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Cameroon's national literatures: An introduction

In the Afterword of my book *The Sacred Door and Other Stories: Cameroon Folktales of the Beba* (2008), I wrote the following: "My earliest impressions of Cameroon were gleaned from the stories told by older people. Their comments revolved around two things: first, that Mount Cameroon—also known as Mount Fako, the Throne of Thunder, and the Chariot of the Gods—the highest peak in West and Central Africa, is the site of the earliest recorded volcanic eruption in the region; and second, that the country they call home was named after prawns by some white people. It is said that in the fifth century BCE, while sailing along the Atlantic coast of West Africa, Hanno, the Carthaginian explorer and ship's captain, observed Mount Cameroon erupting and inscribed in his travel writings the name *Theon Ochema*, Chariot of the Gods. He is said to have noted that the fires from the mountain were so hot and so bright that the flames reached up and touched the stars. Firm believers in this historical version point out that Mount Cameroon (also called Mount Fako because it is situated in Fako Division of the South West Province) is the only active volcano on the coast of West Africa, erupting seven times in the twentieth century alone. They also point to the fact that the mountain is known locally as *monga-ma loba*—Seat of the Gods.

I was born in the South West Province but was raised through my teenage years in the grasslands of the North West, where Beba, my village of origin, is situated. Mount Cameroon has therefore held a kind of mystery for me. As a young girl, I was fascinated with these stories of the so-called discovery by Hanno, of flaming arrows reaching for the stars, and with the fact that Debundscha, the wettest place on the African continent and the place with the second-highest rainfall in the world, lies at the foot of the Seat/Chariot of the Gods. I found it amusing that my country was named after big juicy shrimp, and by a bunch of white men we did not know. I could not grasp what that act of naming really entailed, but the teachers who taught me in primary school and the adults who told us stories by the evening fire were not amused. They insisted that branding

us with the name of shrimp was an invitation to a feast. The metaphor was lost on my young sensibilities.

As I got older and attended primary and secondary school, our curriculum was tailored to the British education system of O Levels and A Levels. In our history lessons, little was afforded the various peoples who migrated to and now inhabit the sahel and plateau regions of the mostly Muslin north, or the grasslands, littoral, and forest regions of the mostly Christian south. History lessons were dominated by European and Cameroon's colonial history. Only later, at the University of Yaoundé, did I, on my own, read all the books I could that addressed the various kingdoms, chiefdoms, and indigenous civilizations of the people who today call Cameroon home.

Cameroon: A brief history

In the fifteenth century, the Portuguese navigator Fernao Do Poo and his crew were so taken by the sheer quantity of *mbea towè* in the Wouri estuary that they named the river *Rio dos Camarões*, River of Prawns. But this name was to undergo further changes with each new arrival of European traders (in both natural and human resources) and conquerors. The name became Camarones to the Spaniards, Kamerun to the Germans, the Cameroons to the British, and Cameroun to the French. The Portuguese arrived in the fifteenth century, launched sugar plantations, and began the slave trade in the sixteenth century. The Dutch were hot on their heels and took over the slave trade from the Portuguese in the seventeenth century. Only later did the Germans begin the effective colonization of German Kamerun, a fact consolidated at the Berlin Conference (1884–85) with the partition of Africa. The country known today as La République du Cameroun/Republic of Cameroon was to endure numerous political and geographical facelifts before it gained its right to self-government in 1958 and independence in 1960.

Cameroon is the only African nation to have been colonized by three European nations—Germany, Britain, and France. The groundwork for this colonial legacy began with the late nineteenth-century scramble for and partition of Africa by European powers. The Berlin conference effectively legitimized German colonial authority over Cameroon. Germany cemented its control with two treaties: one with Douala chiefs in 1884 establishing the German Protectorate of Kamerun; and the other in 1885 with the British, who handed over control of the Southern Cameroons to be administered as part of the German Protectorate of Kamerun. Things would change in the early twentieth century with Germany's defeat in World War I. British and French forces took hold of the Cameroon territory; the Northern Cameroons and the Southern Cameroons went to Britain, and the rest of the territory to France. In 1922, a League of Nations mandate reaffirmed Britain's control over the Northern and the Southern Cameroons and French control over

the remaining territory. The British and French mandate would later be renewed as UN trusteeships after World War II, in 1946, a time when resistance to colonialism gained momentum and spread throughout the African continent.

The struggle for independence resulted in French Cameroun gaining the right to self-government in 1958 and independence in 1960. This newly independent francophone state became La République du Cameroun, with Ahmadou Ahidjo as its president. The fate of the British Cameroons was decided on February 11, 1961, by a UN-sponsored plebiscite. The British Northern Cameroons joined Nigeria, while the Southern Cameroons chose cohabitation with La République du Cameroun. After constitutional negotiations, these two entities became the Federal Republic of Cameroon on October 1, 1961. Even so, Ahmadou Ahidjo could not exercise the total control he desired over this federated state. He crushed political insurgency by opposition parties, reminiscent of the 1958 assassination of anticolonial nationalist leaders such as Ruben Um Nyobé. He cemented his power by introducing the one-party system under the umbrella of his party, the Union Nationale Camerounaise (Cameroon National Union) in 1966, and declared a unitary state in 1972 known as La République Unie du Cameroun/United Republic of Cameroon. When Ahidjo's successor, Paul Biya, took over in 1982, he would by decree in 1984 once again change the name to La République du Cameroun/Republic of Cameroon. The name holds political implications harkening back to the pre-plebiscite, pre-federation era and is therefore heavily contested and even rejected by secessionist movements seeking independence for the former British Southern Cameroons.

This nation of twenty million people, with its tumultuous (neo)colonial history, has been described as “Africa in miniature/l’Afrique en miniature”: a mosaic of diversity in cultures, ethnicities, languages, religions, even geography—from dense equatorial forests in the south to the littoral coast, to the semi-forest regions of the southwest, the grasslands of the west and northwest, and the sahel regions of the north. Today, Cameroon comprises ten administrative regions (formerly known as provinces), an eighty percent francophone majority, a twenty percent anglophone minority, and a policy of official bilingualism coexisting with over two hundred indigenous languages. Cameroon is the only African nation to adopt two colonial languages—English and French—as its official languages after achieving independence and/or reunification. More than five decades later, the British/French colonial legacy remains central to what it means to be anglophone, to be francophone, to be Cameroonian. It is intrinsic to the representation of postcolonial identities in Cameroon literature. To be anglophone or francophone in this postcolony is to be much more than a speaker of English or French. “Anglophone” and “Francophone” are codes fraught with meanings that can simultaneously conjure cultural, political, linguistic complexities and tensions complicated by concepts of nation and/or ethnicity.

Cameroon literature

Cameroon writing generally reflects the postcolonial malaise of a union that for some never was and therefore in need of dissolution; a union that for others is fragile, even diseased and in dire need of healing and reconciliation. Acclaimed anglophone playwright, essayist, activist, Bole Butake, and leading francophone literary critic, Ambroise Kom, both speak to this condition in the interviews I conducted with them in March 2015 in Yaoundé and Bagangte, respectively. Butake and Kom talked about the evolution of Anglophone and Francophone Cameroon literature with the aim of providing a framework for understanding the issues addressed by the contributors to this special country issue of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* on Cameroon literature. They addressed a variety of issues ranging from the colonial era to the early decades of independence under the dictatorship of Ahmadou Ahidjo, to Paul Biya's ascension to power in the mid-80s with the promise of democracy, to the fall of the Berlin Wall and turbulent 1990s brought about when Paul Biya's Liberty Laws that promised freedom of the press and freedom of expression turned out to be an illusion, to censorship, and to the general feeling of hopelessness of the 2000s. As Kom notes,

It was free speech, it was promotion of human rights, it was the new space where you could have free speech; the end of censorship, be it real or symbolic; free thinking, freedom of expression, freedom writing and communicating; that's what we were expecting and for a short while we thought it was real, that a new cultural environment/era was being born. [...] But afterwards, after a few years we realized that the postcolonial system was working very hard to make one think that things were changing but no fundamental change was actually going to happen. You might have the impression or the illusion that you are speaking freely; you might have the illusion that you have a free space, but it's being closely controlled. They were making sure that ideas would not spread, that they would be limited to a closed space and that anyone they suspected could spread such a debate or make this free space invade the whole region or the whole country would be strictly controlled. That control was very different from the dictatorship we had before [under Ahmadou Ahidjo].

And Butake notes,

We began to question why Biya kept talking about democratization, about rigor and moralization, and yet was blocking democracy. I am sure Paul Biya was thinking about what to do about it and finally said that people should be ready for competition even in his CPDM party. He then enacted the Liberty Laws in December 1990. They started encouraging multi-candidates for offices in the CPDM. You could have a slate of three, four candidates in a constituency and the winner would go on to parliament. That's how it all started. And at this time, many newspapers started addressing 'the Anglophone Problem.' In effect, it was only in Paul Biya's era that this Anglophone Problem drew more critical attention because in 1984, just barely two years after he

became president, he went to parliament and passed a law changing the name of the country from United Republic of Cameroon to La République du Cameroun. He had a crushing majority in the National Assembly—there was no opposition party then—and he got the MPs to change the name from La République Unie du Cameroun to La République du Cameroun. Anglophones felt he had just reverted to the French colonial legacy and now saw themselves as a colony of La République. That's the basis for anglophone contestation up till today. Paul Biya has never said a word about the Anglophone Problem. Never. Never. He just ignores the problem and thinks that it is going to go away. I don't think it—anglophones seeing themselves as colonized by francophones; as a colony of Francophone Cameroon—will ever go away because the more he doesn't talk about it, the more it festers, though sometimes it seems anglophones are also tired of talking about it.

Butake defines what is at the heart of "the Anglophone Problem" while Kom speaks at length about "the French Colonial Project" and it is clear from their contributions in both interviews that this condition was and still is intrinsic to contemporary issues facing Cameroon as a nation and its people and is imbricated in Cameroon's national literatures.

Eloise Brière's "Writing in Cameroon, the first hundred years" lays out how "German, French and British colonization, the advent of Christian missions, the fight for independence and the subsequent neocolonial régime, impacted greatly on the literature produced in Cameroon between 1889 and 1989." Brière's richly-sourced article (see the wealth of references) begins with an outline of early writing in colonial and indigenous languages produced by Cameroonians under German, British, and French colonial rule. She then focuses on anti-colonial and postcolonial francophone writing by male and female writers up until 1989; the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall that brought winds of democratic change throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Cilas Kemedjo's "'Anthropological mutilation' and the reordering of Cameroon literature" (published here in both English and French) picks up where Brière leaves off. He describes "the postcolonial existential wound," arguing that "it represents the intertextual nexus that bridges the generational gap in Francophone Cameroonian literature. The tragic malaise, rooted in absurdity and the dire state of the postcolonial condition, echoes anxieties expressed by earlier generations of Cameroonian writers in the 1950s about engaged literature. The article is therefore an exercise in detecting commonalities and discontinuities that weave a shared national literary tradition." In "Anglophone Cameroon literature 1959–90: A brief overview," Joyce Ashuntantang argues that "A careful analysis of the corpus of Anglophone Cameroon literature from its inception to the 1990s reveals two broad phases. The first phase covers the period from 1959 to about 1984. [...] The second phase [...] started in the mid-eighties and reached its apex in the 1990s," concluding that "the 1980s and

1990s were pivotal decades for Anglophone Cameroon literature.” Ashuntantang’s examination of Anglophone literature completes this troika of essays offering the reader an in-depth study of Francophone and Anglophone Cameroon literatures from colonial times to the present.

Following this critical overview of Cameroon literature are four articles by Frieda Ekotto, Eunice Ngongkum, Ekpe Inyang and Donatus Fai Tangem that examine specific topics in Cameroon literature. Frieda Ekotto’s **“Framing homosexual identities in Cameroonian literature”** engages the neglect of LGBT individuals “within the cultural imaginary of sub-Saharan Africa [where] most popular discussions [...] still refuse to allow for the possibility of same-sex love.” She analyzes contemporary works of fiction that create a space and a language for LGBT identities and argues that “LGBT work must be included in our discussions of contemporary Cameroonian cultural productions, for it is part of our modernity.” Similarly, in *“A crushing curse’: Widowhood in contemporary Anglophone Cameroon literature,”* Eunice Ngongkum examines an issue not often given the critical attention it deserves in Cameroon and/or African literature: widowhood and the predicaments women face after the death of their husbands. Ngongkum argues that “the factors that influence the lives of widows, especially, the options available to them and the multiplicity of interests touching on their behavior are grounded in socio-cultural parameters that shape communal consciousness” and shows how these widows “attempt to or actually construct new worlds for themselves by resisting such dominant cultural scripts.” In the turbulent 1990s and the early 2000s, community theatre was adopted by many playwrights as a potent tool for community/civic engagement—in spreading the word about HIV/AIDS infection and treatment; vaccination campaigns or campaigns to alleviate poverty, et cetera. Ekpe Inyang’s *“Community drama as instrument for community sensitisation and mobilisation”* showcases rural communities as “proactive agents for change” with regard to environmental protection, sustainable economic development and good governance. Inyang argues against the exclusion of rural communities “from the design, development and implementation of community Theatre activities, coupled with the difficulties in sourcing and securing funding for the promotion of conventional Theatre activities.” He then highlights “potential implementation constraints and proposes strategies that could be deployed to effectively develop and establish community theatre as part of the African traditional system with a view to influencing change at all levels of the community in particular and the nation at large.” Similarly, Donatus Fai Tangem’s *“Oral history, collective memory and socio-political criticism: A study of popular culture in Cameroon”* places an emphasis on community and collective memory by articulating “the relationship between historico-social reality and popular culture showing how Cameroonian popular cultural musicians use history and social realities as raw material for the configuration of creative ideology [and] further demonstrates that

without forfeiting artistic grandeur, popular culture acts as a reservoir of memory, collective experience and sociopolitical criticism.”

The final three articles by Charles Tita, Anna-Leena Toivanen and Katrien Lievois move us beyond the borders of Cameroon and Africa to engagements with the global postcolonial. Charles Tita’s “Towards a poetics of decolonization: Mongo Beti’s *The Poor Christ of Bomba*” adds to the criticism of this classic novel by arguing that “the novel depicts an awakening of a growing ‘national’ consciousness similar to the Harlem Renaissance that occurred in the United States in the early twentieth century. Just as slave narratives exposed the brutality of slavery as a means to promote abolition, this essay explores *The Poor Christ of Bomba* as a fictional slave narrative that exposes French imperialism by constructing a discourse of resistance that is bound to serve as a path to decolonization.” Anna-Leena Toivanen’s “‘Les lendemains de révolution avortée’: Nathalie Etoke’s bipolar narratives of doomed national romance” examines the hardships of the African postcolonial condition in the global era through the trope of doomed romance in Etoke’s novels of people who leave the post-colonial nation-state and emigrate to what they consider better pastures. Toivanen notes, “While the mobility theme addressed in her novels is typical to third-generation African literatures in general, Etoke’s vision simultaneously struggles against the postnationalist currents informing this literary paradigm. [...] Etoke holds on to the anticolonial romance narrative, but at the same time cannot ignore its inevitable failures in the present. This leads to a tension that marks her work by giving it a bipolar character, one that manifests itself in the constant oscillation between utopianism and disillusionment. The bipolar quality of the texts betrays a discomfort that the narratives’ promotion of an anticolonial struggle for nationhood and decolonisation generate in a postcolonial era that keeps witnessing the failures of these romantic discourses to realise themselves.” Katrien Lievois’s “The Dutch translations of francophone Cameroon novels” takes us on a fascinating journey through the issue of translation of African, and specifically, Cameroonian fiction for Dutch/non-African audiences. She examines “how the Cameroon novels have been integrated into the Dutch literary system, what their position is, and most of all, to what extent the paratexts of the translated novels reflect this position. The detailed analysis of the reception of the Cameroon novels within the Dutch literary system reveals that there is a marked evolution in the way in which the publications have been selected and presented to the public.”

The interviews and essays in this special issue shed light on the anxieties of a people tenuously coming to terms with what it means to be Cameroonian and especially what it means to experience full, partial, or non-citizenship in a post-colonial nation-state. They explore how language, gender, class, sexuality, culture, ethnicity interact with state power and traditional institutions that shape the postcolonial condition in a globalized society. They offer readers a window into Cameroon writing that is actively engaging personal, local, national, international and global issues.