

“[T]he intertwined nature of language, politics, and identity permeates the nation, its institutions, and the public and private lives of its citizens.”

## The Roots of the Anglophone Problem: Language and Politics in Cameroon

ERIC A. ANCHIMBE

When the wind of independence blew through Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, the choice of an official language for the new nation-states was a tricky one. Some adopted a colonial tongue as the sole official language, as in the case of Ivory Coast with French. Others favored two official languages—one local and one colonial—as Tanzania did with English and Kiswahili. A third approach was to adopt a dual policy, as Nigeria did by recognizing English as its official language and Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba as regional languages. None retained an indigenous language as the sole official language.

A special case of this dilemma was Cameroon, which had undergone a complex colonial experience. The Central African territory had been colonized by Germany from 1884 to 1916 and then, after World War I, partitioned between France and Britain until independence in the early 1960s. All traces of the German language were obliterated by the colonial policies of the French and British. The new independent nation-state opted for a policy of state bilingualism: the two colonial languages, French and English, both became official languages in a federal state consisting of the former French-ruled and British-ruled regions, whose people are now referred to as Francophones and Anglophones, respectively.

It could be argued that this was the only practical decision possible at that time. What's certain is that the policy has since had extensive ramifications not only for language policy implementation but also for citizens' identities. Given the dense multilingual milieu in which they live, Camer-

oonians have to adaptively switch among these two official languages, over 280 indigenous languages, and the Pidgin English widely used for an wide range of functions in different contexts. For instance, Pidgin English is used in political campaigns, community health centers, on the radio, and as a lingua franca in interethnic conversations.

Since 2016, Cameroon has been rocked by the latest and most serious eruption of what was referred to as far back as the 1990s as the “Anglophone Problem.” This time it started relatively timidly, in October 2016, with a peaceful march by Anglophone lawyers to protest the appointment of French-speaking judges trained in French civil law to preside in English-speaking, English common law-based courts in the North West and South West regions. The following month, Anglophone teachers protested against the transfer of monolingual French-speaking teachers to the English-language education subsystem of those regions.

The government's response to these peaceful protests was heavy-handed. Lawyers and teachers were beaten and incarcerated. In response, they went on a strike that shut down the courts and schools. With no signs of cooperation from the government, the protests suddenly metamorphosed into a call for the secession of the two English-speaking regions from the rest of the country. On October 3, 2017, the Anglophone Consortium—a movement that emerged out of the strike actions—symbolically declared the independence of the “Republic of Ambazonia” from the rest of the country.

The government responded to this declaration with a crackdown that has led to hundreds being arrested, many killed, and tens of thousands fleeing to neighboring Nigeria, where a refugee camp has been set up for them. Entire villages have been

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razed by government forces in retaliation for alleged attacks on the military; curfews and travel bans have been imposed; and arbitrary arrests and detentions have become commonplace.

How quickly this happened, and how broad-based the support for secession turned out to be, can be explained in light of the long history of what I call Anglophonism and Francophonism. These notions capture the conscious patterns of identity construction and sociocultural and political maneuvering that members of these groups engage in to safeguard their colonial heritage.

In other words, the Anglophones and Francophones constitute two colonially determined and language-based opposing groups. Cameroonians feel they must fit into one or the other and defend its values; they believe their collective survival depends on it. This pattern of in-group building for collective and political survival is not uncommon in Africa, where current borders were drawn by colonial rulers without regard to the different groups living in the territory.

It has had three repercussions for Cameroon. The conscious construction of language-based, colonially inspired identities is reflected in the adage, “Cameroonians are first of all Anglophones or Francophones.” These identities have been interpreted, especially by Anglophones, as equivalent to ethnicity. And these strong identities have led to the current sociolinguistic and political crises in the country’s Anglophone regions, which account for about a fifth of the country’s population.

### QUASI-ETHNIC GROUPS

The importance of language to a people’s identity is widely recognized. How it works out in hugely multilingual countries in Africa is a tale of tolerance and accommodation, rivalry and exclusion, and evolutionary competition and selection, depending on where one looks and the constellation of languages involved.

In postindependence Cameroon, Francophones and Anglophones have had a complex relationship. The politics of mutual tolerance (or intolerance) they practice and the defense of in-group values they engage in have projected identities built around language—in this case foreign, colonially introduced languages—onto the platforms of national politics, government administration, educational and judicial policy, and national resource allocation. The role played by language and linguistic identities in all these spheres in Cameroon has been widely described—by academics, journal-

ists, and politicians—as central and determinative in the trajectory of the country and its citizens.

In his 2001 book *English in Cameroon*, Hans-Georg Wolf of the University of Potsdam analyzes how Cameroonians subsume their ethnolinguistic identities into the more extensive official language identities—Anglophone and Francophone—to such an extent that “the feeling of unity is so strong that ‘being Anglophone’ denotes a new ethnicity, transcending older ethnic ties.” Because of these strong ties, Anglophones tend to consider Francophones as an opposing out-group of an ethnic type.

The immediate and natural reflex, given the politics of ethnicity predominant in Cameroon and in much of Africa, is for members to defend their group each time they feel it is under attack. It is therefore no surprise that every act of protest by the Anglophones or in the Anglophone regions is immediately described as part of the “Anglophone Problem.”

Take an example from the world of journalism. The newspaper reporter V. N. Mbai, in the opening lines of an article published in *The Post* (a leading English-language newspaper) on January 8, 2007, seemed to emphasize his sense of belonging to the Anglophone in-group, displaying a natural reflex to defend the use of English. He wrote: “The Vice-Prime Minister, Minister of Justice, and Keeper of the Seals in what is obviously a flagrant violation of the constitution of the country sent shock waves through English-speaking Cameroonians by banning the use of English during his press conference in Yaounde last Friday, January 5.” The reporter’s tone and his defense of English in the face of the (Francophone) minister’s presumed “attack” may appear justified if we agree with Wolf that Anglophones now function like an ethnic group and that English is the in-group language of that quasi-ethnic entity.

In the same year, President Paul Biya, a Francophone, also weighed in on the issue of official language and, implicitly, on identity as well. In an interview with the cable television network France 24 while on a visit to Paris in October 2007, he declared (in French): “At a time when we are witnessing the linguistic imperialism of certain languages, it is worthwhile to preserve a space where French is spoken.”

One can safely assume that the imperialistic language Biya had foremost in mind here was English, and since English is one of the official languages in Cameroon, it is understandable that he

wanted to create a space (in this case, comprising the entire country) in which French could continue to thrive. The president's apparent defense of French against English encroachment exemplifies the subtle disputes between Anglophones and Francophones in Cameroon.

Biya's statement may have been in response to specific trends in Cameroon. The 2000s saw a huge and unprecedented rush for English-language education at all levels by Francophones, who consider English a means of access to the globalized world beyond Cameroon. Researchers including Stephen Mforteh, Kelen Ernesta Fonyuy, and I have found that many Francophones are now learning English and also sending their children to English-language schools located in the Anglophone regions. The president's remark suggested that French should be protected against this rush for English.

In Cameroon, the intertwined nature of language, politics, and identity permeates the nation, its institutions, and the public and private lives of its citizens. In the examples above, Mbai and Biya use words heavily imbued with emotion, such as "flagrant violation," "shock waves," and "linguistic imperialism" in their attempts to defend their language and by extension their identity group (of an ethnic type).

Some may claim that these disputes are limited to language alone, but the reality is that sociopolitical disputes in Cameroon have repeatedly ended up being described as or incorporated under the rubric of the "Anglophone Problem." After all, the current campaign for the secession of the Anglophone regions from the rest of the country started simply as a protest by lawyers and teachers.

## COLONIAL LEGACIES

How language drives these political issues can only be understood if we take into account the legacies of colonialism in this postcolonial nation. It has often been argued that some of the failures of African states, and postcolonial states in other parts of the world, may be attributed to the colonial baggage they carried into the era of decolonization and independence. The replication of the systems of political administration, education, law, and language policy of the colonizer countries in the highly complex contexts of the colonized territories ignored the different ethnic kingdoms or swaths of ethnic territories with diverse forms of

education, judicial systems, religions, and multiple languages that had been forcibly brought together within colonial boundaries. The acute differences between the colonizer countries and the indigenous contexts were not adequately factored into the independence process.

Whatever these indigenous systems represented for the people was overruled by the new systems introduced during colonialism. This imposition brought with it the danger that the indigenous people would always be locked into a process of learning to use or appropriate those foreign systems, even after decolonization. I would argue that, directly and/or indirectly, the abysmal dysfunction of some state institutions in Cameroon today can be attributed to the desire to maintain colonial legacies. Three such legacies have been at the center of the ongoing protests that started in 2016, namely colonial language policy based on French and English and the parallel judicial and educational systems.

The sociolinguist Ronald Wardhaugh argued in his 1987 book *Languages in Competition* that "language planning has become part of modern nation-building because a noticeable trend in the modern world is to make language and nation synonymous." A modern nation, he suggests, takes its unique identity from the language (or languages) it claims as its own.

Postcolonial countries faced this pressure of making language synonymous with the nation, with the further complication that the new official language was often that of the former colonial power. Cameroon, at independence, prided itself as the only country in the world other than Canada to have a bilingual system of English and French—and in both countries, of course, the two official languages were leftovers from colonialism.

Yet there is no official document dedicated to Cameroon's language policy. Instead, language-related statements are scattered through the constitution and in decrees on educational policy. For instance, a January 1996 constitutional amendment states:

The official languages of the country shall be English and French, both having the same status. The state shall guarantee the promotion of bilingualism throughout the country. It shall endeavor to promote and protect national languages.

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This makes it clear that the state bilingualism policy concerns only French and English, not the more than 280 indigenous languages and Pidgin English that coexist with them. The wording of this provision is also indicative of the type of linguistic identities that the state apparatus is willing to support. Whereas the promotion of French and English shall be “guaranteed,” the state will only “endeavor” to promote and protect the “national,” that is, indigenous languages. Given such a posture, strong sentiments of Anglophonomism and Francophonism were bound to emerge and spread quickly under institutional and constitutional cover. The outcomes of these dynamics are visible today in the crisis in the Anglophone regions.

Education is another colonial legacy that has fueled feelings of Anglophonomism and Francophonism in Cameroon. Most educational systems in Africa are based on colonialist European models. Cameroon, unlike any other African country, inherited two such educational models at independence. According to a 1998 law, “The educational system shall be organized into two subsystems: the English-speaking subsystem and the French-speaking subsystem, thereby affirming our national option for biculturalism.”

These two subsystems are independent of each other: they administer separate exams and award different certificates. Each subsystem teaches the other’s language only as a subject in the curriculum, a pathway to bilingualism that I consider extremely ineffective. The two subsystems merge only at the university level, where students are allowed to choose disciplines irrespective of the language in which there are taught. Almost 17 years of pre-university education is time enough for quasi-ethnic sentiments of belonging to the Anglophone or Francophone language group to become ingrained.

Ironically, the 2016 teachers’ strike happened only because the government tried to merge the two educational subsystems by assigning Francophone teachers to positions in the Anglophone subsystem. Separation would have continued to build in-group feelings without sparking them into protests. Whether the government policy was based on a sound principle—reconciling the two educational subsystems—or not, it was seen mainly as an attempted Francophone takeover, similar to what was also happening in the courts.

The judicial system operates two independent legal regimes: English common law is practiced in the Anglophone regions and French civil law in the Francophone regions. Cameroon has only one state-run school of magistracy, which teaches both types of law. Magistrates and judges trained in this school are often posted to courts irrespective of their competence in the legal system practiced in the given region or in the language used there.

The 2016 lawyers’ strike in the Anglophone regions was in protest of French-speaking, civil law-trained judges presiding in English-speaking common law courts—and doing so in French, since most of them are not fluent in English. According to the Anglophone lawyers’ memorandum of complaint, apart from the inability of the Francophone judges to effectively interpret the law in a system they do not understand and in a language they do not speak, their presence was a political ploy aimed at “infiltrating and assimilating the Common Law system.” Any legitimate reasons that

might have led the government to appoint these judges are now completely dismissed in the heat of clashing linguistic identities.

These examples of language, education, and judicial policy paint a picture of dysfunctional state institutions that owe their origin and stature to colonial models rather than to any independent national model. Since the nation-state was built on these colonial legacies, and its leaders are bent on defending and preserving them, any form of opposition, dissent, or protest over the way they operate is interpreted as an attack on the nation-state itself and countered with excessive force. This is the case not only in Cameroon but also in other African countries where protests over the functioning of state institutions have been met with brutal repression rather than dialogue.

## IDENTITY AND SOLIDARITY

Politics is often about the construction and negotiation of identity. It may be a question of genuine or opportunistic identity, natural or negotiated identity, racial or social identity, ethnic or national identity, religious or linguistic identity, individual or group identity, unique or multiple identities. What generally matters for political actors is the choice of a convenient, albeit temporary, identity marker that encapsulates any relevant groups of

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people each time a political need arises. Anglophones and Francophones in Cameroon are adept at this game. They have developed the ability to shed some of their onion layers of multiple identities when situations call for solidarity with the language group.

One layer of identity that seems to resist shedding is the colonial heritage represented today by the notions of Anglophonism and Francophonism. This layer has become so entrenched in politics and government that it is now part of administrative policy: it has become the basis for appointment to government jobs, promotion in the military, and access to state resources. The two Anglophone regions have come to be considered as one unit in national resource allocation and regional representation; they are granted only one voice, one vote, or one appointment instead of being treated as separate entities like the country's other eight regions. Anglophones' sense of marginalization is fueled by this unequal access to national funding, investment, and representation.

Certain government positions are now implicitly reserved only for Anglophones or Francophones. Today, the post of prime minister is understood to be set aside for an Anglophone, while the president is Francophone—an arrangement often touted by pundits as a balancing act between the two colonially instituted groups. But this is not a genuine balance of power: the prime minister is only third in the hierarchy of succession after the president of the Senate. The last four prime ministers have been Anglophones, while the Francophone Biya has been president since 1982.

This political understanding emerged after the 1990s, when multiparty politics were reintroduced in the country and the Social Democratic Front (SDF)—generally viewed by Francophones as the Anglophone party—was launched in the heart of the Anglophone zone. Of course, many Anglophones remain members of the ruling party while many Francophones are members of the SDF.

How strong are party allegiances when they conflict with the need to defend the Anglophone

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or Francophone in-group or language? The answer may be found in an incident that took place in the Cameroon National Assembly in December 2004. One member, Blama Malla (a Francophone), accused another, Paulinus Jua (an Anglophone), of being a “Nigerian.” In the ensuing uproar, Anglophone lawmakers from both the opposition and the ruling party protested the insult of labeling a fellow Cameroonian as a foreigner simply because he spoke in English.

The members of Parliament who stood up for Jua abandoned political party lines to defend their language-based identity as Anglophones. Anglophone members from all the political parties in the Assembly instantly responded to the bond of this relationship as they rose to defend their ethnic brother and their in-group language, displaying solidarity when their colonially inherited identity was attacked by a Francophone. Even in the country’s highest legislative body, the colonial division still thrives through the language identities it has orchestrated.

### SEPARATE TRAJECTORIES

If anything, the bond of togetherness among Anglophones has become tighter as their perception that the government is Francophone and biased against them has strengthened. As the nature of the educational and judicial systems makes clear, Anglophones and Francophones follow mostly separate trajectories even though they belong to the same nation-state.

For instance, the so-called bilingual schools are not bilingual in the sense that they teach students to use two languages fluently but simply because the two subsystems of education operate in the same compound. The students in each subsystem do not meet in any common classes. This parallelism or separation in institutional contexts has led to total mutual distrust. Potentially good ideas get caught up and discredited in this climate of distrust.

I join many others in saying that while the recent strikes by Anglophone lawyers and teachers were in themselves justified, reasonable, and in the interest of all citizens (both Anglophones and Francophones), they were too quickly branded as the latest iteration of the “Anglophone Problem.” This branding triggered the government’s usual response that there is no such problem, which opened the way for the protesters to be labeled as disturbers of the peace, terrorists, and now secessionists.

If those protests had been handled independently of the Anglophones’ broader struggle against the postcolonial inequalities that are entrenched in the notions of Anglophonism and Francophonism—that is, if they were treated as reasonable requests by professionals who want better working conditions—the current radicalization might have been averted. Before it is too late, it is time for Cameroonians redefine ourselves not along the confrontational lines of colonial legacies but rather on the basis of what makes us unique as a nation. ■