

**“Politics na Njangi: You Scratch My Back, I Scratch Your Back”:
Socio-Cultural Understandings of Politics in Cameroon**

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Introduction

Politics, the world over, is a game of interest. Contrary to what we may think, wish or claim, no individual, however autonomous, is entirely independent. It is in this sense that even the most apparently independent individual is a subject – produced at the point of convergence of many actions on the actions of others – which, of course, is not to deny their capacity to act self-interestedly. To recognise this is to provide for interdependence in accommodation of the paradox that any radical pursuit of independence invariably occasions dependence. Interdependence calls for the pursuit of individual interests only to the extent that such pursuits do not impair or jeopardise the interests of others. Hence the need to domesticate individual agency with laws, values, norms and practices that seek to provide for a level playing field for the game of self-interest. Those who understand this provide for politics as a game that seeks to recognise and reconcile individual and collective interests. The individual interests can be as many as the number of individuals involved. However, given that individuals do not live in splendid isolation from one another, shared backgrounds, experiences, social positions and predispositions inspire common aspirations. It is therefore possible that although the individual might remain our unit of analyses, the fact of individuals not having the same natural dispositions or social cultivation means that individual interests are guided by or articulated in tune with the group or collective values to which they subscribe or which they are compelled to reproduce. Hence the importance of seeing individuals as interconnected in myriad permutations informed by interests that are neither permanent nor frozen in time and space. Politics and democracy are thus necessarily of interest to both individuals and the groups to which they belong and through which they are networked. Both individuals and the interest groups they represent or are represented by are dynamic, and so are their interests. This makes politics an intricate game of navigation and negotiation of myriad individual and collective interests (Olson [1965] 2002).

Contrary to the rhetoric of liberalism that has overly dramatised the autonomy of the individual citizen, democracy best epitomises politics as a game of reconciliation between individual and collective interests. In the USA, the country most credited with individual autonomy and liberal democracy, for example, special interests and *quid pro quo*¹ are the modus operandi (Großer, Reuben and Tymula 2013), and elections are hardly exclusively unmediated affairs between candidates seeking political office and the individual voters. As presidential elections, which are mediated by electoral colleges, lobbies,

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¹ *Quid pro quo* involves bargaining, bartering and leverage, in accordance with an understanding that “nothing goes for nothing”, and one good turn deserves another.

corporations and various interest groups driven by factors such as the economy, employment, education, race, class, religion, gender, generation, immigration and foreign policy, have repeatedly demonstrated, who gets to be president is hardly simply a case of direct popular votes and individual votes. Individual Americans belong to various interest groups that influence how and for whom they ultimately cast their votes. Every candidate for the presidency is only too conscious of this intricate reality of various intermediary communities and collective interests that shape how Americans react to campaign messages and promises. Hence the horse trading that characterises politics and election campaigns. The greater a candidate's ability and capacity to accommodate, navigate and negotiate various individual and collective interests, the greater the candidate's chances of being elected.

This paper uses the Cameroonian institution of “*njangi*” and the tendency to compare politics to this institution and practice to illustrate the universality of politics as a game of interest, interdependence and domesticated agency. The paper argues that the narrow focus on the autonomous individual in liberal democracy takes attention away from the complex, nuanced and collective interest-driven reality of politics in countries that claim the status of model democracies. Scholars of African politics have tended to uncritically internalise the rhetoric of the autonomous individual and of all-powerful leaders in their studies of political institutions and processes on the continent. One of the outcomes has been a misrepresentation of politics on the continent as a game of group and individual interests in which there are neither permanent patrons nor permanent clients nor permanent winners and losers.

Njangi

In Cameroon, where the state has often been distant, indifferent and irrelevant, or present mainly in its extractive capacity, people have cultivated ingenious forms of self-reliance and social networking. Throughout the country, individuals and communities have a long history of investing in networks, solidarity and avenues of accumulation that bypass the state and its encumbrances, and sometimes they even reach out and obtain a harvest from the very same state despite these encumbrances.

Such social networking facilitates the pooling together of financial and other resources by individuals and collectivities determined to fulfil their dreams – in both normal and difficult times. Known among Anglophone Cameroonians as “*njangi*” and among Francophones as “*tontine*”, this institution and practice², a form of solidarity or social networking, is meant to facilitate survival and success for groups and individuals with an intimate knowledge of and trust in one another. In this article, I stick with the Anglophone appellation.

Njangi is available for those who have decided to come together for the purpose of saving some resource – usually money – on a regular basis. The regularity of the payments or contributions - for example, whether they will be on a weekly, biweekly, or monthly basis - is agreed upon from the outset. Participating members refer to their regular contributions in cash or kind as their *njangi*. and to the act of contributing as playing *njangi* – emphasising thus the game-likeness of this particular relationship and activity. As with every game, each *njangi* is governed by rules by which the participants are expected to play.

The associated meetings are usually rotatory in nature, as the group is expected to meet at the home of a different hosting member each time, except for those cases where a central

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□ In English, *njangi* is usually translated to mean a thrift association or practice.

meeting place has been agreed upon. The money saved, or whatever contribution is made at each meeting, is made available to one of the members – usually the person hosting the meeting for the day – in accordance with a pre-established calendar, schedule or order that was arrived at by ballot or through a hierarchy of neediness that was agreed upon at the inception of the group.

The person who receives the *njangi* money is said to “*chop njangi*” – which literally means “eat” *njangi* – although the receiving member is expected to do everything *but* “eat” the money, as “eating money” usually connotes waste. Of course, the person receiving the *njangi* has the freedom to do with the money as she or he pleases. It is generally expected, however, that the receiving member will invest the money wisely and prosper from it. He or she is expected to manage his or her investments judiciously and contribute to the *njangi* when the time comes, so that other members may “*chop njangi*”. Thus, one is expected to eat only to the extent that one is conscious of the need and entitlement of others to their fair share of *njangi*. Trust and reciprocity are the name of this game of banking on one another, or scratching the back of those who scratch one’s own back (Ardener 1964; Delancey 1978; Ardener & Burman 1995; Niger-Thomas 1995; Biggart 2001).

Njangi is also a game of solidarity and mutuality in sociality, especially for, but not exclusive to, family and friends. Strong communal ties are central in it, as is the internalisation of values that emphasise honesty, interdependence and conviviality. The members hardly proceed on the basis of the idea that they would have to seek the intervention of coercive external agents of law and order to enforce the appropriate behaviour (Biggart 2001:134). Instead, the members are expected to embody and reproduce the *njangi* ethic, and years of practice are expected to make this an effortless and instinctive act.

Njangi groups are comparable to, compete with, and complement banks. Like banks, they save people’s money and lend money to people, often with more reasonable interest rates than some actual banks. In other ways, they are more than banks. The fact that they usually bring together people who already know one another fairly well in other contexts (such as a workplace, a church, a college, a business, and so forth) means that *njangi* groups are expected to create, reproduce and ensure continuity for social networks that bind their members in other spheres of life. In cases of social events, such as promotions at work, marriages, births, baptisms and funerals, members are expected to demonstrate solidarity through financial contributions and gifts, as well as by personal participation in celebrating members’ achievements or comforting them when they meet with disappointment.

Politics na Njangi: A Game of Intimacies

Games of solidarity, trust and reciprocity are not necessarily games of intimacy. But a game that involves backscratching the way *politics na njangi* does must be played in close proximity. The players must be close enough to each other for backs to be scratched – hence the element of intimacy involved, and also for there to be a possibility of backscratching becoming backstabbing. No one enters into *njangi* with just anyone, as it involves an investment of hard earned money or resources that one would not contemplate losing. Intimacy, either in the form of primordial bonds, or in the form of solidarities through association and subscription to common values and a shared cosmopolitan belonging, is therefore an important precondition. Intimacy and familiarity may not be a guarantee against betrayal and opportunism, but they offer greater protection than simply throwing caution to the wind with reckless abandon or proceeding with cynicism about human nature.

Little wonder that politicians, enamoured with politics as *njangi*, seem more comfortable fishing in neighbourhoods and networks with which they are familiar - especially those with which they have had intimate encounters and to which they can claim to belong. These include their home villages, their ethnic groups, and their regions of origin or birth, as well as their circles of friends, their former school and college mates, and their other long term acquaintances. It is also little wonder that folk are more likely to vent their disappointment with politicians they know in close proximity than their disappointment with a distant President of the Republic, or an abstraction called the State or ruling party, with whom or which they can hardly claim any degree of intimacy or tangible knowledge. For how can one enter a *njangi* with a perfect stranger, the road to whose house one cannot trace? It is true that the friends of one's friends can also be considered friends, but only indirectly. Hence the importance of passing through regional and local elites and authorities such as chiefs and village heads to make visible an otherwise distant state and an otherwise distant president of the republic. Just as one has to be close enough to scratch another's back, one has to be close enough to stab another in the back or to be stabbed in the back himself. Like witchcraft, which thrives more on intimacies than on a lack thereof, *politics na njangi* is steeped in intimacies. If it brings about success, such success must be felt within intimate circles, just as its failures are meant to be borne by the same intimate circles.

In Cameroon, this takes the form of a politics of divide and rule between and within competing zones of intimacies or of *njangi* groups. It provides a context where ambition informed by difference can be uniting. As I observed in the 1990s, the State and the President of the Republic are just as involved in the politics of backscratching. However, by not claiming the same degrees of intimacy at regional and local levels as the bureaucratic and political elite on whom they depend for self-propagation and perpetuation are obliged to claim, the State and the President of the Republic are able to abscond with indifference and impunity from their obligations vis-à-vis Cameroonians, leaving others to bear the brunt of blame and castigation. If the national *politics na njangi* appears to be everywhere except at the top, one has to look beyond the nation-state and the limits of its sovereignty to see how entangled with *politics na njangi* the President and the State are in their interactions with other states and world leaders in bi- or multi-lateral contexts, and also in their interactions with multinational corporations and other international organisations.

The Cameroonian state and President are only too aware of the consequences that await them should they fail to play on their *njangi* commitments in their politics with the wider world. Because multinational partners and Cameroon's Western partners do not want to go about their activity in Cameroon totally unprotected, they insist on state support, legislation and regulation as a guarantee against the full vicissitudes and turbulence of daring to venture into marginal and highly unpredictable zones of accumulation like Africa. Given the weakness of African states in relation to the interests of rich nations, international financial institutions and multinationals, and their peripheral position in the global economy and politics, the only real authority or semblance of power that is affordable to African governments is that which is aimed towards their own populations, which are often too poor and too vulnerable to organise and mobilise effectively against exploitation and repression. Hence a President like Paul Biya, who is exhausted or humbled by the requirements to fulfil obligations vis-à-vis his external *njangi* partners, can afford a position in which his ministers and subjects play the national *politics na njangi* among themselves, while he himself appears to be largely out of and above the game, in spite of the rhetoric that he shares in it. The only *njangi* that seems to matter to him and his legitimation is that which he opts to play or is compelled to play with external partners, creditors and investors.

Given the State's investment in divide-and-rule, local and regional politicians and elites realise that their best chance for political and social visibility and prominence lies not in uniting to hold the President and the State to account, but rather in jostling for the attention of the State and the President through infighting, tensions, and conflicts with and reporting on one another. In this way, centralised state power is able to reproduce itself by exaggerating differences and denying the existence of an oppressed majority. It succeeds in deflating alternative forms of accountability and in reducing the politics of backscratching to a one-dimensional relationship in which the State and the President force even national level politicians and elites to pose as vote banks in their real or imagined regions and villages of origin. Within such a framework, "The power elite becomes obsessed with maximizing power at ethnic and regional levels, while treating the centre as sacrosanct" (Nyamnjoh 1999: 109). The minister or general manager from a given region or ethnic group "is made to understand that he owes his appointment to the dis-appointment of another" from the same region or ethnic group, and that he or she must derail all signs of solidarity among Cameroonians, regardless of origin, if he counts on staying in office. Members of government and top civil servants are made to believe that they are appointed to high office to, first of all, display a primary patriotism with respect to their home villages, regions or ethnic groups, and only after that can they pretend to serve Cameroonians as a whole. This would explain why the first visit of any minister upon their appointment by the head of state is "usually to their home village to muster support and/or gratitude for the centre, as well as to prove that they have a power base of some sort. This also reveals that they are first and foremost ministers for their ethnic group, before being ministers for Cameroon as a whole, if at all" (Nyamnjoh 1999: 109-110).

In tune with the culture and logic of *njangi*, ordinary folks expect no less (Kah 2010). Popular music, for example, is full of evidence to this effect. Given the rarity of political appointments, the newly appointed politician's relations, friends and village communities do not hesitate to join in the celebrations, as there is the prospect that some of the benefits of high office will trickle down to the networks of familiarities and intimacies. Donny Elwood has most ably captured this suggestion of conviviality and connivance between the privileged few and their marginalized kin. In his song entitled "En Haut", a young man who has lived the life of the ghetto finds reason to celebrate the appointment of his brother to a "very high office". His brother has struggled and sacrificed to be appointed, consulting renowned pygmy diviners and witch doctors to fortify him, and going through such trying experiences as crossing dangerous rivers and sleeping for days with his face dipped in water. He has even danced the *bikutsi* naked with his feet in fire in company with chimpanzees, not to mention eating and drinking medicines made from the barks of trees and from herbs. The young man envisions his brother's appointment changing his life in a big way – "my life is going to change", "at last I am going to relax", as "suffering has ended". The days of suffering in overloaded taxis are over. He anticipates riding in his own car, an air-conditioned Mercedes, going into the inner cities to pick up girls – especially those who turned him down when he was nobody and who cannot resist anyone with a car. He also looks forward to winning contracts which he has no intention of honouring, given the protection he is sure to receive from his brother in high office. He will move to a beautiful residential area, keeping his old friends and relations at a distance by limiting access to his cell phone, and employing a guard to keep visitors at bay. At last he will be able to travel to Paris, see beautiful sights, indulge in delicacies such as smoked salmon, and shop with euros. The song is a real celebration of the power, privilege and comfort of success by association with the political elite. It justifies the saying that when your brother is up a fruit tree, you will eat the juiciest

fruits. Relationships of intimacy and solidarity pay off even when you are not the person directly associated with the success or achievement. But if you forget those you met on your way up, you shall be alone in your failure or on your way down. Success is meaningful only to the extent that it is collective, especially in the sense that its benefits are shared. Success, like politics, is *na njangi* (Nyamnjoh & Fokwang 2005: 259).

Cameroon has a long tradition of associating various forms of relationships with *njangi*. Musicians sing of “bieh-bieh bank” (literally, “pubic hair bank”, to imply saving the proceeds of prostitution) *njangi* by prostitutes who depend on their earnings of the day, week or month (that is, “money for hand back for down”) to play their *njangi*. Men who visit prostitutes complain about being made to contribute financially to the sex *njangi* as if only they, the men, derive pleasure when they meet with women for sex. Joli Bebe sings of a young woman whose only response to the question “What is your name?” is “3500”, meaning her going rate.³ In 1971, Ako-Aya, the famous *Cameroon Outlook* columnist, popularised the notion of “mimbo na njanji,” calling on those who receive “drinks” to respect the rules of drinking by “hipping *njangi* for mimbo” – i.e. giving drinks to those who give them drinks during meetings in bars and other social gatherings. By this, the social commentator implied that one could only offer a drink with enthusiasm to those with the habit of offering drinks in turn (Ngwafor 2010: 151). Giving and gifting are acts of reciprocity that ensure an obligatory circulation of wealth and define, maintain and sustain relationships (Mauss [1925] 1967).

Popularisation of *Politics na Njangi*

The person credited with introducing and popularising the association of politics with *njangi* in Cameroon is Simon Achidi Achu. Originating from the North West Region, Achidi Achu became Prime Minister in 1992, a time when the opposition and various arms of civil society were clamouring for democratisation and liberalisation. It was a time when the ruling Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (the CPDM), which had enjoyed a monopoly of power during the era of the omnipotent and omniscient one-party state, was desperately seeking to cling to power by keeping up appearances with variants of face powder democracy and pseudo-reforms. The North West Region was at the forefront of the opposition’s clamours for radical democratic changes. John Fru Ndi, the leader of the main opposition party – the Social Democratic Front (the SDF) –, was from the same village – Santa (Baforchu) – as Achidi Achu. By appointing Achidi Achu Prime Minister, President Paul Biya was challenging him to reverse the dwindling fortunes of the ruling CPDM in his home village and home region. Achidi Achu was being invited to enter a political fight within his very own intimate circles – against Fru Ndi, his kinsman and rival in party political terms – and to do all within his powers and manoeuvrability to emerge victorious. His victory over his kinsman and intimacies (locality, division and region) would ensure victory and continuity for the faraway President Biya, who was desperately seeking to tame the tides of political change with lip service to democratisation.

In his political activities and speeches around the country, and especially in the Anglophone region of Cameroon, Achidi Achu soon became noted for one of the most recurrent expressions in his speeches – “*politics na njangi*” –, which was often followed by the

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□ See also Saint Bruno’s clip ‘3500’, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFYzMBri6dU>, accessed 29 December 2012.

phrase “Scratch my back, I scratch your back”. What did Achidi Achu mean by “*politics na njangi*”?

In a context where Cameroonians are compelled to perceive and relate to politics as a game of infinite attempts to balance between competing and conflicting regional, ethnic, linguistic and religious interests (Nyamnjoh 1999), selecting and relating to intimate others involves juggling and joggling myriad competing and conflicting claims and counterclaims of belonging. It is in this regard that “*politics na njangi*” means different things at different levels. At one level, Achidi Achu was using it to invite Anglophone Cameroonians to appreciate and reward the fact that one of their own – “a son of the soil” of the Anglophone community that comprises two of Cameroon’s ten Regions – had been appointed and entrusted by the President of the Republic, in a highly competitive context, to the most prestigious office - that of the Prime Minister of the Republic. It was an invitation for them to understand that the President had honoured the Anglophone community and Regions by playing or “hipping” *njangi* for them, and the ball was now in their court for them to reciprocate. The only way President Biya could continue to trust Anglophones with prestigious posts at national and local levels was if they demonstrated their appreciation and rewarded him and his party in no uncertain terms with their votes and relentless support. The fact that the CPDM has won every one of the eleven rounds of elections organised since 1992 might suggest that Achidi Achu and the three successive Anglophone Prime Ministers after him (Peter Mafany Musonge, September 1996 – December 8, 2004; Ephraim Inoni, December 8, 2004 – June 30, 2009; and Philemon Yang, June 30 2009 to date) have excelled at “*politics na njangi*” and/or in the manipulation and manoeuvring their party has become adept at (Nyamnjoh 2002a; Mbuagbo and Akoko 2004a&b; Kah 2010; Ngomba 2011; Nkwi 2011; Mouiche 2012).

In its regressive logic, intimacy is a game of ever diminishing circles. So if the appointment of Achidi Achu as Prime Minister is considered to be of greater significance to Anglophone Cameroonians, it follows as well that among Anglophones, his appointment would be more significant to his home Region of the North West. Similarly, among the North-Westerners, the appointment would have greater significance to his division, subdivision, village, and family of origin. Within this framework, Achidi Achu would have the same message for his North West Region, his administrative division of Mezam, and his home village of Santa as he did for the Anglophone community as a whole. At each level he stressed the aspects that made the people being addressed feel special and intimately involved in the honour of the appointment of one of their own – “a son of the soil” – as well as personally responsible for ensuring that this one of their own, this son of their soil, would not disappoint the President of the Republic and his party by being generous and trusting enough to entrust their community, region, town and village with such a hefty *njangi* collection.

It also meant that Prime Minister Achidi Achu, as the appointed “son of the soil”, had to open his *njangi* envelope in full view to make its contents public and demonstrate the extent to which his intimate others from his communities, region, town and village were part and parcel of his personal success as a politician. The *njangi* could take the form of investment in community facilities such as building new and maintaining existing roads, pipes for water supplies, schools, hospitals and other public amenities and services. It could also take the form of facilitating the appointment and promotion to high office of others from the same intimate circles, and so on. In the context of the magnanimity of the President of the Republic, and in view of the fact that the President’s attention is being sought by the sons and daughters of other soils in other regions of Cameroon, it is

important for everyone appointed to and in high office (that is, from the Prime Minister all the way down the political and civil service hierarchies) to broadcast and sustain their support for the President for as long as possible, during and between elections, with praise-singing messages that are usually referred to as “motions of support” (“motions de soutien”) (Mbuagbo and Akoko 2004).

When Simon Achidi Achu was replaced as Prime Minister in September 1996 by Peter Mafany Musonge, another Anglophone of the South West Region, *politics na njangi* did not disappear with him. In an article on the 2004 presidential election titled “Simon Achidi Achu: *Politics na Njangi*,” the *Cameroon Tribune*, the state owned newspaper, credits Simon Achidi Achu as follows:

His peace broker role in the political upheavals of the early nineties won him much repute. That is why the public gave him several sobriquettes. ‘*Politics na njangi*’ or ‘scratch my back, I scratch your own’ are common expressions attributed to the astute and shrewd manner in which the erstwhile politician negotiated or cajoled even his opponents into the large following he needed on his side... It is believed this approach also helped in improving the score of the CPDM party in [the] Santa sub-division, his hometown and a bastion of the opposition. He finds time to attend all death celebrations in the village, he is the brain behind the rare blend of door-to-door and motorcade swing-style campaign[ing] now causing [a] sensation in the birthplace of the CPDM and the stronghold of the opposition (*Cameroon Tribune* of 4 October 2004, p.6) (Ngomba 2012:180). [The birthplace referred to is Bamenda in the Mezam Division, of which Achidi Achu’s home village Santa is a subdivision – and all of these places are in the North West Region of Cameroon.]

Barely a couple of months into his appointment, Musonge made the following declaration during a reception at Buea: “President Biya has scratched our back, and we shall certainly scratch the Head of State’s back thoroughly when the time comes” – meaning that South-Westerners should resolve to manifest their total support and allegiance to the President who had appointed him Prime Minister. In other words, the President had played or “hipped” *njangi* for their Region, and it was only proper that they should “hip” or play it for him in turn (see *Cameroon Post*, 12-18 November 1996; Konings & Nyamnjoh 1997: 214).

So when in 1996, Dr. Fritz Ndiva Mbua, a *bona fide* son of the soil of the South West Region who came from the same Bakweri village as Musonge, betrayed this collective expectation by militating for the leading opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), he was punished without compunction. Dr. Mbua was an associate professor of education at the state-owned University of Buea, situated in the Bakweri town of Buea. He was also a National Assistant Secretary for Finance for the SDF at the time. During the municipal election campaigns in March 1996, Dr. Mbua, in a campaign broadcast on Radio Buea, carried the metaphor of backscratching to another level when he threatened to flush out the ruling CPDM by scratching the back of its party elite with the very same “engine saw” (making a reference to petrol powered chain saws) that they repeatedly used to scratch the backs of ordinary Cameroonians. His campaign broadcasts on the radio became very popular. In the wake of the defeat of the CPDM in the election, Mbua was subjected to a punitive transfer back to *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, a state-owned training college for secondary school teachers situated in Bambili in the North-West Region, which was also the institution at which he had taught from 1980 to 1993 before joining the University of Buea. It was clear to Mbua that the transfer was a reprisal against him for his daring to

break ranks with his fellow brothers and sisters of the soil by stubbornly insisting on entering a *njangi* contract with “strangers” (Jua and Nyamnjoh 2002:59-60).

Individual and Collective Responses to *Politics na Njangi*

How do Cameroonians relate to “*politics na njangi*”? They relate to it at a personal level and also at collective or communal levels. Cameroonians consider their personal circumstances as individuals when they relate to and interact with politicians and their exhortations. They challenge politicians at political rallies to produce evidence that their extravagant political promises during election campaigns can and should be taken seriously. So when they ask for beer, food, cooking oil, salt, soap, t-shirts, key-holders, watches, caps and other election gifts in exchange for their promises to vote for this or that candidate, it is not that they seriously believe that their votes are worth the modest gifts. Rather, the gifts are meant as a symbolic indication that the politician in question can and should be taken seriously, that he or she can be considered a bona fide member of the *njangi*, and that he or she can be trusted to share in intimacies. It is a seed sown with an expectation of bumper harvests to come.

It is a gift that is given as a testimony of the prospect of infinite reciprocity.

Collectively, villagers and urbanites alike call on politicians either as or through the sons and daughters of the soil to scratch the backs of their communities by solving their problems as evidence that the politicians deserve the scratching of their backs by the people in return. This is as true of collectivities articulated along regional, ethnic or religious lines as it is of associations of a civil nature. Thus, in the North West and South West Regions (Anglophone Cameroon), for example, two associational organisations compete for the political attention of the youth.⁴ One is the Southern Cameroon Youth League (SCYL), founded in Buea in 1995, which advocates secession for Anglophone Cameroon. The other is President Biya’s Youth (PRESBY), founded in Yaounde in 1996, which is supported and promoted by the Anglophone elite in the ruling CPDM party (Konings 2009: 99-107). PRESBY make no secret about their subscription to “*politics na njangi*”. In publicly and uncritically declaring their support for President Biya, Piet Konings argues, PRESBY leaders “have constantly emphasised reciprocal exchange” in the hope that they “can lobby for a share in the national cake, and thus obtain access to adulthood and even elite status” (Konings 2009: 104).

Whether at the personal or the collective level, at the heart of “*politics na njangi*” “is the contention that politics is a game of give and take bounded by mutual dependence among those playing the game. It is giving your support to a party or candidate on the basis of actual satisfaction of your needs or demands or assurances that these will be satisfied once the candidate or party wins the election” (Ngomba 2012: 180). If politics is a game, “*politics na njangi*” is an invitation to provide for a level playing field, one in which responsibilities are just as important as rewards. It is an invitation for politics not as “a zero sum game”, but as a game of interdependence, one where the victory worth celebrating is necessarily that which is inclusive. It is a game in which any individual ambition must be carefully negotiated and delicately navigated to ensure that it is pursued and achieved not at the expense of competing ambitions and interests, but with them. Hence the implicit warning that no one can expect to be taken seriously if and when they do not fulfil their obligations towards others. Life is a never ending process of indebtedness and reciprocity.

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□ These two associations were subsequently joined by Jeuneuse Active pour Madam Chantal Biya (JACHABI).

Life is a game of people banking on each other by making sure that debts are paid to ensure the continued flow and circulation of the resources that make life possible (Biggart 2001). It is a clarion call for interdependence, conviviality and domesticated agency (Nyamnjoh 2002b).

Expressed in terms of “you scratch my back, I scratch your back,” “*politics na njangi*” suggests that domesticated agency is the only worthwhile political action. Any political action predicated on or dictated by a selfish self-interest, however compelling, is bound to result in disappointment. For as Teke Ngomba aptly observes, “given that you cannot effectively scratch your itching back alone, but will rather need assistance from somebody else to properly and easily scratch your back, it is only ‘fair’ that when the person who scratched your back also has an itching back and asks you to scratch it, you should return his earlier gesture” (Ngomba 2012: 180).

This is not to say that some politicians do not insist on scratching their own backs, or that others do not forget those who have scratched their backs. As Marcus Olson argues, it does not follow that just because there exist collective interests and aspirations of which individuals are aware and to which they may subscribe, even if in rhetoric only, they would necessarily promote and act in favour of those interests and aspirations (Olson [1965] 2002). There is always an example here and there of this or that individual who refused to or could not play the game the way that they were expected to by the group of which they, in principle, are a part. One such example would suffice to make the point. It is the story of a minister who disappointed his home village despite the enormous investments in hope and support for him. According to Nantang Jua, when Francis Nkwain was the Minister of Natural Resources, Mines and Water, ironically, a decision was taken to close some pipe borne water points in his home village of Njinikom. The villagers were perplexed, whatever the rationale for the closure might have been. As far as they were concerned, “[t]heir son as Minister of Water was supposed to make sure that this utility was not in short supply in the area.” (Jua 2002:346) The Minister’s situation was not helped by the fact that people of his home village often made allusion to Kembong, the village of his predecessor, “where water flowed from water points round the clock, and bright lights lit the village in the middle of the forest.” (Jua 2002:346) He was seen as having failed his own people in a context where a goat is supposed to eat where it is tethered. When they eventually re-opened the water pipes with the assistance of the Njinikom Area Development Association they had created with the assistance of other elite “sons of the soils”, Nkwain, the “son of the soil” who had failed to deliver as Minister, was piqued instead of joining the villagers in celebrating the achievement (Jua 2002: 346). The worst thing that can happen to a politician is not to be accused of eating, but to be accused of having eaten alone. Forgetting the folks who make your ascendancy to power possible is tantamount to cultivating their indifference the day you come crashing down like a baobab tree (Kah 2010).

Godfatherism: A Nigerian Parallel to Politics na Njangi

While I cannot pretend to be an expert on politics in Africa, I would like to suggest that *politics na njangi* is not specific to Cameroon. Similar logics and practices are noticeable throughout Africa, and also globally. In Nigeria, for example, at the centre of the political game is a phenomenon which dates back to precolonial times. Rightly or wrongly translated into English as “godfatherism,” this phenomenon is centred on the “godfather”. This individual is known as “maigida” (the landlord or the head of a household) in Hausa, “baba kekere” (the small father) in Yoruba, and “Nnam-Ukwu” (my master) in Igbo. “Godfathers” act as “political gatekeepers” by dictating “who participates in politics and under what

conditions”. In the male dominated game of party politics, godfathers recruit or adopt as godsons politicians seeking election into high office, with whom they work to ensure their victory in exchange for favours. Godfathers are said to “have turned politics into a money-making business under which elections are rigged with a view to forcing pre-determined candidates into office”. Posing as vote banks, godfathers compete to outdo one another in their bids to secure victories for their godchildren. Once a candidate’s victory is achieved, though, the godfather expects his godson to do his bidding. “The typical godfather in Nigerian politics basically seeks to manipulate state officials and institutions for his own interests. Conflicts occur only when their clients refuse to be manipulated.” Godfathers openly boast about their power to remove from office any godson who does not perform to their satisfaction. They do not hesitate to subject whoever fails to cooperate to “all forms of humiliation and political violence”. Several godfather-godson conflicts have been documented, especially since 1999, including the well-known case of the controversy between Governor Chris Ngige of Anambra State and his godfather Chief Chris Uba. The latter considered himself “the greatest of all Godfathers in Nigeria” and as having “the power to remove” from power anyone “who does not perform up to [his] expectation anytime [he likes]” (Albert 2005: 94-103). Isaac Olawale Albert sums up this instrumental relationship between godfathers and their godchildren as follows:

“... [the] godfather assures the latter [the godson] of electoral success and the godson uses his political power after winning the election to advance the social, economic and political influence of his mentor. This explains why elections in Nigeria are usually a contest of power between godfathers. They come out with all the tricks that could help to give their candidates victory. The tricks include multiple voting, exchanging official ballot boxes with unofficial ones already filled with voting papers, stealing electoral boxes, chasing voters away from constituencies where their candidates are likely to have few votes, killing and wounding political opponents, etc.” (Albert 2005:102).

However, to focus Nigerian politics on the all-powerful godfather as an individual is to make the same mistake as colonial authorities, who reduced chieftaincy to the individual person of the chief, missing out on the interconnections and networks of relationships of power that made chieftaincy an institution within a particular political system (Nyamnjoh 2003). There is a lot more to the godfather and his power than meets the eye, for, as Chinua Achebe remarks of Nwaka’s formidable power in his novel *Arrow of God*, “when we see a little bird dancing in the middle of the pathway we must know that its drummer is in the near-by bush” (Achebe 1974 [1964]: 40). Far from being a discrete and coherent whole – a single human being – as has been suggested in most of the literature on godfatherism, the godfather is more like a composite personality or a network of interconnected and interdependent individuals and communities that is open to reconfiguration as interests converge and diverge. If one were to draw lines tracing all of the relationships of interconnection and interdependence that make it possible for an individual to perform the role of a godfather, one would uncover fascinating, intricate, and criss-crossing networks of people and institutions that mirror myriad categories and configurations of interest groups involving individuals and communities within and outside of Nigeria, and that suggest that power might not always lie with the individual godfather, as most analyses of this phenomenon have tended to emphasise.

Making Sense of *Politics na Njangi*

The appearance of *politics na njangi* as based on a material and financial translation of reciprocity, trust and interdependence should not blind us to its similarities with politics elsewhere, as the important issue it brings out is this: There is no such thing as disinterested politics. Since every individual in a society has interests, there is a need for potentially conflicting interests to be carefully managed through an investment in interdependence as a way of life, and not merely as a temporary arrangement with the aim of immediate gratification. In this context, the exchange of gifts and money is best understood as symbolic and indicative of the open-ended nature of politics. It is similar to the token offertory made to God, gods and ancestors by humans during sacrifices – as it is evident that if we humans really had to compensate our God, gods and ancestors for their good deeds, we would not be able to do justice, materially and financially, to all the goodness made possible in our regard by the invisible supernatural forces that God, gods and ancestors constitute. This is analogous to the relationship that Cameroonian sons-in-law have with their mothers-in-law, whose baskets are generally perceived to never be full. So material and financial gifts by sons-in-law are not intended to achieve the impossible, but, rather, to assure and ensure that they are seen as caring by their wives and mothers-in-laws.

It is in this regard that any fixation with the primary meaning of “politics of the belly” (Bayart 2009) – the individual as an accumulating autonomous entity disentangled from networks and zones of intimacy and interdependence – is unfortunate. The needs of the belly are not limited to the immediate, and neither is the individual beyond subjection through relationships with others. Not even death can stop the belly from making further calls on the resources of society, as our regular offers of sacrifices and our gifts of flowers and food to ancestors and deceased loved ones would attest to this. Just as the belly is a nodal point, warehouse, transit zone and distribution centre for our entire anatomy and its nutritive needs, so too are references to food and eating symbolic statements about human sociality, desires and networks. At the heart of the politics of the belly is the very impossibility of ever really satisfying the belly. In this light, the politics of the belly is much more about success and achievement as collective and inclusive pursuits. Its metaphor of *quid pro quo*, as we have seen in its *politics na njangi* equivalent, emphasises domesticated agency, conviviality and interdependence. It calls on individuals and groups not to take rights and entitlements for granted, but to invest in reproducing them through a sensitivity and an inclusiveness informed by their subject positions.

When a politician invites someone or is invited by someone to indulge in mutual backscratching, it is an invitation informed by the wisdom of experience that has led many a Cameroonian community to develop repertoires of and enrich everyday language with sayings such as “A child is one person’s only in the womb”, “One hand cannot tie a bundle”, “A goat eats where it is tethered,” and “When your brother is up a fruit tree, you will eat the juiciest fruit”. Africans may be resource-stretched. This is hardly a reason to reduce their political calculations to preoccupations with instant gratification, though. Any investment in serious empirical work of an ethnographic nature tends to suggest a much more complex and nuanced set of relationships that, like relationships elsewhere in the world, are open to renegotiation in ever evolving situations.

Analyses of African politics informed by neo-patrimonial perspectives seldom dwell enough on ethnographically documenting relationships between purported patrons and their purported clients. Analyses of institutions and legal and constitutional provisions are given

far more credit through a narrow fixation on the purportedly all-powerful political elite (epitomised by the image of the all-powerful individual big man or patron) and their pronouncements and actions. In privileging form over content and crediting ordinary Africans with little sociality, agency or capacity to turn the tables on their alleged big men and patrons, the impression is given that appearances and tokenism are more important than the complex and often nuanced game of politics played by Africans as negotiators and navigators of the various political traditions that inform their political actions and interactions. Central to neo-patrimonialism is a clear distinction between “patrons” and “clients”. Studies in this tradition are often articulated so as to leave few in doubt that the patron has the material and financial abundance that the client aspires for or at least aspires to benefit from in the sense that some of it could trickle down to his or her level. The hierarchies between the two are assumed to be unilinear, quasi-permanent and prone to reduce ordinary Africans to passivity and sheepishness in how they follow their leaders, be they religious authorities or politicians. Subservient, Africans bear the burdens of power and inequality like people reduced to “suffering and smiling”, as the late Nigerian musician Fela Anikulapo Kuti⁵ put it, and as Patrick Chabal (2009) suggests in borrowing the expression in the title of his book.

Politics na njangi and backscratching suggest something not quite the same. Not only is the relationship expected to be more horizontal in this case, but one does not always know who is the patron and who is the client, as the roles keep shifting and appearances are terribly deceptive in the murky world of *politics na njangi*. In the seesaw game of *politics na njangi*, no condition or situation is permanent. Positions and roles are judged not by frozen, static or formal indicators, but through real and active relationships. Power is more horizontal and advantages are more diffused than is apparent. Popular language is coloured with idioms and parables to remind those who tend to forget this. It is only in this sense that one can understand the admission at the occasion of President Paul Biya’s 30 years in power in November 2012 by the father of *politics na njangi* himself, Simon Achidi Achu⁶. Achidi Achu said that he was “surrounded by deceitful CPDM militants”, adding, “I cannot make any sense of what transpired during the last Presidential election in my house in Santa where I live with my children; some [of whom] are workers on my farm, others just house-helps.” He gave the following reason for his indignation: “of the 20 CPDM militants who left the house with me [when] we voted, when the votes were counted, only three voted CPDM, which implies that they voted for the SDF or some opposition parties. This is pure deceit.” He could not understand how this happened and indeed was quite helpless to realise that people who stayed, ate and drank with him could be that deceitful about the party they claimed they were militants of. If unreliable militants appear deceitful, such deceit points to the need to question an overly simplistic reduction of politics to a matter of food and drink, where voting and getting voted for are narrowly subjected to the determinism of the belly and its appetites. As active agents capable of manipulating just as they are of being manipulated, Cameroonians refuse to yield exclusive power to elite politicians and their

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□ See his song “Shuffering and Shmiling”, <http://www.songmeanings.net/songs/view/3530822107858727846/>, accessed 28 November 2012.

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□ See “I’m Surrounded By Deceitful CPDM Militants - Achidi AchuFriday”, by Chris Mbunwe, November 16, 2012 <http://www.cameroonpostline.com/Content.aspx?ModuleID=1&ItemID=9270>, accessed 18 November 2012.

repeated claims of close proximity to and control of national and regional resources.⁷ It is a form of resistance not against *politics na njangi* as such, but to being taken for granted by opportunistic politicians and a party that has repeatedly failed to live up to its rhetoric. It is resistance, in general, to the type of politics which a disillusioned illiterate woman characterised as follows after the local elections in 1996: “Candidates who stand for elections are like birds without feathers. We the voters give a candidate his feathers - each vote being another feather. When he has enough feathers off he flies and we never see him again.”⁸

Given this impermanence in patron-client relationships and hierarchies, in Cameroon, elite politicians can be seen penetrating thick bushes in extremely difficult conditions, seeking the blessings of ancestors through chiefs and village elders, as a way of legitimating themselves and staking claims for further success in the realm of national politics and the state bureaucracy (Fisiy Goheen 1998). In this regard, they come across more like clients vis-à-vis their village folks, who are veritable patrons in the world of custom and tradition, and in the eyes of the ancestors. And when the villagers pay them visits in the cities for one reason or another and benefit from their attention and services, as people with an intimate knowledge of the city, they might claim patronage as much as they like, as long as they are aware of the contingency of such claims. Being a patron or a client is relational and situational, and it is not to be considered as something permanent in the context of politics as *njangi* or backscratching.

Conclusion

The politics of *quid-pro-quo* (Großer, Reuben and Tymula 2013), or “one good turn deserves another”, is not confined to Africa. One only needs to look at the grip and influence on power and politics of big business, big media and oligarchs in countries such as the USA⁹ and the UK to know how universal a phenomenon is the politics of “scratch my back I scratch your back” (Palast 2003; Brock 2004; Watson and Hickman 2012). As recently as 2011, a scandal erupted around phone hacking by *News of the World*. This scandal exposed the “poisonous, secretive influence on public life in Britain” of Rupert Murdoch and his News Corporation, and how they were able to use their huge power to penetrate the ranks of and humble the coordinators of power and “bully, intimidate and cover up” (Watson and Hickman 2012). Similar tales of greed, corruption and burning ambition have been dramatized by Michael Dobbs in three novels (*House of Cards* (1989), *To Play the King* (1992), and *Final Cut* (1994)), which were also adapted for television by the BBC. That power even in established democracies is not always formal, obvious or predictable is eloquently dramatized in another BBC TV satirical series, *Yes, Prime Minister* (Lynn & Jay 1989), in which civil servants make sure that ideas of the Prime Minister and his Ministers (elected politicians) never come to fruition, unless when there is something in those ideas that is of

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□ As recently as November 2012, the current Prime Minister Philemone Yang likened the several political parties in Cameroon to “mango trees,” inviting Cameroonians to remain under the CPDM mango tree “to continue to enjoy ripe fruits ready for harvesting and consumption”.

<http://www.cameroonpostline.com/Content.aspx?ModuleID=1&ItemID=9264>, accessed 18 November 2012.

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□ *The Herald* (No. 279, 1996).

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□ Where the practice of ‘pork barrel politics’ is akin to a more institutionalised and formally recognised *njangi* logic in American politics

interest and benefit to the civil servants themselves, who, though unelected, can make or mar. The proof of the pudding, as the saying goes, is in the eating. In the global game of politics, claims of differences and similarities remain rhetorical as long as they have not been substantiated empirically by actual practices on the ground in Europe, Africa or elsewhere. Whatever the case, it is worth bearing in mind that authenticity and identity are relational, and we cannot make essences of them without sacrificing the richness of that relationality and the very open-ended possibilities of most relations. What I hope I have managed to show by this brief discussion of *politics na njangji* is that the “democratic” implications of this phenomenon aside, power and politics, however constituted, are hardly possible or effective without well oiled networks of relationships in which individual and collective interests (however defined or articulated) interconnect and interdepend in a careful balance of tensions between conviviality and conflict, familiarity and distance, them and us, and indifference and collective consciousness.

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