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# Between Hollywood and Bandjoun: art activism and anthropological ethnography into the mediascape

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Journal des anthropologues

**BETWEEN HOLLYWOOD AND BANDJOUN :  
ART ACTIVISM AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL  
ETHNOGRAPHY INTO THE MEDIASCAPE**

Ivan BARGNA\*

*The king, the rain, and the radio*

*People have reasoned that a king could make rain; we say this runs contrary to all experience. Today, people reason that the airplane, radio, etc., are a means of bringing nations together and spreading culture.*

L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §132.

In May 2007, during one of my stays in the Cameroonian town of Bandjoun, on the Bamileke plateau, a complaint ran by word mouth: if the rainy season was late coming, it was the fault of the king (*fo*) who impeded its arrival in order to have the sunny days required to work in the construction of the big hut (*nemo*), the symbol of Bandjoun; the *nemo* was important, but « not enough to starve the people ».

When in December 2009 I returned to Bandjoun together with the Alterazioni Video artistic collective, I found a radio station, Radio Ghomala, which broadcasted in French and local idiom (ghomala), with the stated purpose of strengthening the local culture.

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Although the community of the citizens and the subjects of Bandjoun and that constituted by the audience of the radio are different, many of those who believe in the power of the *fo* to start or stop the rains are the same people who listen to the radio. The owner of Radio Ghomala is the chairman of the Dschang University board, a local administrator of the ruling party (RPDC) and a dignitary of the Bandjoun *chefferie*, where he performs traditional masked dances.

The « modernity » does not simply replace the « tradition », but it interferes and combines with it, reinventing it in a continuous process of battled negotiation that in the Bamileke region takes the form of a « conservative modernism » (Warnier, 1993).

Communication technologies are not just a tool to transfer information quickly and effectively, in the perspective of economic and instrumental rationality, but the means by which to create imagined communities and worlds, and enhance reality. The media operate as technologies of enchantment that draw their power from the enchantment of technology (Gell, 1992): the spread of a radio message in the sky and the intervention of the *fo* to stop the rains, while remaining different things are in the order of possibilities.

In Bandjoun one finds not only the radio station but also bars with satellite television antennas, cyber cafes, video clubs, stalls selling pirated CDs and DVDs, magazines, mobile phones often equipped with camera and camcorder. These are tools and experiences that are not for everyone but that directly or indirectly affect a significant part of the people, while establishing the social divisions between those who have access and those who do not.

Bandjoun is therefore, at the same time, an ancient kingdom, a rural village, and one of the most important centers of social and economic life of Cameroon in a globalized world. The migration to the cities of Douala and Yaounde has been intense, but those who have left, have not, for the most part, broken their ties with their native village, where they return for the holidays, funerals, marriages, sacrifices made on their ancestors skulls, family and

« secret societies » rituals, *tontines* meetings, and community celebrations taking place in the *chefferie*.

It was precisely for one of these celebrations (*Msem Todjom*, the « cultural week » of Bandjoun) in November-December 2009, that I invited the artists collective of Alterazioni Video to accompany me in Cameroon, where, since 2002, I have lead my research about the art and visual culture of the Bamileke region (Bargna, 2007 & 2010).

### **Art, anthropology, and ethnographic practice**

The relationships between anthropology and contemporary art are not new (Clifford, 1988) but in recent years they have become more intense. The anthropology of art has not only expanded its investigation to contemporary art, but has increasingly regarded the artists as its interlocutors, seeing them as bearers of a knowledge with which to confront themselves, by looking at their practices of knowledge construction (Schneider & Wright, 2006). Similarly the artists, who in the past made use of anthropological knowledge only to get access to « primitives », now look more at the way anthropologists work. Some have called this change the « ethnographic turn » of a contemporary art (Coles, 2001) that, having left museums and galleries, has been creating artistic works related to specific contexts and social situations, in ways that recall dialogic interaction and participant observation.

This mutual attraction finds its reasons (Marcus & Myers, 1995) in the proximity of their cognitive styles (their attention to the contextual, sensory and quality aspects of the experience) and in the critique that anthropology and art have led to the modernity in which they arose (their attention to cultural otherness and marginalized forms of experience). It's not just a matter of proximity: looking at the other involves both the perception of a proximity which makes the relationships possible, and that of a diversity which makes it desirable. It is within this distance that the relationship becomes possible.

While anthropology looks at art for going beyond its logocentrism and recover sensoriality and creativity, art instead turns to anthropology as a tool with which to make its emancipation from the materiality of the artwork, continuing in the direction started by Duchamp.

The attention to the performative dimension of their knowledge, the shift of emphasis from the product to the process, and the involvement in participatory and collaborative practices, are the elements that certain artistic and anthropological practices share today.

**Taking Alterazioni Video to Cameroon: fieldwork, documentary and fiction**

Alterazioni Video is an artists collective founded in 2004, whose members – Paolo Luca Barbieri Marchi, Alberto Caffarelli, Matteo Erenbourg, Andrea Masu e Giacomo Porfiri – live between Milan, Berlin and New York ([www.alterazionivideo.com](http://www.alterazionivideo.com)). They have been creating their works in many parts of the world, from China to Albania, and participated in many international exhibitions including the Venice Biennale of Art in 2007, and that of Architecture in 2010.

The choice to work with Alterazioni Video is not only motivated by their experience in video art but also by their poetics which looks at the artistic action immersed in the daily life, as the way to bring out the underlying political logic of the situations considered, putting them in stalemate, and turning them against themselves. They are interventions that sometimes resort to camouflage and parasitic tactics, or that insert dystonic elements into the context concerned, thereby acting on the paradox and the estrangement, or seeking active involvement of the people, providing them with technologies in order to create works together, even in the form of images archives and databases.

The most important work of Alterazioni Video, which is still going, and part of which at least I could follow on the ground, may be the *Incompiuto Siciliano* (Bargna, 2009).

In 2004 the collective proposes the establishment in the town of Giarre of the Archeological Park of Incompiuto Siciliano, made up of a number of unfinished and abandoned buildings built between 1956 and 2000: a theater, an Olympic swimming pool, an athletic center with polo field, a multi-storey garage, and many more. These works were designed and undertaken for the sole purpose of getting the funds. Through a renaming, abandonment is promoted to *incompiuto* (uncompleted) and the abuse is dignified to *non finito* (unfinished). The action is not confined to the art world but is endorsed by the municipality that creates an Incompiuto Department and participates in competitions for finding resources for the project. Meanwhile the artists involve the citizens of Giarre in public meetings, carrying out interviews and collecting documentation, promoting a work of collective memory from below.

Taking Alterazioni Video with me to Cameroon I was interested in exploring the potential of art activism and participatory art to create meaningful situations, but I was also aware of the risks that this entailed: the danger of an excessive intrusiveness in the system of local relationships, actions that could be misinterpreted causing unpredictable reactions, a transgression that succumbed to the spectacular, reducing the local situation to a mere pretext for works to be consumed elsewhere. Last but not least the risk of jeopardizing in three weeks a work that had lasted since 2002.

I invited Alterazioni Video to collaborate in order to work interactively along the border between art and anthropology, creating a common work through an experience lived together, which had as its object some aspect of social and cultural reality of Bandjoun, and which would allow different readings, so that it could be accepted both in the art world as well as in anthropology.

The collaborative goal was common, but the focus immediately appeared to be different. In my case the object on which I invited them to focus their attention, at least as a starting point, were the celebrations which would take place at the Cultural Bandjoun Week (25-29 November 2009). My idea was to have a

different outlook on the reality that I had being studying as an anthropologist of art and aesthetics since 2002.

For *Alterazioni Video* the basic idea was rather that of creating a horror musical movie with local non-professional actors, with no prior script, but staying open to the stresses on the ground.

To simplify, we could say that the anthropologist was looking at the « documentary » and the artists at the « fiction », but not with the aim of making two exclusive fields, but rather two different attraction poles: to give prominence to reality by integrating useful fictions, or producing a fiction resting on reality.

The questions for the anthropologist are those of the relationships between reality and image, representation of reality and reality of representation, between the indexical and documentary function of text and audio-visual and the fictional character of each construct (Geertz, 1973: 15) involving stylistic and authorial choices, being aware that fiction is inherent to each documentary (de France, 1989) insofar as the translation of reality within the filmic discourse always requires a *mise en scène*.

The narrative and expressive side and the analytical and rigorous one are both needed for visual anthropology (Edwards, 1997) and for video art operating in the field of social activism and on the ground of ethnographic practice. An objectivist reification of the facts, and an aesthetic formalism are both dangers to be avoided, as much for one as for the other.

On the part of the artists, reference to reality does not fail, even if it takes freer and less constrained forms, because the work and the knowledge it bears may refer to a reality that is not necessarily the local one. While the anthropologist is tied to the « native's point of view », for the artist this is one variable among others: you can move through Bandjoun, to go elsewhere, changing in the editing the meaning of the images gathered there, in order to speak of other things which are no less real.

For these reasons, the experience and the video made did not seek (nor could they have lead to) an unequivocal result, but have remained open, crossed by tensions. The video does not have an

informative and educational aim, it's not designed to convey some achieved results but, precisely because of its polysemic openness, is something to think about. As such it becomes a tool to be used again in the ethnographic research.

In the video there is a sequence which, more than any other, provides an opportunity for a reflection on this theme: that of the *mwuop* dance<sup>1</sup>. The first part has a clear documentary register: long and medium shots and synchronic sound that give information about the event and the context, shooting the dancers, the audience, the stand, and showing the interactions among the participants. In the second part (also announced by a gunshot and a black screen) everything changes: the images are always those of the dance, but slowed to 50 frames per second, while the sound of the drums has been replaced by a piece of rock music, and the shot moves into a close-up framing the faces and bodies of the dancers. The result is a rather estranging shift from information and referential meaning to the aesthetic and emotional level. A change of perspective that however does not compromise its ethnographic relevance: The slow-motion and high image quality allow us to sharpen our senses and enhance the corporeal dimension of the image, by emphasizing its evocative potential: dust, sweat, and facial expressions become more noticeable, reducing in this way the distance between the spectator and the dance, creating a greater involvement. But what remains uncertain is the nature of reality that we are participating in. The emotional dimension of the image comes out strengthened, the facial expression « distorted » by the slow-motion seems almost to become « monstrous », resetting the distance, not in terms of objectification, but of emotional reaction.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=epe2ZZXZ94is>HYPERLINK  
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=relmfu



Perhaps we are faced more towards ourselves than towards Bandjoun, making the other the place of the projection of our phantoms. This is something real, but we cannot say what it is: the boundaries between outside and inside, between our own and the alien become blurred.

But that's not all. Much of the displacement generated by the sequence is due to the fact that the dancers actually seem to dance to the rhythm of rock music and that, therefore, despite the contrast between what we feel and what we see, the distance between music and bodily movements, is much more reduced than what we would expect. What we are witnessing is the double and contradictory experience of a striking juxtaposition and an unexpected proximity. It is a well-founded impression as the music played by the drums and the rock song have the same basic rhythm. It is not by chance: we might say that the rock here declares his debt to the African music and shows its origins. The artistic work in editing it so makes us « feel » something that, without being contained in the performance, however, is not alien to it, emerging as the result of a relevant connection. By changing perspective, we could also say that this soundtrack added to the image, was only taking what is already apparent in what is visually perceived: the presence of dancing masks portraying Hollywood characters (discussed below) or shooting the performance with their cell, Nike on their feet, or again the industrial towels on their neck replacing traditional *ndop* cloths.

Although all this is highly manipulated, it is not merely arbitrary, even though a part of those who have seen the video in Bandjoun have not appreciated it: during the projection I made in September 2011 for the actors and people who had participated in the making of the film, old people watching the *mwuop* dance they performed, complained that the link between the talking drums and the dancers and audience experience had disappeared. There is no way to reconcile the discrepancy, but more than an opposition between a locally significant experience and an external intrusion that cannibalizes it, we can see it in terms of two different and interfering levels of meaning construction.

The video displaces and multiplies the points of view. In another dance, the elephant dance masks (*tso*) the trick was to attach a microcamera to a dancer's costume<sup>2</sup>. The idea was to overthrow the usual point of view, by looking at the dance not as a spectacle but through the eyes of the mask, through a point-of-view shot. There is little to see: the visual field is limited by the mask going before (dance masks proceeding in a row) and the image is worth much more for its kinetic quality than for its representational one. This trick enhances the perception of the event, but no identification is possible, simply because what the mask feels is connected to a world of beliefs and daily built learnings (dance included) that remains alien to the viewer. The visual experience, although enriched by a « corporeal image » (MacDougall, 2005) hardly can give back that part of the experience that is not viewable.

#### **Audio-visual media as an ethnographic field**

Alterazioni Video and I have then found a meeting point in the field, in conceiving the video as an account of the experience we were making together, that of an anthropologist and a collective of artists who were in Bandjoun to make a film. In this way the horror musical became only one element of the film, a film within a film, showing the actual construction work of a fiction. This increased the epistemological and ethnographic aspects of the project, while reconnecting with some ways of making films (from Vertov to Truffaut) and artworks that integrate the process of their elaboration by making it partially visible; something similar to the self-reflexivity of the anthropologist letting us perceive the traditionally hidden off-text of the fieldwork.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xj\\_zreeUtFQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xj_zreeUtFQ)HYPERLINK  
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The intention of making a film has been the pretext and the pivot around which the experience has been structured, although not everything of what was experienced was shot, and not everything of what was shot (600 GB) has been edited. We should mark therefore the discontinuities that occur at each step (what's left *out of* the movie) but also avoid thinking about the experience as a succession of separated phases: the decision to make a film, put our eye on the level of a « filmic observation » (de France, 1989) by filtering and reshaping reality in terms of its filmability, transforming places and situations into possible locations, and people into potential actors.

The ethnographic field of the anthropologist is redefined as well in relation to the set and backstage film, but without being restricted to them. For the anthropologist, the interest is to understand what aspects of the reality of Bandjoun can pass from this overtly artificial device, what it is possible to see through it, and subject to what limits, and what are the possibilities that this limitation of reality allows.

If we assume that there is no access to reality that does not pass through an interpretation, which combines near and far concepts from the experience (Geertz, 1993) and that all knowledge involves construction work technically mediated (Latour, 1996), then the question of the appropriateness of the device put in the field becomes that of the distance or proximity to the experience of the technical means through which we build our knowledge of the local.

If the set and the backstage of a film shot in Bandjoun, with every situation that is created around them, can become an ethnographic field, well beyond the limits of the ethnography of an artistic action, it is because audio-visual media are a powerful vehicle of globalization by means of the creation of widespread mediascapes shaping the imagination and the feelings of the people all around the world. Today in fact in Bandjoun as elsewhere, the experience of the more immediate proximity is related to worlds made perceptually and emotionally close through the transfiguration made by global flows of images (Appadurai, 1996).

This means that the problems and issues faced by anthropologists and artists in their work, are in some ways similar to those that the people with whom they have to deal with on the set and in the field, must cope with in their life. As a consequence, the audio-visual media are not only a means of the anthropological research but a constitutive part of the ethnographic field as well, in so far as the reality is produced and takes shape through the media. Artists, anthropologists and Bandjoun people find here a contact zone, based on the differentiated and unequal relationships they have with the media, as consumers and users as well.

It is significant in this regard that one of the events that have marked the recent history of the *chefferie* of Bandjoun and the memory of which is still very much alive today, is linked to a TV documentary fiction, *The succession de Wabo Defo* (1987) in which the *fo* Ngnie Kamga played the part of himself carrying a sacred calabash on stage, and showed everyone the *lakam*, the inaccessible royal initiation place (Fokouo, 1990-1991: 50, 59-60). What made the scandal, and caused the *fo* the loss of the consensus of most people, was the disclosure of the « secret », the mix of facts and fictions affecting the sacredness of the king. At that time *La succession de Wabo Defo* circulated in Bandjoun on videocassettes, and today continues to pass around on DVDs.

If cinema is not unknown in Bandjoun, neither is contemporary art. In Bandjoun one finds two very different artists: one is Tzuako Innocent, who lives in Bandjoun alternating sculpture and work in the fields, and the second is Barthélémy Toguou, an internationally renowned artist who lives in Paris, but whose family is from Bandjoun. Both carve out a place and visibility by putting Bandjoun local reality in connection with global mediascapes, although with very different means and opportunities.

Tzuako has carved several posts of the big hut (*nemo*) of Bandjoun, portraying football players, politicians, musicians of international renown; figures drawn from magazines and which he calls « pictures » to emphasize their realism, while their arrangement on posts is conceived as a TV sequence, frame by

frame. When sculpting « traditional » masks, Tzuako mostly takes their models from the photocopies of international exhibition catalogues of African art. He has no access to the international art market, but thinks of himself as a contemporary artist, while having only a vague idea of what contemporary art is.

Barthélémy Togu, who runs from one international biennial to another, has instead built in Bandjoun a great center for contemporary art (Bandjoun Station) which leads the international art in the village and which, thanks to his website, he projects into the art system.

The Tzuako and Togu cases are very different, but for each of them the experience does not happen before and independently from his *mise en image*, but in a circularity that holds together both one and the other.

This compenetration of art and media is very much present in the actions of Alterazioni Video: when in 2008 the collective staged a pseudo-protest demonstration in front of a TV news studios belonging to Silvio Berlusconi, nobody noticed that, but the photos and press releases sent to newspapers made what might seem like a non-event, a news story: the artistic gesture that takes place before its reproduction in the image is only a trigger point, since the artistic device is actually in the whole of the concatenated events to which it gives rise, even through the media.

Many in Bandjoun and not only artists (though certainly not all) think they know what an anthropologist and an artist is. This does not mean of course, knowing anthropology and contemporary art, but being able to reasonably predict how an anthropologist and an artist will perform, to give meaning to their actions, understand what is to be gained and what is to be feared. The greater media coverage of the art with respect to anthropology for example, leads them to pay much more attention to the artist than to the anthropologist, whose writings, though critical, are often seen as harmless. This may explain why the gift to the *fo* of a monumental sculpture consisting of mud and soccer balls, was promptly

accepted by him, and placed in the prestigious main hall of the *chefferie* museum, in the womb of « tradition »<sup>3</sup>.

These expectations limit and regulate the freedom of action of the anthropologist as much as the artist. What is allowed and licit for one may not be for another. The way people look at contemporary art in Bandjoun is marked by the same perplexity, that mixture of credulity and skepticism, with which people look at contemporary art in the West, something that provokes laughter (or indignation) and, at the same time, a sort of deference, with that quasi-religious attitude you may have with what you are not able to understand. But here the aura that surrounds the figure of the artist, creator of enigmatic gestures and images of people, sometimes converges on that of the *sorcier*, in that acting on the images and metamorphosis can influence people's lives.

What happens when Alterazioni Video artists juggle a rubber skull on the main street in a market day, passing the « ball » to the guys who are around them? And when they launch dozens of balloons in a crowded taxi station?<sup>4</sup> And when they stage a procession of « zombies » in the town center?

These actions have mostly taken place by surprise, without telling me anything, for fear that I could prevent them. Nevertheless I could have expected something like that, a little feared and a little desired. This way of behaving, precluded from me as an anthropologist and allowed to them as artists, to bring out dynamics that were otherwise inaccessible to me. Again it comes to working on the border, the one that runs between provocation as a mere transgression (*épater les Bandjoun!*) and provocation of reality through the creation of events that induce reactions and stances.

The topics – particularly soccer and skulls – were not chosen randomly by the artists, but after having read and discussed some of my articles. Football is, as we have seen, in the iconography of *nemo* and is an important part of Cameroonian sociality, identity

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=do24R8zyDUM>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOPdzIxVHNU>

and imagination. In the Bamileke region, the skulls of ancestors are instead objects of family worship and ritual offerings. Playing football with the image of a skull (the image of a generic skull and not that of one of *their* skulls) brings together two important moments of social life in Bandjoun, the « sacred » and « profane », making them collide. The artists can afford it, it is part of their « normal » work and, in fact, has been accepted or tolerated (with some initial embarrassment and perplexity) by people who were involved in the action, who then began to speak of death and the skulls cult (some have even offered, speaking half in jest, to provide us with a real skull).

Even the anthropologist (and not only the artist) intervenes in reality, causing events to happen: they already happen with the fact of the anthropologist's mere presence, by questions that require answers, by the deliberate construction of situations favorable to him, but everything occurs generally with a certain touch, avoiding lacerations that may affect the construction of the network of relations that constitutes the « field ». The interventions of artists, more or less sensitive to places and people, are sometimes more disruptive, maybe because they rarely need to come back into the field.

Yet if the artistic action works (certainly, not always and everywhere) and if it can benefit the anthropologist, it is because its effects are often less disruptive than they might seem. In the apparent double bind in which he affirms and denies the artistry of his intervention in social reality, the artist constructs a liminal space in which it becomes possible to experiment with different modes of relationship (Turner, 1982): the action put under the sign of art in fact allows – as in play – to affirm its character of fiction (*something less* than real life, which temporarily suspends its effects) but also – as in the ritual – to argue that there is *something more* than ordinary life, transforming the banality of gestures in the symbol. In this way what is created is a reversible and ambiguous space that allows you to go further, but also to reverse, and to keep some ways out open. If the artist can do this, to the extent that his interlocutor recognizes and allows him, it is because the artistic

action even when directly involved in reality, makes a shift that is its symbolic transfiguration.

To people involved it is not always clear which game you're playing, whether it is fact or fiction, because the artists themselves remain deliberately in the ambiguity. But it is precisely this uncertain ground that is heuristically interesting for the anthropologist.

### **Artistic action and ethnographic practice between stage and backstage**

Choosing the horror genre, Alterazioni Video looks at Hollywood (with an eye to the Italian B movies of the '70s, like *Cannibal Holocaust*) but also at the Nigerian Nollywood videos available on the internet. «Zombie» and «vampires» are also known in Bandjoun, because both Nigerian and American horror films come there in DVD, and because in the local witchcraft imagery, quite similar figures are found, called *faux-morts*, *revenants* (*ghègne mò*), and *vampires* (*dium*) in local French (Maillard, 1985: 161-64; Pradelle de Latour, 1997: 71-83).

The *dium*, the vampires, attack at night, sucking the blood of the victims and devouring their vital organs (lungs and liver), or they introduce stones, eggs, pig's teeth, and locks of hair into their victims' body, undermining their health.

More recent forms of witchcraft (*famla*) overlap the traditional ones, relating themselves to the modernity, to the struggle for political and economic power, and the desire to get rich quickly and at any cost (Warnier, 1993; Rowland & Warnier, 1988; Geschiere, 1995; Argenti, 2007: 105-120). Here witchcraft takes the form of an anti-social business where family members (wives and children) are sold for cannibalistic banquets in exchange for wealth and power, or where people are transformed into «zombies» and taken to work as slaves. Witchcraft then appears both as a weapon by which the rich impose their will through fear, and as a means by which the poor try to make sense of suspicious sudden wealth, or try to restore sharing customs, blaming those who escape the obligation of solidarity (Geschiere, 1995).



Obviously it would be wrong to assume an identity or a complete translatability between the local traditional imagery and the one conveyed by Nigerian and Western films; rather we must note their copresence, a contact zone, as well as the occurrence of similar beliefs in many traditional societies (Teti, 2007). As the studies about Nollywood have highlighted, a circular relationship holds together films – Hollywood, Nigerian videos, and Italian horror movies – rumors, and reality: the rumors concerning ritual murders that are first considered unlikely but plausible and finally believed, are confirmed by the fiction films that give them visibility and help to shape the concrete reality (Meyer, 1998; Okwori, 2003; Wendl, 2007).

In the investigation of this composite imaginary and the emotions it arouses, explored through fiction movies circulating in Bandjoun and the one we were making there, I tried to find the point of insertion of the anthropological work in the artistic practice, to be able to test the device arranged.

The casting has become in this way the place where not only were actors selected for the film, but also the « informants » of the anthropologist. It has not gone through traditional authorities, but by word of mouth and an advert prepared by the young presenters of Ghomala radio (some of whom have then also become actors in the film). The continuity between the experience of the proposal (playing in a film) and the ways in which it was promoted (the radio ad) has pre-selected the candidates before the casting took place. The people who came were young radio listeners who were also consumers of DVDs and TV programs: some twenty college students, young unemployed people or with precarious jobs, of both sexes. Those who responded to the call were not part of a generic crowd moved only by the opportunity to earn some money, but belonged to a precise segment of the social reality of Bandjoun, for whom the proposal was significant and familiar. For those girls and boys, it was a break from everyday life, but it was not, however, something radically heterogeneous to their experience: *radio trottoir* had spread the rumor that the RAI had arrived, and if they

had come, it was because they hoped there would be an opportunity to enter the world of entertainment, to become successful, or to go to Italy.

During the auditions the candidates were moving at ease, understanding exactly what was required of them and every performance was accompanied by choruses (*C'est qui la star ? C'est moi la star !*) and clapping. If the atmosphere recalled that of programs like *X Factor* or *America's got talent* it was not by chance: it was because Cameroon Canal 2 International has been broadcasting a similar program since 2006 (*Stars 2 demain*) now in its sixth edition. This is a traveling show, with regional elimination rounds (a casting is also held in the West, in the town of Dschang) and a national final. The Sponsor of the transmission is the mobile phone company Orange, which signs the show with the slogan *La vie change avec Orange*. The spectators of course express their preferences for contestants by sending an SMS.

So even in Bandjoun the media shape the people's desires and those who live there are constantly projected into another world, but for those coming from Europe that is not immediately visible, and this can create some misunderstandings.

The decision to hold the audition in a small bar, nothing more than a wooden shack, located near a crossroad and frequented by poor people, has been a source of disappointment among the participants in the casting, further highlighting how the event was locally projected in an emotionally close, imagined world. Alterazioni Video sought an open space visible from the road, to attract the locals and be recognizable as « African » (i.e. visibly « poor ») by an international audience (the potential recipient of the movie). Aspiring actors saw instead in this an element profoundly inconsistent with the dream world the casting had to prefigure. The most appropriate place in their eyes was the hotel we stayed in, very modest but perceived as the best approximation of « modernity » locally available.

In the first part of the casting run by Alterazioni Video the candidates were presenting themselves in front of the camera,

demonstrating their skills in dance and drama; they were asked to make an expression of terror and then a reaction was elicited by suddenly launching at them a rubber skull. These tests intended for selecting the actors also provided information to the anthropologist, for example on the ways candidates represented themselves in front of the camera and on the ways the actors expressed the fear, in their performances and « spontaneous » reactions.

In a neighbouring room the candidates, always on camera, had to answer my questions about their experience of fear. I introduced myself as an anthropologist, establishing a link between my questions and what was the subject of the film, i.e. just fear. I asked them to tell me stories that are being told in Bandjoun about fear, and what were their reactions to certain animals (those that are associated with the metamorphosis of witchcraft or « double » - *pi* - of mighty men, members of secret societies), and then concluded with some more direct questions about facts of witchcraft which they had heard of or witnessed themselves. The results of these interviews and the quality of the response was strongly affected by the context in which they took place and which made them possible: a mixture of awkward silences, performance acting, glib statements that betray not only the delicacy of the subject but also the fear of not getting the job, the hassle of having to go through an « examination », the different priorities and motivations among those who ask and who respond.

Questioning people on witchcraft and getting answers is never easy. Favret-Saada (1977) and Stoller (1997) have shown us how it's not possible to deal with witchcraft without you becoming part of it and assuming a role, whether you be the victim or the sorcerer. In my case I have instead tried the way, certainly more convenient, of speaking of witchcraft in the weakened area of fiction. In similar ways Pradelle de Latour (1997 : 74), when investigating witchcraft in the nearby *chefferie* of Bangwa, tried to circumvent the silences and the resistance of adults questioned on real events, by asking young fans of horror stories to tell him some tales.

The casting was only the first approach, as the process of film also required daily work, from morning to night, encouraging a climate of mutual confidence that comes from the feeling of sharing the work, collaborating in the production of a film or a work of art. The shooting was preceded and followed by meetings that were held this time at the hotel and called for all those who participated in the film (actors, dancers, musicians, singers) to suggest ideas for the screenplay: involvement at this point was very strong and the stories that came out, often very rich and complex, became the subject of lively debate. Within this protected and meaningful area, stories that came out under the cover of fiction revealed the imaginary, beliefs and fears. Often the conversation widened consciously abandoning the ground of the fiction film, to talk about the reality of witchcraft by first-hand witnesses.

In this context we also gave the actors a camera, makeup and a bag of fake blood, inviting them to shoot independently their own horror movie; it is significant that what has been achieved is more like a soap opera with stories of love between teenagers. Even on the set the actors and their friends took pictures with cellphones, then encased in several CDs, to keep a souvenir of their being together in the film.



The procession of the zombes, Bandjoun, 29 November

Cinema sometimes also provides the means in which to articulate self-reflection. One of the actors and my assistant for years, speaking of his dreams (the dream state is also one of the ways in which witchcraft is revealed) described the relationship between day and night life in these terms: By day, our brain shoots as a camera everything that happens, then releases this recording at night, putting us in front of the film of our lives and allowing us to understand more clearly what has happened. Elsewhere in quite different circumstances, I found that this way of looking at life, as if it were a movie, is a clear indication of the penetration of the media in the perception and construction of the self.

It is not possible here to give an account of the interviews and discussions that accompanied the making of the film, and I will then limit my report to the points where the stories intersect or diverge from film imagery.

In Western and Nollywood films, different degrees of realism are found: « When we look at a Western horror movie, we always have the impression that first of all it is necessary to identify ourselves with it, believe it is real, otherwise we cannot enjoy the film [...]. Unlike with an African horror film, you do not need to put yourself in the shoes of someone in order to understand the reality of things..... » (Alain). If you compare the sophisticated Hollywood special effects with much more rudimentary Nollywood ones, the latter may seem naive and yet, they can also be very convincing for the local audience: « My mother when watching this kind of movies absolutely thinks that it is real, she can die before the film ends. [...]. People are panicking in front of the TV. » (Nelly). Yet the most appropriate comparison level is not one of special effects: while Western audiences are overwhelmed by technological hyperrealism that reduces narratives to a simple support, our partners in Bandjoun look rather at the credibility of the plot and context in its connections with everyday experience: the conditions of credibility of the fiction film are placed differently. What seems realistic to one, to another appears unlikely, and vice versa.

What seems to emerge is the limit of our visualism. The modes of expression of witchcraft in Bandjoun are much less direct and visual than our scopis drives desire: « Our witchcraft is more metaphysical. We love more what is metaphysical, so we do not have direct contact, we have to do with spirits. You can enter the body of someone, I go to bed with her... » (Alain).

Witchcraft is given sideways, not as an explicit action of which it is possible to give a direct representation, and it is visible only in its consequences: « The difference between people "simple" and "complicated". Among the complicated people are vampires. But can you single them out? It's something spiritual. They are complicated internally. If you look at their physical appearance, they are not complicated, but inwardly they are complicated. Those who never appear complicated » (Joseph).

« Sometimes you're so together, even though you know that these people have already eaten a part of your heart and with them you eat, the vampires are coming to eat your heart little by little. And you are suffering from diseases that no one can heal; you have an ultrasound and nothing is found. My older brother suffered from this, and he died ... it was moving inside his belly, here, there, here, there, he suffered for seven years. They removed the bile believing that this was the problem, but it was someone who had entered his body. You need special effects to make a film but for him it was pure reality [...] It's a fact also recognized in the courts, there are people who travel in bottlenecks and peanut shells or *avions de la nuit* : when you find an old woman sitting on a stool in a house that was locked it is not normal: it is an *avion de nuit* that fell. This is the *famla* » (Yves).

What's more disturbing is hidden in the normal daily life; witchcraft is the dark side of social family and motherhood, it is the symbolic expression of the envy and jealousy which hatch within the extended and polygynic family: « c'est mon papa, c'est ma maman » says the text of a song written by the actors for the film.

The modes of manifestation of witchcraft in Bamileke country are very distant from those of Hollywood movies (as well as those

of Nollywood and Pentecostal imagery) and are consistent with an aesthetic of containment that is associated with a certain Bamileke ethos based on self-restraint, retention, and accumulation of wealth and power, which can be found in both the allusive turns of phrase of the local idiom and the cadenced steps of dance (Warnier, 1993).

Of course, it could be pointed out that in addition to special effects, horror film (and before that the Western nineteenth-century literature) has always looked to the uncanny that lies in the normal life (neighbors, children and dolls, doors that creak), but our interlocutors in Bandjoun have done more to mark difference than closeness between « us » and « them ». Similarly they didn't take into account that the Cameroonian mediascape, consisting of TV news and newspapers, are often very « splatter », marked by an aesthetic of the obscene (Mbembe 2001) in which the facts of violence, whether they are accidents or acts of « popular justice » (mostly lynchings of thieves which are sometimes burned in the street) are reported with great detail and rawness, and lingering, as if so pleased about all the gory details.

#### **On stage: the Zombies procession and the warriors dance**

Finally, we look now at the question of the relationship between facts and fiction, by linking two different performances, which were both included in the video: the public outing of the « zombies » (an artistic action conceived by Alterazioni Video in the streets of downtown Bandjoun<sup>5</sup>) and one of the traditional dances (*lali*) which was held at the *chefferie* during the cultural week<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5Eh3TImMdk>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8Ww5XMbiu8>HYPERLINK  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8Ww5XMbiu8&feature=relmfu>&HYPERLINK  
ERLINK  
"http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8Ww5XMbiu8&feature=relmfu"feature=relmfu



The lali dance of the Manjong society, Banjoun

Some actors with faces painted like a skull (similar to the British television series *Misfits*) moving with the slow and mechanical pace of the « living dead » and assaulting from behind a young couple as they walked, vampirizing them. The fiction overflows in this way into the reality, through an unannounced action, taking place in the public space. The whole scene with the people around, passing in the street and stopping to watch, was shot with cameras and multi-microphones.

What perception did they have as passers-by? It's hard to say. However, there was no protest, no violent reaction, but rather surprise and perplexity. The video shows two passers-by commenting on the scene, with expressions at the same time disturbed and amused. It was expected that the visible presence of cameras would be taken as a clear sign that what was happening was only a fiction, but it seems that there were people who thought it was about the ritual of a sect, and interpreted the footage as a documentary, « given that Whites are to film ceremonies and traditional dances, especially when there are events at the *chefferie* » (Rosine). « Some have even said that we were creating a sect, that Whites have come to associate us to a sect, the scene shot in the street shows that you are *compliqués* » (Youssuf).



For others, the problem did not arise: these things happen but not in the light of day. For others it was a joke, a Whites oddity that had no relationship with Bandjoun. The boys called by people to give an explanation justified themselves in their own way: « We explained what we were doing, that we are possessed by the spirit to be a star » (Youssuf).

Change of scene: the place is the market square at the *chefferie* entrance, during the celebrations of the cultural week of Bandjoun.

The dancers are the « warriors » of Majong society (Perrois, Notué 1997: 87-89), hundreds of young and old coming from the quarters and performing in front of the *fo*. Brandishing swords and sticks, their advance is impetuous, with cries and threatening gestures: this is a show of strength intended to induce fear. But is anyone really frightened? The *lali* dance is a socialized representation of fear where no one gets scared, where fear is conventionalized, performed, made recognizable and mastered. But this is not folklore: if today the « warriors » do not fight, however, they guarantee the safety of neighborhoods with patrol services and do public works (maintenance of roads, bridges). The Manjong is not an entertainment association, but the first step of a process of initiation into the « secret societies » (*mkem*) that enables the most enterprising and wealthy to climb up the hierarchy to be introduced to the *chefferie*.

The *lali* dance is therefore a ritualized fiction, a staging that produces effects of reality, a social technology for self-construction that makes the dance a way of belonging and incorporation of the social memory; unlike the zombies procession through the Bandjoun streets that looked like a foreign body, it responds to a cultural code known to all that makes it real in its effects.

And yet the distance does not exclude areas of proximity and contact. In the *lali* dance, few of the traditional wooden masks and of the caps surmounted by a plume of ram or goat hair remain, and sometimes there are also masks from different cultural areas (I happened to see a Punu mask of Gabon). But what is most striking is the presence of carnival masks made in China that represent

movies or show characters: *Scream*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars* or the painted faces of the Kiss band. This is not simply deculturation or trivialization: the presence of rubber and plastic masks means that it is not a purely folkloristic event. What is on stage has to deal with what is possible to find, but this apparently mimetic appropriation (Taussig, 1993) is selective: they are all masks that like the traditional ones (*tsemajong*) want to be scary. This can perhaps be said of all masks, but some masks are more frightening than others.

However, what is most striking is to find in the very womb of the tradition, the presence of the mass culture conveyed by the international cinema, with the result that fiction becomes real in its own way, through another *mise en scène*.

This circular dynamic between reality and representation comes to include contemporary art. The Cameroonian artist Hervé Youmbi has taken such a *Scream* mask that he has seen dancing in a « traditional » ceremony and has worn it with the cap mask used in the elephant dance *tso*. Youmbi not only visualizes the dynamics on the ground putting them in a syncretic and layered artifact (the *Scream* mask is an echo of Munch's painting *The scream*), but he uses it as an instrument of intervention in social reality. The artist has proposed an exhibition of this kind of masks created by the artist but drawing from a widespread imaginary to the Musée des civilisations of Dschang. In his project, the masks born in the museum have to be brought into the cultural arena and given to the *chefferies*, encouraging their adoption in traditional dances. The usual heritage dynamics, taking culture from the field to the museum, is in this way intentionally reversed, raising a number of issues about the museification of reality and the « authenticity » involved. Whether his masks will actually enter the local cultural dynamics, perhaps giving rise to new « traditions », we do not know, but it is certainly possible: more and more often, and not without ambiguity, the individual creativity of the artists interacts with the collective cultural creativity of the communities.

### **An open work**

Our awareness of the limitations related to the experience made, but also inherent to audiovisual media themselves, as well as the experimental and processual character of the project, led us to conceive of video as an open work, a point of connection between media landscape and local context, the catalyst through which the events happen, and the work advances. This catalytic function performed by the film, also applies to the actors and that part of the people of Bandjoun who have been or may be affected by the video, and who could find an opportunity to look at themselves differently.

Working in this way meant multiplying the possible uses of the footage by assuming different possibilities, of which only some were made at the time<sup>7</sup>: the creation of different versions (currently four), none of which could be considered as a first or ultimate one; the construction of an immersive environment based on a multi-projection device, interactive technologies, installations and documentary supports; the loading of all the footage on You Tube making a playlist and providing links through which to explore sideways; the launch of a contest for the making of a film based on the footage made available on the internet.

There is no way here to analyze the potential and risks, both artistic and anthropological, raised by these different experimental options still on the table, but what is certain is that they should be considered as part of a multi-sited ethnography making the media an integral part of the fieldwork (Abu-Lughod, 1997), continuing elsewhere what we began in Bandjoun and then returning there.

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<sup>7</sup> The video was presented in 2010, its first version, with the title *All my friends are dead*, along with an installation (*Princesse sur la sardine*) at Fondazione Rebaudengo in Turin in the exhibition *21 artists for the twenty-first century*, curated by Alberto Bonami. Some parts of the video were also presented in the exhibition I curated with Giovanna Parodi da Passano: *Marvels of Africa. African Arts in Italian Collection*, which took place in Genoa in 2010/2011 (Bargna & Parodi da Passano 2010).

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### **Summary**

Audio-visual media are a powerful vehicle of globalization engaged in the creation of widespread mediascapes shaping the imagination and the feelings of the people all around the world. As a consequence the audio-visual media are not only a means of anthropological research but a constituent part of the ethnographic field as well.

It was in this perspective that in 2009 I asked the Italian artistic collective of Alterazioni Video to accompany me to the Bamileke chiefdom of Bandjoun (Cameroon), where I usually conduct my research. The main topic of our work was fear, an emotion we investigated by filming some traditional masquerades of secret societies (which also made use of some Hollywood-inspired masks) and by making a horror movie with a local cast, using the set and the backstage as an ethnographic field. The vampires and the zombies who were the subject of the film form a part of a shared global imagery but they are also an invisible, effective presence in local sorcery practices.

We have tried to stay on the border between facts and fictions, feelings and actors' performances, as well as art and anthropology, but also to question it, in order to test the way in which anthropology and artistic activism could find a meeting point on the terrain of ethnographic practice.

**Key-words: ethnographic practice, art activism, audio-visual media, horror movies, witchcraft.**

**Résumé**

Entre Hollywood et Bandjoun : activisme artistique et ethnographie anthropologique dans le mediascape

Les médias audiovisuels sont un puissant véhicule de mondialisation, agissant par la création de paysages médiatiques très répandus qui modèlent l'imagination et les émotions des personnes dans le monde entier. Par conséquent les médias audiovisuels ne sont pas simplement un outil de la recherche anthropologique, mais ils sont aussi bien une partie constitutive du terrain ethnographique.

C'est dans cette perspective, qu'en 2009, j'ai demandé au collectif artistique italien de Alterazioni Video de m'accompagner au Cameroun, à la chefferie bamiléké de Bandjoun, où je mène mes recherches depuis des années. Le sujet principal de notre travail a été la peur, une émotion sur laquelle nous avons enquêté en filmant les danses masquées des sociétés coutumières (qui utilisaient aussi des masques inspirés de Hollywood) en tournant un film d'horreur avec des acteurs non professionnels recrutés au village et en utilisant le plateau de tournage et les coulisses comme terrain ethnographique. Les zombies et les vampires, qui étaient le sujet du film, font partie d'un imaginaire global partagé, mais ils sont aussi une présence invisible et réelle dans les pratiques locales de la sorcellerie.

Nous avons essayé de travailler à la frontière entre les faits et les fictions, les émotions et les performances des acteurs, l'art et l'anthropologie, tout en cherchant en même temps à la questionner, pour explorer les façons à travers lesquelles l'anthropologie et l'activisme artistique peuvent trouver une zone de contact sur le terrain de la pratique ethnographique.

**Mots-clefs : pratique ethnographique, activisme artistique, média audiovisuels, film d'horreur, sorcellerie.**

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