

**Jean Marie Teno's Camera Verité as Art Intervention in Cameroon.**

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***Abstract***

Historically, filmmakers in Cameroon have reacted differently to stiff censorship by the two political regimes that Cameroon has had since 1960. While some have opted for self-censorship and subtle deconstruction, a few have chosen to use their art as a liberation tool, consistently defying the status quo by decrying various socio-political injustices. Using Italian neorealism as analytical framework, this paper analyzes selected films of Jean Marie Teno, one of Cameroon's liberationist filmmakers, to buttress how he stands in as the voice of the voiceless. At the end of this analysis, the major observation is that Teno could aptly be considered not just as a committed filmmaker with the objective to bring to the lime light alternative (and true) narratives of African life to the limelight, but also as an African theorist in present day socio-political discourse.

**Keywords:** *Camera verité, Italian neorealism, militant filmmaking, socio-political discourse, post-colonial discourse.*

**Introduction**

The main preoccupation of filmmakers in the newly independent African states was, and continues to be, the search of an identity and the fight against neocolonialism (Diawara,1992). This orientation was justified by the political contexts that prevailed on the continent at the time, especially the suppression of freedom of expression. This was the major reason behind the creation of the FEPACI (Fédération Panafricaine des Cinéastes) organization in 1969 (today known as FESPACO), whose mission was to organize, orientate and uniformize African cinema theoretically and ideologically towards liberationist struggles (Diawara, 1992). The choice of the film medium by the FESPACI organization as a medium to communicate liberationists strategies in Africa was not only timely but also strategic. This is because film language is universal and helps in breaking social or cultural barriers, and in a multilingual continent like Africa, this comes in very handy. Media experts and development communicators also feel that films are the most effective mass medium in poorer countries where literacy is low because

screen language can be understood even by people who can neither read nor write (Diawara, 1992).

With the capacity to leave long lasting impressions on the minds of the viewers by generating strong emotions, as well as provoking a change attitudes; the film medium becomes the tool par excellence for political awareness creation. African governments are very aware of these communication potentials of films, reason why the first generation of filmmakers in Cameroon after independence met with a stiff censorship from the Ahmadou Ahidjo regime, which forced them to stay clear of political discourse. As Edmond Nfaboun (2005) puts it:

The gap between modernism and tradition was often a favorite subject of the first Cameroonian filmmakers. Inclined to interrogate the articulations of the social body by displaying them, the first Cameroonian filmmakers, creators of feature length films, adopted a posture that situated them half-way between works of fiction and ethnographic reporting or documentaries. (p.84)

Having “domesticated” or tamed local filmmakers, the Ahidjo regime, and subsequently the Biya regime engaged in a serious business of image fabrication to make sure the government narrative takes precedence over everything else. As Alexie Tcheuyap (2005) puts it:

The state now produces only images, not films. In this context, the national television, completely funded by taxpayers’ compulsory contributions, becomes a huge image industry that does not in any way promote cinema...this lack of collaboration between the well-equipped national television and the filmmakers is due to what should be called “a battle for the control of representation”. This battle is not an epiphenomenon. It is part of a larger strategy for the control of narration, discourse, and language. (p.4)

With the local filmmakers tamed and the state machinery of image fabrication in full bloom, the second generation of “militant” or “liberationist” filmmakers, also known as second generation filmmakers in Cameroon; played a major role in the balance of power and narratives in the country. This paper analyzes selected films of Jean Marie Teno, of the second generation of filmmakers, who seems to have adhered to the FESPACI agenda; and how liberationist agendas have guided his aesthetic and content/thematic options (the unifying central concern of the film, the special focus that unifies the work).

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Aesthetics here refers to beauty and narrative principles in the domain of film as an art, mostly related to framing choices adopted by the filmmaker and how suitable these choices are in enhancing viewer understanding of the intended message of the film. It should be noted that the definition of aesthetics poses difficulties because it designates particular objects, judgments, experiences, and values; which all tend to depend of individual subjectivities. This difficulty becomes even more acute with regard to contemporary art where the position of aesthetics is precarious, with a sharp rise in anti-aestheticism (Osborne, 2004). That is why, from a more reconstructive perspective, Scarry (2013) has called for a reinvestment in the value of aesthetics as an autonomous and self-evident realm of beauty.

However, in order to put Teno's aesthetic into perspective, it is important to understand the conceptual breakdown by Currie, G. (1998) who posits that:

...film aesthetics has been dominated by issues of realism. Three kinds of realism attributable to film may be distinguished: (1) the realism inherent in film because of its use of the photographic method (realism of method); (2) realism as a style which approximates the normal conditions of perception (realism of style); (3) realism as the capacity of film to engender in the viewer an illusion of the reality and presentness of fictional characters and events (realism of effect). (p.248)

Teno's aesthetics across the films selected encapsulates a blend of realism of method and realism of style, to get his viewers to understand (and almost experience) the daily realities of the masses in Cameroon. He opts for a documentary neo-realist approach that uses montage of pictures and archival video footages to define the style, subject and tone of his films. A common technique he uses is eliminating color, opting instead for black and white film, in order to portray a bleak, hopeless style that closely aligns with the subjects of his stories.

Italian neorealism is the analytical framework used to analyze Teno's films in focus here, and serves as a roadmap for arguments developed in this paper. Three characteristics of Italian neorealism make it suitable for this paper: the narrative importance of space, democratic characterization and the documentary style. Detailing characteristics of Italian Neorealism, Garriff (2008) states:

With the fall of Fascism in 1943, Italian filmmakers embraced a new freedom that encouraged this direct and authentic style of moviemaking. Beginning with the films of

Roberto Rossellini (1906 - 1977) and continuing in the work of Vittorio De Sica (1902–1974) and the early films of Visconti, neorealism sought a more democratic spirit, telling stories of the lives of ordinary people. The settings were the streets and buildings of real cities, many of which still bore the scars of the war. The performers, even those cast in major roles, were often nonprofessional actors. If the films had a style, it might loosely be termed documentary (or realistic): they eschewed subjective camera work and editing as well as romantic effects of lighting; they allowed scenes to play out in real time, however slowly or methodically; and they drew dialogue from the street, even when the source of a script was a literary text. (p.4)

As will be seen later in this paper, most of Teno's films analyzed in this paper are inspired by real life events, or constitute an attempt to reconstitute real life events that affected or still affect the lives of the Cameroonian masses. In typical documentary style, most of the performers are not professionals but rather cast in the film by circumstances surrounding the thematic of the films. These characteristics thus situate Teno's films within the Italian Neorealist theoretical framework, in tandem with Gariff's above description. Kartal (2013) also outlines several perspectives of Italian neorealism:

Most neorealist films seem to be relying on dramatic events and characters. Thematically, the uniting factor of the master works of Neorealism is a concern for representing the ordinary and everyday struggles of the working class in the uncertain climate of postwar reconstruction... as opposed to the *telefoni bianchi* films of the preceding years, with neorealism, Italian cinema now turned its attention to ordinary people that had been overlooked for so long. The young and ambitious directors wanted to depict what they saw every day on the streets, and hence form a different perspective on the way we look at cinema. Cesare Zavattini, the highly acclaimed screen writer and director of the era, has defined the true function of cinema as not to tell fables, and to a true function we must recall it...The cinema must tell a reality as if it were a story: there must be no gap between life and what is on the screen. (p.146)

The aspects to note from Kartal to help elucidate Teno's theoretical perspective in filmmaking include the representation of ordinary people and ordinary life, as well as the closeness of what is projected on screen with what happens in real life. In the films under study, Teno seeks to bring to light the predicament of the Cameroonian masses, including the working class as the struggle with the negative effects of neocolonialism and poor

Jean Marie Teno's Camera Verité as Art Intervention in Cameroon governance. This is why Golbert Doho (2005) is quite apt in his description of Teno's filmmaking when he posits that:

The camera in his [Teno's] hand functions as a "camera-verité" that breaks up political "truths". He uses it to show the facts that both the colonial and the neocolonial regimes have hidden from the world. In so doing, Teno offers an alternative discourse to official ones. The constantly wiped out repressive periods of the history of Cameroon are resurrected. (p.32)

From the neorealist standpoint, Teno could thus be considered not just as a committed filmmaker but also as an African theorist in socio-political discourse. His films examined here include: (1989), *Afrique, je te plumeria* (Africa, I will Fleece you) (1992), *la tête dans les nuages* (Head in the Clouds) (1994) *Chef!* (Chief!) (1999), (2004) and *Une Feuille dans le vent* (A Leaf in the wind) (2013). While *Afrique, je te plumeria* and *Une Feuille dans le vent* ex-ray the colonial and neocolonial experiences of the African nations epitomized by Cameroon, the rest of the films bring to the limelight the state of socio-political degradation in present day African states.

It is worth highlighting here that a few other researchers have previously buttressed on Jean Marie Teno's contributions to the post-colonial discourse through his provocative films. Nganang (2005) in his essay *Deconstructing Authority in Cinema: Jean Marie Teno*, analyses Teno's films which he describes as veritable essays on authority. To him, Teno belongs to that category of filmmakers set out to make viewers conscious of the state of African societies; as his films reflect his personal queries and anger as well as express the burning questions of Africans today. Nganang thus articulates two arguments: first, that the colonial period did not only change the African present, but also determined the future of the continent by inventing an anatomy of power and figures of the autocrat; and secondly, that the *mise-en-scene* and editing of his films represent political power in Cameroon as being an endless metonymy of the figure of the colonialist.

In the same vein, Izzo, J. (2015) for example, examines discourses and cinematic representations of modernity in two documentary films by the Cameroonian director Jean-Marie Teno. In the first of these films, *A Trip to the Country* (2000), Teno posits that ideals and aspirations of modernity as a state-sponsored project in Cameroon have their roots in the colonial period. In the second, *Sacred Places* (2009), modernity is given a

different affective resonance and is linked to the pleasure of cinematic consumption in Ouagadougou as Teno situates African cinema in relation to its “brother,” the djembe drum. Izzo’s argument is that, a shift occurs between these two films and their affective engagements with modernity; a transition from a sense of millennial anxiety to a thematic of what he calls cinematic kinship. He further suggests that this shift allows Teno to outline new social roles for the African filmmaker as well as new relationships between African cinema and local publics.

Also, Thackway & Teno (2020) in their collaborative essay *Reel Resistance: The Cinema of Jean-Marie Teno* highlight the biography, filmic poetics and anticolonial politics of Jean-Marie Teno as a filmmaker, emphasizing the postcolonial need for a focus on *the real*, counteracting the somber history of colonial lies and betrayal.

This paper agrees for the most part with the above arguments on Teno’s contributions to the post-colonial discuss. However, this paper further buttresses Teno’s views on the post-colonial question in greater detail, from a three-dimensional perspective. The first dimension is that Teno does not consider colonialism in Africa to have ended, but rather that it has just taken a more sinister form, and continues to destroy African societies notably through well-crafted cultural annihilation strategies. In this light, Africa’s intolerable present is a result of her past and present colonial violence. The second is that Africa’s history has been greatly and intentionally distorted by the western colonizers and neo-colonizers. This distortion of history has been and is still perpetuated through school books mostly edited by the west in complicity with the pseudo-African regimes in place. According to Teno, Africa needs to rewrite her history for posterity’s sake to avoid cultural annihilation and develop her own indigenous development plans. The last argument is that post-independent African nations are characterized by power abuse and economic collapse, and the roots of Africa’s authoritarian regimes can be traced to the colonial experience, compounded by patriarchal local cultures. This is more evident in francophone Africa where patriarchal local traditions co-exist with the French civil code of 1804 (still in use in Cameroon though already revised in France itself). These arguments seem to form the basis for Teno’s thematic and aesthetic in his films. Using the neo-realist *camera-verité* approach, Teno’s filmmaking becomes a veritable form of art intervention in the Cameroonian society and beyond.

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**Jean Marie Teno**

Born in 1954 in Bandjoun, West Region of Cameroon, Teno studied audiovisual communication in Valenciennes, France. He has his own production house known as Les Films du Raphia, and produces his films himself. Rooted in post-colonial experience, Teno's cinematic essays interrogate societal issues facing contemporary Africa, tackling topics such as censorship, emigration, human rights and the impact of globalization on the developing world, as well as polygamy and the status of women. However, political interrogations around the use of political power and neocolonialism always linger in most of his films, especially reflections on the pervasive nature of corruption within society and resistance to injustice. His filmography includes the following:

- 1983: *Schubbah* (short film)
- 1985: *Tribute* (short film)
- 1985: *Yellow Fever taximan* (short film)
- 1987: *The Slap and the Caress* (short film)
- 1988: *The Misery Water* (documentary)
- 1990: *The Last Voyage* (short film)
- 1991: *Mister Foot* (documentary)
- 1992: *Africa, I'll fleece you...* (documentary)
- 1996: *The Head in the Clouds* (short film)
- 1996: *Clando* (feature film)
- 1999: *Chef!* (documentary)
- 2000: *Trip to the Country* (documentary)
- 2002: *The Marriage of Alex* (documentary)
- 2004: *The colonial misunderstanding* (documentary)
- 2009: *Sacred Places* (documentary)
- 2013: *A Leaf in the Wind* (documentary)

**Jean Marie Teno and the Post-Colonial Discourse**

As mentioned earlier, Teno's films seem to align with the agenda of the FESPACI, which intended to use films to counter the negative image of Africa as presented by the western colonialists in the films made about Africa during the colonial days. Nwachuku Frank Ukadike in his book *Black African Cinema* (1994) buttresses the same point as he methodically and persuasively deconstructs the philosophical, historical, literal and cultural components of colonial discourse, which he describes as full of vicious misrepresentations aimed at tumbling authentic traditional values:

Those movies inverted African values by imposing the language and culture of the colonizer on the colonized. They also served to justify military escapades and white man 's civilizing mission.

They provided a false perspective through which the continent was to be viewed... (p. 16)

Towards independence therefore, most African countries were heavily sedated with a distorted view of themselves, their cultural values and history. In Cameroon in particular, the French were exceptionally meticulous in their use of films as an instrument of propaganda and psychological domination. Gilbert Doho (2005) illustrates this fact clearly in his article *The Illegitimate State and Cinematographic Discourse in Cameroon*, when he asserts that:

In line with the praising of French culture and civilization, colonial documentaries carried out the propagandist task of promoting the images of a hardworking and triumphant France to the natives. This can be seen in *L'Inauguration du pont du Wouri* (1953), *Bonjour Paris* (1957), *L'Élevage du Mouton* (1957), and *Un petit port de pêche française*. Most of these documentaries preceded General De Gaulle's historic tour of African colonies and served as a bait to bring Africans to digest the idea of the French Union, a vast empire in which African countries would occupy the periphery. No sooner had the French vacated the field than a neocolonial order replaced it. (p.24)

Here, we realize that the western colonizers exploited the functions of film as a mass medium to their advantage, using their films to impose their culture on the colonized and to propagate the propaganda of white supremacy. In the 1960s, most of the new African states were plagued by repressive regimes and a strong vice-like neocolonial grip on the socio-political affairs, especially in francophone Africa. It is within this challenging socio-political setting that the *Federation Panafricaine des Cineastes (FEPACI)* was created. This association of filmmakers, which in time became a very powerful lobby group, strongly believed that culture had to be national, and that it had to contribute to political liberation. It also had a special political agenda that was developed in response to specific historical, cultural and political circumstances that have since changed. The *Algiers chapter* (1975), as quoted by Alexie Tcheuyap (2011), sought to promote the view that Cinema can only serve an instrumental function such as:

...assume a genuinely active role in the process of development, African culture must be popular, democratic and progressive in character, inspired by its own realities and responding to its own needs. It must also be in solidarity with cultural struggles all over the world. The issue is... to allow the masses to take control of means of production of their own developments, giving them back



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the cultural initiative by drawing on the resources of a fully liberated popular activity. Within this perspective, cinema has a very vital part to play because it is a means of education, information and consciousness raising... The stereotyped image of the solitary and marginal creator which is widespread in western capitalist society must be rejected by the African filmmakers, who must, on the contrary, see themselves as creative artisans at the service of their people. It also demands great vigilance on their part with regard to imperialism 's attempts at ideological recuperation as it redoubles its efforts to maintain, renew and increase its cultural ascendancy (pp.4-5)

The FESPACI organization was out to encourage African filmmakers to play roles that were closer to those of journalists than artists, because they felt themselves as part of a larger social struggle in the quest for absent or vanishing agents of democratic change (Hostettler & Quayson, 2002). As we shall see in this section, Teno's films, especially *Afrique je te plumerai* and *Une faille dans le vent* aligns with this road map laid out by the FESPACI and offer critical indictments of both colonial and neocolonial interventions of the west in Africa.

### 1. Afrique, Je Te Plumerai (1992)

The first of Teno's films that made a bold political statement was *Afrique, Je Te Plumerai*, in which he presents a horrifying narration of over a hundred years of cultural imperialism in Africa by the western superpowers. In this film, Teno uses Cameroon, the only African country historically colonized by three European powers (Germany, France, and Britain), as a carefully researched case study of the continuing damage done to traditional African societies by alien colonial and neo-colonial cultures.

The dominant aesthetic in *Afrique, je te Plumerai*, and which cuts across many of Teno's films, consists of collage/montage. This consists of assembling and combining different elements and images (sometimes from archival sources), in a non-linear fashion, to produce aesthetic, cognitive, and analytical effects that challenge dominant aesthetic trends, especially linear editing. By challenging dominant aesthetic trends as outlined above, Teno's aesthetic becomes just as subversive as his thematic concerns which focus on fighting neocolonialism and dictatorship in their different facets. As a documentary, the film does not focus on specific characters, but opts for a voice over narrative of the

present depressing socio-political situation in Cameroon and why this situation is directly linked to the country's colonial past and neocolonial present; with the use of fresh as well as archival footages. The few cases of characterization in the film include Teno himself as he reflects about his western oriented education, then eventually we meet Marie during subsequent visits to an educational book publishing house, and French, British, German, and the CLE (Christian missionary) libraries. Marie is the guide. We find that European books, rather than African books, dominate in libraries and school curriculum.

From a narrative perspective, the film moves from present to past (and from color to black & white), revealing years of systematic African cultural annihilation. As reported in the Californian newsreel, Teno explains:

I wanted to trace cause and effect between an intolerable present and the colonial violence of yesterday...to understand how a country could fail to succeed as a state which was once composed of well-structured traditional societies.

Through overlapping western newsreels from the 1930s, the film reveals that France perceived and conceived its "civilizing mission" as destroying traditional African social structures and replacing them with a colonial regime of "evolues", a group of western-educated Africans who were indoctrinated to accept European colonizers' language, values and superiority.

In an effort to contribute to the post-colonial discourse, Teno tells a story that applies to many 'post-colonial' African nations today. It should be noted that Teno does not consider colonialism to have ended, but has merely taken a new and insidious form in Africa today. Teno's *Afrique, Je Te plumerai* presents neocolonialism as perpetrated by totalitarian regimes that rule the masses with an iron fist, painting a vivid picture of this scenario right from the opening scenes of the film. As pictures of peaceful demonstrations with placards demanding for democracy countered by violent repressions and mass killings file pass, Teno's voice over is both poetic and reflective:

Yaoundé, *ville cruel* (Cruel Town)

You stuffed our heads with your official lies,

You tread our distress underfoot in an arrogant gesture

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To your children shouting "liberty!"

You reply with machine gun fire

And the soldier's uniform is soiled with our children's blood.

Yaoundé, *ville cruelle*

You inspire shame (My translation).

Through his concerns about rewriting African history, his nationalism and his quest for real independence from the west, Teno positions himself as a post-colonialist filmmaker with a liberationist agenda; especially as he critically indicts press censorship, government-controlled publishing and the flood of European media and school books in the Cameroonian society. Here, it is important to indicate that a fellow second-generation filmmaker in Cameroon like Basseck Ba Kobhio developed similar views on post-colonialism in his film *Le grand blanc de Lambarene* (The Great White man of Lambarene) (1995). In this film, Ba Kobhio embarks on deconstructing colonial myths to show that "colonization did not civilize the African as widely claimed, but rather decivilized, brutalized and degraded him" (Haynes, 2005). The film presents a white missionary, Dr. Schweizer, who abandons his hometown to go and die in the "dark" continent, trying to save the "primitive" peoples. Ba Kobhio rather presents him as a hypocrite "white saint", who uses blacks as a ladder to seek a place in heaven. This line of thinking tallies greatly with Teno's ideologies as have been expounded here.

## 2. Une Feuille dans le Vent (2013)

In this short documentary, Teno pursues with his critical indictments of neocolonialism in Africa, but this time he focuses on the life of a typical freedom fighter. The aesthetic consists of an interview conducted with Ernestine Ouandié, while she is sitting on the porch of her house in the west region of Cameroon. The film allows Ernestine to tell her own story in her own voice, providing a critical perspective that is very often left out in mainstream representations of the African experience. Her narrative is supplemented with voice-over narration, archival footage, and black-and-white drawings accompanied by moody jazz. Ernestine struggles to recall memories while searching for appropriate words to convey them. We learn that she was born in Nigeria on May 11, 1961; to a Ghanaian mother and Cameroonian father. She had a difficult childhood in Accra growing up with

her maternal aunt who treated her like a piece of property. Ernestine's mother had abandoned her because she considered her an obstacle to making a life for herself with another man.

In terms of characterization and major story features, the film offers a powerful portrait of Ernestine Ouandié, the daughter of Ernest Ouandié, a leading figure of the liberation struggle in Cameroon in the 1960s. She was not close to his father either because he was a leader of the underground resistance against Ahmadou Ahidjo's regime in Cameroon. She endured a lot of physical abuse and servitude such as ironing clothes, washing dishes, and sleeping on the cold kitchen floor; until the day she slapped her aunt back, which caused her aunt to send her back to her mother. Ernestine's mother turned out to be even worse than her aunt, sending her out to the streets. Ernestine was then taken to Lomé, where she was registered with the UNHCR as the daughter of a political refugee. The Cameroonian community in Ghana eventually vouched for her at the university and she earned a degree in journalism in 1986. She became so interested in knowing about her father that she travelled and settled in the western region of Cameroon with her father's family. This is when we learn that Ernest Ouandié was executed on January 15, 1971, in a public square in Bafoussam where the heads of dead militants were displayed to deter sympathizers from joining the resistance. However, alternate narratives are circulating on how her father was killed, a historical gap that gives her a feeling of injustice. Speaking to the camera, she appeals to anyone who has information about the circumstances of her father's death to come forward with the facts.

*Une fille dans le vent* thus extends Teno's contributions to the post-colonial discourse, by presenting what looks like a continuation of *Afrique, je te plumeria* (1992), revealing colonialism's ongoing legacy in Africa today, exploring the personal sacrifices that Ouandié made for his people's freedom, right to his eventual execution in 1971. Ernestine's frustrations are by extension also those of Cameroonians and Africans in general, whose history was badly distorted by colonialists, and continues to be distorted by neo-colonialist regimes today. Just like Ernestine feels unanchored in the present (like a leaf in the wind) because of not knowing the truth about his father's history, so too are Africans today; whose history, culture and heritage continue to be intentionally eroded by neo-colonial forces. As we learn at the end of the film, she committed suicide in 2009,

Jean Marie Teno's Camera Verité as Art Intervention in Cameroon leaving behind three children. Teno therefore seems to be predicting the same fate for Cameroon if history is not set right.

### **Jean Marie Teno and the African Nation-State.**

Teno is also preoccupied with the state of affairs in post-independent African nations, characterized by power abuse and socio-economic collapse. Two of such films include *La tête dans les nuages* (Head in the Clouds) (1994) and *Chef!* (Chief!) (1999). These two taunting documentaries seem to be a follow up of his earlier documentary *Afrique, je te plumerai* (Africa, I will fleece you), and propose a bleak picture of the political and economic stagnation besetting many African states. At the same time, he introduces us to grassroots forces in civil society and the informal economy which are usually overlooked by the Western media but which could point the way towards vigorous democratic development in Africa.

### **3. La tête dans les nuages (1994)**

In *La tête dans les nuages*, Jean-Marie Teno criticizes the ills of the modern world and the regression of African societies due to the insensitivity of public authorities to the plight of the masses. This short documentary mostly focuses on the capital city of Cameroon, Yaoundé; which might also be a representation of African cities: heaps of rubbish lie at the edge of streets, academics are out of work, officials unpaid, corruption is the norm, and misery is everywhere.

As observed with most of his films, characterization is sparse and the documentary style with voice over narrative is preferred. It is through this documentary style that the film portrays the social upheavals in Cameroon in the early 90s, marked by ghost towns and other socio-economic crisis that brought the country almost to its knees. In the midst of this crisis, Teno juxtaposes two individuals: first, a woman who works in the ministry of education but sells puff balls in the streets to augment her income; in contrast with a lawyer who ends up selling imported products in a shop. This juxtaposition clearly indicates failure of the Cameroonian system of education, and by extension, the Cameroonian nation since such an educational system cannot adequately safeguard a country's development.

From the post-colonial perspective, Jean-Marie Teno makes his stance very clear in the voice over of the film; “colonization, civilization, independence and humanitarian talk, are merely excuses and theatrical gestures to ensure that Africa remains the place which foreign powers can exploit with a good conscience.” Kleptocracy has thus become an accepted fact of Cameroonian life summarized in the popular saying: "The goat grazes where it is tied." The government-controlled formal sector, like its colonial predecessor, is essentially parasitical, such that an informal sector has emerged parallel to it which increasingly supplies the daily subsistence needs of the people. Cameroon's divided economy is also reflected in its unbalanced education system, as Cameroonians flock to the universities to acquire a neo-colonial education which ill-prepares them for the actual needs of the local economy.

#### **4. Chef! (1999)**

The idea of the film *Chef!* came about during Teno's visit to his village Bandjoun in the West Region of Cameroon to witness the enthronement of the village chief, King Kamga Joseph II, his great grand uncle. His initial plan was to video document the ceremony, especially the dances, but the ceremony soon turned into a celebration of one-man rule, and particularly Cameroonian President Paul Biya's. This prompted Teno to speculate on how people in positions of power at the different social levels in Cameroon exercise power over the people they rule, and he decided to use the ceremony as the foundation for a film. In, *Chef!* Teno traces the roots of Africa's authoritarian regimes to the patriarchal family, compounded by traditional kingship and the colonial experience.

After footages of traditional dances during the enthronement ceremony accompanied by explanatory voice over narratives from Teno himself, characterization starts when Teno comes across an angry mob molesting a 16-year-old boy who had stolen some chickens. It takes Teno and an elderly bystander a lot of effort to save the boy from violent death. In the voice over, Teno comments: "The paradox of this country is that the national sport - far more popular than soccer - is the plundering of resources by our heads and chiefs, yet a youth was nearly lynched for stealing one hen and four chicks." Teno is of the opinion that in Cameroon, the powerless in the face of massive injustice, take out their rage on those less powerful than themselves. A few hours after this incident, Teno buys a

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souvenir calendar listing "the rules and regulations of the husband in his home." He reads out two that particularly catch his attention:

- The husband is always chief - even in bed;
- If the husband strikes the wife while visitors are present, she must smile and pretend that nothing has happened; etc.

These "rules and regulations" clearly indicate that besides the traditional rulers, every man is virtually a chief. Teno sarcastically and aptly observes that if every husband is a chief, then Cameroon is a nation of 7 million chiefs. (The only census results available then (1987) indicated that the population of Cameroon was about 14 million. Now it is estimated at 26million (2005 GPH census).

It should be noted that other Cameroonian filmmakers, especially Jean Pierre Bekolo and Daniel Kamwa have equally elaborated on the subject of power abuse in their films. In Bekolo's *Quartier Mozart* (2004), the father of the lead actress, Samedi is a police officer who goes by name Chien Mechant (Mad Dog), a very apt name for a man who handles his two wives and several children with an iron fist. Kamwa's *Le Cercle des Pouvoirs* (Circle of Powers) (1998) rather looks at power play from the higher echelons of the society. He demonstrates the modus operandi of power at this level through the main character, money Sam, who uses money to buy his position in the government and finances the president's party. In return, the government turns a blind eye to his fraudulent transactions and tax evasions.

Teno further pursues his probing of power abuse in post-colonial Cameroon in *Chef!* with a series of interviews on power issues in the country. The director of the Association for the End of Violence on Women points out that the husbands' dominance over his wife is guaranteed not only by local traditions, but also by the French Civil Code of 1804 which is still in use in Cameroon, though already revised in France itself. Other Cameroonian human rights activists in their interviews denounce "a political culture of irresponsibility granting those in power complete impunity and no accountability." President Paul Biya has banned most civic movements to protect what he calls "Cameroonian style" or "peaceful democracy." For example, in December 1997, Pius Njawe, editor of an opposition news weekly, *Le Messenger*, was arrested simply for asking if the President

had left a football match because of ill health. Teno proceeds to show images of Njawe as he served his two years imprisonment in the horrifying, disease-ridden Newbell prison where 150 prisoners are crowded into 30' by 40' cells without a sewage system or adequate food. In prison, Njawe learns that there is a fixed schedule of bribes that need to be paid even to get a trial date. Njawe and Teno thus perceive the Ministry of Justice as a giant business enterprise selling freedom.

In his perpetual attempt to investigate the source of the chaos that infects contemporary African life with violence, poverty, repression, etc., Teno's voice over in *Chef!* recounts the following parable as the enthronement continues in images: "Funerals are so important to us.... If we don't bury a friend or foe well, we are likely to see his ghost often, until the day we unbury him and bury him again according to the tradition. We didn't bury colonization well, and we can see its ghost everywhere!". This is to say that Africa experienced the violence of the slave trade and of European colonialism for centuries, but when these phenomena came to an end, the transition was not well negotiated. After independence, the violence of colonial regimes gave way to domestic corruption and violence which have invariably steered the African continent towards a state of economic and social chaos.

*Chef!* further illustrates this social chaos in Cameroon by presenting the lives of three individuals. The first is Jacky, a university graduate with a law degree, who searches in vain for a job corresponding to his qualifications. After a series of disappointments, he ends up taking up the profession of his parents: a shopkeeper at the central market. The second is Irene Pesonka, a civil servant in a government ministry, but she has to take on a second job selling doughnuts at a roadside stand just to make ends meet. The third is Pascale Marthine Tayou, a sculptor and poet, who finds his working material in the huge piles of garbage in the streets of Yaoundé. He brands his style *arte povera* or "slum art", an artistic expression of the decrepit state of the Cameroonian society.

The stories of these three individuals describe the chaos of urban life in Cameroon today. Even with good qualifications it is difficult to find a job, and even when you find a job, the salary is often too small to sustain you such that you need to find another to augment your income. However, they are also a pointer to the fact that the informal economic



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sector plays a very important role in Cameroon today as more and more Cameroonians find themselves obligated to operate in the informal sector.

Paradoxically, and as if to justify the fact that Teno himself is African, Teno as a filmmaker is all powerful in his movies. The concentration of roles in his films on himself can also be likened to the concentration of power, which he criticizes so vehemently. He is writer, producer, director, narrator and distributor in almost all his movies, especially documentaries. As Alexie Tcheuyap (2011) puts it, quoting Achile Mbembe:

...the division of labour in the production of films is also an indication of the level of power a director, the real "chiefs" of the cultural business, is prepared to give (up). In other words, there is a certain contradiction in denouncing the concentration of powers in the political system and the practice of the same concentration in cultural business. One can do this in a participatory manner, and many actors are also directors of their own films, but such excessive visibility reminds us of the image of autocrats who, with such "intertwining of multiple identities" are "everything at the same time" (p.155)

This concentration of roles on the filmmaker in *Chef!* however does not diminish the salient nature and accuracy of Teno's observations on the political system in Cameroon. Rather, it constitutes a strong subtext of the overarching message of the film, as if to say that there is a dormant autocrat in almost every Cameroonian, including the filmmakers themselves.

### Conclusion

From the time of its inception, the film industry in Cameroon has evolved with the psyche of the society and also evolved the psyche of the society. Cameroon, like the rest of the African continent has witnessed a rather tumultuous history in the last 100 years, passing from a colonized territory, to an independent nation; with the socio-political context of each era leaving traces on the content of films produced. Having been subjected to films that sought to propagate western superiority during the colonial era, when African filmmakers took up the challenge to make films after independence, they had a double challenge. First, they felt compelled to fight back and improve upon the negative image the colonialists gave of Africa, by reasserting their African values and identity, badly distorted by western films. Secondly, they had to deal with the challenges faced by any

developing area in competition with well-established countries for a share of the film market (Ukadike, 1994, 2002).

However, and as mentioned earlier in this paper, the various neocolonial and pro-western regimes of the newly independent African states fought tooth and nail to control the narrative; first by socio-political censorship and attempts to produce images that favor them. This harsh production context led some early Cameroonian filmmakers to develop a naïve and passive style that tended to support the French cultural imperialism in Cameroon. Filmmakers like Jean-Pierre Dikonge Pipa, Daniel Kamwa, Dia Moukouri, Alphonse Beni and Athur Sibita are prominent figures in this group because of the closeness of their themes to the colonial and neocolonial objectives. They largely opted for self-censorship and presented their works as unthreatening to the repressive regime.

This paper has highlighted the works of one of Cameroon's filmmakers, Jean Marie Teno who, just like others of the second-generation filmmakers like Jean Claude Tchuilien, Jean-Pierre Bekolo and Basseck Ba Kobhio; braved the odds and used the camera not only to decolonize the world view of Cameroon, but also to deconstruct the neocolonial political structures in place. He seems to have adhered to the dictates of the Fédération Pan-africaine des Cineastes (FEPACI), by contributing to political liberation.

Teno's filmmaking approach thus tallies with the three main arguments of this paper as laid out at the beginning, notably that Teno does not consider colonialism in Africa to have ended but has simply taken a more subtle and sinister form; that Africa's violent presence is as a result of vestiges of her violent colonial past and present, and that neocolonialism is more apparent in francophone Africa where patriarchal local traditions co-exist with the outdated French civil code of 1804. This neocolonialism is perpetuated in Africa with the complicity of pseudo-regimes put in place by western powers, and these regimes actively help these western powers to suppress their people's history and culture through western books in their educational system, at the same time suppressing the people and carefully making sure that the truth of the people's subjugation does not get out to the international community. This is why Teno seems committed to using his camera to bring the truth to the limelight. It also became apparent that Teno (consciously or unconsciously) adheres to, or has the same filmmaking ideas as the FESPACI

Jean Marie Teno's Camera Verité as Art Intervention in Cameroon organization, today known as FESPACO. Although these values have softened over the years, they still remain at the basis of selection criteria in the FESPACO yearly international film festival that holds in Birkin-Faso.

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