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**Everyday Prison Governance  
in Africa**

# Power, Control and Money in Prison:

## the Informal Governance of the Yaoundé Central Prison

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**In the 2000s, Loïc Wacquant<sup>1</sup> noted the weakness of prison research in the social sciences. To this could be added the near-absence of studies on prisons in African countries, with the exception of a few books, mainly by historians.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, the image of 'African' prisons largely depends on how they are discussed by humanitarian actors and in the media. The 'African' prison institution is generally summed up as an overpopulated, dilapidated space, symbolic of states that are themselves decaying. To this grey literature could be added many stories (novels, autobiographies) that describe the situation of political prisoners, condemning above all the authoritarianism of certain regimes, at the risk of remaining silent on the condition and experiences of ordinary prisoners.<sup>3</sup>**

Cameroonian prisons — the subject of this article — do not escape this characterisation. Only a few studies make fragmentary mention of the history of prisons in the colonial era. A few Cameroonians have also written their autobiographies<sup>4</sup> after being incarcerated under the authoritarian regime of Ahmadou Ahidjo, the first president of Cameroon. Since Paul Biya's rise to power in 1982, the regime has often been characterised as post-authoritarian, as reforms have been adopted creating a multiparty system and allowing relative freedom of expression. Nevertheless, the operation of institutions remains deeply marked by clientelism and corruption.<sup>5</sup> This leads to asymmetrical power relations and high levels of social inequality. The authorities do not hesitate to use force routinely. In this

context, Amnesty International has issued reports condemning arbitrary detention and prisoner living conditions characterised by deprivation (healthcare, food) and violence (humiliation, corporal punishment).

This article attempts to go beyond this prevalent image of prison in order to understand the everyday life of incarceration, on the basis of research conducted at the central prison in Yaoundé, the political capital of Cameroon. In this prison I conducted a series of investigations in April and July 2010, then in May and September 2011, as well as in March 2013.<sup>6</sup> I first held semi-structured interviews with twenty prisoners inside the prison. These were followed by more informal conversations, mainly with ten of them over a period of about three years, also in the central prison. At this time, I was allowed to go everywhere inside the prison. During this period, I also observed and spoke with prisoners in the courtyard and the death-sentence wing, and even with a few guards, particularly those in the prison registry office. I also met a few prison administration officials and NGO members. In 2013, with great difficulty I obtained permission to spend a single day in prison. As a consequence, during this period of fieldwork, I mainly studied released prisoners, particularly dealers who sell cannabis in a poor neighbourhood in Yaoundé. In fact, a lot of prisoners come from such urban places (personal data). The same situation is repeated relentlessly throughout the world, from one city to the next, from American ghettos to French suburbs,<sup>7</sup> from Brazilian favelas<sup>8</sup> to the slums of Kolkata<sup>9</sup> to the poor neighbourhoods of the capital of Sierra Leone.<sup>10</sup>

1. Wacquant, Loïc. 2002. 'The Curious Eclipse of Prison Ethnography in the Age of Mass Incarceration'. *Ethnography* 3 (4): 371-397.
2. See Bernault, Florence. 1999. *Enfermement, prison et châtements en Afrique. Du XIXe siècle à nos jours*. Karthala. Paris, and Dikötter, Franck, and Ian Brown. 2007. *Cultures of Confinement. A History of the Prison in Africa, Asia and Latin America*. Hurst and Company. London.
3. See the anthology by Mapanje, Jack. 2002. *Gathering Seaweed. African Prison Writing*. Heinemann. Harlow.
4. See in particular chapter 2 'Des rescapés racontent' in *Le totalitarisme des Etats africains : le cas du Cameroun* de Marie-Thérèse Eteki-Otabela (2001). *Le totalitarisme des Etats africains: le cas du Cameroun*. L'Harmattan. Paris).
5. Médard, Jean-François. 2006. 'Les paradoxes de la corruption institutionnalisée'. *Revue internationale de politique comparée* 13 (4): 697-710.
6. In 2010 and 2011, in the context of the TerrFerme programme 'Les dispositifs de l'enfermement. Approche territoriale du contrôle politique et social contemporain' (2009-2014), financed by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (Ref: ANR-08-JCJC 2008- 0121-01) and the Aquitaine Regional Council (Ref: 2010407003). In 2013 in the context of the *Inverses* research programme 'Informalité, pouvoirs et envers des espaces urbaines' (2010-2014), financed by the Paris municipal government (*Emergences* call).
7. Wacquant, Loïc. 2001. 'Symbiose fatale. Quand ghetto and prison se ressemblent and s'assemblent'. *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 3, 139, pp. 31-52; Chantraine, Gilles. 2004. *Par-delà les murs. Expériences and trajectoires en maison d'arrêt*. Le Monde, PUF. Paris.
8. Telles, Vera da Silva. 2009. 'Illégalismes populaires and relations de pouvoir dans les trames de la ville.' In Robert Cabane and Isabel Georges (dir.), *Sao Paulo. La ville d'en bas*, L'Harmattan, Paris, pp. 125-134.
9. Bandyopadhyay, Mahuya. 2010. *Everyday Life in a prison. Confinement, Surveillance, Resistance*. Orient Blackswan, Hyderabad.
10. Jefferson, Andrew M. 2012 'Conceptualising Confinement: Prisons and Poverty in Sierra Leone' *Criminology and Criminal Justice*.

This article analyses prisoners' adjustments to a constrained space. It assumes the existence of a disparity between the space as designed by prison authorities and the space as transformed by prisoner strategies and tactics, not to mention those of guards. It studies power relations, not just between guards and prisoners, but also among prisoners themselves. Prison could be defined as a set of interlocking spaces and passages whose control is the foundation of a power apparatus.<sup>11</sup> The daily order in the prison cannot be understood simply by appeals to formal procedures or rules but by understanding the informal arrangements, architecture and discourses especially of prisoners and guards. This is particularly true in the Yaoundé central prison, one of Cameroon's six central prisons. It has one of the highest prison overcrowding rates in the country.<sup>12</sup> Built in 1968 for 1000 prisoners, in May 2011 it housed 3,830 prisoners (personal enquiries).<sup>13</sup> This concentration of individuals leads to conflicts and creates the need to negotiate the use of prison space. It also gives rise to informal practices that supplement and connect with institutional practices in the day-to-day management of the prison. I will begin my discussion of power relations in the Yaoundé central prison by exploring its main spatial divisions. Some of them are regulatory, others informal. I will then explain to what extent it is helpful for prisoners to be able to circulate through prison and access various spaces, beyond prison's 'classic' divisions.

### **The production of the prison space: institutional divisions and informal appropriations**

Like many prisons worldwide, the Yaoundé central prison begins with a blank outer wall, including a patrol path and watchtowers. After passing through a first door, then crossing the Courtyard of Honour and the administration offices, a second wall delimits the official

detention zone. Here, distributed around the Main Courtyard, are various wings, many of which are composed of several buildings containing shared cells<sup>14</sup> known as '*locaux*' (or '*local*' in the singular, meaning 'premises'). Also in this courtyard are the offices of the *Chef Discipline* (Head of Discipline) and his guards, where regular searches of the wings are planned. There are two disciplinary cells located in two of the prison's wings.

The distribution of prisoners initially appears to correspond to three criteria: age, gender and sentence.<sup>15</sup> Thus one notes a minors' wing, a women's wing and another reserved for prisoners sentenced to death.<sup>16</sup> But then one notices the presence of several other buildings. In prison language, these are known as 'VIP' wings because they are reserved for former members of government and managing directors of semi-public companies prosecuted by the Cameroonian state for misappropriation of public funds in the context of a recent major anti-corruption operation. These prisoners rarely move through the prison grounds without bodyguards, whom they recruit from among their fellow prisoners and pay out of their own pockets. In principle, women and minors should only enter the courtyard for sporting activities or festive events. They

are also allowed access to certain wings on Sundays during worship services. These distribution practices are to be found from prison to prison, and well beyond Cameroon. In theory, the goal is to keep prisoner numbers in check, to categorise them in order to better control them. In addition, these classification practices are not entirely devoid of the wish to protect the most vulnerable categories of prisoners and offer minimal services, theoretically guaranteeing incarceration conditions worthy of international conventions.

However, an understanding of prison cannot be limited to these categories created by institutional actors. It is necessary to examine the status and role of

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11. Foucault, Michel. 1975. *Surveiller et punir*. Paris: Gallimard.

12. According to the Pacdet programme (Improvement of Detention Conditions, Cameroon / EU, 2007-2011), the occupancy rate of the Yaoundé central prison was 38 per cent in 2010. Defendants are in the majority.

13. In 2013, it housed 4,349 prisoners (personal enquiries).

14. In theory, one cell, or *local*, can accommodate 9 to 12 prisoners.

15. Convicted prisoners are not separated from defendants. The length of the sentence does not influence the distribution of prisoners, with the exception of those who have received death sentences.

16. In reality these prisoners serve life sentences.

four other wings: Wing 1, Wing 3, and especially Wings 8 and 9, which are known as the 'Kosovos' and house most of the prisoners. We need to analyse the social relations at play between prisoners, as well as the interactions between prisoners and guards.

The Kosovos are presented as repulsive by a lot of prisoners and guards. Along with the prisoners in the 'Laundry Room'<sup>17</sup> (who are mentally disabled) and those sentenced to death, the prisoners in Wings 8 and 9 define themselves as the 'bottom' of the prison. The so-called VIP wings (7, 13 bis, 15 bis) and Wings 1 and 3 constitute the 'top' of the prison. Their occupants consider themselves 'responsible people', and they go out of their way to distinguish themselves from the 'bandits' in the Kosovos. They believe they have worked in honourable professions (as shopkeepers, employees, military personnel, civil servants), whereas, in their eyes, the prisoners in the 'bottom' make their living from petty informal and illegal activities (market porters, car washers, etc.), lack education and are probably illiterate. They tell themselves they have been sentenced for 'nobler' crimes (embezzlement, fraud) while they accuse the 'bottom' prisoners of being 'armed robbers' devoid of morality. Without claiming to be part of an elite (a position reserved only for the 'VIPs'), they claim to belong to a 'middle class', which is implicitly defined in contrast to the traits they attribute to people from the poorest categories. They are trying to avoid the blemish of the prison. At the same time, all these prisoners continue to demonstrate deference to the 'VIPs', and to wait for financial help, food and other little favours. In prison, the 'VIPs' don't lose their social status, neither their social and financial advantages. Urban inequalities are reproduced within the prison.

The way that prison wings are accessed sheds even more light on social relations among prisoners. It also clarifies the relationship of domination between prisoners and institutional actors. In principle, after a prisoner spends a few days in a transit cell, the prison administration will assign him to a *local* in a specific wing. However, depending on the prisoner, it is possible to change the administration's decision by appealing to the *Chef Discipline* and the Prison Director: a place in

prison can be bought through bribery. The most well-off prisoners (but only among those considered 'responsible' by the guards) will pay 25,000 cfa francs minimum to avoid the Kosovos and obtain a *local* with a bed<sup>18</sup> in a less crowded wing. The Kosovos house the poorest prisoners. Arriving in wings 8 and 9 is only the beginning of a brutal initiation into prison. Overcrowding is such that many prisoners are unable to have bed. They are known as the '*dorment-à-terre*' ('people who sleep on the floor'). Although a new arrival with no money or connections is assigned to a cell, he will sleep directly on the floor, initially in the doorway. Then he can only hope that as other prisoners leave, it will be possible for him to move further into the

cell and eventually access one of the five or six bunk beds containing three places each. A prisoner can access a bed as soon as someone else is released by paying around 10,000 cfa francs to the prisoners responsible for the wing (see below) and sometimes also to their associates.

And yet, some prisoners will choose to be assigned to the Kosovos as a means of more easily avoiding the surveillance of the guards (in order to smoke cannabis, to make phone calls and so on). It is sometimes also a matter of being close to their

associates, with whom they can try to improve their time in prison by stealing, swindling, trafficking or by gaining access to various privileges and roles. Prisoners in wings 1 and 3 are subjected to more searches. The guards seize the smallest pretext (cigarettes, mobile phone, etc.) to threaten to send culprits to one of the Kosovos. Here again, penalties can only be avoided through bribery.

In an overcrowded, deteriorated prison, architecture and the mere presence of guards — greatly outnumbered by inmates<sup>19</sup> — are not enough to guarantee the control of prisoners. Bribery constitutes another means of establishing hierarchies and links of obligation between guards and prisoners, for the sake of maintaining order. Prison administration officials keep within certain limits when it comes to applying the rules, whether formal or informal. They will not overstep certain social and penal boundaries. A prisoner who has been convicted of a crime like armed robbery,

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17. Thus named because it used to be the prison laundry room. It was converted into a detention wing to deal with high prisoner numbers.

18. Prisoners are only supplied with a bed base.

19. I was unable to find the exact figure.

or is known to come from a poor neighbourhood would, in principle, not be assigned to wings 1 and 3 even if he were well-off.<sup>20</sup> In any event, when certain prisoners have the possibility of avoiding a few rules, this gives personal power to individual agents of the institution. This monopoly of 'regulations and exceptions'<sup>21</sup>, by guards and especially by the *Chef Discipline* and Prison Director, who appear to make the final decisions, makes the prison a significant financial and symbolic resource. We see the emergence of a regular income in the context of constant financial exchanges, especially bribery payments. As we will see below, the study of prison circulation throws even more light on these exchanges and their logics.

### Prison circulation

I would like to place greater emphasis on the possibilities for movement and mobility that arise from such arrangements and negotiations — not just between guards and prisoners, but also among prisoners themselves.<sup>22</sup> These mobilities also reveal the double hierarchy that exists in surveillance work: the guards are of course responsible for it but they delegate certain tasks to a few prisoners, keeping these tasks under their control.

The prisoners in different wings are connected to one another, though the wings for women, minors and VIPs are less connected. Circulation between wings at daily or weekly intervals guarantees the possibility for networking. Movements are often linked to an activity that generates income, meagre though it may be. For example, being assigned to the kitchens makes it possible to get outside the prison walls and eat more. In the Main Courtyard, *taxis* (selected by a prisoner responsible for maintaining order: the *Chef Cour* (Courtyard Chief), see below) are in charge of fetching individual prisoners from their wings, at the request of another prisoner, a guard or during visiting days. It is up to them to know how to find the person among the ten wings and thousands of prisoners. A competition may be set up, with the winner receiving 50, 100 or up to 200 cfa francs,

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depending on the goodwill of the person making the request. By the same token, women call on *Commissionnaires* (delivery men) who are responsible for relaying meals, objects or even messages to men in other wings (and vice versa), or making purchases, especially in the courtyards of the *Kosovos*, where everything is sold (vegetables, fruit, hardware, fabrics, magazines, telephone cards, cannabis, etc.).

Other movements are about getting oneself to a wing other than one's own during the daytime, particularly to wings 1 and 3 and the death sentence wing. It is matter of escaping boredom, meeting other prisoners for business, pleasure or prayer. The death sentence wing is reputed to be a Mecca for dealing and using cannabis. To smoke, prisoners hide behind a curtain hung in the cell doorway, something that does nothing to mask the smell. For many inmates, accessing these wings (1, 3 and the death sentence wing) is particularly synonymous with small jobs like that of *majordome*. This involves cooking and washing dishes for one's employer (a wealthier prisoner). Payment varies and often consists of gifts of clothing or food. For prisoners in the *Kosovos*, access to less dirty, less crowded toilets and showers (that are also more secure) represents an undeniable resource.

With prisoner numbers so high, the wish to categorise and count them becomes a pious hope. The guards are compelled to enlist the help of selected prisoners, who are in charge of morning and evening prisoner counts, assigning cells and places and, more generally, enforcing silence and some semblance of hygiene. At the *Chef Discipline's* discretion, each wing is placed under the surveillance of prisoners: a *Commandant* (Commander), assisted by a *Coordonnateur* (Coordinator) and a *Maire* (Mayor) who looks after housekeeping in the wing. The *Commandants* rely on *escadrons* (squadrons, of prisoners), responsible for maintaining order.<sup>23</sup>

There is also a *Commandant*, *Coordonnateur* and *Maire* at the cell level, all chosen by the wing

20. But he would not necessarily seek a place there, since his reputation and connections would guarantee him material and financial advantages in the *Kosovos*.

21. Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. 'Droit et passe-droit'. *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 81 (1): 86-96.

22. I am omitting analysis of fatigues carried out in the city, of transfers to court, etc.

23. The *Commander* can stop a fight, but he may also cover up the theft of prisoner property committed by his neighbours.

*Commandant*. New arrivals remain on housekeeping fatigues until they pay a 'tax' of 2,500 cfa francs. They also have to give 250 cfa francs to the *escadron* occupying the wing's *police post*. Those who fail to pay their weekly cell fee (on average 100 cfa francs for a *mandataire*<sup>24</sup>, 50 otherwise) have to clean the *local* or face losing their bed (or their place on the floor of the *local*). Prisoners who obtain positions of responsibility enjoy a certain benevolence on the part of the authorities (in terms of visits, goods they are allowed to receive, nights out in the Main Courtyard, etc.) and benefit from a financial resource. They are the men that other prisoners pay for a bed or favour, as part of an assymetric system that profits a minority. The mechanism is the same in the women's wing, with a *Commandant* in each wing and each cell, a *Mère-local* (Cell Mother, the equivalent of a *Chef local*) and a *Maire*. Although payments are mandatory, and although the ragging of new arrivals is acknowledged, the women claim to have greater solidarity.

The *Chef Cour* (Courtyard Chief) is another figure in this system. Backed by his *escadron*, he looks after order in the courtyard. He goes from wing to wing inquiring after prisoner numbers. He appoints the *taxis*. Finally, he chooses the wing *portiers* (porters). *Portiers* control access to and from the courtyard for a fee. Those who do not pay (50 cfa francs at least for the first exits) and do not know anyone are not allowed out.<sup>25</sup> Two *portiers* are in charge of supervising one of the two doors leading to the prison's first courtyard: the Courtyard of Honour. The other door is supervised by guards. The space between these two doors forms a compartment known as '*La Porcherie*' (The Pigsty), under the control of prisoners. The *portiers* (prisoners) must especially ensure that there are no escapes on visiting days because of visitors and prisoners are all together in the courtyard. Finally, it is worth noting the presence of certain '*indics*' (informers) among the prisoners. In return for information, they enjoy a certain status in the prison (they have a role in the surveillance apparatus as, for example, fetching defendants before they leave for court) as well as little advantages (being allowed to stay

in the Courtyard of Honour, getting a place on fatigues, going out into the city). Every Prison Director has his trusted men among the guards and prisoners. He also receives his own payments, some arrangements being made directly with prisoners, particularly between himself and the VIPs.

## Conclusion

To sum up, we can conclude that in prisons in Cameroon there typically exists pyramidal surveillance that produces a double hierarchy: between guards and prisoners, and among the prisoners themselves. Guards are responsible for maintaining order, but they delegate

some tasks in certain places to a handful of prisoners, those who have been convicted, have spent several years in prison, and are considered to possess — to quote a guard — 'good morality', an expression that could appear paradoxical in a prison context. Although guards organise wing searches, the maintenance of day-to-day order is mainly delegated to the 'government' (to use prison jargon), that is to say to the *Chef Cour*, the *Commandants* and their *Coordonnateurs*, and finally to their *escadrons*, particularly in the wings and cells.

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prisoners in order to deal in certain items (cigarettes, cannabis). This can lead to misunderstandings and trigger conflicts between guards, since they do not all feel the same way about this sort of arrangement.

It is therefore futile to try to understand how prisons are managed by only interpreting rules of procedure (whose existence remains to be proven in Yaoundé) and studying their application. To quote A. Chauvenet: 'a guard's authority is a given only on a legal, abstract and symbolic level'.<sup>26</sup> Together, prison authorities (numerically the minority) and prisoners (in the majority) 'have [...] a shared interest in maintaining a 'peaceful coexistence' or an 'armed peace'.' (ibid.). The control of space, its appropriation, not to mention its division into territories, lead to forms of clientelism and bribery that benefit both

24. *Mandataires* (Mandataries), contrary to *dorment-à-terre*, are those who have a bed, which is called *mandate* in prison slang.

25. Prisoners sentenced to death can go everywhere, as can the various *Chefs* (with the exception of the women's and minors' wings).

26. Chauvenet, Antoinette, Françoise Orlic, and Georges Benguigui. 1994. *Le monde des surveillants de prison*. PUF. Paris. p. 83.

parties. Likewise, drug trafficking by prisoners would not be possible without the support, indeed the participation of guards, and this illegal trade is also at the root of a certain maintenance of order. Prisoners and guards both derive advantages from peaceful social relations in prison. These informal processes, some of which are illegal, are common to prisons across the world<sup>27</sup> and across different eras.<sup>28</sup> In Yaoundé, the actors on site have internalised these norms, which are circulated by means of a strategic distribution of key roles in the management of the prison. This leads to the existence of a true power apparatus<sup>29</sup> in which prison rules are not codified anywhere, but in which, on the other hand, multiple but hidden arrangements are legion.

However, prisoners seem to be selling off a form of freedom by maintaining a system that is ultimately to

their disadvantage. Only a minority see their room for manoeuvre increased. Though they are in a position to exert a certain power over other prisoners, and obtain a status that sets them apart, they remain incarcerated and subject to arbitrary treatment from prison authorities. Prison overcrowding does not generate much opposition to the prison administration (aside from a few escapes). Perhaps prisoners' tactics<sup>30</sup> are best interpreted as simply a means of survival in the context of a 'total institution'?<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, as one studies daily carceral experience, one does see evidence of small tactics through which prisoners resist their confinement. It is through observations, such as those shared in this article, that it becomes possible to nuance the idea of prisoners' strict subjugation within this apparatus and to understand their ways of becoming political subjects.



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27. See for example in France: Chauvenet, Antoinette. 1998. 'Guerre et paix en prison'. *Les cahiers de la sécurité intérieure* (31): 91-109. See also Garces, Chris, Tomas Martin, and Sacha Darke. 2013. 'Informal Prison Dynamics in Africa and Latin America'. *Criminal Justice Matters* 91 (1): 26-27.

28. See for example Aguirre, Carlos. 2005. *The Criminals of Lima and Their Worlds*. Duke University Press. Durham, London.

29. Foucault, Michel. 1997. *Il faut défendre la société: cours au Collège de France: (1975-1976)*. Paris: Gallimard.

30. Certeau, Michel. 1998. *L'invention du quotidien*. Nouvelle éd. / Paris: Gallimard.

31. Goffman, Erving. 1961. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. New York: Doubleday.