

Research Article

Towards the Canonization of Cameroonian Pop: A Geocritical Appreciation of Selected Cameroonian Pop Songs

Tatang Banda*, Adamu Pangmeshi, Gilda Forbang Looh

English Department, University of Bamenda, Bambili, Cameroon

Abstract

This paper examines the conditions under which selected Cameroonian pop songs may be read as candidates for cultural canonization within postcolonial African music studies. While Cameroonian popular music circulates widely across local and diasporic spaces, it remains under-theorized as a corpus capable of generating enduring aesthetic, ideological, and historical value. The paper addresses this gap by interrogating how certain pop songs function not merely as entertainment, but as cultural texts that crystallize collective memory, gendered subjectivities, and glocal negotiations of identity. Through a comparative reading of “Crying for Salvation” by Afo Akom, “Ça Va Aller” by Salatiel, “Jongde Ma” by Tao, and “Esingan” by les Têtes Brûlées, the study hypothesizes that songs become canonizable when they successfully mediate between global musical idioms and localized cultural codes while engaging urgent socio-political concerns. In order to examine Cameroonian pop songs as geocritical texts capable of contributing to cultural canonization through spatial and narrative analysis; Cameroonian pop songs function as geocritical texts that construct complex spatial, temporal, and cultural meanings through intertextuality, referentiality, and multisensory representation, thereby justifying their inclusion within an expanded African cultural canon. Leaning primarily on geocriticism, the article reads these works as cultural artifacts embedded in the socio-political conditions of postcolonial Cameroon and its diasporic extensions. Through close lyrical analysis, sonic interpretation, and attention to performance and reception contexts, the study argues that canonization in Cameroonian pop emerges at the intersection of aesthetic innovation, historical resonance, and transnational circulation. Ultimately, the paper proposes a framework for understanding how popular music participates in shaping national memory and diasporic belonging. These songs are selected because they span different historical moments—linguistic registers and stylistic orientations—ranging from bikutsi, folklore-inflected performance to contemporary Afro-pop, yet converge in their thematic engagement with moral responsibility, resilience, gender construction, and communal continuity.

Keywords

Canonization, Glocalization, Diaspora, Gender Representation, Cameroonian Popular Music

*Correspondence: Tatang Banda (tatangbanda819@gmail.com)

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1. Introduction

Popular music has increasingly emerged as a significant cultural archive through which societies negotiate identity, memory, modernity, and global belonging. In Cameroon, pop music occupies a central position within contemporary cultural production, reflecting the country's linguistic plurality, ethnic diversity, and evolving socio-political realities. Despite its richness and growing transnational appeal, Cameroonian pop music has received comparatively limited scholarly attention within literary and cultural studies, particularly with regard to its potential canonisation as a legitimate body of artistic and intellectual expression. Existing studies have often privileged historical, political, or ethnomusicological approaches, leaving insufficient attention to the spatial, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions through which these songs construct meanings and represent lived realities.

This article therefore examines selected Cameroonian pop songs through the lens of geocriticism in order to explore the relationship between music, space, culture, and identity formation. By analysing the ways in which selected songs reconstruct urban and rural spaces, linguistic hybridity, migration, gender relations, and post-independent realities, the study argues that Cameroonian pop music functions not merely as entertainment but as a dynamic cultural text worthy of critical recognition and canonisation. The article further contends that the canonisation of Cameroonian pop music contributes to the broader project of validating African popular cultures within global literary and cultural discourses. Through its fusion of indigenous traditions and global musical influences, Cameroonian pop articulates alternative narratives of nationhood, modernity, and cultural continuity. The study ultimately demonstrates that selected Cameroonian pop songs embody aesthetic, thematic, and socio-cultural qualities that justify their inclusion within contemporary African cultural canons.

2. Public Interest Statement

Cameroon is situated on the Gulf of Guinea at the crossroads of Western and Central Africa. Covering a land area of approximately 475,000 square kilometres, the country extends from 2° to 13° North latitude and from 9° to 16° East longitude, with a widest span of about 800 km (Global Water Partnership, n.d.). It shares borders with Nigeria, Chad, the Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and the Republic of Congo, and possesses a coastline along the Atlantic Ocean [18]. Often referred to as “Africa in miniature,” Cameroon is distinguished by its ecological and cultural diversity, encompassing over 260 ethnic groups and two official languages, English and French. Its geographical positioning facilitates both maritime and trans-Saharan connections, linking coastal economies to inland regions. This diversity is further reflected in its varied landscapes—coastal plains, volcanic highlands, plateaus, and savannas—and in a population exceeding thirty million inhabitants as of 2022 [18].

Historically, Cameroon's cultural fabric has been shaped by successive encounters with Portuguese, German, British, and French influences. German colonial occupation (1884–1910) was followed by the partition of the territory between Britain and France after World War I, a legacy that continues to inform its bilingual and bicultural identity [18]. Religiously and socially, the country remains pluralistic, with significant Christian and Muslim populations alongside adherents of indigenous belief systems [20, 28]. Economically, Cameroon presents a diversified profile anchored in agriculture, which employs nearly half of the population and produces key exports such as cocoa, coffee, and cotton. Despite modest growth—estimated at 3.5% in 2024—and declining inflation (World Bank, 2024), structural challenges such as youth unemployment and uneven wealth distribution persist. Politically, the country operates as a highly centralised presidential republic under President Paul Biya since 1982, with cultural production, including music, often shaped by state policies and ideological frameworks (Ndongko & Ngwa, 2020; Nyamnjoh, 2005) [1, 3, 4, 18, 36, 38, 39, 41]. While certain genres such as bikutsi have historically been promoted as markers of national identity, others have encountered varying degrees of regulation, underscoring the interplay between political authority and artistic expression.

It is within this socio-historical and cultural matrix that Cameroonian popular music emerges as a dynamic site of meaning-making and cultural negotiation. Popular music, broadly defined as commercially produced music intended for mass audiences (OED, 2023; Merriam-Webster, 2023), assumes a more complex role in the Cameroonian context, where it reflects processes of urbanisation, social transformation, and cultural hybridity (Collins, 2004). As Agawu (2003) observes, African popular music sustains a continuum between tradition and modernity, integrating indigenous forms such as Makossa and Bikutsi with global genres including hip-hop and Afro-pop. This synthesis exemplifies what Robertson (1993) conceptualises as glocalisation—the “simultaneity of universalising and particularising tendencies”—where global musical idioms are adapted to local cultural frameworks (OED, 2023; Appadurai, 1996) [6, 8, 22, 28, 37, 42, 44]. In Cameroon, such hybridity is further reinforced by multilingual expression—Pidgin, French, English, and indigenous languages—and by thematic concerns ranging from migration and identity to politics and social ethics. In this regard, popular music operates not merely as entertainment but as a critical space for identity formation and the production of social meaning (Frith, 1996) [24, 53].

The transnational circulation of Cameroonian music also situates it within broader diasporic frameworks. Diaspora, defined as the dispersion of people from a homeland (OED, 2023), extends in cultural theory to encompass questions of memory, hybridity, and belonging. Safran (1991) emphasises

the persistence of collective memory among diasporic communities, while Clifford (1997) conceptualises diaspora as “dwelling-in-displacement,” characterised by fluid identities and ongoing negotiation of cultural affiliations. Bhabha’s (1994) notion of hybridity further underscores the “in-between spaces” where cultural meanings are continually reconfigured [13, 21, 22, 42, 45]. Cameroonian pop music, circulating across local and diasporic networks, embodies these dynamics by articulating narratives that bridge homeland attachments and transnational experiences.

Equally central to the analysis of popular music is the question of gender representation. Defined as the portrayal of gender identities and roles in cultural texts (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023; OED, 2023), gender representation constitutes a critical site where power relations are constructed and contested. Feminist theorists such as de Beauvoir (1949) foreground gender as a social construct, while Hall (1997) emphasises representation as an active process that produces meaning and shapes ideological discourse. Within musical texts, gendered narratives may reinforce dominant norms or subvert them, thereby contributing to broader debates on agency, identity, and social hierarchy [16, 17, 42].

Against this backdrop, the question of canonization becomes particularly pertinent. Canonization, understood as the process through which certain cultural works are institutionally recognised as authoritative or enduring (OED, 2023; Merriam-Webster, 2023), has traditionally privileged literary production. While Bloom (1975) attributes canon formation to aesthetic value and influence, subsequent critiques by Guillory (1993) and Bourdieu (1993) reveal its entanglement with power, cultural capital, and systems of legitimation. Canonization thus emerges as a contested process involving not only aesthetic judgment but also ideological negotiation and institutional validation [15, 17, 37, 42]. Extending this framework to popular music invites a reassessment of its cultural status, particularly in contexts such as Cameroon, where music functions as a repository of collective memory, socio-political commentary, and cultural identity.

In light of these considerations, this study situates Cameroonian pop songs within the discourse of canon formation by examining their potential to function as geocritical texts. By integrating the interrelated concepts of canonization, glocalisation, diaspora, and gender representation within Cameroon’s complex socio-cultural landscape, the article argues that selected pop songs transcend their apparent ephemerality to embody enduring aesthetic and historical significance. In doing so, it advances the proposition that Cameroonian popular music, through its negotiation of space, identity, and cultural meaning, merits critical recognition within an expanded African cultural canon.

2.1. Background

The process of canon formation remains a deeply contested and dynamic mechanism through which cultural authority is

constructed, negotiated, and historically reproduced. Traditionally, a canon is understood as “a sanctioned or accepted group or body of related works” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), functioning not merely as a neutral repository of aesthetic excellence but as an ideological apparatus that privileges certain cultural expressions while marginalizing others. Classical theories, notably by Matthew Arnold, elevate “the best that has been thought and said” as the standard of cultural legitimacy, thus reinforcing hierarchies that often exclude oral, performative, and popular forms (Arnold, 1869/2011). Michel Foucault, however, contends that such formations are contingent upon discursive regimes that define what is sayable, visible, and worth preserving (Foucault, 1971). [9, 26, 37]. Contemporary critical approaches increasingly interrogate these exclusions, especially within postcolonial contexts where cultural production resists rigid boundaries of genre and epistemology.

Within this paradigm shift, popular music emerges as a vital yet under-theorized site of textuality. Jick (2008) emphasizes that culture should be comprehended as “a whole way of life,” encompassing everyday practices alongside institutionalized art forms (Jick (2008)). Cameroonian pop music exemplifies this expanded field, operating within a complex matrix of local traditions and global cultural flows, which Arjun Appadurai describes as disjunctive landscapes of globalization (Appadurai, 1996). For instance, in songs like ‘Ça va aller’, the recurring refrain functions not simply as linguistic repetition but as a performative assertion of resilience, embodying a collective urban ethos amid socio-economic instability. Similarly, Jongde Ma employs vernacular lyricism to forge affective intimacy and communal identity, highlighting the interplay between language, space, and selfhood. In ‘Essingan’, the rhythmic invocation of indigenous Beti expressions reterritorializes cultural identity, echoing Chinua Achebe’s call for African artistic autonomy through linguistic reclamation (Achebe, 1983) [5, 8, 32, 53]. Meanwhile, ‘Crying for Salvation’ articulates a poetics of spiritual yearning—“Lord, hear our cry”—serving as both a metaphysical plea and an allegory of socio-political disquiet, resonating with African oral lament traditions.

Despite their thematic richness and stylistic diversity, Cameroonian pop songs remain marginal within the canonization processes in African literary and cultural studies. This marginality reflects Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s critique of the epistemological privileging of written over oral traditions, which systematically devalues performative and orature-based knowledge systems (Ngũgĩ, 1986). Additionally, the hybrid and transnational character of these musical texts challenges conventional criteria of canonicity that rely on textual fixity, singular authorship, and institutional endorsement. Yet, as Stuart Hall emphasizes, meaning is always produced within circuits of cultural exchange, where texts—whether written or performed—are sites of negotiation and contestation (Hall, 1997) [30, 40]. Recognizing this, Cameroonian pop songs function as dynamic cultural texts that encode spatial, ideological, and affective meanings, warranting critical recognition.

Geocriticism, as articulated by Bertrand Westphal, offers a

promising framework for examining these songs' spatial dimensions. By emphasizing the representation of space as a multi-perspectival construct shaped by both real and imagined geographies, geocriticism enables a nuanced understanding of how these songs map lived experience (Westphal, 2010). This spatial approach is further informed by Gaston Bachelard's phenomenology of space, which posits that places are imbued with affective and poetic significance (Bachelard, 1964) [10, 51]. Through this lens, songs like 'Ça va aller', 'Jongde Ma', 'Essingan', and 'Crying for Salvation' function as spatial narratives that articulate the tensions between locality and globality, tradition and modernity. Therefore, this study advances a critical intervention "towards the canonization" of Cameroonian pop music by demonstrating how these songs meet, and indeed reshape, established criteria of literary and cultural value. It aims to democratize the canon, challenge entrenched hierarchies, and reposition African popular music within the global archive of recognized cultural production through the integration of geocriticism.

Fundamental to geocriticism are principles such as multifocalization, which involves narrative perspectives from multiple agents—an idea emphasized by Mieke Bal, who notes that different focalizers present divergent viewpoints (Bal, 1997). This resonates with Edward Soja's concept of "Thirdspace," emphasizing the simultaneity of real and imagined geographies (Soja, 1996). Another key principle is spatiotemporality—the interdependence of space and time—derived from Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the *chronotope*, which describes the intrinsic interconnectedness of temporal and spatial relations within narrative (Bakhtin, 1981). While geocriticism privileges spatial analysis, it also considers temporality, exploring how spaces evolve historically and how temporal layers are inscribed within them. Roland Barthes reminds us that "the real is never more than an effect of discourse" (Barthes, 1977), a perspective rooted in Henri Lefebvre's assertion that space is socially produced and historically contingent (Lefebvre, 1991). [11, 12, 14, 34, 48].

Scholars like Robert Tally further argue that geocriticism involves mapping the relationships between narrative and geography, effectively "reading space as one would read a text" (Tally, 2013). This approach intersects with geography, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies, making it a versatile framework for analyzing contemporary cultural expressions such as Cameroonian pop songs. Fredric Jameson underscores the importance of spatial analysis in understanding postmodern and globalized cultures, where "the spatialization of experience" is a defining feature (Jameson, 1991). The intertextuality of space further emphasizes that places are layered textual constructs—each reimagined and reinterpreted across different narratives (Kristeva, 1980). Michel Foucault's concept of *heterotopia* describes spaces that exist in relation to multiple, often contradictory, sites, adding complexity to spatial analysis (Foucault, 1984). [50, 33, 31, 26].

Literature Review

Scholarship on African popular music has expanded considerably over the past three decades, with sustained attention to hybridity, performance practices, global circulation, and socio-political contexts. Within the Cameroonian context, studies have examined genres such as *makossa* and *bikutsi* as sites of cultural negotiation and identity formation. However, relatively little attention has been paid to how spatial representation operates within these musical forms, particularly across the diverse cultural zones of Cameroon. This study builds on existing research while foregrounding spatiality as a central analytical concern, exploring how Cameroonian pop songs—drawn from the Sahel, Grassfield, Fang-Beti, and Sawa zones—construct and negotiate geographical imaginaries.

A dominant thread in the literature is the hybridity of African popular music, often understood as a product of interactions between indigenous traditions and global influences. Collins (2004) conceptualises African popular music as a modern, urban-oriented form that remains rooted in traditional performance practices while responding to contemporary realities. Similarly, Erlmann (1998) situates African music within broader global cultural flows, emphasising circulation and exchange. These perspectives are useful in explaining stylistic evolution in Cameroonian genres such as *bikutsi* (associated with the Fang-Beti cultural zone) and *makossa* (linked to the Sawa coastal region). However, they do not sufficiently explain how such musical forms encode spatial meanings within specific cultural contexts, such as the Sahelian sensibilities reflected in Tao's *Jongde Ma*, the Grassfield cosmology embedded in Afo Akom's *Crying for Salvation*, the Fang-Beti spatial identity in *Les Têtes Brûlées*' *Essingan*, or the urban-coastal dynamics in Salatiel's *Ça va aller*. [2, 3, 22, 23].

Ethnographic and culturally grounded studies provide further insight into the relationship between music, culture, and place. Henry K. Jick's work on Mbum culture, for instance, demonstrates how musical expression is deeply embedded in socio-cultural environments, where performance is tied to communal identity, ritual space, and ecological context. This is particularly relevant to the Sahelian zone, where Tao's music reflects not only linguistic and cultural identity but also spatial realities such as migration, marginality, and resilience. Similarly, Ngongkum's study of Dony Elwood highlights the artist's engagement with cultural identity and social experience within the Grassfield region. While Ngongkum foregrounds themes of belonging and cultural rootedness, the spatial implications of these themes remain under-theorised. Afo Akom's *Crying for Salvation*, situated within the Grassfield cultural matrix, extends this dynamic by invoking both physical and spiritual landscapes, thereby reinforcing the need for a spatially attentive analytical framework.

Existing scholarship on Cameroonian popular music often privileges performance innovation and international circulation. The case of *Les Têtes Brûlées*, for example, has been widely discussed in terms of the modernisation and globalisation of *bikutsi* music. While such studies acknowledge the group's Fang-Beti cultural roots, they rarely interrogate how

songs like Essingan articulate spatial relationships between ancestral land, modern urban spaces, and global stages. Similarly, research on contemporary artists such as Salatiel tends to focus on production style, linguistic hybridity, and global appeal, often overlooking how songs such as *Ça va aller* construct urban spatial narratives rooted in the Sawa coastal experience while simultaneously engaging global audiences. This gap underscores the need for a geocritical approach that foregrounds spatial representation. [4, 32].

Geocriticism, as articulated by Westphal (2010), offers a useful framework for analysing how texts produce plural and multifocal representations of space. Tally (2013) further conceptualises texts as forms of spatial mapping that reveal layered geographical imaginaries. While these approaches have been primarily applied to literary texts, their relevance to music becomes evident when considering songs as narrative and symbolic constructions of place. This study extends geocritical methodology to Cameroonian pop songs, examining how each selected artist constructs distinct yet interconnected spatial imaginaries: the Sahelian space in Tao's work, the Grassfield socio-spiritual landscape in Afo Akom, the Fang-Beti cultural geography in *Les Têtes Brûlées*, and the Sawa urban-coastal environment in Salatiel. [50, 51].

Barber's (1997) exploration of African popular arts highlights how cultural productions create publics and shared imaginaries. While this is useful in understanding the communicative power of music, it does not explicitly account for how space is constructed within these imaginaries. Finnegan (2012), in her study of oral literature, emphasises the adaptability and mobility of cultural forms across contexts. This is particularly relevant to Cameroonian pop songs, which circulate across regions and diasporas. However, this study moves beyond circulation to examine how such mobility produces layered spatial meanings within songs, especially when artists negotiate multiple cultural zones. [13, 25, 53].

The concept of glocalisation (Robertson, 1995) [1, 44] further illuminates the interaction between global and local dynamics in Cameroonian pop music. Each of the selected artists exemplifies this process differently: Tao blends Sahelian musical elements with contemporary production; Afo Akom integrates Grassfield traditions with modern gospel influences; *Les Têtes Brûlées* globalise *bikutsi* while retaining Fang-Beti identity; and Salatiel fuses Sawa musical sensibilities with global pop and Afrobeat. While existing scholarship acknowledges such hybridity, it often stops short of examining how these processes generate spatially layered narratives. This study addresses that limitation by analysing how glocalisation produces overlapping spatial imaginaries within songs.

Massey's (2005) [35] relational theory of space provides an important conceptual lens for this analysis. Her view of space as dynamic, relational, and continuously produced aligns with the ways in which Cameroonian pop songs construct meaning through interactions between different cultural and geographical zones. In this study, space is understood not as a static backdrop but as an active component of meaning-

making, where identities and experiences are negotiated. Thus, Tao's Sahelian narratives, Afo Akom's Grassfield spirituality, *Les Têtes Brûlées*' Fang-Beti performativity, and Salatiel's Sawa urbanism are interpreted as relational spatial constructions.

Despite the valuable contributions of existing scholarship, there remains a significant gap: the absence of sustained geocritical analysis of Cameroonian pop songs across the country's diverse cultural zones. Most studies prioritise hybridity, performance, and socio-political themes, often overlooking how songs function as spatial narratives that actively construct relationships between regions, cultures, and global contexts. By focusing on artists representing the Sahel, Grassfield, Fang-Beti, and Sawa zones, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of Cameroonian pop music as a spatially embedded and nationally representative cultural form.

The originality of this research lies in its integration of geocritical theory with the analysis of Cameroonian pop songs across multiple cultural zones. By grounding the study in specific artists and songs, it moves beyond generalised discussions to demonstrate how music functions as a spatial text. It shows that Cameroonian pop is not only culturally hybrid but also spatially constituted, with meaning emerging through the interaction of diverse geographical imaginaries. In doing so, the study contributes a new dimension to scholarship on African popular music, highlighting the importance of space in understanding cultural production and representation in Cameroon.

2.2. Methodology

There are several methods of collecting oral literature as it occurs within its natural setting. Nol Alembong posits that fieldwork entails careful observation, interviews, and the administration of questionnaires. He argues that the observation method facilitates the collection of data through direct engagement with performance contexts. According to him, this method enables the researcher to pay particular attention to crucial elements such as the physical and social setting of events, interactions between participants, ideas and sentiments expressed, modes of expression, performance aesthetics, as well as the time and duration of performances (Alembong, 1993, pp. 14–17). [7]. This perspective is particularly relevant to the present study, which, although not strictly ethnographic, remains attentive to the cultural and spatial contexts within which Cameroonian pop songs are produced and performed across different regions such as the Sahel, Grassfield, Fang-Beti, and Sawa zones.

In addition to field-oriented approaches, the library research method is indispensable, especially when dealing with already documented, recorded, and published materials. As Furniss (1996) [27] observes, access to oral performances is no longer limited to physical presence, as technological advancements have enabled the recording, storage, and circulation of verbal

art forms across time and space. This observation is particularly significant for this study, which relies on studio-recorded songs by selected Cameroonian artists. These recordings, though mediated, retain essential elements of oral performance, including linguistic expression, cultural symbolism, and spatial references embedded within the lyrics and soundscape.

A fundamental question that arises concerns whether oral literature that has been collected and published can still be considered oral. Finnegan (as cited in Simms, 2008) [47] answers in the affirmative, noting that there is a significant overlap between oral and written forms of literature. She argues that oral literature may be composed, transmitted, or performed in varying combinations of oral and written modes. This position underscores the fluidity between orality and textuality, thereby legitimising the use of recorded and transcribed songs as valid data for analysis in this study. Consequently, Cameroonian pop songs—though recorded in studios—are treated as extensions of oral performance traditions, particularly in their use of language, rhythm, and cultural symbolism.

The implication of this position is that oral and written literatures are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary. In this study, emphasis is placed on both the oral dimensions of the songs and their creative and imaginative qualities. The selected songs—drawn from artists representing different cultural zones of Cameroon, namely the Sahel, Grassfield, Fang-Beti, and Sawa—are analysed as cultural texts that embody both performance and representation. Particular attention is paid to how these songs reflect the lived experiences, identities, and spatial realities of their respective cultural contexts.

Furthermore, the importance of social context in the interpretation of oral forms cannot be overstated. Okpewho (1992) [43] argues that to downplay the social context and mode of performance of oral literature is to present a truncated understanding of its nature. He emphasises that meaning in oral performance emerges not only from the text itself but also from the occasion, audience, performer's creativity, and socio-cultural environment. This insight is central to the present study, which examines Cameroonian pop songs not merely as isolated texts but as performative acts situated within specific cultural and spatial contexts. Thus, in analysing songs by artists from the Sahel, Grassfield, Fang-Beti, and Sawa regions, due attention is given to the relationship between performer, audience, and environment, as well as to the cultural significance of the songs within their respective communities.

These considerations collectively inform the analytical approach adopted in this study. The analysis is guided by geocriticism, which provides a framework for examining how texts construct and represent space. Through this approach, the selected Cameroonian pop songs are analysed as spatial texts that map out relationships between different geographical, cultural, and social locations. In this sense, the methodology aligns with the central aim of the study: to contribute to the canonization of Cameroonian pop songs by demonstrating

their complexity not only as musical compositions but also as spatially grounded cultural narratives.

3. Discussion

This study's core population comprises communities and artists drawn from four major cultural zones of Cameroon—Sahel, Grassfields, Fang-Beti, and Sawa—each characterized by distinctive musical traditions, gendered participation, and sociocultural performance codes. These zones are not merely geographical markers but lived spaces that produce meaning through language, performance, and cultural embodiment. Cameroonian pop songs manifest in diverse sociolinguistic forms reflective of the country's dual linguistic heritage and plural cultural ecologies. Within this framework, this study examines four songs: "Jongde Ma" by Tao (Sahel), "Crying for Salvation" by Afo Akom (Grassfields), "Essingan" by Les Têtes Brûlées (Fang-Beti), and "Ça Va Aller" by Salatiel (Sawa), reading them as geocritical texts that construct space through sound, language, and performance [1-4].

Geocritical Configurations of Space, Language, and Canon in Cameroonian Pop Songs

This section advances the argument that selected Cameroonian pop songs, when read through a geocritical lens, function as culturally embedded texts whose linguistic hybridity, spatial imagination, and performative aesthetics construct distinct yet interconnected cultural geographies; in doing so, they mediate between local experience and global circulation, thereby fulfilling key conditions of canonization as sites of enduring aesthetic value, socio-political engagement, and cultural memory (OED, 2023; Bloom, 1975; Guillory, 1993; Bourdieu, 1993) [15, 17, 29, 42]. Within the Sahelian cultural zone, Tao's "Jondè Ma" opens with the lines: "Jondè, jondè mà, händé dòo tati fo jondè Gòddò fèrè dé. Hèn finibò fòndùdè, sánne händè fúttà ndòndè. Wàyóo hènfinibò, fòndùdè sánne fúttà ndòndè. Wóondijè finibè sùkali Kàmbè wúndùkò mahbè."

This translates as: "Stay, stay at my side; today like this, do not envy another person's position. We are awake. Hello, we begin things today. Let us wake up; sit down and converse. Some are born with a golden spoon in the mouth." Through this repetitive oral structure, the song encodes a Sahelian ethics of vigilance and communal responsibility, where space is constructed not as individual ambition but as collective survival. As Sapir (1929/2014) observes, language mediates social reality (p. 209), a position reinforced by Whorf (1956), who argues that linguistic structures shape perception (p. 213) [1, 46, 52]. Here, the language of the song produces a spatial consciousness grounded in socio-economic awareness and moral restraint, transforming performance into a lived geocritical experience. The communal and dialogic nature of the performance further aligns with glocal dynamics, where local values are articulated through forms that resonate beyond their immediate context (Robertson, 1993; Appadurai, 1996) [8, 44].

A similar interplay between language, culture, and spatial

identity emerges in the Fang-Beti context through *Les Têtes Brûlées*’ “Essingan”: “Te télé, te télé me ndeg Iban ooo (Ziliyang) Te télé, te télé me ndeg Iban ooo (Ziliyang) Essingang (1/0) Mbongo tchobi ayone édéa, Essingang (2/0). Tedi nyek ve kup, Essingang (3/0). Okiri ma ye wokus Mercedes, Essingang (4/0). Essingang adang minal abui, Essingang, Aloo. International Zubaki show.”

The English rendering—“Do not put your leg in the water our family preserved through generations... Essingan gives Mercedes... cleanse yourself... thank you very much”—reveals a dense layering of ancestral memory, moral injunction, and modern aspiration. As Callaway (1986) asserts, language is inseparable from thought systems (pp. 211–227) [19], and in this instance, the retention of Ewondo functions as a repository of cultural cognition. The invocation of “Essingan” operates as a performative anchor, producing what Bakhtin (1981) conceptualises as a chronotope, where time and space converge within the act of performance [11]. The group’s fusion of traditional linguistic forms with electric instrumentation and global stage aesthetics exemplifies Whorf’s notion of reality as a “kaleidoscopic flux” organised through language [2, 11, 16, 19]. Rather than diluting local identity, this synthesis re-inscribes it within global circuits, illustrating how Cameroonian pop negotiates hybridity while sustaining cultural continuity.

The Grassfields region presents a more explicitly critical spatial construction in Afo Akom’s “Crying for Salvation,” where the multilingual lament unfolds: “Hiyaaah damajong mene kou ma ngoun ah... les choses qui arrivent aux autres commencent déjà à m’arriver... le chemin du succès n’est pas du tout facile... où est donc l’avenir de ces enfants... pendant que les autres sont là pour lutter pour leur ventre...” Translated as “Lamentation... what happens to others now happens to me... the path to success is not easy... where is the future of these children... while others struggle for survival,” the song articulates a moral geography defined by socio-economic precarity and generational anxiety. This aligns with Tala’s (2003) conception of social poetry as a repository of communal experience (p. 43) [3, 4, 49], where music functions as both critique and testimony. Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of the social production of space further illuminates how the Grassfields emerge here as a lived environment shaped by inequality and ethical tension [34]. The hybridity of language—French, English, and indigenous expressions—reinforces the glocal interplay identified by Appadurai (1996), situating the song within broader transnational flows while retaining its local specificity [8, 34]. In this sense, the lamentation becomes not only an aesthetic device but also a socio-political intervention that strengthens the song’s claim to canonizable significance.

This trajectory culminates in the Sawa urban space as articulated in Salatiel’s “Ça Va Aller”: “La rue n’est pas pour premier de la classe. Je n’ai pas sang royal, mais j’ai trouvé ma place. J’avance même si lourde est ma croix... Ma famille doit manger... Peu importe la durée de la nuit, le soleil finira par

se lever... Mami est à l’hôpital... situation critical...” The English version —“The street is not for the best student... I do not have royal blood but I have found my place... my family must eat... no matter how long the night, the sun will rise... my mother is in the hospital... critical situation”—constructs the urban environment as a space of resilience, negotiation, and aspiration. The metaphor of “the street” encapsulates a lived reality that contrasts formal education with survival economies, resonating with Soja’s conception of lived space as the site of social practice (Soja, p. 6). Linguistic hybridity once again plays a central role, as French, English, and Pidgin converge to articulate a distinctly urban Cameroonian identity. At the same time, the song foregrounds gendered expectations through its emphasis on provision, responsibility, and familial obligation, reflecting Hall’s (1997) view of representation as a site of meaning-making and de Beauvoir’s (1949) notion of gender as socially constructed [1, 16, 30, 48].

These musical texts demonstrate that Cameroonian pop songs operate as geocritical archives in which language, performance, and spatial identity intersect to produce culturally resonant meanings. From the communal ethics of the Sahel to the ancestral continuity of the Fang-Beti, the socio-political critique of the Grassfields, and the urban resilience of the Sawa, each song constructs a distinct spatial narrative while participating in broader processes of glocalisation, diaspora, and identity formation. In doing so, they exemplify the dynamic interplay between aesthetic innovation and cultural authority that underpins canon formation, thereby substantiating their potential inclusion within an expanded African cultural canon (Guillory, 1993; Bourdieu, 1993) [15, 29].

4. Results

This study demonstrates that Cameroonian pop songs, when examined through a geocritical framework, function as complex cultural texts that map spatial identities, encode social realities, and mediate between local specificity and global circulation, thereby reinforcing their eligibility for canonization within African cultural discourse (Appadurai, 1996; Bhabha, 1994; Achebe, 1975) [5, 8, 13]. The selected songs by Salatiel and Afo Akom, in particular, exemplify multifocalisation, simultaneously invoking Cameroon, Africa, and the global condition. This aligns with Appadurai’s (1996) concept of “ethnoscapes,” where shifting global flows reshape local identities (p. 33), while the linguistic blending of French, English, Pidgin, Camfranglais, and indigenous languages reflects Bhabha’s (1994) “Third Space,” in which meaning emerges through cultural negotiation (p. 56). Such hybridity not only supports Achebe’s (1975) argument that English can be adapted to African realities (p. 62), but also gestures toward Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s concerns regarding linguistic domination. Geocritically, this multilingualism produces a layered spatial narrative that connects local lived experience to transnational cultural flows, thereby situating Cameroonian pop within a global yet culturally grounded framework (Appadurai,

1996) [5, 8, 13, 40].

Performance remains central to this spatial construction of meaning. Across the four cultural zones, the songs are embedded in dialogic performance traditions characterised by call-and-response structures, rhythmic repetition, bodily gestures, and audience participation. These elements transform performance into a shared experiential space in which meaning is co-produced by artist and audience. Evening performance contexts and communal gatherings further root the songs within lived temporalities, while modest dressing across regions reinforces shared cultural values. Thus, performance operates as a geocritical site where space, time, and social interaction converge [5, 8, 13]. A distinct stylistic configuration emerges across the songs, warranting focused attention as a core dimension of their canonizing potential.

5. Stylistic Configurations and Aesthetic Encoding in Cameroonian Pop

The stylistic architecture of the selected songs is anchored in repetition, imagery, symbolism, and metaphor, all of which function as aesthetic and cognitive devices that reinforce their thematic depth and cultural resonance [53]. Repetition, a defining feature of oral traditions, is evident in expressions such as “hiyaaah” in *Crying for Salvation*, “Essingan” in *Essingan*, “Jónde ma” in *Jónde Ma*, and “ça va aller” in *Ça va aller*. These repeated forms operate as incantatory structures that intensify emotional engagement and facilitate communal participation. The recurrence of the first-person pronoun further enhances authenticity, while performance practices—clapping, dance, and vocal response—embody repetition, transforming the songs into shared spatial-temporal experiences.

Imagery across the songs constructs symbolic geographies of inequality, aspiration, and social positioning. In Tao’s *Jónde Ma*, the line “Wáyóo hènfinibò, fòndúdè sánne fùttà ndòndè. Wóondijè finibè súkali Kàmbè wúndùkò mahbè” translates as “they are born with a golden spoon in the mouth,” evoking entrenched socio-economic disparities while discouraging comparison. Similarly, Afo Akom’s *Crying for Salvation* employs the metaphor “après mon constat, la voiture a été fabriquée pour suivre la route et non la route pour suivre la voiture”—“from my analysis, the vehicle was created to follow the road and not the road...”—to emphasise structured struggle and the inevitability of life’s constraints. In *Les Têtes Brûlées’ Essingan*, “Mbongo tchobi ayone Edéa, Essingan”—“Mbongo tchobi cries in Edéa”—functions as a culturally embedded metaphor of fertility and union within Fang-Beti cosmology.

Symbolism further deepens the aesthetic complexity of the songs. References to “Mercedes,” “car,” “golden spoon,” and “sun” juxtapose traditional values with modern aspirations, creating a symbolic dialogue between past and present. The invocation of *Essingan* itself operates as a ritual symbol, transforming the performance into a culturally encoded space

where meaning is transmitted through oral and performative means rather than linear narration. This aligns with Bhabha’s (1994) concept of hybridity, where cultural meanings are negotiated within intersecting symbolic systems. Through these stylistic devices, the songs embody what Whorf describes as a “kaleidoscopic flux” of reality organised through language [13, 52]. The artists thus reconfigure modernity through a Cameroonian linguistic and rhythmic framework, transforming language and sound into instruments of cultural cognition.

6. Thematic Articulations of Space, Power, and Survival

The thematic concerns emerging from the songs further reinforce their geocritical and canonizing significance by articulating socio-political realities and cultural values across the four regions. Afo Akom’s *Crying for Salvation* foregrounds themes of corruption, marginalisation, and generational anxiety: “On dit souvent que les enfants d’aujourd’hui ils sont les grands de demain... où est donc l’avenir de ces enfants... pendant que les autres sont là pour lutter pour leur ventre...” translated as “It is often said that children are the leaders of tomorrow... where then is their future... while others struggle only for their stomachs.” This lament externalises the socio-economic plight of many Cameroonians, where systemic corruption undermines youth potential and national development.

This condition is echoed in Salatiel’s *Ça va aller*: “La rue n’est pas pour premier de la classe. Je n’ai pas sang royal, mais j’ai trouvé ma place. J’avance même si lourde est ma croix... Ma famille doit manger... J’ai le loyer à payer...” translated as “The street is not for the best student... I do not have royal blood but I have found my place... my family must eat... I have rent to pay.” Here, the urban Sawa space is constructed as a site of survival and resilience, where formal education does not guarantee economic stability. The metaphor of “the street” encapsulates lived realities of marginalisation and informal economies, reinforcing the geocritical notion of space as socially produced.

Themes of gender and social relations are also evident in Tao’s *Jónde Ma*: “Jónde, jónde mà... fo jónde Gòddò fèrè dé... Hèn finibò fòndúdè...” translated as “Stay, stay at my side... do not envy another’s position... let us sit and converse.” The song promotes ideals of partnership, domestic responsibility, and collective effort, reflecting broader cultural expectations surrounding marriage and gender roles. Across the songs, gender representation emerges as a regulatory mechanism through which social norms are reinforced and negotiated.

Collectively, these thematic articulations position Cameroonian pop songs as vehicles of social commentary and cultural reflection. As Finnegan (1970) observes, oral performance can function as an alternative to formal media in expressing public opinion (p. 237), while Jick (2008) highlights the coexistence of pleasure and critique within popular song

(p. 80) [25, 32]. The songs analysed here embody this duality, combining aesthetic enjoyment with socio-political critique, thereby enhancing their cultural relevance and canonizing potential.

7. Recommendations

This study recommends the systematic inclusion of Cameroonian pop music within academic and cultural institutions as a legitimate corpus for scholarly inquiry and canon formation. Greater interdisciplinary engagement—particularly across geocriticism, linguistics, and performance studies—is necessary to deepen understanding of African popular music as a site of knowledge production. Cultural policymakers should prioritise the preservation and promotion of these musical forms as part of Cameroon’s intangible heritage, while educational curricula should incorporate them as texts that reflect both aesthetic and socio-political dimensions of cultural life. Furthermore, the dual function of Cameroonian pop as both entertainment and critique should be sustained. As Jick (2008) notes, the popularity of such songs lies in their capacity to merge pleasure with profound social commentary, encompassing enjoyment in performance alongside critical engagement with societal issues (p. 80) [1-4, 25, 32]. Supporting this balance will ensure the continued relevance and accessibility of the genre.

This contention highlights and underscores the relevance of recreation as discussed in this study relative to Cameroonian pop songs in particular. Consequently, this essay argues that what is true of the Cameroonian pop songs under reference in this research is also true of oral literature as a whole. This dual function underscores the canonizing potential of Cameroonian pop: it is both aesthetic and ideological, local and global, performative and spatial.

8. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Cameroonian pop music functions not only as a form of entertainment but also as a vital cultural and geographical text that reflects the complexities of national identity, space, and place. Through a geocritical lens, the selected songs reveal how localities within Cameroon influence musical production and reception, thereby contributing to the emerging canon of Cameroonian pop. The songs serve as sonic maps that navigate the social, political, and cultural landscapes of the nation, offering a nuanced understanding of Cameroonian identity in a globalized world. As the genre continues to evolve and gain recognition, its canonization will further legitimize its cultural significance and foster a deeper appreciation of Cameroon’s diverse geographical narratives. Ultimately, this geocritical appreciation underscores the importance of integrating spatial and cultural analysis in the study of African popular music, positioning Cameroonian pop as a vital site for cultural discourse and national

self-representation. Cameroonian pop songs, when read geocritically, are not merely artistic expressions but spatial texts that map cultural identity across Sahel, Grassfields, Fang-Beti, and Sawa regions. Through language, performance, embodiment, and audience interaction, these songs construct multidimensional spaces that justify their inclusion within a developing canon of African popular literature.

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Author Contributions

Tatang Banda: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Resources, Investigation, Writing – original draft

Adamu Pangmeshi: Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Software, Validation

Gilda Forbang Looh: Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Visualization

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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