

Bernard Fonlon and *Abbia*: an Introduction

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In 1953, Bernard Fonlon left the Nigerian Seminary where he had been studying for the priesthood. He was well educated in Latin, Philosophy and Theology but had few formal academic qualifications. Eight years later, he had studied in Cork, Oxford and at the Sorbonne and had gained a BA, an MA, a Diploma in Education and a Ph.D. Indeed, he was the first Cameroonian to be awarded a doctorate. His dedication to learning and, in particular, to honing his skills in English, French and African American studies, was so that he could better serve Cameroon. His country had had a chequered past, named by the Portuguese¹, loosely governed by the English in the 19th century², declared a German Protectorate in 1884³ and divided between France and Great Britain after World War I⁴. He returned to his newly independent country⁵ in 1961 and his competence in both French and English proved extremely valuable.

Immediately after his return from Europe, he was appointed to the office of John Foncha, who was Prime Minister of the anglophone region. His strong support for a united, bilingual Cameroon was further rewarded when he was invited to move to Yaoundé to serve in the office of President Ahmadou Ahidjo. Although his bilingualism and his political views meant that he served his government at ministerial level in several capacities⁶ for ten years,

¹ In 1472, the Cameroon coast was explored by Fernão do Pó, who called the Wouri River Rio dos Canarões, River of Shrimps.

² The English set up a base in Fernando Po, now Bioko, to help suppress the Slave Trade. They encouraged missionaries and traders to establish themselves near Douala.

³ The Cameroon coastal chieftains, the English Missionaries and the traders all encouraged England to make Cameroon a British Protectorate. England decided to do so in 1884 but when Edward Hyde Hewett arrived with a treaty, he discovered that the Germans had already signed a treaty to establish German rule. German was the official language of Kamerun.

⁴ The Treaty of Versailles in 1919 gave the government of approximately four fifths of the country to France and one fifth to England. The francophone section was called Cameroun, the Anglophone section Cameroon.

⁵ Francophone Cameroon gained its independence from France in 1960; the Federal Republic was established in 1961. It united the francophone zone with the south west Cameroon.

⁶ He worked in the President's office until 1964 when he was elected as a Député to the Federal Parliament. He had ministerial posts in Foreign Affairs, Transport, Health, Post and Telecommunications.

his first love⁷ was writing and research. In 1971, he was allowed to leave politics to pursue an academic career in the University of Yaoundé.

In 1962, Dr Fonlon set up *Abbia: Cameroon Cultural Review*, as a bilingual cultural review. The name was taken from a game that made use of carved seeds. The flat seeds were approximately 4 x 2cms and the carvings could represent plants, trees, animals, musicians, items of significance in the culture of the country. He designed the logo for the cover of the Review using seven seeds to create a capital A. Both covers have a muted, secondary layer of symbols from the writing script invented by Sultan Ibrahim Njoya of Bamum in 1896⁸. *Abbia* was meant to appear quarterly and had two main goals: it wanted to offer a scholarly outlet for the writings of young Cameroonians and it intended to provide intellectual models for a developing nation.

The first edition was published in February, 1963, and its contents provide insights into Dr Fonlon's beliefs and ideals. He was responsible for the Introduction and for an article on Uganda's 1962 Conference on African writers. Other Cameroonians contributed papers on education and culture, original poems and reviews of books, records and films. Perhaps the most interesting inclusion is 'A live language: "Pidgin English"/"Une langue vivante: le "Pidgin Anglais"' by J.A. Kisob. Dr Fonlon was eager to increase the spread of both English and French and to encourage the highest level of competence in both these languages. He also respected the indigenous languages of Cameroon and supported their use and promotion. He was ahead of his time, however, in also appreciating the value and versatility of Cameroon Pidgin English. This was a time when Pidgins were often disparaged⁹ and rarely given the respect of a capital 'P', but Kisob's article is given space and illustrates the value of this extremely valuable lingua franca¹⁰.

⁷ Personal communication. Whatever his job and no matter how busy he was, he always dedicated two hours every night, usually between 3am and 5am, to non-political study.

⁸ Sultan Njoya developed a semi-syllabic system for transcribing his mother tongue, Bamum. It is an original approach to the creation of an orthography and its intrinsic originality is still being assessed by scholars. See early publications such as Njoya 1952 and Dugast & Jeffreys 1950 and more recently e.g. Orosz 2015.

⁹ Pidgins were referred to as 'bastardised languages', 'trade jargons', 'inferiority made half articulate'. (See Todd 1990: 24).

¹⁰ While Dr Fonlon was in the Ministry of Health, there was a cholera outbreak. He used Cameroon languages and Cameroon Pidgin as well as English and French to broadcast information on the best means of minimising its impact and of preventing its spread.

In spite of his heavy workload, Dr Fonlon continued to edit *Abbia* until 1982, when lack of funding as well as deteriorating health caused him to end its publication. The last issue is, in part, a celebration of the tenth anniversary of the United Republic of Cameroon. In 1972 Cameroonians had voted in a referendum to change from a federal system of government between anglophone West Cameroon and francophone East Cameroon to a United Republic of Cameroon with a National Assembly in Yaoundé. The introductory article is given over to extracts from President Ahidjo's address to the Assembly in May 1972, when he put forward his reasoning for moving away from the federal approach to government. A few months after the publication of this last issue, President Ahidjo had resigned and been succeeded by President Paul Biya.

The final issue, like the first, deals with a wide range of topics, politics, culture, education, African Literature, creative writing and Pidgin in a review article of *Some Day Been Dey*, a collection of Cameroon Pidgin folktales.

Dr Fonlon was a gentle, generous man who loved his country and his continent and still had time to steep himself in classical music and English Literature. He was genuinely humble, always dressing simply in an African abada¹¹ over cotton trousers. He was always eager to support the younger generation and went to extraordinary lengths to ensure they had the opportunity to develop their talents. He was on first-name terms with prime ministers and presidents and recorded their meetings and their correspondence in his diaries although he did not speak of his friendships in public. For many years after returning home, he drove a battered VW, of indeterminate colour and age, and it was in this that he used to join the ministerial cavalcade that welcomed President Ahidjo when he returned from official visits. One day¹², the president called him and asked why he did not drive a black Mercedes like his fellow ministers. His reply was simply that he could not afford it. He was the only son in the family and had a mother and sisters to support. He thought about what the President had said

¹¹ An *abada* is an loose shirt, with sleeves to the elbows. It often has a motif of simple embroidery at the neck, waist and sleeves.

¹² Personal communication.

and worried that his battered, old Beetle might be seen as an insult. As soon as he could afford it, he bought a black Peugeot and kept it for the rest of his life.

Bibliography

Note we have not added formal references to the articles in Abbia since they are included in the online edition included as appendix to this issue of *Vestiges*:
<http://www.vestiges-journal.info/Abbia/>

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