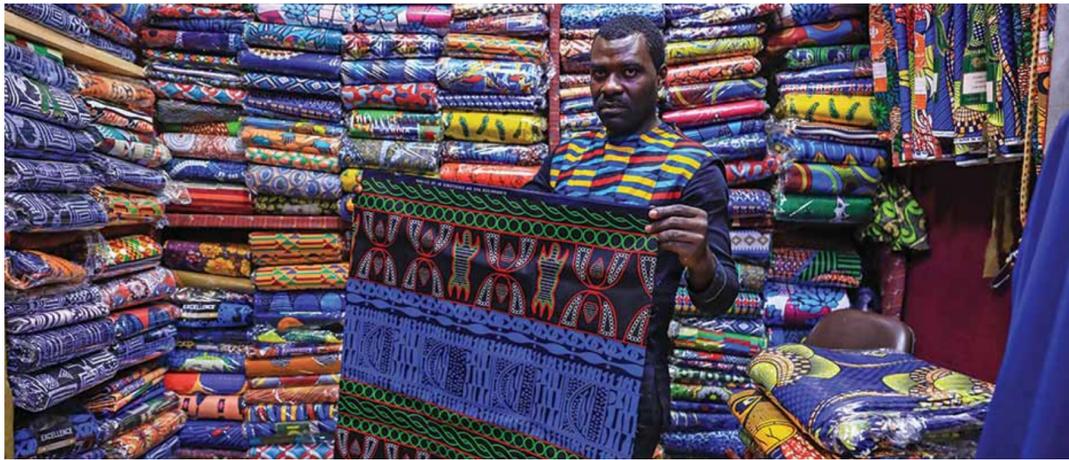


Lifestyle | Features



A trader holds a piece of ndop cloth in his shop at Market B in Bafoussam. — AFP photos



Yougo Tegua Doriane, 24, a designer and stylist, poses in a shop selling ndop clothes and accessories at Market B in Bafoussam.

Cameroon's 'cloth of kings' torn over future

Wambesso Fankam stands out elegantly from the crowd at a funeral ceremony in western Cameroon. As a prince, he's among a select few who are traditionally entitled to wear an eye-catching fabric of vivid indigo with intricate white patterns. "It's an ndop, not everyone can wear it," he said with pride, to the beat of tam-tam drums and the balafon, a type of xylophone, in the western town of Batie.

The ceremonial cloth was once the preserve of chiefs, dignitaries and members of secret societies in the central African country. But the culture around it is now being threatened by cheap imitations and crude rip-offs. Ndog's distinctive motifs—often animals or geometric shapes—are drawn on cotton fabric then embroidered with raffia before the material is dyed blue.

Its richness is down to the many different combinations of symbols that can be designed on the ndop. Cameroon is thought to have 13,500 traditional chiefdoms across its 10 regions.

And it is the north and the mountains of the west where chiefs are seen as all but divine guardians of tradition, where ndop and its culture is the strongest. Once warlords and masters of justice, these days chiefs' powers are limited to inheritance or matrimonial disputes. Even so ndop is "the most important ritual element" among the main western tribal group, the Bamileke, said Hermann Yongueu, head of the Sauvons le Ndog (Save the Ndog) group, which is trying to preserve its heritage.

Making the cloth is a costly affair that takes several days' work and requires specialized knowledge. Prices for a piece of ndop cloth can go up to 100,000 CFA



African fabrics, some styled in ndop fashion, hang in a Market B in Bafoussam.

francs (about 150 euros) — a small fortune in Cameroon where a third of the population lives on less than two euros a day.

Royal garb

Back in Batie, an ndop cloth is symbolically hung on a wooden fence at the main entrance to the funeral. One woman is wearing a long dress entirely in ndop. "She is one of the few to wear an ndop outfit because she is a queen," said Gisele Monkam, who accompanies the traditional chief.

Ndog mostly features "drawings that symbolize our way of life", said Arsene Ngandjouong, head of a museum in the village of Bangoua in the west of the country. One of the principal motifs is "a circle

which represents the duality of the Bamileke world, a communication between the living and the dead," he added.

Sitting near the door of her house made of baked mud bricks in Baham, the main town high on the western plateau where ndop is still made, craftswoman Solange Yougo, 52, is busy on a piece of fabric she's been working on for over a week. Making ndop is extremely laborious, with some long pieces measuring up to 15 metres taking up to a month to complete.

"I'm adding the finishing touches," she said. The finished item will be white with an indigo tint. On a bamboo bench, her cousin, Sylvie Momo, 50, holds an already dyed piece. Cameroon's Ministry of Arts and Culture declared ndop a part of its offi-



Kristelle, a trader of cultural products and accessories made from Ndog, sits at her shop in Batie.

cial national heritage in February 2020 and some also want it to be given UNESCO status as further protection.

'Vulgar'

For hile it was once strictly reserved for royals and nobles, ndop has been fast losing its exclusivity, so much so that some of its motifs are now turning up on bottles of beer as well as low quality wraps and boubous, the loose unisex garment popular across West Africa. "It is even becoming a bit vulgar," complained museum head Ngandjouong. "In the past when someone who hadn't the right to wear ndop wore it, they had to pay a fine," said Prince Fankam.

"But the most important thing is that we

pass on knowledge of how to make it," said Hermann Yongueu. "Before ndop fabric was controlled by the chiefs and the kings made sure that the savoir-faire was passed on to the makers' children. From the age of seven, children began their apprenticeships."

But today few young people are prepared to take that on, preferring more lucrative jobs like driving motorbike taxis. Others hope that a little of the reflected glory the fabric is picking up abroad might tempt them back, with the French luxury fashion house Hermes using ndop motifs in one of its silk scarf collections four years ago. — AFP



A general view of traditional accessories made with Ndog fabric at market B in Bafoussam.



Momo Sylvie (right) and Yougo Solange (left), hold up ndop fabric they are working on in Baham.



Yougo Tegua Doriane, 24, a creative stylist, decorates her stand with products made with ndop fabric at a market in Bafoussam.

France's music street party back at full blast

One of France's biggest street parties is back in full force after two years of Covid disruption—the annual Fete de la Musique returns to towns and cities across the country Tuesday night, boasting everything from classical to rap. Musicians have free reign every year on June 21 in France, taking over bars, street corners and rooftops, while landmarks from the Eiffel Tower to the old port in Marseilles to chateaux in the Loire Valley host their own events. Since 2018, President Emmanuel Macron has even thrown open the courtyard of the Elysee Palace to the festivities.

This year, which marks the festival's 40th anniversary, Ukrainian DJ Xenia will be among those performing in the Elysee courtyard, where the president normally greets visiting heads of state. It remains to be seen whether Macron and his wife Brigitte will be in the mood for dancing—as they have in previous years—after disappointing election results for his camp over the weekend. But many across France are no doubt ready to celebrate after the last two editions of the festival took place under the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic.

'We were worried'

It has been four decades since the

first Fete de la Musique was launched by the then culture minister Jack Lang, appointed by Socialist president Francois Mitterrand a year earlier in 1981. Since then, it has been exported to cities and countries across the world including Berlin, Brussels, New York, Canberra and Lagos. But Lang still recalls the terror he felt in the days leading up to the inaugural event. "We told people: 'Go, go out, take over the streets with music,'" he told AFP. "We were worried they would just stay stuck indoors—but it worked!"

Lang, stage-designer Christian Dupavillon and musician and festival organizer Maurice Fleuret dreamed up the event together—and it was Fleuret who came up with the slogan: "Music will be everywhere and concerts nowhere".

"The first year, in 1982, it was not a great success, but people played along—and then from 1983, it really got going," said Lang, who now heads the Arab World Institute in Paris. Lang said he wanted this year's event to be dedicated to Steve Maia Canico, a young man who died after falling into the river Loire in Nantes, as police broke up a party that had run past the 4:00 am limit. The incident has become the focus of a bitter dispute between those who blame the police for Canico's death and the authorities who have defended their actions that night. For the most part, however, the festival remains a much-loved excuse to party—even if some folk expected at work the next morning grumble about the lack of sleep. —AFP

Ben Stiller tells of 'harrowing stories' from Ukraine visit

US actor and comedian Ben Stiller said Tuesday he had been deeply affected by the stories he heard from Ukrainians after a surprise visit to the war-torn country. The "Zoolander" and "Meet the Parents" star was in Ukraine as an ambassador for the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR.

"The stories of the people who experienced the first few days of this war—speaking to them and hearing these really harrowing stories—was very affecting," Stiller told AFP in a phone call, while travelling from Ukraine to Poland. The 56-year-old actor-director visited Irpin, a suburb of Kyiv, which was particularly hard-hit in the early stages of the Russian invasion.

"To see the physical destruction of those neighborhoods, it's really massive, and it's impossible not to be affected by that," Stiller said. "There was one very young man who... talked about it like something out of a horror film, just being hit by these missiles, not knowing if he should stay or run."

"To see how traumatized, he was—he felt his life had been changed forever. It's really tough when you hear a young person say that, and you realize the effects of war are not always visible." Stiller met with Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky in Kyiv on Monday, and told him: "You're my hero."

"What you've done, the way that

you've rallied the country, the world, it's really inspiring," he told Zelensky. Asked by AFP if he could imagine trading in his job as a comedian in the event of an invasion, Stiller said he didn't know how he would react. "If everything you know is in danger of being obliterated—who knows? But I hope we could react like the people of Ukraine," he said.

"Yesterday, I was in a house that was almost fully collapsed with a woman, and we were sitting in her kitchen," he said. "And she was giving us strawberries and had this incredible resilience saying: 'We have to figure out how to go forward'. It's

hard not to think 'how would I react if my house had half collapsed.'"

Stiller, who has also visited Lebanon, Jordan and Guatemala as part of his UNHCR work, said he hopes people will hear his stories from refugees and "relate with these people and hopefully see themselves in them". "The work that UNHCR and other NGOs do is so important. This war has created 12 million displaced people and even if the war ends, the issues it has created will go on for years," he said. — AFP



This handout picture taken and released by Ukrainian President press-service shows Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky (right) welcoming US actor and UN Goodwill Envoy Ben Stiller (left) during their meeting in Kyiv. — AFP