

Le nationalisme camerounais dans les programmes et manuels d'histoire

Etienne Segnou, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2015.

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Etienne Segnou's survey of the teaching of history in Cameroon offers a useful illustration of the measures taken by *l'Etat historien* (Mbembe) to control the narrative of the past in authoritarian societies; and also, for the student of *Françafrique*, a reminder of France's role in setting up and collaborating with such regimes.

To understand the background to his study, it is necessary to recall the turbulent events that accompanied 'decolonisation' in this sub-Saharan territory. The German colony of Kamerun was taken over by the French in 1916 and mandated by the League of Nations to France and Britain in 1922. Despite its special status, the French territory was governed in a similar way to other French colonies: native Cameroonians were administered from 1924 by the all-encompassing *code de l'indigénat* that led to fines or imprisonment of thousands each year for a very broad range of 'administrative' offences, and infrastructure was built through deadly systems of forced labour. By 1956 there were some 17,000 white settlers in a population of some 3 million.

After the Second World War, Cameroon became a UN Trust Territory. France, however, considered the possession of Cameroon integral to her African empire, including it in the various post WWII forms of Francophone communities, as an associated territory in the *Union française* (1946-58) and as a member of the CFA franc zone (1945 to the present), ensuring close economic and political ties with France. Despite these efforts to integrate Cameroon in the Francosphere of influence, from the late 1940s political activism in favour of independence and reunification developed and crystallised with the founding in 1948 of the UPC – *Union des Populations du Cameroun*. In pursuit of these demands it sent representatives to the UN, lobbied foreign opinion and organised petitions. In 1955, seven years after its founding, the French estimated that the UPC had 100,000 members and sympathisers, particularly on the coast and in central, south Cameroon. It published several papers and had active youth and women's wings.

At the end of 1954, concerned by the growing influence of the UPC, the French government appointed a more intransigent High Commissioner, Roland Pré who turned to the new French theories of (counter)-revolutionary war for inspiration in the rollback of the political organisations that had been, in his words, “infiltrated by the Communist Party.” Continuing violence between members of the UPC, French forces and European settlers led to the banning of the party in July 1955: its leaders went into exile or into the bush to organise guerrilla activity, where they were tracked down by French forces in a covert but deadly war, overshadowed at the time and since by the Algerian War.

On 1 January 1960 Cameroon became the first of the French sub-Saharan colonies to accede to a kind of independence as the French, without organising new elections, transferred power to the Prime Minister Ahmadou Ahidjo. This was followed in the course of the year by the secret agreements for defence and military assistance which, combined with the close personal relationships established between French ministers and African francophone leaders, were to become the model for *Françafrique*. The rebellion continued post-independence, the UPC considering the Ahidjo government illegitimate; the campaign against the rebels was supported by French troops and led by French officers - De Gaulle sent 300 officers to coordinate the action and five overseas battalions, a squadron of armoured vehicles and T26 fighter-bombers – but their role was kept discreet. The last remnants of the UPC were eliminated in the early 1970s.

Ndlovu-Gatshen has referred to the “myth of decolonisation,” predicated on a decisive rupture with the colonial past, that provided the foundational narrative for the new African nations (Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatshen, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa. Myths of Decolonization*, Dakar: CODESRIA, 2013). That Ahidjo’s authority was based on French support in the struggle against the UPC both before and after independence could not provide the basis for a national myth based on such a rupture. Ahidjo was replaced by Paul Biya in 1982 who has continued in power ever since. The perennity of the Cameroonian leadership ensured that *une chape de plomb* reigned over the memory of the war, imposing, in the words of Fanny Pigeaud, a taboo over the entire memory of the UPC. Through its control over education, censorship and the judicial pursuit of dissident voices, the Cameroonian state ensured the top-down inculcation of a particular version of the national history that fostered belief in the legitimacy of its rule. Etienne Segnou’s very recent survey of the knowledge amongst school children and students of Cameroon’s path to independence illustrates the continuing occultation of

this period of their history. Through an analysis of school textbooks and interviews with students from primary to tertiary level, Segnou concludes that in so far as the nationalist movement is taught at all (it is taught at primary level rather than in the later years), the focus is on the period of German colonisation (1884-1916) and its resistance martyrs (160). The foundational myth thus operates in Cameroon on a triple basis: displacement, amalgamation and autogenesis. Displacement of the anti-colonial struggle from the late 1950s to the period of German colonisation avoids comparison with and distracts attention from present-day forms of French neo-colonialism.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the young generation has a rather lapidary understanding of the events leading up to independence, not least because when, in 1991, the parliament passed a law proclaiming the UPC leaders to be “national heroes,” the inclusion in their number of Ahidjo Ahmadou must have fostered confusion, writes Segnou, over the actual roles of the various wings of the nationalist movement (147-8). Despite increasing possibilities for research and publication about this period, Segnou records the continuing fear and reluctance of school inspectors and teachers to tackle this topic, and the use of textbooks (still produced in their large majority by French editors) that give greater prominence to foreign than to local history (151-2; 157). Interestingly, Segnou draws attention to the possibility offered by contemporary online media for young Cameroonians to find out about their past, and their knowledge of certain figures such as the historical leader Ruben Um Nyobe may reflect their access to these sources of information.

Segnou’s text includes in the early chapters a recapitulation of the history of the UPC from a very sympathetic viewpoint, based on rather few sources. While perhaps necessary to explain the background that has been missing from the school textbooks, his account does not add anything to historical knowledge of this struggle, already rigorously explored by Deltombe et al in *Kamerun!* (Thomas Deltombe, Manuel Domergue and Jacob Tatsitsa, *Kamerun! Une guerre cachée aux origines de la Françafrique, 1948-1971*, Paris: La Découverte, 2011). The survey of textbooks and student knowledge does however offer a necessary (and possibly rather brave¹) examination of the way history is taught in Cameroon.

¹ I say brave because perhaps Cameroon’s most famous dissident, Enoh Meyomesse, author amongst many other writings of dissenting histories of Cameroon, has spent many years in prison for his pains.