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"COME-NO-GO/L'ENNEMI...DANS LA MAISON": REFLECTIONS ON THE LINGOES OF CONFLICT IN CAMEROON'S URBAN HISTORY

Henry Kam Kah

Abstract: The re-introduction of multi-party politics and the liberalisation of politics in Cameroon during the 1990s unleashed a venomous language of conflict in some cities. In the coastal region, the expression of "*come-no-go*," synonymous to a dreaded skin disease, was/is frequently used to denigrate people from the grassfields of the country. Many were descendants of migrants to the commercial plantations established by the Germans. Meanwhile, the archbishop of Yaounde at the time called Anglophones "*l'ennemi dans...la maison*" or "enemies in the house." This followed the launching of the Social Democratic Front (SDF) party in Bamenda against a government ban. This article examines the power of derogatory language in Cameroon's urban space. Lingoes of conflict and segregation have denigrated some people and remain a challenge to national unity and integration in Cameroon since the reunification of 1961.

Keywords: *Cameroon, conflict, politics, language, urban dynamics*

Introduction

The efforts of the Cameroon government to promote national unity and integration since re-unification in 1961 have remained unsuccessful, among other things because of xenophobia and hate speech during political consultations in several urban areas in the country. The lingoes of conflict, often unleashed during electoral periods, have affected the peaceful co-existence of a multitude of ethnic groups. Thus far, no conscious efforts have been made to publicly punish its perpetrators. One has to remember that in Rwanda it was partly due to a failure to control emotionally charged and derogatory statements that resulted in the human genocide of 1994, as was also the case in

the Libyan revolution of 2011 against Colonel Muammar Gaddafi (see below).

The socio-political history of Cameroon has been a history of conflict from the colonial epoch on. The introduction of German and then English and French demarcated the country into two separate administrative units led by colonialists. The British and French administrators tried to distinguish between colonised “natives” and colonising Europeans, and also between “native citizens” and “native settlers” not only in Cameroon but elsewhere in Africa (Nyamnjoh 2010: 59 and 62; Neocosmos 2006). This distinction was partly the result of competition for space and power between host groups such as the Duala and Bakweri and migrant communities predominantly from the eastern and western grassfields of Cameroon (International Crisis Group Cameroon 2010: 2). In British Southern Cameroons, for example, the administering authorities distinguished people from the forest region from those who were from the grassfields or *graffi*. This distinction became a source of conflict during electoral consultations from then on until after independence and the re-introduction of multi-party politics in Cameroon during the 1990s.

Colonial administration and unbalanced regional development played an important role in the migration of people from the less-developed to the developed areas for employment and business. Some of the migrants from the western grassfields and from Nigeria and French Cameroon were recruited by the German and later British planters to work in the plantations located mostly in the coastal belt of Cameroon. By the end of the colonial period, many of these people were migrants from the North West Region of Cameroon (Epale 1985; Eyoh 1998: 354). Their initial migration did not pose a problem to the indigenous people but as their numbers increased over the years, host communities like the Bakweri and Oroko people decided to oppose their continued influx into their area. They dramatised the struggle in abusive and derogatory words. The Bakweri, for example, described non-indigenous people as *wajilis* or slaves. The coastal people generally referred to those from the grassfields as *graffi* in a derogatory tone.

The language of conflict seemed temporarily rescinded through the shrewd leadership of President Ahmadou Ahidjo for a super-imposed national unity and integration. Through his centralising policies

and the formation of an all-embracing single party, the Cameroon National Union (CNU) in September 1966, this was pursued with mitigated success. People who had different opinions were expected to express themselves within this single party. Anyone who decided to do otherwise was tagged an enemy of the state. The fact that the single party did not entertain other political views outside the party considerably reduced the language of conflict. This, however, changed during the multi-party era prior to the creation of the CNU in September 1966.

Following the introduction of the liberty laws in December 1990 and the re-introduction of multi-party politics by President Paul Biya, the "floodgates" for freedom of speech and association were opened. This encouragement of the freedom of speech was abused by those who used it to promote hate speech. It was especially fuelled by people in positions of authority who were afraid of losing their positions and those in opposition who wanted to take their places. This venomous language of hate has received scant scholarly attention in the plethora of literature on the political liberalisation in Cameroon since the 1990s. The present article attempts to fill this void by examining how language use became a vector of conflict since the 1990s and has threatened the peace of Cameroon since then. The article is structured into several sections. After the introduction, I provide a brief socio-political background of the area under study before discussing the methodology used. The next section examines language and conflict in historical perspective before I discuss lingoes of conflict in urban spaces in Cameroon. Then I deliberate about the long-term consequences of this provocative language before presenting conclusions.

Socio-Political Background

Cameroon is a multi-lingual country with over 250 ethnic groups and national languages. The different language groups co-exist with one another, and this is expressed through cultural manifestations, good neighbourliness, and the struggle for daily survival among other things. Neighbouring ethnic groups have, from time to time, gone to war over the ownership and control of land and natural resources therein but there is usually a peaceful co-existence through trade and cultural exchanges. While there have been conflicts in some

urban areas with an ethnic undertone due to the hate speeches of politicians, the present article is mainly but not exclusively concerned with the language of conflict between Anglophones/English-speaking Cameroonians and Francophones/ French-speaking Cameroonians.

The promotion of autochthony in place of national citizenship in Africa since the 1990s, and the burying of people in their villages of origin or that of their parents are developments that have triggered a debate on belonging, exclusion and the constant drawing of new boundaries (Geschiere 2005: 11 and 16; Falola and Mbah 2014: 15). In the case of Cameroon, these activities stand in opposition to the preamble of the constitution which states that every person shall have the right to settle in any place and to move about freely, subject to the statutory provisions concerning public law and order, security and tranquillity. The preamble of the constitution also upholds the right of every individual to be free of harassment no matter his/her origin, religious, philosophical or political opinions or beliefs, subject to respect for public policy. The fact that the preamble of the constitution states that the state shall ensure the protection of minorities and preserve the rights of indigenous populations in accordance with the law is problematic in terms of the co-existence or *vive emsemble* between the non-indigenous and the indigenous. Furthermore, during the long rule of President Paul Biya (since 1982), the manipulation of ethnic identities as well as corruption and criminality among the elite have led to frustrations in the population (International Crisis Group Working to Prevent Conflict Worldwide: 2010a: i).

Minority groups have been instrumentalised by their political elite to provoke other groups in the urban space by using revolutionary language. This has largely been condoned by the state. It has often created tensions between diverse groups that could otherwise peacefully co-exist. In some cases, the majority groups have treated minorities badly, for instance, in the case of Bamileke farmers of the West Region who described the Mbororo cattle herders as unwanted strangers, harassed them and extorted money from them (Mouiche 2011: 75–77). In a similar situation in the North West Region of Cameroon the Mbororo or Aku are referred to as uncivilised. Generally speaking, Sama (2007: 193) argues that the Cameroonian political elite seems to have nurtured the cultural and/or linguistic diversities in ways that fuel conflict and could potentially even spark a civil war.

The history of Cameroon prior to 1990 was generally riddled with widespread popular discontent with the regime within the urban areas. The majority of the population accused the government of corruption and authoritarian rule. Konings (1996: 255) reports that the government was described as illegitimate and held responsible for the economic crises. The period also saw the emergence or re-emergence of ethnic nationalism (Fonchingong 2004: 38). The elderly statesman, John Ngu Foncha, argued that Anglophone loyalty in Cameroon was questioned by members of the Francophone population, who referred to them as "*les ennemies dans la maison*" (enemies in the house) and "*les traités*" (traitors) (Dekorne 2012: 1). Amundsen (1999: 408) has examined how radio stations in Yaounde transmit covert political threats and political campaigns to foster distrust, fear and hatred on an ethnic basis in many Beti-speaking communities of the Centre and South Regions of Cameroon. Co-incidentally, the Beti form the ruling class in Cameroon although there are also Beti who have been excluded from the power structure of the state.

The highly conflictual processes that began during this period continued in the socio-political conflicts that followed elections in Cameroon in 1992, 1997, 2004, 2011 and 2018. People, who were upset about the government's failure to protect and offer them opportunities, employed revolutionary and hate language towards those who supported government action. Government officials on their part, who were keen on retaining control of the state machinery, made derogatory statements about those who opposed government, and in some cases even sponsored young people to organise uprisings against government opponents.

The methodology used in the present study includes a personal narrative account based on my empirical observations over the time period from 1990 to 2018,¹ discussions with politically conscious individuals, focus-group discussions, and interpretation of what others said in the existing literature on political conflicts in Cameroon. I have meticulously observed the unfolding political events in

1 It is important to note that I hail from the English-speaking region of Cameroon and was brought up in this tradition in the modern nation-state of Cameroon. I lived to see the hate speech emanating from people from various cultural backgrounds as a result of their belonging to different ethnic groups. There is even a greater crisis over the English and French sub-systems I have observed in the field, first as a student and then as a worker.

Cameroon since I attended Longla Comprehensive College (LCC) Mankon, Bamenda. During the time when I was preparing to write the General Certificate of Education (GCE) ordinary level exams, the opposition Social Democratic Front (SDF) party was launched in Bamenda on 26 May 1990. The reactions of the Cameroon government and the sympathisers of the ruling Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM) were a clear indication that these lobbies did not want a change to the existing orthodoxy. Members of the ruling party quickly lashed out at the leadership of the SDF arguing more or less that it was suicidal for people from the English-speaking region to dream of leadership and the political atmosphere was very heated.

During this period, that is between 1990 and 1992, I read newspapers and magazines like *Cameroon Post*, *The Herald*, *Le Messager*, *The Messenger*, *La Nouvelle Expression*, *Mutations*, *Cameroon Tribune*, *The Sketch*, *Cameroon Times* and *Times and Life Magazine* through the kindness of Mr Kum Philip Mua, my history teacher. He was a militant supporter of the newly formed SDF party and informed me about unfolding political activities in the country. In this charged political climate, I concluded that Cameroon had turned into a highly polarised country. Hate language and actions resulted in bitterness between people of opposing political views in some urban settings. Some of these areas were Bamenda, Douala, Yaounde, Kumba, Ebolowa, Buea and Limbe. Political upheaval and intolerance towards others ruled in these towns and cities and this disturbing scene was fuelled further by provocative and exclusionary language.

At the University of Buea, we experienced a strike in August 1993. Many indigenous Bakweri people were angry with students from the North West Region. The sensational *Weekly Post* newspaper of Chief Bisong Etahoben insinuated that North Westerners caused the strike because the institution was located in the South West. Some of our colleagues circulated the rumour that the strike was the work of Prof. Sammy Beban Chumbow, then Deputy Vice Chancellor who wanted to succeed Vice Chancellor Dr. Dorothy Limunga Njeuma, one of their own. Regrettably, students were used by gullible politicians to propagate hate language based on regional and selfish interests. In another strike, Bakweri and other students organised a counter strike around the Great Soppo market obstructing traffic in protest against North West students. All these actions took place during a period of

political liberalisation in Cameroon. Whether these students were manipulated or not, the language of hatred and exclusion from Bakweri students contributed to the strikes and protests that took place at the University of Buea in the nascent state of the life of the institution. This has survived to the present day in subtle but conscious ways and may breed future tensions.

In April 2005 a strike led to the death of two students and the transfer of Dr. Dorothy Limunga Njeuma to the University of Yaounde. At the time, I was a teaching staff of the Department of History. Lecturers of the South West Region at the University were said to have held a meeting to silence the North West lecturers and students presumably at the home of one of our colleagues. In a Faculty of Arts board meeting and in another one with the Minister of Higher Education, the Vice Dean of the faculty, Dr. Roselyne Jua, decried the behaviour of some colleagues from the South West Region. She regretted that this was happening as she thought people from the South West and North West were brothers and sisters with a shared historical experience.

In 2012, when students vandalised some offices and property of the University of Buea, leading to a court case initiated by the university against some student ring leaders, chiefs of Fako Division, where the institution is located, released a letter threatening lecturers from other places. According to them, lecturers from other areas than the Fako Division were behind the students' action. They said they would use whatever means possible to deal with the lecturers. Authorities of the university led by its Vice Chancellor, Dr. Pauline Nalova Lyonga, kept sealed lips as if to say they were accomplices to the threatening letter of the chiefs. While the problems of the University of Buea are more than just the use of hate language such as *come-no-go* (unwanted strangers) the focus in the present article is how this crisis led to the misuse of language for sectional, regional and ethnic motivations detrimental to nation-state building.

Apart from these personal empirical experiences, I engaged in focus-group discussions consisting of academics, civil society activists, students, opinion leaders and political party leaders. These discussions revealed that language was used to hurt and negotiate people's way into positions of influence. Members of focus groups were unanimous that greed and ethnic jingoism were used in some urban areas for

political ends. Some argued that without legislation to sanction defaulters, the upsurge in this phenomenon would continue between Francophones and Anglophones and different ethnic groups in the urban space. Some participants recounted personal incidents in which they were “othered” and treated as strangers. Some students said that even among them there was perpetuation of hate language instigated by some gullible elite for self interest in the guise of group or regional interests. Several civil society activists spoke of encounters with “powerful” personalities who did not hide their hatred for people from other areas arguing that they were exploiting their resources to develop their own areas.

Above all, I analysed hate statements in newspapers and other publications in order to assess their implication on conflict in urban areas in Cameroon. The plethora of literature lays emphasis on the challenges of co-existence, identity and belonging. While some mention the use of words and phrases to fuel socio-political and economic conflicts in Cameroon, scant attention is paid to the power of these words and phrases to ignite and sustain conflict in the long term. I argue that language is a potent force for sustained conflict. Language – as a polarising force – must be considered when solutions to socio-political crises are sought in Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa.

Considerations on Language and Conflict

Language or the written word plays an important role in either resolving or exacerbating conflicts the world over. This influential role, however, has been under-examined in the literature on conflict studies. Language can either create or sustain conflict or contributes to lessening it. A great part of the literature on citizenship, identity and belonging in political conflicts like Cameroon and elsewhere has given scant attention to language as a crucial factor (Arrey 2006; Awasom 2004; Geschiere 2005; Konings 2001; Konings and Nyamnjuh 2000; Nfi 2012; Nyamnjuh 2010; Nyamnjuh and Rowlands 1998; Page et al. 2010; Socpa 2002; Yenshu 1998, 2003). These works largely focus on the Anglophone/Francophone divide and other forms of identity and belonging in Cameroon but neglect public language usage as contributing to this state of affairs. Some authors, however, have

recognised the importance of language in addressing conflict in society (Allmann 2009; Cohen 2001).

In his discussion of the importance of language in conflict, Allman (2009: 28) argues that "language permeates all levels of socio-political interactions" and its use can both clearly send and tacitly carry embedded political messages about power relationships." She also posits that a lexicon that propagates historical tensions or disadvantages certain domestic actors may need remediation. Language has been used for political empowerment and disenfranchisement. Its use has influenced the way people perceive reality (Allman 2009: 30–31). It was partly through the derogatory use of language in political semantics that the Rwanda genocide of 1994 took the magnitude it did. Hateful speech and ethnic slurs in the media spurred people to action to destroy fellow human beings. The Tutsis were called "cockroaches" and Hutus sought revenge against them (Allman 2009: 34). Similarly, during the Libyan uprising against Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in February 2011, he described those who challenged his authority as "cockroaches," "rats," "stray dogs," "mercenaries," "gangs," "germs," and "scum bags."

These words and descriptions are not only derogatory to the dignity of people but also politically provocative and dangerous. When conflict occurs, statements of belligerents can either calm the situation or provoke it further. Rats and cockroaches are known to eat books, dresses and other material, and to describe people as such is to make them valueless. They may be thought of as worthless and be killed or incapacitated. Besides, "stray dogs" in English Cameroon parlance are *ngong dogs* or dogs that steal food and other valuable things. "Mercenaries" are outsider forces that foment problems where these do not exist. Besides, these are people who support a cause whether it is genuine or not. "Germs" cause illness which may lead to death. When Libyan citizens were described in these words by their leader it was an open declaration of war.

The argument of Allman that language permeates all sectors of life with politically embedded messages about power relations fits well into the Cameroonian context of some cosmopolitan urban areas. The scuffles that often take place between people from other ethnic groups with those indigenous to the towns and cities have been fuelled

by politically embedded messages in election periods. Following the re-introduction of multi-party elections in the 1990s, a lexicon of hatred and conflict was introduced. In some coastal towns and cities, people from the grassfields and other Francophone towns and cities were derogatorily referred to as “strangers,” “*come-no-goes*,” “settlers,” “halogens,” “cheats,” “allogenes,” “power-mongers,” “ruthless land-grabbers,” “tax-evading settlers,” “conservative tribalists,” “greedy,” “parasites,” “traitors in the house,” “migrants,” “exploitative,” “power snatchers,” “aggressive immigrants,” “ungrateful,” “unscrupulous,” “domineering settlers,” “enemies in the house,” “Biafrans,” and “guests” (Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997: 212; Nfi 2012: 61–65; Konings 2001: 187 and 189; Arrey 2006: 38-40; Konings and Nyamnjoh 2000: 7; Nyamnjoh 2010: 62; Fonchingong 2004: 42; Kah 2012: 81; Nkwi 2011: 8; Yenshu 1998; Nyamnjoh and Rowlands 1998: 328-329). While some of these descriptions reflected real relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous populations like “strangers,” “migrants” and “settlers,” others like “cheats,” “power-mongers,” “ungrateful,” and “Biafrans” were exaggerations and intensified tension and conflict detrimental to national unity and integration in Cameroon.

In addition, biased language policies, conflictual and approximate translations and interpretations, puritan ethnocentrism, linguistic de-culturation and acculturation of languages (Nkwain n.d.: 96) can be a cause of conflict between people speaking different languages. In French-speaking cities civil servants coerced others to communicate only in French. Official documents are also mostly sent out in French even though English-speaking Cameroonians struggle to understand the language. This, among other issues, is a significant source of conflict. Approximate translations and interpretation of texts and words in English with trained translators are insulting. Others have often used the public offices they occupy to preach hatred for some ethnic groups. These and other issues contributed to the Anglophone lawyers and teachers’ strike of 2016. This strike eventually snowballed into what is today popularly described as the “Anglophone crisis.”

In the case of Cameroon as a whole, French and English languages have been more broadly at conflict in usage, interpretations and translations. Some Francophones in day-to-day interactions mockingly refer to Anglophones as “Anglo-fools,” and some Anglophones reply that they are “frogs.” This is hate language and a potential for serious

conflict. In 2018, the French-speaking Professor Messanga Nyamnding said in a television programme that Anglophones were not intelligent and it was thanks to the magnanimity of President Paul Biya that they had been admitted to the "*grand écoles*" of Cameroon over the years. This arrogance and self-edification underlines the tension between Cameroonians of English and French expression, which has snowballed into the contested "Anglophone problem" in Cameroon's political landscape (Konings 1997; Nyamnjoh 2003; Nkwi 2004; Kah 2012; Awasum 1998; Ngoh 1999). The co-existence of languages in a single nation or region has often led to conflict. The language of exclusion has been a source of tension and political fragmentation in some African countries, including Côte d'Ivoire.²

The tag on Anglophones as "Biafrans" was comparing them to the secessionists of the eastern region of Nigeria that led to civil war between 1967 and 1970. The history of Anglophone Cameroon shows that after the defeat of Germany in World War I, the country was partitioned into two unequal halves; the smaller one went to the British and the larger one to the French. Following the nationalist struggle for independence, Southern Cameroonians, known today as Anglophone Cameroonians, opted to reunify with their brethren of the Cameroun Republic (former French Cameroon). Anglophone Cameroonians sided against joining Nigeria at a United Nations

2 Political conflict in some African countries is exacerbated by language used by adversaries. In Côte d'Ivoire, the concept of Ivoirité introduced by Henri Konan Bedié to question the legitimacy of Alasane Dramane Ouattara for President was a glaring example. It showed how language could be used to create enduring tension, political chaos, and war (Lamin 2005; Akindes 2004; Dadson 2008). Article 35 of the national constitution of the country compelled any person seeking the office of president of Côte d'Ivoire to show that s/he was born in the country to parents who were also born there. Ivoirité means Ivorianness and was used in politics to exclude. The death of President Felix Houphouët-Boigny in 1993 led to a political crisis that culminated in the Robert Guei led coup of December 1999 overthrowing President Konan Bedié (Dadson 2008:1). Ivoirité had been introduced by Henri Konan Bedie to discredit his main opponent and ensure his own political survival. He re-opened the discussions initiated in 1994 by the opposition leader Laurent Gbagbo concerning the nationality of the Prime Minister Alasane Ouattara. Through Ivoirité the government embarked upon a systematic exclusion based on an imaginary line between "true Ivorians," "intermittent Ivorians," and "Ivorians of convenience" (Akindes 2004: 20). Ivoirité therefore polarised identity and created the basis for varied conflicts leading to the death of several thousands of Ivorians. Language has therefore played a determining role in conflict among not only political adversaries but also their followers.

organised and supervised plebiscite. The vote at the plebiscite was a free choice of citizens of British Southern Cameroons. When in the 1990s, Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya asked the English-speaking population to go elsewhere, it was like making them ask for another plebiscite to sanction their separation from the union which was contracted after the 1961 plebiscite. Following a sustained policy of assimilation of Anglophone Cameroonians, Anglophone members of a constitutional drafting committee organised the All Anglophone Conference (AAC) at the Mount Mary Health Centre in Buea in April 1993. There was a second AAC the following year in Bamenda to reiterate the need for reforming the state. It should, however, be noted that after the first AAC in 1993, the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), a political pressure group, was formed to fight for a return to the federal system of government failing which the English-speaking population would declare their own independence.

Lingoes of Conflict in Urban Spaces in Cameroon

Cameroon cities, as is the case in all African urban spaces, are reasonably cosmopolitan because of the migration and settlement of people from various areas for different reasons. It has been established that 35.4% of individuals living in the cities are non-indigenous of those areas (Tsafack-Nanfosso 2009). Migrants in urban areas represent one-half of the urban population. Yaounde and Douala record the highest numbers of non-indigenous populations. By 2009 migrants accounted for 51.9% and 53.6% of residents of Yaounde and Douala respectively (Tsafack-Nanfosso 2009: 3). This significant percentage of non-indigenous populations in the two cities has transformed these and other towns like Ebolowa, Nkongsamba, Kumba, Buea and Limbe into places of tension due to the mosaic of languages and cultures in an urban space where people struggle to survive. The Beti ruling elite in Cameroon are uncomfortable with the Bamileke for their apparent enterprising spirit (Socpa 2002). They display the same attitude towards Anglophone residents who are doing business in Yaounde and other French-speaking towns and cities. People from the littoral region generally referred to as the Sawa have often provocatively approached migrants from the grassfields, as well as Bassa, Bamileke and other ethnic groups from French-speaking Cameroon who migrated and settled in the then Southern Cameroons

especially in Limbe, Kumba and Bamenda during the Mandates and Trusteeship periods. They had escaped French ruthless policies of *indigénat*, *corvée* and *prestation* in French Cameroon. The *indigénat* was a separate legal system put in place by the French to punish the indigenous population for offences committed, but it was among the first of the colonial laws to be abolished (Rubin 1971: 51–52). On the other hand, *prestation* was the compulsory ten days of unpaid labour that each African offered to the French, while the *corvée* was the compulsory use of African labour in the plantations or for road or rail construction without pay (Nfi 2016: 3).

Following the re-introduction of multi-party politics in Cameroon during the 1990s, the Beti people in Yaounde expressed hostility towards Anglophones. Anglophone students at the University of Yaounde demonstrated against government approval on 26 May 1990, the day the Social Democratic Front (SDF) party was launched in Bamenda. Government officials falsely accused these students of trying to re-integrate Anglophone Cameroon with Nigeria and of singing the Nigerian anthem and hoisting their flag in Cameroon (Ngwa 2009). Anglophones in general were called "Biafrans" and "enemies in the house." To make matters worse, the then Minister of Territorial Administration and today the Sultan of the Bamum, Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya, told Anglophone Cameroonians "to go elsewhere" if they were not happy with "national unity" (Jua and Konings 2004: 12; Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003: 77). The re-introduction of multi-party politics and launch of the SDF unleashed a venomous language that exacerbated conflict between Anglophones and Francophones. The language of hate and exclusion from government officials and the ruling elite challenged national unity and integration.

It was argued that injustices were levelled against the Anglophone student population. For instance, Anglophone students were accused of singing the Nigerian national anthem and hoisting the Nigerian flag (Awasom 2003-2004: 102–103). This was akin to recognising the failure of the Cameroon government to protect its own citizens in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural country.

Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya and other Beti kingmakers like Emah Basile described Anglophone students and their population as "enemies in the house" which was an open declaration of hostility towards them.

People who consider themselves as part and parcel of the house were openly accused of being enemies which was rather unfortunate for a *vive ensemble*. It is a language of hatred, exclusion, and non-recognition. One has to ask, are Anglophones living in French-speaking Cameroon enemies? The inflammatory use of language has the potential to destroy peace.

Beyond the political arena, there are myriads of language conflicts between Anglophones and Francophones in daily life. In a bakery in Douala, Cameroon's economic capital, a young Anglophone who had just returned from a five year stay in South Africa was treated as if he was not a Cameroonian. A cashier embarrassed him by asking "What do you want? Stop speaking English. We do not speak that language here. Return to where you come from" (Jua and Konings 2004: 12). On a structural level, the cashier's statement was a challenge to the constitution of Cameroon, which unequivocally makes both English and French official languages in the country. Although this constitution gives equal status to English and French in official business in the country, French has often been preferred to English when business and political appointments are made or when the government releases official documents for public consumption. It is this overt government bias that underlined the cashier's motives for speaking to a fellow Cameroonian with disdain and extreme arrogance.

The chairman of the Social Democratic Front (SDF) party, Ni John Fru Ndi, was accused by the government-run newspaper, the *Cameroon Tribune*, of an escape to Nigeria after launching the party against government approval on 26 May 1990 in Bamenda. From then on, many Anglophones suffered from all kinds of discrimination in cities like Yaounde and Douala. Whenever they stood their grounds in the face of injustice, they were offensively asked to go to Bamenda to meet Fru Ndi. The chairman of the party himself was openly assaulted in towns like Bafoussam, and on several occasions was physically blocked from moving into certain parts of French-speaking Cameroon. My personal observations suggest that exclusion and marginalisation is the experience of most English-speaking Cameroonians in a country where Francophone leadership rules. Marginalisation through the language of hate and war debases and excludes people who have a right not only to live in their homeland but to speak their language without fear and without accusations of inferiority.

The re-introduction of multi-party politics and the challenge this brought to the Biya regime forced it to adopt tactics and semantics that fuelled conflict between fellow citizens. Ethnic groups from the North West and Bamileke were singled out for ridicule by the Bulu/Beti political elite. As a diversionary tactic from dismal socio-economic policies the people were described as ruthless land grabbers and tax evading settlers who frustrated government's efforts to provide for the basic needs of the people. The mobilisation of the Beti against the appointment of André Wouking as the Archbishop of Yaounde in July 1999 (after the death of Archbishop Jean Zoa) illustrates the attitude of the Beti towards the enterprising Bamileke people of the West Region of Cameroon. The businesses of Bamileke in Yaounde were ransacked in reaction to the appointment of André Wouking, a Bamileke.

Additionally, Bamileke women giving birth in the city hospitals were scorned for having too many babies (Feldman-Savelsberg 2005: 16). Professor Mono Ndjana of the University of Yaounde expressed the marginalising attitudes among Francophone Cameroonians when he made a distinction between the "*l'autochtone*" (the native) as "*un citoyen ethnique de l'ethnie locale*" (an ethnic citizen of local ethnicity) and "*l'allogène*" (the recent arrivals) as "*un citoyen ethnique de l'ethnie d'ailleurs*" (an ethnic citizen from elsewhere) (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2000: 6–7). He simply distinguished between citizens from the area of origin and those from other areas. There is a general tendency to differentiate between "ethnic/regional citizens" and "ethnic/regional strangers" who are likened to "*come-no-goes*" (a Pidgin English term for people who come to a region to stay) (Nyamnjoh 2010: 62). When Cameroonians begin to discriminate among themselves because of ethnicity or language, then the future of the state is in jeopardy.

The government's tactics of declaring war on the Bamileke and Anglophones continued through a tacit recognition of the formation of ethnic militias by the local population and of elite supporting the ruling party with the intention of wreaking havoc (Fonchingong 2004). Throughout Beti territory in the South, East and Centre Regions, the Bamileke and Anglophones were regularly antagonised and abused by these ethnic militias. Many political activists and journalists of Bamileke and Anglophone descent were arrested and tortured. On several instances, Beti mobs and vigilante groups attacked the property of Anglo-Bamileke in Yaounde without the intervention

of government security forces (Fonchingong 2004: 42). These mobs reacted to statements made by the political elite in Yaounde and other Beti-speaking towns.

The popularity of the opposition in several urban areas in Cameroon let many indigenous people, with full support of the government, to normalise hateful words and speech that fuelled decades of discord. In the South West Region of Cameroon people from other regions, notably the western and eastern grasslands were scornfully referred to as “settlers” because they undermined the political ambitions of the ruling CPDM party. The governor of the region at the time, Peter Ashu Oben, himself a South Westerner “fired the first shot” following the municipal elections of January 1996. He also referred to citizens from other regions as “settlers” (Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997: 212) and gave firm instructions to the effect that non-indigenes be asked to produce residence permits before they could qualify to vote in Kumba. Similarly, Prime Minister Peter Mafany Musonge called on his people not to let the “*graffis*” (people from the grasslands of Cameroon) gain control of councils in Bakweriland. Meanwhile, during one of the extraordinary general assemblies of the South West Chiefs Conference in the 1990s, the chiefs lashed out at “settlers” to respect and support the interests of their hosts, South Westerners (Fonchingong 2004: 39–41). In other areas, following the 1997 elections, the opposition party accused the government of intimidation by asking opposition party members to produce residence permits before they were allowed by the chiefs to register in the electoral register (Cameroon A Transition in Crisis 1997).

The bickering between ethnic groups of Fako Division with people from other ethnic groups began in the colonial period due to the influx of people seeking work in the commercial plantations set up by the German planters. In later years, the Cameroon Peoples National Convention (CPNC) propagandist, Peter Motomby-Woleta, openly chastised the grassfielders, and the Bakweri Assembly described them as “native strangers” who wanted to seize land only to spite and oppress the Bakweris (Nfi 2012). The Balondo, through their political elite N.N. Mbile, argued that grassfielders voted for reunification to “drag” the coastal people into “a lawless society” (Nfi 2012). In an interview in the *Cameroons Champion* newspaper, Mbile was quoted as saying that Foncha was keen about reunification because he

wanted to “extend the Bamita Empire to the Congo and Lake Chad” (Nfi 2012: 65). The language of hate and conflict in the South West region before and after independence through re-unification in 1961 also included words and phrases like *graffis*, *come-no-goes*, strangers, unscrupulous and ruthless land grabbers, parasites, traitors in the house, and aggressive immigrants who insult South Westerners (Feldman-Savelsberg et al. 2005: 16; Arrey 2006: 4 and 38; Konings 2001: 187–189; Sama 2007: 206). These descriptions are from the colonial period following the migration of people from other areas into the region to find work in the commercial plantations established by the Germans in the 1880s and sustained by the British following the defeat of the Germans in 1914–1916 (Epale 1985; International Crisis Group to Prevent Conflict Worldwide 2010: 2). During these earlier periods, French Cameroonians were referred to as strangers, the same way they have insulted and marginalised Anglophones over the past few decades (Nfi 2013).

Provocative Language Use and its Potential Consequences

When people use hate speech in public discourse this is likely to aggravate conflict. When those in authority sponsor others to create divisions, they sow seeds of looming dangers for a country that, for a long time, has prided itself as an island of diversity and peace in a turbulent central African region. The divisive words and works of some politicians continuously fuel conflict, and they progressively weaken the state’s grip on public order, transforming these divisions into a civil war with unimagined consequences (International Crisis Group to Prevent Conflict Worldwide 2010: 1).

The use of the term “Biafrans” to refer to Anglophones in Yaounde at the launch of multi-party politics in Cameroon critically undermined the citizenship and destinies of Cameroonian Anglophones. As a result, numerous delegations based abroad have lobbied for the granting of independence to Cameroonian Anglophone regions. Similarly, the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), created out of the ashes of the All Anglophone Conference of 1993, has persistently called for a separate statehood for Anglophone Cameroon because of the abusive language and exploitative policies of the Francophone elite. Other more recent groups like the Movement for the Restoration of the Independence of Southern Cameroons (MORISC) and the

Interim Government (IG) have similar aims. On 1 October 2017, the declaration of Ambazonia independence by an interim government, led by Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe, plunged the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon into war with the country's regular forces. This civil war could possibly have been avoided if provocatively exclusionary language had been dealt with in the most severe terms.

As long as there is suspicion and abusive Francophone language against Anglophone Cameroonians, Anglophones will continue to be frustrated (Akum 2009) with the likely long-term consequence of attempts at secession through force, as is the case now. Among the many reasons that made the SCNC to seek redress at the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) and the United Nations was the abusive use of language on Anglophones in many public places in Yaounde and other French-speaking towns. The Francophone leadership does not adequately protect nor consider the welfare of its Anglophone citizens. Instead, the leadership feels that Anglophones are an unnecessary nuisance who should "go elsewhere" or "go across the borders" (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003: 77; Jua and Konings 2004: 12).

The crystallisation and enduring conflict that emerged from the introduction of multi-party politics and the resulting institutionalisation of the *politics of belonging* (Sama 2007: 199) has intensified during the twenty first century. Several SCNC flags were hoisted in Anglophone towns with shouts of secession or independence from among the young people who joined the lawyers and teachers strike of 2016. Today Ambazonia flags have been hoisted in some places in the North West and South West and brought down by Cameroon's elite forces. This is a long term consequence of the lingo of conflict which could still be addressed at this critical stage in the history of Cameroon.

Cameroonians from different regions and ethnic groups use the language of war and hate to exclude others from the redistribution of the resources of the state. The promotion of the rights of minorities without a clearly defined and enforced minority rights policy undermines national unity and security. If the boundaries and rights of so-called *autochthones* and *allogenes* are not clearly defined and enforced in all of Cameroon, there will always be problems between citizens across ethnic and regional divides.

The continued use of language of exclusion and marginalisation could lead to serious ethnic clashes in the future. In Kumba, for example, the use of the Bafaw vigilante groups to victimise people from the North West Region could very quickly degenerate into mass civilian casualties and possibly ethnic cleansing (Konings 2001: 187). Similarly, in the political arena, calls for residence certificates before people are permitted to vote (Konings 2001: 188) spell a dangerous precedent for people who belong to the same country. These divisive policies and actions, if unchecked and not moderated by the state, may lead to dangerous consequences. The xenophobia of supporting political leaders through the singing of war songs against other people, along with supporters carrying spears, machetes, guns and sticks are preconditions for war, not peace in Cameroon (Konings 2001: 190). Strategies that manipulate the population for the purpose of maintaining political power undermine the unilaterally beneficial policy and spirit of national integration. Instead, these misguided political strategies lead to social tensions which create an environment that may not allow for the economic take off the nation envisions by 2035.

Conclusion

This article has examined the role of language in fuelling or exacerbating social conflicts in Cameroon. I have pointed out that attempts made to cement the peaceful co-existence or the *vive ensemble* in the country have unfortunately not produced the required results due to the persistence of provocative and divisive language in some urban settings of the country, especially against those who are not indigenous to these areas. The historical roots of this abusive language use have also been examined. The colonial era laid the basis for hate speech in Cameroon which continued with great intensity after independence and the reunification of the French and British parts of Cameroon.

I have argued that language use without moderation can actually lead to conflict and war. In the case of Rwanda and Libya, for example, language was misused for political reasons. This created a propitious environment for enduring conflicts with unimaginable repercussions. What started in 2011 in Libya has snowballed into separate and competing armed gangs in the country today making it ungovernable.

One section of this article was devoted to concrete examples in order to discuss the lingoes of conflict in some urban spaces in Cameroon. This situation was accentuated by the re-introduction of multi-party politics during the 1990s. In Cameroon urban centres, the language of conflict between Anglophones and Francophones persists to a dangerous degree and today between the Bamileke-speaking people with their other Francophone-speaking counterparts, notably the ruling Bulu-Fang group. Following the liberalisation of the political space in the 1990s, Anglophones rose to reassert their separate linguistic identity through several political groups. Yet the Francophone leadership became hostile to them through provocative insinuations, which hampered the process of integration and national unity. The reaction of Anglophones exacerbated an already tenuous situation and in Anglophone regions, migrants from the North West and West regions, especially the Bamileke, were also chastised with words by ethnic groups like the Bakweri, Bafaw and Oroko.

There are the immediate and also long-term consequences of this continuous abusive use of language. It is my conviction that spiteful statements should not be tolerated and their perpetrators made to account for. At present, the debasement of the English language and derogatory remarks about Anglophones in cities like Douala and Yaounde have contributed to the precarious socio-political situation with threats of secession from the contested union of 1961 of the two English-speaking regions of the North West and South West, respectively. There is also a general hatred for anything French among the English-speaking masses of the country. Therefore, there is an urgent need for state measures to stamp out hate speech in order to avoid Rwanda- and Libya-like scenarios which resulted from hate-speech among other factors. The government of the country should recognise this and encourage its citizens to use language as a unifier rather than a divider. Ethnic diversity should be approached as an asset in order to promote the *vive ensemble* so much needed today.

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