

Cultural Diversity, Identity Construction and Nation-building in Cameroon: Transitions from Pre-Kamerun to Post-Independence Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

Cameroon, a microcosm of Africa, is characterised by profound cultural diversity, with over 250 ethnic groups and a complex history of colonialism. This paper explores the historical trajectory of cultural diversity and the problem of identity in Cameroon, from the pre-Kamerun through the colonial to the post-colonial periods. It examines the extent to which the German administration and subsequently, British, and French titular rules shaped the country's cultural landscape, creating divisions and hierarchies that persist today. Informed by primary and secondary data, the paper argues that while Cameroon prides itself as a cultural melting pot, the legacy of cultural diversity and identity construction are two social engineering factors that continue to influence conversations, expression and policy orientations on the project of nation-building in Cameroon. By analysing the historical context and contemporary manifestations, the study demonstrates the crucial importance of identity and cultural diversity in informing the project and process of nation-building especially in the cultural-variegated Cameroonian nation where the quest for unity and integration is not only crucial but urgent.

Keywords: Cultural diversity, identity, colonialism, post-colonialism, nation-building, Cameroon.

INTRODUCTION

The objective of each government from time immemorial has been to provide food, lodging and security for their citizens. Once this is achieved, the population begins to look for abstract values to assert their personal freedom and expression. This leads to the conscious or unconscious search for identity or identity revolutions. Once introduced into a modern form of politics different from their once purely traditional politics, different ethnic groups, especially minority groups, gradually develop an identity problem. The supposedly dominated group begins to seek for newfound dignity and liberation.

Cameroon, a country located in Central Africa, is a complex and fascinating example of cultural diversity. With over 250 ethnic groups, Cameroon is home to a wide range of languages, traditions, and customs. However, this diversity has also been a source of tension and conflict, particularly in the context of colonialism and post-colonial nation-building process. The history of Cameroon is marked by the imposition of colonial rule, which had a profound impact on the country's cultural landscape. The legacy of colonialism continues to shape the dynamics of identity politics in Cameroon, where cultural differences are often politicised and manipulated for power and resources.

This article explores the historical trajectory of cultural diversity and the problem of identity in Cameroon, examining the ways by which colonial rule and post-colonial institutional makings fashioned the country's cultural landscape creating challenges and opportunities for nation-building and social cohesion. It attempts to bring to light the underlying issue of multiple identities, which strains the efforts of national integration in Cameroon. This paper is divided into three parts: first, the conceptual clarifications, followed by an examination of the history of identity and cultural dynamism in Cameroon; and finally, we will analyse the impact of cultural diversity on identity dynamics in Cameroon.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

These are the main concepts whose orientations will facilitate the understanding of the subject of ethnic diversity, identity and the problem of national unity in Cameroon.

An ethnic group can be defined as a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of shared culture, a link with a homeland, and a measure of solidarity, at least among the elites.¹ Groups can relate with other groups, but the relationships are most often conflictual, and the better organised group wins.² Identity would not have become a problem in Cameroon if the tribes and villages had not become parts of a nation. Villagers who became nationals after independence automatically belonged to a new political setup. However, ethnically, different groups are most likely to rebel against the empire and reduce the geopolitical power of a state. It is easy for their elites to start off a strike or political uprising.³

Nationalism insinuates the coexistence of different ethnic communities and their transformation into a natural and homogenous society within which the custodians of power and the citizens are supposed to consciously cultivate a national identity, a sense of belonging based on shared cultural values and aspirations.⁴ Nationalism introduced the doctrine that political borders had to correspond to cultural communities with cultures defined largely by shared language. Precolonial Cameroon was a blend of different dialects. French and English were introduced during the colonial period and later adopted as national languages upon independence. The villagers became psychologically lost in the new politics and culture of the colonial and national systems. Within this newly created society or national culture, the indigene began to seek his place by questioning who he really was and what he represented. This clearly indicates that man is not loyal to political systems but to a culture.⁵

What is Culture? According to Carrol Quigley, human beings are species that are different from other living things. Humans are helpless at birth and are cared for and trained as they grow up. As they grow, they combine their potentialities and their actualities to create their personality. 'Potentialities' here refers to what they are capable of becoming originally, while 'actuality' refers to what humans become as a result of their experience and the training received. Their potentialities constitute human nature, while actualities sum up to what is known as human personality.⁶ The way people behave is therefore very largely affected by the personalities of the adults who trained them. This is known as a culture.

Culture is created by human beings in relation to their environment and needs. Margaret MacMillan argues that human beings have created cultures which shaped their mind-set and determined what they consider to be important. They created fairly organised societies with strong central governments in most cases and struggled for survival. Here, the three elements needed for human survival were food, shelter and sex. Human beings were naturally good until society made them corrupt. This happened when humans settled down and picked up farming. This led to the development of private property and wealth, which made some of the successful people become rulers over the poor. Societies moved from their egalitarian nature to unequal and hierarchical entities.⁷

Cultural diversity in this context refers to the complex interplay between different cultures within a society and how this variety shapes individuals' identities. It influencing how they perceive themselves and interact with others, often leading to a dynamic process of identity formation and negotiation within the broader social context. Contemporary democracies have not fully resolved the problem of *thymos*, that part of the soul that craves recognition and dignity. This goes together with the problem of *isothymia*, the demand to be respected on an equal basis with other people.⁸

¹ Peter Turchin, *Historical Dynamics: Why States Rise and fall*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2003, p. 36.

² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁴ Peter Turchin, "A theory for formation of large empires", *Journal of Global History*, (2009) 4, pp. 191–217.

⁵ Peter Turchin, *Historical Dynamics Why States Rise and Fall*, Princeton University Press, 2003.

⁶ Sean M. Carroll, *The Big Picture: On the Origins of Life, Meaning, and the Universe Itself*, Penguin, 2016.

⁷ Margaret MacMillan, *War: How Conflict Shaped us*, New York, Random House, 2020, pp. 9-10.

⁸ Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The demand for Dignity and the Politics of resentment*, New York, 2018, p. XIII.

‘Politics’ derives from the Greek word *polites*, which means ‘citizen’. ‘Citizen’ comes from the word ‘polis’, which means ‘city’ or ‘community’ in ancient Greek. Therefore, politics is the way of running community or city affairs. The way of governing communities or citizens of a city or community. Politics is one of the rare human institutions that has not experienced much change while cutting across several millennia. It has always been about the struggle for power and how to manage it. Managing power is about taking care of the needs of the people of a political entity. Modern politics since the 1500s and in recent centuries has been about states’ governmental regulations based on a traditional political spectrum. Politics was generally characterised by rifts between political parties and politicians. According to Zacharia, politicians have always had to “[...] promise everything to everyone, always be seen in public surrounded by your most passionate supporters and remind voters of your opponents’ sex scandals”.⁹

Identity in human history is driven by the struggle for recognition. Identity grows out of the distinction between one’s true inner self and an outer world of social rules and norms that does not adequately recognise that inner self, worth or dignity. This notwithstanding, human beings as social beings always seek to conform to the norms of their surroundings. Society exists out of the individual, and individuals throughout history have found themselves at odds with their societies, and the societies need to change and conform to the needs of individuals.¹⁰

The issue of identity goes back to the very beginning human existence. It intensified in the 1500s when Martin Luther started the process of Protestant reformation. He believed that there are two things human beings can do on their own. Each human being can believe what he/she believes alone and die when he/she dies alone. This person who believes and dies alone comes to a point in life where he begins to question who he really is. Part of the explanation comes from Maslow, who states the hierarchy of human needs. The fundamental demands are for survival in food, shelter, and clothing. Once these demands have been satisfied, human beings begin to look for luxury or things that are no longer needed for survival. Once they have gotten the survival needs and luxurious needs, a question comes to their minds and stays for the rest of their lives. The question is “Who am I really?” Here comes the issue of identity. In the quest for identity, there are lots of complications. Sometimes people identify themselves by where they come from. As they evolve in society, they might begin to identify themselves by their achievements.

There was also identity based on political philosophy. Some people got into political parties even before independence in Cameroon. People like Endeley, Foncha, and S. T. Muna on the British Cameroon side. On the French Cameroon side there were people like Asale, Felix Oum Nyobe, and Ahmadou Ahidjo. Belonging to a particular party further led to new definitions of individuals depending on the ideologies and practices of the parties. In modern times the issue of identity became even more complicated, as one person could be from a particular community, political party, and so on. In many cases, this led to class distinction among Cameroonians. In some Cameroonian societies, people were either identified as slaves or free people.¹¹ This class distinction was sometimes shared by descendants of slaves, which continues to animate debate in recent times.

Building Phases of Identity and Cultural diversity in Cameroon

When human beings appeared on the scene, there were issues of identity. The history of Cameroon is complicated because it is culturally diverse and has experienced ethno-genesis and dynamism in its cultures and national politics. Cameroon has been a dynamic society from the time it experienced colonialism. Both the Cameroonian society and culture experienced changes in their components, activities and ways of thinking while going through a process of historical changes.

Identity and Cultural diversity in Pre-Kamerun

People in Pre-Kamerun were identified by their local communities, the village, or the family. Even when you got into a big family, there was the issue of whose child you were. When there was polygamy, identity was tied

⁹ Fareed Zacharia, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual origins of America’s World Role*, Princeton University Press, 1998.

¹⁰ Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The demand for Dignity and the Politics of resentment*, New York, 2018, p. 9.

¹¹ Roxana Willis, et al., “‘We Remain Their Slaves’ Voices from the Cameroon Conflict”, A Working Paper, Faculty of Law, St Cross Building, St Cross Road, Oxford OX1 3UL, United Kingdom, 2020.

to the mother. Children from polygamous families were identified by their mothers. Children differentiated themselves by attributing their names to their mothers'.¹² During early European explorations and contacts, Cameroonians adopted western names and naming culture. During colonisation, the surname was further encouraged by the whites to identify people with their families. In a country like Cameroon, people's identity is still largely based on where they were born (generally one's tribe), making each person different from the other. In Cameroon, like in many parts of the world, religion also came with new identity issues where people became either Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, Muslim, or Pentecostal, just to name a few.¹³

The culture of a society is also constituted of all kinds of subtle and changeable interrelationships between people and between groups.¹⁴ That is why in Africa we could find facets of culture interrelated and shared by members of different groups within a society. The evolution of the Cameroonian civilisation presented a cross-cultural mix of over two hundred ethnic groups. Cameroon was made up of a complex mixture of ethnic groups, each possessing a unique culture, language and traditions. Cameroon is known for its cultural, linguistic, religious, and political traditions as well as ethnic variety. The ethnic and cultural composition of Cameroon can be presented in four geographic regions. North, Central, South and West¹⁵. Pre-colonial Cameroon was made up of three main ethnic groups known as follows: The Bantus group consisting of the following tribes: Beti, Bassa, Bakundu, Maka, Douala, and Pygmies; the Semi-Bantus composed among others of the Bamileke, Gbaya, Bamoun, Tikar, Chamba, Tiv, and Wedikum. The Sudano-Sahelian group consisting of the: Fulani (Fulbe or Fula), Mafa, Toupouri, Shoa-Arabs, Moundang, Massa, and Mousgoum. The Bantu communities are found in the southern forest and coastal parts of the country. The Semi-Bantu were found on the Grassfields (the Western Highlands and the Bamenda Grassfields).¹⁶

The period of mixture of cultures in Cameroon can be traced to the 1800s during the migration and settlement of the people that make up what became known as Cameroon. The different peoples came with a multiplicity of cultures they carried along from their original points of departure which formed the basis of their different identities. Each group came with salient visual and cultural differences.¹⁷ These cultures were further affected, and they adapted to the new settlements of the different groups. Some of these groups were known and seen as warlike depending on their relationships with their neighbours, while others were seen as peaceful. This variety of peoples reflected a mixed culture, and further mixture was inevitable when Cameroon became a German Protectorate and subsequently, French and British mandates and Trust territories.

Cameroonians have had to deal with their community cultures and national and international cultures. A large part of our history is the process by which our civilisation and culture were modified by cultural patterns from Europe, especially during colonialism. However, cultural diversity in Cameroon has experienced three phases. The first phase was the precolonial period when the area known today as Cameroon was made up of different tribes and ethnic groups. Each of these societies possessed certain patterns of actions, beliefs and thoughts that were passed on from generation to generation. These patterns were sometimes influenced by change from one generation to another or from one person to another, but the greater part of it remained recognisable.¹⁸ This pattern also depended on the social environment of the people, such as the way they dressed, the way they sheltered themselves, the kind of activities they carried out to feed themselves, the kind of tools they used, the kind of food they ate and how they ate it, how they entertained themselves and the kind of weapons they used to defend themselves. This is known in social sciences as culture.¹⁹ The human being was therefore surrounded by his immediate natural environment, and he and his immediate environment were surrounded by other cultures.

¹² Manuel Castells & Bernard Lategan (Eds), National Identity and State Formation in Africa, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

¹³ Grace Lawrence-Hart, The Socio-Cultural Significance of Polygamy in Africa, *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Volume 5, Issue 1, 2019, pp. 1-6.

¹⁴ V. Terpstran, *International Marketing*, 4 ed. the Dryden press, 1987.

¹⁵ Britanica, Cameroon, www.britanica.com/place/Cameroon.

¹⁶ Mark W. DeLancey, George Benneh, People of Cameroon, [www. Encyclopaedia Britannica.com](http://www.Encyclopaedia Britannica.com), Last updated: Jan 19 2025

¹⁷ Yascha Mounk, The Great Experiment: Why Diverse Democracies Fall Apart and How They Can Endure, Penguin Press, New York, 2022, p. 14.

¹⁸ Fukuyama, *Identity*, p. 51.

¹⁹ Peter Turchin, *Historical Dynamics*, p. 48.

Reconstruction of identity and cultural diversity in the era of Protectorate and Supervisory Rules

The second phase was the era of Protectorate and supervisory rules that marked the presence of the Germans and later the French and British where Cameroon became a melting pot of cultural diversity. Cameroon witnessed the foreign rule of three European powers at different times in its history. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, during the scramble for Africa, European countries rushed for colonies in Africa. During the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, Africa was divided into carved-out colonies.²⁰ Most of the boundaries mapped out at the Berlin Conference were done with little or no regard to existing ethnic and political boundaries that were put in place by Africans. This is partly responsible for identity problems and several conflicts in Africa today. It was in this context that the Germans annexed Cameroon in 1884. Different ethnic groups were brought together to form the German colony of Kamerun (the German appellation of Cameroon). The colonial approach to cultural diversity varied between the British and the French. While the British administered their own part of the territory through indirect rule, the French practised assimilation with the aim of assimilating their subjects into French culture. Cameroon therefore experienced both acculturation and assimilation with the British and the French colonial masters, respectively.

The first signals of national identity were demonstrated when some Cameroonians stood boldly against colonial rule, which, according to them, did not respect the human dignity of their people. There was the propagation of theories on Black empowerment and negritude by Africans of the Diaspora like Edward Blyden (1832-1912) and Dr W. E. Dubois. Shared experiences of Black Americans struggling against racism and discrimination and Africans seeking liberation and independence from colonial powers encouraged Africans to fight for their independence. First African presidents and intellectuals like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Leopold Senghor of Senegal, Dr Hastings Banda of Malawi and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania upheld and promoted the idea of Pan-Africanism. This enabled Africans to develop and construct a cultural identity which differentiated them from the rest of the world. This led to the rise of anti-imperialist movements and wars in Africa.²¹ It is important to highlight the fact that the relationship between the colonial rulers and the locals was based on the problem of thymos, or the recognition and dignity of the local indigenes. The demand of the indigenes to be respected by the colonial officers was expressed through the resistances against an administration they found alien to theirs.

The Germans faced resistance from Cameroonian communities who rejected German rule. Some of these anti-German demonstrations occurred in places like Douala, Fontem, Nso and Kom. The Bakweri people violently rejected the German by killing Gravenreuth, a German military officer. Those who fought against forced labour, like the Duala people, escaped to the Wouri creeks as fishermen. Some ran away from work in the German plantations and escaped to remote places. This was the case of the Bakweri who ran to mountainous areas. Some escaped to neighbouring colonies, like the Ejagham, who escaped to Nigeria, and the Bulu, who escaped to Spanish Guinea and Gabon. Courageous tribes like the Bakweri, Nso, and Bangwa chose to fight wars with the Germans as a mark of resistance to their rule.²² Even though all the resistance did not stop the Germans from occupying their targeted areas, it was a sign that the indigenes did not take the brutal desire to seize their land lying down.

Education redefined the identity of ethnic or community leaders in Cameroon who very often turned against the very colonial rulers that educated them. In Cameroon, the chiefs who collaborated with the Germans sent their children to study in Germany: Alfred Bell, Rudolf Manga Bell, Mpondo Akwa and Martin Paul Samba. The education of such Africans by the colonial governments was aimed at training Africans to serve the colonial regimes. However, the results were not the same in most cases, as education rather triggered the minds of such Africans, and the educated elite ended up developing nationalist ideologies and opposed colonial rule. This was the case for some of the Cameroonian chiefs who were trained abroad by colonial masters in Cameroon.²³

²⁰ Zeinab Badawi, *An African History of Africa: From the dawn of Humanity to Independence*, New York, Marina Books, 2024, pp. 424-425.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 435-437.

²² Mathew Basung Gwanfogbe, "Resistance to European Penetration into Africa: The case of the North West Region of Cameroon", in *Journal of the Cameroon Academy of Sciences* Vol. 13 No. 3 (2017), pp. 119-130.

²³ W. Patricia Etonde Njajou, "The German Colonial Administration and the Traditional Powers Duala and Bamum. An Analysis of Cameroon's Political History", Doctorate/Ph. D in Political Science, University of Dschang, 2023.

The newly acquired identity caused Cameroonian chiefs to fight for the dignity of their people. This was the case of Manga Bell who was sponsored by the Germans to study law at a German university in the 1890s in exchange for the family's support of colonisation. He related well with the Germans until the German administration came up with the Expropriation Plan in 1910. This expropriation plan, according to King Manga Bell and his people, violated the 1884 treaty. By this plan, the natives were going to be expropriated and forcefully relocated away from the Wouri River and the newly segregated European zones and railway lines. When King Bell gathered allies around Cameroon to help solve the problem in 1914, he was arrested by German officials. King Bell was charged for high treason and was executed by hanging in August 1914 at 4 p.m. alongside his secretary, Adolf Ngosso Din.²⁴

Another chief who resisted the Germans was Martin Paul Samba (1875-1914). He collaborated with the Germans accompanying Hans Dominik in his campaigns and occupation of the hinterlands of Cameroon like Tibati, and the Ngila. As a result of this, he was considered by his own people as a traitor. This led to his resignation from the German military and a change of view about the German rule. Samba then sought help from Duala Manga Bell and other chiefs in 1912 in preparation to fight against German occupation.²⁵ Bell and Samba decided to contact the French with the understanding they were enemies of the Germans in Cameroon- for aid.²⁶ Martin Paul Samba was finally arrested by the Germans. He was charged with treason on 8 August 1914 and later executed with his collaborators by gun firing.

Most villages and their kings did not collaborate with the Germans by volition but because they were coerced by the circumstances in which they found themselves. Sometimes these kingdoms were unprepared or simply unable to defend themselves against the colonialists. Firstly, the harsh treatment the colonial military brought scared the locals. So many ethnic communities wanted to escape the harsh German rule by collaborating with them in order to avoid being ill-treated. This was the case of porters and labourers who underwent brutal treatments, especially public flogging. However, collaborations did not always exist because of cowardice: some had selfish interests.²⁷ The Bali and Bamoun assisted the Germans in fighting other ethnic groups and communities. For example - the Bamoun helped them against the Nso. They also helped Germans as tax collectors by becoming auxiliaries of the German administration. While Karl Atangana, a Beti Chief, helped the Germans to penetrate the North with useful information, Fon Galega I helped the Germans to penetrate the Bamenda Grassfields. King Njoya of Bamoun became a great consultant for the Germans in African affairs.²⁸ Hence, Collaboration with Germans redefined the identity of tribes like Bali, and Bamoun. Such tribes were granted specific privileges and authority over other tribes by the Germans.

The awareness of Cameroonians about their identity continued to build steam during the French and British occupation of the Cameroonian territory. After the First World War, Cameroon was mandated to the France and Britain by the League of Nations in 1922. The Eastern part of the former German colony of Cameroon, about 4/5 of the territory became known as French Cameroon while the Western part, roughly representing 1/5 of the territory became known as British Cameroon. The two Cameroons later became trust territories under the United Nations Organisation in 1946 when the League of Nations went defunct at the end of the Second World War.

The fight against French racism and quest for decolonisation by Cameroonians became visible in the 1940s. The French policy of assimilation aimed at replacing the Cameroonian culture with the French culture while the *indigenat* or Native Code institutionalised unequal and discriminatory laws against Cameroonians. This provoked the fight against French rule in Cameroon. The creation of the Confederation of Cameroon trade Unions in 1944 and the Marxist Study Circle created by Cameroonians in 1945 was later followed by the creation of the *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC) in 1948. These were the first indications that Cameroonians wanted to obtain their dignity and resolve the problem of thymos. Their desire for decolonisation and self-rule was an expression of the problem of isothymia, the demand to be respected on an equal basis with other people. The UPC spearheaded the struggle against French rule in Cameroon while asking for the unification of the two

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ E. Mveng, *History of Cameroon*, African Presence, 1963.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Daniel Abwa, *Cameroun Histoire d'un nationalisme*, Yaoundé, CEPER, 2010.

²⁸ Paul Nkwi, *The German presence in the Western Grassfields 1891-1913: A German Colonial Account*, African studies Centre, Leiden, 1989.

Cameroons and outright independence. The struggle escalated into war that went on for seven years with the UPC outlawed on 13 July 1955. Um Nyobe Felix- Roland Moumie and Ernest Ouandie, frontline members of the UPC responded to French repressive and discriminatory measures with a guerrilla war that led to the loss of several lives and the destruction of valuable property. Um Nyobe got killed in 1958 and Felix Moumie who took over his leadership was also assassinated by poisoning in Switzerland in 1960. French Cameroon finally got independence on 1 January 1960 while the UPC continued their armed struggle to obtain what they styled veritable liberation and independence of Cameroon. The UPC struggle only subsided in 1971 when Ernest Ouandie was killed by public execution in Bafoussam.

On the British Cameroon side, Cameroonians suffered domination by Nigerian administrators. The British Administered Southern Cameroons from Lagos treating it as a province of Nigeria and not a full colony. The fear of losing their cultural identity provoked the declaration of benevolent neutrality by the politicians of British Southern Cameroons in 1953. This declaration requested the withdrawal of British Southern Cameroons from the Eastern Nigerian House of Assembly. Upon independence and reunification with French Cameroon in 1961, British Cameroonians' identity problem shifted to the fear of assimilation by the larger part of the country (French Cameroon). This fear resulted from the distinct anglophone cultural identity that was created as a result of diverse contact experiences between the local inhabitants and the British in Cameroon. Anglophones had been tuned into believing in their common history and unique culture. These identity problems are partly considered as the root causes of the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon.

The colonisation of Cameroon by Germany, Britain and France increased her cultural diversity. The French and the British instituted the use of French and English during their occupation of East and West Cameroon, respectively. In this sphere, colonialism created ethnic and sectional disputes, strife, fears and doubts which threw a shadow of protracted complications into post-colonial Africa. The colonialists presented Cameroonians a different culture and social values. They painted what they met as outdated or obsolete, which must be rejected and substituted with Western "cultural philosophy".²⁹ This action by the colonialists initiated ethnic and sectional disharmony and created doubts which launched a line of prolonged uncertainties into post-colonial Cameroon.

Once colonialism came to an end in Cameroon, the problem of national identity among Cameroonians came to the fore. French Cameroon gained independence in 1960 and became the Republic of Cameroon. British Cameroon gained independence in 1961 by joining French Cameroon. In the post-colonial era, there was a *mélange* of alien and indigenous cultural values. Thus, ethnicity has a great impact on national integration in Cameroon. Cameroon experienced a plebiscite in 1972 which brought the French and British Cameroons together to form a unitary Republic, the United Republic of Cameroon.³⁰ This new unitary government later became a republic, giving rise to a strong central government.

Identity Issues in the Post-Colonial Cameroon

At independence, the process of nation-building became problematic for Cameroon, as it was for most African states. It was difficult to redefine the populace of ethnic groups that had been carved out by colonial powers without any regard to ethnicity, culture or geographical boundaries. Cameroon, like most states, pledged through their constitution to treat all their citizens equally, irrespective of their origin or ethnicity.³¹ National identity needed to be deliberately constructed by moulding different ethnic groups into a nation, since colonial practices of divide and rule had resulted in ethnically heterogeneous populations. This situation is evident with several countries and diverse democracies. Most countries suffer from the issue of ethnic strife, racial subjugation or genocide, but each has its history and should be understood in its own right and cultural context.³²

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Daniel Abwa, 2010.

³¹ Yascha Mounk, *The Great Experiment: Why Diverse Democracies Fall Apart and How They Can Endure*, Penguin Press, New York, 2022, p. 10.

³² *The Great Experiment: Why Diverse Democracies Fall Apart and How They Can Endure*, Penguin Press, New York, 2022, p. 51; In Cameroon, one notices that all the ethnic groups are still specific in one way or another and see themselves as different from each other. This situation is, however, not unique to Cameroon. States like Yugoslavia, Italy and the USA share in this identity issue. The USA, for instance, is said to be a melting pot. It is true that there is a melting pot in the USA when one sees things superficially. But

After independence in Cameroon, the instinct of tribalism became obvious in Cameroon. What appeared to be an after- independence complete integration of the Cameroonian population was just a façade as national integration is yet to attain the state of harmony. The different communities and ethnic groups kept their differences in spite of the much-heralded national integration public calls. The very factors and elements that give Cameroon its cultural riches are the same elements that pose problems for the realisation of complete national integration. National integration in Cameroon has been strained by identity issues linked to religion, philosophy, cultural values and even the history of the country. Religiously, some people see themselves as Catholics, Muslims and Protestants. Philosophically, some people see themselves as coming from landlocked parts of the country where even nature does not work in their favour. Historically, some see themselves as descendants of kingdoms and ancestors that have nothing to do with others, while some claim different colonial descent and cultures.³³ Humans use many elements to draw social boundaries and demarcate group membership. Hence the search for social, economic and political recognition and equality has rather provoked national disintegration in Cameroon.

In Cameroon, like elsewhere in Africa and beyond, one of the most common indices is language, especially local languages. People have the tendency to cooperate more with others who speak the same language or local language as themselves. This is remarkably favourable for group solidarity and group-orientated actions, especially against a targeted enemy.³⁴ This was the case in Cameroon, where the population is historically a merger but subtly divided into Anglophones and Francophones as broad national identities but also, different ethnic groups with various cultural outlooks. The dominance of French and English as cultural constructs led to their adoption as official languages in Cameroon after independence. According to article 1 (3) of the 1996 Constitution, English and French obtain the same status, and the state guarantees the promotion of bilingualism throughout the country. French is dominantly spoken in eight regions, while English is dominant in two regions. Besides the official languages, pidgin English, which functions as a lingua franca is widely used by both educated and more of Cameroonians with limited or no formal education. The Fulfulde language dominates the North, and its peoples are predominantly Muslims, while the South and the West are predominantly Christians. The pygmy population of the Eastern and South forests of Cameroon have always been considered as animists. There have been crises in Cameroon that partly resulted from the different language inclinations of the people. The old political wounds of some Anglophone Cameroonians were recently used as an undertow of identity politics to stir political crisis in the country since 2016.³⁵

There were multiple layers of identity within the Cameroonian society based on salient visual differences, ethnicity, gender, religion, and socioeconomic status, which could overlap and sometimes conflict with each other. Cameroon experienced the inheritance of old identities as a result of colonial influence. Besides ethnic labels, Cameroon's colonial history has equally constructed cultural diversity around the following labels: Anglophone and Francophone; Christians and Muslims. The continuous construction of new identities with cultural labels by politicians such as *Nordists*, *Sudists*, *Bonassawa* (people of the coast), and *Graffi* has made Cameroon ideal in cultural diversity and in cultural divides.³⁶

From independence, liberal democracy was put in place with the aim of respecting the dignity of each citizen. But this aim was not achieved as intended because people were not always judged by their characters or abilities based on the laws. They were rather judged based on assumptions about their cultural groups and belonging. Some ethnic groups were defined by others based on their past political battles and other historical circumstances.³⁷ This was the case with the Bassa and the Bamileke as well as the Anglophones and Francophones in Cameroon.

on a more detailed examination, one will discover that in American society, there are many differences within the society. In that society, you find communities of Italians, Irish, Germans, English and Scottish. All these groups always trace their identity to where they came from.

³³ Emmanuel Chiabi, *The Making of Modern Cameroon: A History of Substate Nationalism and Disparate Union, 1914-1961*, 1997.

³⁴ Peter Turchin, p. 30.

³⁵ Gabriel Almond, "Les Partis Politiques : Origine, Types et Fonctions", in [https:// le politiste.com](https://lepolitiste.com), retrieved June 10, 2021.

³⁶ Toyin Falola, *The Power of African Cultures*, The University of Rochester Press, 2003.

³⁷ Mounk, *The Great Experiment*, p. 37.

Impact of Cultural Diversity on Identity Dynamics

Cultural diversity in Cameroon still suffers backlash despite the efforts put in place by the government to attain national integration. However, Cameroon was plagued by ethnocentrism and the increased awareness of self. This is about the unhealthy rivalry between ethnic groups within the same nation. This almost resulted in near-disintegration, such as the continuous attempts of the Southern Cameroon National Congress (SCNC) to secede from *la République du Cameroun*. These attempts are partly due to ethnic differences which are aided by the colonial mismanagement of the situation.³⁸

Exposure to other cultures can lead individuals to reflect more deeply on their own cultural values and practices and usually ends up in an identity revolution. Most countries experience revolutions and crises as a result of either despair of their population or abundance. “Once detached from their traditional roles in the economy and society, people respond with either hope or fear. Formerly marginalised groups perceive the change as liberating and reach for newfound dignity; those at the top fear losing the status they already have”.³⁹ The mere awareness of the existence of other cultural groups provokes cultural division. This awareness results in the construction of group identity, which is used as a rallying point to compete or to demand group rights. Hence the problem of ethnicity in Cameroon which constitutes a huge barrier to effective national cohesion. The belief in the existence of superior and inferior groups as the competition between ethnic groups makes national integration seem farfetched.

Most political leaders have used ethnicity to organise political rivalry against their political rivals or the government they oppose. Strikes, ghost towns, civil wars and even secession crises have been upheld by different cultural groups to fight for their rights and privileges, or seek freedom and autonomy. Such groups mobilised ethnic or cultural nationalism to protect and assert themselves from other groups or gain parity with them. They united themselves to get access to their own share of the economic and political resources of the state.⁴⁰ In Cameroon, in the 1960s and during the 1990s, a generation rose up in opposition to the government in place, kicking against all the political norms and governance. This confirms the idea of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who (in *The Communist Manifesto*) stated that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”.⁴¹ Riots became commonplace in Cameroon during the rise of certain political parties, such as the UPC and the Social Democratic Front (SDF).

The political setting in Cameroon currently has about 300 political parties, and with the legalisation and establishment of opposition parties in 1990, democracy has been a key mission of President Paul Biya’s administration since the early 1980s. However, in diverse societies, individuals may develop ‘hybrid identities’ that combine elements from multiple cultures. For instance, the Bamileke issue, the Anglophone problem and, the eleventh province issue. In this regard, tribalism has also stood out as one of the identity problems challenging social cohesion in Cameroon. Cultural differences in Cameroon sometimes led to social tensions and conflicts, requiring efforts to promote understanding and tolerance. Cultural polarisation came along with and resulted in political polarisation. Party affiliation was in most cases intricately linked to personal and community identity. People identified themselves with parties irrespective of and without caring much about understanding their political ideology. In some situations, switching political parties was regarded as abandoning one’s tribe or clan.⁴²

However, National identity in Cameroon is the foundation of social cohesion with the grand aim of constructing or structuring a global image using the power of the state despite the abovementioned challenges. Through integration, solidarity is achieved in action and purpose amidst multiple ethnic nationalities, each exerting both centrifugal and centripetal forces on the central issue of the nation, bound in freedom, peace and unity where justice reigns. According to Paul Biya, the grand aim of national integration is that “interethnic solidarity should

³⁸ Walters Samah Tohji, “The Anglophone War of Secession in Cameroon: Domestic Problem, Extra-National Challenges, and Shared Responsibility”, *African States: Domestic and External Security Challenges*, edited by Abu Bakarr Bah, Seattle, WA: SUNY Press, 2025, pp. 51-80.

³⁹ Fareed, p. 238.

⁴⁰ Falola, 2003.

⁴¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore, Marxists Internet Archive, p. 14.

⁴² Z. Ngniman, *Cameroun. La Démocratie Emballée*, Yaoundé : CLE, 1993.

lead to the gradual elimination of present sectarian tendencies in favour of a more integrated social environment.⁴³

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the history of cultural diversity and the problem of identity in Cameroon is a complex and multifaceted one, shaped by the country's colonial past and post-colonial experiences. The legacy of colonialism continues to influence the dynamics of identity politics in Cameroon, where cultural differences are often politicised and manipulated for power and resources. Based on its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nature, the country's cultural policy is focused on encouraging the development of a melting pot similar to that of the United States of America. In this light, each specific culture is promoted to enable it to develop fully within the framework of a fruitful and peaceful forum of exchange between the different local cultures. By so doing, Cameroon became a haven of peace and an island of stability at one point in its history. It was due mainly to the ethno- cultural mixture and the fruitful dialogue between different cultures that existed in the country.

Besides ethnic diversity, there are several cross-boundary languages. Schools in Cameroon encourage the learning of local languages. Most people are bilingual, and few are multilingual. Linguistic diversity remains a legacy of colonialism. As Cameroon continues to navigate the challenges of nation-building and cultural diversity, it is essential to acknowledge and address the historical injustices and inequalities that have shaped the country's cultural landscape. By promoting greater understanding and recognition of Cameroon's cultural diversity, we can work towards a more inclusive and equitable society, where all individuals and groups can succeed and contribute to the country's development. Ultimately, Cameroon's cultural diversity should be celebrated as a strength, rather than a weakness, and efforts should be made to promote unity in diversity, rather than uniformity.

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⁴³ Jua, (2004) "Spatialization and Valorization of Identities in Contemporary Cameroon," in Mbaku, J.M. and Takougang, J. (eds) *The Leadership Challenge in Africa: Cameroon under Paul Biya*, Trenton, Africa World Press Inc., 2004, p. 302.

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