Ambazonia: Between Two Rivers

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the underlying causes of the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon. This study questions the extent to which French nationalism and linguistic identity have shaped Cameroonian national identity and contributed to the ongoing unrest in the region. Its goal is to provide a better understanding of Cameroonian nation-building in a post-colonial context through the examination of history, glottopolitics, and the contemporary events of the crisis itself. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse of nation-building in Africa and the connection between language and national identity formation.

Introduction

Straddling the border of Nigeria and Cameroon, the region of Ambazonia has become another focal point in the African continent's ongoing struggle with self-determination, democratization and sovereignty. Ambazonia, formerly British Southern Cameroons, is the homeland of the English-speaking people of Cameroon, a linguistic minority within the primarily francophone nation-state. In 2016, widespread protests turned into calls for independence and various factions have since emerged to push for a new independent Anglophone state; the Republic of Ambazonia. This ongoing conflict has been dubbed "the Anglophone Crisis" and has been characterized by years of civil unrest, violence, and human rights violations. The Anglophone Crisis is the latest manifestation of a long history of colonization, language politics, autocratic consolidation and the struggle for national identity in Cameroon.

Through historical and political examination, I hope to demonstrate that the Anglophone Crisis is rooted in the failure of French-domination within colonial and post-colonial Cameroon and to bring to light the struggles of the Anglophone population in their quest for self-determination

Literature Review

Language, National Identity, and Separatism

Language is one of the key components of national identity formation. Within the last few centuries during the emergence of the nation-state, national identity supplanted ethnic identity as the primary form of social and political identification. (May 37)

After this emergence, promotion of a single language became an important tool in managing the newly established nation-state. French revolutionaries called for the reeducating of the public and an embrace of a language. (Bell 21) Other examples of language homogeneity producing national identity can be demonstrated through the unification of Italy.

Thus within a nation-state, linguistic homogeneity may lead to political unity and stability, but historical and modern events also demonstrate the inverse— linguistic pluralism may lead to micro-nationalist movements that challenge the nation-state (Shabad and Gunther 1). Liberal thinker John Stuart Mill was an early adopter of this idea stating:

"Among a people without fellow-feeling, **especially if they read and speak different languages**, the united public opinion, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist."

Contemporary examples of this include, the political tensions between the micro-nationalist movements within the regions of Euskadi and Catalunya against Spain (Shabad and Gunther 2),

the Flemish national movements within Belgium against French-speaking urban populations (Cetrá 125), and the Quebecois of Canada (Haque 2). Each of the authors demonstrate that these micro-nationalist movements have displayed some form of separatism, but none have intensified into complete civil war— making the current Anglophone Crisis a unique example of language based separatism.

French Language and Colonialism

The effects of French glottopolitics and linguistic nationalism on previous colonial holdings has had various results on the development of nations both outside and within Africa.

The French began with Algerian colonization in 1830, and through this early experience the French implemented the oppressive colonial government (Pitts 167-168) which would develop into the widespread policy *indigénat*, that legally created second-class citizens of the native inhabitants within French Africa (DeLancey 25).

This supplanting of native inhabitants was largely driven by the nationalist views of early republican France, and the political push to expand enlightenment ideals (). A policy of educating the native Africans through the promotion of the French language was implemented as a way to bind the various ethnic groups together— as Paulin Djité states:

"Standard French was not only perceived as a neutral language that could politically integrate the diverse ethnic groups…it was also seen as an international means of communication, a proven medium of science and technology through which the newly independent nation could pursue goals of development and economic prosperity." (Djité 3)

Origins of Anglophone Crisis

Being a contemporary conflict, literature on the Anglophone Crisis has been, and continues to be an ever developing process. The conflict is primarily between the French-speaking Cameroonian government and English-speaking separatists within the former British Southern Cameroons. Tensions between the western Anglophone regions and the Francophone government have existed since independence in 1961. Enonchong notes how the reuniting of Cameroon was not an equal union between the nations as the Francophone regions declared independence first at the Foumban conference (Enonchong XX).

In agreement with Enonchong, Achankeng (2015) also notes how the Cameroon's constitutional convention, the Foumban conference, qualified as "false negotiations" as one of the parties— British Southern Cameroons— gained more by stalling the process of union, and the French Republic of Cameroon engaged in the process without any intentions of reaching any form of agreement with the Southern Cameroons. Achankeng also argues that the problem and proposed solutions both parties aimed for were different. The Republic of Cameroon desired to incorporate the Anglophone regions, while the Southern Cameroons desired to craft a constitution that maintained the Anglophone regions as a distinct political entity.

This initial unfair deal led Achankeng (2015) to state that post-Foumban discrimination of Cameroon's anglophone population was the major consequence of the conference. Enonchong (2020) also compares Cameroon's unification with Tanzania's unification, with the former failing to establish equal parties when constructing the Federal Constitution.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach when examining the Anglophone Crisis. Through an exploration of previous studies on French and Cameroonian history, administrative policies, and post-colonial relationships in Africa; and through an analysis of theories on language and its relationship to national identity, this study aims to provide a comprehensive historical understanding of the causes of the political conflict.

A comparative approach is also used to understand separatism and the effects French linguistic nationalism has on former colonial nations.

On the contemporary conflict itself, the study uses various news reports as sources to add onto any potential information that previously written research may have lacked. Particularly on the subject of the activities of Ambazonian separatists in the conflict.

Chapter One: Feudal Conflict to Linguistic Domination

There are over 150 million French-speakers on the African continent today, more than double the French-speaking population of Metropolitan France. The expansion of the French language was one of the numerous effects of 19 century imperial domination, the results being an organized erasure of numerous native languages and cultural identities. The origins of this linguistic domination however did not begin in the 19th century along the coastal ports of Guinea, but rather began in the villages of France itself.

The emergence of European nationalism has its origins rooted in a particular phenomenon that occurred throughout the 15th and 16th centuries: the dissolution of priestly political power within Europe and consolidation of political power within a single ruler— the

monarch (Bell 24). This phenomenon can be attributed to events such as the Protestant Reformation, resulting wars of religion inside and between European states, and the large amount of imported wealth due to imperial projects in the Americas (Stanbridge 50). This period of instability created new opportunities; with the Church stripped of the power it used to hold, the monarchs of various nations became the consolidator of political power. The result would be dubbed “the Age of Absolutism”, but it is within the antithesis to this consolidation of singular, monarchical power we find the origins of collectively shared, national power (Bell 24). The conflict between these two political forces would have explosive results country by country— but the result: the formation of a national identity. The clearest exemplar of conflict turned national identity would be France.

During the late medieval period, the French monarchs were embroiled in conflict with the English. This war was feudal in the purest sense, as the conflict was not one of national security or national interest but of dynastic legitimacy, prestige, and familial claims. It was not the Kingdom of England disputing with the Kingdom of France over which nation had a claim to the region of Normandy— it was which ruler owned the land, Henry or Louis? One could even describe the conflict as a private affair (Seward 1-4). It was not until after the Hundred Years' War concluded and the English were driven away that the French monarchs were able to begin solidifying their authority. It is during this post-war period where the first component of French nationalism was established: the formalizing of the French language (Haque 11).

France historically had been made of a composite of different regional languages and dialects, with the French language being concentrated within the northern regions of the country (Bell 16). Contrasting the medieval period, where the common language between European states was Latin, by the 16th century French became the language of diplomacy throughout the

courts of Europe. This shift was due to various factors, including economic power and prestige that came through American colonization and trade, increased French influence within central Europe during the period, and countries' geographic position and size (Wright 36-37). The French language becoming the new “Lingua Franca” of Europe would also gain a reputation as the language of intellectuals/the Enlightenment (Wright 38), thus laying the groundwork for the French language to be synonymous with new ideas of national identity and nation formation (Haque 11).

During the end of the 18th century, the French Revolution would be the moment where France fully departed from its feudalistic past and completely adopted a nationalist agenda. Radical French revolutionaries, such as Henri Grégoire, pushed for an agenda of complete reeducation of the nation and having the citizens be “melted into the national mass”. Through mass teaching of a standard French language— the French national identity would be the result (Bell 21). These radical agendas of the 1793-94 Terror, would not be fully implemented, but its influences had lasting results in the form of Napoleon's restored French Academy. The French Academy, where the French language is defined by its scholarly members, is a conservative institution that attempts to maintain the French language’s distinction in opposition to non-French languages— a safeguard to maintain French linguistic prestige and by extension French national identity.

Throughout the 19th century, France exported the French language through its colonizing efforts in the Caribbean, South America, and Africa. A difference from the previous early modern period, French linguistic prestige was challenged by the ascendance of the English language propagated by the United Kingdom and the United States. The unification of Germany and Italy, pushing their own nationalist agenda, also crippled the reputation that French had as a

universal European language (Wright 38-39). This decline status was ultimately cemented in the 20th century, with the First and Second World Wars putting France from leading the Entente powers to becoming an auxiliary member of the Allies and an honorary member of the United Nations. This very transition can be even seen in the very words for the military coalitions: French “Entente” in 1914 becoming English “Allies” in 1939. Despite this setback, the French government had and continues to attempt to exert its own independence as a power on the world stage, and central to this nationalist scheme was building linguistic ties to its former colonies—enter Cameroon (DeLancey 17).

Chapter Two: Supplanting Natives with Nationals

The French relationship with its colonial projects can be viewed as a contradiction. On one hand, after the French Revolution, there was a desire to spread republican enlightenment ideals beyond France— to reject the feudal monarchy, slavery, and religion— “mission civilisatrice”, the civilizing mission (Conklin 16). On the other hand, not only was France’s actions still ultimately a form of colonial exploitation, French skepticism of Africans fully assimilating would lead to greater restrictions of African immigrants to the country (Conklin 167). This tension between revolutionary ideals and reactionary sentiments would be the conflicting foundation of French colonial policy throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, and this detail would be especially evident with French Cameroon.

Cameroon differs from other French colonies of the 20th century as it was not originally occupied by the French, but rather was colonized by the Germans with the name of Kamerun (DeLancey 9). The German period of rule established a precursory form of Cameroonian identity, the new colonial boundaries established an exonym for the people within the borders,

German became a common language, and academic philosophy led to a sense of community and common history to the formerly heterogeneous populations (DeLancey 14). After the First World War, the region was declared a trust territory, a non-self-governing territory with international oversight, of the League of Nations. In de facto terms, the Kamerun was occupied and divided between the British and French administrations, the French managing most of the territory, and the British managing two smaller portions on the border of Nigeria (DeLancey 28).

The government of France appointed Jules Carde to oversee the transition from military to civilian leadership in French Cameroon, whose pragmatic approach allowed some power to be devolved to the native African elites, if they were educated in French public affairs (Conklin 199). Carde's leadership was a clear display of the French civilizing mission, as noted in one of Carde's reports to Paris: "(we) are pursuing tirelessly the education and strengthening of *le commandement indigène*…by infusing it with an unwavering loyalty, this is the primordial task of our policy of sovereignty in West Africa." Instilling of French identity and ideals, while maintaining reactionary sentiments and institutions of colonial domination. It is within this interwar period French Cameroonian nationalism began to animate, with native populations voicing their opposition to French policies of forced labor and secondary legal status (DeLancey 32). These nationalist movements only increased during the Second World War, where many Cameroonians fought and died for the preservation of European democracy— upon their return the question of Cameroonian democracy began to appear (DeLancey 33).

In 1944 the Brazzaville Conference occurred, in which General Charles de Gaulle reevaluated France's relationship with its colonies. Once again, de Gaulle reaffirmed the French civilizing mission, as French leadership envisioned further integration with its colonies rather than decolonization (DeLancey 37). It was at this conference that the former colonial system was

dissolved and replaced with the French Union system— which ended forced labor, but these reforms failed to stem continued calls for independence across the continent (DeLancey 38).

Chapter Three: Divided Identity, The Two Cameroons

Broadly, the period of Cameroonian decolonization and independence was between the years 1948 to 1961, a timeframe that oversaw the rise and fall of a revolutionary nationalist Cameroonian movement, the establishment of an French-aligned independent Cameroonian government, and a flawed reunification of a Cameroonian nation.

French Cameroon was granted a special status with the French Union, as the country was designated as a trust territory, thus was granted more autonomy than other neighboring colonies. This allowed for an outgrowth of political action— most radical of which were the labor unions which saw a surge of support in 1944 (Enonchong 10). One of the leading Cameroonian nationalist figures of this radical period was Ruben Um Nyobè, who directly opposed France's push for further integration and supported reunification with British Southern Cameroons (Enonchong 10). Nyobè founded *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC), a Marxist political party designed to achieve the goal of independence (DeLancey 38). Some UPC members were arrested, detained, or tortured by French authorities— and ultimately the party was banned, its members forced to fight in exile in British Southern Cameroons (Enonchong 10).

By 1957, after a decade of pushing back against nationalists and the UPC, the French government began to abandon the civilizing mission and the French Union (Takougang & Kreiger 35). Originally, Andre-Marie Mbida was appointed to lead a new French Cameroonian government, but his conservative policies and his opposition unification with British Southern

Cameroons, caused French authorities to fear Mbida's appointment would radicalize the public into supporting the UPC. To prevent this, Mbida was replaced with a moderate nationalist: Ahmadou Ahidjo (Takougang & Kreiger 37).

Strategically Ahidjo aligned himself with other Cameroonian political parties to draw support away from the UPC. Ahidjo also granted amnesty for UPC rebels who surrendered. As Ahidjo consolidated political power within the country— the UPC's final defeat took form in 1958, Nyobè would be assassinated by French agents in Geneva, Switzerland. Through the combined use of political and military power, Ahidjo and the French authorities ended the independent nationalist movement within French Cameroon; returning the nation to a state of French-aligned rule. In 1960, French Cameroon would be declared independent as the *République du Cameroun*, with Ahidjo serving as the country's first President.

Chapter Four: Autocracy and Ambazonia

Despite the success that Ahidjo had in maintaining French-alignment, the UPC's push for unification with British Southern Cameroons had proven popular In 1961, the Foumban conference was held to negotiate and produce a constitution both countries could agree to. Reunification was successful, and the Federal Republic of Cameroon was established. Federalism was adopted to grant some autonomy to the western Anglophone regions (Enonchong 23) and two stars were displayed on the flag to symbolize the two countries. Ahidjo's original pragmatic big tent approach would be reversed with his later adoption of the 1972 constitution. The country was renamed the United Republic of Cameroon and the federalist system was replaced by a unitary system based on the French Gaullist model; which gave more power to the Cameroonian president, while reducing legislative autonomy and power in the Anglophone

regions. This consolidation of executive power would be intensified under Ahidjo's successor: Paul Biya.

Paul Biya would ascend to the presidency in 1982 after Ahidjo resigned, likely due to poor health. Biya would quickly replace military officers and administrators whose loyalties were with Ahidjo, and assumed control of the government within the first year (Takougang & Kreiger 72).

After a coup attempt in 1984, Biya's administration would centralize power and symbolically promoted a singular "Republic of Cameroon" removing any reference to Cameroon's divided past— removing the two star flag and replacing it with a one star flag.

These policies only alienated the Anglophone regions, resulting in the first calls for reestablishing autonomy and full separation. One prominent Anglophone lawyer and separatist, Gorji Dinka, would advocate for the founding of an independent Anglophone nation: "Ambazonia".

In 2016, more French judges were placed in positions of authority within the Anglophone region. French was required to be used in court. Around 58, around 39%, of the 148 magistrates in the Southwest Anglophone region, were French-speaking Cameroonians (Shulika 2022). This move from the Biya administration caused large scale protests, a culmination of repeated antagonisms giving way to a major backlash. A general strike was organized to draw attention to the Cameroonian government's neglect of the country's Anglophone minority, but it only drew hostile responses from authorities. Tensions escalated even further when the Cameroonian government retaliated by shutting down internet access throughout the Anglophone regions for several weeks. This was the start of the Anglophone Crisis.

On October 1st, 2017, during this period of unrest, the Federal Republic of Ambazonia was declared and an interim government led by President Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe was established. The declaration of independence only increased Cameroonian security forces' crackdown within the Anglophone regions. In 2019 many of the interim government members were arrested in Nigeria and extradited to Cameroon, including Tabe— where many face life sentences.

Today, the conflict has displaced nearly 712,000 people according to Human Rights Watch (2020) and the recent Ambazonian boycott of the national dialogue meetings held by President Biya in 2019, and the continued skirmishes in the western regions by separatist forces has show Anglophone resolve to keep pressure on Biya's Cameroonian government.

Synthesis

Through a chronological examination of the events that shaped Cameroon— from before colonization, during colonization, and after colonization— one of the primary drivers of the Anglophone Crisis was the Cameroonian adoption of French derived colonial practices to the exclusion of the English-speaking minority.

French language policies, designed to establish unity within diverse native populations within colonies, were replicated through President Biya's policy of rejecting any form of English federal autonomy and embracing a centralized French-style Gaullist executive was the tipping point for pushing citizens to embrace separation from the government. An example of reproduction from a centralized autocracy to centralized autocracy.

Lastly, the similar conditions of domination established by French colonial rule and the autocratic executive rule of President Biya, has led to development of similar revolutionary,

anti-French movements with the UPC and the Ambazonia independence movement.
The culmination of these events illustrate the lasting impact of French policies in Cameroon that continue to shape the country today.

Conclusion

To conclude, the ongoing Anglophone Crisis is a complex topic due to the numerous political players and factions within the conflict, but through a combination of historical and political analysis clear causal factors emerge. Cameroon's history of colonization, French policy in Africa, and linguistic politics have all contributed to the current unrest in the nation. The people of the Anglophone regions have long been marginalized and excluded from the political process for decades, and this exclusion has only galvanized separatist action in the Anglophone Crisis. As President Biya enters his 42nd year in power and questions of succession become more frequent, comprehension of this conflict and its underlying causes becomes more important than ever. It is my hope that this paper has provided an interpretation of the conflict's origins and that it will contribute to a more informed understanding of the situation in Cameroon.

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