

Entertaining Repression: Music and Politics in Post-Colonial Cameroon

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Entertaining Repression: Music and Politics in Post-Colonial Cameroon, strives on the fact that, an understanding of the dynamics of agency and identity among musicians in Cameroon is construed in the connection between musicians and political power. The authors, Nyamnjoh and Fokwang, argue that some politicians have appropriated musicians and their innovative efforts in order to subscribe to political power and/or gain legitimacy. Meanwhile, some of these musicians have blatantly refused such a pledge; others have contrastingly acceded to it as a means of greater recognition. Elsewhere, the authors claim that some musicians have decided to pursue both the politicians and their careers and in this light, their fortunes and statuses have been transformed. In order to accomplish this task, the authors have carefully traced the historical relations between the production of music and how it is appropriated. They even see this as a complex relation among music, musicians and politicians. These issues are handled through several themes like the origin of popular music in Cameroon, the role of Manu Dibango, the Biya regime and popular music, music and patriotism and Lapiro de Mbanga with his repudiating nature of music in Cameroon.

In tracing the history of popular music in Cameroon, Nyamnjoh and Fokwang make a panoramic assessment of how music is appropriated by whom and why. Ingeniously, they do this by citing several examples in Africa. They examine the historicity of music in Cameroon from the colonial era to the present. They state that two type of popular music have often dominated the Cameroon popular culture sphere; *Bikutsi* and *Makossa* which were rooted in Yaounde and Douala respectively. In most cases, as Nyamnjoh and Fokwang claim, popular music was associated with urbanization. *Makossa* emerged in the 1940s whereas *Bikutsi* became prevalent in the 1950s. Due to its cosmopolitan nature, Douala became the centre of popular music. The study further traces the rise of Manu Dibango and the role he played in popularizing *Makossa*. Nyamnjoh and Fokwang go on to assert that during the presidency of Ahidjo, there was censorship and music was

mainly appropriated to epitomize national unity and modernization. With the accession to power of Paul Biya, *Bikutsi* gained an undue leverage over *Makossa* because Biya championed the Beti, which, of course, was Biya's ethnic group. Many *Bikutsi* orchestras were established like the *Richard Band of Zoetele*, *Los Camaros* by Messi Mekonda Martin, Annie Anzouer, *les Tete Bruleés*, Ange Ebogo Emerant, Mbarga Soukous, Seba George, and Nkodo Sitony among others.

The Biya regime is given an in-depth analysis by the authors especially with the rise of the *Bikutsi*. Since most of his appointees were from his region of origin, most of the *Bikutsi* musician and their music were appropriated by these appointees mainly to amass political capital. In 1985, *Bikutsi* gained more grounds than *Makossa* thanks to the introduction of the Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV), which was headed by Mendo Ze, who was from the same region. Most of the *Bikutsi* musicians were projected on the CRTV and many used their music to celebrate appointments or lavish praises on their leaders, especially Paul Biya, and his policy of 'rigour' and 'moralisation'. Donny Elwood's song *En Haut*, which celebrates autochthony but lampoons its excesses, seem to be their point of disgust on the rise of *Bikutsi*. The study also highlights different types of music in Cameroon with regards to ethnic lines, but concludes that the music arena has been dominated by Douala and the Yaounde ethnic rifts.

The study provides rich evidence on why the Ahidjo government censored the music arena. During Ahidjo's epoch, music was harnessed to project national integration, and to glorify the presidential image. The authors believe that most musicians, like Dibango, Eboa Lotin, Anne Marie Nzee and Andre Marie Talla, composed music mainly to hail Ahidjo's policy of national unity. These tunes were used on leading national radio programmes like news, current affairs, and sports. Ahidjo also extended his policy of regional balance on the music space, national orchestra or national radio programmes. Politicians also appropriated folk music mainly to announce the development opportunities created by Ahidjo and enhanced by their elites. Any form of music that was subversive to the incumbent regime was one that could be uttered in metaphorical language, and that was often done in Pidgin English and Broken French.

The authors mention that the political environment was one that insisted on *la politique au politician* meaning that politics should be left in the hands of politicians. Moreover, with the demise of Ahidjo, and the accession of Paul Biya, the rhetoric of "rigour" and "moralization" dominated the music space. But with the failure to deliver the promise of the New Deal as Biya termed his new government, "rigour" and "moralization" were used by musicians to ridicule the government due to incessant corruption, embezzlement, nepotism, favouritism and inertia. The authors quote one of the die-heart singers – Ngale Jojo, whose major themes were to ridicule the promising terms that could be hardly put into action. Nonetheless, the authors state that some Beti musicians did not mind to satirize the president. Sala Bekono is an example. In his song, *Mis Meyo*, he accuses the president of killing his wife Jeanne-Irene Biya. Furthermore, over 107 songs were composed by both popular and rural musicians of Beti origin who condemned Biya for the socio-economic and political malaise. According to Nyamnjuh and Fokwang, the slow pace of reforms in the country provoked the music satire from the group *Les Maxtones de Littoral* in their song *Doleibe*.

The authors move on to examine Pierre Lambo - Lapiro de Mbanga (as he was popularly known) and his protest music. The work traces his ascendancy into the music realm and

explores his outright criticism of the Biya's regime. His songs are mainly in Pidgin English and are widely understood by a cross section of Cameroonians. The most famous of these songs are *Kob Nyé*, *surface de reparation*, *Mimba We*, *No Make Erreur*, and *Na You*. In most of these songs, he denounces ethno-regional politics, corruption, bribery and repression. This won him many followers but he later ran at odds with his followers when he denounced the strike actions and demonstrations. He was accused by his followers of having betrayed his cause presumably by accepting bribe from the President of the Republic. This incident almost cost his life, while his cars and house were burnt. He still remains a strong voice on protest music and of recent other musicians like Longue Longue and Petit Pays have only emulated his example. The study concludes with a very bright future for protest music in Cameroon.

