

ENTERTAINING REPRESSION: MUSIC AND POLITICS IN POSTCOLONIAL CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between musicians and political power in Cameroon in order to make a case for understanding the dynamics of agency and identity politics among musicians. It argues that politicians in Cameroon have tended to appropriate musicians and their creative efforts as part of their drive for power. Some musicians have refused to be at the beck and call of politicians and have tended to criticize and ridicule those in power. Others have seen in such invitations an opportunity for greater recognition and respectability. Some have sought to straddle both worlds, serving politicians while also pursuing their art in the interest of other constituencies. Their different responses notwithstanding, there is evidence that the fortunes and statuses of musicians have been transformed with changing political regimes and notions of politics.

THE MANNER IN WHICH MUSIC IS PRODUCED AND APPROPRIATED, by whom and how, is inseparable from power relations: political, cultural, economic and gendered.¹ In the case of Africa, music has historically been appropriated by social actors with a variety of interests. Through Veit Erlmann², we gather how South African music has served contradictory Western perceptions of Africa as ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’; and through Johannes Brusila,³ how the category of ‘world music’ permits the West to construct

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1. S. Longwe and R. Clark, *Woman Know Your Place: The patriarchal message in Zambian popular song* (ZARD, Lusaka, 1998); J. Brusila, ‘Musical otherness and the Bhundu Boys: the construction of the “West” and the “Rest” in the discourse of “World Music”’, in M. E. Baaz and M. Palmberg (eds), *Same and Other: Negotiating African identity in cultural production* (Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala, 2001), pp. 39–56; J. Brusila, ‘Jungle drums striking the World Beat: Africa as an image factor in popular music’, in M. Palmberg (ed.), *Encounter Images in the Meetings between Africa and Europe* (Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala, 2001), pp. 146–61.

2. V. Erlmann, ‘Africa civilized, Africa uncivilized: local culture, world system and South African music’, in K. Barber (ed.), *Readings in African Popular Culture* (James Currey, Oxford, 1997), pp. 170–7.

3. Brusila, ‘Musical otherness and the Bhundu Boys’ and ‘Jungle drums striking the World Beat’.

and essentialize the 'rest' as musical others, and how African musicians have sought to negotiate an identity for themselves within the imposed dichotomy of 'traditional' and 'modern' music. While Western music is differentiated into various nuanced categories, 'world music' collapses the music forms of various localities, regions and cultural spheres into a homogenous bloc configured to suit every consumer exotic fantasy.⁴

In colonial times, missionaries greeted African musical practices with ambivalence and a tendency to police their expressive lyrics and dance forms. Veit Arlt⁵ recounts how emerging popular highlife music in colonial Ghana was perceived by missionaries as 'obscene' and diabolical, a threat to the Christian values they sought to instil. This theme is revisited by Mongo Beti in his novel *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, in which Father Dumont, who considers the local Bikutsi music of colonial Cameroonian forest dwellers 'heathen', proceeds on one occasion, in a mad rage, to pounce on the xylophones and knock down the tam-tams of a village that had stubbornly insisted on singing and dancing to their own music on the first Friday of the month. Asked by a non-Christian: 'Suppose the whites were dancing here tonight instead of us and you were passing by, would you rush in and break their trumpets and their guitars?', the Father replied: 'But I didn't come to this country for the whites. I came for you, for the blacks. I'm not concerned with the whites. They are bad men and will go to Hell like all bad men.'⁶

Africans have shaped and been shaped by their music. David Coplan relates how Lesotho migrant labourers in South African mines have used their songs

to domesticate intractable contradictions between the symbolically reconstituted past and the uncertain constitution of the present; life at home and at the mines; . . . family solidarity and long-term separation; . . . autonomous self-image and identity as a labour unit; . . . ideal relationships and the reality of migrant and village life; . . . the migrants' thirst to determine their own destiny and the dry well of their alternatives.⁷

Similarly, in Mozambique, sugar plantation workers were able, through satirical songs, to protest their suffering and preserve their identity.⁸ During

4. S. Feld, 'A sweet lullaby for World Music', *Public Culture* 12, 1 (2000), pp. 151–4.

5. V. Arlt, 'The scholars' dance: popular culture and the appropriation of Christianity on the southeastern Gold Coast, c.1890–1918', paper presented to the conference on 'Performing Culture: The politics and aesthetics of cultural expression in contemporary Ghana', Amsterdam, 13–14 June 2002. See also V. Arlt, 'Der Tanz der Christen: Zu den Anfängen der populären Musik an der Goldküste, ca. 1860–1930', *Jahrbuch für Europäische Überseegeschichte* 4 (2004), pp. 151–90.

6. See W. J. J. Schipper, 'The white man is nobody's friend: European characters in African fiction', in W. J. J. Schipper, W. L. Idema and H. M. Leyten, *White and Black: Imagination and cultural confrontation* (Bulletin No. 320, Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, 1990), pp. 31–53.

7. David Coplan, 'Eloquent knowledge: Lesotho migrants' songs and the anthropology of experience', in Barber, *Readings in African Popular Culture*, pp. 29–40.

8. Leroy Vail and Landeg White, 'Plantation protest: the history of a Mozambican song', in Barber, *Readings in African Popular Culture*, pp. 54–63.

the Zimbabwean war of liberation, 'Chimurenga music', appropriated and adapted from local traditions, served to articulate 'the pressing issues of the day more eloquently than any political speech or historical treatise'.⁹ Among the Yoruba, contemporary popular music has played a major role in the production of a negotiated Yoruba cultural identity.¹⁰ And in Zanzibar, consumer tourism has shaped and been shaped in turn by the local music culture.¹¹

However, much remains to be known about the relationship between music and politics, and on how musicians, politicians and political communities all strive to appropriate each other in different ways and contexts. Except for a few such as the late Fela Kuti of Nigeria who became actively involved in national politics,¹² most African musicians tend to limit their overt participation in the political sphere through the medium of their songs. However, it remains possible to investigate not only the ways in which musicians have used their songs in order to achieve personal and collective identities that are of political significance, but also the ways in which political power in Africa has responded. The specific dynamics of the complex relationships between music, musicians and political power is visibly absent in the literature.

In this study, we examine the relationship between musicians and political power in Cameroon in order to make a case for understanding the dynamics of agency and identity politics among musicians. We argue that political power in Cameroon and, indeed, the rest of Africa has tended to appropriate musicians and their creative efforts to seek or maintain themselves in power, and that musicians have reacted variously to such invitations. Some musicians have tended to criticize and ridicule those in power — with varying consequences. Others have seen in such invitations an ideal opportunity to attain greater social recognition and respectability. Some have sought to straddle both worlds, serving politicians while at the same time pursuing their creative art in the interest of other constituencies. We argue further that, although prominent Cameroonian artists have differed in their political stances, there is evidence that their fortunes and statuses have changed with changing political regimes.

9. A. J. C. Pongweni, 'The *chimurenga* songs of the Zimbabwean war of liberation', in Barber, *Readings in African Popular Culture*, pp. 63–4.

10. C. A. Waterman, "'Our tradition is a very modern tradition": popular music and the construction of pan-Yoruba identity', in Barber, *Readings in African Popular Culture*, pp. 48–53.

11. A. Kirkegaard, 'Tourism industry and local music culture in contemporary Zanzibar', in Baaz and Palmberg, *Same and Other*, pp. 59–76.

12. Fela Kuti eventually created a political party, Movement of the People, in addition to his legendary criticism of military rule in Nigeria. Among his most famous songs are: *Teacher, Don't Teach Me No Nonsense*; *Black President*; and *Coffin for Head of State*. See N. Chido, 'Fela: The life and times of controversial Afrobeat superstar' (1997), <http://www.ccnets.com/~caldeira/fela.html> (retrieved 3 May 2001).

We begin by exploring the history of popular music in Cameroon from the colonial era to the present. We observe that two principal genres of music have dominated the urban landscape, namely, makossa, which emanated from the Douala area, and bikutsi, principally from the Beti ethnic group, whose prominence is linked to the emergence of the Biya regime. This historical narrative is intertwined with the history of prominent artists, such as Manu Dibango, whose genre of makossa brought world fame to Cameroon's popular music, but whose attempts to win recognition for music as art and musicians as artists met with repeated frustrations by politicians. A section follows in which we show the emergence of bikutsi music and its relatedness to the patronage of the Biya regime after the appointment of Paul Biya to the presidency in 1982. This sets the stage for a deeper analysis of the relationship between music and politics in post-colonial Cameroon. Here, we arrive at the crux of our argument, whereby we bring to light the ways in which political power has sought to appropriate the creative talents of artists in order to win legitimacy or maintain itself in power. We conclude with a case study of Lapiro de Mbanga, a prominent musician whose genre of protest music attracted wide popularity. The Biya regime's attempt to co-opt Lapiro, and his consequently ambiguous position, led to deep tensions between him and his supporters, on the one hand, and between him and members of the Biya regime, on the other. However, by becoming a member of the ruling party, Lapiro has made known his political stance, although he remains deeply critical of the regime and of Paul Biya in particular.

The emergence of popular music in Cameroon

The development of popular music in Cameroon dates back to colonial times and is closely associated with urbanization. Although lured by the city, Cameroonians in the cities did not abandon older forms of entertainment. These forms included indigenous music from the diverse ethnic and cultural regions of colonial Cameroon that fed migrants to the cities. Attractive though it was to some, European music was often not available or desirable in popular entertainment spaces in the African sections of the cities. Already modernized forms, such as Congolese cha-cha and rumba which were widespread thanks to the investment in powerful radio transmitters in then Léopoldville, and Cuban salsa plus highlife music from Nigeria and Ghana, proved ready and popular substitutes. But indigenous Cameroonian music was sorely missed, and bar-owners began exploring ways of attracting customers by bringing music from their home villages into their premises. Makossa and bikutsi, the respective musical forms of the indigenous Douala and Yaoundé (Sawa and Beti) populations, were the first to make their appearance in the 1940s and 1950s.

Douala's strategic position as a seaport and Cameroon's largest commercial centre gave makossa an early lead. The fact that the instruments for this brand of music were more easily adaptable to electrical instrumentation was an added advantage to its rapid development. Its gentle, jazz-like, cosmopolitan rhythms and dance styles made makossa the perfect music for urban Cameroon at a time when expectations of modernity were at their height. Soon, the music, like President Ahmadou Ahidjo, came to epitomize national unity and modernization, and was often contrasted with forms of music that were still to be harnessed by modern technology. That some of the pioneer makossa musicians migrated to France gave makossa an early opportunity to export itself, and to influence and be influenced by music from elsewhere.

Among these was Manu Dibango, who would subsequently coin the concept '*négropolitain*' to capture his identity as Afro-European, 'African and European at one and the same time'.¹³ Born in 1933 in Douala, Manu Dibango was sent by his parents to study in France when he was only 15 years old. In France he met Francis Bebey, another musician from his native Douala, with whom he formed a band and began to experiment with different modern instruments, such as the piano and the saxophone. He later migrated to Brussels where his music career began to blossom through fruitful contacts, especially with Joseph Kabasele and African Jazz who introduced him to 'the cha-cha and the rumba, the two breasts nourishing Zairean music', and who, in 1961, also invited him to Zaïre. The result was his first record, *African Soul*, 'a mixture of jazz, popular music, and rumba',¹⁴ testimony to his creativity informed by cosmopolitan encounters.

Dibango returned to Cameroon from Zaïre in 1963 to censorship, jealousy, and penury, and to repeated frustration and disappointment as an artist. But he was able to issue the album *Nasengina*, 'his only piece constructed purely from the indigenous Cameroonian Makossa'. In Cameroon, although appreciated by ordinary people, Manu Dibango hated the fact that politicians who 'certainly didn't have the love of the people',¹⁵ kept his artistic creativity under close surveillance. He was disenchanted with authorities that did not allow people 'to fantasize' and 'to dream', and who forced everyone to talk 'in cautious whispers' and to be 'wary of everyone else'.¹⁶ In 1964, disappointed in 'this harmful atmosphere', Manu Dibango closed down his club, abandoned all dreams of opening a 'musical conservatory' or an 'arts institute', and 'sneaked out of Cameroon' to France, after barely 16 months of homecoming.¹⁷

13. Manu Dibango, in collaboration with Danielle Rouard, *Three Kilos of Coffee: An autobiography* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994), p. 134.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 23–40.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 49–57.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 51–7.

He would pay only brief return visits to Cameroon from the early 1980s onwards. His desire 'to forge a unified image of Cameroon, representing all the musical currents in the country'¹⁸ received rare facilitation from the Minister of Culture who happened to be his friend, and 'resulted in a three-record set, *Fleurs Musicales du Cameroun*'. However, his desire to project himself as 'this famous Cameroonian musician heard everywhere but in Cameroon', would be met with the same contradictions, making the air 'unbreathable' in this his 'last African adventure'. He felt cursed that he 'couldn't create something here in Cameroon', as every time he achieved something, an obstacle crossed his path, leading his wife to conclude: 'You'd do more for Africa far away from her.'¹⁹ Together with other expatriate African musical talents in France, Manu Dibango released *Tam-Tam pour l'Ethiopie*, which not only served as 'proof that Africans too could take concrete action' vis-à-vis their own predicaments, but the proceeds from the sale of which were personally taken to refugee camps in Ethiopia by Mory Kante and himself, to ensure that 'For once, the money wouldn't be misused by the government in power'.²⁰ Manu Dibango's music is much more appreciated abroad — as 'world music' — than in Cameroon, where many are critical of his failure to harness his art more clearly to local socio-political causes.

If makossa started as the music of Douala and assumed a nationwide appeal, nowhere did it face stiffer internal competition than in Yaoundé, especially after the coming to power in 1982 of President Paul Biya. Bikutsi, the music of the Beti, has risen to rival makossa nationally and internationally. In colonial Yaoundé, where the bar had 'come to serve as a weekend hangout, often catering to various ethnic groups and offering a taste of home for the ex-villagers', bar owners, 'hoping to cash in on the profitable alcohol trade', encouraged bikutsi musicians to form orchestras. One such orchestra that became quite popular was the Richard Band de Zoetele, but it soon faced difficulties electrifying the sound of the *balafon* to suit new technologies and the tastes of the times. This hurdle was later overcome by Messi Me Nkonda Martin, who shifted from *balafons* to electric guitars and keyboards, earning himself the status of 'father of modern Bikutsi music'. His band, Los Camaroes, became 'a landmark in Bikutsi evolution because the traditional role of the music remained while the instruments which expressed them were changed'.²¹ Traditionally, bikutsi, like other indigenous music in Cameroon, has distinguished itself by focusing on social issues such as sex and relationships, and the private

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 105–12.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 115–17.

21. Hortense Fuller and Charles Fuller, 'A history of Bikutsi music in Cameroon', <http://www.africasounds.com/history.htm> (1997).

lives of prominent individuals,²² thereby playing a complementary role to popular journalism.

Among the earliest and most resilient bikutsi musicians is veteran singer Anne-Marie Nzie, whose first recording dates from the 1940s. Her vocal excellence and popularization of bikutsi earned her the title 'Queen Mother' of Cameroonian music, and brought her to the attention of post-colonial politicians, including Presidents Ahidjo and Biya. Equally popular nationally and internationally, especially since the failed 1984 coup d'état against Paul Biya, have been groups such as Les Vétérans, Les Têtes Brulées, Mbarga Soukous, Mekongo Président, Othéo, Titans de Sang-mélisma, Ange Ebogo Emerent, Seba George, Elanga Maurice, Nkondo Si Tony and Jimmy Mvondo Mvelé. With the artistic and technical assistance of Jean-Marie Ahanda, Les Têtes Brulées, in particular, had become a household name by 1987, with their 'New Form' bikutsi, appreciated by some listeners and dancers as more creative, exciting and profound than older versions.

Others like Sally Nyolo have drawn inspiration from this repertoire to bring the voices and experiences of Beti women to national and international spaces. She is self-confident, courageous and focused in her 'message of hope and faith' in the Beti women that initially created the rhythm from which she sources her music.²³ Evidence that bikutsi has successfully marketed itself internationally has come from, among other things, recognition by a superstar like Paul Simon, whose 1990 *Spirit of the Saints* album was inspired by a fusion of Brazilian and Cameroonian music, and included a bikutsi track entitled *Proof*.²⁴

Popular music under the Biya regime

Since 1982, when Biya became president, the prominence of bikutsi has improved remarkably. Not only have Biya's governments been dominated by ministers from his Beti ethnic group,²⁵ they have consistently paid special attention to the promotion of bikutsi and other cultural products from his home area, notwithstanding official rhetoric on balanced regional development and national integration. The advent of national television in 1985, with a Beti as the general manager, brought bikutsi to the living rooms of viewers even in regions originally dominated by makossa and other music forms. The fact that the management of the national television

22. *Ibid.*

23. 'Sally Nyolo — an interview', http://www.jazzdimensions.de/interviews/the_world/2000/sally_nyolo.html

24. Fuller and Fuller, 'A history of Bikutsi music in Cameroon'.

25. J. Takougang and M. Krieger, *African State and Society in the 1990s: Cameroon's political crossroads* (Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1998).

corporation CRTV has remained firmly in Beti hands since the advent of television has meant more than 20 years of privileged attention for bikutsi.

Bikutsi has defined itself and its role principally in opposition to other music forms, makossa in particular. Promoters of bikutsi music started by criticizing the dominance enjoyed by makossa since independence, arguing that the time had come for a Cameroonian music that was vigorous, cultural and modern. This aspiration coincided with President Biya's 'new deal' rhetoric of 'rigour' and 'moralization'. Paradoxically, it also coincided with Biya's narrow focus on the elite of his Beti ethnic community for appointments to senior government positions. If makossa had epitomized national integration and 'cultural conviviality'²⁶ in the interest of modernization, bikutsi has come to represent a return to cultural chauvinism through a stubborn insistence on autochthony by the elite of the dominant Beti ethnic group.²⁷ While makossa had generously embraced other music forms, bikutsi has been largely deaf to other cultural influences. In the same way, President Biya has been deaf to political and cultural pluralism, while maintaining the rhetoric of national integration, democratization and the celebration of cultural diversity.²⁸ This accounts for the tendency by non-Beti Cameroonians to devalue or trivialize bikutsi for being parochial and chauvinistic, and for depending on political patronage rather than on popular appeal for survival. Like Father Dumont in Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, many non-Beti Cameroonians see bikutsi as a primitive, sexually suggestive music that galvanizes the peoples of the forest to pound the ground with their feet and shake their bodies in frenzy.

Bikutsi promoters, however, argue the contrary: far from celebrating savagery and promiscuity, bikutsi, especially in its new form, is a necessary therapy for the poor. As demonstrated by the popularity since 1993 of a new bikutsi movement known as *Pédale*, once a foot-tapping bikutsi piece is played in popular bars around Yaoundé,

... dancers crush together, shaking in frenzied trances on the square dance floor, expressions of physical and drunken pleasure plastering the face. It's the accelerated beat that does it, and as each song progresses, the realities and frustrations of the past week fade deeper and deeper into oblivion. *Pédale* offers a way in which to escape from *la crise économique* no other art form has previously offered Cameroonians. [It is] a

26. C. G. Mbock (ed.), *Cameroun: pluralisme culturel et convivialité* (Editions Nouvelles du Sud, Paris, 1996).

27. On autochthony and the politics of belonging in Cameroon under Biya, see F. B. Nyamnjoh and M. Rowlands, 'Elite associations and the politics of belonging in Cameroon', *Africa* 68, 3 (1998), pp. 320–37; P. Geschiere and F. Nyamnjoh, 'Witchcraft as an issue in the "politics of belonging": democratization and urban migrants' involvement with the home village', *African Studies Review* 41, 3 (1998), pp. 69–92; P. Geschiere and F. Nyamnjoh, 'Capitalism and autochthony: the seesaw of mobility and belonging', *Public Culture* 12, 2 (2000), pp. 423–52.

28. CPDM, *Argument for Real Democracy: The great provincial tour of President Paul Biya (August–September–October 1991)* (Sopecam, Yaoundé, 1991).

revolutionary message by the people against the economic and social situations that they must face during the week.²⁹

As one commentator shrewdly remarked, ‘one can pedal away the weekend and forget that during the week the children are needy’.³⁰

Bikutsi has also been deployed by the privileged few from the Beti ethnic group to celebrate appointments to high office. Given the rarity of such appointments, relations, friends and village communities do not hesitate to join in the celebrations, as there is the prospect that some of the benefits of high office will trickle down. Donny Elwood has most ably captured this suggestion of conviviality and connivance between the privileged few and their marginalized kin. In his song entitled *En Haut*,³¹ a young man who has lived the life of the ghetto finds reason to celebrate the appointment of his brother to ‘very high office’. His brother has struggled and sacrificed to be appointed, consulting renowned pygmy witchdoctors to fortify him, and going through such trying experiences as crossing dangerous rivers and sleeping for days with his face dipped in water. He has even danced bikutsi naked, his feet in fire, in company with chimpanzees, not to mention eating and drinking medicines made from the barks of trees and from herbs.

The young man envisions his brother’s appointment changing his life in a big way — ‘my life is going to change’, ‘at last I am going to relax’, as ‘suffering has ended’. The days of suffering in overloaded taxis are over. He anticipates riding in his own car, an air-conditioned Mercedes, going into the inner cities to pick up girls — especially those who turned him down when he was nobody — who can’t resist anyone with a car. He also looks forward to winning contracts which he has no intention of honouring, given the protection he is sure to receive from his brother in high office. He will move to a beautiful residential area, keeping his old friends and relations at a distance by limiting access to his cellphone, and employing a guard to keep visitors at bay. At last he will be able to travel to Paris, to see beautiful sights, indulge in delicacies such as smoked salmon, and shop in euros. Sung in a poetic mixture of French and a Beti language, this bikutsi song is a real celebration of the power, privilege and comfort of the chosen few in Cameroonian politics. The song justifies autochthony even as it is critical of its excesses.

The result of the strategic effort to revalorize bikutsi has been a noted insensitivity by Beti in government towards the music of other ethnic areas in Cameroon. On CRTV, the management seems committed to forcing bikutsi down the musical palates of Cameroonians from other ethnic regions, a practice which has not always resulted in a positive and objective

29. Fuller and Fuller, ‘A history of Bikutsi music in Cameroon’.

30. *Ibid.*

31. See Donny Elwood’s album, *Eklektikos*.

appreciation of bikutsi. The fact that the long-serving general manager of CRTV — Professor Gervais Mendo Ze — owns and conducts a choir (*'La Voix du Cénacle'*) which he regularly features on television, and that a good number of his compositions are in Beti and bikutsi-like, has not helped matters. It is similar to the arrogance of being in power, which has been noted by various scholars observing Biya's regime and the role of the Beti elite therein. Thus, although the following assessment can be considered true of all music in Cameroon, it was particularly true of bikutsi:

Television introduced a new medium over which artists could express themselves and their music, and if they were creative enough, even forge an image and hence a nationwide identity for their group. Overnight, television shows such as Elvis Kemayo's Tele-Podium were on air, broadcasting to a virgin public music videos that enhanced the marketability of musicians as audiovisual performers and entertainers.³²

To be sure, the music of other ethnic groups has also developed, thanks to the efforts of musicians such as Salle John and Petit Papa. Various types of music from the Bamiléké area have been popularized over the years by different artists: Mangambeu by Tchana Pierre and Pierre Didy Tchacounté; Makassi by Sam Fan Thomas; Bendskin by Talla André Marie (who has used it to tactfully promote traditional values while being most critical of the promiscuity and death of morality in the age of AIDS); Bafang rhythms blended by Wes Madiko to the fascination of audiences in Europe and North America. The Arab, Foulbé and Kirdi provinces of northern Cameroon have produced a few stars, such as Ali Baba, but little to compare with the above. From the southwest has sprung makossa-type music by Sammy Macfany and others, and the East has been represented by Eko Rousvelt, whose invitation to Cameroonians not to place hurdles in the paths of one another was well received. Others like Donny Elwood have continued with special-interest music that treats serious themes such as the marginalization of the pygmies and the trivialization of African civilizations, and political opportunism in Africa. Donny Elwood's *Negros & Beau* album uses puns and irony to poke fun at those who assume superiority and indulge in hypocrisy.

Meanwhile, the Bamenda Grassfields are arguably the region where there has been the least achievement in producing local pop stars. The reasons are not obvious, but it is clear that Grassfielders love their indigenous music heritage. Gatherings and occasions at home in Cameroon or in the diaspora are always an excuse for singing, drumming and dancing to Grassfield rhythms. Amateur audio and video recordings are easy to come by, and are reproduced infinitely and circulated among Grassfielders at home and abroad. Dedicated performers of various dances are not difficult to find in

32. Fuller and Fuller, 'A history of Bikutsi music in Cameroon'.

cities where Grassfield elites may want to show off or entertain their guests with a bit of 'our culture'. Not wanting to be totally eclipsed, some elites have attempted to sponsor the production of local Grassfields talents, some of whom (Francis Ndom, Prince Afo-Akom, and 'Bottle Dance' musicians like Richard Nguti, John Minang, Ni Ken and Depipson) have made it to the national scene with music from their home area. These and other budding talents in the region and elsewhere shop around for sponsors ranging from businesses to NGOs and publicity-seeking elites, through other artists and the national orchestra.³³

In general, although Cameroon has had an impressive list of stars since independence, budding musicians find it difficult to make a breakthrough, because few of those who have succeeded have bothered, or been allowed, to invest in the industry at home. Manu Dibango, for example, regrets the fact that he has been of service in promoting artistic creativity among local musicians almost everywhere except his native Cameroon, and finds it ironic that Côte d'Ivoire, with the blessing of President Houphouët-Boigny, could entrust him with the task of heading the Orchestre de la Radio-Télévision Ivoirienne, while Cameroon could not even take seriously his expertise as a professional musician.³⁴

For various reasons, including censorship, success seems to imply going to live in France, and coming home briefly for concerts. If this is an indication that the country does acknowledge its artists and show appreciation, it is far from evident that the state really understands how best to harness artistic talent for national development, especially given the importance of music in people's lives.³⁵ It is perhaps worth mentioning in this regard that, despite the government's attempts to impose creative inertia upon him in the early 1960s, Manu Dibango received a decoration as a Knight of Order and of Valor in 1988. However, as he observed, 'The authorities could decorate me with all the medals they liked', without doing much to stop 'the descent into hell' for artistic creativity in a country where it is not uncommon to mobilize the police and army to raid clubs or to impose entertainment taxes with the intention of crippling artists who are perceived to be critical or unpalatable. Fed up with 'the brutality inherent in the life of . . . [Cameroon]', Manu Dibango confesses 'hatred for certain individuals',³⁶ who would not hesitate to politicize anything. Creativity thus stifled, Manu Dibango feels 'condemned to be an expatriate', and is convinced that the next musical generation will have to leave Cameroon en masse like 'musical guerrillas', to seek new horizons, given how costly

33. John Minang's album *Issiah* carries advertisements for 'L&B', 'Beneficial Life Insurance' and 'PMUC'. Prince Afo-Akom obtained sponsorship from the World-Wide Fund for Nature thanks to his song *Our Environment*, in which the WWF is mentioned positively.

34. Dibango, *Three Kilos of Coffee*, pp. 95–104.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 52–3.

freedom of creativity is in the country, and how little anyone cares for anything more than ‘wheeling and dealing’.³⁷ It must be said, however, that Manu Dibango is more critical of the government in his autobiography than in his music, which is often more nuanced, and hardly of the sort to give anyone in high office political headaches. In his new capacity as UNESCO’s ambassador for culture, he has another opportunity to cultivate the musical flowers of Cameroon without undue interference from politicians and bureaucrats.

The quest to make it lays pressure on artists to explore their talents in various ways, including ways that others might consider prostitution.³⁸ Few give up too readily, even if this means performing in bars, market places and private functions as itinerant musicians for very little pay. As Manu Dibango aptly observes, in certain cases, ‘musicians have a day job and become a club owner’s slaves at night. They’re hired for a bit of bread, just the length of time it takes some notable to get married to the sounds of traditional music.’³⁹ Others have gone into satirical comedy where they combine music and sketches that caricature, lampoon and moralize on the shortcomings of political life in Cameroon.⁴⁰ However limited the financial rewards, the local performers do more than ensure continuity for their home cultures — ‘We can’t recite our ancestors’ lessons forever’.⁴¹ They often have more musical space to articulate social criticism of relevance to local predicaments than their better-known foreign-based counterparts trapped in the logic of ‘world music’, and their poverty is in a way a blessing since it compels them to stay within Cameroon instead of migrating to France to seek or celebrate success.

Critical music in tune with popular expectations is not limited to the most disfavoured regions of the country. Even among the Beti, whose bikutsi music has been given greater prominence on state television and radio by the sheer fact of association with President Paul Biya, not all voices have heaped praise on the regime. Critical bikutsi songs have arisen among local performers to challenge complacency and support for President Biya, ‘a son of the soil’ who has repeatedly failed to deliver on promises even to his own ethnic kin.⁴²

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 112–14.

38. Some Cameroonian musicians include in their lyrics names of individuals seeking greater social or political visibility, in exchange for monetary payments. However, other musicians deliberately include the names of politicians in their lyrics not because they have been paid, but in order to attract their attention to the messages embedded in their songs, which on the surface may not always be critical.

39. Dibango, *Three Kilos of Coffee*, p. 54.

40. Some good cases in point include Dave K. Moctoi, Jean-Michel Kankan, Koukam Narcisse, and Tchop Tchop.

41. Dibango, *Three Kilos of Coffee*, p. 88.

42. O. Essono, ‘La démocratie en chanson: Les Bikut-si du Cameroun’, *Politique Africaine* 64 (1996), pp. 52–61.

Music, politics and patriotism

During the Ahidjo years (1960–82), especially from 1966 when the politics of one-dimensionalism became the norm, music was harnessed for the purposes of national unity and development. As the national anthem dictated, Cameroon expected all her children ‘to give their heart’, ‘serve their land’ and ‘with constancy play their part’ in defending her flag ‘as a symbol of . . . [her] faith and unity’. Musicians generally reflected such themes. Songs were composed on the importance of independence, on Cameroon as a land of unity in diversity, and on President Ahidjo as the architect, founding father and wise guide of the nation. Cameroonians were familiar with verses such as ‘*Ahidjo, Ahidjo notre Président, père de la nation, Ahidjo toujours chaud gars*’, and on official feast days, schools competed to come up with a winning patriotic composition in honour of the President.⁴³ As Manu Dibango observes critically, the rhetoric of nation-building was so pervasive that the government virtually denied Cameroonians the right to fantasize and to dream. Even when it came to the creation of a national orchestra, the government gave priority to political, regional and ethnic considerations rather than to music as art and musicians as artists.⁴⁴

Almost every musician of distinction composed pieces in tune with expectations of Ahidjo as the leading politician of the day. Thus, for example, Tala André Marie celebrated ‘20 years of peace and progress’⁴⁵ under Ahidjo, while Manu Dibango hailed his policy of ‘national unity’ in an album titled *Ahmadou Ahidjo*, and Medzo Me Nsom invited Cameroonians to turn out en masse and vote for Ahidjo.⁴⁶ Tchana Pierre, Francis Bebey, Eboa Lottin and Anne-Marie Nzie are other examples of leading musicians who have participated voluntarily or when commissioned in bringing their art to serve their country by singing the praises of President Ahidjo. Talla André Marie and Manu Dibango’s music in praise of Ahidjo was used as the signature tunes for news, current affairs, sports and other leading programmes on national radio. The President’s pervasive presence was not only evident in national politics, but also in music and the different uses to which it was put. Any criticism had to be very subtle and deep in metaphor to avoid the risk of repression for the artist concerned. Manu Dibango tells us how ‘playing with *double entendres* fascinated me’, as it offered ‘a clever way to talk about the neighborhood business and goings-on’. Thanks to his *double entendres*, he was able to ‘open concerts during meetings of heads of state’ with otherwise critical songs such as

43. M. Asse, ‘La chanson dans la communication politique au Cameroun’, *Fréquence Sud* 13 (1995), pp. 121–31.

44. Dibango, *Three Kilos of Coffee*, pp. 52–81.

45. Asse, ‘La chanson dans la communication politique au Cameroun’, p. 126.

46. *Ibid.*

*Pour une poignée de CFA and Afrique sans fric.*⁴⁷ In bikutsi circles, for example, Ahidjo was generally known as 'le pasteur de là-bas'.⁴⁸ Even then, some still fell victim when the ambiguity of their compositions was interpreted by officialdom as a veiled attack on the President. A case in point was Messi Martin's song *Amu Dze* ('Why?'), on suspicion that he was reproaching President Ahidjo for having snatched someone else's wife, even though the song had not mentioned Ahidjo by name.⁴⁹

Ahidjo's politics of regional balance also applied to music, and this meant creating space, in no matter how marginal a form, for music and musicians from the different cultural regions in the national orchestra and/or on national radio, even if this meant a national orchestra not worthy of the name.⁵⁰ Folk music in remote villages was just as liable to co-optation by politicians and civil servants seeking to draw attention to their home regions through compositions in honour of the government and Ahidjo. Politicians and civil servants made regular visits to their home villages armed with recording devices, instigating the local populations to acknowledge the development opportunities brought to their communities by the President through their elite. Back at the regional and national capitals, the folk music collected was fed into radio for wider dissemination, how regularly it featured depending, among other things, on how appreciated it was by the men and women in power. In principle, radio was expected to feature mainly indigenous music in its programmes and entertainment packages. Music has dominated the airwaves since independence.

Under Ahidjo two types of lyrics dominated popular music in Cameroon: pro-establishment political songs and music on social virtues (love, honesty, etc.) and social ills (jealousy, corruption, prostitution, etc.). Lyrics openly critical of politicians or politics were rare, and, when available, were usually very subtle or veiled in their criticism, using understatement, irony, *double entendre*, Pidgin English, or a mixture of broken French and Pidgin English to mask the real message, thereby escaping the administrative axe of the censor who targeted all critical voices in society. Repression was the order of the day, and one of the effects was musicians and others yielding to a narrow idea of politics common at the time: '*la politique aux politiciens*', and reproducing official propaganda either by conviction or as flattery. Others found comfort in defending foreign causes, such as the plight of Nelson Mandela in prison (cf. Sam Fan Thomas, Douleur, Petit-Pays), anti-colonial struggles in Namibia and Mozambique, and the exploitation of Africa by France and the West. This remains a popular outlet to date.

47. Dibango, *Three Kilos of Coffee*, p. 80.

48. Essono, 'La démocratie en chanson', p. 60.

49. Asse, 'La chanson dans la communication politique au Cameroun', p. 127.

50. Dibango, *Three Kilos of Coffee*, p. 81.

Ahidjo resigned as president of Cameroon in November 1982, and was succeeded by Paul Biya, who promised a 'New Deal' government of political 'liberalization', 'rigour' in the management of state affairs, and 'moralization' of the civil service, politics and society. The rhetoric articulated a determined break with an autocratic past, and a *glasnost* that would bring about a democratic Cameroon. Most Cameroonian musicians bought into the rhetoric and euphoria of Biya's early years as president, and composed songs to celebrate his new deal government. Anne-Marie Ndzie composed and dedicated *Liberté* to Paul Biya and his Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), and when John Fru Ndi and his Social Democratic Front (SDF) attempted to use the song for his presidential campaign in October 1992, she was 'vehemently opposed' to the idea.⁵¹ Archangelo de Moneko's *Renouveau National de Paul Biya* replaced Manu Dibango and Talla André Marie's compositions as a signature tune on national radio and television. The song went as follows: 'Paul Biya, we proud militants of the CPDM, are telling you, you are the man of the new deal. With God's guidance and with the support of the nation, you shall never, never falter. Keep going, Paul Biya, keep going. The people of Cameroon are telling Paul Biya: keep going Paul Biya, keep going, we support your action of faith and unity.'⁵² Like his predecessor, Paul Biya also became 'Notre Président, père de la nation, Paul Biya toujours chaud gars'.⁵³ He was even 'God's chosen messenger' who deserved 'respect and veneration' ('Papa Paul, assume ta tâche, c'est Dieu lui-même qui te l'a confiée'). The Beti people wished him well with his mission, assuring him of their support ('Continue ta mission, nous sommes avec toi').⁵⁴

But Biya's excessively narrow focus on his ethnic community disillusioned most other Cameroonians shortly after the euphoria of his first few months in power.⁵⁵ Soon critical songs began to filter through, especially in the now politically disfavoured makossa music genre, questioning the repression and hardship that had come in place of the promise of freedom and prosperity. Makossa artists joined critical sections of the increasingly disillusioned public in ridiculing the official rhetoric of rigour and moralization. Different musicians interpreted the notion of rigour in different ways: to Uta Bella, it had become a slogan for mobilizing people towards political vengeance. For Ngalle Jojo, Cameroonians had to condemn with 'rigour' the thieves who masqueraded as leaders: '*à bas les voleurs, vive la rigueur*' ('down with thieves, long live rigour'). Everywhere,

51. Asse, 'La chanson dans la communication politique au Cameroun', p. 125.

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 124–6.

54. Essono, 'La démocratie en chanson', pp. 54–5.

55. Célestin Monga, *La recomposition du marché politique au Cameroun (1991–1992): de la nécessité d'un aménagement du monitoring électoral* (Fondation Friedrich-Ebert, Yaoundé, 1992). Also see Takougang and Krieger, *African State and Society in the 1990s*.

rigour took on a very negative and cynical connotation: the poor suffered and drank their beer with rigour, while the rich enjoyed their stolen wealth with rigour. Beti were said to play, dance bikutsi, devastate the national economy and feast on the sweat of fellow Cameroonians with rigour.⁵⁶ It was a sign that rigour as intended by Biya had failed to materialize. Cynical Cameroonians corrupted even the signature tune for radio and television news, from: '*Va de l'avant Paul Biya, va de l'avant. Nous soutenons ton action de foi et d'unité*', to '*Mange ta part Paul Biya, mange ta part, et laisse les Camerounais tranquilles*' ('Eat your share Paul Biya, eat your share, and leave Cameroonians in peace').

Even for the Beti masses, the collective celebration of power and expectations of abundance lasted only until 1987, when the new deal government announced that the country was undergoing a severe economic crisis. To non-Beti, this did not come as a surprise, since Biya and the elite few of his ethnic kin had devastated Cameroon with the ferocity of white ants. A structural adjustment programme was adopted, the stiff conditionalities of which dictated a freeze in mass employment policies. As the situation worsened, salaries of civil servants were slashed significantly, followed by a 50 percent devaluation of the CFA franc in 1994. Now, Bikutsi artists attracted attention with an upsurge of questioning songs. Some like Sala Bekono even went so far as to insinuate that President Biya had forced a bad death upon his own wife Jeanne-Irène, who had died with her 'eyes open' (*Mis Meyo*), symbolizing a troubled conscience and unsettled debts to the living.⁵⁷ The moral decadence and corruption in the regime became a focus of attack, as more bikutsi artists joined the bandwagon of those composing highly critical, vibrant and danceable songs, as if keen to provide a sort of musical therapy for victims of the regime.

The first sustained use of bikutsi to criticize President Biya for failed promises came from traditional musicians in rural areas of the Beti region, who, despite years of repression, had largely maintained their freedom of expression. Bikutsi to them had retained its richness, and they have used it to praise and celebrate, admonish and attack, ridicule and humiliate, when each was called for.⁵⁸ In his study of democracy in song, Essono discusses 107 critical bikutsi songs composed by popular and village musicians, men and women alike, disillusioned by a regime that has promised without fulfilling, and that has capitalized on Beti solidarity and community spirit for the selfish interests of the elite few. The songs reject the god-like status attained by Biya through false promises, and the troubles that his regime has imposed even on his own supporters from the same ethnic origin. The

56. M. H. Ndjana, *Les proverbes de Paul Biya* (Edition du Carrefour, Yaoundé, 1997), pp. 13–21.

57. Asse, 'La chanson dans la communication politique au Cameroun', p. 127.

58. Essono, 'La démocratie en chanson', pp. 52–3.

bikutsi messages addressed to the head of state and his government are no longer enveloped in metaphors, as was the case under President Ahidjo and during colonial times. They are direct and without fear, in the spirit of the democracy that the regime has purportedly brought about. The songs are critical of the economic crisis, denounce social injustices and the slow pace of development, and condemn government inaction and complicity in the face of corruption. Biya is even compared unfavourably with his predecessor, President Ahidjo, during whose leadership money was available and peasants were at least sure of being able to sell their cash crops, feed themselves and keep their children in school. While there may be an element of exaggeration in comparing their homeboy unfavourably with Ahidjo, it can hardly be denied that corruption has thrived under Biya, and that only an elite few appear to be benefiting from an economy that has suffered downturns since 1987. In 1998, for example, Cameroon was, according to Transparency International, the most corrupt country in the world. And if those doing the corruption and embezzlement are the dominant Beti in power, the money must be stashed away in cities and abroad, since their village kin see very little of it.

Essono cites a verse in which the women of Nkol-Afeme are asking Paul Biya where he has kept the country's money for life to become so expensive. Their farm products sell poorly, but the price of meat, salt and other essential consumer items has skyrocketed. Yaoundé has become unbearably expensive, and President Biya must say what he has done with the country's money. Yet another group, *Espoir du Renouveau* ('Hope of a New Deal'), is not pleased with the President's indifference to the development of their village: 'Papa Paul Biya, why have you abandoned the hope of a New Deal? It is important that we live a decent life, Papa Paul, we need funds.' A third group invites the people to meet Paul Biya with pertinent questions and demands; he should have foreseen the economic crises, and has the responsibility 'to save them from death or to let them perish'.⁵⁹ Schools are without teachers, hospitals without drugs, and harvests have ceased to fetch money, yet the President is insensitive to all this. He must be reminded that it is his duty to bring things back to normal, for 'your team is working without output',⁶⁰ and some seem to have been born to watch a minute few enjoy the country's resources. It cannot be true, the women of Obala sing, that Paul Biya knows what is going on in his country and decides to sit quiet: 'Paul Biya do you know? Out here it hurts, out here things are bad, do you know that, Biya Paul?'⁶¹ He is not a listening president, he is not informed, and he does not care even for those who have made sacrifices so that his unproductive new deal government may keep its power in the face

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 56-7.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

61. *Ibid.*

of growing opposition, especially from other ethnic groups and regions of the country.

Biya himself has dismissed the opposition parties of the 1990s as being keener to destroy than to construct the nation, and as irresponsible vandals and illusion peddlers. The *Espoir du Renouveau* appeals to him to demonstrate otherwise:

Vandals cannot build the country, thieves and those who burn down banks are incapable of building the country, those who destroy roads are uninformed of what it takes to build the country, what are you doing, oh Biya, towards building the country? We want a country that is strong, rich and united, unite us for the welfare of our country. Why do you sit by and watch the country destroy itself? Don't you have eyes to see? I am asking this of you, oh Paul Biya.⁶²

Les Maxtones du Littoral eloquently capture a similar concern with Biya's 'callous indifference' to the suffering of ordinary people, in a popular tune pregnant with metaphor. Entitled *Doleibe (10f) la suite de l'affaire*, the song tells the story of a woman who becomes pregnant from a one-night stand with an irresponsible shoemaker whom she literally has to squeeze to take care of her. This is a most unusual pregnancy that lasts 24 months, but what is even more shocking is the attitude of the doctor, who, as an expert, is supposed to reassure the woman with words of encouragement and concern. But the doctor does none of this. Each time the pregnant woman comes rushing with concern and worry for her life and baby, the doctor says: '*Il faut attendre. Tu es pressée pour aller où?*' ('You must be patient. Why are you in such a hurry?'). At delivery the child is born already aged, bald-headed, bearded, pigeon-toed and deformed, with little to warrant a celebration. In sum, he is a freak, not a child. That Cameroonians interpreted the song as a thinly disguised allusion to their seemingly infinite wait for democracy under an indifferent President Biya was demonstrated not only by its popularity but also by how they drew from it to describe their daily travails. The refrain '*on attend l'enfant, l'enfant ne vient pas*' has been used to describe Cameroon as '*le pays de on attend*' (Cameroon is a country of 'wait and see'). The doctor's admonishment in the form of a question — '*tu es pressée pour aller où?*' ('Why are you in such a hurry?') — is a metaphor for the slow pace of political reform. Democracy will come when it will come, not through the agitation of impatient vandals and peddlers in illusion, but through the doctor who is impatient with impatience.⁶³ In early June 2004 it was rumoured among Cameroonians in the diaspora that the 71-year-old Paul Biya, who is widely believed to be in poor health, had died in Switzerland, only for him to surface several days afterwards to joke

62. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

63. F. B. Nyamnjoh, 'Cameroon: a country united by ethnic ambition and difference', *African Affairs* 98, 390 (1999), pp. 101–18.

about it: 'Those who wish me dead have the next twenty years to wait,' he announced on the radio. The rumour seemed like the collective, symbolic assassination of President Biya by all those whose aspirations for democracy and the good life have repeatedly been thwarted by the insensitivities of his regime to basic transparency and the rule of law.

Criticism of the Biya regime has come not from fellow-Beti only, who could be argued to have been worst betrayed by their own son of the soil, but soon began to emerge from Douala, the economic capital increasingly without an economy to speak of. Foremost among a new generation of politically-inclined makossa players was Lapiro de Mbanga, a young and vibrant singer who apparently had lived in Bamenda, where he had earned a living as a hawker and taxi assistant. Lapiro epitomizes the strengths and controversies surrounding a protest musician. His experiences, expressed through music, inform us of the spirit of the democratic transition in Cameroon between 1990 and 1992, specifically that it was an era plagued by the superficiality of both the emerging opposition and the ruling government. However, his genre of music and his activism as a human rights advocate have inspired several new singers, including Longue Longue, whose albums *Ayo*, *Africa* and *Privatisation* have made waves with their biting criticism of misery, exploitation and dependency in Africa. Lapiro himself has remained steadfast, devoting his career to singing about the daily realities of pain, rejection and exclusion faced by a multitude of Cameroonians. As a relatively recent exponent of political musical expression, he deserves to be examined at some length.

*The art and politics of Lapiro de Mbanga*⁶⁴

Lapiro made a name in the Cameroonian musical scene from 1987 onwards. He was highly appreciated by common people for the use of Pidgin English⁶⁵ in his songs but loathed by pro-government politicians for his attacks on President Paul Biya. His emergence, as we have seen, came at a time of a failing economy and growing social disillusionment, which he quickly reflected in his songs. Seen not only as a musician but also as an 'incarnation of the hawker population',⁶⁶ Lapiro, in his first album *Kob*

64. Lapiro is an acronym for *Lambo Pierre Roger*. He also had several nicknames including 'Ndinga Man', '*le président des sauveteurs*', and 'Tara'. See *Cameroon Tribune* (French edn), 4912, 24 June 1991.

65. Pidgin English — a mixture of English, French and indigenous slang — is a lingua franca in Cameroon. It is important to note the medium for conveying one's political ideas such as Lapiro's appropriation of Pidgin English. There is a sense of great appeal in speaking to common people in the language they best understand, as demonstrated by Fela Kuti of Nigeria, whose critical, anti-military government songs were all expressed in Pidgin English.

66. *Cameroon Tribune* (French edn), 4912, 24 June 1991, p. 2.

Nyé,⁶⁷ was characteristically eloquent about the burning socio-economic and political issues of the time. He eventually became an opposition reference chiefly among the youth and even with opposition leaders such as John Fru Ndi of the Social Democratic Front (the main opposition party in Cameroon). His popularity further increased because of his outspokenness during the trials of two intellectual critics of the government, the academic Célestin Monga and the journalist Pius Njawe, which threw Douala into great tension (leading to an 'anthropology of anger' as termed by Monga himself) between sympathizers of the ruling party and civil society. Monga and Njawe were charged with treason and contempt for the president's person.⁶⁸

Lapiro's songs spoke of the experience of hunger, the excess of suffering and the need for freedom of expression in Cameroon. Most of the lyrics enjoined the state authorities to remember the *petit peuple* or 'the forgotten' each time they dined and wined and smoked cigars.⁶⁹ Lapiro accused the state authorities (without naming names) of having plundered the state almost beyond recovery, starving mothers and children, like those in Ethiopia. To him, the Cameroonian president was a stooge of France, without any genuine concern for his people; his main priority was to please his neocolonial master whom he regularly visited and consulted. Little doubt then, Lapiro contended, that the common people ('the strugglers') had been advised by the president to go back to the rural areas and till the soil for survival. His songs called for open demonstration and protest against an unfeeling establishment. He frequently referred to the 'strugglers'⁷⁰ as his people, affirming himself as their advocate. Summed up in his words, 'no condition is permanent' — a modest way of encouraging the disillusioned not to give up. His music came to signify the personal and collective experiences of many. As Turino notes, music has the potential to represent and signify 'in a particularly direct manner' the realities, aspects and events of people's lives and hence is *experienced* as real, that is, as a sign of their lives, not a sign about them.⁷¹

67. This is a Pidgin English expression for 'come and see' but Nyé also refers to the repressive forces of state violence that regularly unleashed terror in Douala (Cameroon's economic capital) and other opposition strongholds (Bamenda, for example). One could therefore think that there was a play of words here, given the fact that he makes reference to *gendarmes* in many of his songs.

68. Monga, *La recomposition du marché politique*.

69. 'You wan damé you mimba we, you wan sulé you mimba we yeh, oh mimba weyehe, tara, oh mimba we.' Translated into English, it goes thus; 'At table remember us, even when having a cigarette remember us, you who are our patron.'

70. *Sauveteurs* include taxi men, cart-pushers, hawkers and the unemployed, in other words, those on the margin of subsistence who must scrape by to stay alive.

71. Thomas Turino, 'Signs of imagination, identity and experience: a Peircian semiotic theory for music', *Ethnomusicology* 43, 2 (1999), p. 236.

Having received much approval from the public, Lapiro came up with more songs such as *Surface de Réparation*, *No Make Erreur*, and *Mimba Wè*⁷² which re-echoed the grievances previously raised, but were spiced with newer developments on the political landscape. Endowed with such popularity, Lapiro quickly became an opinion leader and was credited with the office of *Le Président des Sauveteurs*.⁷³ Later he was incorporated as one of the six vice-presidents of the Human Rights Organization of Cameroon (HROC),⁷⁴ a young NGO consigned with the task of tracking human rights abuses within the country and invoking the state authorities to respect the rule of law.

Lapiro also became a member of the Co-ordination, created in October 1990 to lead the 'Biya must Go' campaign and demand a Sovereign National Conference.⁷⁵ He stayed at the forefront of civil society politics in Cameroon despite the banning of his music on CRTV — the official radio and television channel. He pleaded the case of several university students who had been arrested by the police for participating in strike actions in their solidarity with the demands of the Co-ordination.⁷⁶ Later in the struggle, a rift emerged between Lapiro and his colleagues over the issue of the 'Ghost Town'.⁷⁷ While others argued that the Ghost Town Operation was the best and only means of ousting President Biya, Lapiro maintained that such an operation would rather worsen the situation of an already suffering people. He argued that if his colleagues insisted on spearheading the cause of the Ghost Town, he would be forced to disassociate himself from it. Eventually, he went on television and denounced the instigators of the Ghost Town operations. His colleagues regarded this action as an unpardonable act of treachery. *Sauveteurs* suddenly became violent against their so-called advocate as they looted and burned Lapiro's house and vehicles, while he escaped to Yaoundé under cover of the police.⁷⁸ His colleagues also accused Lapiro of having betrayed them by accepting a bribe of 22 million CFA francs from the government to change sides.⁷⁹

72. *Surface de Réparation* ('Penalty Area'), *No Make Erreur* ('Don't be Mistaken'), and *Mimba Wè* ('Remember Us').

73. 'President of struggling people', or the 'Strugglers'.

74. *Cameroon Tribune* (English edn), 1206, 2 June 1991, p. 2.

75. *Le Quotidien*, 29–31 May 1998, pp. 3–13.

76. *Cameroon Tribune* (French edn), 4912, 24 June 1991, p. 2.

77. The Ghost Town Operation (*Opération Villes Mortes*) was the period when civil society witnessed a remarkable resurgence through the efforts of students, journalists, cartoonists, hawkers, taxi drivers, musicians and others searching for space to articulate their rights against the might of the state. Yaoundé was more peaceful during this period, as most of the violence and protests took place in Douala (where Lapiro resided), Bamenda and Bafoussam. Cartoonists and satirical comedians, in particular, enriched their art by drawing extensively from the rich repertoire of Cameroonian music, and enjoyed the great popularity which the ambiguity of their work evoked among ordinary victims of officialdom.

78. *Time and Life*, July–August 1991, pp. 14–15.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Lapiro denied that he had ever received a franc from any one, and were he to receive any, he added with bravado, it would not be the meagre sum of 22 million CFA francs but at least 50 million to share with his large following. He accused the Ghost Town initiators of being money-minded extortionists.⁸⁰

Thus Lapiro became the centre of controversy. On the one hand, he was accused of having betrayed the cause for which he had fought so valiantly by accepting a bribe from the government. On the other hand, others regarded him as a victim of the people's intolerance. It took him over a decade to regain the trust of his fans and members of civil society as a whole. In 2001 he published an album, which some observers have claimed is his most persuasive criticism of the ruling regime in Cameroon. Entitled *Na You* (meaning, 'You are to Blame') Lapiro reproaches the Biya government for the country's continuous economic crisis and growing corruption. Disappointed with the status quo and sceptical about the prospects for positive change, he suggests that a change of government is crucial for democracy to prevail. Lapiro remains a classic example of the kind of artist whose creative talent and popularity are sought by politicians for their own interests.

Conclusion: protest music in the new millennium

There is every indication that, in the new millennium, protest music will play a more influential role in the political landscape in Cameroon. Lapiro's genre of music has inspired a younger generation of musicians, as more protest music seems to emerge from both bikutsi and makossa artists. Some of these artists have become actively involved in local and national politics, the most popular of them being Lapiro himself. A Lapiro-inspired makossa artist in Douala recently applied to create a political party and expressed his plans to run in the 2004 presidential elections. While many have dismissed the artist's intentions as mere fantasy, Cameroonians in general are convinced that dissent and oppositional voices still have a chance in protest music. Because ordinary Cameroonians can 'see beyond the mask or veil of deception worn by the people in power'⁸¹ and, with ambivalence, can bring to the fore the challenge of identifying popular understandings of democracy that celebrate 'the supremacy of the people'

80. See *Cameroon Tribune*, 4912, 24 June 1991, p. 5. Lapiro argued that the accusation was a bid by his enemies to cover up their own practices of extortion. In his words, '*Ces opérations ne sont rien d'autre qu'une escroquerie du petit peuple. Car si les organisateurs vendent par exemple 2 millions de "cartons rouges" au prix unique de 100frs, ils récoltent sans effort la somme de 200 millions de FCEA*'.

81. R. Sekoni, 'Politics and urban folklore in Nigeria', in Barber, *Readings in African Popular Culture*, p. 143.

over dominant illusions and imposed edicts,⁸² they readily create room for popular music that challenges the status quo, while seeking alternative interpretations for lyrics intended to celebrate the structures of inequality, mediocrity and political control. The future may not be one of revolutions, but it most likely promises greater connivance, complicity and convergence between popular music and popular causes, with or without the allure of political patronage.

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