

# The invention of the "Kumba age"

## How has the age of individuals become dynamic in Cameroon?

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### Summary:

This article analyses the way in which individuals react to age barriers instituted by the state in access to the civil service in Cameroon. The instrumentation of civil age shows that this artefact of identification has a political meaning that makes it possible to classify and categorise individuals competing for access to positions. The instituted age thresholds are sortings that determine the right to employment and the end of employability. Faced with their discriminatory effects, individuals engage in various processes of modifying their age whenever it conflicts with their subjectivities. This age-related manipulation of identity is becoming critical with the advent of the biometric state, which is more attentive than the documentary state to the management of personal data. This article shows that age modification practices, far from being a simple disruption to the social game, herald the advent of a society in which age becomes dynamic, with consequences for civil identification.

**Keywords:** civil service, instrumentation, identification, Kumba age, Cameroon.

### Abstract:

This article analyses how individuals react to state-instated age barriers in access to public office in Cameroon. The instrumentation of civil age shows that this artefact of identification has a political meaning that makes possible the classification and categorisation of individuals competing for positions. The instituted age thresholds are selective sorting that determine the right to employment and the end of employability. Faced with their discriminatory effects, individuals engage in various processes of modifying their age whenever it conflicts with their subjectivities. This age-related manipulation of identity is becoming critical, however, with the advent of the biometric state, which is more attentive than the documentary state to the management of personal data. This article shows that age modification practices, far from being a disruption to the social game, announce the advent of a society where age becomes dynamic with consequences for civil identification.

**Keywords:** civil service, instrumentation, identification, Kumba age, Cameroon.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In 2019, A. Bakary (14), a pupil at a secondary school in Yaoundé, was a candidate for the Brevet d'étude du 1<sup>er</sup> cycle. His civil age, known to his classmates, had appeared on his report card since the age of 6<sup>ème</sup>. But in March 2020, his classmates were surprised to discover that he was 3 years younger. The birth certificate submitted for his exam file states that he was born in 2009 instead of 2006, making him 11 years old. To justify himself, Bakary repeats his parents' argument that "you have to have qualifications when you're young in order to remain eligible for civil service competitions for as long as possible". And he adds, "getting younger would reduce the age problems associated with irregular schooling"<sup>2</sup>. In Cameroon, this experience concerns students who wish to enter a civil service to which access is limited by age thresholds, civil servants at the end of their careers who wish to postpone their retirement and sportsmen and women who dream of an international career. Sometimes, it is the institutions themselves that are modified to bring them into line with the required age, as illustrated by the story of Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni. At the age of 74 in 2016 and approaching the presidential eligibility threshold of 75, he amended the constitution to stand for re-election in 2021<sup>3</sup>. In Ghana, where "age is just a number", the press regularly publishes notices of changes to the birth dates of public officials close to retirement<sup>4</sup>. In 2021, the Congolese Football Federation lodged a complaint of fraud against the Gabonese Football Federation concerning a Gabonese player who was allegedly born in 1990 in the Democratic Republic of Congo to Congolese parents, but who had changed his age when he joined the profession. The case was dismissed by the disciplinary panel of the Confederation of African Football (CAF), which found that the accusation was not based on sufficient material evidence<sup>5</sup>. Cameroonians use the expression "Kumba age" to refer to the age obtained by individuals after changing their civil age<sup>6</sup>. Kumba is the name of a town in the south-west region of the country. In the 1990s, the town gained a certain notoriety when it became known that official documents (birth certificates, national identity cards, driving licences, etc.) were issued there with unusual speed; perhaps due to the existence of decongested public services or better bureaucratic organisation? Since then, its name has been used to designate any document that has been illegally altered.

At the root of these efforts by individuals to change their civil age lies the principle of age thresholds that determine access to a large number of institutions. Unlike in a country like France, where these barriers have been systematically removed in the name of equality before the law and the administration<sup>7</sup>, access to the civil service in Cameroon is still subject to age thresholds set by the grandes écoles where future civil servants are trained. In a context where the State remains the main employer, getting a public job or staying in one is a challenge that involves transactions and tricks for young people looking for work as well as for civil servants at the end of their careers: in Cameroonian society, retirement can very quickly mean a return "to the neighbourhood", or even

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Philippe Combessie, Guillaume Vadot and Noé le Blanc for their comments, which helped to enrich this text.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with a focus group in a Yaoundé secondary school, September 2020.

<sup>3</sup> J. Moore, "Uganda Lifts an Age Limit, Paving the Way for a President for Life," *New York Edition*, 21 December 2017, p. 8, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/20/world/africa/uganda-president-museveni-age-limit.html>>

<sup>4</sup> One example is the 800 teachers who applied to change their age in order to postpone their retirement, prompting fierce public protests. See E. Ohene, "Letter from Africa: Why age is just a number in Ghana", *BBC News*, 14 May 2017, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-39859738>>

<sup>5</sup> P. Juillard, "Affaire kanga: la RDC déboutée, le Gabon bien jouer la CAN!", *Foot 365*, 26 May 2021, <<https://www.football365.fr/affaire-kanga-rdc-deboutee-gabon-jouera-bien-can-9969784.html>>

<sup>6</sup> The change is generally to reduce the age and very little to increase it.

<sup>7</sup> With a few exceptions, such as access to special forces.

"to the village", i.e. exclusion from a restricted social world reserved for individuals with a formal and stable job<sup>8</sup>. The "Kumba age" thus became a response by individuals to their exclusion from competition for positions in the civil service, in a context of job shortages. The economic crisis of 1980-1990 had varying effects on individuals' biographies, sometimes preventing them from being eligible for public recruitment because of the existence of age thresholds. Civil age, as the age shown on identity documents<sup>9</sup>, is thus an administrative artefact whose manipulation cannot be understood independently of the postcolonial context.

Sociologists who have looked at the theme of age in Africa have so far been interested in the rites of passage to adult status [Droz, 2015], the condition of social cadets [Beuvier, 2020] or the ageing of populations [Sajoux, 2015; Sajoux, Golaz and Lefèvre, 2015]. The category of 'age' has regularly been approached through the prism of a study of African youth [Peatrik, 2020], by describing young people's living conditions, their pathways to empowerment, their social trajectories or their experiences of subjectivation [Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000; Gastineau and Golaz, 2016; Amougou, 2016; Eyenga, 2021]. Some works have highlighted the emergence of age as a statistical category responding to a national and international demand for data to guide public policy, emphasising the way in which the age category imposed 'from above' has been reappropriated 'from below' to support political mobilisations [Golaz et al, 2016]. These works consider civil age as a principle of selection and socio-political hierarchisation, but without addressing the way in which this category can be contested, subverted and redefined by individuals caught up in configurations deemed discriminatory. This article aims to fill this gap by looking at how individuals react to the civil age thresholds instituted in employment policies. The questioning of this 'age policing' is thus to be placed in the context of an economy of identity goods, the analysis of which makes it possible to grasp the agentivity of individuals who have the capacity to mobilise not just one 'identity', but several, all of them fluid, and as such need to be 'constantly negotiated' [Mbembe, 1992]. Beyond its apparent naturalness or linearity, civil age is therefore "a political, historical and contingent category, just like gender, class, sexuality or race, which it also helps to signify" [Rennes, 2009: 9]. Our analysis thus extends Juliette Rennes's reflections on the 'tyranny of age', which challenge the commodification of the ages of life in order to think of age categories not only as a statistical tool used by the State, but also as a classification that is contested and reconfigured by social actors. In this way of thinking, civil age is precisely an identity that is by definition in flux, which distinguishes it from other types of identity that are apparently more 'essential' (such as ethnicity or gender) but which, in terms of age identities, could also be understood in a more flexible way.

Our data come from a survey conducted from September 2020 to March 2021 in a secondary school in Yaoundé. We conducted a *focus group* with pupils in a class of 3<sup>e</sup> and Terminale about their experiences of age change. This corpus of research was supplemented by twenty informal interviews conducted with young unemployed graduates, civil servants, retired people, sportsmen and sportswomen and parents of pupils. Like research on corruption, the study of the 'Kumba age' focuses on 'practices that are largely clandestine or hidden, and on highly normative representations' [Blundo and Olivier de Sardan, 2010:10]. Apart from data on suppletive judgements handed down for late declarations of birth, there are currently no official statistics on people who have changed their age. In addition to the cases observed in schools and sports centres,

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<sup>8</sup> In Cameroon, less than 10% of the working population has access to the 'job security' offered by the civil service (Ngathe Kom and Njimbon, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> The civil age in question here is distinct from "calendar age", which corresponds to the number of days elapsed since birth; from "physical age", which refers to physiological transformations of the body and appearance; and from "social age", which refers to the age socially instituted by socio-professional status, or life-cycle ceremonies, etc.

the extent of the phenomenon in public services is revealed by the difficulty encountered by police officers in the civil identification department in producing national identity cards or passports because of the number of individuals with multiple identities [Eyenga et al., 2022]. In the absence of statistics, it is still possible to understand the phenomenon through a qualitative approach, based on the subjective meaning that individuals give to these practices.

After showing that the institutionalisation of civil age is a matter of biopolitics, our analysis looks at age policing in relation to sorting practices on entry to the civil service. It then describes the fear that drives future retirees and young people who are sometimes forced to change their civil age in order to remain eligible for employment. The analysis concludes by looking at the future of the practice of changing civil age with the advent of biometric government.

### **Instrumentation and the biopolitics of age**

Instrumentation refers to "the set of problems posed by the choice and use of tools that make it possible to materialise and operationalise government action" [Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2005: 12]. This concept is useful for understanding the rationale behind the authorities' choice of one civil age threshold over another, and the effects of these choices. Since ancient times, civil age has been a variable used to assign social roles [Gaxie, 1978]. Civil age is aligned with calendar age, but the age classes distinguished are social constructs that determine the status of individuals [Razé, 2013]: depending on your civil age, you may or may not be entitled to social protection, you may or may not be prosecuted, you may or may not have access to a job, and so on. In the case of public employment, the institutionalisation of age thresholds as an instrument of government is justified by the need to ensure that civil servants have a career that will guarantee them an adequate pension, while at the same time acting as a socio-technical device for regulating the flow of candidates for public jobs. "In fact, the state, administrative and legal organisation of society into age groups in the school system, the army or through welfare policies has often been constructed as a measure to rationalise and equalise lives" [Rennes, 2009:7]. The introduction of a low civilian age threshold for admission to the civil service also reflects a desire to ensure the homogeneity of promotions, by focusing on people who have recently graduated from the education system<sup>10</sup>.

While civil age thresholds are "carriers of values, nourished by an interpretation of the social and precise conceptions of the mode of regulation envisaged" [Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2005: 13], they acquire an appearance of naturalness because the state has "a power of constitution as an essentially political power to make what is said exist" [Bourdieu, 2015: 87]. Presented as axiologically neutral and indifferently available tools, age categories mask and euphemise power relationships. The authority that sets the thresholds establishes divisions that are relatively uncorrelated with any biological criteria. For example, we might wonder why Cameroonian law allows a 23-year-old to apply for a senior officer's post in the army, but prohibits him from doing so when he reaches 27. Civilian age is therefore not just an element of identification, but a real socially instituted symbolic capital. Age thresholds are mobile barriers that can be moved, redefined and removed.

### **The age police, sorting at the entrance to the civil service**

The civil service covers all staff employed by public services [Pochard, 2011]. Article 12 of the decree of 7 October 1994 on the general status of the civil service states that access to the civil service is open to anyone of Cameroonian nationality without discrimination. However, article 13 states that "no one may be recruited as a civil servant unless they are at least 17 years old and no more than 35 years old for civil servants in categories A and B, and at least 17 years old and no

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<sup>10</sup> See < [https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/article\\_jo/JORFARTI000001337001](https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/article_jo/JORFARTI000001337001)>.

more than 30 years old for civil servants in categories C and D". This decree, which claims not to discriminate in any way, enshrines the principle of discrimination by setting age thresholds as a condition of eligibility for the civil service (although this condition is waived for people with disabilities)<sup>11</sup>. A number of legal studies have demonstrated the discriminatory nature of age requirements in law [Gosseries, 2009], especially as this criterion "can easily interfere with other discriminatory criteria and, as a result, lead to the phenomenon of multiple or intersectional discrimination" [Gualco, 2015: 196].

This discriminatory quality becomes even more obvious when we look at the very specific way in which the age condition is sometimes applied, particularly with regard to eligibility for certain civil service posts. For example, for the competitive entrance examination to the *École Militaire Interarmées* (EMIA) : a candidate for the "A" stream (second lieutenant grade) must be aged between 18 and 23, a candidate for the "B1" stream (non-commissioned officer grade) must not be over 30, as must a candidate for the "D" stream (civilian holding a doctorate in general medicine, pharmacy, dental surgery or veterinary medicine), B2" candidates (non-commissioned officers with a degree in higher education or engineering) may be up to 32 years old, while "C" candidates (civilians with a degree in higher education or engineering) may be up to 26<sup>12</sup>.

The other competitive examinations for entry to the civil service follow a similar pattern. For the gendarmerie competitive examination, a candidate for the rank of "non-commissioned officer in the gendarmerie" must be aged between 18 and 23, as must a candidate for the rank of "student gendarme", while the age limit for a candidate for the rank of "non-commissioned officer in the gendarmerie (military health option)" is 28. Candidates for the *École Nationale d'Administration et de Magistrature* (ENAM) must be at least 17 and no more than 32; candidates for the *École Nationale Supérieure de la Police* (ENSP) must be at least 17 and no more than 30; candidates for the *École Normale Supérieure* (ENS) must be no more than 28 for the 1<sup>er</sup> cycle and 32 for the 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle; The *Institut des Relations Internationales du Cameroun* (IRIC) does not recruit anyone over the age of 32. At the *Institut National de la Jeunesse et des Sports* (INJS), candidates must be at least 17 and no more than 31 for the external competitive examination, and no more than 40 for the internal competitive examination. Recruitment of contract staff, who do not have to sit a competitive examination, is also subject to age criteria. For example, candidates for the post of journalist must be at least 17 and no more than 34 years of age<sup>13</sup>; for assistant labour and social security inspectors, at least 17 and no more than 29 years of age<sup>14</sup>.

As for public universities, they usually practice "numerical replacement", i.e. recruitment to fill posts vacated by lecturers who have resigned, retired or died in service. There is no age requirement for this type of recruitment. In 2019, however, the Ministry of Higher Education has launched a special programme to recruit 2,000 university teachers over three years, with an age threshold set at 45. This threshold led to protests, some of them vociferous, from those excluded from the

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<sup>11</sup> People with disabilities who have completed vocational or educational training are given preference for employment and benefit from a five-year age exemption when being recruited in the public and private sectors. Disabled people with the same qualifications have equal access to employment. See Articles 1 and 2 of the 1992 Labour Code; Art.38 & 39 of Law no. 2010/002 of 13 April 2010 on the protection and promotion of people with disabilities; § 13, 14 and 15 of Decree no. 2018/6233/PM of 26 July 2018 setting out the terms of application of Law no. 2010/002 of 13 April 2010 on the protection and promotion of people with disabilities.

<sup>12</sup> Ministry of Defence Press Release No. 00216/CRP/MINDEF/024/4 of 13 January 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Arrêté n°0002922 MINFOPRA du 30 avril 2020 portant ouverture d'un concours direct pour le recrutement de dix (10) journalistes, session 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Order n°002998 MINFOPRA of 30 April 2020 opening a direct competition for the recruitment of thirty (30) Assistant Labour and Social Security Inspectors, 2020 session.

programme because of their age. In 2011, during another special recruitment programme, this time for 25,000 civil servants, the age threshold was raised from 32 to 40. In addition to these variations in the age thresholds for admission to the civil service, there are also variations in the end of employability.

## **Fear of retirement**

Since the 2000s, the retirement age has been the subject of heated debate, as some civil servants remain in post after reaching retirement age, reinforcing inter-generational tensions: civil servants over the age of 60 represent around 5.5% of the population. Some no longer receive a salary, but remain in post to take advantage of budgets and "service benefits"; others manage to obtain official extensions of up to four years to remain in post. Senior civil servants, meanwhile, do not leave their posts until their replacements are appointed, and may remain in their posts for several years after their official retirement. Within the national army, some septuagenarians are still active for the simple reason that since independence in 1960, no army general has ever claimed his right to retire. However, the legal retirement age was raised from 57 to 61 in 2001<sup>15</sup>.

Civil service doctors, who had been calling since 2015 for the retirement age to be harmonised in view of the particularly long duration of their training, obtained in July 2020 that the retirement age for civil servants in the Civil Service be pushed back by 5 years, being set at 60 for civil servants in categories A and B, and 55 for categories C and D<sup>16</sup>. In December 2020, this new provision was extended to all civil servants<sup>17</sup>. Although this reform has been welcomed by its beneficiaries, some believe that, in the interests of fairness, a new decree is needed to raise the age of admission to civil service competitive examinations: "if some people can work in the civil service for longer, others should have access to it for longer. The age limit of 32 is too low [...] given the new retirement ages"<sup>18</sup> says Anne Féconde Noah, vice-president of the Cameroon Party for National Reconciliation (PCRN). Be that as it may, seen from Western countries, these retirement age thresholds are very low. But these thresholds must be seen in the context of life expectancy in Cameroon, which in 2020 was 58 years for men and 60.5 years for women, compared with 79.2 and 85.3 years respectively in France.

In Africa, contributory pension systems<sup>19</sup> operate on a pay-as-you-go basis (as opposed to capitalisation): working people pay an old-age insurance contribution which is used to pay the pensions of retired people [Eyinga Dimi, 2012]. Pensions are extremely limited. In Cameroon, "a category D civil servant (index 200) who earns 85,938 CFA francs (131 euros) while working receives a pension of only 38,672 CFA francs (61 euros) on retirement. A category A civil servant (index 1115) with a salary of 412,395 CFA francs (630 euros), receives only 243,313 CFA francs (371 euros) on retirement, roughly half the salary he had when he was still working" [Eyinga Dimi, 2012]. It should also be noted that when civil servants retire, they lose their bonuses and service

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<sup>15</sup> Georges Dougueli, "Retirement? Never", *Jeune Afrique*, 02 July 2010.

<sup>16</sup> See decree no. 2020/369 of 3 July 2020. This decree repeals all previous provisions to the contrary, in particular those of article 150 (1) of decree n°2001/145 of 03 July 2001 on the special status of public health bodies.

<sup>17</sup> See decree no. 2020/802 of 30 December 2020 harmonising the retirement age for all civil servants. This decree repeals paragraph 1 of article 124 of the law of 7 October 1994 on the General Statute of the State Civil Service, which stipulated that the age limit for retirement was 50 for category C and D civil servants and 55 for category A and B civil servants.

<sup>18</sup> Anne Féconde Noah, Vice President of the Cameroon Party for National Reconciliation (PCRN), "the age of admission to public service competitive examinations should also be harmonised for the sake of fairness", Facebook, 30 December 2020, <<https://www.facebook.com/FecondeAnne/posts/213266547018642>>

<sup>19</sup> In a contributory system, pensions are directly proportional to the total amount of contributions paid during the member's career. In a redistributive system, pensions are independent of the amount of contributions paid.

benefits, which sometimes exceeded their basic salary. This impoverishment is all the more severe as many older civil servants have to cope with major health expenses and still have their children to support, particularly when the latter are unemployed. As one of them explains:

Cumbersome bureaucratic procedures and the corruption of civil servants in a context of economic crisis are all problems that weigh on the payment of end-of-career indemnities. Civil servants are changing their age because there is no social security to meet their needs after retirement and because they do not want to lose their regular income. This is because the country offers few career alternatives after retirement. What's more, the average civil servant, even if he or she wanted to, can't have a stable life after retirement, because it's hard to save when you have an insignificant salary in the face of the high cost of living. I have a colleague who looks after a family of 12, even though he's not a senior civil servant. In order to survive, he does everything he can to stay in his job to cover his expenses when he should already be retired. This colleague, and I'll speak quickly, has falsified his age. He will still be able to work for another 5 years. As far as I'm concerned, it's the idea of no longer being able to get up every day and go to my office that haunts me. I dread the loss of my title and the honours that go with it.<sup>20</sup>

Retirement thus marks "a break with a past that involved time constraints, hierarchies and economic issues, but also a context of socialisation, identity, self-fulfilment and self-esteem. The break with this past implies mourning, in the same way that entry into adulthood implied the loss of childhood" [Alaphilippe et al., 2001:32]. What's more, new pensioners can sometimes wait up to two years before receiving their entitlements, due to a lack of knowledge of administrative formalities and corruption on the part of current officials. In extreme cases, those entitled die before receiving any payment at all [Sokoh, 2017:57]. Many civil servants forced to retire are thus tempted to commit suicide. This spectre of retirement should be seen in the context of "ageism", i.e. "attitudes, actions and words that give people an inferior social status simply because of their age, whatever that may be" [MacNicol, 2009: 26]. It serves as an endorsement for experiments in changing the statutory age by civil servants at the end of their careers.

It seems to us, therefore, that the age threshold system can be understood through the multiplicity of situations, where we can see that each institution sets its limits according to technical specificities and political issues within the State. These classification procedures go so far as to determine the interval between the candidate's official date of birth and the eligibility threshold (day, month and year). In other words, the establishment of age thresholds limits the movement into the civil service of salaried employees or self-employed workers whose experience acquired in the private sector could benefit the public service in its quest for agility. At the same time, it sets limits beyond which individuals lose their right to hold public office. Refusing to suffer the exclusionary effects of these age thresholds, some individuals are now opting to redefine their age-related identity.

### **Reinventing your age, a practical norm among the "Kumbatois".**

Requests to change age are becoming increasingly common, as illustrated by the story of 69-year-old Dutchman Emile Ratelband, who made headlines around the world when he initiated legal proceedings in his own country to change his civil age on the grounds of discrimination in the search for employment. His request to have his age reduced by 20 years, which would have enabled him to be 49 and feel good about himself, was rejected by the courts, which feared that 20 years of records would disappear from civil status registers, with undesirable legal and social consequences<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with a 50-year-old civil servant, Yaoundé, December 2020

<sup>21</sup> Clément Vaillant with *AFP*, "Dutchman Emile Ratelband will not be 20 years younger. La justice néerlandaise a déboutée ce sexagénaire qui se dit victime de discriminations à cause de son âge", 03/12/2018. <

. In Cameroon, faced with the exclusionary effects of age thresholds, some individuals prefer to take action to change their civil age. This widespread practice is open to various interpretations. Jérôme Tosam [2015], while stressing the link between this practice and the postcolonial context of crisis and unemployment, sees it, for example, as a form of corruption of the social contract. In the same vein, Chris Sokoh [2017], who has studied public services in Nigeria, considers that this type of falsification is detrimental to the renewal of personnel and ideas, leading to a sclerosis of the administration, which is incapable of reinventing itself. The banality of the practice of age modification in Africa, however, invites us to look beyond these arguments. Rather than simply corrupting formal norms, it seems more appropriate to consider this way of acting as the institution of a 'practical norm', i.e. 'various de facto, informal, tacit and latent regulations that underpin the practices of actors who deviate from formal norms' [Olivier de Sardan, 2017: 67].

In 1999, using homosexuals as an example, Guy Bajoit analysed "existential tensions", i.e. feelings of discomfort or suffering at the root of the individual's desire to rebuild a new identity. These tensions take various forms: there is the individual who is the victim of a denial of recognition by others (denied subject); the individual who is divided with himself between what he is and what he would have liked to be (divided subject); and the individual who is frustrated by the non-fulfilment of his social expectations (anomic subject). According to Bajoit, this is where the "logics of the subject" emerge, in other words, the "work on oneself" and "...on others" that the individual engages in to subdue these tensions. For the individual, it is a matter of acquiring "the ability to speak for himself, to forge a narrative in which he pleads his case before himself; in which he explains what has happened to him, what he has done, what others have done to him" [Bajoit, 1999: 75]. The next step is for him to make a commitment by devising "what he is going to do to influence others, and hence the structural tensions to which institutions subject him" [Bajoit, 1999:76]. Thus, the individual constructs his personal identity, on the one hand, through this "work on himself", which he then seeks to achieve concretely in his environment; and on the other hand, through "work on others", by interacting with them, producing social links and engaging in the logic of social action [Bajoit, 1999:78]. This theory of personal identity sheds light on the experiences of changing civil age. Widely shared and fairly routine, these experiences are latent, implicit and hidden in a permissive society.

Individuals apply this practical norm mainly in two situations: 'change by anticipation', where parents anticipate potential difficulties in their child's career path, and 'change by constraint', which concerns either young graduates or civil servants nearing the end of their careers. Change by anticipation has its origins in the economic crisis that hit Cameroon in the 1990s. This crisis led to a restriction on recruitment to the civil service. This situation condemned to a precarious life many individuals who were no longer of the required age when recruitment resumed in the early 2000s:

Before the 1990s, military recruitment was based on physical ability. Candidates were made to run around a stadium and the best were selected. I never wanted to join the army, because at the time it wasn't a very attractive profession. When I graduated from high school in 1990, the crisis hit and the government limited public recruitment for 7 years. Around 2000, when the competitive examinations were relaunched, I was no longer old enough to be eligible. Some of my colleagues in the same situation as me decided to change their age and redo their diplomas so that they could be admitted to the civil service. I didn't do it, but maybe I should have. Today, I live a miserable life, because I'm a victim of the limitations of age.<sup>22</sup>

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[https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/insolite/article/le-neerlandais-emile-ratelband-ne-rajeunira-pas-de-20-ans\\_135912.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/insolite/article/le-neerlandais-emile-ratelband-ne-rajeunira-pas-de-20-ans_135912.html)

<sup>22</sup> Interview with a security guard from a microfinance company, Yaoundé, December 2020



Some parents have decided to lower the age of their children, even though they are still young and have no problems with their calendar age. This operation is not very expensive and is less complicated than a later change, as this parent explains:

Changing the age of a child who is still very young and has no qualifications is less costly and reduces the risk of double identity. All that needs to be done is to redo the birth certificate with the new age, which is easy to do. However, if the person already has one or two diplomas, the change of age will require them to rewrite the official exams they took in the past, but this time with their new age, to avoid problems. And this is very expensive and not easy.<sup>23</sup>

In the sporting world, the age of newcomers is changed as soon as their first sports licence is issued to take account of delays in their professional career. In 2020, Guirane N'Daw, a 35-year-old former Senegalese footballer, said:

Like all Senegalese, I cheated on my age to become a professional. In Africa, I wouldn't even say in Senegal, a player who doesn't lower his age can't play professionally. It's a reality, whether you like it or not. In Senegal, 99% of players have lowered their age.<sup>24</sup>

Guirane N'Daw's comments are reminiscent of the controversy surrounding Cameroonian footballer Samuel Eto'o. In 2014, when he was 33 and playing for Chelsea Club, his coach José Mourinho insinuated that he must be older than he officially was. The coach pointed to a huge discrepancy between the player's civil age and his physical age. The club authorities categorically refuted this assertion<sup>25</sup>, while in Cameroon the trivialised nature of the practice fuelled satire. Eto'o was caricatured with the face of an old man, holding a cane in his hand, and the music group Featurist produced a video entitled *Babaah*, or "the grandfather's dance", which featured a sequence in which, after scoring a goal, Eto'o held his back to mock the comments of his coach<sup>26</sup>. The practice of changing age is so widespread in sport that, in 2011, the Confederation of African Football instituted a compulsory Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) test to verify the age of footballers under the age of 17 taking part in international competitions<sup>27</sup>. Complete fusion of the growth plate on MRI (stage 6) confirms with 99% certainty that the individual is over 17. This is a formal elimination criterion for the FIFA U-17 selection. On 28 December 2022, the Cameroon Football Federation (FECAFOOT) issued a press release informing the public that, as part of the preparations for the UNIFFAC Limbe 2023 tournament, which serves as a qualifier for the next African U-17 Championship, 21 of the 30 players had been rejected on the basis of a positive MRI test and immediately withdrawn from the squad. For FECAFOOT, the expulsion of these players is part of its determination to put an end to the tinkering with civil registrations that continues to tarnish the image of Cameroonian football.

As for "change by constraint", this primarily concerns graduates who have had an irregular education or have repeatedly failed public competitive examinations:

I got my diplomas late because of a difficult education. Then, I was over the age to take certain competitive exams and all that made me very frustrated. So I decided to change my age by adopting a new identity and redid some essential qualifications. Today I'm a civil servant thanks to this change of age.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with a parent, Yaoundé, December 2020

<sup>24</sup> See A. Billebault, "La fraude sur l'âge, fléau persistant du football africain", *Jeune Afrique*, 12 March 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Read "Samuel Eto'o brands José Mourinho 'a fool' for questioning his age", *The Guardian*, 15 May 2014.

<sup>26</sup> See Featurist, *BABA AH "danse du grand père"*, < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLyueCtfpGs>>

<sup>27</sup> See Article 135 (\*) of the Caf Disciplinary Code, amended following the meeting of the Emergency Committee held in Morocco on 5 May 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with a police officer, Yaoundé, December 2020

In one spectacular case, an individual with a slim figure and adolescent physique was admitted to the police competitive examination, at the rank of officer, before the administration realised that he had lowered his age by 25 years [Omgba Mimboe, 2015: 619]. There are also practices of 'age transfer', an expression that refers to the fact that an individual borrows the identity of a family member.

"Change by compulsion" also concerns civil servants at the end of their careers who want to delay their retirement. Until 2000, some civil servants nearing retirement were able to take advantage of the shortcomings of the State archive service, which still processed personal information manually. Each census of civil servants required the provision of new documents (birth certificate, career records, promotion records or records of the award of allowances), and thus provided an opportunity to modify the data recorded [Omgba Mimboe, 2015]. As Sokoh [2017: 56] notes, 'age modification has become notorious due to poor archiving processes that make it difficult to retrieve the accurate data originally provided by most civil servants'. However, this situation is beginning to change with the digitalisation of the processing of administrative files and the biometrisation of civil identification procedures.

## **Changing your age in the age of biometric government**

As the conditions of access to digital platforms illustrate, the digitalisation of African societies is not breaking with the importance attached to civil age in defining social roles and access to resources. When people create a user account with Google, Yahoo or Facebook, they must specify their date of birth, which is then used to determine their age and access to the service. In Belgium, France and the United States, for example, the age of digital majority, i.e. the age at which an individual can register alone on a social network, is set at 13. But the lack of control over the information declared leads to a certain plasticity in the "production of digital subjectivities" [Cardon, 2008].

Facebook users in Cameroon are used to the fact that the age displayed on a user's account rarely reflects their civil age. People like to deceive people about their age. While younger people display an advanced age to appear mature and chum up with the grown-ups, the latter, on the other hand, reduce their age to keep up with the flow of juvenile conversations<sup>29</sup>.

Some social network features, such as Facebook's birthday notifications, are recurrent reminders of users' civil age. These notifications draw attention to the progression of the user's age. One Facebook user celebrating his birthday wrote: "My Kumba act says eh...que norrr...que j'ai l'âge de la maturité! The age of concrete action, the age of experience". Another, with the following message: "Dear friends, I'm 23 today! I'm waiting for the presents", received comments such as: "Tell me, is this the Kumba age, or are you just the body?"; "Now, tell us your real age"; "Every year, you're 23? These humorous comments point out that digital reality creates new conditions for redefining one's civil identity, in particular the adoption of an appropriate age to take advantage of the resources offered by cyberspace. However, while cyberspace encourages the plasticity of identities, this is not the case with biometric government.

Almost five years ago, following the recommendations of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (Objective 16.9), the Cameroonian government embarked on a process of biometric identification

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with Patrick, a digital specialist, Yaoundé, January 2021.

[Awenengo Dalberto et al., 2018; Eyenga et al., 2022]. Carried out in the name of 'good governance', this biometrisation limits the ability of individuals to adapt to the constraints of age thresholds. Indeed, beyond the technical failures sometimes experienced in the process of biometricising identities [Breckenridge, 2014:12], there is a continuing social and political embedding of civil identities and the persistence of a traditional documentary state alongside the emerging biometric state [Awenengo Dalberto and Banégas, 2021].

In 2015, Cameroon launched a reform of its civil identification system, for which two agencies are responsible: the *Système de sécurisation de la nationalité camerounaise* (Senac) and the *Centre national de développement de l'informatique* (Cenadi). The aim of this reform is to produce secure identity documents: national identity card (CNI), residence permit, refugee card, professional card for national security officials and pensioner card for retired national security officials [Mbang et al., 2019]. As a police officer working in the identification department explains, the practice of changing age poses a serious problem for the production of biometric national identity cards (CNI):

For the past 5 years, you will have noticed that there has been a crisis with the national identity card in Cameroon. Users are complaining about not being able to obtain this precious sesame. For some, it's a logistical problem, a lack of boxes and other materials; but for me, as someone who works in this department, I can see that it's double or triple identity that is blocking the production of cards. For example, under the old system, some people had up to two or three identity cards, sometimes with different names and ages. Now, when such people come to us, the biometric system systematically blocks their file, which is then sent to the legal department for detailed examination. The change in age is therefore largely responsible for the failure to produce thousands of identity cards for users<sup>30</sup>.

At a time when MRI tests are being used by sports authorities to determine the age of athletes and bone tests are being used by police forces in developed countries to determine the age of migrants, the sudden administrative rigidity brought about by the biometrisation of civil identities calls for a fundamental reflection on the legitimacy of the State's use of age thresholds.

## Conclusion

The change in civil age is now a social fact that invites us to rethink the economy of identity goods. Civil age itself is central to the life of bureaucratic and biometric societies. Its instrumentation by the state makes it a biopolitical artefact in the service of the management of individuals competing for access to resources. The age thresholds instituted are sorting devices that determine who is and who is not eligible for public employment, and the end of employability. Recent reforms to the retirement age, both here and elsewhere, have revived the role of these barriers in the management of the State. However, the civil age remains an institution that individuals manipulate in return to circumvent the established thresholds for access to jobs. This is the logic behind the invention of the 'Kumba age', which, far from being a disruption of the social contract, actually reflects a desire for social integration in a post-colonial context marked by unemployment and poverty. What is intriguing is that this is systematically about getting younger in a society marked by the hierarchy of eldership, where advancing age is usually valued as synonymous with increased power to act and make decisions within the community. "The 'Kumba age' is not one of social interaction, since it does not alter the hierarchy of eldership. It is the age of the relationship with the administration, which must be circumvented. The "Kumbatois" are "subjects" who trick the State into giving them an institutional position, a sign of a better life. But this project of emancipation from age

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Ibrahim, police officer, Yaoundé, March 2021.

barriers is complicated by the advent of biometric government. This article exposes a contradiction in democratising societies where, on the one hand, primordialism is challenged and identity recompositions are endorsed, with the individual freedom to redefine himself and choose his identity according to the logic of a liquid present [Bauman, 2007]; and where, on the other hand, the modification of civil age is forbidden because it is marked by the seal of the sacred. This reflection re-examines a society in which the definition of age thresholds reveals the symbolic violence of excluding individuals on the basis of their age. It invites us to perhaps foreshadow a society emancipated from the arbitrariness of age-related barriers, where individual freedom to redefine oneself would not be subordinated to State imperatives.

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