

## BLOOD MONEY<sup>1</sup> A Douala Chronicle

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Dominique Malaquais

Je veux ma voix brutale, je ne la veux pas belle, je ne la veux pas de toutes les dimensions.

Je la veux de part en part déchirée. Je ne veux pas qu'elle s'amuse car enfin, je parle de l'homme et de son refus, de la quotidienne pourriture de l'homme, de son épouvantable démission.

**Frantz Fanon** - *Pour une révolution africaine*

**READER, IF YOU DO NOT HAVE A STRONG STOMACH**, may I suggest you put these pages down? Pictures follow – in image, in word – that are excruciating. Torture and death are the subject.

Some might argue that telling such tales as I do here is unnecessary, seeks merely to shock. I plead guilty. It is my intention to shock. Die Hard, Harder, Hardest: at the hands of Hollywood and CNN, we are told, we have become immune to sights and sounds of gore. Here, then, is the smell of such: let us think concretely, tangibly.

Still, who are 'we', who have the luxury of seeking sense? Scholars, for one – fuckademics, says a friend of mine. Distance, we hold, a certain dispassionate gaze, is necessary to our craft. In the age of post-colonial -isms, we know this: that we are outsiders, voyeurs, always, looking in from a safe and sanitising beyond. With great interest, irony at times and a good deal of elegant footwork, for some two decades now, we have been looking at ourselves, analysing our analysis. The results, on occasion – Clifford, Appadurai, Minh-ha – have been stunning. Many have followed in these hallowed steps, as I shall here. From afar, an eagle's eye cast on the distance of my own gaze, I will seek to chart the impact of violent death on space, on movement, on constructions of the self in a city half a world away.

And yet... This paper will be given, first – spoken – in a land, a city awash in the blood of its colonial past and its neo-colonial present. This place, this time are not incidental. They shape what I write. Soon, my words will be no more than ink on paper. For now, from Johannesburg, I would have them be more: a plea for passion, a refusal of distance.

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The academy is in need of analysis that is politically – and, yes, ethically – engaged. Late twentieth-century trends, taken too often too far, have blunted our words, our ability to see. Some of these trends have been undeniably positive (the realisation that some manner of self-critique is essential, sheer embarrassment at the wealth and power that underpin the Euro-American academic enterprise); others, cloaked though they be in the garb of cultural relativism, have proven profoundly reactionary. Too many give us leave to remain wholly, and far too safely, on the outside.

Much of the horror chronicled in these pages is the product of collusion between an African kleptocracy, its (neo-) colonial sponsors and ‘first world’ business interests. A citizen of two nations deeply implicated in the contemporary débâcle of Africa (France and the United States), an academic trained in the USA in the heyday of post-deconstructionism, neither a political scientist nor a sociologist (an art historian, for pity’s sake!), at times I find great comfort in the haven of an outsider’s gaze; distance, the fiction of objectivity tempt. Still... To conduct research, as I do, in one of Africa’s most complicated cities, to observe and write yet do so without denouncing FULL LUNG the world order that produces living conditions and violence such as exist here: this, in my eyes, would be unacceptable.

True, we must recognise that little of what we say has real-world impact. Still, it behoves us to try, to seek, within reason, to commit words that *matter*. In a post-9/11 world, where orthodoxy, more than ever before, rules the day, this, I believe, is fundamental.

## I. INTO THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

On February 20 2000, the government of Cameroon instituted the *Commandement Opérationnel* (Operational Command or CO), a paramilitary body bringing together local and national police and the armed forces. Its main focus, geographically, was the city of Douala, the country’s economic capital, home to some 3.5 million people. Its official purpose was to put an end to a wave of banditry: thefts, break-ins, car-jackings and murders.

At first, the CO was well received. For the most part, the rich were gratified. The poor too, initially, were pleased. In the city’s many slums, men and women both had taken to lynching bandits. The police could not be depended on to keep the streets safe, they held. *Gendarmes* refused to patrol, preferring to spend their time collecting bakshish. On those rare occasions when officers did arrest a mugger or thief, the culprit was back on the street within hours, the price of his freedom a bribe well tempered. Under the circumstances, any sense that the state might be interested in providing its citizens with a modicum of protection was welcome.

Very soon, however, things started going wrong. People were being arrested *en masse*. Entire neighbourhoods were being cordoned off and their young taken in to CO command posts. There, two things were happening: those arrested were being ransomed – made to buy their freedom – and many were being tortured, beaten with night sticks on the soles of the feet, hung from the wrists for hours on end, fallen upon by machete-wielding soldiers and policemen.

Then things got worse. Many of the arrested were not coming home. They were being taken out of over-crowded cells at odd hours of the night and executed.

On June 16 2000, Christian Tumi, the Archbishop of Douala, called foul: in six months, he declared, over 500 people had fallen victim to extra-judicial killings by the CO. Six months later, ACAT, a local NGO, put the number at 1 000 dead.

What follows is an attempted reading of ways in which the CO was experienced – lived, internalised – by members of the Douala community and an inquiry into the origins of the bloodbath it visited on the city.

## RING AROUND THE ROSIE

In the early days of the CO, bodies tortured and killed were positioned in highly strategic places by the army and police: at major intersections, in front of important buildings in the colonial core of the city. As the deaths grew in number, a different approach was adopted. Bodies began to be systematically disposed of. They were dumped into trenches at various points around the city. You can try to hide such things, but an alert population tends to take notice. Some of the mass graves were discovered; others were the subject of hushed speculation. People began talking about the burial sites as a circle of graves, ringing Douala.

Early sites were fairly close to the city centre. Ones discovered thereafter were further afield. As time passed, more and more emerged, creating, in a very real sense, a cordon of death.

The archbishop's denunciation spoke explicitly of these sites, giving their locations and calling them, quite accurately, 'human slaughter-houses'. The prelate's charges were made, originally, in a letter to the president. When it became clear that little would come of this private approach, the letter's text was leaked to the opposition press. It appeared in *Le Messager*, the country's most-read newspaper. The city's emerging geography of death had been a widespread rumour; it was now common knowledge.

This knowledge found expression in a series of renamings. Streets, plazas, dumps were given new names. Among these was a site located in the peripheral neighbourhood of PK 57. Here, a trench was uncovered, in which dozens of bodies had been piled. Once known as Mangoule, it was renamed *Montagne de Sang* ('Mountain of Blood'). In the neighbourhood of Bépanda, in April 2001, nine young men were arrested, allegedly for stealing a canister of cooking fuel, and murdered. Their remains were never found. This site, now infamous, was re-named *Carrefour des Neuf Disparus* ('Crossroads of the Nine Disappeared').

Within the cordon of bodies denounced by Tumi, in time a second, inner ring of death emerged. Once in the hands of the CO, there were several places a person could be sent for 'processing'. All were in the central part of town – in what had been the heart of colonial Douala. Two were located in Bonanjo, the city's administrative centre. A third stood in the nearby area of Mboppi and a fourth, by the very colonial name of Camp Bertaut, in close proximity as well. A fifth was at the Douala port's naval base, a stone's throw away. Two further ones – Base Elf (an allusion to France's all-powerful petroleum company, handmaiden to many an African dictator) and Nkapah – were located a bit further afield.

## NAMING DEATH, RESHAPING THE CITY

For several of these CO strongholds, new names appeared as well. The naval base, a notorious killing field, was given the moniker *Couloir de la Mort* ('Death Alley'). Camp Bertaut was renamed Kosovo, part of a broader renaming campaign in which reference was systematically made to war zones outside Cameroon, globalising the vocabulary of death. In a similar vein, victims of the CO were referred to as Chechen soldiers. Cameroon's president, Paul Biya, was given the nickname Milosevitch. Persons marching to protest CO actions identified themselves

as Intifada fighters. Rumours emerged linking a notorious murder thought to have prompted the CO's birth with Lebanese and Asian gangs.

This renaming process was one of many forms of indiscipline that became crucial, on a street level, in resisting the CO. Related responses included an increased awareness of unseen (or lesser known) parts of the city. Men and women running from CO troops acquired a sophisticated knowledge of side streets and back alleys. This was the case in particular in Bépanda, which, in April 2001, became the site of weekly marches demanding information about the nine young men who had disappeared following the fuel canister incident. The marches brought to a neighbourhood that had had a relatively calm street life an approach to local geography that was characteristic of much more difficult parts of the city. In Makéa, arguably Douala's toughest quarter, the ability to navigate at great speed impossibly narrow alleyways called *mapan* – this to escape the police – is a basic survival skill. With the advent of the CO, the *mapan* approach to movement became a staple of Bépanda life.

A fundamental problem for the police and army, in this context, was a new tool the marchers had at their disposal: the cellular telephone. Cell phones made their way into Douala pop culture in 2000. Before then, in the late 1990s, they were few and far between – little more than props for the city's tiny elite – and, absent proper service coverage, essentially useless. By the spring of 2000, things had changed. Several mobile telephone companies, among them France Télécom/Mobilis and the South African giant MTN, had entered the Douala market, making cell phones common where, previously, access to telephones of any kind had been a rare luxury. In a country little discussed in the world press yet renowned, in Central Africa, for the propensity of its government to drown anti-government protests in blood, this had a powerful effect. Information about what forces were where could be passed on from one group of protesters to another and – an important factor – the private press could be summoned.

Other tools still were put to use to reshape the urban geography of protest. CO forces and anti-CO marchers alike made active use of traffic jams, reorienting the flow of cars and motorbikes on the city's chaotic streets, cutting off major thoroughfares and generally causing havoc. Newspaper accounts of the Bépanda Nine affair abound in descriptions of this battle of the traffic jams. Significantly, both sides, in these settings, used terms associated with notions of circling and closure – most notably *boucler*, 'to create a ring and close or lock in', 'to imprison'.

## THE DISMEMBERED CITY.

As the numbers of dead suggest, the CO was far more successful than its opponents in its use of *bouclage*. Through its enclosing of neighbourhoods, of people, of bodies, it managed, quite literally, to dismember the city. Douala was cut off from surrounding areas; for days on end, people and goods seeking to enter from the West and Northwest Provinces – the country's breadbasket, but also its politically most volatile regions – were denied access to the city. Neighbourhoods were cut off from one another, roads made impassable by heavily armed convoys. Families were cut off from loved ones. Bodies were violently cut, broken, discarded.

Reflecting this vision of a city dismembered, new expressions emerged. Among these were graphic wordplays centred on the term *artère* – 'artery', meaning 'main road' or 'thoroughfare' and 'blood vessel', 'channel of life' – puns suggesting a reading of the city as a disjointed, disarticulated body.

Closely linked to these were accusations of sorcery. Much was being made on the street of missing bodies and body parts. This, of course, is hardly surprising: bodies were missing. But

there is more. Like many cities in the throes of economic and social strife, Douala, of late, has been deluged with talk of witchcraft. Central to this are allegations of trafficking in human bones and body parts. Typically, such allegations rear their head in relation to new forms of wealth – money made too fast, too soon. With the advent of the CO, things took an unprecedented turn: members of the armed forces became the focus of organ theft accusations. Hearts, male genitalia, entire heads, it was said, were being removed from the corpses of CO victims by their killers, for sale to foreign brokers. What remained of the dead was disposed of in vats of acid.

True or false, the accusations of organ pilfering found fertile ground in a city traumatised by the CO. The matter of heads severed had become such a gripping one for many Doualans that, by early 2001, it was making its way into the work of the city's most avant-garde artists. Most striking was the work of sculptor and installation artist Malam, much of whose production in 2000–2001 centred on visions of dismembered and tortured bodies.

Decisions made by the CO in response to families' demands for the repatriation of bodies made the atmosphere more charged still, adding to the sense of occult doings afoot in the city. Where complaints were raised or marches organised to demand the return of bodies, the CO forbade funerals. This proved disastrous. Douala became a city awash in errant souls.

Adding to the tension still more was a determination on the part of the CO and government to foster a sense of uncertainty. Rumour; the broadcasting of deliberately false, misleading or contradictory information; daily additions to the roster of forces involved in the CO – this to such an extent that it became impossible to keep track of all the acronyms... For months on end, the citizens of Douala were deluged with useless, yet at the same time essential data about the CO, which made it impossible to make sense of what was happening.

When, finally, things started calming down in June 2001, even the most basic facts were unclear. One was told the CO was no longer extant. The decree creating it, however, had not, and has not, been abrogated, suggesting it might come back into being at any time. Claims that deployments of soldiers and policemen in riot gear are a thing of the past are palpably untrue. Venture out at night and you will inevitably come across platoons of men in uniform. Look closely and you will find that a new entity has been created to see to the city's 'security'. Look closer, and you will find that this new entity is built on precisely the same foundations as the CO: it does the same thing, in the same way – a bit more discreetly, perhaps, but no more. Its name? *Opération Etau*.

*Etau* signifies 'stranglehold', 'noose'. The ring of violence, of death, strung about the city is still very much present. The geography of fear brought into being by the CO remains in place, branded onto the map of Douala.

## II. THE KING'S NEW CLOTHES

Pretoria, 1994. Cameroonian journalist Pius Njawe is in South Africa to interview members of Nelson Mandela's fledgling cabinet. First stop, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The minister, it turns out, has a problem. He has just received a fax from one of the poshest hotels in Sandton. A guest is announced, the hotel's manager writes, whose rank poses questions of diplomatic protocol: the king of Cameroon. Who, the minister wants to know, might this monarch be? There is no such thing as 'the king of Cameroon', Njawe explains. Puzzlement all around.

Njawe decides to investigate. At the ‘monarch’s’ hotel, he is directed to the presidential suite. A stunning woman greets him, covered in gold. Entering the suite, he sinks into four inches of plush rose carpet. Ahead is a cavernous room furnished in gold and pink. Young men in dark suits lie about. One wrestles with a remote control, attempting to open at a distance a set of floor-to-ceiling drapes. Success: the drapes part, revealing a mezzanine. On it, a man stands, covered also in gold.

The man on the mezzanine is not a king. He is, however, *le king*, one of Cameroon’s most notorious gangsters. Donatien Koagne is his name.

Forty-five minutes of questioning lead nowhere; Njawe leaves knowing no more than he did coming in about what Koagne is doing in South Africa. Further research proves more fruitful. The journalist learns that his fellow-Cameroonian has established close ties with members of the Mandela team. The great man himself may have been taken in: one of the gangster’s proudest possessions is a series of photographs of himself posing side by side with Mandela. Worse, Koagne, it seems, was a guest of honour at Madiba’s inauguration...

Mandela was not the only head of state taken in by Koagne. *Le king* kept snapshots of himself with many a man of power, among them Mobutu Sese Seko and Denis Sassou Nguesso. There is no evidence that his relations with Mandela, whatever they were, became at any point unpleasant. Not so his ties to Mobutu and Sassou. And with good reason: Koagne did both men, and others too, gloriously wrong. He took Mobutu for 15 million dollars. Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso lost 40 million to him. Sassou, Etienne Eyadéma of Togo, several high officials of Gabon, Tanzania and Kenya, a member of the Spanish government and an ex-operative of the Israeli Mossad were bamboozled as well.

Koagne has been linked to a wide range of illicit practices – drug-dealing, money laundering and trade in controlled substances (blood diamonds, uranium), among others. The means he used to defraud Mobutu and his colleagues, however, were something else altogether: a sham money-multiplication scheme involving a top-secret potion allegedly concocted by the United States Department of Treasury for use in the manufacture of dollar bills.

Eventually, Donatien was caught. He fell prey to the Yemeni police, following yet another con in which he took a high-ranking member of the local police for two million dollars.

## FEYMANIA

Any Cameroonian will tell you: Donatien was a *feyman*, a top-of-the-line con artist.

Of all *feymen*, Donatien is the most famous. Still, he is far from alone. There are many, some of whom may even have surpassed him in wealth. Though each has his *mo* – cons, disguises, means of approach very much his own – all share certain fundamental characteristics.

A *feyman*’s gaze is, by definition, trained on the outside. Business, as Donatien’s itinerary suggests, is done abroad. When it is not, the cons it calls for systematically reference the outside. The *feyman* identifies himself as a foreigner or claims close links with foreign partners. Commonly, cons prey on a mark’s yearning for contacts with outsiders, voyages, a life elsewhere. In this net, countless folk have been ensnared: young men and women seeking jobs or an education abroad, who turn over large sums of money only to find themselves defrauded or, in the case of women, held hostage as prostitutes in Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands.

While Europe does figure in the plans and cons of *feymen*, the elsewherees that are of most interest to them and their marks are American or, more generally, Anglophone ones. This



is particularly evident in two contexts: links *feymen* establish or claim to entertain with English-speaking countries in North America and in Africa (South Africa and Nigeria most prominently) and their trademark look. The first of these highlights an essential aspect of *feymanian*. Donatien's success was not a fluke; nor was it the product, merely, of cons well devised. He and others brought to their work a sophisticated understanding of shifting markets, political events and transformations in the social order born of the cold war's end and the fall of apartheid. The former ushered in a whole new era in the illicit world of diamond smuggling and trade in controlled substances. As, post-1989, strategic interests made way for purely economic ones in countries like Angola and Congo, Togo, Burkina and Liberia, a vacuum developed, a space for new players to invest. *Feymen* did particularly well in this setting.

With Nelson Mandela's release, South Africa opened up. Among the first to see its potential as a place where novel forms of business might be undertaken were Cameroon's *feymen*. The new country was in search of capital. At the same time, it was beginning to experience the backlash of disastrous economic policies implemented by the apartheid regime in the 1970s and '80s and, thereafter, to 'rectify' these, at the behest of the World Bank and the IMF. Coupled with deteriorating economic conditions throughout the sub-continent, resulting in widespread poverty and massive immigration in the south, this state of affairs prompted a crime wave such as the country had never experienced. By the early '90s, trafficking in all manner of goods (drugs, weapons, stolen vehicles to name but a few) was rife. Porous borders and police who were trained to kill, not protect, ill-equipped for their new duties and often corrupt, rendered such trafficking easier still, as did the catastrophic conditions created in neighbouring countries by apartheid's decades-long campaign of regional destabilisation. The Rainbow Nation was a place where a businessman well versed in the ways of fraud and deceit could do very nicely...

Of interest too, for those so inclined, was the new South Africa's thirst for links to the rest of Africa, to peoples, cultures, ideas it had been systematically denied for half a century. With this in mind, Donatien and others made extensive use of allusions to 'tradition', evocative references to an African past – of royalty, of power and grandeur – with which they claimed an intimate association. To further such visions of himself, *le king* appeared in floor-length brocaded vestments and intricately embroidered caps. Others did the same, apparently with considerable success.

When in Cameroon, Donatien and his crew sported a different look altogether. Here, the style of choice was meant to suggest links with urban American culture. This proved of great use in a country looking increasingly toward the USA. France, and more broadly Europe, were the reference points of a nomenclature held in little regard by the majority of Cameroonians. America, for most, was the place to be. Of this basic fact *feymanian* made ample use.

In the second half of the 1990s, in Douala's hottest nightspots, in fancy hotels and Air France's first class cabin, over and over you came upon men – most of them *feymen* – dressed for all the world as if they were straight outta Compton: Nike gear from head to toe, thick gold chains, the latest model SUV. 'New Jack' (aka 'gangsta') style was all the rage. *Feymanian*'s adoption of the New Jack look corresponds with the arrival on Douala television screens of MCM, Francophone Africa's answer to MTV, home, in its early days, to videos by 2 Live Crew, Public Enemy and Snoop Dogg. MCM had been available in Cameroon as early as 1990, but only, at that stage, to a tiny minority of the very rich, whose houses were equipped with satellite dishes. In 1994 it became commonly accessible; within weeks it had become a staple of urban pop culture. At this time too, hiphop-themed movies began appearing in Douala: *Trespass*, *Menace II Society*, *Slam*...

In these films, 'ghetto glamour' was the look: out with the Nike and SUVs, in with Gucci and Fendi, Mercedes and BMW. By 1998, if you were a *feyman*, it was the way to go:

Head shaved clean, Armani sunglasses black as night, jacket by Hugo Boss, pen by Mont Blanc, wheels by Mercedes. Scents to swoon: Shalimar, Coriolan. And jewellery: lots of jewellery...

So one Douala newspaper described the style.

In such looks, *feymen* had a powerful marketing tool, particularly well adapted to the clientele of young, mostly disenchanting folk they sought to attract. This was not mere ostentation: it was the stuff of strategy, of sophisticated business. Still, we are not talking, here, of business alone. Underlying this all was a rejection, loud as they come, of ideals deemed normative by Cameroonian society.

All feymen come from New Bell: so the rumour goes. Like many rumours, this one is a little over the top. Still, there's something to it. New Bell, a sprawling cluster of neighbourhoods southeast of the city's colonial core, is Douala's poorest and most congested section. Its name is a reference to the Bell dynasty, one of several Duala clans whose rulers, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, controlled trade networks linking Cameroon's ivory- and palm-rich interior with the coast, long a port of call for European merchant ships. In 1912, the German colonial authority displaced the Bells, moving thousands of men, women and children inland to a mosquito-infested, flood-prone area to take over their seaside lands. From these difficult beginnings came a neighbourhood typified by social tension.

As New Bell grew, tensions increased. Among the neighbourhood's first inhabitants were not only Bells, or more generally Duala, but also folk hailing from the interior. Foremost among them were people whose home lay in the western highlands, in what is known today as the Bamileke region. In the decades following the creation of New Bell, hundreds of thousands of Bamileke emigrated to the city, leaving behind a hopelessly overcrowded homeland. Today, well over 75 per cent of Douala's inhabitants are of Bamileke origin. In New Bell the percentages are higher still. Coupled with a policy of exacerbating ethnic divisions – a highly effective form of divide-and-conquer introduced by the French and pursued by Cameroon's independence-era rulers – this state of affairs has resulted in a pervasive climate of tension and controversy.

Locally and nationally, there is talk of *la question bamiléké*, a deeply divisive ethnicist discourse at whose heart stand government-sponsored accusations of Bamileke economic hegemony. New Bell has come to play a central role in this discourse. As early as 1960, editorials were appearing in the state-run press calling for mass removals of Bamileke from Douala and, more specifically, from New Bell. Such harangues persist today, accompanied, at times, by hair-raising violence. In this environment, several generations of inner-city youth have grown up deeply alienated.

The matter of alienation is central to any discussion of *feymanie* or the Commandement Opérationnel. *Feymanie* can in no sense be termed a Bamileke phenomenon. It is, in fact, distinctly pan-ethnic. Still, the fact remains that the first generation of *feymen*, represented most famously by Donatien himself, counted among them numerous young men of Bamileke origin, a majority of whom had grown up in New Bell. This speaks not, as government spokespersons argue, to Bamileke propensities for economic crime, but to the disastrous impact on poor urban youth of ever-worsening economic conditions in the 1980s and '90s – conditions that most affected the largely Bamileke population of New Bell and nearby slums.

To understand the sense of alienation that pervades New Bell, one needs to consider the origins of Bamileke urban migration. Though many Bamileke families have been living in Douala for generations, few think of the city as their home. For an overwhelming majority, the plan is to make enough money in the city so as, one day, to establish oneself *au village* – 'back home'. For men, this means something quite specific: the acquisition, in the highlands, of a compound (land, a house and dependencies) and a notable's status.



It has never been easy to become a titled homeowner in Bamileke country. Today, but for the very few, it is well-nigh impossible. Land shortages and rules put in place by a local elite determined to maintain its ascendancy make it so. This results in massive emigration.

In 1915 already, young men were moving to the city, hoping one day to come home. By the 1950s, the situation had become critical. Thousands were leaving daily for Douala, where they were received with hostility and lived in abysmal conditions. If things were disastrous for the poor, for a small oligarchy of chiefs and high-ranking notables they had never been better. Under French rule, huge fortunes had been accumulated by members of the gentry willing to work hand-in-hand with colonial authorities. The divide between rich and poor was now a chasm.

In 1957, the highlands exploded. A massive uprising, among the most revolutionary in sub-Saharan Africa, shook the region to the core. The revolt was intended to create a new social order. Drowned in blood by French and Cameroonian troops, it failed. The hopes of hundreds of thousands were crushed.

In the wake of the revolt, things only got worse. More and more people were forced to leave for the city. Economic downturn, starting in the mid-1980s, made things worse still. Devaluation of the currency in 1994, in which the CFA lost 50 per cent of its worth, caused havoc. In places like New Bell, life became near-impossible to live. The sense of anger, of despair was palpable. This sense was heightened by the abject failure of a movement many young people had believed in deeply and in whose service hundreds, many from New Bell, had lost their lives: the quest for democratic pluralism. In 1991–92, supporters of the movement brought virtually all formal economic activity in Douala to a halt in a massive general strike known as *Villes Mortes* ('Dead Cities'). Though, ultimately, the government capitulated and opened up the electoral process to opposition parties, in the end little changed. Well versed in the arts of bribery and nepotism, the Biya clique managed to buy off those of its critics it did not find expedient to arrest or send into exile. The opposition was de-fanged. Those who had fought in its name were left to their own devices: poor as ever and, now, without any hope at all.

It is from this context, of rural exile, demoralisation and ever-worsening poverty, that *feymania* emerged. For Donatien, his colleagues and those who sought to follow in their footsteps, the get-rich-quick schemes for which *feymania* is infamous offered more than a way out: they were a form of revenge. French-style schooling, hard work, obeisance to the rules of chieftaincy and nation: these, young men had been told for generations, were the keys to success. Untrue half a century earlier, by the mid-1990s such admonitions were laughable. Success was the stuff of ill-gotten wealth and political patronage, lies, bribery, fraud. The means and methods used by *feymen* to acquire their fortune were those of the ruling elite – tools unavailable, until then, to the common man, re-worked to fit his needs and the context at hand.

*Feymania* created significant difficulties for the Biya oligarchy. Its conmen took great pleasure in making life trying for officials and allies of the government. Stories abound: a cabinet member bilked of millions in a phoney real-estate deal (he was attempting to buy an apartment in Paris with embezzled funds); an ex-minister of justice – a Bell no less – whose house was thrown into shadow by the mansion of a *feyman* whom he had tried to indict... On the streets of New Bell, such tales were told over and over, with relish. The *feyman* took on a mythic quality: he was the poor man's avenger; a Robin Hood for Cameroon's downtrodden. Men like Donatien, in turn, cultivated this identity. Periodically he and his entourage would roar into New Bell in a convoy of Mercedes and take over a kerbside restaurant, buying food and drink for passersby and distributing CFA bills.

The crowning moment of Donatien's career came in 1994. The national soccer team,

the Indomitable Lions, had qualified for the World Cup, to be held that year in the USA. The government, however, having defaulted on loan payments, was in the midst of negotiations with the World Bank. Training, outfitting, flying and lodging the Lions would cost a small fortune – not something the Bank would look kindly on. The fate of President Biya, however, was (and remains) intimately tied to that of the Lions': failure to send the team would have caused riots. Donatien saw his chance: on national television, he presented the government with a cheque for the amount of ten million CFA. He was now a fully-fledged popular hero: not only had he saved the team's and the country's honour, he had done so in a gesture many saw as humiliating for Biya himself. Donatien had grown up dirt poor; now he was bailing out the government: the ultimate revenge.

But, of course, things were not so simple. The relationship Donatien and his cohorts established with the ruling elite was a symbiotic one: the *feymen* needed the government as much as it needed them. To wit Koagne's close ties with one of Cameroon's most dreaded men, Jean Fochivé (1931–1997). For decades, Fochivé headed the country's secret services. Long Paris's man in Yaoundé, he was responsible for the murder of many political opponents, a number of whom he tortured to death himself. Donatien and Fochivé knew each other well and – even the country's staunchest conservatives admit this – worked closely together, the former providing funds and information, the latter protection.

Such ties are dangerous. By 1996, Fochivé's activities had become too much even for Yaoundé to hide. His Paris cronies were on their way out (to be replaced by more discreet, if no less deadly players); in negotiations with the World Bank, much lip service was being paid to human rights. Not a bit discreet, Fochivé, had to go. He was fired. With his departure, Donatien lost a precious ally. His days were numbered, as were those of the first generation of *feymen*.

By 1999, things were changing in Cameroon. The economy was finally showing signs of redressing itself and the World Bank was planning a massive pipeline linking Chad to the Cameroon coast. Long a fiefdom of French companies, the country was opening its doors to US business interests. South African and Nigerian capital was trickling in. There was quick money to be made, particularly if you weren't a stickler for transparency. This was an environment made for *feymen*; with its focus on the USA and anglophone Africa, it seemed the fulfilment of a prophecy their business tactics had foreshadowed.

But there were others, now, who wanted to get in on the game. Drawing liberally on *feyman* style and approaches, members of the country's tiny Biya bourgeoisie entered the fray. Foreigners too, not a few of them Americans, began doing less than limpid business in Douala. Speculation ruled the day, facilitated by government officials' notorious lack of interest in regulating foreign businesses, so long as adequate compensation was in the offing. Though some, Cameroonian and not, lost their shirts, a number of colossal fortunes were made. Mansions belonging to this emergent group started popping up, complete with heavily armed guards. So reminiscent were they of houses built by Donatien and his clique that a term was coined: *le style feyman*. Façades covered entirely in white tiles, demanding constant attention by an army of minions, neo-classical porticos and wrought-iron gates were its hallmarks. A neighbourhood known as Denver (after the soap opera 'Dynasty'), once a *feyman's* paradise, became the quarter of choice for the newly rich. The first Lexus appeared on the streets of Douala. The city – and the country at large – were undergoing a massive *feymanisation*. What had been a subculture was fast becoming integral to the lifestyle of a fledgling *nouvelle bourgeoisie*. In the words of one observer, 'Cameroon [was] becoming a country of *feymen*.'

For the first time ever, the country's economy was not under the exclusive control of the French-sponsored elite. This had political repercussions. In dining rooms and board rooms, discreetly but surely, talk began of a post-Biya era. Lawyers, financiers, CEOs, long staunch

supporters of his regime, were beginning to speak of change, hinting that others, perhaps, should take over, better versed in the ways of the business world and prepared to look beyond old alliances. A mere four years earlier, no one – least of all in the established bourgeoisie – would have dared suggest such things.

## TAKING BACK THE CITY

This presented the Biya regime with a serious threat – possibly the most serious challenge to its hegemony since its inception in 1982. In response to this state of affairs, the government took a number of measures. One was a series of highly publicised indictments directed at prominent *nouveau riche* businessmen. Another was the CO.

By 2000, there were entirely too many weapons in Douala, many of them in hands other than those of the police and army. To protect itself – against thieves and, more importantly, business relationships turned sour – the *nouvelle bourgeoisie* had adopted an approach favoured by men like Donatien: private guards. In time, this became the norm for all who could afford it. For help with break-ins, you did not call the police; you turned to security companies first introduced following *Villes Mortes* (Africa Security, Wackenhut). If for South Africans this is hardly surprising, in Cameroon it constituted a significant departure from previous practice, symptomatic of a growing loss of faith in the government's ability to provide even the most basic services.

It is one thing for the populace to hold such views, another entirely when it is the opinion of the wealthy. The fact that many of those resorting to the services of private security companies were not staunch Biya supporters made things more complicated still. In essence the city was being patrolled by mercenaries – several of the companies are subsidiaries of larger guns-for-hire concerns – and these mercenaries were being paid by people whose support for the government was, at best, mitigated. From the standpoint of an authoritarian regime that most of the country's poor and, now, whole sectors of the bourgeoisie wanted replaced, the situation was untenable.

Much of the blood shed by the CO was that of poor folk – to this I return shortly. But the CO was not concerned only about the disenfranchised. Its highly visible presence and violent exactions – particularly in the early months, when corpses were positioned in places the rich, not the poor, frequent – were a warning to members of the bourgeoisie, new and old, considering alternatives to a Biya regime. That corpses appeared in the heart of Douala's financial centre is telling in this regard.

The 'order' and interests the government sought to ensure were ones put in place during the colonial era. This too was evident in the CO's work. Any number of locations would have been possible for its detention centres. The decision to centralise everything in the French heart of the city and its immediate environs was not innocent: it sent a very specific message. The message was all the more potent as Cameroon is one of the few African nations colonised by France in which the government in power descends in direct line from the country's pre-independence regime. Only two presidents have ruled: Biya and, before him, Ahmadou Ahidjo, a man handpicked by Paris, whom Biya (his vice-president) replaced in a passing of the reins orchestrated by the Quai d'Orsay.

The CO's massive show of force was meant also for another, related 'public': local leaders (neighbourhood co-ordinators, community representatives and the like). In Cameroon as elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, entirely too much attention is focused on ethnicity as a cause of conflict, to the detriment of other catalysts – class and generation divides, most notably. This

has been the case in analyses of the CO. Much has been made of the fact that a majority of those detained and killed were Bamileke. While this is so, it would be inaccurate to speak of the CO as an anti-Bamileke vehicle. A more relevant factor, here, is age. An overwhelming number of the CO's victims were young folk. This is important in two regards. First is what it says about real (as opposed to statistical) economic indicators; second, it brings to the fore generational conflicts that have resulted in unexpected alliances.

By the mid-1990s, Donatien & co. had become role models for destitute youth in quest of hope. In this, they had replaced the political activists of the early '90s. The children of New Bell had believed in democracy and seen their hopes dashed. With the gradual demise of Donatien-style *feymania* in the later '90s, they lost yet another reason to dream. This proved problematic for the forces of 'law and order.' In the context of *Villes Mortes*, New Bell youth had been a source of considerable disorder, certainly, but a relatively predictable one as well. The same was true during the Donatien years. Now, they had nothing. This, combined with the fact that the country's much-touted economic recovery had had virtually no impact on the poorest sectors of society, made them dangerous: unpredictable and very, very angry.

The CO's violence was unmistakably an attempt to bring under control this potentially explosive force. That so many were arrested, tortured and killed, however, cannot be explained in these terms alone. Such terror would not have been possible without the tacit acquiescence of a group that should have risen up to defend the children of New Bell, but did not: their elders. A characteristic of the Bamileke expatriate community in Douala is its high degree of organisation. In every neighbourhood where Bamileke live, New Bell included, there are chapter houses, one for each major chieftaincy. At the head of these chapters are elders whose responsibility it is to see to their community's wellbeing. From such men (and occasionally women), one would have expected vociferous protests, accusations of ethnic profiling. None such occurred. Their silence speaks volumes. Following the disappearance of the Bépanda Nine, older folk did rally. It should be noted, however, that Bépanda, while many of its inhabitants are Bamileke, is not a slum; far fewer desperately poor young men live there than in New Bell. During *Villes Mortes*, young and old, in New Bell as in many other neighbourhoods, had joined forces. In the face of the CO, the children of New Bell – many more of whom than nine lost their lives – were largely left to fend for themselves.

The neglect was intentional. Over and over, elders say the same thing: the CO may have been targeting Bamileke youth, but this was mostly defensible; the younger generation, they hold, is precisely what the police and army accuse them of being: riff raff. They are lazy, pay their leaders no heed, abandon the traditions of their homeland. As the contrast between *Villes Mortes* and the CO period suggests, this is a novel development. A distinct generational rift has appeared, pitting older men who feel they have played by the rules of the social order against younger ones who show little interest in doing so. Others before these youth had turned their backs on the highlands, refusing to go home and build or acquire a title. Among them, however, were several – virtually all *feymen* – who had done quite well for themselves. Their wealth and clout made up (in part at least) for their rejection of communal norms. For the young of New Bell under the CO, there were no such mitigating factors.

This rift between generations of Bamileke facilitated the CO's task. For those in power it was advantageous as well: properly handled, it could be used to drive a wedge into the Bamileke community's legendary solidarity. This both the Ahidjo and the Biya regimes had long sought to do, mostly to little avail. Their goal, in this respect, was twofold: to break Bamileke monopolies in a number of economic sectors and to counter the Bamileke community's active and often highly successful engagement in opposition politics – an engagement going back to the late colonial period, during which the French-sponsored elite's most formidable political enemies hailed from the western highlands. The CO emerged as a powerful weapon in this setting,

drawing out and inflaming tensions inherent in the Bamileke social fabric, yet until then kept largely under wraps.

In seeking to understand the stunning violence of the CO, there is still another factor to consider. Many a president in francophone Africa was handpicked by Paris to lead his country into 'independence'. Ahmadou Ahidjo's, however, was a unique situation: he was actively *opposed* to independence. Others, who had fought for the country's freedom, were violently silenced by the French and, in their wake, by Ahidjo. To maintain himself and his entourage in power, the French-appointed president had to resort to draconian methods: his was one of the most repressive regimes of the early post-colonial period. Biya too, if less habitually than his predecessor, made use of such means. In shoring up their power, the two presidents relied heavily on the army and police. As a result, both institutions have a high profile and considerable sway. If Cameroon has suffered no (successful) military coups, it is because both regimes have known how to placate their men in uniform. Never, not even at the height of the government's fiscal crisis, have they gone without pay.

Discreetly yet forcefully, on a regular basis, the army and police remind those in power that, without them, chaos would ensue. Shortly before Paul Biya created the CO, there had been rumblings to this effect – talk of disaffection among the army brass, rumours of a possible coup. While this may have been a coincidence (such talk is not rare), it does seem clear that the army and police were given considerably more leeway in setting afoot and managing the CO than was in fact necessary. Many observers of the Cameroonian scene viewed this as payback. It was also a hedge. Well aware of his debt to the military and of the threat it could constitute if dissatisfied, facing massive discontent among the populace and, increasingly, a vote of no-confidence from the bourgeoisie, Biya turned for help to the armed forces, ensuring their support by giving a *côterie* of high-ranking officers what amounted to *carte blanche*. That such was the case is underscored by the treatment the CO's leader was afforded when, finally, his paramilitary units were disbanded: he was assigned another post... in the Bamileke highlands. A few of his subordinates – scapegoats, essentially – were arrested. In the highest spheres of power, however, it is acknowledged that they will probably never be tried. As for the myriad acts of illegal detention, torture and murder committed under the CO, these have yet to prompt even the beginnings of a serious investigation.

## THE ROAD FROM HERE

The CO was a multi-layered phenomenon. Both cause and effect, it was brought on by and, in turn, prompted a whole range of transformations in the social order. As a result of fundamental economic and political shifts – some global, others continent-wide, others still specific to the country and, within this, to particular regions – long-held certainties are increasingly thrown into doubt. Who you are within the social order; how you move through its spaces and what, precisely, these spaces are; who your allies are; where, with and to whom you belong; goals and means of attaining these; ethnic and political affiliations: categories and identities that had seemed fixed, or in any event solidly anchored, are proving wholly contingent.

This state of affairs is the product of a history particular to Cameroon. It is not, however, a specifically Cameroonian phenomenon. Nor is it purely an African matter. The briefest perusal of newspapers, music, poetry anywhere in the world today makes this clear. Still, in many ways, Africa is at the forefront of such developments. Change – the unmooring, de- and re-constructing of identities – is happening faster, in cities south of the Sahara, than anywhere else on the planet. The challenge, for those who would write about contemporary culture South or North, is to do so in ways themselves open to flux, bearing in mind that most of the categories, identities and modes of self-representation that shape our analyses are themselves rendered contingent by the radical changes under way in cities like Douala.