

The Socio-Cultural Perceptions of Strings Among the Betis and Bamums of Cameroon

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Abstract

People the world over are identify by the objects that they use. These objects some can be those used in the home, others are used to augment the beauty of individuals meanwhile some are employed as instruments to protect as well as heal people from health and others conditions. In Africa in general and in Cameroon in particular, there are cultures which use waist beads as well as strings to either beautify, protect or heal themselves or in rites of passage. The Beti and Bamum for instance are two cultures in Cameroon that employ the string and those which are often seen are the black and red types. When some Beti and Bamum people have stomach disorder and pains caused by accidents among others, they do not consult a medical practitioner to determine the cause of their problem but they turn to indigenous treatment. The questions therefore is what are the perceptions of the Beti and Bamum people around strings or cords? The paper seeks to understand the perception of the Beti and Bamum people around strings. It equally seeks to illustrate the functions of cords in the Beti and Bamum socio-cultures. Data for this paper was collected using both the qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative method was employed through participant observation, in-depth interview, life histories and photography. The quantitative method was used through the questionnaires. It (the data) was interpreted using functionalism and symbolic anthropology. Findings reveal that the commonly used strings bear two major colours, the black and red colours. These are colours which are capable of attracting supernatural powers. These strings are attached on the bodies of children both male and female. But female adults are the ones who frequently wear the black rope because they are usually more vulnerable (to spiritual attacks) than the male folk. The string (be it red or black) is attached on different parts of the body and the choice where it is tied is largely determined by its use and the user. Like most cultural elements, this rope is very invaluable to the Bamum and Beti for it has protective, curative, and spiritual connotation or functions. This indigenous system of treating minor as well as spiritual problems of the people is less expensive and has been handed down from generation to generation. Considering the fact that it is part of the peoples' way of life, if developed, it could really be of great help to the entire society especially the masses.

Key words: socio-culture, perception, utility, string, Beti, Bamum

INTRODUCTION

A string is a long, thin, and flexible structure made from thread twisted or braided together. In this paper, the author uses the words cord, rope, and thread as synonyms of string. Strings are used to tie things, attach things together or hang things. Strings exist in types, sizes, and in colours. Internet source

(en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waist_beads) comments on waist beads, that, they are a traditional African accessory that consists of small glass beads on a string or wire worn around the waist or hips. They come in different colours and shapes and may also include

decorative stones, crystals, or charms. They are also referred to as belly beads, waistline beads, or beaded waist chains.

In Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, and other West African countries, waist beads are a symbol of femininity, fertility, sensuality, and spiritual well-being. The Yoruba is known to have the most varied and peculiar reasons for using waist beads. They are worn mainly by females, from the littlest to the oldest.

In Cameroon, waist beads are also very prominent, used mainly by the female folk. But this paper concentrates only on strings with the black and red colours. These strings are usually braided from the plaiting or sewing threads. Such strings are used for diverse purpose as mentioned above. Among the Beti of the Centre Region and the Bamum of the West Region of Cameroon (the research sites), strings are tied on different parts of the body and they are equally used to tie as well as hang things in the home.

As earlier mentioned this object is tied on different parts of the body such as the ankle, big toe, waist, wrist, neck, arm, and on the finger. According to the belief systems of the Beti and the Bamum this string can be used in prevention as well as in healing. It can be used to prevent and treat conditions such as stomach disorder, diarrhoea, muscle pains, and pains and swelling in the finger (commonly known as 'Wicklow'). This same string is employed to control pregnancy as well as to obtain supernatural power.

The researcher currently lives in Yaounde home of the Beti, he equally works in Foumban the capital of the Bamum. As he goes about his daily activities, he comes across many people who use the red and black strings. The selection of these two cultures, (the Beti and Bamum) is because these strings are widely used in these chiefdoms. The string is used on babies (both male and female), children as well as on female adults.

The Beti people are a Central African ethnic group primarily found in central Cameroon, in the cultural zone of Cameroon called Fang-Beti. They are also found in Equatorial Guinea and northern Gabon. They are closely related to the Bulu, the Fang, and the Ewondo (Yaunde) people, who are all sometimes grouped as Ekang. That is, the Beti consists of the Ewondo (more precisely Kolo), Bane, Fang (more precisely M'fang), and Eton or Iton.

The Beti people migrated south and west from the Sanaga River basin into equatorial forests regions. They are Bantu people who once lived in northern parts of Central Africa, with a complex, undocumented, and debated prehistory. They likely moved into equatorial Africa in the 7th or 8th century, then further southwest in central Cameroon between the 17th and 19th centuries, likely after waves of wars and slave raids from the Fulani people. They were also a targeted source for slaves and ivory by the Hausa people.

Their initial migration in the 17th century was from highlands and forested regions east of the Sanaga River towards south and west. They continued to face jihads and violence from the north by the Fulani people (also called Fulbe or Fula people), abandoned their settlements, and migrated further into southern parts of central Cameroon till the 19th century when European traders and colonial forces intervened as they sought trade and markets (en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beti_people).

The Bamoun (also spelled Bamoum, Bamum or Mum (1394-c. 1916)) is a pre-colonial Central African state in the Cameroon Grassfields. It was founded by the Bamum, an ethnic group in the northwest of Cameroon. Its capital is the ancient walled city of Fumban. The Bamum people and Bafia people share ancestry. The Bamum are an ethnic group of Tikar origin, who spread through the Grassfields Territories and established a political entity in the 17th century, reaching its splendour around their capital, Foumban, along the 19th century. The Bamum are a hierarchical society, in which the *fon* is the highest authority. The use of certain materials, objects, and symbols is the monopoly of the *fon*, who uses them as a power symbol. This privilege could be extended to other levels of the hierarchy (https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_Bamum).

The Beti villages are politically independent. They are a patrilineal people, and disputes are typically settled by a due process led by the *nkunkuma* - the leader among the Betis. The notables assist the *nkunkuma* in running the affairs of the chiefdom. Meanwhile, Grassfields chiefdoms including Bamum are independent and the political structure of most, if not all are basically similar (Nkwi and Warnier, 1982). The *fon* or sultan has a very great executive authority followed by the chiefs and notables. The quarter heads also make part of the political structure of these chiefdoms. The political system is based on hereditary and traditional authority and access to power is highly determined by direct descent (Warnier, 1975: 42). On the political strata of these chiefdoms, the *nkwifon* comes first followed by the *fon*, notables, and the quarter heads. And only him (the *fon*) and a few notables have the privilege to organise specific ceremonies.

Religion

Beti and Bamum people are polytheistic, they believe in multiple religions. In these chiefdoms, there is the African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam. The majority of these people are animists, a religious belief which consists of worshipping gods, spirits, and sacred forces. The Bamum traditional religion, for instance, places great emphasis on ancestral spirits which were embodied in the skulls of the deceased ancestors. The eldest males of each lineage had possession of the skulls of deceased males. When moving a diviner must find an appropriate place to hold the skull. Despite these efforts, some men's skulls remained unclaimed and their spirits are deemed restless. Ceremonies are thus done to placate these spirits. The Beti also venerate their ancestors. After the colonial era ended, the traditional religion of the Beti enjoyed a resurgence (https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beti-Pahuin_peoples)

Christianity, brought to the Beti and Bamum by white missionaries is the belief in the Almighty God. Those who practice this religion are called Christians. Most Beti people were Christianised by 1939. At that time, much of their traditional culture was abandoned, including much native dance and song. Christians believe that God is the creator of the world and everything therein. By so doing, they have to give praises to Him. Christianity is propagated by many religious bodies such as the Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists, and so on. Christianity frowns at the use of strings for protection saying that this is superstition. The use of this object for

protection does not glorify God. They believe that the only person who has the power to protect is God, the creator of man and the universe.

In modern times, many Bamum are Muslim or Christian. King Ibrahim Njoya himself converted to Islam then to Christianity and then back to Islam after the Treaty of Versailles. He is said to have disliked abstaining from polygamy when Christian, and from alcohol when Muslim, so ultimately split the difference toward the end (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bamum_people) Majority of the Bamum, practice the Islam religion. The word Islam means voluntary "Submission" or "Surrender" to the will of God (Allah). Those who practice this religion are called Muslims. They believe that God sent prophets to teach mankind how to worship Him, and the last of the messengers was Muhammad (peace be upon them all). (<http://www.whyislam.org/submission/prophethood-in-islam/prophet-muhammad-pbuh/>).

Methodology

The data for this paper was collected using the qualitative and quantitative methods. Underlying these methods, the following research techniques were employed: direct observation, in-depth-interview, life histories, and questionnaires. The researcher visited and interviewed some 15 elderly women who treat ailments such as wicklow and stomach disorder to observe as well as comprehend how strings are manufactured and the part of the body on which it is attached. He also interviewed 52 patients and the mothers of babies who had the ropes on their bodies to find out how and why the string was tied and by who. Direct observation and interviews were carried out with some 5 traditional medical doctors to understand the cultural meanings behind and the function of the different objects attached to the string. A digital camera was used to snap some of the babies and patients who used the string. The photographs gave more credibility to the verbal information collected. The contents of the pictures were interpreted iconographically. The researcher used questionnaires to collect data from the mothers of babies who had strings on their hands and from patients. Among some of the information that were provided by the questionnaires was the choice of the use of the red and black ropes, the duration of the rope on the patients' bodies, and the different illnesses which these strings treat. Data of the study was analysed soon after our fieldwork. Information recorded during observation and interview sessions were transcribed and arranged according to the different categories of people interviewed. The data was interpreted using functionalism and symbolic anthropology.

Presentation of Findings and Discussion

The history of the black and red strings among the Beti is unknown but oral sources claim that the black string - *bobe yavine* became a remedy ever since it was used to save the life of a newborn baby. That is, this rope was tied on the child's body and it restored his health. The exact period when this was discovered as a remedy is not known, but because it cured the baby, it was since then recognised by the people and it became part of the Beti culture. According to an elderly Beti interlocutor,

the red and black cords were a revelation from the ancestors, they were gifts from God to help humans to deal with their daily problems. These strings are therefore used in varied ways. To the Kolo Beti for instance, the black thread is used to protect newborn babies who are not delivered in the hospital. When a baby is born at home or anywhere else apart from the hospital, it is regarded that he or she may be exposed to some ungodly people and to stop any harm from happening to the baby, the black string is tied on his or her wrist or waist to protect him or her. This string is sometimes simple but other times, a cowry is or cowry shells are attached to it.

The Utility of Strings Among the Beti and Bamum

Strings have several uses in Cameroon in general and among the Beti and Bamum in particular. Writing on the arts of the Western Grassfields of Cameroon, Knopfli (1999: 24) notes that wood carvers use the string to mark the diameter of a log of wood. To do this, the woodcarver uses a nail and a piece of string with a pencil attached to it to draw a circle. Among the Beti and Bamum specifically, strings and the objects attached on them have immense cultural significance. When seen, some people perceive it as an object which is used to augment the wearer's beauty. But strings or ropes go beyond a mere beautifying object to include functions such as protection, healing, and an instrument used to obtain supernatural power. Ropes also have potent power to charm men. This portion of the paper, therefore, handles the functions and symbolism of the string among the Beti and Bamum.

The most prominently used cords among the Beti and Bamum are the black and red ropes. The ropes occupy a significant place in these cultures (the Beti and Bamum) like in many African cultures. These cords are used to prevent (stop something from happening or someone from doing something) as well as cure or treat certain health conditions. It is also used to obtain spiritual favour or powers.

The black rope among the Beti is known as *bobe yavine* and it is known as *efeuh* in Bamum. A Beti mother told the researcher that,

the string which is usually black in colour was used by the ancestors for funeral, purification rites, and for protection. This is therefore a cultural aspect which is being handed down from one generation to another. As concerns funeral rites, the Beti tie the black string either on the wrist or the ankle when someone dies, this is a means to announce a death in that family.

The tying of the black cord during funeral is equally common among the Bamum. In the Bamum land, when the *fon* disappears, the population tie the *efeuh* either on the ankle or wrist. Like the Beti, it is an indication that something is wrong in the chiefdom, the *fon* is 'missing'. The black colour of the string means that the people are mourning their departed *fon*, their father. This rope will be on the leg of the mourners (the population) until the new *fon* is enthroned. This black cord can be compared to the wood ash and

dried banana stems used in some parts of the Grassfields to show that the people are grieved by the disappearance of their *fon*. When the disappearance of a *fon* is announced by the *kwifon*, both women and men rob wood ash all over their bodies and dress in skirts made from dried banana stems, or fibre. The dried banana stems and wood ash symbolise death. When the new *fon* is finally shown to the public, with the joy of seeing their "returned" *fon*, the people retired to nearby streams to take off their ragged clothing and then wash off the wood ash worn earlier as a sign of mourning and cleansing to forget about their sorrow caused by the disappearance of their spiritual leader. It also signifies washing all the evil that had happened in the land. The removal of the ragged clothing and washing of wood ash is considered the separation with the spirit of death that took away their *fon* (Moffor, 2022b). The Bamum mourners remove or cut the black string at the enthronement of a new *fon* to show that the ill luck or bad omen of death has left their chiefdom. The tying of the black rope is therefore intended to send away bad spirits, the spirit of death away from the chiefdom.

Among the Beti of Cameroon, this cord is attached on the waist of a newborn to check his or her weight because when some women give birth at home (as mentioned above), they do not bother to go to the hospital for the pediatrician to examine the baby and give him or her appropriate control. In some African countries, a more physical significance of the waist bead is that it serves as an instrument for body shaping. They keep wearers informed of even the slightest change in their weight, weight gain, or loss. While they don't stretch, they either roll up or break as the wearer gains weight. It is also believed that wearing these beads from a younger age improves the fine curves African women are known for (en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waist_beads).

When it is tied on the ankle, it treats stomach disorders such as diarrhoea in people of all ages, babies, youths, adults, and the elderly alike. Diarrhoea is a condition in which the contents of the bowels are emptied too often and in a form which is more liquid than usual, especially causing pain. Diarrhea is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as having three or more loose or liquid stools per day, or as having more stools than is normal for that person. Diarrhoea is caused by an infection, eating of contaminated food, a reaction to some medicine, or just anxiety or excitement (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/diarrhoeal-disease>).

Some cultures in Cameroon believe that this health condition occurs when a couple have sexual intercourse when the baby still breastfeeds. Many cultures in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon believe that to treat this type of diarrhoea, roasted 'achu' banana mixed in palm oil should be given to the baby to eat so as to 'cut' the 'watery' stool. The World Health Organisation and biomedicine recommend improved sanitation, clean drinking water, hand washing with soap, vaccination, and more as preventive measures to combat diarrhoea (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/diarrhoeal-disease>). Among the Bamum and Beti, a black thread is tied on the baby's wrist to stop the ailment.

Diarrhoea can attack people of all age groups as seen above. The figure below shows a young girl of 12 years who suffered from diarrhoea and her mother tied a black string on her left ankle. This rope which nothing is attached to it is believed to have the ability to stop the patient from passing out frequent stool. According to this child when her mother was attaching the cord on her ankle, she said that whatever this ailment is this black rope should help cure it. This thread will be cut when the pains and diarrhoea is completely treated.

Figure 1: A black cord tied on the ankle to treat diarrhoea



Source: Tikere's archive (14/02/2021)

This black rope also treats muscular problems. For people who have pains on the ankle, kneel, elbow, or the entire arm, they are advised to attach the black rope on the ankle or wrist. Where the cord is tied depends on the part of the body where the pain is felt. A woman confirmed this in an interview and this was what she said:

'I tied this rope on my right ankle as demonstrated in the figure below following what my brothers and my neighbours told me. They told me that if anyone fills pain in any part of his or her body, he or she should weave black threads and tied on the affected part. I did not go to the hospital for the doctor to diagnose the problem because I do not have a wound, I do not have a fracture nor an accident but pains. Going to the hospital may be a waste of time and money because I have seen others attaching a similar black string for muscles pain. So I belief that this cord will help me.'

This patient testified that this remedy really helped her because after tying the black thread for a few days, the pains went away and a soon as she did not feel the pains anymore, she cut the rope.

Figure 2: A black cord tied on the ankle to heal pains



Source: Tikere's archive (05/05/2022)

The tying of the black rope protects someone from the 'evil eye', it absorbs negative energies from the interior of someone so that 'bad waves' should not penetrate. That is, it protects somebody from bad spirits or sorcery. It also acts as a shield making someone who has this rope tied on his body to be invisible in the eyes of the sorcerers as well as any other person who wants to cause harm to him or her. A young lady recounted to the researcher how she often had terrible nightmares which prevented her from sleeping and when she told her mother about what she was experiencing, her mother asked her to attach a black string on her ankle or on her wrist. This was done and she experienced some good moments of sleep. But when this rope cut she started having the horrible nightmares again.

Among the Bamum also, the black thread is used to protect people from the evil eye. A good example used to illustrate this is the case of a child who is born and he or she reached the age to walk but cannot. The black string is tied on his or her ankle. Because the child cannot walk, it is believed that the legs are heavy and that some evil energy is behind it. So this rope is tied so as to render the leg lighter and permit the child to walk. In the case of an evil energy, this string is believed to have the ability to send out the evil forces that is stopping the child from walking.

The black rope is also used to protect the home. To do this, it is advisable to tie a black rope on a linen and place it under the door or at the entrance of the house. This object is believed to protect the house from all sorts of negative spirits such that if anyone comes with any evil intentions, he or she will not be able to succeed because the house is protected. This remedy is at its best when incense mixed with garlic is burnt to accompany it. It is the belief of the people that when individuals have problems, one way to harm the adversary is to inflict an illness on him or her. Because this cannot be achieved physically, going spiritual is the only option. Protecting the home therefore is a way to stop such evil attacks.

A student told the researcher that she had stomach disorder and her older brother told her to tie a black string on her ankle. This string which is attached round the ankle as soon as the condition starts will only be untied when the patient is heal from the illness. This informant continued by saying that the patient choses on which part of the body to attach the string, he or she may choose to tie it on the ankle or wrist or on the big toe. The choice of the big toe is to hide the illness from public view.

A patient who had an accident recounted to the researcher how she used the black string to heal her fracture. She had this to say:

I had an accident and had a fracture on my right leg. I was prescribed a bone healer and when a met this healer, she tied a black string on my ankles - the left and right ankles. This string was obtained from the sewing thread. That is, she took sewing thread, cut a good quantity, plaited it, and tied it on my ankles. She massaged the fractured part each time we had a healing session. The bone healer instructed me never to cut this string that, it (the string) will cut on its own. The string on the fractured leg cut recently but that on the left ankle is still there and I have being tying it for four years now. The leg has healed but I cannot remove (cut) it because the bone healer instructed me to leave it to cut alone. I think that I am healed because I am walking well but maybe I will have totally healing when this rope finally cuts.

That means that the length of time that the fracture will heal completely is determined by the duration of the string on the ankle. After four years this string is still there and it can go on to even ten years.

The researcher equally came in contact with another lady who also had an accident and used the black cord for curative and protective purpose. She told me in an interview that:

I had an accident on a motorcycle. I had a large cut or wound on my right foot and a fractured ankle. This wound bled so much and the affected part was operated upon. I spent several days in excruciating pains. The pains persisted and I was advised by my mother to tie a black rope on the injured ankle which she did (see figure below).

Figure 3: A black rope tied on the right ankle for healing and protection



Source: Tikere's archive (10/04/2021)

The accident this lady added had a spiritual undertone. She continued by saying that:

There was this colleague of mine at the job side who never liked me. I discovered this from the way she

usually handled my daughter who was in her class. I was equally told by my other colleagues that the lady in question did not like me. This was finally confirmed when I had this accident. When I had this accident, she said that I have not yet seen anything, that what happened to me was just the beginning. Understanding that she did not mean well for me, I started suspecting her of having a hand in the accident and to stop her from achieving her diabolic intentions. I was told to tie this black rope on my ankle that will stop her from attacking me, for I am very certain that this is something spiritual, a spiritual attack.

In Foumban, I met a woman with a swollen leg as demonstrated in the figure below.

In an attempt to inquire what the cause was, she said:

I do not know what caused my leg to swell, I slept and got up one morning and my leg began to pain. A day later, it started to swell. I have gone to many hospitals with the leg, different medicines as well as anti-inflammatories have been given to me to cure my leg to no avail. I visited a traditional doctor who is also a diviner with the leg to find out the cause of the swollen leg and he told me that I have stepped on 'bad medicine' which was destined for someone else. He told me that had it been that this medicine was 'put' for me and I stepped on it, it could have killed me. He said that I am still alive because I am innocent.

Figure 4: A swollen leg cause by some bad medicine



Source: Tikere's archive 25/08/2022

To treat the swollen leg therefore, the diviner told her that she has to do some scarification on it and also tie a black string on her ankle to neutralise the 'bad medicine' which she stepped on. This rope which will be tied shall not be removed until the leg gets healed. In Cameroon like in most parts of Africa, individuals settle their differences in different ways, and putting bad medicine for someone to step on or cross over it is one of the ways to settle scores. In the Bambui chiefdom in the Bamenda Grass fields, for

example, this condition or the inflamed leg is known as 'nedem' - elephantiasis. The treatment of the leg has two phases; the first is to scarify the leg and apply some black powder medicine on it and the next is to attach the black rope on the ankle.

Strings are not used only by adults, they are equally tied on the bodies of children. Most children have the rope attached either on the neck, the waist, or on the wrist. Throughout the period that the researcher took to carry out the research, he never saw a single baby with a rope tied on the ankle. The researcher interviewed a mother whose daughter had a black string on her hand. She told him that the rope was tied in the village by her maternal grandmother. A 'country fashion' – traditional rites was conducted and the grandmother tied the string on her hand. It so happened that this child was constantly ill and the frequent illness was attributed to the ancestor, that is there were certain ceremonies which should have been performed but were never done, due to this reason, it was affecting the child.

In the course of attaching this black string, her grandmother uttered some words in the local language in which she thanked the ancestors for the gift of the child, for protection, and begged the ancestors to continue to protect them (the living). She ended by asking for more blessings from these ancestors.

The peculiarity of this black string that the child had on her wrist as illustrated in the figure below was that a cowry shell was attached to it.

Figure 5: A black string with a cowry on a child's hand



Source: Tikere's archive (09/12/2021)

This child had problems in her school because it was prohibited for pupils to wear chains, bangles, or string to school. The parents of the child were convoked to school by the school authorities because of the black rope. The authorities of the school asked the mother of the child to remove the cord but the parents explained the child's problem to the Head Teacher, who had some sympathy on the child and permitted her to have the rope on her wrist.

The black string is equally used by pregnant women. When a woman is pregnant and she fears that some harm can be caused on her and her baby, she ties the black string either on her ankle or on

her big toe. This is recurrent in a polygamous family, and in a marriage where a wife is not in good relation with her mother-in-law. The protection could also be done to avoid harm from either friends or neighbours. In Cameroon in general and among the Bamum in particular, there exist polygamous homes where a man can get married to up to four wives. In such families, there is usually a lot of hatred, competition, conspiracy, jealousy, and more. The first wife will want everything for herself - her husband's attention, favour, and more. The second and the others will want the same treatment. It is not possible that the husband treats all of them and their children in the same manner and even if he can manage to treat all of them equally, there will always be problems. A pregnant lady from a polygamous family made the researcher to understand that:

I was pregnant (my first pregnancy) and after four months, I started having horrible night mares which led to a miscarriage. In my second pregnancy, a similar thing was happening. My mother consulted a diviner and this diviner told her that her co-wife was responsible for what was happening to me. She was given a black rope to tie on my big toe. This prevented me from having the night mares and I finally put to birth successfully.

Other women with a similar problem who may not come from a polygamous family will attribute the problems to some uncle or aunt, grandmother, or grandfather. Many women who use the black string testified that an aunt, uncle, grandfather, or grandmother scarcely curses any of his or her relations. The above-mentioned persons can curse his or her relation only when the 'nephew or niece or grandson or granddaughter' has done something terrible and refuses to acknowledge it. This curse is therefore a form of retribution for the wrongdoing.

In Cameroon, it is common to find daughter and mother-in-law who are not in good terms. Before a man gets married, his father, mother, aunts, and uncles must accept the girl whom he wants to get married to. If a man marries a woman without the consent of his mother especially, it means that he has declared a war between his own mother and his wife. Some mother-in-laws will do everything humanly possible to destroy the marriages or frustrate their daughters-in-laws in an attempt to make them abandon or renounce the marriages. One of the common periods to accomplish these diabolic intentions is when the daughter-in-law is pregnant. During pregnancy, there are some mother-in-laws who cause their daughters-in-laws to have miscarriage, stillbirth or sometimes to even die during delivery. The major reason according to an informant was that:

My mother-in-laws hated me so much, as such she did not want to allow a child to be brought to this world who would always remind her of the girl or the wife of her son. These informants continued by saying that when I noticed such a hatred, I took measures to prevent my mother-in-law from causing harm to me and my unborn baby. One of such measures was to get the advice of an elderly woman from my family or I

simply got assistance from a 'native doctor' - traditional medical doctor who gave me some medicine to use to ward off the evil spirit.

Among the Bamum, *efeuh* - black string is attached on a single twin. A single twin in many Cameroon chiefdoms is a baby who is born with the umbilical cord around his or her neck or a baby who comes out with the legs. Such babies are treated in a special manner and some of the special treatments accorded them are - they are given twins' names and a black string is tied on their hands. One thing which marks the separate nature of the single twin is that he or she is often ill. The black rope is tied on his or her waist to protect him or her from witches and wizards. Among the Bamum, it is believed that every illness is the handwork of some spiritual forces.

Strings are equally used on 'complicated' babies and children. A complicated child is one who behaves in an abnormal manner, in a way which is difficult to comprehend. Among the Bamenda Grassfields people, twins, a single twin, a child who is given a 'wrong' name, and many more are considered to be complicated. To the Bamum in particular, a complicated child is not one who must necessarily be a twin but one who has abnormal behaviour. A child who behaves strangely, he or she talks to him or herself, hallucinates, that is, he or she seems to perceive things which are not really present, behaves as he or she is under the influence of some supernatural force, and more.

If these behaviours are observed in a child, it is believed that he or she is complicated and that his or her behaviour may be caused by some spirits. To fight against these spirits, therefore, the red rope (on which cowry shells have been attached) is tied on his or her waist as illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 6: A red string with cowries tied on a child's waist



Source: Tikere's archive (15/09/2022)

This red string is prepared and tied on the waist of the child by the family head. This is done in a ceremony where he brings the family together and offers them food and drinks. As he ties the string on the child's waist, he prays, he speaks to the ancestors and gods, committing the life of the child to them, asking them to make this child to behave like any normal child. He also prays for the entire family thanking the gods for protection and blessings. He would

equally ask for more of everything; protection, blessings, and many more children. The child will have this cord on his or her waist until when the behaviour is considered as normal.

Among the Bamum still, there is what is known as *ikata* which is a black string whose goal is to obtain some supernatural powers. *Ikata* is tied on the arm and covered with the dress. *Ikata* is a combination of the Bamum culture and the Islam religion. This is similar to the cultural practice of the people in the Sahel of Cameroon - Adamawa, North, and Far North Regions. This is a cultural zone whose population is mostly Muslims. *Ikata*, therefore, reinforces its user's strength (the user can do a lot of manual work without getting tired, he can equally fight with so many people at the same time and become victorious, his single punch will scare his enemies).

The black string is equally used to treat wicklow. Wicklow is an inflammation on the finger. A patient who had an inflammation on her finger informed the researcher in an interview that one day, she felt some severe pain in her finger. She thought that the pains will subside but this went for two days. After these two days, the finger started swelling and she showed it to an elderly woman in her neighborhood. This elderly woman told her to cut about nine strands of sowing thread, braid, or weave them into a string and tie it where the finger meets the palm. She told me that this string can only be cut when the pains on the finger have subsided. I was told to tie the string on this specific spot to prevent the pains on the finger from moving or affecting my palm or the other fingers.

The Cultural Connotations of the String and the Objects Attached to it

As already mentioned above, the common braided string usually used among the Beti and Bamum are red and black in colour. It is often very simple but some people attach objects like cowries or small bags to it. Whether the black cord is simple or some objects attached to it or not, it is highly symbolic, having different cultural meanings. This portion concentrates on the symbolism of the string, the colours black and red, cowry shells, and small bags attached to the string.

The symbolism of the string among the Beti and Bamum

The cord as already seen in the previous paragraphs is used to heal and protect people from illnesses as well as from evil forces. The string is also employed to heal certain diseases and pains in the muscles. This, therefore, makes the rope a symbol of protection and healing. When this string is noticed on the wrist, waist, ankle, finger, or the toe of anyone, those who understand it immediately comprehend that the wearers have a problem - physical or spiritual. We live in a world where we are not sure of who is good or bad, who is a friend or who is not. Because of this uncertainty, people have sort for measures to protect themselves.

But Christians believe that these black strings used for protection are something fetish. According to internet source (<https://www.dictionary.com/browse>) anything fetish is *an object regarded with awe as being the embodiment or habitation of a*

potent spirit or as having magical potency. Merriam-Webster (<https://www.merriam-webster.com>) defines fetish as *an object (such as a small stone carving of an animal) believed to have magical power to protect or aid its owner*. Many Christians therefore describe the black string as fetish and not good for a child of God to wear. That is, if the black strings have anything to do with charms or are made for "protection" then they should really be avoided. These Christians believe that God is the only one who has the power to protect and if someone truly believes and surrenders to God or having faith in God he will be protected by the latter. In truth, anything that is dedicated to worldly spirits should be avoided by Christians.

The paradox is that some Christians, take the black cord and attach a Christian medal to it and then tie it on the wrist or neck of their children. This is usually observed on the hands of children who are frequently ill. According to those who blend these two (the string and medal), the cord in itself is a form of protection. Adding a blessed medal to it is a way to reinforce or fortify the potency of the object.

The black string is used as a portent of good luck

This rope is also tied on the ankle especially when its wearer has difficulties. An informant noted that:

I have a lot of problems: whatever I do, I do not succeed, I have invested my money in businesses but all these businesses have crumbled, and I do not even have money anymore to buy goods. Most of my children do not succeed in school, they are frequently ill and they bring me all sorts of problems. Even when I work my farms, the crops do not do well. I have tied this black string on my ankle because I explained my life experiences to my aunt and some elderly women in my village and they advised me to attach it on my ankle. Many of them attributed the failure in my life to an evil spirit. And that if I have to attract good luck to myself, then I have to be cleansed. Some of them said that in the course of my interaction with people, I may have hurt someone and this spirit of failure was 'place on my head'. This rope will 'cut' whatever bad spirit that was placed on me to prevent me and my entire family (husband and children) from succeeding. By using the object, it will make new doors (success, prosperity, good luck) to open for her.

Among the Beti, it is advisable to tie a black rope on a child's leg so that good luck should 'follow' him or her. Good luck following a child means that, he or she will not have anyone who will look at the child with an evil eye to cause pains, illnesses, or even stop him or her from growing normally or of progressing. The use of strings as a source of good luck is not limited to the Beti of Cameroon. According to internet source (<https://guardian.ng/life/the-traditional-significance-of-waist-beads/>) some spiritual ladies wear waist beads for good luck. These people think that wearing those beads will offer them calm, luck, and a good night's sleep. They also wear them when meditating since they believe the beads protect the

heart, mind, body, and soul. As a result, they employ them to counteract unfavourable omens.

As seen above, the black rope is tied on different parts of the body and when it is attached on the ankle, this rope brings tremendous positive changes in the life of the wearer. It is believed that the black cord possesses a special power, it acts like a shield and works or protects against negative energies. It also plays the function of attracting or bringing good news as well as good persons to the person tying it.

The cord is a portent of supernatural power

Supernatural power is the force which is understood to be attributed beyond the scope of natural laws and scientific understanding. Such supernatural powers include many strange things which normal people will be unable to do, such as to attract things or to do some mysterious things. Many women who tie the black string on their waist use them as a charm to attract the negative sex or to acquire wealth. In a conversation with some male friends, they said that they can never have sexual intercourse with a lady who has the black cord or anything in the form of a string on her waist. In order to have sexual intercourse, the lady must remove the cord because to some of them, such ropes are charms to either make the man to have perpetual love for her or to extort the man's wealth. This practice is also common in Ghana and other parts of West Africa, where women traditionally added charms and fragrant oils on waist beads to lure suitors. (<https://www.healthline.com/health/beauty-skin-care/waist-beads-modern-uses>)

The symbolism of the black colour on a string

Three colours are frequently symbolic in most African cultures in general and in Cameroon cultures in particular. These colours are black, red and white. Black is a colour which is like night, the absence of light. The colour black represents evil or sadness, suffering or mourning. This is why the colour black is used more in funerals, especially in Africa. Those who perpetuate evil are associated with evil because all what they do is aimed at hurting, causing pain which could lead to killing the people they target.

Many cultures look at the colour black to represent sadness and mourning but Beti and Bamum belief system associates this colour with the spirits. A colour which does not invite the spirits, instead it is capable of preventing or sending away evil spirits from its user. The black colour of the cord is not only a cosmetic design, it helps to protect those who use it. It is therefore is the symbol of power and protection because it can stop bad spirits from inhabiting an individual.

The symbolism of the red colour on a string

The red colour observed on the string is a symbol of power and transformation. A cord with this colour is tied on the waist of a complicated child, a child who hallucinates and does things that normal children do not do and cannot do. Just like the redness of animal blood which is obtained during sacrifices to appease the ancestors or gods, or to request for divine providence, the red string is employed to supplicate the ancestors and gods to intervene in the problems of the complicated child. The red string, therefore,

signifies power, power which is capable of commanding or inviting the supernatural to transform this child from his or her anomaly.

The cultural significance of cowry shells tied to a black cord

Cowry is the common name for a group of small to large marine gastropods in the family *Cypraeidae*. The word cowry is also often used to refer to the shells of these snails. Shells of certain species have historically been used, in the past and present, very extensively in jewellery, and for other decorative and ceremonial purposes.

Cowry shells are equally used by diviners for divination. A diviner will use them together with other objects and throws them on the ground. By shaking and throwing them on the ground, he looks at the symbol which comes on top. From this symbol, he could discern what hopes and fears are in the minds of the patient or person he is carrying out his divination. Among the Beti and Bamum, a cowry shell or cowry shells are sometimes attached to the black or red cord and tied on the waist, wrist or ankle. Attaching the cowry or cowry shells on the red or black string may be to invite the gods of protection to take control of the life of the wearer. For instance, the child who wears the black cord with a cowry attached to it, is a means to protect her from illnesses and also make her to find favour in the sight of the ancestors following the 'prayer' her grandmother made at the moment she was putting the black thread on her granddaughter's wrist. Still among the Beti, it is believed that when a string with a cowry on it is tied on the wrist of a child, the cowry shell together with the rope will block the child from an 'evil eye'.

In as much as some people wear the black string as a way to heal a



well as protect themselves, others use the black string with two cowries attached to it. In the Grassfields of Cameroon, this will symbolise royalty or riches as the chiefly wives can be seen with cowry chains on their ankle or wrist. The symbolism of the black rope is not the same among the Beti, the two cowry shells used by

the individual as demonstrated in the figure below is a kind of double supplication from the gods for a solution for her problems. The wearer of this black cord with two cowries on it told the researcher that she was ill and almost died and she went to all hospitals but the doctors could not diagnose any illness. She visited a divine who told her that her illness was a spiritual one and that she must combat it spiritually. She was given some medicines and this black cord with two cowries attached to it, made by the diviner himself to tie on her left ankle. This medicine and the black string will gradually send out the evil spirits in her and she will eventually get well again. The diviner instructed her not to cut the rope until she is totally healed from the demons.

The lady continued by saying that the healer told her that when she will be totally healed, another medicine and black thread will be

produced which she has to tie, this time to protect her from the same evil spirits.

Figure 7: A woman tying a black string with two cowries attached to it



Source: Tikere's archive (03/08/2022)

The cultural interpretation of the small bag attached to a black string

It has been mentioned above that one of the objects attached to the black cord (which is tied on the body) is a small bag. This bag is sown by a traditional medicine man or woman at the request of his or her client. Some of the bags contain potent powder whose aim can either be for protection, healing, good luck, or a charm to lure men. It is important to mention that this particular cord is tied on the waist or on the hand, where it is hidden from public view.

This string is tied by both children and adults. That of children is attached purposely for protection, divine providence, and healing. The small bag tied on the waist of the children has no conditions associated with it, they have it on the waist at all times even when taking a bath. It can only be replaced when it cuts or when the child has grown fatter.

The bag attached to the black rope used by adults is specifically to attract supernatural power and for good luck. This bag commonly called 'grigri' contains some medicine which provides extra energy to its wearer in carrying out manual activities or in fighting. This type is used mostly by the male folk. It is equally common among people in the Sahel zone of Cameroon. Others tie or use the black string with a bag attached to it to ensure good luck (Moffor, 2020). This category is recurrent with businessmen who believe that when they use it, it has the ability to attract more customers to their shops.

Some men employ the black cord with a small bag attached to it to acquire supernatural powers meanwhile that used by women may be a powerful charm which are aimed at luring or attracting men to them. According to many informants, this type is used by prostitutes, a man who has had sexual intercourse with them will always come back to them. The bags employed by adults usually have some conditions associated with it and one of such is that the bag should never come in contact with water. If water touches

them, they either lose their powers or have an adverse effect on the user.

Conclusion

In many African traditions in general and in some Cameroonian cultures in particular, the black or red string is an important part of the culture. When this black string is attached on the neck, wrist, waist, or ankle, those who do not understand its symbolism may think that it is an object of beautification just like the chains. It goes beyond mere object which may be employed to render the body more beautiful to an object which is used to heal the people from certain health challenges, conditions which maybe physical or spiritual. The black cord is equally used to protect individuals both young and old against evil spirits referred to by Beti and Bamum as 'evil eye'. Some individuals use the simple black cord meanwhile others attach objects such as cowry shell(s), small bag, or medal to it. The rope is tied on different parts of the body depending on the individual as well as the ailment it intends to handle. This black string, therefore, is part of the belief system of the Bamum and Beti. This indigenous system of treating minor as well as spiritual problems of the people is less expensive and has been handed down from generation to generation. Considering the fact that it is part of the peoples' way of life if developed, it could really be of great help to the entire society, especially the masses.

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