Scripta Humanika:
Jurnal Sosial Humaniora dan Pendidikan
Vol. 2, No. 2 November 2026, Hal 52-63
ISSN: 3110-892X (Print) ISSN: 3110-8911 (Electronic)
Open Access: https://scriptaintelektual.com/scripta-humanika/index

Ethnic-Residential Anchoring: A Sociological Theory of Communitarian Settlement in Cameroonian Cities

MAZOU Issa[1*], GUEBOU TADJUIDJE François[2]
[1-2] University of Maroua, Cameroon
Email: issamazou03@gmail.com[1],gueboutf@yahoo.com[2]*

Article Info :
Received:
18-09-2026
Revised:
04-10-2026
Accepted:
01-11-2026

Abstract

This article developed an exploratory sociological theory of residential choice in sub-Saharan African cities, using observations from the Cameroonian context. It examined the limits of strictly economic and land-market explanations of urban settlement and formulated the theory of ethnic-residential anchoring. The analysis drew on urban sociology and African urban anthropology and conceptualized residential location as a social act shaped by ethnic solidarities, cultural representations of space, and the search for collective security. The article defined the theory's key concepts, identified five secondary postulates, and specified a cumulative explanatory mechanism linking ethnic affinity, communitarian residential preferences, community networks, residential security, spatial concentration, and the reproduction of ethnic neighborhoods. A conceptual model was developed to connect micro-sociological residential trajectories with macro-sociological spatial configurations. The discussion distinguished this framework from classical urban ecology and residential segregation approaches while acknowledging its exploratory status. The article concluded that comparative empirical research in Cameroonian cities was required to assess the relative weight of community-based mechanisms alongside economic, institutional, religious, and social factors.

Keywords: *urban sociology; residential anchoring; ethnicity; African city; Cameroon; communitarianism.*

©2026 Authors. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License.
(https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

INTRODUCTION

Cities in Cameroon have experienced sustained demographic growth for several decades, while urban planning has not kept pace with the influx of migrants. Maroua, Garoua, Douala, and Yaoundé receive households from surrounding rural areas, small towns in the Far North, and other regions of the country in search of employment, schooling for their children, or protection from economic and security difficulties affecting some rural areas. This urban growth raises a question that urban sociology has often approached through imported models: why, once they arrive in the city, do households not distribute themselves randomly across the available urban space, but instead tend to settle in neighborhoods already occupied by members of their own ethnic or regional group?

This question is not new in itself. It occupied African urban anthropology from the 1950s, notably in Georges Balandier's work on Brazzaville and in the Manchester School's studies of mining towns in Central and Southern Africa (Balandier, 1955; Mitchell, 1956; Epstein, 1958). It also informed Abner Cohen's later analysis of Hausa commercial networks in Yoruba towns in Nigeria (Cohen, 1969). Yet these contributions were not always systematized as an explicit sociological theory with its own concepts, hierarchized postulates, and clearly stated causal model. The present article therefore proposed, cautiously, what is termed the theory of ethnic-residential anchoring.

Our approach was grounded in a recurrent observation in cities of the Cameroonian Littoral and Far North, where neighborhoods are often identified in everyday language by the group that historically populated them, even before their administrative names are used. This apparently ordinary observation revealed a deeper phenomenon: Cameroonian urban space is not only a functional space organized by land markets and urban-planning policies; it is also lived space charged with communitarian meanings, where residential settlement can reproduce, reaffirm, or recompose collective identities.

The scientific significance of the article extended beyond Cameroon. It concerned a broader question in contemporary urban sociology: whether explanatory models developed from twentieth-century North American and European cities remain fully adequate for understanding residential dynamics in Global South cities, where historical trajectories, land configurations, and relations to group belonging differ in important respects. The article did not claim a definitive answer. Rather, it showed how a context-sensitive theoretical formulation could account for certain residential phenomena without discarding existing frameworks altogether.

The article pursued two objectives. First, it critically examined theories of urban residential distribution, particularly those derived from the human ecology of the Chicago School, and assessed their explanatory limits in relation to observed African urban dynamics. Second, it formulated a middle-range sociological theory, in Merton's (1949) sense, capable of articulating micro- and macro-sociological levels of community-based residential settlement without claiming universal validity. The theory was presented as a set of propositions requiring empirical testing rather than as established sociological laws.

The article was organized into a review of the problem and state of the art, an epistemological foundation, a definition of the core concepts, the formulation of theoretical postulates and mechanisms, a conceptual model, and a scientific discussion of the proposal in relation to existing approaches.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study used a qualitative and conceptual research design combining theoretical analysis, critical reading of the literature, and field-based observations from Cameroonian urban contexts, particularly Douala and Maroua. The material was not presented as a probability sample and the article did not claim to provide a quantitative estimate of the determinants of residential choice. Instead, observations and existing scholarly findings were used to identify recurrent mechanisms, formulate concepts, and construct propositions that could subsequently be tested empirically. The analytical procedure consisted of four stages: identification of explanatory limits in classical urban-residential theories; comparison with African urban-anthropological findings; conceptualization of ethnic-residential anchoring and its associated dimensions; and formalization of a cumulative mechanism connecting individual residential decisions with collective spatial configurations. This methodological positioning was consistent with the exploratory and middle-range character of the proposed theory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reframing Urban Residential Distribution through the Cameroonian Urban Experience

The analytical comparison of urban-residential theories indicates that residential settlement in Cameroonian cities cannot be adequately interpreted through a single explanatory tradition. Classical human ecology, particularly the Chicago School, conceptualized urban space as an arena in which social groups compete for advantageous locations under conditions shaped by economic capacity, mobility, and succession (Park et al., 1925). Within this framework, the city develops through spatial differentiation, while newly arrived or economically disadvantaged populations tend to occupy transitional areas before moving toward locations associated with improved socioeconomic status. Such an explanation remains useful for identifying the influence of income, housing availability, and urban competition, yet its explanatory reach becomes more limited when residential proximity is actively maintained through kinship, regional belonging, ethnic affiliation, and other communitarian relations. The Cameroonian material considered in this study suggests that households may evaluate residential locations not merely according to material characteristics but also according to the presence of social relationships capable of reducing uncertainty during settlement.

Wirth's (1938) interpretation of urbanism introduced another influential proposition by associating urban growth with increasingly impersonal, segmented, and individualized social relations. Urban density and heterogeneity were expected to weaken forms of primary-group solidarity associated with rural or traditional social organization. The Cameroonian case complicates such a linear interpretation because migration into the city does not necessarily sever relationships with communities of origin. Urban settlement may instead produce new forms through which these affiliations are maintained, reactivated, or reconstructed. Simmel's account of metropolitan life

similarly drew attention to individualization under urban conditions, yet the persistence of more restricted forms of sociability among migrants suggests that metropolitan individualization and communitarian attachment need not be understood as mutually exclusive processes (Simmel, 1903/1979). A household may participate in heterogeneous urban institutions while simultaneously relying on kinship, regional, ethnic, or religious networks when searching for housing, organizing childcare, locating employment, or establishing neighborhood relations.

Theories of residential segregation broaden this analysis by demonstrating that spatial concentration cannot be reduced to household income. Massey and Denton (1993) showed that neighborhood differentiation can emerge through the interaction of residential preferences, institutional practices, housing-market arrangements, and discriminatory structures. Their analysis is historically rooted in racial segregation in the United States and therefore cannot be transferred mechanically to Cameroon, but its major analytical insight remains relevant: spatial concentration is produced through social mechanisms rather than through economic capacity alone. The distinction is important for ethnic-residential anchoring because the proposed framework does not assume that community concentration in Cameroonian cities necessarily represents externally imposed segregation. Some patterns of proximity may arise from actively mobilized relationships that provide information, material assistance, recognition, familiarity, and forms of perceived security. This shifts analytical attention from concentration itself toward the mechanism through which a particular residential configuration is produced.

French sociology of urban space adds a second dimension to this reinterpretation. Lefebvre (1974) treated space as socially produced rather than as a neutral physical container, while de Certeau (1980) distinguished institutional strategies of spatial ordering from everyday practices through which inhabitants appropriate, reinterpret, and reorganize planned environments. This distinction clarifies why an administratively neutral subdivision may develop a strong symbolic association with a particular community even when cadastral plans contain no ethnic designation. Official planning establishes streets, parcels, administrative boundaries, and housing regulations, but residents continuously produce another level of spatial meaning through repeated practices of settlement, association, mobility, exchange, worship, sociability, and mutual assistance. Ethnic-residential anchoring therefore operates in the analytical distance between administratively conceived space and socially experienced space. The neighborhood is not treated simply as a location in which social relations occur; it can become one of the products of those relations.

African urban anthropology provides the most direct evidence for this interpretation. Balandier's (1955) work on Brazzaville demonstrated that urbanization could recompose rather than eliminate solidarities associated with social origin. Mitchell (1956) subsequently showed that ethnicity in African urban settings may be situationally activated rather than functioning as a passive survival of rural culture, while Epstein (1958) documented the role of ethnically organized associations within urban political and social life. Cohen (1969) developed this argument further by showing how Hausa migrants mobilized ethnic organization as a practical resource for commercial coordination, trust, political negotiation, and collective interest in Yoruba towns. These studies challenge modernization assumptions that ethnic belonging should progressively disappear as urban integration advances. They instead indicate that urban environments can give ethnic boundaries new organizational functions.

Later analyses extend the same argument toward access to urban resources. Piermay (1993) showed that land access in Central African cities remained connected to customary and community-based relations alongside formal market mechanisms. Éla (1983) resisted explanations of African urbanization that simply projected Western models onto African cities, while Le Bris et al. (1987) documented the importance of family and kinship networks within urban residential trajectories. Simone (2004) likewise emphasized the continuing role of interpersonal, communal, and religious networks in obtaining housing, work, and other urban resources. Bayart (1989) demonstrated that ethnic and regional solidarities intersect with political and economic access in postcolonial African societies, whereas Mbembe (2000) stressed the need to interpret such relations through their specific historical formations. These contributions converge around the idea that African urban residence is embedded in wider systems of social access, although Hannerz (1980) cautions against reducing urban heterogeneity to ethnicity alone.

Table 1. Analytical Synthesis of Explanatory Traditions Relevant to Ethnic-Residential Anchoring

Explanatory tradition	Principal residential mechanism	Analytical contribution	Limitation for the Cameroonian case	Function within the proposed framework
Classical human ecology	Competition, mobility, invasion, succession, socioeconomic differentiation	Explains market competition and spatial differentiation	Gives limited attention to actively maintained community proximity	Provides the economic-spatial baseline against which communitarian mechanisms are assessed
Urbanism and metropolitan individualization	Weakening of primary relations under urban density and heterogeneity	Explains changing sociability associated with urbanization	May underestimate persistence or reconstruction of community solidarities	Establishes a proposition against which continuing ethnic and regional affiliation can be examined
Residential segregation theory	Interaction of institutions, markets, group relations, and residential preferences	Demonstrates that concentration cannot be reduced to income	Developed primarily from historically specific North American racial relations	Clarifies that similar spatial outcomes may arise from different causal processes
Sociology of socially produced space	Appropriation of lived space through practices and representations	Explains symbolic and social construction of neighborhoods	Does not by itself specify the mechanism linking ethnicity to residential concentration	Provides the spatial dimension of ethnic-residential anchoring
African urban anthropology	Kinship, ethnicity, associations, social networks, and solidarities	Demonstrates the persistence and recomposition of community ties in African cities	Findings remain dispersed across cases and ethnographic traditions	Supplies the empirical and conceptual foundations to be systematized
Political sociology of postcolonial Africa	Networks governing access to economic, political, and social resources	Locates ethnic and regional solidarity within wider resource structures	Residential choice is not usually its principal analytical object	Extends community relations to housing and neighborhood access
Ethnic-residential anchoring	Affinity → communitarian preference → network mobilization → security → residential choice → spatial concentration	Connects household decisions with reproduction of neighborhood configurations	Requires systematic empirical testing	Provides an integrated middle-range explanatory model

Source: Authors' analytical synthesis based on the theoretical and empirical materials examined in the study

Table 1 reveals that the theoretical problem is not the absence of useful explanations but their fragmentation. Market-oriented theories clarify material constraints, spatial sociology explains the social production of territory, segregation studies identify multiple mechanisms behind concentration, and African urban anthropology demonstrates the continuing relevance of community networks. None of these approaches, taken separately, fully specifies the process through which ethnic affinity may become a residential orientation and subsequently accumulate into a recognizable neighborhood configuration. The analytical result of the comparison is therefore a theoretical gap rather than a simple rejection of prior theory. Ethnic-residential anchoring seeks to occupy this gap by linking relational ethnicity, social networks, residential security, spatial practice, and cumulative neighborhood formation without claiming that ethnicity operates independently of markets, class, institutions, or land tenure.

The epistemological structure of the proposed theory reflects this integrative position. Weberian sociology directs attention toward the meanings that households attribute to residential decisions, including proximity to relatives, familiar religious institutions, social recognition, or a perceived sense of security (Weber, 1922/1971). Crozier and Friedberg (1977) permit these decisions to be understood as strategic actions undertaken within constraints, while Bourdieu (1980) clarifies how community networks may function as practical resources capable of reducing information and transaction costs. Barth's (1969) relational treatment of ethnicity prevents the framework from assuming that ethnic groups are internally homogeneous or culturally fixed. Merton's (1949) concept of middle-range theory provides the appropriate theoretical scale: ethnic-residential anchoring does not claim to constitute a universal theory of African urbanization, but a bounded explanatory framework addressing residential choice under conditions of substantial ethnic plurality. The first major result of the conceptual analysis is thus the identification of a theoretically coherent space in which residential location can be treated simultaneously as economic decision, social strategy, symbolic practice, and collectively consequential action.

Ethnic-Residential Anchoring as a Cumulative Micro–Macro Mechanism

The central theoretical result is the proposition that residential location in ethnically plural Cameroonian cities can be shaped by an interaction between material constraints and socially organized forms of belonging. Ethnic-residential anchoring does not claim that households disregard rent, land prices, employment location, transport, housing quality, or tenure security. It proposes instead that such considerations may be filtered through the availability and perceived value of communitarian relationships. A dwelling may acquire greater attractiveness when located close to relatives, trusted acquaintances, members of a regional association, established community leaders, places of worship, or other socially familiar environments. Residential choice is therefore treated as a socially embedded act rather than as a purely individual response to the housing market.

Five secondary postulates specify this central proposition. The first concerns social and psychological proximity: households undergoing urban settlement may value locations where members of their cultural or regional group are already present because such environments reduce the uncertainty associated with arrival. The second concerns economic solidarity, since proximity may facilitate informal credit, information concerning employment or housing, shared expenses, and practical assistance. The third treats housing and neighborhood practices as possible extensions of cultural identity, allowing domestic organization and everyday use of surrounding space to contribute to collective identification. The fourth proposes that repeated residential choices can transform ordinary urban locations into symbolically recognized community territories. The fifth emphasizes the informational and organizational power of social networks during settlement, especially when migrants have limited access to formal housing information. These propositions define mechanisms rather than deterministic rules and therefore remain open to empirical falsification.

Table 2. Core Components, Postulates, and Empirically Observable Implications of Ethnic-Residential Anchoring

Theoretical component	Proposed mechanism	Residential implication	Potential empirical indication
Ethnic affinity	Recognition of shared origin or belonging	Narrows or orients the initial residential search	Preferred consideration of areas where co-members are already present
Residential communitarianism	Preference for social proximity	Community composition becomes part of location evaluation	Stated preference for proximity to kin, regional, ethnic, or familiar social networks
Community-network mobilization	Kinship, neighborhood, association, and mutual-aid relations provide resources	Reduces search uncertainty and practical settlement costs	Housing information, introductions, guarantees, informal assistance, or shared resources obtained through networks
Search for residential security	Emotional, social, and economic security are evaluated alongside material housing conditions	Familiarity may increase the perceived value of a location	Residential choices referring to trust, support, recognition, or perceived social safety
Residential choice	Household selects a dwelling under both structural and relational constraints	Individual trajectory becomes spatially fixed at a given moment	Observable move into a community-associated or alternative neighborhood
Spatial concentration	Repeated choices accumulate geographically	Group presence becomes increasingly visible in the same area	Increasing local concentration over successive settlement trajectories
Strengthened sense of belonging	Residential proximity reinforces interaction and territorial identification	Neighborhood acquires collective meaning	Repeated association between a place and a group in everyday representations
Reproduction of the ethnic neighborhood	Existing concentration attracts or supports subsequent settlers	Spatial configuration persists despite household turnover	New arrivals reproduce a previously established settlement pattern

Source: Authors' elaboration from the central and secondary postulates of the proposed theory

The mechanism connecting these components is cumulative rather than merely sequential. Its logic resembles Myrdal's (1957) cumulative circular causation: an initial condition generates consequences that increase the likelihood of its own reproduction. A small number of households settling near co-members may increase the density and utility of local networks. Stronger networks can improve access to information on rooms, plots, landlords, informal credit, employment, or neighborhood intermediaries. These resources make the area more accessible to subsequent households from related networks. Each new arrival may then increase the amount of usable social capital within the locality, transforming an initially incidental spatial concentration into a progressively reinforced settlement pattern.

The transition from affinity to spatial concentration is particularly significant because it links subjective recognition with observable urban morphology. Ethnic affinity by itself produces no neighborhood. It becomes spatially consequential only when it shapes practical search behavior, when networks channel information or support toward particular areas, and when households convert those resources into actual residential decisions. Once realized, these decisions become part of the environment confronting later households. A newcomer is no longer choosing within an abstract

urban space but within a city where previous settlers have already produced differentiated distributions of acquaintances, relatives, associations, reputations, and perceived zones of familiarity. Residential anchoring is therefore path-dependent: prior settlement modifies the social conditions under which later settlement decisions are made.

Life-course variation adds another layer to this mechanism. The naskah indicates that newly established households with limited economic resources may depend more heavily on community proximity, whereas households with longer urban histories and accumulated economic and social capital may become less dependent on living close to co-members. Such households can move to areas determined more strongly by socioeconomic status, housing quality, employment, or other preferences while remaining connected to community networks through non-residential ties. This possibility prevents the theory from equating ethnic belonging with permanent spatial confinement. Residential anchoring may be strongest during particular phases of migration and household formation and may weaken, change form, or coexist with other residential logics as households accumulate resources and urban experience.

The illustrative cases of Douala and Maroua clarify the spatial implications of cumulative settlement without being treated as quantitative proof. In peripheral areas, households originating from the same rural locality may initially settle close to one another because of information, kinship, practical assistance, or familiarity. Repetition of this pattern over a longer period can produce an area widely associated with the group despite the absence of any formal ethnic designation in cadastral or administrative plans. The emerging neighborhood remains socially mixed and should not be interpreted as perfectly homogeneous. Its significance lies instead in the symbolic and statistical association progressively produced between a social group and a particular urban territory. This distinction is essential because the theory concerns the probability and reproduction of concentration, not the creation of closed or exclusive ethnic enclaves.

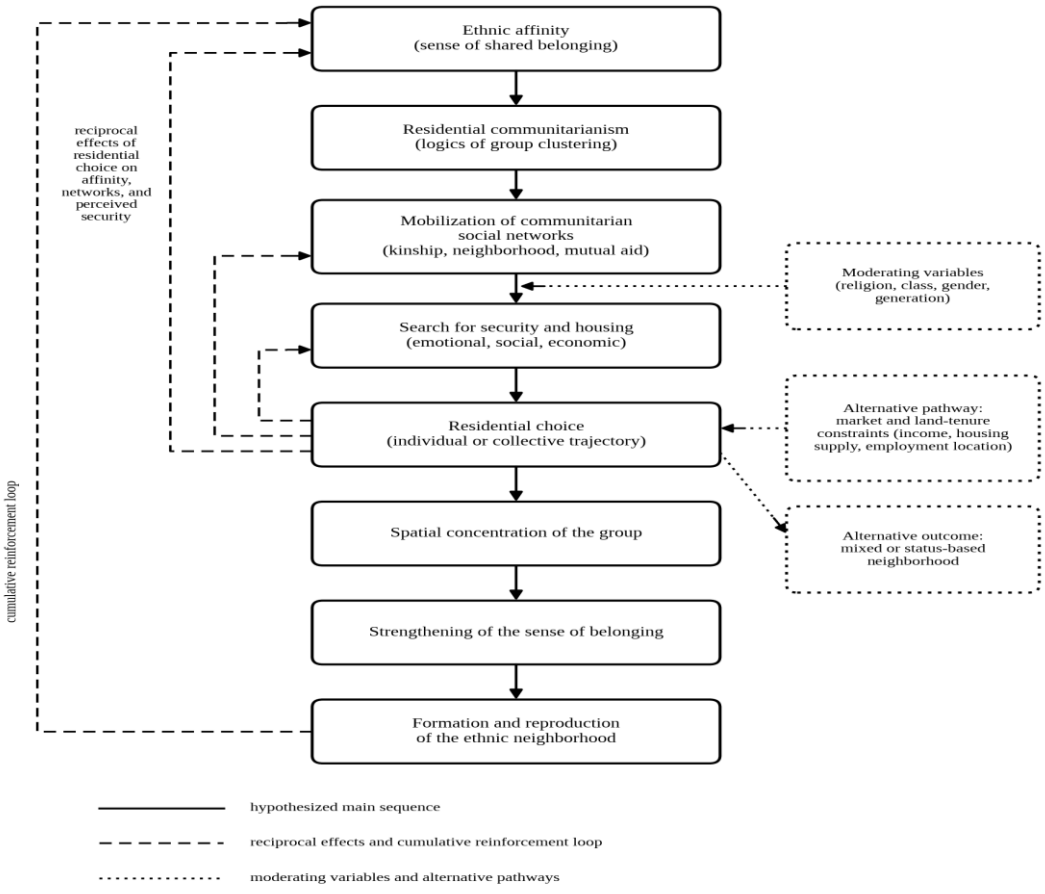


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Theory of Ethnic-Residential Anchoring
Source: Authors' own elaboration (2026)

Figure 1 should remain in its original form because it captures information that cannot be reduced to a simple linear chain. The main pathway moves through eight moments: ethnic affinity, residential communitarianism, mobilization of communitarian social networks, search for security and housing, residential choice, spatial concentration, strengthening of the sense of belonging, and the formation and reproduction of the ethnic neighborhood. The dashed feedback pathways show that residential choice and eventual neighborhood formation can affect earlier stages by reinforcing affinity, networks, and perceived security. The model therefore treats residential settlement as recursively structured: effects can subsequently become conditions for later action.

The figure also preserves the non-deterministic character of the theory. Household choice may bypass communitarian networks when income, available housing supply, land tenure, or proximity to employment becomes the dominant constraint. Such trajectories may produce socially mixed neighborhoods or areas organized more clearly by socioeconomic status. Religion, class, gender, and generation function as moderating variables because they can strengthen or weaken particular links without necessarily changing the general direction of the hypothesized relationship. A household's participation in a religious network may overlap with ethnic affiliation; social class can expand or restrict feasible housing options; gender may shape reliance on proximity-based support; and generational location can affect the salience of ethnic belonging among people born in the city compared with recent migrants. The theory therefore specifies a dominant tendency surrounded by moderators, feedbacks, and alternative pathways rather than a rigid series of universal stages.

The micro–macro articulation is the mechanism's most distinctive analytical feature. At the micro-sociological level, ethnic affinity, communitarian preference, network mobilization, and the search for security operate within the residential trajectory of a household. Residential choice then converts these processes into a geographically located action. At the macro-sociological level, aggregated choices produce spatial concentration, territorial identification, and eventually the reproduction of a socially recognized neighborhood. No individual household intends to create a citywide spatial pattern simply by choosing a dwelling, yet repeated decisions can collectively generate precisely such a pattern. The model therefore explains how apparently individual residential choices may produce durable urban configurations without assuming either complete individual autonomy or a collective structure operating independently of human action.

Explanatory Scope, Comparative Contribution, and Boundary Conditions of the Theory

Comparison with classical urban ecology clarifies the specific contribution of ethnic-residential anchoring. The Chicago School explains residential differentiation largely through competition, differential economic capacity, mobility, and succession (Park et al., 1925). The proposed theory accepts that such mechanisms remain relevant, but it introduces a causal process that cannot be reduced to them: households may assign independent value to social proximity. A residential location can therefore remain attractive even when another location is materially comparable or, under certain conditions, economically more advantageous. The critical empirical issue becomes not whether markets matter, but whether network access, familiarity, social protection, and belonging influence household evaluations after market constraints have been taken into account. This reformulation makes the theory empirically testable because future studies can compare the relative importance of material and communitarian criteria during actual residential decisions.

The comparison with Wirth (1938) produces a second theoretical distinction. Ethnic-residential anchoring rejects any automatic assumption that urbanization progressively replaces collective attachments with anonymous individualism. Balandier (1955) and Mitchell (1956) had already demonstrated that ethnic relations may be recomposed rather than simply preserved or destroyed under urban conditions. The present model extends that insight from social identity toward spatial reproduction. Urban ethnicity matters sociologically not merely because people continue to identify with groups, but because those identifications may become linked to practical networks and concrete location decisions. This provides a mechanism through which cultural and relational continuity can acquire durable spatial consequences.

The distinction from residential segregation theory is equally important. Massey and Denton (1993) demonstrated how discrimination, institutional arrangements, housing markets, and preferences can combine to create racial concentration in American cities. Ethnic-residential anchoring shares the premise that concentration has multiple causes but differs in causal emphasis.

The proposed mechanism considers situations in which proximity is actively sought because it offers social support, trust, information, or security rather than being predominantly imposed by exclusionary institutions. The same visible outcome—group concentration—can therefore emerge from substantially different historical processes. Analytical attention must consequently move beyond the spatial distribution itself toward evidence concerning how and why households reached particular locations.

African urban anthropology provides the closest intellectual foundation for the proposed model, yet the contribution remains distinguishable from previous ethnographic work. Balandier, Mitchell, Epstein, and Cohen established that ethnicity could remain organizationally relevant after migration and urban incorporation. Cohen (1969), in particular, showed that ethnic relations may provide resources for coordination and collective advantage rather than functioning merely as inherited cultural residues. Ethnic-residential anchoring systematizes these dispersed insights around one specific sociological outcome: residential location and the reproduction of neighborhood configurations. The model incorporates situational ethnicity as affinity, instrumental organization as network mobilization, socially produced space as territorialization, and repeated settlement as a cumulative mechanism. Its contribution is consequently synthetic and explanatory rather than a claim to have discovered ethnic organization in African cities for the first time.

Political sociology extends the framework beyond the immediate act of choosing a dwelling. Bayart (1989) showed that regional and ethnic solidarities can shape access to economic and political resources, suggesting that housing may be situated within wider networks of resource allocation. A household that receives information about employment, credit, administrative procedures, or commercial opportunities through community relations may also receive information about land, rental opportunities, or potential guarantors through the same relational infrastructure. Mbembe's (2000) emphasis on the historical specificity of African postcolonial formations reinforces the need to study such mechanisms without assuming that categories developed from European or North American cities function identically in Cameroon. Ethnic-residential anchoring therefore treats housing as one domain in which historically embedded social networks may become spatially visible while deliberately avoiding the claim that residential relations exhaust the broader political or economic importance of community affiliation.

Table 3. Boundary Conditions, Alternative Pathways, and Expected Spatial Outcomes

Condition identified in the model	Likely effect on the anchoring mechanism	Possible residential pathway	Potential spatial outcome
Strong ethnic affinity and dense community networks	Reinforces communitarian residential search	Network-mediated housing access	Greater probability of community-associated concentration
Limited access to formal housing information	Increases dependence on informal networks	Kin, association, or neighborhood referral	Concentration around existing network nodes
Strong perceived social or economic security from community proximity	Increases attractiveness of community-associated areas	Preference maintained despite competing alternatives	Reinforcement of existing concentration
Severe income constraint	May strengthen reliance on networks but also restrict available choice	Network-mediated low-cost housing or purely price-driven choice	Community concentration or economically defined settlement
Restricted housing supply or land tenure	Can interrupt the main sequence	Choice dominated by available plots or dwellings	Mixed or otherwise constrained settlement
Employment-location requirements	Reduces freedom to privilege community proximity	Workplace-oriented residential choice	Mixed or socioeconomic neighborhood
Upward social mobility	Can weaken	Relocation toward	Increased spatial

and accumulated capital	dependence on residential proximity	status- or amenity-based areas	dispersion
Interethnic marriage or multiple social affiliations	Diversifies relevant networks	Choice negotiated across several affiliations	More socially mixed residential configuration
Religion, class, gender, and generation	Modify the strength of links in the main mechanism	Variable dependence on communitarian resources	Uneven anchoring across households and groups
Long-established ethnic concentration	Strengthens feedback and neighborhood reputation	Subsequent arrivals encounter an already structured social geography	Reproduction of the community-associated neighborhood

Source: Authors' analytical elaboration from the conceptual model and boundary conditions identified in the study

Table 3 shows why the theory should be understood as probabilistic rather than deterministic. The model does not predict that every member of an ethnic group will choose the same neighborhood, nor does it treat ethnicity as an invariant force. The effect of communitarian anchoring depends on the configuration of resources and constraints surrounding each residential trajectory. Strong housing scarcity may override preference; upward mobility may expand the feasible choice set; employment location can produce spatial trade-offs; interethnic marriage may connect households to several networks; and generational change may weaken or redefine the meaning of residential proximity. These boundary conditions prevent the mechanism from being interpreted as cultural determinism and make variation itself a central object for future empirical analysis.

The framework also retains important scientific limitations. Its construction rests on qualitative observation, theoretical comparison, and accumulated knowledge of Cameroonian urban contexts rather than on a representative quantitative survey. The relative weight of ethnic affinity compared with rent, land price, employment accessibility, religion, formal housing policy, and non-ethnic associations is therefore not established by the current study. Geographic coverage is likewise limited, with Douala and Maroua functioning as principal anchoring contexts rather than as a statistically representative sample of Cameroonian cities. The theory also risks reifying ethnic categories if group boundaries are treated as internally uniform, which is why Barth's relational conception remains essential. Gender, generation, and social position may produce substantial variation within the same nominal ethnic group and must be treated as analytical dimensions rather than residual exceptions. These constraints delimit the claims that can legitimately be made from the present theoretical construction.

The originality of the proposal rests on three connected achievements. First, it transforms a dispersed set of observations concerning ethnicity, networks, land access, belonging, and African urban life into a cumulative explanatory mechanism inspired by the logic of circular reinforcement (Myrdal, 1957). Second, it connects micro-sociological residential trajectories with macro-sociological spatial outcomes, explaining how individual household decisions can aggregate into durable neighborhood patterns without reducing either level to the other. Third, it translates the theory into explicit postulates, observable components, moderators, alternative pathways, and a conceptual figure that can be converted into empirical hypotheses. Hedström and Swedberg's (1998) mechanism-oriented approach is relevant at this point because the value of the theory depends less on assigning a general correlation between ethnicity and residence than on specifying the social processes through which one may affect the other.

Future empirical testing should consequently focus on the relative strength, sequence, and conditions of these mechanisms rather than simply asking whether ethnic concentration exists. Biographical interviews can reconstruct complete residential trajectories and identify when kinship or community networks entered the housing search. Comparative mapping can examine whether areas socially identified with particular communities correspond to actual patterns of spatial concentration. Household-level studies can compare the importance of price, employment location, land tenure, housing quality, community proximity, and perceived security across different stages of urban residence. Comparative research involving Maroua, Douala, Yaoundé, and Garoua would permit

assessment of whether ethnic-residential anchoring operates similarly across different land markets, demographic histories, and patterns of ethnic plurality. Such research would determine whether the proposed mechanism is strongest during initial settlement, whether it declines with socioeconomic mobility, and under what conditions alternative residential pathways become dominant.

The practical relevance of the model follows from the same analytical caution. Urban planning that treats households as socially isolated consumers may overlook networks already performing functions of information, mutual aid, childcare, economic assistance, and residential security. Housing development, subdivision policy, or urban renewal can alter not only physical access to dwellings but also the relational infrastructures through which residents organize everyday life. Recognizing such networks does not imply that public policy should institutionalize ethnic separation or treat community boundaries as fixed. It indicates instead that interventions affecting residential space may have social consequences that are poorly captured by land-market indicators alone. Ethnic-residential anchoring therefore provides a framework for examining how formal urban policies interact with socially produced residential geographies while preserving the need for empirical validation before any policy prescription is generalized.

CONCLUSION

This article proposed a sociological theory of communitarian residential settlement in Cameroonian cities under the concept of ethnic-residential anchoring. Starting from a gap in the existing literature the absence of a unified conceptual systematization of insights accumulated since the 1950s in African urban anthropology the article formulated a central postulate, five secondary postulates, a cumulative explanatory mechanism, and an original conceptual model. The theory was not intended to replace classical urban ecology, residential segregation theories, or African urban anthropology. It instead proposed a new articulation of these contributions centered on Cameroonian cities characterized by substantial ethnic plurality. Its principal theoretical contribution lay in formalizing a cumulative mechanism connecting initial ethnic affinity to the durable reproduction of community-based neighborhoods. The proposal remained exploratory and therefore required extensive empirical testing. Comparative research combining qualitative interviews with quantitative mapping of neighborhood ethnic composition should be conducted in Maroua, Douala, Yaoundé, and Garoua to assess the relative weight of ethnic affinity against other determinants of residential choice and to identify the social and historical conditions under which the anchoring mechanism becomes stronger or weaker. Beyond its theoretical value, such research could inform urban policy. Understanding community logics in residential settlement could contribute to the design of social-housing programs, subdivision policies, and urban-renewal projects by taking existing solidarity networks into account rather than inadvertently disrupting them. The theory can therefore contribute to contemporary debates on the social production of urban space in Africa, provided that its propositions are subjected to rigorous empirical validation and that its practical implications are assessed with attention to the diversity of urban contexts.

REFERENCES

Balandier, G. (1955). *Sociologie des Brazzavilles noires* [Sociology of the Black Brazzavilles]. Armand Colin.

Barth, F. (1969). *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organization of culture difference*. Little, Brown.

Bayart, J.-F. (1989). *L'État en Afrique: La politique du ventre* [The state in Africa: The politics of the belly]. Fayard.

Bourdieu, P. (1979). *La distinction: Critique sociale du jugement* [Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste]. Minuit.

Bourdieu, P. (1980). *Le sens pratique* [The logic of practice]. Minuit.

Cohen, A. (1969). *Custom and politics in urban Africa: A study of Hausa migrants in Yoruba towns*. University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520314153

Crozier, M., & Friedberg, E. (1977). *L'acteur et le système: Les contraintes de l'action collective* [Actors and systems: The constraints of collective action]. Seuil.

de Certeau, M. (1980). *L'invention du quotidien. Tome 1: Arts de faire* [The invention of everyday life: Vol. 1. Arts of doing]. Gallimard.

Durkheim, É. (1893). *De la division du travail social* [The division of labor in society]. Félix Alcan.
Éla, J.-M. (1983). *La ville en Afrique noire* [The city in Black Africa]. Karthala.
Epstein, A. L. (1958). *Politics in an urban African community*. Manchester University Press.
Grafmeyer, Y., & Joseph, I. (1979). *L'École de Chicago: Naissance de l'écologie urbaine* [The Chicago School: The birth of urban ecology]. Aubier.
Hannerz, U. (1980). *Exploring the city: Inquiries toward an urban anthropology*. Columbia University Press. https://doi.org/10.7312/hann91086
Hedström, P., & Swedberg, R. (Eds.). (1998). *Social mechanisms: An analytical approach to social theory*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511663901
Le Bris, É., Marie, A., Osmont, A., & Sinou, A. (1987). *Famille et résidence dans les villes africaines* [Family and residence in African cities]. L'Harmattan.
Lefebvre, H. (1974). *La production de l'espace* [The production of space]. Anthropos.
Marie, A. (1997). *L'Afrique des individus* [Africa of individuals]. Karthala.
Massey, D. S., & Denton, N. A. (1993). *American apartheid: Segregation and the making of the underclass*. Harvard University Press.
Mbembe, A. (2000). *De la postcolonie: Essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine* [On the postcolony: Essay on the political imagination in contemporary Africa]. Karthala.
Merton, R. K. (1949). *Social theory and social structure*. Free Press.
Mitchell, J. C. (1956). *The Kalela dance: Aspects of social relationships among urban Africans in Northern Rhodesia*. Rhodes-Livingstone Institute.
Myrdal, G. (1957). *Economic theory and under-developed regions*. Duckworth.
Park, R. E., Burgess, E. W., & McKenzie, R. D. (1925). *The city*. University of Chicago Press.
Piermay, J.-L. (1993). *Citadins et quête du sol dans les villes d'Afrique centrale* [City dwellers and the quest for land in Central African cities]. L'Harmattan.
Seignobos, C., & Iyébi-Mandjek, O. (Eds.). (2000). *Atlas de la province Extrême-Nord Cameroun* [Atlas of the Far North Province of Cameroon]. IRD/Minrest.
Simmel, G. (1979). Métropoles et mentalité [Metropolis and mental life]. In Y. Grafmeyer & I. Joseph (Eds.), *L'École de Chicago* [The Chicago School] (pp. 61–77). Aubier. (Original work published 1903)
Simone, A. (2004). *For the city yet to come: Changing African life in four cities*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822386247
Weber, M. (1971). *Économie et société* [Economy and society]. Plon. (Original work published 1922)
Wimmer, A. (2008). The making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries: A multilevel process theory. *American Journal of Sociology, 113*(4), 970–1022. https://doi.org/10.1086/522803
Wirth, L. (1938). Urbanism as a way of life. *American Journal of Sociology, 44*(1), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1086/217913