

Language as a Tool for Exclusion: Reflections on Cameroon's National Bilingualism Day

By Dibussi Tande

Today is National Bilingualism Day in Cameroon. I didn't even know that such a day existed until I read about it in the Monday, January 30, 2006 online edition of the Government-owned daily, *Cameroon Tribune*.

According to an article in the newspaper titled "Bilingualism is still a Challenge", this day was instituted because,

Bilingualism is enshrined in the Constitution of Cameroon since September 1st, 1961, when English and French were recognised as official languages, with equal status in every sphere of national life. Bilingualism was chosen, not only as an instrument to ensure equity, but also as a pivot of socio-economic integration for the two entities, Francophone and Anglophones, who opted for unification.

Now, that it is the political theory, the national fairy tale.

Here is the reality as reported by the Buea-based *The Post* newspaper: "French Frustrates ASMAC Anglophone Students", screams the headlines in a story about the plight of English-speaking students in the Advanced School of Mass Communications at the University of Yaoundé. According to *The Post*:

Only 3 of the 42 permanent lecturers in the Advanced School of Mass Communication, ASMAC, are of English expression. Over the years, English-speaking students in ASMAC just like other higher education institutions in Yaoundé receive lectures almost exclusively in French. Some English-speaking students have described this situation as 'deplorable'.

Yes, that is the real Cameroon where the English language and English Speaking Cameroonians are treated like inconvenient step-children who are barely tolerated.

Institutional and systemic marginalization

The simple truth is that in as much as Cameroonians obsess about national unity and nationhood, those in charge rarely go out of their way to ensure that these political clichés become reality, not even through largely symbolic gestures such as having a fully bilingual website for the Presidency of the Republic, arguably the official gateway of the Cameroon government.

Such acts of omission go to reinforce the feelings of institutional and systemic marginalization that run rampant in the ex-British Southern Cameroons; feelings that have largely contributed in creating the combustible socio-political climate that now exists in the region. Cameroon may be officially bilingual, but there is ample evidence that English and English-speaking Cameroonians are generally an afterthought to the movers and shakers of its predominantly Francophone socio-political system.

This is a serious problem which has absolutely nothing to do with English-speaking Cameroonians stupidly aping the "Anglo-Saxons" or "always whining" about their lot in Cameroon, as some have argued. It is a question of the government failing to use all the means at its disposal to create a climate of inclusion indispensable in building that mythical "Cameroon nation" that government officials always talk about.

A few years ago, I had a discussion with a Cameroonian translator who revealed that even though he was head of a translation department made up of three Francophones and two Anglophone translators, officials in the ministry in question either simply ignored the translation bureau and put out official documents solely in French, or generally went ahead and did the English translations themselves, with monstrous results. He stated that whenever confronted by the translators (since this reflected poorly on the translation department), the standard response from ministry officials was "le message passe quand même" ... a clarion call for mediocrity which has, ironically, never been used as the standard for official government documents published in French...

"Le message passe quand même" was the same response given by Yaoundé Urban Council officials back in the early 1990s when they launched a multimillion clean-up campaign but did not bother to have the campaign posters translated into English by someone with even a rudimentary mastery of the

English language. The result? The French campaign slogan "**Balayer, nettoyer, ramasser la saleté c'est bien. Ne pas salir c'est mieux**" was translated as follows: "**Sweep, clean away, to gather dirtiness is good, not to make dirty is better**". When questioned about this linguistic massacre, the response was that Anglophones should at least be happy that an attempt was made to have posters in both English and French. Yes, the Yaoundé urban council had just done Anglophones a huge favor, and these ungrateful Anglos were complaining as usual!!!! As CRTV journalist Sam Nuvalla Fonkem later pointed out in an article in *Cameroon Life Magazine*, there could not have been a more insidious way of making Anglophone Cameroonians and the official language of Anglophone Cameroon seem inconsequential, if not an outright nuisance within the bilingual Cameroon Republic.

National unity in perspective

Sometimes, "national unity" or national inclusion is not just about the distribution of the "national cake" or about the attribution of cabinet positions to different regions. In many cases, it is about largely symbolic but emotionally-laden issues such as language matters. As Rothchild and Foley have rightly noted ("African States and the Politics of Inclusive Coalitions." In *The Precarious Balance: State and Society in Africa*, edited by D. Rothchild and N. Chazan, Boulder: Westview Press, 1988);

Not all group actors will be mobilized around distributive issues. Inevitably, those issues with a symbolic dimension in a pluralist society - group status, identity or territory - are likely to become the basis for more inelastic or non-negotiable communal claims, setting the stage for intense conflicts of a political nature.

The rise of "Anglophone extremism" or "Southern Cameroons Nationalism" in recent years is largely the result of Cameroonian leaders ignoring these inelastic communal claims.

The irony is that it is the country as whole that loses in the long run as a result of the lack of political will to establish truly bilingual institutions. A case in point: In 2000, The Cameroon Tourism Board came up with the idea of selling the country via the Internet, and to set up a website for that purpose - <http://www.cameroun-infotourisme.com>. Unlike the website of the Presidency whose English section has been "under construction" since 1996, this one does not even pretend to have an English section. A website aimed at marketing a bilingual country in to the world is entirely in French!!! Without doubt,

this oversight is deeply rooted in a Cameroonian political culture whose hallmark is systemic or institutional monolingualism. No wonder veteran Cameroonian journalist, Abel Mbengue once described Cameroon as a "pays francophone bilingue" ...

The Tourism Board officials are totally oblivious to the fact that advertising a country's socio-economic and touristic potential in more than one language increases that country's marketability, and brings in more revenue from tourism. In Cameroon, where language has become a tool for exclusion, this obvious fact is lost to its ruling class.

Facing the democratic challenge

The democratic challenge in a plural society, Author Lewis once argued (in *Politics in West Africa*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1965),

is to create political institutions which give all the various groups the opportunity to participate in decision-making, since only thus can they feel that they are full members of a nation, respected by their more numerous brethren, and owing equal respect to the national bond which holds them together.

This is a challenge that the predominantly Francophone Cameroonian ruling elite -- who have largely excluded one official language from state institutions -- have failed to live up to, in spite of their repeated references to those bonds that allegedly bind English and French-speaking Cameroonians together as a people.

Language is a vehicle for identity and participation, and by institutionalizing the marginalization of one official language, the Cameroon government is in effect preventing citizens who use this language from fully participating in national life. And, even when these citizens do master "the language of gods", they still feel alienated from these institutions, from government, and from the rest of the nation. Yes, Cameroon's "language problem" neither pedagogic nor individual, it is political. And, it is at the core of Cameroon's unending crisis of identity.