

Aesthetics of Violence and Online Visual Propaganda as Weapons in a Separatist Struggle: A Study of Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis

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Since September 7, 2017, the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon have been brutalised by a separatist struggle variously called the Ambazonia War, the NOSO war or the Anglophone crisis. This conflict which opposes some separatist armed groups and government forces has involved the use by each side, of online-based visual propaganda aimed at framing their opponents in a negative light and wooing both domestic audiences and the international community in favour of their respective causes. This determination to negatively frame the opposite camp has led not only to a war of gloomy images but also the recrudescence of an aesthetic of violence in the video-assisted propaganda of the warring parties. This aesthetics of violence has so far remained understudied. This paper seeks to fill this gap by examining how specific violent images have circumstantially been constructed, deconstructed and mobilised by both separatist and anti-separatist forces in this conflict to frame or counter-frame their opponent. Using a qualitative content analysis of relevant online videos/footage, semiotics, documentary analysis and critical observations, the paper specifically addresses three questions: What has been the role of visual-based propaganda in the Ambazonia war? How have the domestic and the foreign audiences received this visual propaganda? And how have international observers – such as news agencies, politics observatories and other world organisations – mediated in the war of images that opposes government and the armed separatist groups in Cameroon?

Keywords

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INTRODUCTION

The post-independence period in Sub-Saharan Africa has been characterised by the recrudescence of various secessionist/insurgent crises and civil wars. From Sudan and Nigeria through the Central African Republic, to Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo, various armed separatist conflicts and internecine wars have either threatened or shattered the corporate existence of different nations within the African continent. This wave of destabilising armed conflicts has in the long run not exempted the Cameroonian republic, a country which had for decades been an island of peace and a haven of stability in the whole Gulf of Guinea and the central African sub-region. Actually, since September 7, 2017, the two English-speaking Regions of Cameroon have been seriously brutalised by a separatist struggle variously called the Ambazonia



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War, the NOSO war or the Anglophone crisis. This conflict which opposes a plurality of separatist armed groups¹ and government/nationalist forces has involved the use by each side, of online-based visual propaganda mainly aimed at tarnishing the image of their opponents and wooing both the domestic audiences and the international community in favour of their respective causes.

On various occasions, each side to the conflict has sought to deploy gloomy footage of the war to frame their opponents as barbaric, unpatriotic or as violators of human rights. In some instances, the belligerents even mobilised clearly doctored or manipulated videos that aimed at representing their rivals as cannibals, voodooists and primitive entities. This determination to negatively frame the opposite camp has led not only to a war of gloomy images but also the recrudescence of an aesthetic of violence in the video-assisted propaganda of the warring parties. This aesthetics of violence has so far remained understudied as the bulk of the available literature on the Ambazonia crisis tends to focus only on the military and socio-political security of communities in the Anglophone Regions of the country.

This paper seeks to fill the gap mentioned above, by examining how specific violent images have circumstantially been constructed, deconstructed and mobilised by both separatist and anti-separatist forces in this conflict to frame or counter-frame their opponent. Using a qualitative content analysis of relevant online video/footage, semiotics, documentary analysis and critical observations, the paper specifically addresses three questions: What has been the role of visual-based propaganda in the Ambazonia War? How have the domestic and the foreign audiences received this visual propaganda? And how have international observers—such as news agencies, politics observatories and other world organisations—mediated in the war of images that opposes government and the armed separatist groups in Cameroon? In line with the questions mentioned above, the paper attains three principal objectives. In the first place, it analyses war footage used for propaganda in the crisis. In the second place, it examines non-war but violent footage used in the visual propaganda; and in the last instance, the paper focuses on foreign observers' mediation in the war of images. The essay is principally based on three methods of data collection and analysis namely documentary analysis, critical observations, and semiotics.

¹ More than 60 separatist groups are active in the two Anglophone regions of Cameroon. Some of these groups include the Southern Cameroons Defence Forces, the Ambazonia Intelligence Forces, Ambazonia Revolutionary Guards, Ambazonia Restoration Army, the Mountain Lions and the Bambalang Marine Force among others.

A BRIEF INCURSION INTO THE GENESIS OF THE AMBAZONIA WAR

The Ambazonia War is one of the multiple manifestations of the long-standing Anglophone problem in Cameroon. This problem has its roots in Cameroon's colonial history. In effect, the country has a tri-cultural colonial heritage. It became a German protectorate called Kamerun in 1884, after Germany signed a treaty with some Duala chiefs. Germany lost its protectorate to Britain and France three decades later, following her defeat in the First World War (1914-1916) and the outcome of the Versailles Treaty. In effect, the Versailles Treaty made Cameroon a mandated territory of the League of Nations under the French and British trusteeship. The British and French colonial administrations divided their newly acquired colony in what was called the Anglo-French condominium. France administered her own part of Cameroon as a separate colony while Britain ruled hers as an integral part of neighbouring Nigeria. Britain further divided her share into two administrative units called British Northern Cameroon and British Southern Cameroon.

In 1960, Francophone Cameroon got its independence from France and sought re-unification with their Anglophone brothers. The following year, Anglophone Cameroonians were compelled by the United Nations Organisation (the successor of the League of Nations) to take part in a plebiscite that was to determine their fate as an independent nation. These Anglophone Cameroonians were made to choose between obtaining their independence by joining the "République du Cameroun" (Francophone Cameroon) or by remaining part of the Nigerian Federation. Through the plebiscite, British Northern Cameroon chose to remain a part of Nigeria while British Southern Cameroon chose to re-unite with French Cameroon. Thus, Southern British Cameroonians reunited with their Francophone brothers. At reunification, the Anglophone Cameroonians constituted a minority—and later marginalised—community in the country, a situation which seems not to have changed up till today (Amnesty International 2022; Nyamnjoh and Rowlands 1998). In effect, upon re-unification, the Francophone-dominated administration of the country has over the years adopted various socio-political policies which have contributed to the marginalisation of Anglophones at almost all key sectors of the nation notably the civil service, the armed forces, ministerial appointments, education and the judiciary among others. Marginalisation has also been evident in the remarkably low level of socio-economic and infrastructural development in Anglophone regions of the country. This perceived marginalisation has given rise to various Anglophone agitations, notably the First and Second All Anglophone Conferences held in 2002 as well as the Southern Cameroons National Council's non-violent campaigns for secession (Human Rights Watch 2021; Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003).

Thus, the Ambazonia war is just an nth manifestation of the longstanding Anglophone problem. The war sparked up on September 7, 2017, after a number

of Anglophone secessionist/separatist movements took up arms to fight the Cameroonian regular army, in view of carving out an independent state called Ambazonia. This armed phase of the conflict followed the violent crushing of two protest marches organised separately by Anglophone Lawyers and Anglophone teachers in Buea, the capital city of Cameroon's South Region. The lawyers' protest aimed at denouncing the adulteration of the Common Law System in Anglophone courts while their teacher counterparts' strike action sought to censure the Francophone domination of the Anglophone educational system in the country. Both protests were violently repressed with the use of forces of law and an order. The violent repression of these protests coupled with the age-old perceived marginalisation of Anglophone communities in the country motivated the emergence of various separatist/secessionist movements. Some of these movements launched violent political activism or took up weapons to advocate the establishment of a break-away state called Ambazonia, comprising the two Anglophone Regions of Cameroon.

Since the outbreak of the crisis, armed separatist groups have tended to multiply in number and to step up their activism in the country. These groups have mainly been active in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon. They have constantly carried out violent attacks not only on government institutions and public and military establishments, but also on civilians. These attacks have led to the death of thousands of civilians and security forces. A more recent manifestation of their military activity is the November 4, 2023 Mamfe attack that led to more than 30 dead civilians and tens of seriously injured people.

The secessionist movements have also instituted series of ghost towns, terror mechanisms, guerrilla tactics and "curfews" which have critically affected the economic and security conditions of the masses in Anglophone regions (Amnesty International 2022). In view of responding to secessionist groups' movements, the Cameroonian government has, mainly through its military, embarked on very muscled actions notably curfews, mixed patrol, military checkpoints, and surprised attacks on separatist vigilantes. These retaliatory initiatives have since 2017 yielded only patchy fruits. Although thousands of separatist fighters have been neutralised, captured or killed by the regular army, the two Anglophone regions of Cameroon have remained visibly brutalised and unsafe particularly for both Francophone and Anglophone civilian communities. Whole villages have reportedly been burnt even by the regular army and incidences of regular military's violation of human rights in the affected regions have regularly been outlined by international observers and the local press (Amnesty International 2022; Human Rights Watch 2022). In effect, the army has sometimes cooperated with ill-intentioned vigilantes to perpetrate various violations of human rights in specific localities of the two Anglophone regions (Amnesty International 2022). Thus, the violent confrontation between the regular army and the separatist groups has often put the civilian communities in crossed-fire situations. In other words, people in the Anglophone zones of Cameroon are everyday between the army, armed separatists and militias. Thousands of lives have been lost. And over half a million of civilians have, for safety motives, sought refuge either in

neighbouring Nigeria or in the Francophone regions of the country (Amnesty International 2022; Mudge 2020).

Besides the use of military attacks, the secessionist movements have deployed various communication strategies that have contributed to magnifying their domestic terrorism and facilitated the spread of their separatist propaganda in and outside Cameroon. The bulk of this separatist propaganda has been in the cyberspace, and aided by a wide diversity of online footage. In effect, the separatists have not hesitated to disseminate videos and images of their violent military attacks, terrorist activities and indoctrination through the social media. The dissemination of these violent images has also been aided by ordinary internautes. The urge to neutralise this secessionist online propaganda has motivated government and nationalist movements in the country to similarly deploy image-based communication strategies which have not always been free from controversies. The use of images in the crisis can well be explained with the aid of the two concepts of visual propaganda and aesthetics of violence.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPTS OF VISUAL PROPAGANDA AND AESTHETICS OF VIOLENCE

By definition, propaganda is the use of biased or misleading information for a political cause or for the perpetration of an ideology. It involves the dissemination of rumours, half-truths and fake news among others, in view of influencing public opinion (Koppang 2009; Hobbs and McGee 2015). According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2011), propaganda has its roots in the history of the Catholic Church, particularly the setting by Pope Gregory XV of the "Congregatio de Propaganda Fide" (Congregation for Propagating the Faith), a movement that was active from 1621 to 1623. The Congregation's mission was to propagate the Catholic doctrine in communities of non-believers. In line with this, propaganda was originally associated with religious indoctrination. It was thus defined as "an organization, scheme, or movement for the propagation of a particular doctrine, practice, etc". However, over the years, propaganda has somewhat shifted from religious to political indoctrination. It has also mainly been used by dominant or counter-hegemonic forces as a tool of control and conformity. For instance (autocratic/dictatorial) governments have often used it to influence their citizens into acting and thinking according to governmental philosophies as well as upholding and supporting the contrived images of these governments (Koppang 2009; Mitchell 2010; Hobbs and McGee 2015). Similarly, more aggressive movements such as separatist and insurgent groups have often deployed it for indoctrination. Fitzmaurice (2018, 64) explains the indoctrinating effects of propaganda. She notes that "propaganda works by "circumvent[ing] individual reasoning and rational choice" and distracts individuals from making personal assessments of biases in the propagandist's reasoning and message

[...] It manipulates acceptance by preying on an individual's emotions such as, fear, anger, grief, guilt and revenge".

Propagandists deploy a variety of potent tools and media to sway hearts and influence public opinion. One of these tools is images. In effect, modern visual media such as film and photography have often systematically been deployed—notably during World War I and during anti-Jews Nazi campaigns in Hitler's Germany—to influence attitudes among the population. Such use of images is called visual propaganda. According to Walsh (2022), this kind of propaganda is particularly prevalent and effective during war periods. The effectiveness of visual propaganda lies in the fact that images are *immediate* influencers in that, they produce immediate emotional responses from the viewers. This is rationalised by the fact that the human brain tends to process images 60,000 times faster than text. Another reason for the effectiveness of visual propaganda resides in the fact that images are uniquely emotive. Seeing the image of a starving African child is likely more effective than reading an article about famine in the Black Continent; this is in line with the maxim that states that a picture is worth a thousand words. International NGOs have often exploited this potential of images in their fundraising campaigns. In the same way, political propagandists have often viewed visuals as a power-laden tool, having a profound effect as a tool for propaganda (Walsh 2022). Violent images of human suffering, warfare and crime etc, in particular even have greater power and effects. As noted by Reinhardt (2019), "repeatedly, pictures that expose the sources and conditions of injury have, in inciting horror at affliction or anger at injustice, helped to change what Elizabeth Spelman called 'the economy of attention to suffering'". These images "burn into memory: it is hard to forget them, even when we want to do so. Nor are these indelible images easy to avoid" (Walsh 2022, 13-14).

The use of visual propaganda in contexts of war—such as the Ambazonia war—is often characterised by the deployment of aesthetic violence or the aestheticisation of violence. According to Margaret Bruder (1998), the aestheticisation of violence in a visual medium—notably a filmic or photographic text—is the depiction of violence in a "stylistically excessive", a "significant and sustained way" that enables audience members to connect references from the "play of images and signs" to artworks, genre conventions, cultural symbols or concepts. This means depicting violence in a way that audience perceives it as a work of art. The concept of aesthetic violence is rooted in theorists' belief that there could be some inherent pleasure in the acts of perpetrating or witnessing violence, particularly when the perpetrator or beholder of this violence is not the victim (of the very violence). Thomas de Quincey (1827) for instance claims murder—like any other thing in this world—can be "treated aesthetically, as the Germans call it — that is, in relation to good taste". Similarly, British philosopher, Edmund Burke (1755) highlights the idea of an inherent pleasure in violence. In his theorisation of the sublime, Burke describes terror and pain as the strongest of all emotions that the human mind is capable of feeling. He further advances that there is an inherent "pleasure" in these emotions. This

conception of inherent pleasure in the act of witnessing violence had earlier on been suggested by Aristotle's concept of catharsis—which is about human fascination with violent content (cited in Pandocchi 2000). In his theory, Aristotle (see Feshbach 1984) contends that man tends to take pleasure in watching the very things that constitute a source of pain to him; for instance, human corpses.

In the same line of argument, Joel Black (1991) argues that under certain conditions, violent acts such as murder could become kinds of artistic oeuvres that are aesthetically pleasing to the human mind. He writes that: “[if] any human act evokes the aesthetic experience of the sublime, certainly it is the act of murder [...] if murder can be experienced aesthetically, the murderer can in turn be regarded as a kind of artist—a performance artist or anti-artist whose specialty is not creation but destruction” (Black 1991, 14).

Much of the theorisations of aesthetic violence mentioned above focus more on fictional media images. However, they may, to some extent, be applied to the online violent images used either for terrorism or propaganda. In effect, violent groups such as terrorist and insurgent organisations have developed methods of treating violent images in aesthetically pleasing ways. Online terrorism scholar, Joshua Molloy (2023) illustrates this truism in a study devoted to a far-right accelerationist network called “Terrogram”. The scholar observes that this network promotes white supremacist terrorism through an aestheticisation of the violence images that it uses for online propaganda. Such aestheticisation is mainly done through visual manipulation which among other things aims at “the fetishisation of the terrorist image in propaganda and ‘terrorwave’ – a visual style in which the aesthetics of the militant are worshipped”. Molloy (2023, 4) further explains the terrorist group's aestheticisation of violence thus:

Content is often altered with a glitchy VHS-style effect to make it resemble old film footage, or with neon colour grading, emitting a sense of nostalgia. Militants and scenes from decades-old conflicts in Northern Ireland, Chechnya or the Balkans are regularly repurposed for accelerationist propaganda, while images from contemporary conflicts are often edited with VHS degradation to appear older. The focus of these images is on what is perceived to be an attractive ‘fashionable’ style, rather than the ideological affiliations of militants.

Slome (2022) similarly theorises violence aesthetic using his concept of “aesthetic of terror”. In an article devoted to America's war against terror in the Middle East, the researcher associates his aesthetic of terror with the preponderance of images of violence in today's popular culture and visual arts as well as with the growing urge from audiences to watch and enjoy these images of violence. Using the visual culture that emerged after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, Slome (2022) illustrates how terror sometimes loses its horrific characteristics and becomes associated with beauty and pleasure. He writes: “What emerged in terms of the visibility of the [9/11 terrorist] act was the power of terror as an image-making machine, an

exploitation of spectacle". The author adds that "Thousands died in the attacks, but billions of people endlessly watched the falling towers until those images were etched into the global psyche. Many writers and artists considered 9/11 a work of art with which few could compete" (Slome 2022, 11). In his book titled *Cloning Terror: The War of Images*, Mitchell (2010) offers a similar reading of images related to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA. Thus, violence is often reconfigured not only as a work of art that can be pleasing to audiences, but also as a strategic and subtle weapon for various causes. Image-making becomes a new and significant weapon in a distinctly novel kind of warfare (Slome 2022; Mitchell 2005).

VISUAL PROPAGANDA AND VIOLENCE AESTHETICS IN THE AMBAZONIA WAR

As earlier mentioned, the Ambazonia Conflict could rightly be called a war of violent images that opposes a number of Cameroon-based secessionist movements and some nationalist/government institutions. The conflict has, in effect, led to what French scholar Henry Giroux (2006) calls a "spectacle of terrorism", a kind of aestheticisation of violence. With close respect to Western nations' muscular crusade against terrorism in the Middle East, Giroux explains that this spectacle of terrorism is "a visual culture of shock and awe". Such a culture is made ubiquitous by "the Internet and 24-hour cable news shows devoted to representations of the horrific violence associated with terrorism, ranging from aestheticized images of night time bombing raids on Iraqi cities to the countervailing imagery of grotesque killings of hostages by Iraqi fundamentalists" (2). In the specific case of the Ambazonia crisis, the visual culture of shock and awe is so far manifested by the way both sides to the conflict deployed violent images to frame their adversary, exonerate themselves from war crime accusations or/and woo national/international audiences in favour of their respective cause. In this section, attention is given to these two sides' deployment of violent images.

USE OF WAR FOOTAGE FOR VIOLENT PROPAGANDA

Since the beginning of the crisis, both the secessionist movements and the Cameroonian government have slanted and deployed war footage to spice up their propaganda and push their respective causes. The secessionists for instance have on various occasions used images of indiscriminate killings of civilians and those showing the destruction of houses by Cameroon's regular army in Anglophone regions, to frame the government as a violator of human rights and an apologist of genocide in the Anglophone regions. In late April

2018 for instance, footage² showing the burning of a village called Azi in the Anglophone region of Cameroon emerged on the Internet. The footage shows a dozen men in military fatigues, helmets and webbing, setting fire to some village houses and torturing handful of villagers. The fact that the aggressors' uniforms are consistent with those often worn by Cameroon's elite army unit, the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR), motivated secessionist movements and even some rights organisations—notably Human Rights Watch (2022) and Amnesty International (2022) —to associate the violent incident with the Cameroonian army. Although it is unclear whether the men on camera are indeed members of the BIR, secessionist groups and separatist activists quickly capitalised on the contents of the footage to negatively frame the Cameroonian army and government.

On December 8, 2021, footage of another military reprisal attack in Mbengwi, a locality situated in the North West Region of Cameroon, made rounds on the Internet. The footage³ mainly shows remains of about 35 houses and shops alleged to have been torched by the Cameroonian military. The video also shows corpses of teenagers allegedly shot dead by members of the Rapid Intervention Battalion, as well as presumed eyewitnesses to the macabre event. The ambient noise in the video is partly composed of some cries and moans produced by some onlookers. According to some eyewitnesses' accounts culled by Human Rights Watch (2021) and Amnesty International (2020), a convoy of the Cameroonian army faced an attack from a separatist group called Ambazonia Defense Forces, in that locality at about 2 PM on that day. Actually, a tactical vehicle of the army was destroyed by an Improvised Explosive Device. This incident caused the death of some soldiers. In retaliation, the Cameroonian army allegedly launched an impromptu raid along the road where they were attacked. They cracked down on any civilians suspected to cooperate with separatists. In the course of the raid, soldiers set fire to houses and businesses along the road and inadvertently killed a dozen civilians. In spite of the eyewitnesses' accounts, the Cameroonian army denied the allegations that its members committed atrocities in the locality. Through a press release, the army rather claimed that the ravaging fire that destroyed the structures was the outcome of an explosion that happened after a separatist military warehouse situated in the theatre of the raid exploded.

Most separatist groups disregarded the government forces' version of the story. They brandished the online footage of the Mbengwi attack as clear evidence of a genocide systematically orchestrated by the Francophone-dominated government in the Anglophone regions of the country. A case in point is the self-proclaimed interim president of the Republic of Ambazonia who blamed the Cameroonian military for the deaths of civilians and described the

2 The video of the Azi village attack is available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-44561929>

3 The footage of the Mbengwi attack is available at the following link: <https://www.bareta.news/cameroun-military-burnt-civilians-alive-in-mbengwi-road-bamenda/>

military action as a massacre. He said: "This is wickedness, this is genocide going on. We are losing hundreds per day" (quoted in *Africanews*, 2021, par. 23-24). In the same line of thought, the commander of the Ambazonia Defense Force (who claimed the separatist attack), denied that atrocities committed were due to his men's "liberation efforts". He claimed that the condemnable killings and burning of businesses in Mbengwi are in no way a dissuasive factor to their separatist struggle. In his words "Ambazonia is our land, our hope, it is our place of respite, [...] You think if you burn our homes, you molest our children, they will give up. Make no mistake. We will turn the armoured cars into dust. We will fight till the end" (quoted in Kindzeka 2021, 11).

By mobilising the imagery of random killings, genocide and massacre, the separatist movements subtly call to mind many Cameroonian and West African myths and stereotypes around African governments and regular armies. They particularly call to mind the image of a despotic and irresponsible government, represented on the battlefield by its heartless, brutal and misguided army. The imagery thus calls to mind the legend of the "zombie" army that will not hesitate to resort to terror and barbarism to ultimately entrench government's authoritarianism, thereby turning its back on the very populace it is supposed to protect. Thus, through their choice of symbolisms, the separatist movements hoped to capitalise on the popular imaginary about the army and the government in Cameroon in particular and West Africa in general. Actually, since the beginning of the conflict in 2016, there has emerged a galaxy of eye witness' accounts and investigative journalists' reports that have sought to provide evidence pointing to such barbarism and carnage committed by Cameroonian forces in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon (Human Rights Watch 2022, 2021; *Africanews* 2021; Amnesty International 2020, Harkness 2020). They have even emerged evidence of similar questionable acts committed by the military in its fight against terrorism in the northern region of the country. On April 22, 2020, for instance, the Cameroon government released a report (cited by Mudge 2021) in which it recognised human rights violations committed by its army in a massacre that took place the preceding year in a community called Ngarub. All the issues mentioned above have over the years pleaded in favour of the separatist movements' claim that government forces are using unorthodox warfare techniques in their anti-separatism moves in the NOSO regions.

Visual propaganda has been deployed not only by the separatist groups but also by the anti-secessionist movements in the country. In effect, the Cameroonian government and its allies have similarly capitalized on a number of online images showing atrocities committed by separatist groups, to attempt to sway the hearts of both domestic and foreign observers in favor of their anti-separatist military crusades in Anglophone regions. A case in point is a video that emerged on the Internet on August 11, 2020, showing three separatist fighters torturing a 35-year-old woman to death. In the shocking video, the three separatist assassins drag their victim (a certain Comfort Tumassang) over the ground. The latter has her hands tied behind her back. She begs incessantly for mercy before being beheaded by her aggressors. "Fine play", a Pidgin English

expression for “well done” can be heard from one of her assassins as her throat is brutally cut with a machete. The woman was allegedly killed because of her suspected collaboration with the Cameroonian army against separatist groups in Muyuka, South West Region of Cameroon.

In a few days, the troubling video went viral on the Internet and was even used by many Cameroonian television stations to spice up their programs devoted to the Ambazonia war. Elite broadcasters such as *Afrique Media*, *CRTV* (state owned television), *Vision 4* and *Equinox TV* among others repeatedly used the images in several of their news programs. Most media houses tended to use the images to negatively represent the secessionist movements. Besides being a golden opportunity for anti-separatist propagandists, the horrific images exposed the terrorist penchant of the separatist groups. In effect, the very brutal nature of the act shown in the video revealed that the armed separatists—and by extension their political allies—sought to instill terror in the hearts of civilians who might want to collaborate with the Cameroonian army to the detriment of separatist fighters. It should be noted that the use or online circulation of horrific videos showing the torturing and brutal killing of civilians and security forces have been one of the strategic weapons deployed by separatist fighters since the beginning of the struggle. These separatist fighters have been using such images to threaten civilians with death and instill terror among communities of people who may potentially collaborate with government forces or violate separatist movements' injunctions in Anglophone regions. Thus, the “spectacle of terrorism” has often strategically been deployed by separatist movements in their violent campaigns.

A counter-terror approach has been used by government forces to mitigate the image-based threat of the separatist movements. This approach has consisted of circulating or encouraging the proliferation of footage showing government forces' major victories at the war front. These have included videos showing the storming of key separatist fighters' bases, the liberation of hostages and the arrest and/or killing of notorious separatist “warlords”. On July 12, 2022, for instance, the government forces exposed the corpse of a notorious separatist warlord nicknamed “Field Marshall” (real name Olivier Lekeaka) in the streets of Kumba, South West Region. This exhibition enabled the massive filming of various videos that were virally circulated on social media. The videos showed the harmless and de-personalized body of a hitherto fearless and dreaded separatist warlord⁴ whom the government forces had tracked for years. Thus,

⁴ “Field Marshall” was at the head of the Red Dragons of Lebialem, a separatist group. He was a dreaded warlord who many times had been declared or thought to be dead. On December 31, 2018, government forces claimed they had killed him in an ambush. Unfortunately for them, the Ambazonia interim government denied his death. Few weeks later, videos of the warlord surfaced on the Internet proving that news of Field Marshall's death were indeed fake. His killing in July 2022 by the government forces signified a major blow dealt on the separatist war mechanism. His killing also signified hope that government forces could deliver on their anti-separatist military campaign.

the footage aimed at two things. Firstly, it sought to neutralize the terror insidiously instilled by Ambazonia warlords in many North-West and South-West communities; secondly, it aimed to depict government forces as unbridled and victorious forces on which the masses could count for their security. This could aid Cameroon government's propaganda around its army's capacity to protect the population against separatists.

According to the popular imaginary in Cameroon, many notorious Ambazonia warlords use black magic popularly called "juju", for fortification and offensive purposes (Arrey-Mbi 2020). Allegedly, such use of sorcery mystically magnifies their fire force and helps them neutralize regular army's attack against their positions. This popular fantasy thus represents Ambazonia warlords as quasi invincible entities or at least, very hard targets for any opposing force. By encouraging the circulation – nay explosion – of videos showing the fall of notorious Ambazonia warlords, the Cameroonian army and government hope to shatter the myth of these warlords' invincibility. Thus, the government suggests that the fall of Field Marshall becomes indexical to the vulnerability of the insurgent and the eminent and progressive fall of separatism in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon.

DOCTORING OR APPROPRIATING NON-WAR IMAGES FOR VIOLENT VISUAL PROPAGANDA

The visual propaganda deployed by both the separatist groups and the government has sometimes involved the appropriation or doctoring of non-war images. Separatist movements, for instance, have in various cases used techniques such as photoshopping and montage to turn innocent images into misleading visual weapons and aggressive propaganda. A case in point is the online circulation in May 2019 of a series of images showing a Cameroonian policeman, presumably lynched by an angry mob in Bamenda. Widely circulated by separatist movements, the images suggested that the police officer (in the images) had shot a youth in Bamenda and was in reprisal killed by an angry mob. Although the images made rounds on the Internet, it shortly turned out that they were drawn from the video of a policeman who consulted a local prophet of God for spiritual deliverance. Thus, separatist movements doctored video images of a non-war event for their violent visual propaganda.

It goes without saying that by deploying the imagery of an angry mob in conflict with security forces, the separatist activists sought to capitalise on the negative reputation of the country's police. Indeed, according to social representations in Cameroon, the police force is unprofessional, corrupt and more bent on supporting an authoritarian regime. This notion of the police has often been observed—and even confirmed to some extent—in situations where the police had been called to handle uprisings or anti-government activism in the country.

Their interventions in these situations have most often been characterised by brutality, gross violation of human rights and the “inadvertent” killing of innocent people. In 2008 for instance the police used such brutality to crush street protests in some of the country's big towns such as Douala and Yaounde where a social movement nicknamed “Strike of Hunger” took place. Similarly, the police violently intervened to quash university student protests in Buea in 2004 and 2006. These unfortunate precedents could only plead in favour of the separatists' anti-police representations.

Another example of misleading separatist image-based propaganda is a short video that was released on December 8, 2016, by secessionist movements to tarnish the image of the Cameroonian President, Paul Biya. The video shows a man dressed in black behind a white mask urging President Biya and his cabinet to quickly address the Anglophone problem. The masked man warns that their organisation will release sex videos relating to the President and attack some public services if Cameroon's government does not oblige. The government overlooked the warning but no attack or release of sex tape was effected by the blackmailers. Thus, Ambazonia separatist movements deployed non-war videos for character assassination campaigns against the Cameroonian government. Their action could be related to some relatively new and popular forms of visual culture in Cameroon one of which is the sharing of sex tapes on the Internet for political reasons. On many occasions, the emergence of Cameroonian celebrities' and politicians' sex tapes on the Internet has triggered controversies and sometimes political confrontations between public figures in the country (Tametong and Meka 2022, The Guardian 2021, Roxburgh 2019). By alluding to some fake sex tapes of the President, separatist activists hope to engender similar scenarios of political controversy or anti-government agitations in the country. By their act, the separatist movements also perpetrated a form of image-based violence (“cyber-obscenity”) that is relatively new, but popular in the country's political scene.

Similar misleading attempts have been made by anti-separatist movements and the Cameroon government. In June 2020 for instance, various government officials used some cannibalism images widely circulated on Facebook as weapons of character assassination against armed separatist movements in the Anglophone regions of the country. The images in question were the contents of a video link posted online on June 20, 2018. The video showed a man cooking human body parts in a pot placed over a wood fire. In reality, the video was the work of Nigerian make-up artist, Hakeem Onilogbo. However, it went viral on social media; and soon elicited all manner of interpretations from Cameroonians. Some internautes claimed the man in the video is a cannibal Ambazonian fighter and that the images were taken in Anglophone Cameroon. Without verification, Cameroon Minister of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation, Atanga Nji, relayed this rumour in a number of televised programs, thereby framing the armed separatist groups and militias as cannibals. In a June 25, 2018, CRTV program titled “Inside Presidency”, the minister said the armed separatists were worse than terrorist groups (notably

Boko Haram) and that they deserved to be brutally crushed by the regular army. In his words: "Boko Haram committed atrocities, but they did not cut up humans and cook them in pots" (quoted in McAllister 2018). By deploying the imagery of cannibalism, Atanga Nji and his followers subtly appealed to Cameroonian people's aversion to cannibalism as well as to their disposition to hastily otherize cannibal people. Social representations in Cameroon tend to associate cannibalism not only with barbarism and primitivism but also with voodoo and black magic. In effect, according to the popular fantasy, a cannibal is not too different from a sorcerer who mystically "eats" the body and soul of their victims. The same as the sorcerer, the cannibal eats human flesh.

Although the cannibalism notion evoked by Atanga Nji was later debunked by local websites and foreign observers, the minister's propaganda brought to the fore the question of the atrocities committed by separatist movements in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon. Additionally, this propaganda somewhat sought to sway the hearts of masses in favour of government military campaigns against the separatist groups.

FOREIGN OBSERVERS' IMAGE-BASED MEDIATION IN THE CRISIS

A good number of foreign observers have sought to mediate in the war of images that oppose the separatist and nationalist movements in Cameroon. In fact, any time controversial footage of the Ambazonia war makes rounds on the Internet, websites and organisations such as the BBC, Human Rights Watch, Al Jazeera, Transparency International and Television France International among others arise to debunk or confirm the veracity of the footage; by so doing, these organisations contribute to the political and media discourse around the secessionist crisis in Cameroon. At various points, the BBC has, for instance, provided satellite images to verify the veracity of various online footage showing village burnings and other atrocities committed by the warring parties in Anglophone Cameroon. Incidents such as the April 2018 attack in Azi village and the December 2021 Mbengui massacre where civilians were randomly killed or injured have triggered various satellite-images from the BBC, aiming at establishing the responsibility of government forces in the attacks. BBC's satellite images show the theatres of the different attacks before and after the attacks. They also show the magnitude of infrastructural destruction to provide hint on the severity of the military attacks. On some of its websites, Amnesty International shows similar satellite images of attacks on a handful of villages in some South West villages⁵.

⁵ Amnesty International shows Satellite images of presumed military attacks on Anglophone Cameroon's villages in a website accessible through the following link: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/07/cameroon-satellite-images-reveal-devastation-in-anglophone-regions/>

For many observers, the satellite images published by BBC and Amnesty International are influential and impeccable. In fact, most Cameroonian audiences have for decades cultivated the habit of trusting international news agencies more than local—particularly pro-government—media organisations (Tanjong 2006). This reduced trust in the news published by local media houses is partly due to such issues as yellow journalism that is common in the Cameroon media ecology and the perceived government's influence on, or control of news in the country. However, it must be highlighted that the satellite images provided by the BBC and other news agencies for verification remained weak—if not inappropriate—in determining the veracity of some online footage. For instance, the satellite images prove that the attacks mentioned above actually took place in those localities. But they don't provide indisputable evidence on the identities of the authors of the attacks. Given that any side to the war may disguise as their opponent just to beat observers' vigilance, evidence other than the satellite images are needed to determine the identities of the authors of the atrocities. Government spokespersons have most often hinged on this weakness of the satellite images to deny claims of government forces' implication in the violent attacks (Atonfack 2021).

Like the BBC, international right organisation Human Rights Watch has circulated a good number of online videos, visibly aimed, at sensitising the international community about the atrocities presumably committed by both government forces and separatist movements in Anglophone Cameroon. One of such videos⁶ is a report produced by senior researcher Ilaria Allegrozzi (see Human Rights Watch 2022). In the video, only images of atrocities presumably committed by government forces are shown. Although the notion of human rights violations by separatists is mentioned in passing in the voice-over of the report, no image of such violations is shown for illustrative purpose. Thus, Human Rights International—like a handful of other international observers—has entrenched the culture of representing the government forces as the only authors of human right violations in the war. Meanwhile, all the belligerents in the conflict have allegedly committed untold atrocities in Anglophone Cameroon. This tendency by international right organisations and foreign news agencies to brand Cameroon armed forces as the principal or sole violators of human rights in the war is likely to be interpreted by pan-African audiences/observers as evidence of an anti-Cameroon image campaign.

CONCLUSION

In the look of things, one has the impression that both the separatist movement and government capitalised on Aristotle's notion of catharsis, that is human fascination with violent contents. The videos both sides deployed have not

⁶ This video can be accessed through the following link: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/03/28/cameroon-new-attacks-civilians-troops-separatists>

been exceptional in terms of image and sound fidelity. Yet they have most often been viral and fuelling huge buzz in and outside Cameroon. Both the separatist movements and the government have tended to believe that the battle to win the hearts of the domestic and international audiences is fought with the aid of violent images. Thus, the Ambazonia conflict has since its beginning been a war of violent images. This war has, at some points, involved what theorists call the "spectacle of terrorism". Both sides to the conflict have sought to use violent images in their online visual propaganda to frame or counter-frame their opponent. The separatist fighters have sometimes used images of their atrocities to terrorise civilians in Anglophone regions and force the latter to scrupulously bow to separatist antigovernment policies. Government forces have on their own part deployed images of their gruesome killing of Ambazonia warlords, to suggest their capacity to neutralise separatist movements and protect the civilian population in the brutalised Anglophone regions of the country. Both sides have also excelled in the manipulation of non-war images to frame their opponents as violators of human rights or barbarous entities. One thus observes that the belligerents capitalised on the Cameroonian masses' strange and paradoxical disposition to watch shocking images related to the Ambazonia war.

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