

# UC Santa Cruz

## Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal

### Title

All le moto a ces droits: Notes on Hervé Youmbi's Translation of the Déclaration Universelle des Droits de l'Homme (DUDH)

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4vj9j1wx>

### Journal

Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal, 2(1)

### Author

Moore, Alexandra C.

### Publication Date

2019

### DOI

10.5070/R72145862

### Copyright Information

Copyright 2019 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

**All le moto a ces droits: Notes on Hervé Youmbi's  
Translation of the Déclaration Universelle des Droits de  
l'Homme (DUDH)**

Alexandra C. Moore

The following photo essay considers Hervé Youmbi's 2017 artwork *DUDH* in the context of the current political crisis in Cameroon. For *DUDH*, Youmbi translated five articles from the Déclaration Universelle des Droits de l'Homme into Camfranglais and installed them on signs in the quartiers of New Bell Ngangue and Ndogpassi III in Douala, Cameroon. He printed one set of the five articles on a blue background for New Bell and the same articles on green for installation

in Ndogpassi III. Youmbi unveiled the signs in December 2017 as part of the Salon Urbain de Douala (SUD) triennial.<sup>1</sup>

The politics of official language in Cameroon is a product of its colonial formation.<sup>2</sup> In 1884 a handful of European leaders declared an area of land that encompasses present-day Cameroon and some of present-day Nigeria, the German Protectorate of Kamerun. After World War I, the League of Nations

divided Kamerun into the British Cameroons and French Cameroun. During this period the French and British imposed on each territory their own language and institutions, including different legal and educational systems. In 1960 French Cameroun gained independence, and in 1961 the Southern British Cameroons, given the choice between joining Nigeria or Cameroun, voted for the latter. This area, the northwest and southwest regions, is now the Anglophone part of Cameroon.<sup>3</sup> Douala, the largest city and site of *DUDH*, is in the Francophone area, but as a commercial center, it draws immigrants from all over Cameroon. Camfranglais, the lingua franca of Douala, mixes the two official languages of French and

English with words from Duala and other indigenous Cameroonian languages.

The layout of this text foregrounds the multiple mediations of language present in the work: each photo of *DUDH* is accompanied by a transcription of the pictured sign in Camfranglais, a direct translation of that sign into English, and the full article from the Déclaration that the sign references, also in English.<sup>4</sup> Following each image, an extended caption expands on the process and context of the work, drawing attention to the need for a conversation about human rights in Cameroon today and the process of linguistic rent and partial repair that Camfranglais evinces.



Figure 1 *All le moto a droit au bolo pour life et ya mo avec ses muna.*  
 (Everyone has the right to work and to feed their kids.)

*Article 23, line 1: Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work, and to protection against unemployment.*

The blue metal sign sits on the second story of a tiled building in New Bell, easily visible from the busy street. It contains a simple message: everyone has the right to work and to feed their children. But within Cameroon as a whole, almost 24 percent of the population lives below the international poverty line of \$1.90 a day, and in New Bell, where the sign in Figure 1 is located, years of purposeful neglect by both colonial and postcolonial regimes have resulted in a neighborhood with minimal infrastructure and a mostly informal economy.<sup>5</sup> This neglect was inscribed into the German and French urban planning of Douala, and continues at least partly because New Bell has been the site of popular resistance to successive governments.<sup>6</sup>

Around the words from the Déclaration runs a geometric motif that resembles the patterns on Bamileke ndop textiles.<sup>7</sup> These cloths were traditionally resist-dyed with indigo, creating a striking blue imagery that Youmbi draws from here, layering the authority of the street sign with a Bamileke visual language of power and respect.

\*\*\*



Figure 2 All le moto a le droit de keep le mboa tchale-tchalé pour ne pas

sick. (Everyone has the right to keep their home clean, so as to not get sick.)

Article 25, line 1: Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

DUDH began with listening. Youmbi worked with Simon Degaulle Moukala, a lawyer and cultural mediator, to organize conversations about the Déclaration in the two quarters. Together Youmbi and Moukala spoke with people of different ages and occupations at various public spaces within the neighborhoods. In these discussions Youmbi and Moukala did not presume to instruct the community members about human rights but through dialogue learned from the community about their concerns and collectively decided on the most fitting articles to present publicly.<sup>8</sup>

\* \* \*



Figure 3 All le moto doit s'instruire et all les muna doivent go au school. (Everyone has the right to learn, and children have the right to go to school.)

*Article 26, line 1: "Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available, and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit."*

As Cameroon is officially bilingual, many primary schools (such as the one partially pictured in Figure 3) are nominally bilingual, but this rarely translates to actual bilingual instruction and often refers to two separate administrations (French and English) within one building, a perverse microcosm of the nation's split.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, though the majority of Cameroonians speak at least one indigenous language and one official language, many Francophones are not fluent in English

and vice versa. Rather than translate the chosen articles of the Déclaration into French and English, Youmbi made the practical decision to use Camfranglais:

Si l'on veut atteindre dans sa communication la large majorité de la population camerounaise constituée de jeunes, c'est la langue appropriée. C'est pourquoi les grosses firmes de téléphonie mobile ou des sociétés brassicoles n'ont pas hésités à faire usage de cette langue dans d'importantes campagnes publicitaires.<sup>10</sup>

(If one wants to reach the large majority of the Cameroonian population that is made up of youths, it is the appropriate language. That is why large mobile phone and brewing companies have not hesitated to use this language in their publicity.)<sup>11</sup>

Using Camfranglais firmly roots the primary audience of this artwork as the residents of Douala, particularly young people. And Youmbi is not the only artist to use Camfranglais: peeking up at the bottom of this image is a 2007 mosaic by Hervé Yamguen, part of his series "Words Written on New Bell," which inscribed Camfranglais rap lyrics all around New Bell.



Figure 4 No body ne doit mimba avec la liberté d'autrui, ne doit toum le piment ni smock le banga. (Nobody should get in the way of the freedom of others, engage in prostitution, or use drugs.)

Article 29, line 2: “In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and

freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order, and the general welfare in a democratic society.”

Prostitution (*toum le piment*) and drug use (*smock le banga*) were two activities that Youmbi and Moukala’s interlocutors consistently raised as problems in the area during the community discussions.<sup>12</sup> Though neither are directly referenced in the Déclaration, Youmbi interpreted the community’s struggles as an example of Article 29: sometimes individual freedoms can and should be restricted for the overall well-being of the community.

This sign in New Bell is the only one of the ten that has disappeared.<sup>13</sup> Youmbi doesn’t know who was responsible, but as the sign sat above a street known as an area for soliciting prostitution, it seems a reasonable guess that an interested party disagreed with the interdiction.<sup>14</sup> The desire to destroy the sign demonstrates the potential power of its speech.

\* \* \*



*Figure 5 No body ne doit te do bad ni te show le peper. (Nobody has the right to mess with you.)*

*Article 5: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.*

Youmbi’s translation of the Déclaration sits against the Cameroonian government’s escalating violation of human rights. Many scholars and artists have drawn attention to the brutality of the post-independence state, but in recent years the ever-present threat of government-sanctioned violence has morphed into a more volatile and vicious reality.<sup>15</sup> Now armed separatist groups and the state military are terrorizing the Anglophone areas. In the last three years, at least two hundred villages have been attacked and half a million people have been

displaced.<sup>16</sup> The death toll is about 1,850.<sup>17</sup> Witnesses have accused the Cameroonian military of burning alive at least four elderly women who were trapped in their homes.<sup>18</sup>

\* \* \*





Figure 6 *All le moto doit s'instruire et all les muna doivent go au school.* (Everyone has the right to learn, and children have the right to go to school.)

*Article 26, line 1: ‘Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall*

*be made generally available, and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.’*

Education is always political, but particularly so in Anglophone Cameroon, where both the language of instruction and the system of schooling differ from the Francophone regions of the country. Since the beginning of the protests, Anglophone educators have been on the front lines, demanding that the government provide teachers fluent in English and familiar with the English education system.<sup>19</sup> Schools have consequently been a flash point of the violence, with the armed separatist groups demanding a boycott of schools and attacking teachers, students, and school buildings. As of June 2018, the separatists had burned down at least thirty-six schools.<sup>20</sup> In this hostile environment, about thirty-three thousand school-aged children are being denied their right to education.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to Youmbi’s sign, Figure 6 also shows *Empreinter les Voix*, a set of moto-taxi umbrellas French Moroccan artist Chourouk Hreich designed for SUD 2017 and which several guests rode under, from artwork to artwork, during the triennial.

\* \* \*



Figure 7 *No body ne doit mimba avec la liberté d'autrui, ne doit toum le piment ni smock le banga. (Nobody should get in the way of the freedom of others, engage in prostitution, or use drugs.)*

*Article 29, line 2: "In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order, and the general welfare in a democratic society."*

Camfranglais takes syntax and vocabulary from both former colonial languages but mixes in enough neologisms and Duala that it is unfamiliar to an outsider. The language pushes back against the violent fracturing of society initiated by the colonial division of territory and exacerbated by the UN's refusal to listen to the wishes of Cameroonian political leaders who called for reunification in the 1950s. The curator Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung refers to the linguistic split of the country as a form of dismemberment; communities "who share the same grasslands, food, similar culture and related [indigenous] languages are deterritorialized by situating them within the geographies of Francophone and Anglophone respectively."<sup>22</sup> Through the split in language, people are alienated from their neighbors, from the shared landscape, and from a common history. Camfranglais could be thought of as the scar—the visible trace of both the violence and the potential for healing.<sup>23</sup>

\* \* \*



*Figure 8 All le moco a droit au bolo pour life et ya mo avec ses muna. (Everyone has the right to work and to live with their family.)*

*Article 23, line 1: Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of*

*employment, to just and favorable conditions of work, and to protection against unemployment.*

*Line 3: Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.*

Language has ontological power, giving form to thoughts and shaping the terms of a shared reality. Camfranglais emerged from a series of negotiations and interactions, from the need to speak with neighbors and to create a linguistic commons. It is evidence that despite the political divisions, people from Anglophone and Francophone backgrounds live side by side. Making street signs in Camfranglais honors this reality and asserts the importance of the community that created it, not simply as a commercial demographic but as a political model. Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung suggests Camfranglais could be a potential foundation for rebuilding Cameroon precisely because of the process of negotiation and remnants of difference that it contains.<sup>24</sup> Youmbi’s project goes one step further and imagines a unified yet plural Cameroonian democracy where citizens can build healthy communities, free from fear, where everybody has the respect and rights that they are owed.

\* \* \*

Alexandra Moore is a PhD candidate in visual studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She researches contemporary art with a focus on artistic practices that connect African and European histories, and is particularly interested in how discourses of race, gender, belonging, and citizenship are constructed and transmitted through representations of territory and built space. At UC Santa Cruz she has held the positions of Public Humanities Graduate Instructor and Institute of the Arts and Sciences Curatorial Fellow. Alex earned a B.A. from Wesleyan University.

## Notes

Many thanks to Kate Korroch and the Refract Editorial Board for the invitation to include this in-progress work in an experimental format and for suggestions and edits. Thank you also to the History of Art and Visual Culture Department, UC Santa Cruz, for supporting this research.

<sup>1</sup> For discussion and documentation of the previous SUD festivals, see Iolanda Pensa, ed., *Public Art in Africa* (Geneva, MētisPresses, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0001972018000554>.

<sup>2</sup> Cameroon is home to about 280 indigenous languages, but English and French are the official languages.

<sup>3</sup> This paragraph purposely uses three different spellings of Cameroon to gesture to the fact that these different spellings represent different administrations with linguistic and tangible consequences for the governed. As this piece is primarily in English, I use the English spelling throughout.

<sup>4</sup> My translations of the Camfranglais are thanks to Justine Gaga, Hervé Youmbi, and the glossary in Peter Wuteh Vakunta, *Camfranglais: The Making of a New Language in Cameroonian Literature* (Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa Research and Publishing Common Initiative Group, 2014). Articles of the Déclaration come from “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” October 6, 2015, <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>.

<sup>5</sup> “Poverty & Equity Data Portal,” accessed July 8, 2019, <http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/country/CMR>.

<sup>6</sup> Lynn Schler, *The Strangers of New Bell: Immigration, Public Space, and Community in Colonial Douala, Cameroon, 1914–1960* (Pretoria: Unisa, 2008); Richard A. Joseph, “Ruben Um Nyobé and the ‘Kamerun’ Rebellion,” *African Affairs* 73, no. 293 (1974): 428–48, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.afraf.a096513>; Piet Konings, “Solving Transportation Problems in

African Cities: Innovative Responses by the Youth in Douala, Cameroon,” *Africa Today* 53, no. 1 (2006): 38, <https://doi.org/10.1353/at.2006.0056>.

<sup>7</sup> An example in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum can be seen here:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/636847>.

<sup>8</sup> Hervé Youmbi, email with author, June 27, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Alain Flaubert Takam and Innocent Mbouya Fassé, “English and French Bilingual Education and Language Policy in Cameroon: The Bottom-up Approach or the Policy of No Policy?,” *Language Policy*, March 21, 2019, 12, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-019-09510-7>.

<sup>10</sup> Youmbi, email with author.

<sup>11</sup> Translation by author.

<sup>12</sup> Youmbi, email with author.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, *Clando* (California Newsreel, Films du Raphia (France), 1996), directed by Jean-Marie Téno; *Les saignantes* (Quartier Mozart Films, 2005), directed by Jean-Pierre Bekolo; Dominique Malaquais, “Quelle Liberté: Art, Beauty, and the Grammars of Resistance in Douala,” in *Beautiful Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics*, edited by Sarah Nuttall: 122-163 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Dominique Malaquais, “Blood Money: A Douala Chronicle,” in *African Cities Reader I*, edited by Edgar Pieterse and Ntone Edjabe: 137-49, (Cape Town, Chimurenga and the African Centre for Cities, 2010), 137–49; A. M. Simone, *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa and Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, *Cameroon’s Unfolding Catastrophe: Evidence of Human Rights Violations and Crimes against Humanity*, June 3, 2019, 17.

<sup>17</sup> International Crisis Group, *Cameroon’s Anglophone Crisis: How to Get to Talks?*, May 2, 2019, i.

<sup>18</sup> Ruth Maclean, “Cameroon’s Military Accused of Burning Alive Unarmed Civilians,” *Guardian*, July 20, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/20/cameroon-military-accused-of-burning-alive-unarmed-civilains-villages-english-speaking>.

<sup>19</sup> “Cameroon Teachers, Lawyers Strike in Battle for English,” *Al Jazeera*, December 5, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/12/cameroon-teachers-lawyers-strike-english-161205095929616.html>.

<sup>20</sup> *Cameroon’s Unfolding Catastrophe*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> UNESCO Office in Yaoundé, “Cameroon: Joint Statement of UNICEF and UNESCO on Abduction of Education Personnel and Attacks against Schools in the South-West Region of Cameroon,” June 1, 2018, [http://www.unesco.org/new/en/yaounde/about-this-office/single-view/news/cameroon\\_joint\\_statement\\_of\\_unicef\\_and\\_unesco\\_on\\_abduction/](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/yaounde/about-this-office/single-view/news/cameroon_joint_statement_of_unicef_and_unesco_on_abduction/).

<sup>22</sup> Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, “Situation Don Ton Parranjanja,” *Archives de Cameroun, Les Dits et Les Non-Dits*, 2017, 6.

<sup>23</sup> For more on scars, see Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 201, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203700372>.

<sup>24</sup> Ndikung, “Situation Don Ton Parranjanja,” 7.