

Streaming platforms and the music industry crisis in Cameroon

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Abstract: Cameroon's music sector has been reinvigorated by a new generation of musicians and by locally created and international streaming platforms. Arguing that these streaming platforms have the potential to mitigate the music industry piracy crisis of the 1990s and 2000s, this article examines the recent developments on the Cameroonian music market, the positions of the various stakeholders in the music business, the twenty-first-century copyright legislation concerning music in Cameroon and users' and musicians' perception of the platforms. It shows how the crisis arose due to the accessibility of digital gadgets that facilitated practices of copying and sharing that drove music producers into bankruptcy. Although in their daily lives users still prefer to listen to free music, as many have difficulties to afford paying for music streaming, this article argues that in the long run the streaming platforms, if they succeed in persuading users to pay for renting music, will turn out to be more efficient in mitigating informal music-sharing than copyright law and prosecuting the so-called 'pirates' in court.

Keywords: Cameroon, copyright, digitalisation, music industry, music stakeholders, music streaming, piracy



Cameroon's vibrant music industry has suffered greatly from the music piracy crisis of the 1990s and 2000s. Digital technology and the establishment of the necessary infrastructure for using it made the copying of music easy and permitted growing numbers of users and musicians to gain access to social media and music platforms. At first, these opportunities provoked a crisis on the music market, as they seemed to amplify the problem of music piracy, but after a while it became obvious that they also had the potential to solve the same piracy crisis for the industry. The music sector has been reinvigorated by a new generation of musicians, encouraged by locally created music and streaming platforms, which in turn has attracted multinational companies. Such streaming platforms can be considered innovations (Hutter 2005;



Rammert et al. 2005: 4–5), content intermediaries (Gillespie 2010: 348) and gateways for everyday social life (Hjörth et al. 2020: 44), and they have created novel opportunities for users, musicians and producers, as many of them are interactive and enable users to upload their creations and become digital entrepreneurs.

This article examines the affordances of digital technology for the music industry that have unfolded in Cameroon in the early twenty first century. It presents the local and international platforms and services that have been established in the Cameroonian music landscape and the local understandings of these technologies and internet platforms by musicians and users. The platforms have the potential to allow for long-term changes and solutions for the music industry crisis. The methods I utilised include ethnographic field research conducted in Cameroon since the late 1980s, digital ethnography, as most happenings in this field are recent and took place during the pandemic, ongoing digital exchange with friends in the capital, Yaoundé, and recent field research on streaming platforms in Yaoundé in the spring of 2023.

I begin by presenting the recent developments in the Cameroonian music sector, the legal framework regulating copyrights, and the interests of the stakeholders in the music scene. I then turn to the perception of users, their ideas and daily practices, before analysing the music-streaming platforms that have been locally developed or introduced from abroad. I end with an outlook on the solutions that streaming platforms have established for the music piracy crisis, showing that the platforms' potential to solve the music industry crisis is reflected by the great upswing of the popular music sector in the country.

Recent developments in the music sector and the rise of the internet

During my initial field research in Cameroon in 1987, the popular music genre Makossa was heard in every corner of the country, occasionally alternated with songs from DRC, Nigeria, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. On my journey from Douala to the backcountry, this music roared into the open taxi windows. Even in the village in faraway Manyu Division, where I began research on the history and performances of cult associations, it was heard throughout the evenings whenever electricity was available. I wondered whether people could sleep with the music, but my local assistant at the time explained that owning a radio or a music

system obliged the owner to let others share in its enjoyment at any hour of the day.

The local genres on which urban popular music is based form part of Cameroon's rich cultural repertoires of music and dance. There is a great musical variety in the country's different regions. Some of the songs and dances in the villages are performed during leisure time by whoever wants to, and others are integrated into specific formats, following a strict protocol, for example, at important festive occasions. In the Southwest Region, some of these songs and dances have been appropriated by dance and cult associations. They are only performed when the members are formally invited and compensated by the inviting party. This could be a village chief or a family head who organises a funeral celebration. During the performance, the audience may honour the artists by entering the dance floor or stage and 'spraying' them with bills and coins, showing great pride at being able to do so (Röschenthaler 2011).

Until today, these dance and cult associations have been very mobile, especially in the Southwest Region of Cameroon. They are disseminated across a large region to form networks of owners who are able to prevent their imitations without permission. Communities who observe a performance in another village often decide to own it themselves. To be sure to perform it well and prevent a conflict, they must acquire the rights of ownership and the knowledge of how to organise it against payments and services (providing food and drinks) (Röschenthaler 2011). In the Northwest Region, with its chiefdoms and kingdoms, the rulers exchange such performances as diplomatic gifts with other rulers (Nkwi 1987). The awareness of the economic value of such immaterial cultural goods emerged in the context of the establishment of trade networks in the region and can be considered a local form of copyright. Their owners were able to defend their rights by forcing pirates to pay a high price or otherwise, in pre-colonial times, attack their village.

With growing urbanisation, when rural people began migrating to towns and plantation areas, new music genres, like Makossa, and modes of memorising and learning music and dances emerged. So far, music and dances had been reproduced by means of memory and rehearsal in practice (Tcheuyap 2016: 237). This changed with the availability of technologies for storing and recording music, which allowed people to listen to a song until they could perform it themselves. Urban artists began to revive older performances and combine them with urban dance styles, new rhythms and foreign performance elements,



and so new and popular genres of music and dances began to flourish. I followed the career of performer Bate Nico over several decades, for example, who mixed local and cult association songs and dances with Hip-Hop and performances in front of flowers and modern buildings. Popular music continues to be played everywhere in bars and clubs, in addition to the older performances in the village squares. With the advent of digital technology, copying music became even easier. Music became reproducible and was sold first on cassettes and then on compact discs (CDs), video CDs (VCDs) and digital video discs (DVDs) (Röschenthaler 2016a), which ultimately led to the music piracy crisis.

The emergence of urban popular music

Before the music piracy crisis began, a vibrant music industry thrived in Cameroon's cities. Popular music, namely Makossa and Bikutsi, emerged in Cameroon in the 1940s and 1950s, still during colonial time. These music genres are closely associated with urbanisation (Nyamnjoh and Fokwang 2005: 254). Makossa with its 'cosmopolitan rhythms and dance styles' (2005: 255) is a syncretised fusion of local Cameroonian and foreign elements in a constant state of re-creation or reconstruction through processes of social change, urbanisation and the cooperation of Africans with their diasporas (see also Emielu 2011: 376, 386). Makossa became popular through the Cameroonian singer Manu Dibango, who lived and performed in Douala, the economic capital. After independence in 1960, he left Cameroon for education in France. Between the 1970s and 1990s (Nkwi 2021), other well-known musicians included Francis Bebey, André-Marie Tala, Longue Longue, Richard Bona, Ben Decca and Ndedi Eyango.

Most of these post-independence Makossa singers, beginning with Manu Dibango, performed in resistance to power, and many voiced veiled political criticisms in their songs. In contrast, Bikutsi became more closely associated with post-colonial government and was perceived as state music (Brunner 2013; Nyamnjoh 2005).¹ In the 1980s, Bikutsi music became associated with the Beti ethnic group, which came to prominence during the Biya regime (Nyamnjoh and Fokwang 2005: 254).² This is important because in multiethnic Cameroon everything is regarded in terms of political power, with most of the developments in the popular music sector taking place in parts of the country where the president is not from – that is, people from Douala and the Anglophone regions became leading in music when, in the 1990s and 2000s, new digital technology changed the media landscape.³

Infrastructure as a requirement for internet access and the use of digital devices

Two of the most important requirements for the use of digital devices and internet platforms – and hence also for music piracy – are functioning electricity and communication networks. Unlike many other commodities, electronic gadgets such as mobile phones and computers rely on governmental media policies and infrastructures (Röschenthaler 2023). Following the neoliberal media reforms of the early 1990s, further electricity lines were established in rural areas and access points introduced that enabled the reception of phone calls, both of which are required for the widespread use of internet platforms on mobile phones. Previously, conversations were conducted over landline phones provided by the state-owned company Camtel. In 1998, as one of the outcomes of the World Bank’s structural adjustment programmes, the government, having privatised some of its telecommunication facilities, created the Cameroon Telecommunication Mobile Company (Camtel), which provided internet access to the first cell-phone users in the country (see Konings 2011). Soon personal mobile telephones replaced the more expensive landline telephones in most private homes. Numerous internet cafés appeared at that time (Frei 2013).

The media reforms partly ended the government monopoly over the dissemination of information and telecommunications. At first, the government feared losing its monopoly over the distribution of information, as anyone in possession of a smart phone could create narratives that run counter to the government’s narratives. Internet shutdowns and social media blackouts happened frequently, especially in areas where government suspected that the opposition was present. Between June 2017 and January 2018, the Anglophone regions of Cameroon experienced a shutdown of forty weeks and another one in January 2019 (Gopaldas 2019). In 2019, Ronas Gopaldas (2019: 15) stated that almost every African owned a mobile phone. However, as his statistics did not consider the ownership of multiple phones and SIM cards, this calculation may be somewhat misleading. It ignores local uses of phones. Some users have several SIM cards to profit from bargains, while others jointly use one phone or rent it out to other users. Eventually, blackouts became less frequent, as Gopaldas (2019) observed, because the Cameroonian government understood that it could also use social media for its own political purposes.

The use of mobile phones remained expensive until early 2000, when competition with the private telecommunication providers



Orange (France) and MTN (South Africa) began and prices for SIM cards and phone credit became affordable. With the arrival of Chinese-manufactured phones, increasing numbers of people were able to purchase affordable cell phones (Röschenthaler 2023). In 2014, with the growing number of mobile phone users and increased demand for faster internet access, the Vietnamese telecommunication company Nexttel (Viettel Cameroun) – a Vietnamese–Cameroonian joint venture – offered its services. Nexttel established a Cameroon-wide G3 technology telecommunications network which offered competitive, fast internet, mobile phone credit, special bargains and winning opportunities for subscribers. In 2015, 96 per cent of Nexttel’s three million subscribers had two SIM cards and a sixth had three or more – one for each of the providers – to be able to profit from all the bargains (International Telecommunications Union 2017; Röschenthaler 2023: 60–63). At this point, users could gradually buy mobile internet access and the number of internet cafés began to dwindle.

Music production, digital transformation and the piracy crisis

At first, when the technology for analogue recording and copying became available during the 1980s, music piracy began but on a low scale. Artwork was reproduced on cassettes and VHS with a reduction of quality, but the practice was tolerated by both officials and artists (Tcheuyap 2016: 236). In the mid-1990s, the first Nigerian Nollywood films reached Cameroon, where they were received with great enthusiasm and watched from VHS that had already been copied many times while their owners commented and explained the storyline to their peers and juniors (see Krings 2015: 150–171; Larkin 2008 for similar observations).

Piracy practices were greatly facilitated by affordable imports from Asia. Already in the 1990s, a growing number of Cameroonian entrepreneurs travelled to Asia to purchase various commodities, including used music sets, televisions and electronic devices in Hong Kong and in other major Asian cities. Following China’s membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, African merchants were able to travel directly to China and import electronic devices nearer to the source of production (Röschenthaler 2016b, 2023).

These new affordable devices made copying easier for a growing number of people. Alexie Tcheuyap noted that in the 1990s individuals went to a music shop or an internet café with a blank CD, an MP3 player or a USB key and downloaded the music from websites or paid the

shopkeeper to do it for them (2016: 281). Music lovers still share music files amongst each other and are not convinced that they are doing something wrong; more so, they feel it would be selfish if they kept the music to themselves and did not share it with their friends and thereby increase the popularity of their star (see Röschenthaler 2016a). The benefits are to make artists widely known and attract invitations to play concerts. Thus, this form of piracy and formal production represent two different models of distribution. In contrast with this piracy model of distribution, the official publisher contracts the copyright holder (the musician), who permits them – in accordance with copyright law – to produce, copy and distribute the music under certain quality standards, and they pay taxes to the government. Album sales and collected royalties are supposed to help the publisher recoup their investments. Part of the royalties are supposed to be handed over to the artist. The latter, however, will gain enough only when huge amounts of royalties can be collected and distributed, as may already be evident.

In the 1980s, there were several music production companies to publish the albums of musicians (Tcheuyap 2016). This music industry, which worked with contracts and royalty collection under copyright law, experienced a severe setback beginning in the 2000s. The developments of digital technology and the importation of Chinese gadgets – providing a situation of polymedia, as Madianou and Miller (2012: 170) call it – enabled growing numbers of people to copy music on CDs, VCDs and DVDs for sale. In Cameroon, in the 2000s more than 90 per cent of all music was pirated (Tcheuyap 2016: 272). The resulting music piracy crisis forced music producers to close their companies, as they were no longer able to recover their investments in producing the music. In the 2000s and 2010s, there were hardly any music-producing companies left in Cameroon (Tcheuyap 2016: 270). Similar challenges were noted in other African countries (Wane 2016, which is about Youssou Ndour’s media enterprise). People attributed these closures partly to the affordable digital technologies imported from China and partly to the lack of interest on the part of the government in supporting the music industry.

Artists copying and distributing their own work

A new form of distribution arose that competed with and somewhat superseded the earlier forms of piracy: artists began to copy and distribute their own work. Thus, in addition to the multiplication and distribution work of so-called ‘pirates’ and following the closures of producing com-

panies, musicians became themselves entrepreneurs and labels, distributing their own music around the country. The affordances of the new affordable Chinese digital technology made musicians and performers inventive and produce music in their homes. A computer with the appropriate software and a CD burner were sufficient. They produced and copied their own music and distributed it to their fanbase. An example from Anglophone Cameroon is the popular performance artist Bate Nico. He engaged a cameraman to record his dances and a studio to mount his music and performances from the villages and from urban and natural environments with digitally created soundtracks and urban dance styles to make his products attractive to urban youths. From the 'original', he produced his own copies at home and sold them quickly to his large fan base before they could be multiplied by so-called 'pirates'. Bate Nico tried selling his products quickly to his network to be faster than the pirates. A large segment of the pirates, however, was made up of his fan base, who considered it their duty to distribute his music to promote it and make him known to more people (Röschenthaler 2016a). At first, other fans uploaded his performances on YouTube to increase his fan base and enable the diaspora to enjoy his performances; later, he started his own YouTube channel and attracted advertisements to support his activities. Several other performers from Manyu Division have copied his performance style, combining music of the villages with modern sounds, and became widely known in the country and in the global diaspora. Recently in South Korea, Manyu diaspora members showed their music videos of these artists to me on YouTube, which, in my opinion, were quite similar to Bate Nico's music videos.

Artists copying their own work and pirates using alternative distribution channels to the formal industry made people talk about the music piracy crisis in Cameroon as they have elsewhere. The discourse was promoted by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and WTO, resulting in the Trade-Related Intellectual Property (TRIPS) Agreement (Reyman 2010). In the international context, the discussion has shifted from copyright guaranteeing artistic creativity to the economic interests of the industry. Questions of copyright are increasingly negotiated amongst the big industrial stakeholders: publishers, producers, labels, media companies, producers of electronic equipment and software, and providers of telecommunication, with attempts by the big companies to unite all of these stakeholders under one roof. The music industry managed to become a powerful lobby, who, together with WIPO, pushed through amendments to Cameroon's intellectual property legislation (Reyman 2010).

However, the intellectual property legislation of these stakeholders ignores the creativity of artists who discovered alternative ways of generating an income and distributing their music on their own. With clearly moral terms, the industry has formulated its own interests as those of the artists and introduced them into public discourse (Reyman 2010). They argue that artists need to be able to live from their art and that copyright must ensure that. They have urged people to adapt to copyright law and required that all members of WTO have a functioning legal copyright framework. Cameroon also had to provide this law when it signed the TRIPS Agreement in April 1994 (though it was effective in January 1995). This means that all those countries, Cameroon included, who so far had not been much interested in copyright had to promise to engage in its implementation if they wanted to continue participating in the global economic network. Encouraged by the WIPO, which promoted the crisis rhetoric, the Cameroonian government launched awareness programmes but was reluctant to intervene in a strict sense to enforce copyright.

The international pressure and accompanying discourse overshadowed the artists' solution to distribute their own work through their own distribution channels. Further, based upon their experience with their own royalty-collecting societies (see below), Cameroonians have willingly appropriated the piracy discourse with the objective of criticising the government for not properly taking care of artists and the music industry. The official narrative included that the widespread copying of music endangered the work of music producers and deprived artists of the income they deserved. Despite sensitisation campaigns during in the 2000s and 2010s, street sellers continued to offer copied – or, according to the narrative, pirated – CDs and DVDs. Sometimes these copies contained what was announced on the copied labels, but at other times they did not contain anything.

Much more than in Cameroon, in some other countries artists perceive attempts to enforce Western ideas about copyright and private intellectual property as acts of cultural imperialism (Lysloff 2016: 487). For example, in Nigeria some musicians and scholars ascertain that piracy has in many cases proved to be more profitable for artists than formal producers and their networks have (Gani 2020; Simmert 2020, see also Adedeji in this issue). Up-and-coming artists prefer to distribute their music along the established piracy networks, as their distribution networks are larger, faster and more efficient than those of the established music producers. In Nigeria, this opinion is based on experiences with the above-mentioned Nollywood film industry, which only became big



through pirate networks (Krings 2015). Widespread is also the opinion that musicians do not make their money from selling albums but from staging concerts and using internet platforms to gain wider popularity and more opportunities for paid performances. Copyright would be beneficial only for well-known musicians who have contracts with the multinational labels. In Cameroon, however, the discourse against piracy is widely accepted, even though it does not seem to carry over much into daily practice.

Changes in the relevant copyright framework and the stakeholders in the music industry

The piracy crisis in Cameroon must be seen from a global perspective. With the creation of the World Wide Web in 1993 and the development of corresponding electronic devices, software and applications from the 1990s onwards, the music industry, especially in North America, raised its voice. It warned that these technologies and internet platforms would encourage the free distribution of copyrighted music, which would deprive honest and hard-working artists of their income and kill the industry in the long run (Reyman 2010). In short, the music industry proclaimed the music piracy crisis and made the platforms responsible for providing users with services that facilitated such illegitimate acts as freely uploading, downloading and sharing music. Before the more recent developments are discussed, it is necessary to briefly examine the situation of copyright legislation in Cameroon.

Copyrights legislation in Cameroon

The concept of rights in intellectual property have been introduced by colonial authorities but were only meant to protect European interests at that time (Peukert 2016; Röschenhaler and Diawara 2016). After independence, the French author rights system became valid in the entire country and Cameroon also became a member of the Berne Convention, but without drafting its own legal version of copyright law (Okediji 2003; Peukert 2016). In 1982, Cameroon also signed the Bangui Agreement of 1977 (amended on 24 February 1999), but until the 1980s copyright in music and literary art was not considered an important legal priority in most African countries. In the case of industrial property, this was different. Cameroon became the headquarters of the Organisation Africaine de la Propriété Intellectuelle (African Intellectual

Property Organization, OAPI), covering most Francophone African countries. The entity, however, is mainly responsible for patents, industrial design, and trademark registration, and only in a general sense for authors' rights and music and even less for performance and choreography. In contrast, authors' rights are administered by separate offices in each country, where artists register their music against a fee through which they acquire the right to be paid royalties.

It seems that Cameroon only established a law specifically regulating artistic and literary work in 2000, following the requirements of the WTO, in which it had become a member on 13 December 1995. The law was issued as CM001EN Copyright Law No. 2000/011 page 25/2591 of 19 December 2000 regulating Copyright and Related Rights. Following the Berne Convention and the revised Bangui Agreement, the copyright duration for artistic and literary work is the lifetime of the author plus fifty years after their death.

As opposed to the relevant statement in the Berne Convention, there is no requirement of stipulation to protect artwork under Cameroonian copyright law according to the jurist Ferdinand Galabe (n.d.). According to the law and in contrast to industrial products, copyrights in literary and artistic work do not have to be registered (Galabe n.d.). In reality, however, the royalty-collecting society requires artists in Cameroon to undergo the formality of registration against a fee to be entitled to receive royalties.

The law also includes penal sanctions for copyright infringement. According to Galabe, Section 327 of the Penal Code lists twelve major forms of criminal infringement of copyright punishable by imprisonment of a period between five and ten years or by a fine of CFA 500,000 to CFA 10 million (about €760 to €15,000), or by both imprisonment and a fine. This is

in addition to the usual restrictions to use copyrighted materials . . . removing or altering any electronic information relating to the copyright regime, without authorisation; and . . . distributing, importing for distribution, communicating without authorisation originals or copies of works, performances, videograms, phonograms, being aware that the electronic information relating to the copyright regime has been removed or altered without authorisation. (Galabe n.d.)

In contrast to many other intellectual property laws, Cameroonian intellectual property law does not allow material in the public domain and folklore to be free. A new law was passed in 2005 that considers the exploitation of folklore and work of the public domain, the organisation of public performances (*spectacles*), and the control of CMOs (Yang

2019). It says 5 per cent of all revenues from the sale of such art must be provided to the beneficiary, the state, as folklore 'shall belong originally to the national cultural heritage' (Yang 2019). For work from the public domain – that is, work of known artists that is no longer under copyright – it is 50 per cent of the value it had while during protection and the money goes into a fund for the support of political culture. The sum to pay from the organisation of a public performance is set by the Minister of Culture, and also goes into the fund for the support of political culture.

There are no indications, however, that the law has been addressing the particular situation arising from social media and music-streaming platforms in relation to the use of artistic work. I now turn to long-existing practices in the form of royalty-collecting societies to show the persistence of earlier forms of collection and how these position themselves as stakeholders in the music management arena.

Collective Management Organisations (CMOs)

Royalty-collecting societies are one way to allocate and redistribute gains made by media companies, public places and individuals to artists. Such institutions have existed in Cameroon since colonial times, beginning with a branch of the French Société des Auteurs, Compositeurs et Éditeurs de Musique (SACEM). It was responsible for collecting and distributing royalties from and to artists in France and its colonies, including Cameroon. Still until the 1980s, all LPs (long-play records) made by Cameroonian musicians were produced in France and artists were paid by SACEM. Music of Cameroonians that was not produced in France, however, was not considered. During this early time, the royalty payout to musicians was transparent and musicians were able to earn some income from their art. Artists were paid every three months by SACEM. Radio stations – there were only national stations at the time – paid for the songs they played (Tcheuyap 2016). The fact that royalties helped artists make a living in the past explains why Cameroonians easily picked up the music piracy narrative provided later by the WIPO, although in daily practice they did not too much care to comply with it but preferred instead to purchase the cheaper pirated copies for their own use.

After independence, several royalty-collecting societies were consecutively created in Cameroon, some of which were directed by musicians, but they all had problems having to do with leadership and embezzlement. The first, the Société Camerounaise des Droits d'Auteurs

(SOCADRA), was created in 1979 under the former president Ahmadou Ahidjo (1960–1982). The Biya regime created its own authors' rights society, the Société Civile Nationale des Droits d'Auteurs (SOCINADA). Following conflicts about leadership, it was replaced in the 1990s by the Cameroon Music Corporation (CMC). This society was also dissolved due to mismanagement and succeeded by the Société Civile Camerounaise de l'Art Musicale (SOCAM) in 2008, but CMC was rehabilitated in 2011.

Unlike the previous societies, which had united authors from the four different artistic branches – authors of literary work, audiovisual and photographic work, graphic and plastic work, and musical work – the SOCAM was responsible only for musicians. It was run by the singer Sam Mbende. After conflicts and court cases, Manu Dibango, who had returned to Cameroon, was elected director. Conflicts and rivalries with members of the CMC (Tcheuyap 2016) did not end, and both societies were dissolved.

Regarding royalty collection, there has been a considerable gap between social practices (ahead of the law) and the law as it is practised in Cameroon, as 70 per cent of the sums allocated should be paid out to beneficiaries and only 30 per cent kept for the functioning of the collecting society. However, royalties have been collected from media, bars and clubs playing Cameroonian music. For the music of foreign singers that has been played mostly from copied DVDs and CDs, no royalties have been collected and transferred abroad (Kamtchoum 2019).

After a break of several years, during which no royalties were paid out at all, in December 2017 a new royalty-collecting society was created, the Société Nationale Camerounaise de l'Art Musical (SONACAM). As its predecessor, the CMC, it is the only collective management society for music in the country, and it is directed by the musician Prince Ndedi Eyango, who in the late 1990s was amongst the most popular singers. Due to the earlier conflicts and embezzlements, hardly any royalties were paid out to registered members during the time of the CMC and the SOCAM (Ngaba 2020). This finally changed in the second half of 2022, when an amount of CFA 340 million was eventually provided and distributed to the four groups of artists via the societies representing them. The amounts individuals received varied between CFA 5,000 and CFA 5 million (about €7.60 to €7,600) (Tjeg 2022). There are high hopes that the model conduct of this society will continue into the future.



The usefulness of copyright for local musicians

The establishment of copyright legislation and the awareness campaigns launched by the government and the OAPI alone have not sufficiently reduced the illegal copying and sales of music, if ever they had an impact. The government would need to have an intrinsic interest in or see advantages to pursuing such activities, as has been the case when it stopped the illegal import of other commodities (Tcheuyap 2016). Following pressure from the WTO, the government disseminated their official narrative and announced severe punishment for pirates, but its measures have not managed to prevent pirates' activities.

Copyright is supposed to ensure that artists' creations are legally protected against theft by other artists and producers in the country and through the various international agreements on a global scale. The legal framework encourages artists to become active in combating pirates and suing them in court. The known cases, however, of artists who have sued other artists for pirating their work are few, and only well-situated musicians can sue other parties, especially on the international level, as the example of Manu Dibango shows.

Manu Dibango, one of the few African artists who succeeded in winning a case against an American musician, or his label, did so not in Cameroon but from his voluntary exile in France.⁴ In 1982, Michael Jackson used the sentence *Mama-se, Mama-sa, Ma-Ma-ko-ssa* from Dibango's song 'Soul Makossa' of the 1970s. The two musicians – Dibango and Jackson – found a solution in an extra-legal agreement, so that the latter was allowed to use this sentence in his song 'Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'' on the renowned album *Thriller*. Some decades later, in 2007, Rihanna asked Michael Jackson whether she could use the sentence, and he agreed, without asking Dibango for permission. Manu Dibango sued her in 2008 and was successful in getting his name mentioned in the liner notes to Rihanna's Song 'Don't Stop the Music'. Michael Jackson and Rihanna are not the only world-class artists to tap into the music of Manu Dibango. Especially in Hip-Hop is where he left his musical mark: the funky and jazzy rhythms and the incantation *Ma-Ma-ko-ssa* of the gifted saxophonist are heard in songs from A Tribe Called Quest, Kanye West, Jay-Z, Geto Boys, Slick Rick, The Fugees, DMX and Childish Gambino (Kiebl 2020).

Meanwhile, other creative actors began to work on solutions for the music piracy crisis. At first in Europe and North America and then in African countries, Cameroon included, information technology specialists created music and streaming platforms which assumed the role of

mediators or brokers in the music industry crisis. This allowed for more flexible forms of music access that have increasingly become globally accepted.

I turn now to how Cameroon users engaged with such access on music platforms. The data demonstrate that locally created platforms are not sufficiently known amongst young people, who prefer to download music freely on social media, although they agree that musicians need to make a living from their music.

Perspectives of users and performing artists

This section is based on a survey that I carried out in 2023 with twenty-five Cameroonian music users in the capital, Yaoundé. The music users in the survey were selected randomly in coffee places or on the street. They were between seventeen and thirty-eight years old, including six women and nineteen men; five came from the Anglophone and twenty from the larger Francophone part of the country, including the southern and northern regions. The survey showed that despite the optimistic outlook of the promoters of African platforms, many Cameroonian youths are not well versed in the use of streaming platforms. Amongst Cameroonian users, Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube continue to be the absolute most popular social media platforms and are also used to access music and music videos. As can be concluded from the 2023 interviews, Cameroonians in the country and the diaspora prefer YouTube because it allows them to access music for free.

The survey showed that these Cameroonian youths were interested in a wide range of music styles, including Cameroonian, other African and international genres: Makossa, Mbolé, Mbalax, Bikutsi, and Nigerian Afrobeats but also Blues, Electro, Gospel, Rumba, Jazz, Techno, and Funk. They are looking for this music mostly using their mobile phones, and a few also listen to radio broadcasts. Only a few of the older generation who already own these devices still listen to music on CD and DVDs; yet they ask their younger friends to go and find the music for them online, download it and copy it onto their memory card. Most also noted that they moved from listening to the radio and television to storing music on their phones. The majority of these youths owns mobile phones imported from China and made by companies like Huawei, Xiaomi, Realme, One Plus and Itel; only a minority have other brands such as Samsung, and these phones are probably second-hand.



They explained to me that when they wanted to listen to music, they bought packages of several GB from the locally available telecom providers MTN, Orange and Nexttel, but most think that the packages are expensive. Most preferred to download their music from the internet and listen to it stored on memory cards in their mobile phones. Only a few listen online. For downloading music, they mentioned various applications. Most of these were pre-installed on their Chinese-manufactured phones. Nearly all of them mentioned Vidmate for downloading music from YouTube. Vidmate is an application that runs on Android phones for downloading multimedia files from various popular websites and saving them on the device. In addition, they mentioned listening to music from Instagram and Facebook. They also uploaded the music of local musicians on platforms, musicians who generally had nothing against it and thought it could enhance their popularity and create opportunities for concert invitations.

Taken together, the data show that users predominantly prefer to listen to music from free platforms. Although the Cameroonian platforms also offer music and free downloads, which are financed by advertisements, users prefer the international platforms. Most have heard about one or the other local platform, but their knowledge of them is limited: only a few listen to music online and regularly pay for music packages. They agree with the narrative that copyright is important and that musicians need to make a living from their art, but in their daily practices they prefer to make use of what their Chinese-manufactured mobile phones afford, the pre-installed downloading applications included. In Cameroon – different from Nigeria, where the video industry became big due to the existence of better-organised piracy networks – critical reflection on alternatives to copyright legislation is not very widespread. However, some of the youths were aware that many musicians preferred to work together with so-called ‘pirates’ to distribute their music, thus carrying out a role outside the reach of official distributors, as indicated above.

Impact of the internet on local music production and the appearance of music streaming

The distribution of music by fans takes place on interactive online platforms and social media networks that allow them to upload and download music and videos and share them with their followers. This turns mobile phones into multimedia gadgets that also allow musicians

to produce their own high-quality music themselves and distribute it on these platforms, bypassing the music industry, which tries to sell music from online stores to paying customers.

Thus, from the 2000s music producers, royalty-collecting societies and other stakeholders in the music industry worldwide increasingly feared that social media endangered their existence through these practices, which they termed 'piracy'. They argued that the amended copyright legislation and the prosecution of pirates alone did not solve their problem. They also accused streaming platforms of offering music for free against the placing of advertisements, which encouraged pirated music distribution. Spotify, one of the growing streaming platforms, however, argues that they are able to both contribute to democratic access to music for their users and concomitantly help the music industry find paying customers. Spotify's goal is to have not more than one-third of their clientele be freemium users and least two-thirds be paying customers (Carlsson and Leijonhufvud 2021).

It took some time until the big global players understood that the model had potential; they attempted to regain their dominance by assembling catalogues of music and putting up streaming platforms themselves where music could be downloaded against payment. Even better for them was the strategy to prevent downloads and convince consumers to listen to music online and prevent them from downloading and distributing copies altogether. Their strong point was and is their large catalogues. Some of the platforms offer paid packages with access to the complete catalogue and free access to a limited number of titles, which is financed by advertisements. If users could be convinced to download music against some sort of payment, Carlos Mureithi (2022), the director of Boomplay in Nigeria, suggested, illegal consumers of music could be converted into to legal listeners also in Africa.

The emergence of the streaming platforms in Cameroon

The opportunities of digital technology have not only encouraged the so-called 'pirates' to share or trade copyrighted music, but streaming platforms have also empowered musicians, whom they have offered new ways of distributing their music to larger audiences. In the absence of formal producers in Cameroon, musicians have increasingly produced themselves and copied and uploaded their music onto platforms. The difficulties, such as a lack of credit cards, that users have had in accessing some of the global streaming platforms have encouraged Cameroonian cultural entrepreneurs to create their own platforms.



They have argued that too much foreign music is on the market that Cameroonians do not want to listen to it: their platforms would offer the Cameroonian and African music that was not in the catalogues of global players.

From the late 2010s, Cameroonians developed their own streaming platforms in various forms. The creation of such streaming platforms has indeed contributed to the rebirth of the music sector in Cameroon, and in the mid-2010s a new generation of musicians emerged with names such as Mic Monsta, Salatiel, and Meshi. In addition to music streaming, Cameroonian users can also access various film-streaming platforms such as the Nigerian Iroko and Yabadoo launched by the South African telecom provider MTN, which is active in Cameroon.

Music platforms in Cameroon

When I asked young people in Yaoundé about which streaming platforms they were aware of, all of them mentioned YouTube and some knew additionally some of the Cameroonian and other international platforms, including Muzee, Colorful, Afrikicko, Boomplay, Kamer DJ, Instagram, Stillac, Spotify and Facebook.

Cameroonian platforms offer a great variety of services for users and musicians. Compared to the number of platforms in Nigeria and South Africa, the number in Cameroon low, but there are several music-streaming platforms, most of which were created by Anglophone Cameroonians in the late 2010s and early 2020s including Stillac, Kamer DJ, Colorful, Muzee, Kamer Music, Voilà Moi, Kmermxdj and Soldiers 237, that offer Cameroonian and African songs.⁵ On some, namely Afrikicko and Auxplay, musicians can directly upload and sell their music and audiences can download it without the intervention of a third party. Some of them, like Muzee, are also able to distribute their music to iTunes, Deezer, Spotify, YouTube and Boomplay. On Auxplay, for example, many of the new generation of Cameroonian musicians, such as Mic Monsta, Salatiel and Meshi, and other prominent Cameroonian artists have released their albums, and audiences can stream, download and/or create personalised playlists and like, share and purchase songs through MTN and Orange's Mobile Money payment service, to name but one payment method.

Most of these streaming services can be downloaded via the App Store and Google Play Store. Users pay with Mobile Money, a service provided by the telecommunication providers MTN and Orange. There is also a music award platform or programme called 'Muzikol' that

organises an award show to celebrate outstanding Cameroonian and other African music performances. For the nominations, it uses a voting system through which the winner is determined. In 2020, Muzikol expanded its services from online to offline by launching the first edition of the Muzikol Music Awards (MuMA) in Douala, which brought together thousands of music stakeholders from all over Cameroon. Musicians from other African countries were also considered as winners (Loretha 2017; see also Boujique 2021; Music in Africa n.d.; Ndinge 2020; Realjema 2021; Steprimo n.d.).

Additionally, several streaming platforms are available from other African countries.⁶ Playfre from Nigeria, MTN Music Time from South Africa, the Chinese-owned Boomplay and, recently, Spotify all offer their services to Cameroonian users. Playfre, created in 2019 by Chika Nwaogu, expanded to twelve other African countries and some countries outside the continent. With a library of over fifty million songs and two million artists, Playfre is currently the largest African music-streaming service in terms of catalogue size. Playfre offers free service and is available for download from the Google Play Store (Delport 2019).

The big international streaming platforms such as Spotify, Amazon Music and iTunes hesitated at first to offer their services in African countries. In their opinion, the enforcement of intellectual property was too weak and the lack of credit cards to pay for the services was another obstacle. When they understood that numerous African platforms and the Chinese-owned platform Boomplay experienced promising development, they decided to get into the African market.

Boomplay, owned by Transsnnet Music Limited and focussed on the African market, is pre-installed on devices made by the Chinese company Transsnion, which sells its brands Tecno, Infinix and Itel all over Africa. Boomplay was launched in Nigeria in 2015 and has offices in Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Côte d'Ivoire and Cameroon. It is one of the first multinational streaming platforms on the African market. According to Boomplay's Director of Artist and Media Relations, the music-streaming platform had sixty million active users in 2022 and is the most popular music-streaming service in Africa. Users have two options: the freemium model, which allows to listen to music without paying but with advertisements, and the full option, which consists in listening to music advert-free against payment. Musicians can upload their music on the platform, which counts every stream so that they can gain income in a transparent way (Mureithi 2022). In December 2020, Boomplay surpassed the one-hundred-million-app-download milestone on the Google Play Store. Boomplay supports artists through

various projects such as the ‘concert of the year’ in Lagos where UMG-signed Nigerian singer-songwriter Tiwa Savage performed; it sponsored the first documentary film on the history of Afrobeats (UMG 2021); it organises conferences with music-industry stakeholders, supports up-and-coming African artists and helps them to find co-operation partners in other African countries.

Part of Boomplay’s popularity is due to its licence contract with Universal Music Group (UMG), a Vivendi company, which allows its users access to UMG’s extensive catalogue of both local and global recording artists and labels, including the Cameroonian artists Tenor, Locko, Charlotte Dipanda and Cysoul. The UMG catalogue has since 2021 been available via Boomplay in thirty-nine African countries. UMG also claims to have provided 250 million megabytes of data to users free of charge for music streaming during the COVID pandemic (UMG 2021). Boomplay has also established licensing deals with Warner Music Group, Chocolate City and WCB (Mureithi 2022).

In the same year as Boomplay – that is, in 2021 – Spotify launched offices in the same thirty-nine African countries, including Cameroon.⁷ Since 2018, Spotify has been available in South Africa, Morocco, Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia, whereas in the remaining part of Africa it was only accessible by VPN (Virtual Private Network) and access had to be paid for by a Visa card (Africanews 2021). Spotify expanded its music-streaming service altogether to over eighty new markets in early 2021, not only in Africa but also the Caribbean, Asia and Latin America. Spotify’s entry increased the number of global and other streaming services on the African market, such as YouTube Music, Apple Music, Deezer, Audiomack and Amazon Music, which are downloadable from the Google Play Store. However, they can often still be used only with a VPN, and the problem begins when it comes to payment, as many people do not own credit cards (Africanews 2021; Boujique 2021). Spotify provided the African market with a lighter version which allows users to stream music at low bandwidths and the least amount of data possible (Africa Today 2021).

The sector is highly competitive, as the big multinationals have entered the scene. Their enterprises seem to grow and dominate the market, and they possibly might acquire and cannibalise local, innovative platform start-ups in the long run. The big platforms are increasingly trying to control access to the entire music value chain (production, royalty collection, streaming), which reduces the flow of money between the various stakeholders and eliminates some of them. The global platforms have come in, as they expect good business and

paying users who do not continue to pirate their music offers – that is, download and share them widely – in order to promote their stars. Such streaming platforms are increasingly acting as brokers in the music piracy crisis.

Outlook: Brokering the music piracy crisis

Examining the recent developments in the music market and in the copyright legislation concerning music in Cameroon reveals several strategies of music distribution and moral claims about how to evaluate them. Considering the interests of the music producers, the experiences of musicians in marketing their artistic creations, and the ideas about users' practices in regards to accessing and listening to music has shown us that the music business is a contested arena in which the various stakeholders strive to position themselves favourably. In this process, the technical improvements and the affordances of digital media led at first to a crisis in the music market, as the copying and free sharing of music became easy and music producers lost their livelihood. However, musicians perceived new incentives when Cameroonians created their own platforms, which invigorated the music sector again. These platforms lured users back with free download options, and they allowed musicians to sell their songs directly to their audiences. These developments attracted local and global producers, and global streaming platforms saw new markets in Cameroon and other African countries (see Adedeji [this issue] on Nigeria).

The impact of the platforms on the Cameroonian music industry is clearly visible. They mitigated the perceived piracy crisis, but downloading and sharing music has not stopped. Most platforms are not yet widely enough known, most users are content with pre-installed (often Chinese) applications, and online listening and streaming are still considered expensive even though platforms offer data-saving options and mobile money payment services.

Altogether, the emerging digital communication opportunities have provided new opportunities for the music industry and for artists. Various online magazines and local platform owners agree that streaming platforms are trying to reduce music piracy in Africa and help artists to earn an income (Africa Today 2021; interviews March 2023; Mureithi 2022). Others are sceptical as to whether these estimations relating to the jumping on the market of Spotify and Universal are realistic or wishful thinking, as access, local habits and viability remain



precarious. Large numbers of people use Chinese-manufactured mobile phones and the pre-installed applications, but many cannot afford regular internet access, which is an obstacle to data-intensive streaming. Closed streaming platforms must contend with a limited portion of the population who can subscribe to services, although the vast majority of the African market is unlikely to pay for a music-streaming subscription. This means that the platforms have the potential to mitigate piracy but must cope with users' lack of regular income and with their ideas about music distribution. For their survival, the local platforms need to attract advertisements that will pay for the revenues that are to be shared with musicians. At least, as some magazines argue, 'the big positive out of this is that the artists' songs are legally streamed or downloaded, which helps to curb piracy' (Africa Today 2021).

What can be concluded, however, is that streaming platforms will in the long run be more efficient in combatting the illegal sharing of music than copyright and legal pursuit. Users see the distributing of music as a social obligation to render their stars popular and provide their friends with music rather than as illegal acts. Not to share would be interpreted as selfish and unsocial. Like reading out newspapers for friends, sharing music with several users is socially expected behaviour. How long the local platforms can survive and whether they are purchased by larger platforms will be seen in the future. In any case, the streaming platforms have a more effective and socially accepted role when it comes to handling the crisis than do copyright laws and the courts.

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Notes

1. For the close connection of Bikutsi with politics and women, see Rathnaw (2010).
2. Interestingly, Bikutsi successfully marketed itself internationally when superstar Paul Simon included a Bikutsi track entitled 'Proof' on his 1990 *Spirit of the Saints* album, which was inspired by a fusion of Brazilian and Cameroonian music (Nyamnjoh and Fokwang 2005: 257).
3. In the Anglophone Buea, an incipient film industry also emerged in the 2010s.
4. See Erlmann (2016, 2022) for another example from South Africa.
5. There is also an incipient film industry in Buea, which has made it into the Netflix catalogue.
6. Mdundo is a music platform that was created in Kenya. It is available in Anglophone East Africa, Nigeria and Ghana, and offers downloads with far less data use than other streaming platforms (Africa Today 2021).
7. Africanews (2021) notes: 'Global music streaming service Spotify is making a giant leap into Africa, with a launch into 39 more African nations in a matter of days. Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Capo Verde, Cameroon, Chad, Comoros, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eswani, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea and Guinea Bissau. The rest are Ivory Coast, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Nigeria and Rwanda. Others include Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe'.

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