

Care for the elderly in the context of the emergence of “retirement homes” in Yaounde

Ismaila Datidjo^{1*}, Djeufack Dongmo Marionne-C²

University of Dschang in Cameroon.

***Corresponding Author**
Ismaila Datidjo

University of Dschang
in Cameroon.

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Summary: In Cameroon, particularly in Yaoundé, retirement homes dedicated to the care and support of the elderly at home are emerging and suggest that the African model of assistance to the elderly centered on the family is losing its value. However, a close look at this reality reveals that the care of the latter within their communities of belonging, under the family umbrella, remains a common practice. This reflection is based on a qualitative data collection based on direct observation and targeted semi-structured interviews involving families whose view of specialized structures for assistance to the elderly was discussed, and the promoters of these structures for the collection of data on the logics that drove the establishment of their initiatives. The analysis thus deployed according to an approach based on the theory of rational choice shows that families are increasingly developing an attitude of trust towards people and structures dedicated to the care of people suffering from aging. Also, their permanent involvement in supporting the latter at home demonstrates the complementarity between the old model of support for the elderly according to endogenous cultures and that adopted which materializes by the emergence of reception and monitoring homes for elderly parents.

Keywords: Elderly, retirement homes, assistance, family, endogenous culture.

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Introduction

In Cameroon, particularly in Yaoundé, structures dedicated to the care and support of elderly people at home are emerging and suggest that the African model of assistance to the elderly centered on the family is losing its value. This state of affairs raises concerns with anthropological stakes focused on the encounter between modernity and the tradition of African peoples, precisely with regard to the care provided to the elderly. In this way, we must question the reasons and the stakes that determine the adoption, rejection and/or conciliation of borrowed cultural values that are presented to the populations of Yaoundé; these people are facing the advent of retirement homes in their environment, even though the pre-existing endogenous practices of support for the elderly are still in progress. In such a context, the model of assistance to the elderly proposed by structures for the care and support of retirees faces that offered by community traditions. This study is based on the hypothesis that the gradual establishment of specialized structures is based on the socioeconomic factors observed in this urban environment, which legitimize the issues of well-being and development of the elderly and therefore their families. Through documentary research, direct and indirect observation targeting families and the tenants of retirement homes, the collection of data on which this reflection is based was carried

out. In the theoretical light of rational choice, the analysis is based on the postulates of individualism and rationality which posit that the social phenomenon results from individual actions, each having a meaning for its author. This has made it possible to highlight the elements participating in the advent of retirement homes and the collaboration of families with these establishments dedicated to the care and support of the elderly at home. This article presents the profile of the elderly in Cameroon, the types of care structures for them, the motivations of the populations of Yaoundé to entrust or not their elderly people to retirement homes and the challenges of the emergence of the latter.

1. Presentation of the elderly in Cameroon

Generally speaking, it is not easy to present the elderly person, because age is a manipulated and manipulable data to agree with (Pierre Bourdieu, 1984). Cameroon is no exception to this state of affairs given that according to (Willy Adrien Yakam et al., 2020), the concept of "elderly person" is among the most complex to define in demography. However, indicators are taken into account when it comes to drawing up a profile of people admitted as elderly in Cameroon. As a result, qualifying a person as old or elderly is inspired by biological considerations of course, but also by socio-anthropological considerations granted to the individual.

1.1 Biological considerations as indicators of aging

Defining the elderly person from biological considerations is based on a logic according to which, the advancement of life expectancy corresponds to a slowdown or weakening of their psychophysical functions; otherwise, a decline in their mental and physical capacities, and therefore constraining for the normal exercise of their activities, which (Christophe De Jager, 2012), also underlines. On this basis and trivially, the elderly person in the Cameroonian context and even everywhere else is subject from a certain age to reduced mobility on all levels of their life. Not because they want it, but because biologically they find themselves unable to carry certain physical and emotional loads. As a result, it is in the image of the biological considerations or theories developed to define it. Which means that the biological perspective consequently places an emphasis on the age of the person. It is in this sense that for (Willy Adrien Yakam et al., 2020), entry into the class of elderly people in Cameroon is from a minimum of 55 years of past life. Although not official, but resulting from a study, this conception does not exclude in any way that of the World Health Organization (WHO, 2002), which admits that one must count from 65 years and over, to be considered an elderly person, nor that of the United Nations (UN, 2002), for which one must be at least 60 years old to be admitted into this category.

From the above, it should be noted that the biological considerations of the elderly person highlight the advancement of biological age to determine whether or not an individual enters the category of old people. Thus, being old means having more than half a century of existence and beyond, something that contradicts the popular discourse of unknown origin, a discourse according to which youth goes from 7 to 77 years. This *ipso facto* means that this perspective does not fully inform the characterization of the Cameroonian admitted as an elderly person, hence the need to evoke another perspective that puts forward the socio-anthropological dimension of old age.

1.2 Socio-anthropological perspective of old age

As a criterion for distinguishing between elderly and non-elderly people in Cameroon, the socio-anthropological perspective stands as the opposite of the previous approach focused on biological age. This is interested in what should be called social aging, this in reference to the social factors defining age. Through these factors, it must therefore be understood that becoming old depends more on social considerations than on being advanced in age or experiencing observable physical transformations due to this age.

From the above, social aging is then presented as a container of several elements. In this perspective, becoming an elderly person means having given birth to the point where one's child or children also have descendants. Otherwise, to agree with (Bernard Kuate-Defo, 2005), it is about being a grandparent, or even the equal in age of someone who is a grandparent in the event that for one reason or another, the individual is not able to procreate. This consideration thus explained implies fertility of course, but also the notion of generation or age group understood as a sociocultural factor. Immediately, it must be noted that depending on the precocity by which an individual becomes a procreator, it goes without saying that their entry into old age is subsequently determined, especially if their offspring reproduces in their time, the practice of early procreation. This is observed in societies where early marriages, that is to say unions contracted as soon as puberty has begun, are common and are followed by immediate

births within the couple. Similarly, the entry into fertile life through sexual relations during adolescence generally leads to early procreation and, by extension, does not exclude later, premature entry into the age group of old age. Following this criterion, it is therefore not surprising that a woman or a man is socially accepted as an elderly person from the age of thirty. This is increasingly gaining ground given the early fertility that now characterizes young people.

Furthermore, when it comes to the retirement of workers, whether they are from the public or private sector in Cameroon, it must be said that any retired person is considered elderly, according to their biological age which gives them a social status, which includes them among the elderly.

Although it is apparent at first glance that it is biological age that determines retirement, it should not be forgotten that entry into the social category of elderly people is marked less by this age, which is immediately eclipsed by the cessation of professional activity. However, this cessation of work does not in any way mean inactivity; it rather refers to the cessation of activity in the context of paid employment which, however, may in certain circumstances, be extended within another structure for the reconversion of the agent admitted to retirement. According to the fourth Cameroonian Household Survey (ECAM 4, 2014), statistical data on elderly people in Cameroon must also be understood by taking into account their place of residence, generally the rural area, and the marital status which serves to represent them in this country.

Therefore, the socio-anthropological perspective in light of the above, demonstrates that age has polysemic characteristics as evidenced by the notions of grandparent, retirement, generation or age group, marital status, and environment which define them.

In the detour of the presentation of the elderly person in Cameroon according to the biological perspectives on the one hand and socio-anthropological on the other hand, it must be said that the second is based simultaneously on sociological, cultural and administrative considerations in an inseparable manner, while the biological perspective draws exclusively on biological age, that is to say the gain in maturity of the person. Applied to the phenomenon of the emergence of retirement homes in Yaoundé, the term "elderly person" calls upon both biological and socio-anthropological considerations that define the social category thus identified, called upon to integrate and/or benefit from the assistance granted to retirees in the real sense of the term by these emerging structures.

2. Types of elderly care facilities in Yaoundé

In Cameroon, it must be emphasized that the care of the elderly is a duty that falls primarily to communities, specifically to families. Although this is the case, it is clear that it is happening gradually, the emergence of new actors through the establishment of specialized structures dedicated to the care and daily support of people admitted as elderly. That said, the retirement homes emerging in the city of Yaoundé in this case offer the families of residents the opportunity to welcome retirees into their midst, of course, but also to support them without removing them from the family cocoon which, itself, has the moral obligation to take care of its elderly. Regarding these specialized structures, observation on the study site shows that there are a host of them that welcome so-called elderly people from the city of Yaoundé and its outskirts, including those coming from elsewhere. However, it should be

noted that some elderly people are not necessarily entrusted to care homes by their close relatives since they are deprived of them or simply abandoned by them. In trying to inventory them, the idea of their categorization immediately presented itself. This categorization shows that there are two essential components of categorization of structures for the care of the elderly, namely those with an external regime and those with an internal regime. The first category takes care of the elderly in their living environments and the second category accommodates the elderly internally far from the family sphere. However, regardless of the qualifying regime of one of the said structures, they are all under the supervision of the Cameroonian Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS).

2.1 Ministry of Social Affairs: central structure for assistance to the elderly

Public structures for the care of the elderly are those that fall under the domain of the State of Cameroon. These are government initiatives carried out by the Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS), as an instrument of the State for public assistance to vulnerable social groups including the elderly. Due to its social assistance strategy focused on risk prevention, assistance to the needy and their protection, MINAS sets in motion public policies in favor of the elderly in order to give them the necessary attention to which they are entitled. In this perspective, it is worth recalling the fact that it organizes every year, on October 1, the International Day of Older Persons; this is a one-off experience, certainly, but an occasion during which the situation of the elderly is placed at the center of public reflection and attention. In this circumstance, seminars, open days and other theaters of action are often organized in favor of the elderly while raising awareness about their general situation. Also, it should be emphasized that MINAS is the guarantor of public initiatives for the care of the elderly to the point of investing in the actions undertaken by private operators supporting the elderly throughout Cameroon and in Yaoundé, the site on which this reflection is being carried out. In this sense, it ensures the supervision and overall support of private structures dedicated to the elderly. Thus, the reality on the ground shows that this government institution covers all private structures operating on Cameroonian territory for the elderly. In the directory of these private structures for the care of the elderly provided by MINAS, it is possible to make a cataloguing, particularly with regard to the city of Yaoundé.

2.2 Private structures for the care of elderly people with an external regime

In addition to the central role played by the Ministry of Social Affairs in favor of retirees in Cameroon in general and in Yaoundé to a lesser extent, it turns out that private institutions dedicated to assisting the elderly hold a prominent place among the populations of this city. The private structures thus mentioned relate to civil society organizations that participate while being supervised by MINAS in supporting people in their old age. They emerge from the growing needs in the context of caring for this category of people and are part of the private social works recognized by MINAS, which moreover, proceeds to categorize them on the basis of criteria such as the name and acronym, the legal nature, the administrative situation, the target, the type of service and the operating regime. Their particularity is that these structures do not accommodate the elderly internally but are organized in the home care of the elderly. By offering, multifaceted psychosocial support to the latter. Thus, these are associations, Joint Initiative Groups

(GIC), and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). These structures thus listed have the particularity of offering their services in favor of the elderly according to their different specializations or areas of intervention, because let us note that the care of the elderly is multidisciplinary. We cite as an example the association Vieillards- Santé- Développement (VI-SA-DE) whose headquarters is based in Yaoundé III. Although having offices, this association does not take care of the elderly within their center as is the case with accommodation establishments for the elderly. VISADE with the help of home helpers and gerontology nurses takes care of the psychosocial support and medical monitoring of the elderly exclusively in the community and therefore in the family living spaces of these elderly people.

From the above, we note that the structures for the care of the elderly under external regime are diverse and present under several hats in Yaoundé. Even if we have only presented one association as an example, the statistical file of said structures can be downloaded from the MINAS website (www.minas.gov), informs us about the existence of a plethora of this category in the political city of Cameroon. Although these do not have buildings to house their service provisions and accommodate elderly people who may be entrusted to them by families. Consequently, they work in a mobile manner by visiting places of residence to meet their targets by following the clauses mutually agreed with the close relatives of the latter. However, there are structures that have the possibility of welcoming elderly people and taking care of them in their spaces with the possibility of making them their living spaces. We have admitted them as structures for the care of the elderly with an internal regime.

2.3 Internal regime elderly care facilities

This category of structures offers in-house elderly care services, but do not hesitate, at the request of relatives of elderly people, to offer their assistance in the beneficiaries' homes. However, accompanying the elderly at home is not actually part of their operating model; those that do so act rather irregularly given the statutory provisions that provide for in-house activities. However, it should not be forgotten that these private institutions, as reception homes, because they have internment or hospitality infrastructures, constitute the second operating regime of structures for the care of elderly people. We take retirement homes as an example.

Retirement homes are considered as the actors and new models of care for the elderly in Yaoundé. They are considered as such because they are still in their infancy and less known to Cameroonians. This may explain why families, although aware of their existence, do not adopt them to make them an integral part of their daily lives. However, some do not deprive themselves, especially out of necessity, of experimenting with them by entrusting their elderly parents to them.

Established in Yaoundé, these structures dedicated to the care of the elderly are particularly given the title of Retirement Home due to their service offerings. As an illustration, the "Missionaries of Charity" Reception Center is admitted as a retirement home, as is the "Sainte Marie Louise Center of Marillac", and the Béthanie VIACAM Center (Old Disabled and Abandoned People of Cameroon). Although they all benefit from the status of retirement homes, it should be noted that Béthanie VIACAM is the oldest of these establishments. It welcomes elderly people from several corners of Cameroon. Béthanie VIACAM was created following

the observation by Sister Julienne Gertrude Avouzoua that the living conditions of elderly disabled people in the area of her apostolate assignment were generally abandoned. After her observation, she decided to set up a space that could accommodate the elderly, hence the birth of this retirement home which reflects the support needs desired by many retirees, especially those without close relatives or abandoned by them. Born from an idea brought by a nun, the Béthanie VIACAM structure did not deprive itself of offering its beneficiaries, in addition to the social assistance they need, a framework for prayer and spiritual strengthening. Its vocation is therefore to support the elderly, disabled and abandoned in Cameroon, particularly those without known offspring, as one of its employees points out. Sister Julienne Gertrude Avouzoua's wish was to offer the elderly a permanent and safe home, and to provide for their basic needs. Having been a charity, Béthanie VIACAM has now acquired the title of retirement home and permanently houses 15 elderly people, including 09 women and 06 men aged between 65 and 87 years. It remains open to anyone wishing to introduce their elderly parent. In order to continue the mission it has assigned itself, this retirement home, which has a management team composed of a team leader, support staff and a cook, does not rule out increasing its reception capacity and its staff as far as possible.

From the above, it should be recalled that private initiatives in favor of the care of the elderly in Cameroon offer a classification of two types, namely external supervision establishments and those with an internal regime including retirement homes. MINAS, through its decentralized institutions, supervises all private structures for the care of the elderly. That said, the profiles of these structures for the assistance and support of the elderly raise questions about the motivations that lead the populations of Yaoundé to entrust or not their elderly to these specialized structures.

3. Motivations of families to entrust or not their elderly parents to "retirement homes"

Talking about the admission of the elderly to retirement homes in Yaoundé is to highlight the motivation of the rational choice of the actors for which any action is preceded by the reasoning factor that provokes it. In this sense, it is necessary to consider this admission not as a spontaneous decision, but rather as one, which is based on various other factors, notably social and economic.

3.1 Challenge of maintaining family solidarity

In the register of families' motivations to entrust their elderly parents to retirement homes, the factor of social balance is prominent. It is indeed a question of guaranteeing the solidarity of family members, a solidarity according to which people in need must benefit from the assistance of the family's protective cocoon. Such a recognized practice drawing on the tradition of African and Cameroonian peoples remains a value in Yaoundé. If it is obvious that it tends to disintegrate, the reasons for this disintegration must be sought, says one respondent, in the situation affecting individuals and families. The latter, being preoccupied by questions of survival in a context of ambient economic crisis, do not rank in the order of their priorities, assistance to the elderly to the point of admitting them to reception centers for the elderly. This state of affairs is however more apparent in urban areas here understood as a conflictual space with various issues.

However, The urban context such as that of Yaoundé reveals according to a respondent that the unavailability of family members to properly care for their dependent elderly persons, argues for their admission into care structures. On this subject, Esther, aged 72 and a resident of a retirement home states:

"My daughter had to bring me to this center a few months ago because there was no one at home to take care of me. My son asked her to find a nurse to take care of my health as a family, but I refused because I had to stay alone every day. So, she had the idea to bring me here. In the city, it's not like in the village where everyone can give you their time..."

This testimony reveals that the "African" family, in the strict sense of the term which includes all close relatives, presents a renewed face in the city today due to its role towards its members. It loses its status as a framework to escape the annihilation of life, as it becomes increasingly difficult to count on cousins, uncles and aunts etc. to cope with the constraints of existence. It is with this reality in mind that many people hear or wish to turn to structures that can offer the care needed by their parents who are suffering from the weight of age.

3.2 Addressing the vulnerability of older people

Another reason that supports the increasing admission of elderly people into care structures lies in the recognized vulnerable nature of the latter. People affected by old age have worrying living conditions, because they are less and less useful to themselves and become more and more burdens for their parents if they have any. Physically and psychologically, their condition is declining and they undoubtedly need to be accompanied for the rest of their lives, otherwise their last moments of life risk being very complicated. The situation of elderly people, far from being an illusion, is a fact in Yaoundé and Cameroon. By the way, the authors (Willy Adrien Yakam et al., 2020), identify four forms of vulnerability among elderly Cameroonians, namely structural, economic, environmental and health. These vulnerabilities are all fueled by various factors. As an illustration, if a priori a phenomenon such as the work of family members is supposed to improve the living conditions of people affected by aging thanks to the capital it generates, it becomes a perverse effect a posteriori, because it deprives the elderly of the proximity of their loved ones that they nevertheless need. In light of this state of affairs, in reference to professional mobility as an encouraging factor for the introduction of the elderly into "retirement homes", a family leader says:

"There are several reasons why a person might want to send their parent to a facility for the elderly (...) For example, I work in Yaoundé and my old mother, who is left alone in the village, may at some point need someone to take care of her. It is difficult for her to come and stay with me because I am always going out and I really do not have time. It may also happen that I am transferred to another city, which is why I put her in a facility for the elderly; like that, I have peace of mind, since there are now people who take care of her..."

Based on these remarks, it emerges that the image reflected in retirement homes is one in which specialists work to manage the situation of the elderly, notwithstanding the efforts that families may make for this task. The services offered by the establishments for the assistance of the elderly in Yaoundé thus resolve the issue

of vulnerability of the latter, because they provide housing, nutrition and medical care to their beneficiaries. Regarding the services offered to residents of the establishments for the elderly, an operator reveals the following:

"For these old people, we clean, wash them and feed them (...) our reception center has six dormitories with one bed each, three for women and three for men. There is a room where we wash them, because most of these old people cannot do it themselves. Most also eat on their beds. We accompany them to the entertainment room where they can watch television, listen to the radio etc. There is also a visiting room where they meet their visitors. There are doctors at their disposal who follow them regularly."

From then on, it is visible that the Retirement homes in Yaoundé generally ride on factors that motivate families to entrust them with the populations they target in the agenda of their action. However, even if a category of families adopts this reality, it remains inconceivable for another to entrust only one of their dependent elderly parents. In this second category, many people see it as a sacrilege that breaks with the old values of African families. Thus, regardless of the mobility conditions of one's parent, they must be taken care of within the family framework. As proof, sometimes it is the populations surrounding these structures for helping the elderly who are the first to castigate them.

4. Challenges of setting up structures to support the elderly in Yaoundé

From the outset, it must be admitted that setting up a structure to assist the elderly is not an irrational undertaking. It highlights multiple logics that bring with them various issues. This is what (Moise Tamekem, 2010), sets out to report. This author identifies three types of issues related to setting up structures to support the elderly in Cameroon:

- The first issue is financial; it is based on the unavowed intentions of the promoters of these structures to use the elderly as targets that can help them escape poverty, hence the expression "everyone is looking for themselves".
- The second issue is prestige; according to the author, there are associations for the care of the elderly, several of whose members are important figures in the country. Being in collaboration with the latter would allow one to climb the social ladder.
- The third issue is political, because structures for caring for the elderly are often tools to fuel the ambitions of political operators who are seeking social visibility as elections approach.

In addition to these issues raised, based on the author's reflection and in light of the empirical data collected, two other major issues are identifiable. These are the entrepreneurial issue and that of the well-being of the person and the family.

4.1 Entrepreneurial challenge of private structures providing assistance to the elderly

Creating a structure whose vocation is to assist the elderly means registering one's action in the entrepreneurial universe. As a result, the establishment of the particular structures that concern this reflection testifies to the opportunities offered by the category of elderly people in Cameroon. Notwithstanding their reduced

percentage compared to other categories, the elderly represent a niche for those who are inhabited by what (Jean Pierre Warnier, 1993), calls the Cameroonian entrepreneurial spirit. Retirement homes, beyond the original function of hospitality that they offer, give us to remember that they are driven by logics of gains that their promoters pursue, which gains are hidden in the background of their actions focused on the well-being of the elderly. In this regard, it should not be forgotten that retirement home operators receive income of various kinds in return for the services provided to families by accompanying their elderly, which are indicative of the non-essentially philanthropic nature of these structures. Certainly, the counterpart can be considered as a means of supporting initiatives in favor of the elderly, but it falls within the economic logic of the search for profit recognized in contemporary society where concerns about life and survival are conditioned by the interest granted to the one who guarantees them, and this, in a sustainable manner. That said, in addition to being in line with the financial issue mentioned above regarding (Moise Tamekem, 2010), this issue complements it because of its economic connotation.

4.2 Issue of the well-being of the elderly person and the family

In addition to the entrepreneurial challenge that governs the establishment of structures for the care of the elderly, the challenge of the well-being of these people and their families is also raised by the operators of these structures. This challenge is based on the fact that retirement homes participate not only in the well-being of the subjects for whom they legitimize their creation, but also for the different families who entrust their members to them. That said, if the elderly admitted to so-called retirement establishments are taken care of, this goes to their own development and by extension, that of their close relatives who thus have the possibility of going about their business without having to be held back by the concern of personally ensuring the care of their elderly. When asked what would have motivated the creation of his structure dedicated to the care of the elderly, a promoter of a structure based in Yaoundé answers:

"The elderly constitute a social class that is not sufficiently taken into account by the government in dealing with issues related to vulnerable social classes. Of course, we always talk about women, children, the disabled, but very rarely about the elderly who, however, are just as much in need. The idea of setting up this structure came from the fact that at the time I was already working with the elderly on behalf of an international organization. An expatriate humanitarian colleague who saw my enthusiasm suggested that I create my own structure to help the elderly (...) So I did it to support the well-being of our parents and grandparents."

These remarks are sufficient evidence of the principle of supervision of vulnerable people which primarily drives certain establishments for helping the elderly. Creating and operating these establishments means being motivated by the desire to help others, particularly the elderly, in view of the privileged place which should be reserved for them in our societies; which is highlighted by this excerpt from an interview:

"The elderly are libraries, reservoirs of knowledge that benefit younger generations. Working to keep them alive for a long time, beyond being human, ensures a long transmission of ancient values. Our elders also remind us

that life is transformation and that everyone is called to become old as long as they live. They are the mirror through which every new generation must see itself..."

Inspired by this testimony, it must be recognized that specialized structures for the elderly also bear, and to a significant extent, a philanthropic issue. Based on all that has been said, it turns out that retirement homes transcend cultural boundaries, serving both for the real support of the elderly they receive or visit in family compounds and by being profit-seeking initiatives for certain operators in this sector of activity in Yaoundé.

Conclusion

In the course of this reflection on the care of the elderly in the context of the emergence of "retirement homes" in the city of Yaoundé, it is revealed that several factors contribute to their establishment and to ensuring their operation and/or exploitation for the benefit of the beneficiaries. The support of the elderly in Yaoundé, far from being an easy task according to the proponents of the establishments founded to deal with their generally difficult living conditions, is based on socio-cultural and biological considerations that determine them. Therefore, the people admitted as old and dependent benefiting from the care of retirement establishments are subjects at the heart of the rational choice, both of the promoters of these specialized establishments and of the members of their respective families who decide whether or not to admit them. However, the so-called retirement homes, in their action logic consisting of meeting the challenges related to the situation of the elderly person, and indirectly establishing family solidarity by reducing the vulnerability of the elderly to its simple expression, are banking on the issues of both entrepreneurship and philanthropy. Thus, despite the reluctance linked to old cultural values, they continue to gain ground in Yaoundé. In this way, they offer a reading of the social dynamics that operate in Cameroonian urban environments. Notwithstanding this state of affairs, the care of the elderly in Cameroon in general and in Yaoundé in particular remains essentially family-based. The elderly who find themselves in specialized establishments dedicated to their conditions are generally disconnected from any family background and the family members who voluntarily accompany their loved ones there are forced and have no other option than to proceed in this way to guarantee the maximum possible attention to their elderly parents.

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