

THE EROTICIZATION OF BIKUTSI: RECLAIMING FEMALE SPACE THROUGH POPULAR MUSIC AND MEDIA

by

DENNIS M. RATHNAW

Eroticism is a disequilibrium in which the being consciously calls his own existence in question.

— Georges Bataille

My first few nights in Yaoundé were spent in the Faculté de Theologie Protestante, a seminary compound that rented rooms with a common lounge and kitchen. The building was overseen by a housekeeper/cook who eyed me with curiosity the whole of the first morning as I assembled my notes and plan of action. Finally, she overcame her polite silence to approach, and ask about my mission in Cameroon. “I study bikutsi,” I answered, what I thought was innocently enough. She looked at me skeptically and leaned toward me almost conspiratorially. She whispered, “The bikutsi is everywhere.” And then she stood up and with obvious disgust remarked, “But it is immoral. Nothing but pornography.” She walked away and didn’t speak to me again.

Three days later I had moved into private lodgings, and again the woman of the house inquired about my work. When I told her about the bikutsi project, she took an obvious interest, both delighted and somewhat confused. I told the previous story from the Faculté. “Ha!” she scoffed. “That woman is the worst kind of hypocrite. She prays to Jesus in the day, and at night she goes home to dance bikutsi.” As I was to find in the ensuing year, this contradiction would inform every aspect of Cameroonian musical society, from cabaret to television to government.

Baudrillard once wrote that we undoubtedly perform the act of obscenity and of pornography, just as others play the game of ideology and bureaucracy (Baudrillard 1987: 34). And Achille Mbembe, writing about Cameroon after independence, put it another way, “in the specific historical context of domination and subjection, the postcolony neither minces nor spares its words” (Mbembe 2001: 108).

In his book, *On the PostColony*, Mbembe defines the ‘postcolony’ as marked by a liking for the ceremonial and an exhibitionism that is the more remarkable considering how illusory are the states’ practical achievements. Furthermore, power is exercised with a degree of violence and naked exploitation that has its antecedents in previous colonial regimes. People’s response is often a ribaldry that revels in the obscene. Mbembe’s singular move here is to invert Bakhtin’s notion of the “carnavalesque” as belonging to the public space, or as he says, the grotesque and obscene belonging to the

unofficial culture.¹

Distinguishing himself from Bakhtin, Mbembe argues that the postcolony is made up not of one 'public space' but several, each having its own logic and yet liable to be entangled with other logics. As a result, this space often overlaps with that of the elite or governing class in an intimacy, almost a complicity we might say, that turns power and play into performance. Thus, the obscene in Cameroon is an essential characteristic that identifies not only the public sphere of ordinary people, but is also intrinsic to postcolonial regimes of domination. In this sense it helps erect, ratify or deconstruct them. That the regime allows for the play of vulgarity, revelry and exhibitionism outside the limits set by the party line demonstrates not only the pretense and unreality of its power, but also conveys its total lack of restraint and taste for lecherous living. Mbembe writes, "what gives rise to conflict is not the references to the genitals of those in power, but rather the way individuals, by their laughter, kidnap power and force it to examine its own vulgarity" (109).

If we accept this reading, Mbembe could have found no more accurate demonstration of his observations than in the contemporary music scene of Cameroon, and in particular of the way the music bikutsi has developed from an unaccompanied women's song form to a hotly contested media, moral and cultural debate. The development of a more liberalized media, as well as the influx of foreign media streams has helped foster different — and I might argue complementary — directions in the popular culture of recent years. This has caused somewhat of a dilemma in what has been termed a masculinist or phallogcentrically cultured society, as women have come to play a more dominant role in the public voice.

This work examines the development of bikutsi from traditional song form to media, moral and cultural issue — a site of contestation between local media officials and an increasingly more internationally influenced and liberalized media. I analyze the experience of bikutsi as mediated by politics and external and internal views and consumption. As the Cameroonian media undergoes a process of democratization highly influenced by foreign media, local musicians and video artists become actors in a conflicted and uncertain environment. On the one hand are issues of nation-building and cultural development in the face of dominant foreign media, and on the other, the multitude of images, sounds and forms of popular culture people attach themselves to in their daily imaginings.²

I will show that, as Mbembe has alluded to, obscenity as a political choice must be

¹ For Bakhtin's understanding of the medieval carnival as it relates to the literary mode, see *Rabelais and His World* 1984. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

² For examples of how the public sphere has been theorized in relation to cultural imaginings, see Arjun Appadurai's classic in the area of globalization theory *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* 1995 Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Michel Maffesoli's *The Contemplation of the World: Figures of Community Style* 1996 Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; and Veit Erlmann's *Music, Modernity and the Global Imagination: South Africa and the West* 1999 Oxford: Oxford University Press on the subject of music in South Africa.

regarded as more than a moral category. Rather it constitutes one modality of power in the postcolony, where, “in a desire for majesty, the masses join in the madness and clothe themselves in cheap imitations of power. And conversely, power, in a violent quest for grandeur, makes vulgarity and wrongdoing its main mode of existence” (Mbembe: 133). I suggest that the conscious use of technology, the media, and images of the body by performing women, historically excluded from the social administration, constitutes an attempt to re-establish and define a critical voice.

Bikutsi is a style that belongs to the mendzan xylophone tradition, and is linked to the cultural traditions of the Beti people of central Cameroon. However, from the time of its exposure on Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV) in the early 1980s, it has developed into a highly eroticized, even pornographic music, sometimes referred to as the “songs of Sodom and Gomorrah.” This phenomenon instigated a crisis of cultural and media ethics, resulting in government media bans and television programming such as CRTV’s “Deviance,” hosted by Ministry of Communications director Gervais Mendo Zé from 2003 to 2005.

Some Background on Bikutsi

The name bikutsi comes from the Ewondo words “kut” and “si.” The verb kut means to fight or slap and si refers to the ground or earth. Bi makes it a plural form. Literally then, bikutsi is to stamp the ground repetitively (Mbala 1985, Mbia 1992, Fuller 1997). Bikutsi is commonly described as an exclusively female genre, one that is deeply rooted in pre-colonial Beti cultural practices. In a broad-ranging *Guide to Dances from Cameroon* produced by the Ministry of Culture, Stanislas Awona writes:

The term Bikutsi has an early material origin: just in the night with the clear moon, the women were reuniting to sing, dance, and share their ideas according to a language known by them only, they delivered the frenetic dances in rhythms rudely stamped to the ground with their feet: from where the name “Bikutsi” (literally “dance stamping-ground”) gave not only to their wriggling about, but also to all that was said of the ones happily playing about (Awona 1971: 87).

But Awona’s description points to one of the central tensions in postcolonial regimes’ attempts at manipulating public culture discussed earlier: while it seeks to celebrate pre-colonial forms in the name of the kind of ersatz cultural nationalism that Fanon so thoroughly critiques in *Wretched of the Earth*, their phallogentricity leads them to devalue the roles that women played as actors in and producers of pre-colonial cultural forms (Fanon 2005). Notice how bikutsi, a traditional female form, is described as having a “frenetic” rhythm, rude dance forms characterized by disorganized “wriggling about” and ultimately given no more weight than the “happy play” of children. Women-centered activities are infantilized and reduced to disorder and chaos.

Our earliest knowledge of bikutsi marks it as an unaccompanied women’s song form in the Beti villages of central and south Cameroon, which carried a number of traditional expectations. It served the women’s private spaces, and the lyrics gave voice to the frustrations and criticisms, as well as the hopes and advice that could be

passed from generation to next (Mbala 1985, Mbia 1992, Ngumu 1976, Menguele 1979, Ghonda 1988). Jean Maurice Noah and others have written about the nature of bikutsi being born of a phallocratic society, one that relegated women to an extremely marginal status. According to Noah, Beti women were forced to create a space in which to have a voice, “a vengeance consciously exercised by the women against the men” (Noah 2002: 25). That is, in male discursively controlled environments, women used indirect speech to critique men’s exercise of power. Beti historian Laburthe-Tolra notes as well that the development of bikutsi has much to say about the social organization of Beti society, where men monopolize speech (Laburthe-Tolra 1981). It is said that good bikutsi lyrics are smart, picturesque, paradoxical, oblique and suggestive. They are marked by uses of imagery, poetry, and what is called the “hidden style,” as it is often possible to hide ideas or references in Ewondo linguistic codes. It is the musical genre of subversion, feminine dissidence, and has always served a critical and tribunal function (Noah 2005: 26).

As a Beti women’s song form, bikutsi therefore served as critique and entertainment, but also functioned as commentary and socialization, establishing female practices and knowledges, while giving advice and demarcating a private space for women to speak in an unedited manner. Cameroonian cultural scholar L.M. Onguene Essono notes that, “bikut-si talks about family matters, jealousy, sweet or rough words for our loved ones. It is an anthem to heroes, reconciliation words for enemies or lovers, advice and wishes to children, complaints and critique to elders or traditional authority” (Onguene Essono 1996: 52). Commentary on the institute of marriage, the trials of love, and the problems as head of house make up the vast majority of its themes, and songs often serve as counsel and advice for young women getting married. Thus bikutsi was born into a need for creating a private space in a marginalized society, where the women could give expression to what often amounted to a veiled form of criticism.

Good bikutsi is often judged by its lyrical competence. While it is true that themes can be intensely suggestive or downright lewd, the best singers are said to be oblique, poetic, and masters of Ewondo linguistic codes and references. At one point in my work I asked Professor Essono to hear tapes of old singers he had recorded in the villages for an early *radio communautaire* project. I assumed these were the kind of singers that were often referenced as lyrical specialists. He suggested something better, and played a CD that I immediately recognized to be Sally Nyolo, ex-singer of the internationally known music group Zap Mama.³ I heard synthesizers, string pads, a drum machine — all the trappings of typical Paris afro-beat production. “That’s good bikutsi?” I asked incredulously. “Oh, great bikutsi! Just listen to those words! She speaks clear, perfect Ewondo. You don’t hear that anymore” (L.M. Onguene Essono, interview with author: 07 November 2005, Yaoundé, Cameroon).

³ Zap Mama began in 1989 as an a capella quintet featuring women from various countries in Central Africa, and combined European choral traditions with diverse African vocal traditions, including Pygmy chants. *Adventures in Afropea* was the best-selling world music album of 1993. Nyolo left the group in the mid-90s to pursue a solo career, and although she’s lived in Paris since the age of 13, was currently building a house in Yaoundé during my fieldwork in 2005.

Though it is possible that lyrical practice may remain unaffected by the addition of modern technology, the historical development of bikutsi does involve the addition of various instrumentation by male musicians, including the *nkul* drum, a hollowed log capable of one interval, the plucked lyre called *mvet* that is more often used to accompany histories and poetry, and most importantly, the *mendzan* xylophone, for which bikutsi is most known today.

Mendzan are portable, gourd-resonated xylophones with a built-in rail that enables the instrument to be held away from the body of the walking player, pointing to its processional nature. Mendzan in the Beti region are characteristically played in four member ensembles, one lead (*omvek*), two accompaniment (*akuda-omvɔk* and *nyia-mendzan*), and bass (*endum*) (Nugumu 1976: 31-4). These are often accompanied by drums and rattles.



Figure 1: Mvet, the most emblematic instrument of Cameroon

Tuning of the traditional mendzan has been detailed in the work of Cameroonian priest, composer and musicologist Pie-Claude Ngumu, who led the group *La Maîtrise des Chanteurs à la Croix D'èbène*. Ngumu writes that mendzan tuning reflects the idea of a hierarchical order of tones corresponding with the family social pattern. Tuning

the ten-note *omvɔk* begins at the center of its extended range, or head of the family, and proceeds stepwise in descending order of pitches 1 through 6 (6 being the lowest note). Upper octaves are then found for the lowest three pitches, the wives of male voices 6, 5 and 4. A seventh note, *esandi* (bad luck), is placed between 1 and 6, completing a near equiheptatonic tone system (Ngumu 1976: 35). The simultaneously struck harmonic basis of this music is mostly thirds and octaves, the thirds being “neutral” at approximately 320-370 cents. According to Ngumu, though, intervals are not fixed and musicians of each ethnic group adjust the sounds of the instruments according to the specific necessities of their traditional and contemporary music (Ngumu: 65).

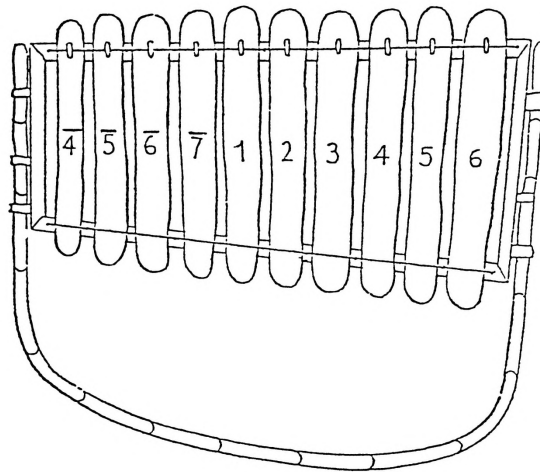


Figure 2: Mendzan tuning pattern

Mendzan, and thus bikutsi, have always served traditional functions in Beti village society such as weddings, funeral *essanas*, boys' initiation ceremonies and the various womens' rituals. However, in response to labor migration and urbanization throughout the 1950s and 60s, bikutsi adapted first to the xylophone orchestras of urban drinking establishments, and finally to electrification, transposing melodic lines from xylophone to guitar. Modern bikutsi belongs to this era, as ensembles such as Richard Band de Zoe Tele, led by Richard Nze, popularized traditional xylophone ensembles throughout Southern Cameroon. They played the traditional 6/8 bikutsi, but also merengue, rumba and cha cha cha, with texts sung in Beti or French.

Popular bikutsi as we know it today owes a great debt to guitarist Messi Me Nkonda Martin, often called the father of modern bikutsi. Influenced by the rumba guitar sounds from Zaire, Martin stuffed foam padding into his guitar to deaden the tone and more accurately imitate the sounds of traditional mendzan. The sound was an instant success and his band, Los Comoroës, had a string of hits throughout the 1960s (Fuller 1997: 4).



Figure 3: Mendzan processional xylophone

The greatest bikutsi group of the popular music era, however, remains Les Têtes Brulées, formed in the early 1980s from previous members of Les Veterans. As I have written elsewhere (2005), Les Têtes Brulées rise to fame in Cameroon, as well as success abroad and international recording contract are phenomena intricately tied to the political and media environment of Cameroon in the 1980s. Jean-Marie Ahanda, singer, producer and image mastermind, deftly utilized newly available outlets and opportunities at a time when the embracing of Beti tradition as well as the economic realities of Cameroon's masses represented an antithesis to the direction in which the Cameroon's music industry had been headed.

While instrumentation, technology and the media may not directly have affected lyric or music practice — though in some instances they certainly have — the historical development of bikutsi shows a shift in cultural practice by privileging male performers of a traditionally female form. Long under the stalled development of the Douala-based *makossa* style, the music and recording scene in Yaoundé and Douala were stagnant until Paul Biya, a Bulu from Sangmelima, took over the presidency in 1982. Today somewhat of a global phenomenon, bikutsi could not have achieved this degree of success without the backing of Biya and subsequent government support. This fact, along with the growing importance of the CRTV (and its music video broadcasts), set the stage for the rise of modern bikutsi and the re-emergence of a women's music.

Some Background on the Media

Cameroon's media-scape has undergone dynamic and, for some, unsettling changes in recent years. The state-controlled audio-visual sector, which has been absolute since its inception in 1986, has gradually loosened to allow private radio since 2000, along with a few fledgling television concerns. Although in principle, private radio and television

have been allowed by law since 1990, as of yet no licenses have been issued, leaving the door open to further intrusion by an ever-watchful government.

Government declarations since Independence have stressed the importance of media in the attainment of cultural, economic and political development objectives. It has always called upon the media to play a leading role in disseminating information and mobilizing Cameroonians toward self-reliance, autonomy and independence in economic, cultural and political matters. In fact, a 1987 law states that all audio-visual communication must assure an essentially public-interest mission, and carries the motto: *Inform, Educate and Entertain*. However the mission to inform was mandated to be carried out “in a spirit of responsibility” and in a way that related the facts in an objective manner, permitting everyone to better appreciate their contribution to the common task of nation-building (Nyamnjoh 1990: 111).

At the advent of CRTV, the president was quoted as saying that “television will more appreciably consolidate the basis of our ideals of stringency and moral rectitude, liberalization and democratization, further testifying to our efforts to build our country in unity, freedom and social justice. Information, above everything else, provides the people with the additional moral and intellectual arms in the performance of their tasks” (Nyamnjoh 1989: 36). However, as private radio and television broadcasting has begun to develop, media content has strayed as far from the moral and intellectual arms as the government might have feared.

Cameroonians of late have access to DStv satellite packages from South Africa that include M-NET, SuperSport, various world news agencies from across Europe, and of course MTV-Africa as well as Trace Music-South Africa. It is interesting that Trace blocks out certain late hours for a program called Adult Trace, which plays alternate soft-core versions of Western urban music videos.⁴ Further, Adult Trace becomes hardcore pornography for a number of hours after midnight, a development that has proved quite popular among the young adults in Yaoundé and Douala.

The Rise of Lyrics

CRTV became a more embedded presence into the 1990s, and as more foreign programming became available, bikutsi developed in two distinct directions. Essono noted that while traditional artists from the village have always had a relative degree of freedom of speech in Cameroonian society, it was only after the advent of multiparty democracy and advances in expressive freedom that bikutsi artists began to sing with impunity against the regime in the name of democracy. He noted how themes often came from the view of the poor, or those that remained most loyal to the power. However they always respected a sense of social code, even when speaking of what might be considered unacceptable.

Below is an excerpt Essono took from a CRTV Radio Centre show called *Bebela*

⁴ American rap stars such as Snoop Dogg and Ludacris often film alternate “adult” versions of their usual MTV music videos, employing naked models or well-known porn industry actors.

Ebug, which programmed an older “village-style” bikutsi.⁵

Nkol-Bikok – “Hope of Revival”

Paul Biya where is the money?
 But so where has the money gone?
 The macabo sells off, but salt is worth gold.
 Manioc sells off while beef is untouchable.
 Banana sells bad, the city of Yaoundé is expensive.
 Paul Biya where is the money?
 But so where has the money gone?
 So what have you done with the money?

Father Paul Biya, why do you abandon hope of revival?
 We need to live decently father Paul, we need credits.
 Hope of revival is falling behind, Why so? Why don't we have credits?
 We farm our fields, we harvest peanuts.
 Our products do not sell well, and we do not have credits.
 So why father do you leave us fall behind.

Paul Biya, anticipating the crisis, fled foolishly,
 Thinking we are dying.
 Then, if you have any sadness, surrender to your father,
 He will save you.
 If you happen to need salt, my sister, why cry?
 Go to Paul.
 If soap, medicines, oil happen to be scarce my sister,
 There is your father.
 (Essonon 1996: 55-57, *translation mine*)

This phase in bikutsi's musico-political trajectory was termed *bikutsi engage*. It was critical, voiced by the “small people” and especially by those of Biya's Bulu/Beti ethnic group—in other words, those whom he was meant to protect. The local economic collapse of the mid-80s meant even more ammunition was handed to a public ready to turn it back on an increasingly failing government.⁶

A second direction was referred to variously as *bikutsi porno*, CSM – Cameroon Sex Music, or the “Songs of Sodom and Gomorrah” (Ndjana 1999: 6). More freedom

⁵ It is not a coincidence that *bebela ebug* is the Ewondo for “truth,” or “plain talk.” Cameroonians take great pride in being able to twist the meaning of French phrases. Mbembe, among others, has pointed to this especially in the realm of editorial cartooning.

⁶ A drastic economic downturn in 1985, officially reported in 1987, resulted in the slashing of civil servants' salaries and benefits, and the privatization of many state enterprises. With the violent crime rate skyrocketing, Biya eventually accepted a \$150 million aid package from the International Monetary Fund.

of expression, coupled with more access to technological modes of exposure, meant women as well as men could and did push the basis of bikutsi to new extremes. Guitarist Messi Martin was a key figure who jumpstarted the rage for non-impressionistic lyrics by using shock words that disrupted the syntax of the song. This proved to be a perfect strategy for radio, and eventually became the standard for television as well. Les Veterans, one of the most popular bands of the modern bikutsi era, penned the song, “*Sima Andegele*” that included the words:

<i>Qui veut dire, en quelque sorte</i>	Who wants to say, to some extent
<i>Le sous-vêtement est gênant</i>	Under-clothing is constricting
<i>C'est un obstacle</i>	It is an obstacle
<i>C'est à l'aube</i>	At dawn
<i>Au petit matin</i>	In the early morning
<i>Quand chante le coq</i>	When the cock sings
<i>Que l'on connaît les vrais hommes</i>	One knows the true man
<i>Sima Andegele</i>	Sima Andegele

(Ndjana 1999: 21, translation mine)

The song played endlessly on the radio, and the live version that was played in the nightclubs extended the narrative into far more graphic descriptions and language. This was accompanied by a dance that mimicked the words and acted out the various sex acts involved. In fact, it became normal practice to have an x-rated version for the nighttime public and a more sedate version for the radio. The makossa singer Petit-Pays provided a further galvanizing moment when he included himself fully nude on the cover of his cassette, *King of Makossa Love*. The scandal and publicity rocketed him to celebrity even as people tried to block the sale of the record.

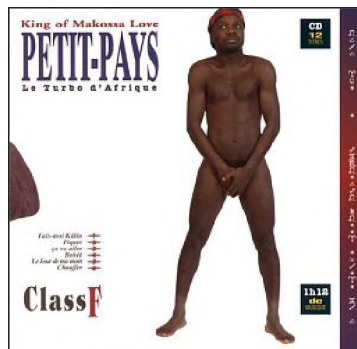


Figure 4: Petit-Pays, King of Makossa Love

K-Tino, *Femme du Peuple*

Perhaps the most famous and infamous performer of this period is Kathryn Edoa Ngoa, or K-Tino as she is better known. Due to her sexually outrageous lyrics and

shocking stage performances, the popular press named her “femme du peuple,” “mama bonheur” and “mama la joie” and she became a bane to the censors and government media officials. Her lyrics were graphic, her dance imitative of sexual gesture, and the populous loved her for it.



Figure 5: K-Tino publicity photo

Older women called her immoral, younger women imitated her, and everyone played her records and videos. The following lyric is an example of one of her earlier hits, “Action 69”, which plays on the not-so-subtle metaphor of an elevator:

K-Tino – “Action 69!”

The lift, every male’s secret
 I like men who are no fools
 Those who know how to press my sensitive button
 The lift, that’s every male’s secret
 I like a man who is no fool
 I like a man who will suck me downstairs
 I like a man who will suck me upstairs too
 I like men who sin on earth
 I like men who sin in heaven too
 Even the parish priest loves that
 Instead of giving me a private service
 He comes home to sin downstairs
 And I like the priest who sins upstairs too
 And his mass will not be sad as a funeral ceremony
 Because every male is a boss
 Even in his pajamas
 But only when he’s strong and big
 With his prick as solid as a man’s gun
 Solid as a church’s big candle

And I'll lick him up and down
 And then, and only then I'll ask him
 To press the button in my lift
 (Nkolo 1994: 325)

There is very little here of the so-called “hidden style” known to be the hallmark of good bikutsi lyrics. Even the Church is not off limits. As her career progressed, K-Tino became known for pushing the boundaries of taste and decency. One of the most popular Cameroonian records of 2005 was her track entitled “*La Queue de Ma Chatte*”, which hardly struggles at all behind its main metaphor:

K-Tino – “*La Queue de Ma Chatte*”

Dédicace à ma chatte et sa queue
Ah, n'est-ce pas?

(refrain)

Aïe, Aïe, Aïe, Fais attention, fais attention
Ne touche pas à ma chatte
Si tu touches à ma chatte je te crée des problèmes
Aïe, Aïe, Aïe, Fais attention, fais attention
Ne touche pas à ma chatte.

Docteur Veterinaire, si tu touches à ma chatte
Ne touche pas à sa queue
 (refrain)

Chat au féminin on l'appelle la chatte
Chat au masculin on l'appelle le chat Oh oh
 (refrain)

Medecin vétérinaire, examine ma chatte
Caresse ma chatte sans toucher à sa queue
 (refrain)

Je dis fais attention
Ne touches pas à ma chatte
Quand tu touches à ma chatte, je me mets à pleurer
 (refrain)
 [etc...]

[*English translation mine*]

I dedicate this song to my pussy and its cock
 AAAH, wouldn't you say?

(refrain)

Aie, aie, aie, Do beware,
 Do not touch my pussy
 If you touch my pussy, I'll be giving you trouble.
 Aie, aie, aie, Do beware,

Do not touch my pussy

Dr. Veterinarian, if you touch my pussy
Do not touch his cock
(refrain)

A female is a pussy
A male is a cat Oh oh
(refrain)

Dr. Veterinarian, check out my pussy,
Pet my pussy, without touching his cock
(refrain)

I say, do beware!
Do not touch my pussy,
When you touch my pussy, I start to cry.
(refrain)
[etc...]

By adding the “t-e” to the end of the French “*chat*”, K-tino effectively changes “cat” to the slang for female genitalia. And the “tail” then belongs to all the willing males.

To emphasize the importance of local linguistic codes, and also the ability of patrons to read between the lines of intended lyrics, I include a translation of the same song by a Cameroonian associate from Yaoundé. The impression one gets is much harder, somewhat more sexual or even pornographic in nature.

Laalaaalaaa
Meeooowww

This song is an homage to all the dicks I am fucking!
AAAh! is not it right?
Oh Yes!

(Refrain)
Aie Aie Aie Do not finger my Godamn Pussy!
I am telling you be afraid, do not try to finger my pussy!
It smells like real dicks, you better believe it!
Aie Aie Aie Don't you dare finger my Godamn Pussy!
You fucking Veterinarian doctor! What do you fucking know?
If you dare finger my pussy, the smell of real dicks will fuck you up!
Thus, be afraid of my pussy, if you try to finger my pussy,
I am warning you, the smell of real dicks will fuck you up!

Meoww!

Female singers all over Cameroon love to perform this, as it gives them the opportunity to cavort with male patrons and elicit attention in the way of cash tips, or *gombo*.⁷

⁷ Gombo, like the Cajun stew, is a common and popular soup made throughout Cameroon. However, if you hear

The very first time I heard *Ma Chatte* was at a stylish cabaret in Douala. I watched a singer in a sequined cocktail dress and stiletto heels perform the number in front of a well-heeled crowd and their cocktails. Imagine my surprise when she danced by our table and meowed while petting her crotch. As well, I witnessed a number of different versions of the song in karaoke bars throughout Yaoundé. The participants in Cameroonian karaoke clubs act out the choreography of popular videos to recorded playback, rather than actually singing the vocals. This gives the performer of *Ma Chatte* the chance to climb onto tables or into men's laps, mimicking sexual gestures in various states of dress. Shocking perhaps, and humorous, but always a crowd favorite.

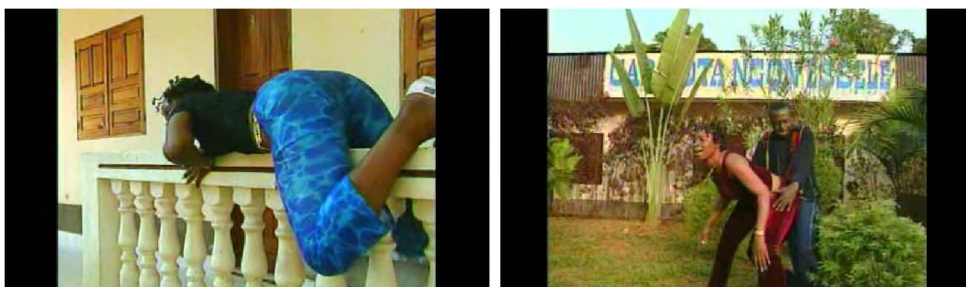


Figure 6-7: Screen Captures from K-Tino Videos

This new bikutsi was denounced in the press as immoral and in violation of the norms of decency. One panicked journalist for the independent newspaper *Mutations* wrote that, “Cameroon has exhibited a looseness of morals unprecedented. The debauchery and the sexual perversions are of the most immoral, and affect everyone. Sex, of the most vulgar manner, is more and more present in the media and the public, marked by eccentric, indecent clothing intended to provoke sensual pleasure, nudity, and sensuality” (Musa 2000). Finally, Ndjana noted that the sociological in art had indeed become the biological, thus negating the explanatory potential with the merely descriptive. K-Tino has gained a reputation as the most bawdy or pornographic singer in Cameroon, however she has defended her performance in an interview, saying:

I speak of love because I don't like war and politics. Madness, everyone needs some at one time or another, to know if one exists. I know what I do. This madness enables us to alleviate accumulated stress. In these times, we have the right and the need to laugh and to heal certain small diseases. And I think that I was born to make others laugh. I accept this place. I am not vulgar, I do not make vulgar spectacles. If I am vulgar, then the Ewondo language is vulgar.

(<http://www.cameroon-info.net>)

the word ten times, only one of them perhaps is someone referring to the food. It is also money, often illicit, and giving and receiving gombo in the form of bribery or tip drives much of the dynamic in Cameroonian life. It is a tacitly sanctioned way to augment income at every level of society and government. Professional musicians, for instance, travel from cabaret to cabaret on any given night, playing a set here and a set there in order to “make gombo.”

She alludes to two things here: the dysfunctional nature of the political system, and the foundation of bikutsi rooted in the mastery of the Ewondo language. K-Tino's interview rhetoric clearly establishes not only critique of postcolonial regimes and the importance of indigenous languages to bikutsi, but also reclaims both linguistic practice and sexuality for the sphere of female public imagination.

Media Policy and the Defining of Local Ethics

If, as has been suggested, we are to look at Cameroonian media as the voice and guardian of official state power, it is possible to see these developments in Bikutsi as the CRTV losing control of that façade. It was certainly viewed that way from within.⁸ Minister of Information and Director General of CRTV Mendo Ze made it his personal mission to re-moralize society. A moral as well as cultural crisis was declared, and the reaction rippled throughout the media.

Music video shows such as Tubevision and Clipbox, easily some of the most popular programming on the air, were drastically curtailed or cancelled outright. The weekly cultural and news show, *TamTam Weekend*, replaced its live music with pre-recorded playback of makossa songs, traditionally non-Beti, and deemed eminently safe for Cameroonian culture.

There followed an effective ban on the recordings and videos of Congolese *ndombolo* and Ivorien *mapouka* in order to avoid "promoting indecent behavior" among the country's youth.⁹ According to Jean Francois Mebenga, then Director of Programming at CRTV, the so-called inappropriate dances had to be banned in order to safeguard the good morals and culture of Cameroonian society from foreign invasion. "Suggestive body wriggling," he commented, "could not be tolerated" (Musa 2000). This must have been the same body wriggling then that prompted anxiety from the Ministry of Culture, and was expressed in Noah's treatise on Cameroonian dances.

This move played nicely into the themes of cultural crisis and loss, as the CRTV officially lamented that it had been playing *ndombolo* as if Cameroonian music did not exist, and hoped the ban would help revive the culture. Official radio policy allowed for 30% time to foreign music, with the happiest recipients being local makossa musicians, whose music had been in drastic decline ever since the meteoric rise of bikutsi and the influx of French pop, *ndombolo* and American rap and hip hop. Mebenga commented that, "as state owned media, we have a duty to educate the masses. We have to maintain a certain measure of decent social morals. This dance, played over our radio and television, encourages immortality in our society, especially among the youths. Our people may have a passion for *ndombolo*, but I think it was a wise decision to ban it" (Musa 2000).

⁸ See any of Francis B. Nyamnjoh's oeuvre, especially *Africa's Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*, for an exhaustive review and analysis of Cameroonian media politics, government involvement and corruption.

⁹ These are styles of popular dance music rhythmically similar to Congolese rumba or *soukous*, but incorporating sexually suggestive dance with, in the case of *mapouka*, varying degrees of nudity.

The third policy, and the one most questionable to the public, was the institution of a weekly talk show called *Deviance*, hosted by Minister of Information, Mendo Ze himself. *Deviance* tackled topics such as proper aspects of cultural production, singing, dancing, and the ways people should behave in society, in public and in administration. Dress was particularly stressed, foreign media was decried — especially the so-called “bordello-culture” of the French — and of course bikutsi came under fire frequently.

Ironically, the program was inherently suspect from a public standpoint, as it was deemed improper for a person of Mendo Ze’s stature, age and position to be directing a program of such nature (François Bingono-Bingono, interview with author: 04 January 2006, Yaoundé, Cameroon). According to public sentiment and cultural convention, the host should have been an anthropologist or sociologist, or some type of civil servant.¹⁰

The backlash to the government’s ban on foreign music and video made it apparent that no one was being taken in by the media’s political diversion. A notable singer at the time, Mpande Star said, “Let’s not fool ourselves. Those who complain that ndombolo is immoral are lazy musicians afraid of competition” (Musa 2000). The private press was unanimous in its condemnation as well, decrying the ban as merely yielding to laziness and encouraging mediocrity. For many, the ban simply amounted to cultural censorship, another expression of the totalitarian nature of the government media system.

From Old Strategy Comes New Tactics

It might be more productive to read these maneuvers by the government as reactionary tactics safeguarding their lifestyle and power, as well as taking umbrage to the media developing in ways unpredictable and uncontrollable. If we look closely, at least to the bikutsi element, we find that criticism, obscenity, and the notion of female power had been there from the very beginning. As Noah argues,

Excluded from the social administration, Beti women find in bikutsi a privileged way of expression, as it allies creativity, poetry and musical expressiveness in defining their own space and voice. Women write their lyrics spontaneously with a particular sense of precision. One at a time they dance in the middle of a circle, teasing and encouraging each other. They take inspiration from true topics and they receive congratulations for the richness, the truth and the rhymes of their verse. (Noah 2004: 22)

As postcolonial feminist theorists have often argued, these kinds of female centered performative spaces are doubly important in the postcolonial era, when women are doubly oppressed by both the legacies of colonialism and the postcolonial phallogocentric regimes that colonialism gave rise to. Trinh T. Minh-ha has echoed these sentiments in her work *Women, Native, Other*, stressing the power of poetry and poetic language in the formation of a distinct and empowered post-colonial feminine identity. For her,

¹⁰ More to the point, the words to a popular song at the time called *Deviance* proclaimed that “there are some words that should not appear from the mouth of an elder, a figure of respect”

power can be a place where language is aestheticized and subjectivity is constituted, a place from which many people of color voice their struggle. According to Minh-ha, women are not only oppressed economically, but also culturally and politically, in the very forms of signifying and reasoning. Language is therefore an extremely important site for struggle. Lyrical analysis, in this sense, can lead to a more richly nuanced understanding of women's lives at every level of society. As Minh-ha points out, "when you hear the conversations of these village women, you can never separate the abstract from the concrete, and the level at which signs and symbols operate leads us directly into the very details of their daily existence" (1990: 71).

And while some have lamented the passage of "the oblique and suggestive approach", postcolonial feminist theory creates space for this so-called transgressive behavior (Suleri 1992).¹¹ In the political anxiety that modernizing nations exhibit to prove their traditional culture remains intact, national rhetoric often calls upon women to be the bearer and transmitter of culture and tradition. Men in these instances have the ability to move across spheres of influence, negotiating the modern and the traditional as need dictates. Regressive policies such as those enacted by the CRTV often limit this ability for women.

In the case of K-tino however, she says, "If I am vulgar, than Ewondo is vulgar," revealing the way in which language works as a socialization tool, and — more relevant to this discussion — how Beti women have historically utilized singing to manipulate masculinist language structures into powerful transformative spaces. If phallogocentric discourses are perhaps inherently repressive, and women's voices have been continuously marginalized, female expression is still not determined by the systems in which they are located. Instead, K-Tino demonstrates a female expressive practice constantly developed through performance. She finds innovative ways to critique existing power structures by addressing their sexuality and subjectivity, and by manipulating both media and language.

K-Tino's music highlights the significance of tradition in women's musical expression over time and beyond urban/rural, modern/traditional binaries. In a previous form, bikutsi served as a (sometimes erotic) socialization process among women. Although the space in which K-Tino operates is more "public" and the manipulation of the media and inclusion of erotic physical movements creates a seeming disjuncture between pre- and postcolonial styles, I argue that a careful listening of her music shows a creative transformation of tradition.

This is significant in understanding women's music-making in an African landscape where modernity and its products are often assigned exclusively to men. And perhaps it accounts for some of the critique and backlash against modern bikutsi as a deviation and degeneration of traditional culture. In this conception men have

¹¹ For discussions of female subjectivity in postcolonial theory, see Chandra Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", *Feminist Review*, No. 30 (Autumn, 1988) pp. 61-88, and the collection *Nationalisms and Sexualities 1992*, edited by Andrew Parket et al. New York: Routledge.

access to participate in modernity while women are assigned the realm of tradition, allowing men to control women's access to expression, critique, and ownership of their sexuality and their bodies. Female bikutsi musicians such as K-Tino demonstrate an access to modernity through adroit manipulation of the media, appropriation of globalized erotic signs and a willful neglect of traditional feminine roles, showing that they have, in fact, always had the ability to participate in what those in power have strived to deny them.

If bikutsi has always been about creating space and voice, then in the new media landscape of Cameroon, the voices choose to be louder, and often share in, as well as mock the tastes and habits of the men in power. For instance, popular rumor often refers to Mendo Ze, a committed Catholic and mariologue (follower of the Virgin Mary) rather as a serpentologue (a Rosicrucian whose mystical totem is a boa constrictor). It has been said that Ze gains and maintains his power by sucking the menstrual blood of young virgins whom he entices with gifts of money and jewelry, usually in the form of a gold snake necklace.¹² More to the point, Mbembe writes that, "Men in power at different levels of society are represented as men consumed by phallocratic passions, and they are ridiculed and debased by the girls and women they often imagine themselves to be debasing. The rebellious chants show the political dimension of the cultural creativity of Cameroonian women... the revolt and the rupture is expressed in song" (Mbembe 2001: 127). I maintain the recent developments of bikutsi fall under this paradigm, as an attempt by performing women to re-establish that critical voice and direct it perhaps derisively, perhaps obscenely, at those on top.

Essono writes that "nowadays men as well as women sing bikutsi and their message stays the same. Nowadays they speak clearly to the power; they claim their rights, say their deceptions and sorrows for the future of their children, complain about corruption" (Essono 1996: 54). The traditional themes of love and sexuality, feminine strength, family and life education continue to be dominant in contemporary bikutsi, though the stylistic liberties in language, dance and visual imagery have expanded to fill the media space it inhabits.

But in the face of overwhelming Beti modesty and shame, the question of obscenity remains. Coming back to Baudrillard, he wrote that obscenity begins when there is no more spectacle, no more stage, theatre or illusion. Thus, only when everything becomes immediately transparent, visible, and exposed in the raw inexorable light of information and communication do we confront the obscene. If this is accurate, then the truly obscene can only happen when there is no more illusion to the exercise of power, when we can see it for all its exhibitionism. If both the public and private space

¹² This is one of the often told stories that make up what in Cameroon is referred to as *radio trottoir*, or sidewalk radio, which is the circulation of rumor and exaggeration meant to overcome the deficiency of real information. A nice discussion of the workings of radio trottoir in Africa can be found in Jean-François Bayart's *The State in Africa: Politics of the Belly* 1993 New York and London: Longman, where he writes that sidewalk radio, "is the murmur of social practices which tirelessly fashion, deform and undermine the institutions and ideologies created by the highest of the high."

are disintegrating, that is, the body, the landscape and time as a stage are disappearing, then the truly obscene, as he says, occurs when the most intimate operation of life becomes the potential grazing ground of the media. The obscene then no longer contains a secret. That is the moment the autocrat should worry.

References

- Awona, S.
 1971 "Danses Traditionnelles Camerounaises", in *Danses du Cameroun*, Publication de la Direction des Affaires Culturelles du Ministère de l'Education, de la Culture et de la Formation Professionnelle. Yaoundé: Cameroun.
- Baudrillard, Jean
 1987 *The Ecstasy of Communication*, New York: Semiotext(e).
- Bingono-Bingono, François
 1998 *Le Nkul des Beti-Bulu-Fang: etude d'un outil traditionnel de communication*, Dissertation, Université de Yaoundé II-SOA, Cameroun.
- Fanon, Franz
 2005 *Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press.
- Fuller, Charles
 1997 "A History of Bikutsi Music in Cameroon", www.africasounds.com.
- Ghonda, Jean-Pierre
 1988 *Le Mvet: evolution, declin et conditions pour sa renaissance*, Dissertation, Université de Yaoundé, Cameroun.
- K-Tino Interview
 2004 www.cameroon-info.net/stories/0,14505,@,k-tino-je-ne-suis-pas-vulgaire.html.
- Laburthe-Tolra, Phillipe
 1985 *Initiations et Societes Secretes au Cameroun: Les Mysteres de la Nuit*, Paris: Editions Karthala.
- Mbala, Agnès Marie
 1985 *Bikutsi: Chants de Femmes Chez les Mvele*, Université Paris X Nanterre, Paris.
- Mbembe, Achille
 2001 *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Mbia, Emma
 1992 *Le Bikutsi: Danse de la Foret*, Dissertation, Université Paris V Sorbonne, Paris.
- Menguele, Maturin
 1979 *Mythe et Ideologie Dans le Mvet*, Dissertation, Université de Yaoundé, Cameroun.

- Minh-ha, Trinh T.
1990 "Women, Native, Other", *Feminist Review*, No. 36 (Autumn 1990), pp. 65-74.
- Musa, Tansa
2000 "Congolese Dombolo Too Hot for Cameroon",
www.ips.org/ips/ips/nsf/db6124472.
- Ndjana, Hubert Mono
1999 *Les Chansons de Sodome et Gomorrhe: Analyses pour l'éthique*, Yaoundé: Editions du Carrefour.
- Ngumu, Pie-Claude
1976 *Les Mendzans Des Chanteurs de Yaoundé*, Wien: Acta Ethnologica et Linguistica.
- Nkolo, Jean Victor
1994 "Makossa: 1 Bikutsi: 1", in Simon Broughton (ed.) *World Music*, London: Rough Guides Ltd.
- Noah, Jean Maurice
2004 *Le Bikutsi du Cameroun*, Yaoundé: Carrefour/Erika.
- Nyamnjoh, Francis B.
1990 "How to 'Kill' an Underdeveloped Press: Lessons from Cameroon", *Gazette*, 46:57-75.
2005 *Africa's Media: Democracy & the Politics of Belonging*, London and New York: Zed Books.
- Onguene Essono, L.M.
1996 "La Démocratie en Chan-sons: Les Bikut-si du Cameroun", *Politique Africaine*, No. 64:52-61.
- Rathnaw, Dennis
2005 "Strategic Minstrelsy: Les Têtes Brulées and the Claim for Black Modernism", in Toyin Falola and Steven J. Salm (eds) *Urbanization and African Cultures*, Durham: Carolina Press.
- Suleri, Sara
1992 "Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition", *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (Summer 1992), pp. 756-769.

Selected Discography

Chantal Ayissi

2002 *Renaissance*, J.P.S. Production

K-Tino

2006 *7ème ciel*

2005 *Best of vol. 2*

2003 *Ne pousse pas...Le bouchon loin*, Moradisc

n.d. *Viagra - Baisse-toi*

Richard Band de Zoetele

n.d. *Èvènement*

Sally Nyolo

2001 *Beti*, Lusafrica France

1997 *Tribu*, Tinder

Sally Nyolo and the Original Bands of Yaoundé

2006 *Studio Cameroon*, Riverboat

Les Têtes Brulées

1992 *Bikutsi Rock*, Shanachie

1991 *Hot Heads*, Shanachie

Various Artists

1997 *Cameroon Bikutsi Tempo*, SonoDisc

Various Artists

2005 *Mvet ai Mandzang: Music of the Beti*, Wergo Germany

Selected Videography

Claudia Dikosso

n.d. *Mayangue Wa*,

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c55zhFd9QNA&feature=related>

K-Tino

n.d. *Viagra*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CM5kqzPIkbo>

n.d. *Agent de Police*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFdg-UM18kE>

n.d. *Ciel*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oP9yK-dgIzw>

n.d. *Ascenseur*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFaCL9hdZwE>

K-Wash (Daughter of K-Tino)

n.d. *Ban Bongo*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJ4qzKK3ErI>

n.d. *Kiss Kiss Balafons*, Live Wedding Performance, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njBatCPrwDE>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=moiblCArBog&feature=related>

Les Têtes Brulées

n.d. From the documentary *Man No Run* directed by Claire Denis

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bnOy5J5KY_o&feature=related

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9y1MOEn7QY&feature=related>

Richard Amougou

n.d. *Èvènement*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6ozQCuBO-Q&feature=related>

Tanus Foe

n.d. *Sabina*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwxEz-3OmGY>