

REUNIFICATION AND THE ELEVENTH PROVINCE DILEMMA IN CAMEROON

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The “Anglophone Problem”, a lucid coinage reflecting the unpleasant marginalisation of the Southern Cameroons, has become a dominant feature of the socio-political discourse in Cameroon. I have always watched with utter amazement the passion and frenzy that this issue attracts on both sides of the philosophical divide. While the sensitivity and obvious disgust of the average English-speaking Cameroonian to his marginalisation is perfectly understandable, there are certain aspects of this minority questions that defies rational analysis.

The problem of the English-speaking minority in the former West Cameroon is a complex one that has situated within its ambit many perplexing questions. Forty-five years after unification presents an ideal occasion to address what is obviously a raw nerve in the discourse on the Anglophone problem. The eleventh province syndrome has increasingly become an unpleasant topic to the protagonist on both sides in the philosophical divide of this discourse. Just what is this eleventh province stuff and why is it such an unpopular topic?

Basically, An Eleventh Province Cameroonian is a Cameroonian who though born in the former West Cameroon (Southern Cameroons) and of Anglo-Saxon culture has his ethnic roots in a tribe indigenous to the former East Cameroon (French Cameroon or La République du Cameroun). They are the hundreds of thousands of Bamilikies, Bassas, and Ewondos whose parents or grandparents moved to the former West Cameroon either as economic migrants or refugees from the French-inspired Ahidjo genocidal wars against the UPCists freedom

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fighters in the Bamilike grass fields and Bassa regions in the former East Cameroon.

Most Eleventh Province Cameroonians who have lived the humiliating experiences of being regarded as third-rate citizens in their fatherland see the occasion of the 45th anniversary of the reunification of Cameroon as one for very solemn reflections. A reflection that must inevitably translate into a lamentation about the individual and collective rape of a people whose forebears spilled their blood during the patriotic UPC war to liberate our country. A people whose ancestors toiled under dehumanising conditions to build the first plantations and rail infrastructure upon which are the foundations of the modern Cameroonian state. The dilemma of the Eleventh Province Cameroonian is his nightmarish double rejection by the Anglophone indigenous to the former West Cameroon and the Francophone government in Yaounde.

Hostility towards the Eleventh Province Cameroonian assumes various forms and is certainly more acute for the Bamilikes. Indeed, besides being contemptuously dismissed as opportunists clandestinely eying appointments meant for Anglophones, some (W.G. Nkwi 2004) have described the supreme sacrifices of the Eleventh Province gallant parents during the UPC independence struggle as terrorist acts. The unarticulated idea is of course that in the fierce tussle for political and economic space, putting the Eleventh Province, generally, and the Bami-Anglo in particular in the mould of a people with a terrorist ancestry is a deft way of making them uncompetitive. One does not need to be sophisticated to know that a system where merits count for nothing in appointing people to office encourages such xenophobic mudslinging.

I have heard otherwise respected people say things like "Well, you see 'W' at the CRTV is occupying the position meant for someone from either the Northwest or the Southwest Province" unashamedly. For them it would have been sacrilege were 'W' to be appointed General Manager of the CRTV for the simple reason

that "W" is a Bami-Anglo! Some have, for similar sentiments, mercilessly condemned any Eleventh Province Cameroonians who dares identify with his 'brothers' across the Mungo after an appointment regarding such acts as irredeemable treachery.

Government attitude towards the Eleventh Province has remained ambivalent over the years. On matters of appointment there is a palpable reluctance to touch them even with a pole a mile long! Why? Not too sure if it has anything to do with Nkwi's terrorist background or our "refugee status" as a friend once casually put it. Does the Bami-Anglo know anything? A fellow Bami-Anglo in our village in Fiango, Kumba, was particularly insightful when he identified the markets and farms as reserved for us and queried the mad ambitions that make some of us lust for appointments.

It was then it dawned on me that we dream if we imagine that the plumb appointments on the president's table could ever reach any of us, and delude ourselves if we think that one of us can be President or Prime Minister! Perhaps Banjul will help us someday.