THE VIDEO IN CAMEROON: INTRODUCTION AND CURRENT USES

RESUME

Cet article a pour but d'examiner la dissémination du vidéo à la lumière de la politique gouvernementale qui consiste à réaffirmer la «personnalité culturelle» camerounaise qui a été marginalisée par les valeurs des colonisateurs français et anglais. L'article essaie donc de répondre aux questions telles que : Quelles sont les mesures prises par le gouvernement pour s'assurer que le contenu du vidéo reflète son intention de forger une identité culturelle pour le Cameroun basée sur ses cultures prédominantes et non pas sur les cultures d'une élite occidentalisée ? Est-ce que les points forts ou les lacunes de cette politique gouvernementale en matière de vidéo reflètent d'une manière ou d'une autre l'état de la radio, la télévision ou le cinéma camerounais ?

ABSTRACT

This article examines the spread of the video in the light of the government's policy of reasserting the Cameroonian «Cultural personality», rendered dormant by French and English colonial values. It seeks to answer such questions as: What has the government done to curb the further frenchification or anglicisation of the people, started during colonialism? How has the government ensured that video content reflects its desire to forge a cultural identity for Cameroon, one founded on its mainstream cultures rather than the cultures of the Westernised few? Are the government's failures or successes in dealing with the video in any way reflective of the situation with radio, TV or the cinema?

THE VIDEO IN CAMEROON: I TRODUCTION AND CURRENT USES

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As Ndongko (1980:246; 1984:9; 1985) argues, Cameroon's post-colonial economic policy of balanced regional development has failed largely because the government, instead of actively intervening to influence investment, has allowed industrial location to be determined by economic calculus alone. The consequence has been the perpetuation of the very same colonial imbalances which successive governments have repeatedly expressed the need to alleviate (see Ahidjo, 1964, 1980; Political Bureau CNU, 1968; Biya, 1987; CPDM, 1985). Thus while the Littoral and Centre-South provinces totaled 370 undertakings for the period between the first and second national investment codes (1962 and 1984), the rest of the country accounted for barely 82 investments. If the liberal nature of these codes have enabled Cameroon to be described as a "paradise" by foreign investors, they have done little to encourage indigenous capitalists; the government has preferred civil servants and bureaucrats with hardly any competence in international business to a viable local alternative to dominant multinationals. What such failure reveals is that the government cannot bridge the gap between the rich and the poor of Cameroon, if its policy and philosophy of planned or communal liberalism remain mere declarations of intent.

In the cultural domain, Cameroon inherited a situation of imbalance as well. First, the indigenous cultures of Cameroon's component *ethnies* had been suppressed by the Germans, the

French and the English, each in favour of their own colonial values. Second, although the French and English cultural heritages were said to predominate, the former, by virtue of its demographic advantage and its instinct to assimilate, was even more so (Fonlon, 1964; Mbassi-Manga, 1964; Ela, 1974; Bayart, 1980). To redress this imbalance, successive governments have advocated a policy of bilingualism and mutal co-existence of the French and English heritages at the same time that efforts at their harmonisation are pursued. Concurrently, the governments have also expressed the need for a renaissance of the local cultures (Ahidjo, 1964; Bahoken and Atangana, 1976; Ahidjo, 1980; Minfoc, 1985; Biya, 1987).

The government by way of declarations, has stressed the importance of the media for the attainment of Cameroon's cultural, economic and political development objectives. It has invariably called upon the media to play the leading role of disseminating information and mobilising Cameroonians towards self-reliance, autonomy, and independence in matters economic, cultural and political. This article examines the spread of the video, in the light of the government's policy of reasserting the Cameroonian «cultural personality», rendered dormant by French and English colonial values. it seeks to answer such questions as: What has the government done to curb the further frenchification or anglicisation of the people, started during colonialism? How has the government ensured that video content reflects its desire to forge a cultural identity for Cameroon, one founded on its mainstream cultures rather than the cultures of the Westernised few? Are the government's failures or successes in dealing with the video in any way reflective of the situation with radio, TV or the cinema?

Much has been written on the video cassette recorder (VCR) as a decentralising or liberating medium, one that offers its owner the choice of what and when to view, and limits dependence on TV (1). The possible impact of the VCR on the developing world has been discussed by a number of scholars. Using the example of the unsuccessful attempt by France and the Soviet Union to stop the illegal importation of VCR machines and undesirable video material, Boyd and Strubhaar (1985:10) argue that «even the most authoritarian or totalitarian developing country has relatively little chance of completely eliminating programmes deemed contrary to the national interest». However, to claim, as Boyd and Strubhaar (1985:14) have done, that developing countries have neither the determination nor the equipment to effectively control the circula-

ting video material is by implication to question: a) the sincerity of Third World governments when they advocate media systems that are harnessed for national development purposes, and b) the ability of developing countries to control their own destinies, including the proper domestication of acquired technology. Boyd and Strubhaar (1985:15) might have a point when they claim that any measures «to regulate incoming flow of taped material for the home market... are doomed before they are enacted», but a government unable to control with maximum efficiency what enters or leaves the country cannot be said to have the competence it needs to steer the cause of nation-building - the supreme mission of many a developing country.

While radio - introduced in 1941 by the French colonial authorities - was the first of the electronic media to be used in Cameroon, TV, planned by the government from 1962, became operational only in March 1985 (Nyamnjoh, 1988). One of the major consequences of the delayed introduction of TV was an early adoption of the video by the well-off at a time when the government had neither a comprehensive video policy nor a rigidly enforceable guideline binding the importation and consumption of foreign cultural products. With little official inhibition, the well-off of the society, already out of patience with the overdue introduction of TV, began importing video hardware and software (2). Djuidjeu (1988), suggests that the political repression of the Ahidjo regime must have pushed the rich and Westernised few to seek video entertainment as a measure against the resultant boredom of monolithic politics, and against intellectual idleness.

Video sets and screens were imported directly from the West or through neighbouring Nigeria and Gabon, and programmes made to suit the exclusive tastes of the audiences of their countries of origin were purchased by Cameroonians. While on official visits or business trips to France, Britain or the US, politicians, high-ranking civil servants and businessmen would seize the opportunity to record off-the-air foreign TV programmes and purchase video material of their tastes. As studies have shown, this is a way of acquisition very similar to that remarked in other developing countries, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, India and Nigeria in particular (Boyd and Strubhaar, 1985). Between 1976 and 1978, there was an influx of video equipment and programmes into Cameroon (Duidjeu, 1988:165-6). By 1979 the networks for a countrywide distribution of all video products were already well established (Djuidjeu,

1988:61). The rich set up video clubs to serve their friends and others with a penchant for movies, soap operas, comedies, game shows, and other entertainment programmes made primarily for Western audiences. Those who were too poor to afford videos of their own, but who frequented nightclubs, snack bars and beer parlours, could watch video while they danced, drank or ate.

The French and American Cultural Centres served as video clubs of a kind, where journalists, students, and others could go to watch Western news reports, films, soap operas, comedies, sports, and other types of programmes (Ndasi, 1983; Meboe, 1984:76-8; Djuidjeu, 1988:64). At the French Cultural Centre for example, such French TV programmes as «Apostrophe» by Bernard Pivot, «Voyageurs de l'Histoire» by Alain Decaux and «L'Enjeu» by François de Closet» were presented on a big screen during viewing sessions. Schools and other institutions could choose for viewing from a variety of French programmes of particular interest to them. «The Cosby Show» was only one amongst many American programmes viewed by Cameroonians at the American Cultural Centre.

Concerning news, four days each week the American Cultural Centre presented video recordings of CBS or ABC televised news editions of the previous week. Well before the advent of TV, therefore, presenters such as Peter Jennings of ABC and Dan Rather of CBS were already well known amongst aspiring TV journalists at the Ecole Supérieure Internationale de Journalisme de Yaoundé (ESIJY) (3). Video tapes furnished by Télédiffusion de France (TDF), and containing different news items produced by the TV channel Hexagone, were also used to train aspiring journalists. French and American TV presenters were an early inspiration to their would-be Cameroonian counterparts, thanks to video. Thus once TV was introduced, instead of seeking to differ in favour of Cameroonian cultural specificities, CTV presenters mimicked their fellow professionals in the West in style and content, so anxious were they to maintain what they believed constituted the universality and uniformity of TV *manière de faire.*

Ndasi discusses the cultural impact of such video activities on Cameroonians and gives us the gist of their popularity prior to the introduction of TV. He writes:

> *After the library, the video is the most successful activity of the American Cultural Centre. Installed since 1973, the vi-*

deo has had an enormous success. In every session, the little hall of 80 seats is seldom sufficient for the hundred and something students, top civil servants and workers. Initially reserved for the intellectual elite only, the sessions have had a lot of success and now public sessions are organised on Tuesdays, Thursdays, from 5 to 6 p.m. and Saturdays from 10 a.m.

An exclusive session is organised for the journalists every Friday at 5.30 p.m. (Ndasi, 1983: 43-4). [Translation mine]

He points out that the aim was to sell American and French cultural and political values to Cameroonians, which, according to him, explains why the American Cultural Centre soon abandoned its initiative to produce videos depicting life in Cameroon and to settle exclusively for American programmes provided by CBS and ABC. It also explains why the French authorities have exploited cultural agreements with successive Cameroonian governments to flood Cameroon with French-made and - dubbed movies, radio, TV, and video programmes (Eoné, 1986; Nyamnjoh, 1988/89) (4).

Due to all of the above, Cameroon became one of the few countries in which video was introduced and used for a long time by individuals and small groups of people before the advent of television. Today, as at the beginning, the government still has little control over what is imported in the form of foreign video products. Laws regulating the situation are inadequate, and have never really been rigorously enforced. Customs are not so rigorous in their control of foreign video material; there are clandestine importations from Nigeria, especially through the northern and South-West borders, and from Gabon as well. The authorities have equally been unable to curb the proliferation of illegal video clubs (Meboe, 1984; Djuidjeu, 1988). In June 1986, there were only 27 video clubs authorised in Yaounde, but research revealed 53 illegal ones and more than ten illicit dealers that preferred a secret network of personal contact to any other form of dissemination (Djuidjeu, 1988:63).

An obvious consequence has been the widespread consumption of material actually banned by the authorities. In addition to displayed tapes, Djuidjeu (1988:63) observes, almost every video club has others, such as pornography that are banned and only lent out to special kinds of customers. An even greater consequence is the large-scale dissemination of video material that is

subversive to dormant but mainstream cultural values, and indeed counterproductive to the government's own policy of national cultural renaissance. As Ela (1974) argues, through the different media forms and content available in Africa, the African is invited to partake in a new system of cultural values and new forms of leisure, as well as in a particular economic system - all of which, far from being the result of Africa's own creative imagination, only serve to efface its cultural identity and right to self-determine. This alienation, he points out, is often achieved with the complicity of so-called *évolués* who, instead of seeking ways of transforming rhetoric into deeds, remain tethered by their prejudice of the superiority of everything Western.

The Cameroonian video industry is doubtless flourishing, but it remains difficult to obtain exact figures on the number of video sets, clubs or programmes in circulation. Customs figures are unreliable, due to clandestine importations from Nigeria and Gabon and to the lack of rigid control at sea - and airports. Video club membership is an unreliable basis for estimation because not every video owner is a member, some people subscribe to more than one, and unauthorised clubs have proliferated (Meboe, 1984; Djuidjeu, 1988). These difficulties notwithstanding, statistics obtained from a survey comissioned by President Biya shortly after the introduction of television, and conducted in 1986 by the Ministry of Information and Culture in conjunction with Marcomer-Gallop International of Paris, provide the best indication yet available of the video penetration of Cameroon. The survey included 2030 persons from age 15 onward - 1521 (75%) men, 509 (25%) women. Of thirteen major urban areas sampled (Douala, Yaounde, Bafoussam, Garoua, Maroua, Nkongsamba, Bamenda, Ngaoundere, Edea, Limbe, Ebolowa, Buea and Bertoua), 30% or more of each population owned at least one VCR (5), with the northern city of Garoua having the highest number (42%), followed by Bamenda with 36% and Yaounde, the capital city, with 33%. In the same year, Djuidjeu (1988:65-6) estimates that Yaounde had more than 10,750 VCRs. The high number of VCR owners in Garoua and Bamenda can partly be explained by their nearness to Nigeria and their heavy involvement in both licit and illicit trade with the latter. In Bamenda, for example, most electronic shops are owned and operated by Ibo traders from Nigeria, some of whom have settled there, but most of whom periodically return to Nigeria for more of such equipment.

As the survey revealed, ownership was most concentrated amongst top-level civil servants (i.e., those in categories A and B of the Cameroonian civil service). The average was one VCR per owner, although some people managed to afford more. Concerning video tape ownership, 27% of the respondents claimed to possess at least one, but the average number of tapes per person was 25. With 41% of its households owning video tapes, Garoua was clearly distinct as the city with the highest tape ownership. The survey also revealed that buying was the commonest way of acquiring tapes, 71% attesting to having obtained their tapes in this way. Amongst the 29% who procured tapes otherwise, more were students than any other socio-professional group. It is worth remarking that tape ownership, independent of VCR ownership, is widespread. While some might acquire tapes in anticipation of eventual VCR purchase, others who are poorer might still want tapes made of weddings and other family celebrations, with the aim of watching them subsequently at a friend's or relative's home. The increased importance of video, especially with the coming of TV, has led to more complaints about stolen VCRs and TV sets.

On the sort of material disseminated through video tapes, 91% of the respondents admitted to having tapes of films, 65% to having tapes of Western music, another 65% to having tapes of sports, and *only* 20% to possessing tapes of family feasts or celebrations. The small percentage of family feasts or celebrations means that few of the programmes are local, since Cameroon produces no video tapes of its own. Perhaps the VCR owners would like to record and view more programmes of their own, but few can afford video cameras as well, and those who can sometimes use them to make money. In Bamenda for example, the minimum cost for video-taping a wedding is 50,000 francs CFA. Given that Cameroon has produced no more than 70 films, and that few of these (if any) are available on video, it is clear that the films are almost exclusively foreign. The same is true of the cinema where an average of 300 films are imported each year, and where the absence of adequate protection from the government has given way to complete domination of the Cameroonian screen by foreign movies (6).

As the survey indicated, 73% of the respondents claimed to have watched movies in cinema halls. Of this total, 53% had watched films on spying or crime detection, 27% had watched Westerns, 24% had watched historical films, 22% had watched musical

concerts, 16% had watched martial arts, and 14% had watched comedies. Only in Bamenda did musical concerts occupy the same level as films on spying or crime detection. While civil servants (categories A, B, and C) placed films of a historical nature second to spying and detective films, farmers cited martial arts and Westerns as their second choice, and men in general gave second place to both Westerns and historical films.

Video ownership is not the only criterion for watching since video clubs, both legal and illegal exist, in almost every town in the country. The official paper, *Cameroon Tribune*, frequently carries articles on video tape seizures and bans on illegal video clubs by Provincial Delegates of Information and Culture, an indication as to how prevalent the video has become. The 1986 survey revealed that an average of 8 out of every 10 persons interviewed in the cities (81%) claimed they knew at least someone with a VCR. In Yaounde and Douala it was 9 of 10, and only in Buea and Bamenda did it fall to 5 of 10. It was also remarked that almost everybody in categories A and B knew someone with a video, while more than a third of the lower classes (labourers, housewives, unemployed and farmers) knew no one. On the average, 27% of those with knowledge of other video owners exchanged tapes with them. Garoua had the highest rate of exchange, with 42% of those surveyed involved. Amongst the A and B categories, 4 out of 10 were reportedly involved with exchanging tapes.

Of those surveyed, 71% declared that they had never watched video, the cities of Nkongsamba (82%), Ebolowa (84%) and Edea (80%) having the highest concentration. Few labourers, unemployed, and farmers reported having watched video. The same was true of people younger than 30, only 14% of whom said they watched video. Incidently, Djuidjeu's survey of 654 students in Yaounde the same year (1986) revealed that only 80 (12%) claimed to have watched video in or before 1979 (Djuidjeu, 1988:60-1).

Of the 29% who said they watched video, 4% did so on a daily basis, 14% from time to time, 8% every weekend, and 3% rarely. In Garoua, 24% (more than 8 out of 10) watched video every day, while more women tended to do so than men (6% against 4%). People generally preferred watching in the evenings (21%) and at night (12%), but in Garoua this preference occurred in reverse order, with 31% saying they liked watching at night, and 13% preferring the evening. In Bamenda, on the other hand, the

video-watching population preferred doing so in the evenings. Finally, 7 out of 10 people declared that watching video had replaced going to the cinema, an opinion shared equally by both sexes. This is a finding which does not augure well for CRTV, especially, as my research has shown (7), its daily activities are seriously influenced by members of government mostly seeking prestigious coverage, its schedules have a heavy political content, and its local programmes are often mediocre in quality because of inadequate resources.

In their studies, Meboe (1984) and Djuidjeu (1988) have complained that despite its potential for rural and urban development, the video has not been adapted to serve this purpose in Cameroon. It has remained largely an entertainment medium dominated by foreign programmes designed neither primarily for Cameroonians nor inspired by the Cameroonian mainstream in matters cultural. They blame the failure on the lack of adequate regulation by the government, and government's tendency to equate video with cinema, thus to underestimate its immense capabilities. The abovementioned survey revealed that only 20% of video tapes contained local family feasts or celebrations. This in effect means that 80% of all video material consumed in Cameroon is foreign, a state of affairs not parallel with government's expectations of the audio-visuals.

According to Law No. 87/019 of 17 December 1987 (8), audio-visual communication must assure an essentially public-interest mission namely (1) to contribute to national integration through the development of social communication (2) ; to support the government's efforts towards national development (3) ; to assure the proper informing of citizens and defense of the political, economic, social and cultural interests of Cameroon (4) ; to respond to the needs of citizens in the areas of education, training, culture and entertainment with the aim of raising their level of knowledge, and developing their civic awareness; and (5) to favour the expression, training and information of the various cultural, socio-professional and spiritual communities, as well as Cameroon's participation in the universal dialogues of cultures through dissemination abroad of Cameroon's cultural values in all their forms.

But while the law mentions radio and TV in particular, over which it says the state retains a monopoly, there is no reference to video or cinema. All it says is that apart from the monopolisation of broadcasting by the state, audio-visual communication in Came-

roon is free to all citizens who may be subject to taxes or fees decreed by government. The law says nothing about how these essentially public-interest goals are to be attained, although an entire chapter is devoted to sanctions against any breach of its provisions. In short, the law pays more attention to securing a monopoly for the government and to defining what it wants achieved in the public interest, than to the possibilities for such achievements. In December 1990 a new law was enacted. But Law N° 90/052 of December 19, 1990 onf Freedom of Mass Communication, although reducing government monopoly in broadcasting, is just as silent on video as the December 1987 law it purports to repeal. The new law, while spelling out the obligations of Radio and TV to political parties, is, quite strangely, noncommittal on their public service obligations.

The difficulties of effective regulation notwithstanding, the Cameroonian government does not seem to realise just how much a threat foreign video programmes in general are vis-à-vis the promotion of the country's national cultures. Other developing governments have already expressed concern at the possible political and cultural repercussions of the widespread use of the VCR. According to Boyd and Strubhaar (1985), some leaders are worried by indications that the ubiquitous ownership of VCRs could lead to the circumvention of their media development efforts, and to the undermining of their political authority. Despite Boyd and Strubhaar's (1985:17) pessimism concerning measures to control the procurement and distribution of foreign video material, we know that most governments would stop at nothing to track down any literature or persons they consider to be *politically* subversive. If Third World governments are capable of such determination and resilience in matters of utmost political interest to them, there is no reason why they cannot do the same for the cultural interest of the countries they claim to represent.

However, in the absence of special, rigidly enforceable legislation in support of the proper harnessing of video technology, Cameroon is likely to remain dominated by foreign video material. With foreign films amounting to more than 99% of films projected in Cameroon's 70 cinema halls, with only 20% of video material being locally produced in 1986, and with only 19.7% of programmes supplied to CTV between December 1986 and May 1988 being Cameroonian-made, it is evident how much remains to be done towards the Cameroonisation of the cinema, video and TV screens

for the purpose of nation-building. Realistic cultural development in Cameroon would involve the renaissance of mainstream cultures rendered dormant as a result of colonisation, albeit shared by 85% of the mainly-rural population, but no development of this kind can occur in an atmosphere in which the French and Anglo-Saxon values of the Westernised few continue to be preponderant, to escape rigorous regulation, and to make no concessions. In addition to the problem of the foreignness of cultural products on the Cameroonian screen is the issue of the urban-centred nature of the audio-visual media. Cinema, video and television are not only the privilege of a limited few, but also largely to the advantage of urban communities in which electricity, literacy, and access are not as scarce as in remote rural areas.

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NOTES

(1) In Gritain, the Annual Review of BBC Broadcasting Research Findings for 1988 noted a decline in television viewing amongst children, and amongst the top managerial and professional social groups. As Maggie Brown of The Independent (Tuesday 7 March 1989) observes, the head of BBC's broadcasting research department, Peter Meneer, could not establish whether «viewing was in absolute decline, or - as seemed likely - the 50 per cent of households with videos were filling the gap with recorded programmes or rented or bought videos». British Households with videos are estimated to spend 10% of their viewing time watching "time-shifted" programmes.

(2) A survey conducted by the Paris-based Marcomer-Gallop International amongst opinion-leaders in francophone Africa (Senegal, Mali, Ivory Coast, Cameroun, Gabon, Congo) in November 1985/February 1986, a time when TV was still tentative in Cameroun, revealed that of 200 elites interviewed in Yaounde and Douala (criteria for selection: had to be African, male, aged 25 and above, engaged in a professional activity, and educated to at least baccalaureate level), three-quarters owned or had access to videos; and that Cameroon's video ownership was the highest in the whole of francophone Africa, with a regular use of 56%. Amongst the six countries surveyed, Cameroon was the only latecomer to the world of TV, which perhaps explains why it had the highest number of videos (see BBC-IBAR, January 1988).

(3) Founded in 1970 by six former French colonies, ESIJY was to become in 1982 the Advanced School of Mass Communication (Ecole Supérieure des Sciences et Techniques de l'Information) ASMAC/ESSTI, when Cameroon transformed it into a national school due to the irregularity of the five other member countries in honouring their financial responsibilities.

(4) Following my analysis of programmes received and recorded in Radiodiffusion du Cameroun (RDC) and Cameroon Television (CTV) between 1986 and 1988, France, with 59.1%, was by far the biggest of nine foreign suppliers of radio programmes. Of eighteen suppliers (Cameroon inclusive) of TV programmes, France was still the biggest with 27.7%, followed by West Germany with 25.2%, and Cameroon with only 19.7%. Almost all programmes supplied by France were in French: even American and Brazilian programmes for example, arriving in Cameroon through France, come dubbed in French. More than 90% of an average of 300 films yearly received in Cameroon are in French, mostly dubbed. The French grip is too much for a successful implementation of Cameroon's policy of bilingualism in French and English. (See my doctoral thesis presented 1989 at Leicester university, Uk, entitled: Broadcasting for Nation-building in Cameroon: Development and Constraints).

(5) A July 1986 BBC-IBAR survey of six urban areas (Douala, Yaoundé, Bafoussam, Kumba, Bamenda, and Garoua), involving 1,218 respondents age 15 and above, revealed that of an estimated 340,000 TV sets, 28% were connected to VCRs. Mytton (1988:2) takes this estimate as representative of the entire country.

(6) See the Radio Cameroon «Dimanche Midi» programme of Sunday 7 February 1988, for details on the state of the Cameroonian cinema industry. Also see Cameroon Tribune (daily) 26 & 27/12/89; (bi-weekly) 29/12/89 for the press conference accorded Cameroonian and international Media practitioners, December 19 1989, by the Minister of Information and Culture, Henri Bandolo.

(7) Research conducted on broadcasting for nation-building in Cameroon, from December 1987 to May 1988, as part of the abovementioned doctoral programme.

(8) See Cameroon Tribune (daily) of Lundi 21 décembre 1987 for the full text of the law, which defines audio-visual communication as «the production, programming, dissemination and putting to public use, through all the appropriate technical means, particularly by way of hertz, cable, sateilite, optic fibre, of sounds, pictures, documents, data and messages of all kinds».

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