

FABRICS OF LOYALTY: THE POLITICS OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY WAX PRINT CLOTH IN CAMEROON

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What IWD [International Women's Day] is not:

- IWD is not just about cloth
- IWD is not an excuse for debauchery
- IWD is not an invitation for women to disobey their husbands
- IWD is not about getting drunk in bars
- IWD is not a seizure of power by women.¹

This call to administrative order published in a government brochure suggests two distinct visions of the celebrations that accompany International Women's Day in Cameroon: one official, disciplined, moral and masculine; the other unofficial, undisciplined, immoral and feminine.² The same sense emerges from the celebrations themselves: in the morning, women dressed in wax print cloth designed and marketed by the government for the occasion parade in an organized manner before public officials, thereby expressing their respect for authority; in the afternoon and evening, these same women (re)appear in disorganized groups, dancing, drinking and shouting all over town. This contrast is well described by journalists of the *Messenger* observing the 8 March celebrations in Douala:

After the parade at the UDEAC site in Douala, while some women went with friends or in meetings, in order to wish a happy Women's Day, most women were returning home. Not that the day was over. 'We're going to rest and get prepared to attack the evening well,' says Emilie, who adds: 'We will end the evening at the Cabaret.' If during the day they all look serious, the masks will fall off in the night. At the Rue de la joie at Deido, young and mature women – in short, all categories – besieged the taverns. Beer bottles, juice and whiskey covered tables. 'DJ, play us the song.' 'Lift up! [Meaning lift

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¹Official brochure, entitled 'XXVIIth edition of International Women's Day in Cameroon', distributed in the presidential grandstand and to media in Yaoundé during the 2012 IWD celebrations.

²The authors attended IWD parades and celebrations in 2006 and 2012 in Yaoundé and studied videos downloaded from the internet of parades held in Yaoundé in 2009 and 2011. They collected and examined administrative documents on the 2012 celebration and studied newspaper reports for the 2006, 2010 and 2012 iterations. Prisca Bissossoli and Jeanne-Antoinette Ngo Maniyinga Diboué, master's students in the Department of Political Science, University of Yaoundé II, generously shared their observations of the parades in Yaoundé and in Soa in 2012, and Guillaume Vadot, doctoral student at University Paris 1, did the same for his observations in Maroua in 2012.

up the wax print cloth.] It is 8 March. We want to have fun, we want to lift up!' they shout loudly.³

At first glance, what we witness here is an authoritarian, male-directed mobilization followed by a female carnival. The afternoon and evening excesses appear to function simply as an outlet after the regimented parading of the morning. A clear-cut distinction could be drawn between political consent and moral disobedience.

This article goes beyond these dichotomies and posits a co-production of loyalty and docility by the government and by the women involved. The goal of the article is to understand the inner workings of the simultaneously loyalist and disruptive popular mobilizations that take place on IWD and to reflect upon the latter as a tool for understanding everyday interactions with the political sphere in the context of a regime characterized by its exceptional longevity (Pigeaud 2011).⁴

Ordinary loyalty is not an easy concept to grasp compared with exit and voice, the two other types of political behaviour studied by Hirschman (1970). In the present context, however, it is rendered more readily comprehensible by the fact that it is embodied: it is made tangible by the bodies of women mobilized and transformed into a unified whole by the wearing of an official wax print cloth. Still, the question of what, here, constitutes loyalty and what belongs to other realms of behaviour is complex. Indeed, if the IWD parades sponsored by the Cameroonian government appear at first glance to constitute instances of total control over women's bodies, on closer inspection they may be seen to function as variegated spaces wherein desire, consumption, seduction and exhibitionism play critical and significantly complicating roles.

Two analytical frameworks can help us address the mobilized and uniform-clad female bodies on which this paper focuses. The first calls for us to observe and to question political performances during which groups of citizens move as one. How, in the context of a parade, a political meeting, a demonstration or even a riot can one evaluate the extent to which individual participants share the views expressed in the group's slogans and songs? How can one interpret such moments of popular effervescence, particularly when they are sponsored by the state (Mariot 2001)? Participating in a parade while wearing an imposed uniform, walking in step and greeting public officials do not necessarily mean that one approves of the event's professed message or of the political power it seeks to underpin. These types of events do not necessarily reflect the consent of the governed, nor do they mean that the governed believe in the good works of those in power. As Michel Dobry notes, commenting on Max Weber's analysis of legitimate forms of domination, the beliefs of those who are dominated and the claims to legitimacy of those who dominate are not necessarily congruent. Further, Dobry observes:

³8 mars 2013: "des femmes en mode soulevée", *Le Messager*, 11 March 2013, accessed 8 July 2014.

⁴This longevity can be explained by the misuse of institutions on the part of the governing elite (Albaugh 2011; Hansen 2010), by a significant loss of interest on the part of the citizenry in selecting their representatives (2011 abstention rates during presidential elections stood officially at 30 per cent, but were likely as high as 60 per cent), by long-standing practices of clientelism (Socpa 2000) and by the fact that popular uprisings, when they do take place, rarely last long (Pommerolle 2008; Ngauss Palla 2009).

for legitimate domination and obeisance to prevail, it is enough that the governed behave *as if* they had internalized orders received from on high ... and as if they had made these orders the basis of their action – the motivation, or the reason, for their docility. (Dobry 2003: 136)

For those who govern, in other words, it is sufficient to *stage* loyalty, in the process reminding all involved of certain basic organizing principles upon which power is built. With this as its point of departure, our article will focus on practices observed during what one might term *joint political performances*: performances organized by those in power but entered into willingly by women who find, on an individual level, an aesthetic and/or narcissistic interest in participating in these events and, collectively, a space for social recognition and interaction.

A focus on the *materiality of power* – on its political economy and on the means whereby it can be alternately approached and kept at bay – also proves significant in understanding collective expressions of loyalty (Hibou 2011) such as those that are the subject of this paper. A close examination of the economy of IWD cloths and of the multiple ancillary activities (buffets, galas, and so on) that are an integral part of the day sheds light on what makes it possible for the power behind the event to endure: a national economy supported by public institutions and political interests, which offers small economic operators and consumers enough room to manoeuvre so that they too can gain something from the proceedings. At the same time, consumer and trader practices surrounding the official IWD cloth are at the centre of complex moves deployed to hold at bay – and, in some cases, to contest – the power apparatus that shapes the whole event. While gender hierarchies are reproduced in the many speeches given by officials throughout the day, power relations are contested by citizen consumers, who, in the manner in which they handle the cloth they wear, find opportunities to express alternative points of view.

In what follows we argue that the IWD celebration and its official wax print cloth function as effective means of political mobilization because they create a space for women to express their desires, and because the attempt by those in power to make visible an alleged collective allegiance to their rule coincides with the needs of those called upon to materialize this allegiance. The article is in three parts. The first centres on descriptions of official parades and on the hierarchies of power expressed – paradoxically, as we will see – through the collective wearing of IWD cloth. In the second part, we trace the history and the economy of IWD cloth, focusing on its identity as both a product of the state and an object of private profit. The third part is dedicated to an analysis of IWD cloth as a controversial object in the making and unmaking of gender and power hierarchies.

PERFORMANCES OF POWER

Mobilization through civil or administrative parades is nothing new in Cameroon. Indeed, it is quite common.⁵ At the heart of Yaoundé, one key street – Boulevard du 20 Mai – is set aside for events of this kind. It is flanked by a few office buildings

⁵Examples abound. Parades are held for Labour Day (1 May), National Day (20 May), Youth Day (11 February) and, of course, International Women's Day.



FIGURE 1 Women of the General Delegation for National Security, on the Boulevard du 20 Mai, 8 March 2015. Photo credit: Nadine Machikou Ngaméni.

and a luxury hotel, but void of small businesses and pedestrians. At its centre is a long, covered stand built to welcome VIP viewers.

The opening event of IWD, *la parade du 8 mars* (8 March parade), takes place on this central artery. It is a highly visible collective expression of allegiance to the regime, represented in this instance by the political and administrative officials in attendance. The act of marching past the stands with arms outstretched and faces turned up at the officials and the different slogans printed on banners and called out by the event's MCs coalesce to produce an expression of enduring loyalty.

Uniform, collective loyalty and hierarchies of power

The collective mobilization of bodies – parading and watching – is materialized first and foremost by the imposition of a single outfit (Figure 1). Even though, as we shall see, singularities and social distinctions can be expressed, uniformity is the norm: whether they are marching or looking on from the stands, women must wear the cloth designed for that (or a previous) year's parade.⁶ During the first celebration of IWD in Cameroon in 1986, no one garment was prescribed. Women wore clothing linked to associations in which they were members or outfits they had commissioned for the event. The resulting heterogeneity, the Ministry of Social and Women's Affairs argued at the time and with increasing

⁶See indications in the official brochure for 2012, cited in note 1.

insistence in subsequent years, was a source of competition, and hence of frustration, among the women. In 2000, Aïssatou Yao, the minister at the time, imposed the use of a single cloth by all, in order to underscore the parade's nature as an event involving women from all walks of life. As we will discuss later, production of IWD cloth is controlled by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Family (MINPROFF), which holds the copyright for its design.⁷

The use of a 'state cloth' as a uniform finds its roots in political practices developed in the 1960s and 1970s: quests to 'Africanize' postcolonial societies in order to legitimize often authoritarian regimes (Etienne 1977; Ayina 1987). In this context, 'African dress' (in the form of wax print cloths or specially designed outfits such as the Zairian *abacost*) was touted as a means of countering Western attire, which, for women at least, was commonly presented as indecent (Rillon 2010). In Cameroon, cloth such as that designed for IWD is typically worn in the form of a *kaba*, a wide dress intended to obscure the wearer's shape, thereby ensuring individual and collective decency – a must according to official brochures such as the one quoted at the beginning of this article. Generally, wax print cloth is encountered in a wide variety of social settings; for purposes of mobilization, members of cooperatives (*tontines* or *njangi* houses), professional associations and political parties are instructed to don attire made of their organization's designated cloth on important occasions. In the post-colonial era, the use of promotional cloth has grown exponentially with the emergence of multiparty politics and associated election campaigns. The latter have become key sites for the production and circulation of such cloths, which, in this setting, function both as signs of allegiance and forms of remuneration (Faber 2010; Röschenhaler, this issue).

During the 8 March parade, a sea of uniform-clad bodies is set in motion: in waves, women pass in front of the assembled powers that be, advancing to the rhythm of a brass band, at times marching and saluting military-style, in an explicit expression of loyalty to the regime. In Yaoundé in 2009, the parade opened with a huge Cameroonian flag, followed by pictures of the presidential couple: a young Paul Biya (so young, in fact, that it put one in mind of 1982, the year he came to power) and his wife Chantal. Then came a banner bearing the following words: 'Mr President, the women of Cameroon are with you. You can count on them.'⁸ Another followed on which one could read: 'With Paul Biya, architect of equal rights.' Elsewhere in the country, on 8 March, similar messages of loyalty abound. In Ebolowa, in 2012, spectators encountered a banner 'salut[ing] the efforts of the [country's] republican institutions', and, in Maroua, an official called out: 'Long live the women of the Far North Province, long live Cameroon, and long live H. E. President Paul Biya!' The first lady, a very popular figure, plays a key role in IWD celebrations. Her arrival in a dark limousine, greeted by the crowd, signalled the beginning of festivities in Yaoundé in 2012. Well known for both her involvement in charities and her flamboyant attire, she is seen as standing apart from her rather retiring husband (Eboko 2004).

⁷See MINPROFF Memorandum N°11/minproff/Cab.

⁸Video from the CRTV (national broadcaster) website, showing the 2010 IWD ceremonies, viewed at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjPjF2GiZlk&feature=related>>, accessed 20 August 2013.

After the pictures of the president and his wife, and, in some instances, of allegorical figures of mothers and women at work, the parade proper begins. First come the representatives of political institutions and administrative services. Their order of appearance confirms the classical analysis of power hierarchies within the Ahidjo and Biya regimes (Bayart 1985; Delancey 1989; Sindjoun 1999; Takougang and Krieger 1998). Women marching in the name of the presidency are followed by representatives of SNH (Société Nationale des Hydrocarbures – the national oil company) and CSPH (Caisse de Stabilisation des Prix des Hydrocarbures – the entity in charge of regulating the price of oil), a trio that points in no uncertain terms to the origins of the state's resources. Then comes the General Delegation for National Security, showcasing its mission to protect citizens and confirming the central role of the security apparatus in the regime's domination of the country. After the different ministries, (former) state companies (SONEL, CAMTEL, SODECOTON) and universities, it is the turn of international actors to parade: women hailing from elsewhere on the continent, as well as members of diplomatic missions and United Nations agencies. In 2009 in Yaoundé, the American embassy's banner was preceded by a lone white woman marching on her own. In 2012, the ambassador and his wife appeared, holding a placard on which a slogan in pidgin English was printed: '*Rural women, we de for wuna back*' ('Rural women: we are with you'). In 2009, the United Nations delegation bore aloft signs supporting women's empowerment. The presence of international figures shows how diverse constituencies have been integrated into the national political agenda. By virtue of the cloth they wear, on which are printed slogans supporting the Biya regime, they are seen as actively taking part in the pledge of allegiance that the parade represents.

Networks of women's associations – village organizations, CIGs (common initiative groups) and cooperatives – come last, but they comprise the largest number of marchers wearing the day's official cloth. The private sector is present but not well mobilized, attesting once more to the central role of the state in this celebration.⁹ The place given to women's networks emphasizes the joint construction of female supervision by government bodies and local associations, many of which, provided they are duly registered, receive subsidies from MINPROFF. As for the presence of village and ethnic associations, this attests to the recognition of regional diversity, a crucial political principle in Cameroon. As a further means of promoting diversity, and out of respect for the secular nature of the country, 'bibles, crosses and other religious insignia are prohibited'.¹⁰

Control, desire and distinction

A carefully controlled event, the 8 March parade is the product of highly efficient administrative action (Adams 2007; Sindjoun 2000). Such oversight, however, is not enough to help us understand why so many women take part, why they all

⁹The relative lack of importance accorded to the private sector is underscored by the kinds of placards held up by women marching in the name of private enterprises. Recycled from one year to the next, they are little more than run-of-the mill advertisements that include no references to the year's thematic focus.

¹⁰See the official brochure for 2012, p. 13.

agree to wear the government's cloth of choice, and why they file in row after row by the official stand. Most notable among these reasons, we will argue, is a desire for individual and collective recognition.

The display and participation of women during the parade are closely supervised. In this, both government and para-public administrative bodies are involved. The technical adviser in charge of the event in Yaoundé is a high-ranking MINPROFF official who entertains close ties with the party's most prominent women.¹¹ At the district level, a *chargé de mission* is dispatched to see to parade preparations and related activities (educational discussions, round tables, sports and cultural events, and so on). Organizing committees are set up and preparatory meetings are held in each ministry and public administration office; calendars and budgets are drawn up and press kits are produced to assist in the structuring of the festivities. During the parade, strict rules are imposed, with marchers following a rigorously enforced order. Incentives and coercion are both employed to ensure that no disruptions occur. In 2012, in Soa, a town bordering Yaoundé, too few women were available to fully staff the parade; to resolve this problem, the organizers set about distributing 500 CFA notes (roughly €0.80) to women willing to march past several times. The same year, in Maroua, the police restrained onlookers from spilling over onto the parade grounds and recalcitrant children were flogged. In Yaoundé, security personnel searched women marchers before they entered the parade grounds; purses and mobile phones were confiscated. Under these circumstances, some women chose to withdraw from the proceedings.

Degrees of coercion vary from year to year and from place to place. In 2012, police prevented women from singing in order to avoid any expressions of discontent.¹² Still, instances of police brutality are rare and tend to be directed at the crowd rather than at the marchers. The fact that they do occur, however, does not explain why women take part in the parades: neither intimidation nor constraint is involved. Data collected from several sources indicate that, while senior officials repeatedly enjoin women to attend, failure to participate does not result in sanctions.¹³ Respecting orders and/or conforming to colleagues' expectations can certainly encourage a woman to take part in the event, but, first and foremost, what is involved is enjoyment in exhibiting one's body clad in the day's special cloth.

Sewing the IWD cloth into a garment of one's own and buying accessories to personalize that outfit seem to play an important part in the day's pleasures (Figure 2). According to the former Provincial Delegate for Social Affairs and Women's Empowerment in the Northern Province,¹⁴ the cloth affords women 'an opportunity to prove to everyone that they are equal: that neither professional occupation nor any other difference makes one more important than another'. In

¹¹She is the treasurer of CERAC, a humanitarian organization founded by the First Lady (see <<https://www.prc.cm/fr/la-premiere-dame/65-oevres-sociales/38-le-cercle-des-amis-du-cameroun-cerac>>, accessed 10 August 2015; Adams 2007). She and her husband work for the Chantal Biya Foundation.

¹²'8 mars: les chants interdits au défilé', *Mutations*, 9 March 2012.

¹³Interviews by one of the authors with staff of a state-owned firm and a public administration office, March 2012.

¹⁴'La longue marche vers la reconnaissance', *Le Messenger*, 8 March 2006.



FIGURE 2 Group of women in Mbalmayo, Central Region, 8 March 2014. Photo credit: Jean-Bosco Talla.

a similar vein, official brochures call for ‘harmony in uniforms and hairstyles’.¹⁵ Despite such stipulations, however, there is considerable leeway for women who wish to exhibit their means and taste and, thus, their uniqueness. Precisely because the focus is on uniformity, comparison thrives. Sewing style and quality, use of decorative materials such as lace, and the addition of assorted accessories all serve as marks of distinction. This is the case both for individuals and for groups (professional associations, for example). High-ranking women wear sophisticated outfits that contrast with the simple *kaba* worn by less privileged marchers. The location where individual women appear during the day’s events is a marker of status as well. In Yaoundé, the most powerful are invited to sit in the grandstand and to lunch at the Hilton with the First Lady. Outside the capital, they share meals with such key officials as the governor or senior divisional officer. For women of lesser status, attendance – particularly in Yaoundé – offers an opportunity to come into close proximity with their elite sisters and with the First Lady. More importantly still, as we shall see below, it provides a platform for them to meet, eat, drink, dance and share ideas with one another, which in turn opens up for them a range of new social networks.

Participating in the parade is also an opportunity for some groups to exhibit their social usefulness and/or their potential as representatives. Institutions call attention to their good works: ‘UMA [University of Maroua] helps women conserve food’; ‘Fight against poverty: always CRTV [Cameroon Radio Television]!’ Ethnic organizations march to advertise their strong attachment to local political communities, as do associations of foreigners, who thereby (particularly when intergroup relations are tense) stake a claim in the national mosaic.¹⁶ Associations and CIGs, which, as we have seen, make up the bulk of the parade, underscore their ability to mobilize and their contribution to the nation’s development. While the mobilization of non-state actors tends generally

¹⁵Official brochure, 2012.

¹⁶This was the case on 8 March 2012, when a contingent of Chadian women paraded in Maroua, shortly after skirmishes had been reported in Ndjamena between Chadian and Cameroonian nationals (observations by Guillaume Vadot).



FIGURE 3 *Bayamsellam* in Soa, 8 March 2012. Photo credit: Prisca Bissossoli.

to be seen as a bid for recognition by government authorities, other goals must be considered as well, notably the intention to assert a capacity for self-organization. Thus, in 2012, the petty traders, or *bayamsellam*, of Soa adopted the slogan ‘We help one another’ (Figure 3), while in Maroua, a group presented itself as ‘the motivated women of Ziking’.

Parading before officials, therefore, is not just a matter of paying allegiance. It is also about showing off, distinguishing oneself, being seen and recognized, looking at others and gauging one’s place in relation to them. The performance of state power is successful here because it involves a whole range of other performances – both individual and collective.

THE MATERIALITY OF POWER

The manufacture, sale and distribution of IWD cloth shed light on ways in which the state attempts to control both the production and the redistribution of wealth, all the while making room for non-state, collective and individual actors, so as to increase the number of stakeholders who benefit from the product and its commercialization.

The political economy of printed wax cloth

Like other cotton-producing countries, Cameroon is facing significant competition from less expensive Asian textile imports (*The Economist* 2007). Grown in the northern part of the country, cotton is produced by state-owned SODECOTON and manufactured by CICAM (Cotonnière Industrielle du Cameroun), the maker of all IWD fabrics (Vadot 2011). Formerly owned by French, German and Cameroonian interests, CICAM was bought out in full by the state-owned National Investment Company (Société Nationale d’Investissement du Cameroun or SNI) in 2009. CICAM had previously been confronted with increasing competition from foreign products that entered the local market more or less

legally and, as a result, was forced to close some of its branches.¹⁷ In recent years the situation has improved considerably, as institutions, both public and private, have begun ordering large quantities of mass-produced printed fabric. *Pagnes événementiels* (event-related wax print cloths) in general, and IWD cloths in particular, are the company's most popular products. The latter account for some 40 per cent of its yearly revenue. In addition, the company designs and manufactures IWD textiles for sale to the Central African Republic and Chad.¹⁸

The recent explosion of interest in IWD cloths – and the specific focus on a wax print textile whose design changes every year – seems intimately linked to the economic and political fortunes of the country's northern elite. In order to alleviate the effects of the cotton crisis, high-ranking northerners have invested considerable energy in promoting *pagnes événementiels*. One woman in particular has been instrumental in this regard: Aïssatou Yao. Originally from the north, from 1984 to 2000 she held the position of minister in charge of women's affairs (MINPROFF); today, she presides over the women's arm of the ruling party, heads SNI, CICAM's parent company, and is the secretary general of the Chantal Biya Foundation. It was she, as we saw previously, who imposed the use of a single cloth by all women participating in IWD celebrations in 2000. In the process, she instituted a practice that shows how *pagnes événementiels* in general and IWD cloths specifically are being used to jump-start the cotton economy. Orders are placed directly by MINPROFF. CICAM, in turn, bills MINPROFF, but at a 'socially conscious' rate that is lower than that charged for other types of event-related fabrics. Commissioned and produced by the state, IWD cloth thus functions as a tool meant to boost the national economy. It has done quite well in this regard: originally, it was commercialized by MINPROFF directly, but its success and, as a result, the quantities involved have been such that this task has had to be subcontracted; it is now in the hands of Laking, a CICAM subsidiary.¹⁹

Alongside its economic role, IWD cloth also functions as an ideological tool. In this latter regard, it is intimately tied to government-sponsored programmes focusing on development and more specifically on women's labour (Figure 4). This explains the texts that accompanied IWD 2012:

From the government's point of view, rendering rural women autonomous [the thematic focus of the 2012 event] ... means making available to them all of the resources, equipment and know-how required to ensure their fulfilment and their participation in the life of the polity, as citizens, as economic actors aware of the country's development, in pursuit of emergence and of the 'Great Achievements' called for by the head of state, H. E. Paul Biya.²⁰

Repeated verbatim by some officials in their speeches, these words emphasize women's labour. Of the ten 'specific objectives' outlined in the document from

¹⁷'La Cicam broie du Noir', Cameroon-Info.Net, 13 October 2003: <<http://www.cameroon-info.net/stories/0,13412,@,la-cicam-broie-du-noir.html>>, accessed 10 August 2015.

¹⁸'Cameroun: où va l'argent du pague du 8 mars', Camer.be, 9 March 2012: <<http://www.camer.be/index1.php?art=18338&rub=11:1>>, accessed 20 August 2013.

¹⁹Interview by Guillaume Vadot with Issa Abdou, CEO of the CICAM factory in Garoua, 23 March 2012.

²⁰MINPROFF, '27th edition of IWD in Cameroon. Terms of Reference'. Collected by one of the authors at the MINPROFF headquarters, Yaoundé, March 2012.



FIGURE 4 Women exhibiting their agricultural produce in Maroua, Far North Region, 8 March 2012. Photo credit: Guillaume Vadot.

which the extract above is taken, more than half deal with ‘the work of rural women’ and their ‘contribution to development’. In previous years, foci included women’s health, their ability to make decisions, and their access to education and training. In terms dear to the development community, the IWD parade and its associated cloth put work at the very heart of the day’s proceedings. On the material printed each year in different bright colours, slogans and small drawings inserted in circles are reminders of women’s social and economic contribution. On the 2006 pink edition, a woman surrounded by bananas and yams carries a heavy basket of tomatoes; another woman handles a hoe while a man cuts a tree. But women are not restricted to manual labour: one is standing in front of a blackboard, teaching a young girl, while another is painting. Women’s work is also at the centre of the parade: from salaried administration employees to CIG members, the marchers are all women who work. Female firefighters file past in helmets; women tractor, taxi and motorbike taxi drivers bring up the rear. Women employed by the General Delegation for National Security hold aloft banners that proclaim ‘Your security is our job’. As their colleagues from the Ministry for Administration and Decentralization march by, a female MC identifies them as ‘the women who handle your applications at the prefect’s office’. In speeches, too, women’s work is celebrated. In some cases, reference is made to the hardships rural women face: difficulties gaining access to property, fertilizers and farm tools in the north, harsh living conditions in the south, and so on.

In response, officials tout the role that the government plays as it works hand in hand with development institutions to better the lives of its female citizens.²¹

²¹For example, a slogan devised by PMUC (Pari Mutuel Urbain du Cameroun), a stakeholder in the national development agenda, was ‘Travail décent, dynamisme pour les femmes’ (‘Decent work for dynamic women’).

Women are called on to assist the state in this task, through their hard work and by exercising social control. In 2011, in the town of Ebolowa, the governor of the Southern Province enjoined women to ‘stand in the way of troublemakers: people who refuse to send their children to school and balk at producing enough food to ensure the region’s and the country’s self-sufficiency’.²² From as far back as the early 1960s, a period marked by the violent suppression of an insurrection movement in the Bamileke region, the government has been brandishing the spectre of political subversion as a means of stigmatizing any and all forms of contestation (Domergue *et al.* 2012). Considered in this context, the governor’s call on women to battle alleged subversive agents is tantamount to identifying them as an arm of the state apparatus.

Speculation, contraband and revenues

This carefully structured political order, however, is called into question by manoeuvres of various kinds to take advantage of the IWD cloth economy: approaches that allow a multiplicity of actors – many more than originally intended – to share in the redistribution and accumulation of wealth that this state economy allows. The granting of exclusive production or commercialization rights to a single firm, miscalculations in the number of bales produced, the purchase of large quantities of IWD cloth by a few wealthy businesspeople – all of these factors lead to practices of speculation, counterfeiting and imitation. Practised by both small retailers and well-to-do traders, speculation is common. At the Laking shop in Yaoundé (Laking shops are the selling points owned by CICAM), where the queue is unending and customers are allowed a maximum of one length of cloth each, retailers and consumers make all manner of arrangements. One client bragged: ‘I got two rolls because I gave 500 CFA to a woman inside.’²³ Those who do not want to wait in line can buy their cloth from a retailer strategically positioned near the entrance of the shop. A premium is involved: 8,000 CFA rather than 6,500 CFA for a roll. In the town of Ngaoundéré, in the north, the degree of speculation was such in 2011 that Laking shops ran out of stock; meanwhile, on the black market, lengths of cloth were going for 10,000 CFA.²⁴ In these and related settings, on the margins of the official cloth trade, retailers large and small turn a profit. Officially, this *de facto de-monopolized* commerce is condemned.²⁵

The government also condemns the production and sale of ‘fake fabrics’: that is, copies of the official 8 March cloth.²⁶ The CICAM–Laking monopoly is adversely

²²‘Ebolowa: les femmes en veulent plus’, *Cameroon Tribune*, 8 March 2011.

²³‘Bousculade autour du pagne’, *Le Jour*, 2 March 2012.

²⁴‘Ngaoundéré: le pagne du 8 mars est introuvable’, *Septentrion Infos*, 1 March 2011: <<http://www.lesseptentrion.net/2011/03/ngaoundere-le-pagne-du-8-mars-est-la-pagne-introuvable>>, accessed 20 August 2013; ‘Régression 8 mars: la mauvaise affaire de Cicam’, *Le Messenger*, 6 March 2008.

²⁵‘8 mars: la chasse à la spéculation ouverte’, *Septentrion Infos*, 28 February 2012: <<http://www.lesseptentrion.net/2012/02/8-mars-la-chasse-a-la-speculation-ouverte>>, accessed 20 August 2013; ‘Régression 8 mars: la mauvaise affaire de Cicam’, *Le Messenger*, 6 March 2008.

²⁶‘8 mars: le faux pagne circule’, *Cameroon Tribune*, 27 February 2007.

affected by this parallel production and sale. For those with small incomes and/or lacking contacts in the official distribution network, however, the existence of fakes is a boon. In Anglophone towns, a length of counterfeit cloth sells for 3,500 (or even 2,500) CFA, compared with 6,500 CFA for the real item. Counterfeiting is generally quite common in the textile trade. A significant number of fakes come from Nigeria, an important (if recently troubled) regional producer. In Cameroon, and throughout West and Central Africa, counterfeit cloth has become a subject of increasing controversy with the arrival of Chinese textiles that are a third the price of locally produced fabric. Beyond the losses decryd by CICAM as a result of this state of affairs and of the state's inability to stop the influx of Asian cloth, many people see it as a question of worth: that of the textiles themselves and that of the women who wear them (Sylvanus 2012).

Because each year's IWD cloth is a source of significant profit for CICAM, the company registers its design with the trademark office – a form of protection that is not extended to most other wax print designs, due to its cost. Neither this, however, nor making the cloth available to buyers only four to six weeks before IWD – in theory allowing too little time for copies to be made – stops counterfeiters from producing fakes. What, under these circumstances, is the value of a counterfeit cloth? Is its low price enough to devalue it in the eyes of consumers? The main concern seems to be its foreign origin: such fabrics are full of typos, it is said, and the material is of lower quality. A form of economic nationalism is generated by these controversies. Still, large amounts of the more affordable cloth are purchased.

Controversy also dogs the authentic version of the 8 March cloth, calling into question the state's respect for and ability to enforce the law. Every year, MINPROFF holds a competition to choose the cloth's logo. In 2012, this event was marred by a scandal. One of the candidates claimed that his design had been used, but that he had not been recognized as its author or awarded the 250,000 CFA prize he was due. 'The official results of the competition put the plaintiff in fourth place,' one newspaper reported, but, according to the plaintiff, 'on the cloth I recognize my logo, which shows two women holding [the map of] Cameroon and, under this, the president's hand giving womankind the equipment it needs to ensure its development in the formal and informal sectors alike (ICT, agriculture, health).'²⁷ Real/fake cloth, real/fake logo: at issue, it seems, is a political object that speaks in fundamental ways to the questions and concerns of citizen consumers vis-à-vis those who hold the reins of power.

Profits associated with the 8 March celebrations extend far beyond the trade in cloth. Numerous public contracts are awarded for the organization of events throughout the day and the week. Alongside the parade, sporting, cultural, scientific and festive activities are planned. They provide opportunities for socializing and, at the same time, for spending and redistribution. Patterned on development or aid projects, as well as on political mobilization initiatives, in which such activities abound (Foucher 2007; Bouilly 2012), they create a space for harnessing the

²⁷'Cameroun. Pagne du 8 mars: mafia gouvernementale autour du logo officiel', *Le Messager*, 8 March 2012.

energies of women, entertaining them and allowing them to share in the economic benefits of the day's events.

In 2011, the total budget earmarked for the 8 March celebrations in one of the state authorities studied for this article stood at 1,990,650 CFA (US \$4,000). This amount was meant to cover: honoraria for speakers, sports instructors and paramedics; cloth purchases (eighty-seven lengths of cloth at 6,000 CFA a piece); transportation costs to acquire the cloth; the cost of sewing of the fabric; transportation for staff participating in the parade (the financial report shows an unreasonable number of participants in relation to the size of the workforce); coffee breaks, soft drinks and cocktails; photographs; a music or sound system and the hiring of canopies; and media coverage. Each of these items constituted a small contract awarded either to staff members or to outside suppliers, following a principle of generalized redistribution. In universities, people invited to participate in round tables on the day's theme are paid for their services. At the Catholic University of Central Africa (Yaoundé), the round table takes the form of a conference entitled 'Female leadership: an African challenge'. Pride of place, in this context, is given to women faculty members. When outside speakers are brought in, they receive an undisclosed honorarium. At the University of Yaoundé II, speakers who took part in the 8 March conference in 2010 were paid 35,000 CFA; at the Advanced Institute of Public Management, the fee was 100,000 CFA.

The cost of these celebrations in public institutions is covered by the operating budget. But high-ranking officials are also expected to participate in raising the necessary funds. Thus, for instance, the funding plan for the celebrations held in Soa in 2012 included a list of people who could contribute cash and also assist in organizing the event, and an injunction that 'other women, male officials serving in Soa and additional goodwill donors' should support the efforts. In this way, high-ranking members of the community positioned themselves at the centre of the redistribution system.

MANUFACTURING GENDER AND POWER RELATIONS

The administrative distribution of IWD cloth is one of the more tangible signs of the state's domination over consuming bodies and of the redistributive pattern addressed in the previous section. However, the 8 March cloth is more than a mere object of clientelism: in addition to its role as an expression of loyalty and rallying, it plays an important part in the articulation of gender relations.

Of cloth and gender hierarchies

In some regions of Cameroon, especially in wedding ceremonies, printed wax cloth is considered to be the gift of choice for a man to present to his mother-in-law and to his wife-to-be, whose promise of fertility he thereby celebrates. Sons are expected to make gifts of cloth to their mothers as well. As a distributor of cloth in the context of IWD celebrations, the state can thus be seen to take on a male role, that of provider, thereby underscoring the key role that family models play in Central Africa in processes of political legitimation (Schatzberg 2001) and in the social production of gender roles. These distribution practices give

rise to an image of patriarchal power – a patriarchal state whose generosity satisfies (or even stands in for) the family obligations of its citizens. But the state gives IWD cloth only to its own agents, leaving sons, brothers and fathers who are not beneficiaries of this largesse to meet the needs of mothers, sisters and wives on their own. Women demand cloth from men, in the process reinforcing the structurally unequal nature of gender(ed) relationships. A man interviewed in 2012 stated: ‘My wife is an accountant in a construction company. So it’s not that she lacks the 6,000 CFA to buy the cloth. But she insists that it is I who must purchase it for her. This is folly.’ For a polygamous man, the cost can be quite high. ‘Each year, I am obliged to purchase a dozen lengths of cloth,’ said a Muslim man for whom it has become a tradition. ‘Apart from my two wives, who I must present with fabric, there are my sisters-in-law. Then there is my mother and my five sisters. If I don’t buy for them, I am a dead man. At the beginning, I complained, but now I just do it.’²⁸ Gifts of cloth, whether from the state or from individuals, thus reinforce existing gender hierarchies but emphasize the obligations towards women of men, and the state.²⁹

The same is true of the parade itself. In the capital, as elsewhere, a woman identified as a high-ranking man’s wife anchors the event. In Yaoundé, the First Lady plays this role. In many cities, a special cluster of women opens the march; although other women may hold important positions themselves, it is the husbands’ titles that are valued and that the MC calls out as the women walk by: governor, prefect, sub-prefect, regional delegate, and so on. In Ebolowa in 2011, in his IWD speech, the governor of the Southern Province reminded the audience that women are ‘wives, mothers, sisters and daughters of men’ and, as a result, ‘key partners in the harmonious development of the country’. Notions of partnership are given tangible form in meals organized by women for men. Thus, in Soa in 2012, women members of the governing party hosted the sub-prefect, who, in return, thanked them with a distribution of small Euro notes.

Much promoted in the international development community, such notions of partnership between the sexes play a key role in the rhetoric of state agencies. They are a mainstay of the type of government-sponsored ‘feminism’ practised by MINPROFF and by associations patronized by the First Lady. Across the continent, this type of approach to women’s rights is a subject of controversy among feminist militants whose focus is, rather, on dismantling socially constructed gender hierarchies (Sow 2012). In Cameroon, IWD is used by some militant groups as a platform to draw attention to their causes, typically to little avail. The Association for the Fight against Violence on Women (AFVW), for instance, makes a point of refusing to join the parade, preferring instead to distribute tracts.³⁰ Some groups demand new legislation on prostitution and others better working conditions for teachers. In 2012 in Yaoundé, supporters of Vanessa Tchatchou, a young woman whose infant disappeared from a local hospital, prompting a nationwide outcry, called for a boycott of the parade. The initiative,

²⁸See <http://www.africavox.com/billet.cfm/7398_mon-pagne-ou-le-divorce.html>, 7 March 2012, accessed 20 November 2012.

²⁹For a subtle analysis of gender roles in Cameroon, see Barbier (1985), Goheen (1996) and Sindjoun (2000).

³⁰‘8 mars: jour de femmes, jour de gloire’, *Cameroon Tribune*, 8 March 2011.

however, was unsuccessful; when hospital personnel marched past, they were heckled by a few lone spectators who were wearing the 8 March *pagne* but cried out: 'Keep our babies safe!'³¹

Moral orders and criticisms of power

The most vocal critics of Cameroon's IWD celebration disapprove not of the event itself but of practices surrounding it that they deem decadent: for many participants, they claim, the event is an excuse to turn gender roles on their head and, in the process, to behave in morally dubious ways. Numerous institutions warn against such behaviour. Denouncing the free-for-all that attends the sale and consumption of IWD cloth, in 2012 *L'Effort Camerounais*, a Catholic newspaper, suggested that the celebration had become little more than a business enterprise.³² In Maroua in 2012, the governor ended his speech with advice for women of the Far North Region: 'Above all, no excess.' In Adamawa Province, the regional delegate for MINPROFF threatened to arrest women found drunk in public spaces.³³ Every year, NGOs join ministries in issuing warnings 'against unbridled enjoyment and feasting'.³⁴ Newspapers are full of testimonies from men railing against the excesses of their womenfolk.

These calls to moral order are responses to the after-parties that follow the parade. On IWD in 2006, Mokolo market, one of Yaoundé's most vital commercial centres, was strikingly quiet. Women who would otherwise have been engaged in commerce could be seen resting on carts usually reserved for transporting goods, or seated in bars in front of multiple bottles of beer. By nightfall, gaggles of drunken women were a common sight. During the parade, when men march past, which happens in some cases, they are cheered, but afterwards the situation is quite different; as these same men walk by, women jeer at them, calling out: 'What are you doing here? Have you finished cooking? If I come home tonight and don't find food on the table there'll be hell to pay!'³⁵ This kind of behaviour, the feasting, drinking and dancing that accompanies it, and, more generally, the presence of women in spaces of public sociability that they usually eschew can be seen as constituting a ritual reversal and, hence, an escape. Relating these observations of women feasting to the literature on mobilization and 'ritual rebellion' might help us to transcend a functionalist understanding of women's licentious behaviour. Rather than a mere reversal of the ordinary social order, these celebrations are spaces of political expression. Typically, those involved belong to organized women's groups (CIGs, cooperatives or associations of co-workers), which, in this context, become spaces of politicization. The literature on women's movements underscores the importance of group activities of this kind

³¹ *Mutations*, 9 March 2012.

³² 'Le 8 mars: arborer le *pagne* ou réfléchir sur les problèmes de la femme?', *L'Effort Camerounais*, 2008: <<http://www.leffortcamerounais.info/2008/03/le-8-mars-arbor.html>>, accessed 10 August 2015.

³³ '8 mars sous fond de menaces à Ngaoundéré', *Septentrion Infos*, 2011.

³⁴ This is the case with CHRAPA (Center for Human Rights and Peace Advocacy in Bamenda) and with the Provincial Delegate for MINPROFF in the Western Province. See *Le Messenger*, 8 and 9 March 2006.

³⁵ *La Nouvelle expression*, 9 March 2006.

and of associated community networks in consciousness-raising, notably as it relates to gender relations (Bereni and Revillard 2012). In rural Cameroon, such routinized events similarly pose threats to the social order (Barbier 1985). In Kom, in the Grassfields, the *anlu* ritual, which is meant to redress offences committed by men against womanhood, formed the basis of a political uprising during the nationalist period (Nkwi 1985). In the forest, Maka rituals of *djade* express the intimate and dramatic tension of gender relationships in the domestic sphere and its potential transformation (Geschiere 1985).

But gender relationships are not the only issue discussed during the IWD. Of course, in the face of such collective self-affirmation, patriarchal reactions take on a distinctly moralizing cast. In songs and in countless newspaper articles,³⁶ women are accused of ‘lifting up their *kabas*’ – a rumour that, every year, draws widespread opprobrium. On IWD, one newspaper reported in 2012, women ‘appear in [the day’s] cloth, parade, applaud, drink, behave in obscene ways, partake in orgies and deviance of all kinds, under the benign – one might even say the encouraging – gaze of the authorities’.³⁷

As the foregoing suggests, the government is also a target of criticism. It is accused of having a *laissez-faire* attitude towards the ‘licentious behaviour’ of women revellers and, in some quarters, there is talk of its using IWD cloth to further morally corrupt practices of its own. Rumour has it that the cloth’s design includes Rosicrucian symbols. In 2006 and 2007 in particular, this rumour was rife; the result, according to Laking’s CEO, was a significant decline in sales (a drop of 15 per cent in 2007).³⁸ The situation was made worse by the archbishop of Douala, who publicly accused government actors of inserting hidden ‘esoteric signs’ into the cloth’s design.³⁹ The belief that public officials use magic and belong to sects of various kinds and, as a result, are involved in all manner of illegitimate activities is widespread throughout the country (Geschiere 1995). Opponents of the government and popular discourses accuse many of its members, including the President, of belonging to a secret society called the Rose Cross (Pigeaud 2011). Women as citizen consumers, materialized here by IWD cloth, have devised a means to communicate their distrust of the government. Such attitudes towards illegitimate power practices are also expressed through the popular condemnation of homosexuality as a means to access power (Eboussi Boulaga and Akana 2007). Rumours about esoteric symbols on one of the most popular cloths in Cameroon become part of the widespread moral condemnation of such practices.

³⁶ ‘Allez, on soulève les robes! Le péché mignon de ces dames camerounaises’, *Africa vox*, 3 March 2012, accessed 20 November 2012.

³⁷ ‘Le 8 mars camerounais’, 15 March 2012: <<http://lecamerounaisinfo.com/Le-8-Mars-camerounais>>, accessed 20 August 2013.

³⁸ ‘Régession 8 mars: la mauvaise Affaire de Cicam’, *Le Messenger*, 6 March 2008; Tsanga (2009).

³⁹ ‘L’archevêque de Douala s’insurge contre certains signes inscrits sur ce pagne’, *Mutations*, 11 March 2008.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that, through its oversight of IWD celebrations, in both their official and unofficial iterations, the Cameroonian government succeeds in asserting control over economic and social distribution, while leaving enough room to ensure private profit and individual freedom. The imposition of a single, uniform-like garment, parades and moral injunctions might all be seen as working together to make the event a tool of political and social command, aimed at controlling women, the regime's ultimate social cadets (Bayart 1985). However, we have sought to show that this would be a reductive reading. Women are not obliged to take part in the celebrations, whether as marchers, onlookers or revellers. Yet, playing elegantly on a mix of desires – for distinction, exhibition and monetary gain – IWD in general and the production of its associated wax print cloth in particular have become true instances of the popular. Approaching the success of this key state mobilization through one of its symbolic objects, the *pagne du 8 mars*, we have sought to shed light on the social fabric of loyalty and the articulation of loyalist and disruptive popular mobilizations, and have moved beyond explanations that are overly centred on the state. As an object of exchange and social distinction, the *pagne* provides women with a variety of ways of interacting (or not interacting) with the state and with men. Although, on the face of it, the act of dressing in the day's cloth may be seen as an expression of collective loyalty to the regime, one cannot assume that it represents a single, undifferentiated approach to authority. Licentious behaviour while wearing this *pagne* may even appear to be a true condemnation of moral and political power imposed on women. In rural areas, such routinized disruptive mobilizations question the social order and may provide avenues for unexpected rebellions. For the moment, however, this ritual and popular mobilization enables the government to point to the event as an exemplar of its capacity to mobilize its female citizens. By this means, it shows its claims to legitimacy – albeit in a somewhat shaky manner – to be well-founded.

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ABSTRACT

Based on a study of the International Women's Day (8 March), a truly popular event in Cameroon, this article attempts to understand the dynamics of state mobilization in this long-lasting regime. By observing the production and use of one of its symbolic objects, the *pagne du 8 mars* (a dedicated wax print), it sheds significant light on the social fabric of loyalty and the articulation of loyalist and disruptive popular mobilizations and allows us to move beyond ready-made, state-centred explanations. As an object of exchange and social distinction, the *pagne* provides women with a variety of ways of interacting (or not interacting) with the state and with men. Although, on the face of it, the act of dressing in the day's cloth may be seen as an expression of collective loyalty to the regime, one cannot assume that it represents a single, undifferentiated approach to authority. Licentious behaviour while wearing this *pagne* may even represent a real condemnation of moral and political power imposed on women. For the moment, however, this ritual and its popular mobilization are sufficient for the government's purposes: it is able to point to the event as an example of its capacity to mobilize its female citizens, thereby showing that its claims to legitimacy are well-founded.

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis une dizaine d'années, le 8 mars, journée internationale de la femme, est devenue une manifestation politique et populaire au Cameroun. Enchaînant

défilés et activités de loisir, une majorité de citadines portent le pagne événementiel créé pour l'occasion. A partir de l'étude de la production, de la distribution, de la vente et du port du pagne, cet article interroge le rapport des citoyennes et consommatrices camerounaises à l'Etat, qui organise cet événement. L'uniforme produit et offert ou vendu par des entreprises et administrations publiques, exhibé lors des défilés, est sans conteste l'expression d'une loyauté au régime en place. Mais, alors qu'il n'est pas véritablement imposé, le pagne est surtout populaire car il est un moyen de s'identifier à un groupe, parfois de se distinguer, ou encore d'être reconnu. Objet d'échange, de commerce et de visibilité, le pagne est à la fois au service des autorités qui tirent de son succès un attribut de légitimité, et un moyen pour les Camerounaises de satisfaire leurs désirs de consommatrices mais aussi leur position de citoyennes lorsque le pagne est objet de controverse.