

## **Inside Electoral Democracy; Gift-giving and Flaunting in Political Campaigning in Cameroon**

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### **About the author:**

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on political electoral campaigning in a given town in Cameroon. The intention is to bring about a deeper understanding of the nature of “democracy” and its implications for political power sharing and accountability in a given locality in Africa. Based on extensive field research, interviews and participative observation the empirical data gathered are analysed with references to recent academic approaches on democratic developments in Africa. The article discusses concrete ways politicians use to convince potential voters to vote for their party in relation to theories of gift-giving and symbolic capital.

**Key words:** Africa, Cameroon, Ngaoundere, Politics, Democracy, Elections

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## **Inside Electoral Democracy: Gift-giving and Flaunting in Political Campaigning in Cameroon**

In 1989 only nine of Africa's 52 states had multi-party constitutions; by 1999, 45 did (Thomson, [2000] 2002: 215). While political policy statements throughout the western world applauded this change in the beginning, contemporary academic works were more divided on what it actually meant.<sup>1</sup>

The 1990s, Africa's "democratisation decade," produced a variety of results. Mauritius and Mali are now hailed as the defenders of democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Cameroon are classified as countries holding "free and fair" elections by international observers, but not by scholars. International NGOs dealing with human rights and democracy, like Freedom House, argue that DRC and Cameroon are unfree and undemocratic (Freedom House, 2009).

Researchers argue that in order to understand the nature of electoral democracy and its implications for political power sharing and accountability in Africa, one has to study local elections (see e.g. Ndegwa, 2001, Williams, 2004, Harbeson, 2008). There are few systematic studies of informal politics in African campaigns (Erdmann et al., 2007). In this article I will make a contribution to this limited researched area by focusing on electoral campaigning in Ngaoundéré, a town in northern Cameroon. Field research was conducted before, during and after the 1996 municipal elections and used as part of my dissertation *The Historical Construction of a Political Culture in Ngaoundere* (Hansen, 2000). However, in the intervening decade between the

fieldwork and the writing of this article, new approaches to discuss democracy and elections in Africa have emerged in the academic literature. Through a thick description of the first local election in Cameroon after multi-partyism was reinstated in late 1990 I examine the connotations and character of electoral democracy in one locality (Ngaoundéré) in an African country (Cameroon).

## **Introduction**

While Cameroon was a one-party state (1966-1990), political competition was reduced to intrigues among rivals for position in the state structure. Private connections to power holders and personal ties with “les Grands” within the state bureaucracy was essential for anyone aspiring to a political position as mayor. Once in position, the officeholder fully controlled the office’s budget and might not make too fine a distinction between the official and personal funds. In that system, the winner took all. Resources were distributed throughout the system through the politician’s network of family, friends and followers. Thus, being on the winning team was of vital importance for prosperity for many people. Because of this personal way of organizing the state, many academics argue that the democratic transition in Africa required the development of the bureaucratic perquisites and a completely new approach to power (Ndegwa, 2001, Schatzberg, 2001, Mbembe, 2004).

However, few if any scholars will argue that this has happened. Ndegwa states that “the dominant mode of elite-mass relations has remained a pernicious patrimonialism” and that the “political parties remain very much the preserves of individual politicians” (Ndegwa, 2001). Schatzberg says that calling political regimes in Africa democratic is “misleading, arbitrary, and premature” (Schatzberg, 2001: 218-19). Ake argues that the authoritarianism of the single-party systems in Africa was reproduced during the 1990s (Ake, 2000: 160-161). Olivier de Sardan argues along

the same lines that “Le passage au multipartisme n’a pas constitué une disparition de la culture politique du parti unique, mais plutôt sa démultiplication” (Olivier de Sardan, 1998). Based on these analyses I will explore electoral democracy in Cameroon.

### **Beyond ideology: Electoral campaigning in Ngaoundéré**

On 21 January 1996, the first municipal multi-party elections in Cameroon took place. Since the end of the one-party system in December 1990, 105 new political parties had emerged. Only 37, however, campaigned in the municipal elections. President Paul Biya’s Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM) was the only political party to run in each municipality in the country.

The names and slogans of the political parties were very similar and voters in Ngaoundéré were unable to match political parties to their slogans.<sup>2</sup> In addition, written political programs did not exist on a municipal level<sup>3</sup> and when interviewed or when giving speeches, all politicians claimed to want improved health facilities, education and orderly marketplaces. They all wanted drinking water and electricity throughout Ngaoundéré. All professed to want to provide paved roads, telephone lines into nearby villages, for the streets to be cleaned<sup>4</sup> and athletic facilities built for adolescents. In short, they wanted “development” and, under the law, most of these were communal responsibilities (Finken, 1996).<sup>5</sup>

Names, slogans and political programs were close to identical among the candidates. To differentiate them by studying their de facto policy implementations was also impossible since Cameroon had been a one-party state for 30 years. Yet, in electoral meetings, CPDM candidates boasted of the important developments reached in Ngaoundéré during their rule, such as the

construction of new schools, kilometres of paved roads and a few new wells. However only by looking closely at the electoral campaign can one understand electoral democracy and thereby political culture in Northern Cameroon. I focus on the two competitors in the municipal elections in Ngaoundéré: the CPDM and the *Union Nationale pour la Démocratie et le Progrès* (UNDP).

I attended all of the electoral meetings during the two weeks of campaigning prior to the elections. I wore CPDM shirts to CPDM meetings and rallies and UNDP shirts to UNDP meetings. I accompanied the UNDP mayoral candidate when he gave speeches and followed *lamido* Issa Maïgari in his car when he rallied for CPDM. At some meetings I had people to translate speeches that were delivered in Mboum and Fulani, yet this analysis is based on speeches that were given in French.<sup>6</sup>

Every afternoon during the two weeks of the campaign, the CPDM and the UNDP held meetings in different quarters of Ngaoundéré. The meetings followed the same pattern. The day before the meetings, the time and place were announced by the local radio station. On the day itself, a crowd assembled in a square, at a crossroad or in a marketplace in a quarter of town.

Many people told me that they would show up for a rally even if they were not interested in politics. These meetings were social events, often the only social event of that *grandeur* in the town for weeks. The political meetings offered free music and dances, and were an excellent opportunity for conversation and laughter. Daily routines were abandoned and a climate of excitement, fun and pleasure prevailed. This made electoral campaigning popular among many people in Ngaoundere.<sup>7</sup> In addition the political meetings offered a place where the attendees might leave with a political gadget, some money, or personal contact with “*un grand*.” The possibility of immediate material benefit or for a possible patron should not be underestimated when explaining why political meetings attracted so many attendees. Chabal and Daloz suggest

that electoral contests in Africa “would have to be understood in terms of material exchange rather than in terms of ideological rationality” (1999: 154).

### **Targeting the ethnic card of potential voters**

#### *Music and dance*

Musicians and dancers entertained the audience until the candidates showed up. Some of the most attractive “free girls” (*femmes libres*) in Ngaoundéré were hired as dancers by both the CPDM and the UNDP. They only changed from the CPDM to UNDP *pagnes* that they wore. Money flowed at these meetings and the girls told me that they could not refuse offers from any of the political parties: For them at least, elections were primarily an opportunity to earn money.

There was, though, an important difference in the parties’ choice of music. The CPDM used Beti music and dances from southern Cameroon, while the UNDP preferred Fulani music and dances from northern Cameroon. The head of CPDM, President Biya, was himself a Beti; the national leader of the UNDP, Bello Bouba Maïgari, was a Fulani. The music was probably used to honour the party-leaders and to attract supporters. The politicians used music to appeal to voters. In this way ethnicity entered the political discourse. However, also musicians performed for both parties. This suggests the importance of disguise and masquerade in Cameroonian politics.

#### *Religion and language*

All parties started their meetings by singing the National Hymn of Cameroon in French. The UNDP meetings followed this with a Muslim prayer in Fulani, while the CPDM meetings offered a Christian prayer in French. However, both parties prayed afterwards to the “other” God in Fulani or French. At some UNDP meetings, it was difficult for the leaders to find a Christian who

could lead the prayer. Nearly the entire audience at UNDP meetings appeared to be Muslim. This did not seem to be a problem at CPDM meetings.<sup>8</sup>

During the 1940s and 1950s, the inhabitants of Ngaoundéré used Fulani as their *lingua franca*. With the arrival of important groups of people from southern Cameroon, especially in the administration and the army, Fulani had to compete with French as the *lingua franca*. The use of French or Fulani in political speeches appealed to specific; Fulani targeted Muslim northerners, French was directed to Christian southerners. Yet, during most of the campaign, both the CPDM candidates and the UNDP candidates used French and Fulani.<sup>9</sup> On the final day of campaigning, when both the CPDM and the UNDP held their meetings in front of their headquarters, the UNDP in Sabon Gari and the CPDM by the stadium, the UNDP made delivered a short appeal in French, the following 1½ hours delivered in Fulani, whereas the CPDM spoke mostly in French.

Politicians are expected to act as spokespersons and torchbearers. According to Chabal and Daloz “the legitimacy of the representatives is [...] a function of the extent to which s(he) embodies the identities and characteristics of the community. It means, inevitably, that a representative must be a member of that community in ethnic as well as, perhaps, religious, regional or professional terms” (Chabal and Daloz, 1999: 55). In this sense, the order in which the Muslim and Christian prayers were pronounced, and the use of French and Fulani in the speeches, revealed the different parties’ appeals to their target populations. When it comes to the use of music, dances, prayers and languages one may observe an ethnic factor. The electoral results clearly connect Fulanis to UNDP and Southerners to CPDM. However, when talking to people and looking at the populace attending the political meetings, ethnicity and religion did not seem to be important at all. For the populace what mattered was to have fun, meet people, dance and listen to music. An added value of the electoral meeting was the possibility of immediate material benefit.

## **Elections as a form of commerce**

An important strategy in winning votes for both the CPDM and also for the UNDP, was the distribution of material benefits to potential voters during the campaign. These material benefits ranged from political merchandise to meat and money. Political merchandise was rare and people did not seem to care about where it originated. A poor CPDM supporter would gladly wear an UNDP T-shirt. Children collected party flags and badges and sold them for small amounts of money or exchanged them for sweets. On a much larger scale was the CPDM's distribution of meat and rice. Very few people I spoke to admitted having received any gifts themselves but most of them knew of somebody who had received.

The obvious goal of this massive distribution of material goods was buy votes for candidates. Yet, what are the rationales for this type of gift giving? The answer is closely connected to Cameroon's neo-patrimonial rule. Candidates for elected office need to cultivate networks of patronage in order to gain votes. Politicians are increasing their legitimacy through patrimonial means (Chabal, 2009: 141). Gift giving is a form of reciprocal exchange "for a recognition of the status and power of the provider" (Chabal and Daloz, 1999: 42). Yet, voters want to know that their leaders are both able to extract resources and willing to share them. Generous gift giving confirms both expectations (Hansen, 2003).

Bourdieu has analysed the practice of gift giving. He has argued that the length of time that elapses between the gift and the counter gift allows two "symmetrical acts to appear as unique and unrelated acts" (Bourdieu, [1994] 1998: 94). The time interval between the gift and the counter-gift distinguishes the exchange of gifts from swapping. It makes both the gift and counter gift gratuitous and generous, and makes "those involved in the exchange work without knowing or planning, to mask or repress the objective truth of their action" (Bourdieu, [1994] 1998: 95).



As in all acts of gift-giving no one can be sure to receive a counter-gift, yet it is considered good manners and *comme-il-faut* to offer a gift in return. The inhabitants of Ngaoundere do not seem to have done what Bourdieu here suggests.

By giving people meat and rice, the elite in Ngaoundere tried to place people under a moral obligation to vote for CPDM. This kind of patron-client relationship required a degree of trust since the patrons had to be generous without knowing if the clients would reciprocate their generosity. In most other situations, the population had to take members of the elite at their word. Over and over again, the elite had deceived the people by saying one thing and doing another, leading to a widespread distrust in politicians and in the political system. During the elections this situation was reversed and citizens had the advantage over the administration and candidates. The population could eat without voting CPDM, since the candidates would never know who had voted for them. I overheard many ambitious local politicians after the elections complaining about people who either voted against their party or did not vote at all. « On vous a donné du vin et de la viande et vous n'etes même pas parti voter. C'est quoi ca ? »<sup>10</sup>

This distribution of food can be understood in other ways than as a possible patron-client relationship. Equally important seems that politics, and thus power, have more to do with personal consumption than with political transformation in Cameroon (Schatzberg, 1993: 446). Jean François Bayart made this assumption known to a wider public in *State in Africa* by subtitling it *The Politics of the Belly* (Bayart, 1993). To consume, or to eat, has a double connotation in Cameroon. In the first sense it means to eat food. Of course it is possible to eat more or less, and more or less well, but it remains a question of consuming food. Whether or not one eats is a question of survival. What one eats is a question of position and power, which leads to the second meaning of consumption (Monga, 2006: 229, 239). Power can be consumed through “eating,” the

power gained depends on what is eaten. Sharing food also “expresses a ritual of belonging to a network of relations” (Monga, 2006: 230).

In Fulani culture, sorcerers are also able to destroy power by eating. They eat “the double” of the person that they intend to injure or harm (Bocquené, 1986: 144, 328-331). This double is not the physical person but his or her image, shadow or tail. How much the sorcerer eats of this double affects the amount of harm inflicted, and how much the sorcerer is able to consume depends on his power.

This second sense of eating can be connected with exploitation or embezzlement. Should someone be accused of having appropriated public money for private use, he is said to have “eaten” the money. When rumours in Cameroon circulated about presidential abuse of public funds, people responded “Mange ta part, Paul Biya” (Mbembe, 1995: 39).<sup>11</sup> By this answer people accepted (ironically?) that a powerful position conferred extra benefits.<sup>12</sup> People in Cameroon often explain this simply by quoting a proverb: “A crocodile which has already eaten is no longer dangerous.” This means that if the president or another “Big Man” has enough resources he will not bother to harm the population. Yet, “Mange ta part, Paul Biya” also suggested that there were limits on how much a person should eat. President Paul Biya was only expected to eat “his share”: an acceptable sum or percentage of the budget. Understood in this second sense the distribution of food during the electoral campaign could be taken as a signal of the CPDM’s willingness to distribute and thereby share power, and thus symbolises the fundamental concerns of democracy.

### *The state's resources as interplay*

On CPDM's last meeting on the day before the election, gift giving took unprecedented dimensions. A group of beautiful Fulani dancers, who had until then performed at UNDP's meetings, showed up in CPDM *pagnes*. The CPDM elite handed out crisp new 2000 and 5000 CFA bills with a generosity never seen before in the campaign. The bills had probably arrived directly from the national mint in Yaoundé. People applauded enthusiastically when the bills were distributed. This illustrates the notion that where or how patrons have obtained their resources does not matter as long as they distribute them. Even illicit ways of obtaining resources will be taken as legitimate if patrons are perceived to be discharging their obligations towards their clients (Chabal and Daloz, 1999: 79, Chabal, 2009).

Local resources are mostly controlled through bureaucratic positions (Mbembe, 2004). According to people in Ngaoundéré's bureaucracy, most of the resources available in the offices of the state administration were earmarked for use in the presidential campaign. In the mayor's office in Ngaoundéré there was "même pas un bic" left after the elections, according to the newly elected mayor.<sup>13</sup> Two high-ranking civil servants in another Ministry commented bitterly, that the director in the Ngaoundéré office of the Minister of agriculture had not spent all of the money that had been available in his office during the campaign. "Normally all money should have been gone by now" one of them explained to me just after the election. The CPDM had access to the financial and other material resources found in the state offices in town, since all important positions in the bureaucracy had been staffed with CPDM loyalists. To go campaigning for CPDM, state offices were emptied of people, money and other material resources.

"How can the other parties manage to do anything? .... How can they [the people] think that the state will support a commune headed by the opposition?" CPDM candidate Yaya Issa protested

to me at the height of the campaign (Ngaoundéré, 19.01.96). The financial manager of education in Ngaoundéré, Al-Hadji Badjo, remarked that the illiterate had not understood that it was pointless to collaborate with the opposition. He explained the state would not distribute anything to the communes headed by a mayor who was not from CPDM. “When you are against the power; do you think the power will give you money?” he asked me rhetorically the day after the elections (Ngaoundéré, 22.01.96). The CPDM supporters assumed that the President and his administration would favour the communes led by CPDM mayors. These supporters saw the CPDM as more capable of delivering expected patrimonial primacies than UNDP. For the CPDM supporters their party’s patrimonial superiority was evident. Being in the power position in the country as a whole, the party had better possibilities to deliver direct material benefits, positions and jobs within the state hierarchy, business contracts and licences, quick costume clearances or other items necessary to make a decent living in Cameroon. This type of favouritism seems to be accepted and regarded as natural by both the elites and the populace. Politics is regarded as an individual and communal power game, not as a statement of an ideology. In this political power game, privileged people (representing a political party) and personal relations with those people represent for ordinary people the potential for materialised politics. In this game ordinary people tolerate abuses of power “as long as the patron is able to meet with adequate largesse the (insatiable) demands which are made upon his person” (Chabal and Daloz, 1999: 38).

Yet, during the campaign political parties in opposition actively tried to turn this legitimisation of illicit resources against CPDM. The CPDM’s political adversaries turned the distribution of gifts into an act of plunder. Each day during the two week campaign, straightforward claims such as “Don’t be blind! They have taken it from you!” and “CPDM are thieves!” were pronounced by the opposition parties when they were allowed radio broadcasting time. Opposition leaders

argued that people should “eat and drink with good conscience” because the meat and the wine had been paid for by taxpayers. They reiterated that this consumption did not oblige the consumers to vote for the CPDM. Thus, UNDP tried to untie the moral obligation created by CPDM’s gift-giving.

### **Display of symbolic capital as a strategy to gain votes: The significance of wealth and crowds**

A related way of understanding gift giving during the political campaign is to analyse it as a transformation of economic into symbolic capital. Such a display of symbolic capital represented an important aspect of political campaigning in Ngaoundéré. In the way rallies in town were performed and by registering persons who participated at the political meetings, symbolic capital was more apparent.

All the candidates for the municipal council in Ngaoundéré arrived at the meetings in cars, the more luxurious the better. The CPDM candidates drove newer Mercedes and Payeros, Mitchubitchi’s luxury four-wheel drive car was *tres á la mode* in Cameroon those days. UNDP candidates were less well off, and drove older Toyotas, - only a few older Mercedes and one Payero were present at their meetings. Even on the last day of the campaign, when the last rally around took place to demonstrate the strength of the party, the UNDP was only represented with only three old Mercedes and two Payeros. Most of the other 62 private cars were older Toyotas. Around 60 *taxi-motos*, 50 yellow taxis, 23 busses and lorries filled up with people formed the rest of the rally.<sup>14</sup> For comparison, the CPDM had twelve Mercedes, seven Payeros, a Buick, a Volvo and a Chevrolet in their final rally. These were in front of a long line of taxis, busses and lorries. However, the CPDM did not show up with as many taxies, buses and lorries as the UNDP. The UNDP had more supporters while the CPDM’s supporters were wealthier but fewer in number.

To exhibit wealth and popular strength are only two different manifestations of the same phenomenon: the display of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1977: 180). Bourdieu argues that economic calculations extend to all goods, whether material or symbolic. He maintains that the “economic universe is made up of several economic worlds, endowed with specific ‘rationalities’ ..., to the ‘practical reason’ which characterizes them” (Bourdieu, [1994] 1998: 93). An important part of a family or lineage’s patrimony is its network of relationships. These relationships have to be maintained. They are “representing a heritage of commitments and debts of honour, a capital of rights and duties built up in the course of successive generations and providing an additional source of strength which can be called upon when extra-ordinary situations break up the daily routine” (Bourdieu, 1977: 178). According to this logic, appearing with citizens in an electoral campaign was not, *per se*, demonstrate show of solid popular support. It exhibited and made known to everybody that the municipal councillor candidates had large and loyal families, friends, and clients. “[R]esources flow downwards from the top in exchange for a recognition of the status and power of the provider” (Chabal and Daloz, 1999: 42). This recognition displayed during this rally. Exhibiting wealth and popular strength confirmed that the candidates possessed important symbolic capital. Bourdieu has argued that in archaic economies, material and symbolic capital are “so inextricably linked that the mere exhibition of material and symbolic strength represented by prestigious affines is likely to be in itself a source of material profit” (Bourdieu, 1977: 180). A large gathering of supporters at an event like an election rally lent legitimacy to a candidate’s right to rule.

Expensive cars are associated with rich people. Scandinavians frown upon displays of great personal wealth in an impoverished society like Ngaoundéré. Yet, in Cameroon, a rich person represents the success of the whole group (Bayart, 1978: 15). Ostentation is an integral part of

representation. Chabal and Daloz have argued that “[n]ot to display wealth opulently would be tantamount to an admission of low collective self-esteem” (Chabal and Daloz, 1999: 43-44). A wealthy person is clearly capable of extracting resources. Politicians must show that they are rich enough to become convincing as voters expect their leaders to command significant resources. The extraction and generous distribution of resources are vital capacities to confirm in a segmented society in which assets are distributed according to particularistic principles of patronage. A line-up of rich supporters is thus regarded both as a possible line-up of important future patronage and as an affirmation of the ambitions of community members.

This reasoning fits Bourdieu’s arguments about symbolic capital. He argues that:

symbolic capital can only be accumulated at the expense of the accumulation of economic capital.... It is a fact that collective pressure - with which the wealthy members of the group have to reckon, because they draw from it not only their authority but also, at times, political power, the strength of which ultimately reflects their capacity to mobilize the group for or against individuals or groups- requires the rich not only to pay the largest share of the cost of ceremonial exchanges (*tswsa*) but also to make the biggest contributions to maintenance of the poor, the lodging of strangers, and the organization of festivals. Above all, wealth implies duties (Bourdieu, 1977: 180).

### ***The candidates and the elite supporters presented***

Candidates themselves were of tremendous importance when it came to decisions on voting. At every outdoor meeting, the presentation of the candidates took up most of the time. The chairman asked each candidate to come into the middle of the meeting ground and to walk around the circle

forming the audience. Very few of the candidates actually said anything. They just raised their hands, flashed the victory sign and walked slowly around the whole circle. Persons, not political programmes, were the focus. Again, this is a form of politics in which personal relations and networks of (inter)dependency are more important than ideology.

As far as I could tell, only one of the 45 UNDP candidates was a Christian.<sup>15</sup> He was from southern Cameroon and was a professor of law at the University of Ngaoundéré. The other 44 candidates were probably Muslims; least 17 were Muslim men of honour, Al-Hadjis. In religious and regional terms thus, the UNDP list of candidates was very homogenous.

The CPDM list was quite different. Of 45 candidates presented, eleven had Christian names. Of the 33 with Muslim names, only four were described as Al-Hadjis. That two candidates who held responsible positions within a ministry were mentioned on the CPDM list. The list was headed by one of the most successful businessmen in town, Al-Hadji Issa Nana Santi, known as a powerful man with an important network of friends in the private and public sectors. One candidate, placed 39<sup>th</sup> on the list, was a regional prince, a son of chief *Lamido* Issa Maïgari.

In addition, higher civil servants often attended CPDM meetings.<sup>16</sup> Through their presence they displayed their political preferences, and lent their authority and prestige to the party. Since the practical outcome of political transactions depended often on personal relationships with high-ranking civil servants and politicians, it could be crucial for members of a political party to show that they were on the right side. On the last day of the campaign the governor, the prefect and the sub-prefect were all present at the CPDM meeting. This enhanced the symbolic capital of the party.

*Lamido* Issa Maïgari also participated in the campaign. Forty years ago the *lamido*'s opinion or (violent) force had chosen the candidate for the large majority of the electorate (Hansen, 2000:



196-201). In 1996 politicians, bureaucrats and researchers still argued that important chiefs, including *Lamido* Issa Maïgari in Ngaoundéré, would play a decisive role in mobilising the electorate for the ruling CPDM.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the CPDM had asked the *lamido* to attend the last meeting. He did not give a speech; according to convention a *lamido* never talks in public. Nevertheless, his presence under the white and blue parasol, seated in a special armchair on seven carpets the *lamido* obviously raised the symbolic capital of the party. One of the CPDM candidates argued with reference to the presence of *Lamido* Issa Maïgari, that nobody could oppose her/his *lamido* and told the people to vote CPDM. After the meeting, the *lamido* joined the CPDM rally around the town in his black air-conditioned Chevrolet.<sup>18</sup>

Looking at the final electoral results in Ngaoundéré, it appears as if people were not influenced by the presence of their chief at the CPDM rally. *Lamido* Issa Maïgari had two polling stations in the entrance building of his palace; one in the reception hall and the other in his courtroom. People living in the palace, the *lamido*'s four wives, his concubines, his servants and neighbours were to vote here. In addition to the administrative quarter of the town, the administration imagined this to be one of the CPDM's strongholds in town. Yet, the CPDM got 104 votes compared to the UNDP's 290 in these polling stations. Few chiefs in the entire Cameroon however, stated verbally that they would actually vote CPDM. What they, including *lamido* Issa Maïgari, actually voted remained a secret. Yet, the electoral results for the entire town of Ngaoundere did not remain secret. UNDP received an absolute majority of the votes and Mohaman Toukour became the first mayor in Ngaoundere ever representing a different political party than the president of Cameroon.

### **Inside electoral democracy: Gift-giving and flaunting in political campaigning**

In this article I described an electoral campaign in Northern Cameroon in the mid 1990s. By focusing on the public events in the electoral campaign, I presented a comprehensive analysis of gift-giving and flaunting. Academic analysis of political elections published during the “democratisation decade” in Africa often emphasised vote-buying, violence, and fraud (see e.g. Bayart, 1989, Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997). The ten years that have passed since the events has made other analysis more relevant.

First, many international experts believed that the problem the lack of democracy in large parts of Africa could be solved by holding elections. Yet, two decades after democratisation started, fewer politicians than expected have been voted out of office; where political leaders have changed, the political cultures have not. The neo-patrimonial style of governance in Africa has not been changed by democratisation and decentralisation. Claude Ake argues that elections are a choice between oppressors because they only reproduce the authoritarianism of the single party systems (Ake, 2000: 160-161). Ake argues that “to democratize Africa successfully, it is necessary not only to effect a political transformation of the state but also a social transformation of society, for social conditions in Africa are not conducive to democracy” (Ake, 2000: 167). Andreas Mehler rhetorically asked: “How would an opposition party behave in conformity with a neopatrimonial system?” He answered: “Probably by being permanently prepared to be co-opted into government” (Mehler, 2007: 196). Schatzberg says that despite the retreat from single-party systems and the (re-) introduction of multi-party elections, it is not certain that “these transformations will result in anything resembling democracy” (Schatzberg, 2001: 216). Ndegwa insists that “the dominant mode of elite-mass relations has remained a pernicious patrimonialism” (Ndegwa, 2001). The Cameroonian political scientist Nkwi concludes his analysis of the

democratisation decade in Cameroon by stating that “democracy in Cameroon since 1990 has gone only as far as the political ritual of holding elections” (Nkwi, 2006: 95). However, ordinary people seem to have taken personal advantage of the introduction of electoral democracy in Africa.

Yet, I would argue that gift-giving is not merely buying way for elites to buy votes but rather a way for the populace to take advantage of a system that they cannot or do not want to change. Some scholars still argue that gift-giving during electoral campaigning can only be understood as undemocratic vote-buying. Others take it further by arguing that this form for vote-buying obliterates the entire idea of democracy. Claude Ake argued that “the offering of the bribe for the vote is an act of contempt for the voting. It reflects the liberties which the elite take by virtue of being dominant.[...] In the offer and acceptance of bribes which commoditize their democratic rights, they reproduce their low self-esteem and their subordination, thus turning election into bondage.” (Ake, 2000: 171). However, others again are questioning the direct relationship between gifts and votes. Nugent asserts that the accumulation and the exhibition of wealth are invested with overwhelming positive attributes in most African countries. Yet, since wealth is also associated with corruption, money is socially ambiguous. An acceptable way of money laundering is by distributing it through an extended social network. In this sense, the distribution of money or rice during electoral campaigns are seen as signs of willingness to take local responsibility and make money socially acceptable (Nugent, 2007: 256-7). Nugent uses the word “transubstantiation” for the act of converting money into votes, implying a divine rather than simplistic act of vote-buying. He insists that material resources have to be transformed into “some kind of moral authority” to be effective in elections and thus represent something different from bribing. The distribution of money enters the image of the benevolent “big man” caring for

his clients (Nugent, 2001). This generosity is primordial in a neo-patrimonial state where loyalties and support are closely linked to personal connections and private benefit. The incumbent regime has privileged access to state resources but that does not mean anything to the masses if the regime's elite do not distribute parts of the resources towards them. It seems as if voters "expect to be showered with gifts as evidence that the candidate genuinely does have local interests at heart" (Nugent, 2007: 256). If politicians fail to demonstrate their generosity they will be taken as selfish and punished on the polling day. It also seems as if where the resources originate from is less important than the fact that they are liberally distributed. Thus, the acceptance and even enjoyment from the masses when CPDM distributed brand new 2000 CFA and 5000 CFA bills at their final meeting in Ngaoundéré.

I would argue that during the electoral campaign, people took advantage of the newly established electoral democracy. For the first time, they were able to turn the uncertainty of the political elite to their own favours by accepting food, drinks and money from different political parties without embarrassment. The fact that the ballot remained secret made it possible for voters to accept gifts without having to vote for the parties that offered them. Thus, electoral campaigning was a way to redistribute public and personal wealth.

Citizens manipulated the neo-patrimonial political cultures during the campaign. By acquiring double and even triple membership in different political parties, people fooled electoral democracy and the political elites. Our case study showed that the same dancers performed at political meetings for different parties only by changing their clothes from CPDM to UNDP *pagnes*. Ordinary people also wore CPDM t-shirts while declaring support for UNDP, and the regional chief, *Lamido* Issa Maïgari would insist on not doing politics while participation in the final rally for CPDM. Indeed, "acting is an integral part of the political behaviour of

representatives” (Chabal and Daloz, 2006: 277), yet both by the elites and the ordinary people disguise their actions and behaviour during the electoral campaigning.

Seen this way, elections the neo-patrimonial political culture persists while the roles seems to have changed; the masses can fool the elite by accepting donations without casting their ballots for the political party that offered the gifts.

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<sup>2</sup> CPDM: Unité - Progrès - Démocratie; SDF: Democracy - Justice - Development; UNDP: Unité - Liberté -Justice; ANDP: Unité- Démocratie5556 - Justice; CPC: Unité - Démocratie – Développement.

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<sup>3</sup> This has also been emphasised by Andreas Mehler commenting on elections in Africa in general (Mehler, 2007: 197)

<sup>4</sup> As ANDP puts it: "Voter ANDP c'est lutter contre les mouches, les mousitiques et les rats" (To vote for ANDP is to fight against the flies, mosquitoes and rats).

<sup>5</sup> Political commentators in the independent press in Cameroon held the same opinion. Biola Ayissi wrote in *Le nouvel Indépendant* (22.02.95) that "le partis politique au Cameroun se différencient seulement par le sigle et le nom de leur propriétaire."

<sup>6</sup> To do a more comprehensive study one could look into the differences in the political speeches given in the different languages. I believe one then would find a more ethnicified argumentation than I did since I mostly used speeches in French.

<sup>7</sup> Celestin Monga (2006) writing about eating in Cameroon repeatedly argues that Cameroonians afford "great importance to the art of enjoyment," the "loci of pleasure" and "the principle of pleasure."

<sup>8</sup> Based on my own presence at close to all the different meetings.

<sup>9</sup> As well as, to a lesser degree, Mboum, Dii, Baya.

<sup>10</sup> "We have given you wine and meat and you did not even go to cast the ballot. What sort of behaviour is this?"

<sup>11</sup> "Eat your share, Paul Biya".

<sup>12</sup> Chabal and Daloz argue that it even is "expected that civil servants will abuse their power" (1999:7)

<sup>13</sup> "non even a ball-point" (Toukour Mohamman, personal communication, 22.02.1996.).

<sup>14</sup> It was important to have the taxi drivers on your side. Taxi drivers were normally in opposition to the state because they were so badly treated by the state-employed police officers. They were stopped almost daily and controlled by the police who always managed to find something which did not conform to the law, and taxi drivers had to pay 1000 CFA (1,3 EUR.) to get out of the trouble. Taxi drivers nicknamed the police officers "mange-mille" (eats thousand); a derived term of the red top bird *mange-mille*.

Taxi drivers were also important agents in the spreading of rumour and information. To have the support of the taxi drivers is therefore important for any political party. In Ngaoundéré, political parties hired *taxi-motos* and cabs to animate their political meetings and participate in the parties's rallies. A *moto-taxi* was given from 500 to 1500 CFA to follow the rally and meeting of a political party, while a cab could get as much as 5000 CFA (6 EUR).

<sup>15</sup> 44 persons were dressed in *gandouras* or UNDP's party *pagne*, while one, professor André Tientcheu Ndjako was dressed in a chic Yves Saint Laurent-suit.

<sup>16</sup> It was rare for anyone else other than the UNDP candidates themselves to be present on the "tribune d'honneur" (special seats were reserved at every meeting for the candidates and their honorary guests) at UNDP meetings. At most UNDP meetings I was the only honorary guest present.

<sup>17</sup> However, why a chief was supposed to be an important vote baker was never stated. Probably it was because of his authority in most matters over his subjects and, at the same time, his official position as auxiliary of the state.

<sup>18</sup> I was invited to join him and sit by his side during this CPDM rally. Many of my UNDP friends saw that I was in the car with the *lamido*. When I met them afterwards they just laughed at the episode.