

## Filming *Food Cultural Practices in Cameroon*

An Artistic and Ethnographic Work

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### The occasion: Expo Milan 2015

The film *Il faut donner à manger aux gens. Food Cultural Practices in Cameroon* is the result of research carried out in Cameroon, from the city of Douala to the Grassfields, by the artist Paola Anziché and myself, an anthropologist, between May and June, 2014, in the places in which I have been working for more than a decade (Bargna 2007, 2012). It was a research project conceived for the universal exhibition of Expo Milan 2015, whose concept was *Feeding the Planet: Energy for Life*, and produced by the Lab Expo of Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli.

The video highlights some food experiences of people living in Cameroon: their daily life, their difficulties, their pleasures, and the different relationships created around food, through sharing and exclusion. Special attention is paid to the cuisine, to the commercialisation and the consumption, but also touching sometimes on food production.

Other activities carried out in the framework of Lab Expo have contributed to form the wide set of topics and questions on food, which are related to this film: a seminar held in Cameroon, in the Musée des Civilisations de Dschang (“Feeding Cultural Practices in Rural and Urban Environments: the Case of Cameroon”, 29/05/2014) and another seminar which took place at Milan Bicocca University devoted to “Aesthetics of Food and Cultures of the Senses” (27/05/2015) and other projects with artists that took place in Milan (*Food which connects, Food which divides. Feeding, Art and Anthropology*).

### The theoretical backdrop: food cultural practice in Cameroon and elsewhere

The focus of the film and of all the other mentioned works has been the link between politics of food and the sensorial-aesthetic experience we have of it.

Food brings people together, but also divides them; it involves not only conviviality, but predatory violence, unequal distributions, competitive consumption and gifts that reinforce and poison social relationships, creating debt and dependency. Around the food are played the fundamental questions of life and death in

all their material and imaginary aspects. Just for these reasons, food cultural practices are always embedded in politics.

Jean-François Bayart, dealing (1989) with state and politics in Africa and Cameroon in particular, has spoken of a *politique du ventre*, a politics of the belly, taking shape around the semantic and practical space of “eating”, which refers in turn to food shortages on the continent, accumulation practices, corpulence, and sexual activities, family dynamics and gender differences, issues that are often expressed through the symbolism of witchcraft cannibalism.

In ways somewhat similar to Bayart, Arjun Appadurai (1981) referring to South-East Asia, speaks of gastro-politics as a conflict or competition over specific cultural or economic resources as it emerges in social transactions around food. In this sense, gastro-politics is a common feature of many cultures.

This semiotic virtuosity of food, according to Appadurai, has two general sources. One is the fact that food is a constant need but a perishable good. The daily pressure to cook food (combined with the never-ending pressure to produce or acquire it) makes it well suited to bear the load of everyday social discourse. The second fundamental fact about food is its capacity to mobilize strong emotions.

In the Grassfields people often express their vision of life saying that *le ventre c'est le combat de la vie* (“we are fighting for our stomach”). The Cameroonian daily and political language with all its food metaphors passing through the stomach, is in this respect meaningful: the sentence that gives the film its title – “Il faut donner à manger aux gens” – is a popular appeal addressed to rich people, to their duty to distribute part of their wealth in the kin group and the community. As reported by Antoine Socpa these are the kind of speeches that pass from mouth to mouth in the political meetings: “Is there something to drink?”, “You have spoken well! But do we eat the words?”, “If you want us to be with you, speak well” (where “speak well” means “give us to eat and to drink”), “A hungry stomach has no ears!”.

Food experience, however, is not just a matter of language: it involves not only metaphors but material practices. If food can be used as a political device, it is because it inscribes power relationships into our body: taste and disgust trace borders and frontiers, impose exclusions, define belongings and then allow to discriminate and to rank people outside and inside each social group in terms of good and bad taste (Bourdieu 1979) or between cooking and gastronomy (Goody, 1982).

Likes and dislikes are not just the sensory and metaphorical translation of concepts and meanings: rather, they are cultural devices that operate in terms of attraction and repulsion towards things and people, causing us to act even before we understand.

It is from this background that the aesthetic and sensory dimension of feeding practices comes into the foreground (Sutton 2010).

The aesthetic dimension, i.e. the corporeal, sensitive and emotional dimension of experience represents the connecting element of all societies and food is one of its main means of expression.

The palatal, olfactory, tactile, visual, auditory and kinaesthetic sensations ac-



Image 1. Douala, the market of Deido, May 2014 (photo Paola Anziché).

companying the act of eating are not a private, individual experience but rather they define our relationship with feeding as part of our dealing with the world: in other words, there's more than flavour to taste, and the aesthetic power of food goes far beyond the pleasure of eating.

### **Aesthetic practices into the field**

All these questions were present in shooting our film: how to give material, tactile, and olfactory substance to images? How to combine critical distance and sensorial participation?

It is on this basis that the anthropologist and the artist can find a zone of contact and take a mutual advantage from their collaboration.

The relationships between anthropological film and art are certainly not recent, but they have become more intense as a result of the “sensorial turn” of anthropology on the one hand (Howes 1991; Classen 1993), and of the “ethnographic turn” (Foster 1996; Coles 2001) and “documentary turn” of art (Nash 2005) on the other hand.

Paola Anziché is neither a videomaker nor a video artist, and this is one of the reasons I have appreciated her so much. Although she has already made several videos, this is not her sole or main activity. Paola is an artist deeply engaged with the body and the materiality of the artefacts (textile fibres and clothing, in particu-

lar): her artistic practice is first of all a sensorial way to do with the world. Quoting her own words:

I see my art practice as an hybrid medium between action and communication. I usually start by making objects with found recycled or poor materials (such as rope, jute, cardboard or old clothes). I consider those objects as sculptures that have to be activated by people. Through people's participation (and activation of those objects), I create situations which allow me to explore the potential of performance. In creating those situations what interests me is the energy that stems from those collective actions: an energy that can stay eventually with people also after the action ends. Since my first important work during the art academy, the functional fake objects, bodily movements and the physical participation of the people are very important factors: my works exist indeed thanks to corporeal participation (Anziché 2015: 3).

So in the artistic practice of Paola Anziché, the artefacts are related to the body and the life of the people, and they are used to activate participatory situations. Her emphasis on materiality and sensory experience also affects her way of making videos, giving a corporeal thickness to her images: in her hands, the camera is not a disembodied eye isolating perception from action, and taking things away, but works as a prosthesis of the body that gives a material, tactile and olfactory consistency to the images. As Paola writes, it is about "to see with your / my hand." The movement of the camera is one with that of the body, both of them sensory and emotionally embedded. Positioning and moving herself on the ground, she uses the camera as a tool to build interpersonal relationships: her style is not an exercise in style, but a personal lifestyle connecting people within the field, and people far apart, as well.

Often favouring the close up, her corporeal camera moves like a nose going into the pots and following the sounds of the lids, the rhythm of which is that of work. In this way the camera turns itself from eye to nose, giving smell, touch and taste to the visual perception of the viewer.

It is particularly the case, in the chapter "La journée des filles Tadjom", of the close-up on the preparation of bubbling *nkui* yellow sauce, swelling like a placenta (term that is not an arbitrary metaphor: the *nkui* is used to nourish women giving birth). The visual effect is very strong: the perception does not come just from the eye, but also involves touch and stomach engendering a mix of attraction and rejection for this unknown, slimy, mutant substance, which remains stuck to the fingers. In this way, cultural distances become the object of a mediated sensorial and emotional experience.

Here the most visceral sensations probably emerge, related to the symbolic construction of the cleanliness and the dirt, with all its fears of contamination: it is the mouse that, although not filmed, appears at the market, beside the grilled fish, with Paola jumping on the chair and the cooker laughing because she sees nothing strange in this (chapter "Madame Poisson").

In these cases, the relationship building does not pass, then, only by words but



Image 2. Douala, Madame Justine, May 2014 (photo Paola Anziché).

above all by the senses: it is not enough to talk about the food, you must eat it (Stoller and Olkes 1986). When the object of study is the food you must eat together with your interlocutors: participation becomes commensality. Eating together enhances the quality of the relationship.

In the film the anthropologist and the artist seem “never eating”, in the sense that they are never filmed when they eat, although sometimes what you see suggests that this happened. Actually, we have always eaten together with our interlocutors, sometimes as customers, in public places, or as invited to dining. Depending on the case, eating together was the culminating point of the interaction or the prelude to it.

Eating together implies not only conviviality and sharing, but also contrast and struggle. In the chapter “Chez Madame Justine”, the interaction with the woman cooking at home does not pass exclusively through the words but also by the stomach: “not you have ever eaten this, you can not eat this, you don’t have the stomach to eat this”.

The Cameroonians are well aware of how Westerners pay attention to food safety and avoid mixing with them: being invited to eat often has the sense of a challenge to be met; all observe you, waiting to see if you eat and if you taste, if you do so doubtfully or with the serenity that comes from habit: either you are in or you are out.

## **The distributed life of the video**

Conceptual and thematic issues and organizational constraints are a constitutive and integral part of the ethnographic field and of the film. From this point of view the collaboration between the anthropologist and the artist cannot be simply thought of as the result of a free agreement between two people, but it must take into account the worlds from which they come, and the institutional and practical context in which the collaboration took place.

All these bonds draw an open frame that defines the constraints within which the work is born and the video is taken, his social life (Appadurai 1986). In this article we will not be able to give a detailed account of the social life of our video, because its biography (Kopytoff 1986) is at its beginning, and therefore its identity still uncertain.

The production of this video has involved the collaboration between different professionals and stakeholders: Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli who commissioned the video, the people who are the protagonists of the film, the foreseen or unexpected audiences the video meets. From this point of view the film is an open work that depends only in part on the intentions of the authors: it is the never ended result of designed and contingent choices, opportunities, cases and necessities. The artistic work is not freer than the ethnographic work, and Cameroon appears in the film in ways that are not exclusively determined by what is over there: what happens in the immediate proximity is affected by what is happening far away, and the film as well as the ethnographic work and the artistic intervention must therefore be thought of in a broader field of forces that does not remain extrinsic to them.

From this point of view, given the context of Expo, one of the keys to understand the video, not only as a work but as a “device” (Agamben 2006) stays in the relationships between knowledge and communication. Obviously any knowledge needs to be communicated, and this is even more true of a video, that does not socially exist without being screened. However, we often tend to think of knowledge and its communication as two subsequent moments, distinguishing between means and ends, form and content, as if they were separated from each other. We should instead think of them together. This would be suitable even if we limit our focus to anthropology, in which films, for a long time, have been made and used mainly for educational purposes, as a visual support to speeches and books (Hughes 2011: 295-298): the communicative aim does not follow the process of knowledge construction but it is present from the beginning as its final cause.

We must take charge of the Expo apparatus as a whole because it provides not only the occasion, but the institutional context within which our experience is carried on and the film is produced. Obviously, Expo is a very complex machine, and what we can see of it, is what is visible from our limited perspective, in the contact zone.

On the side of the Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli the initial request was that of a short film contextualizing the seminar held at the Musée des Civilisations

de Dschang (Cameroon) with local colour images garnishing the talks. Presumably their main purpose, in collecting videos for any of the events put in place, was to account to their Expo patrons for the actions taken and the money spent. The idea then evolved, giving way to several products, as a result of my proposal to involve in the project an artist rather than a videomaker: at this point the idea was to produce a feature film (as was the intention of the anthropologist and the artist) and a series of clips that could be used separately, meeting the communication needs of the Foundation. This of course does not mean that anthropologist and artist, having met the requests (the clips for the communication) had gained the right to do what they wanted in “their” film: the requests were updated again, involving all the new initiatives.

With regard to the film, the Foundation was expecting (as it is in the tradition of the universal exhibitions) an edutainment video: a work able to combine entertainment and information in a didactic way, an easy product able to run on multiple media platforms. To this profile, the presence of an anthropologist could assure a scientific stamp to the work, and the participation of an artist could offer a plus of visibility, enriching the value of the product. At the same time, however, the choice to resort to an anthropologist and an artist involved the risk of falling into academic elitism and artistic crypticism, into self-centredness and incommunicability. All these are fully legitimate concerns, consubstantial to the nature of the institution and of the project, but at the same time they show the possible mismatches concerning goals and expectations of the people involved, depending on the different sectors in which they work. Any project will be successful, only if it will be possible to find a compromise that allows us to meet the needs of scientificity and dissemination, of the artistic, anthropological, educational and communication projects.

All this has to be thought of in the context of the big event of Expo Milan 2015, with its accelerated times where “communication” is something other than popularization. From this point of view, the final product is maybe less important than the possibility to follow its realization “live”, at every step, as a continuous information flow (through internet, twitter, and other social media) that maintains a high level of attention and creates a community of connected followers. Filling the agenda, having well distributed events in the calendar, avoiding overlaps with other activities of the Foundation, and collecting footage for clips to show in public events, have been constant pressing goals to be achieved. As it is known, the risk involved in this kind of situations is that of an emptying of meaning for mere entertainment: a terrible threat for both the anthropologist and the artist.

In the logic of the big Expo event, however, this is something wanted and searched for, producing desirable functional effects: when, for example, parts of our footage are assembled with that of other films produced by the Foundation, and accompanied by texts and/or soundtracks unrelated to the original contexts, the result is a “cover” shaped by an organizational aesthetics that helps to create the context of the event, strengthening its institutional brand.

The event is therefore at the very basis of the possibility of making the film, but simultaneously it is a potential threat to the ethnographic field (to the autonomy of the situations and to the respect of the people who appear in the film) and to the coherence of the artistic work, both of them caught up in the Expo machine, which we can influence in a very limited way.

The situation is further complicated by the fact the collaborative relationships between artist and anthropologist can result in tensions and disagreements about the identity attributed to the work and the contribution made by each of the two. This difficulty is even greater because we are dealing not with two separate products, but with a single work that claims to be worthy both as an artwork and an anthropological product.

The complexity of the situation suggested the opportunity to draw up contracts regulating the relationships between the parts, recognizing the ownership of the work to the authors in terms of co-authors of the film, having the right to make a non-profit use of it, and at the same time giving to the Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli the right to a non-profit use of the work for ten years, respecting the spirit of the work and the identity of the authors. To facilitate the convergence between freedom of use and respect of the integrity of the work, the authors also decided to structure the film into chapters of about five minutes each, so that they could be used as clips without having to resort to cuts. This division, as we shall see, also allowed us to match the ethnographic field and the structure of the edit. Considering the quality of the footage this choice seemed to be the best also for the editing of the film... how to kill two birds with one stone.

From my point of view, all these difficulties should not simply be seen as barriers that separate the anthropologist from their real objective placed somewhere down there in Cameroon: when well understood they are all elements opening the field to other perspectives: instead of trying to defend our field from “intruders,” we should expand it in the perspective of a multi-situated ethnography that takes into account the fact that a film is not the representation of what happened “over there,” but an open thing having its own social life and a biographical path which is largely independent from the lives of people who appear on video and from the intentions of the authors themselves. What the film is cannot be decided in terms of adequacy to the intentions of the authors or to the context that provides the “actors” and the location, but it requires us to follow its life story, the various uses made of it through different media and reception contexts. In this respect, the fact that the Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli has reserved the possibility of making partial reproductions in newspapers or magazines, television, radio; mechanical and digital reproductions and adaptations in any format and in any medium (such as, for example, home videos, discs, CD-ROM, DVD, Blu Ray, HD-DVD, UMD, e-books, audiobooks) paves the way to multiple existences of the film beyond itself, the authors and the actors: a distributed life following incoherent but connected paths, some traces of which you can already find on the internet.

The story of this film is just at its beginning and presumably will continue well





Image 3. Douala, Marché des Fleurs, May 2014. Ivan Bargna talking with Madame Poisson (Photo Paola Anziché).

beyond Expo, which ended on 31/10/2015. The anthropologist and the artist wanted to produce a work addressed to both specialists and the general public, a film able to run in the art world and anthropological milieu as well. Up to now, the movie has been screened at the Museum of Cultures in Milan (05/28/2015) at the Viscult - Festival of Visual Culture of Joensuu, in Finland (30/09 - 02/10/2015), at the International Festival of Ethnographic Film in Belgrade (6-11/10/2015) and at the conference of the Italian Society of Applied Anthropology in Prato (17-19/12/2015). Up to now, the film is moving more easily through the anthropology world than in the artistic milieu, probably because the times required to recognize and incorporate this particular video into these two worlds are very different. Moreover, a film that lasts an hour, is hardly suitable for an exhibition, and it would perhaps be necessary to rethink it differently, for example projecting, separately and simultaneously, the various chapters of the film on multiscreen, creating an immersive environment. However, it is not only a matter of format: to make the film take the form of an artistic event it is necessary that a curator decides to include it as part of his projects. The fact that this film is not simply the work of an artist who uses the services of an anthropologist, but a co-authored work, made by four hands, poses perhaps another problem, that of the inadmissibility of an outsider (the anthropologist) in a system in which the signature of the artist makes the difference between art and non-art.

## **Media and ethnographic field**

If I have been thinking about our film, starting from Expo Milan 2015, it is because the project was born and the film began its life there, all circumstances that do not remain external to the work: Cameroon of course does not need us to exist, but it is within this framework that something like “food cultural practices in Cameroon” becomes, in a certain way, visible to us. Then to treat this subject we need not abandon the ground of media communication to find an outer reality, but we should understand to what extent all this process has configured our view and the field. Cameroon provides the situation, as an already formed and structured matter, but nevertheless complex and polymorphous, which escapes from all sides, which can not be mastered and reduced to unity into a film. Conversely, 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.

What you see, you come across, and shoot, is anticipated and made possible by research hypotheses, experiences and previous knowledge that are different for the anthropologist and the artist, the patrons and the actors, and for all other people who have collaborated in making the film, each one with their own experience or imagination of what Cameroonian food practices are, or should be. This is to recognize how many figures have contributed to the construction of the film, although in different modes and degrees, both during the production and the post-production work.

However, if situations do not just happen, but are actively sought and procured on the basis of an imagined scenario, this does not mean that the film is the enforcement of a screenplay written in advance. Having a network gained over the years, I already knew (or I thought I knew) where to go, but our path is always paved with contingencies, accidents and surprises: the fate of many of our expectations is to be denied, opening other paths to explore. The result depends not only on ideas that can change in the progress, but on serendipity, missed appointments, casual acquaintances, unpredictable events, microphones that melt in the sun, the ways people react to the camera, and so on.

However, if we assume that in every societies no access to reality is given that does not pass through an interpretation, which combines experience-near and experience-distant concepts (Geertz 1993) and that all knowledge involves a work of technically mediated construction (Latour 1996), then the question of the access to reality becomes that of the distance or proximity between mediated experiences. Media are not only deeply embedded in reality, but they are a part of it, because every society produces and reproduces itself through a process of “mediation” (Mazzarella 2004: 346). From the methodological point of view, this means that the question of the appropriateness of the devices put to work in the field becomes that of the degree to which they are familiar to our interlocutors in the shaping of their daily life.



Image 4. The poster of the film (Photo Paola Anziché).

In one of the chapters of the film (“The funeral of Maître Nguena”) Paola Anziché is filming the scene “over the shoulder” of a woman who, in her turn, is shooting what happens with an iPad. Today, in Cameroon, the “democratization” of media culture made possible by low cost friendly digital technologies, the spread of internet and satellite TV, and piracy of cable TV, DVD and VCD format products make watching films, and sometimes filming, an ordinary experience (Santamera 2014). Everywhere public and private events are captured with cameras and cell phones, by professionals, amateurs, and the participants themselves.

This means that the problems and issues faced by anthropologists and artists in their work are in some ways similar to those with which the people with whom they have to deal in the field must cope with in their life. Audio-visual media are not only a means of 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 people in Cameroon find here a contact zone, based on the differentiated and unequal relationships they have with the media, as consumers and users as well (Bargna 2012).

### **Structure of the film and montage**

The film brings on stage some *tranches de vie* which allow us to evoke larger social themes, as the food differences between town and country, the relationships between tradition modernity, the identity role of cooking, the ritual and sacrificial use of food, the cultural heritage politics involving feeding practices. On the other hand, these wider social and cultural scenarios offer in turn the framework in

which those slices of life can be contextualised: they do not remain closed in themselves, and neither become elements of a sampling. In this way, the singularity of people's lives interacts with their social role, and the reason why they have been chosen and selected for the film: they serve as examples, something that remains, at the same time, concrete and extendible to other situations, without the possibility of generalizations (Agamben 2008: 11-34).

Avoiding any systematic and exhaustive approach, which is that of the traditional localized fieldwork or that of the survey, we have tried to bring to light some connections between different people's experiences.

The film is divided into two parts "Manger à Douala" (four chapters) and "Manger dans les Grassfields" (six chapters) that refer to the distinction between town and country; for each of these two parts there is an introduction that, by means of maps and images taken from a car, evokes the distance between them.

Through the editing, the ten life stories fragments become ten episodes. The chapter division allows us both to maintain the uniqueness of each situation, and to create a sequential order, without forcing different situations into a unified narrative. This order is clearly imposed from outside to situations and people who are not directly connected to each other, even if they could probably recognize themselves in what is said.

The different chapters are thus divided in two blocks, along the opposition between town and countryside, but the classical narrative of the modernization proceeding from village to town is intentionally reversed and deconstructed through recurring elements crossing the opposition between rural and urban (e.g. stock cubes or TV programs widespread everywhere) or through dissonances that deny expectations (e.g. in the last chapter, the ironical appearance of football into a sacred context).

The film begins with the noisy and congested traffic of the city of Douala, with images taken from a speeding taxi, and it ends with a sacrificial place ("Le lieu sacré de Fovu") made of cyclopean rocks, the silence broken only by birds, cicadas, two chicks and the greetings of few enigmatic human figures. Trying to contrast an easy sense of progression, the chapters of the film are not numbered, but I think, however, the sequence assumes, willingly or not, the sense of a development, of a spiritual elevation path, with a plot and its denouement: when the structural partition between urban and rural is put in a sequence, it becomes a transition from city to country, a kind of ascent to the sources that seems to lead from an anthropic environment to a natural one, from modernity to tradition, from profane to sacred. The two introductions connecting the two parts, with their maps and road images drawing from the travel rhetoric, reinforce this feeling.

All these structural and narrative elements are something more than a mere rhetorical device resulting from a deliberate choice: they refer to the "great narratives" (Lyotard 1979) of modernity and tradition still in place, although in the weakened forms of post-modernity and post-colony. While this may only seem a convenient scheme, too simplistic in terms of interpretation categories, it does not



Image 5. Preparing the *nkui* sauce, Dschang, Juin 2014 (photo Paola Anziché).

appear arbitrary, to the extent that still animates the intentions of the agents, the expectations of the spectators, and the imaginary of those who research and shoot. Here, we have to see something more than an act of compliance with the requirements of popularisation: what this indicates is the material, imaginary and discursive place within which we all dwell, both in Africa and in the West. Once again, the spaces of communication and thought, without ever coinciding, are however connected. It is in this contact zone (Clifford 1997), providing attachment points with the understanding of the audience, that we can try to give an account of the point of view of the Cameroonian people involved in the film. Needless to say, this contact zone also remains a zone of frictions and mutual misunderstandings.

### **Displacing stereotypes**

The frame provided by post-modernity and post-colony has a performative nature, it is not just something in which one exists, but a horizon in relation to which it is necessary to take a stand.

With regard to food in Africa, we are entangled in a miserabilist imaginary made of hunger and famine, humanitarian aid, and development projects. For our film, two were the risks to be avoided: falling in a voyeuristic miserabilism or on the other hand transforming cuisine and culture into objects of an exotic, aestheticized consumption.

To counter these powerful stereotypes we have tried to stay close to the everyday social practices and escape the pathetic. The viewers of the film are often surprised to see the richness of the Cameroonian food practices we have filmed.

The strategy we have adopted to achieve this has been the voiceover at the beginning of every chapter, providing the social, political and economic context within which people eat.

The other manner we have tried to displace stereotypes has been, as already mentioned, to insert recurring elements crossing the opposition between rural and urban (e.g. stock cubes or TV programs) or dissonances that contradict coherent expectations.

At the beginning of the last chapter, the voiceover ironically announces that the name of the sacred place of Fovu has been, since 1978, also that of the local football team: every aspiration to authenticity and each nostalgic yearning has been so restrained in advance, not simply erased, but re-experienced with discomfort.

All the partitions structuring the film and common sense are slightly put in doubt: the gap between great narratives and effective trajectories becomes visible, suggesting the opportunity to pass from opposition to coexistence and interpenetration.

One of these stumbling blocks disseminated throughout the film is that of the stock cubes. Maggi cubes appear in several different situations: in the kitchen of a Bamun woman living in the Douala slum of Bessengué (“*Chez Madame Justine*”) in a conversation during a home dinner between Italians in the affluent neighbourhood of Bonanjo (“*La cuisine des blancs*”) in the market of Dschang in the Grassfields (“*Manger dans les Grassfields*”). The simplistic opposition between vernacular cooking and imported globalised food here does not work. The Italian expats ironically criticize the excessive use of stock cubes (“*Cameroonian food is very good, it is very tasty for one thing, because it is full of Maggi Stock Cube, and all the spicy products, so everything is excellent, fish and meat*”) while the Bamun woman who is cooking for her children remarks that there are a lot of different cubes on the market and that “*You choose depending on your taste, with your family. You don’t just use any old stock cube*”.

Even if we can reproach the artificial flavour enhancers to standardize the taste, yet we are faced here with something more than a sudden and disruptive intrusion of the global food industry: these foreign goods have been domesticated, and the local demand has redirected the production for the African market.

Stock cubes were introduced in the continent during the colonial era, and since then they have been produced in Africa by European companies from the 70s, also giving rise to a local production of new products and brands (Goody 2005). This process has led to a reshaping of the product based on the tastes of consumers, as clearly attested by the export of the “*Africanized*” versions of cubes addressed to the diaspora communities living in Europe and USA. Here they have become a “*vernacular food*,” linked to the nostalgic memory of the origins but at the same time bound to modernity, insofar as they are ready products, discon-

nected from seasonality, and produced in a range of standardized variants (Renne 2007). Differently, in Cameroon, stock cubes are helping to build a sort of free zone that can serve to shape a trans-ethnic flavour beyond the regional culinary differences. In Cameroon these products, however, don't replace traditional ingredients, but are added to them, in a creolisation process that creates something new. It is interesting to remark, for example, how stock cubes are present in "traditional" Cameroonian recipes, uploaded on the internet.

Just as industrial products can be locally domesticated, so traditional food can prove much more "modern" than one supposes, as in the case of raffia palm wine.

The raffia wine appears into the film in various "traditional" situations (references made to the ritual washing of the dead, and the rites to "wash" curses) that seem to prove its duration in time, and its social and symbolic importance. However, the contrast between trivial consumption and ritual use is then weakened by showing how, not only they coexist, but how raffia wine is mixed with the products of "modernity:" beer, whiskey and spirits of obscure composition, sold in small plastic bags.

The chapter "Le vin du village" begins with a farmer who is drawing the wine from a palm, and it ends with the images of a small bar that opens onto a heavily trafficked road, and of a bottle of a pasteurized, industrially produced, raffia wine on the table. Modernity does not come, however, only at the end of the chapter (as a corruptive phenomenon) but it is already there from its beginning (as a condition of possibility): the farmer who works among the palm trees is accompanied by the Baham Kingdom Museum conservator illustrating the museum's educational project aimed at the preservation of the raffia palm agriculture. So tradition appears as the correlate of the contemporary heritage policies (Bargna 2013).

This theme returns in another chapter: "La journée des filles Todjom". The woman that in her backyard is teaching traditional cooking to young female university students, is operating in a context set up by the Musée des Civilisations de Dschang, aiming to promote the local intangible culture as a part of world heritage, and strengthen the Grassfields identity in the frame of Cameroonian ethnic politics.

Another element in the film that helps to reduce the opposition between town and country is that of television, appearing in the most unexpected places. The woman living in the slum of Bessengué ("Chez Madame Justine") in her comparison between the cooking of the whites and that of the blacks, mentions television as an authoritative source: "when you see the whites eating on TV and you ask yourself if you could eat it". We also find out that the traditional leader ("Wabo Tekam") who, in epic tones, remembers how he began fish farming in the Grassfields, was inspired by a TV program.

Wabo Tekam introduces another key theme in the film, that of witchcraft, a practice of antisocial "eating" that, in its present configuration, is not so much the survival of a rural past but a product of modernity and urban contexts.

The film actually shows nothing of witchcraft, except indirectly: the only person that explicitly mentions it is me. 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. 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. Witchcraft appears in the film only in an allusive way, for example during a funeral, as an invective launched on the dead by his brother ("The deuil de Maître Nguena ") or in the words of Wabo Tekam about people who only like to receive gifts without ever reciprocating, in this way becoming dependent on those who feed them.

Witchcraft also appears in the open question put at the end of the film, addressed to Paola by a student during the seminar held in Dschang: it is a question formulated in an academic tone, but within a horizon of beliefs that refers to the nocturnal witchcraft world: "I would like to know something about the nocturnal eating that we do at night, while dreaming... it is a widespread phenomenon among Africans that during the night are fed in a mystical way... I would like to know then if this happens in all civilizations, if people in Western Civilisations also find themselves dreaming of eating."

In these ways of seeing and doing, we shouldn't see a survival of the past, but a shaping of reality in the frame of the hard and opaque nature of the economy of the post-colonial societies. As Jean and John Comaroff (1999) have asserted about South Africa, and Geschiere (1995) about Cameroon, in Africa we are dealing with a dramatic rise of "occult economies," working as a means to face the unpredictable events of the capitalist economy: a "deployment, real or imagined, of magical means for material ends" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 279) allowing people to explain, act and react, to the sudden fortune of a few and the misery of others. 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. These beliefs are rooted in the memory of forced labour in colonial times, and in the slavery of the cadets traded by the notables since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with big stomachs "eating" the small ones. Witchcraft then appears both as a weapon by which the riches conceal the source of their wealth, and impose themselves through fear, and the 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). Seen from this perspective, the Cameroonian foodscape appears as a dangerous and competitive space in which the struggle between "big" and "small bellies" is fought by licit and illicit ways, with poisoning, cannibalism, and vampirism, considered as plausible practices, both in media and everyday speeches. Solidarity practices mingle and overlap antagonistic practices. The funerals, with all their disputes over inheritance and succession, the giving of food and drink to all participants, put on display these dynamics in a theatrical and ritualized manner, and offer the chance for redistribution of resources and new capitalizations of money and prestige.





Image 6. The Funeral of Maître Nguena, Bafut, Juin 2014 (photo Paola Anziché).

### Working on words, sounds, and images

The collaboration between anthropology and the artist has not been based on a strict division of the work, giving to the former ethnographic field and to the latter the artefact: Paola with her camera has contributed to shape the field, and for my part I have collaborated on the editing of the film. Both of us, according to our skills and knowledge, have worked on the words, images, sounds, concepts and aesthetics, to assure that the audience experience of film does not end in the “pleasure” of the vision (looking at the images) but opens to a sensory connection with the world (looking through the images) enabling them to enter the field. If here art and anthropology are as two sides of the same coin, it is because “referentiality is always performed through style” (Corner 2005: 52), since the translation of reality within the filmic discourse always requires a *mise en scène* (de France 1989).

Take the case of the sound: in general we have tried to preserve the original soundscape, just lowering the background noise. We did not use extradiegetic sound and the music you hear is that of the car radios (except when we were obliged to replace a song by Phil Collins with another to avoid copyright problems). However, even limiting the sound editing to resynchronization and sound polishing, to improve clarity, this work has not been and could not be, purely technical: it was at the same time an aesthetic (lowering the most annoying sounds to allow comfortable listening) and reconstructive operation (so that when you see

a motorcycle or a spoon, you can also hear their sound). Actually, the technical nature of this intervention is associated with an authorial element that is a condition for its own effectiveness. The goal of the sound editor (Micol Roubini who is not only a technician but herself an artist making videos) is to allow the viewers an empathic engagement in what they see and hear, favouring the illusion of being there. However, not only the audience but even the technician has never been there, and the auditory memory of the anthropologist and the artist are not so reliable in order to have an effective control on the final result. What is actually shaped, on the basis of the recorded sounds, is a hypothetical soundscape, able to make the film believable.

This inextricable coexistence of external and internal, is also found in the images. You cannot look *through* the pictures without looking *at* the pictures, and the possibility to see beyond the images depends on the characteristics of the images themselves: there are images which are “good to think,” and others that neutralize our critical view. The desire to make a good film can easily come into conflict with the will to show what can increase our knowledge, although all technical and aesthetic qualities have shortcomings: reference and artefact are always in tension.

I have to confess that at the beginning of our work, I was quite worried to see Paola shooting details, privileging the close up to the wide angle. I feared a loss of meaning and context, the risk of formalism or arbitrary and subjective meanings: “nice” images but no Cameroon.

I was wrong: this artistic choice could meet my ethnographic aims. When Paola cuts objects, faces and full figures shooting people from behind or framing only their legs, arms and hands, she prevents an immediate recognition of what is happening, forcing the viewer to be more attentive and aware that the meaning is not given, but it is something to build. Bypassing the portrait conventions and their oleographic, National Geographic-like effect, Paola is restraining our will to know everything at once through pictures: “nice” images that generate a bit of discomfort. Art and anthropology are here together in trying to limit the logic of easy consumption that drives communication: it is not to make everything simple and clear but to become aware of the limits of our understanding.

Nothing agreed by design, but the artist who does and proposes, and anthropologist who reacts, thinking about what he could draw from what is happening.

Privileging the close up, a nose, as it were, that enters the pots or people of which we do not see the faces, is not only a stylistic choice, but is often motivated and requested by the situations themselves: people refusing to be filmed or our wish not to be too intrusive. Eating times and places, in Cameroon as elsewhere, raise intimate and socially sensitive issues. When in the chapter “Le tournedos de Madame Santé,” people refuse to be bothered and filmed while they are eating, they are not only protecting their own privacy, but they are defending their social status and cultural intimacy, as office workers who fear African misery stereotypes and to be seen in a “poor” context, inappropriate to the image that they want to give of themselves.

Eating in ceremonial circumstances, or in a public space always involves the setting up of a stage: in these contexts the presence of a camera is sometimes perceived as a violation of intimacy, and sometimes as a means to increase conviviality or expose themselves to the world.

When in the film people show their face to the camera, it is because we have built an interpersonal relationship that allows a mutual trust. In some cases it comes to relationships built over the years, in others, they are built in the space of a single day. In the episode of “Madame Poisson” for example, we are faced with the formation of an unpredictable bubble of intimacy within the public space of the market: a sudden confidence that arises among people who do not know each other. In this context the camera is not hidden but participates in the situation as shown by Madame Poisson herself, sometimes turning her eyes to Paola.

All our difficulties met in filming people, however, should not only be seen as obstacles, but as a significant part of the relationships shaping the field. For this reason, they are deliberately shown in the film, where denials, resistances, and negotiations, about who and what is possible to film or not in eating situations, are visible and heard. This is evident in particular in the chapter “La journée des Filles Tadjom” where the woman preparing the sauce addresses the camera asking: “Are you taking the photo of me home with you?” And it is the same woman again who sceptically comments: “What will they learn coming here? Only that the people eat.”

In the managing of tension between referentiality and artefact, art and anthropology, much depends on how words, sounds, and images are tied together. However, also in this regard, there is not any aprioristic opposition between anthropology and art: the narrative and expressive side and the analytical and rigorous one are both needed for ethnographic film and for artistic video operating on the social ground. An objectivist reification of the facts, and an aesthetic formalism are both dangers to be avoided, as much for one as for the other (Bargna 2012: 106).

In this respect, the use we have made of the voiceover in our film is significant. One of the key issues in writing the introductory texts was to say enough to allow viewers to orient themselves into a supposed unknown reality, and at the same time not to say too much, crushing the images and the speaking voices of the protagonists on the monologues of the voiceover. These introductory texts widen the scene to topics connected with what will be seen in every chapter but which is not visible itself, trying to balance information, argument and evocation, also working on the intonation of the voice.

I know well that the use of voiceover in ethnographic film does not enjoy good reputation, and I share the reasons for this criticism. In this case, however, the voice of the anthropologist is not the voice of God, the voice of an omniscient narrator: it is my voice.

Using my voice (on the advice of Paola) we wanted to give flesh to the text, making it clear that what is said is always tied to a particular point of view. For the same reason my voice, as well as that of Paola, is audible even within chapters of the film, where I am visible here and there. So, nothing to do with an objectifying



Image 7. The objects of Maître Nguena, Bafut, Juin 2014 (photo Paola Anziché).

scientific authority that forces to silence the speaking voices of the subjects or submits them to its final judgment: these texts are introductions and not conclusions.

This use of the voiceover represents an assumption of responsibility, based on the conviction that ethnography requires an external look, the linking of events with a theoretical framework, as well as a mediation to communicate its results to a distant audience (Ruby 2000).

Our intention was not to replace the protagonists with the anthropologist, but to support their voices, providing contextualization elements through the use of experience-distant concepts that allow their cultural translation for an audience most of whom have never been to Cameroon.

Argumentative speeches on the other hand are not an exclusive prerogative of the anthropologist, they are spoken by several of the protagonists of the film: as already mentioned, the film ends with the voiceover of a student who launches a question from Cameroon to the world, opening a potential distance conversation.

The sermons that are spoken during the funeral of the lawyer Maître Nguena, by his brother, by a colleague and a catholic priest, are exhortatory and argumentative texts that are not only part of the event, but comments on it, inscribing it in a broader transcultural context, that of the customary and positive law, of the “clash of civilizations” between the West and the local culture.

The voice off of Madame Justine reflecting about White and Blacks people’s

ways of cooking prevents that the images of her serving the dinner to their children fall into the pathetic.

Of course these voices speak from a different place than that of the anthropologist: none of them took part in the screenplay or has seen and known the other people who appear in the video: their voices are off as a result of the asynchronicity between speech and image that the authors have introduced in the montage. However, this mismatch between words and images accentuates the reflective tone of their arguments. This same disconnection compels the viewer to follow a double flow of images and words that, although tied between them, remain separate: what you are seeing is not the same, neither in time nor in content, as what you are hearing. In the effort that this viewing and listening activity requires, the film appears in all its artificiality, preventing a total involvement and thus opening a space for reflection.

The editing allows distant people to speak to each other, enabling the spectators to compare the views that each one have on the other: while the Italian expats speak about the different brands of pasta available in the supermarkets of Douala, Mme Justine opposes the expensive restaurants for white people to spaghetti that in her opinion are “for poor people and not for white people.”

The next step of this process will be our return to Cameroon to show and discuss the film both with the protagonists and other kinds of audience, to continue our conversation, and perhaps make another film.

*Il faut donner à manger aux gens. Cultural food practices in Cameroon* is available to the readers of «Archivio di Etnografia» at the url <https://vimeo.com/122885718> using the password: Cameroon2015.

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