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The Emergence of Public Spheres in Colonial Cameroon: Palm Wine Drinking Joints in Bamenda Township

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Abstract

Habermas' concept of public sphere encompasses a variety of meanings, including social sites where meanings are articulated, distributed and negotiated, as well as the collective body constituted by – i.e. 'the public' in this process. Thus, any area in social life where people congregate and freely discuss and identify societal problems and, through that discussion influence public and political action, constitutes the public sphere. This paper argues that Habermas' conception is relevant to Africa and sets out to examine the emergence, functioning, and consequences of palm wine drinking joints in 20th century colonial Bamenda Township as public spheres par excellence à la Habermas.

Résumé

Le concept de l'espace public selon Habermas renferme plusieurs sens parmi lesquels les sites sociaux où les concepts sont articulés, distribués et négociés, en plus de l'entité collective constituée, par exemple, par le 'public' dans le processus. Ainsi, est espace public tout espace dans la vie sociale où les gens se rencontrent pour discuter librement et identifier les problèmes sociaux, et à travers cette discussion, influencent les actions publiques et politiques. Cet article défend la théorie que la conception de Habermas est pertinente pour l'Afrique. Il examine l'émergence, le fonctionnement et les conséquences des espaces publics par excellence qui étaient, durant la période coloniale, des endroits qui servaient à la consommation du vin de palme dans les bidonvilles de Bamenda.

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Introduction

Most contemporary conceptualisations of the public sphere are based on the ideas expressed in Jürgen Habermas' book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere – An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Although Habermas' concept of public space has been subjected to multiple criticisms, reviews and interpretations by other scholars (cf. Hohendahl 2001, Freundlieb, Hudson, and Rundell 2004) this author still finds his basic premise useful in capturing the public sphere scenario in Africa, represented by the periodic congregation of people in various sites to socialise and indulge in discourses, not necessarily orderly discourses, but any interaction whereby the interested members of the public engage themselves while relaxing in various ways, including drinking, playing cards, eating or dancing.

Habermas' concept of public sphere encompasses a variety of meanings including social sites or arenas where meanings are articulated, distributed, and negotiated, as well as the collective body constituted by, and in this process – 'the public'. Thus, any area in social life where people congregate and freely discuss and identify societal problems and through that discussion influence political action constitutes the public sphere. In the public sphere, people participate in social and political discussions through the medium of talking, debating, entertainment and relaxation. From this complex web of interactions, public opinion is formed and refined in an informal way. Conceptually, the public sphere is distinct from the state because activities in the public sphere include the production and circulation of discourses that can be critical of the state. It is a counter public to the state. The basic belief in public sphere theory is that political action is steered by the public sphere, and that the only legitimate governments are those that listen to the public sphere as an alternative voice. President Ahmadou Ahidjo's one-party state in Cameroon was very sensitive to public opinion, and critical political statements emanating from the public sphere in the shape of bars and 'chicken parlours' were often monitored by the secret police and its authors sometimes paid dearly for them. The Ahidjo government viewed the public sphere as the thermometer of societal thinking as well as centres of subversion which had to be monitored and repressed by the state security apparatus.

This paper sets out to examine the emergence and functioning of palm wine drinking joints in 20th century colonial Bamenda Township as public spheres par excellence à la Habermas. These palm wine joints were comparable to the *Banta Bas* or open spaces under baobab trees in The Gambia where men congregate on a daily basis to discuss and debate for hours and drink tea. Comparable to the coffee shops of early bourgeois Europe, the palm wine drinking joints in Bamenda Township and the Gambian

Banta Bas, also served as places of artistic creation, public opinion moulding, dangerous opposition politics, gossips, sinful behaviour, or the redefinition of public morality.

It is argued that the palm wine drinking joints represented public ‘spaces and arenas’– together with the structures, processes, social actors and actresses and cultures associated with or built into them. The joints stood out as a distinctive *lieu de sociabilité* in Bamenda Township specialised in the sale of native liquor, particularly palm wine, during the day and at nightfall with the weekends as the key periods. As a public sphere, the palm wine drinking joints developed and functioned as regular meeting and discursive places for men and women; and such places became news and rumour generating machines. The palm wine drinking joints were also public spaces for the appropriation and reproduction of modernity through the bottle dance, an alternative form of high life music, and the centre for the discussion of the politics of independence.

Conceptualising and Contextualising the Bamenda Public Sphere

The public sphere refers to areas in social life where people congregate and freely discuss and identify societal problems and through such discussion influence public opinion and inadvertently politics. It is the sphere of private people who come together to constitute a public and engage in debates over general issues in the basically privatised but publicly relevant sphere. The public sphere is, therefore, a discursive space where private individuals or groups meet to relax and discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgement, which may be encomiums for, or a mild or scathing critique of, a political regime. It is in such social and physical spaces that political participation is enacted through the medium of talk and where public opinion is moulded (Benhabib 1992, Warner 1992).

The ‘public sphere’ mediates between the ‘private sphere’ of the ordinary citizens and the ‘sphere of public authority’. Whereas the sphere of public authority represents the state or the realm of the ruling class and the state security apparatus, the public sphere straddles both private and public realms and through the instrument of public opinion the state is sensitised on the concerns of its citizenry. The public sphere is conceptually distinct from the state in that it is the site for the production and circulation of discourses that can be critical of or hostile to the state. It is also different from the economy in that it is not an arena of market relations but rather one of discursive relations, ‘a theatre for debating and deliberating rather than for buying and selling’. These fine distinctions between state apparatuses, economic markets, and democratic discussions are essential to democratic

theory and governance. The public sphere is potentially a regulatory institution against the abuse of authority by the state. The public sphere, therefore, hinges on participatory democracy from the angle of the influence of public opinion on government policy or action. The basic contention is that political action is influenced by the public sphere and the only legitimate governments are those who are sensitive to public opinion (Warner 1992, 2002). However, experiences from many parts of Africa might not comply with this concept of political legitimacy through the public sphere. Rather the political sensitivity of African governments is to issues which might provoke their ouster, and that is where the importance of the public sphere might lie under such circumstances.

The public sphere theory is admirably captured in Haine's (1996), *The World of the Paris Cafe: Sociability among the French Working Class, 1789-1914*. The Paris cafes, like palm wine drinking joints, were privately owned places open to the public for relaxation and they fall in the category of public sphere. The cafes had a remarkable presence in the political, social, cultural, and intellectual life of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Paris. These cafes therefore stood as informal institutions that 'bridged the distance between public and private life, leisure and work, the individual and the family'. They also 'provided a unique space in which the tensions arising from such juxtapositions could be articulated' (Haine 1996:236). The Paris cafes were important public spheres in French history owing to their importance as incubators of France's 18th and 19th century revolutions. During the times of repression following these revolutions, cafes served as shelters and as places where the working classes could express themselves by insulting government officials and the police.

The palm wine leisure joints in Bamenda township in Cameroon stood out as an equivalent of these French cafes in some respects. They had an equally interesting historical role in impacting public opinion and the political orientation of Cameroon's path to independence. Palm wine is a multi-purpose socialisation liquor, which Cameroonians, like other West and Central Africans, enjoy drinking, particularly during the evenings. Tapped from the palm tree, it is used for libation, bride price, and soothsaying among other things. Tradition requires that all notables must sit and drink palm wine with the chief (king) of the village on special days as a sign of fidelity, homage and togetherness. The British exiled Fai Ndzenzef, an notable figure in colonial Nso in Cameroon's North West Province, partly because he had stopped drinking palm wine with the king of Nso in his palace and it was suspected that he was up to making trouble and breaching the peace.¹ The palm wine drinking joints of colonial Bamenda, therefore, bring people together in a way reminiscent of deeply engrained cultural practices. In the township,

the typical village evening scene of togetherness and relaxation was recreated around palm wine joints, the only difference being that the clientele was cosmopolitan and the palm wine had to be paid for with money.

The palm wine leisure joint was a distinct African model of the public sphere in the sense that the class component of its constituents was not important. This model of the public sphere placed little premium on social differences or privileges. They were sites for the people of all backgrounds. This public sphere was, therefore, classless in the Nyererian sense of the word (cf. Nyerere 1967). In a period when newspapers and radios were near-absent and were only of limited elitist value, information dissemination and the formation of public opinion operated effectively within the medium of such palm wine houses during moments of relaxation and entertainment. Even with the advent and popularisation of the radio, particularly in the postcolony, the palm wine joints remained effective news, information, and opinion sites. In the palm wine leisure joints traditional liquor was the dominant form of alcohol for Africans during the British colonial rule in the Cameroons. Although the consumption of palm wine was ubiquitous in West and Central African villages, its importance took another dimension when the tradition was transported and reproduced in the townships for essentially commercial purposes. Willis (2002, 265) states that the sole purpose of consuming alcohol by individuals was to achieve happiness. On the contrary, the consumption of alcohol in the Bamenda joints was not an end in itself but went beyond the attainment of happiness. These palm wine joints came to mark a permanent aspect of an all-encompassing social life in Bamenda township as the inhabitants grappled with colonial modernity.

Historical Context of Colonial Bamenda Township

African townships have exhibited different types of public spheres as venues where people frequently congregate. Mosques, churches, and football stadia, are prime examples of such places.² Sites such as drinking joints, because they are accessible to all classes and the principal activity there is consuming alcohol and playing music,³ very quickly became extremely important as focal points for leisure, entertainment, and socialisation into the evolving urban modernity. The township of Bamenda was one of such places and its growth was accompanied by the emergence and proliferation of public spheres including traditional bars where native palm wine was sold, on-license and off-license bars where European-style bottled beer, grape wines and spirits were sold, and nightclubs, mosques, churches and brothels. However, the palm wine joints stood out as one of the distinctive public spheres that developed in the township and specialised over the years in the sale of native liquor, particularly palm wine.

Bamenda township developed hand in hand with palm wine leisure joints as the town created an enabling environment for the location of such businesses. Bamenda is a crossroad town and all the inhabitants of Cameroon's North West Region have to pass through it before getting to their various destinations. The town owes its origin both to colonialism and the inveterate Hausa traders. Following the German annexation of Cameroon in 1884 and its ultimate conquest and subjugation, Bamenda was selected as the German administrative headquarters for the entire Bamenda region, now the North West Region, and the German administration embarked upon building a Fort to serve as the German Governor's administrative offices (Awasom 2003). German presence created commercial opportunities in Bamenda and Hausa traders from Northern Nigeria took advantage of the propitious atmosphere and started to migrate to the township from 1903. The traders initially camped around the German Fort at the Bamenda up-station before being displaced to the Mankon-Bamenda vicinity downtown. There, the Hausa created a new residential quarter which they named Abakpa – present day Abakpa-Bamenda township. Hausa immigrants are, therefore, the real genesis of Bamenda township (Awasom 2003).

The township provided opportunities, which attracted other ethnic groups into the area. The tax records for 1934 indicated that over 5,000 taxable males from a mixed-bag of ethnic groups comprising the indigenous Mankon, Bali, Bamum, Bamileke, Igbos, Fulani, Bansa, Meta and a host of others lived in the township.⁴ Essentially, the increasing population of Bamenda was fast becoming heterogeneous. Bamenda was a place for business and the cultivation of colonial modernity around highlife music, and the palm wine joints were a major spot of attraction in this emerging milieu. The palm wine leisure joints developed from the private initiative of women who followed the emerging town to cater for the needs of its cosmopolitan population. An enterprising woman, Mama Ngum, is credited to have commenced the first palm wine joint in a haphazard manner in the parlour of her sun-dried brick house. The success of her business paved the way for other women to enter the trade. In the 1930s and 1940s the palm wine joints were located exclusively at the northeastern crossroads area of the town. The joints were littered along the same street about some 200 metres east of the Hausa Abakpa quarters.⁵

Before the introduction and popularisation of modern larger beer in Cameroon, local liquor including palm wine and corn beer reigned supreme. The palm wine joints gave Bamenda an atmosphere of regular festivity, although of different tempos. As Madoeuf notes:

Indeed a town is viewed as the expression of the wish to be together, it is through the feast that this wish is confirmed. Also, the feast is the expression of what Michael Maffesoli calls 'social viscosity', this strange impulse that prompts people to attach themselves to each other (Madoeuf 2005:68).

Local liquor, including palm wine and corn beer, was responsible for pulling people to these *lieux de sociabilité* in the township. People tended to relax over calabashes of palm wine to kill the evening hours and tell stories. The corn beer sold in the palm wine joints was made from fermented corn from which two varieties of alcohol are extracted. The first is called 'shah' and is whitish in colour. The second, called 'nkan', is highly intoxicating.

Modes of Relaxation, Gender and the Drinking Pattern in the Joints

The palm wine drinking joints were rendezvous for entertainment and relaxation and were run exclusively by women. The explanation for the monopoly of the trade by women is that food also had to be provided in the palm wine joints, and food preparation is a domain culturally assigned to women within the society. Since food was an important precondition to drinking, women tended to combine selling cooked food and palm wine. Men restricted themselves to tapping and transporting the palm wine to town and selling them to their female customers who took over the responsibility of retailing the alcohol in their respective joints. So while men specialised as tapers and suppliers of palm wine, women concentrated on selling the liquor. A social network was therefore established in the palm wine industry from the male producers and distributors to the female buyers and retailers.

The palm wine leisure joints were real sites of socialisation in Bamenda, the most populous town in colonial British Southern Cameroons. Although palm wine drinking was an evening resort which capped the residents' daily activities, weekends and pay days were the busiest moments at the joints. How was drinking generally organised by customers? Drinking in the joints did not take place in a haphazard manner. Within the unique space of the palm wine drinking joints, the people developed a distinctive subculture with its own order, structure, and rituals. The world of the public sphere, as Hauser (1999:69) notes, consist of cultural norms and common meanings within which interaction takes place. The participants followed a specific communal pattern of drinking that was dictated by traditional etiquette in the villages. The calabash or bottle of palm wine was poured into the cup of each person in the joint, usually starting from the oldest or a title holder. Each drinker also took his turn to buy a round of palm wine for the others. If an individual was broke, he could continue drinking for free on the

understanding that he would also buy for others when his economy improved. Anybody who arrived in the palm wine joint and bought a bottle of palm wine had to serve his neighbour first as a way of starting a conversation. Although an individual may buy a bottle or gourd of palm wine, the common rule was that he had to share it with others who in turn would also buy and continue the sharing process. Generosity and sharing, and not individualism, was the rule at palm wine leisure joints.

Each time a calabash of palm wine was emptied by the group, the dregs of the palm wine would be poured into the cup of the identifiable elders in the group as custom demanded. Men took the dregs in the belief that it augmented and improved their sperm content and sexual potency. The drinking cups were usually fabricated from the horn of a cow, only in rare cases were modern drinking glasses used. Kola nuts often accompanied the drinking of palm wine and was bought and shared as a sign of solidarity. A popular Cameroonian aphorism says 'the truth lies in the cup'; which means when people drink alcohol, they tend to speak out their minds more freely and with less restrictions. Drinking therefore goes hand in hand with discussions. Hauser (1999:64, 69-70) notes that public spheres usually formed around certain issues that were deliberated on and the discussions would reproduce itself across a spectrum of interested publics who do not necessarily know themselves and might be meeting each other for the first time. In the palm wine joints, people would converse freely but with respect for their customs and tradition, especially age and titles. Such social differences were easily identifiable from the individuals' dressing and general comportment, especially the cap an individual wore and how it was decorated. This recognition of hierarchies notwithstanding, people in palm wine joints generally mixed freely and spoke their minds without any restrictions. No matter how heated debates became, fighting or physical assault was not culturally tolerated.

The palm wine leisure joints were generally considered wayward milieus in the night because of the presence of men and a handful of women who mixed the drinks with the usage of colourful language and sexual innuendoes. The more embarrassing a woman was with her usage of language, the more notorious she became and the more customers she would attract, who would come for a tease. Palm wine leisure joints were, therefore, places *par excellence* for the formulation of new sexual vocabularies. 'Decent' women, therefore, preferred to stay away from joints after night fall for fear of being labelled wayward. The palm wine that was sold at nightfall was called 'overnight'. It means it had been allowed to ferment for about two days and, therefore, had a higher alcohol content relative to the freshly tapped palm wine.

The palm wine leisure joints often served as a stopover to the red light district in Bamenda township popularly known as Bayangi Quarters. The district was littered with brothels dominated by the Bayangi women from Cameroon's South West Region (Fomin 2004). Men would pass some time at the joint, drinking highly fermented palm wine, and consuming traditional 'Viagra', composed of bitter kola nuts and special chewable roots. At a time, bitter kola nuts used to be sold exclusively at palm wine leisure joints, the reason being that they were thought to enhance sexual performance. But the popularity of the bitter kola and its alleged medical potency in cleansing the body's system displaced the nuts from palm wine joints to market places. In general, the palm wine leisure joints were not only venues for drinking and meeting people but also places for discussions, exchange of information, music and politics.

The Appropriation and Reproduction of Modernity and Political Discourses

Whereas coffee houses in London were centres of art and literary criticism, the Bamenda palm wine joints were milieus for the appropriation and reproduction of urban colonial modernity in the form of popular music. If there is anything for which the indigenous Mankon people of Bamenda are known, it is the bottle dance. Bottle dance stars such as John Menang, Richard Nguti, Ni Ken and Depipson (Nyamnjoh and Fokwang 2005:261) have been popularised by the Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV). What is hardly known is that this genre of music developed in palm wine drinking joints. Initially, the palm wine consumers would sing and dance to their traditional music. With the spread and popularity of highlife music, the Bamenda palm wine joint urbanites quickly appropriated it and gave it a completely new twist. The development of highlife music in Cameroon dates back to colonial times and is closely related to urbanisation. Popular highlife music that was produced in Ghana and Nigeria reached the Cameroon urban centres, thanks to powerful radio transmitters and individuals from these centres of highlife music (Nyamnjoh and Fokwang 2005:254). Highlife music was also played in Waterside Bar, a popular nightclub in Bamenda. But such nightclubs were elitist and patronised largely by the educated middle classes.

In the palm wine leisure joints, the popular music played in modern bars was appropriated in another way by the ordinary people, bent on demonstrating their own modernity. In the absence of guitars in the 1930s and 1940s, these modernists had to improvise music with bottles as the main instrument. Guitars were later acquired and used alongside the bottles. The entertainer used a metal object to hit the bottle while an accompanying musician played the guitar. The musicians sang a modified version of the

popular highlife music to communicate critical messages that caricatured the colonial elite, particularly their snobbishness and claims to superiority and their habits of monopolising all the beautiful women. With the introduction of political parties, hired bottle dance musicians often entertained people by playing pro-government songs. Ladies and gentlemen would be invited to engage each other on the dance floor and dance according to the command of the lead singer. The bottle dance display on a grand scale was reserved for special weekends, special occasions and pay days. As the bottle dance grew in importance, it was displaced from the palm wine joints to the township community halls on selected Saturdays reserved for the big dance for reasons of space. The women palm wine sellers would be organised on such occasions to supply wine to keep the occasion going. But the palm wine leisure joints remained the place for the production of bottle dance. Today, there are several Bamenda township musicians who have specialised in playing a modernised version of the bottle dance.

Palm wine joints also served as informal media centres in a society where newspapers were extremely difficult to come by until the early 1960s. Frequenting the palm wine joints was a regular practice of urbanites, not just for drinking but for the simple reason that they had to meet there to be informed about the latest socio-political events in town. There was always a story teller, a philosopher king, or a distinguished individual who would engage people in conversation on a variety of topics or simply entertain people with stories. Raconteurs and home-spurn philosophers honed their skills. Keeping away from palm wine joints meant missing a lot in town. The best source of information on the latest in town was therefore the version from the palm wine joints. From the dawn of nationalist politics in the 1950s, politicians had to socialise with the people in the palm wine joints in the evenings. They would order and pay for rounds of palm wine to customers as a prelude to being given the floor to make political statements in favour of their political programmes. Prince Ndefru, the President of the township palm wine joints, grew in popularity as 'the people's arbitrator'. With the formation of the first two political parties in the Southern Cameroons in 1953, the Kamerun National Congress (KNC) of E.M.L. Endeley and the Kamerun People's Party (KPP) of M.N. Mbile (Chem-Langhee 2005), he was openly wooed by politicians

During the political campaigns preceding the United Nations plebiscite on the independence of the British Cameroons, which was to decide if the territory was to join either Nigeria or the French Cameroons, the various political protagonists used the palm wine joints to sell their programmes and discredit their rivals. The pro-Francophone Cameroon politicians spread rumours about the impending dangers of voting to join Nigeria by alleging

that Nigerian Igbo men were raping native women on a daily basis and compelling native people to buy their goods at exorbitant prices. Nigeria was presented as 'an ocean' that would drown the small British Cameroons were it to opt to join Nigeria while the aggressive Igbo traders would not give Cameroonians any breathing space in the economy. As for the pro-Nigerian politicians, rumours were spread to exaggerate the state of civil war between the anti-French guerrillas and the Ahidjo government in a bid to scare people from voting to join the Francophone Cameroon Republic. Francophone Cameroon was presented as a chaotic and lawless society where civil liberties did not exist and where the gendarmes continuously terrorised the population. Palm wine joints, therefore, served as propaganda and rumour-generating mills. Politicians hired bottle dance musicians to propagate their political manifestoes through their music.

The Public Sphere and the Question of Governance

As the palm wine joints grew in importance and popularity, they attracted a class of hooligans whose indiscipline necessitated the establishment of a governance structure for the joints. The British colonial administration in the Cameroons was particularly thin on the ground given that the Cameroons was more of an appendix of Nigeria and Britain was more concerned with its Nigerian colony than with the trust territory of the Cameroons. The women palm wine sellers at the joints wanted the township administration under the British-appointed Hausa Chief, the Sarikin Hausawa, to be more active in the affairs of the palm wine joints. The Hausa Chief was reluctant to involve himself in palm wine matters because his Muslim religion forbade alcohol. The women quickly resorted to Prince Ndefru, a native of Mankon-Bamenda township, who was a big patron of the palm wine joints, to oversee their administration. Ndefru accepted to assume the presidency of the palm wine joints and all conflicts related to the operation of the joints were brought to him for arbitration. For instance, Prince Ndefru's council of arbitrators policed the palm wine joints, and handled cases of fighting or refusal to pay for drinks consumed. The local government, the Ngemba Native Authority, came to recognise Ndefru's role in the palm wine joints and with the colonial administration, they enlisted his services in collecting taxes therefrom.⁶ Although women were the principal proprietors of the joints, the leadership structure was composed exclusively of males under the leadership of Prince Ndefru. The Prince was popular among the palm wine women dealers given his imposing position as a native of Mankon-Bamenda.

The emergence of Prince Ndefru as the president of the palm wine joints resulted in strained relations with the Hausa immigrant community. The Hausa community were uncomfortable with the activities of the palm wine

joints for political, religious and security reasons. The British-appointed chief of the town, the Sarkin Hausawa, complained bitterly to the British colonial administration that Prince Ndefru was undermining his authority by interfering in tax collection matters in the urban area. He complained that it was unacceptable for the palm wine joints to operate within the residential areas of the Hausa Muslims in the township. Apart from dealing with alcohol which was offensive to Muslims, the palm wine joints were presented as unsafe places where hoodlums operated freely at night and gambling, fighting, prostitution were rife. The Sarikin Hausa requested the British to ban the sale of palm wine around Muslim Hausa quarters and to expel all women around the palm wine joints who were not involved in any visible gainful activity.⁷ The native peoples felt that the Sarikin Hausawa had gone too far. Palm wine joints were their business and in their native land; immigrants had no right to determine which business they did. Moreover, palm wine was a cultural aspect of their lives. From the British perspective, the palm wine joints, were an important source of taxable revenue for the local administration and should not be displaced.

The conflict of authority between Prince Ndefru and the Sarikin Hausawa was subsequently resolved within the context of local government reforms. In 1949, the British initiated local government reforms which sought to transform the Native Authority system into a modern local government system. This reform package included the democratisation of local governments to allow for the inclusion of educated elements, and the representatives of various ethnic and interest groups, including women, in the township administrative system. The reforms culminated in the establishment of a new local government known as the Mankon Subordinate Native Authority Council or the Mankon Urban Council in 1954 as the governing body of the township.⁸ The membership of the urban council was all-embracing and comprised the women palm wine sellers, Prince Ndefru, the Sarikin Hausawa, and other representatives of interest groups in the township. The Councillors were divided into committees responsible for various domains including health, sanitation, education, finance, customary affairs and land issues. Women of the palm wine joints now had a voice under the local government reforms as their representatives could also sit on the council. Perhaps the greatest victim of the reforms was the Sarikin Hausawa. His influence was considerably neutralised since the Hausa immigrants were a minority in the council and decisions had to be taken democratically. The dream of stamping out palm wine joints in Abakpa Bamenda township died a natural death, as the Muslim minority could not take any decision against the majority indigenous and cosmopolitan non-Muslims of the township.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the emergence of the public sphere in colonial Bamenda township. Dovetailing into Habermas' theory of public sphere which used European salons and cafes as discursive arenas, this study has revealed how the palm wine leisure joints in colonial Bamenda were equally public spheres *par excellence* where men and women regularly congregated. These public spheres were leisure joints performing multiple functions and were part and parcel of the urbanisation process in twentieth century Cameroon. The palm wine leisure joints as public spheres were accessible to everybody irrespective of class. Men drank palm wine and shared kolanuts at the palm wine leisure joints regularly as a normal way of life in the urban context, which was a reproduction of similar practices in the villages. But in town the company at the palm wine joints was usually a mixed bag of ethnicities and native liquor in the joints had to be bought and not a free offer as often happened in the countryside. These leisure joints were not only centres for drinking, but also for entertainment, news, rumours, politicking and dating. The leisure joints were also places where highlife music was transformed into bottle dance music which served not only entertainment purposes but was also an instrument of political propaganda and a critique of society. At the penultimate stage of British Cameroon's independence, when a merger with either Francophone Cameroon or Nigeria was hotly contested, the palm wine joints became the centre stage of politics.

The palm wine joints actually gave the township colour and vibrancy, epitomising a new colonial urban modernity that was evolving. They also developed governance structures which were germane to late colonial efforts at democratisation. The palm wine joints as public spheres were subjected to changes in terms of location and importance in the postcolony. The leisure joints were initially located exclusively at the northeast crossroads area of the town and palm wines supplies came almost exclusively from the native Mankon people. The forces of change broke this monopoly. As Bamenda township expanded, swallowing neighbouring towns like Nkwen and Mendakwe through the process of conurbation, the northeast crossroads leisure joint was challenged by the mushrooming of other rival joints, which continued to operate in the same way.

The changing economic fortunes of Cameroon in the 1970s, reflected in the boom in the prices of agricultural exports and the advent of petrol rents, witnessed the popularisation of beer drinking in bars, on-licenses and off-licenses (*les ventes emportés*) by the emerging middle class. In other words, alternative public spheres emerged with a completely different culture that competed effectively with palm wine drinking joints. Palm wine drinking

joints, as public spheres, might not now enjoy their old monopoly but they have come to stay as permanent places in the township with a special clientele who find fulfilment in them. The ordinary folk remain its faithful clientele and continue to give it colour by the stories they continue to tell of yesteryears. If the ordinary folk cannot afford beer from the modern breweries, they can still get 'high' in the palm wine joints.

Notes

1. Cf. Awasom, Nicodemus Fru, "The British Invention of Tradition and the Fai Ndzenzef Affair", Occasional Paper, University of The Gambia, 2006.
2. Cf. Cantome, Cleo, 'The contemporary mosque phenomenon as lieux de sociabilité: gender, identity and space', Fancello, Sandra, 'Du village au temple: les assemblée pentacôtiste comme espace de sociabilité en milieu urbain africain', Benjelid, Abed, 'Le stade de football: un formidable lieu de sociabilité et integration des jeunes de la périphérie pauvre de l'Oran, Algerie'.
3. For interesting sidelines on drinking and music venues in urban centre in Africa see Fourchard, Laurent, Sheben, sociabilité et pouvoir en Afrique du Sud au XXe siècle, Collins, John, 'A century of changing locations of Ghanaian commercial Popular Entertainment Venues'.
4. National Archives Buea/Cameroon, Annual Report for the year ending 31 December 1935.
5. Interviews with five key informants: Bayong, John, 55, a businessman and the son of a title holder from Mankon who told old stories about the palm wine joints of his traditional Mankon. (Buea/Cameroon January 3-5, 2000); Awasom Stephen Anye, 75, father of the author and a stylish bottle dancer. His memory about palm wine joints was always fresh. Stories collected from him between 1980-1985 and 1998-2000 in Mankon-Bamenda; Monikang, Alexander, 74, a native of Mankon and an excellent oral historian. A genuine lover of palm wine joints who tells his story in a musical fashion, particularly about the bottle dance and the red street queens. Stories were collected from him between 1980-1985 and 1998-2000; Ndenge, Alphonse, 78, a notable from Mankon and a retired educationist. Interviewed between 1980 and 1985 and during Summer holidays of 1999; Alhadji Usman Bah, 60, Hausa trader in Mankon town, and son of the Sarikin Hausawa. He was interviewed with six other Hausa people in February 1984.
6. Provincial Archives Bamenda/Cameroon, Pa/Bda 10027, 1949.
7. Nicodemus Fru Awasom, "The Vicissitudes of twentieth-century Mankon Kings in Cameroon's Changing Social Order", in Wim van Binsbergen, (ed.), *The Dynamics of Power and the Rule of Law*, Leiden, African Studies Centre, 2003, p.108-111.
8. Provincial Archives, Bamenda, File No. Ba/1934/b, Mankon Subordinate Native Authority.

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