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See me, know me – cultural expressions of Cameroonian women

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AFRICA

CONTENTS

LITERATURE AND WRITING

- AFRICA 26
Derek Horton
- BIG BROTHER'S HOUSE 30
Niran Okewole
- CUSTOMARY TENURE 32
Samuel Punhal
- I HAVE NEVER
BEEN TO AFRICA 35
Phil Sawdon
- SEE ME, KNOW ME 36
Florence Ayisi and Catalin Brylla
- WE HAVE ALREADY
SOLD OUR HEARTS 44
Sean Furrage
- FASHION
- SUBLIMINAL MUSE 48
Harris Kyprianou

PHOTOGRAPHY

- SAHARA 18
Harris Kyprianou
- NEW ORLEANS 64
Images by *Hervé Coutin*
Text by *Hanne Ghesquiere*

ARCHITECTURE

- DAVID ADJAYE 06
Interview by
Rose Cooper-Thorne

- BLUE CITY 12
Gordon O'Connor-Read

ART

- THE SOUNDS OF A
LISTENER WITH A BAG 58
Alan Dunn introduces
Radio Continental Drift

COVER IMAGE BY HARRIS KYPRIANOU



CERAMIC ARTIST

A portrait of an African woman as an artist is a rare sight, but a reality of women's engagement in art is an important form of expressive culture through objects. Being an independent artist is a phenomenon that not only challenges traditional gender stereotypes, but it also serves as an empowering statement of economic status, personal and social identity. This young artist produces her work in Mbal-mayo, a small town in the Central Region.



THIS PHOTO-ESSAY focuses on the expressions of African culture and identity through photographic representations of Cameroonian women within different situations. These situations are informed by a socio-cultural self-knowledge that reveals the women's re-definition of their role in a modern and gender-divided society; a role that establishes not only their autarchy, but their significance as cultural producers. The women's knowledge in conjunction with the corporeal action they perform in each picture positions them as agents in a particular material context, which constitutes the nature of "being" itself (Merleau Ponty 1962; Dant 2007). This photo collage offers alternative realities of Cameroonian women and the diverse ways they experience and engage with aspects of culture, and thus the establishment of their active roles and identities.

SEE ME, KNOW ME

CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS OF CAMEROONIAN WOMEN

Words by *Florence Ayisi* and *Catalin Brylla*



TRADITIONAL WEAVING

Cotton textile weaving is a disappearing traditional art in Cameroon. However, Bamum women continue to keep the tradition alive. This craftswoman is one of few weavers still active in the city of Foumban. She is using a single-heddle loom to produce a special cloth, mostly worn by women. Textile weaving is a strong tradition that underpins the artistic expression of Bamum people in the Western Region.



TOMATO TRADER

As food crops increasingly become the new cash crops in Cameroon, women are gaining economic independence through their *agribusiness* activities. Women dominate the cultivation and marketing of food crops, and their presence adds another dimension to a shift in their status as dynamic contributors to the local economy. Women make up a large part of the traders at Nfoudi market in the capital city of Yaoundé, Central Region.



WINNOWING MILLET

Food security and sustaining livelihoods are vital roles that women perform, especially in rural communities. These women are winnowing millet in Oudjila village, Extreme North Region. Millet is an important part of African food heritage and culture, and women are key players in cultivating and preparing this staple food. Women's identity as producers of millet is inevitably linked to the identity formation of whole communities in Northern Cameroon.



REPLICA TRADITIONAL COSTUMES

Bafut Women wearing replica traditional costumes and jewellery previously worn by the Bafut Queen and her Ladies-in-waiting. These women from the North West Region displayed their costumes as part of cultural manifestations at the National Festival of Arts and Culture in Maroua. Despite influences on modern lifestyles, women still have a deep sense of pride as promoters and custodians of cultural heritage.



DANCERS

A vision of women on the move, actively engaged in song and dance, and visible evidence of how women collectively remember and interpret living cultures of Africa. These dancers are performing in front of the Chief's palace in the village of Oudjila, Extreme North Region. The women's dance troupe had just returned from participating at the *National Festival of Arts and Culture* in Maroua.



FOOTBALL PLAYER

To play is to belong and to resist; resisting the possibility of being forgotten. Playing soccer gives Cameroonian women a sense of belonging to world soccer culture, and by extension, to the shared experiences perceived and understood in globalized connections. The ball as object provides a unifying force and reinforces the attraction of soccer in different geographical contexts. These women are training at Omni-sports annex stadium, Yaoundé.

Documenting these images of Cameroonian women in different spaces of culture is part of the wider agenda to continue decolonizing African culture and also to establish women's role in expressing cultural values in modern Cameroon. This offers a vision that not only radically reforms how African women are imagined, but also how they can be remembered, and as Teshome Gabriel (1989) attests, "*once memory enters our consciousness, it is hard to circumvent, harder to stop and impossible to run from*".

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