community forms, has been universally reported in social science literature (Nkwi & Warnier, 1982; Tardits, 1981). Earlier historical studies informed by colonial administrative preoccupations with patterns of peopling to serve as a model for administrative organization tended to bring the peoples of the area from the neighboring Western Adamawa (Mbam-Tikar Plains), the River Katsina Ala and Donga Valleys linking them to the Benue area and the lower valleys of the Nkam River as well as the Cross River and its tributaries. Although Tardits (1960) had hinted on the lengthy depth of the historical presence of the forebears of the present inhabitants, it was archaeological research that provided concrete evidence of ancient occupation since Neolithic times, and attention started shifting away from a hypothesis of exogenesis for some of the peoples (Warnier, 1984). Some of these issues have been revisited elsewhere with the conclusion that most of the history of the peopling of this area is a process of reshuffling of peoples in composition and re-composition (Warnier, 1975). More recently I have used data which corroborates the theory of Warnier and Fowler (1979) to argue that some of the peoples are of indigenous origins

(Vubo, 2001a). I call for a study of this convergence towards studies in linguistics, non-material culture (folklore), social institutions and biological anthropology, especially concerning genetics.

The specific area coincides with what is known in linguistic terms as the Central and Western sub-groups of the Ring Group of Grassfields Bantu and comprise the Aghem, Fungom, Mmen, Kom, Kedjom and Oku peoples who are all linguistically closely related. Recent history, going back to about five centuries at most, would point to the occupation of the Babessi area, the vicinity of Oku, the present Kom Highland and the Belo Valley and parts of what is known today as Menchum Division by the forebears of these peoples. Relatively small-scale population movements covering small distances are reported as coming under the influence of natural disasters, internecine disputes and intercommunity conflicts. The movements caused the segmentation/decomposition of certain identity groups as well as the formation of new groups. By the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century there were the incipient developments of some of the present ethnic configurations of the area.

At the cultural level one can find an amazing similarity in *la vie associatif* with all groups almost adopting the same terminologies for the associations. This is very important when *vie associatif* will be at the intermediary level between kinship and political levels of social organization. Basic differences would exist at the level of kinship organization which is at the heart of social organization itself.

In terms of historical background I surmise historical memory no further than five centuries based on reported dynastic trees and likewise two centuries ago based on oral narratives (Vubo, 2001a).<sup>(4)</sup> The study of mythology and folk culture may surely date further back. Oral tradition will point to the Kedjom and Kom elements moving from the Ndop Plain into the plateau in the vicinity of Oku and moving further into the Nggvinkijem sector of Kom in a series of relocations with no clearly defined directions. Kopytoff (1973: 5) dismissed Aghem claims of ethnogenesis from Chamba country in the Benue area as an “echo of a situation in which lineages of locally disparate origins, coming together and establishing an alliance, resort to a locally plausible charter of origins that immediately provides them with common historical roots.” He demonstrated that Aghem clans could only trace their origins to neighboring groups that form part of a larger surrounding ecumene which is the appropriate unit for understanding many local processes (Kopytoff, 1973: 6). In terms of social structure and culture the Aghem form a Western pole of a continuum of a culture of Ring speakers.<sup>(5)</sup> Its history in the 18<sup>th</sup> century would therefore not be radically divorced from the rest of the area. Little history is known of the Fungom peoples except a migration from the neighboring Ndeyum area, a fact that puts into question claims of exogenous origins. It might be useful to note that the oral traditions of a clear nature situate the historical theatre of these peoples within the limits of what Warnier and Fowler (1979) called the Iron Belt.

Sources point to a segmentation of proto-Ring speakers first into groups that either formed the substratum people of the area or the basis of identity forma-

tion processes. The majority of traditions to the East mention the Ntur, Nkar and the Kedjom (probably an offshoot of the latter) as the original inhabitants. Historical traditions indicate an eastern sub-group concentrated around the area extending from the present Nso area to the Ndop plain in a north-south direction and from Nso to the Belo valley in an east-west direction. To the west one could find another sub-group whose traditions mention Ndewum, and are less precise about historical origins. Given the absence of a people of such an identity today can we safely postulate that the earlier identity of such peoples was Ndewum?<sup>(6)</sup> Historical traditions point to an east-west movement for elements of the first group and not the reverse. Kinship structure by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century appeared to be predominantly matrilineal in the west and patrilineal in the east. I postulate that prior to the east-west movement (not premised on the now discredited Tikar ethnogenesis thesis) there was distinct demarcation in kinship structures with clearly matrilineal kinship institutions to the west and patrilineal institutions to the east, with each group aware of the institutional differences and a community of common culture. These apparently clearly demarcated boundaries could then have been modified with the east-west movement operating principally under the pressure of natural forces such as a natural catastrophe involving apparently a process of lake formation at Oku (Vubo, 2000, 2001a: 92-96; Shanklin, 1992; Chilver & Kaberry, 1967a). Although this event sent people in all directions, an important component went westward to form part of the present Bum polity while another settled in the present south of the Kom polity (Nggvinkijem). Other movements related to population pressure, inter-community conflicts, and the mass invasions of peoples farther to the North (Chamba, Fulbe) led to other patrilineal peoples moving in an east-west direction into the Belo Valley closer to matrilineal peoples.

## THE KINSHIP SYSTEMS

### I. The Patrilineal Kinship System

In a patrilineal kinship structure, persons belong to the father's descent group that brings together persons tracing origins to male ancestors (Haviland, 1990; Murdock, 1965; Keesing, 1975). Succession and inheritance is between a senior male of one generation and another male of another generation within the kinship group. One can identify two modes of succession, either restricted or extended, depending on the degree of segmentation. The restricted and narrow mode of succession as practiced in groups such as the Kedjom, Babungo and Bum is characterised by a direct father-son relationship. This type of succession makes for a high degree of segmentation within the kin group. Although I will only present this model in contrast to an extended model, it is observed among the Aghem, Oku and Nso where succession alternates between "lines of descent created either by the progeny of the founder's wives or, if he had only one

wife, by her sons... as the lineage grows in size, a selection is made by a lineage meeting..." (Njakoi, 1996: 25).

In Kedjom Keku, a person may belong to a nuclear family characterized by a male father-founder of homestead, a wife and children. This kinship unit will be captured by the term *ngeng* (lit. house) which is also co-terminous with the concept of household.

A person may also belong to a polygamous home characterised by father/founder of homestead, his wives and their children. In this case the entire unit is expressed by the term *kibeng* (lit. compound) within which each wife and her children constitute a separate *ngeng* (separate household). In this structure one can identify four statuses for persons, namely members, wives, daughters and daughters' children. A member of the immediate kin group can either be called *wu ngeng* (lit. person of the house) or *wu kibeng* (lit. person of the compound) while wives are referred to as *kii kibeng* (lit. women or wives of the compound; sing. *wuwi kibeng*). Children are treated as being in a transient stage and not yet holding permanent statuses. Only daughters continue to carry with them the qualifier of female children (*vuu kii*, sing. *wa wuwi*; lit. female child) while their children (especially male) have the privilege of being treated as the daughter's children in the kin group of their maternal grandparents. Every person in Kedjom society will have more than one or two statuses within the kinship structure. While men are members of their kin groups and daughters' children in the kin group of their mothers, women are daughters within the kin group of fathers and wives within the husbands' kin groups. In this regard one will find a structure of dominant and subordinate relations regulating affinity within the kinship structure. In this regard a man will occupy a high position as a member of his clan but a subordinate position as daughter's child (son) in the kin group of the mother while the woman will be occupying a subordinate position as daughter in the father's kin group and a high position in the kin group of the husband.

This is expressed in the terminology that develops with the acquisition of autonomy at adulthood. A member of the kin group (male) who sets up a new household (*kebeng*) symbolised by marriage, the allocation of a family plot and farmlands, the building of a family house and the planting of a perennial tree (cactus), takes the descriptive title of *ti kibeng* (lit. father of household). Correspondingly women who marry within a kin group take the descriptive title of *mphi kibeng* (lit. mother of the homestead). This articulation of membership and headship of the kin group is thus according to gender lines operating in symmetry. While on the one side one would have members of a kin group described *vii ngeng* or *vii kibeng* (lit. members of a household or polygamous household), on the other one would have *kii kibeng* (women of the household) in a face-to-face relationship to the female children of the kin group. Basically two forms of symmetry define the structure of kinship relations, high-subordinate (vertical) and member-wife (horizontal), each going with its rights, privileges and obligations.

Daughter and daughter's son statuses are subordinate statuses while member

and wife statuses are high statuses. Within this structure, male persons can be placed on one side and female persons on the other side on a horizontal scale but they can also be segregated into high and subordinate status holders (vertical). A daughter or female child will be subordinate to the wife, who is mother or treated as one by assimilation. Daughter’s son will stand in subordinate relation to mother’s father (or brother) but in a symmetrical relation to the mother or daughter because he would have rights and privileges within that kin group. As it were, this category of persons replaces daughters within the kin-group structure. This comes out clearly where a woman has children out of wedlock and stays unmarried for life or where she later contracts a marriage. Male children in this case become *de facto* members of the woman’s father’s immediate kin group while their mothers maintain the status of daughters or female children (*wa wuwi*). In this case the daughter’s son will occupy a high status while daughter and daughter’s daughter (simply referred to as daughter) will occupy a low status. Table 1 presents the situation described above.

This structure highlights the fact that women stand astride two kin groups: daughters within their kin groups of origin and wives/women in their husbands’ kin groups. Such a situation goes with a system of rights, privileges and obligations that make for women to be a vital link across two kin groups and beyond constituent parts of the society. This would explain why daughters would not succeed father but could be designated to bear the heir in the absence of a son. All else in the framework works towards confirming the observation made by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1949) that in the patrilineal system, mother and child do not belong to the same clan, while in the matrilineal system father and children do not belong to the same clan. The system does work to highlight the circulation of women, for it is only in this circulation that women tend to move from low to high status, i.e. from daughter/child to wife/woman. Women who do not effect this movement thus remain as statutory children and are an oddity in the structure.

In sum, kinship relations operate towards preserving not only the memory of a people but also the estate and the continuity of identity. This structure makes for a high degree of segmentation as each adult triggers a new kin group with the setting up of a new household. Each father-founder of homestead ensures continuity by providing each adult son with the wherewithal to fend for himself out of the property to be transmitted to successors. As such, the segmentation does not end at the level of the relations between people but extends to property. It is said that a Kedjom man owed his son a wife and a plot of land to build and farm. This does not however exclude individual initiative as the largely winner-take-all system often pushed property-less sons to undertake

Table 1: Statuses within the Kedjom Kinship Structure

High Status	- Wife/Woman	- Father (member); - Son (member); - Unmarried daughter’s son (member)
Low Status	- Daughter (married), unmarried; - Daughter’s Daughter (married)	- Married Daughter’s son (with rights, obligations)



individual initiative even to amazingly successful levels as Warnier (1994) has shown for the so-called Bamileke.

When a man is “provided with a wife and land” the two become equated as the land becomes unalienable from the woman. The piece of land allotted to the woman is hers for life and is to be exploited to her benefit and that of her offspring. In no case is it transferable to any other person, even by her husband or the custodian of her husband’s property. Old women end up bequeathing their property to son’s wives in the same way as men do when they transfer their own property. As such, the binary structure of kinship organization finds itself reflected in the property relations. While men hold statutory title to landed property the women/wives of a kin group will be in effective occupation for themselves and their offspring. One can talk here of a double/joint ownership with different but complementary claims to property.<sup>(7)</sup>

Beyond the atom of kinship (Lévi-Strauss, 1963: 31-54, 1996: 103-135) one can observe a loosely structured extended kinship system. Beyond the *ngeng*, one would have the *kibeng* that will not only refer to the polygamous household and its descendants but also to the extended family (descended from male descendants of a monogamous or polygamous household) and the *ngwah* (lit. seed) which could be assimilated to sub-lineages, lineages and clans as the case may be. Relations beyond the *ngeng* are fraternal but loose with limited obligations. Strong ties may only occasionally be rekindled through a *vie associatif* of a totemistic nature. On the contrary the terminology used in reference to and in the classification of persons within the kin group continues to be expressed albeit in euphemistic terms. The term *leme*<sup>(8)</sup> (pl. *veleme*) to designate immediate brothers and sisters, i.e. siblings, is also used to describe all other members of the kin group whether they are of the *kibeng* or the *ngwah*. Distinctions come in terms of degree of affinity. Hence we have *leme fa chungeng muh* (lit. a kinsman from the same door<sup>(9)</sup>), *leme kibuh* (lit. kinsman of the same hole<sup>(10)</sup>), or *leme fa mphi* (kinsman of the same mother). The rest of the terminology is determined by the degree of proximity or affinity: *veleme fa kibeng ki muh* (lit. kinsmen of the same polygamous homestead i.e. half brother), or extended family (patrilineal cousin), *veleme fa vetih* (kinsmen of the father’s line, especially patrilineal cousins), *veleme fa vemphi* (lit. kinsmen of mother’s sisters) to refer to matrilineal first cousin and *veleme fa ngwah* (lit. kinsmen of the extended kin group) i.e. members of extended families, sub-lineages, lineages and clans. In fact what characterises kin group affinity is the level of obligations each member owes the other irrespective of whether this is of a vertical, or horizontal or diagonal nature. Hence father, mother and children will owe each other reciprocal obligations of equal magnitude. Nephews and nieces, whether these be father’s sister’s children, father’s brother’s children, mother’s brother’s children or mother’s sister children, will owe their aunts and uncles respect and treatment analogous to that reserved for direct filial relations. This stresses the classificatory equivalence between siblings. It is after this level that segmentation begins and bonds are loose. For example in funerals, brother’s and sister’s children would have the same obligations as the deceased’s children.

Beyond this level there is mutual recognition of kin group membership with no obligations. Relations of an associative type captured in the term *mukum* only strengthen or emphasize social bonds at this level. Although the *mukum* would be the substance of a separate study, this is an association which could take on the socialisation of kin group members, preparation of medicine, education, entertainment, mourning at funerals and performance at commemorative ceremonies (Nkwi, 1973: 71-72; 1976). Its principal characteristic is its secretive nature and exclusivity to members, as membership is subject to the payment of a fee and initiation rites. Kin group based associations of this type are the only instruments that sanction kinship bonds beyond the basic structure. Almost every prominent *ngwah* would have such an association with obligations to members: performance in funeral obsequies, protection of kin group landed property, prohibition of adultery and inter-kin group conflicts whether they be of a violent or non-violent nature, obligations of mutual assistance.

The high degree of segmentation in the kinship structure determines the rules of marriage. Generally marriage within the *ngwah* is prohibited as the limits of kinship relations are defined by the boundaries of permissible marriage. As such, marriage is inextricably related to the kinship structure as a major determinant. One would have descent groups where marriage is excluded whereas marriage between members of two different descent groups establishes a new set of relations based on exchange and the definition of obligations inscribed within a system of asymmetrical reciprocity called *ijuo*. In the *ijuo* system a suitor will be required to make only payments that were made as bride price for the mother of the bride. In this way the nature of the transfer of bride wealth becomes standardised over time. The exchange relations involved in marriage are both reciprocal and exclusive. It is generally said that a male child is exchanged for a female child. Family A would be giving out a female child (bride) into family B from which it receives a male child (groom). This implies the movement of respective persons into the opposite side of the symmetry, taking into it the position of the partner. The daughter's husband takes the position reserved for sons with the rights and obligations that go with them (except succession and inheritance) while the son's wife takes the position of daughter and is treated as such. This is the third position that a man occupies within the kinship system. This comes out clearly where the bride price obtained from the marriage of a daughter is paid as the bride price for the son's wife.

From the foregoing I have identified two types of asymmetrical reciprocity operating in the establishment of symmetrical social relations between groups around marriage. These two types of asymmetrical relations operate according to the principle, of A owes B as the latter owes C. A owes B certain types of goods and services as bridal obligations because B paid the same type of goods and services to C (bride's mother's father) as bridal obligations. C did the same to have bride's mother's mother, etc. This asymmetrical chain operating on a diagonal direction serves to strengthen bonds operating on a horizontal plane. The same practices have been reported for Oku (Njakoi, 1996: 23).

In this way at each stage a kin group is linked to another kin group through

obligations that it does not initiate. On the contrary, these relations are determined by a founding principle originating from a uterine line, that is, precisely in a direction least compatible with patrilineal principles, although this is the principle that links the two patrilineal groups by marriage. A gets into an alliance with B through principles deriving from C just as B got into an alliance with C on principles dictated by D, etc. This principle known among the Kedjom as *ijuo wurwi* (lit. the rite of passage relating to a woman)<sup>(11)</sup> establishes a network of horizontal symmetrical relations between kin groups, thereby strengthening community-wide social bonds. Marriage is thus elevated to the status of a rite of passage, involving initiation into the traditions/customs along uterine lines. Cultural homogeneity or the existence of relatively minute differences between groups would make for relative stability within the system of exchange (involving women and value) and the structure of social relations deriving thereof. Once out of this system one is confronted with a totally novel reality to be learnt as a new culture. That is why the Kedjom liken a marriage outside their community to an initiation into foreign rites of passage (*ijuo kitum*), and thus to the borrowing/introduction of new cultural facts. These would not go without implications in terms of intercommunity relations especially as each community within the Grassfields tended to define its own variant of marriage and thus kinship rules.

Such a description of the kinship structure poses the problem of the appropriateness of classical ethnological and anthropological terminology in the description of Kedjom kinship structure. At the basic level there is the nuclear and extended family but nothing beyond this corresponds to clans, sub-clans, lineages and sub-lineages as one would find in other groups (Nso, Oku) in the same region (Diduk, 1987, 1992). This can be explained by the history of this group marked by fragmentation, re-composition and constant relocation. Oral tradition that is almost imperceptible in official accounts and practices report a dual organization or what Lévi-Strauss (1963: 162-163) called a moiety made up of two groups, Kibo'o and Mbukas (Vubo, 2001a: 91-92). Official accounts report the subsequent affiliation of other groups commonly referred to as Feto' (Meta), speakers of the Momo group of Grassfields Bantu, and other speakers of Ring languages. These peoples (Tsome, Feto', Nshuh) as well as other prominent groups within the Kejom Keku polity (Amban, Temu) do not correspond to kin groups but are corporate political arrangements reflecting social contracts in time as I have reported elsewhere for Nso (Vubo, 2001a: 127) and would correspond to products of the category Warnier (1975) designated as "floating populations." This question is equally problematic for matrilineal peoples in the area.

## II. The Matrilineal System

Here I discuss the Kom model because of its proximity to and cohabitation with patrilineal forms. My description of Kom matriliney is inspired by Nkwi's study (Nkwi, 1973: 34-41), which borrowed much western terminologies, whose

use I will question. The analogy with western model leads him to describe a model that moved from a “clan (*isando*)” through a “sub clan (*ikuo*),” “lineage (*ayun’a ndo*)” to a “family.” This approach reverses the principles according to which the kinship system operates and leads to some conceptual difficulties. I will reverse the argument by looking at the atom of kinship and then progress to the most elaborate or general aspects of the kinship system. I hope to complement Nkwi’s findings with my observations.

The most basic unit of the Kom kinship system is the *ndo* (lit. house) made up of a woman and children to the exclusion of her spouse. The nearly residential nature of the terminologies used here should not be confused with the “residential and corporate units” including the spouse as Nkwi (1973: 35) did. In fact the residential and corporate unit corresponds to the *abei* which can be understood in Nkwi’s (1973) description:

Welded together by the founder (*bobe*) of the homestead, it operates as a social, political and economic as well as a ritual unit where the *bobe*’s authority is virtually unquestionable without putting into jeopardy the integrity of the unit.

The next unit, which is almost the most important in terms of functions, is the *ayun’ ando* (lit. extension of the house) that can be likened to the extended family. It is a small unit with a depth of four to six generations and the only exogamous unit within the kinship system. Descent from a real ancestress can be traced with the name of the ancestress serving to distinguish this unit from others. It is here that inheritance and succession find their most elaborate expression as core mechanisms within the kinship system as I will show later (see Nji, 2001 for the Aghem). Assimilating this unit to the lineage, Nkwi (1973: 35) indicated that:

Unlike the sub-clan the lineage as a social entity does not control property (land, compounds, raffia stands) which [is] considered nominally as clan property even though owned by an individual. The individual acquires land from his father or friends and he administers that in his own name. At his death that passes down to the lineage. Every male member of the lineage has the potential right of inheritance to the compounds of lineage members; preference given to the uterine brothers and next to the sons of uterine sisters of the deceased. The lineage from the point of view of ego is a unit of close uterine relatives most often genealogically linked to one another and who can act corporately on the judicial level in the sense that the group can settle its disputes. There is within the group a greater feeling of solidarity and fraternal spirit because they can easily trace back their most immediate ancestress four to six generation in span.

The *ikuo ndo* (lit. branch of the house) can be described as a group of dispersed extended families (*ayun’a ndo*) “bound together by a common name and ancestress” (Nkwi, 1973: 34) with a loose degree of solidarity seen in community events such as funerals, installations and weddings. One can also observe a certain measure of corporate spirit within the group. It is an internal segment within the largest unit of kinship, the *isando*.

The *isando* is “neither an exogamous nor an endogamous unit... neither a residential unit nor does it exhibit actual social integration in the Murdock sense” (Nkwi, 1973: 34). By this he meant that social awareness of clan membership does not have implications in terms of marriage or incest prohibitions, as it also does not imply obligations or rights of any sort. It will therefore only operate as a distinctive term within a classificatory system to refer to a broad division. It is “extensive,” portraying a depth expressed in the belief in a common apical ancestress. In the 1970s Nkwi estimated membership in this kinship unit at one hundred.

Women are central to kinship continuity and growth, constituting the key elements in the definition of clan identity. The kin group can either grow through the fertility of female members who ensure multiplication and eventual segmentation, but also through “an accretion of persons who have no biological links” (Nkwi, 1973: 36). This can also be observed for the Aghem and Mmen situated within the same cultural space (Fukah, 1998; Nji, 2001; Sah, 2002).

One can identify two statuses within the kinship structure, namely a member status and a child status. A member within a kin group is referred to as *wul-ndo* (lit. person of the house) and this refers to all male and female persons claiming a uterine link through a common apical ancestress. There is a further distinction, based on the degree of proximity, between *wul ndum ndo* (siblings) and *wul ndo* (mere kinsmen). *Ndum ndo* refers to the household based on direct uterine connections (*ndum*, lit-uterus). The men within the immediate kin group, namely the *ndo* and *ayun' ando*, have rights and obligations in relation to succession, inheritance and the performance of rituals. A woman is almost confined to the role of reproducer of the lineage, ensuring lineage continuity although she could “intercede before ancestral spirits for the welfare of her household” or usurp the right of exercising the role of caretaker (*wul nchi*) over her deceased brother’s property (Nkwi, 1973: 38).

Besides possessing a member status within their kin groups, persons are defined by a child status within the kin group of their fathers, paternity being sanctioned here by a marriage in due form. A *wain-ndo* (lit. child of the house) is the child born to a male member of the kin group. A person would therefore be a *wul-ndo* of his mother’s group but a *wain-ndo* of his father’s group. The status of *wain-ndo* is denied to children born of unmarried women of the kin group. Nkwi reported that:

The children born of a legally married woman owe respect, rights and obligations to her husband and his matri-clan. The children call their father’s matri-clan males “father” and all the matri-clan females “*nabo*” (mother of fathers). This relation which exists between the father, his uterine relatives and his children (*woin-ndo*) is strengthened and cemented by the reciprocal rights and obligations. But the child’s failure to fulfil these obligations will invoke legal, religious and moral sanctions (Nkwi, 1973: 40).

The same principle can be observed for the Vouté (Siran, 1981: 42) and other matrilineal peoples of the central and western sub-groups of the Ring Group of

Grassfields Bantu (Fukah, 1998; Nji, 2001; Sah, 2002).

Women acquire a third status at adulthood as they marry, namely that of a *wie-ndo* (lit woman of the kin group) which Nkwi (1973: 41) translates as “wife” of the kin group.<sup>(12)</sup> I prefer the term “woman” because this clearly puts the women in a symmetrical relationship to members of the kinship group with implications for rights and obligations. It is in this regard that Nkwi (1973: 41) wrote:

The status of *wie-ndo* (wife of the lineage) is one of the most important of a married woman’s statuses. By a legal marriage her husband acquires the right to fertility. Her children become the *woin-ndo* of his matrilineage. And they have duty to render him the services required. She has a right to have a home of her own and land on which to farm. Considered as the wife of the lineage, the married woman has to render certain services to her husband’s matrilineage. She has to co-operate with other “wives of the lineage” in carrying out duties required of them: provision of food for mortuary ceremonies, for marriages, building, clearing of farms etc. There is also a hierarchy among the “wives of the lineage.” The younger wives of the lineage perform a greater part of these duties.

This is contrasted with the woman’s status as *wain-ndo* and *wul-ndo* that are almost empty of any meaningful functions and weight for women.

Succession and inheritance is restricted to the most basic kinship units namely the *ndo* (household) and the *ayun’ ando* (extended family) in which the “mother’s brother - sister’s son” relationship predominates. This is complemented by a function of caretaker exercised by fellow members of the immediate kinship unit, the *ndo*, or the extended family, the *ayun’ ando*. In principle, a sister’s son will succeed to the social position and inherit the property of the mother’s brother. However, before this takes place, if the deceased had brothers, the latter would act as caretakers over the property, the wife or wives (*wie-ndo*) and offspring (*woin-ndo*). The brother could also hand over such caretaker function to a surviving brother and in some cases to a cousin. It is at the end of such a lengthy caretaking process that persons can succeed to the position of and inherit the property of their mother’s brothers. In some cases succession to the position and inheritance of the property of mother’s brother is fairly direct when there are no surviving brothers or when there are a host of mother’s brothers and a host of sister’s sons. In this case a person is free to indicate his heir who accedes directly to his position without the interposition of a caretaker. In this regard the succession and inheritance is generated in the direction of mother’s brother-sister’s son, but not brother-brother inheritance. Both cases, however, go with rights and obligations: care of property, sound investments, provision for the needs and welfare of wife (or wives) and children and the obligation of levirate (not synonymous with remarriage). At the center of these operations is the circulation and protection of persons and property. In a form of asymmetrical reciprocity, persons succeed to the positions of and inherit the property of their mother’s brothers as their own positions and property are taken over by their own sister’s sons.

Table 2: Statuses within the Kom Kinship Structure

High Status	- Wife/Woman	- Male members ( <i>wul-ndo</i> )
Low Status	- Children of unmarried women	- Female members ( <i>wul-ndo</i> ); - Children of male members ( <i>wain ndo</i> ; <i>pl.woindo</i> )

## JUXTAPOSED KINSHIP INSTITUTIONS

In the Aghem and Kom communities, matrilineal institutions predominate but co-exist side by side with patrilineal institutions. The Aghem patrilineal system, deeply immersed and almost isolated within a matrilineal system, characterises a ruling kin group whose origin I explore later. It is made up of the corporate political unit of Zonghokwo comprised of six extended kin groups generally referred to as *ndo* (lit. house), a term used equally to refer to the matrilineal kin group. The maximal kinship unit (*ndo*) is based on demonstrated (even claimed) descent from a male apical ancestor. The basic units in this structure are the *ketih* (lit. penis, nuclear household) composed of man and children, the *ahtom*, the extended family made up of man and paternal relatives, the *keindo* (lit. arm of the house, equivalent of sub-lineage) and the *saindo* (equivalent of a lineage) that brings together all persons who claim descent from an apical ancestor, Mih Sugho. In other words, the *keindo* is sub-divided into *ahtom*, further sub-divided into *ketih* in that direction. In this case the basic difference with the patriliney as practiced with the Kedjom what matters is not the household defined by the woman and her children but the role of pater as genitor (symbolised by the penis). Within a kinship unit there is a member, sanctioned by the prefix rule *wuh* (i.e. person or member of). Children within a kin group are referred to as *wahze* (lit. children), while all adult men of the kin group are classified as fathers. On the death of a member of the *keindo*, the right to succession is incumbent on a kinsman from the same *ketih*, preferably the eldest of the deceased's brothers. Where the *ketih* has no male, the right is transferred to the *ahtom* to involve the eldest member of the extended family, i.e. the eldest of the sons of the deceased's uncles. The chain continues to the *kei-ndo* at which stage the right of succession is vested on the person who maintained a close relationship with the deceased. By this time the eldest person is usually very old.

The rules are slightly different in the ruling sub-lineage. When the *Dengkehghem* (Aghem king) dies, neither personal relationships nor relationships within the same *ketih* matters in the selection of successor; the *kei-ndo* meet and decide on who the next *kedeng* (king) will be. What matters here is the type of social relations the person has had within the *kei-ndo* (participation in kin group activities and ceremonies, social ties with kinsmen) and his moral record i.e. the person must be guiltless of murder or witchcraft. The right to succession is reserved for persons of the same *kei-ndo*, but of different *ketih* or *ndo*. In any case, only persons whose fathers had been *kedeng* are eligible.<sup>(13)</sup> Aghem patrilineal practices bear more similarities to the Oku. Njakoi (1996: 23) reported that "...

succession proceeds along a sequence of living brothers irrespective of whether they are full or half brothers until this is exhausted. Then it passes to the eldest living son of the sequence of brothers who starts a new cycle.” The same can be observed for Nso. I prefer the term “extended patriliney” to describe this system in opposition to a restricted form as in the Kedjom case.

The same terminology used to designate the various units in the Aghem patrilineal kinship system is used to designate the units existing above the nuclear level. The basic unit is the *ndum* (lit. vagina) to refer to the nuclear household as opposed to the *ketih*. In this way the children of the penis (patrilineal) are opposed to children of the vagina (matrilineal). Above this level the same names designate the same levels of organization: the *ahtom* (lit navel) referring to extended family, the *kei-ndo* (lit. gathering of houses) to refer to a sub-lineage, *ndo* (lit. house) to mean lineage, *sai-ndo* (lit. division of a house). A nuclear family (*ndum*) primarily refers to a woman and her offspring as opposed to the nuclear patrilineal unit defined by paternity. Polygamous households therefore comprise several unrelated nuclear families or *ndumse*. The term *ahtom* refers to an extended family made up of several *ndumse* (pl. of *ndum*) or persons connected through a uterine link. This is composed of a woman and her maternal relatives to a clearly identifiable level. The *ndo* (house) is a collection of several such units and grouped together to form a *kei-ndo*. The *sai-ndo* is a non-corporate descent group with each member claiming descent from a common ancestor in the sense which Schusky (1983) defined a clan. Headship of the maximal kin group, the *sai-ndo*, is incumbent on the eldest member of the group, whose compound is considered the *bei-neikoh* (lit. big compound).

In matters of succession, considerations are first given to the members of the same *ndum*, followed by the *ndo*, *kei-ndo* and the *sai-ndo*, depending on the degree of vacancy that can be observed within the unit. In kin groups wielding political authority such as those of the *batum* (lit. father of the community), the choice of successor to the position devolves on the entire *sai-ndo*. Character, social relations within the kin group and, in present times, the level of modern education and achievement would count. One can be a claimant for succession or a contestant to the headship of the kin group only once.<sup>(14)</sup>

The question would arise as to how these two systems cohabit without contradiction. In the Aghem society if a woman from a matrilineage (e.g. Nkutowe) marries a man from the patrilineage of Mih Sugho, the offspring of such a union fall under the patrilineage as the children are excluded from the mother's group. Optionally, the child could still decide to join the mother's group, in which case he/she forfeits the rights to the father's group. In this way the patrilineal kinship system has the possibility of growing within this context by absorbing women whose offspring do not belong to their matrilineal kin groups, and by allowing for multiplication and segmentation through the foundation of several *ketih*.

Historically speaking, the Kedjom who practiced patrilineal kinship were in interaction with the Kom who practiced a matrilineal kinship system from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the area known today as the king-



dom of Kom (Vubo, 2001a). The cohabitation was sanctioned, at the apex inter-community level, by a formal peace pact and wife exchange, and at the community level, by trade contacts, friendship ties, wife exchange and a common community of culture (*la vie associative*, rituals, language, daily habits and entertainment narratives). Oral traditions collected in both groups point to conflicts and an eventual drifting apart of the two peoples as a result of the contradictions and incompatibility of the kinship systems. It is reported that the Kedjom people relocated because many of its peoples were becoming matrilineal (Shanklin, unpublished: 5, informant no. 8). In practice, each Kedjom woman married to a Kom was the founder of a new kin group, while the marriage of a Kedjom man to a Kom posed problems of succession and inheritance as women and children from the latter belonged to a kin group different from that of the husband.

The tendency for such marriages in the past was to transform Kedjom men (patrilineal) married to Kom women (matrilineal) into men whose children did not belong to the same kin group as them, producing an incongruity. Some informants interviewed in the Kedjom and Oku communities expressed an excessive fear about marriages between them and the Kom because they were consciousness of the differences in property relations and the implications in succession and inheritance. For instance, they argued that if they married from among the Kom, their offspring would be lured to seek property rights from the Kom and thus neglect their own estates. Marrying from among the Kom was like preparing for an absence of continuity after one's own life.<sup>(15)</sup> My verifications in Kom showed that the offspring of such marriages were classified as "aliens" and therefore not eligible to lineage succession. In some cases there were reports of bitter rivalries between the latter category of persons and the persons whose fathers were Kom, where some of these rivalries escalated into violence.

The matrilineal kinship system also showed a trend to absorb the patrilineal as more inter-tribal marriages were contracted between the two groups. It is this trend as well as overt hegemonic ambitions on the part of the Kom that soured an alliance with the best of intentions into sour relations, a situation Shanklin (unpublished: 10) described as fragile. However, this separation marked by hostility and mistrust seen even to the present day has not obliterated the impact of the cohabitation. One can still observe certain kin groups of Kedjom origins whose members overtly proclaim their Kedjom-ness or their *kedjomitude* (Warnier, 2003: 659) within the Kom polity (Vubo, 2001a, 2003). So one can observe institutions said to be "Kom" within the Kedjom communities. I have postulated elsewhere that the centralisation of the Kom polity was evidently under the impetus of Kedjom patrilineal elements (Vubo, 2001a). According to Kom traditions, prior to the centralisation of the contemporary Kom political system concentrated within a single extended family (*ndo*) descended from the princess Funkwuyn, political power was diffuse because the *foyns* were chosen amongst the ablest men in the *isando Ekwi* (maximal kin group). It is the marriage of this princess to a Kedjom prince, Ayeah (a claimant to a rival chief-

taincy) that transformed this diffuse structure into a centralised system. These developments were accompanied by political arrangements and social contracts, which guaranteed and protected the rights of “kijem”<sup>(16)</sup> lineages to patrilineal succession practices in a community with overarching claims to matriliney.<sup>(17)</sup>

The most important political arrangement was the attribution of the title of titular father figure to the *foyns* of Kom to successors to the headship of the kin group of the father of *foyn* Yuh, Nkwi’s “kijem” patriline (Nkwi, 1973, 1976). In this regard, the *abei Aboh*<sup>(18)</sup> (lit. Aboh compound) is the seat of the head of the kin group, which carries with it the status of father figure (*Bofoyin*, lit. Father of *Foyn*) to all Kom *foyns*.<sup>(19)</sup> In this way a kin group with matrilineal practices (*ndo Funkuyn*) as a whole occupies a child status to the one with patrilineal practices (*abei Aboh*). This arrangement, rather than allowing for the operation of the principle to its logical limits, restricts it to a symbolic appearance within the structure. As such the kin group cannot grow by multiplication and segmentation. Only one son succeeds and inherits the father’s property, while the other sons follow the matrilineal principle of succeeding the mother’s brother. This can also be observed in several kinship units (*abei*) said to be practising the patrilineal kinship system in Kom. This principle is so restrictive that the number of *abei* is limited to some tens. In short, as the local idiom has it, they can be easily counted.

This Kom matriliney accommodation of patriliney is slightly different way from the Aghem accommodation of patriliney. While Kom recognition and accommodation of patriliney fixates and confines the latter to a symbolic function, the Aghem allow for the functional operation of patriliney to its logical limits within a generalised context of matriliney. This interplay between the two kinship systems becomes very clear in the reverse operations that characterise the rights and obligations in the kinship system. By reverse operations I mean practices which move in the opposite direction of rights and obligations that go with belonging to a kinship unit. As can be observed below, the choice of one system constitutes a movement away from the other: the choice of father-son relations implies an apparent movement away from mother’s brother-sister’s son relations. By definition membership in any form of descent group implies certain forms of rights (e.g. claims to property, rights of succession) and obligations (e.g. solidarity, duties) which apparently points to one direction in terms of filiation or descent. The reverse would be to have rights and obligations in a group that by definition is opposed to one’s own (mother’s group in case of patriliney and father’s group in case matriliney). In this regard it would be a reverse direction if one were to be a member of a patrilineal kin group but have rights and obligations that point to a uterine connection. Likewise the same will be true of persons who have rights and obligations in a father’s group although one were a member of a matrilineal kin group. Reverse operation does not compliment (Nkwi, 1973: 85) filiation but reverses the logical claims of the system and balances the relations.

## QUESTIONS OF ORIGINS AND THE LOGIC OF OPERATION

It would be perilous to attempt to embark on the quest for the ultimate origins of any human institutions. However, although I agree with Lévi-Strauss (1963: 40) that the choice in human institutions is arbitrary in the same manner as the choice of linguistic units (phonemes), I go further to say that in the case of kinship this follows certain logic of operation differing essentially in all cases. This logic is that of the antinomy of cooperation - opposition involving the relationship between two male adults in the atom of kinship (father, mother's brother) and the male child. Patriliney would therefore highlight father-son cooperation to the detriment of mother's brother-sister's son relations while matriliney will highlight the mother's brother-sister's son relationship to the detriment of father-son relationship. Our reading of myths of origin would attest to this logic as operating at the genesis of the structures. The point of departure is not any generally accepted principle of the chronological order of the appearance of kinship systems in history such as the precedence of matriliney. I will examine a number of wide spread narratives which serve as explanatory models for the choices at particular points in the history of the area. In one case the generalised system is that of patriliney from which there is a movement towards matriliney. In another generalised matriliney moves towards patriliney.

### I. From Patriliney to Matriliney: The Narratives about the Origins of Kom Matriliney

Case 1. Ngongwikuo, J.A., "Comment on Kom inheritance," in *Sagaah Kom*, 3 (1966) 6-7 quoted in Nkwi (1973: 83).

When the Kom leader and his people settled at Idien for sometime on their trek he married an Idien Lady with whom he begot a son. Later on when they travelled to Laikom and settled. Finally this old Fon wanted his son he begot with the Idien Lady to rule after him but his sisters would not tolerate a foreigner on the throne of Kom. And so that Fon's son could not become the Kom Fon but rather the child of the Fon's sister.... And because of this Fon's sister's decision, inheritance in Kom took a different face for since then the Kom throne is inherited by nephews and since the Kom race originated from Laikom the majority of the families in Kom took to this custom.

Above shows the incompatibility of the father-son relationship on the grounds of autochthony and not affection as in the Case 3.

Case 2. Gabriel Mutan's (2001) version.

It happened that a Kedjom man Abo'oh got married into the Kom royal family and got a son by that marriage. This was when the two peoples were living side by side. The elder brother of this princess became Fon of Kom and ruled Kom for many years before dying childless. The people of Kom recognising the vacancy requested Abo'oh to permit his son to succeed his uncle as Fon. In consultation with his people, Abo'oh gave his son to be made Fon (king). This practice later on became generalised as the succession practice in all of Kom and spread to neighboring peoples.

As in Case 4 the problem is that of a vacancy in a father-son relationship that is filled by a mother's brother-sister's son relationship. This is opposed to the principle of autochthony in Case 1.

Case 3. Extract from Thomas Ketchoua's *Les peuples de l'Ouest en diaspora depuis 3000 ans* (unpublished).

Les Kom et les Banke [Kedjom] tous d'origine Tikar ont pratiqué la succession matriarcale contre les habitudes des Tikar [et] pour cause: un chef de famille Banke tomba malade et tous ses enfants l'abandonnèrent. Seul le fils de sa sœur, son neveu, eut le courage de rester près de lui... et lui prodigua des soins. Ce père sentit ses dernières heures et dit à son neveu [:] «tu n'a pas, mon fils, dédaigné les épaves de ton père, tu as porté ses excréments sans dégoût [:] je te laisse ma tête et tout ce que je possède tout est à toi [:] malheur à celui qui t'en inquiètera après ma mort. Si quelqu'un ose te prendre ma tête, celui là me suivra immédiatement». Après ce testament cet homme s'éteignit et le neveu prit soin de l'enterrer seul. Lorsque les propres enfants de cet homme abandonné apprirent que leur père est mort, ils accoururent pour la succession qu'ils arrachèrent à leur [cousin] qui se retira tranquillement les ayant biens instruits des dernières volontés de leur père. Ils firent sourde oreille. Le fils aîné de s'emparer de la succession et de mourir aussitôt. Le second fils d'imiter son frère et de subir le même sort. Le troisième d'essayer son tour et de succomber sans tarder. La mort successive et soudaine de tous ces enfants obligea le conseil de famille à la considération des dernières volontés du trépassé. C'est ainsi que la succession de la maison de Banke devient le partage du neveu, succession matriarcale qui fit contagion dans les familles Kom, Isi (Sui i.e. Babessi), Isu, Wum, tous voisins. [Kom and Banke<sup>(20)</sup> (Kedjom) people, all of Tikar origins practice matriarcal succession contrary to the general tendency among Tikar peoples. The origins of this practice can be traced to this story. A Banke family head fell sick and was abandoned by all his children. Only his sister's son had the courage to stay by him and look after him. The old man feeling that the time of his death was drawing near had this to say to him: "My son, you did not despise the poor remains of your father; you carried his faeces without a feeling of disgust. I leave my head and all my possessions with you. Let a curse be on any one who will try to trouble you after my death. Anybody who tries to take my head from you will follow me immediately." After this will, this man died and the nephew buried him alone. When this abandoned man's children heard of his death, they hurried home to claim the right to succession from their cousin. The latter withdrew quietly not without informing the former of their father's will. They refused to heed the injunctions of their father and as the first person tried to forcibly inherit his father he died immediately. When the second tried to imitate his brother, he met the same fate while the third also went the same way as he attempted to take his turn. The dramatic deaths in succession of these children obliged the family council to revisit the will of the deceased. That is how the succession of the Banke house became an affair of nephews, matriarcal succession that has spread in a contagious manner into Kom, Isi (Sui i.e. Babessi), Isu, Wum, all of them being neighbours. (Translation mine.)]

I need to point out here some theoretical and ethnographic distortions in the text, which do not however subtract from the substance of the theme. Firstly,

Ketchoua (n.d.) is definitely referring to matriliney as a system of filiation with its implications in terms of property (succession) and the definition of social relations (consanguinity) and not definitely matriarchy, which is a system of authority relations especially in the domestic sphere. One has to note that the matrilineal system does not imply matriarchy in anyway. In fact here is a matrilineal system that is patriarchal, a characteristic it shares with groups that are patrilineal. Secondly, it is said that Banke people are the cradle of matriliney from where it spread to other areas. As I have shown the Kedjom are not matrilineal. Moreover of all the peoples mentioned in the text only the Kom and Aghem (Wum) are matrilineal. These pitfalls may be so because the author is not a professional anthropologist and may not have collected his information about the peoples in question from credible sources.

As for the substance of the text, it underlines both the friction between father and sons, and the ties that link the mother's brother and sister's son. The friction between father and sons is contrasted with the affection between the mother's brother and sister's son that legitimates matriliney.

Case 4. Charter myth, officially the standard foundation history of present day Kom.

Nkwi (1976: 19-21) reported that the ancestors of the Kom were formally settled with the Babessi with whom they had an entente. A Babessi Fon<sup>(21)</sup> is reported to have tricked a Kom foyn<sup>(22)</sup> to destroy his people. The Kom chief went and hanged himself in despair. The remnant people are said to have been led by a sister of the late foyn. It is the son of this sister who became king and this set the pace for the sister-son succession procedure in Kom. Before then the kinship system is reported to have been patrilineal. This version, which is reproduced in Nkwi and Warnier (1982: 172), puts into focus the vacancy of a father-son relationship and, by extension, highlights the mother's brother-sister's son relationship. The vacancy version bears similarities to Gabriel Mutan's version although it does not specifically state who the pater is.

Case 5. Version collected by Eugenia Shanklin (unpublished, privately circulated notes which are, by all indications, part of a planned book).

In Kom it is said that the ancestors arrived at Laikom, the site of the Fon's palace, after following the track of a python. Most of those who tell the story say they are uncertain about where the Kom originally came from, perhaps from Tikari or Ndobo in the east. But all agree that the Kom were settled for a time in Bamessi on the Ndop Plain and that they left there because of a trick played by the Bamessi Fon.

The Kom people flourished and the wily Fon of Bamessi began to worry about the growing numbers of Kom. One day he suggested to the Kom Fon that some of their people were becoming too headstrong and might cause a war between their two groups; he proposed that they each build a house, invite in the troublemakers and set the houses afire.

The Kom Fon, whose name was Muni, agreed to the plan and the houses were built but the Fon of Bamessi had his house built with two doors, while the guileless Muni built his according to instructions, with only one door. When the doors at the front of each house were locked,

the houses were burned. The Bamessi people escaped through the second door and the Kom people were destroyed.

When Muni discovered the trick that had been played on him, he was so angry that he struck the Bamessi Fon on the head with the harp on which he had been playing laments for his lost people. Muni struck with such force that the harp remained embedded in the Bamessi Fon's head for the rest of his life.

Muni went to his sister, Nandong, and told her that she should be preparing to leave Bamessi for he was planning to hang himself. Saying "I want revenge," he told her that he would go to the forest and commit suicide. When his body rotted, a lake would form (from the fluid that came from the rotting corpse) and the maggots that dropped from the body would become fish.

"Then, my sister, you remain where you are until you hear that they have found fish there in the big water; but you do not go to the place because anyone who goes there will die. When you hear that the place has sunk and disappeared, begin to go closer each day. Soon you will see the track of a python; you then collect your people and begin to follow that track. The people of Bamessi will ever after be a small population, but you should not worry."

All happened as Muni had predicted. When the sister saw the track of the python, she and her people began to follow it. Nandong knew that wherever the track disappeared, she should stop. The first place it was lost was at Nkar. Three people from Nkar (usually said to be people of the Ndotitichia clan) followed, too. When the track reappeared they went from Nkar to Djottin. Then to Dien, near Akay where Nandong, the sister of Muni, had delivered a female child, who was near the age of maturity.

When the fon of Dien, whose name was Kuboh, saw the daughter, Bih, he took her as his wife. Bih stayed in Kuboh's compound and bore a son named Jinabo. Then Bih later delivered Kumambong Boh as well as the three daughters: Nangay Boh, Nakunta Boh and Nyangha Boh. When the track of the python reappeared, Nandong stayed there to cook castor oil for Bih to rub the children with.

From there, Nandong went back to Dien and Jinabo, who was ten or eleven years old at this time, wanted to go back with Nandong. When Nandong returned to Ajung with Jinabo, she and the others left to follow the snake once more, leaving Jinabo at Ajung. Then they passed at Ijum, where they were near what would be the palace at Laikom.

Kuboh, the fon of Dien, was angry so he turned himself into a leopard and came to Ijum, to devour his children, including Jinabo. Nandong had collected Bih and all the children except Jinabo to Ijum but Bih discovered in a dream that Kuboh was coming. She spent three days struggling with the leopard, having already hidden the children in the ceiling.

On the fourth day, with the leopard still worrying her and trying to come into the house, Bih had a dream in which she saw Muni, her late uncle. The leopard was then digging into the foundations, trying to dig a hole to come into the house. Muni asked her to warm potash in the fire.... When the leopard was killed, the snake road reappeared, leading to Laikom. Muni had said that wherever the road was lost, they should remain, so when the road disappeared, they stayed at Laikom.

Three compounds were built at Laikom, which in Itangikom means the "home of the Kom people" AbeEkwu, the compound up; Itinala, below the home or down; and Achaf, in between or mud.

All versions point to either the incompatibility of the father-son relationships or the vacancy in a father-son inheritance filled by a mother's brother-sister's

son relationship/proximity. Shanklin (unpublished: 6-8) in her comments on the narratives proposed a symbolic functionalist interpretation and highlighted the importance of sibling relations, the difficulties that characterise father-son relationships or the “dangers of patriliney,” the problematic of husband-wife relationships and the primacy of “mother-son ties” that are at the basis of matriliney. The narrative is presented as a “motif” for discussing the questions of “matriliney vs. patriliney” (Shanklin, n.d.b: 15). The tortuous nature of father-son relations that underlies the logic of matriliney are exemplified in the conflicts that are reported to have characterised the relationship between Foyn Yuh and his father, a conflict whose resolution was found in the arrangements that I have reported earlier. I also observe see the operation of two motives in favour of matriliney: the vacancy occasioned by the death of a king with no male heir in a father-son system (vacancy is ultimately filled by a sister’s son); and the friction of father-son relationship via friction between mother and father (leopard double of father attempting to devour son).

## II. From Matriliney to Patriliney: Traditions of Origin of Aghem Patriliney

Narratives about the origins of patrilineal institution are generally lacking among patrilineal peoples, probably because of their widespread nature that they are taken for granted. However, in my research I came across this rare case of the origins of Aghem patriliney:

Some time far back in the past the whole of Aghem was practising the matrilineal kinship system. People traced their descent through their mother and as a result succession and inheritance followed the same pattern of unilineal descent. The *Dengkeghem* at the time was Nnun-yom, with his palace at Zonghokwo. The ruling dynasty was of the *saindo Sih-Buh*.

When the *Dengkeghem* was sick, he sent his sister’s son and imminent successor to Weh<sup>(23)</sup> to obtain a dog from a friend. The dog was to be used to prepare medicinal potion for the *kedeng*. The sister’s son, hoping for the uncle to die, decided not to go. Instead he went to visit his father. When it was evening, the sister’s son went back to his uncle’s palace. When he was asked why he did not go to Weh, he explained that he went to visit his father.

Late that same evening, the *kedeng* decided to send his son, Mih, to run the errand for him. Mih, willing to his father alive, did just as he had requested and returned after a very short time with the dog. The medicine was prepared and the *kedeng* got well.

After recovering from his illness, Nnun-yom decided to will his son as successor to the kingship. The kingmakers of Zonghokwo (*tsho-te-kwo*) accepted the will of the king but did not execute it as they still made the late king’s sister’s son *kedeng*. The new *Dengkeghem* died after a few days as did other clan members who attempted to claim the kingship. This aroused curiosity and the kingmakers decided to consult the oracle.

Upon consultation, the oracle informed the kingmakers (*tsho-te-kwo*) that unless Mih, the son and heir of Nnun-yom was enthroned *Dengkeghem*, nobody would live as *Dengkeghem*. When Nnun-yom died, Mih had gone to live at Ahgeih, a neighboring people. He was brought back to Aghem and enthroned *Dengkeghem*.

This period marked a turning point in the history of Aghem. It witnessed the transition of the Aghem kinship (descent) system in the Zonghokwo ruling lineage from a matrilineal to a patrilineal one. Mih Nnunyom was the first *Dengkeghem* of patrilineal descent.

The matrilineal clan of Nnunyom, the Sih-Buh, could not live together with Mih's patrilineage and so the former decided to leave and settled at Ngohtubu, now Magha. Mih, the *Dengkeghem* helped them to fight and defeat the people of Ngahtubu where they set up their Sih-Buh chiefdom.

For fear that Mih Nnunyom should not transfer the throne to his matrilineal descent group, his name was changed from Mih Nnunyom to Mih Sugho-ghem (Mih the horn of Aghem) to ensure that the throne remained with Mih's patrilineage. This narrative points to the birth of the Mih Sugho patrilineage in a predominantly matrilineal setting in the Aghem community (Nji, 2001).

The narrative points to the reverse of what is in operation in the transformation to matrilineal institutions. It has strikingly the same structural elements as Ketchoua's narrative for the matrilineal kinship system. There is a crisis of confidence between the mother's brother and the sister's son operating in a context that leads to the strengthening of bonds between father and son, a principle that is at the basis of patriliney.

#### COMMON PRINCIPLES AND REVERSE OPERATIONS: MATRILINITY IN PATRILINITY AND PATRILINITY IN MATRILINITY WITHOUT DOUBLE DESCENT

One general conclusion that could be drawn from my analysis is that the kinship systems operate according to one basic principle which takes the household (*ndo, ngeng, ndum*) as the basic unit from which all else evolves. It is this principle that puts the woman at the foundation of all kinship relations and, beyond that, social relations. Whether patrilineal or matrilineal, it is the community of persons born of one woman that lays the foundation for the elaboration of kinship ties. The way the Kom share the same kinship characteristics with their patrilineal neighbours is simply amazing. At one level they share similarities with the Kedjom in terms of kinship structure although operating on different principles at superstructure level. One finds the same principle at work in some of Cameroon's peoples. The patrilineal Duala and other related speakers of coastal Bantu languages of Cameroon use the term *mboa* (household, home), translated into French by Dika Akwa (1982: 174) as *foyer* (household) and by Bureau (1962: 60) as "la maison, la famille [the home, the family, translation mine.] Siran (1981: 42) reported a similar practice among the matrilineal Vouté of the Adamawa Province of Cameroon.

...la langue vouté possède un teme (si peu utilisé, à vrai dire, qu'il est aujourd'hui inconnu de la plupart des jeunes) pour désigner l'ensemble des descendants en ligne maternelle d'une même femme à partir de laquelle tous peuvent tracer précisément leur généalogie...: *yó*; son usage, toutefois est à la fois métaphorique puisque son sens premier est celui de maison, ou plutôt d'*intérieur*, de *foyer*, *yó* s'opposant en effet



à *duhé* comme *home* à *house* en anglais... Toute personne appartient donc à un *yó* et à un seul :celui de sa mère.  
 [...there is a term in the vouté language (scarcely used that it is unknown to most young people) that applies to all descendants of one woman along uterine lines and that can be used to trace descent... The term *yó* can be said to be essentially metaphorical as its primary meaning is that of home, or rather of the interior, household, the term *yó* being opposed to that of *duhé* as house is opposed to home in English. ... Every person belongs to one and only one *yó*, that of his mother. (Translation mine, italics in the original.)]

The basic unit is the household (*ndo*, *ngeng*) although the difference is that while for matriliney, relations to sisters and mother defined all, the patrilineal system is defined by relations to the brother and the father. In all cases it is the relation to the sibling that is predominant. There is therefore a structural correspondence between of the Kedjom patrilineal system and the Kom matrilineal system, operating as an inverted mirror image. The dichotomy between members (*wul ndo*) and children (*waindo*) with the Kom would correspond to the *wu ngeng/kibeng/ngwah* (member) and *wie wa wuwir* (daughter's son) statuses of the Kedjom. One would observe similar bonds and obligations between members of the same kin group, the same structural implications of marriage for gender relations and the difficulty of adopting western kinship terminology as in current use in anthropological literature. This is very true of the so-called navel clans, Ekwi, Itinala and Achaf which I (Vubo, 2001b) treat elsewhere as toponyms rather than kinship structures as designated in earlier literature (Chilver & Kaberry, 1967a, 1967b; Nkwi, 1973, 1976; Ateh, 1976).

The following structural similarities between the two systems can also be observed:

- Unmarried women occupy an incongruous and almost effaced position within the structure. In fact they do not exist at all.
- Women rise to full status with rights, privileges and obligations when they marry into other kin groups. Their statuses within the kinship structures are in all senses identical.
- There is complementary filiation (Nkwi, 1973) or reverse operations (my own observation) which ensure equilibrium between the two kin groups linked by marriage. In fact this is universal in the Cameroon Grassfields.
- The status of caretaker devolves on male members of the same household (*ndo*, *ngeng*) in either structure while succession is only a second-generation matter involving in one case, a son and, in another, a matrilineal nephew. This would go to highlight the positional equivalence of siblings.

On the other hand succession rules among the Kom are structurally identical to the rules that apply to extended patriliney as I defined above, although in the opposite direction. In Kom matriliney the movement is from ergo to sibling (acting as caretaker) and then sister's son while the case in Oku and Aghem patriliney is a movement from ergo to siblings and then male kinsman's son.

The principle of similarity also expresses itself clearly in the anthroponymy

or the naming systems in the area as observed in the Kedjom polities, Kom and Aghem. In this regard all persons are named in relation to their mothers. In specifying persons a person's name is linked to that of the mother. For example: Ngwe (female) is married to Ngong and bears six children, namely Bi (woman), Che (man), Kain (woman), Vuban (woman), Chikelem (man) and Asang (man). Regardless of whether a matrilineal or patrilineal system the names of the children will be attached to those of the mother in the following manner: Bi-Ngwe, Che-Ngwe, Kain-Ngwe, Vuban-Ngwe, Chikelemke-Ngwe and Asang-Ngwe. If the homestead is polygynous these specifications will serve to distinguish two persons of the same pater with the the same name (e.g. Che). In this case if the mother of one of the bearers of the name is Mbu, one would have a Che-Ngwe and Che-Mbu. This principle can also be observed among the Yao of Malawi who have a matrilineal kinship system (Mtika & Doctor, 2002: 73).

The reverse operations also operate according to the same logic. We saw earlier that the marriage principle in the Kedjom Keku patrilineal system is premised on clear uterine connections. One would observe other reverse operations such as the rights and obligations of daughter's son within the mother's father's kin group. In this kin group the former occupies a subordinate position but it is a very significant one as ontological beliefs put the mother's father (*ti li*) as the central element in a person's welfare. Good or ill health depends on whether certain ritual obligations have been thoroughly satisfied with the mother's father or his group. Warnier (1975; 1994) has pointed to similar practices among the Mankon where the *tama* (mother's father) is a central figure in ritual performances in every male adult's life. This is also true of the Mbam-Nkam speakers or the so-called Bamileke. Chilver (1991: 5) has also described similar practices among the Nso where every male successor to lineage headship had to perform sacrifices to the head of the mother's father's kin group. This rite is known as the *kitaryir*:

The successor to a lineage headship, after being "caught" and installed had to visit his mother's father (her donor, *taaryiy*) 'humbly' with wine and sacrificial gifts, and after a pantomime of rebuttal (unless he was an important title-holder) was capped, sacrificed for, and given a stick of ebony (*menkan*) to scrape in domestic sacrifices.... The *kitaryir* also establishes the agreement of the *taaryiy*, on the demand of the *wan jemeer* (lit. sister's son), who comes with wine, to sacrifice to his patrilineal ancestor for the health of the *wan jemeer's* children. These ancestors in particular – also those of MMF – are causers of evil and the death and illness of children if affinal obligations are neglected (Chilver, 1991: 5).

Njakoi (1996: 21) also reported that in Oku, a woman "may beg for land for her son from one of her brothers... or [a] father can also ask for land from his mother's father... [for his son]. Young princes may also benefit from mother's brother." Gufler (1995) reports similar practices relations among the Yamba where "there is almost a mystical interdependence between MF [mother's father] and DS [daughter's son]. On the one hand we see the MF as protector of DS

.... On the other we also see the DS in an ambiguous role both as enhancing the well-being of MFs kin as well as an agent of misfortune if [the former] is slighted.”

The preceding references all point to an attempt to balance the relationship towards a matrilineal end in a dominantly patrilineal context. In trying to argue for the precedence of patrilineal institutions in Kom, Nkwi (1973: 85) pointed to the operation of this reverse principle for Kom using the term, “complementary filiation” to describe this type of situation within the matrilineal kinship system. He explained that:

In Kom there exists a very strong bond between a man, his wife and children. The complementary filiation which is strongly emphasised seems to point to patrilineal practice.... The children fear and respect their father.... They continue to render him assistance throughout his life. These obligations persist throughout the child's life even when he is grown up. The father continues to regard his children as his essential collaborators throughout his life. When he is dead, his lineage is supposed to continue his paternal obligations towards them.... In Kom the rights and duties derived from one's father are so strong that failure to fulfil them will call for both legal and religious sanctions (Nkwi, 1973: 83-85).

These functions operating in the reverse direction bear striking similarities to those in the patrilineal system in the Kedjom community and with the two systems in the Aghem community. Although the primary link in the matrilineal system as it operates in Aghem is the sister's son-mother's brother relation, the father-son relationship is still strong. When a male child hunted game, he presented it to the father. The son thus owed respect and obedience to the father. The father also had to initiate the son into community rites of passage and sponsor induction into associations such as *Nkoh*, *Kuifer* and *Dowa*. It was the duty of the father to prepare the male child for life. He would supply the son with a hunting gun and a cutlass as well as look for a wife for him. Even the Kom and Aghem distinctions between members (*wul/wuhndo*) and child status (*wain/waahndo*) within the matrilineal system point to the operation of patrilineal principles within a context of matriliney (Nkwi, 1973: 31-41). These observations in the direction of reverse operations or what Nkwi called complementary filiation tend to confirm Keesing and Keesing (1971: 162) when, in reference to the Tallensi kinship system, they cautioned that:

...in a single society, different modes of tracing descent may be used for different purposes. Thus we may be wary of talking about a society as 'patrilineal' or 'matrilineal' as many anthropologists used to do... in a single society seemingly dominated by [one type of descent] we find - used in different ways for different purposes - the three major modes of conceptualising descent, as well as widespread webs of bilateral kinship.

What we have here is the operation of this principle and not double descent *per se*. Radcliffe-Browne (1950: 40) reported similar practices among the Ashanti where a person belonged to the matrilineal group but entertained a

relationship with the father's group because of the spirit that derived from the father's line. It was even the duty of the father to feed, cloth and educate his children after divorce although this did not imply that the children belonged to his kin group. To paraphrase Lévi-Strauss (1963: 21), I will say that beyond the apparent antinomy in rules of kinship, there is a "single structural scheme" underlying the systems and stressing the cultural unity of the peoples in the area. This even undermines the apparent structural opposition between the kinship systems in the area. Lévi-Strauss' excellent analysis of the relations of symmetry the myths and rituals of neighboring peoples (Lévi-Strauss, 1996: 281-300) demonstrated that each group, in its own sphere and without ignoring what the "other" was doing, was meticulous in cultivating and preserving oppositions and combining antagonistic forces to arrive at a balanced set. He demonstrated that in an area with a common heritage each people tended to choose opposing or complementary versions of similar rites or rites with the same function. All this would operate according to a certain logic observed among the Mandan peoples reported by Maximilien and Bowers (Lévi-Strauss, 1996: 299), according to which neighbours have to be close enough to them to be friends and far enough to be enemies. According to Lévi-Strauss (1996: 300) this symmetry, which unites and distinguishes peoples at the same time, offered the most elegant but also the most simple means by which peoples can appear both similar and different, close and far, friends and enemies in a way, enemies while remaining friends. The goals targeted by such processes in history, Lévi-Strauss continued, was to arrive at a threshold that would be beneficial to human societies and wherein there would be equilibrium between unity and diversity; and maintain an equal balance between communication (likely to enlighten all) and the absence of communication which sustains human diversity.

The marriage system is also identical, giving women rights, privileges and obligations to the kin groups of the husbands where they stand in a symmetrical relation to the men as women/wives as opposed to members/husbands. This is reflected in management rights over land. Marriage leads to the autonomy of the woman as she acquires the status of seniority within the structure of kinship. This is more marked in the matrilineal system where women are both members of their kin group and wives within the kin groups of their husbands. Even then the unmarried woman does not enjoy the same rights and privileges as she still carries along with her the two incomplete statuses of a daughter of father's kin group and member of her matrilineal kin group. Married women would have three statuses: child within the father's kin group, wife within the husband's kin group and member of her matrilineal kin group. The men also have three statuses: member of matrilineal kin group, child in the father's kin group and replacement of wife in the in-law's kin group. In the patrilineal kinship system the triple status framework is also very evident. A man is member of his kin group, a daughter's son in the mother's group and he replaces his wife in her kin group according to the principle of a daughter being replaced with a son. The woman in this scheme has only two statuses: daughter/child

and wife/woman. In all the groups the unmarried woman retains a perpetual child status and thus appears incongruous as a social person.

It is important to revisit the question of the appropriateness of kinship terminology such as clan, lineage, sub-lineage, extended family, nuclear family, matrilineal, patrilineal etc. Besides the fact that there is a difficulty in having equivalents for terminology of European origins, what is reported in some cases as kin groups are corporate political groups and correspond to Warnier's (1975: 408) "floating populations" operating with differing processes of integration, processes I have chosen to term "social contracts" (Vubo, 2001a: 127). Nkwi hinted at the difficulties encountered in the use of such terminology (1973: 33), although he continued to use it (1976). Recently Meillassoux (2000) has pointed out the difficulties this poses for research on kinship. He stated that:

Le détournement de la perception du phénomène de parenté vers un vocabulaire approximatif contribue à l'effacement de principes institutionnels tout aussi pertinents... et même la réinvention par les anthropologues ou, parfois, à l'adoption par les populations concernées des nouvelles «traditions» plus conformes aux conceptions occidentales ou aux règles administratives.

[The drift from the perception of kinship towards an approximative vocabulary works towards the obliteration of institutional principles which are equally valuable. This results in the reinvention by anthropologists or, at times, the adoption by local peoples of new traditions more in line with western conceptions or administrative regulations. (Translation mine)]

He attributed this to the problem of translating local language terms into vocabularies derived from Latin origins (Meillassoux, 2000) where there is no functional equivalence between terms. This, according to Meillassoux, rendered kinship studies one of field of ethnology with a high dose of ethnocentrism, and paradoxically one of the worst explored domains ("les plus imprégnés d'ethnocentrisme et, paradoxalement, l'un des plus mal débroussaillés de l'ethnologie"). The problem of congruence of terminologies from classical anthropological theory with local terminologies is real. One would wonder how to equate a system of four terms, as one would have with the Aghem with a researcher's vocabulary with only three terms (family, lineage, clan) even if this were adapted by breaking some of the terms into sub-types. Table 3 illustrates this difficulty.

The same is true of the fluid structure of Kedjom kinship that has no corresponding terms to that of clan or lineage in the classical anthropological definitions. A solution in studying similar structures would be to start with an inventory of the local terminology in use before moving to a description of the structure as a model to be discovered. Many a researcher has looked for and invented clans where, as in my case, there were only households and their extensions. In this regard I will situate the kinship structure at the level of what Touraine (1974: 94-96) called a cultural model, i.e. a specific model of the representation of social reality proper to a particular group that is closely linked to language as it constitutes a "system of terminology" (Lévi-Strauss, 1963: 37)

Table 3: Kinship Terminology in the Ring Group of Grassfields Bantu (with Duala, English and French Equivalences)

Kedjom	Kom	Aghem	Duala (Bureau, 1962: 62)	English equivalent	French equivalent (Dika Akwa, 1982: 158-176 )
<i>ngeng</i> (basic unit)	<i>ndo</i> (basic unit)	<i>ndo</i> (basic unit)	<i>mboa</i> (basic unit)	household	<i>foyer</i>
<i>ngeng/</i> wiechu	<i>ndum ndo</i>	<i>ketih/ndum</i>	<i>mukoa</i>	nuclear family	<i>foyer moléculaire/minimale</i>
<i>kibeng</i> (first meaning)	<i>ayun'ando</i> (extesion of the house)	<i>ahtom</i>	<i>eboko</i>	polygynous homestead	<i>foyer polygyne</i>
<i>kibeng</i> (extended meaning)	<i>ikuo ndo</i>	<i>kei-ndo</i>	<i>mbia</i> (restricted meaning)	sub-lineage	<i>lignage minimale</i>
<i>ngwah</i>	<i>isando</i>	<i>sai-ndo</i>	<i>mbia</i> (extended meaning)	lineage	<i>lignage maximale</i>
<i>mphikibeng</i> (mother of the homestead)	<i>nabei</i> (mother of the home- stead)	<i>muo-ndo</i> (mother of the home- stead)	<i>nyango mboa</i> (mother of the homestead)	female head of household	<i>femme principale du foyer</i>
<i>tikebeng</i> (father of the homestead)	<i>bobei</i> (father of the home- stead)	<i>ba-bei</i> (father of the home- stead)	<i>sango-mboa</i> (father of the homestead)	male head of household (pater familias)	<i>chef de famille</i>

which should be treated as such. It is therefore only appropriate that the first step in the analysis of kinship should start with a discovery of that system. Siran (1981: 55), on his part, followed this path when he sought a classification of relations within the kinship structure by resorting to nomenclature, in his own words, “la manière dont la langue impose précisément une forme au donné biologique qu’est la consanguinité pour en faire une catégorie sociale [the way language imposes a specific form on the biological fact of consanguinity thereby transforming it into a social category (translation mine)].”

#### MODERN INFLUENCES: MATRILINITY IN A CONTEXT OF GENERALISED PATRILINEAL PRACTICES

One of the most profound forces that have come to bear on matriliney in the area under study is a modern world strongly premised on a form of restricted patriliney. These forces not only pit the matrilineal peoples against their patrilineal neighbours but put them in a wider national context where the overwhelming practices are patrilineal, and a global world definitely patrilineal in its dominant outlook and rationality. This has left an indelible mark on the matrilineal institutions leading to profound modifications that might change the kinship structure in very significant ways. Nkwi (1973: 85-104) reported a heated debate among the westernised elite of Kom on the possibility of a movement

from matrilineal to patrilineal institutions and concluded by asserting that “patrilineal succession will inevitably return to Kom sooner or later...” (1973: 104). He revisited the issue with a more personal conviction when he reported a progressive change to patrilineal institutions stating that:

This is a matter of great interest because it shows that people shape their institutions to suit their needs and not blindly obey traditions, whatever that tradition may be. For example, the Kom in modern times are putting more emphasis on patrilineal institutions because husbands are more and more willing to pay a larger bride wealth for their wives provided they can secure full rights on their offspring and see their sons succeed them and inherit their property (Nkwi & Warnier, 1982: 184).

I do not share in these rationalisations since there is no anthropologically established relationship between kinship system and bride price although I agree with the report on the changes taking place. A number of small scale studies undertaken within the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of the University of Buea Cameroon point to a number of factors operating to effect changes in matrilineal institutions in Aghem, Mmen and Kom: modernisation with its trends towards capitalist accumulation, urbanisation and westernised education; abuses by successors who are beneficiaries of the system and criticism of these abuses,<sup>(24)</sup> the growth of feminist doctrines, the doctrine of rights and modern legislation giving rights to wives and children; a Christianity that overtly advocates patrilineal practices; a generalised context of patriliney either at national<sup>(25)</sup> or global level (Titang, 1997; Fukah, 1998; Kimbi, 2001; Nkwi, 2001; Sah, 2002; Nji, 2001). The following practices are reported in the groups practising matriliney cited above:

- Men tend to pay more attention to their nuclear families than to their extended matrilineal kin groups. Fathers provide their children with the cultural capital of modern education even to the tertiary level and in expensive, prestigious institutions in the advanced industrialised countries of Europe and North America.
- Parents also provide their offspring and wives with land and other estate during their lifetime.
- There is a frequent resort to written wills to transfer property to children and wives. This involves property acquired individually and not through kin group as well as property acquired in the urban areas out of the scope of operation of matrilineal institutions.
- There is a strengthening of father-son bonds to the detriment of the mother's brother-sister's son relationships. There are frequent reports of successors dispossessing and maltreating the wives and children of the mother's brother. To avoid conflicts that will arise from such situations and to protect their wives and children, rich persons allocate property to wives and sons through written wills.
- Some sister's sons decline inheriting the mother's brother's property so as not to be obliged to transmit their property to their own nephews (sister's sons).

The case is reported in Kom of the late Bobe Clement Waindim, a Kom who declined to succeed his mother's brother preferring to succeed his father's compound at Anjang.

The following practices are specific to Kom:

- Wealthy and affluent persons construct solid residential houses and business premises either in the urban areas out of lineage land or in the urban areas of Kom (Njinikom, Belo, Fundong) styled "road-side homes." At the same time they construct symbolic houses of very low standards on kin group land and assign this to be inherited by heirs according to the matrilineal principle. The core of the property (consisting of the "road-side homes") is willed to wives and children (sons). This is a *de facto* segregation of property into personal and kin group property, a distinction that was not present in pre-colonial and colonial times.
- The ties between successors and the deceased uncle's children are weaker than in the traditional context. Likewise, widows no longer treat and consider the deceased husband's successor as positional "husbands" as custom demands. This is due to the fact that most successors have failed in their obligations as new fathers vis-à-vis the family whose headship they are to succeed. In many cases a widow and children are simply dispossessed and sent away to look for shelter with their relatives (the wife's brother).
- The practice of linking a person's name to that of the mother has also changed. This is equally true of the Kedjom, patrilineal neighbours of the Kom to the South. Since its inception the school system reversed the system of naming that linked children to mothers and has crystallised this as a practice, where it is the father's name that defines a child. This practice is problematic in the context of matriliney where father and child are not of the same kin group. This transition has probably gained root because of the provision a child status (*wain ndo*) within the Kom kinship structure. In the Kedjom case patriliney might have facilitated the transition. In either case this change was imposed through a school system which required a child to declare father's name as surname when no such concept existed before.
- There are cases of people deliberately willing their estates to their sons even when they do not belong to patrilineal descent groups.

While some of the changes have come to be permanent (e.g. naming system, education), some of them are situational adaptations to the exigencies of modernity. Whether they are going to take root is a matter of time since some have barely existed a few decades or a single generation. The puzzle is what happens in the following cases:

1. A son inherits the substantive estate of the father while the father's sister's son inherits the symbolic estate situated on kin group land. Is this property then transferred to son's son and so on in that direction? Will it revert to the kin group later? For now there are cases where sons are occupying father's prop-



erty but there are no cases where the issue of this property has been resolved.

2. Where a son inherits all the property of the father and succeeds to the latter's position does he transfer the same and his own estate to his son? What are the principles of succession and inheritance in this case? If the transfer of position and property continued and had principles on which it operated then we will be talking here of a change to patriliney.

The cases above point to the fact that this kinship system is based on a particular form of asymmetrical reciprocity and that it is too early to talk of movement from one system to another. To talk of change will imply a change in principles of operation. What is clear is the fact that the matrilineal kinship is undergoing modifications under the constraints of the modern nuclear family (Fukah, 1998: 43) and adapting to the exigencies in creative ways as it had done in the past. Beyond everything else there is a strong feeling of attachment to matrilineal institutions in the rural areas among the local peoples. On a field trip to Njinikijem in 1997 informants indicated to me that they were still attached to their kinship system and its customs and that failure to observe them would lead to religious sanctions.<sup>(26)</sup> What we have here is a critical period in the social history of a kinship system and the challenges it is facing from a world operating according to a competing logic from its own. Mtika and Doctor (2002: 91) have observed similar trends among the rural peoples of Malawi, irrespective of whether they are matrilineal or patrilineal or matrilineal. They show that primary household members tend to be at the basis of serious decisions on wealth transfers and attribute this to the "increasing privatisation of production and consumption among households engendered by capitalism that is penetrating rural Malawi." They believe that "inherent in capitalism are mechanisms for diminishing matrilineal and patrilineal influence over wealth flow" which weaken and undermine "collective appropriation processes" and the values that are at the basis of both kinship systems as they are replaced by "class oriented individualistic mode of production" (Mtika & Doctor, 2002: 92-94).

## CONCLUSIONS

This study described the principles and logic at the basis of cohabitation between patrilineal and matrilineal institutions in the Western Grassfields of Cameroon. The description of the kinship system shows a basic similarity in principles of operation while an analysis of the interaction in pre-colonial times shows that there have been important modifications in each kinship system as each sought to adjust to the other. There is a tendency towards what Nkwi (1973) in the manner of Meyer Fortes called "complementary filiation" but which I choose to call "reverse operations," which strike a balance between kin groups in the opposite direction of the system. Reverse operations strike a balance in kinship allegiance between the father's and mother's group irrespective of whether a system is matrilineal or patrilineal without there being double descent. Such an observation leads me to the conclusion that kinship sys-

tems are based on dominant ideologies or claims of belonging to one system or another while there are conscious attempts to strike a balance between father's kin group and mother's kin group. The confluence between kinship systems only goes to underline such operations of equilibrium. Lévi-Strauss ([1973] 1996: 116) brought into focus this tendency towards equilibrium when he stated that within the structure of kinship, opposed attitudes, which can be qualified as positive or negative, constitute a balanced set ("*ensemble équilibré*").

One question one asks is: why has this situation not developed into a system of bilateral kinship institutions wherein kinship rights extend to either side of the descent systems? One interpretation of the present situation is that it has survived because kinship is inscribed within the system of cultural orientations that define the very heart of the societies in question. Kinship becomes part of the ideology or overarching claims that attempt to define the specificity of the community. It is thus a principal factor of differentiation and thus identity. Conflicts within the cultural matrix only strengthen these claims to difference. In the end claims to belonging to one type of kinship organization or other is part of a culture that is held for its own sake. This explains why being matrilineal is part of being Kom or why being Kedjom is defined by being patrilineal as opposed to the Kom. It needs stressing that these definitions do not extend to every other group. Such reverse operation has meaning only within the same cultural matrix. Being patrilineal as opposed to matrilineal refers to the same peoples, yet serves to provide an identity to people within the same community (where the two systems co-exist for the Aghem and Kom) and across groups that share the same cultural identity (Kedjom and Kom). Conflicts like the ones reported over history serve to strengthen the cleavages viz. across groups (e.g. Kedjom vs. Kom), between corporate groups within polities (e.g. *Ekwi* vs. *kijem* in Kom; Sih Buh vs. Zonghokwo) and conflicts within kin groups (father-son; mother's brother-sister's son). The delicate balances in the arrangements towards accommodation are the mechanisms by which such conflicts are resolved within kin groups and within corporate groups while maintaining the overt claims to separate identities based on kinship.

I have also analysed the place of matriliney as a "minority" kinship system in a dominant nation-state and transnational context of generalised patriliney and shown the adaptations that the former is undergoing. My conclusion is that these adaptations are rather too short-lived and have not yet taken root to be considered a shift in kinship system. My argument is that besides lacking historical depth, the changes have left the logic of the system intact in the same way as the evolution of the kinship systems in the past. The lesson to be learned is the creativity with which kinship systems are lived and this explains why there would be cultural unity in apparently differing social systems based on seemingly opposed logics of kinship as my study reveals.

Further analysis would be of ultimate importance in historical and genetic anthropology. It will strengthen the hypothesis of common ethno-genesis for the peoples under study and the conclusion that the process of segmentation/differentiation in the Cameroon Grassfields is contemporaneous with the differen-

tiation in kinship systems under the impetus of the logic of either father-son or mother's brother-sister's son proximity/affinity or conflict. This would evidently be situated at the level of Fernand Braudel's (1969) *longue durée* for the different kinship systems to take root, and would involve a cluster of peoples within the same historical theatre, the Ring Group of Grassfields Bantu, as my earlier studies on the history and ethno-genesis of the people have pointed out (Vubo, 2001a: 90). Such an observation will confirm a relation of co-occurrence and correlation between linguistics, on the one hand, and material as well as non-material culture, on the other, adding to it an underlying context of cultural unity without this unity being compromised by the difference in kinship systems. The area under study shows an amazing degree of cultural unity or homogeneity. I have illustrated before that this area belongs to the Ring group of Bantu languages. This unity is equally reflected in folklore, mythology, social institutions and a traditional *vie associative*. It is therefore common to hear these peoples paradoxically claiming both distinct identities and affinity: "They are brothers." The trans-ethnicity is also reflected in the substratum peoples who appear to be of the same stock despite their claims to difference (Vubo, 2001a, 2003, Chilver & Kaberry, 1967a). The reshuffling of identities within this trans-ethnic complex has also contributed to the juxtaposition of peoples with different kinship structures. Kinship thus underlines the diversity of a people with a common identity.

## NOTES

- (1) The linguistic group known as Grassfields Bantu that coincides with the geo-ecological area of the Western Cameroon highlands characterized by grassland (from which it derives its name) interspersed with highland forest is sub-divided into three main groups, namely Mbam-Nkam, Momo and Ring (Stallcup, 1980). Throughout the text, the expression, Ring Group of Grassfields Bantu, as found in the literature, is used to refer to the latter group. Its sub-groups are identified by cardinal points as central, eastern and western (Hyman, 1980).
- (2) This study has gained from some of the findings generated by the field work of Theobald Mue Nji (2001). As the supervisor to his undergraduate research project on kinship I gained inspiration for the current analysis. I am highly indebted to him for the permission to use the data. I also appreciate the comments of Walters Gam Nkwi of the Department of History, University of Buea, which have strengthened my argument.
- (3) Patriliney may pose different problems but by and large not as systemic as the ones observed with matrilineal peoples. My reports pointed to a real dilemma of matriliney in the modern world (see *supra*).
- (4) Tardits (1980) had arrived at the same conclusion for the Bamum.
- (5) I will not speculate the detail related to the cultural similarities which have not yet been studied. For now I wish to establish the cultural unity of the area and to argue for a long historical presence in the area.
- (6) Laburthe-Tolra (1981) has suggested that such mentions for some peoples in the South of Cameroon refer to previous identities subsumed in current ethnic formations.
- (7) This would definitely differ from modern definition of joint ownership of property.
- (8) "*Leme*" is a gender-blind term referring to a fellow sibling.

- (9) “Door” signifies same household.
- (10) “Hole” signifies the uterine link. This is quite similar to Kom designation of the basic kinship unit as *ndum ndo* (household defined by vagina) or the Aghem term *ndum* (vagina).
- (11) The concept of *ijuo* embraces a variety of rites of passage among which one would find that of initiation into *vie associative* (*mukum* lit. association), marriage (*wuwi* lit. woman) and building a homestead (*ngeng* lit. house). This is the topic of a separate on-going investigation.
- (12) The term “*wie*” is used interchangeably for “wife” and “woman.”
- (13) There has been a deviation from this practice of recent as the last four *kedeng* have succeeded their fathers in a direct line.
- (14) There are usually many contestants to the headship of the corporate political groups.
- (15) In the patrilineal groups of the Grassfields men are very conscious of their “after death” and make elaborate preparations to ensure that there is a smooth succession when they die. The absence of an heir is therefore a crisis situation to every man.
- (16) Kom pronunciation of the name, Kedjom.
- (17) My informants attested to the considerable size of Kedjom elements in Kom. I could only identify five lineages in which patrilineal succession was in practice. When some Kom people claim to be Kijem they give the impression that the link is matrilineal. Informants I interviewed in Njinikijem and Njinikom explained the presence of Kijem elements in Kom by the marriage of Kijem women in Kom during the time of the cohabitation, and the reluctance of people related by these ties to move during the relocation of the Kedjom peoples.
- (18) Notice the reference to *abei* (Kom equivalent of the Kedjom term, *kibeng*) instead of *ndo*, kinship term relative in Kom.
- (19) This is also reported by Shanklin (unpublished: 13). *The Track of the Python*. Unpublished privately circulated field notes (mimeograph). *The Origin Story: Fifteen Variations on a Theme*. Unpublished privately circulated field notes (mimeograph).
- (20) The term, Banki is used by the Pati-Nun group (Bamun, Baba I, Bali Nyonga, Bagam, Bati) of the Mbam-Nkam sub-group of Grassfields Bantu- and Mubako-speaking peoples to refer to the Kedjom; hence the use of the term Babanki in colonial and some post-colonial official records as well as some ethnographic literature.
- (21) Local term for sovereign monarch.
- (22) Kom variant of the term *fon*. It is variously rendered as *mfon* (Bamun, Bali Nyon’a), *nfor* (Ngemba speaking peoples) and *fo/fe* (Mbam/Nkam languages).
- (23) A community situated to the east of Aghem.
- (24) A case is currently reported of a famous Kom elite, one-time diplomat, parliamentarian and member of government, who, on succeeding his maternal uncle as *njundo* and inheriting his estates, dispossessed the latter’s wife and children of rights to the deceased’s property and maltreated them to the extent that they had to resort to modern courts for redress. In their petition to the modern courts they cited Article 745 of the Cameroon Civil Code, largely patrilineal in tone, which “... recognized children and their descendants as the rightful heirs of their father and mother...” to justify their claims (Application for letters of administration of the Gregory Boh estate dated 2/2/2003, p. 7).
- (25) The majority of the Kom’s immediate neighbours are patrilineal: the Kedjom, Bafut, Babungo, Bum.
- (26) These informants showed much apprehension when I approached the issue of matriliny and its institutions, and questioned me whether I was a government official on assignment to study the institutions with a view to changing them. They told me that such a

mission had been sent before. The behaviour exhibited by these informants bordered on phobia borne of religious fundamentalism.

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