

French Music Diaspora

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**Research Essay – Impact of Colonialism on Cameroonian Languages
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The Impact of Colonialism on Cameroonian Languages

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“Language is an expression of an individual conception of the world and it is essential for the transmission of culture.”¹

These are the powerful words of M. Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow at the Opening speech of the Fifth Session of the Internal Congress of African Studies in December 1985. For many African nations, finding the right language/languages to express themselves has been a source of conflict particularly after their long histories of slavery and colonialism in the 18th and 19th centuries. From 1884-1961, Cameroon was ruled by three different imperial powers, Germany, France and Britain. Cameroonians know all too well the problems associated with finding their own identity, for their country has a multiplicity of languages and cultures.

Cameroon is made up of nearly one hundred eighty thousand square miles and is strategically located occupying the area between the coastal states of West Africa and the western coastline of the equatorial states to its south.² Because of its access to the sea and relative access to surrounding African countries, and an abundance of natural resources, many European nations have wanted add Cameroon to their empires.

The very name Cameroon indicates that a foreign identity has been imposed on the peoples of this African nation. In the 15th century the Portuguese were the first Europeans to land in the territory they called *Rio dos Camaroes*. In Portuguese *Camaroes* meant shrimp. The Portuguese sailors chose this name because the country’s waters were teeming with an abundance of shrimp and other marine life. Each new colonial government decided to rename Cameroon in order to reflect their own culture. Since Cameroonian history is so great I will only

¹ M Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow was the Director General of UNESCO and gave this speech in 1985.

² Rubin 4

focus on the impact of colonialism on the languages. This paper will first explore the language situation in Cameroon before colonialism. Secondly, it will talk about Francis Bebey and his views of the African identity. Finally, I will explore the language of music and its impact on Cameroon.

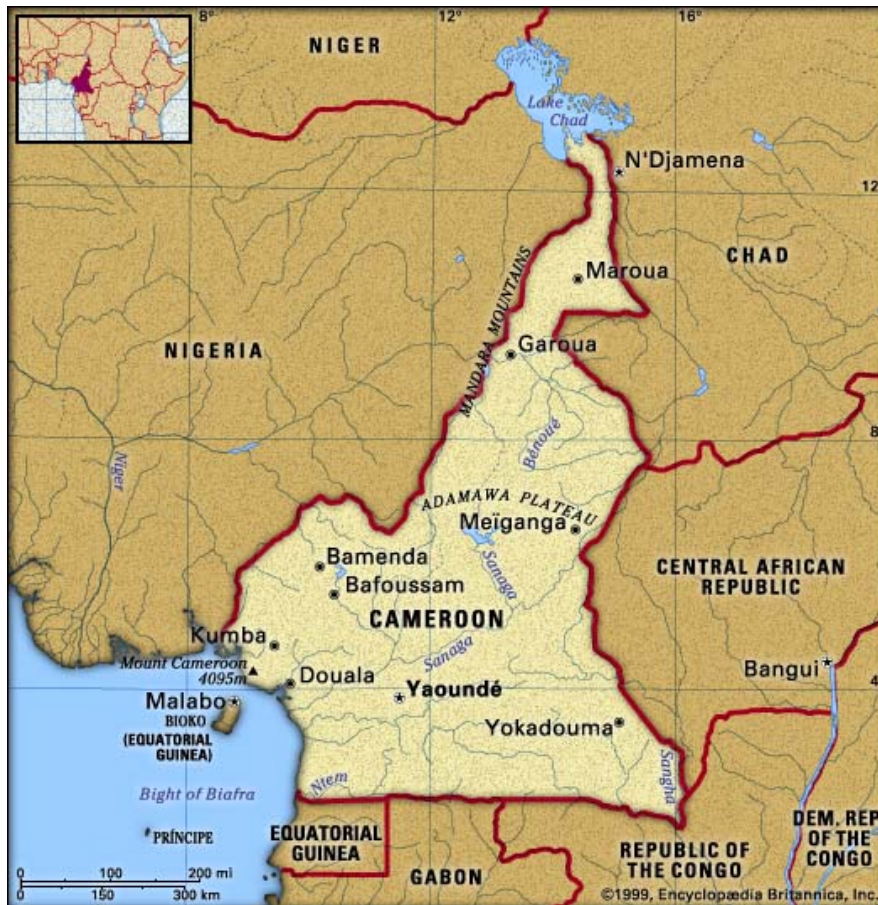
Cameroonian Languages before Colonialism

Hugh O. H. Vernon-Jackson studied Cameroon's language and educational structures before and after the arrival of Europeans and North Americans. Throughout the centuries, there were large migrations of people within the territory. People moved from the southwest to the east and southeast of Cameroon. This continuous migration of peoples had effects on the languages of newcomers and also of residents around the country. By the mid-19th century there were various ethnic groups within Cameroon and they spoke multiple indigenous languages.

In the northern areas, Hamito-Semitic (Shuwa, Arabic, Kanuri and Hausa) is spoken between Lake Chad and the central regions; Sudanic-Fulani is spoken in the west-central part of the territory; and many Bantu-languages are spoken in the east and west from the far north to the coast.

Sudanic-Fulani speaking peoples came from the west, now known as Nigeria, and migrated to the farther north. These people made their livings as slavers and cattle herders. Shuwa Arabic people arrived from the east and settled in the far north. These people had been migrating to the northern part of the territory for a long time. Hausa speaking peoples arrived from the northwest regions for trade. However, most of the Hausa speaking groups settled in the central hills. Looking at the map below to the west of Cameroon one sees the former British

colony of Nigeria where English is the lingua franca. To the east are the former French colonies, mainly French speaking Republics of Chad, Central Africa, Congo and Gabon. Offshore, located in the Bight of Biafra are the Spanish controlled territories of Fernando Po and Rio-Muni and Spanish is the main language here.³



In the 1840s, the very first foreign missionaries arrived in the country. They would be the first to implement language training for Cameroonians. Before the missionaries arrived, international trade between Europeans and indigenous Cameroonians had been going on for more than three centuries along the coast. However, the presence of missionaries to Cameroon

³ Vernon-Jackson 2.; *Cameroon: geography.* Online Map/Still. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. <<http://www.search.eb.com/eb/art-52530>>.

caused an increase in trade. In order to communicate with different groups, the native peoples developed a Cameroonian pidgin. This pidgin was a combination of Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English and many local words and constructions that were changing and influenced changes.⁴

Before a formal education system was established instruction was based on the Koran. There were many Moslems and people who spoke Hausa & Shuwa Arabic languages in the far north. Their school system was based on reading and writing Arabic and memorization of the Koran. When the Hausa peoples moved southwards for trade, Islam and Koranic schools developed in the coastal towns of Douala and Kribi.⁵ Foreign missionaries also founded the first Christian schools in Cameroon. Reverend Joseph Merrick, from the London Baptist Commission got permission from the local chief in Bimbia in 1844 to start a school. In 1845, Reverend Alfred Saker started another school in King Akwa's town. The missionaries learnt the native dialects Isubu and Douala in order to proselytize the Natives. They then translated the Bible into these languages. Various mission schools continued to spread and English and pidgin were the dominant languages of trade and commerce.

Languages Policies under Colonialism

It was during the Berlin Conference from 1884-1885 that the African continent was carved up and shared between the various European powers.⁶ Like in most African countries, little attention was paid to the construction of boundaries by Europeans says Neville Rubin.

⁴ Vernon-Jackson 2.

⁵ Vernon-Jackson, 5.

⁶ JF Ade Ajayi Discourse du Président de CIAF 31 in African Education and Identity.

Ironically, many of the local peoples did not even know that their country was being divided by foreign powers. During colonization, the languages that were used in the schools have mainly been those of Western governments.

Germany was the first European nation to stake a claim to what they called *Kamerun*. Many Cameroonians embraced the German language and encouraged their children to do the same. In 1886, German and Douala were used in schools. German missionaries also learnt Bamum and Bali and these languages were used in the schools of Foumban and Bali. Grants were given to students who excelled in German allowing them to study in Germany. When World War I broke out, France and Britain invaded Cameroon and the Germans all fled the territory taking all of their teachers and educational resources with them.

Under French colonialism, the French colonists saw traditional African music and languages as primitive when compared to their own. It was the Europeans after all who had introduced the printing press to the African continent. Since the Africans never had this invention, they were viewed as backward. France had an assimilation policy and wanted to ensure that the French language prevailed over native tongues in French Cameroun. Therefore, a very strict language policy governed the education and administrative sectors. The French also established government schools and teacher-training highlighted the importance of French. Students were immediately discouraged from speaking in German when the French government took over Cameroon. African schoolchildren heard French spoken for the first time when they went to school. In contrast French Québécois or French schoolchildren already mastered the language so they went to school only to learn how to perfect their knowledge of the world around them. Cameroonians were told that in areas of importance, in order to succeed in the

future, one had to erase all traces of the African identity. “French was seen as the open gate towards culture, the future and progress.”⁷ Scholarships were awarded to students to study in France at secondary, technical and university levels.⁸

The British sections of Cameroon lay close to the Nigerian border. Not many Cameroonians had the opportunity to go to school in the British Cameroons. The few schools established here were parts of the educational system of Northern Nigeria. Initially, the British neglected the educational sector. Many of the German schools had closed during British colonization. English, German and to a lesser extent pidgin, were used to communicate on international and local scales. All of the indigenous groups used one of the many Bantu languages though. Vernaculars were used in the primary schools and English was used in higher forms. High school students finished their education in English speaking Nigeria. Teacher-training and technical training courses were also available.

Unlike in French Cameroun where there were rigid policies, native languages were used more widely in the British Cameroons. Native and local administrators mainly wrote in Hausa; English was only used by federal and regional government departments. Locals continued to speak Kanuri, Shuwa, Arabic and Fulani whenever they wanted to. Many Nigerian civil servants

⁷ Vernon-Jackson, 14-15.

⁸ Ambroise Kom. *La malédiction francophone Défis culturels et condition postcoloniale en Afrique* (Hamburg: Lit, 2000) 99.

were given financial incentives to take English language exams and were sometimes promoted if they passed.⁹

When the Europeans constructed ideas about nationalism, they drew on common factors as culture and particularly language. Richard Bjornson states that the introduction of the printing press played an important role for the development of European nationalism. Many African nations were viewed as primitive because they did not have the technology of printing. However, when the printing press was introduced to them by missionaries, local languages were able to be transcribed and copied. Of course, some native languages were entirely forgotten while preference was given to others.

A whole wave of nationalist movements arose in Africa in the late 18th and 19th centuries. For many African countries, at the dawn of their independence the identity of their new nations was presented in the language of the colonizer. Bjornson states that for this reason, many Africans did not have any nationalist feelings towards their new states. Rather many of them still choose to identify themselves based on their ethnic backgrounds.¹⁰ Those African countries that obtained their independence in the 1960s have found it important to establish their own identities that speak for who they are. However, many nations are faced with problems of determining national languages, and the preservation of other languages in the face of the dominant colonial language. Cameroon is one such African country.

⁹ Vernon-Jackson, 14-15.

¹⁰ *The African Quest for Freedom & Identity* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1991) 3.

Francis Bebey

Last year I discovered a Cameroonian musician by the name of Francis Bebey who knew all too well, the struggles Africans encountered in finding and asserting their identities.

Francis Bebey was born in Douala, Cameroon on July 15, 1929. His father, a Protestant minister taught him how to sing and Francis grew up listening to western music. However he was passionate about African traditional music and culture. He would often sneak off to learn how to play the traditional African harp and mouth bow. All of these teachings would later impact his worldview.

During his lifetime, he was a composer, guitarist, poet, novelist, short story writer and radio broadcaster. Bebey had the fortune of being able to attend high school while he was in Cameroon. While there, he obtained his Baccalauréat in Mathématiques. He then went on to study French literature and music at The Sorbonne. In addition, he studied Broadcasting at the Studio École de la Radiodiffusion Outre-mer, Paris. He also studied Broadcasting and Television at New York University. Through the course of his career he has worked with the African service of the French National Radio, Cameroon Radio and Radio Ghana. In the early 1960s he worked with UNESCO in Paris in the Information Session.¹¹

His music style is a blend of European instruments along with many traditional African instruments. For example, Bebey combined traditional Cameroonian music like the pygmy flute with western styles of music to create a unique and enchanting blend of music. Additionally, Bebey played a vital part in presenting African music to the world.

¹¹ http://www.rfimusique.com/siteen/biographie/biographie_7475.asp

Francis' theme at the end of colonialism was one of reconciliation. He firmly believed in African tradition values and he did not want to erase the history of the colonial past. Bebey advocated that if modern values encroached upon traditional society, cultural values have to evolve to changing circumstances and increased knowledge. However, the insights of these traditions must be kept alive and writing allows them to flourish.¹² He did not encourage bitterness towards Europeans. Rather he wanted Africans to use the memories of colonialism and their present experiences and continue to live peacefully. Francis also published three books where he talks about the challenge Africans face when confronted with modernity. Bebey believed in a spiritual reality that shows the importance of life. He believed that cruelty, selfishness and strife resulted from people losing touch with this spiritual reality.

Bebey truly represents the African who encountered colonialism and took trademarks of it and made them positive. He did not deny the English and French languages when Cameroon obtained independence. Doing so either way would have been seemingly difficult. English and/or French had become the lingua franca in most African countries and are widely used around the world. Moreover, due to the multiplicity of African languages, to choose to sing in one particular language meant that empowering the entire African audience would have been impossible. Many people consider Francis Bebey as the Father of World Music.

Furthermore, Bebey said that it is very important for African musicians not to lose their authenticity even though they are bombarded with foreign music. Music he says is an important part of the African's life from his birth. Every aspect of life from grinding corn to hunting is engaged in a musical melody. Many African musicians tend to develop an inferiority complex

¹² Bjornson, 263.

because they are faced with competition from the radio. He admonishes musicians to develop their talents to ensure that it continually remains authentic.¹³ Bebey adds that Africa has many problems and preserving traditional music is only one of them.



Francis Bebey playing the Pygmy flute

As an English speaker taking a joint major in French and International Development, I wanted to be as fluent in French as possible. So, last year I took Trent's Year Abroad programme, "Trent in Nantes" and fell in love, or so I thought, with France. I loved the French language, but most of all I loved its music. I wanted to hear it around me so much that now, speaking only in English has become foreign to me. Linda, a history student, was one of my

¹³Francis Bebey, (*African Music A People's Art*. Trans. Josephine Bennett. New York: Lawrence Hill, 1975) 33.

neighbours and we became friends. She had moved to France from Douala, Cameroon to finish high school.

Before meeting Linda, I knew nothing about Cameroon. She told me about Cameroon's history of European colonization. Presently, Cameroon has two official languages, English and French. However, Linda only spoke a limited amount of English because at her bilingual school in Cameroon, she specialized in French. In fact, she wanted me to teach her English because knowing English is currently considered an asset in France. She along with many Black students told me that I was lucky that I could speak English. No matter how educated the Black student is, Linda said, in France he always has to go beyond what is expected of his white counterpart, just to be considered for the same job. Many of my African friends came from the Maghreb, Black Africa and Les Iles Comoros and spoke French as a first language. Yet, many of them found that because of the colour of their skins and their last names were foreign, that is African, many white French people did not see them as equals.

My radio show, *Des Ondes Françaises* was my boarding pass to the former French Empire as I sailed along her waves, discovering her legacies and opening my eyes. With every song I played, I was able to trace the steps of France, who branded her world with her language from West Africa to the New World. I had never even heard of many of the artists we played. In fact, William one of our hosts told us it was important to play the African music because most people do not get the chance to hear it or know that such variety exists. William had more than 100,000 songs in his collection. Yet, I had only heard of three artists. Initially, I felt comfortable playing music by artists who sang in French. I did not understand African native

languages and neither did any of my co-hosts. So we mainly played French and English songs. However, I liked Francis Bebey so much that I had to play his music.

Many scholars would agree that colonialism led to the underdevelopment of the African continent. Today, many African peoples are still fighting to find their own identities and to be seen as equals to their white counterparts. Listening to Francis Bebey once again made me realize that I was only perpetuating a problem that existed from the days of European colonization and which many colonized peoples continually face. Colonization's aim was to eradicate the image of the native person. Native peoples and their languages were seen as backward and state run schools only encouraged the growth of European languages. Through ignorance, I was denying their languages and denying their voices.

Unfortunately, still France prefers for other to assimilate into her cultural standards. However, African peoples must realize that they have the power to determine their own identities and no one has the right to impose notions of inferiority upon them. If Africans continue to determine their own paths and embrace peace and love, they can proudly proclaim who they are, and form sustainable goals to help develop the African peoples.

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