



## Local Cosmopolitan Bikutsi

ACADEMIC  
TEXT

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The pop variant of Bikutsi music discussed in this paper is currently one of the most popular dance music styles in Cameroon. Its roots lie in local musical traditions of the Beti ethnic group, however, it also makes use of features and practices associated to pop-rock music around the world. Taking this use of pop-rock music in Bikutsi as a starting point, in this paper, Bikutsi pop is discussed within the framework of collective «aesthetic cosmopolitanism» as proposed by Motti Regev. Drawing on the field theory of Bourdieu, he situates pop-rock characteristics within specific ethno-national cultural fields, understanding them as

intrinsic to local musical practices. In this perspective, musicians do not just make use of «global» or «Western» pop-rock features taken from an «outside». Rather, Bikutsi pop occurs at the intersection of a worldwide field of pop-rock music and the specific Cameroonian ethno-national cultural field(s). Regarding ethnographic research, this perspective may challenge our field research strategies, as it questions common boundaries between inside and outside the field and highlights similarities rather than differences. From the Norient book *Out of the Absurdity of Life* ([see and order here](#)).

When wandering around the streets of Yaoundé, the capital of the Central African state Cameroon, in 2007, one could not escape the presence of Bikutsi music. Majoie Ayi's latest hit «Panik à bord» blared out of the taxi passing by, and numerous market stands on the sidewalk offered pirated video compilations of last year's Bikutsi highlights. At night, Bikutsi was prominent in the musical line-ups played in bars and pubs around town; it was an important ingredient in DJ mixes at nightclubs and was performed live at locations established specifically for Bikutsi music.

Currently one of the most popular Cameroonian music genres, Bikutsi has its roots in the musical traditions of the Beti, an ethnic group inhabiting the region in and around Yaoundé, located in the south of the country. In Cameroonian narratives concerning Bikutsi's history as well as in World Music writings, contemporary Bikutsi performances are usually presented in line with former and still existing traditional musical practices of women's song-and-dance pieces, performed a capella or accompanied by local xylophones called *mendzan* (cf. Mbala 1985, Ngumu 1989, Noah 2004).

In spite of its well-known roots in Beti musical traditions, one of my first impressions of Bikutsi music in Yaoundé was a connection to pop music. Especially the music and presentations of the commercially most successful and most visible Bikutsi variant «Bikutsi moderne», as it is still often labelled in contrast to other Bikutsi music, brought to mind a rather stereotypical image of digitally produced international pop music connected with sophisticated marketing strategies, seemingly simple musical patterns and phenomenal, sexy performances on stage. Simultaneously, however, the links to ethnic identities, the national music market and local performance contexts were obvious.

Musical phenomena around the world incorporate characteristics from «outside» their immediate area of production and impact, especially traits of so-called «Western» music. The music is, however, usually still associated

with specific geographic areas. In recent years, these musical phenomena have therefore been increasingly categorised in terms of «locality» and «globality» and described as hybrid practices that express «glocalization», a term coined by Robertson in the 1990s (see e.g. Robertson 1995). Particularly Hip-Hop and rap music have been analysed as local variants of a global cultural phenomenon. At first sight, it would be tempting to view Bikutsi pop through the lens of the local/global-dichotomy, i.e. as a genre consisting of «global» elements of international pop used in a specific Cameroonian locality. However, this dichotomy merely replaces the theories of musical hybridization and syncretism that were prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s, without overcoming the inside/outside or modern/traditional boundaries and the implicit danger of essentialism (cf. Turino 2003, 58). Additionally, and more importantly, the notion of a «local» style of «global» culture did not correspond to my experiences and observations during my fieldwork or what I learned from musicians, fans and audiences concerning their understanding of Bikutsi pop.

This article will analyse Bikutsi within a different framework, which was recently suggested by Regev (2007a, 2007b). Regev situates features and characteristics of pop-rock music *within* specific ethno-national cultural fields, understanding any presumably «global» («Western?», «modern?») features as *intrinsic* to «local» («non-Western?») cultures. Over the course of recent decades of pop-rock history, specific features of music making, technology and sound aesthetics have become constitutive phenomena in various music cultures around the world and have been legitimated in national and ethno-national presentations. Subsequently, according to Regev, a condition of «aesthetic cosmopolitanism» is currently a driving force in ethno-national cultural fields, with cosmopolitanism not ascribed to individuals and their preferences, but rather understood on a structural, collective level. The pop-rock variant of Bikutsi that I encountered in Yaoundé is a specifically ethnic musical expression and is embedded in Cameroonian national culture, although – or possibly due to – the use of various features associated with popular music from around the world. Therefore, I shall present it as a Cameroonian pop genre that is produced within a specific ethno-national field of musical production, consumption and values. This will be done by analysing locations and aspects of live performances, discussing possible interpretations of sexuality and vulgarity common in Bikutsi pop and reflecting on individual musicians' use of available musical sources and material.

From the perspective of «aesthetic cosmopolitanism», the discussed variant of Bikutsi more closely resembles other pop-rock music around the world than other Cameroonian music traditions, a notion that challenges the dichotomies of self/other and inside/outside the field. Our own position as researchers in the field can no longer be one of a complete outsider; rather, the challenge of future ethnographic fieldwork on local popular music styles around the world is to successfully mediate between similarity and otherness.

The following discussion is based on fieldwork done in 2007 and 2008 in Yaoundé. While the primary focus of my visits was researching the historical developments of Bikutsi, the research also comprised contemporary performances, their meanings and contexts. This entailed frequently attending live performances, collecting recordings and having numerous informal conversations. Moreover, I used material available on the World Wide Web and transcriptions of song lyrics.

## Bikutsi Pop: Digital Sounds and Beti Rhythms

Using similar rhythms, musical structures and lyrical content, the pop-rock variant of Bikutsi does nevertheless differ from other Bikutsi in its musical instruments, sound texture, media presence and marketing, and performance locations. In contrast to Bikutsi pieces played on local xylophones (*mendzan*) or performed a capella by women (Noah 2004, Ngumu 1989), «Bikutsi pop» is currently often composed, arranged and produced in sound studios, using digital sampling software, samples of specifically recorded instruments and libraries of synthesizer sounds available around the world. The term «Bikutsi pop» used in this article refers to this digitally produced contemporary pop-rock variant of Bikutsi. The term is not very common in Cameroon, but it is used occasionally to describe Bikutsi music played primarily on non-indigenous musical instruments.<sup>1</sup> Although people usually differentiate between Bikutsi variants by indicating the names of the instruments used or by using the adjectives «modern» or «traditional», in this context «Bikutsi pop» seems more suitable as a genre denomination because it does not imply the traditional/modern dichotomy, and it highlights the connection to pop-rock music around the world as explained below.

Bikutsi pop songs – as is the case with all Bikutsi – tend to use a rhythmical base in a twelve-pulse structure that is divided into four beats. This structure often leads to Bikutsi being notated in a 6/8 beat (see e.g. Touré 2005). Frequently, digital drum samples create the drum and percussion sound in the recordings, which are either rhythms that have been present in Beti musical traditions for decades or derivations thereof, coupled with melodies on the electric guitar that are reminiscent of xylophone patterns and repeated rhythmical lines on the electric bass guitar. Panpipe melodies, brass samples or xylophone sounds are frequently used in Bikutsi pop for additional sound textures. The lyrics are mainly in Beti dialects and include occasional French phrases or verses.

Bikutsi pop relies heavily on its connections to Cameroon and the Beti ethnic group as a resource for words and music as well as for marketing and performing. On the national level, Bikutsi pop gained a significant position in the 1980s when it was still mainly played by music groups. In the 1990s, it became a genre represented and marketed via male or female «singer-stars»; at the same time, the use of music technologies such as sampling, synthesizers and computers greatly increased. The music is embedded

heavily in marketing and media structures and is prominent on radio stations and TV. Recording, mixing and production are done in small recording studios in Cameroon or in studios abroad, usually Paris. The labels specializing in contemporary Bikutsi pop are usually based in Cameroon or France. Music videos accompanying the songs have become increasingly important in previous years due to cheaper and more easily accessible production technology and especially because of the legislation of private TV stations in addition to the state-owned CRTV after 2000.<sup>2</sup>

The practices of music production and promotion resemble those of popular music around the world, such as songs in the European hit parades or nightclub music in South America. Also the numerous varieties of African popular music styles, like those of Coupé Decallé and Ndombolo, are examples of the use of sampling technology, sound textures and production procedures as well as performance and presentation strategies and related social discourses. Although perceived and marketed as distinctly Cameroonian and/or Beti music and associated with this specific cultural field, in some regards, Bikutsi pop is closer to other pop-rock music than to various Cameroonian musical practices and even other Bikutsi music.

## Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism as a Framework for Understanding Bikutsi Pop

Using the history of popular music in Israel and Argentina since the advent of rock 'n' roll as case studies, Regev argues that «pop-rock was from an early stage a world phenomenon» (2007a, 322). Electric and electronic instruments, technological sound equipment, amplification and other devices for sound manipulation – as distinct methods of music making in the pop-rock traditions – have been present, available and in use not only in the dominant centres of Anglo-American popular music, but also in its peripheries. In consequence, musicians around the world created popular music forms «of their own», usually sung in domestic languages, including local musical characteristics. Subsequently, these musical genres increasingly became possible markers of local identity, and they were perceived as legitimate musical expressions to perform what Regev calls «ethno-national cultural uniqueness».

Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of artistic fields (see Bourdieu 1999) and extensions thereof, Regev situates this «ethno-national pop-rock» within a global field of pop-rock wherein musicians and others find their creative inspiration. Of course, these musics and their respective musicians hardly ever assume dominant positions in this global field; they tend to remain on the periphery. They are, however, part of the field's dynamics, structure and hierarchies (2007a, 2007b). Simultaneously, ethno-national pop-rock agents – including musicians, journalists and other players in the «music scene» – are situated within a specific field of ethno-national culture, where they take



part in negotiating legitimate cultural expressions and compete for profitable field positions and available capital (e.g. financial means, recognition, media presence) on a regional or national level (2007a, 323).

As these two fields converge and intersect, according to Regev, «aesthetic cosmopolitanism» comes into being and enables the representation of ethno-national uniqueness based on contemporary art forms of pop-rock. Expanding former notions of aesthetic cosmopolitanism ascribed to the level of individuals, Regev argues that it is on a «structural collective level, as a cultural condition that is inextricable from current ethno-national uniqueness» (2007a, 318–19). In Regev's theoretical model, this collective aesthetic cosmopolitanism has not existed since pop-rock traditions were invented, but was rather the outcome of what Regev called the «historical event of pop-rock» during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This process culminated in the legitimization of pop-rock within the presentation of ethno-national culture, extending or replacing former presentations via traditional music and folklore (2007a, 325–336).

Bikutsi pop correlates with the developments and conditions described by Regev to a large extent. Not only is it the outcome of decades of creative appropriation and alliance of pop-rock music and a process of legitimization of popular music in the presentation of Cameroonian culture (see e.g. Noah 2004), it also uses the sound strategies mentioned to specifically produce Cameroonian music – consciously situated within the specific ethno-national cultural field. In short, Bikutsi pop is local pop music whose innovations come from within its specific field of Cameroonian-Beti culture, which includes not only various indigenous musical traditions, but also pop-rock traditions. Locality, as Stokes wrote, is «constructed, enacted, and rhetorically defended with an eye (and ear) on others, both near and far» (Stokes 2004, 50).

## Bikutsi Spectacles: Performing Live

Although Bikutsi pop is primarily recorded music distributed via commercial recordings and media such as radio and TV, it is certainly also performed live and interpreted by professional musicians who cover the songs exactly as on the recordings. Besides the occasional festival, the main performance venues for Bikutsi music in Yaoundé are nightclubs, locally designated with the French word «cabaret». Unlike the English and German meaning of the term, a cabaret in Cameroon is simply a location for evening entertainment with live music. It can vary in space, audience and musical programme ranging from restaurants without a dance floor to locations with a stage for performances of any kind to a seated audience to dance clubs. Bikutsi in its numerous variants can be heard at all of these locations, but dance clubs are the primary venues for live Bikutsi pop within Yaoundé's nightlife.<sup>3</sup> It is in these locations that the active Bikutsi stars regularly perform; there, they meet their audience and present themselves and their music.

An evening in a nightclub-cabaret typically began at around nine o'clock, but the location usually only filled up after midnight. Only then did the most popular Bikutsi singers start performing. Until the cabaret closed in the morning, the audience got to see a veritable carousel of contemporary Bikutsi music and musicians with short performances of about fifteen to thirty minutes.<sup>4</sup> The order of appearance of the singers was decided on the basis of their presumable popularity with the audience: Those having a momentary hit single on the market were scheduled later in the night; special invited musicians and rarely performing stars played last.

Before the stage at the centre of the room in the single-storey building was occupied by the stars of the current Bikutsi pop scene, the not (yet) known singers and musicians (often working as background singers or dancers for other artists) got the chance to perform alone. The music played during this phase called «prélude» was never just Bikutsi; it could vary greatly depending on the artists performing. On different occasions, I heard covers of Bob Marley's reggae songs, Afro-Beat of Alpha Blondy, Congolese Rumba or Cameroonian "classics" like older Makossa or Bikutsi songs. Sometimes former Bikutsi stars appeared, as for example Mbarga Soukous, who was successful in the 1990s. People rarely danced during this warm-up part of the evening.

The prelude usually ended with covered Bikutsi songs, and then the booked Bikutsi singers started performing. The male instrumentalists accompanying the singers – electric guitar, electric bass guitar, keyboards, drum set and percussion – remained to a large extent the same all night; they knew the singer-stars' repertoire by heart and stayed in the background, only providing the musical base for the featured artist's performance. Male performers were dressed casually; for women, rather sexy stage clothes like a tight shirt, mini-skirt and high-heels seemed obligatory. The performances of the various singer-stars resembled each other in their overall structure and style: Everyone performed two to four songs, either merged together musically or separated by brief pauses in order to talk to the audience. The songs were those that had been recently released or that had been popular with the audience in the past on the radio and via recordings. Although the restricted time did not leave many possibilities for an elaborate individualized performance, every artist put his or her own stamp on these short presentations. *Tonton Ebogo* for example, a professional guitarist, played guitar himself and was accompanied (as in his recent song) by a *nkul* player, an indigenous slit drum. *Ledoux Marcelin* included members of the audience by letting them perform erotic and obscene dance steps on stage. An intrinsic part of many performances in the nightclub-cabarets was the dancing on stage by predominantly young female professional dancers. Besides sweeping movements of arms and legs, a common dance move of the stage performances was the shaking of the backside of the female

dancers. Also common in many contemporary music videos today, this backside move probably contributed to the stereotype of eroticism and sexuality connected with Bikutsi pop.

Once the Bikutsi stars began their performances, the dance floor filled up. Occasionally, members of the audience would go onstage to dance with the singer or to give money to the singer, a dancer or a musician, thereby showing their appreciation of the artist. During the short breaks between the singer-stars, the musicians continued playing, but the dance floor emptied; people took their seats, only to get back on the dance floor when the next Bikutsi song started with a new artist. Dancing to Bikutsi was done alone or in small groups but with only occasional bodily contact. Bikutsi songs tended to gradually evolve from a more message-oriented section with sung lyrics to music intended for dancing. This evolution could be observed in the dancer(s): rather small stepping movements with the beat often led to «explosive» moves, joyful shouts and ever expanding rotation of the backside toward the end of the song. A usual movement in Bikutsi was to jump/stomp with both feet and slightly bent knees, the arms stretched out in front of the body, shoulders and pelvis moving back and forth. Erotic and sometimes openly sexual movements that are indispensable in professional dancing onstage or in music videos were also made on the dance floor. Sometimes, the audience did not dance at all, but rather sat and watched or stood on the dance floor. This was often the case when the lyrics of the songs had explicit sexual content or when the performance on stage was especially captivating. As soon as the last singer finished performing in a nightclub-cabaret (usually around four o'clock in the morning), everybody left immediately.

The nightclub-cabaret performances are where Bikutsi pop can be experienced as essentially local, but they also illustrate that Bikutsi is embedded in the field of pop-rock, e.g. due to the prelude section featuring different types of popular music. Rather danced than simply listened to, Bikutsi becomes a bodily expression of Beti and/or Cameroonian culture. The language used is predominantly Beti; the often playful and metaphorical lyrics are only comprehensible by people who speak the language and have certain knowledge of the culture. Various types of interaction with the audience are common and expected. The cabaret can also become an obvious battlefield for positions within the ethno-national musical field. One time, I saw the female singer K-Tino perform who hardly sang at all; instead she talked a lot to the audience and gave advice, e.g. concerning family life and how to properly raise children. She presented younger Bikutsi musicians as her «children» because she had helped them in their careers. One younger singer, *Majoie Ayi*, publicly denounced this introduction immediately in the cabaret, thereby refusing to be in symbolic debt to *K-Tino*. Not only did this raise controversial reactions in the cabaret that night, but also comments and articles in the Cameroonian media thereafter.



In addition to the cabaret performances, Bikutsi pop singers based in Cameroon are performing more and more in other African countries, Europe and North America. They often perform in countries with large Cameroonian migrant communities, such as in France, and usually at events specifically designed for the Cameroonian and/or African diaspora. In 2009, numerous Bikutsi stars who mainly perform locally took part in a concert entitled «Le Cameroun au Zenith» in Paris along with other non-Bikutsi musicians from Cameroon. During 2009 and 2010, Bikutsi singers were invited to a discotheque in Lausanne (Switzerland), and the singer *Lady Ponce* recently toured Europe and North America in 2009 with concerts in Germany, France, Canada and the U.S. The concerts usually took place in small locations like public event halls or venues of Cameroonian associations; in the U.S., the Cameroonian embassy sponsored and organised the events; in Germany, the artist was invited by a Cameroonian migrants' organization. The audience was predominantly African and/or Cameroonian. The smaller concerts of Bikutsi stars in Europe or North America are generally «playback»; the artist sings to a recording, but no accompanying musicians are present. The songs are the same as in the cabarets in Cameroon and performed in a similar manner; it is the local pop as performed «back home». In Slobin's terms of visibility of music differentiating between local, regional and transnational, Bikutsi pop has only reached the regional level (Slobin 1993): It is known beyond its community and place of origin but has not been distributed to a large number of different audiences who might make it visible across regional borders.<sup>5</sup> Although it is performed in places outside of its geographic origins, it is local pop music directed at people with specific connections to Cameroon and/or Beti culture. It remains essentially local, irrespective of the location.

In addition to these performances, Bikutsi has of course also found other ways out of Cameroon, though it has only been noticed in the international music market to a small extent. After the 1980s, when the Bikutsi rock group *Les Têtes Brulées* briefly gained attention on the European music market,<sup>6</sup> only the French-based singer Sally Nyolo could make herself known within the niche of «World Music» in the international music market. Her Bikutsi songs are sung in Beti but nevertheless target Western audiences instead of the Cameroonian market; however, she is known and praised in Cameroon, primarily by people with higher education and social status. Her music and her presentation does not have much in common with Bikutsi stars who perform in Yaoundés cabarets: The sound aesthetics with soft voices over a smooth base of percussion patterns and guitar melodies evoke an image of a distant exotic Africa popular in the market segment of «World Music», rather than one of lively dancing in an urban nightclub in an African megacity.

### **Bikutsi «Porno»: Madonna's Legacy, Beti Tradition or the Means to Resistance?**

Since (at least) the 1990s, Bikutsi pop has been accompanied by a public discourse over morality. Descriptions of some Bikutsi music as «pornographic» and «obscene» are common in the media as well as in everyday conversations. In his work on characteristics, politics and history of Bikutsi in Cameroon, the Cameroonian philosopher and music researcher Noah described some Bikutsi as a «pornographic spin-off» (2004, 55–61). As part of an overall attack on music with immoral content the Cameroonian philosopher Mono Ndjana coined the term «Cameroon Sex Music (CSM)» in his book *Sodomme et Gomorrhe* (1999).

Allusions to sex and eroticism appear in Bikutsi songs and performances very often, although not all performers make these allusions explicitly. Some singers keep it to a minimum or express it subtly in order to leave it up to the public's interpretation; others present it in an obvious and unambiguous way, as for instance *Veronique Facture* at the concert event *Festi Bikutsi* in 2007 when she sang «Il faut nettoyer, quand c'est mouillé» («You need to dry it, if it's wet»), while dancing with one hand holding a banknote between her legs.<sup>7</sup> K-Tinos song «Viagra» included lines like «Whip your baby and fuck her angrily» or «I like eating men's testicles because they smell good» (cited in Ndjio 2005, 278, 279); the accompanying video shows female dancers in the position of doing a push-up, imitating sexual intercourse by moving their hips up and down. Other song lines, like «My guy, how you like to prick» or «The man, the belly and the underbelly» in Lady Ponce's song «Le ventre», although not as obvious, can be and frequently are interpreted as allusions to sex. Although the sexual and erotic is mainly visible in female dancing, sex is also addressed by male singers. As Owona-Kouma has shown in a detailed analysis of language use in Bikutsi song lyrics, different metaphorical names for the male or female genitals («baton de commandement», «biberon», «le mortier») or metaphorical and suggestive accounts of sexual intercourse are common in Bikutsi pop (Owona-Kouma 2004).

In popular music around the world, sex is a common topic, not only in playful eroticism in music videos, but also in explicit descriptions of sexual intercourse or erotic situations. In reference to this, a recent anthology on sex and music was even entitled «Topic Number 1» (Helms/Phleps 2011). Sexual allusions in pop history have been repeatedly interpreted as provocation and a threat to moral values, which has led to censoring in some cases, e.g. the banning of videos of the pop star Madonna from the music TV station MTV. One of the first songs to raise a scandal due to its obvious sexual sounds, Serge Gainsbourgs and Jane Birkins «Je t'aime» (1969), was repeatedly cited in Cameroon as legitimization and an example for accepted immorality in music (see e.g. cartoon in *Cameroon Tribune* on October 18, 1990 from the cartoonist Go'away); for more information about the song see Erwe 2011). Furthermore, allusions to sex via dance moves are also present in various popular music genres in Africa, as is the case with contemporary dancing in Congolese music, which is distributed via music videos in Cameroon and

described in some detail by White (2008, 116–118). However, to explain the apparent ubiquity of sex and vulgarity in Bikutsi pop this possible source in African and global pop-rock does not suffice.

Studies of the Beti women's tradition of sung and danced Bikutsi songs describe the function of those songs as more than just entertainment: They also serve as a means to critique and reflect on society and for women to speak their mind in a metaphorical yet, for insiders, understandable manner. It was – and is – their voice in a mainly male-dominated world, and it frequently also included issues involving sex, male/female relationships and concubinage (see Mbala 1985 for examples of lyrics; Onguene Essono 1996). The creative use of the Beti language in its metaphorical possibilities to allude rather than explicitly tell is still an important and valued skill among Bikutsi singers. *K-Tino*, the first successful female solo singer in the 1990s and associated with the «pornographic spin-off» of Bikutsi pop, has frequently been praised for her sophisticated use of the Beti language (Mefe 2004). Contemporary song lyrics in Bikutsi referring to sexual issues may therefore also be – and sometimes are – interpreted within the tradition of Bikutsi music.

In an analysis of public culture in Cameroon based on ethnographic research done between 1998 and 2001, Ndjo provides yet another facet. He connects the vulgarity and voluptuousness observable in public entertainment in Cameroon to the postcolonial state of Cameroon. In an endeavour to keep public space clean, tidy and orderly, the state (or more precisely the state's representatives) frequently used their power to punish people who did not visually conform to the desired image; the suppression thus found its expression directly on the body of the Cameroonians. The rising vulgarity, obscenity and open sexuality, especially among people of lower social status, was a reaction to the state's broad interference in and control of the public space: «These people endeavour to deconstruct the rules and ethical values that officialdom does its best to set up. The populace achieves its counter-hegemonic project not by resorting to a violent form of resistance as in the early 1990s but through a dynamic and skilful use of the body and sex» (Ndjo 2005, 289; see also Mbembe 2001, especially chapter 3). Bikutsi pop is often cited in Ndjos descriptions; its sexual allusions become here a means of performing resistance.

The different possible explanations of the obscenity in Bikutsi pop and their limitations illustrate the complexity of causation. There are aspects to local pop music where we cannot easily draw a line between what is intrinsic to a specific musical phenomenon or taken from the «outside». Musicians act and create their own locally based music in a condition of aesthetic cosmopolitanism from within the ethno-national cultural field that is informed, influenced and shaped by different features taken from multiple sources. These sources might be part of other fields as well, however, they

are not «outside» the ethno-national cultural field within which the music is produced, that it targets and within which it is meant to commercially succeed.

The issue of sexuality is debated on a societal and collective level and is treated by musicians, audiences, producers, politicians and journalists in various ways. Below I discuss two examples of how the multiple sources available within the ethno-national music field can be dealt with in musicians' work on the individual level.

### Multiple sources: *Majoie Ayi* and *Lady Ponce* as examples

The female singer *Majoie Ayi* became popular with her first album *Origines* (2006), especially with the single «Panik à bord» taken from the album. The Bikutsi song starts with an intro featuring panpipe sounds, followed by an electric guitar solo. The song provides the usual Bikutsi elements: a drum and percussion rhythm in ternary rhythmic structure, coupled with a rhythmic pattern on the electric bass, electric guitar lines in the background and the solo voice dominating and alternating with a background choir. After the initial part primarily focuses on the message of the song, the second part is meant for dancing; no new content is introduced, and the music is dominated by solos on the electric guitar and *Majoie Ayi's* spoken and sung interjections. The song's content is explicitly feminist; predominately in French, it is not only directed at Beti people. The lyrics include lines such as «I say no, no, I say stop / to the profiteers who are the men»; men are described as treating women without dignity, using them and objectifying them. The refrain, sung by the female chorus, reads «Les hommes paniquent / à cause de Majoie» («Men panic / because of Majoie»).

Interpreted at first sight in light of the rest of the lyrics, this line refers to *Majoie Ayi* speaking for women's rights who is therefore feared by men who could lose their position and power. However, a joke indicating another meaning was circulating Yaoundé during my stays. In jest, most men stated that of course they would panic if they had to get near *Majoie Ayi*, i.e. due to her physical appearance and what they consider explicit sexual movements.<sup>8</sup> In her song, *Majoie Ayi* deliberately addresses a political and provocative topic and incorporated it with the usual and expected dancing moves, thereby enabling different interpretations and meanings. The public response created by this song led her to reply in her second album *Horizons* (2010) with the song «Ebamba», which opens with the question "Who panics the most?". It then indicates that women contribute actively to protect men's habits and profits and that she had been misinterpreted, as her main mission as an artist had been to ease worries. *Majoie Ayi* thereby acts and reacts consciously within the ethno-national cultural field she is part of; she positions herself as a Cameroonian artist with a specific duty and motivation to contribute to Cameroonian society.

While these songs point to negotiating field positions by means of socio-critical issues, her other songs illustrate different strategies such as the conscious use of «non-indigenous» sources that are available within the field. This is obvious in another song from the 2006 album, which was also quite popular and often performed at the nightclubs: a cover version of Cheb Khaled's song «Aïcha». This song exists in a Zouk version (presumably by the Antillean group *Kassav*) and was in the European charts only a few years ago in a hip hop version by the Danish group Outlandish. In Majoie Ayi's version, this song becomes a Bikutsi dance piece. Other songs on the album indicate yet another direction. They do not provide Bikutsi features at all, but use a sound aesthetic closer to World Music with its target audiences in the West. In «Origines» and «Indifférence», vocals, piano, electric guitars, electric bass guitar and percussion (also using the sound of the local slit-drum *nkul*) are combined into songs in the Beti language, that hardly suit a dance floor, but would fit in well in at a Jazz club or at World Music festivals.

Another brief example of available links within the ethno-national cultural field is the singer-star *Lady Ponce*. In a recent press interview, she presented herself as a former Jazz singer and communicator of Cameroonian culture and requested the Cameroonian audience to support their own artists. When asked about her musical role models, she did not mention any musicians based in Cameroon, but cited the French Cameroonian singers Coco Mbassi and Sally Nyolo, the U.S.-based Beninese singer Angelique Kidjo as well as the U.S.-American singers Janet Jackson, Whitney Houston and Michael Jackson. *Lady Ponce* further states that she introduced dance steps in her last video that had been taken from Michael Jackson to honour the musician.<sup>9</sup>

In the specific ethno-national field of Cameroon, *Majoie Ayi* and *Lady Ponce* are primarily perceived and marketed as Bikutsi singers. Their inspirations and sources both in their Bikutsi pieces and in others are drawn from within this field. This field not only provides Bikutsi songs and xylophone melodies, but also includes, in its overlap with other fields, a variety of music and strategies, which can be and are used to create and perform Cameroonian Bikutsi pop. One of those is the pop-rock field, including music marketed as «World Music» in the Western-oriented international music market. As Taylor already observed, musicians from non-Western countries are well-informed concerning trends in the international music market, and they deal consciously with stereotypes, images and sound aesthetics (Taylor 1997). Due to their (at least) double positioning, musicians mediate between various tendencies in the field of pop-rock music, not as «outside» resources, but rather as part of their understanding as Cameroonian musicians and their interest to promote Cameroonian music traditions. Thereby, they continuously struggle and creatively mediate between the demand for (musical) innovation, performing «Cameroonness», gaining attention, winning market share and further expertise in their music.

## Blurred Boundaries: a Challenge to Fieldwork?

If we accept the notion of pop-rock features as intrinsic to ethno-national cultural fields and as legitimated expressions of cultural uniqueness, then this has the consequence that the «difference between what counts as «exterior» or «interior» to national culture has been blurred» (Regev 2007a, 318). As exemplified with Bikutsi pop, features of presumably «Western» origin, whether they are referred to as «global» or not, are essential for musicians and deep-seated in musical practices in Cameroon; they are not only sources therein, but also means to present ethno-national uniqueness. Encountering music that includes many features of performance, presentation and sound texture similar to music we listen to at home, are exposed to in supermarkets or dance to in our spare time at the nightclub, brings researchers, in many respects, closer to his/her research subject and necessitates a reflexivity in our research that pushes and blurs the common dichotomies between outside and inside of a culture. If ethnography is the ability to «write-across-culture» (Cooley, Barz 2008, 14), then across which culture(s) do we write when looking at local pop?

The notion of insider vs. outsider of a specific «culture» and the intention to get «inside» a culture in order to thoroughly understand it was a very prominent idea in former ethnography, but has been increasingly questioned in recent years (see e.g. Barz, Cooley 2008). As Wong notes: «Entering fully into a postcolonial and transnational world has meant that insiders are both anyone and everyone, and the field is everywhere and nowhere» (Wong 2008, 83). It is widely acknowledged that rather than encountering one specific «Other», in fieldwork we interact with many different «others». At the same time, also researchers take on different roles, e.g. as a teacher, student, friend, rival, musician or advisor.

But in some respect, we encounter not only «others», but also «similars» who act in a different field but with whom many people share similar views, strategies and musical practices. As Agawu wrote, there is «no simple formula for determining the net result of Western and African musical influences, because there are affinities as well as differences» (2003, 8). The challenge for him lies not in the question of whether to construct differences, rather *how* to construct differences (165). Describing our «cultural» differences with labels such as white, female, European, academic, etc., as is common in reflexive ethnography, might help, but will probably not suffice in this endeavour, if it ever had.<sup>10</sup> The dichotomies and boundaries are not that easily drawn; they rather involve – depending on researcher, subject and field – a multitude of possible differences and similarities, which are constantly moving. Thus, the challenge of future ethnographic research might lie in openly yet critically including affinity to our research and to accept the familiarity with the «others» as a constitutive part of their respective ethno-national cultural fields. Contemporary ethnography that looks at local pop music presenting some form of ethno-national uniqueness needs to mediate between resemblance and otherness and constantly redraw presumed boundaries in an attempt to escape any hard dichotomies.



## Summary

Bikutsi pop has been described as being based on the condition of aesthetic cosmopolitanism that occurs at the interplay between a world-wide field of pop-rock music and local ethno-national cultural fields. Pop-rock characteristics have become an intrinsic part of ethno-national cultural fields and serve as sources and influences for musicians, not from the outside, but rather from *within* the respective field. For Bikutsi pop, I discussed examples that indicate this structural condition: sound textures similar to pop music around the world, topics of sexuality, suggestive performances, or simply the practice of covering a popular song.

All these practices are intrinsic to the specific Beti-Cameroonian cultural field, which is not only marked by so-called indigenous traditions, but also by elements that are seemingly not Cameroonian. Pop-rock, often equated with «Western», is as Cameroonian as its various xylophone traditions. This perspective draws Bikutsi pop closer to other pop music around the world and can, in accordance with the assumption, also affect our strategies of researching these musics in a way that broadens our perspectives to include possible similarities and affinities in our ethnographic work.

→ footnotes

1. There is, for example, an album entitled Bikutsi pop by the musician So'Forest (2002), and contemporary Bikutsi singers of digitally produced Bikutsi are at times described as pop artists.
2. In 2005, five privately owned TV stations operated in Cameroon apart from the state-owned CRTV (Alobwede 2006, 16).
3. During my fieldwork I got to know four nightclub-cabarets in and around Yaoundé that had Bikutsi performances every weekend: La Mefou, Le Carrossel, Fiesta and Elle et Lui. In addition to these Bikutsi-pop locations, Yaoundé also offered common nightclubs with music provided by DJs as well as numerous bars and pubs for weekend entertainment. Furthermore, cabarets with xylophone music that play older and newer typical Bikutsi music as well as merengue and soukous pieces have become popular in recent years.
4. The format of various singers performing one after the other only for two or three songs and accompanied by professional musicians is also common at occasional bigger events such as the annual Festi Bikutsi, a festival of Bikutsi music that lasts a couple of days and takes place in a stadium in Yaoundé.
5. In contrast, local musics in Slobin's model «are known by certain small-scale bounded audiences, and only by them», and transregional musics «have a very high energy that spills across regional boundaries, perhaps even becoming global» (Slobin 1993, 17–19).
6. For more information on the group Les Têtes Brulées, see Rathnaw (2005) or Noah (2004).
7. Dancing Bikutsi, especially onstage, and the visually presented sexual allusions are highly connected to the female body; it's usually women dancing and moving their backside, bending on the floor mimicking sexual intercourse or pushing up their mini-skirt until the lingerie becomes visible.

The issues of gender and sexuality in Bikutsi will not be further examined here due to space and scope limitations; for one of the few discussion on the matter, see Rathnaw (2009).

8. Similar sayings circulated concerning the singer K-Tino, e.g. that men feared her and did not want to get close to her. For more information on K-Tino, see Mefe (2004) or Rathnaw (2009).
9. The half-hour interview took place in August 2010 during Lady Ponce's visit to Germany on invitation from the German association Challenge Camerounais (see Loe 2011).
10. As Salzman ironically showed, this individual positioning and biographic information concerning the researcher does not really assist in better understanding ethnographic work (2002). We only have to think about the discrepancy between self-perception and the images others may have of us in order to realize that information about personal background or other individual characteristics is not universally interpreted in the same way. Furthermore, our own ability to fundamentally and critically confront ourselves and examine our practices, feelings and experiences is limited.

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