

***RENEGOTIATING FILM PRODUCTION IN CAMEROON DURING THE
COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE VIRUS IN FRONT AND BEHIND THE CAMERA.***

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Abstract

Film production in Cameroon during the corona virus pandemic period witnessed a number of disruptions in conventional film practices. Many Cameroonian filmmakers found themselves trying to negotiate a new practical audiovisual paradigm for their film praxis. Given the many restrictions that came with the virus, film stakeholders realised they had to rethink their filmmaking approaches. What kinds of films should they be making and who will be the audience of the films they make during the Covid-19 period? How have filmmakers been affected by this crisis and how are they negotiating a way forward? Through direct informant interviews with Cameroonian filmmakers, this article sought to examine the nature of film practice in Cameroon during the peak period of the corona virus crisis 2019/2020. It was difficult for some Cameroonian filmmakers to accept the advent of and operation within the covid-19 crises. In most cases though, they were bound, even unwillingly, to accept the operational difficulties of making a film within the context of the health crises. Finding a voice for the filmmaker in the crises turned out to be one of the most challenging negotiations they had to make as they sought new ways to cope with the situation. The advent of covid-19 took a toll on both the artistic and technical aspects of filmmaking in Cameroon. In most cases, it had a negative effect on the processes of filmmaking but also brought about innovations, skill acquisition and more open-mindedness in the perception of most Cameroonian filmmakers.

Keywords: *Covid-19, production, filmmaker, innovation, filmmaking*

Introduction

Film production in Cameroon has seen a long history of changes, evolution and even revolution. From the 1960s with Panafrican styled productions that sort to write back to the west (Bakari & Cham, Ukadike), through to the 1980s with the wave of filmmakers who were concerned with telling stories of the daily struggles of the common man to avant-garde filmmakers to outright revolutionaries (Jean Pierre Bekolo, Osvalde Lewat,

Jean Marie Teno). There has been a meandering history of changing ideologies and conceptions about telling Cameroonian stories on the silver screen. The evolution has continued to the new wave of filmmakers today who are interested in finding themselves and paving a path of their own which to many tilts more towards commercial film production. The new wave of filmmakers seem indifferent to issues of identity or nationalism in the films they make (Butake 2005, Doho 2005). They are interested in making a good film and selling their films. From a very slow start in the 60s, through the booming 1980s, film production in Cameroon saw a massive explosion in the late 2000s (Fominyen, Layih). This is evident not only in the number of films produced yearly but also in the number of film launches, film award ceremonies and festivals that keep multiplying as the years go by. This brought about hope of a booming film industry in the nearest future. The themes treated by the “new generation filmmakers” have been wide and varied. How filmmakers proceeded in carrying out productions before and during the pandemic are varied, with every filmmaker choosing their unique stylistics.

However, the advent of the corona virus pandemic has brought about a rethink of, the why, the what and the how of the practice of filmmaking in Cameroon. Film stakeholders in Cameroon as everywhere else in the world found themselves in situations where methodologies and even artistry of the art came under the impact of corona virus regulations. Governments, regulatory institutions, some financial institutions and the individual filmmaker often implemented such regulations. Film stakeholders realised they had to rethink how they were going to proceed with making films, if they should make the films at all given the health risks involved. What kinds of films should they be making and who will be the audience of the films they make during the Covid-19 period. Cinema practice all over the world was confronted with a global crisis that threatened to halt most cinematic activities as industries globally shut down production, exhibition venues and other activities surrounding film production.

The bonafide question today is if cinema praxis in Cameroon is in a crisis situation caused by the advent of Covid and what is that situation? Or, is it that, it is a crisis on which Cameroonian cinema can profit to broaden its scope of production both technically and artistically? Is this a new era that has set in and if so what are the variables that set this era apart from the others? How have changes in the manner of production brought in by

the health crisis restrictions affected film production in Cameroon? How have filmmakers been affected by this crisis and how are they negotiating a way forward? These are some of the questions that this research sets out to investigate. Through direct informant interviews with Cameroonian filmmakers, this article sought to examine the nature of film practice in Cameroon during the peak period of the corona virus crisis 2019/2020.

The corona virus pandemic, (covid-19) hit the world towards the end of 2019. Even though it started in Wuhan in China (World Health Organization, 2020a), it soon spread throughout the world in the shortest possible time and was declared a worldwide disaster by the WHO. In as much as it was a health-related crisis, in no time it plunged the world's economy and activities into an uncertain turmoil. Almost every country in the world began witnessing an economic downturn that affected almost every sector, from energy, government agencies, healthcare, education, as well as the entertainment industry in general (Nwakunor 2020).

The virus spread around the world so fast and within seven months it was being reported to have attained 215 countries infecting close to nine million people and killing four hundred and sixty-nine thousand, five hundred and eighty-seven thousand (469,587) people (Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020b). The virus is recorded to have hit Cameroon officially on March 5th 2020 and rapidly became a public health predicament. The Cameroonian government, like most other governments around the globe, did put in place a series of measures aimed at curtailing the spread of the virus in the country. There were many regulations and restrictions initiated by WHO to keep the spread of the virus under check. Such restrictions and guidelines included closure of terrestrial, aerial, and maritime, borders, social distancing between people of at least 1.5meters apart, using face masks, avoiding crowded areas, staying indoors, restrictions in both national and international travel, consistent washing or sanitization of hands, disinfecting of equipment and other items (World Health Organization, 2020c). Most of these restrictions were meant to be short term but as the virus persisted in its spread, they became almost a norm to many around the world. The government of Cameroon did what it could to enforce some of the restrictions recommended by WHO. In this regard, even major national events like the Labor Day (May 1) and Unity Day (May 20), were canceled because of COVID-19. In

Cameroon, as around the world, the world's economy stagnated with stock markets collapsing due to the global shut down of most industries.

The entertainment industry, and in this case the film industry, globally and in Cameroon, was seriously affected by the covid-19 crisis. Film production in general almost came to a standstill given that producing a film entails not only many people to work together, but in most cases requires a lot of movement/travelling between different venues/locations. It thus became an uphill task for many filmmakers and other related film workers to be able to continue working. In this regard, the world as well as Cameroon saw the massive cancellation of film projects and postponements of productions or film releases. A lot of film production related work got cancelled thus bringing about massive job losses and unemployment in the entertainment industry. Some filmmakers in Cameroon cancelled or postponed their projects but many others were determined to and found other ways of moving on with their projects. While others tried to adhere to the attitudinal and behavioural changes imposed by the covid restrictions in order to be able to do their productions, others just ignored them and moved on as if the virus did not exist. The general tendency however was that, most Cameroonian filmmakers saw themselves deviating from their accustomed ways of producing films. They had to adapt to or create a 'new normal' of film production under the covid-19 regulations.

Covid's Methodological and Logistic Challenges

Making a film in Cameroon during the pandemic, was just as challenging as following some of the rules that came with the corona virus itself. The manner in which most Cameroonian filmmakers practiced the art of filmmaking under Covid regulations pushes one to pay attention to the dynamics of production at the peak of the health crisis. Seventeen filmmakers were interviewed for this work with a filmmaker being considered a creative artist who oversees the making of a film. This could be either by writing, directing and or producing the film. They are thus responsible for the major processes that make up the production chain in filmmaking. All filmmakers interviewed for this research were chosen based on their involvement with one or more of these aspects of film production. All of them confirmed that Covid greatly affected the cinema sector in Cameroon in many ways but most especially in its spatiotemporal and economic connotations. Titus Akuro attests that;

...covid-19 generally affected my practice as a filmmaker and the cinema industry of our country. We were exposed to new rules, to the wearing of facemasks, the limitation of the number of persons at any location. Also, people were not welcoming to anyone that had to visit their home or their office or their establishment for something that will be bringing many persons there. In fact, it greatly slowed down our activities. (T. Akuro, personal communication, January 10, 2023)

Akuro's statement affirms how Covid affected production in Cameroon generally, be it from a time-based perspective or from the production perspective. As Tebo Njei concurs, "2020 was really a dead year because...honestly the only project that I subsequently did... I did just one project.... (T. Njei, personal communication, January 10, 2023)

Out of the seventeen filmmakers interviewed, only five were able to do more than one project during the covid-19 period. The rest were able to make do with one project and more often than not spent more time than was required to finish their projects. Concerning the time factor, Akuro states that;

During covid-19, as we were carrying out our production, we were so much conscious of how to manage time especially given that at some time curfews were also implemented. By 6pm, people were expected to be in their homes, all public places had to be closed, so we were affected... (T. Akuro, personal communication, January 10, 2023)

According to Akuro, the curfews that were instituted because of covid, affected the temporality of film production. Others however thought the waiting periods of on and off shoots imposed by some of the covid restrictions had some sort of a positive impact. Some filmmakers report that they took those periods, to make corrections and even plan some upcoming activities in more detail. As Eystein Young puts it;

I have learnt that perseverance within the shoot...perseverance into actually building your story and taking time to do it. Covid taught us a lesson...the things that we did differently after that wait, if we had shot everything at once, we would not have been able to correct some of the mistakes that we corrected over the period we were waiting for Covid to pass. One of the things it made me realise is that there is a lot of perseverance, dedication and time that has to go into achieving a really good product when it concerns filmmaking. (E. Young, personal communication, January 11, 2023)

Young learnt a lot from the outfall of Covid as can be attested from the fact that his most recent film, *The Planters Plantation* (2022), built on the lessons garnered during his covid-19 production of *Clando* (2021) won three prestigious awards including best film (Ecran

D'or) at the Ecrans Noirs film festival. As he asserts, he learnt “patience, perseverance and dedication” to a project during the Covid period. He applied this to his most recent project, *The Planter’s Plantation* (2022). The average period for the production of most feature films in Cameroon ranges between two to four weeks for the shoot and between two weeks to three months for post-production. *The Planter’s Plantation*, as Young affirms, took one year in preproduction, about one month in production and 7 months in post. In total, it took one year eight months to produce and release the film, indicating thus how much time Young invested into the project. Other filmmakers interviewed in this respect rather believed that the loss of time during Covid became an exasperating element in their filmmaking career forcing them to be dormant actors in their field of work. One filmmaker declares;

The virus actually affected my carrier a lot because I programmed so many things to be done that year but then I could not do them. I succeeded in doing the project I did that year because it came at a time when we had invested a lot. We put the money first; we put the investment first than looking at the effect of the virus. That is what pushed us into doing the film, if not, like others, we would have put a halt to it. (N. Romanus, personal communication, January 10, 2023)

According to this Ngang, covid-19 was an unwanted disruption that had to be handled judiciously for a filmmaker to stay in business. As most filmmakers around the globe who needed to stay active and in business, some Cameroonian filmmakers defied the virus and its restrictions to be able to carry out productions. One of the filmmakers, Leslie Chefor avows;

To be honest with you, generally we never really gave heed about Covid. We just took interest in the restrictions put in place by the government. Since the project was taking place indoors, we were just doing our things hoping that nobody could see us or probably call the authorities. (L. Chefor, personal communication, January 12, 2023)

Another filmmaker explains that because their production had been planned long before the Covid restrictions came into force, they had to go ahead with the shoot irrespective. He confirms that most Covid restrictions were not adhered to during their production even as they decided against government restrictions to shoot.

Talking of hygiene, there was really nothing put in place. There was no pipe borne water. We were basically surviving there on mineral water that we bought. During preproduction, we had compulsory washing and sanitising of

hands before and after meetings. But during production we could not keep to that. (N. Romanus, personal communication, January 10, 2023)

This, according to the filmmaker, was largely due to the environment where the shoot happened. He states that the community where the entire film was shot was not very concerned about Covid, so they blended in. It could be said thus that many Cameroonian filmmakers found themselves confronted with a new situation that disrupted the norm of their productions habits and had to adapt either by falling in line with prescribed regulations or find ways to avert the restrictions. For most, the Covid regulations were uncalled for given all the conspiracy theories that surrounded the virus and thus it was not necessary to adhere to them. Some on the other hand found Covid and its regulations as an instigating factor and forum for innovation and a rethink of production habits. The disruptions and rules that came with Covid ignited in many filmmakers the ‘think out of the box’ maxim to which many responded brilliantly.

Covid and Innovative Practices

The cinematic responses to the covid-19 crisis have been wide and varied among Cameroonian filmmakers dictated by varying forces some within and without the control of filmmakers. While some have offered a subtle and potent critique of the crisis impact on production, others have adopted a teleological approach to negotiating production and reception of images within the Covid period.

Filmmakers found themselves in an ideologically and practical conflicted almost fatalistic production environment which dictated, by virtue of the crisis, (un)official norms that shape how production happens. Even though most filmmakers state that there were no rules and regulations from the government specific to the practice of film making in Cameroon, they were aware of the general Covid restrictions and regulations. Menkemdi Randy in his interview insinuates that Covid-19 made him rethink how he went about his productions technically and artistically. Covid made most filmmakers to start thinking of the number of characters to henceforth involve in their stories in order to limit the number of actors on a set. This is definitely a plus to some stories as it will reduce the amount of money that will be spent on cast be it in terms of welfare, logistics or salaries.

Boris Yadia, a filmmaker and coach to the selected filmmakers for the Goethe Institute/Ecrans Noirs- sponsored film competition, says the competition in the period of covid was very demanding on the filmmakers both technically and artistically. The organisers of the competition insisted that the films must be shot in one location and must have only one character.

For the competition that happened during the Covid period, I think it was a little too drastic for the filmmakers. It was imposed on the filmmakers to have only one character in their story. One character and one location. All the three films had this element cut across. You can understand the challenges already for the young filmmakers to write and produce a film with one character, one location. One needs routine, experience; you have to be an expert, a genius and a master to be able to write such a story. Often, it is professional screenwriters who have records of accomplishment, who have a certain degree of competence who are called upon to write such stories. It was thus a herculean task for the young filmmakers to write such stories and keep the audience's attention. Producing such a film also requires a high level of professionalism and technical knowhow. The screenwriter thus is supposed to be super good, the director super good and the actor/actress super good as well, because such a film relies on both efficient dialogue, action and aesthetic elements to be able to hold an audience's attention. (B. Yadia, personal communication, January 14, 2023)

According to Yadia, who was one of the coaches to the three winning filmmakers, this was too harsh given that the laureates were beginning filmmakers. He however observes that this helped in invigorating the young filmmakers, catalysing and pushing the boundaries of their creative abilities. He also notes that unlike the other years since the competition started in 2016, for the first time, the filmmakers did not have to struggle with their budgets. Most of them were able to create their films within the limit of the one million francs CFA provided by the sponsors. This was due largely to the limitations in locations and cast number imposed by the Covid restrictions and reflected in the rules set out by the sponsors. From a general viewpoint, a cut in cast size and locations swings the budget to the benefit of other production departments thus contributing to a better technically realised film. Leslie Chefor specifies that the production they had to do just before Covid hit was switched with another film because of the number of persons that were going to be involved in the production of the latter.

The film I did was just a three-man character film. There were just three people in one house. We had planned for a different production that had a large cast. With the intensity of the Covid restrictions, we simply switched the script with this one given that the whole thing was indoors and it did not have many characters. This is one of the reasons why this story was handled. (L. Chefor, personal communication, January 12, 2023)

As in the case of the Goethe Institute sponsored films, there were filmmakers during the Covid period who changed their story telling style to embrace the spur of the moment that dictated the production of stories with as limited a cast as possible. Such stories often did not need a large crew also for their production. As Chefor confirms;

We also cut down on the technical crew. We had just the director, the DOP, the soundman, the light technician, welfare and one or two others. There were not even up to ten persons for the entire production. (L. Chefor, personal communication, January 12, 2023)

Many films produced during this period in Cameroon, especially those that dealt with the actual theme of Covid itself often had one, two or three characters. The general trend of storytelling seems to have migrated to stories with very limited characters and thus production personnel.

Some of the filmmakers regarded how they negotiated location choices as innovative for them. Before Covid, they were contented with, and able to manage locations that fit their general production design even if they were not accommodating enough for both technical and artistic crew. Fongang zitany states that;

Before Covid, we could just pick a location, like any location that corresponds to the story or with the script. But when Covid came in, we were now very observant and conscious because we could not just go anywhere considering the fact that Covid was everywhere. We needed to be very careful. It was somewhat stressful though because things were not done as it used to be. (F. Zitany, personal communication, January 10, 2023)

For Zitany thus, the Covid crisis pushed filmmakers to be a lot more conscious and critically thoughtful about locations for their stories. The task of choosing locations had a lot more impetus to it than just the artistic and technical considerations often attributed to it. The regulations and restrictions brought about a re-evaluation of the different circumstances taken into consideration when selecting locations. The spacious nature of a location now was no longer a luxury but a necessity to allow for social distancing, even if it were not the recommended 1.5m distance. Menkemdi Randy indicates that;

What Covid did was to pressure us to get locations, especially interior locations that had space...because even if we could not stand 1.5m apart, we could at least stand 1m apart. So we went in for locations that had space. (M. Randy, personal communication, January 10, 2023)

While some filmmakers abhorred the fact that they could not bring their cast and crew to live together to create a convivial relationship for their productions, others were forced to bring together their entire cast and crew to camp in one location. This was in order to circumvent intercity travel restrictions that caused delays of arrival on sets. Sometimes crew and actors were not even able to make it on set. Akuro asserts that:

The best we could do at the time was to rent an entire guest home because it was not just one single building. We had to do that so people could lodge in the same area and be confined so we are just doing production around the area. (T. Akuro, personal communication, January 10, 2023)

Even though this was an expensive venture, it seemed to have been a good thing for some productions. It enabled the crew and artistic team to stay focused on the production keeping away other interfering aspects of life that will otherwise be obtrusive to concentrating on the production. Another aspect of production that Covid brought to the lime light bothered on casting. Most filmmakers realised that because of some of the restrictions in place, they could not lay hands on specific actors that they would have wished for in their productions. Not being able to lay hands on specific actors/actresses desired by some filmmakers because of some of the Covid restrictions was not welcome. Nsoh Piepanse Niba saw this as a setback as he states;

... the fact that one had to choose not from the best, but from those who were free from the virus was also a hindrance because we had to test everyone who was taking part in the production since the story was about Covid itself. (N. Niba, personal communication, January 15, 2023)

While this was a hindrance to some, it was seen by others to have brought about new discoveries in the Cameroon film industry. Wa Musi speaks of this as a challenge turned blessing:

What was a challenge was the fact that some of the actors, A-list actors were really afraid of Covid and since they had a celebrity lifestyle they restricted their outings. This gave more chances to younger actors. This is yielding fruits to the interest of the younger actors because today they are more exposed. They have the opportunity, the B-list actors, to also shine. Today,

they are using that opportunity to excel and it makes the industry quite competitive. (W. Musi, personal communication, January 14, 2023)

This practice would not have come into the industry that easily without the impact of the Covid restrictions. It is a step, filmmakers were forced beyond their will to take which reveals the boundless possibilities that could be out there. It also reveals that exploring new possibilities in film production and being more open-minded could be generally beneficial to the industry.

Still in terms of challenges imposed by Covid restrictions that brought more exploration to filmmakers was the non-ability of technicians to move around freely. Three of the filmmakers interviewed, found themselves in very tight corners during postproduction as their editors were blocked either by travel restrictions or were afraid to step out and find themselves in spaces where they could be exposed to Covid. For Eystein Young and Ngwa Bernard they both had to wait until travel restrictions were lifted but for Narcise Wanji, he decided to become innovative. He actually had to move ahead and start editing himself:

As far as I am concerned, my editor was afraid. He lives in Juvance and the studio was in my place at Mimboman. Because of the lockdown, he was not able to come and work because he wanted to respect the restrictions. So to save my time I did about 50% of the editing of the movie myself. I discovered many new things and this improved my knowledge a lot as far the editing process is concerned. (N. Wanji, personal communication, January 14, 2023)

Not only did filmmakers learn new skills, like Wanji Narcise, but most of them were also forced to turn to new media technologies to be able to realise certain aspects of their production. The use of zoom as a meeting tool came in very handy for some, even if it had its hiccoughs. Some of the filmmakers found themselves carrying out rehearsals and production meetings online via zoom, something they have never done before. Menkemdi Randy confirms that for the two productions he did during Covid, he made heavy use of the zoom digital technology.

We had all our rehearsals online using zoom. It was generally very very difficult for us because of network issues in particular and because of the cost of data. Since everyone was online, internet was very slow and it made it so so difficult. Everything was now online. Of course it came with the beauty of innovation but also made it so difficult especially because we were not used to holding production meetings online, planning productions and so on. (M. Randy, personal communication, January 10, 2023)

Leslie Chefor confirms saying; “I remember during preproduction, I was actually discussing with most of the actors online, most of our meetings were on zoom” (L. Chefor, personal communication, January 12, 2023). Niba also confirms;

We had to do a lot of work online. Production meetings were done online since at that time there were no possibilities for physical gatherings. One had to buy data to stay online for the meetings to be successful. (N. Niba, personal communication, January 15, 2023)

The use of new media technologies could be said to have heightened during the covid-19 peak as filmmakers tried to find new ways of circumventing restrictions. This brought some to the discovery of the different forms of technologies that can be used even after Covid to the profit of their productions.

It can be seen thus, that, be it at the level of artistry, technicalities of production or managerial production techniques, many filmmakers became innovative and open minded about production practices in general during the Covid period. Even with the many difficulties and challenges of some of the new practices, many filmmakers learned new things/skills and accepted new ways of doing things. From a logistics perspective, scripting, location choices or welfare, the restrictions of Covid forced most filmmakers to come up with new initiatives to be able to have their productions up and going. Embracing some of the new ways of going about production however also brought financial strain on the budgets of all the productions that were done during that period.

The economic and spatiotemporal impact of Covid on productions in Cameroon

The economic impact of Covid on film production in Cameroon cannot be overemphasised. The crisis affected physical deployment in the field during productions. It also affected artistic and technical viewpoints of how stories were being told and even more how they were being sold. Leslie Chefor is one of the filmmakers who, notwithstanding the challenges, saw a positive touch on some aspects of filmmaking brought in by the Covid restrictions. For him;

Covid-19 reduces cost of production; you did not have to work on set with many actors and crew. And then it increased your level of creativity as it brought about this element of creating a one-man character film or two-man character film or three-man character film at most. Covid also made people

to come up with very touching stories. (L. Chefor, personal communication, January 12, 2023)

In spite of Chefor's comment on the economic advantage of the reduction in cast and crew, some filmmakers found this to be cumbersome given that one person was now bound to take upon more than one technical role. Most filmmakers found themselves negotiating meaning creation with trepidation as they were bound to include aesthetic elements of production that without the crises would not feature in their stories. Wa Musi points out that;

The virus was a big constraint for some of us ... because Covid brought in added cost. Usually because we often work on low budgets, some actors often have to share rooms to cut down on cost. But during the Covid period, most producers had to separate actors from sharing rooms. So this was also added cost on the production. People could not use the same costumes; people could not use the same beds. Cost also went more on things like cutlery; we had to bring our own cutlery on every set and hotel. We made sure everyone had hand sanitizers that we used in cleaning door handles and other items at hotels. We also brought our own beddings and always swapped the hotel beddings with ours. We bought water for everyone so individuals could use their own water and also got facemasks for everyone. This affected us a lot. (W. Musi, personal communication, January 14, 2023)

The financial pinch of the Covid restrictions was greatly felt by the logistics department in most productions. Lodging, transportation, communication and welfare felt the brunt as the restrictions required major changes in how people interacted with others, with spaces and equipment alike. Spatial interaction was felt both in terms of lodging and location choices. Titu Akuro's experience with lodging his cast and crew speaks to how financially costly some of the restrictions could be on productions. His decision was motivated by two aspects of production; the one being the ability to lodge everyone in one environment to avoid being impacted by transportation restrictions, the other being the desire to have one spacious location for his shoot.

Because of covid-19, in choosing our interior decoration, the best we could do was to rent an entire guest home...because it was not just a single building, and that increased our cost so much. We had to spend over five hundred thousand francs CFA (500.000frs) to get that. Something that you will normally not spend up to that amount for that purpose. We had to get that so people could lodge in that area and be confined so we are just doing production around the area. (T. Akuro, personal communication, January 10, 2023)

Romanus Ngang whose shoot happened in a village around Foubot called Baigom, had similar cost inflations brought about by the restrictions on both lodging and transportation. He states that;

We were living together in a house in Baigom. There were some people who were really conscious and scared of the virus. So they could not live in the same environment with us. So we had to lodge them in a hotel at Foubot from where we transported them to the set every morning and in the evening we take them back to the hotel. That actually played on our budget. After the production, there was a restriction on interurban movement and that played a lot on us because to come back was a problem. We had to stay in Baigom for a while doing nothing and you know feeding the cast and crew was really expensive for us. (R. Ngang, personal communication, January 10, 2023)

One key effect the corona restrictions had was the temporal stretch inflicted on all productions. All seventeen filmmakers interviewed witnessed an unnecessary stretch on the time of their productions, be they shorts, features, fiction or documentary. Some of the productions took almost double, if not double the time of production due to the Covid restrictions. The documentary production of Young's *Clando* (2021) which started shooting late 2019 and was intended for release within eight months was finally released only in 2021. As Young asserts;

It was a really hard nut for my practice of cinema because at that time I had been working on the documentary from 2018 and in 2019 when I was ready to continue shoot, there was an outbreak of corona. This forced us to take a general pause. It was a whole setback because we were behind schedule to deliver the film. Some people we hired went on to other things, some travelled. The issue of wearing masks affected our entire story. Some of the subjects in the film who were shot in 2018 suddenly were now seen wearing masks and this caused discontinuity in the film's story. This affected us in a very negative way. (E. Young, personal communication, January 11, 2023)

Not only was the duration of the production affected, but the story itself suffered from the adverse effects of Covid. Only the duration of production changed for most of the other productions. As for Nsoh Piepanse Niba, Menkemdi Randy and Romanus Ngang, the time factor was the main element that affected their productions.

My production was one that usually will last two or three days but unfortunately, we had to do it for one week. Because it was not easy to transport people to the location given that in taxis, they were supposed to space out. So to get a taxi that was free to come to that location was not easy. And when we got a car, we had to carry people sparingly to maintain social distancing. So things like that made it difficult to produce in a short time frame. (N. Niba, personal communication, January 15, 2023)

We actually used more time preparing for productions during Covid. You know when you are meeting people physically for rehearsal sessions it's very fast. You can easily correct people there and then. But with zoom, with the poor network, somebody says a line and it's not that effective, but you just have to take it really slow. So we wasted a lot of time. We took so many months rehearsing digitally to get on set. Before, we could take a week for intensive physically rehearsals. (M. Randy, personal communication, January 10, 2023)

It was a very large crew and cast. We could not bring them together at once. So we decided to make it in sessions. Meeting people separately on different days was really time consuming and took a lot of money. (R. Ngang, personal communication, January 10, 2023)

It is interesting to note that almost all aspects of film production, from development through to marketing and exhibition, were impacted by covid-19 in one way or another. Even aspects of production like sourcing for and acquiring finances, which often have little to do with movement or physical contact were affected. As Boris Yadia explains;

In our discussions with the Goethe Institute on how the film competition was going to run, they made it clear to us that finances did not come directly from them. The financiers insisted that their money be used in strict respect of covid-19 restrictions. The Goethe Institute thus included in the contracts with the selected filmmakers the clause about the film's story and shoot happening, as a must, in only one location. (B. Yadia, personal communication, January 14, 2023)

The financial undertones and its impact on the artistic outcome of the films is very glaring in Yadia's response. Not just will the funding be given only to filmmakers who will respect the terms related to Covid, the artistic and technical implication will definitely be felt in the film that will result from this. One could easily see what is being referred to nowadays as 'quarantine cinema' rearing its head from the tentacles of the financiers.

Conclusion

According to Boris Yadia, Cameroonian filmmaker and critic, covid-19 did not have a massive negative effect on Cameroonian cinema, at least at the level of production. He states that the number of films produced generally in Cameroon, averaging around ten features a year did not reduce in any considerable fashion during the covid-19 period.

Given my interactions with professionals in the field of film production in Cameroon, Covid did not really have an immensely negative effect on film production in Cameroon. This is my person point of view though. You will

realise between 2019/2020, the number of films produced in Cameroon did not really drop in that sense of it. The number of productions tallied around ten films if you count from the preceding and post Covid years. And so, I cannot really say the impact was that negative. (B. Yadia, personal communication, January 14, 2023)

It is important to note on the heels of Yadia's comments that production during the Covid period was negotiated in almost two different fashions in the Anglophone regions as in the Francophone regions of the country. In as much as most of the filmmakers from the Anglophone regions attest to have neglected during production most of the Covid restrictions, most of them did respect oftentimes some of the restrictions. Most of them state that they made constant use of hand sanitizers during production and to some extent facemasks. They were conscious of hand washing during the preproduction periods of their films. Some even went an extra mile to buy, not only facemasks and sanitizers for their crew and cast (Niba, Randy, Young, Chefor, Musi), but of providing mineral water and even cutlery and beddings for their production team (Musi). This to say the least contrasted heavily with what obtained in the Francophone regions where according to Narcise Wanji and Yadia, majority of francophone filmmakers never respected Covid restrictions on their sets. Even with the production of the films sponsored by the Goethe Institute that had a Covid related production clause in their contracts never respected Covid restrictions. They respected only that the legal clause to shoot only in one location and have only one character in their story. As Yadia affirms:

To be honest, apart from the respect of the injunction given by the Goethe on shooting the films in one location, no other restrictions were respected. I coached the different filmmakers during their entire productions and never did I see anyone wear a mask on the different sets. Even those of us who were coaching the filmmakers, we did not provide any sanitary/hygienic elements, be it water, soap or hand sanitizers. So the atmosphere on these sets ran like any other normal day of shoot in the past. Apart from the themes and titles of the films, you will not even imagine that it was the corona period. (B. Yadia, personal communication, January 14, 2023)

Wanji on his part says his postproduction activity was impacted when his editor could not come to work because of travel restrictions. But apart from that, even when he finally met with his editor, they didn't really respect any restrictions. As he declares, "If I tell you that we were respecting the restrictions, I am lying". Wanji's statement here denotes the

honest attitude of the filmmakers who were interviewed for this work. All of them were often clear about the restrictions that they respected and those they did not respect.

It can be deduced at the end of this research that most covid-19 restrictions affected production directly while others had an indirectly effect on production. Restrictions on movement for instance made preproduction meetings cumbersome, as they had to either be conducted in grouped sessions or had to happen online. Handling postproduction meetings this way lengthened production time thus putting a financial strain on most productions. Washing and sanitising of hands during productions as well took a toll on time as crew and cast had to take time off to carry out these activities. Social distancing and wearing of facemasks saw filmmakers negotiating different ways and narrative voices of visual and sonic presentation on screen. While social distancing impacted the interaction between the technical crew and slowed down work, it curbed and changed how intimate scenes and closeness in acting was portrayed at that period.

Covid and its restrictions also brought some positive impact on film production. Some filmmakers learned new skills because they were forced to do the jobs of some crew members who couldn't make it because of Covid restrictions. Others discovered new talents who only had a chance to be known because A-list talents were not available due to their fear of contracting Covid. There were filmmakers who reviewed their story telling abilities from both an artistic and technical perspective. While many were able to now write and shoot stories with very limited cast, others were constrained to understand the importance of locations being suitable for the general production design but also accommodating for cast and crew.

While it could be agreed that Covid did not have a tremendous negative impact on the number of films produced in the country, it did vastly negatively affect the release of films within that period. Because of the restrictions on public gatherings, majority of films made within that period ended up not released. This took a considerable toll on film marketing and exhibition, especially on Anglophone filmmakers who rely heavily on premiers for the release of their films. This negative element however brought to the lime light an aspect of film exhibition that existed but was not sufficiently exploited. Most

filmmakers now turned to the internet to release their films. The use thus of online platforms for exhibition saw a rise during the covid-19 period.

The covid-19 period could be seen as an era of rupture and disruption in film conventional practices but also as one of renewal in how the practice of production was carried out in Cameroon. It is realised in the context of this research that it was difficult for some Cameroonian filmmakers to accept the advent of and operation within the covid19 crises. In most cases though, they were bound, even unwillingly, to accept the operational difficulties of making a film within the context of the health crises. Finding a voice for the filmmaker in the crises turned out to be one of the most challenging negotiations they had to make as they sought new ways to cope with the situation. The advent of covid-19 took a toll on both the artistic and technical aspects of filmmaking in Cameroon. In most cases, it had a negative effect on the processes of filmmaking.

During the Covid-19 period, the many practices of film production in Cameroon witnessed readjustments brought about by the different rules and regulations that came with the health crisis. What happens after the pandemic is not very certain. However, the findings from this work show that film production practice in Cameroon may not be the same after the pandemic. Film production will assume a more adaptive style of production. It will be characterized by filmmakers' abilities to adapt to alternative film practices and narratives that can be adapted to prevailing circumstances of production.

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