

SYMPOSIUM

on the work of
sur l'oeuvre de

PATRICE NGANANG

With articles by
Avec les textes de

Bénicien Bouchedi Nzouanga
Peter Wuteh Vakunta
Jean-Michel Devésa
Roger Fopa-Kuete
Raoul Djimeli
D. Vance Smith
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Et deux textes de l'auteur.

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THE KABA UPRISING

Patrice Nganang



1. A SOCIAL UPHEAVAL



Madame Juliette Récamier, by Jacques-Louis David, 1800

Wearing a dress which, adapted to Cameroon with colonization, will become the kaba.

The Cameroonian of today cannot imagine a world that revolves around women.¹ In this, the Jacobin tradition that we received from France with the colonial period is not a good help. After all, Simone de Beauvoir's country hasn't

¹ The latest Cameroonian invention to make such a world impossible, is this: Cameroonian women must have the name of their husband on their official ID card, like, *Solange Deumaleu épouse Diadem*, the shorter form being *Solange Deumaleu epse Diadem*. A detail that turns out to be a bureaucratic nightmare in international transactions as *épouse* is a French word and most countries in the world do not speak French, and its shorter form on IDs, *epse*, is an invention only Cameroonian men understand. Women end up having *Epse* as their surname, and it doesn't make their lives easy outside of Cameroon, let alone in case of divorce for the woman must carry the name of her former husband on her ID henceforth. The result is the following: as married men do not have *époux* added to their name, *men end up doing transactions for women!*

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arrived either, after three hundred years of republican history, to imagine that a woman can sit at the Elysée and sign decrees as before he went the guillotine the King of France signed his edicts. So far, in Paris as in Yaoundé, this has only been burlesque. Or else, carnivalesque, as far as Cameroon is concerned. These two possibilities, the wacky and the revolutionary, come together easily in what Cameroonian parlance calls 'uprising' - *soulevement*.



Chantal Biya, in kaba clothes, belted cut, struck by the face of her husband, Paul Biya.

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There are two kinds of uprisings. There is the one that scares Paul Biya the most, the man who, having received its seat by gift ('befallen' is the word here, to designate the fact that it was rather Ahmadou Ahidjo who had chosen him to become his successor), maintained it at first by dribbling the people (by 'snap elections'), then by rigging elections (the 1992 election is exemplary in its infamy), and then finally by violent assaults against the people (the 2018 election was the bloodiest, as it totally excluded Anglophones who did not vote at all, as the English-speaking part of the country was at war).



Kaba sales for March 8.

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So first there is the popular uprising which in the depths of the Etoudi palace makes the tyrant sweat and kill. And then there is this very Cameroonian invention called the kaba uprising (*le soulèvement du kaba*²), the lifting of the kaba. It designates for a woman, the fact that she raises the front of her garment to show her private or intimate parts. The French will very easily recognize the gestures of the cancan, the long tradition which opens on the Moulin Rouge, even if the lifting of the kaba is rather linked to ‘March 8’, as it is said in Cameroon, to designate the International Women’s Day endogenously.



Sale of beer in prelude of March 8.

Notice writing in Camfrançais. The intention of to create a popular event.

² There is no colloquial English translation, although English of one of the country’s official languages.

Kaba is a pidgin word, and simply means ‘cover’. Lifting the kaba is therefore a truism because it means lifting the cover. The kaba, diminutive of kaba ngondo and kaba nyango, its two subgenres, is a typical garment of southern Cameroon, even if introduced with colonization, because it is an adaptation of the dress of Western ladies of the 18th century. It has a version for mourning called ‘méline’ and is black in color, made with lace fabric. That it is rather the women of the North, of Maroua, who started to dress in sandja to celebrate Women’s Day, and they do not wear the kaba, means that the lifting of the kaba is a specifically southern and Christian tradition. Northern women are mostly Muslim.

What remains is this: in Cameroon, March 8 is the Kaba Festival. And yet, even if the kaba goes back rather to the Sawa women, having been introduced to Douala in the 1870ies, it is said, by the wife of the missionary Alfred Saker who thus upstaged the traditional sandja wrap, or rather, pushed it to the very private sphere of the woman, to the toilet, or to the bedroom where it remains till today, the kaba uprising of today can be traced specifically to Yaoundé, and therefore, to Beti women – Bulu, Ewondo, Eton women. ‘Fulani women don’t do that’ would be the quick shot here, ‘never.’ ‘Neither do Bamileke women.’ ‘Nor Sawa women.’ ‘Especially not English-speaking women, especially not!’ What remains is, in the analysis, it is Cameroonian women who, in general, find themselves in this a very particular uprising, because it is the carnival in its very essence. In fact, a great replacement happens in the public arena – for twenty-four hours only –, an upstaging of men by women. In other words, those who in

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the social doxa were confined to the house, dress in the cloth that is now mostly used in domestic occasions, the kaba, and occupy the public space, from which they wean men, from which they chase their husbands. The carnivalesque here is underlined by the general laughter, for it is an amusing chiasm, a collective party therefore, which accompanies this reversal, a party which, even if structured in the morning by an official parade on the *Avenue du 20 Mai*, ends in drinking establishments that are then occupied by women and only by women, in the afternoon and in the evening. After all, the day is a public holiday.



A woman wearing the kaba, seen from the back (2021), and Madame Récamier from the front (détail of a painting by François Gérard, 1802)

There is no carnival without a parade. In Cameroon, the parade itself is part of the social reversal that it deploys. Chantal Biya, the current first lady of Cameroon, is the only one who has presided over the March 8 festivities. Jeanne-Irene Biya, the first wife of Paul Biya, did not preside over parades on Women's Day. But if Jeanne-Irene is engraved in the imagination of Cameroonians by her seriousness, has she ever laughed in her life?, by her intimate pain, she has never had a child, it is said, Franck, the son of the president being rather that of his sister, just as by her death, Paul Biya would have assassinated her, says the rumor; with Chantal

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Biya, March 8 took on a statutory dimension. This day, even the president of the republic leaves his traditional and official seat at the *Avenue du 20 Mai* to his wife who for the parade is enthroned as *Madame la Présidente*.



March 8 parade, 2019, Yaounde, official stand.

She is easily noticeable because of the color of her skin as she is *métisse*, and presidential power in Cameroon is racially defined and held by a light-skinned gang, but mostly because of her colorful hairstyle. In front of her pass the associations of women, and all other groups, to the rhythm of this great parade, which is coming, and which is that of the national holiday – of the May 20 parade. Thus, March 8 is the subversion of May 20, the first being reserved for women only, while the second is reserved for everyone. That the reversal of the official by the unofficial which here is marked in a formal way is of the order of the carnival is important to underline, because if the traditional carnival

has its king, March 8 has its president – both colorful.

The dimension is playful here and there, because otherwise we would not understand the explosion of feminine energy that is released ‘after the parade’ as everyone says in Cameroon. It is there, in fact, that the bars are taken over by women who get drunk, dance, shout, and thus plunge into the subversion of the order whose parade on the *Avenue du 20 Mai*, was only the prelude. And it is there too, in these bars which otherwise were masculine, that the kabas are raised amid bursts of laughter, in lascivious gestures of public coitus. Colonialism had pushed the sandja from the domestic into the private and propelled the domestic reign of the kaba. Now the domestic becomes public, and the kaba reigns in its undisputed magnificence. For a day, domestic energies are unleashed in the public arena, women occupy the streets and the bars of Yaoundé, a woman becomes the president of the republic, but president of the carnival that is March 8. It is King Momo, *Rey Momo*, it is Cologne’s *Seine Tollität*, the Karnevalsprinz in female clothing, it is Chantoux.

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March 8 in a bar.

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March 8 in a bar.

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The female body is displayed in a bar that is also occupied by women.

The next day, the dictatorship resumes.

If in the West the nave of fools is the space of the carnival, in Cameroon, the bars are its biotope. The exponential multiplication of bars we see today is a product of the liberalization of public space, itself a chapter of the democratization movements of the 90s. Never have so many bars opened in Cameroon, and especially in the south of the country, than during these years! The details of their proliferation were tied to the administrative tolerance

which made the actual possession of a license useless in practice, and thus delivered the tenants of arbitrary bars to corrupt officials. Each of the two parties finding benefits in the situation, the multiplication of bars has never been questioned. Like revival churches, bars are therefore the effective measure of freedom in dictatorship: a world turned upside down, given over to an incantatory eschatology for the former or drunkenness for the latter, their rhythm is that of *laissez-faire dans des limites*. Today the two are in absolute competition for the possession of public space. And yet if the bar is a male space, the ‘woman of the bar’ is what the reversed language calls free - the prostitute -, when she is not the one who sells the drinks, the waitress. The free woman is the personification of the space created by dictatorship, because her freedom is illusory. She sells her body to men like the bar sells them alcohol.

The proliferation of bars during the 90s created a whole subculture, articulated through music, especially in Yaoundé, bukutsi, Beti music and dance. That the bikutsi is a dance of the elastic body, is obvious, and yet important here is above all the fact that it has magnified expressions of debauchery. Far from any moral analysis, it made bars a perpetual carnival since the carnival is unthinkable without music and without dance. Animated by the music of liberated sex, of coitus publicly deployed with artists like K-Tino who many times sail from revival churches to the space of bars, who are sometimes pastor and soon prostitute, the bar remains the place of explosion of the crazy body, of the body caught up in the impulses of freedom, which is *laissez-faire dans des limites*, laissez-faire within the tyrannical limits of controlled subversion.

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Arrest of protesting women, November 21, 2020



Some of the arrested women are freed. There are dressed in kaba.

Subversion all the more controlled as when on November 21, 2020, women, almost all Bamileke, took off their kaba to protest against the house arrest of one of the opposition leaders, Maurice Kamto, they were all arrested, and some including their leader, the lawyer Mispa Awasum, an English speaker, was sentenced to seven years in prison! They were charged with indecency.

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The kaba, beer and women on March 8.

2. THE EDUCATION OF A WOLOWOS AND THE TRUE WORDS OF THE AMERICAN AMBASSADOR

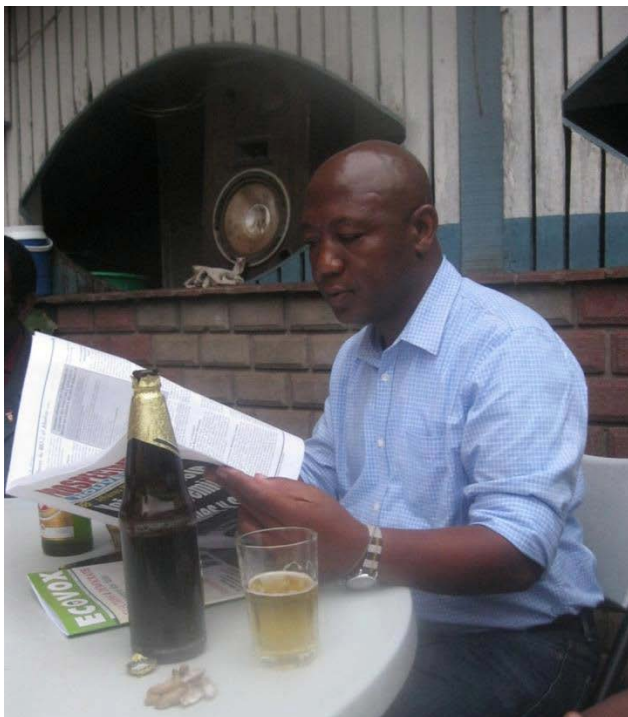
In Camfranglais, the Cameroonian popular tongue, the word for prostitute is ‘wolowoss’, and the wife of the Cameroonian president, Chantal Biya, is the epitome of wolowoss because of her own upbringing. But let Bertrand Teyou instead recount the episodes of her education on the street:

« Once settled in Yaoundé, Chantal gradually fits into the society of the happy few and can frequent leisure clubs or upscale nightclubs. She will meet chic guys who will make her live fairy tales. She will also come across violent men who will put her through hell.

It is during one of these stormy love episodes that she will be pregnant with twins at 17. Her mother will be mad with rage.

Overwhelmed by the weight of the responsibilities to assume, Chantal questions her mother insistently. The latter finally puts her in the footsteps of her father, Mr. Vigouroux. Chantal boards a bus and finds herself in Douala, on Toyota Street, in the Bonapriso district, in front of a metal gate. She shivers for a moment then decides to ring the bell. A nice lady, her father’s wife, welcomes her. In a feverish and pathetic tone, Chantal announces the purpose of her visit. The lady will not take it out on her husband’s frolics. Rather, she sees in front of her a child who needs assistance. She brings Chantal in and installs her. Immediately, Chantal receives unexpected attention. She feels a comfort she had never known before. She is invaded by an indescribable feeling in front of this woman whom she has just met for the first time and who gives her the feeling of being in the presence of a caring mother, producing if only for a short moment, the impression of coming out of her private hell.

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Bertrand Teyou, after his liberation.

When Mr. Vigouroux comes home in the evening, his wife announces the presence of a stranger in the house. Having learned of the facts, he contradicts the visitor, and remains firm: he never had children, the story with Rosette was an adventure. His position is without appeal, he says. During Chantal's brief stay in the house he will not speak to her. For him, she is an unknown.

Chantal's frequent trips to Douala will not change Mr. Vigouroux's position. Even less the maternal efforts of his wife. Even the incessant

appeals of his friends to the usual bar of Bonanjo, the administrative district of Douala, will not change anything. The man will remain unmoved and will advise relatives who want to remain his friends to spare him the subject.

Chantal will be satisfied with the sympathy of Madame Vigouroux who will introduce her to a métis neighbor. The latter is sensitive to Chantal's story and makes her a friend. Her name is Marie Africa and together with her French husband, they own a fashionable nightclub in Douala.

Marie is an experienced woman who has known everything. She has heterosexual and homosexual relations. When she has taken her good dose of grass, she opens the doors of the most inaccessible bunkers with her charm. Within the micro-bourgeoisie of Douala, she is an icon and she is desired by all the men who meet her. She is even at times a kind of business for her husband who is far from being fooled.

Marie will adopt Chantal and will even be her confidante. She will occasionally invite her to her nightclub, give her some advice for choosing her lovers and help her out from time to time with up to hundreds of thousands of francs. Chantal confides in Marie, tells her about her setbacks and her recent meeting with a Bamileke gentleman who takes care of her wonderfully. Marie is so close to Chantal that her partner Françoise suspects them of going out together. A stormy argument breaks out between the two lesbians who will not be reconciled until after Chantal's departure.

Tested by the radical position of her father, Chantal returns to Yaoundé and begins a new life. She does not despair despite all the difficulties that await her: a sarcastic mother, the burden of children and the challenge of her girlfriends. In the political capital, she will work in a very busy bar, will do fashion shows out of passion and to be seen, will go out to nightclubs with friends and above all will strive to find a taste for life.

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Despite this cure, some of her violent lovers will catch up with her and continue to abuse her. »³



Chantal Biya, and Imane Ayissi during a fashion show

Arrested in 2011 during the public presentation of his book, Bertrand Teyou was thrown into prison, accused of defamation, and sentenced to three years. He was freed in

³ Bertrand Teyou: *La Belle de la république bananière: Chantal Biya, de la rue au palais*, Éditions Nation libre, Douala, 2010, pp.22-24.

an extraordinary way, after an international campaign that I mounted and which involved Pen, the world writers' union, as well as many activists. He went to exile after his release, but remained very marked by his incarceration, which essentially destroyed his life. He was once again arrested in France, imprisoned, and condemned for acts of vandalism. Returned to Cameroon after his release, he died in 2020 in conditions not yet elucidated.

Jail is a permanent condition in Biya's Cameroon. Even the carnival and its queen, the National Wolowoss, Chantoux, cannot hide this carceral condition. People revolted multiple times: in 1984, 1990, 1999, 2008, 2011. The revolt that remains the bloodiest in the tumultuous history of the regime is the Anglophone uprising of 2017, and its most controversial witness is the US Ambassador, Peter Henry Barlerin. Having just arrived in the country in December 2017, he participated in the March 8 parade, the sole ambassador to do so, dressed in the day's outfit, showing here a quite unique enthusiasm. The images of him smiling, parading in front of the stand on which Chantal Biya sat, have however remained less in the public memory of Cameroonians, than his remarks on May 18 at the end of his meeting with Paul Biya at the Palace of Unity. He was speaking about the war against the Anglophones which was then beginning in the North-West and South-West.

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The personnel of the American embassy, on March 8, 2018.



American ambassador Peter Henry Barlerin, during the March 8, 2018, parade,

passing in front of Chantal Biya. The presidential spot can be seen on the floor, a special marker of her position on the stand.

His words are worth mentioning for two reasons. First, he pronounced the word ‘Ambazonia’ – as in: ‘a captured prisoner, an Ambazonian commander’ - on the esplanade of the presidential palace, a taboo word in Cameroon since its invention by the first president of the bar association, Forgum Gorji-Dinka, and its inscription in the book *The Rebellion of Ambazonia*, a seminal text written in 1984 during his incarceration in Kondengui prison. There are no trivial words, but this one, uttered in the court of the executioner of Gorji-Dinka, was an extraordinary slap in the face, even if born no doubt of a certain naivety on the part of the newly arrived ambassador. The second reason that will make his remarks historic is his description of the Ambazonian rebellion itself:

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« I would say that there is violence on both sides. The government has committed summary executions, they are guilty of detaining people and not allowing them access to lawyers, to their families and even to visits from the Red Cross. They were guilty of burning villages and looting, and of general harassment of the population. On the side of the secessionists, the separatists, we have seen horrible beheadings, kidnappings of government officials and burning of schools. So, we wanna stress that the United States condemns violence on both sides. We condemn violence and we wanna call on people to listen to each other. Right now, in Cameroon, there is a kind of dialogue of the deaf. People are stating their position, the government is stating its position, separatists and people from the North-West and South-West who do not support the government state their position, but they do not listen to each other. So, I asked the president to use his position as the leader of the country to try to find another solution that would allow both sides to listen to each other and really to listen to each other. »⁴

In the regime of the false, the truth is revolutionary. Putting the Cameroonian government on the same level as the Ambazonian forces, putting a government based on Francophone hegemony on the same level as the English-speaking populations who are a minority in the country, was a crime of *lèse-majesté* too visible and it scandalized Yaoundé. Ambassador Barlerin was immediately summoned by the Minister of External Relations to whom he explained his remarks. He was violently attacked in the media in the pay of power, and a presenter of these hate television channels even threatened to shoot him! On live television! That at the end of his brief stay in Cameroon, he remained

⁴ Ambassador Barlerin's Interview at Cameroon's Unity Palace
Here, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10160414267705716>
[Retrieved, June 7, 2022]

ambassador in Yaounde for only three years, Barlerin left the country's capital in a kind of public disgrace, is not surprising in the face of what, here, can simply be interpreted as a bombshell, but which in fact was as much the beginning of a contentious relationship between Cameroon and the United States, but above all, an irruption into the heart of a Cameroonian public space which until then had been satisfied with the carnivalesque subversion of the kaba uprising, of a real popular protest.

Today, Ambazonians still dictate the terms of the public debate.

3. SAFETY MEASURES TO RESTORATION FORCES FOR THE TOTAL INDEPENDENCE OF AMBAZONIA

Self-defense fighters for the Total Independence of Ambazonia,

Never harass those around you. They are your first backup. They are more than the gun you are counting on. If they commit crime, apply wisdom to their punishment, also adding smile to it.

You must never have a fix home. That is, no one should say I know where he sleeps or he usually be.

There are signs that don't lie. If someone calls you to meet you and is a relative or colleague, analyze and compare their usual tune. If you smell slight change, don't go and more, call them on a video call instantly.

Stay away from cheap girls. If you are married focus on your wife. Your glory makes women approach you, but you must

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know among them could be spy.

Drinking spots should never be your place to be. You are vulnerable once you bring down your security.

Never show your face or move around anyhow. For someone to see you should be difficult even your relatives.

Respect everyone from children to older people. They have messages for you when you put simplicity first towards them.

In war times we avoid thinking of accumulating wealth, building a house, njangi houses, buying of lands and thinking of dressing luxurious

Avoid hard drugs. Drugs shine your eyes but block your brain. That's why a blind man with a brain is better than he who sees but has no brain.

Never collect things from anyone using oppressive measures. We are Africans. As the person speaks evil about you base on how you treated him, note you will fall.

Do findings, read books about war, revolutions and more.

Constantly do cleansing for those who are Africans and constantly pray to your ancestors. Any man get he God.

Try to always share the little you have with everyone. Be generous. Stretch your hands so someone drowning can use it to relief himself.

Give listening ears for a mad man seated at the roadside might have seen what you haven't seen.

Your phone location must never be on.

Live videos both on the field or anywhere should stop.

Never you share on social media your real names or post or tag people, family or friends.

Constant alert.



Takumbeng women marching, September 22, 2017, dressed in white sandja wraps

It was the first truly popular demonstration in the anglophone region.

By excluding bars but also prostitutes from the first security rules on what is now called Ground Zero, the English-speaking space in its entirety, the Ambazonian forces are killing two birds with one stone. They close themselves to the French-speaking regime, to the rules of sociability that it instituted around beer and for women around the kaba, and they eliminate even its carnivalesque manifestations such as the kaba uprising, which thus appears to be just another face,

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even if burlesque, of the same tyrannical regime. They recast the public scene in an organic relationship between each and everyone, including with the insane, who, suddenly, become a branch in an inclusive social relationship based on humility. They put the man back in his home, snatch him from the wolowos and return him to his wife. The family once again becomes the heart of sociability, of society, and therefore of the republic. But above all, using Bamileke culture, they draw from a more anchored feminine tradition of protest, that of the Takumbeng who on September 22, 2017, renewing the precolonial tradition of female sandja, in the heart of the English-speaking people, set in motion the English-speaking revolt and prompted Paul Biya's declaration of war. Community restoration if any, cultural renaissance to say the least, with Ambazonia we see the revolution as being a rearrangement of the social space freed from the jong and all its cultural manifestations. The foundational act of the Ambazonian revolution was the ceremonial destruction of beer racks.

Me lapte nechou !



Fumban women clothed in sandja wraps, 1911.

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- **Bénicien Bouchedi Nzouanga**, La corporalité de Patrice Nganang à l'épreuve de l'écrit, du regard social et du discours politique.
- **Jean-Michel Devésa**, Patrice Nganang et le roman : l'hypothèse d'une langue française « minorée ».
- **Peter Wuteh Vakunta**, Palimpsests: Indigenization of Language in Nganang's *Temps de chien*.
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- **Patrice Nganang**, L'art de la jong.
- **Patrice Nganang**, The kaba uprising.

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