Chapter 11

Beautifying Controversial African Politicians Through Metaphors: A Study of the Cameroonian Media Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This chapter critically analyses the use of conceptual metaphors in selected Cameroonian newspapers articles aimed at beautifying or criticizing President Paul Biya and his aides. The selected articles covered a 2018 US-Cameroon diplomatic crisis triggered by US Ambassador’s advice to Biya to relinquish power. In the light of a textual analysis of the corpus, the chapter argues that journalists and citizen journalists whose articles were considered for this study portrayed Biya and his close aides along a variety of metaphors. Positivity or negativity in the metaphors used in the media text generally depended on their authors’ tones and editorial policies. The pro-government and neutral media voices (notably Cameroon Tribune and Mutations) mostly used metaphors such as nation building (representing Biya as an accomplished nation builder) and scaling (by which Biya and his aides were judged or rated high above standards). Meanwhile, anti-government media outlets (such as Cameroon Concorrds, Cameroon Post, Le Messager and Bareta News) used such metaphors as bestiality, scatology/garbage, theatre, oppression, transgression, and sickness/handicap among others, to criticize Biya’s rule.

INTRODUCTION

Popular representations of politics in Africa have mostly perpetrated the negative stereotypes of Black African Heads of States and their respective governments. According to these popular representations, a typical African Head of State is corrupt, dictatorial, selfish and problematically conservative. Briefly

speaking the African politician is such a controversial figure, a veritable “Nazareth” from where nothing good can ever come (Servant, 2003). Furthermore, by the same popular representations, African governments and Head of States constitute some of the principal socio-political forces responsible for the slow economic growth observed in the Black continent. They (African Heads of States) usually come to power through undemocratic means (rigged elections, political intimidations, demagogy or coup d’états) and use similar unorthodox means to unduly maintain themselves in power for decades as well as to ultimately perpetrate a failed leadership in their respective countries. Such a failed leadership has subtly been maintaining countries of the continent in the abysses of poverty and pauperism.

The negative representations of Black African leadership mentioned above are most often observed in the Western media and in times of socio-political or economic crises occurring on African soil. A recent case in point is the popular Equatoguinean Vice President’s ill-gotten wealth saga in which Teodorin Obiang (the Equato-Guinean president’s son) was taxed with embezzling his country’s huge petroleum income to spend it on the purchase of fanciful and sumptuous palaces in the US, France and other European countries. The issue led to a series of confiscations of Teodorin Obiang’s purchased estates in France, inspiring tons of foreign media’s articles and programs that mostly painted the Equatoguinean leadership in black. Furthermore, the political incident subsequently led to tensed diplomatic relations between France and Equatorial Guinea, shaping the Equatoguinean social discourse for a good part of 2017.

A similar crisis occurred in Cameroonian in May 2018 after the U.S. ambassador to Cameroon (Mr. Paul Barlerin) advised President Paul Biya to envision relinquishing power ahead of presidential elections that were scheduled to be organized that same year. Barlerin actually beseeched Cameroon’s strongman (in power since 1982) to think about his legacy and to emulate the examples of Nelson Mandela and George Washington who did not seek re-election at the end of their respective presidential mandates. In concrete terms, Mr. Balerin said that:

*The President and I discussed upcoming elections. I suggested to the President that he should be thinking about his legacy and how he wants to be remembered in the history books to be read by generations to come, and proposed that George Washington and Nelson Mandela were excellent models. (The US Embassy in Cameroon, 2018, para 9)*

Made only few months to the Cameroon’s 2018 presidential elections, the ambassador’s statement engendered a compounded polemic that almost triggered a diplomatic crisis between Cameroon and the U.S. The statement equally inspired the programs and articles of many local and international media outlets. These outlets focused on a re-assessment of Biya’s 36 years in power vis-à-vis the prospects of democratization and good governance in the country as well as vis-à-vis economic development. Mr. Barlerin’s act and pronouncements also motivated the international media to negatively brand the Cameroonian government in general and the Paul Biya administration in particular. In effect, the foreign media mainly used the incident to predominantly associate Cameroon and its political leaders with autocracy, failed leadership and political tensions, thereby re-enforcing and naturalizing decades-old negative stereotypes of Paul Biya’s country.

However, the diplomatic incident highlighted above inspired not only anti-Biya criticisms from the public opinion and the international community; but waves of counter criticisms from government members and allies. In effect, while “detectors” of the Cameroonian governments aired anti-government vituperations, advocates of government (many of whom were members of the Cameroonian government and political movements that are innocuous to government) seized these same given opportunities to