

Fall 2006

Women's Literacy in Ngaoundéré, Cameroon

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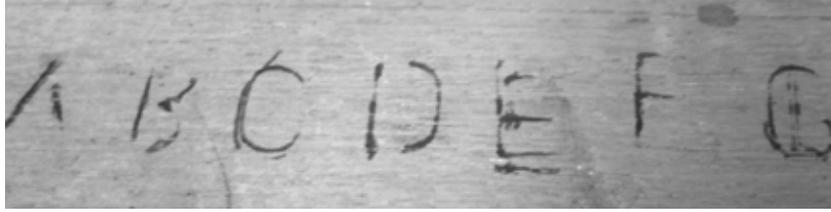


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Women's Literacy in Ngaoundéré, Cameroon

Picture: Alphabet scratched into the surface of a wooden desk in the classroom of
"Les Femmes Royales du Lamidat"

Brianne Carpenter

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Fall 2006

Topic Codes: 302, 502, 203

Abstract

This paper will be a look at adult women's literacy specifically in Ngaoundéré, Adamaoua, Cameroon. I will begin by placing Cameroon's illiteracy rates into a global context. I will then define what literacy is, why it is essential to development, how it benefits women particularly, and what women are affected and why. This will be done through a combination of scholarly research and interviews with women participants of the project of "Les Femmes Royales du Lamidat." I hope to create a setting and a face of one of development's most pressing issues by letting the women's words speak for themselves. The paper will conclude with a section on ideas for how women's literacy efforts could be improved by incorporating the use of new and different resources.

Useful Contacts

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Head of Association des Jeunes Volontaires de Ngaoundéré (A.J.V.N.) which is located in the same office as COLDEN with Aboubakar Yaya (above La King)

Young, enthusiastic, perfect French

Nene Fatoumata

President of L'Association des Femmes Royales du Lamidat

BP 142 Ngaoundere

Tel : 741.34.99

Dynamic, strong woman. Intermediate French.

Mamoudou Bia

Literacy teacher for Les Femmes Royales

Does not have a cell phone or email: best way to contact him is either through Mme Nene or (he's so eager to help) just go to the classroom which is directly in front of the Lamidat and introduce yourself.

Ahmadou Djondi

Tel: 728.48.03

Superviseur Départemental de la VINA, Programme National d'Alphabétisation

His office is at the Ministre de la Jeunesse et des Sports, but call and make an appointment first because he's rarely there.

Very willing to supply information. He's really passionate about what he's doing. His French is perfect and his English is really good too.

For Sue.
Just in case I don't write a book.

Acknowledgements

Mariamou and Ismala Yaya. For all of the laughter and your beautiful hospitality.

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Mme Nene. For answering all of my questions. Your strength amazes me.

To all of the women in the classroom. Thank you for your openness, your smiles, and your greetings in Fulfude, French, and English. Thank you for asking me to teach and putting up with my drawings. Thank you for the examples that you are to the community. May you daily be encouraged and inspired by what you have accomplished and are accomplishing.

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Introduction

With my legs folded compactly beneath me and my lap covered in newspapers, I sat in the corner of our couch in Ngaoundéré trying to decipher the happenings of the week as relayed by the *Cameroon Tribune* (and also trying to distract myself from the plague of unpredictably spastic crickets). I do not remember the first part of the conversation specifically, but, from her seat behind her sewing machine, my house-mom commented on the number of newspapers. And I, thinking that was her way of showing interest, happily offered to give them to her when I was done. No, no she laughed, I don't know how to read. I want to learn, but...she trailed off and continued sewing.

As a literature major, I can not imagine surviving without being able to read or writ. I shudder to envision my life without books. The topic of literacy struck deeper than just my interest: the spark that kindled my curiosity started a burning fire of questions that merit answers. Why can't Mariamou read? And, if *she* doesn't know how to read, (being that my host family is considered to be modern and upper middle class) how many women are in the same position? And, who is teaching them?

This paper will be a look at adult women's literacy specifically in Ngaoundéré, Adamaoua, Cameroon. I will begin by defining what literacy is, why it is essential to development and how it benefits women particularly. I will also explore, in a general sense, what women are effected and why. After looking at the problem in the academic (need I say hypothetical) sense, in the second part of the paper I will attempt to give women's literacy a setting and a face by looking specifically at the project of "Les Femmes Royales du Lamidat" and letting the women's work and stories speak for themselves.

Methodologies

Following the general trend of how I approach projects, my initial plan was over ambitious: a fabulous idea for a book but way too much for a 40 page paper in a two week period. My initial objectives were to observe the women's literacy program at the Lamidat (I chose this program because, after preliminary research during our first stay in Ngaoundéré, I was under the impression that it was the only existing program apart from the one at the Norwegian Mission), to hear the stories of several women participants and to incorporate creative non-fiction into the writing of the paper.

I attended class on the first day of ISP and interviewed the instructor on the second day. From him I found out about the existence of the Plan National d'Alphabétisation, the national program in charge of organizing all of the adult literacy centers in the country. At the end of week one, I was able to interview this region's head of the program who gave me the PNA's founding document to read (he actually gave me the first draft from 2003 as he was not able to locate the actual accepted plan from 2005; some of the information concerning the national program may therefore be outdated) and informed me of the existence of eight literacy programs in Ngaoundéré that he had been able to locate. There are most likely other programs and groups that exist and that meet unofficially. I realized that, to present an accurate view of adult women's literacy efforts in Ngaoundéré, it would be necessary to observe more than one program. So, I visited a second women's literacy group and found that, although there were subtle differences, the two programs functioned very similarly. I realized that I could spend a lot of time and effort trying to visit and observe all of the other programs in Ngaoundéré. When I rethought my goals, one of which was to have the women feel comfortable enough with me

to share their experiences, I decided keeping my project focused more narrowly on one program and the women it has changed which would not only be much more realistic for the timeframe, but also fit my goal of learning the women's names and facial expressions and mannerisms. I wanted to understand them, and to understand them I had to know them. I also realized that it was overly ambitious to try to write a research paper with parallel creative non-fiction stories. I tried to incorporate creative non-fiction description into the main body of the paper and I hope that the reader can form a true mental image of the classroom and the women's faces. For something to be impacting, it has to be real. And the only way to create a reality without physically visiting a place is to construct it in the imaginations.

I interviewed seven women in the program at the Lamidat (five from level 2 and two from level 1), the woman responsible for its creation, the instructor, the head of the national program for the area, the head of one of the NGO's that helped the women write the project proposal, and a university student who is writing her master dissertation on women's literacy in the North. I feel that the variety of my interviews enabled me to truly understand a community development project from the very bottom up and from the very top down. An important thing to mention about the interviews with the women themselves is that I laid out my plan to their instructor at the very beginning. On the positive side, he was extremely helpful and wanted to do anything he could to aid me. On the other hand, without my asking or my knowledge he organized the interviews himself and acted as translator. This was good because the women are incredibly comfortable with him. On the other hand, because of his role, some of the women may have felt obligated to participate (I did not get this sense at all and I made sure to reiterate

several times that they could choose whether or not to participate, answer certain questions, or give their names. The women, because they were comfortable with me, seemed more than willing to share, but for the integrity of the paper I needed to mention this dynamic.) Also, because many of the women although they understood the questions I posed in French, gave their responses in Fulfulde. I use quotes in French in this paper which, although I present them as the women's direct voices, are actually filtered through the words of a translator. I realized quickly after the first interview that the question "what difficulties have you faced?" was most likely going to be met with the modest (untrue) response, "none." So instead, I went about obtaining this information by asking their teacher and the university student who is writing her master's dissertation on adult women's literacy what possible difficulties women who want to participate might encounter. I have matched their responses with comments the women themselves made during interviews (and most often not in response to the direct question).

It is also important to note here that I observed the class for two weeks in the first month after Ramadan when the numbers are traditionally much lower.¹ In addition, confounding the situation even further, is the fact that the teacher was absent for two months prior to the month of Ramadan, during which classes are not held anyway, making a total of three months that the class had not been functioning.² Apparently the numbers have dropped drastically (from about 60 to about 25) but women, as word gets around that Mamoudou is back, are starting to show back up slowly but surely.³ They are eager to learn and it is changing their lives.

¹ Tsasse Fopa. Personal Interview. 14 Nov 2006.

² Mme Néné Fatoumata. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

³ Mamoudou Bia. Personal Interview. 16 Nov 2006. Note: I have even seen this myself as the first week I counted between 20 and 22 students and the second week I counted 25 or more every day.

What is literacy?

To begin a discussion on literacy in a developing country, it is imperative that we first define literacy itself and then explore what role literacy plays in development. The conception of literacy seems deceptively simple on the surface. After all, isn't the question to be answered black and white? Either a person can read, or they can't. Unfortunately, and indeed like any development issue, it is not that simple.

To begin with, the concept of literacy becomes more complicated in a country as diverse as Cameroon where there are two official national languages and over 250 local languages.⁴ As recognized by Ouane, "Very often, literacy statistics are concerned only with people literate in French-the official language of Francophone African countries. Generations of individuals who acquired literacy in Arabic (in Koranic Schools) or, through Arabic scripts, or in local languages are left out."⁵ This point is specifically relevant in Northern Cameroon where the majority of the population is Muslim. Many children (girls specifically) may attend several years of Koranic School even if they never attend public school.

The debate in academic circles over 'the language of literacy' is raging, and indeed could be an entire paper in itself. For the sake of this project, I will define basic literacy as the ability to read and write in French for the following reason: if we are to look at the interaction between literacy and development, it must be recognized that regardless of whether or not it *should* be, for Cameroon French is the unifying language

⁴ CDS "Development in Northern Cameroon." Aboubakar Yaya. 16 October 2006.

⁵ pp. 11. Ouane, Adama, and Yvette Amon-Tanoh. "Literacy in French-Speaking Africa: A Situational Analysis." *African Studies Review*, Vol.33, No.3, Special Issue for the International Year of Literacy. (Dec.,1990), pp.21-38.

of the country and therefore the language of development. Even if a woman is literate in Arabic or a local language, she still is inhibited in her social and economic functionality. Nearly all public information (signs, hospital cahiers, etc) is written in French and in the North, all business interactions with the large non-Fulani population must be conducted in French. As Bhola ardently points out, “Today, in every country of the world, it is quite clear to those who look carefully that every institution of governance, politics, economics, and social service is based on the assumptions of literacy. Every individual – whether living in a village or a town, in a desert, on a river, or on a hillside – must deal with the agents of these institutions and, if illiterate, is by definition disadvantaged.”⁶ The relationship between literacy and development can be easily extrapolated from the author’s claim that illiteracy renders one politically, economically and socially disadvantaged. Literacy is no longer a tool necessary only to businessmen, government officials, and those in large cities, but has become an essential tool for local development and, “those acquiring literacy are becoming key actors in the process of self-management at the village and community level.”⁷ As it is concisely stated on the UNESCO⁸ website, “Literacy is an indispensable means for effective social and economic participation, contributing to human development and poverty reduction.”⁹

While UNESCO’s statement is quite dry, it serves as a sort of check and balance to Bhola’s energetic proclamation that, “The centrality of the role of literacy in development

⁶ pp. 15. Bhola, H. S. “An Overview of Literacy in Sub-Sahara Africa-Images in the Making.” *African Studies Review*, Vol.33, No.3, Special Issue for the International Year of Literacy. (Dec., 1990), pp. 5-20. 17 Nov. 2006.

⁷ pp. 12. Ouane, Adama, and Yvette Amon-Tanoh. “Literacy in French-Speaking Africa: A Situational Analysis.” *African Studies Review*, Vol.33, No.3, Special Issue for the International Year of Literacy. (Dec.,1990), pp.21-38.

⁸ United Nations Education Statistics CO

⁹ Country Profile: Cameroon. <www.uis.unesco.org/profiles/cameroon>. 17 Nov. 2006. <www.unesco.org>.

is not always understood and literacy sometimes waits while more urgent needs are fulfilled first!”¹⁰ Both recognize that literacy is a fundamental, perhaps *the* fundamental, key to successful social and economic development.

In addition to acknowledging the crucial role literacy plays in development, it is also important to recognize that literacy is a process and not a state of being. We have said that illiteracy renders one socially, economically and politically disadvantaged. But, just because a woman learns to read, write, and communicate in French does not mean that all of the pre-existing disadvantages disappear. Basic literacy (reading, writing, and speaking) is only the first step. She must then be taught how she can use her new skills, both for her personal, social, economic, and political advantage and for that of her family. This may take the form of “functional literacy” which teaches women how to contribute to and profit from economic activity in the informal sector through the learning of a small trade like sewing. In fact, one author claims that, “...the uses of literacy may be more significant in the informal sector of the economy than in the wage sector.”¹¹ This statement may be partially justified by the realization that, at the most basic level, literacy enables women to “make effective transaction with their environment as part of day-to-day living.”¹²

¹⁰ Bholá, H. S. “An Overview of Literacy in Sub-Saharan Africa-Images in the Making.” *African Studies Review*, Vol.33, No.3, Special Issue for the International Year of Literacy. (Dec., 1990), pp. 5-20. 17 Nov. 2006.

¹¹ pp. 16. Bholá, H. S. “An Overview of Literacy in Sub-Saharan Africa-Images in the Making.” *African Studies Review*, Vol.33, No.3, Special Issue for the International Year of Literacy. (Dec., 1990), pp. 5-20. 17 Nov. 2006.

¹² pp. 16. Bholá, H. S. “An Overview of Literacy in Sub-Saharan Africa-Images in the Making.” *African Studies Review*, Vol.33, No.3, Special Issue for the International Year of Literacy. (Dec., 1990), pp. 5-20. 17 Nov. 2006.

Women's Literacy Statistics

Now that the term 'literacy' has been defined for this paper and the relationship between literacy and development briefly examined, it is time to place the information into a specific context. I will begin by placing Cameroon's women's literacy rates into a global framework. The macro analysis will be followed by an examination of the rates in Northern Cameroon compared to the rest of the country.

As can be imagined, the validity of literacy statistics should be kept in mind, even for the more respected sources such as UNESCO. In addition to the already mentioned problem of varying definitions of literacy, literacy statistics are usually derived from self report and are often based on old census information (among a myriad of other technical difficulties).¹³ Although one can assume a certain level of inaccuracy, literacy statistics are still enormously helpful in putting the problem into context.

Placed in a global context, Cameroon is located on the continent with the highest illiteracy rates in the world.¹⁴ The following chart presents comparative literacy data – total illiteracy rates, male rates, and female rates – from developed and underdeveloped areas in the world.

¹³ Bholá, H. S. "An Overview of Literacy in Sub-Sahara Africa-Images in the Making." *African Studies Review*, Vol.33, No.3, Special Issue for the International Year of Literacy. (Dec., 1990), pp. 5-20. 17 Nov. 2006.

¹⁴ Bholá, H. S. "An Overview of Literacy in Sub-Sahara Africa-Images in the Making." *African Studies Review*, Vol.33, No.3, Special Issue for the International Year of Literacy. (Dec., 1990), pp. 5-20. 17 Nov. 2006.

**ILLITERACY RATES IN THE WORLD
AND MAJOR REGIONS BY SEX, 1985**

| Region | Illiteracy rates age 15+ | | | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|---|
| | Both Sexes (%) | Males (%) | Females (%) | Female rate minus Male rate (% points) |
| World | 27.7 | 20.5 | 34.9 | 14.4 |
| Developed countries | 2.1 | 1.7 | 2.6 | 0.9 |
| Developing countries | 38.2 | 27.9 | 48.9 | 21.0 |
| Least Developed countries | 67.6 | 56.9 | 78.4 | 21.5 |
| Africa | 54.0 | 43.3 | 64.5 | 21.2 |
| Asia | 36.3 | 25.6 | 47.4 | 21.8 |
| Latin America and the Caribbean | 17.3 | 15.3 | 19.2 | 3.9 |

Source: UNESCO. 1988. *Compendium of Statistics on Illiteracy*. Paris: UNESCO.

15

The table places Africa in a global context as the least literate continent and also shows the enormous gap between male and female literacy rates. But, these statistics are from 1988, the situation must have improved since then. The total levels of illiteracy have indeed dropped, and the disparaging gap between women and men has improved slightly. Unfortunately, news of improved statistics can be falsely reassuring. As of 2000, 26% of women and 17% of men worldwide were illiterate, with the percentages in Africa unacceptably high at 26.7% of men and 43.5% of women. In other words, nearly half of adult women in Africa are illiterate.

Not only positioned on the most illiterate continent, Cameroon specifically as a Francophone West African country is located in a hotbed of illiteracy. In fact, “of 26 countries with highest illiteracy rate (above 70%), 16 are located in sub-Saharan Africa

¹⁵ Bhola, H. S. “An Overview of Literacy in Sub-Sahara Africa-Images in the Making.” *African Studies Review*, Vol.33, No.3, Special Issue for the International Year of Literacy. (Dec., 1990), pp. 5-20. 17 Nov. 2006.

and twelve in West Africa.”¹⁶ According to estimations from 2004, in Cameroon 77% of males and 59.8% of females age 15 and older were deemed literate.¹⁷ Shockingly, this statistic reveals not only that nearly half the population of adult women is illiterate but also highlights the disparaging gap between men’s and women’s literacy, 17.2%. Statistics from within Cameroon itself estimate the gap to be even more severe, claiming that countrywide 65 of every 100 illiterate people are women.¹⁸

Illiteracy is clearly a nationwide problem, but as pointed out in the Plan d’Action National EPT, « les trois provinces septentrionales (Adamaoua, Nord et Extrême-Nord)... sont particulièrement touchées par l'illettrisme. Dans certaines de ces poches d'analphabétisme endémique...le taux d'analphabétisme féminin dépassant très souvent le seuil de 75%. »¹⁹ Adamaoua, the southernmost of the three northern provinces and its capitol Ngaoundéré have, according to statistics presented in the Plan Nationale d’Alphabetisation, an illiteracy rate of 40.5%.²⁰ Nearly 10% higher than the national average, the illiteracy rate in Ngaoundéré justifies the location of this study.

Why Women’s Literacy is Essential to Development

I have just claimed that women’s illiteracy is an overwhelming problem in Ngaoundéré. Although the reasons may seem obvious, it is necessary to justify the need

¹⁶ Ouane, Adama, and Yvette Amon-Tanoh. “Literacy in French-Speaking Africa: A Situational Analysis.” *African Studies Review*, Vol.33, No.3, Special Issue for the International Year of Literacy. (Dec.,1990), pp.21-38.

¹⁷ UNESCO country profile statistics from 2004. Country Profile: Cameroon. <www.uis.unesco.org/profiles/cameroon>. 17 Nov. 2006. <www.unesco.org>.

¹⁸ Obj. VI. Cameroon Department of Education. *Plan d’Action Nationale: l’Education Pour Tous*. Yaoundé :

¹⁹ “the three northern provinces, (Adamaoua, North and Extreme-North)...are particularly affected by illiteracy. In certain pockets of endemic illiteracy...the level of women’s illiteracy often surpasses a threshold of 75%” Obj. VI. Cameroon Department of Education. *Plan d’Action Nationale: l’Education Pour Tous*. Yaoundé :

²⁰ “National Literacy Plan” Cameroun Secrétariat d’Etat à la Jeunesse et aux Sports. *Programme Nationale d’Alphabetisation*. Yaoundé : Sep. 2002.

to alphabetize women. As aptly stated by the Plan Nationale d'Alphabétisation, "Si, pour l'ensemble de la population, l'analphabétisme est un fléau social et économique majeur, ses effets sont encore plus néfastes quand il concerne la population féminine, en raison de la place et des rôles multiples que joue la femme dans la société."²¹ Because of her central role, the effects of women's literacy can be said to have a ripple effect. But, what are these changes? By becoming literate, what does a woman gain and what is she enabled to contribute? The changes, extending far beyond the woman herself, have health, familial, and economic impacts.²² Or, as concisely stated by UNESCO, "In the case of mothers, literacy leads to an enhanced quality of life for their families and improved educational outcomes for their children."²³

The impact of literacy on proper health care is perhaps the most important because of its far reaching effects. After all, if a woman is in poor health, she can not possibly function effectively in either her economic or familial role. Literacy affects a woman's personal health greatly in that she has access to reliable health care information and is not forced to rely solely on "le respect de tabous traditionnels objectivement injustifiés."²⁴ Literacy enables women to attain a better understanding of basic hygiene and health, proper nutrition, and reproductive health.²⁵ Although it may seem intuitive that a woman's knowledge would positively impact the health of her children, Sandiford

²¹ "If, for the entire population, illiteracy is a major economic and social flaw, its effects are even more harmful when it concerns the feminine population, because of the place and multiple roles that a woman plays in society." Cameroun Secrétariat d'Etat à la Jeunesse et aux Sports. *Programme Nationale d'Alphabétisation*. Yaoundé : Sep. 2002.

²² This section will focus on the answer to this question as found in literature while the women's answers themselves will be presented later.

²³ Country Profile: Cameroon. <www.uis.unesco.org/profiles/cameroon>. 17 Nov. 2006. <www.unesco.org>.

²⁴ "respect for traditional yet objectively unjustified taboos." Cameroun Secrétariat d'Etat à la Jeunesse et aux Sports. *Programme Nationale d'Alphabétisation*. Yaoundé : Sep. 2002.

²⁵ Cameroun Secrétariat d'Etat à la Jeunesse et aux Sports. *Programme Nationale d'Alphabétisation*. Yaoundé : Sep. 2002.

and Cassel performed an intensive study in South America to observe the correlation between women's literacy and child health. The team's results, "strongly support the contention that education plays a critical role in child health and survival, independently of other social and economic advantages"²⁶ The enormous positive effects of literacy on both a woman's health and the health of her children are undeniable. This reason in itself should suffice for increased importance placed on women's literacy.

In addition to health care benefits for both woman and child, educational benefits are also present and enormously impacting. Recognizing the importance of women's literacy for child education, the Plan Nationale d'Alphabétisation states that, "il est connu que la femme est le premier éducateur de l'enfant, dans la mesure ou la prise en charge éducative des jeunes en bas age lui incombe presque totalement. Une mère analphabète pénalise donc sur divers plans sa progéniture, voire l'ensemble de sa famille, du fait de son propre illettrisme."²⁷ Women's illiteracy not only affects individual families, but also the expansive family of the local community as a whole. Illiterate women are often inhibited from being socially active members of community development projects and associations.²⁸

In addition to her familial role, women also play a central role in the economy in Cameroon, but mostly as the foundation of the informal sector. Yet, even in the informal

²⁶ See the article for how this was done. Economically advantaged people are, for the most part, the most literate and because of their economic advantages have increased access to health care. By eliminating the economic correlation between means and health, the only correlation left to draw is between literacy and health. Sandiford, P., and J. Cassel, M. Montenegro, G. Sanchez. "The Impact of Women's Literacy on Child Health and its Interaction with Access to Health Services." *Population Studies*, Vol.49, No.1. (Mar., 1995), pp. 5-17.

²⁷ "It is known that the woman is a child's first educator, in that the responsibility of the education of young children is entrusted nearly entirely to her. An illiterate mother therefore, in many ways, penalizes her offspring, even the entire family, because of her own illiteracy." Cameroun Secrétariat d'Etat à la Jeunesse et aux Sports. *Programme Nationale d'Alphabétisation*. Yaoundé : Sep. 2002.

²⁸ Cameroun Secrétariat d'Etat à la Jeunesse et aux Sports. *Programme Nationale d'Alphabétisation*. Yaoundé : Sep. 2002.

sector, literacy is becoming essential for productive transactions. One article even makes the bold claim that “literacy may be more significant in the informal sector of the economy than in the wage sector.”²⁹ Literacy in the informal sectors increases a woman’s ability to communicate and interact with her environment. Following this paper’s definition of literacy as being able to read write and speak French, the French speaking woman in the informal sector automatically widens her consumer base which inevitably leads to an increase in revenue. The woman who can write and factor can accurately keep track of her spending and selling. Well organized finances also lead to increased revenue. And finally, the woman who can read has “accès aux sources d’information sur les systèmes de production” and is not limited to “des techniques de production archaïque.”³⁰

Clearly the numerous effects of literacy for women are sufficient reason to place women’s literacy at the top of the list of development issues. Although stated rather passionately and emphatically, there is truth in the claim that, “It is not realized that there are no first’s and second’s in social change, that literacy and development have a mutually beneficial relationship, and that without literacy, development indeed limps on one leg.”³¹

²⁹ pp. 16. Bholá, H. S. “An Overview of Literacy in Sub-Sahara Africa-Images in the Making.” *African Studies Review*, Vol.33, No.3, Special Issue for the International Year of Literacy. (Dec., 1990), pp. 5-20. 17 Nov. 2006.

³⁰ “access to sources of information on systems of production.” “archaic production techniques.” Cameroun Secrétariat d’Etat à la Jeunesse et aux Sports. *Programme Nationale d’Alphabétisation*. Yaoundé : Sep. 2002.

³¹ Bholá, H. S. “An Overview of Literacy in Sub-Sahara Africa-Images in the Making.” *African Studies Review*, Vol.33, No.3, Special Issue for the International Year of Literacy. (Dec., 1990), pp. 5-20. 17 Nov. 2006.

The Problem of Women's Illiteracy Specifically in Northern Cameroon

After having established the potential benefits of women's literacy and the present problematic state of women's illiteracy in both Cameroon as a whole and in the North specifically, the question that logically follows is, "Why?" Why is women's illiteracy a more significant problem in the North and what problems do women face in their attempts to obtain an education?

The general list laid out in the Plan Nationale d'Alphabétisation gives the following reasons for the increased problem of illiteracy in the North:

Les trois provinces septentrionales (Adamaoua, Nord, Extrême-Nord) et le Nord-Ouest : celles-ci constituent des réceptacles privilégiés de l'analphabétisme en raison des difficultés de l'expansion scolaire, de la persistance de forts courants migratoires alimentés par les populations des pays voisins, de la prédominance de traditions séculaires centrées sur l'autorité de type féodal et enfin, à cause d'une forte implantation de réalités socioculturelles parfois opposées aux pratiques modernes d'éducation et de communication.³²

A combination of several of these reasons impact women particularly. Firstly, as already stated, the northern three provinces are the most under-educated in the country. The lack of a strong educational system in addition to the lack of sufficient schools and teachers etc., means that education is not available to all. In addition the price of education is high and rising. For many families, there are not enough resources to send

³² "The three northern provinces (Adamaoua, North, Extreme-North) and the North-West: these make up the privileged receptacles of illiteracy due to difficulties of education expansion, the persistence of strong migratory currents of populations from neighboring countries, the predominance of age-old traditions based on feudal authority, and finally, because of the strong presence of socio-cultural realities that sometimes oppose modern education and communication practices." Cameroun Secrétariat d'Etat à la Jeunesse et aux Sports. *Programme Nationale d'Alphabétisation*. Yaoundé : Sep. 2002.

all of the children to school and therefore a choice must be made. Often, this choice favors sons over daughters. Parents may question, “Why should I invest so much money in the education of my daughter for it all to be wasted when she becomes a wife and mother?”³³ Inherent in this question are several assumptions: one, that daughters are destined for marriage and that it is more worth while to give them a practical education about their future role in the household; and two that education would only affect the girl personally. The proven fact that an educated woman can be a better mother, for reasons such as the health and education of her children, is either completely ignored or, perhaps more likely, not understood. .

In addition to being penalized by traditional conceptions of her future role, a young girl’s education can also be impacted by religious beliefs. In Northern Cameroon, the majority of the population is Muslim, thereby providing religious reinforcement to the segregation of society along gender lines. According to the rules of Islam, a young girl is ‘legally’ prepared for marriage at the age of 14. Even if families send their daughters to school, they are often pulled out long before completion “de partir au mariage.”³⁴ The unfortunate thing about this phenomenon is that it can render the early childhood education of the girl (if indeed she received one) nearly useless by removing her from a learning environment. Literacy can be lost mostly because neo-literates, especially young girls who leave the classroom to become confined to households as wives and mothers, “do not have sufficient opportunity to practice their newly acquired skills and

³³ Tsasse Fopa. Head of Association des Jeunes Volontaires de Ngaoundéré (A.J.V.N.). Personal Interview. 14 Nov 2006.

³⁴ “to leave to be married.” Tsasse Fopa. Personal Interview. 14 Nov 2006.

competence in literacy.”³⁵ And in the archaic, unorganized and under-funded education system of Cameroon, primary education may not even insure literacy in the first place.

From my observation, it seems that the conceptions surrounding the education of young girls may be improving, at least in Ngaoundéré. A Peace Corps volunteer at one of the local high schools said that he does not see a decrease in the number of girls in class as the level increases.³⁶ And, all of the women with children whom I talked to at two alphabetization programs said independently that the education of their children was very important to them (regardless of gender). This visible change may be due in part to the economic crisis of the 80’s and 90’s: due to economic strain, families have become smaller and it is important for each member to be able to generate revenue, for which the necessary skills are found in school.³⁷ The fact remains that concerning adult women, a sort of generational gap has been created which justifies the immediate need for adult women’s literacy programs.

Literacy Programs

With such a sweeping problem as women’s illiteracy it is certain that various programs exist to combat it. And they do, on many different levels. There are private classes that charge tuition and offer more traditional and supplementary education such as the program through l’Alliance Franco-Camerounaise where one can non-traditionally receive the same certificates of completion as one would receive in the traditional school

³⁵ pp. 13. Ouane, Adama, and Yvette Amon-Tanoh. “Literacy in French-Speaking Africa: A Situational Analysis.” *African Studies Review*, Vol.33, No.3, Special Issue for the International Year of Literacy. (Dec.,1990), pp.21-38.

³⁶ Phillipe. Peace Corps Volunteer. Personal Interview. 17 Nov. 2006.

³⁷ Farikou Amadou. Personal Interview. 2 Dec. 2006.

system (although this program no longer functions in Ngaoundéré specifically).³⁸ There are also religiously associated groups often affiliated with local Christian churches. Several of these exist in Ngaoundéré at the Norwegian mission. Most are free but one might question how effectively they reach the conservative Muslim population. There are private NGO's like FOREDEN in Ngaoundéré that work with both girl's and young adult women's literacy.³⁹ There are literacy groups that meet in association with other groups such as the women's literacy program with the agricultural GIC "Mamdjara" here in Ngaoundéré.⁴⁰ In fact, "Mamadjara's" literacy program fits precisely one author's claim that the most effective programs are "traditional self-help groups – village association of ancient or recent origins..." that have been "fertilized by functional literacy and training programs."⁴¹ Finally, in Ngaoundéré, there is the literacy program of "Les Femmes Royales du Lamidat," a group of women who saw a need and worked to meet it by creating their own program and finding the funds to construct their own classroom.

Although the various programs do not work in conjunction with each other and often are not even aware of the existence of other programs, this may be in the process of changing due to the Plan Nationale d'Alphabétisation (PNA) that was initiated in 2005.

The PNA, funded by HIPC⁴² funds, received an amount of 700million FCFA for the

³⁸ Farikou Amadou. Professor des Lettres, University of Ngaoundéré. Personal Interview. 17 Nov 2006.

³⁹ Adamou, Fadimatou. Master's student writing dissertation on women's literacy. Personal Interview. 16 Nov. 2006.

⁴⁰ GIC Groupe des Interetes Communes "group of common interests." Moussa, Mamadou. GIC des Agriculteurs: Mamdjara. Personal Interview. 22 Nov. 2006.

⁴¹ pp. 12. Ouane, Adama, and Yvette Amon-Tanoh. "Literacy in Frency-Speaking Africa: A Situational Analysis." *African Studies Review*, Vol.33, No.3, Special Issue for the International Year of Literacy. (Dec.,1990), pp.21-38.

⁴² Heavily Indebted Poor Countries as determined by the World Bank

implementation of its project.⁴³ An umbrella program, the PNA is trying to locate already established local literacy programs and determine where existing needs still are. In the words of the Ministre de la Jeunesse et des Sports who is in charge of PNA implementation for Vina,⁴⁴ “We come. We see what they (pre-existing literacy programs) are doing. And we say, ok, this is what we can do.”⁴⁵ The PNA is not trying to take over all literacy programs, it only hopes to work with and support existing programs by providing training for their teachers and a small monthly stipend of 20,000 F CFA plus the gift of a bicycle.⁴⁶ In addition, the PNA when incorporating an existing program or creating a new one, encourages community ownership:

Prendre un centre dans notre programme, ça signifie quoi? Ça signifie déjà que nous connaissons l’alphabétiseur, et le processus de désignation de l’alphabétiseur, ça, ça dépend des apprenants et des personnes qui sont là. Là, nous n’intervenons pas. C’est au gens du centre de nous dire que, ‘voilà la personne que nous avons choisi pour nous alphabétiser.’⁴⁷

In its rather ambitious three year plan, the PNA extension in Ngaoundéré is planning on creating 28 new literacy centers in and around Ngaoundéré.⁴⁸ Interestingly Cameroon’s Plan Nationale d’Alphabétisation, by working in conjunction with local groups, NGO’s and already established programs, seems to fit exactly what Bholá

⁴³ An amount equal to roughly 1.4 million American dollars. Essono, Louis-Martin. “Cameroun: l’alphabétisation renaît.” 19 Sep. 2005. *Thot/Cursus*. 17 Nov. 2006.

⁴⁴ Vina, like a county, is a division with the province of Adamaoua which includes Ngaoundéré and the surrounding small towns and villages. Ahmadou Djondi. Ministre de la Jeunesse et des Sports. Personal Interview. 16 Nov 2006.

⁴⁵ Ahmadou Djondi. Ministre de la Jeunesse et des Sports. Personal Interview. 16 Nov 2006.

⁴⁶ Ahmadou Djondi. Personal Interview. 20 Nov 2006.

⁴⁷ “Bringing a center into our program, what does that mean exactly? That means that we already know the instructor, as for the process of designating the instructor, that, that depends on the students and the people who are there. There, we don’t intervene. It’s up to the people at the center to tell us that, ‘here is the person that we have chosen to teach us.’” Ahmadou Djondi. Personal Interview. 16 Nov 2006.

⁴⁸ Ahmadou Djondi. Personal Interview. 16 Nov 2006.

advocates for the mass literacy of developing countries: “In these countries government is the only actor. Few countries have NGO’s that could plan and implement massive programs. There is thus the need to reconcile top-down approaches with bottom-up approaches by reinventing national visions in local setting.”⁴⁹ And in its mission statement document, the Plan Nationale d’Alphabétisation recognizes the need for this specific type of relationship by stating that, “les campagnes nationales d’alphabétisation étaient généralement trop ambitieuses...et souvent mal définies au plan des concepts de base.”⁵⁰ Although the national program’s plans for implementation have been more clearly defined than in the past, the program is only in the second year of its three year pilot phase. Only the future will be able to relate for sure its effectiveness. On one hand, things look hopeful and well organized while on the other hand, some of the goals seem overambitious and, in light of the track records of other governmental programs, take on a more pessimistic gleam.

Case Study: Les Femmes Royales du Lamidat

Now that we have seen a broad overview of the state of women’s literacy: the reasons why women’s literacy is important; why illiteracy is such a significant problem in the North; and the programs that exist to combat illiteracy, we will now move out of generalizations and into specifics. For the main focus will not be on information, but on (I can not escape my fate as a literature major) the women’s stories themselves. This will

⁴⁹ Bholá, H. S. “An Overview of Literacy in Sub-Sahara Africa-Images in the Making.” *African Studies Review*, Vol.33, No.3, Special Issue for the International Year of Literacy. (Dec., 1990), pp. 5-20. 17 Nov. 2006.

⁵⁰ pp. 7. In reference to the national literacy campaign that lasted from 1961-1980. 12,000 literacy centers were created, only 314 of which still function today. “the national literacy campaigns were generally too ambitious...and often poorly defined in terms of implementation at the base.” Cameroun Secrétariat d’Etat à la Jeunesse et aux Sports. *Programme Nationale d’Alphabétisation*. Yaoundé : Sep. 2002.

be done through a specific case study of one women's literacy program in the cartier Yarmbang, Ngaoundéré, Cameroon started and lead by "Les Femmes Royales du Lamidat."⁵¹

In the introduction to her article on education in Kenya, Cassara decries the need to "listen" to the stories of people from Third World countries instead of just studying the situation from a distance with the belief that 'we' (members of the Western world) not only already understand the problems but also have the solutions.⁵² Instead of writing herself, Cassara published commentaries that the women themselves wrote, so as to let their own voices speak. In this same manner, I wish the reader to allow my writing, my median voice, to fade into the background and let the women's words speak for themselves. Hear their voices -soft- and see their smiles -shy- and listen, listen to what they have to say.⁵³

Step Into the Classroom, Into Their World

Mamoudou opens up the giant metal maroon doors and I step across the threshold -past the colorful mural of PACDDU,⁵⁴ the CCUE⁵⁵ and Cameroon's flags- into the dark and cool shade of the cement classroom. This slightly rectangular building is full, every Monday through Thursday from 14:00-17:00, of beautifully determined women who are

⁵¹ The Royal Women of the Lamido. The Lamido is the local traditional ruler.

⁵² Cassara, Beverly Benner. "The Emerging Role of Women Adult Educator in Kenya." *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol.56, No.3, Knowing the Other: A Look at Education Internationally. (Summer, 1987), pp. 419-422.

⁵³ Cassara, Beverly Benner. "The Emerging Role of Women Adult Educator in Kenya." *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol.56, No.3, Knowing the Other: A Look at Education Internationally. (Summer, 1987), pp. 419-422.

⁵⁴ Programme d'Appui aux Capacites Decentralisees de Developpement Urbain

⁵⁵ Cooperation Camroun-Union Europeenne

learning to read and write and speak French, although for the last hour of the class they also learn Arabic.

There are three vertical rows of wooden bench-desks: 13 smaller ones and 4 bigger ones in the back (for those –I suppose– with longer legs...I could actually dangle my feet!). Simply calculated, the room can comfortably hold 40-50 adults with a max capacity of 70. The women in level 1 who are learning letter and sounds sit in the far right hand row of desks beside the wall that looks like an un-sharp lemon rind grater, letting in peals and ribbons of fading yellow sunlight. In the middle row sit the women of level 2, two per bench, most sharing one slightly battered and beaten book (the one I borrow has only pages 19-90 and even now the middle section is beginning to fall out) and practicing the reading quietly and repetitiously. Mme Néné, her friend, the young woman with the baby and I usually fill the first 3 desks of the left hand row next to the wall of maroon metal shuttered windows.

It smells dusty in the classroom. In the arid dryness of Ngaoundéré, the top layer of the tan dirt streets is almost always in the air. Dust is everywhere. It smells dusty in the classroom, but the dust is different. It smells of learning as the chalk powder mingles with the streets in the air.

There is constantly the soft buzz-hum of library voices practicing the reading accompanied by the tin-can echo of playing children and banging sticks bouncing back and forth between the cement walls of this building and the next. These simple sounds pause at about 15:30 everyday when the voice comes across the loud speakers calling everyone to prayer. As Mamoudou leaves to go to the mosque, a green and white and tan

plastic mat is rolled out. Shoes off and veils up, the women face the back of the classroom to pray.

How the Classroom Came Into Existence

Part of the mission statement of “Les Femmes Royales du Lamidat” defines the problem they are combating: “Les femmes sont les plus marginalisées. Ce facteur est souvent lié à certains obstacles socio culturels qui considèrent la femme de cette localité comme destinée uniquement au mariage. Cette carence culturelle a favorisée la multiplication d’une catégorie de femmes incapables de lire et d’écrire. Or, nous savons tous qu’il serait très difficile voire impossible d’engager un combat véritable pour l’amélioration des conditions de vie avec ce type d’acteur.”⁵⁶ Mme Néné is the fiery spirit behind the strong words of the association’s mission statement. It is impossible to relate the events leading to the creation of this association and its literacy program without telling her story. Although the classroom was built because of the strong wills and hard work of a lot of people, it would have never existed without her.

Brown eyes kind but flashing behind square black wire framed glasses, Mme Néné sits down on the wooden bench in front of me. We are in the cool empty classroom and it is somehow sacred to be there when no one else is: only the veiled ghosts of the students drift about whispering “la chèvre ne produit plus de lait.” Like being at some historical monument, it is certain that your imagination creates a reality more vivid than

⁵⁶ “Women are marginalized the most. Often connected to certain socio-cultural obstacles, this factor regards the women of this region as destined solely for marriage. This cultural cancer has favored the multiplication of a category of women who are incapable of reading and writing. But, we all know that it would be very difficult even impossible to engage in a true fight for the amelioration of living conditions with this type of actor.” Association des Femmes Royales du Lamidat. “Projet d’Education de la Femme à Travers les Cours d’Alphabétisation avec un Accent sur la Formation d’en Technique d’Industrie d’Habillement pour la Promotion du Savoir Faire de la Femme dans la Province de l’Adamaoua.” Ngaoundéré : Aug. 2006.

what you would have recognized had you actually been there. I take a panoramic look around the room and Mme Néné follows my gaze. “This is quite something that you have accomplished,” I say, and opening my notebook, we begin.

Mme Néné did not go to school as a child, save école maternelle.⁵⁷ School was not part of her childhood, but marriage was. She married at the age of 14 and during the course of her married life gave birth to 7 children, 5 of whom are still living. Her husband died when she was 40 leaving her with no means of providing for herself. “Quand mon mari est mort, j’ai connais rien.”⁵⁸ She realized that without the ability to read, write and speak French, “tu ne gagne rien, tu fait rien.”⁵⁹ It was at that moment that she said to herself, “il faut que je commence a lire et écrire.”⁶⁰

She pauses, and with a look that is somehow both bold and bashful, apologizes for her French which she has only been learning for three years. And again somewhat oxymoronicly, while proud of what she has accomplished in such a short time, she also wistfully points out that she, a grandmother, is in school. Looking imploringly at me (with eyes that say, “Don’t you see?”) she says, “Si j’étais à l’école, j’étais au bureau pour travailler maintenant. Je gagne mon salaire, non?”⁶¹ Recovering from the instantaneous moment of regretful reverie, she jumps enthusiastically back into what she *has* done. Realizing that she wanted to learn and that she was not the only woman in her situation, she began to invite other women over to her house for literacy classes.

They met several days a week with a professor from the local university whom she

⁵⁷ The French system equivalent to pre-school.

⁵⁸ “When my husband died, I knew nothing.” Madame Néné. President of Les Femmes Royales du Lamidat. Personal Interview. 21 November 2006.

⁵⁹ “You earn nothing, you do nothing.” Madame Néné. Personal Interview. 21 November 2006.

⁶⁰ “I must start learning to read and write.” Madame Néné. Personal Interview. 21 November 2006.

⁶¹ “If I was at school, I was at the office right now. I earn my salary, no?” translation for meaning, “If I had been to school, I would be at an office right now. I would be earning my salary, no?” Madame Néné. Personal Interview. 21 November 2006.

engaged to come teach them. More and more women started coming, and they decided to make their group official by creating an association. The Lamido,⁶² who is Mme Néné's younger brother, supported the women's efforts by giving them the name "Les Femmes Royales du Lamidat" and by doing all of the official creation paperwork for the association. And the women kept coming, to the point that "la maison ne peut pas garder les femmes."⁶³ It was time to find...or build and new meeting place.

"C'était leur volonté,"⁶⁴ the women themselves came up with the idea of building a classroom and creating a project proposal to find funding. Clearly, since the women were all in the beginning stages of learning to read and write, they needed help to create a solid and official project proposal. With the help of the Association des Jeunes Volontaires de Ngaoundéré⁶⁵ (A.J.V.N.), "On a forme les femmes avec les associations et les GICs pour montrer le projet et le projet a passé."⁶⁶ The funding came through a partnership with PACDDU (Programme d'Appui Aux Capacités Décentralisées de Développement).⁶⁷ PACDDU contributed 7.019.581 FCFA,⁶⁸ or 75,56% of the total estimated cost and the women themselves contributed 2.270.000 FCFA⁶⁹ or 24,44%.⁷⁰ And, the financial contribution of the women continues: "On encourage des femmes de

⁶² The Lamido is the local traditional leader. The Lamidat is his palace.

⁶³ "the house can not hold the women." Translation for meaning, "the house could not hold the women anymore." Madame Néné. Personal Interview. 21 November 2006.

⁶⁴ "It was their will (or will power)." Mamoudou Bia. Personal Interview. 14 November 2006.

⁶⁵ Association of Young Volunteers of Ngaoundéré.

⁶⁶ "We trained the women with associations and GICs to create the project and the project passed." Madame Néné. Personal Interview. 14 Nov 2006.

⁶⁷ An extension of the European Union in Cameroon.

⁶⁸ Roughly \$14,000 American dollars.

⁶⁹ Roughly \$4,500 American dollars. It is also important to note here that about \$1,400 included in the \$4,500 was the estimated value of the land for the classroom that was actually donated by the Lamido.

⁷⁰ Coopération Cameroun-Union Européenne Programme d'Appui aux Capacités Décentralisées de Développement Urbain avec l'Association de Femmes Royales du Lamidat de Ngaoundéré. Protocole d'Accord. 065/S/NRE-HAB/DPI/PACDDU. "Construction d'une salle de classe." 30 June 2004.

participer”⁷¹ in the sum of 500 FCFA⁷² per month. And, due to these two different financial contributions, the women definitely maintain a strong sense of ownership for what *they* have accomplished. The goals that these women, lead by Mme Néné, have set and achieved are astounding in and of themselves. But their work takes on even more significance when one realizes that the women at the Lamidat are at the heart of the town, religiously, politically and culturally. They are therefore a critical example to the rest of Ngaoundéré that tradition and women’s education can and should exist simultaneously.⁷³ The cement classroom facing the Lamido’s palace serves as a concrete visual reminder of this.

Our interview has come to an end, but Mme Néné and I continue chatting as she locks up the maroon metal door. She glances approvingly at the mural on the wall that proclaims the partnership between the European Union and “Les Femmes Royales” and says, “On va parler de moi. Mon nom ne disparaît pas. On ne peut pas m’oublier.”⁷⁴

Demographics of Participants

Who are the women that come every sunny afternoon? The following table organizes the demographics that I had available.⁷⁵

⁷¹ “The women are encourage to participate (financially).” Tsasse Fopa. Personal Interview. 14 Nov 2006.

⁷² Roughly one American dollar. I actually observed this myself one afternoon. The women crowded around Mamoudou’s desk to make their contributions.

⁷³ Aboubakar Yaya. Personal Interview. 17 Nov 2006

⁷⁴ “I will be talked about. My name will not disappear. No one will be able to forget me.” Mme Néné. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

⁷⁵ This information is part of the records that must be kept for the Programme Nationale d’Alphabetisation. Unfortunately, the records are unorganized and not up to date. Mamoudou had to sit down with me and find (among many hand scrawled pages) as many of the current attendees as possible. Unfortunately, information for a few of the women is missing (3-5) but the information present does give an accurate representation not only of the demographic of the classroom, but may also be said to be representative (due to the wide age range) of the illiterate women’s population in Ngaoundéré.

| Age | Family status | Occupation | Literacy level | Date of registration |
|------------|----------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 15 | Single | Housework | 1 | 12 Nov 2006 |
| 18 | Married | Seamstress | 2 | Unavailable |
| 21 | Married | Seamstress | 2 | 28 Nov 2005 |
| 23 | Single | Housework | 2 | 12 Dec 2005 |
| 23 | Married | Seamstress | 2 | 7 Nov 2006 |
| 25 | Single | Housework | 2 | 7 Nov 2006 |
| 31 | Single | Housework | 1 | 12 Nov 2006 |
| 32 | Single | Seamstress | 2 | 28 Nov 2005 |
| 35 | Single | Housework | 2 | 28 Nov 2005 |
| 38 | Single | Housework | 2 | 28 Nov 2005 |
| 40 | Single | Housework | 2 | 7 Nov 2006 |
| 42 | Widow | Housework | 1 | 12 May 2006 |
| 45 | Married | Housework | 1 | 12 Dec 2005 |
| 45 | Single | Housework | 1 | 28 Nov 2005 |
| 47 | Widow | Housework | 2 | 29 Nov 2005 |
| 49 | Married | Seamstress | 2 | 13 Dec 2005 |
| 50 | Divorced | Housework | 1 | 28 Nov 2005 |

As can be seen in the table, 70% (12) of the women are single while 30% (5) is married.

Interestingly, four of the five who claim an occupation other than housework are

married,⁷⁶ meaning that the single adult women that make up the majority of the class do not have husbands providing for them nor do they have means (educational and functional) of providing for themselves.

Difficulties Women Face

Clearly, from looking at the number of women attending the class, just coming is something to be praised. Arising from both internal and external factors, the obstacles that women face are numerous.

Perhaps the most obvious barrier that women face is that it is not a matter of them just making the decision for themselves, but rather a matter of obtaining the permission of their husbands.⁷⁷ I knew the gender based power dynamic was deeply ingrained (culturally, religiously, and traditionally) but was surprised when Mme Néné, one of the strongest and most against-the-grain women I encountered, said unflinchingly, “si il ne peut pas accepter, tu ne peux pas venir.”⁷⁸ This obstacle is clear when looking at the demographics table: only five women out of 17 are married. I interviewed four of these women: two said when they asked their husband’s permission, their husbands were very supportive;⁷⁹ one explained that her husband was actually the one who encouraged her to come;⁸⁰ and one said that her husband is in the Central African Republic where “il ne peut pas me contrôler.”⁸¹

⁷⁶ Informal conversation with Mariamou, my host-mom, about separation of finances. 30 Nov. 2006.

⁷⁷ Mamoudou Bia. Personal Interview. 16 Nov 2006.

⁷⁸ “if he (you husband) doesn’t accept, you can’t come.” Mme Nene. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

⁷⁹ Raissatou Naray. Personal Interview. 23 Nov 2006. Inna Djeinabou. Personal Interview. 23 Nov 2006.

⁸⁰ Mama Djinabou. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

⁸¹ “he can not control me.” Rougayatou Souleyman. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

Obviously, it would be impossible to determine how many women have gathered the courage to ask their husbands' permission but have been denied. The only example I have is that of my host mom. Quite determined, she has taught herself French.⁸² I spent an hour every day teaching her simple phonetics. After watching her face glow from reading simple sentences like "Aboubakar aime sa mère," I mentioned that she could come to class with me, thinking that maybe the reason she didn't go was because she didn't know anyone there. She replied simply shrugging her shoulders, I asked but my husband refused me.

There are several reasons why husbands refuse to grant permission to their wives. Because household work is entirely the woman's responsibility, a husband may claim that she can not complete it properly if she leaves every day for three hours.⁸³ For most married women, in addition to the work of cooking and cleaning, there is of course the responsibility of caring for the children. This could be a strong inhibiting factor, especially if the children are small.⁸⁴ Also, the time of the course, 14:00-16:30, is between meals and therefore typically free for the women in terms of house work, but it is also the time that children get home from school. Mamoudou claims that this is only a valid reason for people without close-by family (as most families can not afford to have a babysitter).⁸⁵ But, most people do have large amounts of extended family close by and, in addition, most children come home, eat, and then are off to roam and play on their own until dinner time anyway. One woman mentioned that the only time she can not come to class is if her children are sick because nobody would be home to care for them when

⁸² Amusingly, the reason she gave was so she could communicate better with the SIT students who stayed at her house.

⁸³ Mamoudou Bia. Personal Interview. 16 Nov 2006.

⁸⁴ Mamoudou Bia. Personal Interview. 16 Nov 2006.

⁸⁵ Mamoudou Bia. Personal Interview. 16 Nov 2006.

they arrived home from school.⁸⁶ And, interestingly, one of the married women whose husband was supportive of her coming to the class said that, “il n’y a pas de difficultés parce que je n’ai pas d’enfants.”⁸⁷ And finally, a husband may be encouraged to take back his permission if his wife visits a neighbor or friend after class, as this is time away from the house that is not part of the program.⁸⁸

The final obstacle, unlike the others given, does not reside in outside circumstances but within the woman herself: “la honte.”⁸⁹ It is the thought that says, “Je suis déjà vieux. Des autres soient de me moquer.”⁹⁰ The women who succumb to this thought join thinking they will learn to read immediately and then give up when they discover that it is hard and takes time and dedication.⁹¹ And the women of determination who chose to stay, even in a classroom of peers who are in the same position and present for the same reasons, are openly bashful when singled out. They are strong, and yet, with backs turned and voices barely above a whisper, they are too shy to stand and read in front of each other. Hiding faces in veils, in books, in giggles, it seems that they (although the least likely of all women) lack self-confidence. On the contrary, a gentle seemingly shy woman who sits in the front row and answers every question softly but correctly said that there are people who try to discourage her but “Je me suis fixer un objectif. Je ne parle pas a eux.”⁹² Mme Néné laughed and said anyone can learn,

⁸⁶ Inna Djeinabou. Personal Interview. 23 Nov 2006.

⁸⁷ . “There aren’t any problems because I don’t have any children.” Sadly, all three of her children died before reaching adulthood. Raissatou Naray. Personal Interview. 23 Nov 2006

⁸⁸ Fadimatou Adamou. University Student in letters. Personal Interview. 16 Nov 2006.

⁸⁹ “shame.” Mme Nene. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

⁹⁰ “I’m already old. Other people will laugh at me.” Mme Nene. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

⁹¹ Mamoudou Bia. Personal Interview. 16 Nov 2006.

⁹² “I’m fixed on my objective. I do not talk to them.” Rougautou Souleyman. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

“même si tu est vieille.”⁹³ After all, she claimed to have seen on television, women over 70 learning to read in Yaoundé! Yet by far the most courageous (and my favorite) response was Hapsatou’s. She shook her head as if I had posed the question incorrectly and said, “Je fait ça pour moi-même, pas pour les autres.”⁹⁴

Why They Want to Learn

The women have made it to the classroom in spite of innumerable obstacles. Why do they want to learn and what is driving them? It is not “la honte” but “la fierté”⁹⁵ that radiates from their responses. Ironically, it is not possible to capture *in* words the power *of* words which are transforming their lives.

For many women it’s the seemingly little things that are vitally important. Not being able to read and speak a little French can make a woman feel “laissée de société.”⁹⁶ Or, put simply and poignantly by Raissatou, not being able to read and speak French, “Ça me fait mal.”⁹⁷ Pointing out that flawless French is not the criterion, Mme Néné says that “Elles connaissent bonjour, merci, poser des questions, compter l’argent. Elles connaissent tout.”⁹⁸ For Rougayatou, these small things are “des avantages énormes:” she can now read signs and prices and count to 100.⁹⁹ And for Hapsatou, although she would like to be able to “très bien m’exprimer” she proudly says that she has already

⁹³ “even if you’re old.” Mme Nene. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

⁹⁴ “I’m doing this for myself, not for other people.” Hapsatou Aliou. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

⁹⁵ not “shame” but “pride”

⁹⁶ “excluded from society.” Inna Djenabou. Personal Interview. 23 Nov 2006.

⁹⁷ “It hurts me.” The French phrase has the meaning of making one disadvantaged but also can mean physical pain as well. Raissatou Naray. Personal Interview. 23 Nov 2006.

⁹⁸ “They know ‘hello’ and ‘thank you.’ They know how to ask questions, count money. They know everything.” Mme Néné. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

⁹⁹ “They know ‘hello’ and ‘thank you.’ They know how to ask questions, count money. They know everything.” Rougayatou Dahirou. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006. “enormous advantages.”

accomplished a lot: “Je lit mon nom et j’écris mes lettres.”¹⁰⁰ Moreover, since women are responsible for running the household, basic French skills could be useful at the many boutiques where the vendors only speak French. After all, “si le vendeur connaît juste le français, comment est-ce que tu fait marchandais?”¹⁰¹ Not only do these skills allow the women to function more effectively in day to day life, they also contribute to their self esteem by allowing them to be less dependent on other people for even the most basic information. This new found feeling of self confidence is present for Mme Néné every time she stands in front of a sign and is able to read it herself, “Avant j’ai demandé, mais pas maintenant.”¹⁰²

Basic literacy tangibly affects women’s lives in a myriad of other ways as well. Since most doctors in the area only speak French, she no longer needs an interpreter at hospital, “si tu n’es pas à l’école, comment est-ce que tu peux parler à médecin?”¹⁰³ Hapsatou articulates that she does not like having to have a translator at the hospital because, she says, “je veux garder mes secrets.”¹⁰⁴ In addition to the importance of keeping medical information private, Rougayatou mentioned the significance of being able to read her own letters without someone else having to translate them for her.¹⁰⁵ And, for Mama Djinabou, the skills she has learned in class enable her to play an active role in her children’s education. While some mothers who only speak Fulfuldé might not

¹⁰⁰ “really express myself well.”, “I can read my name and write my letters.” Hapsatou Aliou. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

¹⁰¹ “If the vendor only knows French, how are you going to do discuss the prices?” Madame Nene. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

¹⁰² “Before, I had to ask, but not now.” Mme Néné. Personal Interview. 14 Nov 2006

¹⁰³ “if you never went to school, how would you talk to your doctor?” Mme Néné. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

¹⁰⁴ “I want to keep my secrets.” Hapsatou Aliou. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

¹⁰⁵ Rougayatou Darihou. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

be able to “suivre leurs enfants;”¹⁰⁶ Mama Djinabou not only understands what her children say in French, but is also able to help the younger ones with their school work. Many of the women also find the class beneficial on a personal level because of the Arabic instruction, which enables them to better understand and participate in their religion. As if speaking for all of the women, Mme Néné asks, “Qu’est-ce que je vais faire sans Arabe? Je ne peux pas prier.”¹⁰⁷

The ability to read and speak French has contributed both to the women’s ability to function in society and to her self-esteem. But, literacy in French is increasingly becoming less of an optional extra and more of a necessity. French is the unifying language of Cameroon and, as Mme Néné recognizes, French is also “une langue internationale.”¹⁰⁸ All newspapers and news on television are in French putting women who can not read or understand French at an informational disadvantage. As the university student pointed out, these women while watching television may hear the word “guerre” but can not understand the context.¹⁰⁹ The countless gendarmes who pose questions and demand ID cards along every road and bus route make Fopa’s statement, “C’est dangereux si tu ne peut pas t’exprimer,”¹¹⁰ a tangible reality for women who can not understand or speak French.¹¹¹ Hapsatou recognizes that French is necessary if she wants to travel even solely within the country.¹¹² In addition, technology which demands literacy is becoming increasingly incorporated into the daily lives of women. According

¹⁰⁶ “follow what their children are saying.” Fadimatou Adamou. Personal Interview. 16 November 2006.

¹⁰⁷ “What would I do without Arabic? I wouldn’t be able to pray.” Mme Nene. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

¹⁰⁸ “an international language.” Mme Néné. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

¹⁰⁹ Fadimatou Adamou. Personal Interview. 16 Nov 2006.

¹¹⁰ “It is dangerous if you can not express yourself.” Tsasse Fopa. Personal Interview. 14 Nov 2006.

¹¹¹ Fadimatou Adamou. Personal Interview. 16 Nov 2006.

¹¹² Hapsitou Aliou. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

to Mme Nene, « Toute le monde travail avec l'ordinateur aujourd'hui. »¹¹³ Although work on a computer may be far off for most of the women, nearly every one of them has a cell phone. Literacy in becomes a daily visible necessity when one wants to be able to recognize incoming and missed calls and to compose and receive text messages (which are much cheaper than voice calls).¹¹⁴

Plans for the future

Although most women found many benefits in gaining basic literacy and French skills, many women mentioned wanting to use their news skills in the economically beneficial manner of a “petit travail.” The younger women see the basic literacy skills they are obtaining as only the first step. They hope to carry their skills further to obtain professional training in hopes of getting a job.¹¹⁵ Rougayatou says with sparkling eyes that, “Je veux apprendre tout! Jusque au niveau important” like becoming a teacher or a nurse.¹¹⁶ After all, in literacy, “Lire et écrire. C'est le début.”¹¹⁷ There is still a strong need for some “post literacy measures... in order to provide them assistance to use these skills for improving their personal, social, and occupational life.”¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Mme Néné. Personal Interview. 14 Nov 2006.

¹¹⁴ Farikou Amadou. Personal Interview. 14 Nov 2006.

¹¹⁵ Rougayatou Souleyman. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

¹¹⁶ “I want to learn everything! until I reach an important level” Rougayatou Souleyman. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

¹¹⁷ Mamoudou Bia. Personal Interview. 14 Nov 2006

¹¹⁸ pp. 13. Ouane, Adama, and Yvette Amon-Tanoh. “Literacy in Frency-Speaking Africa: A Situational Analysis.” *African Studies Review*, Vol.33, No.3, Special Issue for the International Year of Literacy. (Dec.,1990), pp.21-38.

The next step for the women is to obtain “alphabétisation fonctionnelle, de faire quelque chose avec leur niveau différent.”¹¹⁹ The association, “Les Femmes Royales du Lamidat,” has actually already created and submitted a second project proposal to refurbish the empty un-used building next to the class room. They hope to create a small “alphabétisation fonctionnelle” classroom with a sewing machine, a computer, and artisan supplies to teach the women small jobs. They propose to have individuals trained in those specific areas to come in every week to give instruction to the women. The proposed objectives of the program are as follows:

Former en moyenne 30 femmes par an en AGR (couture, broderie, art ménager, artisanat etc.) a la production et a la commercialisation; contribuer a la dépendance des femmes dans leurs propres foyers grâce aux ressources génères pour mieux encadrer leurs familles, mais aussi surtout réduire les charges de fonctionnement du projet; contribuer a l’amélioration de leurs conditions de vie grâce a la formation dispensée sur les petites AGR; lutter contre la sous scolarisation notamment chez les femmes; participer a la lutte contre l’exclusion sociale.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ “functional literacy to do something with their new level (of knowledge).” Tsasse Fopa. Personal Interview. 14 Nov 2006.

¹²⁰ “To train at least 30 women per year in AGR (sewing, embroidery, house hold art, craft making) in both production and commercialization; to contribute to the independence of women in their own homes to better care for their families thanks to resources generated, and also certainly to reduce the functioning costs of the program; to contribute to the amelioration of their living conditions thanks to their training and the resources from the small job; to battle under education especially for women; to participate in the battle against social exclusion.” Association des Femmes Royales du Lamidat. “Projet d’Education de la Femme à Travers les Cours d’Alphabétisation avec un Accent sur la Formation d’en Technique d’Industrie d’Habilleme nt pour la Promotion du Savoir Faire de la Femme dans la Province de l’Adamaoua. Ngaoundéré : Aug. 2006.

In addition, Mme Néné hopes to soon incorporate “l’éducation de la femme en général: la santé, les vaccinations” into the class that is already meeting.¹²¹ She said, “je voulais aller à l’hôpital pour avoir un infirmier de former les femmes, comment nettoyer le corps, les enfants, etc.”¹²²

Areas for Improvement

All development problems are so expansive that they certainly can not be *fixed* successfully with one program or another. Women’s illiteracy is just this type of sweeping issue in Ngaoundéré. The eight centers of about 25 women each, although they are doing great work and changing the statistics one woman at a time, are clearly not sufficient for the population. In addition to the general need for more centers – which the PNA is trying to ameliorate – the following paragraphs present several ideas, still in the brainstorming phase, which could greatly aid the battle against women’s illiteracy.

First, the programs desperately need to seek more publicity. Most programs rely on word-of-mouth for the recruitment of new women. And, although this is successful, it is not enough. Publicity should be aimed at both the target group and the population of the town in general so that the idea of women’s literacy enters the forefront of each person’s thoughts. The problematic issue with publicity aimed and the target group is that it must be creative as the target group is illiterate. But, this could be effectively done over the radio and/or the local television station. “Les Femmes Royales du Lamidat” did use radio advertisements to publicize the opening of their new classroom and literacy

¹²¹ “the general education of the women regarding health, vaccinations.” Tsasse Fopa. Personal Interview. 14 Nov 2006.

¹²² “I would like to go to the hospital to get a nurse to teach the women how to wash themselves, their children, etc.” Mme Néné. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

classes, but discontinued them shortly thereafter.¹²³ Another strategy for reaching women would be to meet them in their communities. Each cartier has a development committee. A group of the women members of the development committee could be targeted and informed about available literacy resources. These women would then have the responsibility of informing the women in their cartier and would be more effective than an outsider coming in.

Unfortunately, women's awareness alone is not enough since married women must obtain their husbands' permission to attend. Therefore, a program that educates men on the importance of women's education (both the necessity of adult women's literacy and the importance of girls in school) might be enormously impacting. The women who are refused by their husbands could still be reached through a radio program that teaches French. This type of program already exists for Arabic and is effective because the woman does not have to leave her home to learn.¹²⁴ The language acquisition program on the radio could correspond with either a monthly meeting or perhaps a television program on the local station that would teach the written words and sounds that had been learned orally during the month.

In addition to the untapped resources of the radio and local television station, is the enormous untouched resource of university students! Farikou, a professor of lettres¹²⁵ at the University of Ngaoundéré, agreed with my observation, saying that volunteerism does not really exist at the university. According to him, most students are just trying to make enough money and find jobs.¹²⁶ But, large financial constraints,

¹²³ Mme Néné. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

¹²⁴ Farikou Amadou. Personal Interview. 26 Nov 2006.

¹²⁵ literature, arts

¹²⁶ Farikou Amadou. Personal Interview. 26 Nov 2006.

although they are a very large, very present problem for university students, do not mean that volunteerism is impossible. Most university students in the United States juggle class work, jobs, and friends but still manage to find time to give back to the community. Students could be matched with their interests. Literature students for example, could volunteer in existing literacy programs or create their own. The potential community aid that exists among the thousands of students at the University of Ngaoundéré will remain unexploited until the professors and the students themselves are convinced of the importance of volunteerism.

Finally, to improve the existing programs themselves, it is necessary to make the woman aware of available resources. When asked if she wanted to learn a small craft after having learned to read, Mama Djinabou replied that, “la chose que je veux, c’est trouver les livres en français.”¹²⁷ In spite of the municipal library and the library at the Franco-Camerounaise Alliance, most of the women when questioned, said that they did not have access to books. It seems that the trend for the moment with literacy programs is the goal of functional literacy, the learning of a little craft or the amelioration of a small skill of business that a woman already has. The importance of this is undisputable, but, by not incorporating the importance of reading, the women are being kept from better language acquisition. Worlds are open to them in books, and reading is the best way to ensure life-long learning.

Conclusion

¹²⁷ “the thing that I want is to find books in French.” Mama Djinabou. Personal Interview. 21 Nov 2006.

Globally affecting 781 million adults, illiteracy is clearly one of development's most pressing concerns.¹²⁸ Worldwide, women are the most common victims of illiteracy, especially in Northern Cameroon where cultural, traditional, and religious factors combine to devalue women's education. Unfortunately, this lack of education extends far beyond the women themselves. The improvement of individual women's lives and social position is enough reason grant women's literacy the utmost focus. But, literacy also enables women to contribute successfully to their communities, the local economy, and the betterment of their families. After all, the direct correlations between women's literacy and child health and education are astounding.

Several programs exist to combat women's illiteracy in Ngaoundéré. And, from the story of "Les Femmes Royales du Lamidat", it is clear that women's lives are being changed one by one. Unfortunately, there are not enough programs like the one at the Lamidat. The Program Nationale d'Alphabétisation is working to increase literacy program's number and effectiveness, but founded one year ago in 2005 and still in its pilot stage, it is impossible to tell whether or not this massive government initiative will be effective.

Although it is encouraging and vitally important for the Cameroonian government, the global community, international NGO's to recognize the importance of women's literacy, it is also possible to be caught up in the bureaucracy of their words and programs, to become tied up in plans and numbers that are far, far from the terrain, and to forget the simple words, the glowing face of the one woman helped who said, "Je lire.

¹²⁸ 17 Nov. 2006. <www.unesco.org>.

J'écrire. L'école m'a aidé beaucoup."¹²⁹ What more justification is needed than knowing that her life is better, is changed?

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¹²⁹ "I read. I write. School has helped me a lot." The winsome nature of this quote becomes somewhat lost in translation. Neither of the first two verbs (lire, écrire) is conjugated, giving the statement the definite air of someone still in the process of learning. Mme Néné. Personal Interview. 16 Nov 2006.

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