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Oral history, collective memory and socio-political criticism: A study of popular culture in Cameroon

A study of popular culture in Cameroon

The growing popularity of contemporary Cameroonian popular cultural production is a significant indication of the value attached to the medium as well as the appreciation of the opportunity offered by the Biya regime. As opposed to the Ahidjo era, Cameroonian popular cultural products today are preoccupied with the daily concerns of the society at large and the masses in particular who have appropriated the art, with its evolving thematic and stylistic focus, thereby making it suitable as a veritable avenue for the representation of voices. Also considered as new forms of oral literature, pop culture owes invaluable contribution to public social discourse. There is no denying therefore that the present form of popular culture is a hybrid of folk or traditional art customized in step with the exigencies of contemporary Cameroonian society. This paper articulates the relationship between historico-social reality and popular culture showing how Cameroonian popular cultural musicians use history and social realities as raw material for the configuration of creative ideology. It further demonstrates that without forfeiting artistic grandeur, popular culture acts as a reservoir of memory, collective experience and sociopolitical criticism. **Keywords:** Cameroonian popular culture, collective memory, oral literature, sociopolitical criticism.

In contemporary Cameroon, the practice of popular culture has decisively connected and engaged the various social strata without exception. Whether by fate or design, popular production continues to sprout and expand its tentacles that touch almost all aspects of human endeavor. The expansion that is measurable in terms of both quality and quantity has inadvertently traced visible demarcations between the pre- and post-Biya eras. While the Biya era takes credit for the vertical and horizontal growth of popular culture, the Ahidjo era is especially remembered for its infringements on the creative muse and outright interference with the output. Practical daily realities that mark a clear distinction between the Ahidjo and Biya regimes are many and diverse. Whether forced upon the Biya regime or granted willingly as the fallouts of the general clamor for change, freedom of speech and association with related press liberation had accompanying issues that remarkably influenced life patterns in Cameroon. Therefore, besides multiparty politics that offered Cameroonians alternative political platforms from which to advertise, demonstrate, as well as implement alternative political ideologies, the 1990 law on freedom of association, midwifed the birth to civil society organizations strong enough the cause the Biya regime restlessness and sleepless nights.

As regards cultural entrepreneurship, literary as well as performance artists welcomed the new found freedoms with open arms. As opposed to the Ahidjo era

where creativity and artistic productions were meticulously watched and censored, the Biya era gave wings to the dreams of imaginative and creative artistry. That the 1990s mark the age of artistic growth and development is to say new voices and new themes emerged on the Cameroonian cultural platform. In this regard, performance artists considered the new dawn an opportunity to make bold their contributions to the socio-political life of the country.¹ It is also against this background that popular musical practitioners stood up and screamed their modest contributions towards the problems of governance. Away from traditional panegyrics, praise songs and lullabies that characterized both folk and modern traditional musical composition, Cameroonian song writers and music composers revolutionized both stylistic as well as thematic foci. Just like the literary craftsmanship that witnessed a drastic evolution of thematic engagement, modern traditional musicians sort to represent voices and thus expanded and extended their creativity to touch the very core concerns of the masses as well as the elite and the ruling class.

It is easy to underscore how popular musical productions evolved from Nkotti François and the Black Style group to Longué Longué and Lapiro de Mbanga.² While the thematic slant of the pre-Biya productions was more social and moral, post-Ahidjo musical productions spotlighted problems such as corruption, dictatorship and political discrimination. Therefore, the likes of Nico Mbarga, the Nigerian-Cameroonian, in such products as *Happy Birth Day* and *Sweet Mother* quickly gave way to the likes of Awilo de Bamenda in *Country Don Spoil* (2006) and Lapiro de Mbanga's *Na You, Lefam So* and *Constitution Constipé* (2011) and others. As concerns traditional folk products, the popularly acclaimed Bamoun songs that extolled the virtues or strength of late Njoya, the Sultant and defender of the Bamoun cultures, or Bottle Dance and Njang, simply had to transform or fade away. The sharp voices of such revolutionists as Prince Mbaya in *Conférence Nationale* (2006) and Saint Bruno in *Changement* (2001), quickly projected folk artists as political animals highly critical of the ruling elite as well as the socio-political evolution of Cameroon. Gradually, folk as well as modern traditional musical production engulfed the entire society seeking an opportunity either for image cleansing or for the popularization of their commercial products. Through the avenue of popular culture, therefore, every social class sought and obtained representations in a medium that cuts across society with its double edges. Antonio Gramsci in *Selection from Cultural Writings* argues that "When the politician puts pressure on the art of his time to express a particular cultural world, his activity is one of politics not of artistic criticism. If the cultural world for which one is fighting is a living necessary fact, its expansiveness will be irresistible and it will find its artists" (109). The double standard of popular culture or its dynamic operational context, is perceptible where, while one production lambastes either the regime or an individual, the other glorifies the state or the same individual criticized by another production. This is clearly the case of Ngalle

Joyo, in his 1993 album *Rigueur*, who hails and praises the Biya regime, while Benji Mateke, like Prince Yerima Afo Akom decries the misery and frustration caused by the same regime.³ As if to explain the *raison d'être* of artistic activism, Leon Trotsky says, "Generally speaking, art is an expression of man's need for a harmonious and complete life, that is to say, his need for those major benefits of which a society of classes has deprived him. That is why a protest against reality, either it is conscious or unconscious, active or passive, optimistic or pessimistic, always forms part of a really creative piece of work" (111). Apart from the need to redress or even merely spotlight issues in society, what continues to be incontestably true about the artists however is that their products maintain the fundamental functions of oral history as well as the recapitulation of collective memory on one hand, and a cry of despair and socio-political lampoon on the other.

Popular culture as oral history and collective memory

In spite of the revolutionary aura of Cameroonian popular cultural production, the fundamental objective of African music as reservoir of history and collective experience remains intact. Karin Barber opines in "Popular Arts in Africa" that the main trust of African music is the articulation of personal or collective concern. This is to say for music to fulfill its basic objectives, it must look beyond the here and now of either the individual or society. In his comment on the relevance of arts in Society, Leon Trotsky in *Art and Revolution* affirms that "Artistic creation is always a complicated turning inside out of old forms, under the influence of new stimuli which originate outside of art. In this large sense of the word, art is a handmaiden. [...] It is, a function of a social man indissolubly tied to his life and environment" (40). Following this principle, Cameroonian popular productions feature prominent aspects of collective experience and historical milestones worthy of preservation. Examples of musicians that imbue their art with the golden records of history include, Prince Panya, a modern Cameroonian folk musician from the Western Region and Longué Longué, a contemporary Cameroon pop star from the Littoral. Although both musicians play different musical genres, the implication of historically verifiable data in their composition mark them as preoccupied with the socio-political life of the country.

Prince Panya, a native of Balengou in the Western Region of Cameroon was born in 1948 to a polygamous family of seven siblings. Though interested in education, Panya Dieudonné had a rough childhood that culminated in a rather early termination of his educational ambition after the death of his father. At the age of seventeen, Panya Dieudonné developed interest in folk music owing to the relative success and popularity of an uncle who was hailed as a village griot. Respected as a community animator, Panya's uncle enjoyed endless invitations to various village ceremonies from where he usually left with a lot of money and

material gifts. Following in the footsteps of this village star, Panya eventually made a name for himself. In his musical productions Prince Panya focuses on the daily societal happenings with such precision that he is often referred to as a record book of events in the community (see the interview with Panya).

In 2006, Panya Dieudonné's release of the album *Conférence Nationale*, crystallized his position as a historical realist. "Conférence Nationale", the title song, is an account of the political history of Cameroon from independence to the present. In his linear account of events from the struggle for independence, Prince Panya recounts aspects of well known history with a special focus on how heroes of African independence struggles were assassinated. Having established the background against which modern day Cameroon is set, the folk artist profiles from the 1960s the leadership sway from Moslem ghandura-wearing Ahidjo of the North to the Christian suit-wearing Paul Biya of the South (see chapter 31 in Mbuagbaw). His description of pre-Biya Cameroon as a Cameroon made of iron is a metaphor of the leadership and managerial approach which according to him, offered and respected meritocracy. Prince Panya's music is replete with historical figures whom he presents as heroes and events about which he does not make any omissions. The historical framework as well as collective memorized recapitulation of his music covers persons, events, and even historic declarations and memorable statements that Cameroonians will live to remember.

On the other hand, Longué Longué nicknamed Le Libérateur (the Liberator), is one of Cameroonian pop stars whose products appeal to the masses owing to his thematic engagements with a demonstrable ideological Marxist slant. Born Simon Longkana Agno, Longué Longué hails from Yabassi in Nkam Division of the Littoral Region of Cameroon. Following the death of his mother shortly after he was born, Longué Longué grew up with an aunt who did not particularly cater to his educational desires. As fate would have it, the young man found out that he had great musical talents and thus groomed himself in cabarets where he performed regularly until he was discovered and sponsored by Ndedi Eyango, another popular Cameroonian musician. Fascinated by the talents of the rising star, Eyango assisted Longué Longué in the production of his very first album entitled *Ayo Africa* in 2002 which won him 'disque d'or,' (a prize for best musical release of that year). His music "Ayo Africa" is a lamentation and a cry of despair—misery for a continent that is ravaged by war, disease and hunger. What makes Longué Longué stand out as a historical realist is his reference to people, events and places every Cameroonian could readily understand. Even beyond Cameroon, the artist points out memorable aspects of the continent's history as well as persons which Africans need to continuously hail as heroes of the continent. The uniting aspects of Longué Longué and Prince Panya are their references and service to collective memory. Although this collective recapitulation is wrapped and coloured with critical

commentaries, the historicity of their approach gives their musical selections a very special appeal. The names of persons, historical figures, events, places and statements or declarations made, constitute major signposts of the new historicist theoretical baseline. Incontestable evidence of this claim is better assessed against a backdrop of what socio-political and historical analysts are likely to hail as historico-artistic truths. As if to galvanize Africans and especially Cameroonians, the pop artists walk down memory lane recounting such figures as Kunta Kinte, Nelson Mandela, Félix Moumie, Douala Manga Bell, Charles Atangana, Patrice Lumumba, Shaka Zulu, Thomas Sankara, Samora Michel, Ernest Ouandié, Ruben Um Nyobé, among others. Behind each of these personalities are enviable historical account of either Pan-Africanisms, patriotism, invincibility, or unshakable will of resistance to the ills of colonial ill-treatment. It is not mere coincidence that in the opening lines of "Ayo Africa," Longué Longué starts by calling out Kunta Kinte and Nelson Mandela before returning home to evoke Félix Moumie and Douala Manga Bell.

Kunta Kinte's heroic tale in Alex Haley's historical novel *Roots* recounts how the African was captured and deported to America in 1767 as a slave. Conscious of his African identity, Kunta Kinte rejected all aspects of depersonalization initiated by his White captors. His rejection of the name Toby, marked his attachment to his roots and cultural provenance. Determined to keep and maintain his original identity, Kunta Kinte demonstrated heroism in the face of crushing deracination by his White masters and slave dealers. By evoking the name and spirit of this hero, Longué Longué is inviting fellow Africans and especially Cameroonians to emulate the resistance and determination of one of Africa's children whose memory must be kept alive especially within the context of continuous infiltration by expatriates with neocolonial intentions.

From the remote past, the pop artist evokes yet the name of another African icon Nelson Mandela. The name and image of Nelson Mandela is meant to remind Africans once again that the continent is not short of heroes and dignified personalities whose worth is known and recognized beyond the continent. The name Mandela carries with it an ideology about which every African should be proud. Born in 1918 in the South African province of Umtata, Nelson Mandela took a rather early interest in issues of human rights, justice and fairness. This ideological inclination urged him to partake in a student demonstration that resulted in his dismissal from Fort Hare Institute. The increasingly biased and discriminatory atmosphere of his environment at the time led the young Nelson to opt for a law degree at the University of Witwatersrand. He would later sympathize with the ANC political ideology and participate in its political actions. Mandela would demonstrate his skills as a lawyer when the apartheid regime exposed its hatred for Blacks and the propagation of injustice. His resistance and committed struggles against the regime earned him life jail term on charges of attempting to overthrow the regime and for

high treason. In 1990 Mandela was released and three years later, Mandela and F.W. de Klerk were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1994 following the end of legalized apartheid and the introduction of general elections where Black people had voting rights, Nelson Mandela was elected the first Black President of South Africa. Prior to his death in 2013, Nelson Mandela was one of the most popular Africans, highly respected and hailed the world over, for his charismatic and special qualities. In Africa and beyond, artists of various genre and specialty devoted their creative productions in his honour. Longué Longué's reference to Mandela therefore is his way of inciting Africans to copy Mandela and resolutely fight against the forces of oppression and exploitation without fear or a fervour.

After citing Kunta Kinte and Nelson Mandela, Longué Longué returns home with Félix Moumie, one of the three founding fathers of the UPC Party in Cameroon. Other members of the group that the artist quotes later on are Ruben Um Nyobé and Ernest Ouandié. It is worth noting that this trio created the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC) with the main objective of the unification of Cameroon and immediate independence. Although they hailed from different parts of the country, their nationalistic drive made them united in purpose and action. That Ruben Um Nyobé from Boumnyebel in Nyong and Kelle Division could set similar goals with Ernest Ouandié and Roland Moumie from Fouban, was a historical lesson of unity in diversity.⁴ Today, the trio is remembered both among Anglophone and Francophone Cameroonians owing to their collective belief in the ideals of national unity, harmony and national integration. It is important to remember that in an attempt to push to completion their ideal conviction about a united and independent Cameroon, Um Nyobé made repeated trips to the United Nations to lobby the international community for support against the imperial forces.

The relentless activism of Um Nyobé and his team raised fear among the colonial powers that sought ways of inculcating the political activists for treason. This high accusation coupled with life threatening reactions by the colonial government urged UPC members to resort to guerrilla warfare. Although they were progressively captured and assassinated at different times and places, their names and images remain forever on the lips of musical song writers and in minds of the Cameroonian intelligentsia. In present day Cameroon, UPC and the names of its founders, are often cited as true compatriots and foundation fathers of a united and independent Cameroon (Mbuagbaw). It can therefore be affirmed that Longué Longué considers these three as heroes whose noble mission remain valid for a post-independent Cameroon that is yet to be free from neocolonial manipulation and exploitation. The invocation of historical heroes—Cameroonian and African—is an invitation to Africans as whole to take their destiny in their hands.

To show himself also as a historically conscious folk artist, Prince Panya's musical production retraces the political as well as social upheavals that Cameroon faced in

and around the 1990s. However, to present a more consistent oral narrative of the land of his birth, Prince Panya in "Conférence Nationale" retraces the events that built up to the 1990s, a period often referred to as the period of reawakening and a period of new consciousness in Cameroon. In his music, Prince Panya notes that once the time was ripe, African activists poured out in their numbers demanding independence. Unfortunately, as he remarks, all those who were actively engaged in the struggle for independence were all assassinated. The artist, like Longué Longué, also cites the names of frontline soldiers of African independence such as Kwame Nkrumah, Steve Biko as well as Patrice Lumumba. Kwame Nkrumah, it must be remembered was born in 1909 in the Southwestern part of Ghana, known at the time as the Gold Coast. His educational ambitions took him to the United States of America from where he moved to Britain and enrolled at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Studies in this domain further sharpened his political activities even as he combined and compared his American experience with the British political systems. In 1945, Nkrumah traveled back to the U.S.A. for the 5th Pan-African Congress. Here, he met George Padmore, an Indian and socialist member with whom he shared views and ideas on socialism. In 1947, Nkrumah returned to Ghana and devoted time and energy to the struggle against British hegemony. His continuous struggles earned him a jail sentence which paradoxically increased his popularity among Ghanaians who hailed him for his hard stance against the British administration. Prince Panya's reference to Nkrumah and Steve Biko is also a means by which to emphasize his awareness of the African heroes whom he feels Africans ought to permanently remember and even emulate for their own liberation. Like Longué Longué, Prince Panya makes reference to Ruben Um Nyobé, Ernest Ouandié and Patrice Lumumba but unlike his fellow artist, Panya develops a clear historical tale that features the names of practicing politicians who occupied prominent positions in the recent history making saga.

The names of these actors include Amadou Ahidjo, John Ngu Foncha, John Fru Ndi, Adamu Ndam Njoya, Hameni Bieleu, Dika Akwa, Jean-Jacques Ekindi, Mboua Massock, Woungly Massaga, Augustin Kontchou Kouomeni, Garga Haman Adjii, Samuel Eboa, Bello Bouba, among many others. The history of the transitional period in Cameroon around the 1990s cannot be complete without these men who were the political party actors that initiated the general clamour for a National Conference and General Amnesty. The title song of Prince Panya's music "Conférence Nationale" is a recap of the causes of massive mobilization that culminated in Paul Biya's historic statement: "Votre Conférence Nationale Souveraine est Sans Objet." (Your clamor for sovereign National Conference is meaningless.) Therefore besides quoting persons, events and places worth remembering, musicians and song writers also quote speeches, make statements of fact and recount practical real life stories and situations. Examples abound where popular musical productions

feature hard verifiable information that is engraved in the collective consciousness of Cameroonians. For example, in Longué Longué's "Ayo Africa," the artist makes the following factual revelation:

Les blancs sont arrivés chez nous et ils ont pris toutes nos richesses.

Nous les enfants de l'Afrique nous n'avons plus rien.

Nous les enfants de l'Afrique nous n'avons plus de richesses.

(We, the children of Africa we no longer have any riches

We, the children of Africa we no longer have anything

the white man came to our land and took all our riches

We, the children of Africa we no longer have any wealth)

To buttress his argument he goes on to explain:

Regardes Bonamoussadi, c'est pour les blancs. La forêt de Yabassi toujours les blancs. Le

pétrole de l'Afrique c'est pour les blancs. Le marché de bois ou Congo toujours les blancs.

(Look at Bonamoussadi, it is a white neighborhood, Yabassi forest, still for the whites.

African oil is for the whites, Congo timber market, still for the whites.)

What the musician implies in these statements of fact is that, after confiscating the natural resources of the land, the neo-colonialists select the best neighbourhoods for their settlements. While Cameroonians wallow in misery and live in swamps, expatriates enjoy clean environments. In his discourse on how Europe underdeveloped Africa, an African socio-political and cultural critic recalls that in Nigeria, "the British Colonial government maintained a segregated hospital service of 11 beds in well-furnished surroundings. There were 34 beds for half a million blacks. The situation was repeated in other areas, so that all together 4000 Europeans in the country in the 1930s had 12 modern hospitals while the African population of at least 40 million had 52 hospitals" (Rodney 249).

In a similar manner, Prince Panya recalls factual situations and even quotes events and declarations recorded verbatim in the golden pages of history. For example, in recounting the political saga of the 1990s, Prince Panya recalls the controversial situation between the late Samuel Eboa and Bello Bouba Maigari over the National Union for Democracy and Progress Party. The fact of the matter is that, when Cameroonians poured out in the streets in the 1990s and clamoured for general amnesty and a National Conference, Bello Bouba was on exile in Nigeria. A beneficiary of the call for general amnesty, he returned home and immediately set afoot a strategy that culminated in the dismissal of Samuel Eboa from a party he contributed in creating and managed while Bello Bouba was in exile. In exact terms, Prince Panya notes: "Samuel Eboa est parti au Nord pour crée l'UNDP. Bello Bouba Maigari revient ... Eboa est renvoyé." (Samuel Eboa went to the North and created the NUDP. Once Bello Bouba returned, Eboa was sacked.)

In a similar manner, Prince Panya recalls a prominent situation when President Biya planned a visit to Douala and newspapers and other news organisations intimated that due to the insecurity, the President would not make the trip to the economic capital. However, the Head of State made the trip as if to make a mockery of those who held the view that he would not visit Douala at that time and said in the opening lines of his official address: “Me voici donc à Douala; tant que Yaoundé respire le Cameroun est déjà en vie. Votre Conférence Nationale est Sans Objet.” (Here am I in Douala, when Yaoundé breaths, Cameroon is alive. Your clamor for sovereign National Conference is meaningless.) That Prince Panya quotes the exact words of the Head of State is a way to underscore his role as a reservoir of collective memory and historical account. The correspondence between what history holds and the content of his song is therefore further testimony of the artist’s attentiveness to the daily happenings of his society and the struggles of his compatriots. His art, therefore, serves as interface between the people on one side, and their record of events on the other. This form of historical recapitulation goes beyond mere mirror reflection as it calls for an evaluation of the collective struggle towards the individual and community development. Longué Longué and Prince Panya accurately fulfil the objective of collective memory and reservoir of history that should motivate and guide contemporary action.

Popular culture as a cry of despair and socio-political criticism

Although popular cultural production in Cameroon is considered an open platform for the articulation of personal as well and collective issues of concern, the noble mission of criticism with the objective of ameliorating standards cannot be over emphasised. Thus the production, and above all, consumption of popular production is predetermined by the inherent values and ideological inclinations of the artist vis-à-vis the socio-political climate. In an interview with Pierre Fandio in the *ALA Bulletin* on the place of politics in art, Bate Besong stresses that “Politics, as we know, enters literature [read: popular art] when the writer’s [read: popular artist’s] concern with the public welfare is dominant. It is the most obvious subject for him to demonstrate that the cultivation of humanizing values is a permanent coda of his art” (96). In the present precarious circumstances of a country ravaged by various socio-political and cultural problems, popular cultural products necessarily attune themselves to exposing such ills. This explains why the artistic products of Lapiro de Mbanga and Saint Bruno, among many others, can be described as the cry of despair and socio-political criticism. Antonio Gramsci notes: “It seems clear that criticism must always have a positive function, in the sense that it must point out a positive value in the work being studied. If this aspect cannot be artistic, perhaps it can be cultural, in which case the individual work [...] will not be important as works placed in series according to cultural tendency” (113). The musical genre played by Lapiro de Mbanga and Saint Bruno relate and reflect the life pattern of the masses that look up to them

and have appropriated the pop artists as their mouthpiece. On the behalf of this class of people therefore, Lapiro and Saint Bruno shout out their misery and criticism at the nation state for failing in its duties towards the citizenry.

Accordingly, the music of Lapiro de Mbanga is often considered a combative product meant to dislodge lethargy, inertia, corruption, complacency, discrimination and dictatorship in all its manifestations. Born Lambo Sandjo Pierre Roger, Lapiro hails from Mbanga in the Mounjo Division of the Littoral Region to fairly wealthy parents from the Western Region who migrated and settled in Mbanga. Lapiro grew up with his maternal grandmother. Although he was relatively comfortable in terms of the material resources, Lapiro de Mbanga had a tough time reconciling the contradictions he witnessed in his society. While he lived in excess, he also noticed the devastating impact of poverty in the life of many children around him. To have a better understanding of the social imbalance, the young Rogers decided to leave his grandmother's house and spend time outdoors with his friends and neighbours who suffered the direct brunt of social lack. After obtaining the C.E.P.E. (the equivalent of the First School Leaving Certificate), Lapiro took interest in music which he considered an avenue par excellence to address the serious social injustice he witnessed everywhere. The Mbanga boy creatively carved out the acronym Lapiro from the spelling of his three names Lambo (La), Pierre (Pi), Roger (Ro) and the location, Mbanga, being his birth place as well as his residence.

In his musical productions Lapiro voices his concerns and levels diatribes at every aspect of society with which he finds a problem. After initiating himself into music at the tender age, Lapiro understood too quickly that to be relevant to and accepted by the class of people to whom he devoted his art, he had to attune his aesthetic approach to his target audience. The language used therefore appropriately reflected the class of people he defended. The use of Pidgin English and broken French and other national languages is an aesthetic orientation that opens and expands the outreach of his art. Since the majority of the victims of social injustice that he decried could hardly afford education beyond primary level, Lapiro decided to keep his style low-brow and basic. The musical production that fulfils the basic characteristics of "agitate prop"—agitation and propaganda—made Lapiro very popular among the masses of people patching up life under tough conditions. The calibre of people for whom he raised his voice and finger include the *buyam sellam*, ambulant petty traders whom he refers to as *sauveteurs*, motorbike riders, park boys and even prisoners whom he often refers to as his "complices" or partners. With over fourteen albums, Lapiro the Mbanga has made a name for himself as the most acerbic musical critic and human rights activist. His exuberant output made him both feared and hated by the Cameroonian governing body that on many occasions brought trumped-up charges against him and threw him in jail.

The peak of open confrontation with the regime was in 2008, when following violent demonstration in Mbanga, the radical pop artist was accused of organising and leading mass destructive manifestations. Prior to this, the release of “Constitution Constipé” was seen by the administrative authorities as an anti-campaign against president Biya’s bid for another term in the 2011 presidential elections. This accusation earned him a three year jail term at the maximum security prison in Douala. Paradoxically, while Lapiro was serving his prison term, the international organisation, Freemuse, awarded the pop star a prize for best and most prolific human rights musical activists.⁴ However, upon completion of his jail term, Lapiro emigrated to the United States of America after releasing a stinker album full of unreserved chastisement of the Biya regime for multiple offences and oppression of the Cameroonian people. He died in the United States on March 16, 2014, at the age of 56. In his “Constitution Constipé,” Lapiro lashes out at the phenomenon of constitutional adjustment that the Cameroonian dictator uses to maintain himself at the helm of the state. A review of Lapiro’s discography shows that the titles of his albums are quite symbolic of the content of the discourse. His first album released in 1979, *Perseverance*, focuses on promiscuity and mutual deception between men and women. His second album released the same year entitled *Nkon nusi, la terre, le monde* explores themes of social interaction and the question of survivalism. After *Pas Argent No Love* in 1985, Lapiro’s *No Make Erreur*, in 1986 left indelible marks on the Cameroonian musical platform. The decisive engagement and focus on such ills as cheating, discrimination, and neo-colonial manipulation, confirmed him as a revolutionary musical artist. Subsequent products like *Surface de Reparation*, *Mimba We*, *Na Wou go pay*, *Lefam So*, *Ndinga Man Contre attaqué*, “Na you” and “Mimba we,” all entail an exposé on the various ills plaguing the Cameroonian society. In “Na You” for example, Lapiro points an accusing finger at leadership for all the failures imaginable in the country such as development and employment opportunities for the Cameroonian youth. Referring to the head of state as team captain and head of a gang of irresponsible manipulators, Lapiro calls on the head of state to take his responsibility and repair the damages he has caused. Enumerating some of the socio-political malfeasance of the regime, Lapiro says:

Baisse de salaire na you!
 Arriérés na you!
 Compression du personnel na you!
 Licenciement na you!
 Privatisation na you!
 Liquidation na soso you...
 Moi ah comprends sei
 Do how, do how Johnny four foot
 Go las come dammer nylon ana carton for dis kondre

(Salary cuts, you're responsible
Arrears, you're responsible
Retrenchment of workers you're responsible
Dismissals, you're responsible
Privatization, you're responsible
Liquidation, you're responsible
Man, understand that
One day one day, goats will eat plastic papers and cartoons in this country.)

As it stands, the numerous challenges and unbearable living conditions have forced young people into the drug trade and other destructive and damaging ventures, all because of the failures of leadership. No doubt therefore that Lapiro maintains, "just as you damage the country, you have to fix it." He believes that the country was better off prior to the advent of the current regime that brought destruction and shame with the multiple salary cuts, unpaid arrears and privatization and a civil service that ceased to guarantee any hope. According to Lapiro, sociopolitical degeneration is easily measurable in the menial jobs that even university graduates are forced to engage in. Irrespective of degrees, jobs are rare to come by, a situation which prompts Benji Mateke to plead in his musical piece:

Donnez-moi un peu de boulot
Moi aussi je veux travailler,
Papa m'a payé des études,
J'ai même fait quelque formation, mais,
Je n'ai pas de boulot.
Je suis toujours au chômage
(Give me a bit of a job
I also, I want to work
My father paid for my education
I even undertook some training
But I have no job
I am still jobless)

Unlike Lapiro who confesses that he never went to school, Benji Mateke regrets that both his certificates as well as professional training have failed to find him sustainable employment. He therefore calls on young people to manage with whatever is available saying it is better to settle on something however small than stay idle relying on the same parents who already spent much money in providing the required educational training. He concludes :

Boulot c'est boulot, il n'ya plus de choix
Mém si tu peur faire ton bend skin

Si tu peur vendre tes fruits à njombe
Etre taximan, porte-faix, chargeur, sauveteur, c'est ça le boulot
(Job is Job, there is no choice
Even if you can be a motorbike rider
If you can sell fruits in Njombe
Become a taxi driver, hustler, loader
Ambulant traders that is the job)

Convinced that the Cameroonian leadership has failed and repeatedly demonstrated incompetence and short-sightedness over the years, Lapiro in "Constitution Constipé", opines that it is time for the Cameroonian leadership to hand over power. He continues to emphasize that the art of manipulating the constitution is a demonstration of lack of respect for the voice of the people. He cries out:

Constitution à gauche,
Constitution à droite,
Révision en haut, révision en bas
Motion de soutien par-ci,
Contre motion par là
Marche de soutien le jour,
Contre marche la nuit....
(Constitution on the Left,
Constitution on the right,
Revision upwards, revision downwards
Motion of support here
Opposing motion there
Support march during the day
Opposing demonstration by night...)

According to Lapiro, a constitutional merry-go-round does not slow or hold down the passage of time and the gradual but unavoidable diminished effectiveness and output. A phenomenon that explains inertia, slow development and misdirected priorities. In effect, he suggests that the same people who organise motions of support and street matches in favour of the leader during the day, do the same for his resignation at night. Lapiro explains the urgent need for President Biya, whom he refers to as Big Katika, to resign:

Aux Etats-Unis d'Amérique, en France, en Union Soviétique et dans les vrais démocraties, les mandats présidentiels sont limités;
Au Cameroun, pays de mes ancêtres, berceau de la démocratie avancée, apaisée, des fraudes électorales et paradis de la corruption, on s'en fout...

(In the United States, in France, Soviet Union and in true democracies,
presidential terms of office are limited.

In Cameroon, land of my ancestors, home of advance democracy, paralyzed,
electoral fraud and paradise of corruption, who cares...)

It is therefore unimaginable that, while presidential mandates have term limits in real democratic settings, the situation of Cameroon remains at the whims of the leader himself. More than thirty years after taking over power President Biya at 82 is still clinging to it. Against the context of democratic *apaisée*, debased democratic options, the pop artist explains that electoral fraud and all forms of manipulations are rife, yet nobody cares because, as the popular saying goes, "Cameroon is Cameroon." This setup leaves the nation at the mercy of the survival of the fittest, in which case, the strong and the powerful arm-twist the weak leaving them with no hope for any access to legal, physical or social protections that enhance citizenship rights and obligations. Against this bleak and hopeless situation, Lapiro has only one solution which he repeatedly shouts out:

Liberez Big Katika
Liberez repé ndoss
Le mater est fatigue oh,
Foutez-lui la paix
Liberez Big Katika
Liberez repé ndoss
Le pacho est die oh,
Foutez-lui la paix.

Big Katika don tire oh
E don tire
Repé don slack oh
E don fatigue
Wouna lef yi e reste oh
E want go rest

(Liberate big Boss
Liberate the fraudulent father
The mother is tired oh,
Give him some peace
Liberate big Boss
Liberate the fraudulent father
Papa is dead oh,
Give him some peace.

Big Boss is tired
He is tired
Papa is weak oh
He is exhausted
Leave him to rest
he wants to go and rest.)

He considers Big Katika tired, sagging and so sapped of energy that he is only a *kass* and shadow of himself. The term *kass* as employed by the artist is a description of all that is left after the wear and tear that the passage of time and age inflict on the human body. Awareness that voluntary resignation is not the priority of the president, Lapiro de Mbanga turns then invokes the intervention of a superior force:

Seigneur Jésus, appelle ton frère le prophète Mohammed. Au secours ; venez nous délivrer, l'heure est grave. Les bandits en col blanc veulent braquer la constitution de mon pays. Les Fossoyeurs de la République veulent mettre les lions en cage. Les poussins veulent échapper aux serres de l'épervier. Le peuple est harcelé et menace d'une tentative de hold-up...

(Jesus Christ, call on your brother Prophet Mohammed, Help! Come and deliver us, The times are hard, white collar bandits want to attack the constitution of my country, the protectors of the Republic want to cage the lion, the chicks have to escape from hawks, the people are harassed and threatened by an attempted hold up...)

The description of the Cameroonian leadership as white collar bandits and robbers is quite telling of the popularity and perception by the citizenry. This new historicist idea further highlights the complexity of the lenses through which reality is perceived. Comparing leadership to the sparrow hawk that devours chicks is good reason for Prince Yerima Afo-Akom to entitle his song "Cry for Salvation." To both Afro-Akom and Lapiro, leadership has completely failed to guarantee any chance or hope of survival. This state of affairs is exactly what Fanon decries in *Towards the African Revolution* when he says, "A society that drives its members to desperate solutions is a non-viable society; a society to be replaced. It is the duty of the citizen to say this. No professional morality no class solidarity; no desire to wash the family linen in private, can have a prior claim" (54).

On his part, Saint Bruno uses his musical discourse to weep in despair for the social malaise that has gained ground in his beloved country. From a more social perspective the artist redirects his critique on social failings and the general moral backwash especially among the youths. In "Changement," Saint Bruno, inspired by the demonstrations that swept throughout the country in the 1990s, intimates that the much awaited change is already here:

Changement, changement, changement.
 Notre changement oh,...changement,
 Ce qu'on attendait... C'est déjà là!
 Changement, changement,... Changement.
 Voici le changement u'on attendait.
 Le changement est déjà là.
 Notre changement est arrivé.
 (Change, change, change.
 Our change oh, ... change,
 What we were waiting for ... is already here!
 Change, change,... change.
 Here is the change we're waiting for.
 The change is already here.
 Our change has come.)

However, contrary to the expected change for the better, Saint Bruno articulates his regrets for a change that rather took a downward turn for the worse. In his musical narrative, the artist holds that in the aftermath of the 1990 demonstrations and the clamour for socio-political change, 1994 witnessed the accumulation of trash in and around Douala markets. The markets of the city constituted fertile areas for the fattening of flies good enough to wear suits and ties. He notes that such rottenness was everywhere with the stench that complemented the atmosphere of filth as evidence of the negative change. As if to emphasize that the said change was multidimensional, Saint Bruno adds that democracy ushered many things, including liberty of the press and liberty of expression. Accompanying this liberalisation was the creation and duplication of churches and places of worship. Saint Bruno thus segments his music into parts related to environment and hygiene, religion and Christianity, dress code and behavioural attitudes of students, laziness and the involvement in the game of chance and pride and arrogance in the face of destiny and vanity. These six basic charges take Cameroon backward in time and civilization. In a similar circumstance, Awilo De Bamenda declares in his musical product that: "Contri don spoil," meaning the country is in total disarray. Awilo goes on to recount how an entire cabinet is incarcerated at the Kondengui maximum security prison for embezzling state funds.

According to Awilo, the rising wave of corruption that characterizes daily realities in Cameroon is good reason why unemployment is rife with laziness becoming a culture. This laziness pushes the citizenry to take popular interest in Tiercé, a Paris-based game of chance on which many people stake their money in hope of winning millions. As a careful observer of this disturbing phenomenon, Saint Bruno uses his artistry to raise awareness and also discourage Cameroonians from the game. As a matter of fact, the game is designed to raise illusive hopes in stakeholders who

think winning is quite possible. As it is often the case, each stakeholder is made to believe that he or she can be the next winner. This consistent illusive hope keeps them going. At the end of the day they are always convinced, even after spending their hard earned money that winning is certain if they manage to rectify any error they might have committed in streamlining the horses according to expected results. To better recapitulate the reactions of a stakeholder, the artist explains:

Connaissez-vous le nom du tiercé actuellement?

Le nom du tiercé c'est "à moins un"

Ou "j'avais bien vu !"

Son éloge c'est "ouais" ooh,

Si je savais

Si j'avais su

Je validais le 10

Je validais le 8

Jean-Pierre m'a trahi, maintenant

J'ai tout raté

Et pourtant j'avais bien vu,

Ouais, si je savais.

(Do you know the actual name of the game?

the name of the game is, "I almost won!"

Or " I actually saw it!"

Its eulogy is "yeah" ohh

Had I known

If I had known

I would have validated no 10

I would have validated no 8

Jean Pierre misled me.

I have lost everything

Whereas I saw it well.

Yeah, had I known.)

The mistaken conviction that Tiercé is meant to enable the acquisition of easy cash prevents most stakeholders from accepting the hard truth that the game drains them of their money. In the same light, Awilo de Bamenda questions if "Tiercé" ever made anyone rich financially. Therefore, like Saint Bruno, Awilo is aware of the misery and frustration that Cameroonians go through by gambling their money on a game they are hardly ever going to win.

Similarly, in decrying the mushrooming of churches that sprouted following the 1990 law on freedom of worship, the artist lashes out at pastors and Christians whose practices show the church more as an institution with hidden motives. According to

Saint Bruno, the pastors like the Christians of the new churches have secret agendas. It is thus not surprising when Afo-Akom in his music underscores that petty gossip and power struggles in the society does not spare the churches or when Saint Bruno exposes the shameful consequences of the church's involvement with materialism. In their collective effort to render proper service to the community, Cameroonian pop artists employ various aesthetic devices like humour, metaphor, repetition, code switching, linguistic diversity and irony. These aspects offer complete edutainment to consumers and also reinforce the artistry of productions that spares no class in the society.

Overall, the service and functions of popular culture as a platform for the regularization and monitoring of societal evolution is well established. Like literary analysts, historical chroniclers, social observers and politico-economic supervisors, the Cameroonian pop artist engages a holistic evaluation of the community, not only as a duty but also an obligation that admits no exemption. Therefore, the pop artist, be they Longué Longué, Prince Panya, Benji Mateke, Awilo de Bamenda, Saint Bruno or Afo-Akom, does not really create anything new but simply gives back in an orderly manner what they take from society in a disorderly way. The question as to under whose regime they emerge and practice their art is not as relevant; what counts is how they employ the socio-economic and politico-cultural resources at their disposal at the time of musical composition and the configuration of their message and to how these compositions are shared, used and misused, only add meaning to the noble mission of popular cultural production for edutainment.

Notes

1. The year 1990 marks a watershed moment in the political life of Cameroon. Massive street demonstrations that were a follow up to the winds of change and demand for inclusion, for a national conference, national amnesty and freedom of association culminated with the December 19 law on freedom of association and opinion. (See *liberté d'association loi n° 90/053 du 19 Décembre 1990*).
2. In the 1970s Nkotti François and a host of renowned musicians put in place a musical consortium code-named "Black Style." Under the umbrella of this group, they hit the world with classical Cameroonian Makossa (purely apolitical) that till date has remained a reference. The group however disintegrated in the late 1990s. Today "Black Style" music is the considered reference of authentic Cameroonian makossa.
3. Ngalle Jojo also known as Ngalle Joseph is among the first musical artist who composed pro-Biya music. His second album, released in 1983 entitled *Esimo Na Rigeure* hailed president Biya's New Deal slogan of Rigour and Moralization. However, events and ideological issues of subsequent years caused other artists to lose respect for the Biya administration and the slogan which many considered as lips service. The likes of Afo Akom, a traditional musical composer from the North West Region became very critical of the Biya administration.
4. Union des populations du Cameroun (UPC) was founded in 1948 by the trade union organizer Ruben Um Nyobé. UPC came out of RDA (Rassemblement Democratique Africain). Its frontline organizers were Ruben Um Nyobé, Ernest Ouandie and Felix Roland Mounie among others. Due to their very critical stance against the French, these activists were hotly pursued and eventually eliminated one after the other with the complicity of the French (see Mbuagbaw et al.).
5. Freemuse, otherwise known as Freedom of Musical Expression, is a Denmark based organization advocating freedom of expression for musicians. It was founded in 1998 during the first world conference on music and censorship in Copenhagen. In 2009, Lapiro was nominated for the Freedom to Create Award at the conference held in November of the same year in London (see freemuse.org).

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