

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Between Empowerment and Objectification: Female Bikutsi Artists and the Representation of Women in some Cameroonian Female Popular Music

Ngwafu Anna Tanjan¹, Njong Divine, Adamu Pangmeshi

¹PhD candidate, The University of Bamenda

²Associate Professor, The University of Bertoua,

³ Professor, The University of Bamenda.

*Corresponding author: njong_zee@yahoo.com

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Abstract

The representation of women in popular music has long been a subject of debate especially in genres where female artists simultaneously challenge and reinforce gender norms. While Bikutsi, a genre rooted in the cultural traditions of the Beti people of Cameroon has historically been a space for female expression, it has also been criticized for perpetuating the objectification and sexualization of women. Female artists navigate a complex terrain where women are depicted in multiple and often contradictory ways, ranging from empowered and assertive figures to objectified and commodified subjects. Through an analysis of the lyrics and performances of prominent female Bikutsi artists such as K-Tino, Lady Ponce, Mani Bella and Coco Argentée, this paper explores the tensions between empowerment and objectification. These artists challenge patriarchal norms by asserting female desire, financial independence and agency while on the other hand, they often reproduce hyper sexualized imagery and lyrics that align with male fantasies, raising questions whether their artistic choices reinforce or subvert traditional gender dynamics. Drawing on

objectification theory and postfeminism perspectives, this paper argues that female Bikutsi artists navigate a complex space where empowerment and objectification are not mutually exclusive but deeply intertwined. This study highlights the need for a better understanding of how women in popular music negotiate agency within commercial and cultural constraints.

Introduction

Bikutsi, originating from the Beti people of Cameroon, is a vibrant and energetic musical genre that has gained fame nationally and internationally. It is a dynamic and influential genre known for its rhythmic intensity and vibrant performances. Traditionally, Bikutsi served as a medium for storytelling, social commentary and cultural expression. However, this genre in the past few decades has registered a significant rise and development as it holds a special place within the Cameroonian community, serving as a symbol of cultural pride, social cohesion and artistic expression. Over time, it has evolved, incorporating traditional rhythms with modern elements, creating a dynamic and influential musical form that has earned international recognition. As Bikutsi transitioned into the contemporary music scene, it has also become a platform for exploring and negotiating gender roles. Female Bikutsi artists in particular have used their songs to express personal and societal experiences often dwelling on the themes of love, sexuality, empowerment and identity.

In the evolving landscape of Bikutsi music, female artists have risen to prominence, not only shaping the genre but also influencing how women are depicted in the Cameroonian music industry. In the traditional Bikutsi context, women were typically portrayed through the lens of male artists, who depicted women in objectified ways by emphasizing their physical appearance.

In this line, Adamu Pangmeshi and Blossom Fondo in *Rewriting her Story: Critical Essays on the Female Subject in the Colonial and Postcolonial World* assert that, "from the medieval right through to the so-called postmodern eras, women still continue to be negatively imagined in literary texts" (2015:9).

The above assertion means that women have often been portrayed in reductive, stereotypical or objectifying ways. When they talk of "negatively imagined," they are referring to how women are often portrayed as weak, passive, irrational, overly emotional or mere objects of desire, rather than as fully developed, autonomous and full human beings. Adamu Pangmeshi in his article, "Shifting Vigour: Deconstructing Dichotomies in Anne Tanyi Tang's Dramaturgy" contends that it is patriarchy that has become the stumbling block to women's progress in most cultures and how these women have seriously engaged in a struggle to reconstruct their identity (2015:10).

With the genre's commercialization, women gained more agency and visibility. However, this shift also introduced a complex dynamic, as female artists navigate the tension between empowerment and the commercial pressures to portray themselves in ways that still objectify them. While early female Bikutsi artists maintained a more conservative image in line with traditional values, modern female artists especially those from the 2000s onward, began to use their sexuality as part of their performance. This shift can be seen as both a reflection of and a response to the commercial music industry's demand for more provocative and visually captivating content. A close examination of female Bikutsi artists shows that they often engage in self-objectification, a trend that contrasts with the traditional objectification of women by male artists in the past. Such representations have traditionally been attributed to male-dominated narratives, this article explores how women themselves adopt, reinforce or subvert these portrayals, often blending empowerment with objectification. Female Bikutsi lyrics today reveal

that many of the messages found within these lyrics are frighteningly just as damaging as the misogynistic, violent and explicitly sexual ones found in the usual advertising industry orchestrated by men. This type of feminist messages introduces a new danger in that it masks the objectification of women into a type of sexual awareness while promoting traditional male behaviors as equalizing acts of power and female subordination through their songs.

In contemporary Bikutsi, female artists such as K-Tino, Lady Ponce, Mani Bella and Coco Argentée navigate a paradoxical position where their lyrics, performances and public personas oscillate between empowerment and objectification. In their lyrics, women are depicted in multiple and often contradictory ways, ranging from empowered and assertive figures to objectified and commodified subjects.

Their songs celebrate female sexuality, financial independence and self-expression which is a form of empowerment and the other hand, it portrays women in ways that align with male-centered fantasies, hyper-sexualization and economic commodification which is a form of objectification. This tension raises critical questions such as: are these artists challenging patriarchal norms or are they complicit in their reinforcement? Do their lyrics empower women or do they sustain the male gaze and traditional gender hierarchies? In recent times, there are still a multitude of Bikutsi lyrics that reduce women to mere objects of desire, reinforcing regressive stereotypes and patriarchal norms. The lyrics still equate female value with desirability and attractiveness. A higher degree of sexually objectified and commodified portrayals of women in Bikutsi lyrics is thought provoking. Despite its fame and contributions to the musical industry in Cameroon, Bikutsi has sparked debates and allegations of promoting immorality, materialism and the objectification and commodification of women.

The concept of empowerment entails that women should be portrayed as individuals with some agency, autonomy and aspirations. It involves showcasing lyrics that celebrate women's achievements, struggles and contributions to society while challenging oppressive structures. Conversely, these female artists demean themselves as they reduce women to their physical

attributes, portraying them primarily as sexual objects for male satisfaction. They are portrayed as objects without agency or personality. The music industry's emphasis on sensual performances reduces female artists to mere objects of desire, overshadowing their artistic contributions. This commercialization risks perpetuating harmful stereotypes and detracting from the genre's empowering potential. While some view these performances as liberating, others perceive them as reinforcing negative images of women. This dichotomy reflects societal tensions regarding women's sexuality and agency. Today, Bikutsi continues to be a site of negotiation between empowerment and objectification as it is a cultural background where artists, producers and audiences continually wrestle over who controls women's bodies and what it truly means to be empowered.

This current trend suggests that Bikutsi lyrics are hyper-sexualized, representing women as sexually alluring objects that make people to belief that women are always available to satisfy the opposite gender. This current dynamics on women's objectification raises a concern about how women define themselves, their identity and existence in their own sexuality. Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* asserts that, "In response, we must now ask the question about our place in our bodies that woman a generation ago asked about their place in society" (1990:270). This means that, sexual beliefs are attributed to women leading to the normalization of women's portrayal as sexual objects. By this, Wolf argues that just as the feminist movements of prior generations demanded inclusion and equality in social roles, there should be a similar effort to reclaim agency over women's physical selves, rejecting the notion that a woman's value is tied to her appearance. In this sense, Wolf is challenging women to redefine their relationship with their bodies on their own terms. These portrayals reinforce traditional gender roles and contribute to the sexualization of women and this has made the female body and its parts to become a target for objectification and commodification within several cultural settings. In line with this, Carole Vance Smith in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, questions, "is objectification and commodification liberating for women or is sexualization liberating for women or is the liberation really just disguised subordination" (1984:5)?

The practice of objectification not only undermines the artistic and personal integrity of female musicians but also contributes to a culture where women's worth is measured by their physical appearance and sexual appeal. Consequently, women are deprived of their rights in terms of control over their bodies and it can perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce gender inequality. This phenomenon raises critical questions about the role of women in the music industry, the implications for gender equality and social justice. As such, this paper contends that female Bikutsi singers may offer an alternative discourse on female sexual freedom through their music, but they ultimately reinforce male domination and female subordination through their songs. Women have been deceived with the mask of women's freedom and equality and this has rather led to the humiliation of the woman more than ever before.

To concur this, Libby McKenna in *Audience Interpretations of the Representation of women in Music Videos by Women Artists* argues that, women in music videos are often depicted as fulfilling "unrealistic masculine fantasies" (2006:37). Women's depictions or representations cater to

idealized male desires, often emphasizing stereotypes of women that are unattainable. This self-objectification raises concerns about the potential influence on young audiences who may perceive these

portrayals as societal standards of attractiveness and value. The pervasive nature of such imagery in Bikutsi lyrics suggests a shift from external objectification by male artists to internalized self-objectification by female artists. This paper investigates this tension, focusing on how women in female Bikutsi music are simultaneously empowered and objectified. However, this study argues that the music industry can move towards a more empowering and diverse representation of women, by reducing self-objectification and promoting gender equality.

Statement of the problem

Female Bikutsi artists occupy a complex position within Cameroon's popular music scene, simultaneously challenging and reinforcing traditional gender norms. While some scholars argue that their lyrics and performances serve as tools of empowerment, enabling women to claim visibility and authority in a male-dominated industry, others contend that these representations perpetuate the objectification of the female body. Existing research on gender in African music has largely focused on male artists' portrayal of women, leaving a gap in understanding how female Bikutsi artists themselves negotiate power, agency and cultural expectations. This study aims to critically examine the extent to which female Bikutsi artists contribute to the empowerment of women or reinforce their objectification through their lyrics, performances and public personas. By addressing this gap, the study will contribute to ongoing discussions on gender representation in African popular music and provide an insight into the complex dynamics of agency and exploitation in the music industry.

Objectives of the study

This paper will be conducted with the following objectives in mind:

1. To analyze how female Bikutsi artists represent women in their lyrics
2. To assess whether these portrayals empower women or reinforce objectification
3. To explore how audiences interpret these portrayals in relation to gender norms

Research Questions

- How do female Bikutsi artists portray the female body in their songs and performances?
- To what extent can the provocative lyrics and performances of female Bikutsi artists be interpreted as acts of empowerment or objectification?

- How do audiences interpret the messages conveyed in female Bikutsi music regarding gender and sexuality?

Hypothesis

This study is built on the hypothetical contention that while female Bikutsi artists claim spaces of visibility and agency through self-expression and sexual autonomy, their representation of women in popular music often blur the line between empowerment and objectification thereby raising questions about whether such portrayals subvert or reinforce patriarchal norms.

Theoretical Framework

The representation of women in popular music, particularly within the Bikutsi genre is thought provoking. This study therefore interrogates whether female artists are complicit in perpetuating male gaze-driven representations of women or whether they are negotiating new forms of agency and control over their own image. Through a close examination of the selected female Bikutsi lyrics, this article seeks to understand the tensions between artistic freedom, commercial success and the cultural pressures that shape how women are represented in contemporary Bikutsi lyrics. This representation of women necessitates theoretical explorations to understand the interplay between empowerment and objectification.

Using a blend of the Objectification theory, Postfeminist framework and Africana Womanism, this study explores how female artists navigate the dual pressures of achieving commercial success and resisting or reinforcing patriarchal narratives. Through the examination of prominent artists like those selected, this paper will also investigate the complex motivations behind such representations, whether they serve as a means of empowerment or reinforce objectified images that reduce women to sexual objects.

The Analyses

The emergence of female voices in Bikutsi music has significantly transformed the genre's thematic and cultural landscape. Once dominated by male performers, Bikutsi now features women who use music as a platform to articulate personal agency, challenge patriarchal constraints and assert their sexual and social autonomy. Through provocative lyrics and stage presentations, artists such as K-Tino, Lady Ponce, Mani Bella and Coco Argentée reclaim narratives traditionally imposed on them by men.

These women do not merely perform for entertainment, they engage in a form of cultural resistance that repositions the female body as a site of power rather than passive objectification. In this context, empowerment is expressed through lyrical self-assertion, open discussions of female pleasure and the subversion of gendered expectations.

In "7^{ème} Ciel" K-Tino adopts an assertive tone to express female sexual desire, presenting herself not as a passive recipient of pleasure but as an active and demanding participant. The expression

"7^{eme}Ciel" (seventh sky) is a metaphor for sexual climax and throughout the song, K-Tino centers the female body and the pursuit of pleasure on her own terms. By doing so, she challenges societal norms that discourage women from expressing sexual agency.

Excerpt 1

Je te jure mon ami ne me fais pas du mal eh
Retirez remettez ça me donne de l'envie
Ça me donne des frissons parfois chair de
coq Tout en balançant les deux jambes en
l'air Super marche Dove a Mokolo
Le muscle de mon ami ça me donne de la
joie Sans hésitation ça m'envoie au ciel
A yob
"7^{eme}Ciel" ciel eh tu me fais des bébés Tu me
donnes à manger tu me donnes le sourire
eh

I swear my friend don't hurt me
Remove and put back makes me feel something
It gives me chills sometimes goose bumps while
swinging the two legs up
Supermarket DOVV at Mokolo
The muscle of my friend gives me joy With no
hesitation it brings me high On the sky
7th sky you make me babies You feed me, you
give me joy Joy , happiness

Her raw and explicit language as demonstrated above, reclaims spaces historically controlled by men, making her performance a form of lyrical resistance against sexual repression. The song's language is provocative with vivid descriptions of physical acts and desires such as "remove and put back makes me feel something, it gives me chills, sometimes goose bumps while swinging the two legs up." She uses explicit language to describe sexual encounters, where the woman is often portrayed in a position of desire in lines such as "the muscle of my friend gives me joy, with no hesitation it brings me high on the seventh sky." K- Tino as such, pushes boundaries to carve out a space where empowerment is found in self- definition. Here, she expands the boundaries of her gender and sexuality by taking on a traditionally masculine role as she chooses to engage in a relationship with a man that can take her to "7^{eme} Ciel" (seventh sky).

In "7^{eme} Ciel," K-Tino constructs a defiant narrative of female sexual empowerment, using explicit language and metaphor to celebrate women's control over their own pleasure. By invoking the concept of the "seventh sky," a euphemism for sexual climax, she positions the woman not as a passive participant in desire but as the one who orchestrates it. Rosalind Gill in "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a sensibility" opines that "Postfeminist discourse constructs women as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner as a form of empowerment (2007:147). She equally asserts that, "the display of the sexualized female body is presented not as something done to women, but as something they do to themselves and for themselves (2007: 153).

To her, women's open engagement with their bodies and sexuality in media is often positioned as a sign of strength, control and self-determination, although she also critiques this framing as being complicit with neoliberal and patriarchal logic. This objectification echoes many feminist critiques, especially from theorists like Andrea Dworkin, who argues that sexual imagery focusing solely on the physical aspects of women enforces patriarchal views. In as much as K-Tino might be

asserting agency, her lyrics still conform to the commodification of women's bodies by framing them as mere vehicles of sexual pleasure. Africana Womanism opposes postfeminist support for sexualized images of women in popular music arguing that these images legitimize men's domination and control.

K-Tino's lyrics dismantle the conventional silence surrounding female sexuality in a conservative Cameroonian society, replacing shame with confidence and agency. Rather than allowing her body to be defined by male artists, K-Tino reclaims it through performance often exaggerating her sensuality to challenge boundaries. To this, Panggmeshi in "Shifting Vigour: Deconstructing Dichotomies in Anne Tanyi Tang's Dramaturgy" opines that women have gone through troubling representations and thus set out to create spaces of freedom and fulfillment for themselves (2015:10).

This explains why K-Tino's lyrics become a manifestation of bodily autonomy and the unapologetic celebration of womanhood. Yet, the empowerment K-Tino performs in "7^{eme} Ciel" is deeply entangled with the objectification of her body. While she asserts agency through her sexual openness, the overtly erotic lyrics combined with her provocative stage persona, turns her body into a spectacle meant for consumption. The female body though self-possessed is packaged like objects to be sold. In promoting her sexual power, K-Tino simultaneously participates in a system that reduces women's value to their physical appeal.

This creates a paradox as her voice challenges patriarchal silencing, yet her visibility is secured through the very forms of objectification that she seeks to subvert. Her body remains a product for public consumption. Her lyrics may celebrate women's independence but that independence is often tied to beauty, sexual appeal or men's desire thereby reinforcing patriarchal norms in new ways. Empowerment through objectification can be conditional or fragile as it is often grounded in the same systems that historically disempowered women. The empowerment of the woman becomes very critical because of the societal expectations imposed upon them by patriarchy. Consequently, empowerment and objectification exist in a tense and often contradictory alliance.

Picture 1 K-Tino



In “Le Ventre et Les Bas Ventre” which translates to (The Belly and the Under Belly), Lady Ponce brings out the aspect of empowerment by placing the female body specifically the stomach and lower abdomen at the center of pleasure, value and control. Rather than portraying the body as an object for male consumption, she positions it as a source of agency and power, capable of influencing relationships.

Her bold celebration of femininity and sexuality challenges the cultural silencing of women’s desires. Ponce’s assertive persona challenges male authority showing women who are unapologetically bold, confident and independent. By vocalizing what is often considered taboo, Lady Ponce not only normalizes open discussions about female sexuality but also asserts the right of women to define their own identities outside of patriarchal expectations.

Through this, she uses Bikutsi not only as entertainment, but as a space for negotiating power and asserting bodily autonomy.

Excerpt 2

Wayem akia ma kat bimi

Abok maliñne ai mod mema eh Abok
ma bili a nguetek Eeh Me noan akoba
me wo a fan eh Me noan boari me wo
étang

Me noan jupe me wo a mbga eh Me
noan akoba me soali eh Abok té me
nga nyenle mema eh Abok té me nga
nyenle

L'homme le ventre et le bas ventre (le
tour est joué)

L'homme le bas ventre et le ventre (le
compte est réglé)

You know how I’ m sexy When I go wild with a man
eh

When I become crazy of sex Eeh

I take my pants off and throw away eh I take my bra
off and throw far

I take my skirt off and put aside eh I hide my pants
eh

Then I start pampering you dear eh Then I start
pampering

Man, on and under the belly (that’s it)

man on and under the belly (it’s a deal)

When Lady Ponce uses phrases like “you know how I grab you, you know how I get wild, you know how am sexy,” they reflect a bold assertion of bodily confidence. In the phrases, she owns her sexuality and openly expresses her power to seduce her man. The repetition “you know” creates a tone of certainty. In this way, her sexuality is something she performs intentionally and not something imposed on her. The phrase “you know how I grab you” paints her as the one in control, the one who initiates or chooses to make love. Her wildness and sexiness are not sources of shame but they contribute to her sense of empowerment and confidence

While “Le Ventre et Les Bas Ventre” (The Belly and the Under Belly) initially positions the female body as a site of power, pleasure and resistance, the song gradually reveals how that power is inextricably linked to her physical appeal and desirability. Lady Ponce’s repeated emphasis on “the belly and the under belly” is associated with fertility, sensuality and desire which draws attention to the body not just as a source of agency but as an object.

This constant repetition reduces aspects of womanhood like emotion, intellect, agency or reproductive functions. Lady Ponce in singing explicitly about her body, sexuality and physical desirability can be seen as reinforcing the same patriarchal norms that have historically objectified and marginalized women. These controversial messages that link women’s worth to their sexuality rather than other important attributes are damaging. Contextualized within Africana Womanist frame, Lady Ponce’s lyric is opened up to a critique that scrutinizes her song for the way it endorses a patriarchal system of gender inequality and eroticizes an incidence of sexual violence. Through such lyrics that commodify the female body, reducing women to sexual parts such as “Ventre” and “bas Ventre,” they replicate narratives that frame women primarily as objects for male pleasure. In this light, women contribute to the same system that sustains their inequality.

According to Africana Womanism, a woman’s “under belly” which translates to the female genitalia is a precious component of her womanhood and for Lady Ponce to use it in a very degrading manner objectifies her. By adopting and performing the gaze traditionally imposed on women by men, they perpetuate a cycle where women’s value continues to depend on their erotic appeal. In line with this, Laura Mulvey opines that,

The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (1975:11).

The above assertion means traditional films turn women into objects for male pleasure, stripping them of agency and autonomy. They exist not as real people but as fantasies, images and sex symbols for the male viewer. This becomes particularly problematic as female artists now package self-objectification as empowerment, blurring the lines between agency and submission. The lyrics suggest that a woman’s ability to gain attention or affection is directly linked to her physical attributes. In this case, the lyric reinforces the idea that the female body becomes a tool within romantic relationships. Even though Lady Ponce reclaims control over her image, she

simultaneously plays into a patriarchal framework that equates a woman's worth with her sexual appeal. This shift reflects a subtle movement from empowerment to self-objectification. The artist knowingly presents her body as powerful but within a system where that power is dependent on how attractive or sexually satisfying she is to others. The body is no longer just a site of self-expression, but it becomes a product. The wildness and sensuality once claimed as liberating still presents the female body as an object of pleasure. These choices of being "wild" and "sexy" occur within structures of constraint where the music industry, cultural norms and audience expectations often leave little room for alternative representations. As a result, the argument shifts from men oppressing women to women negotiating power in a culture that encourages self-objectification under the guise of choice.

Picture

LadyPonce



In “Mani Money,” Mani Bella uses her lyrics not only to amplify her voice as an artist but also to establish herself as an economically empowered woman. She projects herself as a financially successful, self-assured woman.

The song’s title itself “Mani Money” is a symbol of economic empowerment. By focusing on the idea of money, Mani Bella transforms her music into a business while positioning herself in a situation that is capable of generating wealth. She speaks unapologetically about power and her sexuality. She is a woman who is both the subject and object of desire. These characteristics align with the postfeminist ‘girl boss’ persona. She asserts her independence in a way that merges capitalism, sexuality and confidence.

Excerpt 3

Je m'appelais Mani Bella Aujourd'hui c'est Mani	I was called Mani Bella Today I am Mani
Money Avant j'étais très gentille oh Aujourd'hui,	Money Before I was really nice oh Today, no
cadeau fini	more gifts
Mon bonjour c'est cent mille Bonsoir, cent mille	My good morning is one hundred thousand
Mon sourire, cent mille Mon numéro cinq cent mille	My good evening is one hundred thousand
Avant j'étais très soumise Sérieuse, respectueuse	My smile, one hundred thousand
Mais après les déceptions vécues Aujourd'hui,	My phone number five hundred thousand
cadeau fini	Before I was very submissive serious,
Mon bonjour c'est cent mille Bonsoir, cent mille	respectful
Mon sourire, cent mille Mon numéro cinq cent mille	After a lot of disappointment Today, no
Et mon hèhè (le million... le million) Mon hèhè (le	more gifts
million... le million) Mon hèhè (le million... le million)	My good morning is one hundred thousand
	Good evening, one hundred thousand
	My smile, one hundred thousand
	My phone number five hundred thousand
	And my <i>genital</i> (a million... a million) My
	<i>genital</i> (a million... a million)
	My <i>genital</i> (a million... a million)

In this way, the song is more than entertainment because it becomes a tool of economic empowerment especially for a female artist in a male-dominated industry. Mani Bella challenges traditional gender roles not only through her lyrics but by transforming self-expression into profit. Mani Bella's bold sexual imagery and lyrical content suggest agency. She celebrates female success and visibility, suggesting that women can claim space, wealth and influence. In this wise, the sexualized woman is not merely objectified but she becomes a speaker, the subject and the agent. In line with this, Angela McRobbie in *The Aftermath of Feminism* contends that, "The new sexualized figure of femininity is presented as freely chosen and pleasurable, a sign of female agency and autonomy" (2009:55). To Rosalind Gill, "women are seen to be taking control of their bodies and identities with sexual empowerment celebrated as a marker of postfeminist success" (59). However, she is critical of this empowerment because it often reinforces patriarchal expectations under the illusion of freedom. This type of empowerment is not free as it is performed in the music industry that often rewards women for conforming to sexualized norms, thereby commodifying their empowerment.

Many female Bikutsi artists view objectification and commodification not purely as exploitation but as a means to gain financial independence and autonomy. By packaging their image and music in ways that cater to commercial demands, they are able to capitalize on their own bodies and sexualities. To this, Feona Attwood in "Sluts and Riot Grrrls: Female Identity and Sexual Agency" contends that, "sexual agency is increasingly portrayed as a key element of female identity, with women embracing their sexuality as a means of asserting autonomy and power (2007:234). She emphasizes how identity is performed through sexual expression and this performance can be empowering though always within the limits of what the culture allows. For example, "My smile, one hundred thousand, my *genital* (a million... a million)

This reflects postfeminism's embrace of capitalism and consumerism as tools for personal empowerment. Female artists may use their marketability to challenge traditional gender roles, demonstrating that they can thrive financially by embracing aspects of commodification. This approach positions objectification and commodification as a strategic choice, where women use the same tools of objectification to gain economic leverage and visibility. Mani Bella's "Mani Money" reflects a form of empowerment where the female artist is celebrated for her ability to turn herself into a marketable product.

She aligns herself with financial success and autonomy. This resonates with postfeminist ideals that encourage women to be sexually confident and economically independent. However, embedded within this empowerment is objectification of the female body. The artist's body, persona and identity become an object that can be sold. Mani Bella does not only sell her music but she sells her image as seen in the phrase "Mon sourire, cent mille, Mon numéro cinq cent mille, Et mon hèhè (le million... le million). In this sense, the artist actively participates in her own objectification, but under the guise of choice. Her body is both a site of empowerment and a commercial asset.

Mani Bella's lyrics can contribute to the continuation of harmful gender representations through self-objectification. This can be a manifestation of what Sandra Bartky in her essay "On Psychological Oppression" calls "psychic alienation" (19997:1), where women participate in their own objectification because the internalized norms of patriarchy make such participation feel like

empowerment. Bella focuses on a financial transaction with money playing a central role, portraying women as items of exchange where their value is judged by external factors like appearance or wealth. In such a song, the artist demands financial reward in exchange for sexual favor, further embedding the notion of women's bodies as commodities that can be bought and sold.

This song can perpetuate the view that women's identities are wrapped up in money and transactional relationships. This perpetuates the idea that women's value is tied to their ability to offer sex in exchange for money, rather than being seen as full individuals with their own desires and needs. While the lyrics offer financial empowerment and visibility, it also reinforces the idea that women's success depends on how well they can package and sell themselves. Postfeminism argues that women can reclaim practices once considered objectifying as forms of empowerment. But Africana Womanism argues that lyrics that commodify women's sexuality can be analyzed for whether they contribute to the disempowerment of women by focusing on their sexual value rather than their holistic contributions in society.

The title itself, "Mani Money" seems to play on the idea that a woman's worth may be reduced to what she can get financially or in terms of status. From a postfeminist perspective, Bella's "Mani Money" could be interpreted as a statement of female empowerment, where the artist claims her financial independence and defines her worth on her own terms. When she commodifies her body under the guise of empowerment, this aligns with capitalist objectification rather than promoting genuine empowerment grounded in cultural identity.

The selling of the female body as a product to be bought with money can be seen as perpetuating exploitation rather than resisting it. This duality reflects what postfeminist theory often calls a paradox of empowerment. Women may appear empowered, but the tools of empowerment namely sexuality, beauty and desirability are drawn from the same patriarchal system that objectified them. In this sense, Mani Bella is navigating a difficult situation where she must carefully balance between two opposing forces.

She reclaims agency by using her sexuality but she also reinforces harmful stereotypes by repeating objectifying tropes. Postfeminism thrives on contradiction and Mani Bella's "Mani Money" embodies this as she is empowered, yet objectified. She appears to be in control, yet she plays the role of a system that profits from the eroticization of women. Her performance is both a celebration of femininity and a strategic alignment with capitalist and patriarchal standards. Bella is an example of how contemporary artists negotiate empowerment within commodified spaces. She performs in a way that is overtly sexual, aligning with Rosalind Gill's claim in "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility" that, sexualized femininity has become a cultural norm for women in media (2007:148).

Picture Mani Bella



In "Made in Cameroon," Coco Argentée brings out a powerful image of the modern Cameroonian woman that is confident, glamorous and proudly rooted in her cultural identity. The phrase "Made in Cameroon" is a sign of patriotism, celebrating the Cameroonian identity while also highlighting elements of female empowerment. By declaring "Made in Cameroon," Coco places herself at the center of national pride. This title reclaims space for women in music, positioning them not just as symbols but as active contributors to Cameroonian identity and pride.

The confidence with which she delivers her lyrics demonstrates her worth and autonomy. She presents herself as successful and proud, challenging traditional notions that women should be silent. As a female artist in a male dominated music industry, her presence is an act of empowerment. Her choice to celebrate herself and her country through her lyrics resists the

objectifying lens imposed on women in popular music. In her music, she displays elegance, authority and sensuality. This shows that she owns her body and does not comply with the imposed beauty standards. The title "Made in Cameroon" also positions her as a special product that is made in Cameroon. Through this, she asserts her control over her narrative as she is not just a woman from Cameroon but she is an excellent musician. By embracing and expressing her sexuality, she challenges societal norms and asserts her autonomy. While this may be read as bodily autonomy and agency, it risks reducing her worth to her physical appearance, reinforcing the same patriarchal gaze that female empowerment seeks to resist.

Excerpt 4

Voici le mbotcho que tu veux dehors	Voici le	Here are the buttocks you want out there
He is Matos que tu veux dehors	Madjandja que tu	the matos you want out there
<i>Madjandja</i> that you		
veux dehors	Jambauno que tu veux dehors	want out there
Si c'est les lolo (j'en ai)		Legs that you want out there
If it is the breasts (I	Si c'est les ndombolo (j'en ai)	
Si c'est les botcho have)	Si c'est les botcho have)	
(j'en ai)		If it is the buttocks (I have)
If it is the <i>botcho</i> (I	Ma dzo na le hihi (j'en ai)	
Ma dzo na le hihi (j'en ai)	Et puis le hèhè (j'en ai)	have)
Et le tiki tiki (j'en ai)	yakoro	If it is the hihi (I have) and the hèhè (I have) and
Ma djo na j'ai meme un bonus	j'ai la taille de	the tiki tiki (I have) yakoro
Longoria les lèvres d'Angelina	Les Lolo de	I even have a bonus
I have the height of Longoria,	foning Le teint de Chantou	Les hanches de
the lips of Angelina, the breast of Foning,	Beyoncé Le coup de rein de Shakira	Chantou's complexion,
Beyoncé's hips, the		Shakira's hip thrust

In celebrating herself as "Made in Cameroon," Coco brands herself as a commodity as can be seen in the above excerpt. Her image becomes something to consume visually and sexually. Though she is in control of her music, the music industry's commercial expectations often push female artists towards hyper-sexualization. Empowerment here might be acceptable only when it is pleasing to the male gaze or capitalist standards. It is common knowledge that women in our society are more identified and associated with their bodies than are men. And so, in order to gain social acceptability, women are under pressure to correct their bodies and appearance, in order to make them conform to the ideals of feminine appearance of their time.

In the lyrics of Argentée's "Made in Cameroon," there is often a focus on specific body parts which can lead to the fragmentation of the female body. This can be seen in phrases such as, "Here are the buttocks you want out there," "Legs that you want out there" "If it is the breasts (I have), If it is the buttocks (I have), If it is the *botcho* (I have), If it is the hihi (I have) and the

hèhè (I have). The focus on physical attributes such as breasts, buttocks, legs and hips underscore how women are reduced to their sexualized parts, valued primarily for their ability to fulfill male desire. By emphasizing particular physical attributes, this song perpetuates the objectification of women by breaking their bodies down into sexualized parts, rather than portraying them as whole persons with depth and complexity.

To this, some feminists have argued that in being occupied with their looks, women treat themselves as things to be decorated and gazed upon. Sandra Bartky in her book, *Femininity and Domination*, uses Marx's theory of alienation to explain the objectification that results from women's pre-occupation with their appearance. She believes that women in patriarchal societies are under a kind of fragmentation, by being too closely identified with their body. Through this fragmentation, a woman is objectified, since her body is separated from her person and is thought as representing the woman (1990:130). In being infatuated with their bodily appearance, Bartky argues that women learn to see and treat themselves as objects to be gazed at and decorated. Postfeminism emphasizes individual choice and Coco seems to have chosen to be sexy, bold and confident. However, critics like Rosalind Gill argue that this idea of choice often turns empowerment into a disguised form of objectification where women are expected to display liberation by conforming to beauty standards.

This celebration of cultural identity is intertwined with a sensual performance that portrays her body as sexually alluring. She pushes boundaries by making her body, pleasure and needs hyper visible often in ways that challenge norms of modesty and respectability. This can be seen as cultural subversion especially within the Beti patriarchy where female sexuality was traditionally controlled or silenced. Her lyrics, clothing and choreography even though empowering, are also objectifying. From a postfeminist perspective, Coco Argentée is both a symbol of empowerment and a participant in a system that objectifies her body. Like "Mani.

Picture

Coco Argentée



Impact and implication

The argument in this paper has revealed that, the representation of women in music is not merely a reflection of cultural norms but an active force shaping attitudes towards gender, sexuality and power. As such, the objectification of women in Bikutsi lyrics contributes to reinforcing patriarchal values, where women are often reduced to their physical appearance or sexual utility. These portrayals influence audience perceptions leading to the normalization of gender stereotypes and the perpetuation of gender inequality.

Moreover, they contribute to the internalization of objectification by female listeners who may come to view their own worth through the lens of commodified femininity. For the artists, the portrayal of their own bodies as objects of desire creates a paradoxical dynamic. On one hand, female Bikutsi performers gain financial success, social influence and widespread recognition. Their sexually provocative lyrics and performances align with market demands, appealing to both local and global audiences that consume sexualized lyrics. This success however, often comes at the expense of their artistic autonomy and identity, as they navigate the pressures of maintaining a commercially viable persona within a patriarchal industry. The artists openly sing about sexual experiences, often positioning their bodies as sites of pleasure and desire. The potential subversiveness of reclaiming sexuality is undermined when these representations primarily cater to male desire and reinforce patriarchal fantasies.

The commercialization of their art, particularly through the objectification of their bodies, may restrict their creative expression, as they are often expected to continuously reproduce lyrics that conform to this sexualized image. Over time, this can lead to a form of self-commodification where the artist's worth and identity become increasingly tied to their marketable sexual appeal. Female Bikutsi music thus, offer a complex cultural space where women simultaneously claim power and are at the same time packaged as products to be sold.

The impact on the audience, particularly young women and girls is equally complex. For female listeners, these lyrics can simultaneously serve as a source of empowerment and limitation. On the one hand, songs that emphasize female sexual expression may offer a sense of liberation, allowing women to embrace their sexuality and challenge restrictive gender norms. However, when this expression is framed primarily through the lens of commodification where a woman's body is presented as something to be bought, sold or consumed, it risks reinforcing harmful stereotypes that reduce women's value to their physical appearance and sexual availability. Male listeners on the other hand are often exposed to lyrics that normalize the objectification of women, perpetuating the idea that women's bodies are commodities to be controlled and exploited. In a wider social context,

these songs contribute to the consolidation of gender inequality, reinforcing patriarchal ideologies that dehumanize women and limit their social roles.

The effects of this commodification extend beyond the immediate music industry. In a globalized world, where African popular music is consumed internationally, the objectification of women in Bikutsi lyrics plays into discourses about the portrayal of African women in global media. The eroticization of African women's bodies for consumption by Western and international audiences reminds us of historical narratives of colonial exploitation, where the female body was sexualized and commodified. Thus, the commodification in Bikutsi lyrics is not only a reflection of local gender politics but also part of a system of global capitalist patriarchy where women's bodies especially those of African descent are continually objectified for profit.

Furthermore, in a postfeminist context, where empowerment is often conflated with the freedom to self-objectify, there is a line between liberation and submission to patriarchal norms. While some argue that female artists in Bikutsi may be reclaiming agency by actively engaging in sexual self-expression, this expression is often filtered through the male gaze. As a result, female empowerment risks being co-opted by the very forces it seeks to challenge, reinforcing rather than dismantling the commodification of women's bodies. Audiences therefore, have to understand these conflicting messages where the boundary between empowerment and objectification becomes increasingly blurred.

Conclusion

The lyrics and performances of female Bikutsi artists reveal a contradictory line between empowerment and objectification. Artists like K-Tino, Lady Ponce, Mani Bella and Coco Argentée redefine the role of women in Cameroonian popular music like the Bikutsi genre, by asserting their agency, desires and economic lives. This paper has affirmed that, these artists have utilized the genre as a platform for empowerment by reclaiming their sexuality and visibility in a genre long dominated by men.

By openly discussing topics such as sexual pleasure and autonomy, these artists challenge societal taboos and assert control over their bodies and narratives. This reclamation serves as a form of resistance against oppressive norms. Through provocative performances and assertive lyrics, these artists confront patriarchal structures, demanding recognition and equality. Their visibility challenges traditional gender roles and inspires other women to assert their rights. Their lyrics challenge patriarchal norms as they vocalize female pleasure and celebrate sexual autonomy, making Bikutsi a site of resistance and self-expression. However, this empowerment often coexists with objectification as the female body becomes an object of trade. Despite the empowering aspects, Bikutsi's erotic elements have led to the objectification of women. By being empowered through hyper-sexualized imagery and provocative content, these artists risk reinforcing the very structures that they seek to subvert. Female Bikutsi music thus, offers a complex cultural space where women simultaneously claim power and are at the same time packaged as products to be sold.

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