

THE SINGER ANNE-MARIE NZIÉ AND THE SONG “LIBERTÉ”: ON POPULAR MUSIC AND THE POSTCOLONIAL STATE IN CAMEROON¹

by

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In November 2008, the 60th anniversary of singer Anne-Marie Nzié's career was celebrated in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon. The Ministry of Culture and the President of Cameroon organised an overwhelming number of festivities in honour of the popular singer. Anne-Marie Nzié was celebrated as Cameroon's pioneer female musician and one of the most popular singers of the country, and reading between the lines, she was additionally honoured for her life-long loyalty to the Cameroonian nation and especially the ruling powers of the postcolonial state. The life and career of Anne-Marie Nzié, over 80 years of age at time of writing in 2013, are inextricably linked to the cultural politics of the Republic of Cameroon since its independence in 1960.

Much research on popular music has focused on the potential for political resistance of popular music; this article however takes a slightly different approach, and will discuss how the development of the postcolonial state and an individual musical career can be intertwined. Presenting Anne-Marie Nzié's life and career, two issues are raised. First, the relationship between the singer and the Cameroonian state is one of symbiotic character with reciprocal benefits, set in the particular situation of postcolonial reality. Second, due to this particular position as a state-supporting artist, Anne-Marie Nzié's song "Liberté" acquired a specific potential as a political message against the ruling power.

Political references in popular music in Africa are not necessarily critical; often, current or past politicians are praised and their politics are supported (Englert 2008). Anne-Marie Nzié has not only supported the ruling potentates of Cameroon and the postcolonial state throughout her exceptional musical career, as the nation's first popular female singer she has also played an important part in building a Cameroonian national consciousness, one of the political priorities after independence. In the case of Anne-Marie Nzié, popular music was not a means to contest power, but a means to serve and support the postcolonial state.

Anne-Marie's position of loyalty enabled a specific political use of the song "Liberté" during a time of public protests in the early 1990s, although it is a song celebrating

¹ I would like to thank Denis-Constant Martin for his valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper, August Schmidhofer for checking the transcription, the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions and Andreas Hemming for proofreading the final draft.

independence and solidarity within the newly created country Cameroon. Using the song in a different way than intended by its singer served as clear sign or resistance to the ruling powers and revealed the existence of different visions of the (political) future of postcolonial Cameroon. The ambiguity of liberty was exposed based on the song's message of liberty and national solidarity, making the song a pointed and effective means of sending a political message of opposition. Additionally, the appropriation of the song by a movement in opposition to the ruling government showed the changes within the postcolonial state that allowed for the expression of different political meanings, also by means of popular songs.

Music in the postcolonial Cameroonian state

Political players in many African states have since their respective independence kept a close eye on the developments and people in the field of popular music; at the same time, musicians have interacted with the postcolonial state in various ways. It is common knowledge that popular music has a potential for political resistance, and is often censored for this reason (see Drewett and Cloonan 2006). Much less attention has been paid to date to the other side of the coin: the support and loyalty of African (popular) musicians to the state, its profession in musical performance, and the use of popular music and its performers within postcolonial political systems. As Nyamnjoh and Folkwang argue, “political power in Cameroon and, indeed, the rest of Africa has tended to appropriate musicians and their creative efforts to seek or maintain themselves in power” (2005: 253). Not all popular music in Africa is assigned political relevance and which music and musicians they find appropriate to present and support their goals.

Such relationships of loyalty to the ruling power, and a musician's support of politicians in 20th century Africa, are embedded in the typical structure of postcolonial states, including that of Cameroon, as described and analysed by postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe (2001). Mbembe argues that the authoritarian postcolonial regimes are based on a “trinity of violence, allocations, and transfers” (2001: 48). To maintain power, the potentate uses forms of violent suppression and hierarchical relations adopted from the colonial regime. These practices are augmented by the use of “transfers”, the network of social obligations so prevalent in African communities, be they within a household or family or at the workplace. Transfers are social or financial services towards other members of the community, they are an obligatory acknowledgement of the “multifaceted, never-ending debt to the community” (Mbembe 2001: 47). Allocations, the third dimension of postcolonial state power structures, are payments from the state to its people, for example via privatisation or wages. Such allocations guarantee loyalty and are at the same time a means of suppression, creating dependency. A salary is then not a compensation for labour but a favour and privilege of the state given to the individual (ibid. 42–48).

Cameroon had two authoritarian potentates since its independence: Ahmadou Ahidjo, a Muslim from the northern part of the country, was President from 1960

to 1982, when Paul Biya, an member of the Beti-Fang groups from the south became President. The latter was re-elected in 2011 after a revision of the constitution in 2008 allowed him a third term in office. In both cases, the features of a postcolonial state as described by Mbembe can be identified. While during Ahidjo's era, severe repression and allocations went hand in hand; Biya struggled with a loss of power that resulted from a growing lack of financial means. With decreasing financial resources, the material foundation to fulfil the functions ascribed to the state after independence decreased; the state could not guarantee the well-being of all its citizens and lost much of its credibility (Mbembe 2001: 66–101). This process gave way to growing dissent in the country, different political opinions could increasingly be heard in the 1980s. Biya had to give in to a multi-party system and make concessions concerning the freedom of the press in 1990. According to Mbembe, these processes are not necessarily a sign of democratisation. Rather, he interprets these developments in the logic of the postcolonial state as a cry for a different form of distribution of resources and a struggle for a new state order (74–77).

Musicians' lives and strategies in postcolonial Africa have to be interpreted as intertwined with and embedded in these specific struggles over resources and strategies, as I will show with the singer Anne-Marie Nzié. Musicians experience repression and/or support in the postcolonial system. For the latter state support, the singer Anne-Marie Nzie is a good example. Musicians depend on transfers within their communities and they rely on allocations from the state, be it in the form of engagements for concerts, regular wages through a position in a state-sponsored orchestra, or individual contributions. The role of popular musicians since independence has in this context been further bound to a specific task; that is, to contribute to the state's cultural presentation in line with the need to build a national consciousness, in this case of a Cameroonian nation.

After gaining independence, Africa's political leaders looked to construct durable states. The creation of a national feeling, of a national belonging on the part of the citizens played and continues to play a central role in this process. Cameroon was no exception. The construction of the postcolonial state enforced through and supported by close state control was accompanied by and performed on the basis of a specific rhetoric of nation building (*cf* DeLancey 1989, Nyamnjoh 2005). The consciousness of belonging to a shared nation, the establishment of an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) is realised not via personal contact, but, for example, through the media, cultural practices, language and economic borders. Musical performances as a means to communicate and represent common features and symbols played an important role in the imagination and creation of a national Cameroonian identity.

Like any form of identity, national identity is fragile and arbitrary in its nature. Identities are never fixed and static, they are social constructions that need to be performed repeatedly and continuously in order to persist or to change (*cf* Butler 1990), be it in rhetorical utterances by politicians or in musical practices labelled as 'national', or as, in this case, 'Cameroonian'. In her study on cultural politics in Tanzania, Kelly

M. Askew argued that national identities need in turn to be analysed as fluid concepts saying, “No less than individual or group identities do national identities wax and wane and undergo significant change” (2002: 12).

But when it comes to the specific implementation of a national image or of specific cultural practices, no state control is as tight and fixed as it might be intended. Askew argued with Gramsci that, “Aspiring hegemonies, be they imposed from the top or the bottom, are always subject to perforation. Latent possibilities and alternative visions can never be fully nor permanently eradicated, however imposing a state bureaucracy may appear” (2002: 11). Whatever is imposed from above may be acted out below, but not necessarily – and not necessarily as the leaders above intended. Although the cultural visions, activities and plans of the ruling political elite provide the general framework for the work of musicians in Cameroon, the implementation nevertheless remains the domain of the lower levels. Musicians, audiences and other (musical) players forming the nation and as citizens of the state act out, perform, and in doing so negotiate the musical representation of the nation. The singer Anne-Marie Nzié grew successfully into a position to creatively contribute to the musical image of the Cameroonian nation, in line with the postcolonial state. One such contribution was the song “Liberté”, that I turn to now.

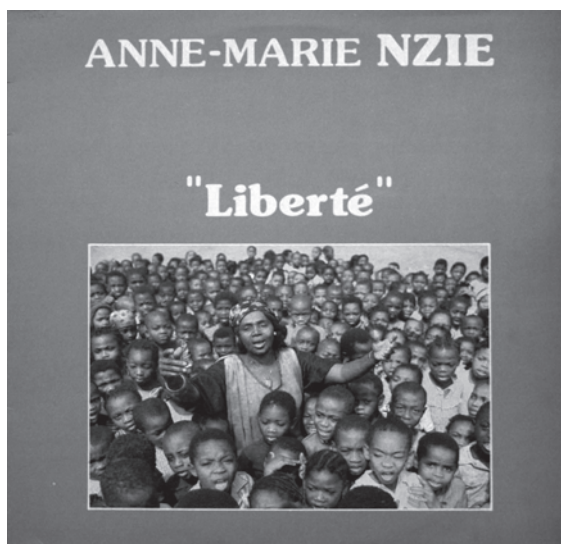


Figure 1. Cover of the LP *Liberté*, released by Ebobolo Fia Productions in 1984.

Notes on the song “Liberté” and the career of Anne-Marie Nzié

The song “Liberté (Dieu Merci)” “Liberty” (Thanks to God) has a long history, going back to the years just after independence. Anne-Marie Nzié and her brother-in-law, Nziouh Outtou Franck, originally composed it under the title “Dieu Merci” (“Thanks to God”) in the 1960s. To my knowledge, no recording of this first version exists. “Liberté”

Liberté (Dieu Merci)*Refrain:**Liberté-é-é**Liberté-é-é**Dieu tout puissant**Nous sommes libres**Merci**Dieu nous a délivrés**De la puissance des ténèbres**Et il nous a transportés**Dans le royaume du fils de son amour**En lui nous avons la rédemption**Et la rémission des péchés**Dieu merci! Nous sommes libres**Oh mon Dieu, merci**Refrain**Ô augustes conquérants de la liberté**Sur une route jalonnée de paix**Sous trente six mille brasiers déchaînés**Vous avez lutté, vous avez sauvé l'Afrique**Ecoutez, frères païens noirs**Ecoutez leurs pas résonner**Comme des génies en furie**Tous comme un seul homme, debout**Luttons pour nos intérêts**Et luttons pour l'avenir**Afrique, apôtre de la paix**Rassemble tes enfants**Refrain**Et toi Cameroun**Terre de nos ancêtres**Je te vois gémir devant ce fleuve de sang**Et cette montagne d'os**Qui craque sous ce soleil africain**Cameroun, terre de rencontre,**Afrique en miniature**Que toutes les bouches chantent avec toi**Et à travers tous les âges, on chante**Chantons la liberté**Refrain*

Refrain:

Liberty

Liberty

God Almighty

We are free

Thank you

God has delivered us

From the powers of darkness

And He has brought us

To the kingdom of the son of His love

In Him, we find redemption

And the remission of sins

Thanks to God! We are free

Oh my God, thank you

Refrain

Oh august conquerors of liberty

On a route marked by peace

Under thirty-six thousand flaming fires

You have fought, you have saved Africa

Listen, pagan black brothers

Listen to their resonating steps

Like the spirits of fury

All like one man alone, standing upright

Let us fight for our interests

And let us fight for the future

Africa, apostle of peace

Assemble your children

Refrain

And you, Cameroon

Land of our ancestors

I see you grieve in front of this river of blood

And this mountain of bones

Which crack under the African sun

Cameroon, land of encounter,

Africa in miniature

Let all mouths sing with you

And across all ages, we sing

Let us sing out liberty

Refrain

Figure 2. Lyrics of "Liberté", transcribed from the LP *Liberté*, released by Ebobolo Fia Productions, 1984. Translation by author.

was recorded and released in 1984. This recording is one verse shorter than the original composition, consisting of three verses, alternated with an unaltered refrain.² In the song, Anne-Marie Nzié celebrates the independence of Cameroon, which, according to the song, God had brought to the Cameroonian people in 1960 (see Figure 2 for song lyrics).

The song expresses the hopes and joys of the people in Cameroon in a future in freedom and liberty from the colonial powers. It portrays the country as rising from a stream of blood, a reference to the violent repression by the colonial powers, but possibly also to the internal civil-war-like armed conflicts in the 1950s that overshadowed the first years of independence (*cf* e.g. DeLancey 1989). The singer honours those who fought for the country; she celebrates the new nation and calls the people to join in and stand together for a better future. It is this message and statement of a free Cameroon, of a Cameroonian *cf*nation standing together that made the use of the song possible and relevant in the context of political struggles over power and resources some years later, as I discuss below.

Throughout the song, two important biographical characteristics are apparent: Anne-Marie Nzié’s deep religious beliefs and her personal solidarity with the young nation of Cameroon. As will be shown, her political positioning in favour of the postcolonial government was not merely a pragmatic move but a deep personal admiration and the conviction that, in accordance with the logic of the postcolonial state, the state is responsible for its citizens’ well being.

Anne-Marie Nzié’s was born during the colonial era, in the early 1930s in southern Cameroon.³ Her first musical activities were during her youth in the village church choir. Under the guidance of her elder brother Cromwell Nzié, who was a well-known guitarist in the 1950s, she learned to play the Hawaiian guitar. She supported her brother, who was widely popular and received a great deal of radio airplay, as a background singer on recordings and in concerts. In the 1950s, Anne-Marie Nzié recorded some of her own compositions, accompanying herself on Hawaiian guitar. She was the first woman in Cameroon to sing and play an instrument in public, at a time when this was considered not at all suitable for a woman. After her marriage in 1958, she interrupted her musical activities, according to Ndachi Tagne’s biography (1990), at the request of her husband. In 1963, however, she took part in a guitar contest organised by a German musician. Competing against popular guitarists of the time, including her brother Cromwell Nzié, she won. This success restarted her musical career that led her to becoming the most popular female singer in the newly founded Republic of Cameroon.

Anne-Marie Nzié’s compositions were generally in line with musical trends in the country. In the 1960s and 1970s, Congolese music and French chansons were particularly popular with the Cameroonian audience; musicians such as the Congolese

² One verse was cut on the recording because it would have otherwise have exceeded the ideal song length of around five minutes (Ndachi Tagne 1990: 185).

³ The exact year Anne-Marie Nzié’s birth cannot be verified. The sources vary between 1930 and 1935.

Franco Luambo and his group O.K. Jazz and French singers like Tino Rossi and Edith Piaf were played regularly on the radio. Local musicians positioned themselves based on these popular musical trends, with occasional tendencies to include features of some of the manifold local musical traditions. They played at nightclubs and in bars in Yaoundé and Douala and were recorded especially for radio-airplay or by French or Congolese labels. The lyrics written by the local bands were mainly in local Cameroonian languages or in one of the official state languages, English or French. Anne-Marie Nzié was no exception; she sang in African languages, mainly in her native language Ngumba. Her songs were in a slow chanson style, had Congolese rumba or merengue rhythms and dealt with everyday problems of relationships, love and marriage, or they praised particular people, such as famous Cameroonian athletes. As was common for many musicians, she also recorded advertising songs, for example for Cameroonian Airlines in the mid-1970s (Ndachi Tagne 1990).

Anne-Marie Nzié's popularity grew throughout the 1960s. She was soon known as "La Voix d'Or du Cameroun" ("The Golden Voice of Cameroon").⁴ She attracted attention with her extraordinary voice as well as her status as the only woman in Cameroon to sing and play the guitar in public. In 1969, Anne-Marie Nzié was chosen to represent Cameroon at the *Festival Culturel Panafricain* in Algiers. She was one of the headliners in the first national music festival of Cameroon in 1973 and the Cameroonian cultural week in Senegal in 1975. In the same year, a music journalist wrote in the national newspaper Cameroon Tribune: "Anne-Marie Nzié n'est une inconnue pour personne au Cameroun"⁵ (Bolap 1975), indicating her national popularity.

Throughout the early 1970s she recorded several LPs for the French label Pathé Marconi, toured the country and traded her Hawaiian guitar for a complete orchestra, including electric guitars and bass guitar, congas and drums. Most local orchestras and musicians at the time regularly played in bars and nightclubs in urban areas, mainly in Douala and Yaoundé, where it was common to have live music at least on weekends. Anne-Marie Nzié, however, avoided this scene. It can be surmised that she did so to avoid compromising her image as a respectable and exemplary woman of Cameroonian society. Throughout her career, Anne-Marie Nzié was awarded, encouraged and supported by the Cameroonian government.⁶ She was invited regularly to sing at official state events, like gala dinners, receptions or openings and was engaged repeatedly to represent the nation abroad. In 1978 she fulfilled this role once again at the *Second Festival Panafricain des Arts Nègres* in Lagos. In the 1980s, she had firm place in Cameroonian national musical representation.

⁴ According to a newspaper article written by her husband in 1975, this unofficial title for Anne-Marie Nzié had its beginnings in a radio show in 1965 called "Le match des incollables" (Nziou 1975).

⁵ Translation by author: "Anne-Marie Nzié is an unknown to no one in Cameroon".

⁶ Apart from the various engagements to represent Cameroon at international events, she was awarded the Prize of the President of Cameroon for her success in the above mentioned guitar competition, followed in 1976 by an Order of Merit of the Third Class of the Republic of Cameroon (Ndachi Tagne 1990).

Anne-Marie Nzié and the postcolonial State

The relationship between Anne-Marie Nzié and the state powers can only be described as mutually beneficial. Anne-Marie Nzié fitted perfectly into the government's aims to create a national cultural consciousness through art and music: she was an extraordinary musician, loyal to the government and supportive of the idea of a Cameroonian nation. She often declared that she sang for the Republic of Cameroon, and at her concerts she prominently presented the Cameroonian flag. Anne-Marie Nzié supported whole-heartedly the general political line followed by President Ahidjo and the ruling Cameroon National Union (CMU), later Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), which was the only legal political party until 1990. When Biya took over the President's office, she remained supportive of the political system and its leaders.

But Anne-Marie Nzié not only contributed to the political goals of the postcolonial state; she was also well aware of her personal value for the government. In the logic of the postcolonial state system, she seemed convinced of the state's role to support her, as a singer and loyal Cameroonian citizen. This became evident, when in the late 1970s, Anne-Marie Nzié got into financial problems. Maintaining an orchestra was expensive; as leader of the group it was her responsibility to care for every member, in the sense of social responsibility that Achille Mbembe called “transfer”. The occasional performances at galas and festivals did not suffice to cover daily expenses. Additionally, she stopped recording new LPs; her label Pathé Marconi no longer seemed interested. According to the singer's biographer, David Ndachi Tagne, she thought of retiring, but then instead wrote to the Cameroonian President in 1977, asking for financial aid. Anne-Marie Nzié received three million CFA. In another letter, two years later, she described how she spent the money and again solicited financial help. She explained that she wanted to move to her village to build a hotel and bar for tourists, arguing that this would help prevent the rural exodus of the youth, which was a concern of the government:

“Aujourd’hui que l’âge commence à peser sur moi et que je songe à prendre bientôt ma retraite en campagne, je présente le moment venu d’adresser à Son Excellence la présente requête qui est la suite de celle du 17 juin 1977 précitée, afin de solliciter une fois de plus son aide financière pour que je m’installe définitivement avec mon orchestre en milieu rural.

[...]

Ma retraite en campagne s’explique non seulement à cause de l’âge, mais aussi et surtout par mon désir de contribuer efficacement à la lutte que mène actuellement le gouvernement contre l’exode rural des jeunes qui constituent le puissant moteur du développement de notre société (...). Je voudrais vous exprimer ici toute ma sincère reconnaissance et solliciter, peut-être pour la dernière fois, que la générosité de Son Excellence m’accompagne jusqu’à la fin de ma carrière, pour que les jeunes qui seraient tentés de suivre ma voie soient encouragés par mon exemple.” (Ndachi Tagne 1990: 164)

“Now that age is beginning to weigh on me and I have begun to consider retreating to country retreat soon, I come to address His Excellency with the present request, following that of 17 June 1977, to seek once more financial support so that I can finally settle in the country with my orchestra.

[...]

My retreat to the country is due not only to age, but also to my desire to contribute to the fight that the government is now leading against the rural exodus of young people who are the powerful motor of our society (...). I would like to express my very sincere gratitude and seek, perhaps for the last time, the generosity of His Excellency at the end of my career, so that the youth who might be tempted to follow my path are encouraged by my example.”
(cited in Ndachi Tagne 1990: 164 translation by author)

Once more, Anne-Marie Nzié was supported financially, and according to Tagne it was not for the last time, although he remains unspecific about later occasions. In the end, Anne-Marie Nzié's plans were not realised and in 1979 she was offered a position in the National Orchestra as a singer, tutor and adviser for the musicians. The plan to establish a National Orchestra had been discussed for some years within government circles and in the public. Consisting of around 30 people, it performed for the first time in 1978, but soon had to be refounded in 1979. Besides several singers, the instrumentation included guitars, bass, a wind section, xylophone, drums, percussion and an organ. The veteran musician of Cameroon's music scene, Francis Kingué, was chosen as the director of the orchestra (Ndachi Tagne 1990: 166). In the following years the national orchestra gained neither international nor even much national fame (*cf* Mboua 2004). For Anne-Marie Nzié, however, her position in the orchestra meant a regular salary in addition to her income from her own occasional concerts. The singer had officially started to serve the Cameroonian nation with her art and the postcolonial state in return guaranteed her a living.

These developments in Anne-Marie Nzié's career make the possible influence of and embedding in postcolonial realities in Cameroon of a highly talented and professional individual musician all too evident. Anne-Marie Nzié was responsible for other people and supported them as their leader, while the state was in turn responsible for Nzié's financial security and willingly provided these means, first on the basis of lump payments and then by a position in the national orchestra. At the same time, Nzié guaranteed her loyalty to the state's leaders and contributed as singer to the creation of a national identity consistent to the leader's aims. Her song “Liberté” was one such musical contribution celebrating the Cameroonian nation.

The song “Liberté”

The first release of the song “Liberté (Dieu Merci)” by Anne-Marie Nzié came at a politically tumultuous time. Her LP “Liberté” (see Figure 1) was recorded with the national orchestra and released with the young Cameroonian label Ebobolo Fia in 1984. Two years earlier, in 1982, President Ahmadou Ahidjo had stepped down, handing the presidency to former Prime Minister Paul Biya. In April 1984, however, the presidential guards attempted a failed *coup d'état* that was attributed to Ahidjo. The latter was sentenced to death in absentia, the verdict being changed to life imprisonment soon after. This incident was one of the first open contestations of the new president's power, and throughout the 1980s public opposition grew louder. The diversity of the country, the change in political power, and especially the economic crisis led to struggles over

resources and political power. Conflicts between the north and south of the country as well as between the largest ethnic groups became increasingly overt (*cf* Schicho 2001; Konings 2002).

The release of the song “Liberté” by Anne-Marie Nzié during the early period of consolidation for the new President was a sign of support for him and the postcolonial state. By changing the title from “Dieu Merci” to “Liberté (Dieu Merci)”, the religious orientation of the first version was backgrounded in favour of the political message of celebrating independence and liberty. With the song, Nzié called publicly for solidarity in the young nation, recalling the struggle and war that led to independence in the first place. In a time of rising internal conflicts, this is clearly a statement in favour of the Cameroonian nation. According to Ndachi Tagne, the new song title probably also had commercial reasons (1990: 29), but the highlighting of the political message was clearly a sign of Anne-Marie Nzié’s position as a supporter of the state and the ruling party. Taking her position as a famous symbol of Cameroon as well as her position as an employee of the state into account, the song “Liberté” has to be interpreted not only as a message of solidarity to a Cameroonian nation, but also as a legitimation of the system and the party in power.

The message of liberty and freedom conveyed by the song is expressed not only in the lyrics but in the music as well. In its recorded version of 1984, the song borrows features of the popular reggae genre. Reggae, originating in Jamaica in the 1970s, was from the very beginning of its international dissemination associated with the religious movement of Rastafari and a quest for freedom and liberty for all peoples of the world. Reggae was associated with the celebration of ‘Africanness’ and pan-African solidarity and as such was greeted with great enthusiasm by the youth all over the African continent (see e.g. Savishinsky 1994). This was also the case in Cameroon. In 1981, the state-owned newspaper Cameroon Tribune, which seldom reported on popular music matters, stated that “reggae was gaining ground” in the country (Nfokolong 1981). The choice of reggae as the genre for the song “Liberté” is consistent and comprehensible: it conveys implicitly the quest for liberty and freedom that at that time was communicated by no other musical style in a comparable way.

Musically, the song is kept at a slow reggae tempo, allowing the message of the lyrics room in the foreground. The song’s instrumentation is that of a typical orchestra of the time: a prominent rhythmic bass guitar and electrical piano, drums and percussion and a chorus that provide a background for the dominant solo voice of Anne-Marie Nzié. The verses and parts of the refrain are sung solo by Nzié, mixed chorus joining in during the words “Liberté” and the closing “merci” of the refrain, thereby musically accentuating these words as essential messages (see transcription of the refrain in Figure 3). In the second and third verse, Anne-Marie Nzié’s singing style changes in comparison to the melodic form of the first verse, introducing a spoken speech mode reminiscent of an honorific political speech, the addressed audience being the people of Cameroon. At a slow tempo of around 86 bpm, the organ chords mark the typical reggae off-beat phrasing, while bass drum, bell as well as bass guitar patterns accentuate the third beat, as is common for many reggae songs. Generally, the reggae feeling and

Liberté

1984

Anne-Marie Nzié

Tempo: 86 bpm

Voice

Voice

Electric Bass

Electric Piano

Bells

Bass Drum

Electric Piano (Chords)

Vo.

Vo.

El. B.

El. Pno.

Be.

B. Dr.

Be.

F F F F F F F F C C C C

G d7 F C

C C C C G G G G G G G F C

Figure 3. Transcription of the refrain of the song “Liberté”, transcribed by author from the recording on the LP *Liberté* (Ebobolo Fia, 1984).

the accentuated lyrics highlight the political message of freedom for the Cameroonian nation in a tumultuous time. Furthermore and most importantly, the song provides an easy to remember refrain melody that facilitates its use in political marches as was the case in the early 1990s. This will be discussed further below.

When first released, the song attracted little attention, according to Ndachi Tagne, probably due to the poor recording quality (1990: 186). It was only in the early 1990s with its instrumentalisation as a political symbol that it acquired a permanent place in Cameroonian national sentiment. But before discussing these later incidents, some comments on the developments of popular music in the 1980s will be of interest.

Popular music in the 1980s: bikutsi as state music

Musically, the 1980s saw the emergence of a novelty in the national field of cultural expression in Cameroon. The popular music genre *bikutsi*, which is associated with the Beti-Fang ethnic groups, gained popularity. A number of other local popular music genres had already emerged during the 1970s, and many musicians and orchestras playing this music performed regularly in the cities of the country, among them *Les Black Styls*, *André-Marie Tala*, *Francois Misse Ngoh* and *Les Vétérans*. As Cameroon's first musical export, *makossa* had made its way to the United States with the jazz piece “*Soul Makossa*” by the Cameroonian saxophonist *Manu Dibango* (Dibango 1989). This international attention also led to the increased popularity of *makossa* in Cameroon. People danced to local popular music, like *tchamassi*, *ambassa bey* or *assiko*, to Nigerian *highlife* and American soul music by *James Brown* or *The Jackson Five*. Then, starting in the early 1980s, *bikutsi* gained commercial ground on the national music scene. As music of the Beti people of southern Cameroon, of which the President himself was a member, the genre quickly became associated with the governing regime.

Although *Anne-Marie Nzié* was never a central figure in the *bikutsi* scene, she has sometimes been referred to as a *bikutsi* singer. She started to introduce *bikutsi* into her musical work shortly after it emerged on the music scene in Yaoundé in the 1970s, a development that can be heard on the album “*Liberté*”. *Nzié*'s move towards *bikutsi* can be explained on the one hand with her close connection to the local traditions of her region of birth. On the other hand, the political appropriation and support of *bikutsi* by the President could well have been a reason too. In a special feature on *bikutsi* stars in the state-owned newspaper *Cameroon Tribune* in 1990, *Anne-Marie Nzié* was not mentioned and thus put outside the main circle of *bikutsi* musicians. But she was nevertheless associated with this musical genre, again, due to her close relation to the postcolonial political authorities. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, *bikutsi* was to a large extent a symbol for the reigning political elites, dominated by people from the Beti-Fang ethnic groups.

The 1980s saw the development of an increasing awareness of ethnic and regional belonging, accompanied by struggles over political power, financial resources and symbolic representation. This led, especially in Yaoundé, to public protests and violent conflicts in the early 1990s in which the ethnic tensions already noticeable in the decade before came to the fore. As mentioned, due to the increasing lack of financial resources

in the wake of the economic crisis, the postcolonial state could not guarantee to the same extent as before what Mbembe called “allocations”, financial rewards and wages, to all Cameroonians (2000: 74-77). More and more the distribution of the state’s resources became based on ethnic affiliation, as “transfers” in compliance with traditional forms of social responsibility. With an ethnic Beti in power, the Beti ethnic groups were – in the eyes of the rest of the country – privileged. The main groups struggling against this political power and for a different distribution of state resources were the Bamiléké and Anglophone Cameroonians, who had significant economic power but felt politically discriminated against and underrepresented. This struggle was not, as so often argued, a call for a more democratic society. Rather, in the logic of the postcolonial state, it called for a different distribution of the resources, for a state that cared for all its citizens and for a new order within the state (Mbembe 2001: 77). In short, the country was roughly divided into pro and anti-government factions, and these poles became visible in the popular music of the late 1980s.

The two dominant popular music genres, makossa and bikutsi, point to the two opposing political positions.⁷ The open or covert support of bikutsi musicians by leading political authorities and the general rise in the number of recordings and especially media coverage of bikutsi led to increasing dissatisfaction on the side of makossa musicians and fans who felt neglected and disadvantaged (Owona 1995). The conflicts between musicians and fans of the two musical genres intensified in the late 1980s and culminated in a violent incident during a large concert in Douala in December 1990, when the bikutsi singer Nkodo Si-Tony was beaten by concert visitors. To be for or against bikutsi was to be for or against the government, Owona calling the factions “bikutsiphiles” and “bikutsiphobes” (Owona 1995: 237). Popular music then, was at the heart of the struggle over meanings, resources and political power in postcolonial Cameroon that dominated the early 1990s.

Contested “Liberté”

In 1990, President Paul Biya grudgingly introduced a multiparty-system in Cameroon. The subsequent election campaigns in 1992 were accompanied by open accusations of fraud and riots, again along ethnic and regional lines. The first opposition party SDF (Social Democratic Front), headed by a politician from the anglophone region of Cameroon, even boycotted the election (Konings 2002; Nyamnjoh 2005; Monga 2000). One of the main sites of conflict in the early 1990s was the University of Yaoundé, located in the heart of Beti land and at the time the only university of the country. It was overcrowded with students from all over Cameroon, and the financial crisis led to delays in the payment of scholarships and stopped investments in necessary equipment. The political debates did not pass unnoticed and students formed political groups along ethnic and regional lines. Beti student groups supported the President and referred

⁷ For further information on the development of these genres and the relevant musicians see Noah (2004; 2010).

to oppositional students as intruders; student groups in the opposition argued for political change and accused the Beti students of domination. Next to protest marches and campaigns, violence dominated university life from 1990 to 1996 (Konings 2002).

In this situation of open opposition to the ruling government, popular music not only served as a symbol for one or the other side, as witnessed in the bikutsi/makossa rivalry; it was further a means to publicly protest and declare political opinions. Songs served as a popular means to express discontent at protest marches, during campaigns and gatherings. Some popular songs were sung unchanged, some with different lyrics and some were especially composed for the purpose.⁸ One of these songs was Anne-Marie Nzié’s “Liberté”. Konings mentions one specific occasion when “Liberté” was sung in 1991: “On May 4 [1991], Parliament held a meeting approved by the chancellor at the university sports complex. An estimated crowd of twenty-five thousand students attended this meeting chanting the popular freedom song of the famous Cameroonian singer Anne-Marie Ndze [sic]”⁹ (Konings 2002: 191). Opponents to Paul Biya’s regime had thus already appropriated the song at the beginning of the protests. While the melody, simple-structured and easy to be sung by a crowd while marching, was kept, the lyrics were altered, highlighting the oppositional message:

<i>Liberté-é-é</i>	Liberty
<i>Au revoir</i>	Good bye
<i>Paul Biya</i>	Paul Biya
<i>Nous sommes libres</i>	We are free
<i>Va -t-en</i> ¹⁰	Off you go

The song thus became an explicitly political message directed against the ruling government and President Paul Biya. In 1992 the opposition party SDF used the song “Liberté” (presumably in the original version) in their presidential election campaign, although without asking Anne-Marie Nzié’s permission (Modo 1995). With this move, the song became a contested symbol of political meaning.

To use this song as means to support a political message against the ruling regime of Paul Biya was a strategically subtle move by the opposition. The core message of the song suited the message of the opposition perfectly, that is, a Cameroon for everyone, a solidarity nation and more political participation for all relevant groups in the country. This message was underlined by the lyrics, reminding people of the joint struggles and suffering during colonial times, as well as the overall message to be and remain free – from any repressing power. At first glance, then, the use of the song “Liberté” in a political campaign was simply a pragmatic move to make a political statement in music. At second glance, it additionally claimed that music that was known and

⁸ Martin, for example, mentions a song by Marie Archangelo de Moneco (Martin 2004: 9).

⁹ This spelling used by Konings is one of several variations used for Anne-Marie Nzié in Cameroon. “Nzie” and “Ndzié” are also common. For this article, I chose the variant “Nzie” as it is used both on the CD release from 1999 and on the LP “Liberté”.

¹⁰ I thank Jean-Maurice Noah for this information. Translation by author.

acknowledged nation-wide – especially by a singer living off the state's resources – belonged to everyone in the nation, could be used and sung by everybody. However, the circumstances do not correspond to such a simple interpretation. With the close relationship between Nzié and the government in mind and her specific position as nationally supported and supporting artist within the postcolonial state, the use of this song by members of the opposition was especially delicate and at the same time particularly efficient for communicating their message.

In the 1990s, Anne-Marie Nzié had long been a renowned Cameroonian singer, had regularly presented the Cameroonian nation at international events, and continued to be active with the national orchestra that in some way figured as the musical representation of the state. She was represented and perceived as an artist of national relevance, declared by the state and by herself as an artist for the Cameroonian nation, for “all” Cameroonians. Nevertheless, her proximity to the ruling powers and the ethnic group of the President was well known. Against this backdrop, the liberty sung about in the song “Liberté” was the liberty to share in her own beliefs. She argued herself in the course of the ensuing discussion that the song was about and for the people supporting the postcolonial potentate, the specific postcolonial state system she worked for, and not for those struggling for a different political order. It was a different form of liberty that Nzié sang about than the one the governments' opponents were fighting for. Although she sings about liberty for everyone and national solidarity, through her political position, the song acquires an implicit bias towards the ruling powers. To use the song in an oppositional campaign, then, made this bias all the more obvious – presumably deliberately. It demonstrated the possibility of a different form of ‘liberté’, one including all Cameroonians, one applying to a different vision of the Cameroonian nation, one of different national solidarity, one of a country wherein the participation of all groups and individuals was possible to the same extent. In other words, using the song contrary to the singer's convictions, but within national political arena, publicly claimed the liberty the song hails as valid for all Cameroonians, including and especially those opposing to the government.

Using this song about liberty and the unity of the Cameroon nation in an oppositional context was thus an easy and effectual means to radically and publicly criticise the notion and perception of the ruling party as representing the whole Cameroonian nation. Beyond the level of the singer's convictions, it was a statement addressed at the government and President Paul Biya. Contrary to what was commonly presented as a nation ‘united in difference’, a common rhetorical phrase of the governmental authorities, and a President for all citizens, the oppositional use of the song “Liberté” pointed implicitly to the fact that the government did not care equally for everyone in the nation. Rather, the liberty, the freedom, the independence sung about in the song excluded those critical of the government.

In answer to the implications of the appropriation of the song by the oppositional SDF party, Anne-Marie Nzié felt the need to claim back vocally her work for her own convictions. The singer publicly protested against the use of her song; she appeared

on TV and stated explicitly that the song “Liberté” belonged to the party in power, the CPDM, and its leader President Paul Biya. This statement made the song an explicit supporting pillar of the government, almost ten years after its release and thirty years after its composition as a religious song. It consolidated the existing but subconscious notion of the song as a hymn to the existing postcolonial system rather than of liberty as such. Until then, the song had not been explicitly political, its lyrics passed as a mere celebration of independence with a neutral political position, sung by a well-known singer. But the clear and open resistance against the state authorities and the misuse, in the eyes of Anne-Marie Nzié, of her song forced her to explicitly state her political opinion and reveal her notion of the state as rightly governed by the President in power. By publicly dedicating the song to the ruling party, she inscribed her specific political interpretation of the song and reclaimed it for her own personal convictions. Until that time, Anne-Marie Nzié could have passed as politically more or less neutral, as a loyal citizen of the postcolonial state, but not necessarily supportive of any political party. With the postcolonial state no longer equated to just one political party, the need to position oneself politically arose, especially for musicians of national popularity like Anne-Marie Nzié.

Conclusion

To quote Nyamnjoh and Fokwang, “much remains to be known about the relationship between music and politics, and on how musicians, politicians and political communities all strive to appropriate each other in different ways and contexts” (2005: 253). The life and career of Anne-Marie Nzié described in this article are but one example of a specific political situation in which music and musicians are often overlooked. An individual musician and a postcolonial state can establish a particular type of relationship of reciprocal benefit, specific within the postcolonial political realities as described by theorist Achille Mbembe (2001). In other words, Anne-Marie Nzié’s case shows how an individual musician can become intertwined with the postcolonial state. All her life, Anne-Marie Nzié met her obligations towards her community and the state, she performed what could be seen as her duty as a postcolonial citizen, by relating musically to the cultural consciousness of a Cameroonian nation. In exchange, Anne-Marie Nzié received financial support and patronage, solicited and granted within the framework of a postcolonial state conceived of as a distributor of resources. Anne-Marie Nzié’s position towards the government made the appropriation of one of her songs especially attractive for the opposition. Of limited popularity until that time, the song “Liberté” became a contested symbol in the public and violent protests against the President in the 1990s. With the song’s main message of national solidarity, including its reference to the bloody road to independence, using it in contexts opposed to the ruling power pointed to the government’s exclusion of some Cameroonians from the “liberté” promised to all, a political matter that came to the surface with these protests. With the song, members of the opposition claimed the liberty, the freedom and the Cameroonian nation for all Cameroonians. Additionally, the use of the song against the will of the

singer openly contested her image as a “national” musical figure. What becomes evident is that musicians and their work in postcolonial settings have a specific power not only of resistance, but also in support of the ruling elites. It is evident that musical performance and musicians as postcolonial citizens are an integral part of specific situations of domination, of power hierarchies, and the distribution of resources.

Anne-Marie Nzié still performs at official occasions and with the national orchestra. She gained international attention in Western Europe after performing at the Angoulême Festival in France in 1998. In the same year, she re-recorded some of her songs for a CD that was released in 1999 with the French firm Label Bleu. In the liner notes she is presented as “the fetish singer of several generations of Cameroonians” and as an “undying legend of urban African music” (Tenaille 1999). In 2013, Anne-Marie Nzié lives in a house in Yaoundé provided by the government. Her loyalty to and support of the government became, as mentioned above, evident again in 2008 with the public celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the beginning of her career. Since then, Anne-Marie Nzié has, despite her age, appeared in public on occasion, for example for the celebration of the 50th anniversary of independence in 2010. Wrapped in a Cameroonian flag, she sang the song “Liberté”. It remains a powerful hymn for postcolonial Cameroon.

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