Book Review


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Through the concept “Golden Age”, which refers to the “most flourishing epoch in a nation’s history” (p.3), Anthony Ndi, a historian from the North West region in the Anglophone part of Cameroon, describes the period when Southern Cameroons was characterized by a probity of civil service, the existence of visionary leaders and moral fiber, all impregnated by Christian values. The first thing that captures attention on this book—which is a second edition—is the expression “Vital lessons” contained in its title. Based on the dictionary definition something “vital” is something essential and of great importance (Davies & Barry, 1972). However, the word stands to be difficult to comprehend within the context of the book firstly because the author fails to explain explicitly the meaning of “vital” and equally, he falls short of showing why the lessons are vital and to whom the “vital lessons” are destined in Cameroon. Are the “vital lessons” destined to Anglophones or Francophones?

Whatever the case, this book is relevant and interesting in the sense that it proposes a historical depiction of the evolution of Southern Cameroons (today Anglophone Cameroon) during the “Golden Age” that is from the colonial period to the Reunification of French and Anglophone Cameroons in 1961. Written in an accessible language, the book is a dithyrambic essay about the Anglophone culture and identity. It makes it understood the agitations and claims of a majority of Cameroonian originating from the Anglophone regions (North West and South West regions) of Cameroon regarding their identity and culture. This is apparently informed by the knowledge pursued about the past of Southern Cameroons as clearly elaborated in this book. However, the author has developed some ideas which raise some preoccupations.

According to the author, the culture and character of Southern Cameroonian during the “Golden Age” were that of good ethical values, moral fiber and that of probity of the civil service among other good attributes. Their culture was the result of the contact between the indigenous culture and the colonial experience. He explains that:
Southern Cameroons does undeniably have a unique, glorious past containing an authentic indigenous culture shaped by appreciable contributions from British and German colonial experiences greatly sanctified by Christian ethics from which enormous hope and inspiration could be drawn (p.xxxv).

Southern Cameroonian therefore were exclusively products of Christian missionaries. Their “untainted” attitude could be used as an identity card meaning that they lived a perfect live upholding a static culture. These allegations are hardly conceivable in a real life situation. It is somehow a utopia to imagine a society where everyone is perfect in addition to the fact that culture is not static but dynamic in nature. The “Christocentric” view developed by the author about the “Golden Age” also gives the impression that all Southern Cameroonian were Christians whereas history and sociology make us to know that they were also Muslims (Pelican, 2008) and pagans living in Southern Cameroons.

Talking about the political character of Southern Cameroonian, this book alleges that the British colonial policy of Indirect Rule input in Native Authorities good practices. As a matter of fact the author says that: “[Natives Authorities] dispensed justice in harmony with native laws and customs in Native Courts” (p.35). While considering the authors views about the culture and habits of Southern Cameroonian, one has the impression that they were free of any type of misconduct and illegal acts (probity). If this was the case what can then justify the existence of the Native courts mentioned by the author? The fact that justice had to be dispensed means that there were problems and troublemakers in the society? This thus put into question the probity character and the moral fiber that the author seems to attribute or confer to all Southern Cameroonian. Even St Augustine’s City of Gods was not spared from sin, evil and bad angels.

Talking about the political actors of Southern Cameroons, the author enforces accent on their democratic nature. To him, Christian missionaries catalyzed good leadership by ushering in democracy among the political actors (Endeley, Mbile, Foncha) of Southern Cameroons. He lucidly says that:

Another democratic dimension of 1959 elections is that, although they were organized by Premier Endeley (KNC), they were marginally won by Mr Foncha, the KNDP opposition leader; followed by a peaceful, harmonious and dignified handover of power” (p.127).

This therefore means that elections in Southern Cameroons were free, fair and transparent. In order to assert his opinion, Ndi compares the nature of power transition in Southern Cameroons with that in independent Nigeria where political transitions led to “bloody takeovers, coup d’Etats, military overthrows, assassinations” (p.127), things that never occurred during the “Golden Age” of Anglophone Cameroon. However, this comparison seems not to be proper and logical because it deals with two different periods and contexts. The political
realities during the colonial and post-colonial periods are different. It is then inappropriate to compare the evolution of a territory already independent (Nigeria) with another one which is still under colonial rules (Southern Cameroun before 1961). Besides, at the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, the sociopolitical environments of independent Nigeria and Southern Cameroons had different features in terms of challenges and actors though the two territories had a same colonial master.

The British initiative to administer Southern Cameroons as an integral part of Nigeria resulted to the influx of Nigerians -especially the Igbos- which the author coins “Nigerianisation”. This led to the Nigerian economic hegemony and the underdevelopment of Southern Cameroons. As a matter of fact: “In those days, Igbos were notorious for economic exploitation. They regarded Southern Cameroonsians as primitive, backward, second class citizens” (p.80). By making this expression, the author contradicts his position about the steady character of Southern Cameroons economy. He has mentioned elsewhere in the book that this economy was “portable, tidy and promising” and again he complains that it had fallen in the hands of exploitation (p.126). Moreover, Piet Konings makes mention of the fact that Southern Cameroons’ economy suffered exploitation from the presence and activities of the Nigerians (Konings, 2005).

To the author, this “Nigerianisation” factor explained the choice of Reunification with La République du Cameroun instead of Nigeria during the 1961 plebiscite. However, while elaborating on the choice of Southern Cameroons to become independent by reunifying with French Cameroon, Fru Awasom (2006) argues that it was motivated by the existing cultural ties between some Anglophone and some Francophone ethnic groups. To an extent, Ndi’s judgment about the rationales for reunification is lopsided but this doesn’t change anything to the fact that after Reunification, the Anglophones’ grievances against the Francophones were almost the same with those they previously had with the Nigerians (p.78-81). After “Nigerianisation” they have been complaining about “Frenchification”.

To Ndi, the Francophones did not respect what was agreed with the Anglophones during Reunification. For instance, he explains that Ahidjo solely “violated” the 1961 constitution by introducing the Unitary System. To him the creation of the unitary state replacing the federal state annihilated the unity between Anglophones and the Francophones. Ahidjo who “was an astute and manipulative politician who could not brook any opposition or rivalry and was determined to diffuse this state of affairs” (p.153), deliberately dismantled the federal structures. Ndi then reiterates an idea he developed in a previous book about Ahidjo’s attitude who used his position as the president to dictate the unitary system of government in 1972, proving that the federal structures were just an unavoidable step towards the creation of a unitary state (Ndi, 2013).

Though the book presents Ahidjo as the sole violator of the federal constitution, the author gainsay himself when he brings up issues about the
political game of some Southern Cameroonians which in effect of course assisted in the slay of the federal constitution. He lucidly denotes that: “Endeley’s persistent struggle for a single party state was because he saw it as the only opportunity for the CPNC to come out of political wilderness” (p.155). Making it clear that many hands were involved in the change of the constitution, Ngoh (1996) also indicates that Foncha and S.T Muna, all from the Southern Cameroons, partook in dismantling the federal constitution because of their anxiety for “juicy positions”. Ndi considers that this dismantling of the federal constitution paved the way for marginalization of Anglophones by the Francophone majority:

There has been a consistent tendency to downgrade whatever originates from former Southern Cameroons for integration into the national system as inferior or is generally treated with scorn and ridicule (p.213).

In other words the Anglophone culture has always been clouded by that of the Francophones. He takes the educational and the legal systems among others to illustrate this marginalization. Echoing the complaints of the Anglophones, the author asserts for instance that Anglophone Universities had been, “flooded with a plethora of Francophone Lecturers with no smattering of English to teach in an Anglophone University” (p.238). This remark can bias the meaning of the word “University” and give the impression that they are no Anglophone lecturers in francophone Cameroonian universities.

Nevertheless, these critiques do not undermine the contribution of this book to the understanding of the Anglophone problem and the production of knowledge on the history of Cameroon.

References


