

1. Description

1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family: “Bamilekè” Broken down into smaller tribes: Aghem, Babadjou, Bafang, Bafou, Bafoussam, Bagam, Baloum, Bamaha, Bamdendjina, Bamendjou, Bamenkoumbit, Bamenyam, Bana, Bandjoun, Bangangté, Bangoua, Bangwa, Bangwa-Fontem, Bapi, Batcham, Batchingou, Bati, Batié, Dschang, Fe'e Fe'e, Fomopea, Fongondeng, Foto, Fotouni, Mbouda

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com): [ISO 639-3: bcw](#)

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude): The Bamilekè region covers 6,196 square kilometers and extends 5°-6° N and 10°-11° E. Northwest they are protected by the Bamboutos Mountains located northwest and by the Noun River on the southeast side of the tribe boundaries.

1.4 Brief history: Including some 100 kingdoms of chiefdoms in this bantu group. They are of varying size but similar in cosmology, social, and political structure. They all speak similar languages but some more specific to the immediate tribe. The Bamilekè refer to themselves as Bamilekè when speaking with non- Bamilekè tribes but specify their kingdoms when speaking with other Bamilekè tribe members. The Bamilekè region is divided into five administrative divisions in the western province: Bamboutos, Haut-Nkam, Mifi, Menoua, and Nde.

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors:

1.6 Ecology (natural environment): The Bamilekè lives in the grass fields in the western providence of Cameroon. They were known as “the people down there” associated them with the region of habitation. The region is made up of mostly grass fields, a mountainous plateau. The region is known for its hilly relief and rich soil. Some of the valleys have the richer soil but are mixed with savanna and forest. It is common to find lots of volcanic rocks like basalt. The high altitude prairies are non-cultivated and average an elevation of 1,400 meters. Temperature ranges from 13°C-23°C and receives approximately 160 centimeters of rainfall per year. The dry season runs from mid-November to mid-February and the remaining months fluctuate the rainy season.

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density: Population size varies among each tribe. There are over 100 kingdoms. There is no census data on the Bamilekè but scholars estimate 25 percent of Cameroon’s populations. In 1980’s the populations was around two million. The populations average density is around 125 persons per square kilometer but fluctuates from 15 to over 400 inhabitants per square kilometer.

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s): The Bamiléké’s main carbohydrate is maize, plantains, beans, and peanuts. When food is scarce cassava is eaten until more crops are grown. At the end of each row, farmers grow tomatoes, onions, pumpkins, and condiments. The main farming tool is an iron hoe.

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources: The Bamiléké are farmers and keep pygmy goats and sheep.

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?:

2.4 Food storage:

2.5 Sexual division of production: Both men and women work in trade of the market place and of farming the product itself. They work eight-day weekly cycles and in long distance interethnic exchange. Men are mostly responsible for tree crops and clearing the fields for the women and building any fences that are needed. They are dominant in the field of transportation; mainly men drive taxis and trucks since the pre-colonial involvement in animal husbandry and war.

2.6 Land tenure: The kings in each kingdom are the owners of all land. Then there are quarter chiefs that distribute the land to the head males. The head males then distribute plots of land to their wives, non-inheriting brothers, and sisters. They nominate heirs and heiress who will inherit the land and responsibility of all dependents on the land.

2.7 Ceramics: Religious sculptures are made for fertility, royalty, and wisdom.

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns: The main cash crop is coffee, but they also sell cocoa, potatoes, eggplant, and leeks. Strawberries are grown but rare to find.

2.9 Food taboos:

2.10 Canoes/watercraft?:

3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f):

4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f):

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f):

4.3 Completed family size (m and f):

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f): The birth rate is 49 per thousand, and completed fertility is 6.3. Infant mortality is high, about 158 per thousand. Life expectancy at birth is 39.9 and at age 5 increases to 49.2.

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously:

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?: At a young age the boy to men will attempt to gain a title and money to be respected to buy a bride. There are wife givers and wife receivers. “In bride-price marriage, the groom gains reproductive, sexual, and domestic rights by giving gifts of palm oil, goats, blankets, firewood, and money to the family of his bride.” The bride’s father and the groom never do the bride price exchange. The father of the bride gains rights over the marriage and the patrilineal side of his daughter. “Christian

marriage can still take place with or without bride-wealth, marriage by a justice of the peace, elopement, and single parenthood.” The bride price depends on the amount of education the woman has but also on how much the groom ability to pay is. The term for marriage is to “to cook inside” that symbolizes the women’s confidence to her kitchen. This is a literal term for the woman to cook each meal for her husband but to also “cook” or procreate children.

4.9 Inheritance patterns: The Bamiléké people have emphasis on the male lineage through agnatic relations. Patrilineal decent determines the membership of the village as well as who gets ownership of the titles, land, compound, and wives. “For non-heirs, the obligation to sacrifice to patrilineal skulls ceases after two generations. Matrilineal descent determines inheritance of titles, movable property, and moral and legal obligation to lineage members.”

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict: There is some competition among wives of one man but in some cases there is tight relations and warm companionship. Some older co-wives are assigned to younger ones as a “foster” mother. Full siblings tend to have a close bond to the mother and family while half siblings fight for attention and inheritance. “Social roles are learned through example and through stories told around the mother’s hearth at mealtimes. Bamiléké report particularly warm relations among full siblings, and refer to hearthside commensality and storytelling as the source of this solidarity.” Mothers pay the role in child rearing but sometimes the an older sibling or co-wife will help with care while the mother is working.

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals:

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy): The Bamiléké are exogamous, preventing patrilineal links up to the fourth generation from marrying. Also preventing marriage with the matrilineal kin.

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these “other fathers” recognized?

4.14 What is the belief of the mother’s role in procreation exactly? (e.g., “receptacle in which fetus grows”) Girls of wealthy families usually spent up to six months in seclusion eating fattening foods and learning about marriage and sexuality by older female kin. School has now replaced this method almost completely.

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)?

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin)

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?

4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring

4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children? Child fosterage is a common situation among the Bamilèkè. It seems reasonable when resources are scarce. There are heiress assigned to each land owner who pick up responsibility of all dependents after one dies.

4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females

4.22 Evidence for couvades

4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older)

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect? Father is called heir and the mother is the heiress. Cousins are referred to by sibling names but are distinguished in everyday language. There are special sibling terms that are referred to in order of birth. Also another name for twins, children born following a set of twins, and there is a complex system of praise names that announce the village origin of mother and father. Generations also have a given name to specify kingdoms and divisions age.

4.24 Joking relationships? Some nicknames are generated from the given praise name. The praise names are a marker of cultural competence.

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations: “The political implications of hometown associations focuses on male elites.” The Bamiléké have emphasis on the male lineage through agnatic relations. Patrilineal decent determines the membership of the village as well as who gets ownership of the titles, land, compound, and wives. “For non-heirs, the obligation to sacrifice to patrilineal skulls ceases after two generations. Matrilineal descent determines inheritance of titles, movable property, and moral and legal obligation to lineage members.” Sons try to establish land near their father.

4.26 Incest avoidance rules

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?

4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?

4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?)

4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)? They vary by bride wealth by the giver and receiver. The young boys “made a deal”.

4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:

Warfare/homicide

4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare: “Young men were organized into warrior associations such as *mandjo*.”

4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:

4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing:

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations):

4.18 Cannibalism?

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size:

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality): The group has high crop yield seasons and low crop year seasons. This varies the trade market and the food consumption. It was often difficult to make decisions on where to move that would improve and strengthen the chiefdom and the society of the people. The community wants to expand areas of trade.

- 5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes): There were kings who owned all land then trickled down a ladder hierarchy to women of the land owning men.
- 5.4 Post marital residence:
- 5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense): The Bamilekè boundaries are natural processes like the Mountain and River that excludes the Bamilekè to the plateau.
- 5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex): Bamilekè boys in their youth go out seeking jobs in return for cash to buy consumer goods, bride wealth, and to gain title.
- 5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships: Nicknames are given from cultural relations.
- 5.8 Village and house organization: The kingdoms are divided into quarters, villages, compounds, and houses. The kingdom government and administration live in the “quarter” also referred to as the “village”. If the family were monogamous then the living arrangement would consist of a conjugal house, a kitchen, and an outhouse. If the family were polygynous the living arrangement would consist of just “the husbands house surrounded by a semi-circle or two rectangular “quarters” of his wives’ kitchen-houses.” The wives live in their kitchen houses with their children. The children (boys and girls) will live there until they get married or go off to school. The kitchen-house has one room with a hearth in the middle and a granary of raffia bamboo above the hearth. They are most commonly made out of mud bricks and roofed with thatch or tin. The house used to be made of raffia bamboo with sliding doors and thatch with conical roofs. They would all be square. During the pre-colonial era, rural compounds commonly had a fence. They rarely do now days. All of the royal houses follow a specific floor plan and are always located/built on a slope. “Below an entry gate made of spines of the raffia palm (“bamboo”) and either thatch or corrugated iron, a wide path (the “foot” of the compound) divides the two wives’ quarters, each quarter ruled by titled queens.”
- 5.9 Specialized village structures (mens’ houses): “A gate leads to the king's palace, a variety of meeting houses of secret societies, a traditional court building, and a sacred water source used only for the king's meals.” They consider the area above the gate to be “dry and infertile” while the area below the gate is considered “rich, moist, fertile, and spiritually complicated.”
- 5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?
- 5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc: They have no clans.
- 5.12 Trade: The Bamiléké trade agriculture goods, game, small livestock for salt, palm oil, and iron hoes. Trade markets grew during the colonial and postcolonial eras. “Both local and European goods were bought or bartered.” The entrepreneurs are known for being aggressive. They dominate the taxi and transportation in most sectors they are associated with.
- 5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

- 6.0 Time allocation to RCR:
- 6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine): The community had diviners and spirit medians that determine the need for a ceremony and in healing. Healers and witches use the same supernatural powers.
- 6.2 Stimulants:
- 6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal): It is ritual that the mother buries the placenta and umbilical cord after birth. Baby boys are then circumcised and girls are secluded until prepuberty. For the king: “Royal rituals enact the transformation of a new king from a mere mortal to a divine being, the embodiment of the office of kingship. These rituals include capturing the new king, and enclosing him and two of his queens in a special temporary structure (*la' kwa*) for nine weeks. During this time they are fed medicines and taught their new duties. A ritual—complete with the symbolism of birth and feeding—marks the emergence of the king from *la' kwa*. He fully becomes king only after he has sired at least one male and one female child.”
- 6.4 Other rituals: Death ceremonies are held one year after the death and they are a public display of wealth and the value of the deceased. The mourning ends when the body has made a full transition into ancestorhood. Spirit medians, diviners, and religious specialists use herbal medicines. Herbalists are now seen as equals to the spirit medians, diviners, and religious specialists.
- 6.5 Myths (Creation): “All Bamiléké believed in the power of ancestors, through the metonym of the ancestral skull (*tu*), to cause good or bad fortune for their descendants.” They believed the ancestral skulls control access to propitiary rights. If improper care of the ancestral skull follows death, there is said to be wrath, illness, infertility, and sometimes, even death.
- 6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games): The Bamiléké are known for their wooden sculptures, masks, stools that are often decorated with beads and cowries, and carved house posts. The motifs include human figures usually representing ancestors, and witches, along with animals that represent fertility, wisdom, and royalty. It is ritually that the kings wear white and blue woven cotton cloth.
- 6.7 Sex differences in RCR: There was a myth that matrilineal ancestors were prone to anger.
- 6.8 Missionary effect:
- 6.9 RCR revival:
- 6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs: Relatives shave their heads and wear blue or black clothing during the week of mourning. After one year of death, lavish celebrations are held. After the celebration the heir and heiress will exhume and care for ancestral skulls and keep them in clay pots or in small house-like tombs.
- 6.11 Taboo of naming dead people? After one year of death, lavish celebrations are held. After the celebration the heir and heiress will exhume and care for ancestral skulls and keep them in clay pots or in small house-like tombs.
- 6.12 Is there teknonymy?
- 6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.): “Prior to missionization, Bamiléké believed in a creator God, Nsi. Some groups believed in local deities relating to natural features (streams, groves of trees, rocks) and personal spirits.”

7. Adornment

7.1 Body paint:

7.2 Piercings:

7.3 Haircut:

7.4 Scarification:

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:

7.7 Sex differences in adornment:

7.8 Missionary effect:

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:

8. Kinship systems

8.1 Sibling classification system:

8.2 Sororate, levirate:

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

Numbered references

1. Feldman-Savelsberg, P., & Ndonko, T. (2010). Urbanites and urban villagers: Comparing 'home' among elite and non-elite bamiléké women's hometown associations. *Africa*, 80(3), 371-396. Retrieved from www.scopus.com.
2. Ouden, Den, J.H.B. (1987). In search of personal mobility: changing interpersonal relations in two Bamileke chiefdoms, Cameroon. *Africa*, 80(1), 3-27. Department of Rural Sociology, Unv. Wageningen, The Netherlands.
3. <http://www.everyculture.com/Africa-Middle-East/Bamil-k.html>
4. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=bcw