

OPINION



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Culture of indifference

After the interminable rows and fighting in Cameroonian football, people are now tearing each other apart over culture. President Paul Biya has given each of these two sectors a particular role, a role used since the colonial period. Football is a tool of alienation, so it must be promoted. Culture is a tool of emancipation, so it must be controlled. But if these

two fields are in turmoil, could it be that Biya's 33-year-old reign is dragging on and the country is developing a case of what philosopher Bernard Stiegler calls 'generalised incapacity'?

Stiegler argues that ultra-liberalised economies lead to the discrediting of politics, the weakening of the state and the loss of people's ability to think and act. We all experience this lack of ability to improve our situation – like when a Nigerian professor asked me

why Cameroonian intellectuals are unable to get rid of Biya or when the German president asked us why things are not working in Africa.

Many people, especially young ones, function without reference to the state. But what are their chances of success on their own? How are people like young artists getting by in a city like Yaoundé, where the mayor is more interested in creating boutiques than cultural institutions? How can you be an artist who is not just struggling to get by?

These artists all know that the culture minister is a position reserved for members of former national assembly president Salomon Tandeng Muna's family. Ama Tutu Muna is not there for them. She tells anyone that will listen that she played on the lap of the Queen of England and calls the president of the republic 'Daddy'. What these uncared-for young artists in Yaoundé and Douala think does not bother anyone.

Cameroon can have its cultural celebrations without its artists. The culture minister succeeded in reopening a national museum in January with photos and objects from the presidential family, leaving our traditional dancers outside at the entrance to welcome the guests who were going to attend a ballet performance and listen to an American singer! What

explains the absence of brilliant Cameroonian curators like Simon Njami, Koyo Kouoh and Christine Eyene?

Today, all of these young people who sing, dance, play and create have accepted the sad idea that they have to make it without the government, which remains as inscrutable as ever. For example, in May prime minister Philémon Yang annulled culture minister Muna's creation of her own company to protect artists' copyright, gather royalties and do business with mobile telephone companies.

The infighting in government shows that there is money to be made in spite of the government's much-hyped *Opération Epervier* anti-corruption campaign, which has put several former ministers in prison. South African telecom MTN and France's Orange have become the real investors in culture – despite the banners at every public event that announce that it was organised under the 'distinguished patronage' of the culture minister or the president of the republic, without whom nothing is possible.

There are astonishing talents in this generation, like the young rapper Jovi, who is working hard to set up his own networks. His hits *Mets l'Argent à Terre* (Put the Money on the Ground) and *Et P8 Koi* (And Then What) now play on a loop in everyone's heads. Jovi is one of the generation who ignore Biya's power elite and create their own 'alternative' Cameroon.

Nonetheless, in Yaoundé there are dozens of clubs where you can see young people demonstrate their talent. Senegalese star Youssou N'Dour even went there to recruit two people who are now on a world tour with the star. As the government does not have a cultural policy and there is no professional status for artists, the hat or basket on the ground in front of each band is a reminder that musicians remain poor and dependent on donations from the country's petty bureaucrats in the audience. Young people have to depend on their ingenuity as the old artists have dug in for an endless fight over royalties.

Even the rapidly multiplying TV stations ignore young artists. Most channels are filled with debates where people talk day and night, as it helps them to get a bit of money from the country's politicians. Musicians have to pay to get on TV, and often it is not the best ones who are seen. And school bands, which

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were the training grounds for many of the Cameroonian artists who gained a global following, have disappeared.

Nightclubs that sell beer for 700 CFA francs have become the employers of some of these young talents. Such is the case of Maison Mère in the neighbourhood of Mini-Ferme. This area – where the rapper Valséro of *Lettre au Président* fame grew up – has a bad reputation as a home to prostitution. But something phenomenal is happening here in Yaoundé.

Some 20 young male and female dancers aged between 19 and 25 launch their careers as professionals. They strut on the stage lip-synching, with the sole goal of putting on a dance performance for those in the audience – usually traders and taxi drivers – who want to relax after a long day. Up there, the dancers move to the rhythms of the latest *coupé décalé*, Nigerian tunes and of course local *bikutsi* sounds. Their organisation, costumes and choreography are admirable. How much are they paid? Between 25,000 and 50,000 CFA francs (\$43-\$86) per month for working from 8pm to 4 or 6am six days per week. One of them said to me: “I have already found a good job here, what am I going to look for somewhere else?”

With a system that cannot be called democratic heading to elections in three years and with a likely

candidate who will be 85 years old, these artists continue to suffer. They have brought so much joy to generations and find themselves in a miserable situation. Meanwhile footballers – most of them living abroad – fail to help the national team qualify for tournaments but are still pampered.

It is necessary to ask how this ‘generalised incapacity’, which leaves Cameroonians passive, will affect artists. Will they die? Will they go abroad? If we keep along this path, Cameroonian culture is condemned to death, like football, which only lives through tournaments like the European Champions League.

Why should liberal economies destroy their cultural strengths? Bernard Stiegler would say that this common ‘I-don’t-care’ attitude comes from buying too many foreign commodities. That makes us consumers instead of producers. There could be more producers if people refused to watch Beyoncé or Shakira thrust their pelvises, making money off African dance styles *à l’américaine*. If the destruction of cultural ability is a phenomenon of globalisation, then Biya and Cameroon are ahead of the curve. ●

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