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Doing nothing? Dynamics of waiting among ageing internally displaced Cameroonians during the anglophone crisis

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ABSTRACT

Waiting is often perceived as an inactive or static period and is mostly linked to a hope for a better future among youth. This paper pays special attention to older internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Cameroon and how they use their experiences, knowledge, and capabilities to create new livelihoods as they 'wait' to return to their original homes. Specifically, the paper elucidates how 'aged' care for family members, create new jobs, do old jobs in a new manner, or 'do nothing' at all. Special attention is paid to the reconfiguration of family life and relationships, as well as to gender roles and shifting (in)dependencies. This paper goes beyond the notion of older people as vulnerable, inactive or frail, and highlights that work and activity at an older age generate new forms of mobility, resources and new ideas about the future. Drawing on ethnographic research among internally displaced families in Bafoussam, the Francophone capital of the West region of Cameroon, this paper illustrates that the condition of 'waiting' is productively and actively shaped by Anglophone IDPs who dynamically combine practices of the past with their present status, as well as notions about their still-uncertain future.

KEYWORDS

Waiting; internal displacement; Cameroon; ageing; anglophone crisis

Introduction

What can I do here in Bafoussam? There is nothing for me to do here. I just wait here until the war is over and then I go back home to my village.¹

In most contexts of forced mobility, waiting seems to be a perpetual state of being. Some refugees and irregular migrants wait for borders to open that they can cross, others wait for their asylum requests to be accepted or – if these are denied – to return to their country of nationality. Some wait to find accommodation, to receive a work permit or find a job, while others wait to be reunited with their family members and send their children to school. They wait for things to happen or not to happen or for wars and violent conflicts to end, so they can move on to a better future, or simply move back home.

As the introductory quote from one of the interlocutors from my fieldwork demonstrates, many Anglophone internally displaced persons (IDP) in the Francophone

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West region of Cameroon were eagerly waiting for the latter – returning to their home towns or villages in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon. ‘Stuck’ in Bafoussam, a city where they did not want to be, they experienced waiting as inactivity or boredom, both of them often mixed with feelings of worthlessness, despair and hopelessness. While their displacement due to the so-called ‘Anglophone Crisis’ – the widely acknowledged term for the violent conflict between separatists and military troops that flared up in 2017 – was protracted, returning to their hometowns and villages in the Cameroonian Northwest and Southwest regions seemed out of sight. Thus, waiting appeared to be the only option for the internally displaced. This perceived state of stasis, however, was experienced and expressed in different ways, most often influenced by various features like gender or age. While adolescent IDPs usually went back to school as they did before, ageing displaced persons ambitiously tried to keep themselves ‘busy’ in manifold ways, relying on their social and intergenerational networks as well as their occupational background.

The ever-growing body of literature on ageing and migration has gone a long way to illustrate the complex intersections between the two, including discussions of transnational care, retirement migration and citizenship or belonging among ageing migrants and members of the diaspora (see e.g. Baldassar and Merla 2014; Ciobanu and Hunter 2017; King et al. 2017; Walsh and Näre 2016). However, not all of the observations in this field are directly applicable to the displacement contexts of the Global South, which have their own specific ageing and migration experiences. Research in this realm is still scarce and, as Sakti (2020) aptly points out, ‘there is a critical need to explore the aging dimension of forced migration [...]’ (303), particularly in the so-called less developed countries. While specific issues facing older refugees in Western societies have been explored by some scholars (Bolzman 2014; see also Scott and Bolzman 1999; Lewis 2009), the experiences of ageing people in countries of the Global South remain underexamined with some notable exceptions (e.g. Sakti 2020; this volume).

In this paper, I build on existing perspectives on growing old in displacement in the Global South, and expand on the debates relating to the ageing-migration nexus. In this regard, I illustrate how the context of internal displacement outside of refugee camps is shaping older people’s lives in particular ways. The paper aims to elucidate the neglected conjunction between ageing and waiting during displacement, and simultaneously connects it to the literature on the ageing-migration nexus by asking how family relationships and finding an income within a new environment are linked within the context of forced migration in older age. Drawing on ethnographic research among internally displaced families in the West region of Cameroon, I, first, illustrate how waiting within the context of displacement does not only apply to youth and, likewise, impacts on ageing people’s lives in several ways. These impacts differ according to personal experiences and socio-economic status, among other things. Displacement, thus, disrupts ageing persons’ lives and leads to re-configurations of both present and future by drawing on fundamental experiences from their past. Second, I demonstrate on how displacement within an internal or translocal frame disrupts older people’s and their families’ lives in different ways than in a transnational context. Instead of ‘being stuck’ in another country, where forced migrants generally try to obtain legal status or citizenship, I highlight the spaces of agency and regional mobility within the borders of the same country. Although the question of permanent residency might be irrelevant to the internally displaced, social

and economic (in)security for the aged and their families remain important concerns. While many older people around the world work to sustain their livelihoods even after reaching a state-defined 'retirement age', I, thirdly, underline the complex challenges of finding work or creating jobs while being older and displaced in this specific context. Yet, as I will outline, displacement (and age) can, in some cases, have an immense effect on the work itself as well as on the people and their own perceptions of what they do. In other cases, the effects are less visible.

In the following sections, I will turn first to a broader conceptual discussion of waiting in displacement and connect it to the relevance of age and ageing. I will then introduce my research site by outlining the (post)colonial political context of Cameroon and giving detailed insight into my research methodology. I then analyse ethnographic case studies of older displaced Cameroonians by exploring the limits and capabilities of their agency with regard to a disrupted present and future. This analysis aims at gaining a broader understanding of the temporal dimensions of (internal) displacement and its multifaceted dynamics among older people.

Waiting in displacement

The dimension of time, and waiting in particular, has increasingly been used as a conceptual lens in anthropology and other social sciences to analyse the complex experiences, practices and social lives of migrants that are framed and re-shaped by temporalities, not only of the future but also of the present (Stasik, Hänsch, and Mains 2020; see also Brun 2015; Dobler 2020; Hage 2009; Kleist and Jansen 2016; Stock 2019). Although this growing body of work approaches various aspects of the temporalities of waiting and covers a wide geographical range, including case studies from Africa and the so-called Global South (e.g. Grabska 2020; Jeffrey 2010; Honwana 2012; Khosravi 2017; Machinya 2020; Mujere 2020; Ungruhe and Esson 2017), the focus is largely on younger people who 'voluntarily' migrate in order to search for a better life elsewhere. Meanwhile, the diverse experiences and perspectives of older or ageing migrants are more or less neglected as Victoria Sakti also argues in her article on older displaced East Timorese in Indonesia (this issue). The term 'waithood' (Honwana 2012; Singerman 2007) is often applied to youth in the phase of waiting or delay (Inhorn and Smith-Hefner 2020) among young people across the globe in this situation, and describes 'the involuntarily prolonged adolescence of (mainly male and urban) youth grappling with issues of poverty, underemployment, access to education and, more generally, social and political marginalization' (Stasik, Hänsch, and Mains 2020, 1).

Similar to the situation of younger people, ageing persons, within and outside the context of displacement, are also confronted with the issues that Stasik et al. correctly describe. Regardless of age, disruptions in life that come along with (forced) migration or displacement like the above-cited unemployment, poverty or social and political marginalisation, are problems that also impact on the lives of the ageing generations. However, these disruptions and their outcomes reveal the importance of *linked lives* that point to the interdependencies of social relationships (see e.g. Elder 1994). This principle, Glen Elder notes, 'refers to the interaction between the individual's social worlds over the life span [...]' (Elder 1994, 6) and thus, I argue, interferences in life like forced displacement affect older persons in a different scope.

While waiting is often connected with a state of stasis, passivity or immobility, ongoing research on migration clearly demonstrates that ‘waiting [...] is not just the mundane and essentially meaningless practice as which it might appear to us if we are standing in a queue’ (Dobler 2020, 20). Waiting can also be understood as productive (see e.g. Stasik, Hänsch, and Mains 2020) or as a stage of action and agency (Stasik, Hänsch, and Mains 2020; Dobler 2020; see also Brun 2015). This, in the context of long-term displacement, can become a ‘relatively stable condition’ (Brun 2015, 23), influencing migrants’ lives in multiple ways and changing existing notions of, and anticipations for, a future that may be uncertain (Brun 2015; Jacobsen, Karlsen, and Khosravi 2020; Stock 2019). This might be expressed in different ways, depending on individual situations, locations (e.g. in a camp or urban setting) and social networks, and may range from caring for children to walking around the city or camp to doing household chores or working. More generally, Catherine Brun notes that ‘agency-in-waiting denotes the capacity to act in the present, in everyday time, based on the experience of displacement from the subject’s history and a critical reflection of the future possibilities framed as waiting and hope’ (2015, 24). In this sense, instead of ‘doing nothing’, many displaced persons try to maintain a daily routine in order to control the present while being unable to control the future (Brun 2015). In the following section, I will add to this understanding by demonstrating that, particularly in older age, ‘waiting’ in displacement and the preservation of a makeshift everyday life is often deeply intertwined with an individual’s past and shapes his or her present as well as the future.

Exploring the field: historical and methodological context

Compared to other countries in West and Central Africa, bilingual Cameroon used to be considered within and outside the African continent as ‘[...] a peaceful country that is politically stable and relatively well off’ (Pelican 2013, 239). Despite this image of a calm spot in a turbulent region, the Republic of Cameroon has, since 2016, faced socio-political struggles that have resulted in massive internal displacement and a civil-war like conflict in the Anglophone areas of the country. The origins of this internal conflict date to 1961² when the former British Trusteeship Territory of Southern Cameroons joined the young former French colony of the Republic of Cameroon³ after a referendum, while the northern part of British Cameroons voted to join Nigeria. Today, it is widely acknowledged that the country’s colonial and postcolonial past laid the foundations of what is today most often referred to as the ‘Anglophone Crisis’ (see e.g. Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997; Mbongulo-Wondieh 2020).

When peaceful demonstrations by lawyers and teachers against the marginalisation of the English-speaking minority in the Anglophone North-West and South-West regions were violently repressed by the Cameroonian government in 2016, existing interethnic tensions escalated and were followed by an attempt by secessionists to separate these regions from the rest of the country. Separate but linked groups, collectively known as the Amba Boys, announced the Federal Republic of Ambazonia in October 2017. Since then, skirmishes have continued with government troops, including the elite Rapid Intervention Battalion.⁴ The persistent fighting has led to thousands of dead and injured civilians and the displacement of more than 700,000 people (UNHCR 2020). While some IDPs went to the bigger cities within the Anglophone North-West

and South-West regions, such as Buea, Limbe or Bamenda, the majority escaped to the French-speaking regions. Although the influx of the displaced is continuously growing, there is little international attention paid to what the Norwegian Refugee Council has declared the world's most neglected displacement crisis.⁵

With a lack of national and international commitment or support, most internally displaced families rely on their social networks, such as family members, friends or neighbours, to help find accommodation, sources of financial income and bilingual schools. Fulfilling these necessities brings many IDPs to bigger cities like Douala, Yaoundé or Bafoussam. These cities, which are common migration destinations within Cameroon, are already challenged by scarce housing, high unemployment and insufficient infrastructure.

This paper is based on ethnographic research conducted in Bafoussam, the regional capital of the West region, from November 2019 to March 2020, and follows on long-term undergraduate research in the city prior to the Anglophone Crisis. Nevertheless, my main interest was focused on recent developments of the socio-political situation within the country. I collected empirical data using qualitative methods such as participant observation and narrative interviews that encouraged my interlocutors to tell about their lives, both before their displacement and in Bafoussam. I engaged intensely with 12 families beyond interviews and observations during my regular visits. With these families, I attended church services, prepared food and played with children and grandchildren. We went together to work or on walks, cried and laughed together. In short, I tried to share their everyday lives as far as possible and was fortunate in that my interlocutors let me.

A Cameroonian friend introduced me to the Anglophone community at her Catholic church. All research partners were found in this community which met regularly after church to discuss political issues or to practice chants. Before they came to Bafoussam, most of my interlocutors and their families had lived in smaller towns or villages in the Anglophone region where most owned a house or a farm. Only one male interlocutor had lived in Bamenda, the regional capital of the North-West region, with more than 300,000 inhabitants. Three of my interlocutors were retired civil servants but had engaged in economic activities such as cattle rearing or farming to earn an extra income as their pensions were insufficient to cover their expenses. These activities were disrupted by displacement. Those who were not yet retired had had different occupations: farming, teaching or running different businesses.

Although my research mainly focuses on older or ageing Cameroonians, it necessitates an intergenerational perspective on both ageing and displacement, not only to develop a broader understanding of the familial impact of internal forced migration but also because all the stories told involved other members of the (extended) family or friends. All my interlocutors, except one, lived with other members of the core and/or extended family, with whom they shared both commonalities and divergent reactions to the same experiences. The age range of the interviewees who participated in my doctoral fieldwork stretches from then 32–90 years but the majority was in their early fifties to late sixties. In this paper, I draw solely on the narratives of those aged fifty and older to highlight the dimensions of waiting in older age. I further reflect on 'old' or 'aging' not as immobile categories but rather, as Wignall et al. (2019) express it for the contemporary African context, as 'relational, socially determined and self-defined' (4; see also Hoffman and Pype 2016). Thus, following a rather fluid understanding of ageing and 'being old', I

define my interlocutors according to their own definition of what it means to be old, not in accordance with specific age cohorts. Nevertheless, I want to point out that all but one were in good or relatively good health condition and not in any need of physical care from their children or other members of their (extended) family or social networks. On the contrary, it was common among my interlocutors to regularly look after younger children or grand-children as well as to take care of their older parents whose health status was sometimes frail and required regular support to fulfil the basic needs. Subsequently, my interlocutors were not yet at the end of their lives but rather in a stage that Mary C. Bateson (2013) refers to as *Adulthood II* and describes as

[...] a stage that begins when one or more of the major generative projects of adulthood comes to an end with the winding down of a career, or the departure of maturing sons and daughters, and itself ends when aging or other accidents of health begin to seriously affect participation. (27)

Finally, I want to add some remarks on the ethical dimensions of my research as my interlocutors could be considered vulnerable and marginalised on at least two counts: their older age and their status as internally displaced persons. The encounter between ‘them’, Cameroonian IDPs, and ‘me’, a white academic from the global North, provides enough of a foundation for a paper on research ethics in itself. Here, I only briefly address this topic to keep the focus on the temporal dimensions of my research. As mentioned before, all interlocutors were in good mental and physical health and I obtained their informed consent after explaining the purpose of my research and before we started the interviews which were usually recorded. The confidential conversations during and beyond the interviews included highly sensitive and often traumatic and violent experiences from my interlocutors, whose boundaries I always respected to the greatest extent.

Ageing and retirement in urban Cameroon: responses and responsibilities within a shifting society

Although Africa remains a ‘young’ continent, the absolute number of people aged 60 years and above in Sub-Saharan countries is expected to grow from 44 million today to 160 million in 2050 (see e.g. Wignall et al. 2019). Cameroon is no exception. The role of and response to older members in African families vary depending, for instance, on a rural or urban setting and other contributing factors like family constellations and expectations (Hoffman and Pype 2016). As a result of the steadily growing number of older people, this setting frames, and is also framed by, older people’s practices (McQuaid et al. 2021) which in turn continuously respond to shifting informal economies, heterogeneity and different forms of mobility (Wignall et al. 2019). With more people living in cities and changing family patterns that are often marked by the migration of close family members, care for older people is increasingly challenging (see e.g. Dossa and Coe 2017 for the reconfigurations of kin work). Though there have been broad improvements in public health care leading to increased life expectancy in most African countries (Fonchingong 2013; Hoffman and Pype 2016; McQuaid et al. 2021; Ngere Nangia, Njikam, and Yenshu 2015), older persons are often poorer, a fact that goes along with inadequate access to infrastructure and services. Thus, care by family members remains an important factor in older people’s lives. The idea of the

responsibility to take care of ageing family members is often supported by African national governments as, for instance, Sjaak van der Geest (2016) has demonstrated for the case of Ghana. While he sees the importance of reciprocity within care relationships, van der Geest points to the growing challenges to provide good care for ageing parents or grand-parents due to increasing mobility and shifts within family constellations (van der Geest 2016). The changes within societal structures in Ghana and other countries in Africa come along with an increasing establishment of institutionalised care, e.g. in retirement homes or home care provided by third persons (see Coe 2018 on that issue).

Social security provided by the state is the exception rather than the rule in African countries and only few older people receive pensions or equivalent benefits. This results in the mostly absent notion of retirement as a stage of life (which is still common in Eurocentric perspectives on growing old). Though Erdmute Alber (2018) importantly describes how ageing adults in Benin develop new imaginaries of living the good life in 'retirement' and new paths after the end of formal work, this is not (yet) the norm. The Cameroonian government provides pensions to civil servants once they retire, but the amount depends on the position held while in service and the duration of that position. As an outcome, women who worked as civil servants usually earn a lower pension than men due to child-bearing and their responsibilities as direct carers within the family. My interlocutors remarked that payments were often not on time or sufficient to fulfil their basic needs, so they usually had to earn some additional money or borrow it from family members or friends. Private retirement planning is also available but usually only accessible for a small share of the population who works in the formal sector or has enough income to put aside. Thus, private pension as a precaution had not been an option for my interlocutors even if they were part of the (lower) middle class before their displacement. In most cases, the economic activities of my research partners in Bafoussam took place within the informal sector which employs about 95% of the Cameroonian population and accounts for half the country's GDP (Benjamin et al. 2020). Moreover, '[t]he informal sector also disproportionately employs the most vulnerable segments of the population, including the less educated, less connected, and geographically disadvantaged' (Benjamin et al. 2020, 209). In the global sense, ageing and older people, as well as IDPs, are certainly included in this group but I would like to add that, in my research context, it was most often the IDPs' social networks that enabled them to run a business or find work while in displacement and many of them had completed high school and, in some cases, earned higher degrees.

Though working in the informal sector can require a high level of physical mobility and may not actually improve the precarious living conditions of older IDPs and their families, it provides the opportunity to start a small business with few or no administrative barriers. The economic activities undertaken by older members of internally displaced families are often essential contributors to meeting household expenses such as paying for children's school fees and other liabilities.

My adult interlocutors in Bafoussam, regardless of age, were eager to find work in the informal economy, ranging from setting up small roadside shops and selling produce in local markets to preparing traditional Anglophone dishes at restaurants. The activities of older IDPs varied widely in terms of financial return, but all demonstrated high productivity and creativity. Their engagement and perseverance were an endorsement of Aboderin's (2012, 72; cited from McQuaid et al. 2021, 818) argument that even if:

[...] older persons [in African countries] are, implicitly or explicitly assumed to be unproductive or marginally productive, thereby rendering input into their physical or cognitive capacity redundant. However, such assumptions, as well as the use of old-age dependency ratios, are fallacious.

While the notion of older people as frail and vulnerable cannot be sustained (see e.g. King et al. 2017), during my research it became apparent that, after displacement, reciprocal relationships and dependency among family members changed in some ways while remaining constant in others.

In Cameroonian families, in both rural and urban areas, women care for the household, tend to for the elderly and children, work in family farms and produce crops, or take other 'paid or unpaid employment' (Fonchingong 2013, 85), while the father is usually the acknowledged head of the family (Fleischer 2007). Despite women's contributions to their families' livelihoods and their equal status officially, there remains a gendered 'division of labor [...] (and) separation of responsibilities and the partition of financial means' (Fleischer 2007, 417). For example, cultivating family farmland and growing and selling crops is usually a woman's task. These divided responsibilities are not only essential for the preservation of the family, they seem to be an important part of a person's identity and can signal women's (financial) independence. All of my female interlocutors from rural areas in the Anglophone territories emphasised more than once how they missed working on their farms. One remarked:

Every evening I went to my farm [in her home village]. The work there is hard but I love it. You can breathe the fresh air and you harvest your food. [...] I sold the food in the market and had my money. I could buy food and clothes and I could pay for my children's school fees.⁶

Another woman in her fifties, who was now unemployed, said:

Back in the village, I had my farm and I was happy. I had my money to buy things from but now I have nothing. Now, I am dependent on my husband [an English teacher in Bafoussam]. I am dependent on him and I earn nothing. What should I do?⁷

Both quotes underline the shifting gender dependencies that displacement brought along. The two women felt able to act independently before they were forced to migrate and then experienced that the transition changed their reliance on their husband or other members of their social networks. On the contrary, some male IDPs also experienced a shifting dependency on their wives after coming to Bafoussam. This was most often the case for retired civil servants or police officers who lived on their pensions. Some, although retired, had been active in farming or husbandry, both to contribute to the household income and 'to keep me busy', as Johnson,⁸ one of my interlocutors, told me. Johnson, who had been working as police officer throughout his life, had used his pension to obtain a credit so he could invest in a small oil palm plantation and buy some cattle for reselling only two years prior to his displacement. He told me that his pension was completely used to cover the monthly credit instalments and he initially had planned to increase his pension with his investment. In the meantime, after he had come to Bafoussam, he learned from friends in his home village that separatists had burned parts of his plantation and killed some of his animals. His pension now was wasted to nothing and Johnson was very depressed by that fact that he could not contribute anything to sustain the family any longer. His wife had opened a small roadside shop

that helped earning a little money but the couple mainly relied on financial and material allowances from friends and their adult children.

In their new environment in the city, the possibilities for both men and women to farm declined due to a lack of land. While women could often find a chance to sell crops from their villages that were sent to them by friends and neighbours back home to compensate for their lack of income, men continued to struggle. This is because not only is labour is gendered among Cameroonian families, crops are as well. Men usually cultivate cash crops, like coffee or cocoa, which are sold internationally. This was simply not possible during displacement because selling to the international market usually takes place by using cooperative infrastructures that were not working during my research according to my interlocutors. Women, by contrast, produce staples like beans, corn or vegetables for the local market. These could easily be transported to with bus transports or private cars. Some of my female research partners made use of having some of their crops sent to them while they were in Bafoussam. These crops were usually harvested before their displacement and deposited in their village homes. Whenever the women needed corn, beans or other goods from their stock for consumption or selling in Bafoussam, they called a neighbour, friend or family member who would forward bags and buckets with available means of transport.

Moving back, moving on? Waiting for the past, waiting for the future

Among my interlocutors, perceptions of a 'glorious past' were often strongly tied to the work they did before they escaped to Bafoussam. This is apparent in the words of Mildred, whose quote opened this paper. At the time of my visit, she was in her mid-fifties and had fled with her two children and her disabled 90-year-old mother to Bafoussam after her village home in the Northwest had been attacked by separatists. She came to the city as her older brother and family had already escaped there and were able to help her find an apartment. Mildred spent much of her time in her apartment, caring for her bed-ridden mother and children that were attending school. Apart from attending church services on Sunday, she sometimes visited her brother and his family or nearby neighbours but she never stayed long as she had to look after her mother. When I visited her, she was usually busy cooking or doing other chores. Though she had primarily cared for her mother whilst living in the North-West region, Mildred often talked about her farm that she was also working on:

I sometimes remember of how I watch my farm and then I become so sad. I was so happy when I watched the corn and the beans were growing and everything was green. [...] I felt strong although my back hurt. Now, I am not strong anymore although I do nothing. [...] But I will be strong again when I am back home.⁹

Mildred longed to go back so she could feel again strong, and did not seem to acknowledge that her care work for her frail, bed-ridden mother was certainly something that she brought to Bafoussam from her old life in the North-West region. The responsibility for her mother, who needed assistance with eating, dressing and going to bed or the toilet, amongst other things, uncovered the mixed emotions she experienced while in her new, makeshift home. As the youngest daughter of nine children, her father, the head of the

family, had appointed her to care for her ageing parents when they once needed her support. This imposition changed Mildred's plans as she wanted to marry a man she had met when working in Nigeria some years before, and with whom she had a daughter: her father had forbidden her to marry him in order to fulfil her duties. In the end, she left the man she had loved so desperately. A few years later, she wanted to marry a Cameroonian but was again not allowed to do so for the same reason. Her old father was already ill at that time and depended on her to care for him full time. He forced her to live with him and her mother until he died three years later. From then on, Mildred, her two children and her mother lived together in her parents' house and Mildred began a successful career as a hairdresser until her mother suddenly fell sick and was unable to walk anymore. Then, Mildred had to give up her job to attend to her mother full time while also cultivating her mother's farm. She was supported financially by one of her older brothers. It is remarkable at this point that Mildred was not included into the decision-making of her own future even if she was in her forties at that time her father compelled her to change her life plans. This reveals how decision-making processes within Cameroonian families today are not only highly gendered but also intergenerational.

Mildred's story makes clear how the contradictions and bitter pills of her past in the North-West region – apart from the violence she had experienced due to the conflict – affected her everyday life in Bafoussam and blurred her perception of her own agency and decision-making. When I asked what she was hoping for her future, she answered, 'I pray that the war will end. [...] I will go back to my house in the village and work in our farm. Just as I did before I came here.'¹⁰ Though we often talked about a possible future of returning to the village and what her life might then look like, it seemed that whenever she spoke of her as yet uncertain future it was in reference to her past. I found it striking that Mildred never mentioned caring for her mother (in contrast to caring for her children) as an activity when talking about the past or the future, which perhaps was the root of her perception that she was 'doing nothing'. Caring for her mother only seemed to determine her present not her future.

In contrast to Mildred, who was waiting for the end of war to take up her former life again and continue at the point at which she had left the North-West region, another of my interlocutors oriented her story to the future. Esther, a widow aged 52 years, came to Bafoussam with her daughter-in-law, two grandchildren, her youngest son and her mother-in-law. Her husband had died in 1998. The mother of four adult sons, Esther was passionate about her family and talked in detail about her children's ambitions and life paths. I visited her often in her rented apartment at the edge of the city and we would sit together and talk. While doing so, she was often busy knitting dresses and other children's clothes, which she sold at a nearby market: 'You need to keep yourself busy, otherwise you will go crazy here'¹¹ she told me more than once. Apart from this small income stream, her daughter-in-law was learning to sew so she could make and sell clothes and contribute to the household income. When I asked Esther how she could pay for the rent and the education of her two youngest sons who were still in school and college, she explained that she was lucky to have inherited a relatively large private pension from her deceased husband, who had worked at a bank. She also had some savings from her own business, a shop in her home town in the North-West.

Esther maintained strong ties with all of her children and communicated with the three elder sons almost daily. Her first-born son, the father of her two grandchildren, had been living in the United States for a year at that time and called her every day. She was very happy that he had managed to acquire a Green Card and gain residency in that country, and that her daughter-in-law and grandchildren would soon reunite with him near Boston. A poster of her second son, a priest in the capital of the North-West region, Bamenda, was pinned to the wall and smiled down on us warmly. Esther was very proud of the priest and would go to visit him whenever possible in Bamenda, where another son also lived. Though there was still ongoing conflict in the region between the military and separatists which, sometimes, extended to its capital, Esther travelled there about once a month. Going to Bamenda from Bafoussam by public transport meant that the vehicle could be stopped by separatists or the army at any time once it entered Anglophone territory. Though the distance between the two cities is less than 80 kilometres the major part of the journey lies within the North-West. As most travellers were older men and women of all ages,¹² it was unusual to experience violence, but if stopped by either of the parties a high 'toll' was usually exacted to be allowed to continue. Nevertheless, it was a dangerous journey and it sometimes so happened that public buses were attacked by separatists to stop people from going back and forth between the regions.

However, Esther travelled regularly to Bamenda for two reasons. Apart from the longing to see her son and to attend mass at his church every once in a while, she also went to Bamenda for a second purpose. Some months prior to our first meeting, Esther had started to build a house in Bamenda where she wanted to move with her family when it was complete. Coming from a smaller town in the rural part of the North-West that was still heavily affected by violence, Esther decided not to stay in Bafoussam until she could move back home. 'Only God knows when the war will end,' she used to say. Like Mildred, she was eager to go back to her home where, she told me, she would resume her business. But the violent conflict had already lasted for almost three years and there was no sign that a peaceful solution would be found, so Esther chose to move to the North-West's capital to be closer to her home and her two sons. When I asked her why she risked going there, she answered:

Life in Bafoussam is hard and I don't like it here. [...] I don't speak the language and it is hard to find work, also for Florence [her daughter-in-law]. I can't do anything here and I miss my home. [...] What can I do here? I just sit and knit and cook and that's all. This is not good.¹³

When I wanted to know if she intended to stay in Bamenda for good, she told me that she planned to eventually move back to her village. But since the conflict in the Anglophone regions seemed likely to last for further years, she was not very hopeful she could do so any time soon. Moving to the still-dangerous Northwest seemed to her preferable to staying in the Francophone region where she was isolated from her family and was 'doing nothing'. Thus, Esther used her 'waiting' time in displacement to invest and build an altered version of her future plans before she would, hopefully, move back home one day.

While it seemed clear that women and men alike were coping with their everyday lives in a new environment, discontent and the sense of being inactive and useless frequently came up during my interviews and meetings. The frustration of 'doing nothing' or 'being stuck' experienced by most of my research partners was often combined with a sense of

sadness and despair about their precarious situation in a place they did not like and the hope that, one day, they would be able to return home and resume the lives they had had before the Anglophone Crisis. In Stock's (2019, 131) description of younger Sub-Saharan African migrants in Morocco who wanted to escape to Europe, 'they were waiting to escape the situation (first in the country of origin, then in Morocco) in order to be someone else'. By contrast, some ageing Cameroonian IDPs were waiting to escape in order to become their 'old' selves again: to return not only to their familiar homes, but also to transform back into someone they only remembered from the past. This observation connects to Brun's description of Georgian IDPs who 'often dream of return and a future located in an idealized and harmonious past' (2015, 24; referring to Kabachnik, Regulska, and Mitchneck 2010).

Conclusion

This paper tries to move beyond 'the dominance of spatial understandings of migration in anthropology and beyond' (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2020, 1) and refers to the multiple and temporal dynamics of waiting among ageing Cameroonian IDPs by demonstrating that waiting in displacement in older age is productively and actively shaped. Although activities are often reported as 'doing nothing', it became clear that, as in Mildred's case, these attachments to certain tasks in the present are tied to unpleasant emotions, memories and experiences in the past. Even when feelings about the past are ambivalent, my research revealed that reverting to this previous stage of life is the desired condition for the future as people attempt to connect to what is familiar. As there was yet no sign of a possible return to their home villages, older IDPs tried to shape a new version of their planned future – this was the case for Esther and her family. The outlined stories shed light into how the disruptive past in the lives of older IDPs leads to a transfiguration of present tasks and future aspirations, and how different temporalities are inextricably intertwined. However, physical mobility and the mobility of materials between Bafoussam and places of origin can bridge the different temporalities at some points in the makeshift environment of the internally displaced and provide fundamental resources to their new everyday lives.

Furthermore, analysing waiting in displacement as the status quo highlights how individual life stories are influenced by gender dynamics, personal histories and intergenerational relationships that in some points change over the life course while, in others, stay the same. The immense disruption in life that the interlocutors experienced also makes clear that both gender and generational dependencies might change over the course of time.

This paper also develops a more nuanced understanding of what it means to become old in the context of displacement and outside an adequate system of retirement. More than that, the stories of my Cameroonian interlocutors show how notions of 'doing nothing' or 'doing something' are inextricably linked with new forms of mobility and new ideas about the future.

Notes

1. Interview with Mildred, 52 years, Bafoussam, January 2020. All names of the interlocutors in this paper have been replaced by pseudonyms.

2. Some scholars refer to World War I as the origin of the Anglophone Conflict in Cameroon (Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997).
3. La République du Cameroun, the former French Trusteeship Territory of Cameroon, achieved independence in 1960.
4. The Bataillon d'Intervention Rapide (BIR) was originally created to fight armed terrorist groups such as Boko Haram along Cameroon's borders with the Central African Republic, Chad and Nigeria.
5. The Norwegian Refugee Council declared the Anglophone Crisis the most neglected crisis in 2018 and 2019. Criteria for this designation include lack of political will to solve the crisis, lack of media attention and lack of international aid. See <https://www.nrc.no/shorthand/fr/the-worlds-most-neglected-displacement-crisis/index.html>.
6. Interview with an Anglophone woman, 55 years, Bafoussam, December 2019.
7. Interview with an Anglophone woman, 52 years, Bafoussam, December 2019.
8. 63 years, Interview in Bafoussam, December 2019.
9. Interview in Bafoussam, January 2020.
10. Interview in Bafoussam, January 2020.
11. Interview in Bafoussam, February 2020.
12. It is mainly young or younger middle-aged men who are targeted by separatists and the military. They run the risk of being accused of supporting one or the other party and physically attacked.
13. Interview in Bafoussam, February 2020.

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