

FONTM (CAMEROON): A LABORATORY OF FRATERNITY *

INTRODUCTION

(BENNIE CALLEBAUT**)

Since 1966, an African people from Cameroon, the Bangwa, together with the Focolare Movement are living a very singular experience, defined as an experience of 'solidarity'.

The question that we ask ourselves is: what can we, as sociologists, deduce from this experience for our congress, the subject of which is fraternity? In sociological analyses there must be factors, a context and the dynamics of interactions. In these dynamics sociologists will pay attention to detect the ways in which these realities combine amongst themselves, difficulties that cause tension, possible, visible or less visible conflicts, and to identify the eventual methods of overcoming these conflicts.

Let us therefore present the factors, the salient moments of the "Fontem" story, the geographical place that has given a name to this paper, and try to formulate a sociological commentary. This is a task that I undertake initially as a member of the Focolare, personally involved in this experience, then also as an outside observer with a detached outlook, fully aware of my limitations having worked mainly on research of the sociology of religions.

I have to keep in my mind two elements: a sociologist knows that he practices a limited science, or rather a reduced one. Together with you, I would like to propose to cautiously examine this dossier. Why? One can quote in this regard one of the founder fathers of sociology, Max Weber, who reprimanded those who from a professorial chair hoped to found a new religion. "You will only form the hundredth sectarian group" he wrote¹. He was convinced that an experience which succeeds in bringing people together, especially if these have religious roots, does not come from study or from some genial idea, proclaimed in some Congress.

Which are the factors and what is the context?

We are in 1966, in Cameroon, in open equatorial forest. This part of Africa, situated to the south of the Sahara, has just overcome a colonial period with all the wounds that it had caused. The principal factors are three: the first one is a tribe, the Bangwa, who live in a remote valley, which is very hard to reach. This

* This report contains a series of contributions on the story of Fontem with three contributions by Chiara Lubich together with some interviews to protagonists that Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia has taken care of. There are also some brief presentations on today's situation. Bennie Callebaut has prepared the sociological comments and other texts which are shown in italics.

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tribe had been the victim of such a high infant mortality, that it was risking becoming extinct. At this point, the main authorities of the tribe asked for help from a Catholic Bishop of the region, Julius Peeters who was Dutch.

The second factor is therefore this bishop and the Catholic Church, missionary or otherwise, that in those years was living an intense period of renewal brought by the Vatican Council and was re-evaluating all the set rules that had for centuries moulded the very action of the Church.

The third factor is the Focolare Movement, a movement that promotes an evangelic approach to life, following Jesus' new commandment on reciprocal love. Max Weber, the abovementioned sociologist, when talking about religious leaders who propose strong messages, states that one can verify in them what he calls a "unitary vision" of life. They see everybody and everything from a sound experience. In Chiara Lubich something similar is found: she understands, she lives and interprets the entire Gospel from the point of view of mutual fraternal love! Such things were not usually heard of in the pre-conciliatory Church. The Church had however just approved the Focolare (1962) and this approval was accompanied by an important period of the spreading of the Focolare in the whole world.

THE EXPERIENCE OF FONTEM AND THE AFRICAN VISION OF LIFE (MARTIN NKAFU NKEMNKIA^{*})**

Julius Nyerere, an African sociologist, in his fundamental treatise *Ujamaa*², affirms that African socialism consists in an experience of sharing everything amongst everybody. This is why no African is a millionaire, and why there is no place for capitalists and for exploiters. The same Nyerere also sustains that having goods as a guarantee of power and prestige is antisocial. For socialism, all the members of society must have all that is necessary.

African socialism is based on the sharing of goods. In such a society the State plays an important role, since poverty is not concentrated to just one individual agent. This conception is founded on traditional society, characterized by communal living. In fact in African traditional society no one lacks food, no one is deprived of his dignity.

"This is exactly what African society managed to achieve. The rich as well as the poor were absolutely secure in the African society. Natural calamities brought famine, a famine that made everybody suffer, rich and poor. Nobody suffered hunger, neither from lack of food, nor from human dignity because of the fact that they had no personal richness; each and every one depended on the richness of the community of which he or she was a member. This is pure socialism. In our African traditional society we were individuals in the community. We took sincere interest in the community and the community provided for our needs. We did not

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feel the necessity or the desire to exploit our equals or to abuse them”³ as Nyerere says.

If there still are African people who live in this way these are certainly the Bangwa people of Cameroon. The foundation and the ultimate object of African socialism is the extended family. The true African socialist does not look at one class of men as his brothers and at another class as his natural enemies. He does not establish an agreement with “brothers” for the extermination of “non-brothers” (so says the above mentioned African sociologist).

The analysis presented here describes the meeting of Chiara Lubich and the Focolare spirituality with the Bangwa people of Cameroon, and all that renders this story such a singular experience in the world to this very day. From it one can see that unity between races, cultures and people is possible even when everything around seems to induce to the contrary, to hatred and mistrust of one another.

The experience and the message of the citadel of Fontem – that with pleasure will be exposed during our Congress as a “laboratory of fraternal relationships” - were capable of “informing” a society of tens of thousands of persons, to be a model of healthy, exemplary development.

Today is a historical day, because, this experience has become part of the story of many people, not only of the Focolare Movement. The good result of this experience is indebted also to the profound religious sense of the Bangwa people, to its capability of being always available and open to others - to the extent of adopting the Focolare spirituality. From all these elements a laboratory of fraternity was generated, and this is Fontem.

**THE INSPIRATION BECOMES DAILY LIFE:
THE SIXTIES, THE INSPIRING SPARK, THE COMMON INTEREST
(Bennie Callebaut)**

Which were the dynamics that put together the three factors that we have just presented? Max Weber, amongst many others, explains that man’s story moves principally according to the dynamics of interest of different factors. These are the driving forces that move things along the paths of social life. But Weber indicates also that, where these paths lead to can instead be determined by the great ideas of the present moment that give a sense of direction to everything.

The question that we can ask is: what were the interests at risk in this relationship?

The interests of the Bangwa were more than evident: to survive, to defeat disease. In order to survive a health system had to be established. But how could one attract competent personnel to come to such a place, far away from everything? The State of Cameroon in the nineteen sixties did not have the possibility to provide the Bangwa people with the basic necessities. The politics of the regional government of the time were clear: it expected missionaries (catholic or protestant) to take the burden to furnish the indispensable elements

of a modernized civil society. Thus it expected the missions to build schools, day clinics or hospitals and parishes; only then was the State was ready to guarantee its presence.

At the beginning of the Sixties the relationship between the Church and the regional government was a very positive one. The government had administrative authority over the English-speaking part of Cameroon, where Fontem is situated. The Prime Minister of this region had stipulated an agreement with the Catholic bishop: the Church had to provide the personnel and to build hospitals, whereas the government had to find the money to pay the wages.

So bishop Peeters tried to find health personnel as the classic missionary personnel were not enough to see to all the needs of the population. He looked for persons who were ready to undertake pioneer work, with low wages, of course. Bishop Peeters got to know the Focolare when he met a lay Focolare doctor (Giandomenico Catarinella). Peeters was Dutch, and he very well knew that lay people were a new strength in the Church, a strength that had to be made use of and valued, in ways still to be discovered. He went to the Vatican Council and made it a point to meet Chiara Lubich (1963), and to ask her whether she could send competent persons, doctors and nurses, to start the Movement's experience in Africa too.

What interest did the Focolare Movement have in this initial phase?

As I said before, Chiara's fundamental idea, her "unitary" vision – according to Max Weber's expression - is, that the only intelligent thing to do in life, the only thing which makes one happy, is "to live for universal fraternity", as she often says. Besides, the Focolare in the sixties was fast spreading: could Africa be left out? The interest, in this request, was therefore to verify, from the point of view of fraternity, if its way of thinking and of dealing with problems would also work in that part of Africa, south of the Sahara. The bishop's request seemed to suggest that the time had arrived. And so a group of Focolarini, men and women, went to work in two hospitals in the north-western region. However, after two years, the results were only slightly positive. They had made the first experiences in the African world, they had worked with skill and were respected, but they had achieved very little to be able to make contacts and make the Movement more known. The distance between the male and female communities and the bad state of the roads made it very difficult to travel, and this prevented a general testimony. Besides, the existent missionary structure was well rooted, and it appeared to leave little space for anything else - in other words for the Focolare - and after all nobody could well understand what we really were! The situation seemed to be at a deadlock.

What comment does this state of things bring to a sociologist's mind?

We have here a situation that in many aspects recalls the well-known writings of Max Weber on how traditional societies change. Changes come mostly through charismatic figures, who pass on a new message that totally overturns current convictions, and that consequently gives rise to a retinue who believe that such a person has a particular gift (of divine or even human origin). Among other things

Weber emphasizes that it is due to the authority and the faith in these persons, that many persons change their way of thinking and begin to live differently. Eventually the novelty becomes a new tradition or translates itself into a new legal-rational system. Weber calls his way of thinking **typical-ideal**, thus indicating that it deals with an intellectual formation which cannot be found in reality as it is known, because in real life there is always a mixture of things: tradition, the legal-rational system and sometimes even characteristic changes under the action of a “charismatic” person.

The sociological approach imposes another element. “It is too easy – some sociologists would say – to try to find confirmation of a pleasing theory in current reality”. It is necessary, as Popper proposes, to counterfeit the working supposition, to try to analyze the contrary hypothesis; or, control also the hypothesis called “hypothesis zero”. In our case this hypothesis would be that the meeting between the Bangwa people and the Focolare were totally normal, absolutely rational and logical, entrenched in a tradition that provided for this kind of cooperation. Now with these questions in mind I invite you to listen to the talks that relate to the initial phase, that of the sixties.

We have therefore two alternatives: we can either arrive to the conclusion that all this was a normal evolution, or else we will see that this does not explain the real dynamics involved, and so we will be constrained to resort back to the other hypothesis, which shows that this is something which contains original elements and which shows a process of change under the influence of a charismatic person!

What was the spark that triggered these dynamics?

Bishop Peeters remained impressed by a member of the Focolare, a doctor, who worked as a lay missionary in the diocese of the north west of Cameroon, who was trying to understand how the Church could overcome a certain deadlock.

We, therefore have our three factors, and the context. Let us therefore look for the dynamics.

The story of the Focolare with Fontem actually started on the evening of 6th February 1966, when six men arrived there, sent by the bishop in agreement with Chiara Lubich. They were a doctor, Lucio Dal Soglio, a land surveyor, Franco Pellegrini; a mechanic Vittorio Brugnara and three youths from Bamenda, Dominic, Florian, and Benedict who had already shared the Focolare way of living in Shisong.

“A PARADOXICAL CHOICE” AN INTERVIEW WITH LUCIO DAL SOGLIO

We interviewed Dr. Lucio dal Soglio, who is presently a very close collaborator of Chiara Lubich for the whole sub-Saharan continent, and who personally lived the initial twenty years of the Fontem adventure.

MARTIN NKAUFU NKEMNKIA: You had already been living for some years in the northwest region of Cameroon. How did the idea to go to Fontem arise?

LUCIO DAL SOGLIO: Bishop Peeters presented us with an idea, saying: "There is a tribe that for some time has asked me to help them, but I cannot help because I do not have sufficient personnel to start this mission. They live in a very remote area, there are no roads, it is all so difficult ... it is almost an impossible enterprise. So, if you consider going there I would suggest that all of you go, men and women Focolarini as well priests, if there are any. I suggest that you all go there and take over the responsibility of this mission. You can bring it to life, live your Ideal, and live an experience in Africa, without the interference of anyone, without any conditions, be they civil or religious". That was his point of view. He perceived that besides our own difficulties there were also other difficulties arising from the missionary Church of the northwest to be considered. We were in fact a special case as we did not belong to any evangelization scheme. Every missionary society had its own way of evangelization, its own guidelines and regulations which were justly respected. We had no such regulations. We said, "We must go to love one and all, to see Jesus in everyone and to try to live with Him in our midst". No-one else had any idea of this style of life. The bishop was aware that his missionaries did not understand what we wanted to do. He thought, though that the moment had come, and he put together two things: our will to do something together, and his necessity to answer to the urgent need for this new mission. He said: "I will talk to Chiara and ask her that you go there".

Chiara came to Douala (1965), where we joined her, and we remained together for a few days. We had already written to her about our going all together to this place, called Fontem. But it was not easy! It meant hours of discussion to give an affirmative answer to the bishop.

I remember that one day we went with her by car out of Douala, to see the forest, the villages around, which she did not know at all. Along the road, Chiara turned to me, I was driving a Volkswagen car, and she said to me: "What do you think of the bishop's proposal to go to Fontem?" My answer was: "Chiara, to tell you the truth, I do not think that we should go. When we were at Shisong and at Njinkom, we had a lot of difficulties to spread the Movement, to organize it in a simple way. Now, if we go to Fontem the difficulties there will be ten times as much". I actually answered her in this way.

Chiara was lost in her thoughts, and after a while she said: "I do not think so. I think that it is a good idea, so prepare to go to Fontem, and next year I will come to lay the first stone of the new hospital".

Chiara is the foundress of our Movement and our president, and so I did not say another word. But, still a little bit doubtful, when Chiara left, I went to the bishop wondering how he would consider the difficulty which I saw and I told him: "Your Excellency, do you know Fontem? How does one get to Fontem, if there are not even roads to get there? You want us to build a hospital, a college and a Church, but what shall we do if we do not even know how to find a sack of cement, because there isn't any, if we do not know from where to find food because there is not even a shop, if we do not know where to sleep? Tell us of a place where to find all these things!"

And his reply was: “No, no, no, you have to go there together. Because you have to live your experience, your Ideal in Africa! So you have to go there, all of you!” I gave in to this evidence, to Chiara’s idea and to the bishop ... I did not know who else to turn to. It was all this which determined our going to Fontem.

And so, without any further hesitation we went there, following Chiara’s and the bishop’s urge.

But as a condition, the Movement had asked the Bangwa people to give us a plot of land, big enough to build a citadel in time. This was therefore of an advantage to the Movement. Going far away from built up areas, we asked to have a territory where to build our buildings, in particular a citadel. We certainly went there to help the people, for love of truth and of justice, but I must say we also thought that it would pay back on the Movement.

THE FIRST VISIT OF CHIARA LUBICH TO FONTEM (1966) VIDEO: A MIRACLE IN THE FOREST

Speaker: When Chiara arrived in Fontem for her first visit, all the people, with the Fon and the Chiefs at the head, got together to make a feast for her arrival. In the spacious area in front of the royal palace, official, moving speeches and a series of unending, beautiful dances were performed by the different villagers to give homage to Chiara. It was a special moment. Chiara really felt the presence of God, like the sun which illuminates and welcomes all those present in unity.

When speaking of this event Chiara said: *“(...) I had this intuition. It was as if God embraced us all together, us Focolarini who were present, together with all the tribe. There, in fact, for the first time I had the idea that we, also, were involved in inter-religious dialogue, namely with followers of other religions. And I felt there was God’s blessing on this initiative, on the Bangwa people in the way they presented themselves and on us, together with them”.*

There was an extraordinary understanding between Chiara and Fon Defang, who, in virtue of his profound union with God, had immediately perceived the divine intervention in the events of those days: God had answered the invocations for help of his people and had loved them through the Focolarini. And his wise look, which brought to our minds that of some patriarch of the Old Testament, saw far away things. “Chiara – he liked repeating – was sent in this land by God, to tell us something that He wants to explain to the world of today”.

And Chiara said: *“With the Fon Defang, I had a marvellous relationship. I remember when he invited me to his royal palace and asked me this question: ‘You are a woman, and so you are not worth anything, so how could you make this movement?’ And so I answered him: ‘Precisely because I am a woman and am not worth anything, it is clear that here there is someone else’s intervention. And since the Movement is very big and widespread, it could not be but God, it*

cannot be a human force'. He understood and then followed us for many, many years".

“SMALL TOWNS OF THE FOCOLARE” AN INTERVIEW WITH BRUNA TOMASI

We asked Bruna Tomasi – who is a direct collaborator of Chiara Lubich for the African continent and who is one of her very first companions, since the beginning of the Focolare in Trent – to tell us more about an aspect of these first years: the dream of having a small town.

MARTIN NKAUFU NKEMNKIA: Dr. Dal Soglio has talked about the idea you had that one day Fontem would have become a small town of the Focolare in Africa. Can you explain to us what the idea of building small towns reflecting the typical inspiration which form the Focolare life meant to the story of the Movement?

BRUNA TOMASI: During every summer of the nineteen fifties people of the Movement, of different social categories, used to meet in the valley of Primiero, (north of Italy), to get to know more about the new spirituality which Chiara Lubich and her first companions – I was one of them - had started to live. Together we spent, I would say, original holidays, living according to the way of life that was clearly emerging in those years. We spontaneously formed a temporary small town, the Mariapolis, with people of all ages, vocations, nations and languages. This experience was so strong that it made us wish to build similar permanent small towns: the desire, as Chiara herself one day said, to give rise to a small town which was to have all the elements of a modern city, with houses, churches, schools, shops, workplaces and factories. Different persons living together, bound together by the commandment which is the basis of our spirituality: “Love one another as I have loved you”.

A little before the arrival of the Focolare in Fontem, in 1964 this idea became a reality in Loppiano, near Florence, on a large plot of land. Today Loppiano has almost one thousand inhabitants coming from 70 nations from all continents, and it has become a meeting point for different cultures, an open worksite where one can experience universal fraternity. In all these years, 32 other small towns have been established in different nations in all continents. Each small town gives an answer to problems which have to do with its socio-cultural environment in a unique and particular way. Each has its own characteristics, like the importance given to ecumenism in Ottmaring, in Germany; dialogue and fraternity lived with Buddhists in Thailand; the attention given to social problems in Brazil; the openness towards youth in Argentina, etc.

And what about Fontem, one may ask? When Chiara went there for the first time in 1966 she laid the first stone for the building of a new hospital. I have been

asked whether there was a particular significant moment in those first years which I still remember. I believe that the key to understand what and why this experience was successful can be found in the extraordinary relationship of trust that was established right from the very start between the Fon and Chiara. She consequently met Fon Defang again several times. He was the highest authority amongst the traditional heads of the Bangwa. As we read in the book on Fontem written by Michele Zanzucchi⁴ the Fon made a long welcoming speech, a speech of thanksgiving of which I would like to recall two phrases: “Madam, when you sent a group of persons from your Movement in Africa, you did not in the least expect that these members of your mission would have ended up in this lost and forgotten part of Cameroon. (...) Just when we began feeling discouraged for having been abandoned for so long, like the Israelites in the desert, God finally sent us help from heaven, he sent us a saviour in your person, to look after our souls, by sending us priests for the future parish of the Bangwa, a school for our children and a hospital which we needed so much”. The Fon added more beautiful words, that evoked this answer from Chiara: “I can sincerely say, neither in America nor in Europe, nor in Asia, where I have been, have I met such a welcome and such understanding of our Movement, and the love which you have mentioned (...) is exactly that which we would like to bring here, together with you. On this love, we would like to build all the work that is necessary for the people. (...) I would like to assure you in my name and that of the whole Movement that we will consider this part of the world as the first in our hearts, that to which we will dedicate ourselves with most love”.

It is perhaps in the conversation held a few hours later that we find the full dimension of a totally personal and collective relationship which was to determine all that was to come afterwards. The Fon, at a certain point during the reception held after the feast, asked Chiara: “You, who are so close to God, explain to me why, in two months, 400 children of my people have died”. Chiara was absorbed in thought for a moment and then answered: “This happened because fraternity is not lived yet among all people. You will soon see however, Mr. Fon, that with the arrival of the paediatric doctor, mortality will diminish”.

This path which scientifically reflects on those elements that sociology discovers as being fundamental for a more fraternal cohabitation is perhaps the right way for this Congress.

CHIARA’S SECOND VISIT TO FONTEM (1969) VIDEO: *A MIRACLE IN THE FOREST.*

Speaker: Three years after her first visit, Chiara Lubich returned to Fontem to inaugurate the first pavilion of the hospital, which was already functioning. At the official ceremony, beside Bishop Peteers, there were present this time Bishop Ndongma, and the Minister for Public Works of the west of Cameroon. Undoubtedly, this is the work for which the Bangwa show a lot of gratitude. Above all, they were profoundly touched by the fact that many children were saved, because for them life is very important. A gratitude that was expressed,

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this time, also with colourful dances performed in the presence of thousands of people coming, not only from the Bangwa village, but also from the Mundani tribes.

And Chiara, once again, was touched by the spiritual atmosphere that could be felt in the whole valley, and it made her feel a sort of an intuition, when she stopped to look from the top of a hill at the intense green of the basin of Fontem, dotted, here and there by few buildings.

Her comment was: *“Well, I think that, there in that valley, all forest, extremely green and blooming, a city shall be built, and this city will be a model, therefore a city on the mountain, so that it can be visited by many persons, who will not find material goods, but spiritual richness, that is Jesus’ commandment put into practice by all inhabitants”.*

To sustain this initiative which always appeared to her to be God’ work, in the spring of ’69 Chiara involved the youth of the Focolare Movement, the gen, in an international project to collect funds to contribute towards the realization of social works in Fontem.

At the end of that same year, Chiara decided to send one of her first companions, Marilen Holzauser, to Fontem. When she was about to leave for Africa, Chiara suggested that she was not to talk, but to live, for at least six months.

Chiara said: *“(...) I had clearly understood that it was useless to go there to talk, to make known our spirit, if our brother was hungry, thirsty and had no abode. Even the Scripture says: if your brother is hungry and you say to him ‘go in peace’...no, you cannot say that, first you have to give him something to eat. So it was a piece of very useful advice. So Marilen remained silent, and so did all the the others, and they made their actions talk. Hence all our friends who lived there were convinced that they had gone there to love, and not for any particular interest. Consequently they were able to talk, of course, and could tell them what had made them go there. In the meantime reciprocal love and collaboration had grown, and everyone was able to see and understand this”.*

‘LEARNING TO TOLLERATE DIVERSITY’ AN INTERVIEW WITH LUCIO DAL SOGLIO

Martin Nkafu Nkekmnkia: *When you arrived in Fontem, did everything go smoothly or were there any difficulties? And how did you overcome them?*

Lucio Dal Soglio: There certainly were many difficulties: I can say we encountered them from the very first day. In this sense, difficulties accompanied us for many, many years.

I’m speaking of difficulties which have to do with culture. For example, legal problems on property ownership: we went on top of a hill and the *chief* who accompanied us showed us all the plain below. Pointing to all that was below, he said: “All that you see is yours”. He was chief Forchap and he resembled Moses on Mount Sinai! And we said: “Good, at least this is clear”. Then we went to cut a

small tree, and they told us: “No, you cannot cut that”. And we said: “Why not, if all this is ours”. Their reply was: “The ground is yours, not the trees!” And so we understood that perhaps there was some difficulty. In the culture of the Bangwa the ground can belong to somebody while the trees growing on it can belong to others. And the place was full of trees, and full of palms. If we did not cut down the palms we could not build anything.

Then there was the problem of the huts which were already there. I remember, one, which belonged to Alexander’s father (a young man who was helping us) who lived in a hut three metres by three. And we had to build a college just there (one of the conditions, why we were there was to build a college). We asked him: “But are you going to move from here?” “Going where?” “We have to build a college here and this hut has to be demolished!” He answered: “This is my town. Where do you want me to go, if this is my town”. Besides, underneath the house, his ancestors were buried, and so that was his sacred place! These were all the difficulties that arose, of a cultural nature, as you can easily imagine.

Once a person came to us and wanted to be operated on for a strangulated hernia. In those first days, we did not even have a knife to cut bread with, so you can just imagine us doing an operation! And where? In the open? But this was what was expected of us. People thought that our presence could solve everything, and this was unbelievable, the thought of it made us shudder... Subsequently we understood that it was a marvellous thing. We had not understood at once how much they believed in the possibility that we could help them. They helped us to carry stones, wood, sand – they carried the sand from the river: everything was done as a benevolent collaboration to develop what was to be our citadel and that of the Bangwa.

In fact, the citadel of Fontem began to grow, not only as a citadel of the Movement, but as a citadel of the population of the region that was made up of the Bangwa and us.

This was absolutely marvellous, and we were not yet fully aware what was happening. It happened just like that. Even our houses were not fenced, we did not build a closed citadel. Because we had to build on spaces here and there, with all those trees and the cultural prohibition, we could not even build big houses, so we were obliged to construct to the right and to the left, and so live together with the people.

FRATERNITY AS A CODE OF BEHAVIOUR-1 (BENNIE CALLEBAUT)

What can one conclude from the first years of the Fontem story if looked at from a sociological point of view?

The “zero hypothesis” will surely present us with hints that may be useful while analysing the praiseworthy interests of the story, and it may be plausible. But I am inclined to think that the Fontem story explains itself better if one were to use the hypothesis of decisive influence of persons with charismatic traits, as Weber

states. I am aware of the fact that lack of time will hinder me to give sufficient proof of why I have chosen this theory, but I will try to make up for this by making a comparison between this case and another historical fact.

Very often Fontem brings to my mind the birth of the European Community. Taking certain facts into consideration, I have discovered a common element. It is a known fact that, back in 1950 Jean Monnet, the person who contributed most to the birth of the European Union, was motivated by a very precise idea. He felt the urgent need that European history, marked by recurrent conflicts between Germany and France and by two world wars, had to change its course and avoid a third conflict, which he and others were already foreseeing in 1950. When Monnet analysed the situation, he realised that the tension between these two countries was mainly due to steel and coal, two resources that were the driving power of their economic development. Monnet proposed that this difficulty should become the solution to settle their latent conflicts. So he thought: "Let us share equally the access to these resources, let us create a common interest that goes beyond national interests."⁵ This idea was very well accepted by both German and French politicians. From the very beginning Monnet made it clear that he was presenting a political suggestion and not an economic one. Peace in Europe was at stake. France and Germany were to behave like brethren, and according to Monnet no other idea made sense. Monnet argued that the individual interests of each were always a menace to peace.

Now I will try to present the facts about Fontem.

Chiara Lubich understood the idea of universal brotherhood as presented in the Gospel, and in 1943 she decided that this idea should be the corner-stone of her life. Maybe two short phrases taken from the thousands of thoughts that enrich her understanding of universal brotherhood, can explain her interpretation: "Unity is built through diversity". And: "When we are together, each one is more beautiful".

The interest that dominates Chiara's life is universal brotherhood. Even in her approach towards African people, once and for all, her decision is: they are my brethren. Bruna Tomasi's report about the crucial moment of the meeting with Fon Defang of Fontem, shows that Chiara has discovered a man who did not hesitate to adhere to this idea, because he believed in it as well. On the other hand, neither Chiara nor Fon Defang thought that universal brotherhood might hinder the development of good and necessary partial interests or that it would abolish diversity.

Universal brotherhood does not destroy but it stimulates. It helps each one become better while it also helps to indicate the right direction towards which partial and particular interests should be oriented.

Just as Adenauer, Schumann and Monnet understood that the main interest was not bound to steel and coal, Fon Defang and Chiara understood that in Fontem

there was more than just the sanitary development of the region. And they put their resources together to achieve this scope: universal brotherhood, now promoted as a common interest by both the Bangwa people and the Focolare.

We now come to the end of the 1960's, and we must say Chiara and the Focolare entered into contact with Africa through the privileged relationship with this tribe. This happened at a very dramatic moment in the life of the Bangwa people, but later on, one discovered that this was also a unique moment for the Focolare, because the Movement could measure the impact of its ideal in a completely different environment, very different from the Jewish-Christian reality. According to the anthropologist R. Brain, the Bangwa people of that time, represented Africa that was still very profoundly tied to its traditions, that had not yet suffered from its contact with the West, but this was a situation that could not have lasted for a long time.

Max Weber teaches that once a social change starts, the real challenge is to make it become a normality, to make it become everyday life. Can brotherhood become a culture; can it become a social behaviour, a code of living that answers the question: is this brotherly behaviour?

One understands that the clan society and African tribes are particularly privileged in this sense, but the challenge lies in making this brotherhood go beyond traditional structures, where traditions enforce a strong solidarity.

*So one can understand how at the end of the sixties, Bangwa and Focolarini, Focolarini and Bangwa, ventured together in a process of **apprenticeship**, where one had to be formed to live this universal brotherhood. In this process there were many new things, and it consisted of successes and difficulties. Just as for Adenauer and Schumann, in the case of the building of the European Union, one can also ask about Fontem: without this agreement and the fundamental understanding between the two moral authorities (Fon Defang and Chiara) would Fontem have become what it is today? It has been up to them to give the final word when difficulties arose. If they were not there, would the events of daily life have become the pang of normal difficulties that crop up in each historical project? Maybe, yes!*

To-day it is difficult, or rather impossible, to think of another war between France and Germany, and it is as difficult to think of Fontem without this story. How could it be that from the 1970's till the 2000, a common biography - as sociologists would say - was built in Fontem, in such a way that no one would ever dream of reversing its course of events, even because this consolidated experience now attracts and astonishes many beyond Fontem itself?

THE STORY OF EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY (1968-69)

(ALBERTO FERRUCCI)

In 1969 Chiara launched an appeal to the Movement's youths to start "Operation-Africa". Through this she wanted to answer to the material needs of the place and establish a real experience of equality. The qualities that Chiara found in the Bangwa people when she first met them convinced her that there could be a real exchange of gifts, an authentic reciprocity. Africa had a lot to give to the western world. Not only the young, but also the adults of the Movement felt stimulated and acquired a dynamism that helped to establish a reciprocal relationship that was to the advantage of both parties. Alberto Ferrucci, a chemical engineer, relates briefly an experience that is in many ways an example of the commitment of the Focolare during these years.

At the age of twenty I became a student worker at the Refinery ERG of Genova (Italy), and ten years later I became head of the distillation department in the same refinery. During those first working years, I managed to establish a lot of friendly relationships with colleagues and workmen, with whom I passed long working hours in day and night shifts.

In 1967, when I heard about Fontem, I become personally involved. So I started to relate the Fontem story to my friends at work. I talked to them about the necessity to think of the future of those children who were being saved by the doctors and the contribution needed to modernize the country. Electric energy had to be installed, at least for the hospital, and metal pipelines were needed so that the river water could be used by means of a hydroelectric plant that was already in place.

When I finished relating all this, I asked my friends at work if they were ready to give an hour's pay every month for nine months, so as to buy this equipment and set it up. I repeated this talk to 140 friends, and again I got a positive reply, so we decided to affix a letter, signed by all 140 of us, in the reception area of our factory, proposing this initiative to all the workers of the factory.

550 out of 900 workmen answered positively to our appeal. A "Committee for the Collaboration to the Development of the Bangwa People" was set up and this committee entered into a deal with a Genovese iron and steel factory to purchase the material needed to build the water pipeline. When the iron and steel factory got to know why the things were being bought, the material was given at a special price. With the funds collected from the workmen, it was possible to obtain two kilometres of steel piping for the first aqueduct in Fontem.

The steel sheets were shaped into water pipes and this work was done gratuitously by mechanics at the factory. A shipping agent was ready to transport the material to Douala without any payment. The Genovese dock workers stopped a strike they were staging so that the material for Fontem could be loaded without difficulty. The assembling work in Fontem was done with the help

of different local workmen, and by two experts from ERG, who returning back to Genoa could testify that the workmen's contribution was indeed for a good cause.

An unforgettable feast concluded this first experience of cooperation between our factory and the African people. This was an experience that united us all as equals, regardless of hierarchical positions: workmen, directors, proprietors. We had all given our share towards human solidarity.

The news of this twinning project between workmen of an Italian oil industry and African people living to the south of the Sahara was reported by the Italian media. The following year Cameroon's minister for labour visited the ERG refinery to personally thank the workmen for all that had been done.

“BREAKING DEPENDENCE” AN INTERVIEW WITH LUCIO DAL SOGLIO

Martin Mkafu Nkemnkia: *For a number of years, only the Bangwa and the Focolarini lived this way of life together, but later the citadel (small town) of Fontem attracted many more Africans. How did this happen?*

Lucio dal Soglio: This type of life that we lived together with the Bangwa people increased because it was based on unity and fraternity. But I must say that difficulties were not lacking, because when you start going through tangible circumstances of everyday life, things do not always run smoothly. In fact, in 1972 a commission from the Bangwa people came to speak to me and Marilen Holzhauser, because at that time we were responsible of the Focolare Movement in that place. The Bangwa told us: “We would like to speak to you”. “Yes of course, let us talk”, was our reply. And they said: “You have now been here for six years, but we have not yet understood what you came here for, what is it that you want.” And we said “How is that possible? After six years?” We had already started building the church they had asked for; we had built a hospital and a college. And yet they did not understand why we were there!

So, we thought of organising a Mariapoli (a meeting of a few days that gives the spirituality of the Movement). We thought of inviting all the Bangwa who wished to attend so that we would be able to explain what made us come to live together with them and what we expected that they would do. We held the Mariapoli and we repeated it in 1973 and in 1974 and the ones who came from afar kept

increasing. When the Mariapoli came to an end, the Bangwa people said: “No, this is not good for us!”

“Why, isn’t it good?” “It is not good because you are doing it for them, for all these people who came”. And we said: “We do it for everybody”. And they said: “No, you are making use of us; through us you are showing that this is a good thing, so that you convince them to do something for you”. This really surprised us!

It makes you understand that nothing is obvious where cultures meet. There are at least ten things to be solved each day. We stopped holding the Mariapoli. And we told them: “We are not going to do the Mariapoli anymore. We will live for you”.

And we started to improve their existing roads, to build new ones to make it easier for them to go to their fields and to be able to take the coffee they cultivated to Dshang, to the market, etc. We levelled hilly ground, because as those who visited Fontem know, the territory is very hilly and the hills are steep. It was necessary to level the ground to build more adequate, more spacious and more hygienic houses. Well, all we did was just work for the Bangwa; all the rest did not interest us anymore.

However we had to be constantly animated by a spirit of adaptability and of acceptance of diversity One could not say: “We will do this, because this is good!” One could not tell whether a thing was just or unjust, whether it was good or not. We needed to consult the other party, who was different from us. In this way we learnt to know diversity, and to love diversity.

Notwithstanding all this, we were always the ones “who were holding the knife from the handle’s end”, as the saying goes, because we were the ones who had the means. We had a Caterpillar, which Piero Pasolini, another Focolareno, managed to get from Italy; we had a Landrover to go from one place to another; we had a truck to carry the material, and we had the money, the knowledge of how to carry out the different jobs, we knew how to repair the machines. The Bangwa had nothing of all this; they did not know how to repair machines because they did not have any. We taught at the college, and we were the ones to tell them what to learn, how to study, etc.

At a certain moment the Bangwa people felt that they depended completely on us. There was nothing wrong in this, everything was done with a good intent, but it was a situation of dependence that made them say: “Are you so indispensable for us? So go away”.

And so we were faced with another surprise, one surprise after the other. And we asked ourselves what to do. It was a question of either going away or of changing. We had to change ourselves and not the Bangwa people. So all of us together, Focolarini, men, women and priests, we all agreed: “We need to be converted, we will stay but we must remember that we are all equal. We are

here to live with the Bangwa, not to make big things. We are not here to save the life of the Bangwa; we will do so if the Bangwa ask this from us. We do not want to build a super hospital, we do not want to set up a university, we do not want to teach this or that programme; we just want to do what we agree to do together with them”.

And this is what we started to do. And we were blessed with a true grace because we understood that we had to be equal and that this is where universal brotherhood really begins. What you say is as important as what I say. One is not more important, or more holy, or more beautiful than the other. This is not important; what counts is that we understand together, in a reasonable manner what should be done. This is the basic principle of equality and of brotherhood. And this is what we have done.

FONTEM SEEN THROUGH ITS STORY THE OPINION OF SOME OF THE LEADERS OF THE BANGWA PEOPLE

We will now present the interventions of five Bangwa leaders, who very briefly want to show the impact that the common effort by the Bangwa and the Focolare left on the story of Fontem.

My witness of an event – Focolare Movement and the Bangwa people of Cameroon

*Ndi Asa’ah Fontem Fontava**

Your Royal Highness, Mafua Ndem {Chiara Lubich}

Dear participants,

Distinguished guests, Ladies and gentlemen

First of all allow me to thank the organizers of this conference for giving me the opportunity to be here in this beautiful and historic city of Rome. I’m here to bear witness to the truth. The people of Fontem have asked me to convey to all of you here present their sincere message of goodwill and fraternity at the start of the New Year 2005. As the third person in rank to His Majesty the Fon of Fontem, traditional Ruler par excellence of the Fontem people, I feel proud to be called upon to talk about a theme so dear to the heart of all Fontem people.-

* Fontem Royal Family – Cameroon. Official of the United Nations for the Environment, Washington DC, USA.

Fontem as a laboratory of relationships

The Fontem - Focolare relationship came about at the urging of my father, His majesty Fon Fontem Defang after a meeting he had had with the then Bishop of Buea, (Monseigneur Jules Peters.) The Focolare came to Fontem to rescue the people from an unprecedented infant mortality rate.

Since the creation of the Mary Health of Africa Hospital in Fontem, the death rate has dropped significantly. I stand here as one of the survivors of that tragic period, having lost two younger brothers and a sister.

In 1966 Chiara Lubich visited Fontem. During that visit she and my father the dearly departed Fon Fontem Defang, together made history. They laid the foundation stone not only for the Mary Health of Africa Hospital, but also for a relationship that would soon blossom like the morning flowers. As in all relationships there is bound to be initial apprehension and anxiety on both sides especially as the partners hail from different socio-cultural backgrounds.

The Fontem experiment was no exception. Fortunately that period did not last long enough to forestall the good intentions of the people of Fontem and the Focolare movement represented by “Madam Chiara Lubich” as she is fondly called in Fontem. It did not take long upon their arrival in Fontem for the Focolare people to discover that the Fontem people were a tightly-knit society where, if one member of the community had a problem, everyone else considered it as their problem. Moreover the Focolare found that the Fontem people were not only hospitable, they were also a peace-loving people with an amazing sense of mediation.

These characteristics seemed to go down well with the Focolare movement whose mission statement calls for love and peace amongst people of all races on the face of the earth in keeping with their motto- that “ALL MAY BE ONE”.

In turn the message of the Focolare movement resonated well with the Fontem people, who welcomed the Focolare movement with open hearts. The Hospital saw the light of day. Then a secondary school, Our Lady Seat of Wisdom College Fontem was inaugurated. Fontem became a beacon of hope as we saw one Focolare member after the other arrive. Their backgrounds were as varied as their fields of specialty. For example, amongst them were Italians, French, English, Philipinos, Kenyans, Zairians, Nigerians, and later on Cameroonians, most of whom came from Fontem. Many were medical doctors and nurses, but there also were engineers, lecturers, priests, carpenters, and electricians, to name but a few.

The stage had thus been set for what the Archbishop of Bamenda, Paul Verdzekov would later describe as a veritable revolution unfolding in Fontem. A bond of fraternal friendship between the Fontem people and the Focolare movement had taken hold in Fontem. Presently there is a strong emotional relationship between the people of Fontem and the Focolare movement. To the Fontem people, the Focolare movement represents everything to every one of them.

The leader of the movement, Chiara Lubich, is the personification of all that my people love and admire. Chiara Lubich has brought good health, education, fraternal love and a sense of well-being to the Fontem people. Perhaps more importantly, the miracle city, which she promised the Fontem people, has become a reality as Fontem has graduated from a purely farming community to a modern city- thanks in no small measure to the Focolare movement under the distinguished leadership of Chiara Lubich. A little miracle occurred during Chiara Lubich's last visit to Fontem for she was conferred the highest title of 'MAFUA NDEM' {QUEEN OF GOD} by His majesty the Fon of Fontem Njifua. This can only lead me to conclude that Chiara and the Fontem people have the same goal –the well being of humankind, so that all may be one.

The interaction between the Fontem people and the Focolare movement has proved that social-cultural diversities, far from separating peoples, can often bring them together if these diversities are well exploited and tolerated. The level of social integration between the Fontem people and the members of the Focolare movement has been quite amazing. In the area of culture, for example, let me say that not a single cultural ceremony takes place without the organizers extending an invitation to the members of the Focolare movement. They are frequently seen at such festivities dressed in very beautiful traditional Fontem clothes.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, if Fontem is today being christened "A LABORATORY OF FRIENDLY RELATIONSHIPS" this is because of the determination of the Fontem people and the Focolare movement to forge that relationship ahead. I must say, at the risk of being disproved, that both parties have done their part in order to come to where they are today.

The result is that today Fontem has become a point of reference within the Focolare family – indeed a second home to many. I have been told that there is a message circulating among many young members of the Focolare movement, which states "SEE FONTEM AND THEN DIE". Certainly Fontem may not be Paris, London, New York, or ROME yet it has what most big cities lack: the right setting for anyone seeking fraternal love, peace of mind and religious devotion. I encourage all of you here to visit Fontem. You would not regret doing so for you will be meeting some of the most generous people on the African continent. And there we are all one thanks to the uncompromising love brought about by mama Mafua Ndem {Chiara Lubich}.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Fontem people are very proud to note the presence in the Focolare family here in Rome of their very own son MBE NKEMNKIA, prof. MARTIN NKAFU who has been a wonderful link and inspiration between Loppiano and the people of Fontem. For the younger generation wishing to join the Focolare movement he is a success story.

Last but not least let me pay glowing tribute to both my parents, His Majesty Fon Fontem Defang and his beloved wife {my mother} Madam Lekeleface Susan Fontem for their dedication to the development of the Focolare movement, as well as Fon Fontem Defang's first wife, the dearly departed Mama Ngwiikonga. You only have to see the

first publication of the Focolare movement magazine – “The Living City” where the three of them appear on the front cover to get an idea of what I mean. I should have been here today with my best friend and loving wife Fontava Caroline to take part in this occasion but she just gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. With that joy in her heart she asked me to extend her full love to all of you here today to show our full support for the Focolare movement too.

To conclude, let me say on behalf of the people of Fontem, whom I represent that, if there is anything I have brought with me in my briefcase, it is the pledge that we are going to do whatever it takes to keep the flame of the relationship between the people of Fontem and the Focolare movement burning for generations to come.

Prayers and an invocation to the Ancestors

Now we will recite a traditional prayer to invoke the blessings of God and our ancestors and call on some of our dearly departed ones in Fontem and some of the members of the Focolare Movement’s family.

Thank you all for listening to me.

Please stand up and join me.

God the Creator of the Sky and the earth, Our ancestors, Fontem Asonganyi and Fontem Defang, Mafua Nkeng and all the Nweh and Lebialem ancestors, Marilen, Piero Passolini, Pa Nika, Maria Mai, Ita, Mani Ekobena, Vittoria and all the ancestors of the Focolare Movement,

We call upon you all to assist us in this gathering and help us strengthen our friendship and love for one another, protect us from bad thoughts and deeds and help us always to be at the service of one another for a better society and a better world.

Please raise your hands to invoke blessings of our ancestors and of God.

Linking Generations and Building Strong Families: The Life Span of Lebialem Women from 1960 to date

*Paulina Khumbah**

‘A young man’s gait is rapid, but he does not know the way; an old man’s gait is slow but he knows the way’ (Apt 1997, p. 7). This statement is a clear indication of the symbiotic relationship between the generations. In the following discussion I will talk about some of the experiences and life course transitions of the women of Lebialem from 1960 to the

* Family Sociologist, Dallas, USA.

present. Who are the women of Lebialem? I am one of them. Lebialem Division is an administrative region in South West Province, Cameroon, West Africa.

Definition of family

The family is the oldest and most fundamental of all social institutions (Sullivan 2001). It is universal and involves both biological and social ties. The family is a very important social group that carries out specific functions. Historically, the family has been the centre of many important activities. In most societies children and adults expected and usually received emotional nurturing and support from members of the family. The institution of the family regulated sexual activity and reproduction. It is the economic centre of society, where all the members work together to earn a living and support one another financially. The role of the family changes constantly as the economies around the world shift from local industries based on agriculture to massive global industrial bureaucratic entities. Formal schooling and the possibility of family members working independently outside the home has changed the way families meet their material needs. As such what form the families of the 21st Century are taking and what functions they perform continue to vary widely among various societies (Gelles and Levine 1999).

Some sociologists see the family as an established social system that lasts and changes over time. They consider the family as a resilient institution that has remained stable even in the face of constant social changes. In studying families as a social institution we recognize that families are organized in socially different ways. Moreover, the family is closely intertwined with other social institutions such as the economy, law, religion, education, health care, government, science and technology (Anderson and Taylor 2004, Kornblum 2005). We cannot define or study the institution of the family in isolation. The criteria of family ties vary enormously at different times and according to various cultures.

As the nature of family life, work, social change, sexual preferences, use of assisted reproduction technologies, divorce and remarriage, global labour market dynamics continue to change and fluctuate around the world, the issue of what a family represents continues to be widely debated (Kendall 2004). The social functions of the family include ensuring communication among its members. This is done through language and specialized networks such as the media. The family also ensures the production and distribution of goods and services. Another major role the family plays is the protection and defense of its members. The family is responsible for replacing its members socially and biologically. The family also controls its members to ensure that other social institutions continue to function and conflict is reduced (Kornblum 2005). Thus, one may conclude that today's families face exceptional challenges. For the purpose of this discussion we have to broaden the scope of what we consider as the family to be more than a social and spiritual kinship. At the very least I would define family as the people that we meet and interact with on our life's journey. We form different relationships at different times. Therefore, the family cannot be limited to blood relations. For believers, it is a spiritual bond. In a way we are the family of God's children.

The Multiple Roles of Women

In most of sub-Saharan Africa, men and women live very different lives. Globally, the social conditions of women and the very concept of family are rapidly changing (Stuckelberger 1997). When I was growing up in Lebialem in the 1950s and 1960s, a typical day for most women started very early in the morning preparing meals or working in the fields. Depending on the day of the week, women would go off to the local market where they bought and sold consumer goods. There were no paved roads or means of transport so they would walk long distances to carry out these activities. Like most women in sub-Saharan Africa, the women of Lebialem have always played a very important role in the production, processing, marketing and storage of food and cash crops (World Bank 1990). The families in Lebialem, like most families in sub-Saharan Africa, depend on women for the household production of consumer goods (Adepoju and Oppong 1994 and Boserup 1970).

In the 1960s and 70s fewer girls went to elementary school. The numbers and rates of female schooling have since increased and improved through high school and even at university level. When I was an adolescent many girls started school but the drop out rate was high as they approached puberty. Cultural practices included marrying girls off shortly before or right at puberty. Polygamy was widely practiced. Even when girls had the opportunity to finish elementary school there were always suitors waiting anxiously. When we were teenagers in secondary school we had these conversations among ourselves about which girl was betrothed to which young man. At the time our culture evaluated a girl's worth on her reproductive capabilities. Very young girls and women served the family and community in various ways.

Stages in Life

As we go through life, changes, various events and family relationships are processes that challenge every race, class, social structure and geographic location (Haraven 1982). The changes that we experience are not isolated and in general are not unique individual human experiences. History, events, social change and time are some of the crucial factors that determine what happens to all of us during our life span. Historical conditions change. Some of the changes are individual and some are collective. Those who study these changes argue that we must be concerned with understanding what happens to people at various stages throughout an entire life span. The occurrence of significant events such as being born into a particular biological family, growing up, marriage, bearing children, working and growing old become important to the social structures, and historical changes affecting them (Haraven 1982). This is true for all human beings.

Historical Transitions

By the late 60s few parents in Lebialem sent their daughters to school. There were both parochial and public schools. Our administrative area had only elementary schools. Thus, after completing elementary school, girls who had the opportunity to further their studies had to go far away from home to seek higher education. Most of the girls married very early and started bearing children. A few fortunate ones were able to find paid

employment. Personally, my first job was a summer position with the rural council in 1967. I went to work full time for the Ministry of Territorial Administration as a translator in Manyu Prefecture in January 1973. Normally people migrated from rural to urban areas to seek higher education, employment or to join a spouse. Some young women left the country to get married to spouses who lived in other countries.

By the late 70s single women started venturing overseas to further their education. Some went on scholarships, others ventured on their own. I left on my own in 1979 because of the encouragement of a male friend who felt that such a venture would enhance my life and that of my whole family. I was not only the eldest of eight children, I was also a single mother of a special needs child. I sought admission to several schools in the USA. The admission to the University of Wyoming in Laramie came first. A cousin I grew up with was a medical student at the same university and was able to get me admission into an undergraduate programme fairly easily. In August 1979 I left my job and set out for the USA. This was done more with the spirit of adventure, not really knowing what to expect. At the back of my mind I knew my goal at the time was to attain some degree and go back home to get a better-paid job. People I knew who had studied abroad had better chances and a better quality of life. So I bid farewell to my loved ones and headed for the cold Rocky Mountains. I arrived in Laramie on August 22, 1979. My cousin helped me to enroll and for the first time I registered as a foreign student. I settled down to this new phase of being a foreign student. I kept in close touch with other peers around the world and with my work colleagues back in Cameroon.

The Catholic Church: Faith, Culture and Centrality

The Catholic Church has played a major role in the development of Lebialem. Fontem was until recently a simple parish in the Diocese of Buea. In the 1960s the Bishop was the late Monseigneur Julius Peters. In the late 1950s and 1960s there were several Catholic parochial elementary schools in addition to the public schools in the area. The priests travelled throughout the region and would come around as frequently as their duties in other parts of the diocese permitted. These were mainly Mill Hill missionaries and were usually always respectable white men of Dutch, Scottish and English decent. One of the priests who came in the 1960s was commissioned by the hierarchy of the church to dig the road through the hills linking Fontem to Dschang so that vehicles could come through. We used to call him "Father John of the road". He got up early in the morning, celebrated mass, ate breakfast and got on the caterpillar and worked till dusk everyday except Sunday.

Even though Catholic doctrine clashed with some of the local traditional practices, most people in Lebialem went to church faithfully. The local people adapted the religion to their culture and life style. One of those adaptations is exemplified in the fact that in a polygamous marriage the first wife could be baptized in Church and was allowed to receive Holy Communion but the husband and other wives could not. My maternal grand-mother was one of those first wives. My own parents were devout Catholics. My father married only my mother and they actually had a Catholic wedding. We were baptized as children and practiced the faith right alongside our parents.

The Focolare Movement: Health Care, Education and Infrastructure

In the spring of 1966, the focolare movement in collaboration with the Catholic Diocese decided to open a coed secondary school in Fontem. The new institution would bridge the gap between the all girls secondary school of Okoyong and the all boys secondary school of Sasse. The Principal in Sasse came up to Fontem that rainy season in July and August to interview potential candidates. I was one of them. They were to try many new strategies. The school would be coed unlike most other schools of that nature. The students would also be day students. The establishment took over a main building with four rooms from the local catholic school. The first batch of forty-two students, thirty-boys and four girls, had to find accommodation anywhere in the town. The faculty was made up of a mixture of local teachers, members of the focolare movement and a Mill Hill priest who became the first principal. The Secondary School was named Seat of Wisdom. I am a pioneer and a proud graduate of Seat of Wisdom. Two of my five sisters graduated from there as did my daughter and several nieces and nephews. Today, Seat of Wisdom is one of the best schools of its category in Cameroon. The high quality of education, discipline and graduation rates for both boys and girls has set records nationwide. The demand to get students into the school is so high that there are long waiting lists every year.

Simultaneously the focolare started a health clinic. Over the years the health clinic has been expanded to become a fully-fledged hospital named Mary Health of Africa. Years later the government set up some primary care units offering basic health care services to the population. However, the health care services that Mary Health of Africa has offered to the people of the region for nearly forty years is unequalled in quality, quantity and intensity. People receive the care they need irrespective of their ability to pay the highly subsidized rates. I know personally that the availability of such high quality health care has been a major factor in reducing both maternal and infant mortality as well as illnesses. Patients travel very long distances to seek care. The focolare has set up other satellite health centers in surrounding areas.

The focolare movement loved the people of Lebialem so much that they made Fontem their headquarters in Africa. This has propelled the infrastructural development of the whole region forward. It is absolutely amazing what a single organization such as the focolare has achieved. This model is exemplary and unsurpassed. The results are unbeatable.

Migration and the Global Labour Market

The migration and mobility of people across local, regional, national and international boundaries is not a new phenomenon. Since the beginning of human history, groups of people have been wandering the earth following food supplies, exploring, conquering and building civilizations (Defay 2002). The concept and study of international migration and mobility patterns of persons in various parts of the world is limited in scope to the establishment of the modern nation-state and to populations in the post-industrial age. One of the central questions that we ask when discussing migration at any level is “why do people move?” What are the conditions in the country of origin that propel people to want to relocate? What are the circumstances in the receiving region that make it attractive to prospective immigrants? Economists talk about the push/pull factors. In other words what factors combine to provide an element of necessity that

“pushes” individual emigrants away from their homes and what factors “pull” them to the receiving environment (Defay 2002). Marxist political theorists use the structural-historical approach and a macro level focus to look at larger underlying structures that link sending and receiving regions in several ways. This perspective contrasts attitudes about the effects of social and economic change as well as transformations occurring in the global labour market over a given time span. Others who identify reasons that encourage or discourage migration question in particular whether international migration is determined by a combination of individual decisions or by compelling structural changes in society that supercede individual actions (Smith 1996, Defay 2002).

The issue here is that each individual emigrant has different circumstances, motivations, hopes and dreams for wanting to uproot themselves to go to a far away land. The individual approach treats each migrant as a rational person who makes an optimum combination of choices and seeks to obtain the best results in the long run. This human capital approach widens one’s view to discuss migration as a group or family decision. The family as a unit decides to make a series of investments in the migrating member(s) with a view to reaping long term benefits (Stalker 2003).

Another factor that we must consider is how economic globalization is shaking many people and making them falter. Globalization and economic development continue to pose challenges that compel people to displace themselves from their native countries to locations where they can enhance their careers, their quality of life and that of their families. Some of us left our countries to go overseas and seek an education then go back home to live the “good life”. The educational system in Cameroon has never been able to satisfy the needs of all those who are able and willing to pursue higher education. During the colonial period, many people were given scholarships to go abroad, get a formal education and return to better paying civil service employment. I knew a lot of people who even went to neighbouring African countries, particularly Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone to attain a higher level of education. The majority won scholarships and financial sponsorship from some entity. Personally, I had a paternal uncle who went to the American University in Cairo in the early 60s and pursued a degree in chemistry. When I was ready to seek higher education I was considering going to Nigeria but no further than Sierra Leone or Ghana. I had tried in vain for over eight years to gain admission into the University of Yaounde or a similar professional school like the Nursing School in Bamenda, the Agriculture School in Bamboli or the Public School of Administration and Law. I also felt that my job as a translator at the Manyu Prefecture in Mamfe had very few chances for advancement or promotion. I was even refused an interdepartmental transfer to the Provincial Office of the Governor in Buea or to Ministry in Yaounde. I was told that there was no one to replace me in Mamfe and my services were crucial because Mamfe is situated on the international border with Nigeria. I made the decision to leave my job and my whole family supported me. My parents gave me their blessings and I left my five year old daughter in their care.

Once I arrived in the USA, I maintained close contact with my friends and family in Cameroon and around the world. I also kept abreast with my civil service colleagues. For the first few years, my main goal was to work hard and attain a degree in Education then return to Cameroon. My father had always said that teaching was a good profession for a woman because it was very compatible with being a wife and mother.

I had been brought up in a very international setting so I was able to make new friends easily with Americans and non-Cameroonians. In my third year a faculty member at the University of Wyoming helped me raise money to bring my daughter from Cameroon. She arrived in Laramie in September 1982. She underwent intensive treatment for her medical condition first at Shriners Hospital in Salt Lake City and then at Laramie. I achieved a B.A. in Education in 1982. I knew that this would not get me very far anywhere in the world. My academic counsellor, Dr. Robert Point, advised me to specialise. I enrolled in the post-graduate programme in Sociology at the same university. I had taken a Sociology course in my senior year and was very enthusiastic at the idea of becoming a Sociologist. In this way I could travel the world and work with women on family planning, maternal health care, childcare and economic empowerment issues. These are some of the things I had watched my mother do as a little girl. She still does them today. During my years as a translator for the Cameroon Ministry of Territorial Administration I had seen some of those needs first hand. From 1975 to 1979 I served as section secretary for the women's wing of the only national political party and worked extensively on women's issues at the local, provincial and national level. Therefore, I was convinced that a masters' degree in Sociology would equip me with the knowledge to work on global issues that will enhance the lives of women, children and the elderly around the world. As a single parent of a special needs child I myself continue to experience some of these challenges at first hand.

Social Change and Patterns of Intergenerational Relationships

Moore (1979) defines social change as the meaningful and decisive alterations in the social structure. These alterations are characteristic of a system of organized life. Likewise, social change is the process by which the underlying structure of society becomes more complex. Social institutions, values, norms, class systems, and social relationships are altered at both the macro and micro levels (Giddens 1991, pp. 778-779). Social change occurs because of the innovations of populations and efforts to use new ideas and behaviours to improve on their material and physical well-being as well as to enhance their access to valued resources (Handwerker 1989, p. 8). Social change is the shift in the characteristics of a culture and society. It is a vital part of social life. It is a process through which patterns of social behaviour, social relationships, social institutions, and class systems are altered over time. Social change also refers to the variations in the ecological order of populations and communities, in patterns of roles and social interaction as well as in the structure and functioning of institutions and the cultures of societies (Henslin 2006, Kornblum 2005, Thompson and Hickey 2005). It is also the result of forces that were set in motion thousands of years ago, beginning with the domestication of plants and animals (Henslin 2006). The first social revolution made it possible for hunting and gathering societies to be transformed into horticultural and pastoral societies. The second social revolution was brought about by the plough from which agricultural societies emerged. The third phase was the industrial revolution that was prompted by the invention of the steam engine. The fourth and current social revolution has been stimulated by the invention of the microchip and other technological innovations, population growth, mobility, modernization and massive rates of migration (Henslin 2006). These processes in human history have been far reaching and universal in their consequences (Henslin 2006 and Kornblum 2005).

When I look back on the last forty years or so, I find that social change has had a great impact on the patterns of intergenerational relationships. I have recollections of many of the daily activities of my childhood and adolescence. I spent a great deal of time with my cousins, aunts and grandmother cooking, going to the fields or to the local market. We went to church together on numerous occasions. I have vivid memories of wonderful conversations and confidential counselling sessions with the older family members. I remember the visits of my maternal great grandmother to our house. She always brought us the first harvests of ground nuts. We were thrilled by her visits because she used to bring carefully chosen packages for each one of us. Towards the end of her life she was brought over to my maternal grandmother's house (one of her three children) and all four generations of family members took care of her. She passed away very peacefully with many loved ones present. Her life was passionately celebrated by the whole community. I participated in the celebration. This is an illustration of what the family was like when I was a child. In those days family, kinfolk and relatives lived in the same geographic area.

Today the picture is so different. Very few of us live within the same geographic area or close to our parents and the older people in the families and communities of origin. We have migrated from our places of birth to different parts of the world to get marketable skills, work and have reasonable careers. This trend has greatly altered relationships between the generations. We are also marrying and having children who have limited physical access to the biological grandparents and other relatives.

The people in my age cohort have had to be creative in keeping contact with and having some level of long distance relationship with relatives-. We continue to do this by writing letters, making phone calls, sending e-mails and traveling on an international scale. Sometimes we travel to our native countries and at other times our relatives come to visit us. The situation is more complicated than meets the eye. When we go home, most of us can only afford to stay for a short while. When relatives come to visit, some find it boring and too confining. My own mother told me that she felt like a prisoner in my house because I locked the door every day and was gone for hours and she could not go anywhere. The same sentiment has been echoed by other relatives. When some of the relatives arrive they experience a culture shock. This creates its own set of head aches.

One of the most critical aspects of intergenerational relationships is the funding of travel for various family events such as funerals and anniversary celebrations of the dearly departed. Somehow there is always a demand for funds without much regard for the availability of such funds. Child bearing for parents in Cameroon and many developing nations constitutes an investment, mostly because mothers in particular can maximize their income and social status through their children (Khumbah 1997). However, in the face of globalization and social change in work patterns, there are economic issues that we must address when it comes to providing financial support for the older people in the family while at the same time caring for our children and planning for our eventual retirement.

What the Future Holds

As a world community we have not actually started addressing the issues and challenges posed by increasing rates of migration of young people from their home towns to far-off lands, and the effects of such movements on the psychological well-being of

different generations of family members. People are living longer. Families are dispersed geographically. New technologies are useful in solving some of the problems we encounter as we communicate and handle daily family matters across continents and time zones. However, there is an urgent need for some serious research and brainstorming on how to deal with the financial and emotional burdens that weigh down the working generation as they try to carry out their multiple roles. It is true that there is a degree of filial love and responsibility towards parents and older members of the family but where do we draw the line between the needs and desires of both the older and younger generations. If the choice is between buying a bicycle for a ten year old son for his birthday and sending money home for a relative to go to a funeral what takes precedence? In the light of current global labour market possibilities what are the chances of family members 30 years old and younger finding work in the homeland and actually earning a living? There is a trend for schooling in several areas yet, in spite of this, one is unable to find gainful employment in the homeland! How many funds have been sunk into fruitless ventures of younger family members who left their homeland trying to venture to the Far East, Eastern Europe and Russia only to meet obstacles and be deported or end up in a nightmarish judicial system.

At present we have no appropriate system in place for resolving intergenerational conflicts without investing money, time and other resources into fruitless ventures into trips home, and hours of fruitless telephone conversations. If we take into consideration the challenges on a family by family or case by case basis the premise is clear: there is a great deal of work to be done to create support networks for all three generations of family members that were discussed earlier. I for one can carry out my daily activities in Dallas without worry or anxiety about my mother who is in her 70s because I know that she is surrounded by young women from the local church, by all the extended family members including her younger siblings and their families, as well as all the young school children who just visit her because she has always had a very open door policy. It is not unusual to find fifteen people in her house at dinner time. I am tranquil because I know she will never be alone. The situation is not the same for other families.

Health Impact Assessment of the Focolare Mission in Bangwa Cameroon: 40 years on public health”

Asa’ah Nkohkwo*

HRH Mafua Ndem (Chiara Lubich),
Organisers, participants, dear fellow Lebialemers here present,
Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends:

Greetings again!

* Chief Executive of the nationwide “Sickle Cell” Society in London, fellow of the Royal Society of Health Promotion, advises the British Medical Journal.

Further to my comments at your 60th Anniversary occasion in London⁵, last June, perhaps, as a more poignant observation to start this address, I should invite you to consider the following extract. Chief Fuankeng Ajuah Alemanji of Bangwa, in his recent work, anthologizes a couple of names Bangwa people gave to their children. While they show the seeds of the Word of God in Bangwa culture, they also reflect the frustrations of the Bangwa people, with rudimentary health facilities overwhelmed by high child mortality, at the time the Focolare Movement arrived in 1966:

Ageh'ndia = the one who stuck with the family (while others died)

Ale'feh = the cry of a baby here?

Ambo'ndem= God's wishes (shall prevail)

Ndem'azeh= God knows (what the outcome will be).

From this background, perhaps I should next invite you to consider the Focolare Movement in Bangwa, Cameroon, as a Catholic/divine policy statement. Then employing the WHO Gothenburg Consensus of 1999, let us consider how this divine policy may have influenced the key determinants of health among the Bangwa people. This is precisely the exercise that the Bangwa Focus Group undertook last October.

Anecdotal accounts, focus group discussion reports, rudimentary field statistics and other tools have been employed to gauge the public health impact of a divine miracle that came in time to save a people from virtual extinction. While looking back with measured gratitude, let me then urge you, Focolarini, to join the Bangwa people to consolidate the amazing achievements, with the following perspectives of the future:

- Can the Mary Health of Africa Hospital, in Fontem, with its satellite centre in Fonjumetaw together be upgraded into a formal centre of training for Primary Healthcare and Basic Health Technology personnel?
- Can a more formal partnership be forged with the increasingly meaningful Lebialem Diaspora, so as to really empower the Bangwa people in a sustainable way?

Managing diversity within the gospel context of **one united world**, the Focolare have produced a miraculous dividend on improving the public health of the Bangwa people from near extinction to admirable national levels within a couple of decades. The challenge now rests on consolidating, sustaining and indeed disseminating the gains of this oasis of excellence in healthcare and education within and beyond Bangwaland, investing through education and training.

The Focolare Movement Bangwa 1966-2004: A Public Health Impact Assessment
(By the Bangwa Focus Group - see below)

⁵ Refers to the 60th anniversary of the Focolare Movement.

THE BANGWA PEOPLE OF CAMEROON

Bangwa, (literally, people who speak the *nweh* language mix), actually defines an ethnic entity of nine ancient African royal settlements, (from pre-19th Century), known today as Fondoms (ruled by Fons), prominent among which is Lebang (formally known as Fontem), under the legendary and influential Fontem dynasty. The Bangwa, indeed Lebang people, make up the vast majority of some 300,000 people, constituting the wider administrative region of Lebialem Division in Cameroon.

AN ENCLAVE ON THE VERGE OF EXTINCTION?

Thanks to persistent lobbying by Fon Defang Fontem, the Catholic Focolare Movement from Europe - Rome eventually arrived Bangwa on the evening of the 6th of February 1966.

Legend has it that disease prevailed in the region – measles, smallpox and chickenpox, sleeping sickness, malaria, filariasis. The rudimentary healthcare facilities were completely overwhelmed at the time. A basic Government Dispensary, under the legendary Nurse Martin Atemajong, was housed at the Azi Palace of Fontem, administering vaccines for the poxes and other drugs, brought in by head load some 100km away from Mamfe. The nearest hospital was either in Dschang in French speaking Cameroon, or in Mbetta, both some 40km away on foot from Azi. Hardly one of five children reached their fifth birthday. Mortality rate was also very high for adults. Thus, the *raison d'être* for a high birth rate - to make up for those to die! There was no awareness of sleeping sickness. Due to the high prevalence of malaria, anaemia was common in both children and adults. Traditional native medicine as an alternative was ineffective against malaria. Coupled with a diet poor in proteins and minerals, the blood haemoglobin levels were very slow to recover following bouts of anaemia.

Pregnancy complications were often fatal for both baby and mother-to-be. For example, pregnant women who suffered premature separation of the placenta bled to death with no possibility of caesarean section. Foetuses with cord complications and those in transverse position often died, with occasional successes on the delivery of transverse babies by traditional doctors. Such obstetric complications were often attributed to witchcraft and the victims had a special burial rite performed on them.

Due to illiteracy, there was poor public awareness of hygiene and sanitation. There were very few primary schools. The young pupils had little ability to transform their environment into what they learnt in school. The local bamboo building material was infested by blood-sucking bed bugs. Poverty level was such that most households could hardly afford soap for washing and bathing.

The death rate varied with the vegetation of the hamlet. Generally, hot moist areas with lots of palm trees were disease prone pockets. This was probably due to the presence of tse-tse flies, mosquitoes and loa-loa worms in hotter zones and along river courses. Generally, quarters such as Atchang, Atohangeh, Takweh, Nnyuy, Nwechen, Esoah and

Menji were areas of very high mortality. The same applies to Njohgwi and Essoh-Atta. Moreover, the communicable diseases such as measles, chickenpox and sleeping sickness were certainly affecting nearby areas. Therefore people in the upper areas were known to be reluctant to marry off their daughters to men settled in those lower areas.

Few adults reached old age in these areas, (although deaths were generally wrongly attributed to witchcraft). Old age was therefore geographically linked. It is not possible to get statistics for these deaths. However, anecdotal accounts from bereaved mothers estimated the death rate to be 80%.

BANGWA SINCE THE ARRIVAL OF THE FOCOLARE

The Mary Health of Africa Hospital (MHA) was set up by the Focolare Movement. From various options presented by the late Fon Defang Fontem, the present site, in Mveh, was chosen by specialists for its nearness to the River Begeh, where sand and water could be quarried for construction work and hydroelectricity installed for an intended “urban” village. Thus forty acres of land was secured by the Fon, from Chief Forchap, and offered free, for the freehold of the Focolare Movement to help his suffering people, the object of his earlier lobby of Bishop Jules Peeters of Buea.

The foundation stone was laid by Chiara Lubich, the Movement’s founder, on June 19th,1966. Three years later, she came back to formally open the hospital, accompanied by Bishops Peeters of Buea Diocese, the then mother diocese of Bangwa, and Albert Ndongmo of Nkongsamba, the mother diocese of the neighbouring town of Dschang. Together with Fon Defang Fontem they inaugurated the hospital which to-date serves as the regional referral centre and has saved countless lives.

The lobby for the Movement, the acquisition and offer of the hospital site were a significant testimony to the bravery of the Fon, given the mistrust held by the Bangwa people, who had previously fought the Germans for taking away a number of porters assigned to the Germans by Defang’s predecessor. Moreover, Defang heeded to the request for land put forward by a woman, and this was an anathema in Bangwa culture, as recorded in the following inspired dialogue with Chiara Lubich: “You are a woman and so you are worth nothing. Tell me how all this happened that you are spread all over the five continents.”

MHA SATELLITE SERVICES

A satellite health centre was later opened in Fonjumentaw in 1972, on land donated by Fon Fonjumentaw. It was appropriate to have a health clinic on higher grounds away from the focus of sleeping sickness. The Focolare will later bring mobile clinics to the villages of Besali and Fozimombin. The government has since joined in and set up health centres in some villages in Bangwaland.

HOW MANY ARE TREATED?

Recent statistics estimate annually and on average: 30,000 consultations, 300 major operations, 800 deliveries, 3,000 in-patients of which 600 are men, 900 are women and 1,500 are children. These statistics are for the Mary Health of Africa Hospital only.

The major causes of admission include: malaria, typhoid fever, bronco-pneumonia, high blood pressure, anaemia, diarrhoea, intestinal worms, tuberculosis, hernia and HIV-AIDS. The number of in-patients is increasing and the duration of admission is also getting longer. This is due largely to drug resistance. It may also be due to the improved facilities for diagnosis and treatment. There is the added contemporary epidemic of HIV-AIDS with severe lifelong morbidity.

Sleeping sickness has dwindled from the peak of 271 (1974), to one case in 2004.

HEALTH PROMOTION CAMPAIGNS

The Focolare Movement co-operates with the Cameroon Ministry of Health in that the Ministry carries out the campaign for vaccination against polio, measles, and DTP while Mary Health of Africa (MHA) Hospital is a referral hospital in Lebialem Division for treatment. The MHA Hospital is working also with some traditional doctors in order to understand their practice and to enlighten them on dosage and the risks associated with their herbalist practice. There are also risks associated with the practice of sharing blades and tattooing in the spreading of HIV-AIDS and other illnesses.

CREATING HIV-AIDS AWARENESS AMONG COLLEGE CHILDREN

The Movement regularly goes into colleges for HIV-AIDS awareness and education through various forms: question and answer sessions, lectures and religious morality lessons. Children are divided into age groups and take part in appropriate exercises. MHA hospital staff occasionally work with government staff when protocols and views agree.

PRE-MARRIAGE COUNSELLING

Couples getting married are prepared for the challenges of the vocation along Catholic guidance on family health. The government's local officer for Women's Affairs frequently invites the movement to organise conferences on HIV-AIDS for men and women.

FOCUS ON EDUCATION

The Movement started Our Lady Seat of Wisdom College, Fontem, in September 1966, enrolling 42 students including 4 girls. The college has come a long way, with hundreds enrolled today, and offering a complete modern 7-year mixed coeducational curriculum secondary level education. In the academic year 2003/2004, the college's

Advanced Level graduates topped the provincial performance table and featured among the top at national level in Cameroon, according to Government published figures.

Many graduates go on to further their studies abroad. A few eventually return to teach briefly at the college, motivated by the hospitality of the Bangwa people, their ties with, as well as the friendliness of, their alma mater. They soon move on, though, due to the low salary level, a situation not helped by the extremely low and patchy level of subvention from the Cameroon Government. Moreover, the Diocese of Mamfe, now in charge, is a severely economically disadvantaged region.

The above notwithstanding, the multiplier effect of the education gained and spread by graduates locally cannot be underestimated in terms of improving literacy and hence primary health education within Bangwa.

CHILD DAY-CARE

A small day care centre was established to help the staff of the MHA hospital and Movement workers, so as to release school-aged children from babysitting their younger siblings, while parents were at work. Following the intervention of the local government officers this useful centre was recently upgraded and expanded to include a Nursery school and also allowing access to other workers. It now enrolls 30 children.

A NUCLEUS FOR SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

A craft training centre for carpentry and building existed from as far back as when the Movement started in Bangwa.

Over the last four years a three year School of Carpentry, enrolling 9 boys, has developed serving local furniture and technical trade needs with quite sophisticated machinery brought over from Italy. So far no girl has applied to join the school. A garage for motor vehicle maintenance now employs 5 workers. Welding is also done in the garage. A building workshop now employs eighteen workers. All these activities help to employ local youths, thereby substantially controlling the rural exodus which is increasingly a major socio-economic challenge in Bangwa.

The Movement has thus frequently developed simple workable pilot socio-economic solutions, with a significant impact on health, some of which methods have eventually triggered government intervention.

DISENCLAVING A PEOPLE

The first digger-grader caterpillar was brought in 1972 by the Mill Hill Mission through Rev. Father John Brummelhius. He popularly became "Father John the Road", because he surveyed and supervised the construction of the road linking Dschang and Fontem. The Movement and the villagers worked together to maintain the new road, whenever

necessary. The Focolare Movement also used the caterpillar to support various village development projects, charging for fuel only.

EU LOBBY

Under the banner “Together Everything Is Possible”, the Movement together with local dignitaries lobbied the European Union to support the work on the worsening road, and eventually won a grant. Hence after 30 years of self-maintenance, an EU grant enabled the construction of over 200 culverts and laterite macadam all along the 45 km in 1998. The caterpillar has however, since gone out of service, severely hampering road maintenance, making it impossible for non four-wheel drive vehicles to use the road in rainy seasons. During the rain season a journey could take up a whole day for those willing to pay at least twice the usual fare by private transport sharing.

HOUSING STANDARDS

Depending on their availability, the Movement’s experts help either to supervise or carry out local building projects. They occasionally help to produce and interpret template drawings. The Movement has thus helped to improve local standards of civil engineering, occasionally under the personal intervention of the then Bishop Peeters, through the introduction of such trendsetters as floor concrete cementing and aluminium sheet roofing of dwellings for the Focolarini.

A SOUND BODY IN A SOUND MIND

Health to the Movement does not only mean physical or bodily health, but it is extended to include health of the soul or spiritual health. In this realm, the Movement is particularly keen to provide hospice care for the terminally ill, from a Catholic ethos, while accommodating the patient’s own faith wherever possible. Occasionally, Christians who had gone astray are reconciled with their faith and non-Christians seek for Baptism at the terminal stage, which is provided; and in the case of minors this is done with informed and mutual parental consent.

Spiritual guidance as an avenue for health promotion was also emphasized following the third visit of Chiara Lubich, who launched a Bangwa programme for the papal message on New Evangelisation of the year 2000. This on-going local programme is a concerted partnership involving the local Focolarini, the Fons (notably Fontem Njifua and his colleague Fonjumetaw Njiendem) and the people of Bangwaland.

LEBIALEM WITHOUT THE FOCOLARE?

As the locals themselves testify, the Bangwa were clearly a disease-overwhelmed and endangered ethnic group, prior to the arrival of the Movement. As previously mentioned, HRH Fuankeng Ajuah Alemanji has eloquently captured the hopelessness in

the afore-mentioned anthology of typical Bangwa names before the arrival of the Movement.

Not even members of this Focus Group would have lived to tell this tale. Only 4 girls for example (three of whom the daughters of Fon Defang) were at secondary school at Okoyong girls Catholic college, a 100km trek away towards Mamfe in the mid 1960s. A few more were at St Francis College further away in Kumba. The establishment of the local college, OLSWC, in Fontem not only provided local access to secondary co-education, but also conveniently allowed parents to pay fees in kind, hence boosting attendance. This was especially significant for boys who had to face a journey of over 300km to a boys' Catholic college at Sasse in Buea.

Coupled with the high level of mortality from disease, the consequences of lack of education on an enclaved population that would have certainly been left at the mercy of the risks associated with indigenous practice and ignorance is obvious.

THE WITNESS OF A UNITED WORLD

Parents quite commonly show appreciation in kind to teaching and other staff of the Movement in Bangwaland. This exceptional phenomenon is probably influenced by the ideology of sharing of the Movement. One finds a similar attitude in the hospital with in-patients where food brought in for one patient is shared by other patients voluntarily. Bangwa people who get admitted in other hospitals find the MHA hospital in Fontem unique in this attitude to sharing homemade food.

Through living the gospel concretely, moment by moment, the “urban” village of the permanent Mariapolis in Bangwaland has also demonstrated that it is possible to unite, into one harmonious world, people of a diverse race, culture and belief. Present in the Focolare Mariapolis community of Bangwa-Fontem are as many as 15 nationalities from 4 continents, from three different Christian denominations, Judaism and people of indigenous traditional religious beliefs. What matters most is to promote a culture of concrete love.

Managing diversity within the gospel of **one united world**, the Focolare have produced a miraculous dividend on improving the public health of the Bangwa people of Cameroon, from a near extinct population (under 50,000) to admirable national levels (an estimated 300,000) within a couple of decades. The challenge now rests on consolidating, sustaining and then disseminating the gains of this regional oasis of aspirations, excellence in healthcare and education within and beyond Bangwaland, investing through education and training.

REFERENCES

THE AUTHORS: This report was based on the deliberations of October 2004 held in Fontem by the Bangwa Focus Group, including:

1. H.R.H The Mafua of Fontem (Mrs Christine Asong), who also recorded the discussions
2. Anne Plantard, Matron, Mary Health of Africa Hospital, Fontem.
3. Mbe Tasong (Charles Etiendem).
4. Mrs Mary Ategwa.
5. Mbi Asaatong Fontem, (Dr Asa'ah Nkohkwo), London, Focus Group Counsel of Reference, (Nkohkwo@Btinternet.com).

The group acknowledges Princess Amingwa Fotabong, Brandenburg University Cottbus, Germany, for processing the minutes. Professor Dominic Fontem, relaying from Dschang, Cameroon, comments from HRH Fuankeng Ajuah (Yaounde), Prince Peter Fontem (Ohio-USA), Edmond Asonganyi (London), Tom Bekong (Maryland-USA) and Dr George Atem's work- "The Lebang Kingdom", Jan 2000, Buea, as well as MNF Ashu's "Lebialem Story", 1999, Menji Cameroon, all facilitated scrutiny and the guidance of the Focus Group remotely from London.

Focolare Movement/LECA-USA Partnership to improve the quality of life for Lebialem People"

Valentine A. Nzengung*

INTRODUCTION

Lebialem Cultural Association (LECA-USA, Inc) is a certified and registered non-profit organization in the United States of America. The membership consists mostly of sons and daughters of Lebialem, residing in the United States of America (USA). The mission of LECA-USA is first and foremost to foster unity and love among Lebialem people in the Diaspora and to build on that unity to leverage the cultural, economic and educational aspirations of Lebialem and our motherland Cameroon. This, I believe can only be done through the many opportunities offered by our host country the United States of America. LECA-USA is poised to make the best of both worlds by capitalizing on the positive aspects of the mystical, rich cultural and social heritage of the people of Lebialem, and the fast pace, materialistic, contemporary life of our New World.

Without the aspirations of Chiara Lubich, a noble laureate and founder of the Focolare Movement, it is likely that the name Lebialem would not be appearing on this

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document. This is because the upgrading of Fontem Sub-division to Lebialem division by Cameroon's administration is attributed to the development of Lebialem and its exposure to the rest of the country and the world thanks to the Focolare Movement. The original goal of the Focolare Movement, to create in Fontem a model of unity that could be applied to the rest of the African continent, has been termed "Miracle in the Forest" and is well depicted in the documentary that bears this name. From this vision came the Mary Health of Africa hospital that saved the life of this speaker who was a sickling at birth and, like many of his eight deceased siblings, was not expected to live past the age of two.

Our Lady Seat of Wisdom College (SWC) came next and is credited with training a new breed of successful and accomplished Lebialem sons and daughters who would otherwise never have seen the four walls of a secondary school. The role of the Focolare Movement in the transformation of the lives of the people of Fontem in particular, and Lebialem in general, has been succinctly summarized in *Partnership in Lebialem* ("Lebialem Development Partnership" edited by Nkemnji, Tazi and Bezejouh, 2000), from which I quote "The saving of lives, the building of the college, the new church and the introduction of the great 'new commandment' in Fontem by the Focolare Movement, are acts of kindness and love which humanity is in search of." These acts of kindness in Lebialem are being extended beyond Fontem to Nweametaw and other Fondoms of Lebialem.

The many achievements and acts of kindness of the Focolare Movement to the Lebialem people not only provide motivation, but also a challenge to LECA-USA to emulate Chiara's message of love and unity. A new generation of Lebialem sons and daughters has been inspired by this social transformation that is occurring in Lebialem and have embraced the selfless service message and example of the Movement. Guided by the miracle that is Lebialem, we in the Diaspora have rallied to a single cause and are willing and determined to improve the lives of all Lebialem people. We want to be participants at both the formulation and realization phases of both projects and the aspirations of Lebialem. As a result, LECA-USA has identified clear visions and an execution plan. Our approach includes the establishment of sustainable and effective collaboration among the many cultural and development organizations in Lebialem and the Focolare Movement.

1. LECA-USA's VISION

Our organization is working closely with the entire Lebialem community in the USA to foster unity and love. Our guiding principle of "unity in the development of Lebialem" is the rallying song for the entire Lebialem family as we embark on multiple cultural, developmental, educational, and health projects. It is LECA-USA's vision to acquire human, technological, and financial resources from the USA and around the world and utilize such resources to improve the quality of life for Lebialem's 160,000 inhabitants. The very heterogeneous topography of Lebialem coupled with the dispersed rural settlement pattern of modest homes constructed of red clay-bricks and an aluminum zinc roof scattered throughout the peaks and valleys of the tropical mountain villages of Bechati, Besali, Bamumbu, Igumbo, Nkong, Lepi, Ezzo-attah, Lebang, Lewoh,

Mmuockmbie, Mmuockngie, Ndungated, Nwangong, Nweametaw, etc. poses an extra challenge as our young organization implements its vision. The specific aspects of our organization's vision are:

- To be a project-oriented organization. To this end, LECA-USA conceived a record number of projects in 2004 to be executed in the immediate and long term. There are ongoing health projects to combat HIV/AIDS and provide much needed medical equipment and basic medical supplies to all Lebialem health centers. Additionally, LECA is researching ways of acquiring and applying the voluntary service of those Lebialem sons and daughters who are highly trained and qualified medical doctors and nurses in the Diaspora, to address the enormous shortage of qualified medical specialists in Lebialem. A cultural heritage center that will be constructed in Menji would enable us to observe, research, capture, nurture, house, preserve, and transmit the mystical, cultural and social heritage of the people of Lebialem.
- To raise funds to support projects. The organization continues to identify and seek different avenues to raise funds to support multiple development projects: essential medical equipment, the construction of a library with a community development and training center, and supporting the efforts of Fondoms and regional development organizations in the implementation of local development projects.
- To continue to strengthen our existing partnership with the Focolare Movement to implement the many development projects in Lebialem.
- To serve as the umbrella organization for Lebialem division by building partnerships with the smaller local and regional development associations and organizations including Lebialem Cultural and Development Organization (LECDA), LECA-EU, Lewoh Cultural and Development Meeting (LECUDEM), Lebang Educational, Cultural and Development Organization (LECUDO), Wabane Development Association (WADA), Non-government Organizations (NGOs), etc. By functioning more as an umbrella organization, LECA-USA recognizes the need to unite all the people of Lebialem administrative division of Cameroon, be they from any of the 17 Fondoms that make up the area.
- To build partnerships with foundations and private institutions in the USA to finance our development goals.

2. PREVIOUS AND ONGOING FOCOLARE – LECA-USA PARTNERSHIPS

There is a lot of work in progress in the partnerships entered into between the Focolare Movement and LECA-USA. We would like to highlight the following points:

2.1. The expansion of Mary Health of Africa Hospital to include an HIV/AIDS ward. The Mary of Health of Africa Hospital was the first hospital to be opened in Lebialem. Over the years, this 120 bed hospital has played a leading role in providing health care and improving the quality of life for about 160,000 people who live in the Lebialem Division as well as thousands of others who come from neighbouring regions to seek healthcare in the facility. This hospital has played a key role in the fight against such devastating endemic diseases in the Division as Sleeping Sickness, Malaria, Tuberculosis, Infant-related diseases, and recently, HIV/AIDS. LECA-USA has made a cash donation to the Focolare Movement of \$5,000.00 (US dollars) towards the construction of the HIV/AIDS ward and expansion of the hospital. LECA-USA members raised this sum from out-of-pocket contributions. Future financial contributions are planned.

2.2 The accreditation of the Mary Health of Africa Hospital. HIV/AIDS currently is the leading cause of death in Lebialem Division. Over the past 4 years, the Focolare Movement has documented a prevalence of about 13% of HIV-infection among patients seeking care at Mary Hary Health of Afica Hospital, and over half of the patients hospitalized are HIV-infected patients. The HIV-infected patients often do not have the financial capability to afford for antiretroviral therapy. Even those who can afford the drugs face serious difficulties traveling to get drugs from different treatment Centers, such as the Limbe Provincial Hospital. Several other factors have raised tremendous barriers to accessing lifesaving antiretroviral drugs:

- a) the cost of transportation to treatment sites,
- b) the high cost of laboratory tests, such as CD4 counts and Chemistry
- c) the poor state of the roads in Lebialem, especially during the rainy season.

Mary Health of Africa Hospital and the people of Lebialem have a strong commitment to fight HIV/AIDS. The hospital has implemented a voluntary counseling and testing facility, a program to prevent pre-natal transmission of HIV, and the treatment of opportunistic infections.

LECA-USA and the Focolare Movement, through the hospital's Matron, have applied for Mary Health of Africa hospital to become one of the Ministry of Health's accredited sites for providing HIV anti-retroviral treatment. Through the efforts and intervention of LECA-USA, the Ministry of Health has already conducted a site inspection and the issue of the official accreditation is awaited.

2.3. Education. LECA-USA recognizes the role of education in sustaining the socio-cultural and economic institutions of Lebialem. LECA-USA also recognizes and is especially grateful to the Focolare Movement for operating one of the top secondary and high schools in Cameroon – Our Lady Seat of Wisdom College (SWC) Fontem. In fact, most of LECA-USA's current members received their secondary school education from SWC. Seat of Wisdom College Fontem is ranked at the top of all secondary schools in Cameroon when placed on both the standards of education and costs. Were it not for the Focolare Movement's vision of providing secondary education to Lebialem people by opening Seat of Wisdom College, many of our members would not have had the

opportunity to obtain secondary school education, let alone be in a position to contribute to the above mentioned partnership.

While embarking on multiple initiatives to support education at the primary level, which is in dire need of resources including manpower, our organization has recently donated several hundreds of books, computers and a printer to SWC. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Board of Trustees of LECA-USA and the President of Seat of Wisdom Ex-Students Association in the United States (SWESA-USA) are exploring ways of building a partnership for the purpose of financing the Focolare Movement's vision of providing computer facilities for teaching and learning at SWC.

3. LOOKING AHEAD

The rich Lebialem culture is rapidly being lost, as the younger generations tend to adopt a foreign culture. LECA-USA has conceived contemporary methods of preserving as much of this culture as possible. Our Lebialem Heritage Institute project, upon completion, should serve as a research and development center, a heritage museum, a heritage-training center, a re-enactment laboratory, a heritage communication center, and a heritage library. To ensure the rapid success of this project, LECA-USA would be seeking another partnership with the Focolare Movement, to oversee the construction of the physical structure after LECA-USA has completed the design and secured funding.

LECA-USA plans to ship medical equipment and supplies to Lebialem on a yearly basis. Through this effort, LECA-USA hopes to encourage and finance the Focolare Movement's expansion of the Mary Health of Africa Hospital. It is also hoped that in the not too distant future, the hospital will expand to include such specialized units as cardiology, infectious disease units, entomology, cancer center, etc. LECA-USA would like to consult with the Focolare Movement in the identification of any potential obstacles to the expansion of the hospital.

We are also collaborating with LECUDO-USA and RIGID Systems to complete the development and installation of a "Patients Tracking System" for Mary Health of Africa Hospital. Presently the situation is as follows:

- The Hospital does not store vital historical data,
- Doctors do not have access to Patients' History,
- There is no statistical reporting capability available, and
- Critical diseases such HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria are not tracked.

LECA-USA has made a commitment to provide Mary Health of Africa Hospital with technical advice on laboratory monitoring of patients who will be receiving treatment in the facility.

We are especially disappointed by the deplorable state of the roads from Buea, the provincial capital of the South West province, to Menji and the Dschang to Menji road. Thanks to a grant from the European Union, the Lebialem people for the first time in their history enjoyed a road that was passable all year round in the late 1990s. The same

grant made it possible for Menji, the divisional headquarters, to be linked with Besali and Esso-attah by a motorable road. LECA-USA would like to partner with LECA-EU and the Focolare Movement to maintain the road that links Menji to the rest of the South West Province of Cameroon. LECA-USA in collaboration with LECA-EU will provide the engineers and part of the funds for this road project. We hope that the Focolare Movement will assist our organization to raise the necessary funds within the EU states and to be responsible for the implementation phase of the project.

The leaders of our organization recognize the fact that a major difficulty met during the execution of any project in Lebialem is the lack of people with the will and determination to provide selfless service for the common good. As a result, many development initiatives conceived by Lebialem elites have failed during the implementation phase because of lack of people committed to the tasks. LECA-USA has learned from the failures of our elites in the past and is building positive and sustainable partnerships to meet the challenges of the future.

Finally, I am proud to mention that the Focolare Movement has been and remains the most committed and reliable partner that LECA-USA utilizes to successfully implement its projects in Lebialem. The trust and excellent working relationship that exists today between the Focolare Movement and LECA-USA is the result of more than 30 years of the Focolare Movement's teaching and living God's message of love and unity in Fontem through service. A new generation of Lebialem sons and daughters, who have lived and shared the words of life with the Focolare Movement while growing up, now feels even more comfortable than their parents in collaborating with the Focolare Movement in many ways. The solid foundation of love, faith, service, trust, and unity on which the relations between the Focolare Movement and LECA-USA is built leaves no doubt that it can be sustained in the years to come. LECA-USA is at ease having the Focolare Movement as a partner on multiple projects whose goal is to improve the quality of life of Lebialem people. Chiara Lubich's message of love and unity is, indeed, "The Miracle in the Forest of Lebialem. Thank you all for your kind attention.

Education in Lebialem Before and Since the Arrival of the Focolare Movement: Seat of Wisdom College, Fontem

John Nkemnji*

Introduction:

Some members of the Focolare Movement from Italy started the first post primary school on their arrival in Bangwa on the 6th of February 1966: Our Lady Seat of Wisdom College (SWC) located in Fontem. Since then, other Colleges have been established in Bangwa by the Cameroon government, individuals and private

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organizations. To date, Seat of Wisdom College remains a leading institution of choice for the people in Bangwa and Cameroonians in general.

The impact of this institution on the lives of the Bangwa people and Cameroon will be examined from an educator's perspective. Published reports, anecdotal accounts, and national statistics will be employed using a power-point presentation to analyze the impact of the first institution of higher learning [post-primary], focusing specifically on the academic, moral, economic and social well-being of the Bangwa youth and society.

Background:

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to speak on "Education in Lebialem Before and Since the Arrival of the Focolare Movement: Seat of Wisdom College Fontem," at this important international conference of Sociologists, Educators, the Bangwa people, and the Focolare family. I thank the organizers for the invitation.

Our Lady Seat of Wisdom College started in September 1966 with 42 students from the Bangwa community and beyond. There was a non-Bangwa student from Buea in the first intake of students. The College currently has a great impact on education in Lebialem and Cameroon. Fontem is the name for both the location of the College and the paramount chief of the clan. Lebialem today is the name for the division having three subdivisions namely, Fontem, Alou and Wabane, and is one of many divisions grouped together to form the ten provinces in Cameroon. Lebialem, inhabited by the Bangwa and Mundani people, is an administrative division in the Southwest Province. In some cases, the name Bangwa and Lebialem have been used interchangeably and without clear distinction.

Seat of Wisdom College was established in Bangwa after a humble appeal for help from the Fon, Fontem Defang, to Bishop Jules Peeters of the Diocese of Buea in Cameroon. The Bishop had served as parish priest for Mbetta parish that included Bangwa in 1948 and thus he was already aware of the needs of the Bangwa people. Bangwa, formerly a mission station under Mbetta parish of the Diocese of Buea, later became Fontem parish (1974) and Fonjumetaw parish (1995) prior to the creation of the Diocese of Mamfe in 1999.

Following the appeal for help from the Bangwa to the Catholic Diocese of Buea, the Bishop invited the Focolare Movement to establish the necessary health and educational facilities in the Bangwa area. The Focolare came to serve and save the people of Bangwa who were seriously lacking in education, healthcare, communication and road infrastructure. Anecdotal accounts showed that their mortality and illiteracy rates were very high, however my presentation will concentrate on the development of education, while a separate presentation will examine the impact on healthcare since the Focolare arrived in Bangwa.

Genesis of a Name:

The name of the College, "OUR LADY SEAT OF WISDOM," from a Christian point of view is a fitting appellation of the ideals of what liberal education and learning are about - educational wisdom and growth guided by our Lady and the Holy Spirit.

According to Fuankem Achankeng, a 1966 alumni of Seat of Wisdom College and a traditional ruler from Bangwa, there is another point of view regarding the name: Seat of Wisdom. Research on the name of the College will be inadequate without

mentioning Cunningham's mind frame when he arrived in Bangwa to open the College and serve as its pioneer Principal.

Rev. Father George Cunningham, a visionary, who had been principal of St. Joseph's College Sasse, Buea had noticed that students from the Bangwa area stood out in several ways during their College career in Sasse. One of his great ambitions had been to open a College in Bangwa where he could work with more exemplary students in their homes. He told some of his students that Bangwa boys in Sasse were particularly always well behaved and bright, though sometimes not very financially healthy. Most class prefects in Sasse were in fact Bangwa boys. In other words, Rev. Fr. Cunningham finally brought the "Seat" to Bangwa where Wisdom dwelled.

First Post Primary Institution:

Seat of Wisdom College was the first post primary school in Lebialem, set up amongst other important establishments by the Focolare Movement on their arrival to the area in 1966.

The College started with 42 students - (38 boys and 4 girls) by sharing in the buildings of the Saint George's Catholic Mission Primary School Fontem. After about two years at this primary school site, the College moved to its present site in Nveh and has since been expanding into a modern College campus on the hilly terrain. I was so impressed with the scattered structures of the campus and its surroundings that I produced a postcard of the area, showing the College, hospital and neighbouring homes in 1990.

With the advent of the Focolare Movement to Bangwa and the growth of the Christian doctrine in the area, a new Fontem parish administered by the Focolare was formed, in 1971, out of the former larger Mbetta Parish, which was administered by the Mill Hill Missionaries. The Mill Hill Missionary Society had been the proprietor of most of the primary schools in the area. The government of Cameroon, the major proprietor of Colleges and higher educational institutions, had no post primary school in the region. The government is usually accused for neglecting the development of the Bangwa hinterland.

Female Population Increase:

Since 1992, there have been more girls than boys attending Seat of Wisdom College. In 1972 the school had its first female principal, Ms. Ann Bustarret who served as principal from 1972 to 1977.

The second female principal, Ms. Jane Dube – may her soul rest in peace - had been a teacher in the College for several years prior to serving as principal from 1998 to 2001. She died in a motor accident on October 26, 2001 due to the bad road conditions in the region while in service of Seat of Wisdom College. The students proclaimed, "Mother Jane acquired an eternal home in Fontem." She devoted 29 years of her life serving the people in Bangwa. During her time as principal, Seat of Wisdom was transformed into a high school which provided the students with the facilities to study for both the General Certificate of Education (GCE) ordinary level, (O/L) and advanced level, (A/L). During her time the students scored highest in the nation at the certificate examinations.

Ms. Jane Dube will always be counted as one of the many heroes of this great institution of learning and as an example of one who loved and served to the end.

Jules Peeters, in addition to Chiara Lubich, Fontem Defang, Father John Brumehius, Chief Dominic Nkeng Fobellah, Chief Forchap Bisongbeng, Chief Fotabonganche, and Mr. Michael Wetngem Nkeze, contributed in many ways in making the establishment of Seat of Wisdom College a reality.

Regional Impact:

The establishment of Seat of Wisdom College in remote Bangwa, Cameroon, made a great impact on the education of girls in the region. The tradition of the Lebialem people made it more difficult for girls to attend post primary schools outside the Bangwa area. Parents felt comfortable investing their scarce financial resources in the education of boys than in the education of girls. With the establishment of the first College (Seat of Wisdom College) in the region, the smaller burden of expenditure for tuition and board made education for both sexes more affordable. Parents found in SWC a haven because they were allowed to practically pay tuition and boarding fees in kind, a rare opportunity at the time. Many parents thus found work as kitchen or cleaning staff in SWC to be able to pay the school fees for their sons and daughters.

Less than a dozen boys of College age in Lebialem could annually afford to go to Saint Joseph's College Sasse. Sasse was the College of choice for boys prior to Seat of Wisdom College, while Queen of the Rosary College Okoyong, Mamfe was the College of choice for girls from Bangwa, Lebialem. However, only three to seven (3-7) boys and girls could annually leave Bangwa respectively for Sasse College, 290 km away or Okoyong, 99 Km away. A few alternatives existed for youths who wanted to become teachers or who wanted to study in the francophone system. Even then the least distance from "home" was 45 Km to the nearest school, in Ngundeng, East Cameroon.

The establishment of Seat of Wisdom College was bad news for Sasse College. Sasse was now deprived of bright students from Bangwa. This could be a reason why the first two principals in Seat of Wisdom College were principals from Sasse College. The pioneer principal of Seat of Wisdom College was Rev. Father George Francis Cunningham. He was there for a little over a year. The second principal of Seat of Wisdom College was Father John William Stumpel from 1967 to 1972, and like his predecessor he came from Sasse College, Buea.

There have been eight principals (six males and two females) who have served SWC to date since its establishment in 1966.

Today, with Seat of Wisdom College within reach, the number of boys or Bangwa male students entering College has doubled and the number of girls or Bangwa female students entering College has quadrupled.

Seat of Wisdom College enrollment for the 2004/2005 academic-year was 453 students (233 girls and 220 boys). Many of the Bangwa students are gifted both in the Arts and Sciences.

Sacred Heart College, in Bamenda, Northwest Province, now competes for Bangwa sons who cannot find admission into Seat of Wisdom College. There are currently at least 12 other technical and grammar secondary schools in Bangwa. In my interview with past and current students of Seat of Wisdom College for this presentation, I heard them jokingly recall that students attending one of the schools in the area are often asked, "So, were you not able to find admission to Seat of Wisdom College?"

Healthy Competition:

There is a healthy competition amongst students in the various Colleges in Bangwa, and students work hard to meet high academic, moral, and social standards set by Seat of Wisdom College. This healthy competition has a positive effect on the well being of youths in Bangwa.

The administration of Seat of Wisdom College has been more varied than that of other Colleges in Bangwa, and most principals have been non-Cameroonians. This diversity in the Seat of Wisdom College administration and staff has provided for a greater exploration in social interaction between the administration, staff and the students. The students learn in new social contexts from the administrators and the administrators also learn to interact with students whose cultural background and social experiences are different. The mix of experiences is not the same with the staff-student interaction in other private and government established schools in Lebialem.

Seat of Wisdom College students have affiliation and contacts with students from other nations and cultures that their friends in Lebialem government Colleges do not.

Graduates from Seat of Wisdom:

It is due to the good education of students in Seat of Wisdom College that former graduates of the College are in every professional field at national level or in advanced educational institutions in Cameroon. Many former students of Seat of Wisdom College (SWESA) are also in foreign institutions of higher learning and in profitable careers worldwide. A good number of them belong to the Lebialem Cultural and Development Association (LECA-USA).

Lebialem people in other parts of Cameroon and worldwide now send their children back to Lebialem to study at Seat of Wisdom College. They study both academic disciplines and their culture. I cherish the days when the program of studies in Seat of Wisdom College had a place for Bangwa cultural studies. In the early days of the College, there was a "Bangwa Cultural Hour" once a week.

After many years of a "5-year education cycle" preparing students for the Cameroon General Certificate of Education (GCE) examination, which is a final competitive examination for secondary schools, Seat of Wisdom College has added an advanced section to prepare students for the GCE advanced level certificate. Upper Six as some call it, comes after five (5) years of studies. Both the GCE O/L and A/L certificates prepare students for university studies in Cameroon and abroad.

I take this opportunity to thank the Focolare Movement for the sound education that Lebialem people are receiving through Seat of Wisdom College. Parents have pointed out that they have sent their children to Sacred Heart, Our Lady of Lourdes, Baptist High School, Sasse, Seat of Wisdom, and Saker Baptist, and that Seat of Wisdom has stood out tall from the lot for a variety of reasons. My sister started College in Mamfe Grammar School before transferring to Seat of Wisdom College. Though she paid no fees in grammar school while in Mamfe, we found out that it was cheaper and better for her at Seat of Wisdom. She was healthy and more studious and her stay in Bangwa was financially less stressful.

In the last five years, Seat of Wisdom College students scored a 100 percent pass in the GCE. Many of the students have A grades in the subjects passed. The excellent graduation result in Seat of Wisdom College stands in contrast to the poor performance of students at the elementary level in Bangwa.

When Seat of Wisdom College started the first batch result in 1971 was 28 percent. There has been steady improvement since that rocky start with a very marked improvement in 1986 when the school scored 100 percent.

New Evangelization:

The impact of the Movement on education has spread widely. Now the Bangwa people have learned the ways of the Movement. Many of them embrace the new evangelization started by Madame Chiara Lubich during her recent visit to Bangwa. Prior to the fraternal pact between the people and the Movement both parties were not very sure of each other. The way of life of the Movement in the early days of their arrival in Bangwa appeared strange to the culture of the natives. They had not been used to a culture devoted to living and practising the gospel. They were used to ordained religious people but not to having the laity embrace and practise a communal lifestyle. The knowledge of the Movement has been acquired by the Bangwa people and more and more of them now aspire to live by its tenets.

The Focolare members have educated many people, especially the youth, in the Bangwa area by providing a forum for them so as to learn a variety of trades. The Focolare constructed the first hydroelectric power plant in the area and trained many youths to generate and service electricity. They also assisted the youth learn other trades like nursing, brick-layering, carpentry, auto mechanics and road construction. The Bangwa people observed the Movement for some time before convincing themselves of the sincerity and transparency of the Movement and its tenets.

Atmosphere of Love and Progress:

As an educator from Lebialem who did not attend Seat of Wisdom College, I am proud that many of my brothers, sisters, and friends have studied in this great institution of learning. I encourage the College, students, staff, and the Focolare Movement to keep up the good work. I appreciate the support from past students (SWESA), the parents of current students (PTA) and elites from the area. I appeal to the Diocese of Mamfe to support the school administrators and staff in their noble effort of providing a good Christian education to the students in this remote community.

**CHIARA LUBICH'S THIRD VISIT TO FONTEM (2000)
From the Video: *A MIRACLE IN THE FOREST***

SPEAKER: If today one were to stop to look at the valley of Fontem from where Chiara Lubich looked at it in '69, when she spoke about future developments that at the time seemed almost impossible, one has to admit that some sort of miracle happened here. Today, Fontem is an amazing reality and this is how Chiara looked at it in May 2000, during her third visit to this small town.

The crowd, gathered on the plain of Azi in front of the royal palace, was the one that is usually present for big occasions. All awaited with joy, there was a colourful and festive atmosphere. (..)

The welcome songs, the speeches showing appreciation for the work done by the Focolare, the dances – all these were different ways through which the Bangwa people wanted to show Chiara how much she meant to them.

In her speech, Chiara asked all those present to do all that they possibly can to save the vocation of Fontem, the “city on the mountain”:

“Let us always ask ourselves: are we at peace with everybody? And if we are not, let us promise ourselves to do so as soon as we possibly can. Only if love continues to shine in this city will God’s blessings from heaven continue to be upon you and upon your children. And now, I do not feel that I can leave you without first doing a solemn pact with you: a pact of reciprocal love that is strong and binding. It is a sort of oath through which we commit ourselves to live together the fullness of peace and to rebuild this peace again each time we realise that something has gone wrong. Now let us shake hands as a sign of this pact of ours.”

Fon Lucas Njifua answered by saying: *“If we follow the example you have given us by your life (Chiara’s life), there will be peace, harmony, and there will be love on earth. (...). We do not know how to express our joy; for all that you have done for us through your way of life. Giving you the title of Mafua Ndem, which means, ‘queen sent by God’, is a way of showing our gratitude and our appreciation for all that you have done for us’.*

BROTHERHOOD AS A CODE OF BEHAVIOUR –II (BENNIE CALLEBAUT).

In May 2000, Chiara Lubich visited Fontem for the third time; she was there for almost fifteen days. She was then eighty years old, so one can imagine the value of this visit. How can one sociologically value all that happened in the year 2000 together with the developments after that visit?

At the end of the nineties some questions were being asked. How could the population of Fontem, the second generation, who had not lived the initial period, keep intact the initial spirit of this story? How could the new generations remember the old ties, the initial enthusiasm; how could they remember all that happened, and renew the choice made, although they had not lived those first heroic beginnings?

The sociologist may also put another question.

Has the spirit of brotherhood really penetrated in all the different strata of the population, even the lower classes? Or, was this the story lived by just an elite few? It is also necessary to keep in mind that in the meantime, the Focolare

Movement spread in all Africa. So, was it still necessary for the Focolare to speak of Fontem? Was Fontem still at the heart of the Focolare, as it was before? Just as France was considered to be the firstborn daughter of the Church, was Fontem the firstborn daughter of the Focolare in Africa?

Another thing: Was the idea that at Fontem a relationship with the whole population had to be established still valid? Or was this more binding on a particular section of the population? And one asked these questions because here, as in so many other places, some people in Fontem were closer to the Focolare than others, who were more attracted by other things and ideas that kept them busy somewhere else, even in other parts of the world. Did this make them abandon the common effort to live for fraternity? And then, can one really say, that many of the Bangwa emigrants continued to keep contact with those special brethren of the Focolare that lived in the countries to which they emigrated? These and many other questions made me look at the events that happened after the year 2000.

*The sociologist is not a prophet and therefore I cannot look into the future. But it seems to me that the event of May 2000 has renewed the old understanding that existed between Fon Defang and Chiara Lubich. This happened with the new Fon, his son, Lukas Njiufa and it gave unexpected results. The rare privileged title of **Mafua Ndem** given to Chiara Lubich on that occasion illustrates this.*

To continue with the same historical metaphor, it can be said that just as the situation between France and Germany had started the ball rolling towards the construction of the European Union, in the same way the understanding between the king of the Bangwa and Chiara is the fundamental force for Fontem. The example of Fontem affected other Fon in the vicinity and this new event resulted from the meeting of the year 2000. In these regions, where relationship difficulties between tribes are more often the case than intra-tribal difficulty, this beneficial effect may be considered as the most fruitful development for these regions.

Besides, the Bangwa's contributions show that they are a people of remembrance, and there is no doubt about this. The different inter-religious manifestations of the Focolare held in Washington (2002), in London (2004), and also in other places, show that there is quite a solid bond between the Bangwa and the Focolare. So, at least for a long time, there is no risk that the new generations will forget the past.

But, the event of May 2000 can also indicate a creative re-interpretation of the old understanding between Fon Defang and Chiara. I think that this time there was a step ahead because the collective pact was proposed to all the Bangwa people. The proposal of the Fon and Chiara to hold meetings named "a new evangelization" has created a common language, a possibility for the Bangwa of all creeds, together with the Focolare, to interpret together this common activity,

to build – as theologians say – a narrative community, that elevates the interpretation of its proper story, to a significant religious level. This was something never heard of before and in this way, all the participants became, more active actors of the Fontem story.

One is struck in a very special way by the explanation given by Fon Lucas Bjifua, who spoke about what induced him to intensify his relationship. He realized that the Bangwa who were in a more direct contact with the Focolare, and who were convinced of this way of life, were those for whom he never had to solve any quarrels or disputes.

And so, as a sociologist of religions, I find here a phenomenon very frequently found in all groups that live an intense religious life. The positive tension produced by the Gospel and found throughout Church history as a decisive duty, is not to forget the great number of people who are not yet aware of a direct religious commitment, and long for the same fraternal spirit. The new evangelization helped Fontem to do a very significant step in continuing this first intuition which then proved to be a completely new experience for the Focolare: the brotherly relationship with a collective group that wanted to maintain these relationships as a group.

I would like to propose one last remark. The Focolare had never really thought of doing the typical work of an ONG, or to work strictly for social development. This was not their specific talent. They wanted rather to evangelically animate a community. However, in reality for many years they had to put aside most of their ideas because of a collective social commitment. Only after almost forty years were they able to dedicate themselves to this campaign of evangelization, that involved everyone (faithful of the traditional religions, Catholics, Protestants) and which seemed to confirm the Focolare's most genuine vocation. It is important to note that it was not the Focolarini who suggested the initiative for evangelization, but it was the Fon himself and this idea was addressed to the advantage of the whole tribe. The Fon was the first one to take this commitment.

“Together, each one becomes more beautiful”. This is what Chiara Lubich said on the 31st May 1945 when she met a girl who asked her about this the new life. Doesn't the story of Fontem show that both the Bangwa and the Focolare have become “more beautiful” in their initiative of solidarity? Will the various partial interests be fulfilled through the effort of living a fraternal relationship between them, a relationship not thought to be instrumental although great and important in itself? Sociologists know that only long and accurate research can say if this is an ideological talk or if it corresponds to the truth. But, in the meantime the vision and the practice of universal brotherhood in the story of Fontem provokes some thought for their analysis.

**PROJECT AFRICA 2000.
THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE YOUTHS OF THE FOCOLARE MOVEMENT
(MARCO AQUINI).**

Marco Aquini is a legal expert on questions that deal with the development of Youth for a United World of the Focolare Movement and he is also the world co-responsible for this section. He will speak to us about "Project Africa", the name given after May 2000 for the initiative taken by youth in favour of Fontem.

In August 2000, on the occasion of the world Genfest, Chiara Lubich encouraged the youths of the Focolare Movement to renew their commitment and their collaboration with the Bangwa people.

This proposal recalled "Operation Africa", an activity in the seventies through which the youths of the Movement contributed to the development of Fontem both through funds and through periods of time spent in the citadel (small town). Operation Africa united the youths of the Movement of that time, especially European Youth. It presented an opportunity to face a very hot subject: the underdevelopment of the Third World. Operation Africa presented itself as a bond between Europe and Africa, as a way to "repay past debts" in the context of the decolonization that was taking place during those years. When Project Africa was taking place in the year 2000, the situation was a very different one.

The first element to be considered is that the novelty in Fontem during the year 2000 was the pact of fraternity between Chiara and the Fons. This pact involved all the strata of the population. Thus Project Africa was "to be at the service" of this pact of fraternity, with some development projects and with the collaboration of the youths of the Movement whose presence in Fontem enlarged the net of the already existing relationships between the Focolarini, the Bangwa and the Mundani (another tribe present in the territory).

In the year 2000, Project Africa followed the footsteps of Operation Africa, by answering to the requests of the Fons who identified the priorities to be worked for.

Fontem started giving attention to the technical formation of the Bangwa youths who were more inclined to learn a trade. The Centre for learning carpentry has been functioning since 2002.

Project Africa has also been attending to some needs of the area next to Fonjumetaw, inhabited mainly by the Mundani people. It is helping to make the water of the villages fit for drinking: a work that had already been started by the parish; and it opened a new dispensary at Besali to provide a better health service. It aimed to provide a local health service which till then was mainly centralized at the Fontem hospital. Since 2001, however, this health service in Besali encountered a fundamental difficulty: its continuity. In the coming two years a revision and eventual adaptations are needed to make this service become more efficient.

One notices that the methodology of development in Project Africa correctly uses the technique of answering local needs first. The sectors that they attend to are

those pointed out to them by those who are locally responsible for the interested communities.

Voluntary work carried out by youths at Fontem continues to be an important factor. When one compares the youths who have been going to help at Fontem in recent years with the youths who were there in the 70's (in Operation Africa), one notices that the 40 young people who were there from September 2000 to December 2004 presented a wider international range. It is worth mentioning that together with Europeans, there were more young people from various African regions, from Asia and from North and South America: nurses, mechanics, carpenters, land surveyors, teachers.

Such experiences enrich Project Africa in its work for brotherhood on a universal scale.

AN INTERVIEW TO THE MAYOR OF FONTEM

The town authorities of Fontem are also pleased to give their share towards a more authentic brotherhood lived by the Bangwa people and the Focolare. After Chiara Lubich's visit to Fontem in 2000, Mr. Francis Mbiaoh Nkemabi, the mayor of Fontem felt that he should also pay a visit to Chiara and he went to Rocca di Papa in September 2004. We were able to interview him during this visit. The fact that this gentleman was the first native of Fontem to be elected as mayor shows the development of the relationship between the Bangwa and the Focolare since 1966. Presently, at Fontem there are five political parties but when he was elected as mayor he was not involved in any of them.

The political system is very similar to the one of the town councils in the western world. If traditionally the village is united and has a traditional chief as its head, the council is responsible for a group of villages and sees to the administrative tasks for the whole territory. The municipality now comprises about 65,000 people. The rural council of Menji-Fontem started in 1964. It has 25 members that are elected every 5 years. The executive committee is made up of the mayor, two members and a general secretary. The territory, characterized by hills and valleys is situated at 1200 metres above sea level, and has an area of 1050Km². To the east, the vegetation is green savannah while there is a tropical forest to the south. The climate is hot and humid (it rains for 8 months and there are 4 months of dry season). The main resources are the very rich flora and fauna of the country, while the main economical income comes from agriculture (cocoa, coffee and cassava).

The African historian Se'ke'ne' Mody Cissokok says that in most African languages there is no word which indicates the city, the urban reality. They always talk of a village or of the "big village", depending on its size.

In intercultural relationships, all this can easily lead to a misunderstanding and could make one believe that the city and the council do not exist in the African culture. Now here are the three questions we asked the mayor.

Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia: *When did the reality of Fontem start?*

Francis Mbiaoh: The “division” of Lebialem and the reality of Fontem started when Chiara Lubich came and she put this name in the limelight. Before Chiara came, no one talked of this reality; the district, the “division” of Lebialem did not exist. The reality of Fontem came into being with the coming of Chiara and her people. The population began to grow. You know, that before the coming of Chiara’s people, many children used to die and many people died because of the sleeping sickness. We were all the time crying, going from one funeral to the other. When Chiara came and we were freed from this sickness, then we found time for development. Now, the public authorities are very grateful to Chiara, not only because of the new evangelization but also because she has given us this new administrative unity. Very often one looks at Fontem as a model and this has been happening since Chiara Lubich came to us.

Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia: *What relationship is there between the council authority and the traditional authorities?*

Francios Mbiaoh: The state authorities and the traditional ones are complementary in their relationship. The tribal authorities have an authority that is limited to the village, in a traditional sense. When it comes to global matters or to state administrative matters they help the council by being the link with the population of the village. We are complementary and between us there is collaboration and cooperation. There are no conflicts even if at times there is some sort of misunderstanding when a traditional authority does not understand the role of the administration.

Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia: *How does the presence of the Focolare Movement influence the political life of the Bangwa?*

Francis Mbiaoh: This is a really good question. The Focolare Movement has had a very positive influence on the political life of the Bangwa people. Before its arrival in 1966, the Bangwa people had many difficulties, and political matters were tense. When the Focolarini arrived and they shared with us their idea of brotherly love and of unity, we started to understand that whoever won the electoral campaign had to administer the same municipality. Now, since all politicians take part in meetings organised by the Movement or attend the same meetings on evangelization, they have understood the importance of loving one another, of caring for the other, and so there reigns an atmosphere of gentleness, peacefulness and brotherhood. Chiara has brought a breeze of real gentleness in political relationships.

CONCLUSION

Fontem challenges us as sociologists and not only. In fact there are other things that we have not mentioned. For example, Fontem is significant when one

considers inter-religious dialogue, in a context where there are no problems of relationship with a big population that embraces mainly traditional religions. It is also significant where the ecumenical aspect is concerned, and this is because of its very cordial relationship with the Presbyterians. We have not mentioned the long list of persons who have dedicated their life, or an important part of it, to make the experience we related possible.

Fontem is an open story: the Bangwa people, proud and strong, known in all Cameroon to be particularly faithful to their roots and customs, managed to value the unexpected resources of their privileged partner, the Focolare.

One day, the great orthodox Patriarch Athenagoras said that his dream was to put all theologians on an island, let Christians live unity between them and then ask the theologians to explain how Christians achieved unity.

In the same way, Jean Monnet wanted all diplomats of the European nations to be out of the game during the process of the building of a united Europe because he said that they were not capable of forgetting the interests of their individual nations.

Let us hope that no one will ever wish to imprison us sociologists on an island and to put us aside because in our social work we were not able to discover those useful elements needed to build society, and stimulate men to go beyond conflicts – without undervaluing them – and to achieve more pleasing social experiences.

BENNIE CALLEBAUT
MARTIN NKAFU NKEMNKIA.

Notes

1. M. Weber, *Le savant et le politique*, PlonPocket, Paris 1987, p.96
2. J. Nyerere, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism*, Oxford University Press, Nairobi – London -New York 1968.
3. *Ibid.* p.2; pp.6-7.
4. M. Zanzucchi, *Fontem, un popolo nuovo*, Citta' Nuova, Roma 2002, pp.90-93.
5. J. Monnet, *Mémoires*, Fayard, Paris 1976, p.342.