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# The Story of Cameroonian Cinema Toward Independence in Production

Florent Coulon

**In January 2009, the last three movie theaters in Cameroon closed their doors one after the other. Although the government had tried since 1973 to support its motion picture industry by creating a development fund, the lack of any resolute policy held back the development of a viable industry. It is against this backdrop that the author reviews the history of Cameroon's motion picture industry, which has been trapped between the production sector's economic dependence on wealthy countries and the stranglehold of foreign companies' distribution and screening networks. Over and above a small number of exemplary but rare international co-productions, however, a new generation is now using digital filmmaking equipment to gain genuine economic independence.**

**Keywords:** cinema/motion pictures, industry, Cameroon, historic, production, distribution, digital, new generation, co-production



The most striking thing about the motion picture industry in Cameroon is that conventional exhibition is now in crisis, if not finished completely. Between January 12 and 20, 2009, the last three movie theaters in the country closed down—the Abbia in Yaoundé, the Wouri in Douala, and the Empire in Bafoussam. The Cameroonian Fotso Group, who owned the buildings, decided to take action over unpaid rent from their tenants, the

French distribution and exhibition company, Ciné News Distribution. Since then, the two parties have been embroiled in a complicated legal action.<sup>1</sup>

The announcement of the closure of the entire network within the space of a week caused considerable outcry from directors, producers, and actors, who sought action from the government and local authorities. The Culture Minister, Ama Tutu Muna, announced that she would “do everything in her power to

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the subject of a Master's dissertation entitled “Les Écrans noirs du cinéma africain, enjeux de la coopération culturelle” in 2006. (florentcoulon17@yahoo.fr)

remedy the situation” (Nguibaba 2009). Two years on, there seems to be no hope of the theaters reopening. Given this situation, it may seem surprising to be looking upon movie-making in Cameroon as an industry. We will review, in detail, the economic history of the movie distribution and exhibition sectors in Cameroon in order to understand how the present crisis can be seen as a necessary period of transition toward the development of an actual Cameroonian industry since, even though there is no existing structure in place in Cameroon, a number of economic factors intrinsic to the motion picture industry are currently at play in the country.



**Abbia, the last movie theater in Yaoundé.** Here we can see the main façade of the Abbia movie theater, dubbed the “Temple of Culture,” which was closed on January 12, 2009. The Abbia was the last of eight movie theatres in Yaoundé, Cameroon. A whole constellation of micro-economies, made up of small businesses making money from people frequenting this cultural center, has disappeared since its closure. Photo by Stéphanie Dongmo, January 17, 2011.

**1** In August 2008, the Cameroonian businessman, Victor Fotso, went to court to get an eviction order on the Ciné News Distribution Company. He was claiming back rent from his tenant to the order of CFAF 27 million (about 40,000 Euros) owing on the Abbia cinema for the first six months of 2008. In September 2008, Victor

Fotso made a claim in Yaoundé’s Magistrates Court against the legal representative of the Ciné News Distribution Company, Frédéric Massin. No agreement was reached and the conflict rapidly escalated into a legal battle. The special hearing Court of Appeal judge in Douala found in favor of Ciné News

Distribution in March 2009 and again in May 2009. The Fotso Group has appealed or brought a new petition each time. The legal battle continues. **2** The Étalon d’or de Yennenga is the supreme prize at the Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO).

## The Long History of Cameroonian Cinema

Cameroon is one of the first African countries to have made a name for itself in the world of cinema. From the time of Cameroon's independence in 1960, people set about creating and directing cinematographic works, including Thérèse Sita Bella and Jean Pierre Dikonguè Pipa. In 1962, Jean-Paul Ngassa co-directed *Aventure en France* in Paris with Philippe Brunet. Although Cameroonians had begun to make movies, the first feature film shot in Cameroon, *Point de Vue No. 1*, directed by Dia Moukouri, did not appear until 1966. At the time, the French Ministry of Cooperation—which succeeded the Ministry of French Overseas Territories when African countries were declaring independence—retained its influence through development aid, which was channeled both universally and to filmmakers in particular. This helps to explain why some African countries saw national production increase very rapidly in the 1960s. According to N'Gosso and Ruelle (1983): “From 1963 to 1975, some 185 films—a mixture of features and shorts—were made in francophone Africa. About 125 of these were produced with technical and financial support from the [Ministry of] Cooperation.”

These pioneering productions led to the Cameroon government taking an interest in creating a structure for the film industry. In 1973, there were thirty-two theaters spread right across Cameroon. The government made every effort to structure the sector, and created the Film Industry Development Fund (FODIC – *Fonds du développement de l'industrie cinématographique*). This was set up to “support national film production, not only through direct financing, but also through organized and controlled ticketing. FODIC is not just about financing, it is also about logistics. The quasi-governmental company bought excellent quality filming equipment, which it made available to filmmakers” (Mollo Olinga 2008). The 1970s and 1980s were thus glory years for Cameroonian cinema, and remarkable films were produced such as *Muna Moto* by Jean-Pierre Dikonguè Pipa, who received the Golden Stallion<sup>2</sup> (Étalon d'or de Yennenga) at the Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO – *festival panafricain de cinéma et de télévision de Ouagadougou*) in 1976.

At the end of the 1970s, African filmmakers got together within the Pan African Federation of Filmmakers (FEPACI – *Fédération panafricaine des cinéastes*). This federation would meet during either of the two newly-created large African festivals, the Carthage Film Festival or FESPACO (see references on p. 123). The filmmakers denounced the fact that it was very difficult to see African productions in their countries of origin owing to the fact that it was harder to get these films accepted by distributors and exhibitors. Added to this injustice was the gradual disengagement of the French Ministry of Cooperation from 1980 and the advent of television. The national CRTV (Cameroon Radio and Television) channel began broadcasting countrywide in 1985. While the government made the decision to prioritize this new medium, FODIC's efficiency was being disrupted by a number of failures that had begun

in 1984. Bassek Ba Kobhio<sup>3</sup> was one of the directors who “benefited from the last financing from a moribund FODIC, which sunk without a trace in 1991” (Mollo Olinga 2008). The 1990s were marked by the government’s total disengagement and a growing dependence on institutional subsidies from wealthy countries.<sup>4</sup> Cameroon went through a period of crisis. Production fell and filmmakers turned to other sources for funding. At both a regional and a Pan African level, existing regulations for the development of the motion picture industry in francophone Africa were no longer applied. Only Burkina Faso, and to a lesser extent, Senegal and Mali, managed to maintain their national industries through voluntarist policies.



**The Capitol, conversion of a cinema in Yaoundé, Cameroon.** This former cinema, closed in 2003, became a furniture, domestic appliances, and electronics store. The movie posters were replaced by advertising billboards. From the outside, there is no visible sign of the site’s cultural past. Photo by Stéphanie Dongmo, Yaoundé, January 17, 2011.

**3** His first feature film, *Sango Malo (Le Maître du Canton)*, was selected for the Cannes Film Festival in the “Un Certain Regard” category in 1991.

**4** These subsidies came mainly from the French Ministry for Foreign

Affairs, the International Francophone Organization (OIF - Organisation internationale de la francophonie), and the European Union.

**5** The award-winning *Muna Moto* ended up being released in theaters

in Cameroon in 1976, but was not commercially successful. Dikongué Pipa went on to make films with the support of the newly-created FODIC: *Le Prix de la liberté* in 1978, *Canon Krak-kum* in 1981, and *Histoires drôles, drôles de gens* in 1982.

Due to the disappearance of the theaters, the main outlets for African films are now festivals and television. Cameroonian productions are not profitable enough on the traditional movie circuit, either in Africa or abroad. North-South co-productions are the only way, in this climate, of producing professionally-made feature films in Cameroon (the 2007 Jean-Pierre Bekolo film, *Les Saignantes*, is a case in point). The advent of digitalization and the growth of private television channels, however, have led to a profusion of productions. A new generation of Cameroonian filmmakers is appearing including, most notably, Joséphine Ndagnou, whose film, *Paris à tout prix*, was recorded as selling 70,000 tickets in 2008. This new generation now has to rely on alternative circuits of digital projection and on DVD and VCD sales for film production to be profitable and to compete with the Nollywood (Nigerian home video productions) invasion. Owing to the fact that there is no organized network in Cameroon, new industrial dynamics are essential. Since there are no theaters, financiers are taking a cross-disciplinary approach and drawing on all sectors.

Over and above a small number of rare international co-productions, today's new generation is making use of digital technology to gain real economic independence. An essential historical review of the period from 1960 to 2000 will provide the starting point for an analysis of, on the one hand, the production sector's economic dependence on wealthy countries and, on the other, foreign companies' stranglehold on distribution and exhibition networks.

### **The Economic Dependence of Motion Picture Production**

The *Haut-Commissariat de la République française au Cameroun* was the first motion picture shot in Cameroon just after World War I (1919). This was symbolic. It would not be until independence, as was the case for the whole of francophone Africa, that the next Cameroonian motion picture was produced. The first two films were made in Paris where young students had been training in filmmaking techniques since the middle of the 1950s. Jean Pierre Dikonguè Pipa and Alphonse Béni had studied at the Conservatoire libre du cinéma français (CLCF), while Daniel Kamwa had studied film at the Université de Paris 8-Vincennes.

Between 1963 and 1973, about fifteen short- and medium-length films were produced, mostly with financial support from the French Ministry of Cooperation and technical support from the French Cultural Centers (CCF – centres culturels français) in Yaoundé and Douala. This was the environment in which Jean Pierre Dikonguè Pipa, with an old camera and a vehicle loaned by the Yaoundé CCF, made *Muna Moto* in 1975.<sup>5</sup> The filmmaker enjoys telling the story of the financial precariousness under which the film was made (N'gonana 2008).

Dikonguè Pipa claims that he never received the funding from FODIC and, as a result, was forced to work with volunteer actors and technicians and with equipment loaned by the French Ministry of Cooperation. As he explains to Pélégie N'gonana (2008):

As far as funding was concerned, I didn't have any. I managed to scrounge money from my friends as I went along, a thousand francs here, five thousand there. And the actors and I used to go fishing or hunting so we could eat. So the money I was getting was used to buy rice and other food. This meant that sometimes we stopped shooting to go fishing or hunting. The other difficulty, which was technical, and you can even see that in the film, was that not having any money meant I had to use old-fashioned equipment. The camera was old, lying around unused for a long time at the Yaoundé French Cultural Center. They loaned it to me. The cameraman was a trained photographer and coordinator at the Douala French Cultural Center. We had an R4 to shoot with, from the same organization, and it was wrecked in the bush because the road was no good.

**The pre-programmed failure of FODIC.** The creation of FODIC by decree on October 27, 1973 was in response to a request from filmmakers to provide a framework for the industry and to promote the birth of a real motion picture industry in Cameroon. The government gave the public organization financial autonomy and FODIC's budget benefited from a special tax allowance on exhibition permits and a tax allowance on admissions. FODIC thus participated in the financing of films within a selective aid framework, and supported the construction and fitting out of theaters.

The decree specified that FODIC could become involved in three ways: "1. Granting loans for the fitting out of film theaters; 2. Guaranteeing loans provided by credit organizations to national film producers and movie theater owners; 3. Providing various forms of financial support for Cameroonian filmmakers."<sup>6</sup> FODIC had a board of directors, a management team with finance and accounts departments, and a finance committee.<sup>7</sup> Filmmakers soon realized that the government's concern was not to set up a "bank to finance an industry," but rather to tax film distributors and exhibitors, while providing a framework for national production. A graduated surcharge on ticket sales (from 5 to 17 percent) was set up in December 1977 to promote Cameroonian films.

<sup>6</sup> Extract from Article 2-2 of Decree No. 73-673 of October 27, 1973 on the creation and organization of the

*Fonds de développement de l'industrie cinématographique.*

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

This new provision, however, mainly allowed the government to increase its revenues from motion picture exhibition, and FODIC soon collapsed amidst accusations of misappropriation of public money leveled at the filmmakers. FODIC's loan and loan guarantee mechanism meant that producers (a role often assumed by filmmakers themselves) were not able to repay contracted loans within the required two years. The system required that 40 percent of the ticket price should be returned to the government and 30 percent, to the distributor. Statistically, only 30 percent went back to the producer. If the motion picture did not make any profit in the national market, the producer could not meet the repayment deadlines in this system because the revenue from showing the film abroad would arrive too late. FODIC's influence was therefore quite limited, since the organization's role had not been clearly established when it was created. This meant that the public servants involved were accorded enormous scope and they under-insured its running. Suspicions of corruption and embezzlement, which were backed up by statements from filmmakers, discredited FODIC and the organization never recovered.

FODIC was involved, however, in the production of about twenty feature films. The screenplay of *Pousse-Pousse*, which was produced and directed by Daniel Kamwa in 1975, received the Grand Prize from the Agency for Cultural and Technical Cooperation (Agence de coopération culturelle et technique). It sold more than a million tickets throughout the whole of francophone Africa. This was an incontrovertible economic success story but, unfortunately, it proved to be an exception to the rule.

In the 1980s, France, which for a long time had been the leading funder of African cinema, substantially reduced its aid allocation to film production. There was still direct aid available for production, but this was to be used for post-production carried out in France and paid for French technicians hired for the production, and for technical and laboratory costs. This forced African filmmakers to complete production of their films in France. The expenditure, therefore, benefited French professionals and the subsidy was fed directly back into the French film industry. "This situation repeatedly provoked outrage from African filmmakers, especially from the Malian, Cheick Oumar Sissoko. For him, this provision restricted the chances of a motion picture industry emerging in Africa" (Hofflet 2003). The motion picture industry in francophone Africa remained dependent on the French Ministry of Cooperation. Cameroonian filmmakers, some of whom lived in France, became conscious of the need to set up co-productions.

**Development of South-North co-productions.** The growth of television in Europe and its involvement in financing films attracted filmmakers, who found a new freedom. Even though French television took few risks and mainly produced African cinema's big names, South-North productions gradually became the norm.

Television channels such as Canal Plus, France 2 Cinéma, France 3 Cinéma, and Arte France Cinéma took part in African films through co-production, in cash or in kind, or through the pre-purchasing of broadcast rights. France 3 Cinéma, for example, co-produced *Guelwaar* by the Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène in 1991. Of all the television broadcasters in the North, Canal Plus was the most significant investor in African cinema. A few European channels also became involved in co-production or in pre-purchase agreements for African films: WDR and ZDF in Germany, Channel 4 and the BBC in Great Britain, and RTS in Switzerland. In England, Channel 4 bought a large proportion of the broadcast rights of feature films that won awards at FESPACO. An increase in funding and in the number of co-producers was essential to the production of feature films. Indeed, Bassek ba Kobhio produced and directed *Sango Malo* in 1991 with the participation of Channel 4, FODIC, CRTV, and the support of the Agence de coopération culturelle et technique (superseded by the Agence de la francophonie) and the French Ministry of Cooperation.

This growth in co-productions with television channels from the North meant that films could be made and professionals could live from their art, but it did not promote the emergence of a true motion picture industry in Cameroon, where African films were still not being seen. Cameroonian cinema continued to depend economically and politically on the North, and on France in particular. This comment in 1978 by Tahar Chéria about African film production companies was still valid in the 1990s: “Each one is structurally (and therefore economically and politically) a kind of monster. It is a head (authors and their films) without a body (no markets to make these films profitable and no public since there is no normal distribution structure). Even nationalized markets remain dominated by foreign companies, which monopolize their import and distribution systems” (Ruelle 2005).

### Foreign Companies' Stranglehold on Distribution and Showing

The jolt to conventional showing suffered by Cameroon, with the disappearance of its last three theaters, reveals the crisis experienced in the industry since the appearance of television in the middle of the 1980s. To understand this process, it is necessary to examine the import and distribution systems common to the whole of postcolonial francophone Africa.

**Origins of the foreign stranglehold.** In 1960, two foreign companies based in Monaco, the Compagnie marocaine du cinéma commercial (COMACICO) and the Société d'exploitation cinématographique africaine (SECMA), had the

<sup>8</sup> Senegal, Mali, Mauritania, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Niger, Benin, Togo, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Cameroon,

Chad, Gabon, and the Central African Republic.

monopoly on all motion picture distribution and screening in francophone Africa. This amounted to 150 theaters in fourteen countries.<sup>8</sup>

Programming was mainly made up of American, French, Indian, and Egyptian motion pictures. In repatriating between 40 and 50 percent of their turnover, the two companies prevented the birth of a real motion picture industry in Africa as none of the profits from exhibition were reinvested in the industry. From the end of the 1960s, FEPACI constantly condemned the economic structures for the import-distribution of motion pictures. Some francophone governments, notably Algeria and Burkina Faso, dared to nationalize their movie theaters and create national import and distribution companies to counter this cultural imperialism. Given the number of theaters in each country, it was necessary to regroup African movie markets to ensure the profitability of local films.

The large foreign companies that dominated the sector, however, boycotted these attempts at nationalization. The arrival of the American majors, who stormed first the English-speaking African market following independence and then the francophone market from 1971, changed the game. The American Motion Pictures Export Company of Africa took on the distribution of American motion pictures, which were very popular with the African public, and soon managed to break the COMACICO-SECMA monopoly. These two companies sold their shares to the French group UGC (Union générale cinématographique) in 1972, offering national companies a share in the Société de participation cinématographique Africaine (SOPACIA). This new legal entity allowed UGC to keep control of the distribution market while, at the same time, selling a number of the theaters to local entrepreneurs, including the Kadji group. Foreign companies continued to monopolize the import and distribution of American and Asian motion pictures, which beat all box office records. In 1979, African filmmakers created the Inter-African Consortium for Film Distribution (CIDC – Consortium interafricain de distribution cinématographique), a common market for film distribution grouping fourteen countries from francophone Africa, including Cameroon. UGC sold its theaters and its film portfolio to CIDC but retained decision-making powers.

Despite the success of motion pictures such as *Djeli* by the Ivory Coast filmmaker, Fadika Kramo-Lanciné, and *Finye* by Malian Souleymane Cissé, the member countries backed out. They had not implemented the reforms required nor paid their dues to CIDC, which disappeared in 1985 (Barlet 1996). The market was subsequently invaded by American motion pictures, distributed by new foreign companies—the Swiss company SOCOFILM, formerly the Compagnie franco-africaine de l'audiovisuel (CFAA). In the 1980s, the exhibition and distribution of motion pictures in Cameroon was thus in profound upheaval. In 1987, Cameroon had about eighty theaters, 60 percent of which belonged to foreign companies. The rest of the market was shared between a few independent Cameroonian exhibitors and distributors. Programming everywhere was essentially made up of American action and Asian martial arts movies.

**The impact of the arrival of new media.** Once the national television channel, CRTV, started broadcasting across the country in 1985, the number of people going to the theaters fell dramatically. High taxes on admission (up to 36 percent of the ticket price) crippled exhibitors as they were faced with the gradual erosion of their 35mm projection equipment because of a lack of trained professionals to maintain them. Some exhibitors dived into the informal sector or were forced to sell their theaters, which were then turned into supermarkets or churches, since showing motion pictures was no longer profitable and often had to be run at a loss. Only the newest theaters survived, like the three theaters of the Fotso group, which were renovated in 1990. In the period from 1995 to 2000, the last exhibitors experienced a boom, most notably because of *Titanic*, but they continued to run at a loss. In 2005, Frédéric Massin described his situation:

My turnover has dropped by 65 percent in five years, but costs are rising. The renovation of the Abbia Theater in Yaoundé would require a budget of CFAF 400 million, but there is no sense in renovating a 1,250 seat theater; it has to be transformed. A multiplex is a possibility [ . . . ]. The Fotso group borrowed over a period of eight years to construct two new screens at the Babemba Theater in Bamako, but this was not long enough [ . . . ]. In France, borrowing for this kind of activity can be done over fifteen or twenty years at 4.5 percent, or even at 6 percent as the French Development Agency (AFD/*Agence française de développement*) has done. In Africa, it can only be done over a maximum of eight years and at 9.5 percent. (Barlet and Massin 2005)

According to Frédéric Massin, excessively high interest rates in Africa are an obstacle to the survival of movie theater exhibitors and do not allow the industry to make a profit on its investments.

In May 2003, faced with the fragile state of African cinema, the “Africa Cinémas” plan, initiated at the 56th Cannes Film Festival, gathered together funding from three donors (the European Union, the Agence intergouvernementale de la francophonie, and the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs) to the tune of four million euros. This was not enough, however, to resolve the situation satisfactorily.

Foreign distributors no longer bother to send copies to Cameroon since, in the absence of any network, the possibility of making a profit is non-existent. Piracy is now a well-organized activity with an army of people selling forged copies. Today, DVD and VCD copies of American, French, and African motion pictures are not only sold on the street, but can also be found for rent in many local stalls for CFAF 200 (30 euro cents). The technical transformations in the motion picture industry as well as the lack of any proper policy, especially

9 Remarks recorded by Caroline Pochon, <http://www.clapnoir.org>, June 12, 2009.

against piracy, have thus expedited the disappearance of conventional exhibition in Cameroon.

### Exemplary International Co-productions

In the first decade of this century, the growth of the video has been exponential. The supply of images for consumption grew rapidly with the creation of private Cameroonian television channels, such as Canal 2 International in 2003, and the reception of satellite channel packages, in particular Canal Horizon. In an environment of no theater distribution, only established filmmakers succeeded in producing films, and always with support from the North. Co-productions led to a rise in the number of motion pictures and agreements were signed between France and Cameroon in 1993. Within this economic framework, Bassek ba Kobhio directed the 1995 film, *Le Grand Blanc de Lambaréné*, which he co-produced with two French companies and with the support of Gabon's Centre national du cinéma (CNC) and the Organisation intergouvernementale de la francophonie (OIF). In 2003, he produced *Le Silence de la forêt* with support from OIF, the Fonds Sud of the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and Gabon's CNC. The film was also co-produced by the French producer Guillaume de Seille (Arizona Films). Although it was shown in theaters in Cameroon, *Le Silence de la forêt* spent most of its working life at festivals, including at the Cannes Film Festival in the "Un Certain Regard" category.

In 2002, Jean-Pierre Bekolo received an advance on earnings from the French CNC to produce his film *Les Saignantes*. He had already, in fact, directed *Quartier Mozart*, shown in Cannes in 1992, followed by *Le Complot d'Aristote* in 1996, a motion picture that was part of a series commissioned by the British Film Institute, which also involved Martin Scorsese and Jean-Luc Godard. Jean-Pierre Bekolo explained the difficulties he had in financing his project: "We hoped to get a television channel, but we had to wait two years. Michel Reilhac at Arte said he liked the first part, but not the second. When he saw the film's first edit, he was very negative. At Canal, they didn't take my film. So we did a Franco-Cameroonian production in 2004."<sup>9</sup> For artistic reasons, he decided to shoot in video, but was forced to kinescope the film (record video images onto film) to show a 35mm copy to FESPACO. The film received the *l'Étalon d'argent de Yennenga* (Silver Stallion), but ran into serious problems with the censor in Cameroon. Jean-Pierre Bekolo took on the distribution of the film himself in Paris with the only two copies in existence. The director had to turn producer, director, and distributor.

These examples of film production show how difficult it is to speak of a motion picture industry in Cameroon. Only the most well-known filmmakers manage to shoot feature films, and with great difficulty owing to the lack of technicians, high costs, lack of infrastructure, and a lack of partners. There is no questioning the creativity and skill of Cameroonian film authors.

Daniel Kamwa, the most constant and prolific Cameroonian filmmaker since the 1970s, had to wait about ten years after *Le Cercle du pouvoir* (1997) to start production on *Mah Saah-Sah* in 2006. Despite these difficulties, the film opened the 21<sup>st</sup> FESPACO festival in 2009.

### Toward Economic Independence?

**A new generation in the profession.** The 2009 FESPACO Festival saw the emergence of a new generation in Cameroonian cinema. Taking all the categories together, Cameroon showed a total of eight motion pictures, three of which received awards: *Waramutseho* by Bernard Auguste Kouemo Yanghu, *Une affaire de nègres* by Oswalde Lewat, and *Paris à tout prix* by Joséphine Ndagnou. This new generation meant that Cameroon could have a presence at major international festivals and they made box office records. These productions were noteworthy because they had been directed by trained and experienced professionals. Joséphine Ndagnou, for example, had been trained in audiovisual production in France.<sup>10</sup> She had also been a director at CRTV for fifteen years and had performed in many television and feature films including, most notably, *Les Saignantes*. Her profile as a real participant in Cameroonian cinema, both as a generalist and a technician, enabled her to be highly successful from the moment her first film was released in 2008. Joséphine Ndagnou started her film with sponsorship from companies like CamTel, the Cameroonian Post Office, and Cameroon Airlines. She received support from OIF and was then given help to complete her film from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Fonds Sud. *Paris à tout prix* was a commercial success selling 70,000 tickets in all, with 25,000 sold in just two weeks in Douala, Yaoundé, and Bafoussam. Even though the chosen subject met with audience expectations, the director was able to use her reputation to communicate effectively in the Cameroonian media. The award-winning film has been bought and will be broadcast by Canal Horizons, CFI, and TV5 Afrique.

It should be highlighted that *Paris à tout prix* was part-financed by CRTV and supported by the Cameroonian Ministry of Culture. The Compte d'affectation special, which was created in 2001 by the President of the Republic, Paul Biya, to provide support for culture, has benefited national motion picture production to some extent. Granted CFAF 1 billion per year (about 1,500,000 euros), the Compte is supposed to finance all cultural sectors. Unofficially, the Ministry of Culture claims to subsidize audiovisual and motion picture production to the tune of CFAF 300 million per year (or 450,000 euros). According to Jean-Claude Mollo Olinga (2008), "all the films

<sup>10</sup> Joséphine Ndagnou has an audiovisual director's certificate from ESRA in Paris and a Master's degree

in Film and Audiovisual Studies from Paris-1/Panthéon-Sorbonne.

released since 2001, without exception, have benefited from more than CFAF 257 million. With this small sum, only about ten motion pictures (features and shorts for theaters and television) have, in fact, been produced. A pittance! What's worse, those who got this public money embezzled it and used it for other things."

**Digitalization.** Cameroon has seen a resurgence in its local film production on (variable quality) video thanks to the digital revolution, which has meant that a motion picture can be produced with relatively limited technical means.

Since the 1980s, there has been a blurring of the boundary between productions destined for theaters and audiovisual productions. The growing role of television channels in movie production, both in the North and in the South, means that motion pictures can be produced by television and distributed initially in theaters. This profusion of motion pictures for local television or for the DVD/VCD market is fertile ground for film creation. Exhibition methods for movies have diversified everywhere and, in Cameroon, the home-video industry (based on the Nigerian model) is starting to become an interesting economic model ripe for new investment. Nigerian productions sold in Cameroon, despite their poor technical quality, are prompting Cameroonians to produce more films. This is more of an informal economy, in which films are released in local video clubs. *La Tcham*, which won the 2009 People's Choice Award for the Yaoundé Short Film Festival (*Prix du public du festival Yaoundé Tout Court*), is a martial arts action film. Made locally by friends who were passionate about movies and using amateur actors, the film became profitable mainly through small-scale exhibitions—local screenings and DVD release.

Small-scale production and distribution structures have thus been created in large cities, especially in the two anglophone areas of Cameroon. They distribute their own motion pictures alongside productions from Nigeria. Shops selling and renting movies in the main anglophone cities in the country mean that the productions can be distributed. The prices are derisory—CFAF 1,000 (1.5 euros) to purchase and CFAF 200 (30 euro cents) to rent. Nollywood stars are known in Cameroon so Nigerian videos, which are shot in Nigeria over a few days and on minimal budgets, flood the Cameroon market. The anglophone association of Cameroonian producers, Collywood, was created in 2008. The success of Nigerian films in this area of Cameroon is partly explained by the geographic and cultural proximity, language, and colonial past under British rule, on the one hand, and by the suitability of the Nigerian model for the anglophone population in Cameroon, on the other. It is difficult to obtain reliable quantitative data, but the Waa Musi coordinator suggests that Collywood has produced eighty films per year on average since 2008 (Dongmo 2010). About 150 production houses have joined the association and produce movies only on

DVD/VCD. Stéphanie Dongmo (2010), a journalist for the daily *Le Jour*, provides an insight into this economy:

In two years, Elvis Tanwie alone has written and directed eight films. His latest, *Ride my Wrong*, which was released in February 2010 and sold four thousand copies, was in two parts of one and a half hours each. He shot it in seven days with two HDV cameras, in Yaoundé and Limbé. Postproduction, which was done in Bamenda, lasted two weeks. The total cost of the production was estimated at CFAF 7 million (about 11,000 euros), with three-quarters of this sum being allocated to post-production and packaging of the film.

The anglophone Cameroonian model is a good basis for the birth of a genuine industry, where distribution methods correspond to national needs. Joséphine Ndagnou (2009) reports that, to get her movie onto DVD, she protected her film from piracy by organizing her own national tour with video projection equipment that could be adapted to any theater. For her, “real profitability has to come from DVD and VCD release” (Ndagnou 2009). Recent productions have taken the reality of the local market and the modes of consumption of audiovisual productions into account. New arrivals on the scene are proposing economic models that will create a local industry. These endogenous developments in movie production, made profitable nationally, represent the beginnings of a motion picture industry in Cameroon.

### An Essential Commitment from the Government

Despite the increase in and diversification of audiovisual production, a formal exhibition network is essential for a successful motion picture industry in Cameroon. The government has never attempted to combat piracy, which is a major handicap to the development of Cameroonian cinema. When the economic interests are significant, however, the government reacts. The fight against piracy in the cable distribution sector was relaunched in November 2010. Formal notice was issued to “cable operators who broadcast, without permission, the channels of the Canal Plus package in every city in Cameroon” (Tchopa 2010). The potential loss is considerable for Canal Plus Cameroun, who estimate that there are about one thousand unauthorized cable operators in the country. The size of the informal sector in the economy, corruption, and too much administrative red tape are all obstacles to the development of the audiovisual industry as a whole. Canal Horizons,<sup>11</sup> who have been increasing the number of African movies they buy and broadcast in francophone Africa,

<sup>11</sup> Under the new name of “Canal Plus Afrique” since July 2010.

have invested in Cameroon despite the economic and political situation in the country. Beyond francophone Africa, the Canal Plus group have also been developing audiovisual co-productions in South Africa, a country where the motion picture industry is the most developed. In Cameroon, establishing a legal and regulatory framework would provide those involved in the motion picture industry with formalized status and security.

President of the Cameroonian Republic since 1982, Paul Biya and his government give out small subsidies and do not become involved in structuring a legal and administrative environment that would promote the birth of a genuine industry. Cameroonian production companies can, however, produce profitable motion pictures for the national market through sponsorship, video exhibition, and the distribution of movies on DVD/VCD. The government's commitment is indispensable for the development of this new economy. The solutions are well-known and have to be implemented with the involvement of governments at regional (Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa) and continental (African Union) level. International festivals such as FESPACO and Écrans Noirs could act as catalysts for African professionals to unite and work together to get their voices heard. The Fédération panafricaine des cinéastes (FEPACI) could provide this meeting ground. In Cameroon, pulling together all the motion picture professionals' associations and unions into a single representative structure could be a first decisive step along this path.

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