CHAPTER 2

National projects in a postcolonial capital city: The example of Yaoundé

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Introduction

Since achieving independence in 1960, the Central African nation-state of Cameroon has had three different political regimes, each of which used the capital city of Yaoundé to represent not only the emergence of a new nation, but also to reflect the power of the State. This chapter aims to focus on the role of national influences on Yaoundé, the capital city, while the influences of the global and the popular will also be identified. Emphasis will be placed on the illustration of the differing representations of the capital city through examples of changes observed particularly in the built environment of Yaoundé. Each of the three national regimes developed public policies that singled out Yaoundé as the capital city. The implementation of these national policies in the capital city is the first aim of this chapter. Their consequences for city residents in terms of nation-building and state formation is the second.

After a brief historical overview of the emergence of Yaoundé and the introduction of Cameroon's three postcolonial regimes (Section 2), the focus of this chapter will be on the identification and implementation of the differing ideologies of the three regimes regarding the capital city (Section 3). Subsequently, the focus will shift to the consequences of this implementation, in particular by identifying certain forms of monumentality and name changes in the city, as well as the construction of commercial infrastructure by national and international businesses (Section 4).

Before concluding, the use by citizenry of particular sites in the capital city to express political and more general opposition to national regimes is addressed (Section 5). Since the capital city is widely perceived to be where political power is wielded nationally, opposition forces, both symbolically as well as in terms of 'counter-power,' often employ the same venues.

The conclusion (Section 6) assesses the influence of national regime politics on developments in the capital city while indicating that global as well as popular forces

have also played a role. In addition, these regime politics employ both indigenous African as well as global urban elements.

A brief history of Yaoundé and the emergence of Cameroon's three postcolonial regimes

Yaoundé is situated in the space that caught the attention of German explorers in 1887. A space between 11 to 15 days of walking from the coast in the middle of a lush forest described as one of 'picturesque beauty.' The city was established in 1889 as a military post by two German officers, Kund and Tappenbeck (Von Morgen 1972), and served as a strategic base for the German administration in southern Cameroon, through which it controlled the hinterland. This security policy, according to official German colonial records, was to counter violent threats from local African kingdoms, in particular from incursions of Ngila, where Chief Vuté was 'famous for his slave trade in the region' (Von Morgen 1972). This policy, far from being limited to the protection of the populations of the region, was also a strategy to provide the military post with greater military protection and to lay the foundations for future conquests into present-day northern Cameroon (Essomba 2005: 258).

After the First World War in 1914, Germany lost its colony of Cameroon to the Allied forces. Great Britain established itself in the western part of what had become a Trust Territory, while France administered the eastern part of the territory – designated Western Cameroon and Eastern Cameroon, respectively. During this phase, until its independence, Yaoundé was the capital of French Cameroon. On 1 January 1960, Yaoundé was confirmed as the capital of postcolonial Eastern Cameroon. One year later, in 1961, French and British Cameroon formed a federal republic and Yaoundé was declared the federal capital.

The population of Yaoundé has expanded rapidly in the years since independence. Its population grew from 89 969 in 1962 during the first postcolonial *federal* regime, to 313 706 in 1976 during the second postcolonial *unitary* regime and then to 2 440 462 in 2015 during the third regime under President Biya. Today, it is the second-largest city in Cameroon after Douala (MINDUH 2010: 21).

According to Debbasch et al., a political regime designates the institutions and political personnel of a state. Accordingly, it is clear that a political regime involves two aspects: the institutional form of power, but also the practices of the leaders linked to the exercise of this power (Debbasch et al. 2001: 357).

This definition leads us to consider two essential changes in Cameroon after independence. The first one was a constitutional change which marked the country's conversion from a federal state to a unitary state on 1 October 1972, both under the presidency of Ahmadou Ahidjo. The second was a presidential transition that took place on 6 November 1982. It marked the end of Ahidjo's presidency and the start of the Biya regime. Thus, the history of postcolonial Cameroon may be divided into three regimes:

1. the federal regime under Ahidjo (1961–1972),
2. the unitary regime under Ahidjo (1972–1982) and
3. the unitary regime under Biya since 1982.

Figure 1: Extension of the city of Yaoundé between 1960 and 2010

	1962	2010
Area	2 920 ha	31 000 ha
Population	89 969	2 400 000
Average annual growth	1.6%	6.8%

Source: Adapted from Plan d'Urbanisme Directeur Yaounde 2020 (CUI 2008:34)

These different political regimes each developed their own system of ideas, beliefs, opinions and rules that influenced the processes of construction and change of the capital city.

Ideological impact

The ideological impact of the federal regime under Ahidjo on the public policies of the capital city

The system of ideas on which this federal regime was based revolved principally around the assertion of the power of the state over its entire territory. Apart from multiple public services, policies reflected a distinct desire to concentrate most of the power around the president of the republic to whom the government was answerable. This centralisation of presidential power in a federal regime – seemingly contradictory in terms – may be explained by the regime’s commitment, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, to put down the ‘rebellion’ led by nationalists of the Union of the Peoples of Cameroon (UPC) (Eboua 1995: 31–35). Significant military force was employed by the first postcolonial government and this left it with established central authority, albeit in a federal regime.

If public policy is understood to mean the ‘interventions of an authority vested with public power and governmental legitimacy in a specific area of society or power’ (Thoenig 2014), then the main such policy of the federal regime in Yaoundé began with two urban plans: the Urban Plan (PU) in 1963 and the specific Master Plan for Yaoundé a few years later.

Approved by a decree in December 1963, the PU was developed by the federal regime to ensure the well-being of the population, with focus on three main goals: (1) to improve residential space by extending the urban perimeter, (2) to clean up the working-class suburbs by removing the traditional low-cost shacks and slums, (3) to

adapt infrastructures and services in the city to the functions and roles for which they were assigned. In this last aspect, action consisted of reducing or extending residential space, and where necessary, redeploying it along the main roads (Ngwé 1982).

Through these provisions, the federal regime ordered and guided the development of the capital city (and other large urban areas) according to its ideology. The desire to adapt infrastructure to the functions of the city is a testimony to the desire to assert the power it has inherited and exercise it by renewing the urban landscape of the capital city. This is the same vision that seems to be pursued in the second public policy, the Urban Management Master Plan (SDAU), drawn up shortly after the implementation of the first one. The SDAU was an ambitious public policy designed solely for Yaoundé, which aimed at comprehensive implementation by the year 2000. By taking up some aspects of the PU, the SDAU intended to realise the following five goals:

1. Adapting infrastructure to the function of the federal capital.
2. Establishing a balance between residential zones and economic activities.
3. Incorporating peripheral areas through the development of non-urban, urban and suburban spaces.
4. Creating a city centre in order to accommodate high-level structures necessary to fulfil its role as capital.
5. Creating structural hubs within the suburbs, adapting and rehabilitating the working-class districts. (Ngwé 1982: 81)

Furthermore, in order to achieve these goals, the federal regime adapted local urban administration by amending the status of the municipality of Yaoundé. In 1967, the urban district of Yaoundé became an urban municipality falling under a 'special regime'.

In fact, the functions of an elected mayor at the head of the urban municipality were assigned to a government delegate appointed by presidential decree. The activities of the delegate in the performance of his or her duties were defined by provisions carefully established by the federal regime, which had supervisory authority. Effectively, the delegate exercised the functions generally assigned to the elected mayor of an ordinary urban municipality, but did not preside over the municipal council (Kuoh 1992: 88). Nonetheless, the delegate was granted discretionary authority to manage the capital city according to the ideological orientation of the federal regime.

The ideological impact of the unitary regime under Ahidjo on the public policies of the capital city

The unitary regime period under Ahidjo was from 1972 to 1982. Through the merger of the federal institutions in 1972, the unitary regime under Ahidjo further centralised and consolidated its power, such as by declaring Yaoundé the capital city of the new unitary state (Azevedo 1989). In particular, the ideology of the unitary regime was based upon a single political party, the National Union of Cameroon (UNC) (Bwele 1981). The urban public policies of this party influenced specific developments in the capital city during this regime.

The ideological involvement of Ahidjo in the construction of the capital city can be observed in the departments created for this purpose. Mainly attached to the

central government, these departments constituted the spearhead through which the regime controlled urban growth in Cameroon. A status report on Yaoundé drawn up by the urban planning department revealed various urban structures and their features whose fragmented and heterogeneous appearance in both residential as well as commercial zones left the impression of anarchic living. In light of this situation, the government of the unitary state planned to transform the urban space of the capital city by establishing public policies whose implementation was intended to lead to effective operational urban management. These specifically consisted of the Mission for Management and Maintenance of Urban and Rural Lands (MATEUR) and the Société Immobilière du Cameroun (SIC), for property development.

The application of these public policies in the capital city minimised the participation of local administration. Under the unitary regime of Ahidjo, Yaoundé fell under the responsibility of an officer-in-charge appointed at national level to head the urban municipality. In its organisation, the municipality retained the structure established under the federal regime. That is, it was a decentralised public authority with a legal personality and financial autonomy (Kuoh 1992: 86). In practice, the government delegate appointed by presidential decree exercised the function of a mayor, acting as the political authority of the national government (Bwele 1981). Visibly, the Ahidjo regime reframed the status of the municipality through measures that reinforced state authority over local urban government (Law no. 74/23 of 2 December 1974). In addition, the national government had the primary responsibility of establishing the urban planning documents that the local urban government were called upon to implement. In effect, for all urban areas nationally, control over the management of municipalities was provided at national level by the Ministry of Territorial Administration and applied at local level by the governor and the prefect of the territorial administration where the local community was based.

The ideological impact of the unitary regime under Biya on the public policies of the capital city

When Paul Biya took over as president of Cameroon on 6 November 1982 after the resignation of his predecessor, a decisive turning point in the proposed political life of Cameroon took place. Envisaged political changes were conceived within the context of what was called *progressive liberalisation*. Three years later, in 1985, one year after the failure of an attempted state coup, the president established his own political party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) and thereby marked an ideological breakaway from his predecessor. The essential aspects of the doctrine of this new party as well as its guidelines for government action are carefully set out in a book that Paul Biya published in 1986, entitled, *Pour le libéralisme communautaire*.

In reality, *community liberalism* is an ideology through which the Biya regime planned to promote a democratic awakening in Cameroon through top-down rule. This ideology is based upon values that promote the sharing of customs of the multiple ethnic groups of Cameroon, each considered an integral part of the Cameroonian nation (Mono Ndjana 1989: 31).

The construction of the nation-state as conceived in the ideology of the Biya regime requires the consolidation of national integration. He asserted this under these terms:

We must give all Cameroonians a sense of their existential solidarity, the basis of the optimal deployment of the vital forces essential for the acceleration of the general progress of the country. I therefore consider the achievement of national integration, the supreme phase of national unity, to be the main historical and priority work that I must undertake with all Cameroonians. (Biya 1986: 30) [own translation]

Contrary to the ideology of the National Union advocated by the unitary regime under Ahidjo, Biya's national integration 'demonstrates the desire to move from a juxtaposition to a fusion of cultural realities through links that the regime intends to encourage between Cameroonians,' according to Mono Ndjana (1989: 33). To achieve this, the regime needed a strategic location to realise this new orientation of national policy. Yaoundé seemed appropriate because it was the seat of state institutions, and so would serve as a showcase of the country both domestically as well as internationally.

One of the first decisions of the Biya regime regarding the capital city can be traced to the local government reform of 1987. Pursuant to law no. 87-015 of 15 July 1987, a decree was signed to rename the city's municipality into the Urban Community of Yaoundé (CUY). The new name described a decentralised public authority that grouped together and coordinated the activities of the four municipalities of the arrondissements that Yaoundé had by that point.

In effect, urban public policy in Yaoundé was controlled by the administration of the central government. At the level of the different arrondissements of the capital city, responsible for local administration, elected mayors chaired arrondissement councils (UNDP 2002). Many decisions at this level required ratification from the community council of Yaoundé itself. Instead of an elected city mayor, the government delegate, appointed by the President of the Republic, presided over the community council of the city and authorised the decisions it took (CUY 2008: 39). In 2008, this centralised approach to governance in the capital city was concretised in the Urban Master Plan (PDU) of Yaoundé horizon 2020.

Accordingly, it is clear that many of the urban public policies developed and applied in Yaoundé after 1960 were influenced both by the somewhat divergent ideologies of the three postcolonial regimes as well as by the fact that they wished to implement particular policies in their capital city with the intention of symbolising the emergence of an independent African nation-state. It is also apparent that these regimes believed they required centralised authority over their capital city in this endeavour. We will now turn to the visible consequences of these policies on the built environment of Yaoundé.

Transformation of the built environment of the capital city

The two Cameroonian presidents and their central governments – largely by way of their control over Yaoundé's local governments – brought about visible changes in the capital city. Three have been selected for discussion, one during each of the three postcolonial regimes. These cases reflect the use of the capital city in the process of nation-building and of expressing national state power.

The construction of public and commercial buildings in Yaoundé

Changes and additions to the built environments of capital cities, particularly in the years after independence from colonial rule, may fruitfully be viewed in the context of nation-building (Bekker & Therborn 2012). In this regard, Maurice Agulhon states that 'political power aims at being recognised, identified and, if possible, favourably appreciated by means of a whole system of signs and emblems, the principal ones of which are those that strike the eye' (Agulhon 1988). Here, the focus is on the construction of buildings of both national and international significance in Yaoundé as well as changes to the names of boulevards and main streets in the capital city (Pondi 2012; Essono 2016).

1961 was the year of reunification of Western and Eastern Cameroon and the establishment of a federal republic. Accordingly, Yaoundé represented both the capital of the Eastern federated state and the capital of the federal state. It accommodated 2 governments, with 7 ministers for the Eastern State and 20 for the federal state (Ze Nguele 1972: 1096). The city also had two legislative assemblies with their respective administrations (Bwele 1981). In short, in a physical and visible sense, the Federal Assembly of Cameroon, the Supreme Court, and other ministerial buildings, contributed to symbolising the power of the new state in its new federal capital.

At the global level, the confirmation of Cameroon's independence led to the need for the capital city to play a role in international affairs. Yaoundé served as a showcase for independent Cameroon when it hosted the head office of the Common African, Malagasy and Mauritian Organisation (OCAM); the African and Malagasy Intellectual Property Office (OAMPI), which later became the African Intellectual Property Organisation (OAPI); the Regional Bureau of Unesco as well as other bodies (Ze Nguele 1972: 1096). The architectural style chosen for these buildings – a modern mix with German, French and African roots – is also apparent in the headquarters of state and private enterprises: the Société Nationale des Hydrocarbures (SNH) and the, then, Central Information Technology Directorate as well as the head office of Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV) are examples.

Change of road names in Yaoundé

Many of the main streets in Yaoundé continue to bear names that signal both the period of their construction as well as people of note at that period. First are the names of religious personalities: *Rue Mgr René Graffin*, *avenue Mgr Vieter*, *Mgr François-Xavier Vogt*. Second, the names of French doctors and soldiers: *avenue Jamot*, *avenue Maréchal Foch*, and third, as Cameroon changed its status from Trust Territory to sovereign independence: *avenue Kennedy*, *avenue Charles de Gaulle*, *Rue Valéry Giscard d'Estaing*, *avenue Churchill*, and *avenue Jean Paul II* (Pondi 2012).

After independence, a number of boulevards and streets changed their names to commemorate important dates and personalities reflecting the sovereign independence of the nation: the *Boulevard du 20 mai* and the *Boulevard de la réunification* as well as the *Squares de l'indépendance* and *du cinquantenaire* (the 50th centenary of Independence). *L'Avenue Ahmadou Ahidjo* and *l'Avenue John Ngu Foncha*

(a former prime minister of Cameroon) pay tribute to two Cameroonian leaders. The table below records a number of the changes that have taken place after 1960, identifying old and new names.

Table 1: Some of the road name changes in Yaoundé since 1960

Formerly	Currently
Abyedege asi/Bilig bi Embumbun	Boulevard du 20 mai
Boulevard Charles de Gaulle	Rue Essono Ela
Carrefour Bouillet	Place Ahmadou Ahidjo
Plateau atemenque	Boulevard de la Réunification
Mfundi assi	Av. Ahmadou Ahidjo
Elig Mballa Enyengue	John Ngu Foncha
Vallée de Dzungolo	Av. Kennedy

The national flag and reunification

The design of the Cameroonian flag predated independence. Adopted in October 1957 by the Legislative Assembly of Cameroon (ALCAM), the legislators selected a tri-colour flag with vertical stripes of equal size from the left to the right, in green, red and yellow. The green symbolised the large tropical forest of south Cameroon, the red indicated power and the blood of the Cameroonians shed during the struggle for independence, while the yellow represents the sun, the Sahelian soil and the savannah of the northern part of the country (Mbarga 2014).

Changes made to the flag after 1960 are evidently related to the country's march towards unification. In 1961, the flag was enriched by two gold stars incorporated in the green stripe, representing the two federated states and, from 21 May 1975, the two were replaced by a single star in the red stripe following the reunification that took place in 1972.

It was in Yaoundé that the flag was hoisted for the first time on 10 November 1957 by the then Prime Minister, André Marie Mbida (Bwele 1981). Subsequently, it has been used in official ceremonies country-wide. It may be seen in front of many public buildings in the capital city and its third expression – that of the reunification of the East and West symbolised by a golden star – was accompanied by the construction of the Monument to Reunification in Yaoundé (see Figure 3).

The capital city as the site of claims to 'counter power'

African capital cities may be viewed as public sites where African governments express 'power over' their citizenry. This 'power over', however, differs from 'power to': most administrations lack the know-how and resources to address the city services and other needs of their burgeoning urban populations (Bekker & Therborn 2012).

Figure 2: Evolution of Cameroon's flag since 1957

Source: Essono (2016: 238)

Figure 3: Monument to Reunification

Source: FischerFotos

As a consequence, opposition forces often use sites in the capital city to publicly express their resistance to the national government. The Boulevard *du 20 mai* is an appropriate example. Located in the city centre, the Boulevard *du 20 mai* publicly and symbolically recalls the 1972 transition of the federal state to a unitary nation-state. Accordingly, as is well-known in the capital, it serves each year as the setting for the parades commemorating National Day, National Youth Day, Workers Day and several other national events. It is not surprising, therefore, that opposition forces and opposition national parties use the same Boulevard to publicly express their claims to voice and to 'counter power.' In 1990, a number of political parties demanded of President Biya that the next national elections be multi-party. These demands were publicly expressed and widely broadcast from the Boulevard.

Conclusion

Since independence in 1960, the built environment of Yaoundé has been deeply influenced by national government interventions. The skyline of the central city illustrates modern buildings built to accommodate central state and new private sector edifices, reflecting both domestic as well as global interests. The names of the capital's main streets, moreover, identify both earlier leadership as well as new nomenclature reflecting postcolonial iconic dates and events as well as leadership.

These changes are due in no small measure to the postcolonial ideologies of the three regimes described above. The chronology of regimes from federal to unitary and subsequently from the rule of Ahidjo to that of Biya moreover parallels an increasingly centralised and authoritarian national control over both the capital city as well as the country as a whole. These central government and presidential interventions in Yaoundé have contributed toward the vigorous and sustained urbanisation flows into the capital city. It is somewhat surprising, moreover, that these internal migration streams have not demonstrated superior flows of members of each presidents' ethnic group to the capital during their tenures (Togolo 2019). Rather, the venue of the capital city has been identified – by both competing national political parties as well as by a restless urban citizenry drawn from Cameroon as a whole – as a public area where their opposition and displeasure may optimally be made visible and public.

In conclusion, it is not only the leaders of the central government whose top-down control has marked the urban landscape of Yaoundé but also global interests – as evidenced in their new edifices – as well as the influences of the urban citizenry. It is also worth noting that the nature of these changes to the built environment expresses a mix of African and global values. The monument to reunification, illustrated above, is an example.

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