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Urban Circulation and the Everyday Politics of African Urban Youth: The Case of Douala, Cameroon

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Urban youth in Africa

During July 2003, 25 youths participated in a series of discussions about the quarter New Bell where they lived. There were many ideas and opinions exchanged, a sampling of which follows:

> New Bell has always been a place where people had to adapt to each other coming from different places. People here do always imagine themselves someplace else, and this is partly because their ancestors came from somewhere else. They were able to get by in this place as long as that memory was kept alive. As this was and remains a very crowded place, these memories are always coming up against each other. People had their different associations — the Bassa, the Bamileke, the Sawa — all had their social obligations, and then you have the Malians and Nigerians from West Africa, bringing money, marrying here, mixing people in new ways. There were not a lot of rules for what people should do. Many things would happen, and people would discover that they could make many things happen . . . people would get money or lose money; people would disappear and never return; there were always ways to get hold of things, and people would call this magic. Because there were so many places being brought into this place called New Bell, it could never be clear just who was doing what. And so people discovered that together they could make many things happen, both good and bad . . . but they didn't know how to control it, and so people have become afraid of their own collective power; they don't know where it could lead them, there are too many possibilities (Mariam, a teacher, age 24).

> The difficulty is that the old rules no longer apply, and efforts to adhere to them only get us into trouble. Take, for example, family relations. Fathers are afraid to face their children if they are unemployed. They stay away from the house because they cannot face the fact that they are unable to provide. But meanwhile, the children are further deprived as they become convinced of the father's indifference. Of course in this life of ours we are unable to be men, but at what cost is maintaining the importance of these definitions. The father will say to the girls, you must come back to the house early in the evening, and you must respect my judgment. But the girls will only laugh, and say, ok, I will leave for good and then what will you do in your old age. It is better to accept whatever I do, and however I make money, than for you to live like you are in the bush. And there are young men who accept that their girlfriends will prostitute themselves for them; this has become a sign of real love. But while the boys may gain the money for their manhood, they soon lose the experience of the love itself. Take the experience of family and social gatherings also. The old rules say that different dishes must be cooked for different events, and that people must bring drinks in large quantities. But in order for these obligations to be fulfilled, for people to feel like the social order is being reaffirmed, they engage in so many manipulations with each other, threaten each so many times that bad things will happen unless these obligations are fulfilled, that people

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> no longer feel that they really belong to something. How many of us simply decide to look straight ahead, to walk through the crowded streets and not come back to anything familiar. We always say that such and such person is among us, that we hold within our families and quarters the sense of a person, his reason for living. But we have turned this into a confinement . . . and many are now living away from their families and their quarters. They haven't traveled abroad, but they are living in different worlds, trying to make different worlds, here in this city. Even myself, I must stay with my mother who is not well and my brothers and sisters, but it would be impossible if I didn't have other places to go and think, to take food, to talk to others — in Bapenda, Tergal (neighborhoods in Douala). We are learning new migrations here at home; from these new rules will come (Jean-Paul, a driver, age 22).

What I want to take from these excerpts is the sense that the crisis of sociality that many African cities confront — i.e. the vulnerability of relied-upon social connections, of viable publics, of reciprocity and exchange related to the construction of effective livelihoods — is also full of possibility, a possibility that has deep historical antecedents. This is the possibility for the creation of new urban sensibilities and collaborations that is increasingly being expressed through more transversal ways of experiencing, navigating and conceptualizing everyday life in the city. The prospects for daily existence and for future livelihood may not be primarily conceptualized within the terms of mobilizing proximate forms of social capital and connectedness, as the configuration of solidarity and collaboration may entail broader and more diverse expanses of territory and compositions of social actors.

What is also important to keep in mind from these excerpts is that such capacities to intersect different territories and actors as a means of substantiating local places have significant roots in many African urban quarters, particularly as many were only nominally subsumed within the colonial and postcolonial logics of urban development and governance (Schler, 2003).

Conventionally, urban survival in precarious conditions is conceptualized as a process of narrowing one's universe to a manageable domain of safety or efficacy. In physical or social environments that are highly disordered, unhealthy, or dangerous, it is usually assumed that individuals constitute small islands of security or order from which they can better deal with the insalubrious or insecure conditions that surround them. For example, the way in which the inside of a one-room cardboard squatter's shack is meticulously maintained in the midst of overflowing refuse at the exterior; or the way in which so-called marginalized populations attempt to secure a highly circumscribed territory of operation and hold onto it tenaciously.

But what of the possibilities that in precarious environments, people also 'let go' of such consolidation, concede most efforts to maintain the integrity of a coherent space of operation and therefore, to a certain extent, a coherent sense of themselves, and rather disperse themselves across discrepant urban spaces? Thus, conventional notions of urban development that focus on the consolidation of local social capital, community governance and so forth may have limited applicability if increasing numbers of urban residents are elaborating practices of seeking their everyday sustenance through much more lateral and dispersed movements and activities across the larger urban system.

Much of the literature on associational life makes the assumption that discernible, if not necessarily formal, groupings or institutions are necessary structures of mediation that provide conduits between local quarters and the larger urban system (see, for example, Ahn and Ostrom, 2003). It has been my experience working with urban development NGOs across many African cities that there are more provisional, less visible modalities through which such intersections can be made.

Therefore, the discussion here attempts to address some ways in which specific sectors of urban youth in Douala, Cameroon attempt to expand their spaces of operation outside any formal or apparent institutional structures by finding ways to perform particular kinds of circulation across the city. Here circulation refers specifically to a practice of lateral, transversal movement, whereby individuals attempt to get out of their

neighborhoods and familiar social relationships, to demonstrate a capacity to navigate a wide range of different quarters and an availability to engage in different activities, as well as an availability to become parts of different stories, games, transactions being elaborated by others elsewhere in the city. This discussion thus attempts to complement ongoing work on new modalities of urban social organization in Africa and the south (for example, Bertrand, 1998; Agier, 1999; 2002; Le Bris, 2000).

The designation of youth as an object of analysis here in part stems from a situation where this reference to a particular stage of development is unmoored from clear meaning — the term youth itself begins to exceed the definitional boundaries through which it is normally understood. When children become the primary foot soldiers of civil conflict and 40-year-olds with a college degree await their first formal job and the opportunity to start a family of their own, it is hard to tell where youth begins and ends (Argenti, 2002). A common saying among young men in Douala is that they can never stay within the neighborhoods in which they grew up if they are going to be able to be 'real men'. Youth then increasingly comes to connote a certain volatility of energies that cannot be emplaced but also that in many instances are likely to be wasted or at least remain incoherent (Biaya, 2001).

In Africa, particularly, the shifting intersections of truncated urbanization, social conflict, and the privatization of the trappings of public life have in many contexts thoroughly destabilized what is possible to imagine by virtue of being a youth (Fanthorpe, 2001; Crais, 2002; Mkandawire, 2002). It is not simply that the youth are increasingly cut off from the possibilities of social reproduction and regeneration. Rather, youthfulness itself is re-imagined as something beyond the purview of any particular age group — something highly mobile and potentially without end — and thus something dangerous — i.e. rapidly productive of new life or the immanence of sudden death (Durham, 2000; Honwana and DeBoeck, 2004).

Larger numbers of urban Africans are disconnected from both the post-independence narratives of national development and the collective social memories that had established an interweaving of individual life histories with the prospective and 'eternal' return of ancestral knowledge (De Boeck, 1998; Ferguson and Fabian, 2002). Employment, marriage, raising a family are foreclosed for increasing numbers of youth. As such, the incessant provisionality of actions, identities, and social composition through which individuals attempt to eke out daily survival positions them in a proliferation of seemingly diffuse and discordant times. Without structured responsibilities and certainties, the places they inhabit and the movements they undertake become instances of disjointed histories — i.e. places subsumed into mystical, subterranean or sorceral orders (Devisch, 1995; Bernault, 2000), prophetic or eschatological universes, highly localized myths that 'capture' the allegiances of large social bodies, or daily reinvented routines that have little link to anything (DeBoeck, 2003).

This prolongation and remaking of youth is set in a daily life in urban Africa that has been frequently characterized as a rather tedious routine of incessant improvisation required to make ends meet in contexts offering little formal employment, economic production or political stability (Monga, 1996; Ferguson, 1999; Baker, 2000). Many residents carve out and tenaciously hold onto a specific niche of economic activity. But massive overcrowding of petty trade, which is the most relied upon source of income, demands constant adjustments in the search for cheaper inputs, customers and places of sale (King, 1996; Robertson, 1997; Tripp, 1997; Meagher, 2001). As education, health and other social services become increasingly expensive to obtain, intricate decisions are made as to just who within households will be schooled or treated (Economic Commission for Africa, 1999; Bryceson, 2002). The labor intensity of daily provisioning and household management consumes large amounts of time from most household members. Just because rice could be bought at a specific price in a given market yesterday does not mean that it can today. For households where incremental margins in the prices of what is bought and sold are crucial, wide territories of the city are often

canvassed in search of the best prices for food, repairs and materials (Bangura, 1994; Tacoli, 2002).

What ensues is a highly competitive game for minimal advantage in urban cultures infused with the active memories of strong mutuality and social support. Daily life thus also entails the continuous elaboration of practices through which individuals and households maintain some equilibrium between an almost parasitical use of fellow residents, kin, neighbors and colleagues — whereby they attempt to insert themselves into the events and activities of others — and the generosity required for maintaining viable reciprocities within extended family and neighborhood networks (Berry, 1997; Geschiere, 1997; Hibou, 1999; Kelsall, 2000; Chukwuezi, 2001; Masquelier, 2001). This orientation goes beyond any simple engineering of mutual indebtedness in gift relations, although this is an element of the overall picture. In some African cities, such as those not substantially affected by the demographic consequences of civil conflict or HIV/AIDS, households are often increasing in size, due to their absorption of family members from rural areas or other parts of the city, or in pursuit of a more viable economic position by engaging in more diverse activities simultaneously (Kanji, 1995; Bayat, 1997; Harts-Broekhuis, 1997; Andersson, 2001). In these situations, a sense of solidarity must be achieved when there are sometimes simply not enough resources to go around.

At the same time, the challenge for individuals is how to sufficiently extricate themselves from household responsibilities, perspectives and norms so as to keep themselves open to new alliances, sources of information and opportunities. Not only do individual residents circulate amongst each other, but the very meanings of their various points of anchorage — household, networks and livelihoods — must perform a kind of circulation as well. It is often unclear just who has the right and ability to do what. Once relied-upon forms of authority are increasingly unable to put their stamp on how daily life is to be enacted and understood. As a result, there is a pervasive anxiety on the part of urban residents as to who they can live and work with, who they can talk to and what kind of collective future they can anticipate (Lund, 2001; Roitman, 1998; 2003).

In such conditions, there is a tendency to retreat into specific particularisms — i.e. ethnopolitical groupings, reinvented traditions, or heavily defended local territories. But as African cities continue to grow and continue to be shared by residents from different walks of life, specific methods are forged that enable such ethnopolitical groupings to maintain parallel social spaces. These spaces enable them to keep each other in some kind of consideration, keep open the possibilities of some kind of common future. In part, this occurs through a circulation of meanings, styles, vantage points, experiences, ways of talking — tried on and discarded, and perhaps retried again. These elements thus come to belong to no one, even though strong claims can be made on them by particular groups at any given time (Biaya, 2001). However pursued, there are a wide range of efforts undertaken on the part of urban residents to attempt to insinuate themselves into the lives of others, to become some part of their ‘stories’, networks and activities, without becoming too obligated, too dependent or tied down.

The multifaceted dimensions of circulation

I stated earlier that the notion of circulation that is used in this discussion refers to practices that enable residents to navigate and engage diverse spaces, actors, sensibilities and activities across the city in its entirety, or at least across domains larger than the quarters where residents work and/or live. This circulation is not just the action of physical movement, but entails several facets, which I outline below.

It is true that large numbers of urban youth in Douala act at a loss, spending their days in video clubs, gambling halls, bars and street corners. They seem to never move. But there are sensibilities on the part of increasing numbers of youth that are at least capturing the imagination, as well being translated into various actions. Youth, in

different ways, have for a long time attempted to push African urban life into new directions (Diouf, 1996; El-Kenz, 1996; Ly 1988; Marks, 2001). But especially now, youth face marked urgency to figure out a workable place in the world and undermine the otherwise traumatic or deleterious connotations of enforced marginality. This is fostered in part by taking on, one might even say circulating through, various and often discrepant stances, styles, living arrangements and self-assumptions. There is also the popular practice of continuously renaming urban places, a practice which signals their availability to changing uses and meanings. As youth in Douala frequently remark, the ability to 'become someone' is directly linked to the ability to 'move around', and so circulation is also about acquiring a facility to operate everywhere, and to not be known as a specific son or daughter of a specific family coming from a specific place with specific ethnic origins and professions. On the other hand, the parochialism of these former social categories can be remade in new ways, as is the case in many African cities where various forms of youth militancy have mushroomed, as has occurred in Abidjan.

The objective of such militancy is not to engage in either a politics of advocacy or control; there is little interest in taking over specific territories or inducing the provision of better urban services. For what is meant by 'education', 'youth' or 'labor' is no longer evident; these notions are no longer integral enclosures that embody specific anticipations and securities (Honwana and DeBoek, 2004). The modernity of cities elaborated through labor specialization, sectored institutional landscapes and charted trajectories of accomplishment has largely dissipated in many African cities, as time is only tentatively punctuated, either in terms of work and non-work, youth and adulthood, night and day.

Disrespect for a confined sense of things, therefore, becomes a key element of self-fashioning. This is reflected in the widespread theft and distribution of false documents, paychecks, waybills, licenses, that do not so much become objects of value in their own right but which can be displayed and commandeered to prove certain legitimacy, status and, most importantly, to access visas, opportunities and contacts. While the trappings of wealth may be incessantly hidden, 'finds' of all kinds — t-shirts with obscure insignias, computer parts, packaging, wires and even body parts — are displayed. They are displayed not simply in the event that, for example, another person needs something to fix a car or a radio or to make a pirate electrical connection. More importantly, they are displayed in order to demonstrate that something took place, something out of the ordinary, something on which a story can be based, and where these stories can lead to a specific introduction to new actors, new stories.

Many times I have found myself in shacks along swampy creeks and in the vast estates of the elite at all hours gathered with a motley bunch of youth, all of whom do not really know each other, but who have converged on these places following diffuse leads or instructions. All are either returning favors, attending a purported social event, delivering goods or money, or simply waiting on someone who supposedly has a job or connection. Sometimes these gatherings take on a mystical or quasi-religious character. At other times, there are substantial levels of tension and fear, and still others, the strangeness of the gathering puts everyone at a remarkable ease — all of which are inexplicable in terms of the event or location itself, or the characteristics of those gathered.

To circulate through the city means not only to transverse it as a geographical domain, as a series of distinct quarters, institutions and times. It also connotes a set of tactics that attempt to elide a range of political controls whose purveyors are often content to maintain youth in a state of developmental suspension so as to better manipulate them (see, for example, Human Rights Watch, 2002). So, an additional dimension of circulation for the many youth of Douala is the ability to pass through and under the often merely feigned efforts and then usually arbitrary applications of political power to define how the city is to be organized and used. Conversely, it also specifies a sense of regularity within a highly uncertain environment, where it is not clear what is likely

to ensue from the usual prescriptions regarding commitments to particular ethical, livelihood and social welfare practices. Douala is replete with complex codes of conduct applied to situations that youth often describe as 'chasing those who owe them money, running from those whose money they have stolen'.

Again, such efforts do not constitute a refusal of participation in a larger world largely defined by Western notions of consumerism and efficacy. Rather, it is the working out of particular engagements where any apparent evidence of these youths' marginality from these notions can at least be made ambiguous, if not denied. In other words, this is a matter where the power in the diffusion of commodities, ideas and identities rests as much with the particular characteristics of reception as to their purveyance (Weiss, 2001; Nyamjoh and Page, 2002). Similarly, it can also be argued that these emerging forms of urban circulation constitute the further alignment of urban realities to regionalized and networked configurations of economic transaction. These configurations, which Nordstrom (2003) calls extra-state, shadow sovereigns intersect the formal and informal, legal and illegal, and operate with their own ethical frameworks, geographies, commodity chains and production practices (Gore and Pretten, 2003; Jung, 2003).

It can even be argued that such circulation constitutes an internalization within the city of specific practices of movement that have long predominated social reproduction across swathes of largely rural cultural clusters in various African subregions. Although we tend to understand movement as performed by seemingly disconnected individuals uprooted from home and stable places of belonging, disconnected individuals have constituted a persistent and deep-seated concern for many African societies. Therefore, if efforts to make stable social and institutional lives within the confines of specific territories or places is either materially not viable or generates unacceptable levels of internecine conflict or social stress, then local institutions will be flexibly shaped to incorporate shifting social compositions (Amselle, 1999).

As Mariam, the young teacher, clearly stated in the opening excerpt, localities are constantly trying to come up with imaginative ways of making relations among people with varying degrees of prior connection with each other, knowing that people are always coming and going. But instead of coming up with a set of consistent norms and rules by which those incorporated should abide, localities — be they villages, towns, urban neighborhoods — try to find norms which best fit the particular hodgepodge of kin, strangers, passers-by, neighbors that they have on hand. Here, a sense of stability is forged from the very instability of the compositions and relations of those institutions that try to provide a platform for social connectedness and collaboration (Ferme, 2001).

To 'place' individuals, then, does not mean to incorporate them as permanent members of a specific locality, but rather orient the construction of 'locality' to an ability to continuously, if only temporarily, root specific persons to a series of collaborations and obligations. Not only do social institutions accommodate themselves to such assumed and potential mobility, they also become drivers of it — as the principles and terms of affiliation and cooperation are more heterogeneous and contingent (Donnelly-Roark *et al.*, 2001).

In the rest of this discussion, I will examine several small examples of how a capacity to circulate — in the sense of engaging the heterogeneity of the city — is being elaborated by some particular groups of youth in Douala. The material is based on ethnographic work completed over the past three years with a cultural center, Doual'art, which works intensely with youth development committees in the neighborhoods of Bessengué Akwa, Oyok Nylon, New Bell Nganguè and Bapenda Omnisport. Concretely, this has entailed working with a development committee in each quarter, and a youth subcommittee attached to it on specific programs of sanitation, job creation and local governance. Each youth committee organized a series of focus groups which met 10 times for discussions on the problems, aspirations and practices of the youth predominant in the quarters. A total of 10 focus groups — two in each neighborhood — were organized with roughly 25 participants in each group. The information

generated here comes primarily from these focus group discussions, as well as with youth who were part of the social networks of those participating in the focus groups.

In this discussion, my objective is to begin to understand the politics inherent in the interlocking potentials and constraints produced by efforts to secure immediate tactical leverage and operating space within an urban field dominated by the application of arbitrary and patrimonial power. The question is how to keep possibilities open, and how a sense of justice and egalitarianism can be affirmed in an urban context where the public is increasingly described by local residents as a kind of phantasm, and where public institutions exert influence through finding ways of operating outside of established norms and rules.

Douala and the problems of circulation

The basic infrastructure of Douala is notorious for its state of disrepair, with extensive flooding during the long rainy season, quarters cut off from main arteries, the vast port barely articulated to transport corridors, and so forth. This state of disrepair is frequently cited as a metaphor for the city's lack of social and political integration, and the way in which its freewheeling entrepreneurial culture fragments the city into disparate domains. These domains are then viewed as unwilling and unable to assume some kind of collective responsibility for improving life beyond an entrenched insularity.

Indeed, Douala is a patchwork of settlements. During Douala's early history, different social groups converged upon it, forging varying articulations to different colonial powers and specializing in markedly different economic and cultural orientations to a broader external world. A multiplicity of social and economic infrastructure ensued, reflecting various investments in international trade, political competition, emigration and the consolidation of ethnic neighborhoods (Clignet and Jordan, 1971).

Because Douala lacks the history of being a capital, the relative absence of political institutions and a dependency on public employment means important instruments of urban socialization are absent, i.e. domains around which social collaboration and solidarity can be fostered. Historically, cadres of civil servants, public sector unions and networks of local authority, forged in relationship to negotiating positions in and resources from the state, have played a critical role in fostering a sense of social cohesion in many African cities. As the burden of survival in Douala is much more incumbent upon individuals and households, there is a greater valuation on the autonomy of operations rather than on fostering social interdependency (Warnier, 1993).

While urban households may be adept at securing livelihood and opportunity, the largely ad hoc manner in which this is pursued means, as indicated earlier, that there are massive problems with critical urban functions, such as transport across the city, drainage, refuse collection and security. At the same time, it is difficult to foresee how applicable the array of local solutions often effective as stopgap measures in many other African cities with more substantive histories of social cooperation would be in Douala. So the city combines heightened ingenuity, a high degree of urbanization of behavior and social outlook, a largely inadequate institutional framework for regulating urban processes, and a highly contentious relationship to the political regime in power — all dynamics which make innovative urban development planning both necessary and difficult (Njoh, 1998).

Douala experiences clear problems of transport and mobility. Conventional wisdom says that the urban economy could be so much more dynamic if only the roads were not so bad, if only it had decent infrastructure. This is a problem that the national and municipal authorities, in collaboration with sizeable amounts of World Bank financing, are attempting to rectify by rebuilding much of the city's infrastructure. At the same time, as is the case for many past and present political regimes, there is a pervasive wariness about the city, about the circulation of residents, knowledge, speech, initiatives and information. For such circulation attenuates the dependency on the state's traditional

role as a definer of spaces, the consolidator of perspective, and thus legibility — reflected in zoning regulations, land use rules, cadastrals, and so forth.

The state's limited abilities and financial means, as well as its diminished limited interest in deploying such powers of definition, have increasingly reoriented the exercise of power to trying to make residents believe that urban circulation counts for little. It attempts to act as if the whirls of activity — of students passing through classrooms, workers through offices and streets, residents through neighborhoods, buyers and sellers through markets — are not, in the end, productive of people's individual everyday lives, as if they are not a threat.

In Cameroon, a single party, Rassemblement Démocratique du Peuple Camerounais, has dominated political life in the 44 years since independence, with the current head of state, Paul Biya, in power since 1982. As the Cameroonian intellectual, Achille Mbembe, has frequently stated in numerous press articles, the key to the survival of the state has been its inertia — the capacity to play off sectors, regions, ethnicities, ministries and actors against each other so that independent initiative is tempered while, at the same time, enabling a wide range of diverse people to feel that they are included in the political game, a game that always includes the prospect of some form of personal enrichment.

Part of this inertia, according to Mbembe (2001) is that the state has been able to penetrate into the very intimacy of everyday life. It does so by acting as if it is in charge of a kind of invisible circulation. In other words, that it possesses a capacity to bring the mundane, traceable activities, contexts and relations re-launched on a daily basis by residents to seemingly impossible intersections with unseen forces, unknown lives, distant places, and a whole range of unspeakable occurrences (Takougang and Krieger, 1998).

The state has managed to convince many that it rules by sorcery, that it is able to control through deploying invisible powers that take what is discernible to residents and connect it to unknown events, persons and situations (Rowlands and Warnier, 1988; Geschiere, 1997; Malaquais, 2001). Thus, the state plays on a basic fear incumbent in urban life. That is, residents who navigate the city can never be sure how their own existence may be implicated in the narratives of others. They can never be sure whether their immediate positions and actions inadvertently place them in some 'line of fire' — on a trajectory of some conveyance capable of harming them. As the possibilities of mediation diminish — i.e. the possibilities to convert differences of intensity, of disorder, into clearly defined sets of locations, corresponding entities and fields of reliable interpretation — the sense of potential harm increases. The very situation that many urban residents aspire to — i.e. a capacity to traverse the city, to get involved in a diversity of actions, networks and stories — can be, at the same time, turned around as a kind of threat — where people have no clear sense of just how involved they may actually be in the lives of others they don't know and are unable to witness what they are doing or what they about.

Benskineurs

In the early 1990s, the political opposition, the Front Social Démocratique, attempted to temporarily shut down Douala as part of an effort to press for greater democratization. During this campaign, '*les villes mortes*', efforts were made to close all businesses and shut down the transportation system. Organizers of the campaign, however, still needed to get around, and motorbikes were used to replace the taxis and buses that were being shut down. Following the end of the campaign, this form of motorbike transport became increasingly popular as the city's population grew and spread out across terrains that were impossible to navigate with other vehicles.

Presently, it is estimated that there are about 35,000 *benskineurs*, as the motorbike drivers are called, which cover the bulk of Douala's transportation needs. These drivers

are predominantly young men between 18 and 35 years of age. The majority come from the ethnic Bamileke groups, whose origins are rooted in the region to the north of the city. While the Bamileke are considered to be the economic power of the city, the indigenes of Douala — the Sawa and the Duala — continue to largely view them as strangers. Mostly kept out of the civil service and many formal organized private sectors, young Bamileke men are forced to pursue various commercial activities, of which the consolidation of this transport sector has been a key one.

Unlike other modalities of transport, benskineurs largely fall outside any institutionalized regulatory system. They are compelled to pay annual insurance fees, but otherwise are unlicensed, and thus vulnerable to the incessant harassment of police. Again, as the majority of benskineurs are Bamileke, who perceive themselves as largely marginalized from the institutional life of the country despite, or perhaps because of, their reputation for economic dynamism, their domination of transport always borders on becoming a display of political possibilities. Bamileke have generally not supported the ruling party. The majority of benskineurs not only share a common ethnic identity, they largely reside in the city's densest neighborhoods of Bapenda and Makepe, long singled out as targets of the state's active repression and indifference.

In the early morning hours of 10 July 2003 near the major market at Nkololoun, a benskineur, age 19, was reportedly killed from a blow to the head during an altercation with police. Several other deaths occurred in the immediate aftermath of this struggle. Within hours, after word of the incident spread like wildfire, the entire city was shut down, with hundreds of barricades set up using commandeered vehicles, equipment being used in the massive road repair project, and various corner stalls used for cell phone calls and lottery sales. While many youth who were not benskineurs were quick to join in the escalating mayhem, benskineurs were also seen in strenuous efforts to curtail looting and other actions not focused on simply shutting down the roads. Bridges, roundabouts, major axis routes, underpasses and lateral arteries were all quickly cut, significantly delaying the possibilities for state security organs to provide reinforcements and allowing benskineurs to burn down several police stations, as well as ferry significant numbers of their supporters to key strategic locations.

Without any centralized command operation, the speed through which the dispersion of blockades was accomplished indicated a remarkable proficiency in both disseminating information and ensuring a comprehensive coverage of the entire urban area. At key intersections one could witness the convergence of scores of benskineurs that then would immediately fan out in different directions, accumulating additional numbers along the way.

During the following days, many press articles speculated about what the events of 10th July meant, and particularly focused on why it seemed that the city allowed itself to so readily be shut down. If the materials from the various focus groups can be seen as representative of a certain collective mood, it seems that many residents in Douala have concluded that their activities count for little. The potential resourcefulness of people moving back and forth, working together, socializing, trying on new roles and activities has largely been subsumed as a productive way of life to the more opaque machinations of a state posing as the coordinator of an overarching sorcery. Instead of anticipating the development and transformation of lives within the city, the city is used as a platform to actualize some form of escape. With all of its possibilities, more and more people have concluded that there is no possibility to remain at home. Every participant in the 10 focus groups reported having an immediate family member living outside of Cameroon, and almost all of the participants indicated that they were presently exploring concrete possibilities to leave as well.

Although the benskineurs' actions to bring the city's transport to a halt lasted a mere eight hours before subsiding, it reiterated, almost by default, the extent to which circulation is at the heart of urban life. By concretely shutting down the possibility of circulation, benskineurs restore to visibility its importance. Of course, many observers were interested in how the benskineurs could so quickly mobilize their numbers to

engage the substantial expanses of the city as a whole. While it would be important no doubt to know more precisely the logics of self-organization deployed, what interests me here is what the benskineurs themselves say about their practices, and particularly the quotidian procedures and orientations that accrue to provide them some capacity to act as 'municipal-wide' actors.

In fact, many benskineurs I spoke with, and particularly those who occupied a small office in Akwa that acted as an interlocutor in dealings with the press and various government officials, indicated that this demonstration of 10th July was really only incidental to a larger objective of building commercial networks of greater scale from among the hundreds of small initiatives being undertaken by benskineurs in addition to their transport function — for example, initiatives such as linking small workshops making school uniforms to those photocopying school curricular materials to those providing inexpensive lunches to school pupils.

When queried about acquiring a capacity to circulate across the city and to articulate bodies, events, actions and resources — whether it be in anger over an attack in the market or aspirations of greater economic power — many benskineurs pointed out that it was important to pay attention to how they eat. While meals are frequently taken at home and in each other's company, there is also a deliberate practice on the part of the individual benskineur to eat in a new place, with a new audience and in a new neighborhood. Wherever one is and whatever one is doing, one must stop to eat, and this context of eating in public, of sitting down with others in the thousands of make-shift restaurants across the city, conversations are not only overheard, but trajectories into different lives are also potentially opened up. As my benskineur informants would indicate, this is not only about witnessing the *terroir*, but of continuing to 'steer the roads' — i.e. to direct conversation between others in particular directions, suggest possible entry points among those sitting to take a meal into each other's dilemmas, stories or activities.

Of course, those who stop to eat must be careful about what they say. Often they may share their food, but they will make sure to say nothing to give themselves away. Sitting down to eat is then engineered with a complex toolbox of declensions, fragmented words, smirks and grunts, tongue clicks and glottals. But at the same time, my informants would say that the event of strangers eating with each other is also an opportunity to 'get carried away'. Unlike meals with households, there is no discussion about daily earnings and obligations, of responsibilities met or unfulfilled. They therefore try to use a battery of jokes, jousting and stories to get those hurriedly working their way through the food to make a comment about what someone else has just said, or to offer some advice or information.

One benskineur described a recent meal where there was a captain who has just slept with the 15-year-old daughter of his commanding officer in a bleak backstreet hotel, a university student who has packed a small bag and is meeting a truck that will deliver him across the first of many borders that lie ahead, a director of a women's marketing group faced with a choice of taking a small grant from a European country to send her daughter to university in France, a thief who worried that his father would identify him as the one who held up his office a few hours before, and the director of the recently opened stock exchange who was delivering a crate of chickens to the aunt who has cooked at this location for four decades — all sitting in an unpredictable animation, each at the cusp of each other's trajectories, somehow ready to move and be moved.

At the smallest of levels, benskineurs were elaborating a particular political practice using the sheer event of eating as a site of potential circulation, of knowing the larger city better, of trying to provoke people from different walks of life to make some uncertain, unanticipated connections with each other; trying to operate outside the accustomed discursive sites of sociality, of family and neighborhood conviviality. Although these latter continue to exist and remain important, benskineurs are clearly indicating a need to exceed these familiar domains and routines.

Remasking power and the politics of opportunity

In order to understand these practices of the benskineurs in the context of an apparent political gridlock, one has to consider that the issue of what things look like, what can be seen and brought into view with what connotation becomes a key focus of urban politics. For, who can do what with whom, under what circumstances, and in what ways remains an issue fraught with conflict.

Given these concerns, social collaboration may often require heightened levels of invisibility or of the mundane in order to be viable. The basis of such collaborations can sometimes be the invocation of identities that are seemingly limiting and clear, but which are used in 'wrong' ways, thus interrupting their clarity and opening them up to the intersection and cooperation of previously discordant features or tendencies. For example, certain networks, syndicates or associations may be self-deemed as 'Muslim' or 'Bamileke' — giving them a certain cohesion and clarity — but where participation and scope are not at all limited to these designations.

Accordingly, investment is made in configuring a particular kind of visibility to the social field, which then allows a space of operation for actions that everyone may know are taking place without them having to be recognized in a direct visual way. For if such clarity is produced, it may compel a spiraling need to make assessments about which kind of people get to have what kinds of rights, resources and opportunities as compared with others.

Households must also strike some balance between the economic support they provide to household members and the potentially debilitating conflicts that can ensue from increased overdependency as specific set incomes must support more people. Therefore, a seemingly laissez-faire attitude often now prevails, where household members must pay their own way, engage in some kind of activity, however minimal, so as to consolidate the sense that all household members can and do make a contribution to the survival of the household. This ensures its capacity to operate as a collective unit and thus maintain a semblance of authority to direct the behaviors of its individual members. Such an orientation is also popularly considered as a way of reducing the vulnerability of the household to sorceral forces considered particularly vicious when individual behavior cannot be adequately domesticated and integrated into a coherent household vision. But such a laissez-faire practice is also viewed as an enormous risk, as familial togetherness and support is made the object of conscious tactical maneuvers rather than tacit understanding.

At the same time, residents of Douala are often compelled to engage in a game of pretense in the face of the arbitrary application of state power. This power has become more extensive through the ability of the state to appropriate the formal decentralization of governance which has taken place during the past decade (Forje, 1999). As popularly understood, the repressive character of the state does not operate by telling residents of the city what to do and forcing them directly to do it. Rather, the local machinery to the ruling party singles out specific persons, particularly the youth, for reprimand or marginalization for not having acted in a specific manner. The reasons are varied. A person could be singled out for not attending a local meeting, not having made a specific monetary contribution to a certain fund, for having refused an appointment to a local position, such as block party captain or local market chief, or not having informed officials of potentially criminal or subversive actions on the part of neighbors.

Despite the complete disillusionment with politics and a profound disdain for the state and ruling party, what ensues is a daily orchestrated performance, not only of quiescence, but active support for the party machinery, which largely displays itself through a host of ceremonial functions. This party machinery does little that has any substantive economic or social impact on people's lives through what it actually provides or does. Yet, it sets up a stage for witnessing and scrutinizing, and the public performances it elicits are the critical factor in determining who has access to specific

opportunities of formal employment, servicing, advancement and approvals for self-made enterprises, buildings and so forth.

On the surface then, there is little room for local initiatives and organizing outside of this game. As the rules and consequences are not clear, it is difficult for residents to anticipate what is likely to happen to them if they take particular steps in terms of pursuing specific objectives. On the one hand, constitutionally enshrined democratic principles in Cameroon accord a wide range of freedoms for people to act, organize and form associations of all kinds. Still, the ruling power has been the only organized force capable of operating proficiently within the new decentralization regimes. But without the resources sufficient to really make its mark, it is forced to make its presence known as a disruptive force, a source of blockage, confusion and interruption.

For example, in very obvious ways, uninvited party officials are seen carrying bags of money in the middle of the night to households seemingly picked out randomly, so that neighbors conclude that some kind of pay-off is being made. Residents sometimes find their names in local newspapers identified as having been appointed to some local party committee, even when they know nothing about it. There are few opportunities for denials. Residents thus continuously face distrust amongst themselves in everyday lives already burdened with the demands of trying to make ends meet.

On the other hand, the profusion of these performances of compliance is exaggerated, taking on an almost baroque quality so that the demonstrated compliance becomes a local communication system allowing for certain reciprocities and complicities among local residents to take place. For example, on certain days of party celebrations, residents are 'encouraged' to wear black. Regardless of the fact that 'black is black', there is a common game in Bapenda Omnisport, one of the fiercest anti-government quarters in all of Cameroon, where the youth compete with each other over whose outfit is the blackest. This is a game which sets in motion extensive discussions about which company makes the blackest dyes. The discussions might also focus on the relative eyesight of local party officials, the sexual proclivities that may affect their eyesight, about the latest shipment of dark glasses coming from China that might be presented to party officials. Unofficial delegations are sent to other quarters to assess the nature of 'local darkness' existing there.

Under the cover of this 'darkness', and in pursuit of the perfect conformity to party dictates, extensive discussions take place about the tastes and weaknesses of a wide range of local characters, how they can be manipulated, seduced, diverted, and how youth can, however momentarily, work together towards these ends. All of these exchanges, in which wide-ranging information about many topics is shared and debated, are conducted in the idiom of a dedication to the perfect performance of compliance. This is a game of leakages, slips, indirectness, where no one has to commit themselves to anything irregular but where a horizon of other possibilities is momentarily visible, and where the belief in the fundamental absurdity of state power is renewed, particularly as a dynamic of mutual captivity.

Re-envisioning the invisible

At times, youth may even simulate the mysterious circulation that the state itself simulates. Here again, the issue is what is visible or not; what can be brought into view, and what kinds of sight lines can provoke specific collaborations whose meaning and objectives may not be clear. Let us take another example from the practice of eating. On 20 February 2000, President Paul Biya established Operation Command as a means of rectifying the alarming increase in violent crime taking place in Douala. At first, residents across the city widely applauded this military operation, as they had become increasingly terrified of venturing anywhere in public, even during daylight hours. It was common for people from all walks of life and in all quarters to tell stories of being held up at work, on the street, or in their homes. Equipped with vast powers of search

and seizure, as well as arbitrary detention, Operation Command quickly zeroed in on a vast network of warehouses harboring stolen goods, as well as illicit acquisitions of cars, houses and consumer goods.

As the net widened, almost everyone came under greater suspicion. During raids on homes, if the residents were unable to immediately provide receipts for items like televisions or refrigerators, they would be immediately confiscated. Increasingly, the Operation Command appeared to the residents of Douala as organized military theft. There were also reports about large-scale extrajudicial killings, of detainees disappearing from prisons. Bodies of suspected criminals were often found in the streets with signs of torture and bullet wounds.

On 23 January 2001, nine youths from the Bapenda quarter were picked up after a neighbor had reported them as having stolen a gas canister. They were taken to a police station in Bonanjo, on the other side of the city, where they were allowed to visit their families and correspond with them, although they reported being physically tortured. On 28 January they were transferred to an Operation Command post whereupon all communication from them stopped. The parents of the children were unable to find out any information as to the location of their children. Following the disappearance of the *Bapenda Nine*, Douala witnessed the first in a series of marches and demonstrations which were brutally halted by the police.[1]

During this time there were many reputed sightings of the disappeared, usually at night and usually in quarters considered highly dangerous. The sightings would describe the boys as beaten and emaciated, but desperate to hide from the expected onslaught of Operation Command from whom they inexplicably slipped. There was widespread concern that if there were any validity to these sightings, that all should be done to keep the boys alive as testimonials to the thousands of others that it was widely believed the military had killed.

It is common practice in Douala to take in young girls from the rural areas as unpaid domestic servants. Many rural households can no longer provide for their children and so either throw them out of the home or sell them to intermediaries. These girls remain the 'property' of the households they work for and are usually badly mistreated and have little freedom of mobility. As Marc Etaha, Frederic Ngouffo, Chatry Kuete, Eric Chia, Jean Roger Tchiwan, Charles Kouatou, Chia Effician, Elysee Kouatou and Fabrice Kuate — *the Bapenda Nine* — served as a kind of 'last straw' for the public patience with the Operation Command, there was an uneasy mixture of guilt, anger, impotence and mysticism wrapped up in the larger public response to their disappearance.

Whether people actually believed in the reputed sightings of the disappeared or not, in some quarters of the city, a ritual developed where efforts were made to feed the disappeared. Because the sightings were most frequently in very dangerous parts of the city, households would send their girl domestics, often great distances, to deliver food. From one sighting to the next, from one part of the city to the other, these girls risked their own disappearance on these feeding expeditions. In the process, however, they crossed Douala at night in ways that were, at the time, without precedent. Sometimes they would meet up with other girls they had met on previous journeys and share what they had seen, as well as embellish stories and invent new ones. The danger entailed was secondary to the flush of this sudden and usually daily freedom, for soon they would meet up in particular spots and go where they wanted, never mind whether it corresponded with the destination they were instructed to seek out.

They would leave ciphers and other marks on cars and household walls, on store windows and security grates, or pile up empty pots and pans at key intersections. They would then tell their respective employers that the disappeared were attempting to leave messages, to communicate with the residents of the city about what was really taking place. Word spread that these girls had become interlocutors between the disappeared and the city and not merely deliverers of food. Their capacities were greatly inflated in

1 Taken from the reports of Christian Action Against Torture, Douala, 3 March 2001.

a city where the reputations of those able to navigate the world of the night were already inflated. As a result, many of the girls started being sought out by various officials, businesspersons, and even top personnel of the Operation Command itself. They made these visits not so much for direct information about the disappeared or to interpret their supposed conveyances. Rather, they wanted interpretations for their dreams, advice on new ventures, insights on the wheeling and dealing of colleagues and competitors.

Girls of 13, who not long before went hungry in rural areas experiencing economic and social decline, and who were bought and sold to fetch water for perhaps the rest of their lives, now suddenly found 10,000 CFA notes pressed in their hands, and started demanding more. Although I never saw her, stories spread about how one of the girls, Sally, would hold court by the pool at the Meridien Hotel, cellphone in hand with an entourage of bodyguards. Whether this story was true or not, I was taken to a four-story building in Bonapriso — a middle-class enclave in Douala — whose occupants were all young girls.

Concluding note

The large number of youth with 'irregular' lives in Douala probably know that they cannot go it alone, but who exactly to go with and how is another matter. There is always much imagination and discussion of the future. But in many of the workshops and discussions I run with children and youth across the city's many neighborhoods, there is also a sense that everything has to be taken in now, that things don't last, that there is nothing in the present that will really constitute a platform on which the future can be planned for or enacted. As Mariam indicates at the beginning, there is a reluctance to really put collective power to work since so many possible futures might ensue. As Jean-Paul also says, in one of the opening excerpts, the new rules will stem from new migrations. So it often seems as if the boundary between the actual and the possible is effaced, so that events which never transpired, but perhaps could have, are remembered as if they are about to reappear in the present, as if some normal reoccurrence. The benskineur one-day shutdown, the search for the perfect blackness, the 'complicity' between the 'disappeared' and the house girls — all point to a repositioning to call upon possibilities that may have been there all along, in, as Jean-Paul says, this incessant effort to make different worlds. It is a repositioning that releases a multiplicity of active forces to be in play, rather than assigned to reiterate existing values and differentials.

New trajectories of urban mobility and mobilization are taking place in the interstices of complex urban politics. Distinct groups and capacities are provisionally assembled into surprising, yet often dynamic, intersections outside of any formal opportunity the city presents for the interaction of diverse identities and situations. But, across urban Africa, there is a persistent tension as to what is possible to do within the city and the appropriate forms of social connections through which such possibilities can be pursued. Often the only possibilities entail heightened levels of violence, thuggery and trade in illegal commodities.

Increasingly, youth are trying to find more effective ways of living in their cities, of being able to finally put 'youth' behind them and consolidate the opportunities and resources to build families, careers and real lives of their own. As youth begin to operate outside of the conventional rubrics for how to achieve, accumulate and exert influence — conventional rubrics that for the most part do not work for them anyway — rules for conduct and for managing social relationships, although provisionally formed and applied, are not always clear or applicable across the city. As such, there can be intensifying contestation as to what kinds of social modalities and identities legitimately are able to mobilize resources and people's energies. While these contestations can be potentially productive, they can also bog residents down and keep them from being opportunistic and flexible. This is because what youth in Douala seem to have on their minds is the question of how to reach a 'larger world' of operations and how they can

make better lives. What happens within the domain of the city itself that allows urban actors, often highly rooted in specific places and ascription to operate outside these confines? How are apparent realities of social coherence and cohesion maintained, while opportunities that would seemingly require behaviors and attitudes antithetical to the sustainability of such cohesion are pursued?

While these questions are often and should be at the heart of urban governance and development policy frameworks and practices, it is important to have some understanding of the various, usually small ways, in which particular actors, in this case youth, attempt to work them out.

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