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MAKING ETHNIC ELITES: RITUAL POETICS IN A CAMEROONIAN LYCÉE

Clare A. Ignatowski

> Africans . . . are not so much faced with the dilemma of letting go of tradition as much as letting tradition go its own course. [Hecht and Simone 1994: 133]

Classic studies of youth culture (e.g. Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979; Willis 1977), as well as more recent contributions (Fuglesang 1994; Liechty 1995; Schade-Poulson 1995; McRobbie 2000; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000), have focused on the potential for resistance, rebellion, and social critique in the new cultural forms produced and consumed by young people. Although the cultural forms themselves may have older roots—for example, hip hop music has clear antecedents in African American and African poetic forms (Perkins 1996)—youth culture is usually characterised by its innovativeness, modernity, and high-tech veneer. In short, youth are thought to contribute to the future-leaning trajectory of culture (Urban 2001), both in the United States and abroad. By taking Western popular culture as its ground, this formulation makes it more difficult to appreciate forms of cultural innovation by youth that do not look forward, but rather build upon tradition—those forms that capitalise on idioms representing the past.

In rural northern Cameroon I rarely observed young people creating their own separate, salient 'youth culture' in the sense that that term has been used in British and American cultural studies (Lave *et al.* 1992). Instead, I found in the context of the lycée where I conducted research that young people had turned to the cultural resources of their ethnic communities, cultural forms associated with older, privileged males. Students had imported rituals associated with ancestral dance and poetics into the school setting. For these Tupuri-speaking students of Cameroon's Far North Province, the ritual complex from which they borrowed was called the *gurna*, a dance association practised by men and unmarried women in village contexts. The *gurna* involved seasonal bush camps, performances at death celebrations, and a vibrant song tradition. Tupuri lycée students brought a version of the *gurna* society into their school as an extra-curricular club called the Gurna Club. This article seeks to interpret the appearance of this club in the lycée as a youth cultural production with significance for the youth themselves, their

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adult interlopers, and the ethnic politics of the wider Cameroonian society. Drawing on Mahmood Mamdani's vision (1996) of African society as characterised by bifurcated, mutually reinforcing civic and customary levels, I seek to understand how, for Tupuri young people, 'self-fashioned' membership in a local communitarian association complemented their aspirations and responsibilities as educated citizens in the modern state.

Tupuri-speaking people, whose homeland straddles the Cameroonian–Chadian border, number approximately 300,000–400,000. Although in recent years Tupuri have migrated to cities and areas of agricultural resettlement, Tupuriland is primarily composed of dispersed villages in the Mayo Danay department (Cameroon) and the Mayo Kebbi department (Chad). Livelihood in the region is primarily subsistence agriculture, with cotton as a cash crop, and mixed animal husbandry. There is limited civil service employment in the small town of Doukoula, the *sous-préfecture* of the Mayo Danay department, where the current study was conducted from 1996 to 1999. The rural area around Doukoula is densely populated and almost homogenously Tupuri. Within Doukoula and at the Lycée de Doukoula, Tupuri are still the majority, although there are sizeable numbers of Fulɓe and small numbers from other regions in Cameroon.

Methodologically, this study is neither a school ethnography, nor a network analysis of elite Tupuri; rather, it is an ethnography of communal forms of association and socialisation and how these are recreated in schools or are pre-empted by formal education. In the past, the *gurna* was the primary site for the moral and sexual socialisation of youth, as well as a cultural–political arena in which conflicts and competition were staged between both individuals and villages. Today, Tupuri farmers still establish *gurna* camps in nearly every village; however, with the onset of mass schooling, urbanisation, and Christian evangelism, the ranks of the *gurna* have thinned. Nonetheless, the story of the *gurna* is *not* one of gradual extinction; urban migrants, university students, and *lycéens* have re-created versions of the *gurna* in urban and institutional settings to mediate new social relations and challenges they encounter. In addition to Gurna Clubs in lycées, teacher training colleges, and the major branches of the state university system, these modern forms of *gurna* took the form of cultural associations, self-help societies, and dance troupes, organised collectively by Tupuri émigrés.

Categorised as a branch of the Theatre Club, the Gurna Club at the Lycée de Doukoula was neither purely created by youth, nor was it imposed by the school as a kind of multicultural project desired by the administration. Rather, the Gurna Club was situated between school officialdom and subterranean youth culture. Tupuri students ran the Gurna Club autonomously, and the school recognised it as an extra-curricular club, to which a faculty advisor was assigned and small budget was allocated. Such cultural clubs created by Tupuri students are not new; they appeared in lycées and training centres during the 1970s and 1980s throughout northern Cameroon, wherever there was a critical mass of Tupuri students. What is unclear is why students,

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attending the lycée where a French-based assimilationist model of modern education[1] predominated, chose to introduce performances of their ethnic customs into this domain. This article seeks to understand the complex of motivations and intentions behind the Gurna Club, as well as the broader effects such youth cultural productions have on problems of citizenship, socialisation, and identity in Cameroon.

Within literature on the politics of ethnicity in Africa, analysts have reformulated classic Africanist interest in urban–rural interaction. They speak of a more flexible 'politics of belonging' in the ethnically charged terrain of African politics after the early-1990s democracy movements (Ferguson 1999; Geschiere and Gugler 1998). Building on Bayart's influential formulation (1993: 55) of ethnic politics in the state as inevitably tied up with accumulation of wealth and power, much recent scholarship on Cameroon has focused on increasingly corrosive ethnic sectarianism. After the initiation of regional multiparty politics in Cameroon in the early 1990s, idioms and symbols of local power were mobilised by both the people and politicians who sought to represent them in the capital. 'Ethnicised elite associations' (Nyamnjoh and Rowlands 1998), funeral events (Eyoh 1998), and self-help groups are a few of the domains where elite networks are activated and maintained along ethnic lines. In this article, I suggest that educational settings, including lycées, have also proved to be sites where young Cameroonians draw on local sensibilities and put crafted representations of ethnicity to new tasks.

From the point of view of the Cameroonian state, public expressions of ethnic identity such as the Gurna Club were understood as nostalgic or 'folkloric', and therefore 'safe', as long as they did not veer toward upsurges of ethnically based insurgency that often attract disenfranchised youth in Africa. From the point of view of members of the village-based *gurna* society (upon which the lycée-based Gurna Club was modelled), the student club was outside their horizon of interest, nested as it was in the school institution. But, from the point of view of the lycée students themselves, the Club became a resource through which they could mark their ethnic identity in the institutional context of the lycée. They were able to launch veiled critiques of the failures of government and the educational system, within the elliptical rhetoric of Gurna Club song. And the Club became an avenue for students to

[1] Secondary education in the francophone region of Cameroon continues to be strongly marked by the French colonial model of education whose purpose was to generate small numbers of civil servants for government administration. (Technically, Cameroon was not colonised by France and Britain, but rather was administered by them under the League of Nations and then United Nations Mandate after Germany lost its colonies, including Cameroon, after the First World War.) Then as well as today, Cameroonian students are socialised as modern citizens through mandatory use of French and English in school, rather than their mother tongues (of which there are some 275 in the nation). The education system in Cameroon follows the French lycée model, including a national curriculum and examination regime.

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revalorise their injured ethnic identity as Tupuris in the face of teachers from the more educated, wealthier South.[2]

Interpretation of power as either hegemonic or resistant has limited ability to explain how Tupuri youth position themselves as persons and players in the nation-state. The youth whom I knew neither saw themselves as pawns of the state nor as warriors against it. Rather, as Deborah Durham suggests in her article (2002) on citizenship and the 'intercalary subject' in Botswana, metaphors of 'linkage' and movement toward poetic holism may go further in accounting for these tradition-based youth productions. That is, by inserting the communal poetics of the *gurna* into the lycée, Tupuri youth were yoking multiple facets of their identity, 'outing' their potential to be *gurna* from its submerged position beneath their civic obligations as lycée students. Or, one might think of this dynamic as a process of making visible these youths' inchoate potential to be *gurna*, a possibility ostensibly foreclosed by their roles as students. Furthermore, if analysts of Cameroon are correct in asserting an increasing trend toward the use of idioms of parochialism (such as ethnically based elite associations) as strategies for garnering *national* power and recognition, then one might wonder if the Tupuri Gurna Club is another such manifestation, albeit embryonic or inchoate. This paper will explore each of these interpretive avenues, without assuming that one necessarily pre-empts the other.

To this end, I analyse four years of Gurna Club songs translated and explicated from the Tupuri to French by the late *gurna*-song composer, Dangmowore. These songs span 1995–99 when Dangmo was a *lycéen* in his early twenties. My earlier analyses of *gurna* song produced in villages (Ignatowski 2001) allow me to draw conclusions about continuities and ruptures in *gurna* practice in the lycée setting. I also draw upon observations of Gurna Club performances on National Youth Day, interviews with student leaders and faculty, and interviews with elder women and men concerning pre-colonial means of socialisation in Tupuri society that modern schooling had all but replaced. But, first, in order to put interpretation of the Gurna Club into a wider analytic perspective, I compare this case to other ethnographic examinations of youth culture. Issues of past and present, cultural continuity and rupture are foregrounded into which I weave comparison of other youth cultural forms to the *gurna* society and Gurna Club.

[2] In brief, the complex ethnic landscape of Cameroon can be viewed as a series of dynamic tensions: between the francophone and anglophone regions, and between the Beti/Bulu bloc (from which the current president hails) and the Bamileke/Bassa bloc which challenged the legitimacy of the national government from the 1950s to 1970s. The Muslim north versus Christian south antagonism, common across Sudanese Africa, is more complicated in Cameroon where the majority of the north is in fact comprised of non-Fulɓe animist and Christian ethnic groups. The Tupuri who are the focus of this paper are among the latter.

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POWER TO REMAKE SOCIETY: YOUTH PERFORMANCE IN AFRICA AND ELSEWHERE

Analysts of the cultural practices of youth in Africa and beyond have explored the multiple ways that 'youth' as a social category can be constructed, and how 'youth' have acted as agents of socio-cultural change—including in the collective reworking of social identities—in their communities and nations (Bucholtz 2002; Durham 2000). My interest here is how images of the future and of the past appear and reappear in youth cultural productions, as young people assert positions of power for their generation(s). However, as some analysts point out, claims for 'the new' are often seen to have deep continuities with earlier communal forms and symbols, while claims for continuity with the past may mask quite different formulations of earlier forms. For the Tupuri Gurna Club, the appearance of continuity with the ancestors was 'on the surface' and valued by the youth, in spite of constraints in the way that *lycéens* could perform the *gurna* dance—that is, only on the National Youth Day stage.

Describing youth 'Culture Clubs' in Guinea Bissau, Eric Gable (2000) shows that post-colonial clubs have prototypical antecedents in colonial/missionary/state 'youth associations', as well as now-obsolete indigenous institutions of socialisation (called 'youth dormitories'). Gable makes the point that the image of wild, revolutionary youth—the 'forces of modernity'—overcoming the stagnant, authoritarian gerontocracy of the village elders is a kind of Africanist nostalgia (*op. cit.*: 201). Rather the dynamic power of the youth to make and re-make society was present in the very traditions that the Culture Club was supposedly overturning. Capacity for dynamic intergenerational change was embedded in the tradition. By contrast, the Tupuri Gurna Club was not openly antagonistic toward the elders because the *gurna*, even on the village level, fully occupied the category of 'youth'. Although called *were-jõore* (lit. 'youth-dancers'), *gurna* members could be literally of *any* age, as long as they had the 'strength to dance', a youthful vitality that was highly valued. Instead of trying to overturn the elders, the Gurna Club in the lycée made use of the older forms of socialisation represented by the *gurna* in order to assert the continuing value of Tupuri identity.

In the North West Province of Cameroon, far to the south of Tupuriland, Nicholas Argenti (1998, 2001) examines dance performances by youth in Oku. In one case, he shows that the modernist aesthetic of dancers (tracksuits and military gear) belies a strong continuity with earlier masquerade forms in which symbols of 'wild foreign' power (bush animals, European military might, and later Cameroonian gendarmes) are appropriated and transformed in the context of dance. He finds continuity in the role of insurgent youth in checking hegemonic power in the context of their own dance and masquerade spaces. Similarly, I see the Gurna Club not as an aberrant or even new social category of youthful resistance, but as one whose social legitimacy has pre-colonial roots.

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In Bolivia, Aurolyn Luykx (1996) describes student performances in which earnest presentations of indigenous Aymara dance alternated with dances favored by urban youth satirising middle-class and upper-class pretentiousness (arising from their purported 'over-education'). She points out that the biting wit of the youths' parody is rooted not only in pre-colonial performance forms, but is born also from Indian youths' experience of institutional racism, or as she puts it: 'the disruptive interface where indigenous culture meets the dominant institutions of Bolivian society' (*op. cit.*: 256). While this interpretation of youth performance as a form of resistance to marginalised class/ethnic identities may also hold for the Tupuri Gurna Club, it is not isomorphic because in the rural milieu of northern Cameroon, *lycéens* are considered, and consider themselves to be proto-elite—that is, elites-in-the-making. While Tupuri students pore over their notebooks, with hopes of becoming salaried civil servants in the city, their parents labour with hand hoes on small family farms of cotton, sorghum, and peanuts. Part of the ambiguity of educated youth in Cameroon is that, on the national level, *lycéens* are marginalised and undervalued while, on the village level, they are respected as *petits fonctionnaires* ('junior civil servants').

Also writing of youth's desire to reconstruct their inherited ethnic identities, Stephanie Marlin-Curiel (2001) discusses the rehabilitation of white Afrikaner identity in the context of raves in South Africa. Youthful organisers of the rave, with its 'mind-bending techno dance music' and 'hippie aesthetic', wanted to 'propel a new movement redefining Afrikaner identity in the wake of apartheid's demise' (*op. cit.*: 150). 'Campy' icons of Afrikanerness were projected over the dancers in such a way that encouraged youth to deconstruct and unseat shame they felt about their heritage as oppressors and to weave a new, non-racist pride in their identity as Afrikaners. The rave offered a public, carnivalesque arena for collective reworking of historical memory. Although the Gurna Club did not make use of global youth culture technologies (e.g. raves, hardcore music, etc.), the insertion of *gurna* practices, albeit modified, into the school context created a kind of provocation that forced both youth and adults to reconsider the value of Tupuri identity in the post-colonial state.

While some analysts emphasise the agency of youth in 'negotiating cultural identities in a variety of contexts' (e.g. Bucholtz 2002: 544) and suggest that anthropologists should be concerned with 'the blending of traditional cultural forms into new youth-based styles and practices' (*ibid.*), I suggest that our research agenda is larger. It seems that problems related to the continuity and disruption of older forms are less about new hybridities as such, as about struggles to rework critical social relations in contemporary settings. Youth are engaged in the social production of collective memory and the revalorisation of ethnic identity, as they try to change the world they fear to inherit. Where their performances and activities are public, young people are not merely 'negotiating identities', but attempting to produce new spaces where new kinds of people and value systems can thrive. I suggest that the Tupuri youth I knew were asserting the possibility of an 'ethnic elite'

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in counter-distinction to the national civil servant whose loyalty to the state made him uniquely vulnerable to the state.

PERFORMING YOUTH DAY

Although modelled on the *gurna* society popular in Tupuri villages, the Gurna Club at the Lycée de Doukoula operated apart from this community network and inserted itself into the interstices of the lycée academic programme. Unlike the village *gurna* members who would luxuriate in their camps outside the village with their lactating cows tethered nearby, the *lycéen-gurna* had neither camp, nor cows. They commandeered an empty classroom for their meetings, and laughed that they should buy Nido (powdered milk) from the market to substitute for the ritual milk-drinking, that was the *gurna*'s hallmark. The village *gurna* societies were called by local families who sought to celebrate a death, to memorialise the life of a family member in the eyes of extended kin and the community at large. The *gurna* were called to dance at widely attended death celebrations, sometimes as frequent as each weekend during the dry season. In contrast, the sole opportunity the lycée Gurna Club had to dance was on Youth Day as part of the soirée organised by students to showcase their talents to the community. As I will discuss later, students found it difficult to participate in both the worlds of the village *gurna* and of the lycée.

Regardless of these constraints, the Gurna Club was internally organised like the village *gurna*, with a chief (*waŋ-gurna*) and other leadership positions, including a chief of girls (*waŋ-mayre*), whose duty it was to chaperone the girls home from the dance and to act as a gatekeeper for potential suitors seeking access to them. Unlike in the village *gurna*, the *waŋ-mayre* was, at the lycée, a female student. Like the village *gurna* societies where men collectively establish *gurna* camps (*jak-kaw*) without sponsorship by any chiefly or priestly authority, it was the students themselves who created the Gurna Club in the lycée. Recognising it as an extra-curricular club, the lycée budgeted a meagre 1,500 CFA francs (US$ 3.00) which Club leaders used to perform the necessary preliminary ritual sacrifices.[3]

The lycée Gurna Club was most visible to outsiders when members performed at the soirée organised by students on the evening of National Youth Day (11 February). After a day of parading by school students and political parties in front of dignitaries seated under the umbrage of the town hall dais,[4] the lycée students presented a 'variety show' in

[3] In the village *gurna*, when the season camp was first established, the *gurna* chief (*waŋ-gurna*) conducted a sacrifice of a chick and planted a protective fetish (*jak-jin*) to guard the camp against misfortune. In 1999, Dangmowore, the lycée Gurna Club composer, said that he conducted the sacrifice of a chicken at his family compound in Zouaye to ensure an auspicious composition.

[4] These state-sponsored rituals are common in sub-Saharan Africa. Sharp (2002: 58–62) provides a vivid description of marching school children in Madagascar.

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the evening. This open-air show was attended by school administrators, teachers, town dignitaries, and as many children and townsfolk who could fit around the small raised stage mounted in front of the town hall. The show consisted of twenty-eight short presentations, dizzying in their diversity: comedy routines, *makossa*,[5] *soucous*, rap dance numbers, and skits. The fourteenth presentation was the Gurna Club.

The Gurna Club members—mostly young men, though also two girls—crowded onto the stage along with their drummer. Wearing the usual *gurna* costume of white shorts with torso decorations, the dancers tapped out the low throbbing drum beat with their shuffling dance steps. Some made further reference to tradition by donning a red leather *faage* (animal skin) over their shorts. Even though this garish dyed leather obtained from Fulɓe leather-workers was not the same goatskin *faage* that the Tupuri fathers wore before the adoption of cloth clothing in the 1970s, the nod to the ancestral past was clear. The dancers had painted their torsos and festooned their lithe chests with the fibre body decoration of the *gurna*. They were not without the prime dance implement, the *garaw*, the customary war weapon of the Tupuri (a long wooden stick, slightly heavier at the top), for sway.

The rectangular stage for the Youth Day soirée did not permit the dance to be presented as it would have been at village death celebrations. There, hundreds of dancers would spread out over an expansive plain (*laale*), creating a massive counterclockwise circle of dancers arranged in multiple single-file lines. At death celebrations, the dance would last for hours, with powerful drummers beating out the rhythm that undergirded the song chanted in unison by the dancers. In contrast, for the Gurna Club, the dance was reduced to a sway back and forth, dancers' backs to the audience, facing the drummer in the centre. In muffled bass tones, the customary manner of chanting the *gurna*, they intoned that years's Gurna Club song.

What were the motivations and intentions of students in presenting the *gurna* dance on National Youth Day? In 1998, I turned to the Gurna Club president, Horlina, to answer this question. When I first met him, I was surprised that the spindly young man before me with the wandering eye was in fact 'Machine de Guerre'. (*Lycéen-gurna* took on jaunty sobriquets just as the village *gurna* did.) He reported to me that 150 students in the lycée were members—probably a typical *gurna* hyperbole, reminiscent of the frequent claim that the dance is so seductive that 'no one will stay at home'. Consistent again with the village *gurna*, many more young men participated than young women. Horlina reported earnestly to me that the purpose of the Gurna Club was 'to preserve our tradition, our culture'. And, in an interesting twist of Christian discourse which usually was antagonistic toward so-called 'pagan dance', Horlina added: 'God is helping youth, so it is up to them to dance. Young Tupuri are destined to dance—that is normal.' His

[5] Contemporary pop music drawing on traditional rhythms of the Douala people in southern Cameroon.

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view of the Gurna Club reflected a widely held belief in Tupuriland that to be young was to dance, and to dance was to be young. A contribution that young people brought to society was an expression of their vitality and energy through dance. It was through dance—learning the proper steps, rhythm, coordination with the group, song chant—that Tupuri people were socialised as moral beings. (For other discussion of the socialising role of dance, see Binet 1974.) For many Tupuri youth it was self-evident that the school, the now-dominant site for youth socialisation, must include dance, even if it must occur at the margins.

The students' argument for their Gurna Club was one of cultural continuity; they felt responsible for maintaining the thread of the tradition, even if they found themselves in entirely different life narratives and contexts from their fathers who were farmers. In addition, the insertion of the *gurna* dance into the lycée context had a mnemonic role: the appearance of the *gurna* reminded the community that the school was not the only mode of moral socialisation—that the *gurna* society still provided the bedrock identity of the Tupuri person. Third, although the students did not explicitly articulate this, the performance of the Gurna Club on Youth Day was for a multi-ethnic audience, one composed of teachers and administrators from many regions of Cameroon—not the communal 'insider' audience of the village death celebrations. (In the 1999–2000 academic year, eight full-time teachers at the lycée were southern Cameroonians and thirteen were northerners, of which ten were Tupuri.) When Tupuri students performed their *gurna* for such an ethnically mixed audience, they sought to revalorise and re-signify their identity as northerners.

Caught up much earlier in European colonial education, administration, trade, and hegemonic value systems, southern Cameroonians tended to view northerners as 'primitive' or 'backward'. In some ways, the Gurna Club reaffirmed this view of northerners as more 'traditional' than southerners; however, the show of strength that characterised *gurna* dance emphasised the power of this cultural heritage. When I queried teachers from the south about the *gurna* dance they had witnessed, they told me that the *gurna* was an expression of the 'warrior' tradition of the Tupuri, and the song accompanying the dance involved 'praise of the ancestors'. While this description was only true in a loose sense,[6] the overall impression stood: that the Tupuri were powerful as an ethnic entity and that their power was indexed by the *gurna*. By presenting their version of the *gurna* dance, the Doukoula *lycéens* were asserting their strength as a people in realms *outside* of formal education, the French language, and national citizenship, areas in which southerners maintained a hegemonic edge over the north. At least to some degree, southern teachers received and internalised the message of ethnic integrity performed by the *gurna*.

[6] Although dancers carry throwing sticks (a pre-colonial war weapon) as part of their dance costume, the roots of the *gurna* society is in the practice of collective herding of cattle, rather than war. And *gurna* song does not involve praise of ancestors except in the most general way; rather it is filled with highly creative praise and ridicule of peers.

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It was not only in the dance that the *lycéens* asserted themselves as 'ethnic elite'. The *gurna* song that accompanied the dance—both in the village societies and in the lycée Gurna Club—was an arena for social commentary, marking of prestige, and lampooning crimes and misdemeanors. Elsewhere (Ignatowski 2001) I have described how this public sphere of song operated within the micro-cultural politics of villages, but in the next section I describe how students used the poetic repertoire of song to shape a youthful public opinion about the moral dimensions of schooling.

'DOSSIER OF OUR CULTURE': *GURNA* SONG IN THE LYCÉE

Students at the Lycée de Doukoula from 1995 to 1999 had among them a young song composer who hailed from the famed lineage of composers based in the village of Zouaye.[7] Having learned the craft of *gurna* song composition within his family, Dangmowore, adapted it to the lycée context. I worked with Dangmo while he was an upper-level lycée student to translate and explicate four years of his Gurna Club song, a corpus that included one song per academic year.[8] (Both the village *gurna* society and the academic calendar followed the pattern of labour and rest rooted in the agricultural season: October through June.) Tragically, in 1999, while preparing to take the *bac* exam,[9] Dangmo fell ill and returned to his family home where, in 2000, he passed away aged twenty-five.

Dangmo's legacy, his songs, reflect the major rhetorical forms that appear in village *gurna* song: panegyric, satire, social commentary, derision, and insult. However, intended for the single performance of the Gurna Club dance on Youth Day, the lycée song was much shorter than the village song performed at death celebrations. Dangmo's lycée song was innovative in its development of new themes reflecting the subjectivities of his generation and the life conditions of students in the rural Far North, including: the promotion of a bicultural identity for youth (being both *gurna* and *évolué*); fear and shame surrounding the transmission of HIV/AIDS; trenchant criticism of female students and male teachers for their sexual liaisons; and social commentary on Cameroon's national educational policy that shut out economically disadvantaged students. He used praise and censure of his superiors

[7] Zouaye is about a forty-five-minute drive over unpaved roads south of Doukoula.

[8] A methodological note: song texts appearing in this article were transcribed by Dangmowore in Tupuri and then were translated by him into French. Since Dangmo was translating his own words, I have been reluctant to modify it. Through extensive interviews with Dangmo, I obtained explications of the lyrics and from there translated the French into English. Some of the song texts contain metaphors and allusions far more obscure and indirect than those presented here.

[9] In the French lycée system, the '*bac*' (*le baccalauréat*) is the final exam for completion of secondary school, and corresponds to the first year of college in the US education system and GCE 'A' levels in the British education system. Few youth in the Far North of Cameroon arrive at the level of the *baccalauréat*, much less pass the exam.

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(teachers and administrators) as a way to comment on the pervasive problems of corruption and elitism in Cameroonian institutions. As a composer, he forged a youthful subjectivity that reflected both the harsh realities of the seemingly interminable economic crisis and the contrasting richness of Tupuri cultural heritage.

Over time, Dangmo's songs became longer and more complex in their wordplay and metaphor. He described a progression in his thinking, in which he became increasingly embittered by the reduction of education and employment possibilities for northern youth. As he progressed through the lycée, he became increasingly aware that civil service recruitment had been eliminated, corruption had replaced meritocracy, and that high university tuition fees shut out the children of peasant families. These cutbacks occurred under the World Bank/IMF structural adjustment programme beginning in 1988—details of which Dangmo may have only been partially aware of. One way that he responded to this diminished outlook for his future and that of his generation was by calling for a turn to the 'dossier of our culture'.

Repudiation of school in favour of the dance appeared in Dangmo's song, a common theme in village *gurna* song as well. The oppositional relationship between school and the *gurna*, as two diametrically opposed modes of youth socialisation, was grounded in lived experience. As will be discussed later in the article, the introduction of mass schooling drained Tupuri youth from participating in indigenous forms of socialisation and sociability.

Nday lɛ de wãare théorème math ɓay
Pan ɓi po hay jɔŋ théorème ga,
Ndi Dangmo ma Zouaye
Men me jo pãa lay sɔ
Nday décourage wa
Ndi ndal wɛ ndal ge kɔɗɛ.

(L 1995–96: 3)[10]

You bother me with your mathematical theories,
My father never did these theories,
I am Dangmo from Zouaye,
Let me drink my milk now,
Don't get discouraged,
I'm only playing with you.

The second-person pronoun refers to Faare, a friend of Dangmo's, who in addition to promoting his song (as a *courrier*),[11] achieved high

[10] Notation for song discourse: (L [=Lycée de Doukoula] year(s) of composition and performance: verse number).

[11] In the *gurna* world, the *courrier* (a word borrowed from French) is the composer's assistant, promoter and emissary of his song. He helps to gather and verify information in the

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exam scores in mathematics. Dangmo teases him by saying that his (Dangmo's) father—and by extension all of their elders—were never trained in school 'theories'. Rather, Dangmo proffers milk, a symbol of immersion in the *gurna* life-world. In the final lines of the refrain, he breaks his joke and says, 'Don't worry, I'm only kidding; it's important to attend school.' Signficantly, this verse was composed early in his lycée career (in 1995).

Two years later, Dangmo became frustrated that the long-standing practice of taking entrance exams after lycée to gain a salaried civil service tenure was not to be reinstated. In his song, he says that it's not even worth it to apply for the exams:

'A riŋ wɔ ga concours lay na
Ndi da laage mbɛ ga
Ndi ɓalak l'argent ɓiŋ ga,
Duu bɛ kal ga lay.
Wii Theophil Wangbara huu sɛn
Gɔlɔg bɛ nday ɗ'ar nɛ ga na.

(L 1997–98: 3)

They say there will be entrance exams again,
but I don't want to present my application.
I'm not going to waste my money,
The results won't be published,
Ask Theophil Wangbara to insult the state
that it just plays with its ass.

One response that Dangmo developed to his disillusionment with the state is a return to local cultural logics and ways of being. (Later, back in Zouaye, ill, he sought to install himself as a tailor.)

Ƒõo raa mbal-mbal men mo ge Roumgaï
Fɛr wɛ la dossier ma culture na
Nday laad sɛn ga na huu kɔl 'a yeɗ yeɗge lay na.

(L 1997–98: 17)

If the dance is really animated, you can't stay seated, Roumgai,[12]
Return to the dossier of our culture,
You don't want to understand that the civil service has been bought off.

village that will be included in the annual *gurna* song, as well as carries the new song to the *gurna* camps where it will be memorised by the dancers.

[12] *Gurna* song is typically peppered with individual names as panegyric. To the outsider, these names may seem random or obscure, but in discussions with composers, I learned that the inclusion of each name was related to the micropolitics of friendship, itself related to the promotion and popularity of the composer's song.

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The composer exhorts students to 'Return to the dossier of our culture'. He ironically uses a metaphor of the modern bureaucratic state—'dossier'—to impart a parallel importance to the realm which is not bureaucratised as such: customary tradition. If, as he sees it, the avenue of the civil service is closed off due to corruption ('bought off'), then he implores youth to return to their local cultural resources, the *gurna*.

To soften the blow of unemployment, he notes later in the song that even though their class is approaching graduation, it will be the dance that they will turn to, the life path of their ancestors:

Mando Mbraogue dulŋya yaŋ seege na
Mo na mbi salle diplome lay,
Tɛk me diŋ rɔɔ
Hay mbaa nen moo na wɔ mo na 'uwaa na say wãare jõo-day
Pan bi po hay da diplome ga.

(L 1997–98: 21)

Mando Mbraogue, life will pass well,
Know that we are near to getting our diploma,
Continue the dance with me,
In the time of our ancestors, we didn't talk about anything but the dance.
My father had no diploma.

In the face of the uselessness of the lycée diploma during the economic crisis, Dangmo notes that his father didn't go to school, and he had a fine life, because the dance was highly valued.

In his final year of composition in the *terminale* year of lycée, Dangmo takes a bittersweet perspective on the prospects of his generation.

Ndi da' moda ma Ngaoundéré hoo wɛrɛn wɔ
Ndi kɔ Dangmo yoo jar ni kaw pa,
Nday day ge jam sɔ Mando Nenbara
Faculté wii l'argent lay na fen mbɔ je coo gurnan ga yaw la.

(L 1998–99: 14)

I found a bus for Ngaoundéré picking up students.
I saw Dangmo among these there,
Bon voyage to you, Mando and Nenbara,
Because the institution asks for a lot of money, for you, the poor, it's the dance.

Ngaoundéré is the Adamawa provincal capital where the northern branch of the national university is located. Dangmo said that in his mind's eye he sees the bus picking up students bound for the university and he imagines himself among them. But, realising that

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this is impossible, he wishes his friends Mando and Nenbara farewell, and he remains in the village. In the final line he explains that for poor students like himself who cannot possibly afford tuition, there is nothing to return to but 'the dance'. Here, 'the dance' and the *gurna* refer not just to the voluntary association, but to an entire complex of Tupuri indigenous socialisation and social organisation, most saliently encoded in the *gurna* society.

Gurna Club song had numerous functions and messages, of which I have focused here on just one: its role as an arena where *lycéens* could reflect on and critique their social–political positions as students—a proto-educated elite who, nevertheless, had little chance of gainful employment in the formal economy. Perhaps as a result of this disillusionment, through their spokesperson in Dangmowore, the song composer, they promulgated the value of Tupuri culture—here equated with *gurna* dance—as a valid 'fallback' position or safety net, even as they were largely alienated from its village roots. In order to fully understand the power of memory-making in the *lycéens'* performances, it is important to appreciate the actual social practices, including modes of socialisation, to which their nostalgia referred. Their nostalgia was not chimerical, but instead referred to an indigenous educational system that differed radically from contemporary schooling and, as such, produced a different kind of Tupuri women and men from the youth of today.

'HEARTS OF MEN': INDIGENOUS TUPURI EDUCATION

What were the major avenues of indigenous Tupuri education and socialisation[13] that many young Tupuri 'remember' today, even though they may have had little or no personal experience of participation in them? Tupuri young adults who designated themselves as 'modern' ('*les Tupuri d'aujourd'hui*'), were often eager to discuss rituals that they saw as central to Tupuri culture. In 1999, Taiwe Mouhamad identified the *gurna*, youth initiation ritual (*gɔɔni*), and wrestling (*gumu*) to be among the fundamental ways that Tupuri youth were socialised to be courageous, or as he put it, to 'have the hearts of men'. This courage, according to Taiwe, enabled the Tupuri to resist the Fulɓe jihad against the Tupuri during the nineteenth century and later, to participate successfully as enlisted soldiers in the violent suppression of the southern resistance movement (*le maquisard*) in the early days of Cameroon's independence. Beginning in the mid-1950s, the Tupuri (as well as the Moundang and Massa whose lands flank Tupuriland to

[13] I use the term 'indigenous' forms of education to indicate those that Tupuri people have embraced as part of their ethnic heritage, in contradiction to national forms of education (i.e. Western-style schooling). However, Tupuri people did not invent these 'indigenous' forms; rather, the *gurna* and the youth initiation (*gɔɔni*) were borrowed from a neighbouring ethnic group, the Massa. This cultural borrowing (of which the Tupuri make no secret) is encoded in their Massa language nomenclature.

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the east and north respectively) were recruited in great numbers into the government military, and today they remain over-represented in security sector occupations (Schilder 1994: 249). These early recruits were the first wave of Tupuri to become modern elites in the nation-state. However, in spite of the continuing symbolic importance of indigenous Tupuri forms of socialisation, participation in schooling has profoundly altered the Tupuri ritual landscape.

The introduction of mass schooling began relatively late in Tupuri-land with the establishment of the first Catholic mission school in 1952.[14] Over the past decades, Tupuri youth have been increasingly less available to undergo the key indigenous forms of socialisation: the *gurna*, initiation, and wrestling. As MaïDjare, an elder Tupuri woman, put it bluntly: 'With all the youth going to school, school has replaced the dance. For us, the dance *was* our school.' In the pre-colonial era, public dance was an important site for young men and women to display their social and sexual readiness for marriage. This display was of the body: the dancers' vitality and ability to move well, that is, rhythmically and in a coordinated fashion with the other dancers. For men, there were also a variety of dance gestures and 'performances' (such as 'stealing a girl' [*mange may*]) for the display of masculine bravado.

Today, Western-style schooling squarely pre-empts participation in the *gurna*. While students attend classes during the afternoon hours, *gurna* members gather under the shade tree of their camp (*jak-kaw*) to share milk-laced sorghum porridge and relaxed camaraderie. More subtly, students reported a cognitive gap between the affairs and priorities of the school and those of the *gurna*. Students were immersed in the world of studying, grades, and the merciless exam system, while *gurna* members were preoccupied by the quotidian affairs of the village and by the cultural politics of the *gurna* song and dance. Menwa Gabriel, a senior Tupuri man who worked as a cook in the provincial capital, noted: 'For youth who went to school, when they came home they didn't dance the *gurna* very well. They missed steps and were ashamed.' Although school leavers may return to the village and its *gurna* society, most who were still immersed in school found it difficult, if not impossible to join the village *gurna*.

In recent years, the distinction between being a *gurna* member and a student was, in fact, not so clear-cut. Due to the insecurity of educational financing in Cameroon, many students from poor families moved in and out of school. For example, Taiwe experienced a hiatus in his schooling between his completion of lycée and his entrance into a teacher training college. Back in the village, farming cotton to earn money for tuition, he danced the *gurna*, including performance gestures called *ɓɔ'ge fɔgɛ* in which he would taunt the category of students in

[14] In contrast, in southern Cameroon, the first mission school was established along the Atlantic coast at Bimbia (present-day South West Province) by British Baptists in 1844. School enrolment rates in the north continue to lag behind those in the south, particularly for girls.

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a stock anti-school discourse. (The *bɔ'ge fɔgɛ* is an improvised dance gesture of a mock challenge, involving a single or pair of dancers peeling off from the dance group to face the audience with a defiant expression and exclamation.) Of course, in the context of ritual performance, identity and social status are situational, and often involve play, parody, and irony. In this case, it is ironic that while aspiring to higher education, Taiwe performed anti-school taunts during the *gurna* dance.

Distinct from the *gurna*, the Tupuri male youth initiation, the *gɔɔni*, involved the movement of huge numbers of boys over the Cameroon–Chadian border, where they were amassed in a lake basin called Gounagaya, near the spiritual homeland of the Tupuri. This rite of passage occurred every seven years and involved rigorous ordeals, the learning of a secret language (*jak-gɔɔni*), training in moral codes and etiquette appropriate to male adults, and ritual separation of the youth from the community followed by social reincorporation. Details of the *gɔɔni* are kept secret, except among the participating men who were organised as named age sets in a solidarity that they carried to their graves. Uninitiated males, disdainfully called *lugud*, were kept away from sacred funerary rituals of initiated men.

In 1975, the Tupuri initiation was banned by government under the Fulɓe President Ahmadou Ahidjo, putatively for fear that the fanaticism of the Chadian *authenticité* movement would seep into Cameroon. Nonetheless, today's Tupuri students had other explanations for the banning of initiation. Taiwe blamed the power of initiation to erase youth's knowledge from their minds. His explanation took the priority and constancy of school knowledge as its base:

> People thought initiation didn't go with school because once you went to initiation, you came back and you had forgotten everything—even the Tupuri language. You learn the *gɔɔni* [initiation] language and it erases everything. You must relearn the Tupuri language...
>
> When you return from initiation ... you don't think like a person, but like an animal. You're aggressive, you get angry easily, you strike people at the slightest provocation. You have no contact, after initiation, with women, not even your mother or sisters. You only 'see' men...
>
> For some [initiates], they go back two or three years [lose two or three school grade levels], after finishing initiation. You spend one year in the bush, and on your return, during the second year, you relearn the Tupuri language. If you are not intelligent, it might take two years to learn Tupuri, so you would have lost three years. For this reason, many people just leave school all together.

Taiwe understood the abandonment of Tupuri initiation in terms of its interference with the cognitive and linguistic development necessary for schooling. He admitted that even though it was not their fault that they were uninitiated, the youth of today 'have hearts of women'—were not courageous like Tupuri of the past. Although the stigma of the *lugud* ('uninitiated') has diminished, some youth still awaited the day when the elites would decide to reinstate the *gɔɔni*.

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The third arena of indigenous Tupuri socialisation, wrestling (*gumu*) was a major way that young males publicly displayed their power. Wrestling was included alongside the dance during the *gurna* funeral celebration dances. After completing their *nage-may*—an adolescent male's ritual 'first' sexual experience with a woman—a young man was challenged to a wrestling match by the members of his *gurna* camp. At dawn after having completed his 'night with a girl', drums would be beaten to alert the entire village and the young man would exhibit his power—or in some versions of the narrative, his fatigue after the 'work' of the night—in a playful wrestling match with his peers. Today, although it is still possible to see some wrestling matches, school-sponsored soccer has overwhelming replaced wrestling as the primary site for male socialisation and public display of prowess.

Although the ranks of the *gurna* had thinned, youth initiation had been banned for three decades, and wrestling has diminished, male Tupuri youth still located the core of Tupuri socialisation, and thus manhood, in these cultural practices. Even though lycée students have not had the chance to experience these rites of passage—or maybe *because* they haven't—they expressed a sense of loss. One young adult saw 'the lack of tradition' as the root cause of youth turning to alcohol: 'The lack of wrestling or the *gurna* leaves a lack of structure for youth, a vacuum, so they begin to drink. People become free, they are no longer tied to tradition, they no longer respect tradition.' Though tempering his nostalgia for past forms, he conceded that some practices associated with the *gurna* were considered uncivilised ('*barbares*'), i.e. to dance 'naked',[15] to smear clay on the fattened body, or to discipline harshly the girls who came out to join the *gurna* before marriage:

> Some people [especially girls] don't like the restrictions: that they can't talk to non-*gurna*, that you are forced sometimes in the camp to drink beyond your capacity. You can be whipped until you drink the entire calabash of porridge.

Even though contemporary youth appeared to be caught up with the tasks and priorities of now-global forms of schooling (coursework, studying, aspirations for higher education, etc.), that did not mean that older forms of socialisation, prestige, and the marking of cultural identity had disappeared from youth subjectivity. On the contrary, as the dream of modern educated citizenship became less and less attainable in the era of structural adjustment and educational compression, the more enticing, older forms of order and well-being appeared. By performing the *gurna* in the school context as the Gurna Club, youth chose to evoke modes of being and becoming Tupuri that the lycée with its national curriculum and procedures could not reproduce. The insertion or juxtaposition of such a communal form into the school domain

[15] Tupuri people understood dance as to be properly performed 'naked', that is, in the 'ways of the ancestors'. Nonetheless, 'naked' in the late 1990s meant, for men, white shorts and body decorations, and for women, a short loin cloth and black brassiere.

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appears, to me, to be not a repudiation of formal education as much as an attempt to bring wholeness to it by remembering the substratum of ancestral modes of sociability.

CONCLUSION: LOCATING CONTINUITIES AND RUPTURES IN CULTURAL PRACTICE

> Culture as custom simply orders everyday life; culture as imperial heritage makes possible a politically powerful present and future. [Ebron 2002]

To assess the effects and potential of the Gurna Club requires that we move beyond a definition of culture as an organising matrix in daily life to one of a self-consciously constructed heritage with, as Ebron puts it, the power to shape political realities, present and future. My approach has been to try to distill out what is unique or original about the Gurna Club for Tupuri history. Where do points of rupture and continuity with the past lie for the Gurna Club?

In what might be surprising to those who focus on youth culture as 'the shock of the new', the Gurna Club was neither original for the reason that it was controlled by youth, nor because it contained satire and social commentary. Both aspects had clear precedents in the village-level *gurna* institution. The social meaning of the *gurna*, regardless of the age of the members, was of a gathering of 'youth': men and women who meet in a retreat-like setting to replenish their bodies, and later to display their vitality in the public dance arena. In addition to this social meaning of 'youth', the *gurna* structurally allowed for the participation and training of children. The *gurna-fiiri* ('*gurna* of the goat') was comprised of six- to twelve-year-old boys, who composed their own songs and danced in their own ring at the village death celebrations, adjacent to the adult *gurna* society, the *gurna-day* ('*gurna* of the cow').[16] Parents encouraged youth in their *gurna-fiiri* activities, but left it to the youth to organise them. Similarly, the Gurna Club in the lycée is not unique for its control by the students themselves; equalitarian autonomy was already a core value of the *gurna*.

Second, the satire and critique of the education system contained in Gurna Club songs was not a product of critical consciousness arising from the cognitive development of schooling, nor of modernist sensibilities of the young and educated. Rather, *gurna* song has long been a public discourse in which poetic licence was granted the composer to air grievances against corrupt chiefs and 'foolish' members of the village, no matter how powerful. This political commentary was threatening enough that during the 1960s the renowned *gurna* composer Dang

[16] The cow is the basis for the adult *gurna*. Each *gurna* was required to bring a lactating cow to the camp whose milk would be shared by the members in order to fatten their bodies for the dance. The goat was the diminutive counterpart of the cow and thus symbolised the children's *gurna*—though the children did *not* gather with goats.

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Biina was exiled to Chad by the chief of Doukoula whom the composer had fiercely lampooned in his song. While Dangmo, the *lycéen* who composed the Gurna Club songs, had to protect his status as a student in good standing, he nonetheless took on, in his lyrics, teachers whom he felt had stolen school funds and had sexual relations with female students. As Luykx (1996) notes for the satirical performances of Aymara students in Bolivia, youth, like their elders, may turn to older traditions of satire, parody, and derision to cope with injustice they experience in the modern education system. However, reading student texts is more complex than noting moments of social critique. As in the village-based *gurna*, Gurna Club song equally contained praise for the moral status quo that the *gurna* was charged to uphold in the community and that could be said to privilege older males.

In consideration of Tupuri history writ large, the Gurna Club represented the movement of the most salient Tupuri cultural practice, the *gurna* society, into a state-sponsored institution under the rubric of 'cultural heritage'. However, from within the domain of the Lycée de Doukoula, established in 1977, the practice of the Gurna Club by Tupuri students was also 'traditional' in the sense that bureaucratic institutions too have their rituals, routines, and sets of expectations, handed down over time. In fact, to take a broader view of 'modern tradition', cultural associations under the banner the 'youth' were not new to Cameroon or Africa. Such clubs had antecedents in the early nationalist movements of the 1930s to 1960s (see for example Mbembe 1985). On the one hand, these ethnically based nationalist collectivities are credited with facilitating the birth of an independent Cameroon nation, though, on the other hand, in later years similar ethnic formations were criticised as vehicles of national disintegration and ethnic infighting. In recent years, under the 1990s reforms toward multipartyism and decentralisation (encouraged by international donors and lending institutions), Cameroonian elites have been seen to use these homeland or cultural associations for extracting benefits at the national level, at times disingenuously in the name of their local constituencies. Although the lycée students of Doukoula may have had little knowledge of the broader history of such cultural associations in Cameroon, it appears that they had an intuitive feel for the power to be generated from inserting expressions of their ethnic particularity into the governmental institution of the lycée. Not fully developed as a political organisation, their Gurna Club nonetheless gestured toward the possibilities of local, ethnically based power in the face of the state. By remembering indigenous forms of socialisation that formal education was intended to replace, they marked the national institution of the lycée with a form of grassroots power and regional social organisation that could be called upon when, and if, the state failed to meet its promises.

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ABSTRACT

This case study of youth cultural production in Cameroon examines how lycée students introduce idioms of tradition and the ancestral past into the lycée context by creating a club modelled on a dance society popular in the region. In pre-colonial rural Tupuriland, the *gurna* society was a key site for the moral–sexual socialisation of youth and a cultural–political arena where competition was staged between individuals and villages during death celebrations. Today, the *gurna* remains popular in Tupuri villages, though it has been recreated in urban contexts and modern institutions where members use its forms to mediate new social relations and modern realities. This paper explores the meanings, functions, and effects of the creation of the 'Gurna Club' by students in the Lycée de Doukoula, by examining students' Youth Day dance performances, vibrant song discourse, and nostalgia for earlier forms

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of indigenous socialisation (e.g. the *gurna*, youth initiation, and wrestling). By inserting the communal poetics of the *gurna* into the lycée, Tupuri youth seek to yoke multiple facets of their identity, making visible their desire to be *gurna,* even as they pursue their civic obligations as students. In creating the Gurna Club, students begin to participate in an increasing trend in Cameroon toward the use of idioms of parochialism (such as ethnically based elite associations) as strategies for garnering national power and recognition.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude de cas sur la production culturelle des jeunes au Cameroun examine la manière dont des élèves de lycée introduisent des idiomes de tradition et de passé ancestral dans le contexte du lycée en créant un club inspiré d'une société de danse très appréciée dans la région. Dans le Tupuriland rural précolonial, la société *gurna* était un lieu clé de socialisation morale et sexuelle des jeunes et une arène politico-culturelle au sein de laquelle la concurrence était mise en scène entre individus et villages au cours de célébrations de la mort. Aujourd'hui, le *gurna* reste apprécié dans les villages tupuri, même s'il a été recréé dans des contextes urbains et des institutions modernes dont les membres utilisent ses formes pour faciliter de nouveaux rapports sociaux et réalités modernes. Ce papier étudie les significations, les fonctions et les effets de la création du Club Gurna par les élèves du lycée de Doukoula, en examinant les spectacles de danse donnés à l'occasion de la Journée de la jeunesse, le discours vibrant des chansons et la nostalgie de formes anciennes de socialisation indigène (ex. le *gurna*, l'initiation des jeunes et la lutte). En introduisant le poétique communal du *gurna* dans le lycée, les jeunes Tupuri cherchent à lier des facettes multiples de leur identité, en rendant visible leur désir d'être *gurna,* alors même qu'ils accomplissent leurs obligations civiques en tant qu'élèves. En créant le Club Gurna, les élèves commencent à participer à une tendance croissante au Cameroun, à savoir l'usage d'idiomes de parochialisme (tels qu'associations d'élites basées sur l'ethnie) en tant que stratégies d'obtention de reconnaissance et de pouvoir national.

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