

# **When Theatres Shutdown: A Historical Survey of Cameroonian Theatre and Cinema Culture (1980-2018)**

---

*Paul Animbom Ngong*  
*Department of Performing and Visual Arts,*  
*University of Bamenda, Cameroon*

---

## **Abstract**

The economic crisis that struck Cameroon in the eighties left no sector untouched. By this period, Cameroon had close to fifty cinema halls spread over some major cities. These halls were also used for theatre performances by budding theatre practitioners with plays largely sponsored by foreign governments and organisations. The crisis caused these theatres to shut down as they could no longer have funds or pay the high taxes levied on them by government or raise enough funds to pay their rents. Theatre practitioners and lovers therefore resorted to new ways of entertainment and income generating activities. In this historical review of theatres in Cameroon, focus is on coping mechanisms which were adopted as a result of economic crisis. How did practitioners welcome the crisis and what was their reaction? In this write-up, a historical survey of theatres (both as forms of practice and institutions) in Cameroon is made to show the stages undergone from 1980 to 2018. From the analyses, it shows that two main trends developed in the area of theatre productions as a result of the outbreak of economic crisis. The Francophones resorted to theatre productions for festivals while Anglophones turned to community theatre and theatre for development. This does not however imply these forms or avenues were not practiced or existing before, but rather, they witnessed intensification in their practice. Filmmakers also turned to produce more of home-videos following the Nigerian Model. Nowadays, new trends are seeing the light of day as is the case with therapeutic theatre gradually gaining grounds in the area of mental health which is a laudable effort by practitioners who intend to live from their art and the guerrilla filmmaking practice.

**Key words:** Theatres, cinema, economic crisis, entertainment, culture and Cameroon.

## **Introduction**

Cameroon is known for her diverse cultural practices which range from music, dance, theatre and cinema. Before the arrival of colonialism, cinema was the only art-form amongst this list that was not yet practiced in Cameroon. Though theatre per se, was not practised as in western style of performance, ritual performances that could be termed theatric were the order of the day. Mostly organised in the evenings, these performances usually take place in open spaces or in market squares. This was not however going to be the case with exposure to western style of performance.

With the introduction of mainstream style of performance, theatre, music and dance now left the streets, market places and palaces to fixed structures where particular rules and principles had to be respected. The performing artists were hereby given the arduous task of adapting their performances to suit Eurocentric standards thereby breaking the cultural link which had hitherto existed between the art-forms and the people (Butake, 1988).

There was to be a clear distinction between the stage and the audience, situated within the confines of a building termed 'theatre'. This building was later to also accommodate the projection of films, musical concerts and other cultural manifestations. Towards the late 1980s, the economic crisis came and the arts industry was the most struck in Cameroon. Government cut subventions that were given to artists and projection houses. The public (due to the cut of salaries by more than 2/3) could no longer go the theatre halls to watch performances or film projections. Government also increased taxes which theatre houses had to pay.

These drastic measures only facilitated the fall of the arts industry in Cameroon. The question that this paper seeks to address is, what became of performing artists at the dawn of the economic crisis that struck Cameroon in the late 1980s? Did practitioners turn to produce other forms of performances or they simply turned to other activities so as to make a living? What became of the theatre houses? Did they remain open or shut down?

Through a historical exploration of the performing arts in Cameroon, especially the production/projection houses, this paper intends to highlight two main points: the economic crisis that struck Cameroon permitted performing artist to develop coping mechanisms which enabled them to create other forms of performances that did not need physical buildings in the name of theatres. The second point is that, the economic crisis forced owners of theatre halls to either go bankrupt or change business. In order to support these two hypothetical positions, data presented is drawn from three main towns in Cameroon: Yaoundé, Douala and Bamenda. This permits a conclusion to be drawn since the phenomenon traversed the entire territory.

### **A brief history of Cameroon theatres**

Before the economic recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s struck Cameroon, there were close to fifty cinema theatres in most metropolitan cities. According to Florent Coulon, “*in 1973, there were thirty-two theatres spread right across Cameroon*” (2011/2, p.93). By 1980, the number had increased. In Yaoundé were cinema theatre Le Mfoundi, Abbia, Capitole, Mefou, Les Portiques, N’djoungolo, Rex and Le Febe; in Douala were cinema theatre Le Berlitz, Etoile, Le Bonapriso, Cinecam, New Star, Toula I, Toula II, Concorde, Grand Canyon, Les Palmiers, Rex, Le Douala, ABC, Ciné Alpha, Omnisport, Le Wouri; in Bafoussam were Tamdja, Mifi, Troisétoiles, Empire; in Garoua were Etoile, Ribadou; Nkongsamba had Le Moungo and Relais; Bafang had Le Haut-Nkam; Dschang had La Menoua; Foumban had CinéBamoun; Mbalmayo had Ciné sport; Buea had Town Hall; Ebolowa had Rex; Kumba had Biphonse; Maroua had Rex, Le Diamaré; Kouseri had WalNgania; Tiko had Rex; Limbe had Rio; Ngoundéré had Onais; Bamenda had Roxy, Rota and National; Edea had Ciné Ration. However, between January 12 and 20, 2009, the last three of the thirty-two movie theatre in the country were shutdown. These were the Abbia in Yaoundé, The Wouri in Douala and the Empire in Bafoussam. The halls served both as movie theatre and live concert halls. It is in this light that Le Wouri became known as “the temple of culture”.



*Image 1: Cinema Le Wouri in Douala, shutdown in 2009,  
©StéphanieDongmo, 20 January, 2009*

A city like Yaoundé also had about seven movie theatres, two of which, were very renowned: Cinema Abbia and Le Capitol. It is worth noting that Cinema Le Wouri in Douala, Abbia in Yaoundé, and the Empire in Bafoussam all closed between January 12 and 20, 2009, were all owned by the Cameroonian Fotso Group. This notwithstanding, these buildings were used by the French distribution and exhibition company, Ciné News Distribution but failed to pay rents which resulted in the shutting down of these halls. Despite the outcry from directors, producers and actors of the closure of these last theatres in Cameroon, the then Minister of Culture, Ama Tutu Muna announced that she would “*do everything in her power to remedy the situation*” (Nguiamba 2009), none of them has reopened.



*Image 2: Abbia, the last movie theatre in Yaoundé, shutdown on 12 January, 2009. ©StéphanieDongmo, 17 January, 2009*



*Image 3: the Capitol cinema, closed in 2003 and converted into a super market © StéphanieDongmo, 2011*



*Image 4: Roxy cinema, closed in early 2000 in Bamenda is now used by small business men. © Paul Animbom, august 20, 2017*



*Image 5: National Cinema, closed in 1999, is now used as a church by the Nigerian community involved in car parts business in Fon's Street, Bamenda. It also hosts the Nigerian Union Secretariat. © Paul Animbom, august 20, 2017*



*Image 6: Cinema Rota in Nkwen, closed in the early 2000, is now housing a building material shop of Cameroonian group Fokou. © Paul Animbom, august 20, 2017.*

The Anglophone Cameroon also had some small-size movie theatres. According to Muluh and Ndoh (2002), the cinema industry in this part of the country started way back in 1928 when the Ekona Plantations Company wrote to the Divisional Officer of Victoria Division for permission to use cinematographic apparatus to show films to employees and labourers at no cost (p.10). This move somehow, legitimated the Ekona plantation company as a movie theatre wherein films were projected mostly to its workers without collecting any fee.

By 1940, the Bota cinema now existed and films were projected therein. A Douala based company Société Cinématographique Africaine, with Dutchman Mr. Schoofs as director according to Muluh and Ndoh, was the first company to operate a cinema theatre in West Cameroon and specifically at the Buea town hall and the Rio Cinema in Victoria. In Bamenda, there were three cinemas: Rota in Nkwen, Roxy in Commercial Avenue and National Cinema in Fon's Street. These movie theatres, accommodated both films and live performances like music concerts.

Regarding performance halls designed specifically for theatre and other stage performances, Cameroon as whole had very few of such spaces. According to Eyoh, "*Cameroon's only purpose-built theatre is the Palais de Congrès in Yaoundé (the Yaoundé Conference Centre), built by the Chinese and commissioned by Ahmadou Ahidjo as the last public act as president in 1982*"

(2001, p.82). The 1,500 seat multipurpose hall, has an ultra-modern stage, sound and lighting equipment. This notwithstanding, the cost of hiring and the location makes it practically difficult for theatre practitioners to use.

The Cameroon Cultural Centre and French Cultural Centre are the two accessible theatre halls in the heart of the city of Yaoundé. It is in these halls, in combination with other non-theatre/performance designed spaces like the Goethe Institute, University lecture Amphis, and other halls identified in town, that most of theatre productions and performances were organised. Kenneth Harrow seems to confirm this view when he states that:

A large proportion of the theatrical performances that were given in the capital, Yaoundé [...] were put on in the French Cultural Center, the most cultural hub in the city [...], a range of plays at the Cameroonian Cultural Center, a number at the University, more rarely one or two at the Abbia Cinema and even one at the French Military Base (1982, p.846).

For decades, culture, especially theatre and film/cinema were regarded by the regime as weapon used by artists to incite the population to rise against any form of mal-governance. This pushed the government to censure any such production suspected to pose a threat to the functioning of the state. This situation was further compounded by the complete absence of state support in the promotion of culture and the very high taxes levied on theatre houses. According to Muluh and Ndoh, “*the government was not interested in financing independent film production, which could be critical of the established order*” (op. cit. p.11). To consolidate these positions were signed decrees to this effect.

Decree No. 90/1462 of 9 November 1990 stipulated the conditions and procedure for obtaining authorizations to carry out cinematographic activity. The decree addressed the issues of authorization for production, shooting, and distribution of cinematographic films and sound recordings. This decree also addressed authorizations to show films as well as censorship of cinematographic films and sound recordings (idem).

The end result was the shutting down of most, if not all of these theatres. This, it should be noted, is not the sole responsibility of the Cameroon government or that of Cameroonians. Foreign investors for instance, failed to adjust to the Cameroonian realities. Only western movies were projected and their prices kept at the same rate as abroad and even higher in some cases. Local Cameroonians running these theatres had to answer to their foreign

investors which explain their reluctance to go feature anything other than the movies handed to them.

The question which one can seek answer to at this stage is to find out what exactly is the state of theatres in Cameroon as of today?

### **Present state of theatres in Cameroon**

The impact of the economic recession that struck the world in the 1980s is still felt in the cultural domain in Cameroon today. Currently, there are few theatres still standing and functioning. Cameroon has relatively few purpose-built theatres in the likes of Cameroon cultural Centre, Centre Culturel Française, Africréa (all in Yaoundé), and the Alliance Française spread in some regional capitals. According to Kilo (2004), theatre performances still take place in Anglophone Cameroon “*on college campuses*” (p.185) or better still in congress halls, community halls, university lecture halls, and city council halls (p.191).

With the high taxes on admission levied on the exploitation of films since the 1980s, the advent of new media, and the absence of theatre culture in Cameroon, theatres stand less chances of surviving. Many broadcasting houses are present in the national territory, broadcasting not only films but also filmed stage performances. The state-owned CRTV even pays theatre producers/directors to produce plays which are recorded in their TV studios and broadcasted. Most, if not all, exhibitors have dived into the informal sector. Theatres have been sold out and most of them turned into supermarkets (Abbia, Le Capitol, Le Wouri, Rota), others into churches (National) and some given out to small business men (Roxy).

One of the burning issues that have always animated critics of Cameroon arts is State contribution towards the destruction or collapse of culture. As a result of this, the Cameroon cultural industry is still highly left on the hands of foreign sponsors and investors who remain at the borders. This implies, they do not pay much attention to the realities on the ground or to the expectations of the cultural consumers. Rather, the sponsors/investors seek to impact the consumers/consumers with products which are out to valorise the formers’ ideologies and even culture.

Consider theatres as those promoted by the French. In Yaoundé, Douala and Bamenda, there are French cultural centres or better still what they call Alliance Françaises. In these theatres, censorship is executed to the highest order and any production denouncing the French government or cultural values is rejected. While there, you are reminded that it is a French territory thereby setting a psychological barrier to the cultural practice as a product of art, aimed



at expressing the artist's mind and creativity. Recently, the Vivendi group has built two modern cultural halls in Yaoundé and Douala (image 8). The promoters aim to promote local artists by providing a platform for film projections, concerts, stand-up comedies, and performances. Despite this ambitious desires, the doors of the halls most of the time still remain close to artists. Conditions to gain access are tough and cost is high. The local artists which they aimed to promote still remains without performance space for the exploitation of their products. The only affordable space remains the Cameroon Cultural Centre in Yaoundé.



*Image 7: Alliance Française, Bamenda, © Alliance Française*



*Image 8: Canal Olympia Yaoundé 1 © Canal Olympia*

It is also common to find that even movies premiered in these theatres are mostly western. Local movies are not readily received or granted the authorisation to be premiered in these venues. The producers have no choice left than to look for space in renowned hotels in town.

Efforts to promote the sustainability of theatres in Cameroon have also been frustrated by the arrival and vulgarisation of VCs and DVDs, TV, Satellite and Cable distribution networks or better still, the new media. Through this media, watching movies no longer requires going to the theatres. Viewers turn their TV sets on, connect DVDs, Satellite Dishes or cable networks, or log unto the World Wide Web and the magic is done.

These new technologies or media now permit numerous TV stations to show popular Nigerian movies (much cherished by Cameroonians), western action movies and tele-novelas. The influx of computers enabling VCD and DVD movie and music piracy, and cheap movie products readily found on streets or even special spaces set up for movies to be rented at a giveaway price of 200 CFAF has caused a drastic change in Cameroon theatre/cinema scene.

#### **Coping mechanisms developed by performing arts stakeholders**

When theatres shutdown, film producers and their productions turn to cable TV channels, home videos, film festivals and even ambulant projections. This is due to the failure even of the attempt to use video-clubs, which in effect, are

mini-movie theatres that used to project films. FESPACO, ECRANS NOIRS, Yaoundé Tout Court, and Cameroon Movie Awards are some of the avenue exploited by film makers.

Film productions are no longer destined for the theatres. Cameroonian films are now produced with the primary objective of meeting the demands of television channels. When this avenue cannot be met, producers concentrate on VCD/DVD products. This seems to be confirmed by Coulon who states that “*exhibition methods for movies have diversified everywhere and, in Cameroon, the home-video industry (based on the Nigerian Model) is starting to become an interesting economic model ripe for new investment*” (2011/2, p.102). It should be noted that, the Nigerian model has greatly influenced the production of films in Cameroon. Though it is an informal economy, slowly, Cameroon is starting to regain a place in the African cinema industry though there is still dire need for movie theatres this, pioneered by the Anglophone Cameroon.

Theatre productions on their part resort to productions destined to festivals like FATEJ, FESTMOC, RETIC, FESTI-FORUM, FATEA, FENAC, more development oriented productions, community-based theatres which require no physical constraints and can be staged in open air. This latter, is seen as a return to traditional style of performances before the arrival of western conception of theatre. The survival of these different platforms also shows that all hope is not lost. Things can still be revived especially as public turnouts in these different festivals and productions are ever increasing.

### **Way forward**

From every indication, there is a need for the revival of Cameroon performing arts. This call for revival entails the examination of the very existence of the industry itself. For the performing arts to succeed, the state needs to finance the industry, avoid censorship, and create an artists’ fund which can boost the morals and permit them to earn a living from their art work. Etoundi Zeyang’s call for the rebuilding of Cameroon’s theatre (in an interview with Nchewngang-Ngassa) seems to concord with this point of view. This fund however, should be different from the Film Industry Development Fund better known by its French acronym FODIC (*Fonds du développement de l’Industrie cinématographique*) created in 1973. Studies have examined the failure of FODIC and lessons should be drawn from them to enhance the smooth running of the Artists’ Fund which this time around, is not limited to film but covers all artistic manifestations.

The call is not only that of rebuilding theatres but also that of empowering the people to return to theatres. Cameroonians need to develop attitudes of going and watching movies in movie theatres; watching plays in theatre halls. This

though, can only be made possible if quality films and plays are produced. There is therefore a need to intensify the training of performing artists and the putting in place of a regulatory body to oversee the industry. This is partly because any person who can hold a video camera is capable of going out on the street, gathering two or more persons, asking them to say this or that, and automatically becomes a film maker. The market then becomes flooded by sub-standard films which cannot attract film lovers. The same tendency is witnessed in the theatre. Mediocre performances are put on stage with relatively little or no production experience. The so-called actors and directors write anything in the name of scripts, mount them and perform within the shortest possible time.

All of these cause the audience to lose the desire to go to the theatres thereby resorting to watching either foreign movies on cable TV channels, Satellite channels or better still, foreign recorded theatre performances and drama sold at street corners in the form of VCD/DVDs (Fofie, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this paper, focus has been on examining the history of theatres in Cameroon. Though it concentrated in three cities only, the case is not different in the remaining cities in Cameroon. The inductive approach can therefore enable a general conclusion to be made regarding the performing arts industry in Cameroon. Though few theatres exist in the country, the study has shown that, an industry can emerge from the Anglophone example. Be it with film or theatre, in direct collaboration with the government, when theatres shutdown, coping mechanisms are born. These mechanisms, if fully developed can comfortably respond to the demands of the public, the producers and all stakeholders involved in the performing arts business. In this way, Cameroonian production companies can produce profitable motion pictures and performances for the national market through sponsorship, video exhibition and various distribution strategies put in place.

A traditional or community-based form of performance is also an area to be encouraged. By taking theatre back to the people, theatre practitioners will be accomplishing one of the main goals of the art, that of ensuring that the people who need the information get it. This falls in line with the development of a new trend of using theatre to relieve mental patients. In these performances, theatre is actually taken to the patients thereby enhancing an applied form of theatre which requires no spatial constraints as per edifice, though it takes into consideration the creation of 'a safe space' wherein, patients (now participants) can freely interact and express ideas and emotions without fear.

This trend can also be adopted by film makers by embarking in a ‘moving cinema’ tradition where projections are made in villages and communities, using mobile screens and projectors. If this grassroots entrepreneurship method can be adopted, it will be seen as a respond to the demands on the ground. In this way, the problem of lack of theatres coupled with the poor acoustics and little technical equipment which the industry is witnessing will be avoided, though a body is still needed to be set up so as to screen the products.

### References

- Butake, B. (1988), “Play Production in Cameroon”, in Butake B. and Doho, G. (Eds.) *Théâtre Camerounais/Cameroon Theatre, Actes du Colloque de Yaoundé*
- Coulon, F. (2011/2), “Une Histoire du Cinéma Camerounais”, *Afrique Contemporaine*, No. 238, pp.91-105
- Eyoh, H.N., (2001), “Cameroon” in Rubin, D., Diakhaté, O. and Eyoh, H.N. (Eds.), *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: Africa*, London and New York: Routledge, pp.76-89
- Fofie, J.R. (2011), *Regards Historiques et Critiques sur le Théâtre Camerounais*, Paris : Harmattan.
- Harrow, K.W. (1982), “Cameroonian Theater: the Dialectic of Modern and Traditional”, *The French Review*, Vol. 55, No. 6, Literature and Civilization of Black Franchiphone Africa, (May, 1982), pp.846-854
- Kilo, A. (2004), “A Note on Recent Anglophone Cameroonian Theatre” in Banham, M., (Ed.), *A History of Theatre in Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 181-191.
- Muluh, H. and Ndoh, B. (2002), “Evolution of the Mass Media in Cameroon” in Eribo, F. and Tanjong, E. (Eds.), *Journalism and Mass Communication in Africa: Cameroon*, New York: Lexington Books, pp.3-16
- Nguiamba, E.P. (2009), “Cameroun : un Pays sans Salle de Cinéma,” *Journal du Cameroun*, May 30
- Zeyang, E. (2017), “Cameroon: Rebuild Cameroon’s Theatre” interviewed by Brenda Y. Nchewngang-Ngassa, *Cameroon Tribune*, 16 January, 2017.