

Pop-Culture and the Postindependence Condition in the Music of Awilo de Bamenda

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Abstract

Unlike during the last two decades of the 20th century when music was a medium for cultural exchange and entertainment in Cameroon, the first two decades of the present century are witnessing a radical transformation in the art form, which seems to climax the *fin de siècle* anxieties bedevilling the country. Ethical questions characterise the songs both from creative and critical perspectives, casting doubts on the overall moral vision. In the '80s and '90s, Cameroonians were familiar with the censorship of what was considered by the establishment to be obscene renditions, although a few examples related to political themes that were seen to critique the regime. For the Anglophone musician in particular, as this paper argues, using the music of Awilo de Bamenda, a renaissance in output coincides with the emergence of an iconoclastic, youthful, and multilingual demographic, partly influenced by a similar resurgence in Afro-pop music on the continent. More specifically, the perennial theme of Anglophone marginalisation evokes a necessary complement to entertainment and resistance. Associated to this outlook will be the exemplification of collateral values that are related to Pan-African and feminist values, with the implication that issues of identity are as unique as they can be fluid.

Key Words: *Anglophone Cameroon music, pop-culture, identity, postindependence ideology*

Introduction: The Rhythm of Patriotism

Between the mid-1970s and the 1980s, Cameroon music witnessed a renaissance after recovering from the dominance of Congo and Kenyan varieties. This was when The Black Styl orchestra was making national inroads into a musical world that had been exposed to an international audience by Manu Dibango—"a master of rhythm and blues, rock's progenitor" (Collins:1992 110, 154) and "Afropop's avatar" (Santoro:1997 170)—after the release of his 1973 hit single, "Soul Makossa". With its traditionally non-differentiating allure, music is a measurement of the state of patriotism in the country, until patronage started disavouring Makossa and Anglophone marginalisation was thematised as a dominant cultural influence. Previously,

and only second to football in its ability to galvanise the vital energies of patriotic fervour amongst the citizens across demographics, individual origins had been, and are still, neutralised on the dance floor, with Makossa as the leading brand of this genre. It was common for students to anticipate the latest releases by their favourite musicians, especially in June and November, to hail the third term (Summer) holidays and Christmas respectively. But barely a few years after the New Deal—the political ideology of President Paul Biya who has been in power since 1982, and distinct from the post-Depression version of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the US—was installed in Cameroon, visible fractures appeared on the cultural image of inclusive conviviality. This was when political patronage became a political strategy and coincided with increased censorship from the same constituency of ideological fraternity. The polarised atmosphere which developed distinguished those who “belonged” from those who were othered. It resulted in the metaphorical blindness of former stars like Ngalle Jojo, whose “Osi Muna Rigeur” was a jingoistic surrender of artistic vision to the ideological godhead, when he ridiculed the Ahidjo regime, which Biya succeeded, by citing a series of failed projects; just as cheerleaders in the same ideological camp like Nkodo Sitony were pushed up the charts, while those who were perceived to be hostile toward the regime were sanctioned in various ways.¹

Emanating from the culture of the ruling elite, Bikutsi music was the greatest beneficiary of the patronising largesse, and it did not matter that in the pre-patronage days, the Assiko brand of Jean Bikoko Aladin (and later Samson Chaud Gar) was more “visible” than its aesthetical complement of Messi Martin. Apart from the ultra-vested patronage which fed the egoism of specific personalities, there was the “Hit Parade Internationale” programme on Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV) Radio, hosted by Saint Lazarre Amougou. In its heydays, it would not have been a mistake to rename the show as *Hit Bikutsi Internationalisée* due to its conscious entronement of relative mediocrity against observable talent, based on the cultural origins of musicians. While this is not to say that Bikutsi music was mediocre (after all, it bloomed eventually into some of the best names and bands that we know of like *Les Têtes Brûlées*), the host of the programme violated every rule of the game in collecting data that could have come from discotheques, radio stations, and nightclubs all over the country. Instead, he concocted his evidence of popularity from a few customised joints in Yaounde, thus enabling Bikutsi musicians to win awards successively while more popular Makossa counterparts looked on. A few of the disfavoured criticised the process, but that was as far as it went. A direct consequence of this was that the Makossa flame was dimmed as popular names either went on early retirement or left the country for a new frontier, especially the US. The neglect of merit marked the formal start of recalcitrance

¹ For a more detailed analysis of the “popular song” perspective on Cameroon’s postcoloniality, see Henry Kah Jick, 2008 and 2015.

in Cameroon's musical output opening the floodgates to partisan expressions, with artists sourcing their energies from dispossessed constituencies and

thematizing them into contexts that had previously not been x-rayed with such frankness. While Prince Panya in "Conference Nationale" highlighted the difference between the Ahidjo and Biya regimes and the runaway corruption and its consequences into one between the past construction of Cameroon with iron and its present version with wood, Petit Pays expressed typical nostalgia for pre-New Deal paternalism in "Le jour de ma mort".

For Anglophone Cameroonians, Awilo de Bamenda's² art is the most acerbic reaction against this *manknowmanistic* consciousness, in which new demographics imagine the discourse of national identity without the distractions of political correctness which Ngalle Jojo and others indulged. From a folklore ancestry that was enriched by names like S.T. Ngu, Francis Ndom, and John Minang, together with "modern" versions like Etub' Anyang and Amumba—all celebrating cultural unity in diversity—Awilo, self-styled as "l'homme le plus suspect de la planet terre", came on stage at a time when it was no longer taboo to sing Anglophone. He can be considered as the last prophet before the deluge, and it is important to listen to him, even with his controversies, in order to understand how things finally got to their present impasse. This is especially the case because ever since the dramatic phase of the Anglophone Crisis in 2016—when Common Law lawyers and Anglophone teachers' trade unions began a protest that degenerated into armed resistance—we have hardly had informed discussions on the role of art and the artist in any attempted mediation of the impasse. This neglect speaks volumes of the very low esteem which our national community accords the artist as vision-giver and restorer in times of uncertainty. Awilo's pronouncements on the Anglophone identity in Cameroon are blunt, contestable at times, but always uncompromising in expressing what can also be seen as a continental issue. In Awilo's music, we are hailed, abused, warned, advised, cautioned, within a familiar, unfamiliar, and *defamiliar*—where the blurring is caused by us—contexts. While this paper focuses on this awareness, it also extends the limits of the artist's inquiry to an analysis of the continental condition.

Awilo de Bamenda and Verisimilitude

The problematic of verification in Awilo, coded as "les choses a verifier", challenges our convictions on historical data. Whose story is being analysed by whom and when, given the fact that Anglophone Cameroon history is a uniquely contested site? Yet, it is insightful to the need to combine fixed data with interpretive nuances, to underscore a relativity that has always been circumvented by the authoritative voice in spaces like Cameroon where "independence" remains an unconvincing amalgamation of suspicious

² He will be referred to hereafter as Awilo, but not to be confused with the Congolese Awilo who certainly inspired the one from Bamenda. I acknowledge the philosophical insights of my colleague, Prof Jerome Mbih, during our discussions, in the use of the term "manknowmanism" here, that is, a Cameroonianism that references extreme nepotism.

sentiments. Inevitably, continuities determine the nature of origins and identities implicated in them. With the general impression that Cameroon had independence in 1960, the 2010 and 2014 celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the military and the golden jubilee of the country in Bamenda and Buea respectively, have been viewed as botched attempts to rationalise national unity against available evidence to the contrary. We are reminded of Fonlon's prophetic insight into the fallacy of the unitary state: "For it is sometimes astonishing that one can go on for a life time of fifty years and more[,] taking it for granted that one knows the meaning of certain words" ("Res Una Publica" 13). The staged conviviality connotes Plato's unfortunate representation of the artist, which was recuperated by Aristotle's suturing through verisimilitude, captured in Hasan Baktir's (2003:167) argument that the difference between the two is one between "ethical and political context" and "an aesthetic phenomenon", respectively. In Awilo, the shimmering space between fact and fiction is interrogated in almost every appearance of authenticity including his personal data. His interest is not to delineate historical truth but rather to imagine this as the trough to possibilities for an enabling communal lifestyle which has been hijacked by custodians of the authoritative discourse. Indeed, as Aristotle reminds us (1900:333), in opposition to the Platonian vilification of the artist's representation of the "original" image and meaning (1991:404), the artist always generates plausible truth at the crossroads of possibilities.

In contemporary debates over origins and identities, the landscape of history has shifted in its enunciation of meaning from facts and their geo-markers, or what Ndi (2013:171) calls the mere "recounting or narrating of facts, dates and names", to interpretive nuances from such data with subjective relevance. Often caught in the authoritative doublespeak of policymakers and the political correctness of even the marginalised (see Ahidjo's *Collected Presidential Speeches* and Muna's *Speeches*), the narration of Cameroon's geopolitical condition, since 1960, has been burdened by tensions generated from these opposing voices. They are conservative on the one hand and liberal on the other, and are so exclusive that "truth", or even a semblance of it, generates an avalanche of reactions and counterreactions. This section engages such a controversial subject from the perspective of artistic representation of "facts" as the Achebean dancing mask whose imaging depends on the location and other tempo-spatial variables of the observer. Twined to the historical discourse on identity, the one conservative and the other liberal, it is easy to understand why the fate of artists in the postcolony has been star-crossed into either recalcitrant testimonies of alternative truth. While Prince Afoakom's "Cry for Salvation" testifies to the recalcitrance which John Minang attributes to the fact of a failed marriage due to the lack of peace, Christophiling Bush already anticipated the strategy of "*vivre ensemble*" that is meant to transform Anglophone identity in Cameroon into a tribal alternative. Otherwise, the artist flirts with apologetic cheerleaders whose aesthetics align with immanent political philosophies that speculate continuous subjugation and compromise of plebeian futures.

Arguably the most articulate Anglophone musician in Cameroon's transition from postcolonial to postindependence revaluations³, Awilo challenges us to appreciate art beyond the emotive response of pleasure, such that his music becomes a platform for the interrogation of especially authoritative excesses, and how this abuse conditions the collective unconscious of the nation-state. Specifically, the overlap between history as a political trope and art as the counterforce to the grafting of meaning is insightful to the degenerate state of the postcolony. As such, Awilo's famous disclaimer, "*Les choses à vérifier*", is a reminder for us to take fact, both artistic and historical, personal and collective, with a significant caution; it is a trademark statement which suggests the unreliability of what may pass as fact and therefore truth. This is the crossroads where voices have clashed in authenticating Cameroon's historiography, culminating in the sectarian nightmare that has deconstructed the halo of independence.

Since 2016, therefore, when Anglophone militantism threatened the unitary state that was installed and consolidated by the Ahidjo and Biya regimes respectively, in violation of the federal entente, the contestations of the marginalised Anglophones have targeted the facts and figures of the nation-state, with previous conclusions questioned and challenged on the basis of both factual and interpretive evidence. The shift in tone is significant because of a quasi-colonialist strain in relying on vested data whose provenance is considered as key to the genesis of the Anglophone Crisis. Yet, an ambiguous zone has to be addressed in order to account for the reasons behind the radical mind-set barely two years after the protracted commemoration of the golden jubilee of Cameroon's independence. First, the date for the event harboured a deliberate misnomer, with the authorities not coming out clearly about the significance of the two independence dates, January 1, 1960 for La République du Cameroun and October 1, 1961 for Southern Cameroon. Second, Albert Mukong's (1990) *Prisoner Without a Crime* contains two important statements in the preface of the 1990 edition: "I lament for my country, Cameroon"; and then his rededication of the "work to all those who fell in the Cameroonian struggle for independence" (v).

These are interesting remarks from a firebrand critic of Presidents Ahidjo and Biya who personify power in Cameroon and the notion that "Might is right". Linked to this is the dedication of Boh Herbert and Ntemfac Ofegbe's (1991) *Prison Graduate*, which pays tribute to victims of political abuse and concludes that our common fight should ensure that "history may give such deserving Cameroonians a place in its golden pages" (5). We can go on and cite more examples of an apparent mutuality in recognising and even hailing a Cameroonian identity that authenticates a unitary structure. But suffice it to say that patriotic concessions were being made by the Anglophone Cameroonian,

³ There is a bias on my part here, preferring the more self-critical term "postindependence" to its popular and—because of that—escapist substitute, "postcolonial".

if only because it was the Anglophone's voice, more than the Francophone's, which highlighted the initial monument of reunification bannered in Foumban on July 16, 1961: "How nice it is to meet our brothers". The fraternal sentiments in these words clearly contrast with the abstract celebration of the nation-state in what was supposed to be a translated complement, "Vivre le Cameroun unifié" (Ndi 150). Clearly, while the Southern Cameroons delegation stressed or was urged—depending on how it is read—to stress "the brotherly feeling we have toward the Republic of Cameroon" (ibid 153), the Francophones were more concerned with what has turned out to be popularised by political stakeholders as the "one and indivisible" form of the State, that is, "le Cameroun unifié". As Fonlon reminds us in words that cannot be over-quoted, "[a] thing is said to be One by this[,] that it is not divided in itself, but divided, separate, from [e]very thing else: internal whole, external separation" (13); and Ndi adds that "it is illogical and impractical to conceive of a solid unity of the whole (Cameroon) without considering that of the parts that embrace it" (61).

With the advantage of hindsight today, we can understand these duplicities within their historical and evolutionary contexts as, essentially, "les choses à vérifier", based of course on the reassessment of the marginalised. And listening to Professor Carlson Anyangwe in Washington D.C., during the Southern Cameroons People Conference in 2019, when he recalled a discussion with Chief Gorji Dinka (author of the name Ambazonia) who reminded Anyangwe that the Referandum of "1972 [was] not acceptable", it became clear to me that all along the Anglophones were engaging a diplomacy of patience in Cameroon. In fact, there is abundant evidence that every Anglophone acknowledging sectarian consciousness today was once a drum-major patriot, only hoping for the respect of his status within the national binary on a federated basis.

To analyse the lyrics of Awilo de Bamenda as an urban aurartist who is obsessed with the vested duplication of historical data in Cameroon, then, it should be noted that in rationalising this, he simultaneously unveils tensions in a postindependence configuration like Cameroon, which represents the self-induced failures in the postcolony. For the convenience of vindicating redundant and even stagnating policies, these tensions are generated, represented, and meant to be understood (by the masses) as the hangover of colonial power relations which were handed down at independence to a new African elite. In trying to assert their mediated authority and its predictable end, these new "masters" ignored the nature of the balance of power in precolonial Africa and instead strengthened the polarised structure which had been established by the Europeans. The most devastating consequence of what this new leadership endorsed was the further splintering of tribal and ethnic boundaries which colonial masters had earlier fractured to suit their imperialist designs.

In exposing such boundary politics, Awilo first paints a sorry picture of postindependence Cameroon, with everything going down the drains,

metaphorically, not only because “la corruption c’est une maladie qui est nee au Cameroun” but also because Yaounde represents “la capital du corruption” (“You no commot Yaounde”). Such a metonymic scenario is one in which the masses are at the mercy of no one except the communal voice:

This contri don pass me
Yi don burn bed sotey i³ touch matrass
And if we leave’am i touch the man wey yi dey ontop,
Da mean say we don die.

(“Bush Faller”)

The awareness-raising campaign here is established when Awilo compares the contemporary situation in the country to a bed on fire; and cautions that if the flames are not put out, but instead allowed to “touch”/torch its occupant, then collective death will be inevitable. Such an apocalyptic representation of the state of the nation, which not only deprives the people of sleep and peace of mind, but is also testimony of collective guilt, is the platform for its dissection, based, as we will see, on the duality of the Anglophone-Francophone consciousness. Patriotic as a Cameroonian and at the same time militant as an Anglophone Cameroonian, Awilo implicitly challenges the conservative construct of identity in the postindependence entity which glosses over cracks of the nation-state arrangement. On “Cameroon Calling” of Sunday November 13, 2016, a member of Parliament, Hon. Awudu Mbaya, re-echoed this point by alluding to a minister who described Anglophones as two cubes of sugar meant to sweeten Francophone appetite in Cameroon.

For Awilo, political sloganeering is therefore one of such glossing endeavours, and becomes a strategy to rally the feeling of patriotism away from specific concerns:

Everyday Grand Ambition, yi di so-so give motif, kind-kind big name:
Ba peace work fatherland
Un seul mot continuer
Impossible n’est pas Camerounais
Et le Cameroun de grandes ambitions

(“Bush Faller”)

In Awilo’s aesthetics, “Grand Ambition” is an ambiguous term that references the leader, the government, and/or government policy, depending again on the context of use. Here, it is a reference to key phrases in President Biya’s speeches from which his vision is seen and contested partly because of the

³ The Pidgin pronouns “yi” and “i” for “he”, “she”, “it” are used here interchangeably, and meaning is gotten within context, which determines whether the word is pronounced as “yi” or “i”. I should also point out that unable to have the artist’s lyrics, my transcription necessarily has a poetic bias, which may be different from others’ versions. But this in no way affects overall meaning.

rhetoical effect of what they propose. With no palpable evidence that such statements enable individual and communal progress, the artist's pessimism becomes terminal: "Time wey this contri be get for change, i don pass". Here, the New Deal regime is faulted with foreshortening its own promise, with the consequent free fall of every ethical pledge and expectation.

From this national context, the artist then underscores Anglophone marginalisation as part of the systemic distortion with which he is concerned. To understand this in a holistic reading, we consider the significance of the logo of the National Union for Democracy and Progress, NUDP, as representative of the distortion observed by the Anglophone in Cameroon. It can be argued that the party blanks out the Anglophone component of the national territory and endorses the triangular nature of Cameroon in a net exclusion of the Anglophone territory and consciousness; a reductionist reworking of what colonial cartographers and their crass consideration of cultural value initiated. What can be described as the "buttocks" of the country—that is, the Anglophone part made up of the North West and South West Regions—are of less visual/ideological significance in the NUDP logo, when compared with the "nose"—the North-eastern stretch into the Central African Republic. This coheres with a condescending description of Anglophones in Cameroon as Biafrans, based on the historical connection with Nigeria. Francophones generally spin a myth that Anglophones fled from Igbo atrocities and came begging for unity with the then La République du Cameroun. The discrimination in Awilo's song is thus a symptom of this authoritative Self/Other fallacy.

It will be evident then that Awilo capitalises on the Anglophone consciousness in Cameroon as a relative hub for the examination of what has gone wrong in his own composite society and how the situation can be arrested. In doing this, he ventures into blurred "no-go" zones of social consciousness, with a recalcitrant message that mirrors and challenges authoritarian excesses in the hope of opening up new horizons of communal meaning. Clearly, from his approach, the existentialist artist is an anti-establishment crusader *par excellence*, from whose vision a formative pedagogy begins to emerge. The postindependence artist thus combines his aesthetic talents with complementary "gifts" as teacher and critic of the postindependence space and finally fulfils in an ironic way his bardic mission of encouraging socio-political stability. This is the context in which we are expected to appreciate Awilo, whose music co-opts the pastiche of neocolonial rhetoric as a complex generic experimentation with Afrobeat euphoria into mainstream pop culture at the crossroads of globalisation and its neoliberal propaganda. To this extent, Awilo is both a militant and intellectual Anglophone Cameroon artist whose art sets a new frontier for postindependence revaluations. In his songs, the meeting point between regional and national consciousness is also a clash in the unapologetic affirmation, or not, of regional-into-national patriotism.

We should however bear in mind that Awilo's lyrics defy any logical plot sequence in favour of an episodic collage that resonates with the status of the committed *aurartist* as the voice of the masses. Accordingly, his sense of history is fractured, and by his own admission, is subject to verification. This apparent instability is important because, as I have already suggested, history is more than just a collection of facts in the form of personalities, events, and dates; it is above all, an interpretive science which is conditioned—and even threatened—by vested interests, where the *privileged* voice tends to “other” the silent and especially silenced voice. Thus, colonial and even neocolonial history wholly reflects the consciousness of the victor, while the vanquished is written into patriotic concessions until the othered consciousness begins the radical process of voicing itself back into *itstory*. It is in this ambivalent state that we are expected to patch the pieces of distorted history together by ironically affirming a subjective narration or interpretation. Listening to Awilo's song(s), we shift significantly from (neo-)colonialist constructs of history as the preserve of the victor, problematize the factual data of history, and finally lay more emphasis on the interpretive necessity of relative historical value. Ironically, the colonialist—not just for Awilo but for the entire Anglophone Cameroon artist, irrespective of genre—is actually a new personality with “kin” credentials, who assumes undue privileges in the postindependence society. Like with every *aurartist*, his community keeps mutating, just like the characters and their roles in it, and his relationship with them. Because an emotion is hardly rationalised and sustained for long, it is in analysing the national diptych from Awilo's art that we begin to understand his concern with how the postindependence nation exploits its own identity and history. The vacuum in representation results from distortions of previous identities within the nation-statist history and its attempt to recreate colonial binaries, using patriotic illusions, with implications of internal colonialism. This strategy overlaps with the gendered history of Cameroon, in which a part of the national community is implicitly feminised in order to explain its subjugation.

Linguistic Fluidity as Afropolitan Agency

In the postcolony, generally, the legitimacy of language initially adopted the colonial bias of masculinist configurations. As such, the prestigious status of colonial languages became another indicator of the failure of decolonisation. Attempts by some African writers to reinstate African languages in creative and curricula strategies not only confronted the barriers placed by colonial strategy; they were also challenged by the peer complexes of the ruling elite in which linguistic imperialism was legitimised as a sign of both patriotism and sophistication. Describing the tension between colonial and indigenous African languages as “a vicious circle”, for instance, Ngugi (1993:14) asserts that “while the two pieces mirror my current involvements in the struggle to move the centre of our literary engagements from European languages to a multiplicity of locations in our languages, they also illustrate the frustrations in the way of immediate and successful realisation under the present conditions of

a continent's disbelief in itself". Although he later modified his stance,⁴ his recalcitrance seemed to have inspired Afropop artists who can be viewed today as some of the best ambassadors of Rusdie's (1982) of writing back to the empire with a vengeance. As a way to mediate the tension between colonial and national languages or Mother Tongue, the lingua franca emerged with a populist appeal marking the formal beginning of New Englishes, whose affirmation coincided with the gradual demise of colonial languages, to the extent that English itself has been considered as a lingua franca (see Mauranen and Ranta 2009; Björkman 2013). This development is a clear consequence of "writing back" strategies that were meant to counter the cultural hegemonies of colonialism.

Although Gikandi (2011:9) highlights the recuperative focus of Afropolitanism as one that "attempt[s] to rethink African knowledge outside the trope of crisis"; and bearing in mind that the opposite of this approach is "Afro-pessimism—the belief that the continent and its populace is hopelessly imprisoned in its past, trapped a vicious cycle of underdevelopment, and held hostage to corrupt institutions" Awilo voices himself as a neo-Afro-pessimist. We should bear in mind that the fluidity which Afropolitanism accommodates between transnational and cosmopolitan states of consciousness (Clark 2015:10) is critiqued by Awilo partly as a consequence of a perverse tax burden in the postcolony. Yet, the "been-to" or arriviste mentality becomes equally counterproductive when the migrants or new middle class cultivate hypercorrective habits that are ultimately detrimental to the African identity. His proposed solution in "l'Heure a Sonne" is to accompany a purge of the cocoon leadership which enables the incursion of neoliberal agents with an imperative: "if we no burn da bush, di pickin dem no go 'gree come back for pays⁵".

In Awilo's musicology, linguistic overlaps follow a tradition adopted by musicians in almost all musical genres in Cameroon, and meant to reach a wider, less literate audience. In such expressivity, the inferiority complex associated with Pidgin English or its creole variety of Camfranglais—which was most popularised by Lapiro de Mbanga—is overcome through its endorsement by the plebeian majority of the population. The popularity of Pidgin particularly in the private media is a tribute to how the marginalised constituency of postindependence society is deconstructing the habits of linguistic elitism. Awilo adopts this position, and employs it against the palliative of linguistic unity. Consider this: "Le Cameroun est malade, et gravement malade. Et c'est a cause de vieux *politicien* dem wey dey no wan giv road for licencier dem" ("L'heure a Sonne"). Similarly, football—a national drug which is usually administered by the authorities at strategic moments to diffuse national tensions, at least before the start of the Anglophone Crisis—

⁴ See chapter 4 of *Decolonising the Mind*.

⁵ Here, as in the quote below, and in the name of the musician, the word is pronounced in the French as *paeyi*.

provides an arena for the display of the Anglophone/Francophone split in Cameroon, typically expressed by Awilo:

Ndefi Pius, Mukake

Dem no fit play again?—na problem?

Discrimination don pass mark for we own pays here

This excerpt typifies the macro context; the exclusion of performant Anglophone footballers from the national team is a variant of the identity crisis in Cameroon. In “Contri don Spoil”, Awilo reinforces the lines above within this context of tribal exclusionism by reminding Ndefi and Mukake that “If wouna wan’ for play, wouna change birth certificate for Mbarga Ndefi Pius, Onana, Atangana ... before wouna fit commot for banc de touche”.

Although such duplicity is not possible for the Anglophone footballer, it is permissible to the Francophone who shuns Pidgin and aspires for the superior standard by literally invading Anglophone educational establishments. It is an open secret that the enthusiasm in Francophones to learn English and pursue education in Anglophone educational institutions is an attempt to neutralise historical and cultural Anglophoneness, and only promote what some Francophones conceptualise informally as linguistic Anglophoneness. He makes it clear that “corruption” is synonymous to “discrimination” in Cameroon where the process of naming performs anew the colonial strategy of authenticity. Whether it is Shakespeare’s Calib, Defoe’s Friday, or Joyce Cary’s Johnson, the native is phased out and reimagined through the loss of identity and attribution of a new one, respectively. The ironic relevance of this policy in a postcolony like Cameroon is the fact that colonial markers of Self and Other resurface as testimony to the failure of independence. More importantly, it echoes the paradigm of “internal colonisation” which Michael Hechter (1975) expresses in his interpretation of the literature and identity of the Celtic fringe. For the Anglophone to be so fringed in Cameroon, a new centre had to be created or imagined in entertainment and linguistic centring, so that the Anglophone can be reduced conveniently to a peripheral Other with no credential to participate in the nation as full citizen; conveniently, that is, because the blame of exclusion will be on the Anglophone’s inability to function in the bilingual setup. This distortion of cultural data underscores the sectarian outcome of the Anglophone Crisis.

Awilo and Postindependence Renaissance

To get a sense of this national misrepresentation, we have to look back to the last half century or so of African history, to understand the way the political economy of culture has been managed on the continent. The danger faced by the postindependence scholar today in discussing any topic associated with culture is to ignore the fact that even the most marginal notion of it reflects the questionable seductions of globalism. One way of resolving this will be to begin by acknowledging the trajectory from precolonial culture to pop-culture, where the genre and sub-genre culminate in postmodern aesthetics at the coincident

moment of independence in Africa. While this global perspective has an organic history in the West, it has only been foisted onto the histories of former colonies, particularly Africa's, and therefore communicates something of a jumpstarted consciousness. Logically, there is a problem with defining popular culture today, which is not unrelated to our rush and consequent inability to determine *what* we mean by culture in the multicultural world of the twenty-first century.

The Africans, for instance, adopt a sentimental attitude toward it, and assume the word to be connected to indigenous, even atavistic mores—which is basically what should obtain—before engaging an evolutionary process. In the West, on the contrary, culture has evolved from such roots-consciousness through feudal privileges, industrialisation, colonialism, and imperialism, to capitalism and its doomsday neoliberal rhetoric about the end of history, which is simultaneously locked onto technological advancement. It is therefore commonplace for one to hear politicians and commentators in Europe and America talk proudly and protectively of “our way of life” in the same Universalist sense that democracy, Christianity, and freedom of speech are celebrated as cultural values of the West. What is not often made clear especially to the non-westerners is the fact that while these attributes were also part of Africa's—and indeed, every culture's—worldview, it took centuries for this “way of life” to be formatted into its amazing sophistication of osmotic diplomacy for the West. And following the encounter with European (and later, western) imperialists, the processes of cultural growth in the colony were more or less terminated and the grafting of cultural fatuities was authorised as norm, through religious and other blindfolds. Little wonder then that a composite philosopher like Kwame Anthony Appiah urges us in the fourth of his “2016 Reith Lectures”, to “give up the idea of western civilisation” mainly because it conjures unreality as historical fact and dilutes same into the popular culture which social media has transformed into a global given.

While African politicians attribute failures of the nation-state ideal to colonial atrocities, thereby offering themselves undue reprieve, such failures result from their insensitivity to diagnose the logic of bloc diplomacy, especially when they are vulnerable to flatteries from the conservative intellectual for who culture is just a convenient smokescreen. The inevitable liberal backlash feeds on regional and even sectarian sympathies which filter down to the common man's articulation of individual versions of history. These citizen historians—those who testify from personal and contemporary experiences in summative accounts against the hierarchical provenance—constitute what Awilo valorises in his patriotic—and for that reason, anti-establishment—lyrics.

To talk of a cultural renaissance in the African postcolony, then, it should be noted that the postindependence context of complacent activism is the greatest threat to such a development. This distinction is necessary because it is from 1957, following the independence of Ghana, that we can reverse Rodney's perceptive title to instead demonstrate *how Africans underdevelop Africa*. This

will be a more convincing starting point in understanding the shades of culture on the continent today and how this is connected directly to the shabby manner in which its promoters and practitioners are treated.

An Enlightenment derivative, which developed into mainstream European and then western worldviews, popular culture is therefore an inherited spice to our discursive postcolonial-into-postindependence history, one to which we adapt, as in everything else, without profound reflection. In the West, it developed from the resolved tensions with science, technology, and industrialisation, and then transformed into an organic marker of the psychological aesthetics of a consumerism. In this way, *culture* was democratised and quickly spread across the world, and while it succeeded to predictable moments of globalising identity for the West, it ironically stymied such energies in the former colonies through conceits of a primitive-civilised binary. It was an inevitable step in western historiography, based on the need for complementary visions of a horizontal power structure in which the artist, even of a lowly ancestry, could still comment on sensitive topics without fear of being incriminated. In a worst-case scenario, the artist resorted to exile both as a sign of protest and a means to fulfilment.

In contrast to this, the African artist is generally and repeatedly harassed by the excesses of vertical power adaptation largely because our notion of the artist's social role—for instance Unoka in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and eventually Fella Onikpula Kuti against successive military regimes—was fragmented by an uncritical endorsement of colonial sophistry. For the non-conformist African artist, exile is not a choice; it is an imperative for survival against direct and indirect threats that lead to imprisonment and may even result in “accidental” deaths. The difference between the themes explored by the traditional artist in Africa—glimpses of which can still be found in the “Bottle Dance” tradition in the North West Region of Cameroon—and those pursued by his modern counterpart—even as urban orature—lies in the way they address social or national issues and how they are perceived in this light. The one performs around rehabilitating themes and his criticisms become part of the community's self-reflective endeavour to resolve individual and collective problems. His urban counterpart does as much, but is identified as a threat to social harmony. This break in communication between the artist and his community is the result of how those who pose as leaders in the respective spaces have been groomed to think communal on the one hand, and ideological on the other. Ever since the precolonial nation was replaced by the postindependence nation-state, and the traditional ruler reduced unfairly to a mere auxiliary of the latter authority, an ideological meeting point was needed to justify the trespass on individual and communal privileges. From the national constitution right down to prefectural orders that are buoyed by police intimidations, depending on the regime in place, ideology has become a conscripting instrument in the interest of leadership in Africa. Embarrassingly, this ideology is generally a hybrid of colonial mentality being foisted on the people in lieu of a culturally more

tolerable disciplinary format. Tragically, the ideologies that have replaced culture militate in the interest of alien civilisations.

As I already hinted, the pop-culture artist in Africa benefits from an ancestry of unassuming performers whose world was predictable to the point that any turbulence could be addressed according to laid-down rules. It was part of their individual and communal strength and pride to be corrective even as they chastised recalcitrant individuals or habits, in order to ensure a more harmonious community through rehabilitation. But in the pluralistic and more sophisticated world of the 20th and 21st centuries into which Africans were rushed by their new elite unguardedly, things really fall apart in a cultural ferment in which everything goes and is considered business as usual. This Americanism reinforces the need for us to also investigate the manner in which pop-culture has been Africanised as a means of resistance to the new centrist ideology of postindependence.

Listening to Awilo, there are clear instances in his songs where the personalities he criticises are inhibitors of all what defines the pop-cultural environment. Whether they are politicians or businessmen or intellectuals, he suggests that they have failed to ensure an availing atmosphere in which the citizen can participate in the consumerist culture without complex. By satirising Cameroon as “un pays où les jeunes n’ont pas le parole” because octogenarians who constitute the “équipe national for mal gérance” have hijacked leadership, Awilo describes how “Mugabe say na only party opposition for Yaweh go come minoté yi for dat side for Zimbabwe” (“Libere Ndingaman”). The failure of such vision-givers to enable the future leads Awilo to wonder: “Quel est le rôle d’un pays d’être indépendance?” (“Na You Spoil’am”). The history of postindependence states is smeared by this lack of initiative, most evident in the non-revival of the cultural landscape, so that multinational interests easily negotiate new colonising deals that cast us at a disadvantage.

Such North-South discrepancies that determine global hegemonies in development are actually replicated in our postindependence condition. Talking about the road network in Cameroon for instance, Awilo transforms it into a symptom of the lottery development that characterises the nation. Mamfe and Kumba stand out as examples of what is clearly a form of segregated development, and by extension represent sites of the consciously distorted history in which, for Awilo, even the commodified female—like her space—cannot be visible beyond the authoritative imaging. The artist declares that the South West has been transformed into “extreme South West”, just like the “Kumba-Mamfe road ... don turn na the culture of the Manyu people”. Extremity is meant to be understood here as a qualitative testimony against the jingoism of ideological puppets.

On its part, “culture” takes the form of daily “motion of support from Mamfe to Yaounde...for a job badly done?” Awilo’s rhetorical denunciation attributes part of the blame for this deceit, abandonment, and distortion to conservative Anglophone leaders in Cameroon, who either engage in hero-worship for

personal reasons or engage in a self-destruct war that affects the whole Anglophone community. On the one hand, as we have seen with the Manyu leaders who are representative of this culture, they cheer-lead the writing of motions of support to the incumbent and, on the other, scribble petitions against each other with predictable consequences. More specifically, in “L’heure a Soné”, Awilo shifts from national and social generalities about the “mafia organisé” to a specific national signpost that symbolises the fate of the Anglophone and his/her history:

For las’ fight, Mongo sep-sep—I mean pont for Mongo—yi decider say married wey yi no di born pickin, better na divorce. Wouna get all thing, get oya, get petrol, get banana, get rubber, but wouna own politichien them no get voice. Ashia! Ashia!

[In the end, even the Mongo—I mean the Mongo bridge—decided that divorce is better than a marriage with no child. You have everything; you have oil, you have petrol, you have banana, you have rubber, but your politicians are voiceless. Sorry! Sorry!]

This is the crux of what began as the Anglophone Problem and exploded into the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon: it is one of dispossession in every context, including the deprivation of voice, and points literally to the state of Anglophone marginalisation in the country. But the situation is more complex than merely assessing it through a binary of “them” and “us”. Here, Awilo also invokes the self-induced voicelessness of Anglophone politicians on the Right as part of the problem and not a consequence of it. When such opinion leaders are favoured through preferment, and find themselves at the periphery of the ruling pantheon, the symbolic “privilege” then imposes a silence and blindness on them with regards to crucial identity matters, and they assert themselves, like the house slave, ineffectually. Singing the state of the nation casually, then, Anglophoneness becomes the disturbing subtext in Awilo’s vision about the dehistorisation of the Anglophone in the erstwhile country. A tele-guided diplomacy from colonial through neo/postcolonial to postindependence machinations accounts for the sorry state of things.

Conclusion

Although Awilo’s erratic vision appears to express terminal scepticism about the future of Cameroon—“time wey dis contri be get for change i don pass”—he is actually interrogating the indolent communal psyche in a conscientisation strategy to rescue the nation from neoliberal strategists and their white-masked agents. As I have implied so far, if our postindependence history is to offer something more than a mimic mentality, it has to acknowledge positive native views and definitions in every context, based on inspiration from indigenous knowledge systems. Besides, if we had factored artistic vision into our national polity, and sustained it accordingly, rather than resort to the crudest form of Platonian fallacy in demonising such vision; if we had made allowance for the artist’s flaws and built on what goes beyond his or her basic humanity, the progeny of Achebe’s Unoka in *Things Fall Apart* would have provided the

necessary insights to our philosophers the same way Aristotle benefitted from Homer and his peers in the process of universalising their culture. Across Africa, the artist has been reduced by the postindependence elite to a clown of convenience whose act must fit into the ideological closet, else be perceived as public enemy Number 1. A lot of what constitutes the Anglophone Crisis today would long have been nipped in the bud if the voice of the artist had been heeded to. Failing this, we have been embarrassed by historical and identity issues that manifest in curious forms of imbalance, linguistic marginalisation, a wilting chauvinism, its plethora of invectives, and the sectarian standoff that seems to be pulling the country toward the edge of the cliff, and so on. If the Anglophone writer in Cameroon, to go Bate Besong's claim indulges in patriotic art, then it can be argued that the vision which results from such art contains seeds of peace, conflict anticipation and resolution, tolerance to difference, and the appropriation of a national space of the globalising stage. The Anglophone Crisis can constitute the microcosm of the African condition—for the lack of a better word beyond what is becoming a cliché—in terms of how tailored geopolitical identities cannot resolve issues of diplomatic grafting as long as godfather paternalism still determines the future of the people.

A musician and journalist at the same time, Awilo reinvents the pre-independence town-crier as the moral conscience of the imagined national community. Although his sudden "silence" is already raising eyebrows as to whether he has not fallen victim of what he criticises in his peers, Cameroon's political establishment is historicised and ridiculed in his unapologetic songs as a space of possibilities which have been abused and betrayed by unpatriotic actors. No doubt that postindependence consciousness degenerates into sectarian conflicts whereas the colonial era, even with its self-serving agenda, still built up to independence and nationhood. And that is why in reminding his audience in "L'heure a sonné" that "un docteur malade n'a jamais traite un autre patient", Awilo challenges the conscious attempts to distort history by suggesting that enabling diversity is a vital ingredient for our postindependence futures.

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