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Do you eat Achu here? Nurturing as a way of life in a Cameroon diaspora

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Earlier studies on migration were largely dominated by the study of the determinants of migration, with economic theories being at the fore in explaining this phenomenon. Our focus instead will be on the life-cultivating practices that migrants associate with ‘home societies’ and wish to maintain in host societies. Rather than pursue the darker side of ‘biopolitics’, we focus instead on the domestication of nurtured life and the privatization of everyday practices ensuring well-being within the diasporic setting of Grassfield Cameroonians in Cape Town.

Keywords: life-making practices; Cameroon migrants; Cape Town

Introduction

This is a paper about the cultivating of life by migrants from the Cameroon Grassfields resident in Cape Town, South Africa. Earlier studies on migration were largely dominated by the study of the determinants of migration; with economic theories being at the fore in explaining this phenomenon. Equally, before the 1990s, studies were also preoccupied with migration as a disjuncture between family and migrants, and gave priority to the latter’s quest to integrate into the host society (Levitt, Dewind, and Vertovec 2003; Portes and DeWind 2007). However, since the 1990s, a gradual paradigm shift has taken place from a trend of assimilationist/acculturation epistemology to current trends that focus on migrants’ social relational (transnational) connections between host and home countries (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc 1994; Portes, Haller, and Guarnizo 2002, 279; Levitt, Dewind, and Vertovec 2003; Portes and DeWind 2007). As such, a focus on transnationalism challenges inevitable processes of assimilation and incorporation and looks at the complexity of cultivating a life that reproduces a sense of well-being and at the same time accommodates new circumstances.

Obviously, as part of a focus on cultivating a life we are taking advantage of Foucault’s writing on biopower and the techniques of the self (Foucault 1978). We also find Agamben’s grounding of modern sovereignty in the distinction between forms of life ‘proper to an individual or group’ (*bios*) and bare life ‘common to all living beings’ (*zoe*) particularly useful (Agamben 1998, 9–14). In both forms, Agamben argues, the issue is not belief in a natural life but a qualified life, a particular way of life (Agamben 1998, 9). The ‘care of life’ is not only a matter of individual or collective preference

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but, he argues, has become part of the ‘fundamental biopolitical structure of the modern’ (Agamben 1998). While as Foucault instructs us, certain ‘arts of existence’ and ‘practices of the self’ are constitutive of living in the conditions of sovereignty encouraged by any modern nation state (Foucault [1984] 1992, 10–11), we argue that this promotes too exclusive a view that their value will inevitably be subject to judgements made by a state managing a population en masse. On the contrary, migrants may wish to exclude themselves as a sort of voluntary ‘state of exemption’ precisely in order to retain the life-cultivating chances of the biogenetic population to which they believe they belong (cf. Agamben 2005, 1). How this makes them vulnerable as enemy to a ‘state of exclusion’ as far as their host society is concerned relates directly to Foucault’s discussion of the regulatory power of the state over the life of its population and to Agamben’s focus on ‘bios’ as ways of including or excluding ‘bare life’ from its polity (Agamben 1998).

As many authors have stressed, this state of ‘inclusion exclusion’ is the very ethos of biopolitics: to manage the health of the body politic inescapably requires the control and elimination of foreign bodies and a politics of death as the first principle of biopolitics (following Rose 2007, 57–58). When life itself becomes the overriding criterion that can guide the exercise of political authority, it is understandable that to prevent this exercise or gain some protection from the threat of a ‘state of exemption’ the practices of cultivating a life become domesticated or privatized. Under these circumstances, people ‘escape’ by withdrawing the conditions of life to within the ‘home’ wherever that might be. The form of life described by Agamben (1998, 9), following Roman and Ancient Greek distinctions, as ‘zoe’ is more in line with such cultivation of life as everyday practice, experienced both as common-sense feelings of health and well-being as well as being based on practices that are ‘withdrawn’ or domesticated within settings that are treated in some sense as ‘home’.

Rather than pursue the darker side of ‘biopolitics’, it is this sense of the domestication of nurtured life and the privatization of everyday practices ensuring well-being that we want to dwell on within the diasporic setting of Grassfield Cameroonians in Cape Town. Our inspiration here is drawn from the studies by Farquhar and Zhang of nurturing life in contemporary Beijing (2005, 2012). Their premise is that life-cultivation arts, health practices broadly understood, are a political practice that cannot be separated from the conditions mobilized in the service of the good life (Farquhar and Zhang 2005, 303). We extend their argument to the ethnography of everyday life and practices of nurturing life to be found in cultural practices and associational meetings of Cameroonian migrants from the Bamenda Grassfields in Cape Town.

Nurturing life in Cape Town

Migration is embedded in memory; memories that migrants want to carry with them to make connections between home and host country. These connections may be in the form of what they physically carry (food, objects) or as knowledge that when performed gives them a sense of who they are and where they come from. The body is, therefore, a sort of conservative container that modifies any abstract notion of memory. The actions of migrants in terms of what is brought with them from home (food, traditional regalia and ritual substances) reflect internalized habits that migrants have consciously or unconsciously learnt and in many respects, the human body becomes a ‘microcosm of society’ (Douglas 1970, 93). By looking at the cultural practices of migrants, we ascertain how these connections between the host and home countries are made. This leads us to yet another important aspect of the cultivation of memory in the body: the connections between the living and the dead. The activities of migrants at home are unequivocally concerned with the ontological basics of life and death. Of particular interest therefore is to find out the connections between memories, objects and the body. How are these connections harnessed, produced and reproduced to ensure continuity and prevent effacement?

In a pragmatic sense of surviving, migrants from Cameroon in Cape Town will adapt to and incorporate a way of life conducive to living in South Africa. In effect, there is no deep divide between the everyday practices of living in Cape Town and wider senses of well-being involving relations with communities at home in Cameroon. Often, successful migration is seen as a respite for the family, when huge amounts of remittances are involved; be they financial or material. This in effect is undeniable as migration is often seen a means of improving the livelihood of the family much as it is the well-being of the migrants. Among Grassfields migrants in Cape Town this sense of well-being involves a reciprocal tie that recognizes a deeper private or domesticated sense of well-being that cannot be reproduced living in Cape Town. This sense of deeper well-being is expressed through two main practices of nurturing life among Cameroon Grassfields migrants – celebrating the birth (born-house) and the naming of the child, and the treatment of the dead. It is through such life practices that this migrant community see themselves in relation to other communities and that of the host community and so foster a sense of who they are.

Born-house is the traditional celebration to mark the birth of a child in the family, a few weeks or months after the baby has been born. What marks this ceremony is not just the food that is consumed (though it is equally important for the occasion as it entails particular meals to be prepared, the absence of which is tantamount to no born-house at all) but also the rituals that are performed for and in honour of the child. Migrants are still firmly attached to ancestral names as seen in both the naming of children born to migrant parents in Cape Town as well as the born-house ceremony that ensues. While it is very common for most first born children (male) to be named after their fathers, in the communities under study all of the three males, two born of Mankon and one of Pinyin parents, are named after the father. However, one important aspect of this is that the middle name given to the child must come from the home village. For instance, all informants talked of how, as soon as the baby was delivered, they phoned home to disclose the sex and to ask ‘what will the child be called?’. In cases where the family back home had been notified of the pregnancy, two names are chosen (male and female), and depending on the sex, one is used. For instance, when Jane gave birth in Cape Town, the news was communicated to her father, who in turn called his father’s brother, to find out which ancestral name is appropriate for the child. Combined names of two deceased relatives were sent to Cape Town. As explained by Jane’s father,¹ the two names belong to deceased members of the family and since their deaths no member of the family had named a child after them; hence in order to ward off any dissatisfaction from the ancestors it was time for the deceased to be brought back among the living. This however, not only suggests attachment to ancestral kin, but importantly, the power of the name. The question that follows is, what effect does the name have on the bearer? Quite often, the bearer is likened to the person that s/he is named after, and in the event of deviant behaviour s/he is admonished to behave like the person whose name s/he is carrying. In case of the reverse, s/he is acknowledged as living up to the name. Also, the deceased is brought back to life by telling his/her history and recreating his/her mannerisms. Besides, children are not only given the names of the dead; a child can be named after a living kin as well. In most cases, this would be for a matrilineal relative who did not ‘sow any seeds’² of her own.

As regards born-house, Jane’s parents decided that the mother would visit them in Cape Town and see the baby. It was during her visit that the born-house for the baby was organized. The festivities associated with this occasion demonstrate the extent to which cultural attachment is maintained despite being away from home. One indication of this is the effort made to overcome the difficulty acquiring the food that gets its name from the ceremony – ‘born-house plantains’ – a porridge of plantains in lots of palm oil with bitter leaf (vegetable), and huge chunks of beef.³ When plantains are unavailable, whatever may be prepared is adorned with a large quantity of palm oil. Apart from feasting, the occasion also serves to connect the child with the ancestors. But it also shows the relationship between the body, food, the living, and the dead. Tropical

food in Cape Town is expensive and not often available. Hence, in order for the born-house to be considered significant, a large quantity of plantains are cooked. Given its scarcity, it is substituted with green bananas and cooked in a similar manner. *Achu* is also prepared (see Figure 1), although the availability of cocoyam (*colocasia*)⁴ is seasonal, and members go to any length it takes to ensure its presence during the ceremony.

Also, during the course of the celebrations, the grandmother is given the child to hold and is expected to call on the ancestors to watch over him and in turn tell the child that, as he grows, he should know that his umbilical cord is at home, taken there to be kept with the ancestors. Besides, she is expected to ‘fogho djwi-zo’ on the child. Loosely translated, this will mean she should pour her breath on the child. In effect the breath is not literally considered to be hers as it is believed she now represents the family and the ancestors – both the living and the dead. Hence her breath is of the family and the ancestors. As explained by Rowlands (1992, 121) ‘breath was partible in its manifestation in all life and nature and made its mystical power felt in unexpected events and numinous places where libation would be made.’ It is therefore in this light that the grandmother’s breath is considered as part of the libation process of entrusting the child to the care of the ancestors. The child is further reminded that when s/he shall visit home s/he will be united with the ancestors⁵ (see Figure 2). What takes place in the born-house therefore is the return of an ancestral spirit in human form, and the grandmother who is representing the family at large, welcomes the child into the world of the living and calls on him to stay and not to go back to the world of the ancestors. Invoking the latter to take care of the child as he grows also serves to maintain the connection between the world of the living and that of the migrants’ ancestors. As confirmation, the child is given a drop of liquid from the food prepared as a way of welcoming him to the world of the living. More importantly, to reassure him that he is among kin and kith who care about his well-being.

It is quite understandable therefore, why every migrant aspires to give a deceased parent and/or grandparent a befitting funeral. This is because in death they are believed to take the role of ancestors, hence it is important that they are sent off well in order to assume the role of watching



Figure 1. *Achu* the staple meal of Mankon and one of the must-have dishes in a born-house. A migrant at a born-house ceremony eating *achu*. Source: Photograph by Henrietta Nyamnjoh.



Figure 2. The baby is handed to the grandmother to ‘fogho djwi-zo’ concomitantly presenting him to the ancestors. *Source:* Photograph by Henrietta Nyamnjoh.

over the living. Those unable to travel back home for this occasion will endeavour to send substantial amounts of money as well as organize an event in the host country to mark their own mourning of the dead. During this period of bereavement, much is dedicated to careful planning before the migrant travels home. This involves long periods spent on the phone with relatives to arrange how the funeral will take place and neither money nor effort is spared to give the ceremony the quality it deserves (see also Geschiere 2005). Much of this planning is centred on which funeral house to use, what sort of casket to obtain and ultimately on buying food and drinks. It would be considered shameful and improper for a deceased person with children abroad not to be buried in this manner. While migrants would want to provide the best for their deceased parents in terms of how well the funeral is organized, they are equally as concerned with their image as ‘bush fallers’ – a hunting and distance farming metaphor to refer to migrants who go abroad. And the country of destination is regarded as the hunting ground from where migrants are expected to bring back their game (cf. Nyamnjoh 2011, 701) and hence will succumb to organizing a befitting funeral that deserves to be called ‘bush faller die’ (migrants indulge in elaborate and excessive expenditure in organizing the funeral), with everything done in excess. For those who cannot make it home they send a substantial amount of money. For instance, when Joyce’s mother died in October 2011, Joyce sent home R17,000 (approximately €1600) with precise instructions on how she wanted the funeral to be arranged. Although Joyce is the youngest of her mother’s children, her financial prowess has given her an edge over her elders. Watching the video that was sent by courier immediately after the funeral Joyce was visibly satisfied that it was organized as instructed.

Although being away from home, migrants are conscious of where they belong – where the ‘umbilical cord (*nitong*) is buried’ – returning the body to the place of birth is therefore the required thing to do because, as informants contend, it is ‘a disgrace to bury one of ours in

Cape Town, the corpse will certainly haunt us'. This statement echoes those that would be made in Cameroon as sufficient reason for the deceased to be taken back to the home village for burial in order to stop his spirit wandering in the city (see also Geschiere 2005, 47).

Whether it is a funeral that occurred back in the home village or in the host country, members would want to respect all the traditional practices that go with such occasions. In the event of being unable to return to their home village upon the death of a close family member, people not only send money home but also organize a funeral ceremony in the host country. Most often, the funeral is made to coincide with the day of interment back home. Such was the case with Paul when he lost his father in Mankon, Cameroon. Belonging to two home village associations in Cape Town meant that it would be a grand ceremony involving the whole Mankon population, with food, drink and dancing. During such moments, the meals served are Cameroonian. It is partly for these reasons that foodstuff such as *eru* (forest vegetable), *garri* (tapioca), *egusi* (pumpkin seed), bitter leaf, smoked fish and spices and even vegetable seeds provided by those with gardens, are among the things which migrants would travel with from home. As with photographs, having these various foodstuffs in their kitchen cupboards subdues nostalgia and satisfies the craving for home. For those who do not go home or have nobody to bring them foodstuffs from Cameroon, tropical shops have sprung up to satisfy these appetites. Restaurants in Cape Town (run by Cameroonians) now serve Cameroonian meals for those who cannot prepare the exotic meals like *eru*, or *koki* (black-eyed bean pudding), and *achu*. While some of the restaurants reserve the weekends for special dishes that are time consuming in their preparation like the above mentioned.

Much as born-house, and funeral rituals (locally referred to as *cry die*), reiterate migrants' sense of belonging and self-consciousness, they also depict them as people firmly attached to their culture. It is believed that certain forms of cultural practice cannot be sustained because people live far from their homeland and so the moral work of nurturing oneself focuses around acts of providing and consuming food and drink. To go deeper into how Cameroonians engage in the work of constituting moral subject requires that we say something more about food, substances, and the body within the home region of Grassfields Cameroon and in particular Mankon and Pinyin, the two communities from which our migrant informants originate.

Feeding ancestors in Bamenda

Most African languages, and all the Bantu languages, make a lexical distinction between different types of eating. In particular, distinctions are made between the swallowing of soft, ground food and eating that involves chewing or tearing food. In Mankon and the Ngemba-speaking (the Western Bantu borderland) region of the Grassfields in Cameroon, the two words are *dzie* and *kefuru*. The emotional connotations are quite different. *Dzie* is 'good eating', i.e. nourishing and unifying. It implies a sense of well-being gained from sharing and eating food together, of good words being said, and experienced at events promoting social harmony or the resolution of conflict. The successor to the title of a dead elder for instance, is described at his installation, as one who 'eats the house' (*dzie nda*), i.e. restores its unity. *Kefuru*, on the contrary is perceived as potentially harmful and dangerous – the focus is on the teeth and acts of tearing apart. For instance, when people eat meat, or show their teeth during acts of extravagant consumption. A commensality of bad nocturnal cannibalism is opposed to the good diurnal commensality and the sharing of ground, soft, mixed vegetable food that can be swallowed in a lump (cf. Rowlands and Warnier 1988; Warnier 2007).

Kefuru is widely associated with witchcraft where emphasis is on the destructive consumption of the lives of others, usually referred to by witches as goats or fowls. When humans transform into animals to hunt other animals, or to prey on the domesticated animals of others, they usually

privilege taking the form of predatory animals and so will kill their prey by tearing it with their teeth. Little children on the other hand, who transform into animals to follow their mothers to the farm, because they have been left unattended at home or miss their mothers, usually turn into a harmless type of snake, or chameleon, or such like. So there is indeed a wildness associated with eating fellow flesh, and a sense that humans indulge in such destruction only as a last resort. The expression ‘be dze be’ is reported in the Wimbun area to mean those who eat with others, contrasting with the Bum expression ‘gheta kuta ghet’ – those who eat others (personal communication to Nyamnjoh, March 2, 2012).

Sometimes someone might therefore appear to *dze* only to turn out to *kfuru* those which he/she was expected to protect, such as lineage heads that turn out to deplete rather than enhance. Similarly, that which you *dze* might turn out to be harmful to your system, almost as if it was something that you *kfuru*. It is also significant that most things eaten raw are usually considered as *kfuru*, however soft they might be. It would appear that there is no hard and fast rule, overwhelming though our case may be, for the distinction between the two terms and slippage or ambiguity between them is a constant feature.

In a seminal article, Ramon Sarro has described a similar distinction in types of eating among the Baga, a group of swamp rice farmers living on the coast of the Republic of Guinea (Sarro 2000). As in many other African languages, the Baga have two verbs for eating, *kidi* and *kisom* which he describes, in relation to Baga notions of personhood, as opening two antagonistic symbolic domains. We can justifiably describe distinctions of eating as a widespread feature of African languages and modes of thought.

However, the act of ingesting or swallowing food is certainly more complicated than it might seem. There are two types of eating, two types of masticating and swallowing food and two images (at least) of the parts of the body involved. As we go on to show in this paper, there are also several different ideas of personhood and moral agency involved which we argue have remained stable over long periods of time and are maintained despite long distance migrations and spatial dislocations.

Ingestion and moral agency

Swallowing in the Grassfields generally relates mouth/teeth, throat and stomach in different ways. As widely found in West Africa – distinguishing head and belly contrasts ideas of separate individuality/fate from the commensality of consuming food together. This is a more embodied version of the contrast Fortes made between the cult of ancestors and individual destiny shaping Tallensi personality (Fortes 1959). Horton, continuing a Fortesian use of a psychoanalytic distinction between conscious agency and unconscious mind, drew out the Kalabari distinction between *biomgbi* (individual awareness pursuing status and competition) and *teme* (immaterial spirit existing before birth and surviving death that speaks the words of destiny before joining the body on earth) to create a wider West African scenario (Horton 1961, 113). While *biomgbi* is that part of a personality that would be recognized as conscious agency, it is *teme*, he argued, that steered the person into a good or bad destiny. While the psychoanalytic model has not received much favour, the original Fortesian distinction between ancestral substance/spirit reincarnated to guide the individual agency of the individual has been widely recognized (cf. Sarro 2000). Morton Williams, in his outline of Yoruba cosmology, also emphasized that in art works, individual agency is related to the head as the site where destiny would become apparent.

The Fortesian psychoanalytic distinction can be relocated as the embodiment of a contrast between head and belly. This also corresponds with other recent interpretations of West African personhood, such as the ‘politics of the belly’ as expressed in Bayart (1993, 228–260) and the ‘pot-king’ (Warnier 2007). The throat or swallowing can therefore be interpreted as

transitional between these states and, like all boundaries, can be recognized as the seat of considerable ambivalence. The throat is not only the site of swallowing; the ideal of soft, ground food slipping down without a blockage is emphasized versus the food that might block and choke. It is also perceived as the place where sound comes from – words are emitted from the throat – so the association with good and bad speech makes it a place where ingestion is met by emission. To have a good throat is therefore to be a good person. To be able to have good thoughts and say good words and to be in a transitional state between uttered words and ingested food is the physical expression of integration and harmony (cf. Sarro 2000, 171 who draws our attention to the role of the throat among the Baga in Guinea). To have a bad/big throat is a sign of selfishness and anger. To swallow without considering others would be for some the main characteristic of being a witch. To have a good throat is also associated with wisdom and status. In a meal involving a chicken, the best part, given to the oldest person present, is the gizzard because a chicken is noted for its feeding (hence it is not really meat) in that it pecks and swallows in one movement without chewing. Breath, saliva and spraying liquids held in the mouth – described by Warnier as characteristic of Fons – evoke a similar idea of goodness through emission and their linkage with ingestion (Warnier 2007). To have a demanding throat – *langaa* – is also seen as dangerous, as it might generate appetites that result in disharmony. So a Fon with a greedy throat risks having nothing left for his kingdom to eat, and could thus be accused of having depleted the kingdom in the same manner as someone who commits *kefuru* against his people. *Kefuru* also suggests eating in a hurry almost as if one were afraid of being surprised or caught in the act, which is often how witches, or civil servants who take bribes, eat. Little wonder that the republic under Paul Biya and the Beti is often likened to a country depleted by white ants, an image not helped by the fact Biya constantly refers to himself as ‘l’homme lion’. What is *kefuru* might in certain instances be regurgitated and then eaten, suggesting that power and success itself is demonstrated through acts of eating that both emulates and confronts the ‘bad eating’ of the witch.

Fear of poisoning evokes roughly similar responses. The good person will vomit the poisonous substance; hence any symptoms of regurgitating food or drink are a source of fear. But the bad person will ingest the poison which will meet the good substances of the belly and the latter will destroy both the ingested substance and the body ingesting it will be identified as a witch. Hence the belly is a safe place for the gradual accumulation of substances that will protect and increase the potency of the holder. A baby is born with some element of this capacity – hence the idea that the umbilical chord (*mitong*) – once left to wither and drop off (not cut!) will be buried under a plantain in the compound of the father where the child is born. Mothers are known to physically send their forefinger into the child’s throat to force them to vomit when they suspect they have taken in what they should not have. This also happens when children are learning to chew – using the teeth to *kfuru*. Almost as if, preparing their teeth to go hunting, the growing child moves from domesticated eating to wild eating, which one may not like but cannot avoid.

Comfort and commensality

Recent studies of African systems of witchcraft and sorcery and concomitant notions of individual success and failure have shown that Africans live a delicate balance between ‘centripetal’ tendencies that tend to collapse the individual into a member of a corporate group and centrifugal tendencies towards individual excellence and success (Rowlands and Warnier 1988, 123–125; Rowlands 1996). What might be termed extremes of individualistic and relational personhood create tensions that are expressed and managed in the use of explicit bodily metaphors. We might say that people in the Grassfields have an individualistic view of their heads and

throats and a communitarian view of their bellies. The head is the site of individual agency, anxieties and worries, also where envy and selfishness is located. The head is also the site in funerary rites associated with the transmission of ancestral substance from the dead to the living and, in particular, eventually to the named successor. This is done in Mankon and Pinyin by rubbing a stone on the forehead of the dead elder, also placing the rim of his drinking horn there so that his ancestral substance will be held in these items in a special shrine (*nebeute*) until his successor is named and the stone rubbed on his head (*ngoh-htu-bephah* – lit). and he drinks from the drinking horn as part of the installation ritual. The throat is also a transitional space of speech where either nice or harsh words and thoughts are expressed – words which either promote the harmony of the group or form a curse that combined with libations will have serious physical effects on the person named (cf. Dillon 1990). But the real sign of a good throat is eating correctly, in particular eating *achu* or corn *fufu* and showing a willingness to share it with others. Indeed, the sharing of *achu* or *fufu* is one of the first signs in children that they are real persons. Hence the importance, even if far away and unable to easily get the correct ingredients, for migrant Grassfielders to be able to at least occasionally eat *achu* or corn *fufu* as a sign of their intact personhood. But if the throat is a transition space between ingested food and the emission of good words, the belly is the site of the communitarian substance that is linked to the idea of the protection of an ancestral spirit that survives death and will be reincarnated in a newborn.

The passage from head, mouth and throat, to belly is therefore dynamic and open to different perceptions of the general health of the person. You can never be sure of the food that might be offered to you. For example, dreaming of eating meat is a sign of becoming a witch or of being caught up in the invisible world of witches (what Geschiere 1997 calls the dark side of kinship). Protecting the mouth/throat as the point of entry and emission is therefore quite a sensible way of protecting vulnerable parts of the body. Weak points of the body are thought to exist for example at the nape of the neck, shoulders, wrists and elbows and the lower legs where the skin become stretched and thin over the flexing of joints. These are the places where a mother will take a child to a healer who will, by using a razor, make fine incisions and rub in medicines that will protect these vulnerable spots against the entrance of malevolent spirit substances.

But the mouth/throat is the most vulnerable of these openings. Jane Guyer discusses the wearing of brass rings among the Beti up until the 1930s as forms of enhancement which connect also with oiling the body and the permeation of substances that were ingested or rubbed into the skin. The neck and throat were the most prominent places for wearing heavy brass collars and rings that seems to have been associated with youth and yet added as a sign of maturity and age. It is the weight and sheer discomfort of wearing these heavy collars and rings that puzzles 19th-century observers, and Guyer (2012, 366). Yet brass is both medicinal and protective, and the covering of weak spots previously alluded to suggest that the purpose is not adornment but apotropaic. In the Grassfields, beads had already replaced brass by the end of the 19th century and the wearing of large chevron beads around the neck accompanied by the increased wearing of imported European cloth and indigo dyed cloth from the Benue Valley had, by the 1930s been supplemented by European-style clothing and Hausa-style embroidered gowns. A consistent theme is the focus on the throat and the passage of digestion to the belly in both the wearing of beads, the wearing of buttoned up European clothing and the popularity of Hausa gowns with embroidery of the ‘dagger type’ from the throat to the abdomen. The implicit protective functions of the body are energized by the wearing of rings, beads, cloth, and the elaboration of embroidery designs in silk and synthetic threads. Activation of the defences of the body against threat is a constant theme of long historical duration, modified only recently by the plethora of new substances and materials that can be used to protect the body.

Autopsy, where practised, also focuses on the passage from throat to the belly, and the body will be slit along this line to examine substances located around the liver for signs of poisoning or witchcraft substance (cf. Salpeteur and Warnier 2013). The analogue here, however, is with how the products of the hunt will be caught and slaughtered. The prescription for the ritual slaughter of a leopard details that the hunter brings the animal's body to the palace where the Fon will officiate. He slits the body of the animal from belly to throat, removes the head, empties the entrails and examines with diviners different organs to establish whether it is a human transformed that has been killed. As one can imagine, such an event is now rare, but both authors have participated on occasions where domestic animals are slaughtered and the meat shared out in a similarly prescribed manner. For example, a cow that a group of friends will share for a Christmas feast will be killed in front of them by having its throat cut. The body is then opened from the belly to the sternum with the ribs broken and the head is cut off and removed. The entrails are removed and examined and, if satisfactory, the upper and then lower limbs and back are cut and the meat apportioned to members of the club on the basis of how much they paid for the animal. Autopsy for the human dead merges therefore with the practice of slaughter and sharing 'hunted' meat, as a sign of death from witchcraft and as a rather horrendous sign of the failure of the defences of the body to defeat death and ensure the continuity of life.

Eating secrets

Achieving the right balance between individualizing and communitarian tendencies involves feeding the stomach with success. And the latter can only come from the ancestral group which has fed you since you were invisible, i.e. before you were born. Moreover, after birth, as a visible being, potentially capable of seeing invisible things, you are literally fed the 'secrets' of the group as you eat the food of the group. For example, installation rites are the time when you take the name of a dead elder but also are fed the secrets of the descent group located in the elderhood. In the kingdoms of the Grassfields there are many different 'bundles' of secrets that can be ingested as medicines (*ngang*) and there are many other secrets to be ingested relating to special roles in the descent group and other associations. Joining a secret society or 'house' (*nda*) meant payments in food and drink to 'feed' the house; the members of which would in turn feed an initiate with the special medicines associated with the powers of that house or society. Grassfields knowledge or secrets are not ideas secreted and stored in the mind but come from substances ingested in the mouth/throat and the belly, thus transforming individuals into a different kind of person. In fact the substances are most often normal food but it is the context of words spoken and of eating together that confirms solidarity and belonging and the power to convey secrets to members. Success and personal differentiation are therefore quite physical matters that move down the body from head, mouth, throat to belly and, in this movement, transforms individualizing success into collective potency, and manifestly visible to invisible forms of success. The most powerful of these substances, it is widely claimed, existed in the past but with modernity have been lost or deliberately suppressed because members could no longer guarantee they would be kept secret and used responsibly. Even so, it is clear that societies exist in Grassfields kingdoms that are attributed with actions, substances and words that activate potency, potentially to cause great harm as well as forming the basis for real influence and power. Hence 'bush fallers', i.e. returning migrants, who build large and ostentatious houses and give lavish spectacles with expensive food and drink, are enjoyed and yet scorned in that their powers are limited to displays of visible success. Yet migrants in Cape Town bring with them these principles of association and the conditions of success which they use and to which they attribute their success while comparing fellow Africans as inferior and impotent.

Transnational nurturing and success

There is a practical nature to nurturing in Grassfields of Cameroon, therefore, that judges practise by their efficacy. It comes down to certain basic assumptions about what life is like for its inhabitants and what they share in common in terms of aspirations and fears of loss. How migrants manage their lives outside of Cameroon is part of this disposition which they take with them and at the same time learn to alter and accommodate as they go along. As we might surmise, issues of self-nurturing for migrants come up most pertinently with onset of illness or bad luck, but this is offset by planned occasions when acts of commensality are celebrated as the achievements of diasporic associations that are competing with each other to demonstrate to the families at home in Cameroon how successful they have become. Both Pinyin and Mankon have their own home village associations – Pinyin Family Meeting and Mankon Association for Cultural Development (MACUDA) respectively – that play the role of parents to their diaspora communities. Hence, while belonging to them is not obligatory, it is a moral duty for migrants in Cape Town to set up a branch of the home village association and to participate following the adage that ‘one hand cannot tie a bundle’. These are self-help associations usually organized around the celebration of certain events like birthdays/marriages or for the organization of events like football competitions. They are part of a prestige economy in which the presentation of self is based on the mutual recognition of personal success and status. Apart from discussions of the welfare of the group, one thing that binds them together is the joy of sharing food and eating together. For each meeting session a group of 15 members from the Pinyin association take turn to provide meals that would feed the group, while four members do the same for the Mankon association. Usually members perform this duty once every year. Members are expected to go out of their way to provide Cameroonian food from one of the food items listed above. In this regard, members gain further respect from the group by the way they entertain. Despite calls for feeding in MACUDA to be suppressed because of the cost and the acrimony created by accusations that some members provide substandard food, members are still encouraged to provide proper meals (Cameroonian food) as this is what draws people to the meetings, and eating together promotes commensality and conviviality.

Also, the visit of a sister group is a serious occasion that calls for an all-out celebration of sharing and exchange of gifts. For instance, when MACUDA Johannesburg visited their Cape Town counterpart in May 2011, this occasion was marked by a cultural evening for which the Cape Town branch prepared *achu* with both yellow and black soup, as well as pepper soup in Cameroonian style. Another highlight of the occasion was the exchange of gifts by both associations. Having been formed long before the Cape Town branch, the Johannesburg branch assumed the role of the mother branch. As such, the Johannesburg branch saw it as their duty to delegate members to travel to Cape Town with a message of support and encouragement – ‘for see whether this new pekin di waka fine’ – loosely translated, this would mean ‘they have come to verify whether the new baby is able to walk well’; euphemistically referring to the Cape Town branch as their new baby. This is similar to the visit by Jane’s mother to see the baby from Cameroon. The groups then pledged to support each other, to hold annual conventions together, and especially to help financially with repatriation of deceased members back to Cameroon.

The emphasis MACUDA places on collective effort over individual achievement is further illustrated when in December 2012, the group decided on a picnic at Cape Point. Members had to car-pool, and every member was called upon to make a packed lunch for three persons in order to eat as a family, given that the picnic involved members and their families (spouses and children). Although a few members had visited Cape Point before, they found it appealing to go with the group again as it was ‘more fun’. This transnational sense of moral agency

extends the tenuous links to how one should behave at home to many different diaspora settings. In general, Cameroonian migrants within Africa maintain stronger ties with each other and their homeland than those migrants who live in Europe or North America. Yet this is a matter of degree. MACUDA groups in St. Paul Minnesota do travel to meet their parent group in Washington, DC or attend an annual national convention that brings together all the branches of the various states as if they were also returning to the home village in Cameroon.

Conclusion

The main point of our paper is that cultivating a nurtured way of life is key to materializing the person in both Grassfields and more widely West and Central African and diaspora settings. It is more than metaphoric in the sense that quite literally, living bodies and persons are the same thing and both are shaped and made by the ingestion of substances and the speaking of words over a life time. With the spread of neo liberalism since the 1990s there had been strong condemnation of ‘bad governance’ and the excessive consumption and corruption of elites; however, no matter how justified criticisms of such excess might be, what has become obscured is the basic issues of the efficacy of nurturing practices and their relationship to personal well-being and success for many Africans. Where life itself is felt to be at stake, fine distinctions are made about moral agency. Judgements are made on the basis of a person’s speech and actions as to whether they are engaged in forms of ‘nurturing’ that are beneficial and oriented towards the interests of the collective or are dangerous and selfishly individualistic. The idea that any one form or act will inevitably attract opprobrium would be naïve. ‘To have a belly’ is the achievement of a cultivated life. If goods, wealth and material success are signs of individual agency and acumen they are also products of a destiny shaped by ancestral substances shared by a group. Maintaining the balance between the centripetal and the centrifugal is more or less the struggle around which notions of ‘life’ are formed and accounts for the considerable emotional fluidity often characterizing relations between close kin. It is a reasonable expectation that leading a good life will result in a good death and one where perpetuity in terms of being reborn can be expected. But pain as both the outcome of malicious or selfish acts is also anticipated as a shared experience and as a source of anxiety. Maintaining the ‘blindage’ (armature) is inevitably somewhat fraught and unsure.

Paying moral attention to acts of ‘nurturing’ inscribe themselves in many ways into the perpetuity of life. Grassfielder migrants in Cape Town adapt and sustain a ritual life consistent with the collective life (*bios*) at home in the village in Cameroon. It does not mean that life will be exactly the same; at home in the village, the world of the ‘bush faller’ may be envied and exaggerated in the language of excess and success (Rowlands 2011). But in the world of the host society, maintaining a collective life as a voluntary act of exclusion and inclusion has its dangers. It compromises making modern sovereign power in biopolitical techniques of rule compatible with seeking a popular form of life as the basis for everyday relations of existence.

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Notes

1. Conversation in Bamenda; 24 September 2011.
2. A euphemistic way of referring to childless women in Mankon.

3. Less palm oil makes this plantain very different from porridge plantain that is prepared for normal consumption.
4. A particular cocoyam that is pounded and eaten with yellow sauce (*achu*).
5. Field notes, Cape Town; 5 November 2011.

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