Youth and Currency Counterfeiting at Crossroad with Special Reference to Mutengene (Cham), South-West Cameroon

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Abstract

This essay examines the involvement of youth in counterfeiting and uttering of the Franc CFA in Cameroon, and the response of state authorities. In particular, it establishes a connection between ‘shrinking possibilities’ and youth criminality. In this regard, it contextualises the preponderant involvement of the youth in the circulation of forged money in Mutengene, a junction town in the South West Region (SWR) of Cameroon. It shows that lapses in security strategies and nuances in the country’s penal legal arsenals are possible explanations for the persistence of currency counterfeiting which greatly hampers the town’s economy and social relations. The association of fake money with Mutengene has scarred the town’s image. It must be disclaimed, however, that not all Mutengene youth are involved in counterfeiting, and Mutengene is not the only town in which counterfeits or counterfeiting pass as an ‘illegal-legal tender’ or has become a form of accumulation. Finally, I argue that this symbolises cracks on the walls of effective political and economic governance and epitomises a response to the denial of the basic rights to access decent jobs or have better life that, even with the reintroduction of popular democracy, has not been able to successfully reverse the situation in the country.

Keywords: Counterfeit, Currency, Economy, Mutengene, Uttering, Youth

Introduction

This essay is about the involvement of youth in the forgery and circulation of fake money in Mutengene. It argues that, contrary to the views of previous studies on counterfeiting, there is a correlation between the performance of the economy, governance, and counterfeiting. As economic possibilities shrink in the formal sector due to poor economic performance, particularly those available to the youth, there is the tendency for juvenile citizens to exploit their agency and resort to creative ways to circumvent the severity of

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challenges meagre economic performance generates. Some of the response tends out to be engagements in the informal sector like hawking of items in the street for survival, riders of commercial motorcycles, or self-invest in agro-businesses like vegetable farming and stock-breeding. Perhaps, because of the commendable job the riders are doing, President Paul Biya unexpectedly mentioned them in his traditional speech on the night of 10 February 2013, the eve of the national Youth Day commemorated annually on 11 February. Following his speech on 1 March 2013, approximately ten thousand commercial motorbike riders from across the country staged a support march in Yaounde in Biya’s acknowledgement of them. Since then, various politicians have exploited this development to make political capital out of it in the guise of organizing the sector or through the distribution of free helmets.

Similarly, in an effort to address youth unemployment and encourage entrepreneurship, the government launched in 2012 a program, the National Civic Agency for Participation in Development, through which it sponsors business projects of youth groups in the entire country. These are positive ventures that deserve encouragement from appropriate quarters considering their potentials in socio-economic transformation and development of the community. Yet, others with disposition indulge in clandestine and socially deviant activities like petty theft, car-jacking, smuggling, organised crime, scamming and currency counterfeiting.

The challenges Cameroonian youth face are considerably enormous and they tend to respond differentially. The economic calamity of the last three decades shrunk

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5 Flavius Mokake, “Youth, Poverty Reduction and Possibilities within the HIPC Discourse in Cameroon: The Case of Youth in Fako Division”, paper presented at the Faculty of Social and Management Science Seminar Series Implementation, Challenges and Prospects of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative in Cameroon, University of Buea, Buea – Cameroon, (November 2007).


opportunities for everyone. The Bretton Woods’ ambitious Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) designed to remedy the structural economic problems only exacerbated the crisis. Generally, many consider the SAP in Cameroon and Africa by extension as a macroeconomic catastrophe, engendering high unemployment and limited growth, and preceded the January 1994 devaluation of the CFA. Being overly dependants, the consequences of SAP on the Cameroonian youth were even more devastating. The scarcity of legal tender as a result of the program intensified the marginalisation of youths and firmly shut on their faces windows of opportunities for sustainable livelihood. The youth were also further politically disfranchised contrary to the opinion of previous studies. Confronted by a seemingly inescapable dilemma the youth resorted to beat-the-system strategies or migrate to the West having succumbed to popular imagination of perceived than real images of Europe and the United States of America (USA) as metaphorical lands of milk and honey among Cameroonian youth. New forms of criminality like counterfeiting money and feymania like internet scamming, and other dubious means were adopted and adapted by Cameroonian youths for survival. The argument is that poor economic performance erodes the values that hold society together. It is from the vantage point of connection between deprivation and criminality that the study examines youth and counterfeiting in Mutengene.

At this point a discussion on Mutengene, in time and space, may be in order. Mutengene is a road junction town located in Tiko Subdivision, Fako Division in the SWR of Cameroon. The area derived its name from the Bakweri word litengene meaning “to place across” and had grown as a crossroad since the period of German colonial rule when the latter mapped out and constructed a road to serve as a hub to the network of paved roads from Buea, Tiko, and Bwenga. Worthy to mention that this was part of a scheme to construct a road from Victoria to Mutengene that avoided delays from transiting via Bwenga. In recent years the area has experienced dramatic changes in its spatial morphology and sociological character, and is considered one of the most rapidly urbanising towns in the country. Initially a village dominated by the Bakweri ethnic group, the town is currently a cosmopolitan area with a heterogeneous population. Because of its strategic position, the town was pivotal in trade

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relations between indigenous ethnic groups\textsuperscript{14} before and during colonial rule. This has not changed. Rather, the strategic nature of this crossroad town serves as a gateway to three major commercial centres in the region, Kumba (business capital of the region), Limbe (erstwhile colonial port town known formerly as Victoria), and Douala (both the major entry port into and economic capital of Cameroon). Adjacent to Mutengene is Tiko, together with Kumba and Limbe the busiest commercial centres in the region. Its location is both a boon and bane to its commerce. While pregnant with business opportunities, Mutengene is also a sanctuary for urban crimes like counterfeiting and uttering of the Franc CFA. However it should be cautioned, the use of forged money is not particularly an urban problem.

The Franc (CFA) zone Coopération Financière en Afrique Centrale translated Financial Cooperation in Central Africa comprises fourteen independent African states divided into the West and Central Africa economic and fiscal zones with separate central banks, West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) and Central African Economic and Monetary Union (CEMAC) respectively. The Franc CFA in circulation in the six central African states of Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon is issued by the sub-region’s central bank (BEAC). The coins of this currency range from one, two, five, ten, twenty-five, fifty, one hundred, and five hundred Francs (frs), while banknotes include five hundred, one thousand, two thousands, five thousands, and ten thousands frs. Fake banknotes of two thousands, five thousands, and ten thousands are widely in circulation than coins, except the five hundred frs coin. The disparity could be attributed to the fact that higher denominations fetch more profit than the lower denominations as was noted by Falola in his examination of counterfeiting of the colonial currency in Nigeria.\textsuperscript{15} It could also be that those denominations that are easier to forged, are those most flagrantly counterfeited and put into circulation.

**Objectives, Methodology and Significance of Study**

The primary aim of this study is to examine the involvement of youth in the manufacturing and circulation of counterfeit money in Mutengene. The specific objectives are the interactions between its sociological composition, contemporary character and the upsurge of criminality as alleyways to sustain livelihood within a context of flinching opportunities. The study also discusses the possible factors that accounts for the persistence in the counterfeiting and uttering of fake money, and its reversal effects on the economy and social relations in the town.

To achieve its principal objective, the study draws from three major sources of information. First, public opinion was obtained from semi-structured and informal discussions with randomly selected Mutengene residents. The interviews were conducted intermittently between June 2010 and the summer of 2012; and is equally informed by two encounters with three \textit{feymen} (the same swindlers) on two different occasions within one week that summer.


\textsuperscript{15} Toyin Falola, “Manufacturing Trouble”, p. 124.
The first encounter is an incident I accidentally witness in September 2009 in Mutengene. Alighting from a taxi from the neighbouring town of Tiko, I encountered a squabble by the roadside involving a bartender and distributors of a brewery company which attracted a crowd. Upon inquiry, it was narrated that the bartender had been caught in an attempt to dupe the beer distributors with counterfeit money. I will come back to this incidence in the course of our discussion. The other experience is quite recent. Last summer, August 2012, while visiting Cameroon, I had appointment to interview a retired health officer in Mutengene. On my way to his residence, I was confronted by three young men who claimed to be my acquaintances. After an unsuccessful attempt to have me shake their hands, one of them touched my right shoulder at which point the other stepped forward and asked me if I know the boy who just touched me, and that I needed to perform some rituals with them else I will took ill. Aware their scheme which incidentally they replay to all their potential targets attracted by their outfit, I warned them and walked away smiling, having eluded their scheme. I encountered the same trio a couple of days later, about thirty metres from the spot I met them previously, in another attempt to scam a lady who was heading to the Baptist Hospital in the area. Considering that they keep repeating the same line of story, the lady who certainly had been informed of previous cases from the regional FM radio station did not fall to their prank. These two incidences rekindled my interest to investigate the extent to which the town’s youth can go to make extra money.

The target informants were those involved in commerce of any type, for example bartenders, street cafes/ restaurants, hawkers, transporters and operators of filling stations. Most respondents were remarkably enthusiastic to offer relevant pieces of information as a way to contribute in effacing this illegal enterprise. Our aim was to ascertain the velocity of the circulation of counterfeit money in Mutengene and the demographic category involved. Though the respondents were mixed in terms of gender, literacy and regional background, they were unanimous in terms of age-group involved, youth (15-35 years), although others were of the opinion some elder men are also culpable. Except for cases reported in the tabloid, all names of informants and the bar are pseudonyms.

Additional relevant information was gotten from security reports of the local Police and Gendarmerie forces, although not without challenges. Authorities of both force were unwilling, at best reluctant, to release classified police files containing vital information. This difficulty was partly overcome by discussions with some ‘outgoing’ principal investigators of the Tiko District Police and Gendarmerie Stations who provided information on the condition of anonymity. However, court cases reported in tabloids provide some anecdotes. The other source of data includes a review of extant literature on the subject.

A number of factors warrant a study on youth and counterfeiting in Mutengene relevant. First is the increasing crime wave and notorious insecurity in the town. Public perception holds Mutengene as arguably one of the most unsecured towns in the country. This unfortunate imagery, perhaps, explains the fear among the population and visitors, and justifies the move by state authorities to create new Police and Gendarmerie Posts at strategic points in the area within the last decade. The cells of these posts are usually crowded with yobbos and
hoodlums, discern from my visits, some of whom were money swindlers. Second, the difficult economic terrain paved by the economic malaise that struck the country in the 1990s and the global financial recession, and poor economic and political governance have led to the scarcity of legal tender and an inflation of the size of jobless youths in the streets. Similarly, the reversal effects of the global economic crunch exposes local economies in developing countries to primitive modes of accumulation\(^\text{16}\) and while it predisposes others to illicit coping mechanisms that create ideal conditions for the growth of underground and parallel banking systems epitomised by the negative effects of counterfeit money on an economy. The third factor is the flexibility and malleability of the youth to emulate wrong things, especially from the West as part of the ‘global culture.’ In this perspective the involvement of youths in the counterfeiting business is interpreted as a form of agency.

The Sociological Composition and Criminality in Mutengene

To better understand the interaction between youth, state-economic fragility and phoney money in Mutengene, an idea of the town’s sociological composition is imperative. Partly due to the dramatic changes the town experienced in recent years, its heterogeneous population is dominated by youths attracted by its opportunities. It opportunities attracts youth from different regions with diverse cultural, social and educational backgrounds. The schools and educational services located in the town are sites of attraction for many youth, although, the town registers a school drop-out rate. In this category are found youth who abandoned school because of the hardship of their parents/guardians hard hit by the privatisation, closure of state-owned plantations or retirement from the Cameroon Development Cooperation (CDC) and Del-Monte in Dibanda, Ombe and Tiko. Yet, others were brought to town by relations employed by the plantations and local firms. The closure of these establishments means the youth are left to fare in a precarious socio-economic climate. Counterfeit barons recruit prospective agents from this lot. Survival in the precarious situation the town presents is challenging. Employment refuge is sought in menial jobs in bus-stops, garages, patchworks, street hawking and in illicit forms of accumulation like pick-pocketing and to circulate counterfeit money. Though risky, the uttering of counterfeits is perceived by the youth as an alternative source of employment and it is my observation that fast and easy money is the delight of Mutengene youth.

Becker argued that youth have the predisposition to resort to the fast and risky means to earn money with contempt for moral values for a livelihood. According to the economic theory of crime, individuals form expectations of their legal and illegal income opportunities. Similarly, Horst and Spengler are of the opinion that criminal activities become more likely, when illegal income opportunities are higher than opportunities from legal work. This could be a possible explanation for the increasing crime rates in towns in transitional countries characterised by a deficiency of formal economic opportunities and formally provided public services. Urban theorists are unanimous that there are quantitative differences in the incidence of crime in areas of varying degrees of urbanisation. The causes of youth


delinquency in Mutengene are manifold—social, institutional and physical urban environment—and currency counterfeiting is arguably a manifestation of the dysfunctional impact of its urban growth.

Agents, Uttering and Circulation of Counterfeit Money

The study makes no claim to provide a detail discussion on the manufacturing of counterfeit money. This could have been possible and exhuming if the ‘factories’ of counterfeit gangs were infiltratable, culprits willing to open-up to an outsider, or classified police investigation reports accessible. Security officers claim that raids to the homes of suspected forgers and arrested con artists have yielded limited information on how counterfeit money is produced. Besides, being a criminal act, it is necessarily diminutive and secretive. No doubt the readily available modern sophisticated technology facilitates the activities of the counterfeit industry. Rather, this section limits its discussion to the different strategies by agents to distribute counterfeit money in the town. Conversations with residents confirm that youths are agents in the uttering of counterfeits. Uttering, the criminal act of passing bad money as genuine, complements the art of counterfeiting itself since money is produced to be spent. As has been mentioned, Mutengene youths consider the counterfeit industry as an alternative site for employment. Recruits are usually smart fellows, and demonstrate the willingness to share the risks and profits in the furtive business.

The velocity of the circulation of counterfeits suggests that the social phenomenon is fast becoming part of the daily life of the economy of Mutengene. Agents attempt to and use counterfeit money at various times of the day, but nights are preferred to minimise risks of detection. The town has a longstanding reputation for street hawking by both adults and children of a variety of items. Agents usually take advantage of the night markets to introduce counterfeit coins and banknotes into circulation. To the utterers, it is easier for coins to be used than banknotes as coins are difficult to discern in places with limited light than notes. Young children or women, considered more gullible, are approached often hastily with bad money and whatever item is bought with the intention of gaining genuine money as change and several visits are made to different vendors in each expedition to increase profit. In a perfect form many of the spurious coins would never be detected. In this way a large quantity of fake coinage in circulation stay in the streets and among petty business operators since they are rarely tendered to firms or banks in the hours of daylight.

Another means of circulation is by taxi-drivers or commercial motorists using fake bank bills at fuel stations particularly during rush hours to refill car tanks. It should be cautioned some drivers may, unknown to them, have been duped through this process in an earlier transactions as it is, for example, alleged to be the case with the driver footnoted here.

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22 A taxi-driver discovered a fake coin (new one hundred frs) handed to him by a passenger who claimed to be innocent. At close examination it was realised that the bronze core with the face value had been replaced with a counterfeit. The fake one is glued to the original silver ring. If perfectly glued, it is difficult for one to detect. The driver was able to because the coin handed to him was not a perfect version and was shaky.
They are usually lucky and as such succeed not only in changing the counterfeit, but in addition drove away with a full tank and, perhaps some good money. Similarly, utterers also target the suppliers of brewery products. Bartenders connive with counterfeit agents and slot in fake bank notes within legal money for purchase. It is generally assumed that brewery companies have a solid capital base partly because of their high turnover and profit, thus consequently a few fake notes would not threaten or crumble the establishment. This was the case of the bartender of Casino Friendship Club, a popular drinking spot in Mutengene, who surreptitiously slotted forty thousands (three pieces of ten thousands and two pieces of five thousands) CFA francs notes into two hundred and twenty-five thousands frs. meant for purchasing drinks. Unfortunately for him, the dubious scam was detected by the brewery company’s agents. The barman insisted it was not deliberate and was, probably, himself a victim of transactions the previous night. But the amount of counterfeits uncovered was implicating. It was after persistent intimidation and threats that the matter was reported to the Police where he confessed to being a partner to a network of utterers, though his collaborators were never disclosed. It can hardly be imagined the number of times he had performed the dishonest act.

What makes the findings on counterfeiting fascinating is the preponderance of the social phenomenon in particular quarters and neighbourhoods in the town. Field evidence points at particular quarters infested with utterers and where counterfeit is exponentially ripe. Informants spoke with one voice and were quick to describe Quarter II, Rangers Valley Street and Quarter Rubber (a conglomeration of Quarters X, XI, XII, XIII and XIV) as havens for dealers. Here, there is no gender sensitivity as both young males and females are involved. It is even easier for girls to be successful in the circulation of counterfeits than boys because least suspicion is raised. Security attention to these quarters has forced dealers to relocate to neighbouring towns like Miles IV, XV, and XVI, and Ombe, areas noted for harbouring lumpens, colony of deviants. From the adjoining towns they move into Mutengene, strike and then retreat to their various hiding places to evade the dragnet of security officers. The hide-and-seek attitude of dealers renders anti-forgery efforts by authorities, the least, ineffective.

One other strategy or technique utterers employ to circulate counterfeits is using children as young as fifteen years old, especially during festive periods and to pay fines to some corrupt Police officers and Gendarmerie checkpoints. Under the country’s Penal Code teenagers less than eighteen years are minors and cannot be prosecuted for felony. Dealers hide under this provision that literally protect juveniles to exploit innocent children. Coins or notes of five hundred frs are handed to minors and sent to buy foodstuffs like puff-puff-and-beans, a local morning or evening delicacy, or any other item costing a few francs. The intention is to collect genuine money in exchange. The choice of minors is determined by the feeling that

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24 Martin S. Ndeh, “Plantation Offshoots, Youths and Social Malpractices in the Littoral Quadrant of Cameroon”, paper presented at the CODESRIA Child and Youth Institute Street Children and Lumpen Youth Livelihood at the Margins held in Dakar, Senegal (October 2006).
it plays down on any form of suspicion and also to evade exposure, public ridicule or litigation. But the children are rarely courageous to cushion the slightest public pressure and ridicule when caught in the act. Juveniles are easily lured into this execrable enterprise partly for their high premium for easy life and delight for dubious activities. Yet, a public transporter confided he usually buys his way with fake five hundred frs coins through highway checkpoints on several occasion at night. It is interesting how security agents supposed to be of exceptional character and vigilant are easily baited. This speaks tomes of the depth of corruption in the country’s Police and Gendarmerie forces.

Another interesting dimension of currency counterfeiting in Mutengene is its connection with feymania and the involvement of bigwigs in the society. Ndjio defines feymania as the “ability to attain wealth through witchcraft, trickery, and devilish intelligence” and considers the phenomenon a noticeable manifestation of some dubious Cameroonian’s endeavour to reinvent the global capitalism. He describes how a suitcase or trunk of allegedly genuine money is shown to a mugu (victim or gullible person), as they are ordinarily known. The prospective mugu is told that because the notes are ostensibly stained with a special substance, a special chemical is needed for it to be washed off in order to authenticate the notes. Huge sums of money is then requested from the victim, the rest is obvious. In the context of our study victims are usually approached on the streets or in taxis and the proposed amount in legal currency to buy counterfeits is usually half the face value, thus tempting to any irresolute individual. At high level deals foreign currency is usually involved, US dollars and Euro.

No example better illustrate this evil blend than the case brought before the Buea Magistrate Court on Tuesday, 23 November 2004, “involving an Army Colonel, Michael Mosah, who allegedly lost FCFA thirty-eight million to counterfeiters” (Manga, 2004). In the caption “Colonel Loses FCFA thirty-eight Million in Counterfeit Deal,” the newspaper columnist narrates the four-count arraignment against one Severin Wandji, alias John Kumalo Babey, who posed as the son of Mosah’s course mate, General Kumalo of Sierra Leone. Wandji told Colonel Mosah, a medical doctor, that he was in possession of hundreds of thousands of stamped, but genuine US dollars meant for relief aid, which had to be washed (Manga, 2004). It turned out to be a ruse, but not before Colonel Mosah had lost a colossal sum of money. Even more

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25 This point is developed based on a narration from a delinquent, Sama, aged sixteen, caught in the act of exchanging counterfeits. According to this boy, he was given ten thousands frs in fake five hundred frs coinage by a certain ‘Big Boss,’ as he is locally known, to buy a variety of items of his choice. He had to visit puff-puff sellers and other street kiosks poorly lighted. He was instructed not to spend more than one hundred frs in each five hundred frs, which was supposed to be his reward for the service. He was also promised a few extra commission if he was completely successful in the execrable expedition.


fascinating is the manner in which cases of financial crimes implicating influential persons are treated by the Cameroonian judicial system as the Wandji-vs-Mosah case presents. Another counterfeit case involves a young man who fleeced a Chinese woman of the equivalent of nineteen million frs is reported in AfricaNews by columnist Mforgham.29

Effects of the Forgery of the Franc CFA on the Economy

The circulation of forged money is injurious to the social economy of the country in general and that of Mutengene in particular. Because the volume of counterfeit money in traffic in the town cannot be measured, it is difficult to estimate in real terms its impact on the country’s economy and financial system or how illegally accumulated money affect the lives of counterfeiters. In advanced economies the effects of counterfeit are cushioned by the low fraction of paper money in circulation.30 In contrast, in a rudimentary all-cash economy like Cameroon’s, counterfeiters increase the cash in circulation and dilutes its value. It is fair then to conclude that the public takes the hit.

Obviously the circulation of counterfeit currency in Mutengene has negative effects. First, while the activity enriches a few individuals it conversely ruins business initiatives. Counterfeits chop up the running capital of its victims; slash deeply on profits that may eventually ruin business. This is the case of a certain bread seller, Rachael who lost her capital to swindlers. She narrates her story thus: she was given ten thousands frs, three loaves of bread costing two hundred and fifty frs each collected and in return she gave the phoney client in a bus nine thousands two hundred and fifty frs (the day’s sales) as change. It was only after the bus kicked-and-drove off that she realised she had been duped. Rachael ran into financial difficulties and wrapped-off. She had to pay in a certain sum to her supplier at the end of the day and failed to meet up with daily contributions. Only her small savings could bail her out from her lose at the expense of her business. There are other cases like Rachael’s, which dampens the potentials of street-vending highlighted by Jimu in the case of Botswana.31

Second, the fear of being duped with counterfeit has led to suspicion and lack of trust among individuals. Since a courier cannot be identified physically, the tendency is for individuals to thoroughly scrutinise banknotes during each commercial transaction, especially when dealing with a stranger. Thus, undermining confidence and sometimes leading to acrimonious quarrels, fights that negatively affect business. The circulation of counterfeit has also strained and dragged social relations to the edge.

31 Jimu, “An Exploration of Street Vending’s Contribution.”
Third, the association of criminality, counterfeiting and Mutengene negatively affects the image of the town. The town’s public image seems hardest hit by the clandestine activity. This has generated unprecedented fear among members of the public, visitors, or those transiting through Cham. The origin of this disparaging name of the town is not clear, but its pronunciation puts individuals on alert. However, because most counterfeiters do not understand basic monetary policies, they cannot estimate the length and ways in which their activities harm the economy or franc CFA.

Responses to Efface the Circulation of Counterfeits in Mutengene

Because this undesirable social phenomenon is a tragedy both to the national and local economies, and society, several mechanisms have been introduced by the state authorities and at community level to wean the circulation of counterfeits in Mutengene.

Recognising the fact that counterfeit was increasing exponentially and that bad money chases out good money, and undermine the confidence of real money, state authorities resorted in the mid-1990s to the use of propaganda as a countermeasure to the menace. Radio slots aired messages and sensitise the public against the negative effects of counterfeit money. Many people used to accept counterfeits ignorantly in commercial transactions. To further raise awareness, posters were pasted on the walls and entrance of Police and Gendarmerie Stations, banks and micro-financial institutions, and at strategic spots along the streets. The posters carried diverse messages and picture illustrations that discredit forged money and impressed on the public the risk involved in using counterfeits. At moment the degree of success of such campaigns is tentative for a number of reasons: high illiteracy rates, the contemptuous attitude of the Cameroonian public to public notices, and the degree of penetration of such media outlets. Nonetheless, it is estimated that it created some impact, if not on the public in general, among counterfeiters that authorities are on alert and determine to combat the clandestine trade. As a result of such campaigns, people became diligent in scrutinising any money tendered. But some are so close to perfection, as Olukoju noted with the uttering of currency in colonial Nigeria, that they cannot be detected by ‘ordinary visual examination’.  

Another measure has been to arrest and penalise counterfeiters. Under Section 215 of Cameroon’s Penal Code, the manufacturing and circulation of facsimile version of genuine money is a criminal offence and attracts severe punishment. The reason why retribution is harsh is because counterfeit money reduces the value of actual money and causes inflation due to the increase in money in circulation in the economy. In addition to the numerous cases reported, occasional police raids – known locally as kalle-kalle  – by agents of the new security posts were carried out in suspected quarters and households as was the case

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33 The origin of this phrase that describes Police raids is not known. Local vigilante gangs (known as Peace-Keeping Force) are very instrumental during raids as they are acquainted with the terrain. Vigilante groups, an alternative security guarantor is a phenomenon that sprang up on the ruins of a collapse security sector and increasing crime wave in the country in the last two decades.
with the above-mentioned Wandji case. Such raids have not been quite successful for a number of reasons. This partly accounts for the persistence of the circulation of counterfeits. During such raiding expeditions culprits found with counterfeits are arrested and expected to be prosecuted, but corruption occasionally shroud and abort due process. Consequently, shortly after arrest culprits are once more seen parading the streets. Even so, records of litigation in the Tiko courts are less revealing of the widespread nature of counterfeiting in the municipality.

In the Wandji case, as comments on the tabloid’s blog suggest, the public is of the opinion that lapses in the judicial system condole with high level counterfeit deals that implicates societal bigwigs like the army colonel. It was expected that the army officer be also prosecuted for charges of shady acquisition of wealth. Expectations are that an officer of Mosah’s calibre could have sensed that when the surface of any currency is stamped, it simply means the currency is no longer meant for circulation, or that it is just a sample and not genuine.

A certain procedure follows the arrest of a suspect or culprit. Instantly, in the presence of security officers and onlookers, the serial number of the suspected banknote is written down against which the culprit signs. This is to prevent eventual refusal and to ascertain the banknote was found on the said individual. After investigation an expert report from BEAC is appended to the Police report and forwarded to court. It is only the BEAC report that confirms the status of the money. Without the report the case risks being thrown out of court and the accused person acquitted. Nevertheless, arrest and incarceration do not seem to deter prospective couriers.

The third measure by the government to combat the circulation of counterfeits among genuine money followed the introduction of new CFA banknotes in 1993 (two thousands), 2002 (five thousands and ten thousands) and 2006 for coins (one, two, five, ten, twenty-five, fifty, and five hundred frs). On the new notes, new serial numbers difficult to destroy by folding were inscribed on the edges, rare colours were used in their production, insertion of a tread, emblemised with lithographic watermark paintings and the exclusion of portraits of individuals. Milling and security edges were impressed on coins together with complicated designs. The change in the design of the currency has made duplication difficult and, in Falola’s words, “catches counterfeiters by surprise and throw them out of business.”

However, forgers are smart and are still able to produce counterfeit banknotes and adjust edges on the old five hundred frs coin still in circulation.

At the individual and community level, there is the widespread use of counterfeit discerners – pens, mercury bulbs etc. There is hardly a shop, provision store, or drinking parlour without this machine or gadget. Transporters use red mercury bulbs especially at night. Money collected is place under the light or attempt is made to write on the notes, one is able to detect if it is fake. The absence of the lithographic seal of BEAC and other short special marks indicate its falseness. The marks can only be seen with the help of detectors. Coins are dropped on the road or floor, and from the sound it can be detected if it is counterfeit. The method has been

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34 Falola, “Manufacturing Trouble”, p. 139.
quite successful which accounts for their proliferation. But there is a shared fear that due to high demands unscrupulous suppliers may supply cheap defective counterfeit-detectors from China and Asia that may complicate efforts to stamp out counterfeiting. Another strategy adopted by business people in Mutengene is to report suspected cases to the Police or employ honest youths with exceptional character to manage their businesses to prevent a similar situation, or even worse, of the barman at *Casino Friendship Club*. But good character is not tangible.

**Persistence of Currency Counterfeiting**

Despite efforts by state authorities to abate the counterfeiting and circulation of bad money, the trade persists. Why? It was noticed counterfeiters demonstrated steadfastness to break the law. One reason why the activities of counterfeiters continue is not only because of the cumbersome procedure from arrest to prosecution highlighted above, but also due to the nuances in the provisions of the country’s new criminal procedure code. Investigators lament with disappointment the frustrations of the cumbersome course of action. Worthy to mention the new procedure code is heralded as designed to safeguard the inalienable rights of individuals. Puzzling how efforts at stemming a criminal offence like counterfeiting is sacrificed at the altar of human right.

Security officers also find it difficult to identify the source of counterfeits because most of the complaints from the public of cases of swindling are against the unknown. These are mostly after daily commercial transactions. Because suspects are not identified in person or by name the police and gendarmes find it difficult to trace, track and crack down perpetrators of the illicit trade. This is compounded by the taciturn character of the town’s residents to expose suspects in their midst. It is often said that it is easier to locate a criminal in big cities like Douala, Lagos or Nairobi than in a small town of the size of Mutengene. The reticence is partly based on fear of retribution or requitement.

The public repine at corrupt security officers for the flourishing of the activities of forgers. It is believed that quacks officers tip-off suspects whenever raids are planned, collect brides or collude with offenders to ensure their release unduly from police detention, thereby allowing currency forgery to flourish. Several cases were cited by our informants. But it should be understood arrested persons are necessarily suspects until tried and proven guilty in a law court. Besides, police release could be based on the fact that no incriminating evidence was found on the arrestee strong enough for him to be arraigned. Since it is not always possible to apprehend coiners in act or red-handed, it can be argued they were mere innocent victims of swindlers. Yet another reason for the persistence of counterfeiting is because of the nomadic lifestyle of couriers. It has been noticed most of the suspects troupe in from adjoining towns like Mile IV and XVI, distribute and then retreat. The highly floating nature of counterfeiters makes efforts to track them down ineffective.

Based on the findings, one other factor for the persistence in the circulation of bad money in Mutengene is the unwillingness of some members of the public to be at the losing end of counterfeit deals. One Bob, a businessman, confided that “in case he was given a
counterfeit, he will do his best to pass it over to another person. Life continues.” To him as a businessman such an action is driven by the desire to make profit and fast cash. Many people with Bob’s line of thinking were encountered.

The persistence of poverty characterised by the scarcity of money and the liberalisation of the country’s economy in the 1990s literally opened up floodgates for the importation of sophisticated money minting machines used for the manufacturing of counterfeits, even though these were mostly smuggled in. There is the need for custom officials and ports’ authorities to carry out rigorous checks to control the importation of goods that are inimical to the country’s economy. Until the authorities fully understand that currency forgery is bad for both the economy and society, and all necessary steps taken to prevent its (re)occurrence or weed out counterfeitors, their clandestine activities will persists.

Conclusion

The study concludes with a summary of the main issues discussed. The study has examined the involvement of youth in counterfeiting and uttering of the franc CFA in Mutengene. The study was rimmed within the context of disappearing opportunities to youths in the country and their alternative coping strategies before the introduction of national youth empowerment and employment programs. The origin of counterfeiting in the town is not determined as much as it is associated with the replacement of old mediums of exchange by the introduction of ‘new money’, but it certainly assumed disturbing proportion during the economic squeeze that led to the scarcity of hard cash. It is evident that the undesirable social phenomenon was given a fillip by the economic adversity of the gruesome three decades that trailed SAP, and it is partly a response to the failures of poor governance and persistent denial of basic rights to employment.

The findings reveal that because of high profits more banknotes are forged than coins. There are a number of strategies that have been adopted to rid the economy and society of counterfeit money, but because of factors like nuances in the country’s criminal procedure, complicity of security officers with forgers rather than hunt them down, the clandestine activities of counterfeitors threaten to persist in perpetuity. No doubt the sociology of Mutengene negatively affects its economy that threatens social cohesion. The public perception of the town is a negative one. This negativity is partly influenced by the association of the town with felonious activities like counterfeiting.

Although dwindling, the circulation of counterfeit CFA in the town is real and is continuously a source of financial loss to individuals. Failure to take decisive action at combating counterfeiting can lead to uninsurable risk with negative effects on the reputation and functioning of the country’s central bank. This is contrary to the opinion of some critics that reports about the circulation of face CFA notes is a deliberate attempt by invisible forces to discourage the CFA zone countries from coming up with their own ‘African-made’ single

35 Falola, ”Manufacturing Trouble”, p. 122.
currency. However, wealth earned by pursuing anti-social activities like counterfeiting, genuine money could neatly be likened to what the Luo of Burkina Faso consider ‘bitter-money’, money that is illegally earned, illegally transferred or illegally utilised. If money breaks laws in its origin, movement or use, then it qualifies for the label and is thus less a source of prosperity than a danger to be avoided. There is the need for young people to understand there are better options for survival other than in counterfeiting money.