

Cinema, Politics and Resistance in Cameroon

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Both the colonial and post-independence eras in Cameroon have been characterized by repressive public policies regarding freedom of speech and expression, with strict surveillance on cinematographic expression. In 1934, for example, the French government passed the Laval Decree to prevent cinema from spreading “subversive” or anti-colonial messages. The decree also required the French government’s permission before shooting or showing films in French colonies. The subsequent neo-colonial state, established in 1960, worked hand in glove with the former colonial masters, and it can be argued that this neo-colonial state has survived to the present day. Within a national context characterized by dictatorship, human rights abuses, cultural belligerence/emasculatation, poverty, and above all, press censorship, this paper sets out to demonstrate that filmmakers such as Alphonse Beni, Jean Marie Teno, Jean Pierre Bekolo, and Basseck Ba Khobio successfully employ several forms of militant cinema techniques and aesthetics to lend their voices to an oppressed Cameroonian and African society. While filmic approaches like the anti-documentary (Teno) and the Mevungu (Bekolo) are more overt in their deconstructionist agenda, others like “sly civility” (Beni) and “Subtle Deconstruction” (Ba Kobhio) are more veiled, in the register of what James Scott calls “hidden transcripts”. These hidden transcripts here refer to codified stylistic and narrative techniques constructed by oppressed groups as they speak against the injustice of repressive apparatuses or power structures, serving as a means to protest against hegemonic forces while evading their surveillance. From a post-colonial perspective, this paper analyses films from the aforementioned Cameroonian filmmakers, as well as existing literature on Cameroonian cinema. The objective is to shed light on how these committed filmmakers denounce neo-colonialism, dictatorship and cultural alienation on one hand, and the government’s incompetence and insensitivity to the plight of the masses on the other.

INTRODUCTION

In the colonial era, the continent of Africa as a whole was largely represented cinematically by Western filmmakers who made films that depicted black Africans as inferior, submissive workers, savage, or cannibalistic. Examples of this type of filmmaking include *Kings of the Cannibal Islands* (Wallace McCutcheon, 1909), *Congorilla* (Martin and Osa Johnson, 1932). Others portrayed Africa as exotic, without history or culture. Examples include jungle films based on the Tarzan character created by Edgar Rice Burroughs, as well as adventure films

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like *The African Queen* (John Huston, 1951), and various adaptations of H. Rider Haggard's novel *King Solomon's Mines* (1885).

In the French colonies, Africans were prohibited by the 1934 Laval Decree from making films of their own. This decree, passed by the French government and written by Pierre Laval, the minister of colonies, aimed to prevent cinema from spreading subversive or anti-colonial messages. The decree stated that any person who desires to make cinematographic images or sound recordings must address a written request to the lieutenant Governor of the colony where the applicant intends to operate. The request was to include all the information about the applicant's professional references, as well as scripts for film or musical accompaniment. This decree thus restricted the work of both African and European filmmakers from 1934 until 1960. This ban stunted the growth of film as a means of political, cultural, and artistic expression for Africans. This excessive policing and control of the various mechanics of self-expression and how Africans were perceived elsewhere aligns with the views of Memmi (2003), who posits that:

Just as the bourgeoisie proposes an image of the proletariat, the existence of the colonizer requires that an image of the colonized be suggested. These images become excuses without which the presence and conduct of a colonizer, and that of a bourgeois, would seem shocking. But the favored image becomes a myth precisely because it suits them too well. Let us imagine, for the sake of this portrait and accusation, the often-cited trait of laziness. It seems to receive unanimous approval of colonizers from Liberia to Laos, via the Maghreb. It is easy to see to what extent this description is useful. It occupies an important place in the dialectics exalting the colonizer and humbling the colonized (123).

From Memmi's perspective, the colonizers found the need to "suggest" an image of the colonized to the rest of the world that suits their intents and purposes, and that could only be done by controlling the different means and technologies of self-expression, such as cinema. In the particular context of Cameroon, the colonialists were in complete control of filmmaking activities and the type of films that were watched in the colony. They favoured films which portrayed blacks as needing to be civilized, emotionally volatile and easily distracted; in an effort to amuse and disarm the colonized (Tcheuyap 2011). It can thus be argued that cinema was not a neutral force in the colonies. A clear example is the Western genre which was very popular during the colonial era. It used point of view conventions to project the white man—the imperialist agents—as superior; thus, building a sense of dependency within the fissured mind of the colonial spectator. This limited the possibility of the colonized identifying with the colonizers, as the viewer systematically developed inferiority complexes.

Having been subjected to films that sought to propagate Western superiority for over half a century, when African filmmakers began to make films after independence, they confronted a double challenge. First, they felt compelled to fight back and improve upon the negative image the colonialists gave of Africa,

by reasserting their African values and identity, badly distorted by Western films. Secondly, they had to deal with the challenges faced by any developing area in competition with well-established countries for a share of the film market (Diawara 1986, 1995). Unfortunately for Cameroon, the departure of the colonial order did not give way to more freedom of cinematic expression for Cameroonian people as a neocolonial order immediately replaced it. The state dominated the cinematographic field from independence in the 1960s onwards, simply replacing colonialist propaganda with repressive state propaganda, without giving room for pluralistic voices in the country. Between 1960 and 1988, for example, the state propaganda machinery of Cameroon produced over 248 documentaries, flooding the country's cinematic landscape with images of government propaganda. In most cases, the image of the "father of the nation," symbol of a strong state and a prosperous nation, is portrayed in documentaries such as *Le temps de L'Unite* (Sab Atem Stephen, 1965), *Le Cameroun et les Nations Unies* (Sab Atem Stephen, 1965), *Dix ans de liberte et de Paix* (Jean Paul Ngassa, 1970) and *UNC* (Sab Atem Stephen, 1980) (Doho 2005). The struggles of neocolonial regimes in Africa to protect the interests of neocolonial forces over those of their citizens confirms Jean-Paul Sartre's assertion in the preface of Frantz Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) when he says:

The European elite undertook to manufacture a native elite. They picked out promising adolescents; they branded them, as with a red-hot iron, with the principles of Western culture; they stuffed their mouths full with high-sounding phrases, grand glutinous words that stuck to the teeth. After a short stay in the mother country, they were sent home, whitewashed. These walking lies had nothing left to say to their brothers; they only echoed (7).

Viewed from Sartre's perspective as stated above, it becomes clear that post-independence regimes in Africa were "manufactured" by the former colonial masters and could only "echo" the interests and lies of the neocolonial forces that fabricated them.

The paucity of independent films in Cameroon was further compounded by the lack of equipment, funding and basic infrastructure, a perfect arrangement for the state that had a firm grip on government communication agencies for its propaganda (Ngansop 1987). This harsh film production climate impacted the filmic approaches of early Cameroonian filmmakers in different ways, ranging from more veiled indictments of the West as found in the works of Jean-Pierre Dikonge Pipa, Daniel Kamwa, Dia Moukouri, Alphonse Beni and Arthur Sibita and Basseck Ba Kobhio, to more overt ones like Jean Marie Teno and Jean Pierre Bekolo (Nfaboum 2005). However, what was common with all of them was the use of cinema as a form of resistance. Filmmakers like Alphonse Beni and Basseck Ba Kobhio, in particular, adopted an aesthetic that reflected a concept which James Scott calls "hidden transcripts". Scott explains that hidden transcripts are constructed by oppressed groups as they congregate "offstage" to speak and act outside of the elites' surveillance and repressive

apparatuses" (1990, 4). They are thus a way for the subordinate to express their protests while avoiding being a target of punishment. Because the hidden transcripts are by nature secret and conspiratorial, they are not often subject to policing and repression. Hidden transcripts typically manifest in films through stylistic/aesthetic devices like metaphors, allegories, subtexts in dialogue and characterization, and visual symbolism. Some Cameroonian filmmakers thus use these devices to make veiled statements on the sociopolitical ills plaguing Cameroon and Africa, especially those related to bad governance, dictatorship, institutionalized corruption and the enforcement of neocolonial interests over those of the African masses.

Although all the works analysed in this paper fall in the register of militant filmmaking, each of the filmmakers has a unique style that can be considered as an individual approach to filmmaking. Some like Alphonse Beni and Basseck Ba Kobhio are considered to employ the concept of hidden scripts more thoroughly. By analysing these works, the objective of the paper is to demonstrate that filmmakers are some of the most committed, accurate and courageous media personalities in Cameroon history when it comes to speaking for the oppressed masses in Cameroon and Africa in general. The idea is also to highlight Cameroonian filmmakers' indigenous cinematic styles which demonstrate that, besides deconstructing neocolonialism, dictatorship and bad governance, they are also forging an aesthetic, void of the Eurocentric prisms and voyeuristic approaches to filmmaking in and about Africa.

ALPHONSE BENI AND THE CONCEPT OF "SLY CIVILITY"

Beni's films analysed in this article challenge Western hegemony and white supremacy ideals in subtle ways. Within the post-colonial discourse, his approach falls under the register of "sly civility" as introduced by Homi K. Bhabha (1992) as an extension of the concept of "mimicry". As Bhabha explains, sly civility entails:

...subtle forms of resistance "through which the native refuses to satisfy the demand of the colonizer's narrative. In this vein, sly civility may be regarded as a sophisticated affective response that in its ambivalence—outward compliance and inner resistance—may be far more effective in its evasion than overt resistance because it escapes detection (1992, 13).

Although several film scholars have placed Beni among the complacent Cameroonian filmmakers who carefully avoid political discuss in their films, resorting to stories about love, sex and culture (Okadike 1994; Nganang 2005; Tcheuyap 2011), the argument in this article is that Beni is just more subtle and anecdotic in his deconstructionist agenda. The idea of outward compliance and

inner resistance, as elaborated by Bhabha above, is what makes the concept of hidden transcripts also relevant in Beni's films. As will be demonstrated, Beni's films are therefore not just mindless copies of Western genres, as he tactfully employs sly civility in films like *Cameroon Connection* (1985), *Terror Force Commando* (1986), and *Black Ninja* (1987) to destroy the myth of white superiority and invincibility vis-à-vis Africans. To put Beni's deconstructionist approach into perspective, it is important to recall Delavignette, a French colonial officer who was the first to codify a film language that ensured that French and European interests were always presented in a positive light, and as morally superior to Africans. In his films, Beni seems to apply a kind of reverse engineering on Delavignette's approach by showing Africans as superior in very subtle ways. By doing so, he was able to take his films beyond the limited sphere of African films into popular exhibition circuits in the west. By beating the vigilance of the French gatekeepers, Beni was able to gather a considerable following in the West and to achieve considerable commercial success.

To better understand how Beni successfully beat the vigilance of the French, it is necessary to analyse how sly civility is applied in his three films under study. The first thing we notice is that Europeans are mostly portrayed as criminals who are defeated by the hero played by Alphonse Beni, an African. In *Cameroon Connection*, for example, the nightclub fight scene in Paris shows Baiko fighting a group of racist thugs, before Bruce who comes to his aid. We see Baiko (Cameroonian) in a dominant position and he beats up the racist thugs (whites), which is a sharp contrast to what Western films preferred to portray at the time. Furthermore, the town of Paris (which represents Europe in general) is not presented as the dream place to be, as was the popular opinion at the time and reflected in Western movies. Rather, it was presented as a place that harbours dangers at every turn and also holds dark secrets such as a haven of prostitution.

In a similar way, Beni also deconstructs white moral superiority in *Terror Force Commando* where Europeans and Europe are represented in unflattering terms. For example, the main antagonist of the film, Zero, and his entire gang are Europeans, and we find a scene at the beginning where Inspector Baiko roughs up one of the apprehended gang members to extract information. When the investigations later take him to Rome, he faces more European criminals there. In *Black Ninja* however, not all white characters are presented negatively, as we see two antagonists in the persons of Rudolph and Mr. Temple, both of European descent. But what is interesting is that black characters are portrayed to work as equals with whites and not as less experienced nor incompetent, thereby destroying the hierarchy envisaged by Delavignette as concerns representations of working relationships between Africans and Europeans in Francophone African cinema.

It can therefore be concluded that in his deconstruction agenda, Beni makes use of sly civility as a form of hidden transcript; in attempts to escape detection from. Typical of James Scot's approach, Beni pretends to embrace the colonizer's ways by adopting hybrid genres like action films, parts of which

are shot in Western nations. This makes him appear like a colonized subject struggling to emulate the colonizer, which spares him from closer scrutiny from Western gatekeepers. At the same time, he uses subtexts anchored on cultural and political allegories that silently challenge established hegemonies of power structures and societal norms such as those imposed by the French in Cameroon.

BASSECK BA KHOBIO AND SUBTLE DECONSTRUCTION

Ba Kobhio generally catalogues life's experiences from the perspective of the ordinary Cameroonian, providing interesting and informative counter-views from the official one. These counter views are propelled by social actors who are not necessarily experiencing the same level of oppression, because they come from a wide range of social groups such as academics, human rights activists, church leaders, independent artists, businessmen, women's groups, and athletes. His deconstruction becomes quite subtle because these counter-views are not always perceived as posing a direct threat to the state, yet in their own subtle ways gradually erode state domination, staging their opinions from the fringes of the state to create their own forms of social power not controlled by the state. This is demonstrated in *Sango Malo* (1991) where he argues for a theory of development that respects the culture and history by adapting scholarship to local realities in Cameroon.

In *Sango Malo*, Ba Kobhio introduces Bernard Malo, a young teacher trained in the tradition of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1972, 1995), who believes that education must be based on dialogue rather than a strict curriculum. This concept of dialogue is based on lived experiences, social practices, and building social capital to enhance the community as a whole. From this perspective, Malo vigorously opposes the school principal, a product of colonial education who remains unaware of the resurgence of nationalism and political progressivism in the country. The school principal seems stuck within the rigid and traditional Eurocentric colonial curriculum, designed to produce docile colonial administrators. Malo's ideological fight with the school principal is an analogy of the fight between nationalistic activists in Africa against neo-colonial leaders whose primary interests seem to be to defend the interests of Western hegemonies. This aligns with what Ziauddin Sardar posits in his introduction to the 2008 edition of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) that:

The question then becomes: can the non-West develop its own self-definition by using the tools and instruments of Western civilization? In human sciences, Fanon detects a problem: they have their own drama. They have emerged from a particular cultural milieu and reflect the concerns and prejudices of that culture and worldview. If Western civilization and culture are responsible for colonial racism, and Europe itself has a racist structure, then we should not

be too surprised to find this racism reflected in the discourses of knowledge that emanate from this civilization and that they work to ensure that structural dominance is maintained (xv).

In light of the above, the school principal is a typical product of the colonial educational system, trained specifically to protect colonial interests. Ba Khobio's use of the fight between Sango Malo and his school principal to indict the colonial educational system typifies hidden transcripts categorized by James Scot (1990) as ideological and political allegories, which constitute covert critiques of political systems or subversive messages from marginalized perspectives, often masked as entertainment.

Freire used the term "banking education," (2005, 72) to define this sort of mindless and conformist education. As a strong disciple of Freire, Malo rather advocates for an education that serves the needs and purposes of the community. Like his role model, Freire, Malo believes in the transformative power of education. He therefore focuses on training the students to survive in the world not only through conventional knowledge but also through common sense and physical labour. Malo believes that training in agriculture will reduce the country's dependence on imported food, but it is not on the headmaster's curriculum. His teaching methods in the school gradually raise the consciousness of the rural populace who start questioning the neocolonial economic system based on export products such as coffee, cocoa, banana, cotton, wood, etc. In order to break the economic monopoly in the village, he organizes the farmers into a trade union that markets their products.

Similarly, in *Silence de la Forêt (Silence of the Forest, 2003)*, Ba Kobbio pursues the same trajectory as in *Sango Malo* by pitting Western education and socialization against tribal relationships and loyalty. The main character Gonaba is a well-educated African, who believes that his Western education is enough for him to trigger positive change as he returns home to the Central African Republic. Top on his list is to shake up the stagnation and privileges of the ruling class. Gonaba's vision is based on the presumption that Western education and his experiences are sufficient to help get the Central African Republic out of under-development. To Gonaba's frustration, that vision is not well received back home. He is seen by his compatriots as nothing but a white man and his entire effort is unappreciated. Having failed woefully to achieve his goal, he decides to make himself useful by taking on the plight of the Pygmies who are regarded with racist contempt by both non-Pigmy Central Africans and the whites running multi-national foreign corporations in the country. At that point, the movie turns into an attack against the mistreatment and exploitation of pygmies in Africa and the ecological threat against the continent.

At the end, Gonaba decides to settle in the jungle and embrace the Pygmies' culture, even taking a Pygmy woman as his spouse. His intention is to use his Western education to teach the Pygmies how to read and write in order to put them on track to be equal to the taller men running the country. To his surprise, he finds out that they have no use for him because their age-old culture is

strong and reliable and does not need to be changed by Western ideals. He also finds out that the game-hunting practised by the Pygmies comes packaged with an authentic and honest way of life, which is more important than what he learned in Europe. Gonaba's helplessness and impotence get compounded when he discovers impending development projects being planned by foreign corporations on their land. This development consists of cutting down the forest for foreign exports, thus completely destroying their habitat and there is nothing he can do about it. *The Silence of the Forest*, as indicated by the title of the film, and so cherished by the Pygmies, is about to be shattered forever.

JEAN MARIE TENO AND THE “ANTI-DOCUMENTARY” FILMIC APPROACH

Jean Marie Teno is an African filmmaker who fully understands the role of film in the decolonization process as well as the capacity of cultural action to mediate social change. To this effect, he makes a conscious effort to initiate political discourse in his filmmaking. He thus aligns with the assertions of film scholars like Frank Ukadike (1994), who claim that the colonial project left Africa little choice but to turn to an “activist cinema” in order to undo the damage of colonization, as elucidated in the introduction to this article. As explained by Ki-Zerbo (1996) in an interview, Teno highlights the historical context of African cinema to argue that the emergence of militant cinema in Africa is not by chance, given that the continent has a long history of exploitation and colonial oppression by Western powers. This explains why in their films African filmmakers focus on reinventing an image and culture that was suppressed by the colonizers. Teno's films aptly demonstrate his views, mostly countering Hollywood aesthetic and narrative style in an effort to extend his narrative to fit within African cultural and socio-political realities.

This aesthetic revolt from Teno has been described by Tchouafe (2006) as “reverse anthropology” or “anti-documentary,” in the following terms:

This particular documentary style aims to rewrite African visual history from a native perspective by turning the tables on colonial anthropology, which now becomes the subject of investigation rather than the one doing the investigation. It is a practice aimed at removing the documentary genre from colonial paternalistic clutches and obliterating their traces by highlighting its own internal inconsistencies and propaganda through the colonial “voice of God” that for so long has tainted Africa with a colonial ideology lacking in compassion for the natives’ human rights... Within these processes, Africans also became strangers in their own land, a nation within the colonial empire, because they were forced to look at themselves through colonial eyes... Thus, the anti-documentary is a way for the natives of Africa to come, on their own, out of the colonial archival shadow. It links aesthetic and moral objections to the colonial project and ideology (33).

Teno's adoption of the anti-documentary approach is thus aimed at reintroducing humanism into filmmaking, by directing the attention of the viewer to the subject matter, rather than distracting him from it with sophisticated cinematic effects. His philosophy of filmmaking is thus anchored on his beliefs in participation, not just ideological observation based on bad faith and prejudices, an approach that turns filmmaking into an activist tool for progress.

It is therefore apt to draw a parallelism between Teno's anti-documentary approach and Italian Neorealism in post-war Italy. This is especially given the latter's limited effects, combining newsreel-type footage to create a documentary feel to the cinema, enhance moral engagement, and dedication to give a voice to the voiceless. However, with the use of irony, paradox and metaphor which he achieves through the juxtaposition of ideas and images, Teno's aesthetic goes a step further by adopting the performative mode of documentary filmmaking in which he uses his own voice-over, giving him a distinct visual identity. Another parallelism between the two filmic approaches is that while Italian Neorealism was a revolt against Fascist Italy during World War II (Bordwell et al. 1985), Teno's anti-documentary approach is heavily influenced by the ongoing struggle of decolonization in the country, such that both cinemas could be described as shaped by circumstance. This is why both cinemas lay emphasis on real life and real-life events, and in both, the action usually takes place on the street. This way, filmmaking becomes an indigenous way of archiving local realities, analysing, deconstructing and anticipating the symptoms of their societies, then prescribing appropriate remedies.

Teno's first feature film, *L'Eau de Misère (Bikutsi Water Blues, 1988)*, articulates a powerful critique of polluted water supplies in Cameroon. The film shows long queues of desperate Cameroonians looking for potable water from very few taps on the streets, only to get brown water. Teno's next work *Afrique, je te plumerai (Africa, I Will Fleece You, 1992)* was even more critical, probing into the continuing legacies of colonial oppression. In this film, Teno explains why the Cameroon school system has totally failed. After a series of sequences that show the streets invaded by enraged masses and a maddened army, and after zooming in on corpses, Teno brings our attention to the pedagogical tools in use in Cameroonian schools. Books are extremely scarce and those that are available are not adapted to the reality of the country. The university library in Yaoundé is empty, and Teno indicts the former colonial masters who continue to monopolize the market for textbooks so as to make sure that no counter-narratives from the people. This is echoed by Ng g wa Thiong'o (1981) when he asserts that:

Publications were censored directly, through government licensing laws or indirectly through the editorial practices of those running the government and missionary presses. African languages were still meant to carry the message of the bible. Even the animal tales derived from orature, which were published by these presses in booklets, were often so carefully selected as to make them carry the moral message and implications revealing the unerring finger

of a white God in human affairs. Thus, imperialist pretenses to free the African from superstition, ignorance and awe of nature often resulted in deepening his ignorance, increasing his superstitions and multiplying his awe of the new whip and-gun-wielding master (67).

Teno thus presents the political leaders as mere protectors of French interests. The president's poster used to cover a corpse clearly indicates the physical and the spiritual dungeon into which decades of dictatorship and psychological manipulation have plunged the country.

Similarly, in *Clando* (1996) Teno denounced the blatant violation of human rights. This film uses the perspective of Sobgui, a computer technician, to archive a historical period. During the upheavals that ran from 1990 to 1993, Sobgui helps the students to print their tracts against the regime. Betrayed by his colleague, he is arrested and held in a torture chamber in a Douala police station where he experiences hardship, but he also witnesses a policeman's sexual assault on his wife. Though he is eventually liberated, Sobgui still feels imprisoned by the repressive forces all around him. Sobgui is at the brink of madness by the time he leaves for Germany, but even in Germany he discovers to his dismay that the status quo is not any better. The immigrant in Europe is the unwanted other, forced to live a ghetto/underground life smeared with alcohol and women.

In the same light, Teno's 2004 film, *Le Malentendu Colonial (Colonial Misunderstanding)*, is a critical indictment of the paradoxical relationship between European Christian missionaries and colonization in Africa, and how their "noble deeds" actually served to further the interests of their own nation states, rather than those of Africa. The film thus unearths colonization strategies like the Rhineland mission, which even predates German colonization, and which seems to remain in operation till date. From Teno's perspective, the colonial misunderstanding stems from the fact that the term "colonization" with all its violence, continues to be used to comment on world news, even though evoking European colonization in Africa remains a taboo subject. This paradox seems to suggest that collective memory should only retain European propaganda which presents colonization as a civilizing mission.

JEAN-PIERRE BEKOLO AND THE CONCEPT OF "MEVUNGU"

Introduced in his 2005 film *Les Saignantes*, Bekolo's concept of "Mevungu" appears to represent a private space for self-expression, out of reach of the dictators' power. It is within this private space that his films ignite conversations on the nature of African traditional religion and power in Cameroon. To Bekolo, the reins of power always seem farfetched and elusive to the ordinary Cameroonian. To have a complete grasp of the Cameroonian political landscape

therefore, one has to make a conscious effort to understand the complexities and sophistications of its politics, which are deployed within multiple activated spheres of power. Within these contexts, political power does not necessarily mean power over the sacred; consequently, the "Mevungu" cannot be controlled, even by dictators, because politics in Cameroon operates in a context that is mediated by multiple factors and social actors who do not necessarily take directions from the state. In the relative safety of the "Mevungu", Bekolo thus tasks himself with breaking the state's monopoly over the country's audiovisual landscape. With this sacred and safe space, cinema becomes a magical tool which facilitates the participation of new social actors who can now form communities and new modes of addresses from the hinges of the state. Consequently, Bekolo's cinema becomes part of the process of finding new possibilities within the formations of other spheres of power outside of the realm of the state.

In *Les Saignantes*, the "Mevungu" concept is in full display as Bekolo demonstrates the contrast between indigenous African secret societies' practices against the problematic use of sex and satanic cults by Cameroonian elites, a remnant of a colonial culture not based on meritocracy but on an economy of desire brought by the predatory violence of colonization, rape and fascism. The film presents these satanic cults as expressing the colonized elites' attempt at internal colonization through an economy of desire based on colonial mimicry and psychological delusions. As Tchouafe (2006) explains:

In practice, it means that the Cameroonians' top brass have settled for mimicking the colonizers and are now wearing their uniforms to routinely exploit their fellow compatriots, hopelessly poor and confused, not understanding that these people are broken and need healing. Bekolo, however, claims that by settling for these evil practices, whatever power the elites gain from their satanic cults cannot stand the test of time, because the "Mevungu's" cosmology is timeless and cannot be bound by evil power. The "Mevungu" sets both the oppressed and the oppressors free (59).

Bekolo's belief therefore is that the government's power is limited. Both his movies, *Quartier Mozart* (1992) and *Les Saignantes*, were entirely shot in Cameroon within two months before he quickly left the country to do postproduction work in France and the United States. The idea was to be quick enough to beat the slow repressive machinery of the country. The "Mevungu" concept thus also leverages on technological evolutions like light digital cameras leading to smaller crews that draw less attention, to succeed. With this approach, Bekolo has succeeded to develop a completely original, provocative, challenging and even daring understanding of filmmaking. In an era plagued by poverty, opportunism, then political and cultural censorship, Bekolo succeeds to bring in a new breath through the power of imagination.

This imagination runs through almost all his films. *Le président* (2013), for example, depicts a president in office for 42 years who takes a sudden road trip

on the eve of an important electoral meeting. His disappearance is watched by the media, political opponents, and even prisoners and causes a war over who will be the successor. While on his journey he sees the disastrous consequences of a prolonged reign over his country. This is clearly anecdotic to what was happening in 2013 in Cameroon, which continues till date; and with the extremely violent nature of the government in place, his courage can only make sense when attributed to "Mevungu". The same traits can be traced back to an earlier film, *Quartier Mozart* in which he presents a grotesque figure, "Chien merchant" (Mad Dog), a police officer and main character of the film. Mad Dog monopolizes the financial, political, religious and mystical powers in his neighbourhood and exhibits an obsession for total control over those around him, an attitude that leaves his family and neighbours ill at ease. This figure clearly represents, in a larger scale, the autocratic nature of public authorities in Cameroon that sometimes threaten to suffocate other actors within the social system. Bekolo's hidden transcripts could thus be classified to be of the anecdotic and symbolic variant, given his flair for using anecdotes to critically indict hegemonic forces at play in/on Cameroon and elsewhere.

Through filmmaking, Bekolo thus succeeds to highlight the differences between hegemonic forms of institutionalized history and individual histories, and the role of art not as an enforcer of official history (ies), but as a tool to tell the truth. His imaginary "Mevungu" sacred and safe space, where ordinary and powerless Cameroonians can safely express their opinions and frustrations, is a typical demonstration of survival strategies that prop up in a totalitarian society where freedom of speech (or freedom after speech) is not guaranteed. This aligns with Lassiter (2000), who posited that African filmmakers also play the role of journalists and activists. By successfully reflecting the daily realities of ordinary Cameroonians, which are in sharp contrast to images relayed by the government propaganda machinery, Bekolo confirms Lassiter's claim, especially by lending his voice to the voiceless Cameroonians and Africans as a whole.

CONCLUSION

The analyses of selected Cameroonian filmmakers and their films developed in this article show how Cameroonian filmmakers have critically examined the past in order to understand the present and predict the future. The films discussed here also critically appraise the state's monopoly over collective history and memory, drawing attention to the fact that history is not only a science of the past but also of the present. From this perspective, it becomes imperative to contribute to a (re)writing of contemporary history, given the consequences that this is likely to have in the future. Cameroonian filmmakers have evidently understood the power of the camera in contributing to the (re) creation of the world, and the (re)writing of a history free of neocolonial agendas. This accounts for the deconstructionist approach of filmmakers analysed in

this paper, a cinema that reflects a generation of postcolonial citizens ready to examine their country's colonial archives, to determine how its legacy informs their government's neo-colonial ideology and practices, and to build new forms of progressive social idealizations.

Cameroonian cinema has also played an important role as a tool for social change. Through the prism of post-colonial discourse, the analysis of selected works by Alphonse Beni, Jean Marie Teno, Jean Pierre Bekolo and Basseck Ba Khobio has demonstrated that these filmmakers successfully employ several forms of militant cinema techniques and aesthetics to lend their voices to an oppressed Cameroonian and African society. While Teno's anti-documentary technique and Bekolo's concept of "Mevungu" are more overt in their deconstructionist agenda, others like Beni's "sly civility" and Ba Kobhio's "Subtle Deconstruction" are more veiled; more in the register of what James Scott calls "hidden transcripts". Hidden transcripts here refer to codified stylistic and narrative techniques constructed by oppressed groups as they speak against the injustice of repressive apparatuses or power structures, a means to protest against hegemonic forces while evading their surveillance. As a substitute for the human eye, the camera reveals the powerful combination of imagination and the kind of magic recognized in the public sphere. And, embodied within the context of the Cameroonian culture, the camera becomes a powerful witness, establishing a visual model for resistance. Cameroonian cinema, as a communicative enclave, has thus effectively rebelled against the brutal state-sanctioned public sphere as well as the guardians of government-approved national history and their lobotomizing propaganda.

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