

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Clando/Clandestine (1996)

Jean-Marie Teno

### OVERVIEW

*Clando* is a film about Cameroonian dictator Paul Biya's oppressive regime, how it has transformed Cameroon into an open-air prison for those who have no option but to remain in the country, and how it has reduced most of those who have chosen exile into nostalgic, wandering souls. *Clando* was filmed in 1996, fourteen years into Biya's forty-year long reign, and four years after a bloody repression that had seen Biya's death squadron kill hundreds of Cameroonians, mostly students, who were protesting for multipartyism. *Clando* is Jean-Marie Teno's first feature film. In 1996, it was nominated for Best Film at the International Festival of French-speaking Films at Namur. Jean-Marie Teno is a scholar of cinema. He studied film at the University of Valenciennes in France, taught film in the United States, and is a film critic.

### CHARACTERS

*Anatole Sobgui* Sobgui is a computer programmer.  
*Madeleine Sobgui* Anatole's strong and loving wife who supports him during his incarceration.  
*Irene* A German activist. She has an affair with Anatole during his short stay in Germany.  
*Rigobert Chamba* A Cameroonian immigrant who is ashamed of returning to Cameroon because he has failed his exilic life in Germany.

### SYNOPSIS

Sobgui Anataole is a computer programmer who opens his office after hours to student activists to print political pamphlets. His office colleague knows about his underground activities and warns him to stop playing with fire. Sobgui is arrested one day as he is leaving the office, tortured, and jailed for three months, which leaves him physically and psychologically scarred. He is freed after the party in power wins the elections, but he remains under surveillance. Jobless, Sobgui repairs his vandalized car and uses it as a clandestine taxi, thus, the title "Clando" of the film. The members of his tontine group (a money-saving collective) send him on a mission to Germany to buy cars but also to find a son of the community who has given no news of himself for years, and convince him to return to his country before his ailing father dies. In Germany, Sobgui has a romantic affair and engaging political discussions with a young German activist, Irene. Although she would like Sobgui to remain in Germany, Irene convinces him of the importance of going back and fighting his country's oppressive regime.

### SCENES

**Sobgui is kidnapped and tortured** Sobgui opens his office after working hours to let in activist students print political pamphlets against the oppressive political regime of Cameroonian dictator Paul Biya. Sobgui's office colleague is aware of his illegal activities and warns him not to court disaster. As he leaves his office one evening, Sobgui is kidnapped by two individuals and taken to a basement where his captors torture him until he passes out. Sobgui wakes up the next day to realize that he is being held in the jail of the first police precinct of Douala, the economic capital of Cameroon. He finds himself in the company of a heteroclite group of cellmates: a pan-Africanist named Kwame, (in the likeness of first Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah), two Tanzanian tourists, and an alleged tax evader.



**Dr. Woppe assists his friend.** Sobgui's kidnappers have badly hurt him, and he needs a doctor. Kwame negotiates with the guards to send for Dr. Woppe, Sobgui's friend. Dr Woppe is surprised to see Sobgui in jail and wants to know how he ended up there. The guards order him to stop asking questions and treat his patient. He treats Sobgui and, before leaving, promises to see a lawyer and try to get Sobgui out of jail. Dr. Woppe trades some prescriptions and medical advice with the police in return for their promise to treat his friend well.



**Surviving prison** Beside Dr. Woppe, who helps Sobgui in his first hours in jail, his wife, Madeleine, confronts the hostile prison guards and forces them to bring enough food and water for him and his cellmates. Sobgui's cellmates also help him to his feet each time he needs to use the bathroom, as his feet have been crushed by his captors. To have it a little bit easier in prison, Sobgui must agree to give some computer lessons to one of the guards and grade his papers. Also, he must share with his guards the food that Madeleine brings him. One of Sobgui's cellmates complains to him that he had to pay his prescriptions seven times before the guards will bring them to him. Kwame calls that the law of supply and demand. In prison, as outside, he says, one always needs something, and one must bribe for it, bribe for the right to eat, to breathe, and to live.



**Prison Conversation** Kwame deplores the African elites' naïveté, the fact that they so trust the Europeans who once fought them to control their lives. African leaders, he laments, are malleable and lack critical thinking. They will think whatever the former colonizers want them to think. He points out how the Europeans convinced African leaders to fight Nkrumah's idea of African Unity only to steal Nkrumah's concept and create their own European Union.



**Sobgui's open-air prison** Two men come to the police station and take Sobgui for a ride. Sobgui notices that while he was in prison, life went on and people kept going about their business as usual. The two men drop Sobgui at a street corner with the firm instruction to wait for them there. They tell him that he is being watched and had better not try to flee. Sobgui waits for them for hours, suspecting every passer-by of working for his captors. His office colleague, who has now been promoted to his post during his long absence, recognizes Sobgui and convinces him to come with him to the office building. Sobgui finds his car where he left it, but it has been vandalized. He also suspects his colleague of having denounced him to the authorities.



**Sobgui goes home** Sobgui heads home, shaking his keys, as if pinching himself to make sure that he is not dreaming. The front door opens as he is about to put the key in, and his wife Madeleine appears. She was at the prison and could not find an answer as to where her husband was taken. At home, Sobgui takes a shower under the relieved and affectionate gaze of his wife. The couple have missed each other for a long time, and they get to bed to have some intimate time. Sobgui cannot perform. Madeleine reassures him that it will pass. However, over time, the situation remains unchanged, and Madeleine becomes impatient.



**Clando** Sobgui fixes his car and uses it as an illegal taxi. He becomes a 'clando', a clandestine taxi driver, taking customers without the legal taxi permit. As a clando, Sobgui must evade the police checkpoints as best he can. When he does not succeed and is spotted by the police, he must bribe them to go on with his business.



**Money-saving collective** Sobgui joins a tontine group of people from his village. A *tontine* is a place for the community to trade familial news, the latest national news, and the latest gossip. But it is principally a place for the community to save money to be loaned to members in need of capital to start a business.



**Sobgui decides to leave the country** Sobgui witnesses a wave of violent revenge acts by those who suffer at the hand of the political regime. He decides that it is time for him to leave the country. A rich, ailing elder whom he met in the tontine group hires him to go to Germany buy him some cars and look for and convince his lost son to return home to take over the leadership of the family. Madeleine takes Sobgui to the airport. She urges him to get help for his physical and psychological trauma while he is in Europe; otherwise, he should not come back.



**Sobgui in Germany** Sobgui meets the Cameroonian community in Cologne. He is pleased to see that they are carrying on with the tradition of tontine. He gives them news of the country and tells them the circumstances that have brought him to Germany. He also tells them that he has a second mission, that of finding Rigobert Chamba, the son of his benefactor, and convincing him to return home, for his father is ailing and needs him to take over the family's leadership. Sobgui's friends invite him to a nightclub to celebrate his arrival.



**Sobgui meets Irene** Sobgui meets Irene, a German activist who has chosen an African club with two of her friends to celebrate the fourth anniversary of their group, an association for the defense of asylum seekers. Their relationship blossoms. Irene notices Sobgui's torture wounds. She wants to know how he got them. He tells her his story from the day he was captured to how he met her. Irene wants Sobgui to stay in Germany. Irene informs Sobgui that her group can help him stay in Germany if that is part of his plans. They can even offer him a job, as he has proven his competence by fixing the group's computers. Sobgui shows no enthusiasm about Irene's proposition.



**Irene solution: armed struggle** Sobgui invites Irene to a gathering of the Cameroonian community in Cologne. After a short time, she decides to leave the party precipitously. Sobgui walks her home. As Sobgui insists that she explain why she left so early and seems so upset, she tells him that she is fed up with the Cameroonians talking interminably about the political system that oppresses them but taking no action to change things. The walls of Irene's apartment are plastered with posters of armed revolutionaries. Sobgui asks her if armed struggle is also what she envisions as the solution for Cameroon. Irene replies that it is. She tells him that in countries where injustice is rampant, changes generally come by way of armed struggles. By waiting, people only get sucked into the system and perpetuate their own oppression.



**Sobgui's explanation** Sobgui explains the Cameroonians' dilemma with the parable of a psychopathic driver (the Cameroonian leader) and the armed prisoners (the people) he is transporting on a tortuous dirt road. Should the prisoners shoot their crazy driver and risk a brutal and sudden death with him when he crashes his van? Or should the prisoners not shoot their driver and let him lead them to a slow and inexorable death? In other words, should the Cameroonians take up arms against their dictator determined to hold on to power at all costs and face his army of killers in an Armageddon or should they wait and be slowly but surely eaten by the dictator? This is the dilemma that confronts Sobgui and his compatriots whose country is being ruled by a psychopathic dictator.



**The Cameroonians find Chamba** Sobgui tells his compatriots that his benefactor has tasked him to find his lost son, Rigobert Chamba, and bring him back to Cameroon. Sobgui's friends in Cologne comb the city for days and find Chamba. He is the founder of a Cameroonian brotherhood association, who now lives at a homeless shelter under an assumed name. His compatriots urge him to come to the anniversary of the movement he created, which now bears his name. Chamba is a bitter man. Chamba comes to the celebration of the Association Rigobert Chamba. He tries to convince his Cameroonian friends that his misfortune is symptomatic of a larger evil, white duplicity: White people do not like Africans and always end up revealing their true faces, he claims. When he sees Sobgui with his German girlfriend, he makes it his duty to warn him that he is spinning bad cotton.



**Chamba's story** Chamba wants Sobgui to know his story. He takes Sobgui to his previous address and shows him the building in which he used to live and the parking where he used to park his Mercedes. Today, he is an estranged husband and father who is not even allowed to visit his two children and can be arrested and deported just for trying. He tells Sobgui that he has wrecked his life and does not deserve to return to his country and take over his father's role as the chief of a large family. Sobgui tells him that his destiny was to be a great man, but he settled for mediocrity in Germany, and that it is time to return to what he is meant to be.

**The lost hunter's return** Chamba dramatizes the tale of the hunter who is embarrassed to return home empty-handed, and who keeps sinking deeper and deeper into the thick forest until he finally gets lost. For this hunter, as Sobgui explains, the solution is to step back and make a fresh start, return to the source and grow again. Sobgui convinces Chamba to return to Cameroon. Sobgui tells Irene that he will be returning with Chamba. Irene has convinced him that he must not wait any longer. He is returning home to fight for freedom.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**SOBGUL** Sobgui is a flexible, reliable, and convincing character but an unfaithful husband. He is a fictional victim of President Paul Biya's oppressive regime in Cameroon, has shown resilience. After a three-month incarceration followed by a job loss, his adaptability and dependability get him on his feet. His skills of persuasion help him repatriate a Cameroonian immigrant in Germany who felt shame for his failure in exile and hesitated to return to his country. Despite his great qualities, Sobgui is not flawless.

*Flexible* Sobgui is an open character who easily adapts to new situations. After his first frightening days in jail, he quickly built a friendship with his cellmates and established a non-belligerent relationship with his guards, which helped him survive his three-month incarceration. When he lost his job after three months in jail, he seized the first opportunity that was offered him to convert himself into a 'clando', an illegal taxi driver. His openness won him the confidence of Chamba's father, who hired him to go to Germany to purchase cars and look for his lost son. In Germany, Sobgui had no problem making new friends in the Cameroonian and German communities and got along with people on both sides, without any preconceptions, despite Chamba's efforts to influence his opinion of people.

*Reliable* In Cameroon, something that the *tontine* members usually tell those with whom they entrust their money is the following: "This is our hard-earned money that we give you. May you put it to good use, and may you remember who helped you." Chamba's father put his faith and trust in Sobgui: he entrusted him with his hard-earned money to go to Germany buy him cars and convince his lost son to return to Cameroon before he dies. Sobgui kept referring to Chamba's father as more than his employer—as his benefactor, someone whose good actions towards him he remembers, someone to whom he owes a debt. Sobgui did not disappoint the old man. He went to Germany and accomplished the missions he was tasked with. Sobgui is a trustworthy man.

*Unfaithful* Sobgui might be a dependable business partner and worker, but when it comes to his marriage, the same cannot be said. Sobgui is an unfaithful husband. In Germany, he has an affair with Irene. Could it be that he is seeking a cure for his erectile dysfunction, as Madeleine asked him to, but in

his own way? That is, in the thrill of random sexual adventures far away from the oppressive and traumatizing regime of Paul Biya that has broken him physically and psychologically? In any case, it seems like his affair with Irene has revived Sobgui's sexual potency; Madeleine had urged him not to return unless he is healed, and he is returning to Cameroon.

*Convincing* Chamba has failed in his German exile life and is ashamed to return to Cameroon. He has lost his wife, his children, and his job and lives in a homeless shelter. Sobgui does not judge him for his failure. Instead, using the metaphor of the relentless hunter that risks being lost in the forest, Sobgui reveals to Chamba that wonderful things await him at home. The village is eager to greet and celebrate him. He should not settle for less while he is destined to a life of leadership. Sobgui's strong, persuasive appeal touches Chamba, who decides to return to Cameroon. Had Sobgui been judgmental, he would certainly have not accomplished his mission of bringing Chamba home.

**IRENE** Irene is an empathetic, impatient, and ambiguous character. Irene's work with an association that defends asylum seekers' rights in Germany. This suggests that she is a compassionate person, which she proves with her empathy for the Cameroonian people under the repressive regime of Paul Biya. However, her romantic involvement with Sobgui and her awareness of his torture wounds bring the atrocities of the Cameroonian government a little too close to home. Against Sobgui's and the Cameroonians' hesitation to engage in direct confrontation against the oppressive regime, Irene impatiently advocates armed struggle as a solution to tear the shroud of oppression.

*Empathetic* Irene works for an association that fights for the rights of asylum seekers. To work with immigrants demands that she understand their perspectives, that she put herself in their shoes; it demands a certain disposition for empathy. Among the people that Irene's group helps are Africans. So, to celebrate the fourth anniversary of her association, Irene and her friends decide to go to an African nightclub and share the joys of the African immigrants and learn more about their stories. When Sobgui invites her to an African party, she seizes the opportunity to discover and taste some Cameroonian food and exchange views with the Cameroonian immigrants.

*Impatient* +When Sobgui invites Irene to a Cameroonian party, her conversation with Sobgui and the other Cameroonian immigrants upsets her. She leaves the party angry that the Cameroonians do not go beyond mere talk and are afraid to confront Biya's dictatorship with actions. As a response to the violence of Biya's oppressive regime, she advocates armed struggle as the best way to force change. She does not understand the Cameroonians' patience with the Biya regime.

*Ambiguous* Irene would like Sobgui to remain in Germany with her. She tells him that her association stands ready to help him if his plan is to live in Germany. At the same time, she urges Sobgui to return to Cameroon and fight Biya's repressive regime. Of her two positions, it is difficult to know which one Irene holds dear. Her persistent question to Sobgui ("So, will you go with [Chamba]?") does not give away her real intention. It is difficult to know whether she means "so, are you abandoning me?" or "so, have you decided to go fight and give Cameroon a better future?". In any case, she seems satisfied with Sobgui's ultimate decision to return to Cameroon.

**MADELEINE** Madeleine is a loyal and relentless character. She is a faithful and supportive wife to Sobgui. Her husband's physical, psychological, and financial recovery would have been difficult were it not for her presence. Madeleine also desires a fulfilling sexual life, which in Sobgui's situation has become challenging. She does not shy away from making her desires clear to her husband.

*Loyal* Sobgui's office colleague once suggested that he doubted that his wife would be home waiting for him if he left for a month-long trip. Sobgui retorted to him that the only way to be sure was to leave for a month and see. Ironically, it is Sobgui who found himself in the position of gauging his wife's loyalty as he was incarcerated for three months. Probably alerted by Dr. Woppe to the place where her husband was jailed, Madeleine braved the guards' contempt and insisted on seeing her husband on the second day of his incarceration. Each day, she brought him food and water, which he later started to share with his cellmates and his jailers. Madeleine patiently waited for her husband until his liberation, and when he came home, she lovingly watched him take his first shower, loved him passionately, and comforted him when he felt shame for not performing well in bed. With her savings, Madeleine helped Sobgui repair his car, which

he used as an illegal taxi to make ends meet. Madeleine passed the test of loyalty, which can not be said of Sobgui.

*Relentless* The prison guards of the first police precinct of Douala are intimidating and contemptuous characters. When Madeleine arrives at the police station to get news of her husband, they tell her that there is no trace of him in their book. She insists on seeing her husband because, she says, she knows he is being detained there. So, she sits, and she waits. Her persistence pays off. The guards allow Madeleine to see Sobgui and give him the food she brought him. In the succeeding days, she starts cooking enough food for her husband's cellmates and jailers, which gets him better treatment. She never misses a visit until Sobgui is freed. Her husband gets home physically and emotionally broken. Where many African women would have avoided talking openly about their husbands' erectile dysfunction, Madeleine insists that Sobgui look for a cure. When he leaves for Germany, she advises him to get a cure for his sexual incapacity or never come back.

**RIGOBET CHAMBA** Rigobert is a cynical and irresponsible character. He is the typical blamer. He refuses to take responsibility for the mistakes that led him to his situation and projects onto others his own mistakes. He tries to rationalize his estrangement from his family as the consequence of an essential flaw in white people.

*Cynical* Rigobert Chamba is a disillusioned man. He has lost faith in Germany as the promised land and in the German people as compassionate, welcoming people. He is divorced from his German wife and is forbidden to visit their two children. Although Chamba does not exactly explain how things came to be, one of the Cameroonians present at the nightclub hints that Rigobert had been unfaithful to his wife on multiple occasions. For Rigobert, however, the German court's restraining order imposed upon him is evidence of duplicity and racism at the core of the German society. German people, he insists, will never like black people. Chamba is peddling his discrete familial and judiciary difficulties as the consequences of a general inherent moral defect in all Germans.

*Irresponsible bigot* For Chamba to paint all the German people with the single brushstroke of racism and duplicity on account of his own turpitude reeks of dishonesty and immaturity. It is, in fact, he who displays racism, disloyalty, and irresponsibility for lacking self-introspection and for branding the woman with whom he has shared the same life for five years and with whom he has had two children as racist. Chamba is a bigot who prefers to play the victim card rather than taking responsibility for his actions.

## THEMES

### SOCIETY

**Corruption** When one of Sobgui's cellmates complains that he had to pay the guards six times the cost of his medical prescription before they would deliver it to him, Kwame retorts that it is the law of supply and demand, and that, be it in prison or outside of prison, Cameroonians must pay for everything, down to the right to breathe. Kwame's proposition is a deposition on the level of corruption that pervades Cameroonian society. In prison, as one can see in the film, to be treated as decent human beings demands of the prisoners that they bribe their jailers. Sobgui's friend Dr. Woppe writes prescriptions and gives free medical advice to the prison guards with the understanding that they will treat Sobgui correctly. The food that Madeleine brings to her husband in jail, and which he shares with his cellmates and the guards, allows Sobgui and Kwame to get out of their smelly cell and share the relative comfort of the guards' office. Sobgui himself teaches computer classes to one of the guards to remain in the good graces of his jailers. Outside the prison, in the world believed to be a world of autonomy Cameroonians live in an open-air prison, where freedom of movement is also acquired at the price of corruption. Sobgui learns this at his own expense as he is constantly bribing the police in order to carry out his illegal activity as a cab driver when he is not able to evade them.

**Community** One value that helps Cameroonians survive the oppressive regime of Paul Biya is their solidarity. Sobgui's incarceration would have been unbearable were it not for the loyalty of the people around him, such as his cellmates, who nursed him, his friend Dr. Woppe, who assisted him from the first day, his wife, Madeleine, who defied the guards' contempt and overcame the obstacles they set in her way to bring food and water to her husband and his cellmates every day. That strong Cameroonian solidarity is

also observable in the tradition of the *tontine*, which is a way for the community to raise money to be loaned to members in need. It is by joining the *tontine* group that Sobgui meets his benefactor who buys him a plane ticket to Germany. The Cameroonian expatriates in Germany carry on with this solidarity chain as their link to the fatherland, allowing them to get news of each other in Germany and of the country from newcomers like Sobgui. And when Sobgui informs his compatriots of his mission to find Rigobert Chamba, the son of his benefactor, the Cameroonians immediately start combing the country until they find Rigobert at a homeless shelter and convince him to come to the tenth anniversary celebration of the association he created. Solidarity is not just a national or racial virtue.

***Interculturality*** The Biya regime, with its oppressive system, has proven that solidarity is not exclusively Cameroonian or black, but that selfishness and greed are also pervading vices in Cameroon. Solidarity is a global virtue that transcends race and nation; and Irene and her friends, who donate their time and energy to fighting for the rights of asylum seekers, are good proof of it. They are a testimony to the fact that neither good nor bad are the prerogative of a nation, a people, or a race, contrary to what Rigobert, who paints all the Germans with a single brushstroke, would have us believe.

***Discrimination*** Rigobert Chamba has had an unpleasant experience in Germany. He was married to a German woman with whom he had two children. He is now an estranged husband and father who is not allowed to see his children. From his marital experience, Rigobert has deduced a general characteristic of the German person, which he peddles to all the Cameroonians whom he comes across. Whatever experience Rigobert had with his German wife that led to his divorce and estrangement, Rigobert refuses to see it as a discrete familial experience that is his and not necessarily everyone's. He has concluded that the German people are racist and duplicitous, and he warns his compatriots to stay away from them. Fortunately, Rigobert's bitterness and bigotry towards the Germans do not persuade his compatriots or Sobgui, who has decided to live his own experience with Irene and come to his own conclusion for himself.

## **POLITICS**

***Autocracy*** When Sobgui's friends in Germany throw him a welcome party at a nightclub, they raise their glasses to their "country, or at least to what is left of it." This is an indication that Cameroon has declined since their exile to Germany. The Cameroon they are talking about is the one ruled by President Paul Biya, who came to power in 1982, and whose picture is visible on the wall of the Douala police station where Sobgui is incarcerated. Biya has been in power for forty years now. He is the longest serving president in Africa, and his long reign is far from being an example of democracy.

***Intrigue*** Sobgui's misfortune is a summary of the modus operandi that maintains Biya in power, namely denunciation, kidnapping, imprisonment, gagging of dissenting opinions, turning the country into open-air prisons, and intimidating and forcing people with opposing views into exile. Sobgui's office colleague denounced him to the authorities for helping activist students print opposition political pamphlets from his office. Henceforth considered as an opponent of Biya's regime, Sobgui was kidnapped as he walked to his car. He was severely tortured and thrown in jail without being given the opportunity to speak with a lawyer, which silenced his dissenting voice for the time of the election. After the election, his captors freed Sobgui, but they kept him under pressure, telling him that he was being watched, forcing him to constantly watch over his shoulder, until he cracked and decided to leave the country. Such is the plight that Biya reserves for his opponents, and which has kept him in power for forty years.

## **PSYCHOLOGY (nostalgia, isolation)**

***Nostalgia*** Sobgui does, indeed, live his own experience as an immigrant, one that remains observant to the realities around him by frequenting both African immigrants' circles in Germany and Germans' circles through Irene's work group. From his compatriots in Germany, Sobgui detects a deep nostalgia for Cameroon, held as a lost paradise, a melancholy that they unsuccessfully try to exorcise with nervous repetitions of the *tontine* tradition in dark spaces, with occasional bulimic consumption of Cameroonian food and drinks, with an almost carnivalesque display of Cameroonian sartorial trends. A disingenuous dissimulation that reveals even more acutely their lonely exilic lives. If the Cameroonian immigrants in Germany are lonely, it is less the fault of the Germans than their own. Hunted by a dictator in their country,

they fled the shimmering colors of Cameroon, the spicy scents of its open-air markets, the thunderous hubbub of its streets, all those things that make one never feel lonely in Cameroon, even in one's greatest misery, and which Sobgui missed so much during his incarceration.

***Isolation*** The immigrants took refuge in the rigid, sanitized, and silent streets of Germany. And while an immigrant like Rigobert Chamba prefers to impute his failure and despondency to German bigotry, Sobgui is quick to correct him, telling him that it is his fault; he satisfied himself with so little while he was meant to be great. For, if immigration is a lonely business, if the immigrant is a lonely soul, it is not by lack of compassion and empathy of the host country. It is just that immigration entails leaving behind a history, a life, and joys and fears that can never be reconstituted in the host country, and which will always leave the immigrant longing for the mother tongue and the fatherland. Having understood this, Sobgui decides to cut short his exile and return to the Cameroonian oppressive furnace