

Official Bilingualism in Cameroon: An Endangered Policy?

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Abstract: At the dawn of independence and reunification in 1961, Cameroon opted for a bilingual republic with English and French as its two official languages. “Official bilingualism”—which for a long time became a source of pride and distinguished Cameroon in the international community has been eroded in recent years by a number of factors militating for its demise: controversy over its meaning; challenges in its application; challenges in the safeguard of the English-subsystem of education and law; among others. Can bilingualism survive in Cameroon? This paper sets out to examine factors militating against the survival of bilingualism in Cameroon and factors supporting its continued existence. The analysis is predicated on the hypothesis that though facing significant challenges, bilingualism still stands a good chance to survive in Cameroon. The paper begins with a succinct definition of what is meant by bilingualism in Cameroon and concludes with some proposals on how to better improve on its implementation. The collapse of bilingualism might trigger further political instability in the country as it may be used as leverage for secession, especially with the Anglophone minority which has for long lamented their marginalization. At the international level, such an occurrence (secession) may inspire a similar pursuit to linguistic or ethnic minorities in the Africa and beyond.

Keywords: Bilingualism, Official bilingualism, Anglophone, Francophone

Introduction

Bilingualism in Cameroon is the constitutional recognition of French and English as the two official languages of the country equal in status and guaranteed promotion by the state. This is what is termed “official bilingualism” which differs from the ordinary or basic definition of bilingualism—fluency in or use of two languages. Official bilingualism was given its most unequivocal definition by Cameroon’s first President Ahmadou Ahidjo who underscored: “By bilingualism we mean the practical usage of our two official languages, English and French, throughout the national territory.”¹ This paper examines the potential for the survival of bilingualism in Cameroon. It starts with a brief historical background to bilingualism by tracing the origins of the phenomenon in the governance of the country. The second section contrasts factors inhibiting and enhancing the survival of bilingualism in the country. The paper concludes with some proposals on the effective implementation of bilingualism in Cameroon. The paper draws its significance to the current volatile socio-political situation prevailing in Cameroon, as a result of protests staged by Anglophone Cameroonians (notably teachers and Common Law lawyers) against their marginalization. This predicament has put to question the effectiveness of bilingualism as a state policy and makes such analysis all the more expedient.

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Historical Background of Bilingualism

Bilingualism in Cameroon is largely a colonial construct bequeathed to the country by its former colonial masters (Britain and France). After the capitulation of Germany at the end of World War I, the German Protectorate of "Kamerun" was partitioned to Britain and France first as a Mandated Territory of the League of Nations and later as a Trusteeship Territory of the United Nations.² The British administered their own portion of Cameroon as part of their Nigerian colony with English as the official medium of expression. The French administered their part of Cameroon as a full-fledged colony with French as the official language.

The English-French colonial dichotomy was not limited to language as it encompassed the systems of administration they pursued. There was a clear variation in the educational, legal and governance systems used by both colonial powers in their territories. In the domain of education, Dupraz points out that the educational system in British Cameroon was less centralized and confined to religious missions supported by "grants-in-aid" from the British government.³ British missionaries, whose educational enterprise was geared towards conversion, had an all-inclusive approach which sought to reach as many children as possible. The French in contrast put in place a secular, free public network of schools oriented towards training a limited number of administrative elites.⁴

The British instituted "Common Law" in both the Southern and Northern Cameroons. Since both Southern and Northern sections were governed as an integral part of Nigeria, the colonial administration simply extended several of its laws enforced in Nigeria to Cameroon. The framework for the application of the Common Law was solidified in section 11 of the Southern Cameroons High Court Law of 1955 which underscored:

Subject to the provisions of any written law and in particular of this section ... (a) the common law; (b) the doctrines of equity; and (c) the statutes of general application which were in force in England on the 1st day of January, 1900, shall insofar as the legislature of the Southern Cameroons is for the time being competent to make law, be in force within the jurisdiction of the court. (Provisions enacted under powers granted by the Foreign Jurisdiction Act of 1890).⁵

The British system of "indirect rule" also provided for upholding customary laws deemed non-repugnant and compatible. The retention of customary law was regulated under section 27 (1) of the Southern Cameroon High Court Law (SCHL) of 1955 which stipulated: "The High Court shall observe, and enforce the observance of every native law and custom which is not repugnant to natural justice, equity and good conscience, nor incompatible with any law for the time being in force, and nothing in this law shall deprive any person of the benefit of any such native law or custom."⁶ Therefore, the legal system Anglophone Cameroonians inherited from colonialism was not limited to the "Common Law" as it included customary laws (local usage and beliefs regulating a particular ethnic community) given recognition by the British.

The French instituted the "Civil law" in French Cameroon through a decree enacted on 22 May 1922, which extended to the territory all the laws and decrees promulgated for French Equatorial Africa. However, distinctions were made in the application of the Civil law. Two parallel court systems were put in place: one dubbed *justice de droit Française* for whites as well as "assimilated" Cameroonians and the other called *justice de droit indigène* for the 'ordinary' Cameroonians.⁷

The British pursued the administrative policy of indirect rule in the Cameroons. This policy developed by Lord Lugard was first practiced in Northern Nigeria where local emirs were used to enforce the authority of the Governor.⁸ Indirect rule was seen as a cost effective means of administering a huge territory without expending resources. Importantly, by using traditional authorities to enforce their rule, local languages were retained and used in administration. To this end, Echu (1999) maintains: "local languages remained an indispensable medium of communication at the service of the colonial administrator."⁹

The French governed their section of Cameroon through a system of administration known as "assimilation" whose goal was to transform the indigenous population. This policy presumed that French culture was superior and that colonialism was part of their civilizing mission.¹⁰ Local African cultures were therefore dismissed as parochial or of no value. French language and culture was therefore given priority.¹¹ Educated segments of the indigenous population were granted French citizenship and the legal rights of Frenchmen.¹²

Bilingualism and Independence

French Cameroon gained its independence as the "Republic of Cameroon" (La République du Cameroun) on 1 January 1960 with Ahmadou Ahidjo as President. British Southern Cameroons subsequently attained independence after opting to join the Republic of Cameroon following a United Nations administered plebiscite on 11 February 1961. To cement this reunification and work out a constitution for the country, the leaders of both parts of the territory (President Ahidjo of the Republic of Cameroon and Prime Minister John Ngu Foncha of erstwhile British Southern Cameroons) and their accompanying delegations met in Foumban in July 1961. The outcome of this meeting was a Federal Constitution which went into effect on 1 October 1961 making Cameroon a bilingual country with French and English as official languages.

The option of a federation of two heterogeneous communities (in terms of system of governance, language and culture) has been criticized by political scientists. Johnson postulates the foundation of national unity and integration on which the federation emerge was always precarious. He argues that not enough empirical evidence existed for cultural homogeneity to support the pursuit of what was then known as the "Kamerun Idea" – the reunification of former British and French controlled parts of the former German colony. He goes further to point out that the establishment of the Federal Republic tilted more to the favour of the Francophone majority as their English counterparts had to conform to a preference of a centralized, presidential government system.¹³ Based on the benchmark of political integration through nation-building, Johnson points out the establishment of the Federal Republic represented the successful creation of a state rather than the emergence of a nation.

Nevertheless, some scholars view the adoption of the policy of bilingualism as an endeavour toward national integration and nation-building. Anchimbe posits that Cameroon's adoption of bilingualism at independence was aimed at shaping a unique identity for the country.¹⁴ To this end Cameroon's first President Ahmadou Ahidjo underscored:

[W]e must in fact refrain from any blind and narrow nationalism and avoid any complex when absorbing the learning of other countries. When we consider the English language and culture and the French language and culture, we must regard them not as the property of such and such a race, but as an acquirement of

the universal civilisation to which we belong. This is in fact why we have followed the path of bilingualism since...it offers us the means to develop this new culture...and which could transform our country into the catalyst of African unity.¹⁵

However, the aforementioned enterprise was shrouded with controversy from the beginning. On the one hand, scholars and statesmen such as Prof. Bernard Fonlon advocated an expansion from official or state-level bilingualism to individual bilingualism. Fonlon underscored this in 1969: "the target to aim at, for us, should be, not merely State bilingualism, but individual bilingualism: that every child that passes through our education system shall be able to speak and write both English and French."¹⁶ On the other hand, other forms of bilingualism were also prevalent. Ayafor identifies a strand of individual bilingualism consisting of the alternate usage of indigenous languages in the Bantu and Congo-Kordofanian families.¹⁷ Another form of individual bilingualism, which was more widespread, involved the use of one (or more) indigenous language and one official language.

Challenges to the Survival of Bilingualism

More than fifty years after independence many scholars and observers of Cameroon history and politics are pessimistic about the prospect of survival of bilingualism in the country. Some factors have been identified as substantiating this pessimism. Though Cameroon is well known internationally as bilingual country (sharing with Canada a dual membership of the Anglo-Saxon heritage organization "Commonwealth of Nations" and its French counterpart "La Francophonie"), bilingualism in Cameroon remains a subject of controversy. What defines bilingualism? Who is bilingual or supposed to be bilingual? These are some of the questions that continue to be a subject of hair-splitting debate among Cameroonian scholars and the common folk. On the meaning of bilingualism, there are two interpretations that have emerged with strong arguments. Some view bilingualism as the ability to function in more than one language which may not necessarily be the two official languages. Others insist on "official bilingualism" which is the state endorsed interpretation that is based on functional ability in both official languages. As noted above, it is also easy to find many who speak one official language and an indigenous language.¹⁸ Though this is administratively useful, it is still not "officially" considered bilingualism.

Closely related to the above is controversy over who bears the onus to be bilingual? Is it the state or the citizen? Some argue that bilingualism in Cameroon should be incarnated by the state and be present in state institutions and governance. This perspective embodies the government perception of bilingualism which, according to Ayafor, is limited to the use of both official languages in government domains and formal transactions in private sector domains.¹⁹ However, ordinary Cameroonians adhere more to the popular maxim: "*C'est le Cameroun qui est bilingue, pas les Camerounais*" ("It is Cameroon that is bilingual not Cameroonians").²⁰ This interpretation understands official bilingualism as limited to governance and state institutions. The controversy over what actually constitutes bilingualism and who is supposed to be bilingual represents a serious impediment to official bilingualism and a factor that could lead to its demise.

Another factor militating against the survival of bilingualism is the gross violation or neglect in governance and administration. Official bilingualism requires that all decrees, texts and official government documents be translated in both languages and that public services be accessible to citizens of both language expressions. However, the reality several decades after independence has been the “francophonization” of the Cameroonian administration. On this score, Fouda points out that French dominates most administrative communication in Cameroon.²¹ Administrative documents (decrees and laws) are drafted frequently in French and where the English version exist they are marred by errors.²² Nsom corroborates this, noting a lack of political will to promote usage of both languages at the highest level. President Paul Biya has often cautioned state officials to ensure that official communications are prepared and signed in English and French, but the documents he signs himself are often exclusively in French.²³ This apparent language bias does not portend a good future for bilingualism in Cameroon.

Yet another sector that creates pessimism over the survival of bilingualism is education. One of the cornerstones of bilingualism is the dual educational system inherited from the colonial period. While the state sought to promote bilingualism by introducing the teaching of both official languages throughout the national territory, it also had to ensure the cohabitation of heterogeneous English and French educational sub-systems. However, attempts were made to undermine the English sub-system of education in favour of the French through “harmonization.” To this end, the government promulgated an order in 1983 modifying the anglophone “General Certificate of Education” (GCE) to be more in line with the French “Baccalauréat.”²⁴ This attempt spurred boycotts and demonstrations by anglophone university students at the State University in Yaounde and anglophones in other urban centres. As illustrated in Nyamnjoh and Akum, the struggle against dilution of the English subsystem of education through harmonization culminated in the creation of the Cameroon GCE Board in 1993.²⁵ The uneasy cohabitation of the two sub-systems of education adds to the difficulty of effectively pursuing bilingualism.

Those pessimistic about the survival of bilingualism also point to the legal system and its domination by French Civil Law as a stumbling block. As with the educational sector, Cameroon inherited a dual legal system from the former colonial powers. Bridging the gap between British Common Law and French Civil Law at times resulted in conflicts so the state sought to harmonize both systems. This process engendered a unitary Penal Code (1967), a common Labour Code (1992), and a single Criminal Procedure Code (2005).²⁶ Though well intended, the pursuit of harmonization took on a French character as state officials sometimes undermined the Common Law. The Ministry of Justice deployed magistrates to Common Law jurisdictions who lacked a sound knowledge of the Common Law or sometimes even fluency in the English language. The unavailability of an English version of some key legal instruments and other issues provoked Common Law lawyers to go on a strike in November 2016. The relegation of the Common Law in Cameroon’s legal system adds fuel to the perceived “francophonization” of the country’s administration and further complicates chances for survival of bilingualism. Furthermore, Soule argues that the lack of a legal and institutional framework to sanction or supervise the implementation of bilingualism remains a serious issue. Although bilingualism is enshrined in the constitution, there are no provisions to guide

implementation. Violators of the principle of bilingualism go scot-free in the absence of any sanction or supervisory institution.²⁷

Another cause for concern is linguistic bias in elite formation. Political appointments under the Ahidjo and Biya regimes have been heavily in favour of Francophones. A member of parliament from the Social Democratic Front (SDF) Hon. Fonso decried this situation in a question and answer session at the National Assembly in March 2009, telling the Prime Minister bluntly: "The Anglophones have been discriminated against in the Ministerial appointments."²⁸ His worries were echoed in a letter by the Bishops of the Bamenda Ecclesiastical Province to the President in the wake of the 2016 teachers and lawyers strike that escalated to an "Anglophone crisis." The Bishops pointedly state: "There seem to be key ministries that have been reserved for Francophone Ministers only and Anglophones do not even qualify to be Secretaries of State under them. These include, but are not limited to, Defence, Finance, Territorial Administration, and Economy."²⁹

Elite formation and party affiliation are significantly influenced by linguistic identities. With the advent of multiparty politics in the early 1990s, leadership and membership affiliation among the top political parties were significantly swayed by the language divide. The ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) constituted its leadership and found adherents more among Francophone than Anglophone Cameroonians. The reverse was true of the main opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF). This linguistic bias in elite formation is inimical to a pluralistic culture which is important for the survival of bilingualism as a common heritage in Cameroon.

Cameroon's ethnic plurality has also been a source of ethno-nationalism and primordialism, often exploited by political elites, demagogues, and opinion leaders. Fearon and Laitin identified more than 250 ethnic groups in Cameroon.³⁰ With such a vast pluralistic ethnic heritage, ethno-nationalism has an adverse effect on efforts, policies and instruments devised to build and consolidate national identity. The attachment ethnicity evokes tends to frustrate attempts to encourage individual bilingualism. Hastings posits that ethnicity "constitutes the major distinguishing element in all pre-national societies, but may survive as a strong subdivision with a loyalty of its own within established nations."³¹ Brass highlights the potential of ethnic and national identities being exploited or "instrumentalised" by competing political elite as tools to mobilise support in their quest for prestige, wealth and power.³² To this end he underscores that:

The study of ethnicity and nationality is in large part the study of politically induced cultural change. More precisely, it is the study of the process by which elites and counter-elites within the ethnic groups select aspects of the group's culture, attach new value and meaning to them and use them as symbols to mobilize the group, to defend its interest, and to compete with the other groups.³³

The arguments put forward by Hasting and Brass are largely applicable in the context of Cameroon where linking citizenship and voter registration to regions of origin has produced official distinction in eligibility based on place of birth and place of residence.³⁴ The prevalence of a distinction between original ethnic settlers (autochthones/allogènes) and strangers meant that ethnicised elite associations replaced political parties as the major force in regional politics. Eyoh notes that the ethnicised politics driven by the bureaucratic-administrative elite led to an

ethnic realignment of the power structure of the state under President Biya as the Beti, Bulu and Ewondo elites sought to contain the challenges to their grip on power from the Hausa-Fulani.³⁵ These ethnicised elite struggles persisted even after the reintroduction of multiparty politics in the 1990s, undercutting the unity and integration bilingualism seeks to create.

The Survival of Bilingualism

Perhaps the prospects for the survival of bilingualism in Cameroon are not as gloomy as the foregone analysis seems to suggest. There are a number of factors enhancing the chances of survival of bilingualism in the domains of governance, educational policy, legal reform, and administrative structure.

The impetus for bilingualism from political authorities began from independence with Cameroon's first President Ahmadou Ahidjo. While launching the first bilingual secondary school created by his government in Buea in 1962, Ahidjo exhorted his compatriots to be practical about bilingualism. Constable noted that policy statements on bilingualism had been a recurrent theme in speeches from state officials since independence.³⁶ In recent years, President Paul Biya has been consistent not just in stressing the importance of bilingualism but giving some of his speeches in English. This eloquent demonstration of political will on bilingualism goes to strengthen its prospect of survival.

The policy of "regional balance" instituted by Ahidjo and continued under Biya also consolidates bilingualism. Ahidjo introduced regional balance as a policy of equity which sought to promote "balanced development" and "redress regional inequalities by providing education, infrastructures and the public amenities necessary for bridging the country and the town."³⁷ Under this policy, special attention was focused on the particular needs of different communities. For example, it created state universities in the two Anglophone regions (Southwest and Northwest).

The government has pursued other educational policies to enhance bilingualism. The Ahidjo regime created bilingual high schools, e.g., the Bilingual Grammar School Buea (established in 1962) and the Bilingual High School Yaounde (established in 1977).³⁸ Attempts were made during the Ahidjo regime to also introduce bilingualism in primary schools.³⁹ This process continued under Paul Biya with an educational policy that made English and French compulsory for students at the primary and secondary levels of education. Rather than limiting the two educational sub-systems exclusively to their respective regions, the government permitted them to run in all the regions of the country. This enabled the creation of English schools in the French part of the country and vice-versa thereby giving all Cameroonians the opportunity to acquire a bilingual education.⁴⁰ Another advantage drawn from this policy is that of language immersion. Etchu notes that since the 1970s there have been many francophone students attending English primary schools.⁴¹ Soule extends this phenomenon, arguing that the immersion is from both sides (French to English and vice-versa) and continues up to secondary school.⁴² Immersion is a strong factor that consolidates bilingualism and could ensure its preservation in Cameroon.

In March 2017, the government passed sweeping reforms to address the concerns raised by Common Law lawyers about relegation of the Common Law. President Biya signed a decree creating a Common Law Bench at the Supreme Court and a Common Law Division in the

Advanced School of Administration and Magistracy.⁴³ This came after the January 2017 handing over of an official English version of business laws to the President of the Cameroon Bar Council by Minister of Justice and Keeper of the Seals Laurent Easo.⁴⁴ The Common Law Bench was officially installed on 20 August 2017 with an Anglophone Chief Justice—Epul Mathias Aloh—also installed as President of the Judicial Council of the Supreme Court. The aforementioned measures are crucial to the resolution of the fundamental grievances of the Common Law lawyers and the creation of a legal environment for bilingualism to continue.

The Cameroonian government has also taken major administrative steps to promote bilingualism and ensure its survival. It established the Bilingual Training Programme, which is placed under the supervision of the General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic. This department coordinates bilingualism training centres that operate in all ten regions and provide bilingual training to civil servants and citizens. The Office of the President, Prime Minister's Service, National Assembly, Senate, and all government ministries run translation units to ensure that official texts are translated in both languages.

January 2017 saw the creation of a National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism. While commissioning members to their function on 27 April 2017, Prime Minister Philemon Yang pointed out that the role of the Commission constituted *inter alia*:

submitting reports and recommendations on issues relating to the protection and promotion of bilingualism and multiculturalism to the President of the Republic and the Government; - monitoring the implementation of constitutional provisions establishing English and French as two official languages of equal status, and especially ensuring their use in all government services, semi-public bodies as well as any State-subsidized body; - conducting any study or survey and proposing measures likely to strengthen Cameroon's bilingual and multicultural character; - preparing and submitting to the President of the Republic draft instruments on bilingualism, multiculturalism and togetherness.⁴⁵

The creation and functioning of the Commission helps to allay worries about the lack of supervision of the implementation of bilingualism. National social integration, the cultural blending of Cameroonians and the emergence of cosmopolitan communities in most of Cameroon's major cities, also enhances bilingualism. Intermarriages between Anglophone and Francophone, and their resettlement or integration outside their areas of origin has led to the birth of ethnically diverse communities in urban centres. This mitigates the pressure of linguistic nationalism and stabilizes social relationships.

Conclusion

It is evident from the foregone analysis that there are strong factors threatening the existence of bilingualism in Cameroon. These factors range from controversy about the meaning and application of bilingualism to linguistic bias in elite formation. Notwithstanding, it would be a premature judgment to yield to this pessimism without a proper consideration of the grounds for optimism. As demonstrated above, efforts made by successive Cameroonian governments to promote bilingualism and policies put in place to remedy present challenges provide measured hope for bilingualism. This paper also offers a few suggestions to improve on the implementation of bilingualism in Cameroon:

- Creation of a “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” under the National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism. This would provide a forum for victims of marginalization from both linguistic communities to air injustices and heal divisions.
- Inclusion of bilingualism as an important criterion in the appointment of state officials and high level civil servants.
- Drafting, adoption and implementation of a national policy on bilingualism that will assist the Commission on Bilingualism and Multiculturalism to better coordinate and supervise the implementation of bilingualism in Cameroon.

Examining official bilingualism in Cameroon and efforts being made towards its sustenance may be helpful for other African countries which have already adopted or desire to pursue official bilingualism in their system of governance. Currently, apart from Cameroon, some twenty-one other African countries have two or more official languages: Algeria, Botswana, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Rwanda, Seychelles, Swaziland, South Africa, Tanzania, and Tunisia.⁴⁶ The issue of effective management of the policy of official bilingualism therefore resonates deeply among African states. It represents a crucial tool in national integration and nation-building. The Cameroon example can therefore serve as a cautionary model to other states on how to pursue such a policy and address the challenges that emerge in its implementation.

Notes

1 Gonondo and Djiraro 2016, p. 38.

2 Fochingong 2013.

3 Dupraz 2015.

4 Ibid.

5 Fombad 2016.

6 Kiye 2015, p. 80.

7 Fombad 2016.

8 Swift 2012.

9 Echu 1999, p. 20.

10 Mills n.d.

11 Echu 1999.

12 Lee and Schultz 2011.

13 Johnson 2015.

14 Anchimbe 2011.

15 Ibid. p. 36.

16 Fonlon 1969.

17 Ayafor 2005.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Nsom 2015.

- 21 Fouda 2013.
- 22 Ibid. p. 49.
- 23 Nsom 2015.
- 24 Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997.
- 25 Nyamnjoh and Akum 2008.
- 26 Kiye 2015.
- 27 Soule 2013.
- 28 Kini 2009.
- 29 Cameroon Info Net 2016.
- 30 Fearon and Laitin, 2005.
- 31 Hastings 1997, pp. 2-5.
- 32 Ozkirimli 2000.
- 33 Ozkirimli 2000, p. 88.
- 34 Nyamnjoh and Rowland 1998.
- 35 Eyoh 1998.
- 36 Constable 1974.
- 37 Tande 2009.
- 38 Ayafor 2005.
- 39 Constable 1974.
- 40 Etchu 2005.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Soule 2013.
- 43 Dialle 2017.
- 44 Kendemeh, 2017.
- 45 Yang 2017.
- 46 nationsonline.org 2018.

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