

Max-Planck-Institut für demografische Forschung  
Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research  
Konrad-Zuse-Strasse 1 · D-18057 Rostock · GERMANY  
Tel +49 (0) 3 81 20 81 - 0; Fax +49 (0) 3 81 20 81 - 202;  
<http://www.demogr.mpg.de>

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**Marriage over space and time among  
male migrants from Cameroon to  
Germany**

Annett Fleischer ([fleischer@demogr.mpg.de](mailto:fleischer@demogr.mpg.de))

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This working paper has been approved for release by: Hill Kulu ([kulu@demogr.mpg.de](mailto:kulu@demogr.mpg.de))  
Deputy Head of the Laboratory of Contemporary European Fertility and Family Dynamics.

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# Marriage over space and time among male migrants from Cameroon to Germany

by Annett Fleischer

## Abstract

Restrictive immigration and integration policies in Germany increasingly force African migrants to develop strategies and practices to acquire legal residence and obtain an essential work permit. Our account of Cameroonian men in Germany contributes to the discussion about the role of the nation state in transnational migration processes. Since national policies in the receiving country determine the right to settle and the risk of expulsion, the German nation state plays a decisive role for African migrants. The present paper emphasises the impact of national migration policies on Cameroonian men's marriage strategies. Diminishing options for legalising their status in Germany by other means make Cameroonians increasingly dependent on sustaining a three-year marriage to a German wife. Mainly based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Cameroon and Germany, the present article explores the distribution of marriage over space and time as a means of securing the right to work and stay in Germany.

## INTRODUCTION

*'Since hunters have learned to shoot without missing, birds have learnt to fly without perching<sup>1</sup>.'*

Studies on immigration and integration in Germany so far have concentrated on former guestworker groups and following generations, mainly on Turkish migrants in German society. Few studies have emphasised newer migrants groups, such as sub-Saharan Africans<sup>2</sup>. African migration to Germany becomes increasingly important and relevant, not only for the increasing number of migrants coming and attempting to stay, but also for their very different pathways and contextual settings compared to the 'guestworker generation'.

Four main reasons raise interest in studying African migration and, in particular, Cameroonian migration to Germany.

First, sub-Saharan African migrants in Germany are a recent phenomenon. They started arriving in larger numbers in the mid-1980s, when an economic crisis hit many African countries.

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<sup>1</sup> One of my respondents used this proverb to illustrate strategies used by African migrants to, as he said, 'deal with the draconian laws adopted by the German government'. I found a German version of the proverb in the book of the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe: *'Seit die Menschen gelernt haben zu schießen, ohne zu fehlen, habe ich gelernt zu fliegen ohne innezuhalten.'* (Achebe 1983: 29)

<sup>2</sup> One exception is Glick Schiller et al. (2005). The article is based on ethnography of Ghanaians in Berlin (Nieswand), Nigerians and Congolese in Halle/ Saale (Glick Schiller) and Somalis in Germany (Schlee), among others.

Second, compared with former ‘guestworker generations’, Cameroonian migrants present completely different pathways of entry and different strategies for remaining in the country of destination. Whereas guestworkers were at least temporarily welcomed and wanted as workers in Germany, African migrants are confronted with quite different legal and political conditions concerning access to the labour market, right to residency, and family reunification regulations. Germany has a hierarchical system of classification and regulation, and distinguishes not only between EU and non-EU citizens, but also between the different legal statuses of migrants (Morris 2000: 226).

From this follows a third point: Because Germany increasingly erects barriers intended to discourage assumed economic migrants from Africa, migrants are forced to develop new strategies in order to be legally included and obtain the right to work. According to the German Federal Statistical Office (2004), the majority of Cameroonian migrants enter Germany as students or asylum seekers. Due to their middle-class family backgrounds and their fairly high levels of education, one-third of the registered migrants with Cameroonian nationality are currently enrolled as students in a German university. The second largest group of Cameroonians in Germany are asylum seekers, often without any realistic chance of being granted asylum. Neither group has a long-term right to stay and work in Germany. Official statistics on Cameroonian immigrants in Germany do not contain any information on undocumented immigrants living and working in Germany. It is estimated, however, that the ‘real number’ of African immigrants in Germany is about 50 per cent higher than statistical reports suggest (Lentz 2002). This would mean that around 20,000 Cameroonian immigrants are living documented or undocumented in Germany.

Fourth, male Cameroonian migrants are increasingly finding it necessary to resort to marriage with a German citizen to acquire residency. Binational marriages and family reunification<sup>3</sup> are often the only means of obtaining rights to live and work in Germany. Existing studies on marriage strategies of migrants concentrate on foreign-born women entering a country of destination by relying on marriage to a native-born man (Lauser 2004). The marriage strategies of male migrants are highly under-researched. This article elaborates a specific case of marriage among Cameroonians coming to Germany, elucidating the hardships and contradictions wrought on people caught in the impossible demands that EU and German rules create.

This paper contributes to the current debate around the relevance of national policy for transnational migrants. The article aims to answer the following research questions: How do Cameroonian men distribute life events – and here I focus on marriage over space and time as the inducer of rights – to enter, stay, and work in Germany? What role does marriage to a German partner play as a means to “integration” and “inclusion”? Finally, what relevance does binational marriage have for Cameroonian men’s life course and their future plans of returning to Cameroon?

### **THE REMAINING IMPORTANCE OF THE NATION STATE**

Transmigration studies describe migrants as living simultaneously in more than one society (Glick Schiller et al. 1995). In this regard, the assumption is that national borders become more fluid and permeable, and that people, as well as goods and ideas, move between two or more societies (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004). Transnational migrants, also referred to as transmigrants, are characterised as being embedded in different cultures, working in various

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<sup>3</sup> Bledsoe analyses the demography of family reunification using the example of Gambians in Spain (2006).

nation states, and belonging to more than one society concurrently. Portes (1997: 812) defines transmigrants as persons who are *'often bilingual...move easily between different cultures, frequently maintain homes in two countries, and pursue economic, political and cultural interests that require their presence in both'*. Scholars of transnational migration often emphasise the improvements and developments in the modes of transport and communication which enable migrants to travel more easily across national borders. This may be true for some migrants, but definitely not for all.

Some scholars involved in transnational migration research argue that the nation state gives away some of its power due to the increasing transnational processes (Appadurai 1996, Sassen 1996, 2005), whereas others claim that the nation state remains crucial, or becomes even more significant, for some transmigrants (Bommes 2003, Morris 2000).

In line with other researchers like Bommes (2003), I bring forward the argument, that the legal constraints of the nation state on some migrants are not emphasised enough in transnational migration research. National policies regulating entry, stay, and work allowance continue to be crucial. Using the example of Cameroonian migrants to Germany, I demonstrate that the German national policies remain relevant for transnational migration processes of non-EU citizens.

The nation state continues to be important for some transnational migrants (mainly non-EU nationals), but less relevant for others (EU citizens). The EU attempts to protect its territory from some non-EU citizens, but facilitates the movement between its member states<sup>4</sup> (Bommes 2003). The respective nation states within the EU act in similar ways: EU countries ease the entry and stay of other EU citizens, but erect barriers for non-EU nationals. EU citizens are free to move within the Schengen space. They are allowed to access the labour market, use educational facilities, and even use the health care systems in the various member states. European member states determine not only the entry and stay of non-EU citizens, but also how they are permitted to move, work, and live within the country of migration. The distinction between migrants from other EU countries and non-EU citizens is pivotal<sup>5</sup>. In this context, Bhabha (1998: 714) speaks of the 'Kafkaesque restrictions' imposed upon third country nationals in Europe.

In Germany, regulations for employment do not apply equally to all migrants. This fact has created a hierarchical 'system of inequalities' (Morris 2000). The nationality of an immigrant and the reason for coming to Germany are crucial for any job application. In contrast to EU nationals, who are subject to European law, non-EU nationals must adhere to strict national regulations when applying for a job, even when holding a residence permit. Migrants from outside the EU are only approved to take up employment in Germany when no German citizen, no EU citizen, and no other employee with preferential treatment (e.g. third country nationals with longer permission to stay in Germany) can be found. The system is referred to as the 'Priority Principle' ('Vorrangprinzip'). The right to apply for employment is just one example of the distinctions made between citizens from different nations and their respective legal status. It points to the remaining importance of national policies, despite rising harmonisation

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<sup>4</sup> Borders within the EU became less relevant when European member states started to sign the Schengen Agreement in 1985.

<sup>5</sup> When referring to non-EU citizens, it is necessary to distinguish between those from countries belonging to the OECD, and those who are not. Non-OECD nationals face stricter controls and regulations than members of the OECD (Miles & Thränhardt 1996: 3). When I talk about non-EU citizens, I refer to non-OECD nationals. I use the terms non-EU nationals and third country nationals interchangeably.

within the European Union. In my study, I discuss the legal constraints facing some non-EU nationals using the example of Cameroonian men.

## **THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF MARRIAGE**

Since the early 1990s, Germany has issued a number of immigration laws and policies to further prevent and control immigration of mainly non-EU citizens<sup>6</sup>. The grounds for non-EU citizens to enter and stay legally in Germany have been whittled down to basic human rights, such as the protection from persecution and prosecution (asylum), the protection of the nuclear family (e.g. family reunification) and the right to freely choose a spouse (binational marriage). Cameroonian men must increasingly resort to a combination of asylum application and family formation processes to obtain legal status, and thus receive a work permit.

### **The privilege of being married**

In order to understand the strategies and practices of Cameroonian men in Germany, it is essential to provide the reader with some historical context regarding marriage expectations, and a juridical framework of laws and regulations concerning marriage in Germany.

Marriage is regulated by various social (e.g. partner choice), religious (e.g. sexual behavior or attitudes towards divorce) and juridical norms and rules (e.g. divorce or inheritance). In the past, marriage in Germany, as well as in other parts of the world, was a kind of contract between different families or lineages (Schmohl 2005). The institution of 'marriage' was viewed as the foundation of family formation, and as a key pillar of society. A formal legal relationship between a man and a woman was seen as ensuring various functions, such as protection, control, and organization. During the period of Romanticism that began at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it became more common to wed for emotional reasons. Love was considered an important element in the relationship between husband and wife. Romantic love was based on constancy and exclusiveness (Peuckert 2004). The so-called 'love marriage' ('Liebesheirat') became the ideal ('Leitbild') in many parts of society. As one consequence, the influence of the family on partner choice became less important, and the legitimacy of divorce had to be accepted (Schmohl 2005).

According to Peuckert (2004) and others, a long-lived, monogamous marriage was the social norm in the 1950s and 1960s. It was considered 'normal and self-evident' that adult men and women marry in order to form a family. In the 1970s and 1980s, the importance of marriage slowly started to decline in both parts of Germany, and non-marital unions became more common. In the past two decades, the registered number of weddings in Germany decreased and the number of divorces increased (Peuckert 2004).

While marriage has been losing both legal and social relevance for many German citizens, it ironically has become essential -- often the last resort -- for immigrants who have no other way of staying.

### **Binational marriages**

For those people in Germany who do choose to marry, marriage in Germany is regulated in Article 6 of the Basic Law ('Grundgesetz'). This means that the institution of 'marriage' is

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<sup>6</sup> Here I will just mention the most important changes: reform of the Asylum Law (1993) limits the right of asylum – 'Asylum Compromise', Act to Amend Foreigners and Asylum Provisions (1997), New Citizenship Law (2000) that adds citizenship based on place of birth to the principle of citizenship based on descent, Immigration Act (2005) and reform of the Right of Abode ('Bleiberecht') (2006).

under special protection of the state; it is not a private and personal issue once, it comes to the official marriage ceremony at the civil registry office ('Standesamt'). Marriage has consequences for both partners. The legal status of a person changes once he or she is married. Generally, there are some financial benefits for married individuals, such as lower taxes or health insurance costs.

Marriage has special significance for non-Germans. Foreigners who marry a German spouse receive, first of all, a temporary residency which enables them to work; later on they can apply for unlimited settlement permit. It is not surprising, then, that special regulations apply to marriages between a German and a non-German citizen.

By marrying a German citizen, the foreign partner first obtains a temporary residency and a work permit (Foreigner Law paragraph 23 (§17 Section 1)). After three years of marriage, the non-German spouse can apply for permanent residency (§ 28 Section 2 Foreigner Law). The issuance of a permanent residence permit is contingent upon the ability of the applicant to finance his or her own living, without relying on social benefits.

Following a change in the law that went into effect on June 1, 2000, the foreign spouse has been able to obtain after two years a right to residency independent of the continuity of the marriage to the German spouse ('Eigenständiges Aufenthaltsrecht')<sup>7</sup>. This means that, after two years of marriage with a German spouse, the foreign partner can stay in Germany even if the couple is about to divorce (§ 31 Foreigner Law). The independent residency right enables the immigrant to stay in Germany temporarily. After five years of independent residency and meeting other requirements, there is the possibility to apply for a permanent residence permit. Prior to 2000, the marriage had to last four years before the independent residency right was established.

The right to marry depends, among other things, on the legal status of a foreigner. Marriage to an undocumented migrant living in Germany is almost impossible. The civil registry office will report the 'illegal status' of the immigrant to the immigration office ('Ausländerbehörde'), which means that the foreigner can be arrested and deported immediately (Rose 2001: 97). In some cases, it is possible to file for an 'exceptional leave to remain' ('Duldung') in Germany with the support of a lawyer. 'Tolerated immigrants', i.e. denied asylum seekers who can not be deported immediately, have the right to marry, although it is becoming more and more difficult for them to do so. Providing the necessary documents remains complicated for immigrants with an insecure status in Germany. Foreigners who enter Germany on a tourist visa are allowed to stay for three months. If the wedding does not occur within the three months, the foreign partner has to leave Germany. He or she might then apply for a new visa in order to marry in Germany. For students, it is easier to marry in Germany.

All of the regulations and laws outlined above can be interpreted in practice. The authorities have the discretion to decide in each individual case whether or not they will allow a binational couple to marry. Binational marriages, particularly those between a German citizen and a third country national, such as those from Africa, are often viewed with great suspicion by the majority of the public, as well as by the authorities. While authorities see the purpose of binational marriage as crucial, they are interested not at all in why German-German couples

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<sup>7</sup> During the first two years of marriage, the foreign partner depends strongly on the good will of the German spouse since the right to residency depends on the maintenance of the marriage. In some cases, this regulation is misused by the German partner. He or she can file for divorce at any time and endanger the insecure situation of the foreign spouse. The dependency of the right to residency on marriage seems to be problematic in practice.

marry. German citizens may also wed for reasons of tax reduction, economic stability or advantages in career building. Yet for binational couples, the German state effectively sees love as the only legitimate grounds for marriage. Hence, couples have to give proof of their emotional closeness. According to the statement of a member of the Association for Binational Marriage and Family in Germany (cf. [www.verband-binationaler.de](http://www.verband-binationaler.de)), a pregnancy may indicate ‘real love’ and could facilitate the marriage process.

Authorities have administrative discretion to decide whether to allow a couple to marry. To help them determine whether the relationship is genuine, authorities are permitted to interview the partners separately, and to talk to neighbors, friends, and co-workers (§ 5 Section 2 (1) Law of Civil Status). Some of the criteria on which the authorities base their suspicion include:

- whether the wedding was scheduled to take place after an intended deportation was announced,
- whether the partners speak a common language,
- whether the German partner was formerly married to a foreigner,
- whether the couple shares a common apartment, and
- whether one partner is much older than the other (especially when the woman is older than the man)<sup>8</sup>.

The civil registry office has the right to refuse to conduct the marriage ceremony if they suspect a ‘fictitious marriage’<sup>9</sup>. In this sense, the authorities or, more precisely, individual officials, regulate immigration to, and integration in, Germany. Anderson (2003: 93) talks about ‘the legitimate immigration regulation within the scope of marriage’.

The focus of the immigration office is on a familiar and marital relationship, which implies that controls are also possible after the wedding. In Germany, as in other European countries, marriage for the purpose of obtaining a residence permit is viewed as deception and can be prosecuted (Beck-Gernsheim 2006: 120). According to § 92a of the Foreigner Law, the foreigner can lose the residence permit and the German person involved can be penalized if it is proven that the purpose of the marriage was to obtain a residence permit in Germany. In addition, the penalty for the German person is even higher when he or she accepted money in exchange for marrying the foreigner.

In short, despite the fact that marriage and family are legally protected by the German Basic Law, different regulations apply for binational couples.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

The analysis of transnational movements between Cameroon and Germany and marriage strategies of Cameroonian men in Germany benefited greatly by the opportunity to conduct multi-sited ethnography. I conducted field research in Cameroon (for four months) and in Germany, mainly in Berlin (for four months). In this article, I concentrate on data collected in Germany, although my interviews in Cameroon are taken into account in the discussion of the

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<sup>8</sup> Human rights organizations criticise the generally suspicious attitude towards binational couples. They describe the examination of binational marital relations as unfair, inhuman and as an intervention into the private and intimate sphere.

<sup>9</sup> The so-called ‘fictitious marriage’ also referred to as ‘marriage of convenience’ (‘Scheinehe’ or ‘Aufenthaltsehe’) is defined by the European Union as solely aiming at circumventing the rules on the entry and residency of third country nationals, and on obtaining a residence permit.

migrants' life journeys. I used the snowball sampling technique to contact my informants. With many of my interviewees I still keep in touch via email or telephone. The research process has no clear beginning or end; it is, rather, a continuous process.

In the presentation of my results I have changed the names of my interviewees and some background information in order to ensure their anonymity. These changes have no influence on the content and context of the descriptions. I conducted informal conversations, participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and expert interviews in order to understand the experiences, attitudes, and strategies of Cameroonian migrants in Germany. This explorative research approach enabled me to review my research questions throughout the entire study. I was able to change research questions and go back into the field to explore different directions and areas.

The exploration of migrants' strategies is associated with methodological difficulties. Above all, the examination of practices of migrants with a 'weak' legal status, such as undocumented migrants or those living and working in Germany with false or faked documents, proved to be difficult and extremely time-consuming. It is clear that undocumented immigrants are not particularly willing to talk to a German researcher about their experiences and their tactics. In the majority of my interviews, I first had to prove that I am not working with the immigration office, and second, that I do not want to report them to the police. Many of my informants feared deportation. For this reason, I used the first meetings to introduce myself. I explained my research project and answered questions such as, 'Why are you doing this?' or 'What are my advantages for participating in the study?' Field research of this kind demands patience, personal engagement and empathy. Frequent meetings and long talks are essential to build trust<sup>10</sup>. Mahler (1995: 26) describes the challenges of doing field research with illegal migrants: '*...to study them requires finding them; to find them requires patient, exhaustive networking; to understand them requires entering their communities and earning their trust*'.

## **CAMEROONIAN IMMIGRANTS IN GERMANY**

Cameroonian immigrants constitute the third largest group of sub-Saharan Africans in Germany. With an official estimate of 14,272 men and women in June 2005 (Federal Statistical Office 2005), Cameroonian immigrants are thus just behind Ghanaians (20,609) and Nigerians (15,544). Interestingly, this figure has increased in the last five years, albeit slightly, whereas the number of other sub-Saharan immigrants has declined. One explanation might be that Cameroon experienced a delayed economic crisis in the mid 1980s compared to other West and Central African countries where the economic decline began already in the 1960s. The gender distribution among Cameroonians in Germany is about one-third women (5,400) and two-thirds men (8,900) (Federal Statistical Office 2005). Cameroonian immigrants in Germany, as well as in other European migration destinations—like France, Belgium, and the UK—are predominantly young (between 25 and 35 years old according to official statistics) and relatively well-educated. In the winter term 2005/06, about 5,300 Cameroonians were registered at a German university, and around 1,000 new students from Cameroon enroll each year (DAAD 2006). Parallel to the increase in the number of Cameroonian students attending German universities, the number of asylum applications from Cameroonians has been rising in recent years, despite the fact that the recognition rate is almost zero. Each year, around 600

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<sup>10</sup> Many of my informants rarely talked about their own situation, but rather about a third person. They were explaining experiences of friends and acquaintances to me and it was not always clear whether it was their own story or that of another.

Cameroonians ask for asylum in Germany, but fewer than one per cent are granted asylum (Federal Statistical Office 2005).

Irrespective of whether Cameroonians are living in Germany as students, asylum seekers, 'tolerated migrants' or undocumented migrants, almost all interviewed persons had previous contacts in Germany before their arrival. The presence of a transcontinental network is one of the most important factors influencing the choice of the country of destination. Social networks are essential sources of information about housing, employment, and immigration and integration laws. My field work data from Cameroon show that migration decisions are rarely individual, but are rather family and community decisions (Fleischer 2007). Families and households select certain family members for the transnational migration process. They invest in them and finance their journey with the expectation of receiving support and remittances<sup>11</sup>. Cameroonians coming to Germany are generally from middle-class families who can afford to pay for the expensive migration process in advance. The majority of the respondents plan a temporary stay in Germany. Some would like to finish their education and subsequently work for some years in Germany, while others simply aim to earn money to support their family before returning to Cameroon. However, in practice, the return is often delayed because the process of legalisation, which is often a precondition for earning money, takes longer than expected, or because the desired amount of money could not be earned in the expected time frame.

### **INSECURE STATUS**

Pathways of students and asylum seekers to Germany, and their experiences in the country of destination, are quite different. However, both groups face similar difficulties in securing the long-term legal status that would allow them to achieve their migration goals, e.g. to earn enough money to support the family or to set up their own business in Cameroon. Certainly, for asylum seekers the situation is much more complicated and the risk of being deported is much higher than for students, but all of them fear being sent back without accomplishing their personal aims, and those of the family.

According to my informants, applying for a student visa in Cameroon can be compared to a hurdle race. Several preconditions need to be fulfilled: German language skills are required and financial guarantees are asked for. Some applicants manage to get enrolled in a German university and subsequently obtain a student visa. After arriving in Germany, many students need to finance their studies by themselves, while, at the same time, they are expected to send money home. Long work hours or personal difficulties in Germany can prolong the time it takes to complete their studies, which might lead to a refusal by the authorities to extend the student visa that has to be renewed every two years. Once they have completed their studies, the German government allows them to stay one more year in Germany in order to find employment in the field of study. Few manage to obtain a work contract enabling them to stay. Some students fail to complete their studies and hence, forfeit their right to remain in Germany. A former student from the western province in Cameroon reflects:

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<sup>11</sup> In many cases, remittances pay for the education of younger siblings, the health care of family members, the construction of houses, the establishment of a business, or for technical equipment, such as mobile phones or computers. My respondents reported sending monthly remittances to their families of between 50 € and 400 €

*'I tried hard to complete my master's, but it did not work out. I had to work a lot in addition to my studies and I rarely had time to learn. The language barrier made it even more complicated and I failed the exams three times before they made me leave the university. I had no other choice than to obtain a residence permit in a different way. A friend recommended that I marry a German woman.'*

As the statement above clarifies, marrying a German is often not the first preference, but rather the last resort for many, when there are no other options.

For asylum seekers, entering and obtaining legal status turns out to be even more complicated than for students. To apply for asylum in Germany, the asylum seeker must enter Germany directly from Cameroon, and not from a so-called 'safe third country'<sup>12</sup>. Since Germany is surrounded by safe third countries, the foreigner has no other choice than to arrive by plane and apply for asylum directly at the airport. Some of the respondents reported that they entered the country with faked documents, or with the passport of a different person whom they had paid. The asylum procedure follows a strict order: application for asylum; several interviews; distribution to reception centers, and, subsequently, to asylum homes; more application hearings, and so on. The asylum process can take up to five years or longer. And the co-called 'residence obligation' ('Residenzpflicht') restricts the movement of asylum seekers to their administrative district. Here they are lodged in 'asylum homes' ('Asylbewerberheime') often situated far outside of cities and towns. Conditions in these homes are described by my interview partners as dire. Reaching there by public transport is both time-consuming and complicated, and often there are only a few buses a day. As one Cameroonian woman reflected, *'The government gave us houses in the forest to show its citizens that we are not like them.'* Rooms are shockingly small. Bathrooms and kitchens need to be shared, no easy feat, when people from more than 20 different nations are living together. Private life is hardly possible. Additionally, asylum seekers are often given coupons for foods, clothes and cosmetics which they can only exchange in certain supermarkets. Asylum seekers from different African countries call themselves '*aduro*', which refers to the hard living conditions in asylum homes. One informant told me '*aduro*' means, literally translated, 'to suffer'. Cameroonian asylum seekers have almost no chance of obtaining secure legal status in Germany<sup>13</sup>. For this reason, they need to search for alternatives during the asylum process. Some Cameroonians receive an 'exceptional leave to remain' ('toleration')<sup>14</sup>, i.e. they cannot be deported immediately, but have to fear deportation in the near future. Their status is extremely insecure, and working legally is highly restricted.

## **CAMEROONIAN-GERMAN MARRIAGES**

The following paragraphs describe strategies and practices of Cameroonian men to legitimacy using available data from the German Federal Statistical Office and examples from my field work illustrated as quotes.

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<sup>12</sup> This holds true since the introduction of the Asylum Compromise in 1993.

<sup>13</sup> In 2004, 717 Cameroonians applied for asylum in Germany. Only two of them obtained asylum and thus temporary residency, while 19 obtained a tolerated status, and 585 Cameroonians were denied the right to asylum without any explanation. In addition, 111 formal decisions were conducted, i.e. the asylum applicant rejected his/her application, another EU country is responsible for the person or the asylum seeker had applied previously (Federal Statistical Office 2004).

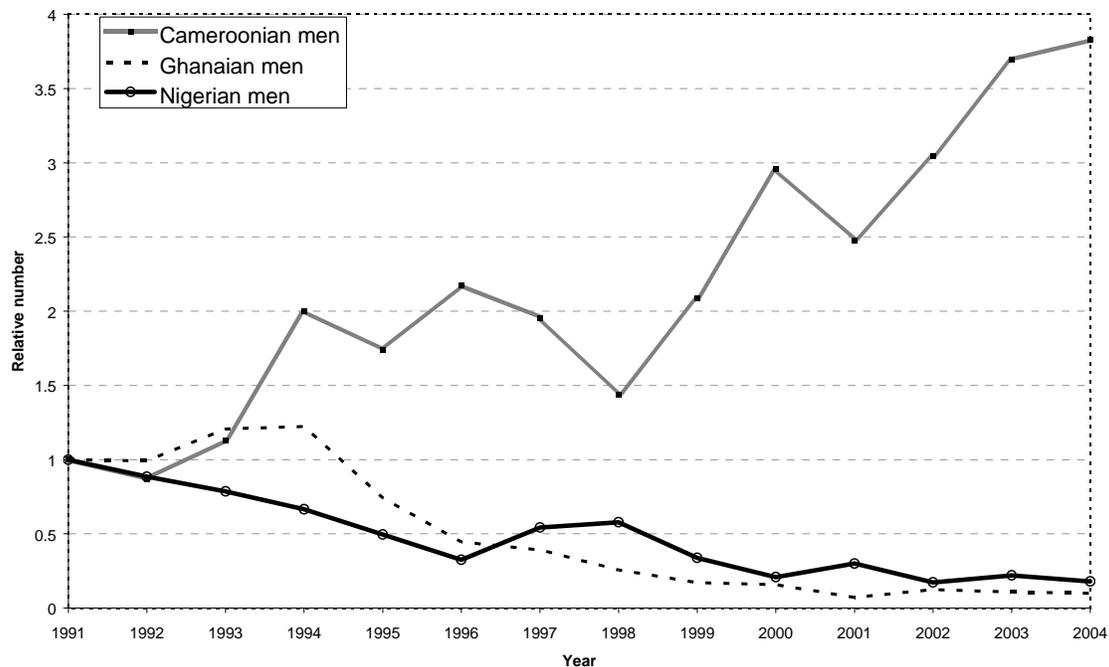
<sup>14</sup> In 2003, 1,569 Cameroonians were living on exceptional leave to remain ('toleration') in Germany (Federal Statistical Office 2004).

The number of binational marriages has been continuously increasing in Germany. In 1960, every 25<sup>th</sup> wedding was between a German citizen and a foreigner, while in 2004, every sixth marriage was binational (cf. [www.verband-binationaler.de/zahlenundfakten](http://www.verband-binationaler.de/zahlenundfakten)). Since 1995, more German men have been marrying foreign women—mainly from Poland, Thailand, Russia, and Romania—while fewer German women have been marrying foreign men. Before 1995, the trend was reversed. When marrying binationally, German women prefer men from Turkey, Italy, and the USA.

Data from the German Federal Statistical Office on binational marriages allow only limited analysis and interpretation. The main problem is that weddings outside Germany are not registered in the German marriage statistics. According to the Association for Binational Marriage and Family, the number of binational weddings outside of Germany could be significantly higher since many German-foreign couples marry abroad for administrative reasons. My interview partners confirmed this statement. They declared that many Cameroonians-German couples marry abroad, either in Cameroon or in Denmark<sup>15</sup> to avoid administrative problems like the provision of a certificate of no impediment ('Ehefähigkeitszeugnis'<sup>16</sup>) which does not exist in Cameroon. If the couple marries abroad, it is necessary to apply subsequently for a family reunification visa.

The following graph presents relative numbers of Cameroonian men marrying German women between 1991 and 2004, in comparison to Ghanaian and Nigerian men in binational relationships to German women.

**Graph 1: Number of Cameroonian, Ghanaian, and Nigerian men who wed a German woman in Germany, 1991-2004**



<sup>15</sup> The liberal Danish marriage laws enable an easy and less complicated marriage that also goes much faster than in Germany, because fewer documents are required.

<sup>16</sup> The certificate proves that there are no barriers to a marriage according to the law of the home country (§ 1309 Section 1 German Civil Code).

Source: German Federal Statistical Office 2004

- in reference to 1991
- only marriages registered in Germany

The number of marriages between a Cameroonian man and a German woman has quadrupled from 1991 to 2004, whereas marriages between Ghanaian and Nigerian men and German women have declined radically. In 2004, official figures show that only 36 immigrants from Ghana and 61 men from Nigeria, but 88 Cameroonian male immigrants, married German women. One explanation for the increase in Cameroonian-German marriages versus the decline in Nigerian-German and Ghanaian-German marriages might be that Cameroonian migrants arrive in larger numbers since the 1990s. Another reason could be that because migrants from Ghana and Nigeria have been longer in Germany, they found other ways to obtain residency.

Marriages between Cameroonian women and German men are also on the rise, but their absolute number is smaller than that of Cameroonian men and German women. Marriages between Cameroonian partners in Germany are extremely rare. In 2004, there were only six registered marriages between a Cameroonian man and a Cameroonian woman listed.

***'Go and find yourself a German wife!'***

The Cameroonian artist Koppo, who sings in Franc-Anglais<sup>17</sup>, reveals the future of many young Cameroonian migrants in one of his songs named '*Je go*'. In the song, he states that he would even marry a widow to achieve his migration goals:

*'I am going to the white man's place, to make money. When you watch TV you see that in the white man's place do they suffer? Everybody is fine. As soon as I reach there, I find a job, any kind of job, which can give me money: take the dog to a walk. I will work. I will wash corpse. I will work. I will even get married to the widows.'*

Two of my respondents who were only 'tolerated' in Germany at the time of the interview reported that they were advised by German authorities to look for a German woman who was willing to marry them. Authorities, but also friends, acquaintances and fellow countrymen, advised them to marry since this would be the most successful way to secure long-term residency in Germany:

*'If you are afraid that they send you back the only chance you have is to marry.'* (Cameroonian man, 34)

*'The German legal situation does not give you any other chance than to get married. I went to ask for temporary residence and they [the authorities] have told me, go and find yourself a wife.'* (Cameroonian man, 27)

*'We from Africa have no chance of obtaining asylum in Germany and there is no other way than to marry.'* (Cameroonian man, 24)

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<sup>17</sup> Franc-Anglais is a mixture of the two official languages French, English and a lingua franca Cameroon Pidgin English.

These quotes describe the impasse of many Cameroonian men. The German law places them in impossible situation, where marrying a German woman remains the last resort. But how do Cameroonian men and German women meet? One option is to visit African night clubs. One respondent reflects on the situation in these clubs in Berlin:

*'In these places there are mainly Cameroonians with an insecure status who are looking for women. And then there are these German women who come mainly out of curiosity. Some of them come to have sex with a black man.'* (Cameroonian man, 34)

Charles Ofoji (2005: 63-65), a former asylum seeker who was later living undocumented in Germany and comes originally from Nigeria, describes the precarious situation in the nightclubs of Berlin. He writes: 'Hustling for women here is a serious business, and for most of the blacks it is a do-or-die affair.' Ofoji explains that African men need German women for different reasons, but mainly to receive a residence permit.

Other ways of meeting German women include marriage advertisements or lonely heart ads in newspapers or on the internet; chat rooms for Germans interested in getting to know Africans, and vice versa; introductions by friends; engagement in non-governmental organizations and associations; or African-specific events, such as concerts or readings. Some Cameroonian men are pretty desperate and are even willing to pay for their marriage to a German woman. During my field work I have had several relevant experiences myself. Once I was asked to marry the brother of one of my informants. He offered me 15,000 € for the marriage. In another case, I was supposed to find a German woman who would be willing to fly to Cameroon to marry. Her Cameroonian husband would then apply for family reunification in Germany, and they would remain married for three to five years. It was clear that the arrangement was set up to be temporary from the outset. Travel expenses, like the flight ticket and visa, would be covered. The wedding ceremony would be arranged in Cameroon, and the German woman would receive around 20,000 € in installments.

### **Various incentives for German women to marry binationally**

During my field research in Berlin, I also had the chance to interview six German women who are, or have been, married to Cameroonian men<sup>18</sup>. The conversations with German women illustrate their motives, the complexity of binational marriages, and the difficulties associated with the phenomenon<sup>19</sup>. Concerning the reasons for marrying an African partner, it is hard to draw general conclusions. As with every marriage, there are diverse motives, incentives, and impulses which lead to the decision to marry somebody. My guess is that only for very few couples, binational or otherwise, is love the only motivation for marrying. It can be assumed that a marriage often fulfills several functions. For most German women I talked to, the reasons for marriage were diverse, and could not be reduced to one purpose. Some women told me that they were already thinking about marriage shortly after meeting their Cameroonian partner. In a couple of cases, the partner had only an 'exceptional leave to remain' in Germany.

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<sup>18</sup> In addition, I analysed reports, comments and requests made in the internet forum "Fast Africa" by German women in relationships with African men. These contributions helped me to understand the perspectives of German wives ([www.fastafrica.de](http://www.fastafrica.de)).

<sup>19</sup> Several studies focus on marriage between African and German partners. Englert (1995) describes the worries and fears of both partners using case studies. In her diploma thesis, Rose (2001) examines stereotypes of binational relationships using the example of Ghanaian-German couples.

The insecure status of their partners caused fear and anxiety in the women, as well as in the men. The women were afraid to lose their partners. In order to avoid the deportation of their partners, they agreed to marry much faster than they would have 'normally' done. Many women claimed they would have married him anyway, but not so quickly. A German woman, 35 years old, reflects upon her relationship as follows:

*'I met my husband in a Salsa disco where I usually went every Wednesday to dance. After a couple of dates, he quickly moved into my apartment since he had just a small room for himself in a friend's flat. He came as an asylum seeker to Germany and when we met, he was only tolerated here. I feared he would not return home one day because they deported him to Cameroon. Sometimes I could not sleep because I was worried about him. I was simply afraid to lose him. My fears were the main reason for the fast marriage. In other circumstances we would have waited much longer. We were married for four years and we now live separated, but we are still good friends.'*

Other couples were constrained to marry because the foreign partner was lacking a work permit. By marrying, the Cameroonian spouse receives residency and a work permit. He then acquires access to the labour market and can support his wife financially.

Sympathy and charity were other reasons for a binational marriage. In one case, the German woman reported that she married because she wanted to do a favour for a friend. Otherwise he would have had to leave Germany and return to Cameroon. She told me that she did not receive any money for the marriage. A 37-year old woman explained to me: *'I felt sorry for him and I wanted to help him to stay in Germany and earn some money'*.

Among my interview partners, many were already divorced or lived separated from their German partners. Three of the women interviewed were already divorced from their Cameroonian husbands. Two of them told me that they felt betrayed by their former Cameroonian partners. After the separation, they realised that their husbands had married them for a residence permit. One woman, 29 years old, stated: *'I think he never really loved me. Meanwhile I am sure he just married me for the papers.'* Both women told me that they had had romantic ideas of love. Their relationship with an African man promised to be special because *'he was so different...the way he looks, the way he talks, his culture, everything'*. A different appearance and manner often gave the first impulse and provided the main attraction. Some women admitted that cultural differences, mentality, and vitality fascinated them at the beginning of their relationship, but became problematic at the end. A couple of my interviewees told me about their fascination with the solidarity and strong bonds between family members in African families, and they hoped that Cameroonian men would fulfill this ideal. In addition, they hoped to become part of such a family. The majority of the German women were older than their Cameroonian spouses, and some of them had had relationships with African partners before. One woman, 39 years old, confessed: *'I was so happy to have a young, good-looking man at my side. My female friends admired me and I was really afraid to lose him and be all by myself again.'* Christine Thomas-Khaled, legal counselor from the Afrika-Center in Berlin and a specialist in German foreign law, informs and advises African-German couples and families. She summarises the motives of German women for marrying an African partner as follows: curiosity, the desire to escape the German culture and 'to break rules', a longing for the exotic, but also disappointment and frustration with German partners.

### **Perspectives of Cameroonian men**

The interviews with Cameroonian men revealed another side of the story. They often described their situation as desperate and hopeless. In addition to their complicated situations in Germany, their families pressured them to send money and support other family members. They reported that they felt totally exhausted and at the end of their tether. In a frank admission, one 28-year old respondent stated:

*'Africans use German women only for the purpose to receive their permit. And when they have obtained their legal status they leave the women and look for somebody from their own background. I know this is very hard, but it is no secret that marriage is in many cases the only chance to stay in Germany.'*

Marriage to a German woman can also lead to dependency for as long as the residence permit is contingent upon the existence and maintenance of the marriage. Some Cameroonians felt under extreme pressure from their German wives, who threatened to file for divorce unless the men did as the women wanted. One informant, 27 years old, explained:

*'In many marriages between African men and German women, there is a strong inequality. The German women clearly have the power. They can decide when to get married, but also when to divorce their husband. The African man is depending totally on his German wife in many ways, since the marriage has to last at least three years in order to get the permit. The situation makes some men mad.'*

Another man, 34 years old, was emotional as he described his situation:

*'Me and my German wife had to go to the Ausländerbehörde [immigration office] to prolong my temporary residence permit. As soon as we got there my wife told the authorities that she wants to get divorced. You cannot imagine how I felt in this situation. I was totally afraid and I did not know what to think. There was nothing wrong in our relationship. We were almost two years married and I could not think of what to do without the permit... I was so afraid to lose my residence permit and that they would send me back to Cameroon. After some arguing and discussion in German which I only understood in parts, my wife explained to me that she just wanted to test me whether I would be afraid of losing her. She told me to behave better in the future and not to come home late anymore, otherwise she will get divorced.'*

Almost all respondents stated that being married to a German woman means something completely different to them than being in a relationship with a Cameroonian woman. The majority of them expected to return to Cameroon in a few years. Their aim was to marry a Cameroonian woman in Cameroon, and their families also awaited their return and their marriage at home. One Cameroonian man, 29, explained:

*'Getting married here in Germany is somehow a problem for us, since marriage in Cameroon has a totally different meaning than here. I know many who got married to a German woman, but when they received their permit, they got divorced and now they are living together with a woman from Cameroon, because they always wanted this.'*

Some men appreciate it when their German wives become pregnant and give birth. A child gives them additional legal security. Even if the marriage does not last, the father of the common child can remain in Germany in order to carry out his responsibilities as a father since the child has German nationality. A 32-year old respondent remarked:

*'I was happy when my wife told me that she was pregnant. First, I like children and second, now I am less dependent on my wife. If she wants the divorce, fine. I can still stay in Germany and prolong my residency because of the child.'*

Certainly some marriages, as reported both by Cameroonian men and German women, were happy despite the fact that they had to marry faster than other couples, and their administrative trouble was much more intense. Englert (1995) claims in her book that love will develop with the course of time. She argues that binational couples need time to 'get used to each other'. Furthermore, friends and family members are in some cases suspicious of the relationship. However, Englert (1995) describes, on the basis of case studies, the possibilities for a harmonious binational relationship where love was not the initial motivation, but developed in the course of time. The same holds true for some German-Cameroonian couples who reported being happily married.

### **Incentives for transnational polygyny**

The diminishing options for African migrants to legalise their status, with marriage to a German woman being one of the last resorts to legal inclusion, may lead to 'transnational polygyny', i.e. being married in Cameroon as well as in Germany. During my field work in Cameroon, I met two men in their mid-thirties who were married and planned to go to Germany knowing that they might need to marry a German woman there to acquire residency. I also talked to their Cameroonian wives who simply stated that there was no other option, and that if their husband had to take another wife, they had to accept that. They were more worried about their husbands sending money and supporting the family than about them marrying again. One of my respondents in Berlin, also married to a German woman, admitted after several meetings that he had another wife in Cameroon, and also two children<sup>20</sup>. He had not seen them for over five years, but he confessed to sending money regularly to his wife and the children. His German wife knows nothing about the double marriage, and he intends to return to Cameroon in a few years. In two of my interviews with German women who were already divorced from their Cameroonian partners, they explained that they discovered during their marriages that their husbands had another woman in Cameroon, and also children. Both of them remained married despite the other wives, but refused to give money to their husbands since they suspected that they would send it to their families.

Transnational polygynous marriage strategies<sup>21</sup> can be seen as a consequence of restrictive immigration policies in Germany. Although some Cameroonian men are already married in Cameroon, they are obliged to take a second wife in Germany in order to be able to remain and

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<sup>20</sup> Lately these practices might also be occurring among Cameroonian women married in Cameroon migrating to Germany. They meet German men on the internet who invite them to Germany (on a tourist visa) where they get married. Their aim is to stay there for some years and support their children from abroad. In this sense, they take over the household position of the men.

<sup>21</sup> Lubkemann (2002) defines transnational polygyny as a man's marriage to multiple wives residing in different countries.

work in the country of destination. In addition to the legal aspect, the German wife generally also offers housing, financial support and necessary integration opportunities into the German society, e.g. networks and information. One Cameroonian man explained: *'Marriage helps you to survive in Germany, not only for the papers, but also for a place to live and some money to send home.'* However, the vast majority of Cameroonian men told me that they intended to return home. They see their German marriage as temporary, and talk about being rejoined with their families.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

My study demonstrates the remaining importance of national policies and legislation for marginalised migrants like Cameroonians. Germany has steadily tightened its criteria for entry and residency down to the moral and ethical cores of German society: asylum, marriage, and family. Unwanted migrants are thus forced to develop strategies and practices to become legally included. For Cameroonian men, marriage to a German woman often remains the only option for obtaining permanent legal residency and the accompanying right to work. While the importance of marriage has decreased for many German citizens and non-marital unions have become more common, marriage to a German spouse remains crucially important for some migrants. The German state, represented by its authorities, determines categories of acceptable marriage partners and denies marital unions which do not conform to the German marriage ideal. African-German couples need to prove that their relationship is based on love and emotional affection, criteria which the German state expects in a binational marriage relationship. Life trajectories of Cameroonian migrants are shaped by the boundaries of German immigration and marriage laws and regulations.

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