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QUEER POLITICS IN PRE AND POST INDEPENDENCE CAMEROON THROUGH THE LENS OF WEBERIAN POLITICAL AUTHORITY

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ABSTRACT

Policy in Cameroon, and on the African continent more generally, is often summarily referred to as the result of neopatrimonial authority. This paper rejects the framework of neopatrimonial authority in Cameroon, applying Weberian notions of charismatic authority to trace the development of queer policy from the pre-colonial period to the present. This paper first analyzes the impact of European colonialism on legal language and then investigates the rhetorical defense of this legal language following independence. Since statehood, the presidencies of Ahmadou Ahidjo (1960 - 1982) and Paul Biya (1982 - ) have implemented selective enforcement of inherited legalisms through near unilateral action. As activists attempt to change the Cameroonian legalisms criminalizing the queer body, this analysis argues that changing the opinions of head of state has the greatest capacity to enact change given the federal configuration of power.
A note regarding terminology:

This paper purposely invokes the words “queer” or “homosexual” to refer either more generally to those implicated under sodomy statutes in Cameroon. This paper avoids the invocation of terms such as “LGBT” or “LGBTQIA+” for the reason that Marc Epprecht lays out in the following excerpt from Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa:

Choice of terminology acquires added meaning. Indigenous African terms for people whose behaviour does not conform to heterosexual expectations, for example, often have their roots firmly in local, traditional, and patriarchal cultures. Such terms abound, and there is some agitation to ‘modernize’ them for contemporary struggles so as not to be dependent on Western vocabularies. Yet indigenous terms commonly imply an age/power hierarchy, oppressive or restrictive gender roles, a specific ethnic identity, and/or the occult, none of which fits very well with today’s transnational human rights and sexual health agendas.

The terminology used here is specific and purposeful, in an attempt to contextualize Cameroonian queer lives in the greater context of queer lives in general whilst operating under the constraints of the English language.

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Introduction: Bebe Zahara Benet and Queer Cameroon

For many Americans born around the turn of the 21st century, including myself, the first invocation of the place Cameroon can be attributed to one person: Bebe Zahara Benet. Bebe Zahara Benet was the first winner of the television show RuPaul’s Drag Race, which, though humble in production and format at its start, has fourteen regular seasons, three American spinoff series, international drag races on multiple continents, and its own streaming platform. The legacy of this multinational drag dynasty began with the crowning of Bebe Zahara Benet, a drag queen quite vocal about her childhood in Cameroon. Though several scholars have raised valid criticisms of her portrayal in the show, (including Sarah Tucker Jenkins, who argues that the producers of the show commodified Benet as “the ‘exotic’ other”) the role that Benet played in exposing an entire generation of queer folk to Cameroon as a place is difficult to overstate. Notably, though Benet recognizes that Cameroon has faults, especially in its treatment of queer people like herself, Benet holds pride in the place she is from, giving the following quote to Oke/Fika magazine in 2020:

I feel like my culture has a huge part to play with who I am as an artist, and I want people to be able to see it, and celebrate it, and love it, and be aware of it, be aware of where we come from, the richness of where we come from. But I think that when it comes to the culture

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itself, because it's so conservative, there are a lot of artists like us that are scared of even being who we are and being the kind of artists we want to be. But as an artist, you don't stop being what your gift is that God has given you to do. You don't stop living your purpose regardless of the challenges, because even living here in the US, it doesn't mean that I don't have my own challenges as the kind of artist that I am. You don't stop spreading, or creating beautiful art, beautiful work and raising the flag of wherever you are coming from.3

When scholars write about queer politics in Cameroon, often they write without taking into account the input of actual queer voices that have lived the lives that they are interested in studying.

An analysis of quantitative and qualitative data does indeed indicate that Cameroon has one of the world's worst reputations on queer rights. According to a 2018 dataset collected by Thomas Serwatka, Cameroon, on the metric of the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Index (SOGI-LI) ranked 146th out of 184 analyzed states.1 In addition, literature suggests that queer issues were personal for President Ahmadjo, who faced questioning surrounding his sexuality throughout his entire presidency and used queer politics to solidify his “divine mission,” a key facet of Weberian charismatic authorities. This paper does not seek to impose modern notions of sexuality on President Ahmadjo; rather, it seeks to acknowledge that President Ahmadjo’s opinion about policy in post-independence Cameroon was the primary determinant of whether the policy was implemented writ large.

This paper draws on the theories of Max Weber in his *The Sociology of Charismatic Authority*. The framework of charismatic authority will prove integral in describing the power delegation that is useful to analyze the policies of Presidents Ahmadjo and Biya. Though an imperfect application of Weberian theory, it is useful to view both Ahmadjo and Biya as modern examples of charismatic authority, to the extent to which this comparison can be drawn. Weber argues that, “In its economic sub-structure, as in everything else, charismatic domination is the very opposite of bureaucratic domination.”5 Whereas pre-modern charismatic authorities defined their right to rule under a Hobbesian divine right of kings, the Cameroonian presidency has been defined by the removal of any alternatives to the unitary charismatic rule of a few men. Queer policy in the nation is partially a side effect of this. Criminalization of queerness is particularly harsh because Ahmadjo and Biya have each decided that they want it to be. While analyses attributing an entire nation’s policy to heads of state, especially on the African continent, can lack nuance given to political analyses of Western states, the argument here is that policy in Cameroon can be understood in this way because of the particular methods by which they have consolidated power.

The argument presented in the subsequent analysis is two pronged. Firstly, this paper argues that state efforts to criminalize homosexuality are not inherent to Cameroon or Cameroonian culture. Instead, such notions originate in Europe and are strengthened in the rhetoric of Cameroonian leaders following statehood. Secondly, this paper argues that coupled with the unique

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1 Thomas S. Serwatka, "Dataset for "Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) Laws That Support and/or Limit International Development" (2020). Research Datasets. 1. https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/datasets/1

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Sodomy: Grown in Europe, Harvested in Cameroon

The society of the modern-day Cameroon pre-European colonization was filled with varieties of people that tolerated and at times even celebrated those that engaged in same sex relationships or lived their lives expressing a gender that did not correspond to their biological sex. One of the earliest written accounts of queerness, as we might define it today, comes from the Portuguese priest Father J.B. Labat, reacting in 1732 with much shock to the sexual diversity he witnessed in the Congo kingdom. It is important to note here that because most native African languages did not have writing systems prior to European contact, it is necessary to look to European accounts, though flawed, to understand historical conceptions of sexuality and gender. Even community leaders openly expressed deviation from Western gender norms with the support of their communities: “According to Labat, the Ganga-ya-Chibanda routinely cross-dressed and was addressed as ‘grandmother.’ The element chibanda in his title is certainly related to other terms used by Bantu-speakers in the region for nonmasculine males who are often shamans and have sex with other men.” Though pre-colonial conceptions of homosexuality in the region were by no means homogeneous, Labat’s accounts highlight that encouraging images of the queer body were presented before European contact, despite the reactions of European missionaries.

The first explicitly Cameroonian queer ethnography occurs during the period of German colonial rule. Murray and Roscoe include a translated excerpt from German anthropologist Günther Tessman’s 1921 ethnography “Homosexuality Among the Negroes of Cameroon.” Though it is difficult to uncouple notions of European Judeo-Christian morality from Tessman’s account, it is notable that Tessmann quotes a local who quite candidly calls same sex relations amongst men a “national custom.” In adolescents, additionally, same sex relations were considered normal and, at times, encouraged. Wholesale, queerphobic notions originate in the Europeans’ accounts. This is an important distinction; Cameroon has a cultural basis of accepting sexualities deemed deviant by Europeans. Proliferation of queerphobia runs contrary to the cultural principles of those that have inhabited Cameroonian land for centuries.
Sex more generally was used during early colonial Cameroon to define an explicit hierarchy between the colonizers and the colonized. This is particularly evident during the period of German colonization by Cameroon, which preceded the more often studied French colonial era. Until the fall of the Berlin Wall, the legacies of German colonialism in particular were difficult to define because of closed access to records. Now, though, a lot of scholarship on sexuality in colonial Africa is focusing on the role that the Germans played in the introduction of European moral systems on the continent. Daniel Walther argues that, "In the colonial context, the concept of the 'Other' was integral to defining white male sexuality and ultimately white, heterosexual German male control not only over Germany's colonial territories and their non-European inhabitants, but also intimate control over female bodies." The relationship between the German man and the African woman was principally defined by domination, and this reality leeches into early queer colonial politics in the region as well. In a separate article, Walther argues that unlike in the colonies of the British empire, in which weak forms of statehood meant that men actively colonizing overseas possessions could escape the watchful moralistic eye of European society, the German colonial state was interested in limiting the sexuality of its colonists in order to uphold notions of superiority that justified colonization. Stricter notions of German nationalism explicitly defined what the German man was and was not; a good German colonialist was heterosexual and interested in German women. The German colonial period marks the first introduction of a homophobic moral system, which is quite notable given the blame that a lot of scholarship places the modern Cameroonian state.

Walther's analysis of German prosecution of colonists for same sex relations reveals an interesting departure that the German empire undertook from those of its European neighbors; prosecution of homosexuality occurred more intensively in the colonial sphere than in the metropole. In fact, the first successful prosecution of a man for same sex relations on Cameroonian soil noted in scholarly literature occurred via invocation of *widernaturlich* (unnaturality) statutes against a German colonist named Eric Happel. Walther notes that these statutes are explicitly not sodomy laws; sodomy laws definitionally must involve condemnation of homosexuality via religious and moral justification rather than medical justification, as *widernaturlich* statutes did. Though the text of this legalism did not explicitly aim for social purity, the decision to apply German statutes via colonial authority did, given how atypical such prosecutions were in the German empire. Though hotly debated in the metropole, Happel was successfully prosecuted and expelled from the German colonies in the interest of maintaining notions of German racial and social superiority over the othered African. Sodomy in its most literal sense is derived explicitly from Catholicism, which was not a feature of the German colonial mission given the role of Protestantism within the German state. However, functionally, despite prosecution using medical language, rhetorical context reveals that such a prosecution was not all that functionally different from those in the Catholic empires.

French and British rule of Cameroon furthered the criminalization of the queer body. A survey of colonial Francophone literature reveals that homoeroticism, at least between males, was

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"Daniel Walther, "Sex, Race and Empire: White Male Sexuality and the 'Other' in Germany's Colonies, 1894-1914," in *German Studies Review*, vol. 33, no. 1, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 45.

1 Daniel Walther, "Sex, Race and Empire," 11.

quite present in the valorization of the French colonial man. As Julian Everett puts it, “Francophone colonial novels often function as displays of hypermasculinity within a homosocial framework presenting examples of manliness which necessarily favor Europeans.” In addition, French colonial novels often exhibited images of men openly engaging in homoerotic voyeurism, seemingly quite removed from the moral systems that guide sodomy legislation. Everett argues that this is due in large part to the removal of the European woman from the narrative of colonization in Africa. It is also important to note how attitudes about homosexuality on the ground in Africa pre-colonization affected colonial social structures post-colonization. If homosexuality in Cameroon really was a “national custom,” as Tessman noted in 1921, it makes sense that colonialists adapted moralisms to partake in a sexual conquest in the region as well.

It is impossible to understand the criminalization of queerness in French Cameroon without noting the greater political context that homosexuality had in the French empire. Though the British played a massive role in the politics of Anglophone Cameroon, the version of sodomy laws that Cameroon has inherited today are, according to Alok Gupta, directly attributable to the French.14 Jeremy Rich notes that debate over homosexuality in the French empire began in earnest in 1884, when scandalous accusations between two French colonists stationed in Gabon brought into question French notions of masculinity and authority.15 Dubbed the Faucher-d’Alexis affair, this incident brought into question exactly what and how homosexuality could be perceived as a subversion of the French colonial mission. Unlike in the German era of political rule in Cameroon, the French empire was defined by “references to homosexuality or violence only when they related to broader internal disputes in the colonial bureaucracy.”16 Certainly, similarities can be drawn between the Happel and Faucher-d’Alexis affairs in that such accusations were explicitly drawn to define the image of the superior colonial man, but differences are notable as well. Debate within the French sphere was limited only to colonial administrators, while in Germany the forum for debate was extended to public opinion in the metropole. This is notable; the shift to French political authority in Cameroon marked a cease in the mention of non-heterosexual sexualities in the public sphere. French presence in Cameroon needed little justification to the French public, where notions of civilizing Africans took the forefront in political debates.

The Charismatic Authority of Ahmadou Ahidjo

Though few of Cameroon’s neighbors perform particularly well on metrics of queer rights, the modern Cameroonian state has a specifically negative reputation among scholars. This is primarily due to one man, the first of Cameroon’s two presidents: Ahmadou Ahidjo. Arguments attributing an entire state’s attitude to the personal decisions of individual leaders in Africa are often

4Rich, 9.
overly simplistic and fail to acknowledge diverse ideoscapes at play within multinational states; however, most all measures taken by the state against queer people in Cameroon since its inception have cited one statute in their enforcement of state persecution: article 347-1 of the Penal Code. As previously noted, the language of article 347-1 is modeled after French colonial sodomy regulations. Interestingly, as Di Baku and Enama note in a report for the ILGA, despite a complete overhaul of the penal code in 2016, archaic language criminalizing same sex relations was kept intact. Despite most every external pressure urging Cameroon's government to reform, again and again, Ahidjo and then Biya have made it very clear that no matter the wishes of Western influences, social policy towards queer people is domestically directed.

In addition, it is important to note Ahidjo’s justification of anti-queer politics in the context of native African ideologies. Basile Ndjio notes that Ahidjo’s administration “relied on Afrocentric ideologies to enact repressive legislations against same-sex relations, generally misrepresented as an un-African phenomenon or a vestige of Western colonialism.” However, this paper still chooses to label the legalisms governing homosexuality as a fundamentally colonial phenomenon, given that “the Cameroonian penal code has endorsed the Judaeo-Christian conservative view of homosexual acts and desires.” Thus, legalisms governing homosexuality are, in fact, textbook vestiges of European colonialism. Rhetoric, in contrast, used to justify these legalisms was based uniquely on pan-African social notions. F.H. Ngwa Nfobin highlights in an analysis of pan-African francophone literature that often anti-gay African politicians paint homosexuality as a feature of Western society that must be stopped in Africa at all costs. The gap between pre-colonial views of homosexuality and post-colonial condemnation is notable, especially given the accounts of Tessman.

More generally, Cameroon’s independence in 1960 and Ahidjo’s ascendancy to the presidency marked a period of intense political centralization in Cameroon. Given that colonial powers were quite disinterested in establishing a meaningful and effective government bureaucracy in their colonies, political leaders of young African states often had a wide power vacuum to fill upon independence. After just a few years into Ahidjo’s presidency, Mark DeLancey notes that generally, “it is widely believed that the president approved or disapproved all Cameroon citizens’ applications for visas to leave the country.” Every detail of policy, from the very minute to the very large, had to pass through Yaoundé, and, more specifically, through President Ahidjo. Vice presidents, prime ministers, and executive officials, to the extent to which they existed at any given time, derived all of their power directly from orders from Ahidjo. Nothing in practice constitutionally granted anyone but Ahidjo a single formal power, meaning that the National Assembly’s agenda, the CNU’s agenda (Cameroon’s only party by 1966), and Ahidjo’s agenda were always the same. This trend of centralization was noted by his successor, Biya, as well, and was

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19 Ndjio, “Post-Colonial Histories,” 624.
22 DeLancey, Cameroon: Dependence and Independence, 53.
argued against as a rationale for Biya's rule. One journalist at the time, Sam-Nuvala Fonkem notes that only under Biya did a “willingness to delegate power” arise in the Public Service Ministry. Many scholars only focus on Cameroonian persecution of homosexuality in the twenty first century, as such persecutions have only increased in number. However, the political gridlock caused by the focusing of power in one person was particularly present during Ahidjo's administration and might be a significant reason that anti-homosexuality statutes were seldom applied during the period.

Interestingly, though, Marc Epprecht points out that Ahidjo may have had underlying political calculations for his decision to introduce anti-sodomy language into the penal code in 1972 via executive order, given that rampant rumors alleged that Ahidjo enjoyed having anal sex with a former French colonial official. This official, Dr. Louis-Paul Ajuolat, officially an administrator for Equatorial French Africa was subject to, as Epprecht's colleague S.N. Nyck puts it, speculation about his sexuality throughout his political career. This knowledge was commonplace in Cameroon, but was not brought significantly into political debate until 2006, when, as Nyck notes, the widespread publication of a list of assumed homosexuals in the republic featured Ajuolat and Ahidjo principally. The implementation of these statutes without any illusion of democratic process, to the extent that such illusions existed in 1970s Cameroon, indicate that motivations for criminalization were primarily motivated by the personal politics of Ahidjo.

Ahidjo's personal reasons for implementing the criminalization of homosexuality bolster the argument that he acted as a Weberian charismatic authority during his tenure, though his popularity as a historical figure has waned posthumously under Biya. As Weber notes, “the charismatic hero does not deduce his authority from codes and statutes, as is the case with the jurisdiction of office; nor does he deduce his authority from traditional custom.” Uses of state violence against queer people have been derived from a statute; however, article 347-1 was implemented via executive order and illustrates the power that Ahidjo had during his rule to introduce new legal language into the penal code at will. Underlying all of this is a divine mission, another integral component of Weberian thought on political authority. Unlike his predecessors in Europe, Ahidjo's mission (at least rhetorically) was based on the protection of the masculinity of the African man. Such rhetoric creates a them versus us narrative that particularly illustrates Ahidjo's former ability to unilaterally change policy at will. From the centralization of the young Cameroonian state to the implementation of queer politics, the personality and individual political agenda of Ahidjo were easily merged into the national political dialectic. Because of this, Ahidjo qualifies quite explicitly as an outright charismatic authority. The fact, too, that such identical unilateral language has remained in the Cameroonian penal code long after Ahidjo resigned from power signifies the strength with which Ahidjo's cultural image has endured attempts to smear it.

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26 S.N. Nyck, “Mobilizing Against the Invisible,” 165.
Regression in Queer Politics under Biya

Today, anti-queer sentiment in Cameroon is commonplace from politicians allied with and in opposition to Biya. Following Gabon’s decriminalization of homosexuality in 2020, Cameroonian opposition leader Pierre Mila Assoueté remained in staunch defense of the penal code’s condemnation. This exists despite remarkable achievement of queer people and allies on the ground. The first French speaking black woman admitted to the Cameroonian bar, Alice Nkom, was made famous by being awarded the 7th Human Rights Award by Amnesty International in 2014 following her 2005 criminal defense of a group of gay men arrested by police during a raid on a bar in Yaoundé. Nkom’s work has become more and more necessary in recent years, as enforcement of anti-queer statutes has only increased. This is quite notable; decades of Biya’s rule passed by without enforcement of such statutes. Only now, when external pressures pose the most antagonism than they ever have towards Cameroon’s view of queer people, has the state drastically ramped up prosecutions and arrests under article 347-1. The most recent iteration of AfroBarometer in 2016 found that 80.4% of Cameroonians would "strongly dislike" having a homosexual as a neighbor. Clearly, homophobia and violence against queer people is not unilaterally attributable to Europe. In fact, President Biya, in recent years has ramped up persecutions of queer people primarily because it is such a popular issue, bolstering support for his personality driven politics. Foucault argues that to fully understand subversive sexualities, as he calls them, one must minimize the role of “the quantity of repression” in contrast to the “form of power that was exercised.” Coverage of queer rights in Cameroon has solely focused on the human cost, which although important, emphasizes the persecution of queer people as an inevitable feature of society. However, change by one man, Paul Biya, could literally reverse the entire trajectory of legal persecution of queer people in Cameroon. This is primarily because, much like Ahidjo early in his rule, Biya enjoys complete control over the Cameroonian political system. Though testimonies from journalists like Fonkem (as previously mentioned) have illustrated a rhetorical willingness by President Biya to delegate power, in practice, and especially on queer issues, Biya has ultimate authority. Pitcher, Moran, and Johnston identify the simplification of political authority as commonplace in the study of Africa writ large:

The reliance by leaders such as Houphouet-Boigny or Paul Biya of Cameroon on particular historical moments or potent symbols to justify their authority was selective, varying in accordance with their perceptions of threats to their authority. Over time, each leader oversimplified "traditional" relationships between chiefs and subjects to rationalize his own behavior. At different moments during his rule, each privileged the importance of particular customs or rituals, and their symbolic meanings, over others. Thus a newly installed leader, unsure of his political base, might reference a feared animal to induce compliance. Another leader, as his rule continued, might portray himself as the "father of the nation" who would nourish and protect his subjects if they offered him respect in return. Yet another, after

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30 AfroBarometer Data, [Cameroon], [Round 6], [2016], available at afrobarometer.org.
many years, might resort to "ancestral policy" to resist external pressures to seek legitimacy through the ballot box."

It is easy to halfheartedly apply notions of patrimonialism and neopatrimonialism to the actions of African leaders, in part because such analysis is so popular. However, labeling all of Cameroon’s political developments as the result of neopatrimonial systems neglects a key theory of the devolution of power presented in Weber’s *The Sociology of Charismatic Authority*. Though Biya emphasizes the role of patrimonial social structures in the implementation of his policy, he is nonetheless driven by notions of charismatic authority in the development of a vast number of areas of social policy. Just as Pitcher, Moran, and Johnston identify, applications of patrimonial authority by Biya are highly selective.

Though legal statutes exist, it is important to note that upon indictment, very little due process is given to those accused of homosexual acts. As American journalist Robbie Corey Boulet notes in a book on the 2005 police raids on gay bars in Cameroon, “During their first court appearance, several days after the raid, these officials made clear to the eleven men who remained in custody that they were already guilty in the eyes of the law.” The explicitness with which the Cameroonian state engages in during the prosecution of these men marks a shift in national attitudes toward queer people: prejudices left unsaid were now in the realm of public debate. It came as no surprise when *La Matin* and *L’Anvol*, two Cameroonian tabloids, released the names of more than fifty suspected homosexuals less than a year later to much international fanfare, labeled a “witchhunt” in *The Guardian*. The dynamic in which this shift occurs, whereby action by the state facilitates a domino effect of the actions of the press and people and so on, illustrates the large extent to which the state has an influence on the expression of public opinion in Cameroon. Though influenced by a momentary political surge in the public forum of debate on queer issues, the outing (or attempted outing) of more than thirty former and current public officials represents an institutional knowledge about that existed throughout both the Ahmadjo and Biya presidencies.

No person has more control over the actions of the state than Paul Biya. These legal prosecutions and subsequent media frenzy cannot happen without Biya’s explicit approval. Again, though this paper remains cautious of over simplifying the complex politics of the region by invoking the image of a dictator haphazardly, in recent years, Biya’s control over other areas of national policy indicate that the state centralization that Ahmadjo had once dreamed of has been realized. In fact, Dutch scholars Harrijvan and Weerdesteijn identify Paul Biya’s economic policy as an integral tool in the repression of dissent, illustrating just one of the many complex factors that give Biya control over public opinion in Cameroon. Quantitative data too illustrates the complete

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power grip that Biya has over Cameroonian politics. The following graph, obtained using the World Bank’s GovData360 tool, illustrates the measure of “institutionalized autocracy” from 1960 to 2018. Cameroon’s score on institutional autocracy, measured 1 to 8, has remained constant since 1992. This year, notably, was the last year that President Biya faced an election with a meaningful opposition candidate. Since 1992, Paul Biya’s government has enjoyed the same level of institutional autocracy despite regional trends. Thus, it is appropriate to emphasize Biya’s role on queer politics in the nation at large.

Conclusion: Imagining Reform

One of the only ways to achieve change on queer policy in Cameroon is to change the mind of Paul Biya, or more likely his successor. Paul Biya is 88 years old and he cannot rule forever. Marc Upprecht emphasizes that “the African state will be essential to challenging cultural attitudes and facilitating the achievement of sexual rights and gender justice.” This is especially true in Cameroon, where one man has become the embodiment of the federal state. The state has many roles to play in the economic and social transformations occurring in Africa today; only the state can outlast the backlash from repealing popular policy in the interest of human rights. This is the hidden advantage of Biya’s centralization of power over social policy in the executive. If either the international community or domestic activists like Alice Nkom can cogently convince the inheritor of this highly centralized executive to change positions on queer issues, state persecution of queer people in Cameroon can reasonably improve. Fundamentally, though, the extent to which such change can be achieved depends greatly on the charismatic authority of the next Cameroonian president, given how central the role of charisma has played during the young state’s first two presidencies.

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37 Marc Upprecht, Sexuality and Social Justice, 109.
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