

# THE CAMEROONIAN URBAN ORAL ARTIST AS REVOLUTIONARY THINKER

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## **Abstract**

*This study sets out to ascertain whether Lapiro de Mbanga and Prince Afo-A-kom, two Cameroonian artists, produce their art primarily to inform, educate and entertain their audience or for a revolutionary purpose of changing society. In order to facilitate the task of the research, the following two main analytical approaches are employed: new historicism and pragmatic functionalism. New historicism is appropriate primarily because it cuts across other disciplines like culture, sociology, linguistics and anthropology. Since pop music is part and parcel of a people's culture, the approach becomes very relevant here. Pragmatism on the other hand, highlights the commitment of the artists. The study tentatively posits that due to the entrenchment of capitalist/materialistic attitudes among the people in Africa in general and Cameroon in particular, revolutionary oral artists will always be needed to create awareness in the people relative to a change of mentality. It also argues that the two artists under reference are committed and determined to "change their society." Consequently, it is to a very large extent that they are revolutionary in content and form of their songs. The study further avers that the artists are true practitioners of the literature of realism and will as long as people exist; continue to produce such literature to reflect the changing nature of society.*

**Keywords:** Cameroon, Orature, Revolutionary and Urban artist

## **Introduction and Background to the Study**

Folklore is not survival but rather it is a living organism still growing and developing where people live, struggle, hope, make merry, despair and die (Charles Haywood xv). From the forgoing epigraph in which this researcher takes refuge, this study is carried out on the premise that literature is a changing activity that defies extinction. It continues to exist as long as people continue to exist; both in traditional African societies and in the urban areas or cities of Africa. This essay, sets out to investigate (not ascertain) whether the urban oral artist's primary objective is just to use his art to inform, educate and entertain his audience or for a revolutionary purpose of changing the society. In order to achieve this objective, the essay hopes to examine the thematic and literary undercurrents of selected songs by two Cameroonian artists, Lapiro de Mbanga and Prince Afo-A-Kom, to demonstrate how they have transformed pop music into

instruments to re-direct the mind and conscience of their people towards a higher awareness in favour of meaningful change in their Cameroonian society in particular and Africa in general.

African oral literature remains a vigorous art rooted in rural communities but flourishing too in the urban areas in many ways. This is because three-quarters of the people of modern Africa continue to live outside the cities. Meanwhile, in the cities, football fans, militants of political parties, musicians, school children are among the many categories of people, who actively promote urban orature.

Orature today can be said to be adapting to modern circumstances just as it adapted to and reflected change in the past. This means that one should not dare think that African oral literature is primitive or deals only with the past. The present is reflected and the future is also predicted in this literature. (It is=leave this out) Ruth Finnegan, (who=leave this out) aptly insists in her *Oral Poetry in Africa*, that oral poetry “is not just something of far away and long ago, it is all around us still” (24).

From time immemorial, orature has been used for education, entertainment and social criticism. It is with the didactic purport and the latter function of oral literature that this essay is concerned with to demonstrate that the urban oral artist has always been committed to his society. In the contemporary setting, the oral artist finds himself in what Kashim Ibrahim Tala refers to as a “heterogeneous society with no unified body of norms and with no clear-cut expectations from its members” (164). This therefore, means that this present dispensation needs a new artistic sensitivity and a new medium. (It is=leave this out) Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, (who=leave this out) has rightly asserted that a committed artist must “respond with his total personality to a social environment which changes all the time” (47). This respond to the social environment can best be illustrated in this study by highlighting the evolution of oral literature in Africa. K. Ogungbesan and D. Woolgler argue that:

Poetry and song are basic human activities, and in traditional African society, the people have used these forms of expression to accompany the activities of daily life, to give utterance to their joys and sorrows, to comment on life, or simply to entertain. (7-8)

This is a view with which this critic is in total agreement and draws inspiration and fortitude from to submit that the more perceptive Cameroonian oral artist is conscious of the fact that in a changing society, he must be relevant to his audience. For him to be relevant and have a wider audience, the artist has to transcend his traditional African environment to embrace the new concepts of a nation and the global village, and consequently, the urban setting, thus, the relevance of emerging perspectives on African orature. The fact that urbanization is threatening the traditional society that nourishes oral literature more inspires the oral artist to change the content and form of his works of art. Kashim Tala and Henry Jick have argued that most oral artists in Cameroon adopt “songs as a vehicle for analyzing and commenting upon contemporary life and the socio-political relationships it has engendered” (34).

### **Conceptualization**

The major operative term in the title of this study is “revolutionary”. Consequently, the prior question at this stage is what is revolutionary as used in the essay? *The Webster’s New World Dictionary of American English* defines “revolutionary” as “bringing about or constituting a great or radical change” (150) In this essay ‘revolutionary’ is going to be considered as bringing, or favouring great changes not through violence or not radical change but change that touches the minds and attitude of a people, thus leading to a change in their outlook on life. It is this kind of change that would, subsequently, instill in the people, the desire to react against the oppressive conditions under which they exist. Theirs is a change not brought about by one person or a group of persons, but one that is the result of communal and concerted effort. They sing about whole communities, mostly of the downtrodden masses. This idea of dealing with the masses does not

only tally with the idea of African communalism, but it also reflects the artists' socialist ideology, which focuses on people rather than individuals.

### **Problem Statement**

Fredrik Jameson has argued that orature has only a marginal and problematic existence in today's world. He goes on to contend that:

The popular and folk-arts reflected and were dependent for their production on quite different social realities.... Advanced capitalism, however, has induced folklore's decline, not by attacking the expression itself but by dissolving, fragmenting and atomizing its nutritive social contexts by way of the corrosive action of universal commodification and the market system (Limon 40).

According to the foregoing submission, Jameson believes that orature is obsolete and if remnants of it exist at all today, it will be under marginalized and declining conditions.

### **Objectives of study and Hypothesis**

This essay hopes to argue that while western orature might have become antiquated, African orature is alive. In most African countries, oral literature is beginning to occupy an important place in educational programmes today because, after the attainment of political independence, these countries and their governments gradually became aware that African cultures for the most part still exist in the oral form and that Africans continue to transmit their cultures through oral expression. The essay intends to demonstrate that the future of African orature is not bleak as Jameson may wish us to believe. It is amenable to adaptation and modification and to what Helen Chukwuma refers to as "another medium, which is the written, to reflect the tastes and tempo" (xii). Many oral compositions now emerge from urban centres. Consequently, the concept of urban orature is still an emerging and dynamic perspective in contemporary Africa.

The primary objective of this study, therefore, is to ascertain whether the songs of the following two Cameroonian artists, Lapiro de Mbanga's and Prince *Afo-A-Kom* are produced primarily to inform, educate and entertain their audience or for a revolutionary purpose of changing society. In other words, can these two popular artists be considered as effective revolutionary thinkers?

The ultimate objective of the research is to provide a comprehensive and cohesive study that will hopefully add to a better understanding of the view that the urban oral artist has always been and will continue to be committed. This view also supports the thesis that oral literature is, indeed, a changing activity.

### **Rationale for Choice of Artists**

Kashim Ibrahim Tala and Henry K. Jick posit:

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 peopled by such popular musicians as Tala André Marie, Donny Elwood, Longué Longué, Prince *Afo-A-Kom*, Lapiro de Mbanga, Saint Bruno and Ben Zama (35).

In spite of the long list, this study limits itself to Lapiro de Mbanga and Prince *Afo –A-Kom*. This choice has been influenced first, by the bilingual nature of Cameroon. Lapiro de Mbanga represents Francophone Cameroon while Prince *Afo-A-Kom*, Anglophone Cameroon. Secondly, Tala's and Jick's submission that

Lapiro de Mbanga 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” (35) also influenced this researcher’s choice. Third, both artists address similar themes and refer to themselves as liberators of their people. Fourth, both artists are aware that the popular song is folklore and not just a political song, so they graft on the body of their social and political ideas, artistic feathers that are sometimes, surprising in their brilliance. Fifth, the two artists do not only criticize the evils of the society, but also propose revolutionary trends that will hopefully restore the permanent values of society, namely; justice, freedom and human dignity. This essay is convinced by the foregoing views that the choice of Lapiro de Mbanga and Prince *Afo-A-Kom* is not mistaken but quite representative of pop music in contemporary Cameroon.

### Methodology

Mindful of the fact that it is best to be a participant observer in oral performances if such data has to be collected for study, this researcher could not and has never been opportuned to participate in any of the live performances of the artists under reference in this study. He had to rely on watching the artists on television and through their CDs in order to collect the data that he has analyzed herein. The fact that about 98% of the language used by the artists could be readily understood by the researcher posed no problem in understanding the lyrics of the songs.

No single literary approach can effectively be employed to appropriately study any oral piece of literature at a given time. Nevertheless, two analytical approaches have been utilized in this study. These are new historicism and pragmatic functionalism. New historicism is primarily appropriate because it is interested in how history or the past is interpreted in literary works by reading non-literary works. Second, it cuts across other disciplines like culture, sociology, linguistics, philosophy and anthropology. Since pop music is part and parcel of a people’s popular culture, new historicism becomes an appropriate approach to adopt in this study.

Pragmatic functionalism is also utilized in this study in order to highlight the lessons from and the relevance of the themes that the artists hope to communicate to their audience. This is important because this study also hopes to reiterate the commitment of the urban oral artist to his society.

### Textual Analysis

The two songs that constitute the primary data for this study are Lapiro de Mbanga’s “Mimba Wi” and Prince *Afo-A-Kom*’s “Liberation.” Excerpts from these two songs (poems) will be used to demonstrate that the two artists are revolutionary and committed to the philosophy of positive change in their society.

Before carrying out any analysis, it would be appropriate to first decode the titles of the selected songs. Consequently, this essay makes bold to contend that both titles are pregnant with meaning. The title of Lapiro de Mbanga’s poem is “Mimba Wi”. This title in pidgin English presupposes that Lapiro de Mbanga’s society is polarized between the capitalist and the downtrodden or “wretched of the earth.” Translated into English, the title means “Remember Us.” It is a call from the downtrodden masses to the capitalist class of the society to be remembered. Second, it is recognition of deprivation, marginalization, rejection and inequality in the society. Consequently, one easily recognizes from this title that the NATIONAL CAKE of the country is not distributed equitably.

Prince *Afo-A-Kom*’s title of poem (song) is “Liberation.” This word, presupposes that people are not liberated or are liberated. Is the author going to fight for liberation or celebrating liberation? This comes to mind when the title is mentioned. *The Cambridge International Dictionary of English* defines “liberate” as “to release (someone) from political or military control, social duties and limits, prison etc” (816). A country

could be liberated from a dictator. On the other hand, “liberation” is defined by this same dictionary as a word “used to refer to activities connected with removing the disadvantages experienced by particular groups within society” (816). This essay considers this definition as appropriate to be utilized since Prince *Afo-A-Kom* is preaching for the African masses to be liberated from all the disadvantages that they are experiencing.

African pop music and modern poetry in general are charged with a redemptive mission or a revolutionary perspective as long as capitalism continues to breed inequalities in the society. Revolutionary poets are committed poets, who are out to preach equity and raise nationalistic awareness in the people of Africa. After all, Edward Berry argues:

To revitalize a nation, poetry must be revitalized and to revitalize poetry, we must turn to poets who are capable of inspiring the nations with a sense of commitment, justice and equality (Newey and Thompson x).

It is Berry’s conviction that “there is no fine nationality without literature and there is no fine literature without nationality”(x). Berry’s conviction is more relevant relative to oral poetry and especially when the evolution of African oral poetry from the traditional setting to the urban setting is concerned. The urban oral poet is, indeed, attempting in his ‘revitalized’ oral poetry (pop music) to instill a sense of ‘commitment, justice and equality’ in the society.

In the following part of this essay, some of the themes and literary undercurrents of the songs under reference in this study will be discussed. This section argues that by highlighting the good and evil aspects of the society in order to teach the people to learn from their shortcomings and mistakes, the poets are being revolutionary. Some of the themes to be discussed include: poverty, discrimination, corrupting power of money and position, excesses of government, economic crisis/exploitation, national integration, national unity, materialism, lack of political vision among others.

Central to the two songs (poems) under reference is a strong sense of material deprivation, discrimination, injustice and social neglect of the majority by the capitalist class. Lapiro de Mbanga’s song opens as follows:

You wan dame you Mimba Wi  
You wan sule you Mimba Wi  
You wan motu you Mimba Wi oh,  
Oh-Mimba Wi o oh  
O oh Mimba Wi

Here, the artist, representing the masses is telling the capitalist class to remember them whenever they wish to eat, drink or sleep. After this appeal, the poet goes ahead to highlight the predicament and dilemma of the downtrodden:

Wi no wan kikoh  
Wi no wan go for gata  
Wi de da so for ndengwe  
A beg mimba we ooh-yes  
Wi no wan problem para  
Wi no wan go for ndengi  
Wi de fine da so garri  
For help our own family ooh.

Here, he argues that though they lack the necessities of life, they do not wish to use an unorthodox means to obtain them. That is why he sings in the first two lines of the foregoing excerpt that they do not wish to steal because they do not wish to be imprisoned. Whatever they are engaged in, is just because they are struggling to look for a means of subsistence for themselves and for their families.

Wi de fine da so garri

For help we own family ooh!

As an oral artist, who is conscious of the role of his audience, he constantly refers to them in order to draw their attention and sympathy to what he is saying or intends to say. He frequently addresses them:

Nkoululu a wan talk

Mokolo a wan gi dictée

Gare routier, a masham?

Marche central, a go trowe, ehe he

Sauveteur a chakara?

This approach where he uses metonymy to refer to his audience and those, for whom he is speaking, is used to establish him as their spokesperson. Notice the areas he refers to in the figurative language above that represent the people for whom he is criticizing society. “Nkoululu” is a prominent quarter in Douala that harbours a market, ‘Mokolo’ is host to a market in Yaoundé while ‘Gare routier’ is the park, ‘marché central’, the central or main market is both in Yaounde and Douala. ‘Sauveteur’ here means those who struggle for themselves for survival (every man for himself). The language used by Lapiro de Mbanga is most appropriate in these areas as it is a combination of French, Pidgin spiced with special coinages predominantly spoken and understood by those who carry out the daily activities in these areas highlighted in his song.

In this early part of his song, Lapiro de Mbanga presents the people for whom he is crying. These are those struggling for survival in his society as against the capitalist class. It is from this down-trodden class that he is asking for permission to speak on their behalf. With the support and encouragement of the masses, Lapiro moves to his next theme; the excesses of the government.

Prince *Afo-A-Kom*’s critical eye does not also miss the world of poverty and the helplessness of the masses. He summarizes their state of deprivation in “Liberation” when he sings:

People are suffering Matagini eh

Because of selfishness na motemba-eh

Cow wey e no geti tail oh

Na God di drivam fly

Oh Nini eh oh

Give us long life and security oh

Almighty God, your children are crying

Na you bi Alpha and Omega.

Here, the Prince uses a powerful proverb to instill hope and courage in the “wretched of the Earth” when he sings:

Cow wey e no geti tail

Na God di drivam fly.

The artist places the sufferings of his people at the doorsteps of God for intervention. After all, he argues “Na you be Alpha and Omega oh”. This approach highlights the socialist vision of Prince *Afo-A-Kom*. This submission draws support from Ernst Fisher’s contention in Emmanuel Ngara that socialist art cannot contend itself with blurred visions. The task of socialist art is rather, to depict the birth of tomorrow out of today (78). This is exactly what one perceives in the Artist’s song.

After presenting the ills of the society, Prince *Afo-A-Kom* is optimistic that since God is the Alpha and the Omega, he would finally laugh at the end when he sings:

I have a dream that time shall come  
For me to enjoy the fruits of my  
labour with my wives and children ...

This same optimism is expressed in “Crying for Salvation” when the Prince uses a biblical allusion to say that

When the children of Israel began  
Crying for salvation at the banks of  
The red sea, it was just a matter of time.

Consequently, this essay argues that Prince *Afo-A-Kom*'s parting words in all his songs may be said to be “La Luta Continua” since he believes that no matter how difficult the struggle for liberation or salvation may be, victory is certain. After all, his last words include this universal truth expressed in the following Kom Proverb:

Samóh lae zhia

No one will doubt the veracity of this proverb, which translated into English, is “truth will prevail or win”. Therefore, the Prince is preaching that in any revolution in life, truth should be the strongest weapon to defeat lies and fraud.

The next themes to be discussed fall under what this essay refers to as political governance and the excesses of government, corruption, democracy, rigging of election, political maneuvers, amongst others. Both artists are conscious of the fact that if a revolution must take place in their society, they must be active in the politics of the society. When they set out to revolutionize the population, they are, indeed, articulating the people's collective consciousness. In “Liberation” Prince *Afo-A-Kom* sings, “Democracy, democracy, democracy will stand for justice oh”. He goes further to remind the people that:

Whenever we shall learn to play the politics of development  
Learn to vote those who can deliver the goods instead of this and this;  
That will be the beginning of the way forward.

From this excerpt, this paper is convinced that Prince *Afo-A-Kom* is conscious of what the way forward is. He is equally aware that this will come to pass someday. He considers himself as one of the freedom fighters fighting for freedom in his country. It is important to note here that the Prince has a peculiar way of making his revolutionary messages not misinterpreted. That is why he sings and talks out certain portions of his song. Whenever he wishes to communicate an important message, he speaks out instead of singing. One of such messages is:

If you don't play politics, politics will play you  
For the mere vote for a law that may affect you one-way or the other.

Prince *Afo-A-Kom*'s submission above is informed by the realistic presence of many political parties in Cameroon. In reality, there are above two hundred political parties in Cameroon. Unfortunately, the Prince does not highlight the positive characteristics of politics in his song. Vote-rigging is a major feature that the artist satirizes in “Liberation”. Here, he talks out the following excerpt in the form of a rhetorical question:

Est-ce qu'on peut facilement  
 Changer une équipe qui gagne  
 Même si cette équipe gagne  
 Avec la complicité de L'arbitre de touche  
 Et L'arbitre central sans oublier  
 Le Commissaire du match.

For fear of being misinterpreted, the artist presents the forgoing rhetorical question in the two official languages of Cameroon; English and French. Thus:

Can a winning team be changed, even if the team is winning with the complicity of the linesmen, the central referee, not leaving out the match commissioner?

Such rhetorical questions do not demand listeners' response(s); they are asked based on an implicit common assumption by the poet/singer that listeners (because they share his experience and have common socio-cultural background) would be able to read sense into them. The foregoing question asked by Prince 'Afo-A-Kom' pre-supposes that as long as the rigging of elections continues, the country would continue to suffer ruin. Consequently, he is calling for positive change. The rhetorical question, therefore, is an effective strategy in the songs of the artists under reference in this study.

Though the artist paints a bleak picture of democracy in Africa in general and Cameroon in particular, he does not wish to instill despair in his audience. He makes despair bearable when he quickly draws their attention to another rhetorical question, whose answer one attempts to proffer here:

Will there be success after a long struggle?  
 But anything e get e own time.  
 Accountability and transparency oh  
 For everything you do in this world oh.

This is an optimistic way of ending a peaceful and revolutionary message to an oppressed people. The artist argues that there is time for everything in this world. That is, time for rigging and time for transparency, free and fair elections. However, the strongest political message that Prince *Afo-A-Kom* may be proffering in his song is that genuine dialogue in the political landscape of his country is very necessary. That is why he strongly believes that:

Whenever the gods of the sea and the gods of the land shall be able to dialogue together on a round table, naturally, the wars will give peace a chance. (Source).

It is only when this happens that genuine peace and development will reign and be carried out respectively in the Cameroonian society. The Prince is very optimistic that this goal will be achieved, for as he says, "but anything e get e own time." When this will happen, he concludes, it would be time for him to enjoy the fruits of his labour; what a patriotic and optimistic way of ending a protest and revolutionary song? From the foregoing argument, one can comfortably submit that the Prince is a political artist or a committed artist of the socialist – realist school of thought, who is interested in both mental and social changes in his society. The symbol of the gods of the land and the gods of the sea are representative of the main political leaders of Cameroon.



The dialogue that the Prince is advocating is not, indeed, between the gods of the land and those of 'the sea' but it seems the artist is raising an awareness of the need for dialogue between the political elite of Cameroon. It is no secret that since the launch of the main opposition party, the Social Democratic Front on the 26<sup>th</sup> of May 1990, the Chairman of the party and that of the party in power, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) have never met. But at the time of writing this paper, the president of the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement, president Paul Biya met the National Chairman of the Social Democratic Front, (SDF), the frontline opposition party in the country on Friday 10<sup>th</sup> of December 2010. This confirms the prophetic and visionary voice of Prince *Afo-A-Kom*, who had in 2002; year of the release of his song predicted this meeting when he opined that "anything e get e own time," that is that there is time for everything in life. Consequently, this essay contends that Prince *Afo-A-Kom*'s revolution is beginning to bear fruits.

The excesses of the government are also highlighted in Lapiro de Mbanga's song "Mimba Wi"  
 Dem de bumble ma complice dem sai bai sai  
 Na dem dat for Mboukou  
 Damé no dey,  
 Mburu for pay location sep, nating  
 Ngiri don make reme ana Njanka  
 Dem don dry leke enchantillon for Ethiopia  
 A man, sauveteur na boulouh wey i no get compression de personnel,  
 Sauvetage na boulouh wey I no get retrait anticipé  
 For we own boulouh for sauvetage, Dem no di ask man diploma ana cinq ans d'experience  
 For sauvetage, il n'ya pas de concours, Ehe, lefmi a truwe française, I don bad.  
 Wi wey wi noba get ntong for go for sukul fo sai for Ngoa Ekele  
 Na for sauvetage wi de fine wi own garri.

The foregoing excerpt is, indeed, in coded language. An attempt to decode this will have the following approximate translation into English.

Hello (sauveteur) those who struggle for themselves with no specific job (everyman for himself) is a profession or occupation where personnel are not reduced or redundant or people do not go on anticipated retirement. In this profession, people are not requested to apply for positions with five years of working experience before they are recruited. There are no competitive examinations to be written for recruitment. For those of us who are not lucky to go to the University of Yaoundé at Ngoa Ekele, it is in this profession that we struggle for our survival.

At the time this song was released, there was only one University in Cameroon and that is why the poet mentions Ngoa Ekele where the then university is located. This part of the song is a lament expressing Lapiro de Mbanga's disillusionment with the way things have gone in the public administration of his country due to selfishness, unscrupulousness of the rulers and ruthlessness in the management of the country's resources. At the time of the release of this song, many civil servants or workers in public corporations were redundant; recruitment into the public service was mainly through competitive examination characterized by bribery and corruption to the detriment of the masses. What is more interesting in this part of the song is the poet's language characterized by *Franglais*, a combination of French and English, the artist's coinages and pidgin.

After castigating the public administration and the unscrupulousness of the rulers, Lapiro turns his criticism to the economic crisis of the early 1990s.

For dis heure for austerité, a man,  
 For dis heure wey cinq no mus change position  
 Yes, austerité da bi say dolla no mus change foot,  
 Wusai wi own espoir de no?

His language here is mainly figurative. He wonders in this rhetorical question where the hopes of the masses hang due to the austerity that would not permit even five francs to change hands. The artist is surprised at the way the economic crisis is handled because he thought as follows:

Mi a di mi mba say na time dis wey all man  
 Must ndengwe for yi own secteur,  
 For say wi bumble da crise economique  
 We i don put all man à genou

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

The two artists also raise yet another debatable and controversial subject in Cameroonian politics. This is the theme of National Unity and National Integration. The theme of decentralization is also a major preoccupation of Prince *Afo-A-Kom*. On the theme of national integration and unemployment, Lapiro de Mbanga questions:

Integration national na weti noh?  
 Na say de mus rata ara pipi?  
 Or na say all we must put hand  
 Say make wi 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?

The rhetorical questions posed in this excerpt highlight certain concepts. According to the poet, instead of consolidating national integration and unity that can easily give Cameroonians 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. The youths are suffering since there are no jobs and, consequently, no recruitments. That is why the singer is questioning that even if you have the Advanced Level Certificate or the Bachelors or first degree where will you work?

Yes or no, if you get da so na bacalo – licence oh,  
 You go boulouh for wusai?

Language is used economically to express the disillusionment of the masses seen through the eyes of Lapiro de Mbanga. He uses allusion to place name to refer to president Biya when he mentions Etoudi.

In “crying for salvation”, Prince *Afo-A-Kom* raises the theme of National Unity and National Integration. He also includes the theme of Decentralization in this song.

L’Unite Nationale, National Integration and Decentralization is a necessity.

A hungry man is an angry man!

A patient dog that has been waiting to eat the fattest bone as part of his own share of the national cake may soon be dying of starvation.

Oh my waist! on my waist! oh my waist!

What a hard road to travel and very rough.

When the children of Israel began crying for salvation at the banks of the Red Sea, it was just a matter of time.

At the beginning of this excerpt, the poet singer employs the two official languages of Cameroon, namely English and French. *L'Unite Nationale* is in French while national integration is in English. The singer seems to suggest that both the English and the French speaking Cameroonians must handle these two concepts collectively. However, one may ask if *L'Unite Nationale* is more relevant to French speaking Cameroonians or that they are the people losing in this deal of unity. On the other hand, is the Prince suggesting that the Anglophones have been integrated? This is really the type of ambiguity that one observes in protest songs.

Decentralization is very necessary in a country that has attained national unity and national integration. But these concepts will serve no purpose if the people are hungry due to the fact that the national cake is not equitably distributed. The artist is sensitizing the people to be patient but at the same time warning the powers that be that the patient dog may soon die of starvation. This is the beautiful use of proverbs in this excerpt as well as the use of the Biblical allusion of the children of Israel.

Prince *Afo-A-Kom* is conscious of the fact that to attain national unity and complete national integration, Cameroonians need to work very hard for it is a hard and difficult road to travel. Using a Biblical allusion, he concedes to the fact that time is an important ingredient if this difficult task must be accomplished. This is quite a nationalistic manner to preach revolution. Here, the artist reminds the audience of the nationalistic awareness of justice and equity in the distribution of the national cake.

Lapiro de Mbanga ends his attack on the institutions of government and corrupt political officials by reinforcing his plea that people in power should remember the deprived masses in the society. He uses contrast and juxtaposition to highlight the large gap that exists between the poor and the rich in his society. This device is also very good because it clearly and quickly brings out the good and evil aspects of the two worlds that the artist seeks to expose:

D'ailleurs sef njo pajero ana njo Mercedes yi don bolle from  
 So, no, a man, wi di beg da so:  
 Wi taximan,  
 Wi bi sauveteurs dem,  
 Wi pipi fo chuck head,  
 Reme no de, repe no de,  
 Lef wi, wi helep wi own sikin  
 Oh mimba wi o oh, Oh mimba wi o oh, tara.

Africanisation is also a major theme that is discussed in the literature emanating from Cameroon and hopefully will continue to appear in the decades ahead. Prince *Afo-A-Kom* gives glory to some living African patriots when he sings "Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela, human beings will never forget you." Africa again is his main preoccupation as he sings:

Freedom fighters fighting for freedom  
 Liberation liberation...  
 East Africa na wusai we di go?  
 West Africa na wusai we di go?  
 North Africa na wusai we di go?  
 South Africa na wusai we di go?

In this excerpt, Prince *Afo-A-Kom* makes use of alliteration and the rhetorical question. Alliteration is seen in the first two lines of this passage. These devices add to the alluring lyricism, which gives the song a regular rhythm. The rhetorical questions come to emphasize the fact that all of Africa is suffering under the weight of bad governance, corruption, poverty and other evils that have contributed to the underdevelopment of Africa in general and Cameroon in particular during the colonial and neocolonial periods. To the Prince, things must change because

“Toli don bad eh enough is enough oh”. He sings this, calling for freedom fighters to fight for freedom and liberation. The alliteration here is a device to reiterate the artist’s message and to instill courage in present-day Cameroonians to fight for freedom and liberation. Allusion to historical personages conjures up the courage of such historical figures intended to inspire the freedom fighters in Cameroon. That is in essence, the aim of using ‘Desmond Tutu’ and ‘Nelson Mandela.’ This is a patriotic way of preaching a revolution in view of equality and freedom in a dictatorial regime.

### Research Findings

Due to the constraint of space, this essay cannot continue the analysis of the songs. However, as part of the conclusion of this study, we reiterate the following salient points raised in the work. Hopefully, these pertinent points should contribute in reinforcing the thesis of this paper.

This study has argued that contemporary African societies generate the evil that helps to destroy them. The political, cultural and economic policies of most African governments are at the root of some of the disillusionment and rebellion that are so frequent among the African people. The entrenchment of capitalist/materialistic attitudes among the people creates a big gap between the rich and the poor. These are some of the major issues that help to keep most African nations in a permanent state of instability, hence the relevance of revolutionary oral artists in order to create awareness in the people relative to a change of mentality.

Second, the study has argued that Lapiro de Mbanga and Prince *Afo-A-Kom* are committed urban oralists who are determined to “change the world”, in this case, Cameroon. When they criticize the issues that they consider as impediments in the development drive of their beloved country, it is because they intend to teach and mould the consciousness of their audience. Their presentation of the Cameroonian society in particular, shows how preoccupied they are with the present, especially the conflicts and abuses that appear in daily life. Their themes are based on conventional subjects of poverty, exploitation, ignorance, greed, and struggle for power, material deprivation, and unemployment just to mention these few. Their style reveals that they are close to the social reality in the treatment of events. After all, Eldred Jones points out:

The writer today in Africa must see around him bad politics, bad religion, the misleading of ordinary people, and he is bound to write about his environment. Of course, he can decide to opt out of it altogether, to write space fiction or something like that. But I feel that the writer has to write about what happens around him. (qtd in Taiwo75)

This is the duty of all committed artists in Africa be they of oral or written literature. When Lapiro de Mbanga and Prince *Afo-A-Kom* looked around them in Cameroon from independence till date, they saw among other evils, a large measure of “bad politics” and the “misleading of ordinary people.” They are, therefore, very sensitive singers who are concerned with the welfare of their society. It is Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, who has rightly asserted that a committed artist must “respond with his total personality to a social environment which changes all the time” (47). We have seen this in the artists’ presentations.

Third, the two artists are practitioners of the literature of realism by using their art as a weapon against all evil forces that seek to undermine the welfare of their society. Through realism, they attempt to capture the totality of life at each particular time and phase of history in their songs. To add to the realism in their songs, the artists describe situations that can be quickly identified in Cameroonian cities. Consequently, this study opines that the artists present themselves as lenses through which people should see their society as it is in reality. It is only after this realistic presentation of society that they call for a revolution, if their vision of a just society must be accomplished. Their vision of a just society ties up with the global search for peace embodied in the various calls for peace and disarmament treaties.

Fourth, in his 1989 interview with G.G. Darah and Kunle Ajibade, Festus Iyayi, the Commonwealth winning novelist, argued that he is committed to the liberation of the people from oppression. That is why he submitted:

...anyone who is committed to the liberation of the people from oppression necessarily has to be politically active. It is for this reason that I've been involved in trade unionism and very closely related to mass organization (32).

Lapiro de Mbanga is conscious of this role of anyone involved in the liberation of people from oppression. That explains why in 2007, he contested municipal elections on the ticket of the major opposition party in the country, the Social Democratic Front (SDF). Inih Akpan Ebong strongly argues:

By the very nature of his calling, the writer is primarily a revolutionary. His principal objective is not so much to inform, educate and entertain, as it is to change the society. (72)

From the foregoing submission, one takes refuge to argue that the writer of written literature plays the same role that a committed oral poet is expected to play. From the songs of Lapiro de Mbanga and Prince *Afo-A-Kom* this study strongly asserts that it is to a very large extent that these poets are revolutionary and committed to their society.

The fame and revolutionary consciousness of Lapiro de Mbanga and Prince *Afo-A-Kom* can be seen from the themes discussed and their medium of expression. This medium is a strange linguistic concoction of Douala, English, French, pidgin, ItaNikom and some coinages and neologisms. This is not strange with the language of poetry. For Widdowson contends "it is common to find instances of language use which cannot be account for by grammatical rules." (162) It is this deviant and abnormal feature of the language of poetry that stylistics focuses on. The message encoded in the selected songs, especially Lapiro's can only be decoded within context because of the peculiar language that he employs. So many listeners may need to take a longer time before getting the messages of his songs. That is why Isidore Okpewho comforts us when he contends:

Some song texts also contain 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)

Apart from the difficult linguistic vocabulary that Lapiro and the Prince employ, they have also used such poetic and artistic devices as alliteration, contrast ad juxtaposition, assonance, proverbs, allusion to historical personages and Biblical allusion, assonance, parallelism, symbols, metaphors, repetition, similes, just to name a few to enhance their thematic concerns.

In spite of the profound ideas the artists discuss in their songs and the revolutionary explanations that they proffer, they remain popular in their communities. Henry Jick argues that the reason for this:

Lies in the theme of pleasure that their songs treat. Here, we refer to pleasure in singing and dancing, pleasure in drumming and musicianship, pleasure in the beauty of landscape and a whole range of pleasures from childhood to old age can be considered as a major preoccupation of the oral artist (80).

This essay, therefore, contends that what is true of the songs under reference relative to pleasure is true of oral literature as a whole. It is also important to observe today that many studies have also been carried out to highlight the power of music. In Greek Literature, Orpheus, as seen by avid, created a magnetic field with his sweet melodies, a field which drew towards the poet, forests, wild animals, snakes and rocks. If one would call this mere fiction without positive effect, one may be surprised at what seems to be its verification in an experience, which a Chinese writer of our times, Chiang Yee, author of *The Silent Traveller in London*, once had in Great Britain. According to this writer:

The seals are said to have a keen sense of music and I remember a holiday on the sea coast of West Scotland, where seals came up in hordes on to the rocks of an island where we were playing the gramophone (7).

This tells us that the charm of music can be very effective and can be exploited in magic, religion and in orature to convey explosive political messages in an oppressive environment.

This study also argues that contiguous to the magical effect of music is its therapeutic effect. That is why Willy A. Umezinwa opines:

Music is the chief source of catharsis: it reforms, rehabilitates and refines man by helping to push out from his psyche accumulated impurities which could take the form of aggression, envy, jealousy, hatred to list just a few (3). It seems this therapeutic effect of these songs also contributes to the popularity of the artists. Both higher and lower classes of the society enjoy music. Its wide reach and particularly its grassroots appeal make it a powerful medium in contemporary Cameroon for political activism. In summary, therefore, music serves both functional and artistic purposes in urban oral literature and will continue to be a convenient instrument for preaching revolution in this literature.

Furthermore, this study asserts that the *raison d'être* of a revolution is the search for meaningful change. Lapiro de Mbanga and Prince *Afo-A-Kom* are revolutionary and committed urban oral poets who are searching for political, economic and social change in their Cameroonian society as seen in their songs. In this respect, they expose the evil in contemporary Cameroon. They examine the sources of these evils and their effects on the people. They then react to these evils in such a way as to make the people take a closer look at what is happening around them. Their modes of expression are equally revolutionary as out of their respective cultures, they strive to build with their linguistic vocabulary, an authentic Cameroonian aesthetics. Finally, this essay concludes for now that as long as people continue to exist, urban oral literature will continue to treat the changing content of their societies in more revolutionary perspectives.

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