

# Rethinking Orphanages: Drawing Inspiration from Cameroon's Culture and Traditions

<sup>1</sup>Djitchap Ajua Dilane Rublex; <sup>2</sup>Mipo Tchinkou Edith Flaure; <sup>3</sup>Bwemba Charles

<sup>2</sup>Architect, NOCA N°. 412

<sup>3</sup>Civil Engineer, Lecturer, Interim Head of Department of Architecture

<sup>1,2,3</sup> Department of Architecture, National Advanced School of Public Works

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Yaoundé, Cameroon

**Abstract:-** This article explores the concept of rethinking orphanages in Cameroon, drawing inspiration from the country's rich cultural and traditional practices, it argues that the current model of orphanages often falls short of providing a holistic and culturally appropriate environment for children. By examining Cameroonian cultural values and practices related to child-rearing, kinship, and community support, the article proposes alternative approaches to caring for orphaned and vulnerable children. These approaches emphasize community-based care, extended family involvement, and the preservation of cultural identity. The articles conclude by highlighting the potential benefits of such a paradigm shift for the well-being of children and the strengthening of Cameroonian communities.

**Keywords:-** Family, Family Structure, Family Values, Orphanages, Community Involvement.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Cameroon, a diverse and culturally rich country, have a long history of caring for orphaned and vulnerable children. Traditional practices, such as extended family support and community-based care, have played a crucial role in providing a sense of belonging and support for these children. Generally, children are taken in by extended family members after the passing of both parents. However, the influx of western influences and the challenges of modernization have led to a shift towards institutionalized care, often in the form of orphanages.

While orphanages have provided a necessary safety net for many children, they have also faced criticism for their cultural heritage and deprive them of the benefits of family-based care. Recently, the on-going arm conflicts in the Northwest and Southwest region of Cameroon has left many children without parents. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the vulnerabilities of institutionalized care, as outbreaks and lockdowns have disrupted routines and limited access to essential services.

This article seeks to re-examine the concept of orphanages in Cameroon and explore alternatives approaches that are more aligned with the country's cultural values and traditions. By drawing inspiration from Cameroonian culture,

it aims to develop a more holistic and culturally appropriate framework for caring for orphaned and vulnerable children.

## II. CAMEROONIAN CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON CHILD-REARING

Cameroonian culture places a strong emphasis on family and community. Children are typically raised within extended family networks, which provide a sense of belonging, support, and guidance. The concept of "ubuntu" which translates roughly to "I am because we are", underscores the interconnectedness of individuals and the importance of collective responsibility. Traditional child-rearing practices often involve a shared responsibility among parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and other relatives. This extended family support system provides a safety net for children, particularly in times of crises or hardship.

Furthermore, Cameroonian communities often have strong cultural traditions and rituals that celebrate childhood and mark important life stages. These rituals help to reinforce children's sense of identity and belonging with their community.

## III. THE ROLE OF KINSHIP IN CAMEROONIAN SOCIETY

Kinship plays a central role in the Cameroonian society, defining relationships, obligations, and rights. The concept of "umuntu" (humanity) is often associated with one's lineage and ancestry. Kinship ties are not only limited to blood relatives but also extend to individuals who are related through marriage, adoption, or other social bonds. Within the kinship system, there is a strong emphasis on reciprocity and mutual support. Individuals are expected to contribute to the well-being of their kin, and in return, they can rely on their kin for support in times of need. This sense of obligation and solidarity provide a safety net for children who may have lost their parents or primary caregivers.

➤ *Kinship has a Lot of Significance in the Cameroonian Society. Some of these Significances are: -*

- The extended family including grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and in-laws, are often more considered to take over child-rearing than other family systems.

- Family members provide emotional, financial, and physical support, especial in times of need.
- The community shares responsibility for raising children, ensuring that no child is left without care.
- Children are often raised by the whole village, with multiple caregivers contributing to their upbringing.
- Elders and community members offer guidance and mentorship, shaping children's values and behaviors.
- Communities often have informal support systems in place, such as rotating savings and credit associations or cooperative farming, which help to alleviate poverty and ensure basic needs are met.
- Land, livestock, and other resources are often shared within the community, fostering a sense of solidarity and interdependence.

#### IV. THE INFLUENCE OF SPATIAL ARRANGEMENT OF ORPHANAGES IN CAMEROON IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ORPHANED CHILDREN.

Spatial arrangement refers to the way in which objects or elements are positioned within a given space. It encompasses the distribution, orientation and interrelationships of these elements. The spatial arrangement of orphanages in Cameroon can significantly impact the development of orphaned children. A further exploration of this topic reveals the following:

##### ➤ *Access to Education and Resources:*

The location of an orphanage affects children's access to education, healthcare, and other essential resources. Orphanages situated in urban areas may have better access to schools, hospitals, and recreational facilities, while rural orphanages might face challenges in providing these services. Proximity to schools and vocational training centers is crucial for educational development. Children who attend school regularly are more likely to acquire essential skills and knowledge.

##### ➤ *Social Interaction and Community Integration:*

The spatial layout of an orphanage can impact social interactions among children. Large, open spaces encourage group activities, while smaller, cramped spaces may limit socialization. Orphanages located within communities allow children to interact with local residents, fostering a sense of belonging and cultural exchange. In contrast, isolated orphanages may lead to feelings of loneliness and detachment.

##### ➤ *Health and Well-Being:*

Clean and safe living conditions are essential for children's health. Proper sanitation, ventilation, and access to clean water contribute to overall well-being. Orphanages situated near polluted areas or industrial sites may expose children to environmental hazards. Conversely, those in serene environments can promote physical and mental health.

##### ➤ *Emotional Support and Caregiver Availability:*

The arrangement of sleeping quarters, common areas, and play spaces impacts emotional support. Children need

nurturing caregivers who can provide individual attention. Smaller orphanages with a low caregiver-to-child ratio may offer better emotional support. In contrast, overcrowded facilities may struggle to meet each child's emotional needs.

##### ➤ *Cultural Context and Identity:*

The location of an orphanage within a specific cultural context influences children's sense of identity. Exposure to local customs, traditions, and languages helps preserve cultural heritage. Orphanages that celebrate cultural diversity and encourage pride in one's background contribute to positive identity development.

##### ➤ *Security and Safety:*

The physical security of an orphanage matters. Children should feel safe and protected and equally have a sense of belonging. This can be achieved by avoiding seclusion through the building of tall walls around the structure. Proximity to high-crime areas or unsafe neighborhoods can negatively impact children's sense of security.

#### V. THE INFLUENCE OF TRADITIONAL FAMILY STRUCTURE IN THE STRUCTURAL SETTING OF ORPHANAGES

Traditional family structure plays a significant role in shaping the structural setting of orphanages in many societies. Below, we will examine in what ways traditional family values and practices influence the design, layout and operation of orphanages.

##### ➤ *Cultural Context and Architectural Adaptation:*

Researchers have explored how cultural norms and family structures impact the design of Child Care Institutions (CCIs) and orphanages. Traditional family structures vary significantly across different regions and societies. Adaptation is a key consideration. Architects and designers must understand local customs, family dynamics, and community values to create spaces that resonate with the children's cultural background. For example, orphanages may incorporate traditional motifs, artwork, or cultural symbols into their buildings and surroundings.

##### ➤ *Spatial Arrangement and Emotional Well-Being:*

Orphanages often aim to replicate a family-like environment. The spatial arrangement plays a crucial role in achieving this goal.

- Family-style units: Some orphanages adopt a family-style model, where children live in smaller groups (akin to nuclear families). These units typically have shared living spaces, communal dining areas, and private bedrooms. For example, The SOS Children's Village model is based on the concept of family-centered care, with children living in small family units with a dedicated caregiver.
- Emotional well-being: Research suggests that children in family-style orphanages experience better emotional well-being compared to those in large institutional settings. The design elements borrowed from traditional family structures contribute to this positive experience.

➤ *Role of Nature and Outdoor Spaces*

- Traditional family homes often integrate nature into their design. Gardens, courtyards, and outdoor play areas are common features.
- Biophilic design: Architects incorporate biophilic principles by including green spaces, natural light, and views of nature. These elements positively impact children's mental health and overall development.
- Outdoor play: Traditional families spend time outdoors together. Orphanages should provide safe outdoor spaces for play, recreation, and physical activity.

➤ *Privacy and Personalization*

- Traditional families value privacy. Architects consider this when designing individual bedrooms or personal spaces for children.
- Customization: Allowing children to personalize their living spaces (e.g., decorating walls, choosing bedding) fosters a sense of ownership and identity.

➤ *Challenges and Balance;*

- Balancing tradition with modern needs: While drawing from traditional family structures, architects must also address contemporary requirements (such as safety, hygiene, and accessibility).
- Flexibility: Spaces should be adaptable to accommodate changing needs, as children grow and transition.

➤ *Community Integration:*

Orphanages that are integrated into the community may

have open spaces and facilities that are accessible to the surrounding neighborhood. This can help reduce the stigma associated with orphanages and promote a sense of community ownership and support.

## VI. IMPACT OF THE TRADITIONAL FAMILY STRUCTURE AND VALUE ON ORPHANAGES

The influence of traditional family structure and values on orphanage care has been a topic of interest in various studies and theories. Understanding how cultural norms and traditional values impact orphanage care is crucial for providing effective support and nurturing environments for vulnerable children.

### A. Theoretical Frameworks

The influence of traditional family structure and values on orphanage care has been a subject of interest in various theories and studies. Understanding how cultural norms and traditional values impact orphanage care is crucial for enhancing the well-being and development of children in institutional settings. Here are some existing theories that analyze this relationship:

➤ *Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969).*

The theory was formulated by the psychiatric and psychoanalyst John Bowlby in 1969. This theory proposes that the physical attachment between parent (typically the mother) and child leads to a sense of physical and psychological security. They are four basic characteristics that basically gives a clear view of attachment. They include; a safe haven, a secure base, proximity maintenance and separation distress. These four attributes are very evident in the relationship between a child and his/her caregiver.

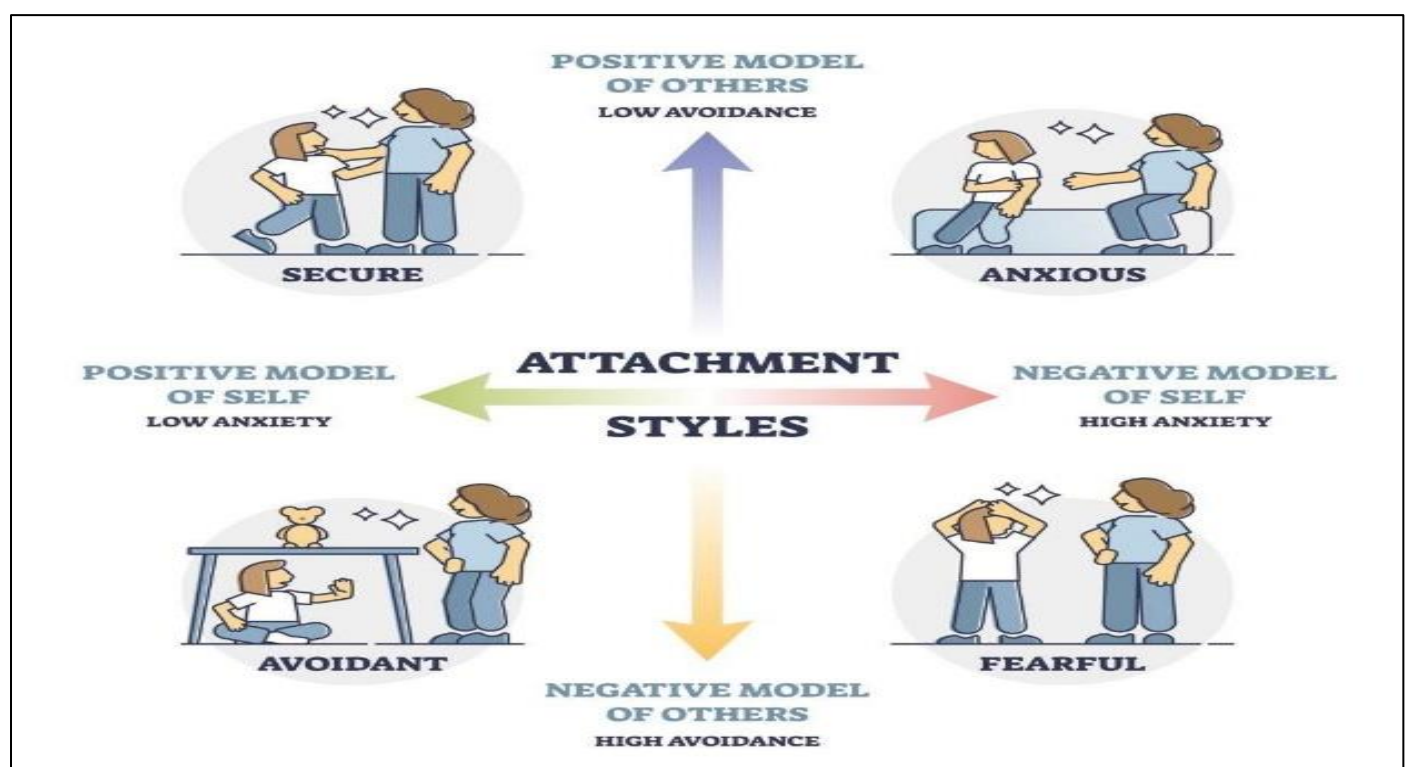


Fig 1 Illustration of the Attachment (*Attachment and Loss: vol 1. by John Bowlby*).

Theory Studies have shown that traditional family structures, which provide consistent and loving relationships, contribute to healthy attachment formation in children. Orphanages that mimic familial structures and values may promote secure attachments among orphaned children.

➤ *Role Theory (Parsons, 1955).*

The role theory refers to the cultural norms regarding psychological and interactional aspects of members of the

society, such as mothers, fathers, sons, daughter, and grandparents. The role theory focuses on the social roles that individuals play within a society and the expectations and behaviors associated with those roles. It is a concept in sociology and in social psychology that considers most of everyday activity to be the acting-out of socially defined categories. Each role is a set of rights, duties, expectations, norms, and behaviors that a person has to face and fulfill.

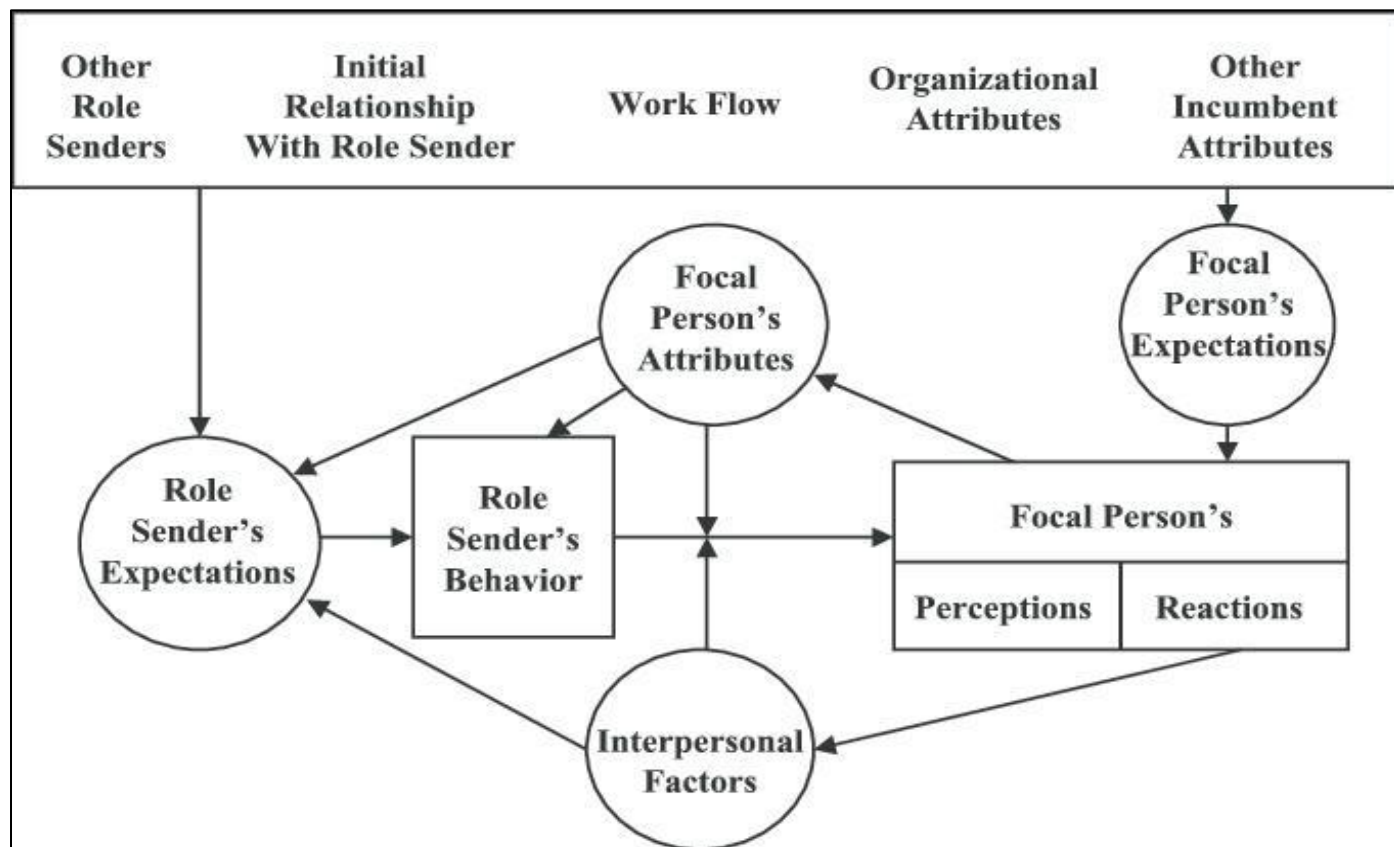


Fig 2 Illustration of the Role theory (*The Social System (1951)*)

Traditional family structures assign specific roles to parents, children, and other family members. Orphanage care may disrupt these roles, creating confusion and difficulties for children in understanding their place in the society. Nonetheless, studies have shown that orphanages that adopt the traditional family style in caring for orphaned children provide them with the necessary tender love and discipline to know their role at home and in the society.

➤ *Socialization Theory (Bandura, 1986).*

Socialization theory is a theoretical framework that explains how individuals learn and acquire the norms, values, beliefs, and behaviors of their culture or society. Albert Bandura proposed that socialization is based on observational learning/ meaning people learn from observing and imitating other behaviors, attitudes, and emotions. His theory is also known as the Social Cognitive theory. Bandura argued that observational learning involves four factors:

- Attention; this is paying attention to the model's behavior.
- Retention; this is remembering what was observed.

- Reproduction; this is reproducing what was learned.
- Motivation; this is being rewarded or punished for one's behavior.

Traditional family structures and values play a crucial role in socializing children into accepted behaviors and beliefs. Orphanage care may limit opportunities for children to experience these traditional socialization experience. Studies argues that this can be remedied through setting up orphanages with traditional family structures other than building large dormitories.

➤ *Functionalism Theory (Parsons 1975)*

Functionalism is a sociological theory that views society as a complex system made up of interconnected parts, each of which serves a specific function in maintaining the overall stability and equilibrium of the system. This theory suggests that social institutions, like the family, serve specific functions for society.



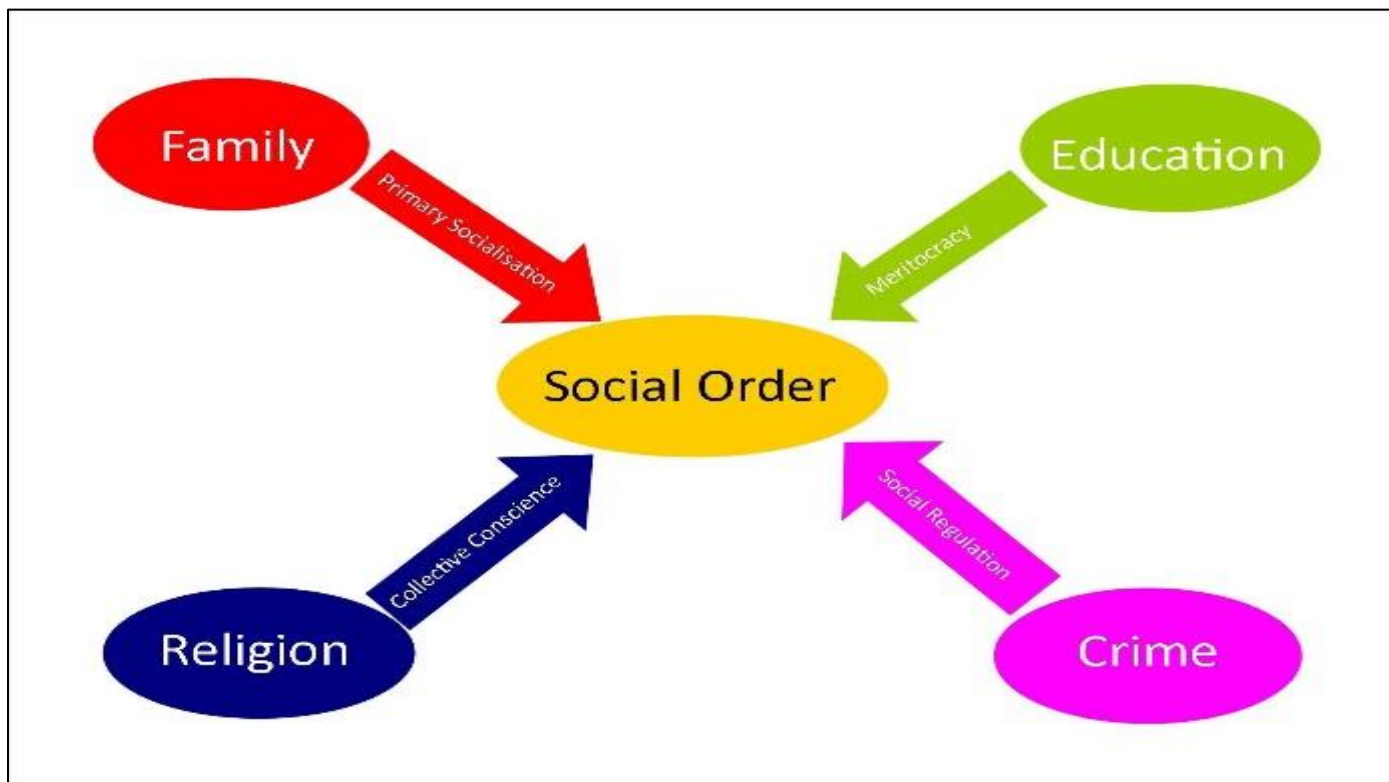


Fig 3 Bubble diagram illustrating the Functionalism theory (*The Structure of Social Action (1973)*)

In traditional societies, the extended family fulfills the function of socialization and ensures the well-being of its members, including orphans. Orphanages may be seen as a necessary intervention when the extended family unit fails to fulfill this function.

➤ *Cultural Competence Theory (Cross et al., 1999)*

Cultural competence theory as proposed by Cross et al., emphasizes the importance of understanding, valuing, and respecting cultural diversity in interactions and services. It involves developing skills, attitudes, and knowledge to effectively engage with the individuals and communities from different cultural backgrounds.

This theory highlights the importance of understanding cultural values when designing care for children. For example, some cultures may place a higher value on collective responsibility within the family unit. Cultural Competence Theory suggests that orphanage care models should be sensitive to these values and explore ways to support extended families caring for orphans.

*B. Review of Existing Studies*

Numerous studies have examined the influence of traditional family structure and values on orphanage care, highlighting its impact on the well-being and development of children in the institutional settings. Below, we delve in to some notable studies that provide valuable insights into this relationship:

➤ *The Centrality of Family in Traditional Societies*

Many cultures around the world emphasize the extended family as the primary unit responsible for child welfare (Ikels,

2004). This concept is particularly strong in African societies where the proverb "it takes a village to raise a child" reflects the communal responsibility towards children, including orphans (Mbaku, 2005). Studies by Wiredu (1990) suggest that the extended family acts as a buffer, protecting children and mediating their interaction with the world.

➤ *Cultural Influences on Orphanage Care in Sub-Saharan Africa.*

A study by Beck et al. (2016) explores the influence of cultural values and traditional family structures on orphanage care in six sub-Saharan African countries. The study found that children in orphanages who maintained connections to their extended families and communities had better overall well-being and social-emotional outcome.

➤ *Impact of Family Structure on Attachment and Development in Orphanages*

Research by Van IJzendoorn et al. (2004) examined the impact of family structure on attachment and development among children in orphanages in Romania. The study revealed that children raised in family-like settings with consistent caregivers formed more secure attachments and had better cognitive and social outcomes compared to those in traditional institutional care settings.

➤ *Cultural and Identity Development*

- Disconnection from heritage: institutional settings often fail to provide opportunities for children to connect with their cultural heritage. This can lead to a loss of cultural identity and sense of alienation from their community.

- Limited access to traditional practices: children may miss out on learning important cultural values, customs, and traditions, which are often passed down through families and communities.

➤ *Environmental and Operational Challenges*

- Overcrowding and poor living conditions: traditional orphanages often struggle with overcrowding, leading to inadequate living spaces and limited access to resources.
- Lack of community involvement; traditional orphanages often operate in isolation, neglecting the potential benefits of community involvement and support.

## VII. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR RETHINKING ORPHANAGES IN CAMEROON

➤ *Challenges*

- Shifting paradigms. One of the biggest challenges is shifting deeply ingrained paradigms about orphanages. Traditional institutional models are often deeply embedded in norms and historical practices, and societal expectations. Overcoming these established beliefs and practices requires a fundamental rethinking of how we can care for orphaned children.
- Limited resources: many orphanages face significant resources limitations, including financial constraints, a lack of trained staff, and insufficient access to essential services. Overcoming these challenges requires sustained investment and support from government, Non-Governmental Organizations, and philanthropists.
- Community Involvement: integrating orphanages more fully into communities can be challenging. This requires overcoming existing barriers, fostering collaboration between orphanages and community organizations, and building trust between communities and orphanages staff.
- Cultural sensitivity: rethinking orphanages must be done with sensitivity to local cultural values, beliefs, and traditions. Designing models that align with cultural norms while addressing the needs of orphaned children requires careful consideration and consultation with community leaders.
- Addressing trauma and loss: many orphaned children have experienced trauma and loss, requiring specialized care and support. Creating an environment that addresses their emotional needs and provides access to therapeutic interventions can be challenging but crucial for their well-being.
- Adapting traditional family structures: integrating traditional family values into orphanages is crucial. This can be challenging, as traditional homes often prioritize communal living, hierarchy, and specific spatial arrangements for different family members. Replicating this in an orphanage setting requires careful consideration of space, layout, and activities to foster a sense of community, respect for elders, and appropriate privacy for children of different ages. This is generally not the case with orphanages in Cameroon as they mostly tend to build dormitories for the orphans within their institution.

- Balancing privacy and communal life: orphanages need to create a balance between communal spaces that encourage interaction and individual spaces that provide privacy for children. This is often a tightrope walk, as traditional values might emphasize communal living, while modern considerations prioritize individual privacy.

➤ *Opportunities*

- Family centered-approach: moving towards a family-centered design models offers a transformative approach. This involves creating environments that fosters a sense of belonging, nurture emotional security, and support healthy development.
- Community Integration: strengthening partnership with local communities can provide opportunities for mentorship, cultural enrichment, and social integration. Communities can become a vital support system for orphaned children, helping them build a sense of belonging and connection
- Empowering children; giving children a voice in their care is essential. This involves fostering environments where they can express their needs, participate in decision-making, and have a sense agency.
- Focus on prevention: investing programs that support families and prevent separation is a critical component of rethinking orphanages. This could include poverty reduction initiatives, early intervention services, and family strengthening programs.

## VIII. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF RETHINKING ORPHANAGES IN CAMEROON

Rethinking orphanages in Cameroon drawing inspiration from its rich culture and traditions can have profound economic and social impacts, positively influencing the lives of orphaned children, their communities, and Cameroon's overall development.

➤ *Social Impacts*

- Enhanced emotional well-being and Identity: a family-centered design, rooted in Cameroonian cultural value of community and kinship, can foster a sense of belonging, stability, and emotional security for orphaned children. This can lead to improved emotional resilience, stronger self-esteem and more robust sense of identity.
- Reduced stigma and social exclusion: by integrating orphanages in communities and emphasizing the role of extended family networks, the stigma associated with orphanhood can be reduced. Children will be less likely to face isolation and social exclusion.
- Strengthen cultural identity: by incorporating traditional practices, languages, and values into the daily life, the orphanage environment can help the children maintain a connection with their cultural heritage. This fosters a sense of belonging and pride.
- Improved social skills: family-centered approach can promote social skills, communication, and empathy in children.

➤ *Economic Impacts*

- Increased human capital: children that are raised on a nurturing and culturally sensitive environment are more likely to thrive academically and socially. This leads to a more educated and skilled workforce, contributing to Cameroon's economic growth.
- Reduced social cost: a family-entered design can lead to reduced social cost associated with orphaned children. Less reliance on institutional care can free up resources for other social programs and initiatives.
- Community development: the involvement of local communities in orphanage design, operation, and support can stimulate economic activities. This can create job opportunities, strengthen local businesses, and revitalize communities.
- Sustainable development: by integrating sustainable practices into orphanages design and operations (e.g., using local materials, promoting energy efficiency, and engaging in local gardening, we can contribute to Cameroon's sustainable goals.

**IX. CONCLUSION**

Rethinking orphanages in Cameroon is a critical step towards providing a more holistic and culturally appropriate environment for orphaned and vulnerable children. By drawing inspiration from Cameroonian culture and traditions, it is possible to develop a more sustainable and effective approach to child care that emphasizes community-based care, extended family involvement, and the preservation of cultural identity.

This article has explored the concept of rethinking orphanages in Cameroon drawing inspiration from its rich cultural and traditional. It has argued that the current model of orphanages often falls shorting if providing a holistic and culturally appropriate environment for children. The article concludes by highlighting the potential benefits of such a paradigm shift for the well-being of children and strengthening of Cameroonian communities. By embracing its cultural heritage and investing in community-based care, Cameroon can create a more nurturing and supportive environment for all its children.

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