

COMMENTARY

CAMEROON: A COUNTRY UNITED BY ETHNIC AMBITION AND DIFFERENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts an answer to the question: What keeps Cameroon together despite widespread instability in Africa, despite the turbulence of the subregional environment in which it finds itself, and despite its own internal contradictions? The main argument is that the politics of regional and ethnic balance, the chronic lack of vision as a country, the lack of real commitment to democracy, the propensity to vacillate on most issues of collective interest, together with an infinite ability to develop survival strategies, have acted to counter all meaningful attempts to pursue common interests and aspirations. All that appears to unite Cameroonians is a common ethnic or regional ambition to preserve their differences under the delusion of maximizing opportunities. However, as the 'national cake' diminishes with the worsening economic crisis, corruption, mass misery and ethnicity, making it more illusive for the bulk of small people to claim the same benefits from their connections with the big—or the not so big—men and women of power, one can legitimately wonder just how much longer the system can continue to deflate the disaffected.

IN SEPTEMBER 1998 Cameroon was, according to criteria adopted by Transparency International, the most corrupt country in the world. This declaration came shortly after a month-long anti-corruption campaign initiated by the Cameroonian government itself, and barely two months before the French newspaper *Libération*¹ published a story about a Cameroonian 'money doubler' of international notoriety, Donatien Koagne, detained in Yemen since 1995 in connection with 3 million dollars which he had offered to multiply to 9 millions. These developments lead me to revisit a topic that has always fascinated me: Cameroon as a social scientific curiosity.

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1. See *Libération* of 14 and 15 November 1998, p. 18 for Karl Laské's articles on 'Koagne, l'homme qui multipliait les dollars' and 'Ce Camerounais qui escroquait des chefs d'Etat est détenu au Yémen'.

What keeps Cameroon together despite widespread instability in Africa, despite the turbulence of the subregional environment in which it exists, and despite its own internal contradictions? This is hardly a question to boast of any ready answers, but it is one to leave few indifferent.

While I am very conscious of the significance of a historical approach to the question, I have, in this article, limited myself to the politics of post-independence, knowing that Cameroonist historians and political scientists will certainly do justice to the colonial origins of the 'variety' or 'version of despotism'² created in independent Cameroon.

To refer to Cameroon as Africa in miniature the way its authorities tend to do with pride, is to imply that Cameroon is a reflection and presentation of Africa in terms of endowments (and only reluctantly in terms of pitfalls as well). While this may be true in many respects, it certainly stretches our credulity when it comes to testing out social scientific theories or making predictions therefrom. Far from being Africa in miniature in this sense, the country has earned distinction as a burial ground for many a theory or generalization. As Cameroonians are wont to say: 'le Cameroun, c'est le Cameroun'. Meaning, Cameroon is a peculiar case, 'un paradis des paradoxes'.³

And indeed, it is. Elsewhere the objective conditions have led to violent outbreaks, bloodbaths and changes from bad to worse or better, but, in Cameroon, quite strangely, these effects simply petered out, as if the entire country was the victim of a hypnotic spell by the sorcerer state. When in 1994 the CFA franc was devalued after two successive salary cuts for civil servants, it was widely speculated by observers that this would lead to riots and the downfall of the government. Nothing happened, although in other francophone countries in a similar predicament, governments rushed to increase salaries in order to cushion the effects of devaluation on their subjects. During the 1991–92 'ghost towns'⁴ campaigns when the opposition commanded much credibility and popular support, and when it was widely assumed that taking over was just a matter of time, President Paul Biya stood his ground against dialogue and against the call for a sovereign

2. M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism* (James Currey, London, 1996), pp. 8–27.

3. See H. Mono Ndjana, *Les Proverbes de Paul Biya* (Editions du Carrefour, Yaoundé, 1997), for more on this and other common sayings, the origin of which he attributes to President Paul Biya, while blaming on the opposition and other forces of dissent their creative, critical and provocative interpretation.

4. This was the period between April 1991 and January 1992, when the radical opposition issued calls, ultimatums, tracts, etc., asking the public to immobilize economic activity by staying indoors, blocking streets, refusing to pay taxes and bills, and boycotting markets and offices. The intention was to force the government to agree to hold a 'sovereign national conference'. These protests were to be intensified after President Biya, in what many observers have termed his firmest and most provocative speech ever, declared on 27 June 1991 that 'the national conference is pointless in Cameroon', and that he would maintain order at all costs.

national conference, and was able to puncture radical opposition by organizing parliamentary elections which, though boycotted by the Social Democratic Front (SDF) and others, saw participation by parties which until then had formed part of 'la coordination des partis de l'opposition'. Even though the results of these elections gave victory to the opposition (the first and last of its kind), the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) was still able to woo the Mouvement pour la Défense de la République (MDR) and Union des Populations Camerounaises (UPC) to join it in government. The CPDM was to be further comforted by a crisis within the Union Nationale pour la Démocratie et le Progrès (UNDP) party when two key members (Ahmadou Mustapha and Issa Tchiroma) accepted ministerial positions in the government formed after the October presidential elections which Paul Biya won with 39.976 percent of votes cast. The opposition candidates together scored a total of 60.024 percent, showing that, even according to official statistics, the majority of the electorate wanted a change of president. The opposition, which had failed to present a consensus candidate, made some critical noises about the level of rigging, as did the international community. This yielded little dividend, for the protests were neither organized nor sustained.

After the 1996 municipal elections which the opposition won in a significant number of key urban councils, the government was able to gain effective control of these councils by imposing CPDM government delegates with powers to manage council projects and finances. Again, the opposition did little to correct the situation, limiting itself to critical press releases and newspaper condemnation of government action and unjust laws. The same can be said of opposition reaction after the May 1997 parliamentary elections in which the official results claimed the CPDM won by 116 seats as against 64 for the opposition. The opposition cried foul, but came short of any meaningful action to reverse the official results. Finally, in October 1997 Cameroonians again witnessed another presidential election which Paul Biya won by 92.57 percent (i.e. 3,167,820 votes of the 3,433,081 allegedly cast), but which the three major opposition parties in parliament (SDF, UNDP, UDC) boycotted on the grounds that there was no independent electoral commission. Again, little came of threats by these parties to disrupt the elections with an 'active boycott', apart, of course, from the claim that 80 percent of the electorate had stayed away from the polls. And so, as the popular comedian Tchop Tchop puts it in his satirical sketch on election protest and political prostitution in Cameroon, 'le chien aboie, la caravane passe.' 'Elections', the victors in his sketch claim, 'are like a football match where you must prepare your players physically and psychologically. You can consult the Pygmy witchdoctor, corrupt the

referee, or motivate [bribe] your opponents. . . . You organize your elections knowing full well that you are going to win them. You have yourself to blame for not having known what to do.⁵

It is not only civil servants or opposition parties that have failed to assert themselves against the government's diversionary tactics. The anglophone community, through the Teachers' Association of Cameroon (TAC), the Confederation of Anglophone Parent-Teachers' Associations of Cameroon (CAPTAC) and the churches, had fought very hard to have an independent Examinations Board granted them in 1993,⁶ but have done little to consolidate this victory. The GCE Board thus lost its autonomy to the Ministry of Education, which was very reluctant to grant it in the first place. Since 1990 journalists of the private press and their newspapers have suffered as victims of the selective application of a repressive press law, yet they have been unable to organize themselves into a strong union capable of defending and promoting their interests.⁷ What today passes for a Union of Cameroonian Journalists, goes unrecognized by many journalists (including an impressive number of veterans), and lost credibility when its president, Amadou Vamouké, became a member of the ruling CPDM party central committee. Teachers, tutors and university lecturers are similarly disorganized, preferring to go in for sinecures rather than fight for professional interests. In general, attempts to empower civil society have yielded little fruit. And this is true regardless of what aspect of society we look at.

If one were to talk of successes by the opposition and civil society in terms of popular aspirations for the institutionalization of freedom and democracy, one could argue that their difficulties with laws and government action have offered Cameroonians and the world the opportunity to discover the overwhelming reluctance, exemplified in self-contradiction, of those with vested interests in the status quo, to open up and give society a chance to move forward. That is an invaluable contribution, even though opposition parties themselves face an uphill task in avoiding some of the pitfalls that are second nature to African politics, such as using 'the belly',⁸ not ideology, as their main political compass. If the opposition has stayed divided, unable to agree on a common strategy or a consensual candidate, the ethnic factor of mutual distrust and suspicion is largely to blame. Since July 1991 when four parties headed by leaders from the same Beti ethnic group as President Biya dissociated themselves from la Coordination

5. Tchop Tchop, *Candidat Unique de l'Opposition* (Vol. 1 audio sketch, 1997).

6. Cf. F. B. Nyamnjoh, *The Cameroon G.C.E. Crisis: A test of anglophone solidarity* (Nooremac, Limbe, 1996).

7. F. B. Nyamnjoh, *Mass Media and Democratisation in Cameroon* (Friedrich-Ebert Foundation, Yaounde, 1996).

8. J.-F. Bayart, *The State in Africa: The politics of the belly* (Longman, London, 1993).

des partis de l'opposition, because of the Yaoundé Plan of Action,⁹ the rift between the opposition parties has only grown wider. Instead of seeking a common platform, parties have fallen easy prey to the entrapment of primordial bonds, and so have their militants who have tended to vote along regional and ethnic lines. The ruling CPDM party has not only capitalized upon such differences in the opposition, it has further encouraged the proliferation of ghost parties whose militants put together 'ne peuvent pas remplir une cabine téléphonique',¹⁰ with the sole aim of thwarting the efforts of the real opposition in Cameroon.

From the above, it is apparent that the democratic process in Cameroon has stalled, and that opposition parties and other sections of civil society seem rather slow (not to say incapable) of coming up with workable solutions to the current disillusionment. Yet it is curious that opposition parties, the media, the churches and other associations have failed to capitalize (in a positive sense) on the widespread inclination at the grassroots towards a more democratic social and political order. Surveys and undoctored election results have repeatedly left little doubt that the bulk of Cameroonians want a change for the better. They want to have an active say in matters of public interest, and to free themselves from the misery of which they are victims. Conversations with individuals leave an unmistakable impression that this is the case. What, then, stops them from pursuing their aspirations in an organized and sustained manner, with or without violence? How is it that their actions (when and if they act) have often tended to contradict their declarations in favour of democracy? Here are some suggestions.

The politics of regional or ethnic balance

I believe that, thanks to the policy and politics of regional and ethnic balance which Ahidjo instituted,¹¹ borrowing from and reforming the colonial legacy of 'decentralized despotism',¹² and which Biya has perfected,¹³ Cameroon has become a country much easier to govern than it is

9. The four parties included Louis Tobie Mbida's Parti des Démocrates Camerounais (PDC), the Parti Socialiste Camerounais (PSC) of Nseth Nseth Appolinaire-Guillaume, the Parti de l'Alliance Libérale (PAL) of Bedzigui Célestin, and Ngouo Woungly Massaga's Parti de la Solidarité du Peuple (PSP). They viewed the Yaoundé Plan of Action as a call for war and violence, and claimed they were ready for dialogue with the government and to respect constituted authority. Their move was interpreted as a stab in the back by the other members of the opposition, who rationalized that they had always suspected that the Beti among them were spying for their 'brother' in power (see *Cameroon Post*, 75, 20–27 June 1991, p. 1 and 71, 27–30 May 1991, p. 1).

10. Tchop Tchop, *Candidat Unique*.

11. J.-F. Bayart, *L'Etat au Cameroun* (Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, Paris, 1979).

12. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, p. 8.

13. See the 18 January 1996 constitution (e.g. 'the State shall ensure the protection of minorities and shall preserve the rights of indigenous populations in accordance with the law').

to run a family. In reality, this policy is far less about balancing, than it is about diverting attention from real to imagined problems and causes.¹⁴ A civil servant appointed to high office or merely aspiring to such an office is made to understand that the system (epitomized by the Head of State) is of boundless benevolence, and that the Head of State is to be thanked for any appointment, while oneself and those from one's ethnic group or region are to blame for the lack of any appointment or for the loss of one. The policy creates the illusion in the elite, and in the masses from the 200 and more ethnic groupings, that everything is possible with the state—even in economic crisis ('l'impossible n'étant pas camerounais'), and that individuals must give the president total support if they wish to maintain, climb to or come by high office (or a sinecure) and the favours that go with it. Every presidential decree of appointment concludes with an emphasis on the benefits of the position to the individual concerned, but hardly ever with the responsibilities that go with the office ('l'intéressé aura droit aux avantages et prérogatives liés à la fonction'). The effect of this policy is to blind Cameroonians to the fact of the system as their real problem, and to diffuse all momentum and potential unity on the basis of common interests and aspirations.

The politics of strife and conflict and the struggle for power are thus tactfully relegated to the regions, while the president, like a master juggler, plays the regional or ethnic elites against one another. The president can stay in power, and be 're-elected' repeatedly, without ever having to go out personally to campaign. For, under the system of regional and ethnic balance, presidential elections are seldom about voting for the president as such, but more about testing the popularity of the party elite in the various regions. This certainly explains why, at every election, the central committee of the CPDM sends its leaders back to their regions and villages to campaign. This is ample proof that there is little national integration. Like sorcery, ethnic ambition eats into the family instead, devastating its own kith and kin under the patronage of the state which poses as a *nganga* or *wutangang*, in such a way as to guarantee that no one puts together what the system has put asunder. Within this logic, the most unpardonable crime is that of disloyalty to the president. Every other law can be broken with impunity. Thus corruption in the customs, police and gendarmerie, embezzlement, bribery and exploitation in the civil service, are all glossed over until one commits the ultimate crime of political disloyalty. Political allegiance to the CPDM remains one of the surest guarantees against

14. Cf. P. Nchoji Nkwi and F. B. Nyamnjoh (eds) *Regional Balance and National Integration in Cameroon: Lessons learned and the uncertain future* (ASC/ICASSRT, Yaoundé, 1997); Collectif Changer le Cameroun (C3) and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (eds), *Ethnies et Développement National: Actes du colloque de Yaoundé 1993* (Edition C3 & Editions du CRAC, Yaoundé, 1994).

'a state-sanctioned inquiry into allegations of fraud'.¹⁵ Civil servants and businessmen and women know this only too well. The case of Titus Edzoa, former secretary general at the presidency, minister, doctor to and close friend of President Paul Biya for nearly 15 years, now imprisoned for 15 years 'for embezzlement', is a good example in this connection. Yet, were embezzlement truly the reason for Titus Edzoa's imprisonment, one should expect him out soon, given the widespread belief that in Cameroonian prisons 'on achète de tout . . . même le droit de ne pas y rester.'

The system has little regard for virtue and meritocracy, and proves to have more room for loyal mediocrity than critical excellence. It thrives on appearances and not on substance, making subservient mediocrities feel more important than real achievers, hence the omnipresence of: 'Savez-vous à qui vous avez affaire?' A second- or third-rate academic, for example, who provides the regime with the conceptual rhetoric it needs to justify its excesses and highhandedness, is more likely to be promoted to professor (with or without publications) and made dean, vice chancellor or even minister, and to accumulate portfolios, than his more productive but critical counterpart who is denied promotion and recognition for being a genuine intellectual. This situation accounts for the current 'misère intellectuelle' in the country, denounced by Le Forum des Universitaires Chrétiens (FUC) in a recent publication.¹⁶

The system is totalitarian in a sense similar to that of Vaclav Havel's post-totalitarian Czechoslovakia, in that it 'serves people only to the extent necessary to ensure that people will serve it', with anyone not playing their predetermined role running the risk of indictment as an enemy of the system.¹⁷ Because the ideological pretences of the system seduce people at every level of society, the system has succeeded in permeating life thoroughly with hypocrisy and lies. Havel notes that, within such a system, all the mystifications undertaken by the state in a bid to consolidate its power need not necessarily be believed by every individual, 'but they must behave as though they did, or they must at least tolerate them in silence, or get along well with those who work with them. For this reason, however, they must *live within a lie*. They need not accept the lie. It is enough for them to have accepted their life with it and in it. For by this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfil the system, make the system, *are* the system.'¹⁸ This is a point very well illustrated by

15. D. Eyoh, 'Through the prism of a local tragedy: Political liberalisation, regionalism and elite struggles for power in Cameroon', *Africa*, 68, 3 (1998), p. 347.

16. FUC, *La Misère Intellectuelle au Cameroun* (Centre Catholique Universitaire, Yaoundé, 1997).

17. V. Havel, *Living in Truth* (ed. by Jan Vladislav, Faber and Faber, London, 1986), p. 44.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 44-5.

Mbembe's study of power, prestige and hollow pretence in postcolonial Africa.¹⁹

How does the practice of the politics of regional balance puncture resistance to the system in concrete terms? We may take the anglophone community as a case in point. Objectively speaking, English-speaking Cameroonians have far more interests uniting their two provinces than pulling them apart. But in the interest of the politics of regional balance (divide and rule) in high office, no person can be appointed from the anglophone region, without another being dis-appointed from the same region. This makes it incumbent on power-brokers or opportunistic politicians in the two provinces to imagine divisions among themselves in order to increase their chances of prominence or appointability. Fanning the flames of the 'indigenes/settlers' or 'coastals/grassfielders' ('Nkwa/Ngraffi') dichotomy can be of enormous political benefit within this context. Faced with the rising popularity of the SDF and Southern Cameroon National Council (SCNC), the CPDM government has used this tactic of divide and rule (for example, appointing South-Westerners as Prime Minister, ministers, members of central committee, and political bureau, directors and advisers; encouraging the creation of pro-government elite associations²⁰) to attract South-Western support by making people there believe that it was the North-Westerners who kept them out of power and prominence, and not the government and the francophones as the SDF and SCNC would want them to believe.²¹ While the anglophone elite are obviously benefiting from the exposure such politics brings them, the masses for their part are victims of the extravagant illusion that 'since our son or daughter has been called to the dining table, we shall hunger no more'. Seldom do they know, nor are they keen to believe, that even the Beti who share the same ethnic origins as the President for whom their elite have repeatedly signed a blank cheque since 1982, are critical of his failures to deliver on promises.²²

The divisions and differences between anglophones are therefore more induced than real. This makes the modern power elite in the anglophone provinces their community's worst enemy, as they seek and relish the status of gatekeepers or facilitators to francophone penetration and domination. These politicians or this elite, instead of being a solution to the anglophone predicament, become indeed the

19. A. Mbembe, 'Provisional notes on the postcolony', *Africa*, 62, 1 (1992), pp. 3-37.

20. F. B. Nyamnjoh and M. Rowlands, 'Elite associations and the politics of belonging in Cameroon', *Africa*, 68, 3 (1998), pp. 320-37.

21. See D. Eyoh, 'Conflicting narratives of anglophone protest and the politics of identity in Cameroon', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 16, 2 (1998), pp. 268-71; D. Eyoh, 'Through the prism', pp. 354-5.

22. L. M. Onguene Essono, 'La démocratie en chansons: Les Bikut-si du Cameroun', *Politique Africaine*, 64 (1996), pp. 52-61.

problem, thanks to the politics of regional balance. Through dubious cultural or development associations devoid of any real cultural or development agenda (e.g. SWELA, SAWA, NOCUDA),²³ they have fanned the flames of division with mutual accusations and mutual stereotyping.²⁴ The hate literature and rhetoric this engenders serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy, as they come in handy in the quest for proof of claims of deep-rooted cleavages between the two provinces. Power thus reproduces itself 'by exaggerating differences and denying the existence of an oppressed majority'.²⁵

The power elite becomes obsessed with maximizing power at ethnic or regional levels, while treating the centre as sacrosanct. The minister or general manager from the North-West or South-West is made to understand that he owes his appointment to the dis-appointment of another anglophone, and that he must derail all signs of solidarity among anglophones, regardless of province of origin, if he counts on staying in office.²⁶ Thus it is not uncommon to find CPDM barons of the North-West Province condemning South-Westerners without distinction, and vice versa. Appointing an anglophone Prime Minister is hardly hailed as the regime's recognition of anglophones in general, but rather, as a victory for North-Westerners or South-Westerners as the case may be. The same is true of ministers whose first visits after appointment are usually to their home village to muster support and/or gratitude for the centre, as well as to prove that they have a power base of some sort. This also reveals that they are first and foremost ministers for their ethnic group, before being ministers for Cameroon as a whole, if at all. The system produces trouble-makers, and this includes promoting inter-provincial or inter-ethnic conflicts, which the central government regulates and crushes from time to time when things get a little out of hand.²⁷ The system is interested in nation-deconstruction, not nation-building, national disunity, not national unity, disintegration, not integration. It finds comfort in chaos, and makes of conviviality a subject mostly of rhetoric.²⁸ Little wonder then, that the government makes it a point of duty to 'repatriate' the corpse of every civil servant to their village of origin, lest their folk became emotionally attached to that part of Cameroon where they worked,

23. Cf. Nyamnjoh and Rowlands, 'Elite associations', pp. 325-33.

24. P. Konings and F. B. Nyamnjoh, 'The anglophone problem in Cameroon', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 35, 2 (1997), pp. 207-29.

25. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, p. 8.

26. See Nyamnjoh, *The Cameroon G.C.E. Crisis*, for examples.

27. J. A. Mope Simo, 'Land disputes and the impact on disintegration in contemporary Western Grassfields: Case study of the Ndop Plain Chiefdoms', in Nchoji Nkwi and Nyamnjoh, *Regional Balance and National Integration*, pp. 225-41.

28. C. G. Mbock (ed.), *Cameroon: Pluralisme culturel et convivialité* (Les Editions Nouvelles du Sud, Ivry, 1996).

died and naturally should have been buried.²⁹ And little wonder that the system identifies Cameroonians geographically and administratively with the place of birth of their fathers, rather than culturally or in terms of where they themselves were born and/or grew up. Thus are brought about such ambiguities as imagining an 'eleventh province' for Cameroonians denied francophone and anglophone cultural identity in this way,³⁰ or referring to them as 'les francophones de culture anglophone' and 'anglophones of francophone culture'.³¹ Yet, it is important that policy statements say quite the contrary, for it is only in that way that any government can appear to have a credible mission.³²

However, as the ordinary Cameroonian is confronted with the contradictions in his daily life, he comes to the conclusion that the whole business of national unity and national integration is a smoke-screen perpetuated with the hidden aim of thwarting all attempts at meaningful change. Thus, it all boils down to the power game—how much longer you can stay in office through corruption and the misrepresentation of reality. Although the system is keen to block all conventional channels of effective resistance to the government—its claims to democracy notwithstanding—and although the masses generally fear retribution, it would be wrong to assume from this that there is little resistance at the grassroots. The language of ordinary Cameroonians is pregnant with verbal aggression: anger, cynicism, irony, sarcasm, ridicule, puns, mockery and hostility abound. This comes across in newspaper articles and cartoons (which the government in turn uses as proof of its tolerance), in songs, sketches and satirical comedy, in sermons, conversations, exchanges in taxis and buses, at market places and in drinking parlours and bars. The perfect medium of communicating dissent and discussing the powerful remains *Radio Trottoir*, the popularity of which has also been noted in Togo,³³ Zaire³⁴ and elsewhere.³⁵ Described as the 'poor-man's bomb'³⁶

29. Although a 'moral necessity of being buried in the home' has been noted in many parts of Africa among elites who see burial in the city as 'the ultimate sign of social failure' (cf. P. Geschiere and J. Gugler, 'Introduction: The urban-rural connection: changing issues of belonging and identification', *Africa*, 68, 3 (1998), p. 311), in Cameroon there is no policy discouraging the practice for the benefit of national integration.

30. See excerpts of Professor Beltus I. Bejanga's interview with *The Herald*, Geschiere and Gugler, 'Introduction', pp. 313-14; see also Collectif Changer le Cameroun (C3) and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (eds), *Ethnies et Développement*, pp. 121-7.

31. Cf. H. N. Eyoh, 'Building bridges: reconfiguring nationhood through culture', in Mbock (ed.), *Cameroun, Pluralisme culturel et convivialité*, pp. 161-2.

32. Hence books such as *Communal Liberalism* (Macmillan, London, 1987), written by President Biya himself and parroted by many.

33. See S. Ellis, 'Rumour and power in Togo', *Africa*, 63, 4 (1993), pp. 462-76; C.-M. Toulabor, 'Jeu de mots, jeu de vilains', *Politique Africaine*, 3 (1981), pp. 55-71.

34. J.-P. Diamani, 'L'humour politique au Phare du Zaire', *Politique Africaine*, 58 (1995), pp. 151-7.

35. S. Ellis, 'Tuning in to pavement radio', *African Affairs*, 88, 352 (1989), pp. 321-30.

36. A. Mbembe, 'The "thing" and its double in Cameroonian cartoons', in Karin Barber (ed.), *Readings in African Popular Culture* (James Currey, Oxford, 1997), p. 157.

or the 'weapons of the powerless'³⁷ in the face of the government's arbitrariness, water cannons, tear gas and guns, rumour has become the most distinctive feature of *Radio Trottoir* in Cameroon.³⁸ One of the cumulative effects of *Radio Trottoir*, Toulabor³⁹ and Mbembe⁴⁰ have suggested, is a demystification, de-mythologization, taming or weakening of the powerful by the masses in a way that could actually render the state powerless. Furthermore, it could be said that the disaffected may not have the means to effect the changes they yearn for, but they do indulge in symbolic wars with symbolic victories on a daily basis. These are wars in which the system is vanquished, and a new, imagined, just, democratic and populist order put in place, in fulfilment of what the power elite have all along treated as extravagant expectations.

Chronic lack of vision

What is a country for? Why does one seek power? These questions evoke the idea of a vision. What does Cameroon mean to its inhabitants, powerful and powerless alike? Is there a common sense of belonging and purpose? Sometimes one can understand the cynicism of those who think that most Cameroonians in high office or business see their country essentially in terms of a natural plantation. Their dreams of power do not seem to go further than having a place at the dining table, and benefiting from what a minister under Ahidjo once referred to as: 'les grâces et les servitudes de la fonction publique'. Their struggles in the name of democracy seem more like the war of the bellies where the 'eaters' ('*les bouffeurs*') are questioned, but seldom the act of 'eating' ('*bouffer*'). Patrons and clients may be questioned, but not patronage or patrimonialism. To many people in or seeking high office, Cameroon is little more than a farm tended by God but harvested by man. Does it not strike one as odd that a president, minister, director or general manager flies his pregnant wife to France, Switzerland or America to have their baby in order to gain French, Swiss or American citizenship or to feel prestigious and superior?⁴¹ Does such a person feel that Cameroon is a country with a future? Does he feel for Cameroon? Does he have a vision for his fatherland? If a minister, who is supposed to be a shining example of patriotism, prefers foreign citizenship, will it surprise anyone that that same minister sees Cameroon as a farm or a plantation that needs clearing out when it is time to harvest? Few in high office encourage the masses to

37. Toulabor, 'Jeu de mots', p. 69.

38. F. B. Nyamnjoh, 'Political rumour in Cameroon', *Cahier de l'UCAC*, 2 (1997), pp. 93-105.

39. Toulabor, 'Jeu de mots'.

40. Mbembe, 'Provisional notes', pp. 3-37.

41. F. B. Nyamnjoh, 'The politics of development: modernity, power elites and popular disillusionment in Africa', in Jan Servaes and Rico Lie (eds), *Media & Politics in Transition: Cultural identity in the age of globalization* (ACCO Publishers, Leuven, 1997), pp. 195-212.

pursue this illusion called Cameroon. None of them gives anyone reason to think of patriotism as a virtue. What use, ordinary Cameroonians are bound to ask, is fighting a real war over such a depleted illusion, a worthless illusion sucked dry by the extravagant greed of those in high office? Those who embezzle and bank abroad, lest investing at home provides jobs to those for whom misery is a faithful companion.

How then can Cameroonians even begin to think of getting together to pretend to one another and to the outside world that they mean business for their country? An overriding ambition seems to be to plunder the country and dissipate as much as possible, everyone at his own level. And thanks to such appetite, the 'social fabric has become so infested with the cancer of corruption that virtues like honesty, assiduity and accountability have become laughable luxuries'.⁴² In the light of the above and more, it is hardly surprising that in September 1998 Cameroon was the most corrupt country in the world according to Transparency International.⁴³

The culture of corruption cuts across the entire society. Everyone is doing it at his own level, from top to bottom—the only difference being that those at the top have more to steal from, they are stealing and making off with a lot more. In a way, Cameroonians all have an interest in maintaining the status quo: from the taximan and the police or gendarme officer at the check-point, to the parent and college principal during admissions, the customs inspector and the businessman at the port, the civil servant chasing files at the ministry, the university lecturer trading marks for sex and cash, etc., right up to the helm of state. Because they each have a bit of the system in them (either through direct involvement with the centre or via links of patronage and influence) and thus a vested interest,⁴⁴ it becomes very difficult to contemplate the system's undoing without in a way contemplating one's very own undoing. The chronic lack of vision as a country denies them any feeling of patriotism which the idea of a country should normally inspire through a shared vision. Without a shared vision, the tendency is for Cameroonians to devalue one another as they glorify themselves, each believing that they are the best thing to have happened to their country. Such selfish greed hardly allows for time to think of Cameroon in real terms as a collective treasure to be valued and protected by its inhabitants.

While a constitution or social contract of some sort is definitely important for promoting social security and collective interests, and for protecting

42. G. Ngwane, 'Cameroon: nation at a crossroads', *West Africa* (20–26 October 1997), p. 1678.

43. A verdict widely reported in Cameroon and throughout the world (see for example *NRC Handelsblad*, 23 September 1998), but vigorously contested by the Cameroonian government through its media and diplomatic services, although coming shortly after its own anti-corruption campaign was abruptly suspended.

44. Cf. Mbembe, 'Provisional notes', pp. 24–5; Bayart, *The State in Africa*, pp. 218–27.

individual freedoms, having a good constitution is hardly enough to put things right. While agreeing with those who believe that the January 1996 constitution has only accentuated the propensity in Cameroonians to emphasize their differences and ethnic ambition, I rather think the chronic lack of vision as a people is more of a problem than the lack of a good constitution. For, armed with the best of constitutions, prevalent attitudes of disregard for the public good still remain a formidable neutralizing force for any prospects of a common sense of purpose and direction. I dare conjecture that if Cameroon were to be confided to a self-professed dictator, one with a vision and one ready to take Cameroon forward without a constitution—the worst-case scenario—such a person would endear himself to ordinary Cameroonians much more than have most smoke-screen democrats in high office today. That, of course, is not what I am advocating. But what I believe is that one can have the greatest blueprint on paper, but when people disregard with impunity laws which they themselves have voted, saying that laws are made by man for man and need not be applied to the letter, what use is a perfect constitution? Our greatest problem is not the lack of law, nor is it a problem of imperfect laws. The simple truth is that Cameroon is yet to be imbued with a sense of mission or purpose as a country. To what extent this lack of vision can be explained by the bloody crushing of radical nationalism in Cameroon before and after independence,⁴⁵ has already been contemplated by some historians and political scientists.⁴⁶

No real commitment to democracy

With the Eastern European revolutions in 1989, disaffected Cameroonians in their numbers felt the time had come to quench a thirst long ignored: the thirst to be liberated from dictatorial complacencies, endemic corruption and suffocating mediocrity. They were fed up with power-mad dictators hiding behind the nebulous notions of national development and stability to disarm all forms of opposition. Everyone had come to know that such stability was phoney and development elusive. They wanted change—multi-party democracy, with the hope that this would bring about pluralism and popular democratic participation in practice. Mono-partyism made large promises for Cameroon, but failed to deliver even the meanest minimum. Their argument was that if thirty years of sacrificed freedoms were not time enough to have attained the promised land of unity, integration and betterment for all and sundry, then mono-partyism was a problem, not a solution.

45. R. A. Joseph, *Radical Nationalism in Cameroun: Social origins of the UPC rebellion* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977).

46. See, for example, A. Mbembe, 'Introduction: L'Etat-historien', in Achille Mbembe (ed.), *Ruben Um Nyobè: Ecrits sous maquis* (L'Harmattan, Paris, 1996), pp. 10–42.

The feeling is growing, even among pessimistic scholars, that, however entrenched, tyranny in Cameroon today is a candle in the wind. Its days, it is hoped, are numbered, thanks to mounting disillusionment, international pressure, and the growing recognition by the masses of the importance of organized resistance to government repression. Having access to the Internet, as institutions, social groups and individuals are doing increasingly, means more possibilities of by-passing the conventional mechanisms that the status quo has perfected over the years for silencing voices that threaten.

Such optimism notwithstanding, it seems that the Cameroonian masses still have quite some waiting to do before they emerge onto the superhighway of participatory democracy. For when one takes stock of the current democratization efforts, one is bound to admit that there is no goodwill and genuine commitment to collective betterment either with those in power or with those seeking the takeover.⁴⁷ 'Faced with many grievances and demands from poor social groups, the supply of ideas from political leaders has remained limited.'⁴⁸ It seems as though the general concern of the opposition parties is to substitute the ruling bellies, and not the wellbeing of everyone. Again, the quarrel of the opposition is more with the eaters than with the eating, as those of them who have managed to get themselves involved in government have quickly fallen prey to the comforts of chaos. Denunciations of malpractice in high office, by the opposition, appear more and more as mere political gimmicks, as even the most radical of them have not sought to go beyond what Monga has termed 'slogans in line with populist illusions'.⁴⁹ The opposition has failed to inspire or sustain popular hope either in the way opposition leaders manage their intra- and inter-party differences on the one hand, and their councils on the other, or in the way they have conducted themselves in parliament.⁵⁰

The momentum and enthusiasm for change generated by the rebirth of multi-partyism petered out shortly after the presidential elections of October 1992, when the public was made to understand that democracy is not necessarily having as president the person the majority wants. Subsequent elections at the local, parliamentary, and presidential levels in 1996 and 1997, have done little to rekindle hope and interest. It is quite common to hear ordinary Cameroonians say: 'On ne se tape même plus le corps ici. On attend.' Thus the bulk of Cameroonians, despite the

47. Ngwane, 'Cameroon', pp. 1678–9.

48. C. Monga, 'Civil society and democratisation in francophone Africa', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 33, 3 (1995), pp. 365–6.

49. Monga, 'Civil society', p. 371. According to *The Herald* (No. 279, 1996, p. 7) a disillusioned illiterate 'Takumbeng' woman who had seen leaders come and go, voted in and out, had this to say of the 1996 local elections: 'Candidates who stand for elections are like birds without feathers. We the voters give a candidate his feathers—each vote being another feather. When he has enough feathers off he flies and we never see him again.'

50. Ngwane, 'Cameroon', pp. 1678–80.

reintroduction of multi-partyism, continue to be compelled to abide by decisions taken without their consent or participation. These continue to have little impact even on their most pressing problems and interests, as the political, economic and social changes that they yearn for are being planned, executed or thwarted according to the one-best-way logic of the one-party era. Those who do not share the same political platform with 'us', cannot be right; they must be dishonest, traitorous, unpatriotic. How can they afford not to see things the way they do? It is a case of recycled monolithism, of pseudo-democracy given out in gift parcels, of democracy by remote control—a situation in which the genuinely thirsty have little real chance of quenching their thirst for freedom and meaningful participation.

Since the advent of the new wave of multi-partyism in 1991, Cameroonians have had little reason to believe that they are anything other than pawns in a game of chess played by the power elite; the latter set their agenda for them, use them to serve their ends, and at the end of the day, abandon them to the misery and ignorance to which they are accustomed. Democracy is yet to become a way of life—a culture—in Cameroon; so far it has served mainly as a face powder, an empty concept or slogan devoid of concrete meaning used to justify reactionary propaganda by the CPDM and its acolytes, on the one hand, and revolutionary propaganda by the opposition and some pressure groups, on the other.

With political parties being rather slow and increasingly incapable of delivering democracy, attention should normally turn to the other branches of civil society. But then, which of the pro-democracy NGOs created in Cameroon as alternative voices, is indeed free of the contradictions that plague opposition parties? How many of them can justify their existence beyond a mere ploy to target foreign donors for the personal enrichment of their founders? One finds that the emerging civil society is being infiltrated by organizations that are quite undemocratic in orientation, some of which may even have been created or sponsored by the ruling party to protect the government by countering the activities of other associations fighting for greater empowerment and genuine democracy. There are many examples of such associations and organizations either created by government or sponsored by it to water down the quest for democracy by the more radical elements of civil society.⁵¹ In the absence of a vigorous civil society and creative initiative, Cameroonians in their numbers continue to perceive the state as the sole source of personal enrichment and reward, and of massive frustration and neglect. Thus are stifled the ambition and enthusiasm of those keen to contribute towards the empowerment and edification of the dispossessed.

51. Cf. Konings and Nyamnjoh, 'The anglophone problem'.

There is therefore little public control of power in Cameroon because of the lack of public competition for power. The masses are passive spectators in decision-making at many levels, perhaps because they have relied overmuch on politicians and elites, rather than on their own ability to organize themselves into social forces with a contribution to make. Political affairs and social life are not organized and conducted in a way that allows for *effective* access to decision-making for all and sundry, and for an *equitable* distribution of the fruits of progress among the various social groups. Yet, only by returning power to the people in this way, could Cameroonians hope to stop 'living within a lie', and start 'living within the truth'.⁵²

Propensity to bend over backwards

Perhaps because of the politics of ethnic and regional balance where the meatiest bones are promised to the most patient dogs, Cameroonians tend to have a very elastic capacity to endure. Hence the adage: 'tu as déjà vu quoi?' This is an attribute highlighted by the nationwide popularity enjoyed by Les Maxtones du Littoral in their tune 'Doleibe (10f) la suite de l'affaire', from which the words 'on attend l'enfant, l'enfant ne vient pas' have been drawn to describe Cameroon as 'le pays de on attend'. Cameroon is a country of 'wait and see' . . . 'tu es pressé pour aller où?' There is always something to make a Cameroonian think twice even at the very last minute, for 'le Cameroun c'est le Cameroun'. Thus the adage: 'l'impossible n'est pas camerounais'. With Cameroonians, you must never say never on any given issue, just as you must never claim to know them. They like to be seen as being unpredictable, and therefore in control. However, such unpredictability is both in relation to the outside world and in their relations with one another. But they also like to present themselves as innocent victims of forces beyond their control—an attitude summed up in yet another adage: 'on est là . . . on va faire comment?' This attitude could lead to their seldom assuming their responsibilities, yet blaming others for their failures. On this mentality (itself a product of divide and rule), the politics of divide and rule can thrive very nicely.

The current system may consider itself fortunate that Cameroonians have the propensity to bend over backwards, or that they are always thinking of something to fall back on in the face of adversity in their jobs or businesses. Few civil servants rely entirely on their salaries, just as few businessmen live entirely off their businesses. In order to get by or to get through, one 'has to manoeuvre in and out, get round or step over things and people', and bend rules by getting things 'fixed', 'with the help of "something for the boss"'.⁵³ Other survival strategies devised to cope with

52. Havel, *Living*, pp. 36–122.

53. Mbembe, 'The "thing"', pp. 153–4.

the whims and caprices of the system include the tendency for civil servants to keep a garden, do some farming, indulge in formal or informal trading, and/or depend on supplies from relations in the village who in turn look up to them for some of the benefits of being in the city. There is also embezzlement and money-doubling, known locally as *feymanie*, of which Donatien Koagne⁵⁴ is an international representative. Prostitution⁵⁵ and the concubinage (*deuxième bureau*) phenomenon are another strategy, HIV/AIDS notwithstanding, thanks to which big men and women of phallocratic disposition subsidize the otherwise destitute lives of female and male students in exchange for sexual favours.⁵⁶

A traditionally useful strategy has been accusations of sorcery which are aimed at discouraging personal notions of success. For, only if the individual can spread out or redistribute personal success to bring betterment for all and sundry in his family, village, or community, is he really considered to have succeeded. Hence the tendency to see personal success as something 'essentially destructive unless seen to be acting for the good of all and this ensures that such achievements should be accompanied by egalitarian redistributory mechanisms'.⁵⁷ In this way sorcery can be as much a source of political power or powerlessness as it is a levelling mechanism against various forms of exploitation, marginalization, inequality and individualism.⁵⁸ Indeed, the fact that accusations of sorcery are usually among family members or kinsmen is indicative of how much ordinary Cameroonians cherish solidarity and how ready they are to protect it from any aggression.⁵⁹

All the above survival strategies mean that Cameroonians are always able to avoid the worst by making ends meet somehow. But it also means that since they are seldom stretched to their elastic limits, no one can bank on their support to make political capital out of failed policies or from any social or economic crisis.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to highlight my idea of Cameroon as a country united by ethnic ambition and difference. I have argued that the government, instead of pursuing and capitalizing upon what Cameroonians have in common, has opted for the Machiavellian approach, which is 'devilish or

54. Cf. *Libération*, 14 and 15 November 1998, p. 18.

55. Cf. P. Songue, *Prostitution en Afrique: L'exemple de Yaoundé* (L'Harmattan, Paris, 1986); P. Beat-Songue, *Sida & Prostitution au Cameroun* (L'Harmattan, Paris, 1993).

56. Cf. Mbembe, 'Provisional notes'.

57. M. Rowlands, 'Predicting personal success in Bamenda' (unpublished, 1994), pp. 1–20.

58. See M. Rowlands and J.-P. Warnier, 'Sorcery, power and the modern state in Cameroon', *Man*, 23, 1 (1988), pp. 121–5; P. Geschiere, *Sorcellerie et Politique en Afrique* (Karthala, Paris, 1995); C. Fisiy and P. Geschiere, 'Witchcraft, violence and identity: different trajectories in postcolonial Cameroon', in Richard Werbner and Terence Ranger (eds) *Postcolonial Identities in Africa* (Zed Books, London, 1996), pp. 193–7.

59. See Geschiere, *Sorcellerie*, pp. 7–35; Fisiy and Geschiere, 'Witchcraft, violence', p. 197.

satanically manipulative', and which Maya Angelou paraphrases thus: 'Divide the masses that you may conquer them; separate them and you can rule them'.⁶⁰ By attaching the elite of every ethnic group to the illusion that having a place in the limelight is just a matter of time for them and their ethnic group, the system has skilfully succeeded in dividing Cameroonians into the haves and the hopefuls. Hardship or misery are seen and treated as transient, and sometimes as a necessary prerequisite if one is to maximize the benefits of high office when the time comes.

Cameroonians are, as a result, very patient people. And whoever calls for a change of system before everyone or every group has had their own turn or 'fair' share at the high-table (*la mangeoire*), is unlikely to command much support. Especially as, thanks to the system, Cameroonians judge one another not so much by the merits of what they say or do, but rather by the stereotypes and prejudices for which their ethnic group or region are known.⁶¹ Anyone who speaks up in favour of democratic change quickly gets labelled as a self-seeking 'utopiste'⁶² or 'marchand d'illusions' and accused accordingly of trying to 'use innocent Cameroonians' as a stepping stone for selfish and ethnic ambitions.⁶³ Resistance to the government is thus diffused by mutual stereotypes and prejudices provoked by competing ethnic ambitions and difference. The only thing that unites Cameroonians is a common sense of ethnic ambition and difference, and the need to pursue this under the patronage of the godfather state. In this way mediocrity, corruption, exploitation and a false sense of stability get perpetuated.

How long this situation is likely to last is difficult to say. But as the 'national cake' diminishes with the worsening economic crisis, corruption, mass misery and ethnicity, it becomes more illusive for the bulk of small people to claim the same or any benefits from their connections with the big—or the not so big—men and women of power. The crumbling of lucrative networks of patronage and influence that have linked the masses and the elite, championed national politics and frustrated most attempts at bringing about a more democratic dispensation over the years, could well be the beginnings of a long awaited revolution. And the ruling elite might well have reason soon to exclaim: 'Les choses qui arrivent aux autres commencement déjà à m'arriver!'⁶⁴

60. M. Angelou, *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* (Bantam Books, New York, 1997), p. 99.

61. Tchop Tchop, *Candidat Unique*.

62. See G. Owona, *Un Bateau dans la Tourmente? Cameroun: Des raisons d'espérer* (Editions Intermedia, Douala, 1995), pp. 67–87, for such a judgement of John Fru Ndi and the summary dismissal of the major opposition leaders by the author, a CPDM baron.

63. For a collection of Paul Biya's speeches on this theme, see for example, CPDM, *Plaidoyer pour une Vraie Démocratie: Le grand périple provincial du Président Paul Biya (Août-Septembre-Octobre 1991)*.

64. Popular line from one of the songs of Jacky Ndoumbe, Cameroonian pop musician.