

# Ethnicity in cameroon



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Ethni and the ' National Question' in Cameroon. Cameroon, a bilingual country (it was colonized by the French and the British after the First World War) with a population of close to eighteen million inhabitants is situated on the west coast of the Central African Sub-region. (World InfoZone, 2008). It ruled by the presidential regime with the three arms (the executive, legislative and the judiciary) forming the government. (World InfoZone, 2008). Culturally, it has a diversity of ethnic groups (about 250), varying religions but the most prominent of which are Christianity and Islam. Its relief ranges from desert in the north, Savannah grassland to tropical rain forest in the southern region. (World InfoZone, 2008). It is called ' Africa in miniature' as it harbors almost all the political, economic, religious, cultural and relief features of the entire continent. (World InfoZone, 2008).

Ethnicity has been a topic of debate in the country for a long period now. With over 250 different ethnic groups having different cultures and local dialects, representative governance and integration becomes difficult and thus has recently become a national topic of debate. This has its roots dating back to 1964 when the late Dr. Bernard Fonlon questioned the former president Ahmadou Ahidjo on the Functioning of the then Federal Republic of Cameroon which was failing. This led to the change of the structure to ' the United Republic of Cameroon' in 1972 and later to the ' Republic of Cameroon' in 1984. (Culture of Cameroon, 1997).

The national question in Cameroon is more an issue of being either being part of the ruling majority and in which case, being submissive, paying allegiance to the powers that be, or being part of the geographically privileged southerners who dominate and control power. (Mentah, 2008).

The latest tendency is for the ruling establishment to meticulously fuel ethnic

exclusion, articulating ethnic animosity getting isolated entities or ethnic groups for the-right-moment political manipulation. (Mentah, 2008). This means that the system of government is that of little or no patriotism but a struggle to share in the constantly diminishing ' national cake.' (Nyamjoh, 1999). Though the country is politically very stable, the question of National unity and integration due to the ongoing ' politics of regional and ethnic balance, chronic lack of vision as a country, the lack of real commitment to democracy, the propensity to vacillate on most issues of collective interest, together with an infinite ability to develop survival strategies which have countered all meaningful attempts to pursue common interests and aspirations'. (Nyamjoh, 1999). National identity, stemmed from a national culture formed by external colonial masters during the period of mandate and trusteeship. (Mentah, 2008). This has, through the years, led to regional and ethnic distinctions, breeding coalitions and tension on a local level. Thus, it is common to have people from the northern region being referred to as the Northerners (as united by their common religion: Islam), or those from the grassland fields commonly called the Anglophones or Bamiléké and Bamouns and those from the Centre and south commonly referred to as the Betis or Ewondos. (Mentah, 2008).

Administratively, the country as seen by Nyamjoh, is administered by a divide and rule system, wherein particularly from the Anglophone provinces, an appointment to a post of responsibility is followed by the sacking of a predecessor from the same region. (Nyamjoh, 1999). This has led to a situation of political back-stabbing and to gain favour and appointment from the powers that be, and leading the elite of the respective ethnic groups to the illusion that having a place in the limelight is just a matter of time for

them and their ethnic group. (Nyamjoh, 1999).

To conclude, the national question can be fully addressed if the powers of the state in intervening in the free operation of the social, political, economic, cultural and ethnic identity should be reduced to give the local indigenes the sense of belonging to one nation. (Mentah, 2008).

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