

A Legitimate Call for Separate Government

Anschaire Aveved, PhD.

Anthropologist and Independent Researcher

Two separate notions on who is an Anglophone have been gathering attention and shaping up against one another since the onset of political unrest in the North-West and South-West administrative regions of the Republic of Cameroon. The first and prevailing notion, especially outside of the country, is that Anglophones are English-speakers of the country's English-speaking area corresponding to the former British Southern Cameroons.¹ In the background of this notion is the assumption that Anglophones are the bulk of Cameroonians, wherever they are, who have been presumably educated in English and have thus become, more or less, the bearers of English language and British culture. Common law and the British-inspired educational curriculum have been epitomized by the demonstrations of lawyers and teachers as the expression of that culture and its resilient façade in the country's political institutions.

The provocative status that our first notion of Anglophone confers to English language and British culture in an African country, which as Achille Mbembe wrote² might make some laugh, cannot be

¹ Created as German protectorate in 1884, Kamerun was split after World War 1 under the auspices of the League of Nations and administered separately as the British Mandate in the Cameroons and the French Mandate in Cameroun. The British Mandate was administered as two separate entities: the British Northern Cameroons and the British Southern Cameroons. The two Mandates were transformed into the United Nations Trust until the end of French Trusteeship with the independence of La République du Cameroun in January 1960 and the end of British Trusteeship with the UN plebiscite in February

taken seriously unless both the administration of justice and the provision of minimal genuine education are examined within the context of the struggle of the people of the former British Southern Cameroons to resist attempts by the central government of Cameroon to undermine any institutional difference with the former French Cameroun, in the name of harmonization, while upholding its institutional borrowings and channels with the Republic of France through sustained and ceaselessly renewed cooperation and ever more bolstered technical assistance.

The second notion is a peculiar one. For ordinary Cameroonians, an Anglophone is he or she who is native to the two regions of the North-West and South-West. However, the peculiarity of this notion comes with the idea that being a native of the region, or of any place in the country for that matter, has neither to do with being born there nor being able to speak the putative language of the place. It all has to do with being able to trace and materialize one's patrilineal descent to the place back to colonial era. In that sense, an Anglophone may not necessarily be someone born or domiciled in former British Southern Cameroons – but these facts will not diminish an iota of their 'Anglophoneness'. Their genealogy bears testimony to their birth right as Anglophones. There have been accusations of deceit regarding people's supposedly real origin at times of dissension on tactics, especially when it related to enforcing ghost towns or boycotting schools.

1961. British Southern Cameroons reunited with the République du Cameroun while British Northern Cameroons voted to join Nigeria. The British Southern Cameroons formed a federation with the République du Cameroun until reunification in 1972. Until this time, the two were respectively designated West Cameroon and East Cameroon.

² Mbembe, Achille (2017) « La république en haillons », <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/joel-didier-engoblog/220117/litterature-comprendre-le-probleme-anglophone-au-cameroun>.

Furthermore, no one expects him or her who is a native Anglophone, to be able to speak English or to swear by the superiority, or at least the convenience of common law and British-style education for the descendants of peoples once ruled under the guiding principles of the British Empire. As a point of fact, Pidgin has grown all too well and has become the *lingua franca* of the country, to the point of threatening English in South-West and North-West public institutions. In the event of a legitimate reinstatement of a federal government, this fact will have to be accommodated if the issuing government is not to alienate the mass that supports federation and cares not much about English.

Moreover, developments over the last two decades or so, understandably the result of the ruling party's endeavor to smooth over boundaries in the name of bilingual education and polity, have reshuffled the composition of the population nationwide and blurred the line between those presumed English speakers and those sanctioned French speakers. A day after his arrest, Patrice Nganang issued an article online in which he articulated his belief that the North-West and South-West regions were the true heart of the Republic because most of their inhabitants spoke alternately English and French, with Pidgin always in the background; and that English was irreversibly the language of the future for the entire country.³

The relevance of this common understanding regarding being native to a place needs further clarification. Failure to elucidate its underpinnings comes with the price of turning the current crisis into a matter of cultural borrowings and mere divergence of mindset. The trend is to emphasize differences in manners, thoughts, trajectories and beliefs between two cultures; not necessarily between the inhabitants

of the two areas as does Nganang interestingly, but between the descendants of former subjects of British and French Empires by virtue of their lineage. One underside is the anxious silence on the second notion, always lurking in the background. Another is confusion over the reasons for the dissension behind the escalating confrontations between government forces and the so-called separatists. Theirs may not be the pursuit of things British. This is where indolent condemnations of violence and wishful calls for dialogue have stumbled.

David Abouèm à Tchoyi, former governor of respectively the South-West and North-West regions, has been the most vocal with regard to promoting both the second notion of Anglophone in the media and the need to funnel the crisis into a recognition of differences of minds between the children of British Southern Cameroons and French Cameroun. Additionally, he surmised that the current political arrangement burdened the people of the two regions because, unlike other regions of the country so the rationale goes, they experienced a short-lived parliamentary system during the federal era.

In early January 2017, well before the declaration of Ambazonia's virtual independence⁴, the series of school burnings and a rise in violent confrontations between the government and an indiscriminate opponent, Abouèm à Tchoyi published a pamphlet. In one of Cameroon-Info.Net's longest ever article, he warned the government that the burgeoning tension in his former administrative areas of duty would develop into an uncontrollable civil war, not unlike Boko Haram's insurrection in the northern Lake Chad basin. He advocated that the differences highlighted by Anglophone leaders were to be understood as differences ingrained in government practices and political institutions⁵. Behind such differences, he

³ Nganang, Patrice (2017), « Le carnet de route de Patrice Nganang : « Seul le changement au sommet de l'Etat peut régler le conflit anglophone au Cameroun », <http://www.cameroon-info.net/article/cameroun-crise-anglophone-le-carnet-de-route-de-patrice-nganang-seul-le-changement-309876.html>

⁴ Ambazonia is the name of the wishful country for which an Anglophone independence movement has been

struggling non-violently since the late 1970s. A declaration of independence was issued through social media on 1 October 2017.

⁵ Abouèm à Tchoyi, David (2017), « Le problème anglophone pourrait devenir le nouveau Boko Haram », <http://www.cameroon-info.net/article/cameroun-opinion-le-probleme-anglophone-pourrait-devenir-le-nouveau-boko-haram-278841.html>

argued, the drive toward centralizing all political decisions in former French Cameroon was detrimental to the task of governing the North-West and South-West and turned their inhabitants into mere spectators of unquestionable and unintentionally ruthless decisions.

Before Abouèm à Tchoyi's magisterial appearance onto the scene of controversies that had already been nurtured by the now self-institutionalized ghost towns, most contributions in newspapers and televised debates either downplayed the grievances of lawyers and teachers, especially by inflating the condition of regions poorer than the South-West and North-West, or called on the government to foster dialogue with the leaders of the then already-banned Cameroon Anglophone civil society consortium.

Drawing on his extended service in the governments of both Ahmadou Ahidjo and Paul Biya, Abouèm à Tchoyi weighed in. He spoke the language of the government, yet set it to a different task. He reasserted the relevance of recent events and traced them back to 1979 when a series of tracts decrying a programmatic marginalization and 'Frenchification' of former Southern Cameroons were distributed all over former British Southern Cameroons. At that time, voices from abroad and from within rushed then-President Ahidjo into setting up a committee under the chairmanship of Biya, then prime minister. The riddle today lies in the realization that no lasting solution has ever since been found. Although then in retirement, Abouèm à Tchoyi, who stood as the secretary for the committee, claimed a right to professional secrecy as to the conclusions of the week-long series of discussions and two-person conversations that took place in 1979.

That no lasting measure was taken does not mean there were no measures taken at all. One of these measures was the belated and ever more infuriating amendment of the legal designation of the state in 1984. The country's official designation changed from the United Republic of Cameroon to the Republic of Cameroon under the leadership of the once chairman of the committee, now President Biya. Some Francophone bureaucrats had judged from the comfort of their offices that the residual marker of a previous cleavage in the official designation of the

country was the basis of a penchant for subversion and division.

The rationale of the change, in Abouèm à Tchoyi's point of view, was that before being divided by the French and the British the country had already been shaped up as one by the Germans. Thus, the 1972 reunification was just a 'ceremonial' step toward reestablishing an earlier oneness. Therefore there was no need to speak of unification anymore. It was the first time that the ruling party made enemies from within its first ranks, all were Anglophones who saw in this rite of passage a formal annexation. Yet political might requires disasters to stifle dissension. There was no need to orchestrate one at the time. The failed putsch maneuvered by a part of the Republican Guard (6 April 1984), and unquestionably attributed to Ahidjo, who was then sentenced to death in absentia, provided the stage of looming disaster hovering over whoever else would provoke the government

This time too, members of government have found in the fear of secession the specter of doom that could be wavered effortlessly in the media to discourage further calls for dialogue and to authorize the use of newly wrought legislation on terrorism to hunt down dissenters. Another measure was taken too, this time an ideological one as it has often been the case since the independence of French Cameroun. The government conjured up a sort of foundational myth that plays unity against diversity. The President hailed it this time in the name of the indivisibility of the State during his end of year speech. A commission was subsequently set up to foster bilingualism and multiculturalism at every level of government. Such was the substitute for an outright dialogue. Ironically, Abouèm à Tchoyi gleefully accepted a position within the commission and hence willingly played the mascot of successful bilingualism and integration, alongside Peter Mafany Musonge, the former Prime Minister.

There's indeed a common thread between the beliefs of the ruling party and Abouèm à Tchoyi's self-confessed propensity to centralize political processes as a Francophone civil servant. The point is that the two notions of Anglophones, with which I started, are both the starting and end-points of these beliefs

inasmuch as they are the very predicament of a legitimate call for separate governments. It's a postcolonial predicament, one that consecrates at the core of government a mode of differentiated ethno-territoriality, birth entitlements, and a kin-based redistributive mode of government. This predicament unites the fate of the Republic of Cameroon to that of what Mahmood Mamdani has described as mainstream nationalism in Africa⁶. Yet the position of Anglophones is not that of second class citizens. The Anglophone crisis is nevertheless rewriting this fate and creating a radical opening never experienced before in Africa.

First, I would like to remark that, even though it remains a deflection and temporary deferral, the new commission on language and culture is a progressive move on the part of the government. By making room for discussions on colonial heritage and ethnic diversity, the government has sought to reach out to the Anglophone lawyers and teachers' call for an actual, not rhetorical, "bilingual, bi-jural, and bi-cultural state."⁷ The apparently innocuous difference of mind on culture is not the least to consider. Nevertheless, dissensions are accommodated by the new platform. Now, let's go back to our notions of who is an Anglophone.

A notion is not a thing of language. It's not something language communicates. It is a learned habit, the habit of seeing oneself as an agent of some sort of knowledge. More appropriately, it is knowledge that comes with experience. Language works through and through to make it come into existence, become thinkable and describable, but language has no control whatsoever over its course. Otherwise said, notions resist conceptual mastery. Their true abode lies in their currency. With the invocation of colonization and ethnicity, the two notions of Anglophones seem to have a common foundation and to tap into the government's predicament on heritage

and diversity. However, the lines of tension and breakage are clear.

The two referents of a call to unity in diversity should not be conceived of at liberty. As already indicated above, the ethnicity at work in defining a native has more to do with lineage than it has with language or culture. Abouèm à Tchoyi rightly argues that not once have people in the former British Southern Cameroons ever fought against an ethnic practice originating from Francophone Cameroon. In saying so, he exceptionalizes and excludes French and its putative cultural elements.

On the other hand, nowhere in Africa has colonial heritage been set in the spotlight of cultural difference to such an extent that it runs to the vanguard of being the subject of special care and devotion. More exactly, devotion to the language and culture of former colonial metropolises has been a bedroom ritual, or an intellectual delight better indulged where authenticity is outwardly sought. The taboo is carefully enshrined in the ubiquitous notions of official language and national language. In Cameroon, the first is the language of government, in as much as the language that is supposedly spoken by the entire nation. As for the second, it designates any language of a tribe or an ethnic group sanctioned to be native to the country. Yet, these tribal groups or ethnicities are not scheduled in the constitution, unlike in some countries such as Uganda.

The underside of the linguistic arrangement of African countries, especially in Francophone countries, is that it leaves matters of language policies to the former colonial ruler and ensures their leadership wherever standards are at stake. Since language rules over all matters of life, so do colonial ties and bonds. Accordingly, tribal languages have conquered the public space in most public offices in Francophone Cameroon, and some grammatically altered French dominates written material. On the other hand,

⁶ Mamdani, Mahmood (2005), "Political Identity, Citizenship and Ethnicity in Post-colonial Africa," Arusha Conference, "New Frontiers of Social Policy", Keynote Address - (December 12-15).

⁷ All Cameroon Common Law Lawyers' Conference (2015), Resolutions Made At The Inaugural All Cameroon Common Law Lawyers' Conference Held At Bamenda In The North West Region Of Cameroon On Saturday May 09.

dwindling cultural cooperation between the country and Great Britain since the late 1980s has made Pidgin overtake English in Anglophone Cameroon.

Let's not be mistaken in thinking that the lot of the so-called tribal languages is any better. The current generation speaks and works in a language and culture they are legally prevented to identify with. They must identify with a language and culture of which they have no knowledge or grasp. I remember a young businessman who came to me to seek advice on how he could learn his "mother tongue". I was puzzled until I learned further that what he considered a mother tongue was not the language he learned from his mother as a child, but the language, in his own words, of his "father". With the language of his father, he confessed, he could win over the people of his "village of origin" for political pursuits. As proof that ethnicity in Cameroon has everything to do with lineage, all must by law identify with the ethnicity of their father.

Now, how does this play out in the Anglophone struggle for autonomy? The shortest answer is that this struggle draws heavily, though legitimately, on the language of the State that preys on diversity to call for unity, and therein ensures its control over every single resource in the country with the mere promise of lineage-based redistribution. As a quarter century has proven all over the continent, this language is impervious to any call for democracy.

The Anglophone call for an actual bilingual, bi-jural and bicultural State does silence the question of diversity. Yet, with the motto of marginalization and historical grievances, they tacitly tap into the rationale of a redistributive State that has long practiced mischievous ethnic quotas. Theirs is not to challenge the foundation of this State but the efficiency of the government in ensuring fair redistribution. Its own political challenge, not necessarily required for an already legitimate call for a federal state, is to articulate a competitive and compelling narrative that

would unite the inhabitants of former British Southern Cameroons, instead of just building on common ancestry by denouncing betrayal, adumbrating cultural difference, and pursuing a reactionary return to a prior state of affairs.

There is no guarantee that a new and legitimate two-state federation will translate in practice or work in the direction of a return to the past. Yesterday's circumstances were different from those of today. The population has long been reshuffled, there is a massive and angry push of dispersed natives from the Diaspora, and there is no guarantee that the current administration has not drastically transformed the habits and expectations of those that are in the bush.

In a not so distant past, Paul Biya had a peculiar understanding of his task at the summit of the government. In his mind, the living together of so divergent and antagonistic peoples was the product of forcible integration masterminded by European colonization. The task of the independent State, as much as its *raison d'être*, was to lead them into a peacefully integrated nation⁸.

Abouèm à Tchoyi came up with a contiguous narrative to accommodate the current political crisis. "History has summoned Cameroonians," he said, "to a sublime contest; one of building a united State out of the singular trajectory of their country, and capable of standing for a model of the integration of various colonial inheritances and its multi-centennial traditional values".⁹ The problem with these stories is that they tend to misrecognize the suffering they create and refuse to acknowledge the right of their victims to disagree. Women and non-natives have been sacrificed at the altar of culture and tradition, while the younger generation still grapples with their elders' obsession with colonial ties and bonds.

About the Author

Anschaire Aveved is an anthropologist and independent researcher based in Cameroon. He is

⁸ Biya, Paul (1987). Pour le libéralisme communautaire. Lausanne, Favre.

⁹« L'Histoire a lancé aux Camerounais un défi sublime : celui de bâtir, à partir du parcours singulier de leur pays,

un Etat uni, capable de constituer un modèle d'intégration des divers héritages coloniaux et de ses valeurs traditionnelles multiséculaires »

currently involved with the return of persons associated to Boko Haram in the Far-north region.