

Lapiro de Mbanga and Political Vision in Contemporary Cameroon

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Abstract

This paper sets out to articulate the resilience and efficacy of popular songs as overt political texts and to examine the thematic and literary undercurrents that have transformed popular songs into rallying forces for dissonant discourse within Cameroon's contemporary political history. I wish to posit that the politically conscious and the ideologically committed Lapiro De Mbanga has, through his songs said what only a few diehards dared to say in some of the darkest hours of Cameroon history. His songs also reinforce the point that Oral literature provides a rich commentary on what is taking place in society. The paper thus reinforces the argument that while Western Oral literature might become antiquated, African Oral literature is alive, vibrant, well and dynamic. Consequently, while the critical edge of Western Oral literature might have been blunted by history, African Oral literature retains its contestative nature and is concerned with both private and public criticism.

Key words: Political vision, popular song, oral literature.

Introduction

The poet speaks not for himself but for his fellow men. His cry is their cry, which only he can utter. That is what gives it its depth. But if he is able to speak for them, he must suffer with them, fight with them, work with them and rejoice with them (Thompson, 1946).

This paper sets out to articulate the resilience and efficacy of popular songs as overt political texts and to examine the thematic and literary undercurrents that have transformed popular songs into rallying forces for dissonant discourse within Cameroon's contemporary political history.

The popular song is an integral part of Oral literature and, as the Italian Marxist Sociologist, Luigi Lombardi-Satriani aptly points out, Oral literature, as folklore,

...actively contests the hegemony of dominant social orders...folklore has the capacity for direct contestation; that is, it can directly symbolise and "name" the class enemy in the manner of political jokes and protest songs. (Limon 45-46)

Thus, for Lombardi-Satriani oral literature plays a vital role as a counter hegemonic activity. That is, it attacks individuals, communities or institutions. However, while Lombardi-Satriani presents oral literature as an inherently critical force and is optimistic about its continuity in the contemporary world, the English literary critic Frederic Jameson is less optimistic about the prospects of oral literature and, consequently, critical ideological possibilities. According to this pessimistic scholar, oral literature has only a marginal and problematic existence in today's world. He goes on to argue that

The popular and folk arts reflected and were dependent for their production on quite different social realities. They were the organic expression of so many distinct social communities or caste, such as the peasant village, the court, the medieval town, the polis, and even the classical bourgeoisie when it was still a unified social group with its own cultural specificity. Advanced capitalism, however, has induced folklore's decline, not by attacking the expression itself but by dissolving, fragmenting, and atomising its nutritive social contexts by way of corrosive action of universal commodification and the market system. (Limon, 40)

For Jameson then, Oral literature is obsolete and if remnants of it exist at all today it will be under marginalized and in declining conditions.

I cannot deny the fact that the reorganization of social and economic relationships in the modern world has adversely affected the prospects of Oral literature. Nevertheless, it will be wrong to hold as Jameson has done that Oral literature is a fossilized form of a primitive past of a people's culture. In this paper therefore, I intend to argue from the premise that while Western Oral literature might have been antiquated, African oral literature is alive, well, vibrant and dynamic. Consequently, while the critical edge of Western Oral literature might have been blunted by history, African Oral literature retains its contestative nature and is concerned with both private and public criticism.

The contemporary Cameroonian Society is heterogeneous with no unified body of forms and with no clear-cut expectations from its members. Hence the artist finds that he has to transcend his immediate cultural environment to embrace the new concept of the nation. He also finds to his eternal chagrin that urbanisation is threatening the traditional life styles which sustain Oral literature. Above all, he discovers that the disregard for normative order has moved from a "micro: inter-personal level to a macro: individual versus community bases". What all this means is that the present requires a new artistic sensibility and a new medium. Ngara (1985, p.29) points out:

The dynamics of political struggles and social change effect the content and form of works of art so that if we are to understand fully and appreciate the rise, development, concerns and styles of literature of a nation we must see that literature in relation to history and struggles of its people, and in relation to the various ideologies that issue from socio-economic conditions.

Thus, the artist who in traditional society was essentially preoccupied with local events is in contemporary context concerned with wider subjects which reflect the important issues of the day. As a result, his level of social criticism has to change from private to public. His method also has to change from indirect to direct contestation. Above all, he has to adopt songs as a vehicle for analysing and commenting upon contemporary life and the socio-political relationships it has engendered. This is so because songs, especially the more politically oriented ones are seen by the masses as an effective means of expression to air out their ideas, opinions and impressions as well as their grievances both on different private and public occasions.

In the early 1960s the construction of protest discourse became a dangerous undertaking in Cameroon as freedom of expression was systematically stifled by the oppressive regime in place. Journalists who tried to protest against the repressive and vindictive tendencies to the political authority were arbitrarily detained and tortured. Critical civil servants who refused to be muzzled were summarily jailed.

The radio which was the most important medium for disseminating information became a sensitive political channel and presenters were careful to avoid any political representation that could be interpreted as an attack on the political authority.

Under such conditions of fear and apprehension, Cameroonians were constrained to choose the path of least resistance. They handed over critical comment to the popular singer whom they see as a political commentator and the outspoken voice of the voiceless majority. Their action is understandable and is based on the old adage that a public starved of critical self expression would normally look for appropriate public icons in which to anchor their repressed emotions.

The popular singer himself sees his primordial role as the liberation of Cameroonians from the tyranny of an "irresponsible and insensitive" government and his songs as powerful metaphors of popular music which is a hybrid of western instrumentation and local rhythms and lyrics. This music is enjoyed by both higher and lower classes. Its wide reach and particularly its grassroots appeal make it a powerful medium for political activism.

The importance of popular music as a powerful and flexible vehicle for political communication explains why the landscape of popular music in Cameroon is vast and is peopled by such popular musicians as Petit Pays, Longe Longe, Saint Bruno, Lapiro de Mbanga, and Prophet Afo Akom etc. But, for purposes of this paper, I will limit my analysis to one artist, Lambo Pierre Roger Sandjo otherwise known as Lapiro de Mbanga who, to my mind is not only a highly acerbic critic and articulate commentator but also one of the most eloquent, the most prolific and, therefore the most representative of popular musicians in contemporary Cameroon.

The acronym Lapiro is an abbreviation of his names: La (Lambo) Pi (Pierre) and Ro (Roger) which he caps off with Mbanga in order to identify with his place of birth. In an interview with The Sun newspaper, Lapiro intimated that he was born in Mbanga in 1957 of mixed parentage:

My mother is from Douala/Aboh. Aboh covers Miang, Mbanssen Bonalea (which is the district headquarters). My father is from Bametcha in Bangoua Sub-Division, Nde Division in the West

Province of Cameroon. Two of them met here in Mbanga and I don't know what happened. (9, 17 June 2007)

In spite of his rich and comfortable background, Lapiro alias Ndingaman drifted into delinquency in his early life. He made friends with street urchins and together they engaged in pick pocketing and other petty crimes. Like most juvenile delinquents in urban setting, his misdemeanours landed him in prison. The time he spent behind bars gave him the singular opportunity to experience at first hand the deplorable and precarious living conditions of the wretched of the earth. It is therefore not surprising that when he took to popular music in later life, his major concern was with the plight of the down trodden. His songs celebrate the resilience while exposing the rapacity and voracity of authority figures.

Lapiro's artistic fold rest on two solid foundations. The first is the thematic preoccupation which encompasses such burning issues as national integration, galloping unemployment, abject poverty, ethnocentric marginalisation, economic exploitation and, of course, political chicanery. The second is his medium of expression which is commonly known as "Mboko talk", a strange linguistic concoction of Douala, English, French and Pidgin English spiced with his own coinages and neologisms.

The wind of democratic change which swept through the African continent in 1990 ushered into Cameroon a new political era governed by the rule of law. It also helped to shape Lapiro's musical agenda by creating a favourable socio-political context in which he launched his masterpiece selling album, "Mimba We".

Lapiro reached the apogee of his music career in 1992 as one of the principal proponents and spearheads of the famous "Operation Ghost Town". The turbulence and imbroglio which characterised that political activism helped to propel Lapiro into Cameroon's music hall of fame.

Then suddenly and inexplicably, the virulent and vitriolic voice of the fearless and intrepid Lapiro de Mbanga went silent. His fans comprising the deprived and politically endangered could not understand what was happening. Had their cynosure ran out of steam or out of inspiration? Had he been bought over or better still, had he overstepped the bounds of political decorum and became the unwitting victim of executive censorship? In other words, had he taken too much for the owner to notice?

Whatever the case, it did not take long for his votaries to know that their idol has committed the monumental political error of publicly endorsing the regime of President Paul Biya, a regime which to them was made up of predators who encouraged widespread injustice and acquisition of ill-gotten wealth under the veneer of peace and political order. They immediately censored him by boycotting his public performances and forcing him into a precipitous artistic limbo where he vegetated for almost a decade.

He resurfaced on the popular musical scene around 2001 with the same flair and ardour only to discover that he has lost his popular appeal. His "little people" of Nkoululu, Mokolo, and Marche Central (some of the most popular places for the unemployed) no longer believed in him.

Lapiro retreated to his hometown of Mbanga where he found refuge and time to chew the cud. About seventeen years after, and in retrospect, he tries to defend himself:

I am the only one and nobody else, who started pointing and criticising the government actions vis-à-vis the population. This gave me the stature of a politician even though a singer. Everyone knows what transpired in 1990-1992 and the story of Lapiro and all the talk that Biya and Fochive (the then director of secret police) gave me money to change my position. Seventeen years later, the truth is here. Do you think that if I was a traitor the people of Mbanga could have made me their chief? I am not a chief because my father was a chief. I am not a chief because Biya and his government decided to make me chief. I am a chief because the people of Mbanga chose me to be their chief. (9)

Apart from music, Lapiro de Mbanga has other preoccupations. He is a traditional ruler and a politician who campaigned for the position of the Mayor of Mbanga on opposition Social Democratic Front (S.D.F) in the municipal elections of 22 July 2007 in Cameroon but he unfortunately lost the position to the ruling Cameroon Peoples Democratic Party (CPDM). As he puts it, the people of Mbanga have confidence in him because of what he has done for them:

I am a singer, musician, composer and arranger... the people of Mbanga, especially those of Quarter 12 decided to make me chief. This was a sort of recognition for all that I have done to bring out the name of Mbanga at the international level. It was also due to my character. They know that I am simple, no superiority complex, I mix freely, we do everything together because a leader has to be of the people, among the people, with the people and not out of the people. (9)

That explains why the nascent politician acts according to the dictates of the people:

Who am I to go against the will of the people? In history you know what befell those who went against the will of the people. It is better for me to be with the people. I don't want that people point fingers at my children saying "look at the children of stupid Lapiro de Mbanga who knew people, he had relations but refused to help his people. (9)

It is worth noting that Lapiro de Mbanga was arrested in his hometown of Mbanga on 9 April 2008, accused of instigating mass demonstrations and strikes against the high cost of living, skyrocketing fuel prices and inflation which took place at the end of February. However, according to local press reports, many people believe his arrest was in fact linked to a song he wrote entitled "Constipated Constitution" which warns President Paul Biya of the dangers of a controversial constitutional amendment. The Constitutional Amendment Bill, which was adopted on April 10, 2008, allows an unlimited number of presidential mandates, as well as granting the president immunity for any acts committed while in office. President Paul Biya who took over from his predecessor Amadou Ahidjo in 1982 is seventy-five years and has been in office for twenty-six years. According to The Post newspaper,

...the government was in panic after adopting the constitution to give Paul Biya life presidency, which he [Lapiro] is against. He said he has been very vocal about the issue because he fears nobody when criticizing issues of the nation because it is for posterity. (4, 18 April 2008)

I will now turn my attention to what has raised Lapiro de Mbanga to the status of celebrity. I will use excerpts from "Mimba We", the album that brought him to public notice to illustrate my point.

The very title "Mimba We" is pregnant with meaning. Firstly, it is a clarion call on the political vultures, that is, those who HAVE to remember those who do not have when it comes to sharing of the national cake. Secondly, it is a reminder that an important segment of Cameroonian population has been marginalised, rejected and ignored by a privileged minority. Thirdly, it is an open recognition of the fact that those who wield political power in Cameroon cannot provide opportunities for individual and collective fulfilment. Finally, the title, "Mimba We" points to the true subject of the song which is not simply political corruption but the corrupting power of privilege, position and money.

Lapiro elaborates on the above subjects in the following line. I will try to give an approximate translation of the English version of the excerpts.

Solo: You wan damé you mimba wi
 You wan sulé you mimba wi
 You wan motu you mimba wi oh,

Chorus: Oh- Mimba we ooo-
 Ooh mimba we

Solo: When you are eating you should remember Us
 When you are drinking you should remember Us
 When you are sleeping you should remember Us

Chorus: Oh! Remember Us
 Oh! Remember Us

After appealing to those in power not to forget the down trodden, he goes further to allude to the dilemma of the underprivileged who lack the basic necessities of life but who do not want to use unorthodox means to obtain them:

Solo: Wi nɔ wan kik oh
 Wi nɔ wan go for ngata
 Wi de da sɔ for ndengwe
 A beg mimba we ooh-yes.

Chorus: Wi nɔ wan problem para
 Wi nɔ wan go for ndengi
 Wi di fine da sɔ garri

For helep wi own family ooh

Solo: We don't want to be thieves
 We don't want to be imprisoned
 We are barely surviving
 Please, remember us ooh!

Chorus: We don't want to become pick-pockets
 We are only looking for garri (cassava food) to sustain our own Families.

Like most radicals, Lapiro is anxious to know whether the people on whose behalf he is fighting are solidly behind him. So, he poses the question:

Solo: Nkoululu a wan talk
 Mokolo a wan gi dictée
 Marché central, a go trowé he he
 Sauveteur a chakara?

Solo: Nkoululu, I want to speak to you
 Mokolo, I want to give you dictation
 The central market, I want to send a message to you
 All the unemployed (taxi drivers, truck pushers, petit traders)
 Should I break everything down?

The reply is resoundingly affirmative:

Chorus: Go bifo go bifo, go bifo
 Motion, motion, motion
 Ndinga man no owa
 All complice dem dey for you back tara.

Chorus: Go ahead go ahead, go ahead
 Motion, motion, motion
 Ndinga man (Lapiro) cannot be afraid of anybody
 Everybody is prepared to throw his weight behind you.

With the support and encouragement of the masses, Lapiro plunges into a full diatribe against the excesses of the government:

Solo: O.K Mola, no be da so for secteur
 For Peter Botha wey i bad eh
 Moyen no de for Ngola
 Répé for side for ito don beke
 Yes, Jacques Chirac for Ngola
 Don comot corrige for ultimatum.
 Yi say, ma own pipi must dame sipun
 E, he
 Yi say sauveteur dem must nyung
 Dem di bumbla ma complice dem sai bai sai
 Na dem that for Mboukou

Damé no dey
 Mburu for pay location sep, nating
 Ngiri don make rémé ana njanga dem do dry
 Like echantillon for Ethiopia.
 A man, sauveteur na boulouh wey
 i no get compression de personné,
 Sauvetage na boulouh wey i get rétraite anticipé
 For we own boulouh for sauvetage
 Dem no di ask man diplome
 And cinq ans d` experience
 For sauvatege, il n`ya pas de concours,
 Ehe, lef me a truwe francais, I don bad.
 Wi wey wi noba get ntong for go sukul
 For sai for Ngoaekélé,
 Na for sauvetage wi di fine wi own garri.

Solo: It is not only in Peter Botha`s country (South Africa during Apartheid)
 That things are not alright.
 There is nothing in Ngola (Yaounde, capital of Cameroon)
 The occupant of Ngola, Jacques Chirac (meaning Paul Biya)
 Has come out and said Cameroonians must eat spoons
 He says the unemployed must die.
 All these neglected people who are friends are everywhere
 And have nothing to eat.
 Even something to buy second handed cloths is not there.
 This situation has made our parents, sisters, brothers and children
 Not to be different from the hungry-ridden Ethiopians.
 Petit trading, truck-pushing etc.
 Do not require any competitive examination
 In the recruitment of personnel.
 They do not have any anticipated retirement.
 This type of jobs do not require a certificate
 And five years of experience.
 In this sector, there is no competitive examination.
 Eheh! Let me speak French, it is terrible.
 Those of us who did not have the opportunity
 To study in Ngoakele (where Yaounde University is located),
 We can only have our own garri through
 This petit trading, taxi driving, truck pushing etc.

The above excerpts not only reflects Lapiro`s intense disillusionment with the way things have gone, It is also a serious indictment of post-colonial Cameroon

After castigating the calculated ruthlessness, brazen selfishness and blatant unscrupulousness of the rulers, the musician turns his artistic searchlight on the economic crisis, a cancer worm which is eating deep into the fabric of the Cameroonian society.

Solo: Fo dis heure for austerité so, a man,
 For this heure wey cinq no mus change position
 Yes, austérité da bi say dolla no mus change foot,
 Wusai wi own espoir de no?
 Mi a di mimba say na time dis wey all man
 Must ndéngwe for yi own secteur,
 For say we bumbla dan crise économique
 We I don put all man a génou.

Solo: In this world where a franc cannot change its position,
 Where is our hope?
 I feel that time has come for all
 Sectors to come together
 And fight this economic crisis.

Contrary to the artist's hope that Cameroonians will join hands to fight the economic crisis, private greed and societal apathy appear to be gaining ground.

Finally, Lapiro dwells on the controversial issue of national integration:

Solo: Intégration nationale na weti noh?
 Na say de mus rata ara pipi?
 Or na say all we must put hand
 Say make we helep wi own don grand
 For Etoudi for boulouh?
 Yes or no, if you get da so na bacalo-licence oh
 You go boulouh for wusai?

Solo: What is National Integration?
 Does it mean that the less privileged are rejected?
 Or does it mean that everybody must go to Etoudi (Presidential
 Palace in Cameroon) and look for jobs?
 Yes, even if one has all the necessary certificates that qualify him,
 Where and how is he going to have a job?

The rhetorical questions raised by Lapiro in the above excerpts clarify certain pertinent concepts. Instead of consolidating national unity and giving the people a sense of identity, the so- called national integration has set off a degenerative process: freedom has become corruption and democracy has collapsed into autocracy.

Lapiro concludes his fiery and scathing crusade against the cynicism and apathy of corrupt political officials by reiterating his concern with the tendency of the people in power to forget the people they govern.

Solo: D`ailleurs sef njo pajero; and njo Mercedes yi don bolle for outside.
 So no, a man, wi di beg da so:
 Wi taximan dem,

Wi sauveteur dem,
 Wi pipi fo chuk head,
 Réme no dey, répe no dey,
 Lef wi, wi helep wi own sikin.
 Oh mimba wi ooh, oh mimba wi ooh, tara.

Solo: After all, there are no longer free Pajero and Mercedes cars (for government officials).
 So we are just begging:
 We taxi men,
 We the unemployed,
 We struggling people,
 With neither mothers nor fathers,
 Permit us to help ourselves.
 Oh remember Us, remember Us.

In “Mimba we” then, Lapiro identifies the basic problems which are responsible for the deplorable state of affairs in Cameroon. They are, the lack of an adequate moral and the ethical monitoring yardstick for actions of people in politics, the corrupting influence of power and privilege, unbridled materialism, and the lack of political vision and social consciousness on the part of the leaders. He rounds off his song by advocating that the leaders of Cameroon must always consider the needs and aspirations of their citizens.

The message encoded by Lapiro in “Mimba We” can only be decoded within the context because of the peculiar language he uses. He also uses such poetic and artistic devices as alliteration, assonance, and parallelism which unite with appropriate music and gesture to create pleasurable effects and to leave lasting impressions on the minds of the listeners.

Since the meaning of the song may not be immediately understood by everybody, some listeners may need to go home and reflect on the texts. This homework though tedious is indispensable for a better appreciation of the song. For, as, Isidore Okpewho reminds us,

Some song texts also contain some archaic words, and words whose meaning may not be immediately intelligible. Whether these words are understood or not they are integral to the total linguistic vocabulary of the people. Scholars should therefore be careful in thinking that these words are ‘meaningless’ or incorrect grammar. (225)

For a period of close to two decades, the reformist activist and satirical Lapiro de Mbanga has successfully exploited the power of popular music especially its vast potential for bringing deviants in line with social ideals, and its tremendous appeal to the masses. His rustic wisdom has provided a cultural prism through which Cameroonians have interpreted and commented on political behaviour. His vast resources of songs collectively constitute a cultural megaphone by which the defranchised and politically endangered vicariously exercise free speech. As he himself puts it very succinctly,

People should make a distinction between multiparty politics and democracy. I think that what we have (in Cameroon) is multiparty and not democracy. Even within political parties, the assessment is the same because those with new ideas and contrary views are regarded as opposition within the house and if you insist you are dismissed. We have to accept that nobody is perfect and that we can learn from each other. We should be able to make self-judgement. For instance, if at five or ten years, you have been doing things in a certain manner with no results, you have to change to move further. (9)

In conclusion, I wish to postulate that the politically conscious and ideologically committed Lapiro de Mbanga has, through his songs said what a few diehards dared to say on some of the darkest hours of Cameroon history. His songs also reinforce the point that oral literature provides a rich commentary on what is taking place in society.

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