



History and Nation Building: a Theoretico-Historical Introspection into the Current Socio-Political Crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon

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Abstract: One of the biggest challenges African countries have faced since independence is that of nation building. The difficulty has been how to forge a sense of collective belonging by bringing together hitherto disparate groups and peoples. One often neglected avenue for the achievement of this objective is through the use of history and historical knowledge. In Cameroon, the current state in the articulation and use of historical knowledge about the country fuels some divergent and even antagonistic views of what the Cameroon nation is. Such divergences find expression in opposing sentiments and varying degrees of attachment to the idea of one's country. At no point in the history of Cameroon have the manifestations of such challenges been more acute and compelling than within the period from 2016 to the present moment.

Drawing from Cameroon's history and some frequently used expressions and narratives about the historical foundations of the country; this paper examines how the discipline of history can be a useful tool in nation-building. Focusing on the current socio-political crisis in the Northwest and Southwest regions of the country, it contends that the appropriate use of historical facts can enhance and promote the perceptions, strategies and processes of nation building.

Keywords: Cameroon, Anglophone, Anglophone problem, nation, nation building, history.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2016 Cameroon has witnessed some arguably unbelievable and unimaginable socio-political difficulties which have found full blown expression in an open call to question of the idea of a one Cameroon nation. Specifically, there have been violent socio-political upheavals which have curiously but not unexpectedly, been limited particularly to the Northwest and Southwest regions of the country, popularly known and referred to as Anglophone Cameroon. The incongruities have manifested in so many ways and have shown themselves as having the potential of bringing to naught the very foundations on which the country is built. Several militant and disgruntled voices have emerged and gathered steam of non-negligible proportions highlighting frustrations about the way Cameroon is governed and especially the way its historic and component parts are held and live together as integral parts of the same nation. Open and dissenting voices have brought to the fore obstacles which beset and negatively impact the process of structuring, constructing and consolidating the young nation of Cameroon.

This contribution examines the difficulties of nation building in Cameroon from a theoretical and historical perspective in order to stimulate discussion on how the appropriate use of history and historical knowledge can contribute towards understanding the challenges which the country is currently experiencing and thereby suggest the relevance of historical knowledge for nation building. To do so, we focus on the simple theoretical underpinnings of the subject matter of history and show how historical concepts inform the basis of the question of nation building in Cameroon. We suggest that a better understanding and exploitation of the subject matter of history could provide salutary insights into this important question and bring about a more purposeful and rewarding experience in the arduous task of nation building.

Conceptual Framework and Definition of Terms

Even though the focus of our discussion is on the way the use of historical knowledge can enhance nation building, there is a need to have a common understanding of the word ‘nation’, and its use as a prelude to defining the key concept of nation building.

The Nation

Bentley and Ziegler affirm that the idea of the nation is one of the most influential concepts in modern political thought. In simple terms, they suggest the use of the term to refer to a community or race of people with a shared culture, traditions, history and language and who occupy a common territorial space (Bentley and Ziegler 2000, 748). The term also refers to a large group of people with strong bonds of identity (Tolz 1998, 993).

Europeanists such as the French political historian Ernest Renan lay emphasis on “the past of the community, its present” and the “possession of a rich legacy of memories, the consent and will to live together, a desire to continue to invest in the heritage that has been jointly received” (Renan, 2021). He opines that a nation is the outcome of a long past of efforts and sacrifices.... bringing together people having common glories in the past and a will to continue them in the present (ibid). Meanwhile M. Guibernau posits that the nation is “a human group, conscious of forming a community, sharing a common culture, attached to a clearly demarcated territory, having a common past and a common project for the future and claiming the right to rule itself” (Guibernau 1996, 47). Stated otherwise, issues such as a common past, self or group awareness, territory, history and culture, language and religion are important determinants when defining the concept of a nation. These elements contribute towards reinforcing bonds of identity which is an essential characteristic of a nation. (Tolz 1998, 993). Notwithstanding the general perception of the nation as “a concrete historical form of society” united through language, territory, economy and race, the meaning of a nation has not been static. In fact the definition has and continues to evolve and nations are in a continuous state of change (Kuzio 1998, 8).

In the case of Africa, mention should be made of the fact that today’s concept of the nation was introduced into Africa from a typically European background and reinforced during the colonial period. As a result, its use is heavily influenced by its European origins. This is not to say that the societal organization which would correspond to what was known in Europe as a nation was inexistent in Africa. What happened was that when European colonialists arrived in Africa, they treated Africa and African society rather condescendingly. Influenced by their home grown prejudices, they characterized and treated Africans, their societies and societal organization rather derogatorily. Yet as can be seen from the few excerpted definitions of the nation, African communities clearly met the criteria that made them nations long before colonialism. Not surprisingly various African communities were referred to in very derogatory terms which suggested that African social organization was tribal, insinuating that they were in a state of primitivity and backwardness. Be that as it may, the concept and use of the term has evolved. Today, a nation is not necessarily identified with territorial togetherness. Other considerations include race, language, religion, and interests^[2]. References to a common past or heritage or territoriality for that matter are no longer sufficient as defining aspects of a nation. For example, the reference to the nation of Islam is not based on territoriality but on the practice of the Muslim faith as a common identity factor.

In much of Africa, and has already been stated, the nation in its contemporary form was derived from imperialism and colonialism. What were to become the nations in Africa after independence were formed and kept together through the use of coercion and outright force, a legacy of the colonial era. After independence, African nations very much respected the frontiers demarcated during colonial rule, which frontiers at the time of their demarcation did not respect any delimitation which existed before the colonial implantation. In reality the history of the new nations was to be written to accommodate the arrangements, re-arrangements, and or modifications which were carried out under colonialism. The use of faulty or erroneous discourses and slogans when writing the history of the “new nations” emerged and were designed to serve the same purposes, as if to say “if you tell a lie or a falsehood repeatedly over a long period of time, it could be misconstrued for the truth.” (Interview Fomin, 2019). The inaccuracies incorporated into the slogans about some African countries today are less of history than they are propaganda or outright falsehoods.

Understanding the History of the Nation in Africa

In so far as Africa in general is concerned, the origins, nature, organization and functioning of the colonial state contributed towards the distortion noticed in the way the essential tenets of the discipline of history were used. By its very nature, colonialism sought to promote an understanding of the history of the colonial state that justified and propagated the importance and primordial position of the new entity which became the precursor of the new nation. Historical knowledge was designed to favor the development of the nationalist history paradigm (Carretero et al 2012, 35.) History was built around the nation state whose construction implied maintaining its tangibility and cohesiveness in order to be strong and powerful. Through such considerations, the exploits of its leaders and the gains in war were consolidated and extolled.

The purpose of history and history teaching in the colonial context was to develop and sustain certain sacrosanct values and virtues of the state, as “a powerful and strong constant and around whom the whole community revolved (Fomin, oral discussion). Respect for and obedience to the rulers of the realm had to be passed on through the body of historical knowledge that had to be taught and learned and which implicitly underscored the primordial role and place of the nation-state. Fact, fiction and myth were inexorably enmeshed in historical knowledge.

The philanthropic and humanitarian justifications for colonialism equally fitted this paradigm, so too the definition of the state and the nation even when the evidence suggested the contrary. A nation had to be built on the colonial foundations even if such erections had big cracks and crevices in them. Slogans were used to erect colonial states and were equally used to justify and maintain them in unaltered forms after independence. Any knowledge or reflections which questioned the validity of the slogans was undesirable and unacceptable because of the instability such could create (Berger, in Carretero et al. 2010, 33-34).

Nation Building

The discussion about nation building is about the process of building or the construction and consolidation of a nation. Building refers to the assembling or bringing together of various parts to form a consolidated whole. The simple fact of building can also refer to building from scratch, or continuing a process that was already started or rebuilding something that was either stalled, destroyed or what have you.

Carolyn Stephenson maintains that “nation building is a normative concept that means different things to different people” because of the shades of meaning that emerge in the use of the term (2005). Writing on the conceptual and definitional challenges involved in defining “nation building”, Sinclair Dinnen holds that though widely used, the term remains imprecise, contested and can be seen from many perspectives (Dinnen 2006, 1-8).

For a start, it would appear that the difference in the way the concept is used is linked to the way nations came into being or about how the process took root, grew or developed. Thus when a nation was formed from initially disparate groupings of people without a clear history of prior togetherness, nation building refers to the actions and initiatives which are taken to consolidate “its growth and togetherness in the overall interest of the entire component parts of the emerging new nation” (ibid. 6). René Grotenhuis surmises that nation building is the process whereby a society of people with diverse origins, histories, languages, cultures and religions come together within the boundaries of a sovereign state with a unified constitutional and legal dispensation “to pursue a common agenda for the benefit of all its citizenry” (Grotenhuis 2016).

Nation building would therefore imply a process, involving the admission, acceptance and tolerance of heterogeneity and the facilitation of inclusion. In most of Africa, the fact of colonialism affected the process of nation building because colonial state formation which was the precursor of the contemporary nation started off with many inherent contradictions embedded in them. Amongst the most pronounced were the fact that colonial boundaries were arbitrarily carved out. The result was that what were to emerge as nations in Africa were replete with heterogeneity and diversity. Nation building would thus be perceived and rightly so as a continuous process of molding to contain and keep people from assorted backgrounds. It would be permanently ongoing with the objective of developing and forging greater bonds of mutual understanding, cooperation and mutual co-existence

amongst the inhabitants of a country. To succeed in the nation building process, Sabastiano Rwengabo opines that the ability and effectiveness with which the leadership develops and implements policies that lay emphasis on inclusion and freedom is paramount (Rwengabo 2016, 30). Consequently the more the people in a country feel a sense of belonging and inclusion, the more purposeful the nation building effort would be and the more prosperous the nation would flourish.

When the nation building effort is poorly conceived or pursued, the observed weaknesses in carrying out the nation building agenda can easily lead to a societal impasse and generate the kinds of crises that Cameroon is currently facing especially in the two regions concerned in this article. Interestingly, one of the often ignored issues that can derail the process of nation building is the way historical knowledge is created, propagated and used.

History, the Nature of History and its Relevance for Nation Building

The question has often been asked: what is history? What is historical knowledge? What is the utility value of the discipline of history? What makes for the specificity of the discipline of history and how useful and helpful is the discipline of history for society? Concretely, how can knowledge about the past contribute towards nation-building?

Many historians and lovers of history agree that there are many definitions of history, even if all of them have as a common element the study of the past. In very simple and maybe oversimplified terms, history is the discipline which studies the past. “History is everything that has occurred or been thought [and done] from the beginning of time through the last elapsed instant.” (Gray 1964, 2). Stated otherwise, history is the study of everything that took place in the past. The subject matter of history includes what people thought, said, did or did not do especially if such can be based on verifiable evidence.

People know what happened in the past through a methodical investigation which uses evidence from that past. According to Professor Geoffrey Barraclough (Barraclough 1975), history is the study or the reconstruction of the past using fragmentary evidence. That fragmentary evidence, call it data, is known as sources. It includes but is not limited to records, manuscripts, books, newspapers, and letters and entries in diaries. It also includes artifacts such as pottery, tools, human or animal remains, old coins, and of course oral testimonies. In short, historical evidence is from diverse sources.

The venerable Professor E.H. Carr is categorical that the historian “can only write history through a careful, critical and analytical use of evidence” (Carr 1961, 24). As Gideon Were further puts it, history is not only about the accumulation of hard facts, it is “a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past” (Were 1979, 114-127). History is the study of the past particularly as it relates to human beings and their activities. History is about the human being in all the domains which affect or impact his existence and wellbeing. Arthur Marwick succinctly elaborates on the nature of history and the necessity for studying it (Marwick 1970, 7-17).

To be accepted as history, any writing about the past must obey the canons of scientific scholarship. Though not in the nature of the physical or exact sciences, historical knowledge must be based on facts and verifiable evidence which has been studied and critically analyzed using a clearly defined methodology. Approached from this perspective, sources are an inevitable requirement in the construction of any historical study. Such sources must be critically and carefully assessed, examined, analyzed, cross checked and corroborated as far as possible. Like every scientific discipline, history would have no place if it did not contribute towards understanding issues plaguing society, or finding or providing solutions to the problems which “man” and society face. History studies the past in order to understand that past: the actions of man, the motivations and outcomes of man’s thoughts and deeds in order to appreciate, and valorize them for the purpose of understanding the past with a view to coping with contemporary challenges and also being “pro-active” in anticipating the future (ibid, 9).

As the English philosopher and historian Robin George Collingwood stated “history is for human self-knowledge” (Collingwood 1946). To him, the only clue to what man can do is what man has done. The value of history is that it is a good teacher especially concerning what man has done. History is about the build up to what man is. Knowing oneself means knowing first what it is to be a

person, secondly knowing what it is to be the kind of person you are and therefore being able to anticipate and possibly reflect on the challenges of the past as a basis for coping with the challenges that are susceptible to arise in the future. History enables man to understand his society and be the master and constructive builder of that society.

The above treatise notwithstanding, it is important to remember that for history to achieve the objectives for which it is intended, the foundational basis of the discipline must be observed. To write credible history the sources used must be credible and incontrovertible. Historical facts and evidence are the most resilient and unavoidable characteristic features that the discipline has. When well researched, historical facts stand the test of time.

Whereas facts are always facts, and may live “forever”, they may be corrupted in the course of their collection, interpretation, analysis and use, but the facts are the facts. Many African nations today are colonial creations or colonial constructs which by their very construction carried along the seeds of uneasiness, and maybe trouble, because of the way they were built. Attempts to disregard, distort, falsify or obliterate some of the facts and realities which had existed and were an inevitable ingredient in the construction of the colonial edifice can only be anti-constructive.

The Historical Antecedent: Cameroon in Historical Perspective

There is no gainsaying that what is known today as Cameroon is a colonial creation. Prior to the European partition of Africa and the setting up of European colonies in the continent, the territorial space known today as Cameroon was made up of so many independent socio-political and cultural entities. Organized around their leaders and, or rulers, these different entities held together people who had certain unifying characteristics. For example, they claimed their origins to a common ancestor, or had a common story of migration and settlement. Besides traditions of origin, migration and settlement, there were other binding factors such as language, religious and or ancestral beliefs, call it a common culture. The political, economic and socio-cultural foundations of these entities were not in doubt, except of course that each sought to preserve its independence as much as possible and as far as could be done.

Consolidated as they were at each point in history, these principalities rose and fell, expanded and retreated very much like in any other political entities in Africa at the time (Shillington 1995; Ki Zerbo 1978; Forde and Kaberry 1968). Their internal organizations were such as to enable the growth, expansion and consolidation of the states as well as the welfare of their respective citizenry. Of course there was also due regard for the existence of territorial neighbors.

From the large centralized states in the north (which were later held together by religious considerations) as well as those in the Western Highlands (commonly called the Grassfields today) to the smaller and relatively less centralized polities in the so-called forest areas, peoples were always juggling for political and economic space. There were wars of expansion and conquest, but there were also acknowledged periods of growth and expansion when mutual recognition and respect cemented good neighborliness and brought about prosperity.

The concept of living together so much appropriated today for political expediency was very much alive. There is no question that “living together” contemporaneously referred to as “*le vivre ensemble*” is not new; it is an age-old experience in Africa (Forbi 2017, 170). The success of living together was not seen in conflict-free relationships but even more in the successful resolution of challenges that arose there from. People who lived as neighbors maintained diverse but important economic, political and social relationships with their neighbors (Nkwi 1986).

Fast forward to the period of the implantation of colonial rule, European nations agreed to divide the vast African continental space amongst themselves in order to respond to the assorted demands and challenges of the industrial revolution in Europe through the creation of selfish economic, cultural and political spaces in Africa. The ensuing scramble and setting up of colonial states revealed the non-respect of any intelligible rules in the carving out of these European colonies in Africa. There was no consideration for prior or existing ethnic or cultural affinities. Colonial boundaries were set up without any regard for homogeneity or the respect of any pre-existing common spaces.

The result, as is well known, is that peoples of same ethnic or cultural backgrounds were partitioned between different European powers and thenceforth forced to live and develop in accordance with and under the influence of the administrative, economic and socio-political cultures of the colonizing powers. At independence, colonial boundaries became the boundaries of the new nations of Africa and were accepted as such by the new emerging African nations themselves in accordance with the infamous decision dealing with the intangibility of frontiers (Nugent 2004, 103). The new African nations were “constructed around the concept of state rights as opposed to group or people’s rights” (ibid).

Post-independence Cameroon: One Nation Different Colonial Pasts

The particular case of Cameroon reveals a very interesting colonial situation, where the territory started off as a German protectorate, then passed under British and French administrations following the confiscation of the territory from Germany in the aftermath of World War One. The expropriated German territory was divided into two, and placed under French and British administrations first as Mandated Territories of the League of Nations and later Trust Territories of the United Nations (Le Vine 1964; Ngoh 1996; Abwa 2010). The division was so unequally done, with four-fifths placed under French rule and one fifth under British administration. This situation lasted throughout the Mandate and Trusteeship periods.

Cameroon under French administration obtained independence on the 1st of January 1960 and the new nation was baptized The Republic of Cameroun. The area under British rule acceded to independence on the 1st October 1961 (in the wake of a UN sponsored plebiscite held earlier in February 1961), “by joining” the already independent Republic of Cameroun to form the new nation thenceforth known as the Federal Republic of Cameroon. The Federal Republic of Cameroon emerged as a new nation, and came to be aptly presented as “an African experiment in nation building” (Kofele-Kale 1980). Arguably, it was not the continuation of any particular country; it was the emergence if you will, of a new nation composed of two entities with a certain colonial antecedence, the fact of having lived under German rule as one colonial territory.

The specific developments and experiences which each of these two territories had lived during the nearly forty years spent separately under British and French rule were not and could not be brushed aside or surreptitiously done away with, with the coming into being of this “new independence arrangement” thoughtfully baptized the Federal Republic of Cameroon. To be more concrete, the respect of the acquired specificity of the colonial cultures of the two component parts of the Federal Republic of Cameroon was not only a fact in history, it was accepted and equally enshrined in the constitution of the new country (Ndi 2016, 209).

The colonial heritage lived during the mandate and trusteeship periods as seen in the systems of education, law, and more were to be protected, developed and sustained, subject to any systemic discussions and agreement of what could or could not be harmonized for the eventual growth and emergence of a new typically Cameroonian culture and identity. For all intents and purposes, this coming together was considered as a “union of equals” and there was no room in the constitution for any alteration to, let alone the dissolution of the federal basis of the country. In fact, article 47 of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Cameroon stated very unequivocally that any proposal to amend or revise the federal form of the state was inadmissible (Ndi 2016, 208).

It is probably safe to assume that this clause was not only a rare demonstration of wisdom, it was also intended to prevent the majority francophone population from using any legal or other political ruse to do away with the particularities of the minority ‘Anglophone’ culture which characterized the state of West Cameroon. Thus the Federal Republic of Cameroon was made up of two federated states: West Cameroon, which was the former British Southern Cameroons that had just acceded to independence and East Cameroon, which was the former Cameroun under French rule and which had acceded to independence earlier in January 1960 as the Republic of Cameroon. This coming together was euphorically albeit misleadingly celebrated as the Reunification of Cameroon^[3.]

It is on record and has been widely written and commented upon, that the arrangements agreed upon and which formed the basis of the Federal Republic soon began to be disrespected. Articulations drawing attention to violations of the spirit and laws of the federal arrangement were especially and

openly expressed by political and traditional leaders of the West Cameroon part of the arrangement. For each violation of the spirit of the ‘Reunification’ calls for a respect of the reunification agreements were made but fell on deaf ears or nipped in the bud through various political intrigues and manipulations masterminded by the dominant political leaders of the majority French-speaking East Cameroon (Lyonga 1989, 134-146). Here are a few blatant but highly illustrative examples. In 1972, following a well orchestrated political ruse called the “peaceful revolution” the name of the Federal Republic was abolished, and the country became known as the United Republic of Cameroon. Along with is, a key institution in the state of West Cameroon, the West Cameroon House of Chiefs was abolished amongst many other modifications in the structure of the state. Twelve years down the road, in 1984, the name change went full cycle and reverted to the Republic of Cameroon, being the name which the former Cameroon under French administration took at independence in 1960 (Abwa 2011, 191-221).

In reaction and protest, activists and political pundits from West Cameroon (the former British Southern Cameroons) interpreted this act as a clear demonstration of the fact that the Republic of Cameroon had withdrawn itself or seceded from the spirit and intention out of which the Federal Republic of Cameroon was born. Accordingly, West Cameroon (the former British Southern Cameroons) could therefore assert and lay claim to its own independence and identify with a new name in sovereignty (Fomin, Oral discussion 1991)

What preceded and has since followed the foregoing narrative encapsulates the fundamental basis of what has come to be referred to as the Anglophone problem in Cameroon (Eyoh 1998, Nyamjoh & Konings, 1997; Awasom 2020), and which can be considered in its regular or exaggerated forms and manifestations as a formidable threat to the process of nation building in Cameroon. It is about the observed institutional non-respect or deliberate disregard of the special status of one of the two partners who formed the Federal Republic of Cameroon in 1961, especially in the post 1972 administration and governance arrangement.

By abolishing the name of the “new” country and reverting to the previous name of one of the component states, the signs became increasingly ominous for the sustained visibility of the presence of two parties that came together to create the Federal Republic of Cameroon. Herein lay the origins of a major threat to the process of nation building in Cameroon. As time went by, Anglophone Cameroonians[5], meaning those whose ethnic or adopted origins were in West Cameroon, (the former British Southern Cameroons) felt increasingly excluded and disrespected, bringing about a deep sense of being strangers in the new Cameroon nation that was supposed to be theirs as well.

The outbreak and slow but steady escalation of what is now referred to as crisis in Anglophone Cameroon has emerged to be a major challenge to the sustained drive towards nation building. As presented here, the process of nation building in Cameroon was hampered by visible manifestations which suggested the deliberate neglect of the interests of the major component parts of the Cameroonian nation. Nation building has by and large been presented as an inclusive process in which the various components in a nation be they social, political or economic feel concerned and involved (Ndlovu 2013, 1-12).

Some Current Discourses and Expressions about Nation Building in Cameroon

Some prevailing contemporary narratives about the foundational basis of the nation in Cameroon have (maybe inadvertently) been built on a premise that ignores or does not take into account the history of the origins of the country today. So far, the preceding explanations in this paper have attempted to highlight the fact that Cameroon is a colonial creation. Building on that premise, the Cameroon nation as it exists today is an amalgam of peoples who prior to the coming of colonial rule did not enjoy the observed socio-cultural, economic and or political togetherness that exists today. With the superimposition of colonial structures and boundaries, and the eventual emergence of today’s nation, so many diversities were brought together. The new nation in the post independence period was clearly a mosaic whose strength and cohesion could be strengthened in our opinion by showcasing and respecting that diversity.

In contemporary Cameroon, a select number of historical narratives and discourses have very pompously brought to the fore some of the issues which this paper so far tried to highlight. One of

these narratives speaks to the indivisibility of Cameroon. It states that Cameroon is “one and indivisible”. Without doubt, this is a politically motivated statement which is intended to forge a sense of unity and purpose in the country and avoid any irredentist intentions. The underlying premise is that from the time when the Germans carved out their protectorate in the area, the territory Cameroon became one country. By this statement therefore, any attempts or intentions to sow seeds of division or refer to the historical antecedence of Cameroon are discouraged in the interest of nation building and consolidation. A second saying which addresses the ethnic and linguistic composition of the country professes that in Cameroon “there are no Bassa, Bamileke, Ewondo, Nweh, Bakweri, Kenyang, Nkose, Kom or Nso”^[6]. Still a third states that in Cameroon, there are no francophones, or anglophones, there are just Cameroonians (Abwa 2015).

The first and second of the above affirmations are references to the ethnic origins and foundations of the peoples of the country, whilst the third is a veiled attempt which seeks to deny the impact of the over forty years of Anglo-French administration on the peoples of the Cameroons during the Mandate and Trusteeship periods. What emerged from these a-historical discourses undeniably suggests a high level of manipulation, falsification and distortion in the use of historical knowledge. Examined carefully and from a purely historical perspective, the first and second positions smack of political rhetoric and demagoguery than history. By their very formulation, they exclude any possibility that the Cameroon nation had at any point during the process of its construction and reconstruction been made up of component parts that were different from one another. Here political aspirations and intentions are confused with history. This undoubtedly is a historical fallacy.

Moreover and as has been earlier stated, before the coming of Europeans and the putting in place of colonial boundaries, the geographical space which corresponds to present day Cameroon was inhabited by people belonging to different political, ethnic or cultural entities. The entities to which they belonged did not acknowledge any fact or act of belonging to anything that was or could be labeled Cameroonian, since such did not exist. The name Cameroon, which is derived from the Portuguese designation of and reference to the River of Prawns (*Rio dos Camaroes*), entered the lexicon of European adventure in the Africa at the end of the fifteenth century (Eyogetah 1981, 53).

The forceful superimposition of wider boundaries which became the boundaries of the colonial state was carried out without the consent of the various peoples. It is these boundaries which have become the boundaries of the new nation of Cameroon today. Attitudes towards the new entities were developed in an atmosphere of colonial fear and all attempts to challenge the colonial order met with violent and deadly repression and force. The various ethnic groups became Cameroonian by colonial force and by dint of historical circumstances.

It is true that when the might of the colonial forces became obvious, colonized peoples decidedly exploited what united them as Africans to build opposition platforms which led to their eventual emancipation and independence. Partnership and collaboration in the anti-colonial fight was cemented by the wish to overthrow the colonial yoke. It did not bring about any automatic suppression of primary relationships and loyalties. Loyalty and the acquiescence to belong to the new nations were then forged, nurtured and strengthened through admittedly inclusive policies that enhanced a sense of belonging.

The post-colonial nation being the successor of the colonial state, faithful to the tradition of force, persisted in forcefully developing attitudes towards the state. One of the ways to do so was to coin and use slogans as we just tried to elucidate bringing about the transmission of some a-historical inaccuracies. The fact that there are various ethnic groups and peoples in Cameroon does not impair the process of nation building. To deny that these ethnic groups existed prior to the development of the nation that is today is to run away from facts in history. The same can be said of the cultural and other differences which are the consequence of the colonial encounter. To be more concrete, mention should be made of the fact that the francophone and Anglophone subsystems which are a part of Cameroon’s post independence cultural landscape are grounded in historical fact.

To deny that there are anglophones and francophones in Cameroon is a political and historical fallacy. That Cameroon is one and indivisible is one of the inspirational aims of nation building. However it would appear to be inappropriate if the story of a nation’s development is built on imagination or politically-influenced constructions than historical reality. To avoid telling the history of a country

which openly admits and references the diverse origins and composition of the country is tantamount to playing the ostrich, and betraying the fundamental principles of the discipline of history.

CONCLUSION

The discipline of history by its very nature and content emerges as the societal repertoire which undeniably preserves the trajectory of how any nation for that matter has developed and how nation building has taken place. It emerges that the story of the development of the nation is well captured through its history. From wandering hordes to the discovery of fire and the development of civilization, through conquests and the consolidation of nation states, history preserves the facts. Interestingly, in the writing and use of history, a-historical voices and forces attempt to twist or deform or hide or falsify the process of growth. One result is that the history that is handed down is filled with inaccuracies. Force and selfish motives underlie the drive or the urge to falsify history mostly in the interest of anything but history.

In the case of Cameroon, one of the most celebrated touristic slogans is that which refers to the country as Africa in miniature. It is an expression of reality, because by virtue of the geographical location of the country, it is a microcosm of the continent. There is a little of everything found in Africa in Cameroon, whether these be climatic, vegetation, cultural, economic or otherwise. Admission of the plural origins of the Cameroon nation is historically grounded and seeks to valorize than demean the wealth that is in the history of the country. Accepting that the Cameroon nation is made up of diverse ethnicities and cultural groups, or admitting to the plurality of European languages spoken...all these are only indications of the historical development of the country.

The challenges of living together, of seeking solutions to the multifarious problems and challenges of nation building are not dealt with by denying the historical facts, rather it is by admitting them that more profound reflection can begin and bring about the more purposeful exploitation of difference to overcome the challenges of nation building. Admitting the facts of history is to recognize the presence and relevance of various component parts in a national equation. History remains very well placed to provide evidence-based sign posts which remind historical actors of what man has done, why and how it was done and with what results. Through an objective consideration and use of historical facts and evidence, nation building could be a more enjoyable and less strenuous experience. The relevance of the discipline of history for understanding and appreciating the process of nation building is nowhere more demonstrably amplified than in the study of nation building in Cameroon.

Notes

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² There are strong references today to the Nation of Islam, bonded more by the practice of the Muslim faith than by territoriality.

³ Historically speaking, the reunification of Cameroon was a much more profound, extensive and ambitious project. Limiting that process just to the coming together of the British Southern Cameroons and the Cameroun under French administration is inappropriate because parts of the former German Kamerun are today buried in Nigeria, Central African Republic and Chad.

⁵ This label is used to refer to those who inhabit the area of Cameroon called the Northwest and Southwest Regions and is the theatre of the dangerous socio-political upheavals that have inspired this article.

⁶ Allusion here is to the seeming denial of the ethnic differences in the composition of the country.

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History and Nation Building: a Theoretico-Historical Introspection into the Current Socio-Political Crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon

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