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Francophone Cameroon literature: A conversation with Ambroise Kom

Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi: *Professor Ambroise Kom, we are here for a conversation about the evolution of 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. Thank you so much for talking with me.*¹

Ambroise Kom: It is my pleasure, Juliana, to be with you here today. I can share with you what I have learned along the way: my experience as researcher, as a professor of African literature and especially as someone very interested in education as a whole, and literary education, to say the least. So, thank you for coming from so far away and to visit us here in Bagangté at Université des Montagnes.

You have had an illustrious academic career in Cameroon, France, the United States. You retired from the College of the Holy Cross and came back home. Before we talk about Francophone Cameroon Literature, can we begin with what you're doing now?

To tell you what I am doing today would be a long story because that goes back to my education as a postcolonial student in African literature and culture at the University of Yaoundé. We were being taught in the mid-60s about how colonization operated; we were being trained to be those young men and women to continue the project of the colonial master. When I left the University of Yaoundé, I went to France to pursue my doctorate and there I met a French professor who told me he wasn't qualified to supervise my thesis on African literature. He suggested instead that since I had done some African American studies in Yaoundé, I could continue with that focus. That's why I found myself working on African American literature; on Chester Himes. Along the way, he found me a job as an instructor at Brown University. I moved to

the United States and I was in North America for over ten years. Because of my training as a postcolonial student concerned with the evolution of African countries, I kept thinking that my place was not in the United States; that I must go back to Africa; to Cameroon. I applied for a job at the University of Yaoundé. I didn't get it. However, I got 3 jobs, one in the Congo, one in Algeria, one in Morocco. I took the job in Morocco and spent 3 years at the Université Mohammed V in Rabat before an opening became available at the University of Yaoundé and I went back in the 80s. I realized afterwards that my expected duty at the University of Yaoundé was not that much different from what my colonial teachers taught me, so I felt I needed to do something else. That's why we have ended up constructing this project here at Université des Montagnes; a project completely different from private schools, different from public education as we knew it. This was an institution made up by postcolonial intellectuals to fulfil, to serve a postcolonial country and environment. We created this school primarily to train students in domains that were not being taken up by the postcolonial education system, public or private. We were the second school to train medical doctors in this country, the first to train Cameroonians in pharmaceutical studies, the second to train Cameroonians in dentistry, the first to train Cameroonians in veterinary medicine and the first to train Cameroonians in biomedical engineering. Nowadays, there are many other schools offering the same disciplines, even state schools, but we are glad that we paved the way and hope to open other new fields.

The colonial era and the early years of independence

Let's build on what you were saying about the colonial project. You left the University of Yaoundé, went to France, the professors there could not supervise your work in African literature. Did you feel that you lost some of the oral and language literatures that were part and parcel of what you wanted to pursue but the colonial project had made impossible and you had to find your way back to the literature that nurtured you before the colonial project intervened?

That's a very interesting question. Juliana, let me address what I mean by "the colonial project." The role of the colonizer school wasn't to train us in our own culture or to educate us about our culture. The purpose of the colonial project was to prepare those who would help the colonial master in administering and educating colonial subjects to serve his project. To borrow from Lord Macaulay, I'd say that the colonial project here was meant to train people who would be African in color but be like the French in taste and the French in mind.² Talking about literature, culture, or oral tradition was not their concern and I understood that very early on. I felt that you should be prepared to be educated in the colonial master's system but come back and deal with African literature yourself because colonial education,

and especially the French colonial project, did not have that focus. Maybe before them, the Germans, and maybe the British a little bit, but especially the Germans were ready to learn our own language, to learn our own culture in order to prepare us and maybe to prepare themselves to understand us but in the French colonial mind what you thought, who you were, where you came from, where you were going was not their concern. So, when we were at the University of Yaoundé in those days—we were the third or fourth promotion of Cameroonian students entering the national university—about 85% of teachers were foreigners: they were French, British, UNESCO professors who came here to prepare people who will be educated enough to understand how an administration works, to understand how to run a college, to be able to teach French to young Cameroonians, to teach English to young Cameroonians, to teach them German, et cetera. Our indigenous culture was not at all the immediate concern of our professors, the colonial education or our immediate postcolonial education system. I say, immediate, because 50 years later things have not changed much. That's why I knew very early on that to deal with your own culture, your own literature, your oral traditions, you had to do it yourself by building a team of Africans, of Cameroonians to do that research and educate the people. Université des Montagnes is that type of project. It is currently not a humanities or social sciences project but we had to begin somewhere. We thought that beginning with education in the medical sciences was urgent. We are planning on opening an Institute of African Studies next year.

A welcome departure from the colonial project that basically trained interpreters who could translate colonialist ideology. The missionaries who were also part and parcel of this colonial education gave indigenous languages importance when used in translating the Bible. Can you speak about writing and publishing that was sponsored by missions?

The missionaries were more or less pursuing the same objectives as the civil colonial administrators. The colonial administrator was preparing us to replace him, as you say very well, to be their interpreters, and the missionaries wanted as many converts as possible. In order to have converts, they had to evangelize in local languages. Those more prepared than others even established publishing houses to print and disseminate their evangelical doctrine in local languages. You still have what has become very popular in Cameroon, Les Éditions CLE, the publisher of Protestant missionaries, whose mandate was to publish evangelical books but who at some point published local Cameroon literature in French.

In pamphlets, newsletters ...

Books and pamphlets, and at some point they found they could give some lip ser-

vice to local populations by publishing books that were not necessarily evangelical in turn but that people could read in schools; a service that the missionaries were rendering to the local population that together fulfilled their duty on one side and the colonial administration's on the other. Such publications were not meant to help the local population develop their own culture or identity. There were meant for you to embrace religiously the missionary's or the colonial master's identity; to embrace his own vision of the world. Mongo Beti allegorically discusses this collusion between missionaries and colonial administrators in his famous book, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* published in 1956.

This is really important because today some think of Éditions CLE as the publisher of Les contes et fables ... (folktales and fables) or of some prominent francophone writers. There isn't an awareness of how big Éditions CLE's influence was, not only in Cameroon but all over francophone Africa.

I think what you are saying is extremely important because if you look at various literary institutions in the postcolonial era, you will see that the postcolonial state as such didn't do much to either transform spaces occupied by Éditions CLE or offer something else. SOPECAM³ and various little houses here and there tried to do some publishing but didn't go very far. Publishing was more or less abandoned to these mission groups. The postcolonial state didn't think that to build national culture we must promote libraries, bookstores, etc. There were no policies to open this space to newcomers, to local entrepreneurs who could do something that could help us scale up to something different from what the missionaries were doing. Unless you understand the context of how we were prepared to only consume what the colonial master was doing, you won't understand where our difficulties come from in the country today.

Indeed. I remember as a student at the University of Yaoundé in the eighties, there was much talk about libéralisme communautaire (communal liberalism), about authenticité culturelle (cultural authenticity), and yet, there were no Cameroonian writers in the curriculum; there were few African writers but no Cameroonian writers. To wit, in secondary school—I attended the boarding school, Our Lady of Lourdes—I “read” Achebe's Things Fall Apart for the first time in Form Three. We didn't actually read the book because our books were ordered from England and that year the books were still at sea, so the Reverend Sister brought a record to class and played it. My first introduction to Things Fall Apart, to written African literature was listening to a white male voice reading Things Fall Apart and it made me think that Achebe was a white man. I went home and accused my father of being a liar for telling me Achebe was a Nigerian. Can you imagine what that does to a teenage African girl in an African school? This, in some way, was the continuation of the colonial project, and, in

a so-called independent postcolonial state. What you're saying is that my relationship with this educational system even after independence was still a continuation of that larger project.

I attended secondary school from 1960, the year of independence, to 1967. I never read a single book written by a Cameroonian although they existed—Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono. The only bright spot was when I enrolled at the university in 1967 and there was a professor called Thomas Melone. He had just come from Paris and had probably met the first African writers there. Of all the professors we had in our first year of our liberal arts education, he was the only one teaching us African literature. We were discovering African literature at the university level. But since Melone was only teaching us written African literature there was no one talking about oral literature, about indigenous culture. After a year or two, Melone said we needed someone to teach us oral tradition and that's how he hired Louis-Marie Ongoum as my professor.

He was mine too. He supervised my doctoral thesis.

But Ongoum was not a professor of Oral Traditions. He was a high school teacher who after earning his CAPES in France, came back here, was teaching in Nkongsamba and began doing research in oral literatures. Melone encouraged him to come to the University of Yaoundé and devote himself exclusively to that research and teach it to the students. That's why, retrospectively today, we can see that the only way we could know about our cultural production was if our own professors were aware of what it represented and could then research it and teach us. You might not know that Melone didn't stay long at the University of Yaoundé because by teaching African literature, his thinking, his way of seeing and being, his way of looking at the evolution of society didn't fit with the postcolonial dictatorship that was running the country. That's why, in the end, Melone was forced out and his teaching career ended. He went back to Paris and continued to teach in France for some time before coming back to Cameroon but when he returned, he never again taught at the University of Yaoundé. He became a fisherman in Edea and ended up at the National Assembly. He never came back because by his training he could not live in an environment where the postcolonial ideology of interpretership had completely taken over.

Eno Belinga must have benefitted from the space Thomas Melone created.

Of course. But Eno Belinga was a professor of Geology who was doing oral literature and oral tradition as an aside. He was not doing that full time. As a professor of Geology who was interested in the oral tradition—the *mvèt* epic traditions—he could afford it because he did not have to teach it to students in the amphitheater. People like Melone

were considered more or less dangerous to the mind of youngsters because he was a teacher who would communicate that critical thinking to his students.

As a literature student, I embraced Eno Belinga as a literature professor but the university saw him essentially as a geologist.

Yes. And since his many publications on the *mvot* had no impact on students, the postcolonial regime could allow him to continue to do it. People could talk about it outside of classrooms, people could talk about it in towns, in the villages but that had no impact on the students the way Melone had an impact on students' minds and the formation of their identity. Eno Belinga was essentially a modern griot.

The French held literary and essay contests that were published in La Gazette du Cameroun but the subject matter of these essays and the prizes won reflected empire. What did the French hope to achieve with these stories that were pro-French representations of the colony and not about Cameroon or Cameroonians?

You could only be a successful person if you assumed, developed, and spread the colonial ideology.

French-ness ...

Yes, of course. You have a whole generation of poets spearheaded by Louis-Marie Pouka, a whole generation of writers whose role was essentially to imitate and to dream to be like Victor Hugo, to dream to be like French writers. The aim was to be white, to think like French writers and the colonial system and even the postcolonial system afterward rewarded them for thinking like that, for writing like that, for being as close as possible to the colonial master. This went on at the University of Yaoundé in the sixties and early seventies and even in the early eighties. The French Cultural Center would sponsor all sorts of projects and a project would be sponsored if you did your work on French culture; compared what was happening in Cameroon or African culture to French culture, you would then obtain grants to go to France to pursue your studies or research but if your project only centered on African literature, your project would be of no interest.

From La Gazette du Cameroun to the French Cultural Center ... building on the same theme.

Of course. But since the postcolonial leaders didn't take over the project of constructing a national culture or national identity, the French said, we are no longer in power but we are going to maintain parallel marginal institutions that you will depend on.

At the University of Yaoundé in the eighties or nineties, the library was so poor that most students went to the French Cultural Center. The director of the Center decided to invest heavily in books needed by the students, therefore willingly or unwillingly maintaining dependence on French institutions.

But kept the books at the Center where the students would go to read them.

Of course. At some point, I raised this issue with them and they bluntly told me they were not supposed to be a public library but since the university was failing in its mission, they were becoming like a university library and were glad to do it because that brought young Cameroonians to their Center and so a system was built to make one depend on what the metropolis was producing. If our postcolonial leaders don't understand the necessity of building institutions that would give our people an identity or a vision, they will continue to depend on what the colonial master will continue to create and promote. People depend on foreign television, foreign news broadcasts, on what the foreign media keeps bringing us because we fail to understand the mission of the postcolonial leader.

Thankfully, in the years before independence we had young writers, brought up through that French colonial project, who began questioning it. People like Mongo Beti, like Ferdinand Oyono, writing literary pieces that were striking a blow at the heart of colonialist thinking. What did it mean for someone like you or for people who had been brought up in that system to have contemporaries writing against colonialism; that you could actually read that first generation of francophone writers who made the French stop and think, if they did, through their writings?

Indeed, if they did. I think they didn't because for some reason the French considered all that as an accident; as people who didn't really understand what they were doing. The French said, the writers will give up when they understand our true nature; they will forget about it and come back to us; they will even regret it. And I think that's exactly what happened. What someone like Oyono wrote was extremely violent against the French colonial way of treating Cameroonians, of treating its adults, of treating its people but after independence, he entered the civil service, became ambassador and never wrote again. So you wonder, was it accidental? Someone like Mongo Beti who wrote similarly violent pieces continued to write in that vein but he was never allowed to come back to Cameroon. Because he was in France before independence, he was a French subject, he had French papers—a French passport—but the postcolonial regime never allowed him to come back because he didn't want to negotiate his place in the system. That's why Mongo Beti became more or less a permanent exile in France until the nineties. What happened in the fifties in terms of

literary production by Cameroonians, or Africans, was more or less considered by the colonial masters as extremely dangerous and they did whatever they could to stop it or prevent it from continuing. None of these books were ever published in Cameroon. They were published in France by French publishers because censorship in France didn't work the same way as in Cameroon. A book like *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* was censored, banned in Cameroon because the missionaries complained that the book was dangerous and would hamper their recruitment efforts. So, what happened in the fifties can, as such, be considered an accident; a good accident for the Cameroonian people but a bad one for the colonial masters who did everything they could to prevent or discourage any other writer from following this path; from producing such anti-colonial writing. People like René Philombe who tried experienced the same fate. They were mistreated, imprisoned because of their writing; because they didn't want to align themselves with colonial ideology.

The sixties through the eighties should have been boon years for writing but you note that the state did everything to prevent writers from writing freely; they couldn't get their work published in Cameroon and Éditions CLE would not publish such works. Some of my professors in the eighties had to self-publish and many still do. It is not uncommon to see a writer selling their books out of the trunk of their car. It was really difficult to get books by Cameroonian writers in the two decades after independence.

Yes and as you remember Éditions CLE did not publish politically sensitive books. They would publish books by Francis Bebey, Henri Lopez, books dealing with social issues, with moral issues; books that could do no harm to the system that was being built. And Éditions CLE got endorsed and promoted. They could then publish from all over Africa, books from the Congo, Congo Brazaville, Cameroon, Tchad. They published folktales and that was welcomed by the government. The government has recognized Éditions CLE as a non-profit institution for the public good—*Reconnu d'Utilité Publique*. If you go to Éditions CLE you can see the document in a frame, signed by the president himself, posted on the wall; upstairs.

That means they published someone like Guillaume Oyono Mbia because it was safe?

He was safe, but not Mongo Beti.

The turbulent 1990s

How did the 1990s change things?

In 1990, we thought it would be a new beginning. We worked hard to make it a new beginning. We really hoped that Cameroon would never ever be the same. After the

Berlin Wall came down in October 1989, we didn't think that it would bring such a dramatic change all over Africa. The shock, the wave came and we thought things were going to be different but what happened politically was just the surface, it wasn't really what was going on underground.

When you say it changed politically, do you mean the advent of multipartism?

Yes indeed, the multi-party system was the visible part of the iceberg. But what we at the University of Yaoundé were interested in wasn't the multi-party system. 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. Unfortunately, the multi-party system was just an illusion.

Free speech was happening.

Yes, it was happening because we began to have a space where we could give free lectures, where we could talk freely.

Debate sensitive issues.

Freely. Teach freely certain books and without censorship, without someone being there watching, telling you what not to do. We really thought that a new country was being born.

Exactly, there was an explosion of newspapers.

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. Now it was a control of the mind: you would be called or invited into the close circle of the ruling body and asked, "What really are your problems? What are you interested in? We can finance you. We can give you money if you are in need." That's why even with the explosion of private newspapers, the people in power tried to create their own.

As a countermeasure.

A countermeasure and when they realized that you have launched your newspaper yourself, you would be more or less invited to the circle of those who could continue to convey the thinking, the ideology of those in power. You were given a seat in the regime, a piece of the cake, so to speak.

The critical voices were slowly being bought off.

Slowly, slowly, and that's what happened with writers. You see many books published by what Hubert Mono Ndjana calls *les intellectuels organique du pouvoir* (organic intellectuals of the system).⁴ These intellectuals were there to be the mouthpiece of the government, to defend the regime, to be part of the system. Right away you could see two paths: the intellectual of the regime or the intellectual that didn't belong to the regime. Those that belonged to the regime—Fame Ndong, Mono Ndjana, many journalists—were all writing, producing tons of books, all celebrating what the government was doing. If you do not belong to that team, you would see that you are cornered, that you are being marginalized. Cameroon is a very poor country and people are in need. You have family with needs, you'd think, what the heck, why should I be defending ideas that promote the well-being of the country when others are benefitting from what the regime has to offer? You are inside or you are outside. All of a sudden people like Jean Marc Ela, Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, all these intellectuals who didn't belong to the regime were slowly but surely marginalized, left without work, without subsidy to do any significant research. The government realized that the university was freeing itself too much too fast and they started putting plain-clothes police in classrooms, on campus, as spies who reported back to the regime on who was doing what. That's why we were so disillusioned... We brought Mongo Beti here in 1992 thinking things were opening up and he was not allowed to speak in public. He was not allowed to speak anywhere and we realized then that this freedom was fake. Even the free press were being censored. Some of the press could write freely if they were pro-regime but others like *Le Messager*, *La Nouvelle Expression* or *Challenge Hebdo* were being banned, being censored.

I remember how frustrating it was when one went looking for Le Messager or Popoli and the vendors would say simply, on a saisi! (it has been confiscated), and especially that newspapers were sold along the street and one didn't have to go far to get one only to discover the seizure of an entire number, and if available, paragraphs were crossed out, were missing or were just blank pages; partially, heavily, or completely redacted pages, or the suspension of entire publications.

Mono Ndjana's philosophy was basically that the government should not take democracy for granted; that the type of democracy that would exist in the country would be of those in power and if need be—he went very far—they would use the instruments of the previous dictatorship to manage democracy. How can you use the instruments of the previous dictatorship to manage democracy? Mongo Beti said it doesn't mean that in a democracy you be allowed to do what you want. Well, we were not asking to do what we wanted, we were asking for rules to run the country from then on.

They were always changing the rules to their benefit. You might want to conform to the rules but the rules were constantly changing.

That's why I can say that the nineties was a deception and we realized that those who created political parties didn't have the guts to pursue and fight for the space needed by the people to overrun things, to change the country, to really turn the country, not upside down but to change things according to democratic rules because most of these political leaders created political parties just because they needed something to do. They needed employment and the postcolonial regime then approached them and offered them a deal: feel free to create your party, we will even subsidize you under the table provided that when the time comes you declare that you are siding with us and that's what happened. Most of these political leaders in the nineties ended up being mere satellites of the government and ruling party and most of the intellectuals who took the stand in the nineties to speak out ended up as *intellectuels organiques du pouvoir*. So we ended up being as marginalized as the Mongo Betis and Ferdinand Oyonos of the 1950s, not by the colonial masters but by their heirs; those who inherited power from them. So colonial power in Cameroon was now in the hands of Cameroonians. Cameroonians had become colonizers.

It is sad that the nineties in the end were disappointing given they started with so much fervor and promise. Do you think Cameroonians, as citizens, underestimated the work that they needed to do to change the system? Even taking into consideration the power of the nation state, did Cameroonians underestimate how much work needed to be done and how much they had to sacrifice? To be clear, people did sacrifice a lot in the 1990s but I wonder whether the system was so powerfully engrained, so entrenched that they couldn't work against it?

No, it wasn't that power was so strong. It wasn't that. Cameroonian people invested a lot but we had one fundamental issue, Juliana, the fundamental issue for me was the lack of leadership. And that lack of leadership was due to the colonial education. Because you didn't have leaders who could—how would you put it in the United States—think outside the box; who could think that you could do something so

different it would not resemble what you have in France, what you have in Great Britain, that this is Cameroon where we could design something completely different. As Ngūgĩ would put it, decolonizing the mind is not at all an easy matter.

No vision. We had leaders but the leaders did not have a vision for their country.

People were ready to die. And some of them died. They were ready to fight. And people fought. Some were ready to sacrifice. And there were sacrifices. But at some point we didn't have leaders with a vision of where we are going. I remember my friend-brother-colleague, Augustin Kontchou, talking and his references were always, "Even in France," "Even in America," "Even in England" ... Well, we are not in America, we are not in England, we are not in France; we are in Cameroon.

So, the reference point was always somewhere else, not Cameroon itself.

Yes, not Cameroon itself. And he'd say, that's the way it is done in France—and actually his reference in France might not be necessarily correct—and people assumed since he is a Professeur Agrégé, what he is saying is necessarily true. But why should we take it for granted if it doesn't serve our needs or the interests of our country? This is our real problem. We have these intellectuals who say, "we were educated in America; we were educated in France; we were educated in England, so you should trust us because we have the knowledge." No, we should not trust you just because you were educated abroad; we should trust you because you have a vision for our country with clear strategies that would make that vision a reality. But people were very fascinated by all this "important knowledge" that comes from abroad because we were never trained to think closely about what we are going to become. How are we going to build our space and transform our milieu? What are we going to become in 10, 15, 50 years? There is no project. You mentioned *libéralisme communautaire* earlier ... there was/is no project to back it up.

It was just a lofty slogan.

Libéralisme communautaire was just a ploy written by Biya's entourage to please him. Sengat Kuo confessed it to me later on. The book gave us no vision, no concrete project. It didn't propose a system of governance for postcolonial Cameroon: new agricultural or health systems because we need to feed our people, keep them healthy; educate them in what we need to know in order to transform our environment. You come from America, the pioneers in America came from England but when they went to America, they didn't reproduce another Great Britain. They barely kept the language—even that language has changed—but they wanted to create a space that

didn't resemble England and they were successful in doing it, and it was not easy to do it. So how can we, now that we are independent, not think ourselves different from the colonial master and if there are no people in front that have the thinking to do that, that have the power to lead us then there is no way we can be successful.

This affects the young people in universities who are yearning for those professors that can help them think critically about issues of concern and when they are lucky enough to have such professors, the latter are accused of fomenting rebellion and thinking critically becomes synonymous with incitement. How can generations of Cameroonians do better when they are not given the opportunity to be active participants in their governance?

I think there is a fundamental issue here because we were educated, be it in the colonial or postcolonial system, but were never prepared to understand the Other. We were never trained or prepared to understand the French being, and the French mind. We read books, we studied the French language, French literature, French culture but we were not trained to understand his/her mind. Had we been prepared to understand the French mind, the British mind, the American mind, we would have learned to design something different or specific for ourselves. After independence we never sat down and said, this is a country that we have to build, that we are going to manage, that we are going to develop. We never engaged in this exercise. We were simply the colonial enterprise, unaware prisoners of the colonial project. In the meantime, the colonial master himself is changing, and changing faster than you can believe and while he is changing he does not tell which way he is going. If you look at our educational system in this country, since 1960, the French educational system has changed many times but it's difficult for us to change one millimeter of what we inherited from the French because this administration has come almost to a standstill. If you are not able to reinvent yourself like the others are trying to do—even the French try to reinvent themselves, but the Americans are faster than them, the Germans are faster than the French, so everybody is running after everybody else—and you are stuck with what you inherited. The books that Mongo Beti wrote in the nineties while he was in Cameroon are so desperate because when you read them you see that this country is in chaos. He called the Biya regime *dictature à l'édredon* (soft dictatorship)—it's not even a dictatorship, it's like pillow dictatorship because no matter how you hit it, it comes back like a cotton pillow.⁵

Oh I see, and it will simply rebound.

Yeah, rebound. But you can hit it—it doesn't even prevent you from hitting it—because you don't feel anything and it doesn't feel anything.

What a wonderful metaphor—dictature à l'édredon.

Édredon is like foam. All these newspapers can keep on insulting Biya, calling him names, but that does not change anything. Keep on hitting. I don't feel anything. Do what you like. I don't care.

That's the political stalemate we have in Cameroon.

This country has so much wealth—oil and other minerals, timber, cocoa, coffee—that those in power will never complain. The rest of you can starve. They don't care. They don't care because there is no project and they made no promise.

Dictature à l'édredon—how fitting!

When Mongo Beti returned home, he realized that it's not useful to continue writing pamphlets critical of the Biya regime because whatever one does not change anything. In much of our contemporary literature there are rarely literary works critical of or engaging the regime. Calixthe Beyala's last book was on religion. Of course, all Cameroonians are in chapels all day praying. They think that it's by praying that things will change. Nothing's going to change.

On censorship

We were talking about censorship and newspapers in the turbulent 1990s. What are the new forms of censorship in the 2000s? Are things the same? Have tactics changed? You said many writers are now self-censoring. They are not writing the kinds of books or essays they want to write. I remember when Bole Butake wrote a powerful open letter, "I Refuse to be Lapiroed" in 1992 in which he heavily criticized the Biya government. It is disconcerting when intellectuals and writers have to self-censor because that affects not just our creativity but the production, distribution, and dissemination of knowledge.

I really don't know whether you can call it self-censorship. I think the entire country, all the categories in this country have more or less abandoned hope; we have given up. I think it's not even censorship. People have simply given up because of what I've just explained to you—*dictature à l'édredon*. You can write pamphlets, you can write open letters; Patrice Nganang does it all the time, but who cares? What does it change? Lapiro and others were jailed because they were considered as "dangerous" political activists mobilizing masses to get up and protest. Writing as such could hardly get you lapiroed for the simple reason that readership is so limited.

It's a lethargic atmosphere everywhere.

Since I came here, I could have been writing so much about censorship and what is happening but people would read it and laugh at me. They'd say, "What do you want?" I consider being here at Université des Montagnes and doing what I am doing to be the best contribution I can make. It's not easy for me, it's a tough job because communication is more or less impossible. In this type of environment you have people who have more or less given up on any social transformation so the only thing you can work on is find something to eat, a place to sleep, find something to do to feed yourself, to feed your family, to get medicine if you are sick.

It's a daily hustle. People are hustling, as they say in America.

Yeah. Juliana, you talked about the nineties. You will see that all the political opposition parties of the nineties have more or less disappeared. They are still there but they have disappeared because most of them are speechless, completely mute. Some of them have become so fat because they have received so much under the table from the regime that they can no longer talk.

They've been neutered.

Yes. Even Pierre Flambeau Ngayap who was one of the leaders of the opposition is a senator now appointed by Biya. You might have a few writers living abroad who continue to write about their memories of life in the villages like Miano, experiences of immigration like Kelman or going back to the immediate (post)colonial daily life like Nganang does but if you write about what's currently happening in this country you can only face what Mongo Beti calls *la dictature à l'édredon* because whatever you do people will ask you, "What's your problem? Get something to eat, forget about the rest," they'd say. Whereas in the nineties people had hope that something can change, that something might happen and they were looking for something to happen. Now, hope is gone.

Is that why the theme or metaphor of madness is prevalent in the works of so many Cameroonian writers, francophone and Anglophone alike?

Yes, of course. And they are right because the French philosopher Roland Jacquard says in his book about madness that madness is not what you think you see, madness is not necessarily a disease, it is the environment that makes you mad. You become mad because of how the environment can transform you. You may be completely sane, you may be healthy, but people would say that if you do not behave like them you are a mad person. If you think outside the box in this country you might not have anything to eat, you might not be successful and everybody wants to be successful,

everyone wants to make money, wants to have a house. If you don't you would be considered a mad person and even your family would ask what's wrong with you. "You are given money and you refuse? No, no, take it. You don't ask where it comes from. *Tu es malade*, you are sick," they'd say. The issue of madness is real. Imagine, this country is at war (with Boko Haram) and the president is in Geneva enjoying life for the last month or so, and as petroleum prices are dropping, the wealth of this country is diminishing but he doesn't care. He has been in power for so long, we have almost forgotten that he exists. Can you live in the United States and forgot that there is a President called Obama in the White House?

Nope.

Because he has to intervene in so many issues in real time but here you never see Biya, you never hear him. Who's governing? The country seems to be running itself. Excuse me, this might sound desperate but I'm just describing what we see. There are no rules or there are so many rules you can't get around no matter what. No country can operate like this.

It's a state of national being that affects everything else: our intellectual production, cultural production, educational production; in every way. It's the domino effect. A vicious cycle that keeps repeating and reproducing itself.

You talk about educational production, we don't even have a calendar year. A school year used to go from September to June, now we can go from October to April. And when school children take exams, the most important thing is to have a diploma because in the civil service you are paid according to your diploma and not according to what you know or what you can do. I think it's extremely important to understand how and why many people have given up. Those who were born in the nineties are 25 years old. It's one generation without any dreams. This is a lost generation and even their parents who were probably born in the seventies or in the sixties. These two generations haven't lived any significant change, socially and economically speaking.

You were talking earlier about what is read in school and there is a crucial problem that if you are a Cameroonian author whose book is being read in school, it first has to be given the greenlight by someone in the Ministry of Education and the book becomes a textbook in the curriculum. The problem arises whose book gets selected.

We could deal with this lengthily. It's the whole issue of literary institutions in a country like this: we are talking about critics, writers; we are talking about newspapers, journals, libraries, bookstores; we are talking about textbooks. In a "normal" country, all these issues are linked.

Interconnected.

Completely interconnected. The state would encourage—not that the state would create publishing houses—would make sure that we give enough possibilities to local publishers to be able to publish books for our schools, for our readers, for our public. What are the rules that govern, say, bookstores so that you could be allowed to distribute books published locally? That books published locally would be favoured over imported ones? There are no rules, so you still have books published outside the country, in Europe, and shipped here and in order to get your book into the curriculum you have to go to the ministry to negotiate because the ministry itself has not designed a program that outlines how and why a book is selected as a textbook. It is a permanent negotiation between the individual and the postcolonial state. I deal with those who manage Mongo Beti's *Librairie des Peuples Noirs* in Yaoundé. The problem they have is immense; insolvable, because the sole distributor of books throughout Africa and from France is Messapresse, the French colonial agency.

Books for Mongo Beti's bookstore in Yaoundé have to be channeled through Messapresse?

Unless you order them directly from the publisher and if you do you'd be in trouble with customs in Douala. The books might never leave the port.

Messapresse still has the monopoly.

Messapresse is still there at the *Marché Centrale*—Central Market, Yaoundé—and they distribute everything. Moreover, if you are a local publisher of a journal in this country, unless it is distributed by Messapresse, to be sold in the street, you have no luck. And you must print a specified number before Messapresse would accept to distribute them. They have their conditions. This means there is no national policy governing publishing and literary institutions.

That means books by writers writing in France or outside Cameroon will not get here because they'd be too expensive. Copies of my fiction—Your Madness, Not Mine: Stories of Cameroon, The Sacred Door and Other Stories—or my scholarly book, Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference that are available in Cameroon are those I put in my luggage when I come here. You'd find that ten, twenty people have read the same copy...

In 1994 after the devaluation of our currency, the CFA Franc, there was a conference at the French Cultural Center and the Cultural Center officer tried to convey the message that France will continue to subsidize books that are printed in France for

African countries. I told him it was an insult to say such a thing, noting, I had hoped he invited us to tell us that France was going to train us to open new publishing houses, local publishing houses; to manufacture books for ourselves but here he was telling us the French government is nice enough to continue subsidizing books from France to Africa. He bluntly responded that unless you do it yourself no one is going to do it for you. When we, a country of 20 million people import books from France, we are working for the French economy.

The money spent here goes elsewhere; to subsidize the economies of the west.

So, the issue of building literary institutions is a fundamental one if we want our literature to grow. You mentioned Afrikiya, but these are publishing houses that cannot survive and thrive. I lived in Canada... You lived in Canada, right?

Yes, from 1988-1994 when I attended McGill University in Montreal and earned a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature.

Publishing houses in countries as wealthy as Canada have special treatment in terms of taxes. When I was in Sherbrooke publishing with Nama, Nama told me their books were considered cultural products. When we mailed our books, we paid the shipping rate by sea but the books shipped by air. This was the decision of the Canadian government that for any cultural product you pay the sea rate but ship by air which is very helpful to publishers. Look at this country, where are the special rules applied to publishers? That is why you cannot grow as a publisher here. SOPECAM tried to publish but it was like using government funds...

To print textbooks.

But if you want a private initiative you would run into trouble because paper is important, machinery is important, the knowhow; everything is. Unless you have special tax arrangements, there's no way you can survive.

The 2000s

Given all this, where are we in the 21st century? Where do we go from here with Francophone Cameroon writing?

I think Francophone Cameroon writing can only grow from, it's sad to say, the outside.

That's sad.

Publishing within our national boundaries is tough, selling books within our national boundaries is not easy either. Most books published by our own people are in the diaspora—old and new—in Europe, America; they publish and some of their books can get here, generally shipped by themselves as you have yourself experienced it. Second, we are having more and more self-published authors because a publishing house like l’Harmattan has given people possibilities to publish with them. However, l’Harmattan is no longer, from what I see, a publisher. My friend, Denis Pryen, has become a printer. Pryen has agencies here and there, in Cameroon, in Burkina Faso, and if you want to publish with him you do the set up yourself, you do everything yourself. Afterwards, he prints a few hundred copies and most of the time you distribute the book yourself.

Editing?

Editing, everything. He just prints. You pay some amount of money and he gives you back a few copies that you sell yourself. This is becoming a more common development in this country. I’ve been reading more and more of these books by Cameroonians who have no access to publishing houses. They prepare their own manuscripts and then l’Harmattan accepts to publish them and the author buys, say, 50 copies which they sell themselves. We cannot call this a book industry. It’s a self-publishing venture, extremely limited in scope.

I think in Anglophone Cameroon a similar example would be Langaa Publishing. When you read some of their books, your reaction is to the lack of copy-editing. You can tell the manuscript was simply printed without being reviewed and/or copy-edited. Langaa is publishing a lot of books, which is a good thing, but the quality sometimes takes away from really good work that would have benefitted from professional editing.

And that’s because we don’t have professional publishers. You cannot survive in this country as a professional publisher. Even Éditions CLE has “survived” because of the *reconnaissance d’utilité publique*. Being recognized as a non-profit institution for the public good gives it local governmental support as well as subsidies from outside missionaries. Messapresse can exist because it is a multi-national company. Their customers in Cameroon are mostly expatriates who don’t have any buying power problem. If you import books you might run into the same problems with our bottleneck custom services and Bollre Africa Logistics, the French multinational that controls most shipping transit to and from Cameroon. So, to answer your question, where do we go from here in the 21st century? Until and unless there is a policy, we will not have a professional book publishing industry. It is difficult to maintain a bookstore in this country unless you sell textbooks exclusively, and bookstore sales

are seasonal. They open in the fall—September, October—and can close until the following year to open again.

Or they stay open to sell exercise books and stationary.

That's it. So the book industry in this country is not yet born. It is yet to exist because the conditions do not allow for it. Nowadays, you send a manuscript to France and why would a publisher even waste his/her time to look at it? They have no time for that and imagine how many manuscripts they receive every day from African immigrants and from the continent. Eventually they would be more interested in manuscripts by immigrants because the issues they deal with will be closer to their preoccupation.

And there is the bias of looking for very specific kinds of African stories that reinforce a certain image of Africa or preconceived notions about what Africa was or should be. Such works are then heavily reviewed and promoted.

Exactly, that's why writers like Leonora Miano, Gaston Kelman get really famous because they provide an image of Africa that Europeans like, want, are comfortable with. The question is: is this what we want? At the beginning, L'Harmattan, for instance, was not at all interested in publishing fiction. L'Harmattan opened up to African countries because he knew that most academics needed publications for their promotion and he knew that many of them would pay dearly to have their book published. People used to pay cash to get published in order to get their promotion and were satisfied whether the book sold or not. That's what L'Harmattan understood in the African continent. He only slowly got into fiction publishing. Today, he is still very much interested in publishing "Studies" because he knows people need them to get promotion. Even my friend, Paul Dakeyo, who used to publish poetry continues to publish fiction in France but not at the rate he used to. Buyers/readers are probably getting scarce. If our diaspora in France write books on migration, immigration, there are sensational publishers in France very interested in publishing the experience of the diaspora, but nationally, we are in big trouble.

I like what you said that the Cameroon book industry is yet to be born, which means an affordable book industry is far away; almost unthinkable.

Indeed. To have a book industry means taking into account the buying power of the people it serves and the buying power of the population is so low that you cannot publish without some tax arrangement with the government that factors in the buying power of the people. You would hardly see a Cameroonian offering a book, a novel, as a present because it's so costly.

Yes, intentional policies and practices need to be enacted and put in place.

Well-thought designs. If you publish in Canada, it would be at an affordable price, the distribution to France would be easy because the government has set forth ways of distributing these cultural products throughout the world so why go to France when you can publish at home and Canadians can afford it? It's not just Canada, France has been doing the same thing. If we think we can live without any policy to promote the book industry in our country then there is no way we can survive. You need people at the governing level who think of the good or the future of the country. Unless we like to maintain the country in oral culture or prefer analphabetism to literacy.

Thank you for having this wonderful conversation with me about Francophone Cameroon literature. I hope that the next time we talk about these issues, a lot would have changed. Your being here at Université des Montagnes is very encouraging to me.

Well, I would not encourage anyone to follow in my footsteps unless you are very well prepared and ready to face very unexpected challenges.

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Notes

1. This interview took place in Bagangté, Cameroon, on March 26, 2015.
2. See "Indian Education: Minute of the 2nd of February, 1835" in which Macaulay (729) argues, "I feel with them, that it is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population."
3. Société de Presse et d'Éditions du Cameroun (Cameroon News and Publishing Cooperation) was created by presidential decree n° 77/250 of 18 July 1977. For more on publishing in Cameroon, see the Afterword in Makuchi. (Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi writes fiction under the pen name Makuchi).
4. Clearly, Mono Ndjana's *intellectuels organique du pouvoir* are the traditional intellectuals intimately linked to the dominant power and culture and therefore in no way akin to the "organic intellectual" espoused by Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*.
5. *Édredon* also means "eiderdown." A pillow, quilt, or comforter can be filled with eiderdown or soft feathers.

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