

Cameroon : A marriage of three cultures

by Francis MBASSI MANGA, B. A.

Look here, you are more 'French than the Frenchmen themselves, you fellows over here.. !

What you have not realised is that, if the Englishmen left any legacy at all in West Cameroon, it is this that they succeeded in making you very 'English'.

This was the theme of a discussion I heard in Yaounde sometime in January, 1963. I was in fact so interested in the discussion that I listened to it to the end.

The East Cameroonian, French educated, imputes the behaviour of his counterpart, who is English educated, to the British character, and the West Cameroonian accuses his compatriot of being un-Cameroonian because he is too 'French'.

In Yaounde, this argument goes on, day in day out, in the offices and at home whenever these once separated brethren meet to discuss daily problems. Their discussions reveal the struggle that is going on in our new society — the 'French' in conflict with the 'British'.

The discussion has been ringing in my head from the day I heard it. Sometimes I have tended to forget it, but suddenly I recover it by fresh episodes of the same type. This involuntary conflict gave me the image of a struggle of cultures in Cameroon: the prominently conspicuous being the French and the English underneath which lies the Cameroon Culture.

Since the feelings expressed in the above conversation are being repeated, they may tend to conquer certain minds, and develop in them an attitude of impatience and revolt, instead of the desired attitude which consists in likening this "unwilful struggle" to that experienced by a devoted fiance before wedlock. For this is a period for laying the foundations of New Cameroon. These feelings, because they are given verbal expression, may soon become ideas

that are likely to acquire fixity in certain minds and make the process of cultural fusion difficult if not impossible.

For "human nature being the most plastic part of the living word, the most adaptable, the most educable," as Hocking puts it, "it is also the most maladaptable and mis-educable." The **Cultural Heritage** which contains the whole structure and fabric of good life is acquired. It may **not be acquired** at all. For we are **not born with it**. If it is **not transmitted from one generation to the next**, it may be lost, indeed forgotten through a dark age until somewhere and somehow men rediscover it, and, exploring the land again, re-create it anew. Where is the Cameroon cultural heritage today? The following paragraphs will try to answer this question.

Now, one can ask the following question: How did this writer come to the idea: "Cameroon: a Marriage of three cultures?" This is the way it came to me. I listened to the conversation which is mentioned at the beginning of this article, then after hearing it several times, it stuck to my mind, it became a puzzle to me. Then I asked myself: "Why this conflict?" After some time, I arrived at the following answer: The East Cameroonian accuses the West Cameroonian of being "English" because the English in fact ruled West Cameroon. The West Cameroonian may or may not be "English!" And the West Cameroonian accuses the East Cameroonian of being "French" because the French did in fact rule this sector of our country. But more than this, each accuser unconsciously feels himself more Cameroonian than his compatriot. For, by rejecting the French culture, he is not espousing the English, but the Cameroonian. So in reality, we have in Cameroon, French and English Cultures struggling in our society. The basic heritage lies securely embedded, as a resistant rock, under the covering of the French and English dominant cultures. These two somehow hid the indigenous Cameroonian Culture for almost half a century. It was in fact threatened in many ways by these dominant two and by some elements of missionary work. But as a resistant rock appears in places on the surface after a heavy rain, our culture expressed itself in lone places in traditional dress — called then "native dress" and in several forms of handicrafts, carvings, weaving, knittings, to be bought almost exclusively by the "whiteman."

But today, by the force of indigenous Cameroonian cultural elements, the French and British heritage are melting together in our society. These three will 'marry' together to constitute a new Cameroonian Culture containing a unified structure.

In our society we now have a good slice of our people who think in 'French' another group that thinks in 'English' and still another who think in the various Cameroonian "languages."

The behaviour of the first is conditioned to a great extent by their association with the French and English milieux.

Let us borrow from the philosophy of national stereotypes and apply it to these two groups determine whether Cameroon has indeed French and British characteristics. Professor H. J. Eysenck speaking on social attitudes in his "Uses and Abuses of Psychology," says: "The French, needless to say are sophisticated, talkative, artistic, passionate, and witty," and "The English consider themselves sportmanlike, reserved, trade-loving, conventional, intelligent... courteous, honest, extremely nationalistic and humourless."

I know that one cannot portray a whole nation, neither can one describe it in such cursory terms. But stereotypes having the obvious advantage of giving a more or less constant picture of a people, do we not find in Cameroon, persons who will fit into these two moulds?

We in fact have on the one side institutions based on the French systems and on the other institutions based on the British pattern. This is true of our legal, our educational, our civil service systems, it is true in the way we dress, in the choice of our pastimes and even true in our choice of dishes.

I am not suggesting in any way that we should reject these two acquired cultures. Rather, I am putting them into the limelight so as to appreciate them and willingly **knit** them together with the indigenous cultures, which are many, in order to form a unified whole.

This knitting process constitutes a whole programme which could be considered under three aspects:

- (a) sifting of the acquired cultures
 - (b) studying and sifting of the indigenous cultures
 - (c) "marrying" of the acquired and the indigenous cultures.
- Out of this "marriage" a new culture will be born: the Cameroon Culture.

There is a whole gamut of subjects through which the Culture of a nation can be studied. We shall, for the sake of this article, examine the marriage of cultures in Cameroon in its educational set-up and in the field of language.

Education and Culture

Before the whiteman came, education in Cameroon took the form of initiation into society. This initiation followed a tribal and geographical occupational pattern.

First of all, children were taught the ways of life or their families, their quarters, their vilages, their tribal units and finally, that of their geographical entity.

A child born, say in a fishing society, would first be initiated into the values of sea life. He would have to know how to swim and for this, his father or one of his relatives would take him out to sea several times a week and at times would drop him out of the canoe into the deep, while watching on. As soon as he attained the age of seven, he would learn to paddle. At ten he would be a steersman and would take his mother across the river to fetch wood and his father into the creeks to fetch thatch. From 12-14 the child would have known nearly all the basic occupations. He could now, apart from the food-bringing occupations, in the bush and at sea, sew thatch and help in building houses.

After 14 years of age, the child began to be initiated into greater tests of endurance. He could be sent all alone at night; could be left in the forest to find his way back home. In brief, he was initiated into those manly test values needed for inter-tribal competitions and even warfare.

To complete this formation, young people were initiated into the religious and spiritual life of their clan. While boys grew up following what cultural norms defined as manly roles, girls too were educated in those values that made them good wives.

The Cameroon youth was, therefore, brought up to use his hands and his head; he was brought up in those moral and ethical values that were necessary for the good life of society. He had a religious upbringing and was taught to cultivate his body in such sports as wrestling, canoe racing, running, horse riding, etc.

In fact it was considered a disgrace even in the early 1900's if a young man could not participate in, say, a wrestling contest, canoe racing, horse riding with those of his age group. Such a child was tabooed by his group. He was an object of ridicule to girls, a disgrace to his mother and father. True valour in several forms of contests earned special names and even titles, for the valorous young people.

A good wrestler in say, the Douala area was popularly called "Ngum" (champion). Such names came to stick to the owner even effacing, as it were, his real name. In a hunting locality, a young man who was fast at hunting chase, earned not only the name "Antelope" or "Dog," but he also had a special share of the meat. If a hunter killed a leopard, an elephant, or a lion; if a fisherman caught a crocodile, a manatee, hippopotamus, or any such rare animal or fish, he received special honour from the ruler and a title was conferred on him. Such honours were valid in the forest area, and wherever such a citizen went, he had special privileges. In fact, some rulers gave their daughters in marriage to their subjects who proved so brave as to kill such rare animals or catch such rare sea dwellers.

If the initiation had such results in the Forest Area, it had even greater results in the Grassland Area, where pastoral life created more hardship for the inhabitants. To keep herds of cattle means to live often in the open air night and day at the mercy of wild animals and robbers.

Apart from this basic upbringing, it can be said that Cameroon was not altogether ignorant of writing before the advent of the whiteman.

The Arab infiltration brought with it a variant of Arabic writing, and the late Sultan Njoya of Fomban invented a writing of his own. You will remember that, the covers of the copy of your Abbia are decorated: the first cover in part, and the last cover entirely with funny figures. These funny figures, I may remind you, are BAMUM script invented by Sultan Njoya in 1896.

It can, therefore, be said that had the whiteman not come to our country, Cameroon would have most likely adopted its own writing, a writing which would have served as a vehicle for Cameroon education based on indigenous culture.

It could be deduced from the foregoing that before the whiteman came to Cameroon, education was functional. Its purpose was to maintain and pass on to the new generation the traditions of our culture, its skills, knowledge, principles of interpersonal conduct, its religious and moral values.

It cannot be said that there was no need for literacy, but that early Cameroon Education was provided and stimulated by outsiders.

Parents and other relatives educated the child in his culture by providing him with an increasing participation in the work of the community and in ceremonies, as well as giving him specific instruction.

But when the whiteman came he introduced his own system of education. We shall for the sake of this article, concern ourselves with the period after the first World War. This will limit us to the British and French influences, — first, in what was then called British Cameroons, and second in former French Cameroons. That is to say, in today's West Cameroon, the British educational system was adopted, and in today's East Cameroon, the French

I should like to deal with each of these two systems in turn and then suggest ways and means by which both can fuse with indigenous Cameroonian culture to make up the Federal Cameroon's Educational system. But before we go on, I would like to cite an Egyptian delegate at the Unesco General Conference held in Montevideo in 1954.

The Egyptian made an interesting proposal on the curriculum of education in colonies. He said: "As a general principle, colonial powers should be asked to base education in their colonial territories on the culture indigenous to those territories." Whatever might have been the motive of this delegate, to me he was pointing out that some colonial powers did not base the education on their territories' indigenous culture. Taking the proposition at its face value, it might be necessary to point out here that this is a sound principle to apply to all countries, sovereign states as well as colonies.

How far is it possible to base education in the colonies on indigenous cultures? This is one of the principal points on which the French and British practices differ and that is why Cameroon has inherited a dual educational system in one and the same country.

The difference is based more on educational principles than on political, though no doubt political differences have had some influence. Since it was the aim of French colonial policy to establish a Union where member-states were re-presented in the Assembly in Paris, whereas British policy aimed at establishing a loose Commonwealth, it is naturally more important for the French territories to speak and write perfect French, and be thoroughly at home with French Culture, than for the British territory to have the same mastery of English.

But educationists differ on what educational policy should be. The British thought that it imposed an intolerable strain on the child, to take him from home to school, set him to acquire arts and knowledge belonging to a very different culture, and teach him through the medium of the English language.

Let us, they thought, ease the transition for the child as much as we can. Let us work outward from his experience, let us begin teaching him through the medium of the mother tongue and incorporate into the work of the school as much as we can of the culture of his own people. He will thus acquire the needed habits of thought and behaviour more easily, and will more easily pass over to foreign subject matter and the use of English when the time comes.

In other words, the young West Cameroonian had three difficulties to face sooner or later: the change from home life to school life; the new knowledge and new ways which he had to learn, and the new language which he had to use. Let us not face him with all three at once. Admittedly, thought the British, the young Cameroonian will know less English than an English pupil of the same age and attainments. But this disadvantage will be quickly made up, and by the end of the secondary school course, it will have vanished.

So in West Cameroon an attempt was made to teach the children through the medium of the vernacular — Douala was taught in the Forest area in all Protestant schools and in some Roman Catholic schools, pidgin and English were used. Native Administration, and Government schools followed a similar pattern. Mungaka (Bali) was used in the grassland area.

The Missionaries who came brought with them text books prepared for these schools in both vernaculars — Douala and Bali. The Missionaries themselves learned the vernaculars and were able to preach their sermons in either Douala, Bali or in pidgin English. Apart from the Missionaries, Administrative Officers, Residents and Senior Police Officers had to learn one written vernacular. I remember that in 1949, I had government permission to teach Douala to all Government officers who were transferred to Victoria.

So children went first to what was then called vernacular schools, learnt to read, write and count in their local language, and then later entered the Elementary School where English was used. And even when they went to the elementary schools, they continued to use the vernacular as a language, sometimes up to Elementary IV. This teaching in the elementary school was, however, limited to story-telling and religious knowledge.

Apart from these, the children who came to school continued to learn their local crafts in a more organised way, through handicraft lessons, and agriculture and home-craft for girls. Children

learnt to weave bags, baskets, cane-chairs, to carve chairs, walking-sticks, etc. Two mornings a week were devoted in the school time-table for gardening, handwork for every class, and the junior part of the school did mostly gardening.

These manual subjects continued in Teacher Training Colleges. The teachers had to deepen their knowledge of handicrafts, home-craft and farm work, and thus prepared themselves to teach these subjects more ably in their schools.

I think there was no consensus in the then Cameroons under the United Kingdom Trusteeship to push on one of the vernaculars. If there was, either Douala or Bali would have been accepted by the Universities of Cambridge and London for Cambridge and London pre-university examinations, like the C. G. E. ordinary level, and G. C. E. advanced level, because at the time four Nigerian languages were indeed so accepted. These were, Hausa, Yoruba, Efik and Ibo. The work of writing vernacular languages was unfortunately left to Protestant Missionaries and pidgin English to Roman Catholic Missionaries.

The French on the Eastern side approached the matter from a different angle, French education is in any case more formal, less child-centred, than British and American education, and French Educationists are more apt to judge the efficiency of an educational system by how much the pupils know and are able to do. It seems they argue on the following lines. Whereas the British are more impressed with the misery of the five-year old child who finds himself in the unfamiliar atmosphere of the classroom drowned in meaningless sounds to undertake unheard-of tasks, we (the French) are more impressed by the misery of the ten-year-old whose eager attempts to learn history and geography and to express himself are thwarted by his shaky knowledge of the French language.

The language, they seem to say, is an essential tool, and the sooner the child begins to acquire it, the better. Early childhood is the best time to learn a foreign language. In any case, children will pick it up quicker than they would five years later. Something has to be sacrificed. So they said: "Let us sacrifice some of the normal activities of the infant classes in order that the children will easily and quickly become fluent in French." Then the culture of the world stands open before them through the medium of French books. If the pupil wishes to make a linguistic study of his mother-tongue, or to develop his native art or music, he will better be able to do so because of the wide knowledge and comparative standards he will have gained from learning French.

The German Protestant Missionaries had organised vernacular schools all over the territory. Some of the local dialects that were written and taught were: Douala, Bulu, Bassa, Ewondo, Bangangte, Bamoum, and the North already had Arabic in a somewhat "developed" system of Arabic Education.

Children who left these schools, knew the three 'R's — Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic and only entered the French school in the third year of the Primary School. It may be well to point out that in Forekedchang, former Minister, Djoumessi Mathias, has kept on with the system. Children who enter his school, do all basic subjects in Dschang dialect up to First School Leaving Certificate level, before entering the French school. It is interesting to note that some of his students from part of the Cameroon Republican Band.

But in the early 1930's, when I started school, children going to Government schools were at once put on the French text books. They had their "Mamadou et Binetta" text books written for French West African Schools. As you can see the names Mamadou and Binetta have a touch of West Africanism. Other readers such as "Monod," "Mon Ami Kofi" had this touch in the names of the characters only. But from the word "go," they started learning meaningless French sounds, singing them with all the innocence of five- and six-year-olds across the streets, and "coranising" them for fear of the teacher's cane. Then we had to study recitations, one of which had for its first line "Nos ancetres les Gaulois," etc., today immortalised in Salvador's "faut rigoler," just as we had to sing in the English primary schools the "Rule Britannia!" In the villages there were vernacular schools as well, and some forms of handicrafts were taught.

There is something to be said on both sides, and it is a pity that it has not been possible to run a controlled experiment to see which system produces better results.

One argument could be that the British way of working through the mother-tongue would be better where all spoke the same local language, or to those who speak an important group language and have a sizeable published literature available for the majority than for those who come from smaller language-groups or who leave school early.

The child from West Cameroon who left school after three or four years retained his literacy in Douala or Mungaka but there was little for him to read, and he knew very little English, and so could hardly get a job. The only work readily open to him was that of a catechist.

The child from East Cameroon who left school after three or four years, on the other hand, had a fair amount of French, and there was plenty for him to read and could easily find a "white man's" job.

But I think this argument fades before the greater values of education which consist in leading the child to discover what he does not know from what he knows or what is more familiar to him, leading him through his own native surrounding to discover the world. **Education for the child must be based upon and grow out of, his own past, and his chief link with this past is his mother tongue.**

It is unfortunate that colonial government took no initiative to develop local Cameroonian languages.

In the then British Cameroon, the teaching of dialects was left to the Protestant Missionaries who used it mainly as a vehicle for spreading the gospel they had brought to Cameroon. In the then French Cameroon, on the other hand, the Protestant Missionaries struggled to keep the local dialects alive. The Colonial Government was not interested in their being developed, and the Catholics either limited their use to saying prayers in churches, or never gave them any recognition at all.

Today there is a growing tendency in East Cameroon for parents to make their children speak French from infancy up and some consider it beneath their dignity for their children to speak their native dialect!

But if the principle of education stated in the preceding paragraph has any meaning at all for the present Cameroon Nation, then the following statement should constitute one of the basic principles of the system of Education in Cameroon.

Education for Cameroon must have for its centre "the Cameroon child." It must be based upon, and grow out of, his nation's past, but the Cameroon child's chief link with the past is his mother tongue. To exclude his own language from his own school, is to make as great a mistake, and to be guilty of as much injustice as to separate him from his own land. Because of it, he would become a stranger in his own family, a foreigner in his own village, and would feel at home neither among his own people nor among those of another race. Particularly would this be true if he is led to despise his own tongue and with it all that he has inherited from his race.

What can be done is clear. We now use French and English as our official languages. The machinery for Bilingualism is being set. Our bilingual Secondary School opened its doors in Victoria last year. English and French are being taught in all our Secondary Schools. An experiment should be made to start the teaching of these two official languages earlier than the Secondary school level. But after all this has been done, there will still remain a missing link between the child's home and himself. This link is a Cameroon language.

Let us call French and English vehicles of "international culture." The Cameroon language could constitute the language of "National Culture," a base on which the international culture will lie without being blurred.

In order to convince ourselves of the necessity of this National language, let us try to solve the following puzzles:

How many Cameroonians today know French and use it as a working language?

How many Cameroonians know English and use it as a working language?

How many Cameroonians know French and English and use them as working languages?

I am certain, your answers will reveal that out of the four million Cameroonians, a majority knows neither French nor English.

Today there is a tendency in our society to consider those of our nationals who know neither French nor English as uneducated. We have seen earlier in this article that the local dialects were not encouraged.

In the North, fortunately, Cameroonians who know "Arabic" are not considered uneducated by Government.

The North excluded, what obtains in the other parts of Cameroon where many of our nationals read and write one of the formerly taught dialects? Let us attempt an answer. A knowledge of these local dialects is not in itself sufficient. To earn a living, for example in what used to be considered a "whiteman's job" these Cameroonians had to learn some trade like carpentry, masonry, etc. If not, they were confined to tribal occupations — fishing, hunting, cattle-rearing.

This attitude to the native dialects discouraged many parents who thus considered going to school to learn English or French, the sine-qua-non to being employed. This economic factor defeated

the cultural and explains in part why none of our local dialects was made the national language. There are no doubts that political reasons played their part also. An allegory from the Holy Bible might help to make the reasons apparent. The Old Testament gives an account of the construction of the Tower of Babel in Mesopotamia. The aim was to make an edifice that touched Heaven, the home of God. While all the workmen spoke the same language, the work went on very well. But because Heaven did not want these men to achieve their aim, Heaven confused their tongues, and when A asked for a trowel, B gave him a knife.

Today, local dialects should be given and should enjoy some sort of **recognition**. In courts, parties are allowed to speak in native dialects, while interpreters render all they say in French or English.

In Native Courts, native dialects are used by the courtmen, but minutes are taken down in either French or English. In the North they are, of course, taken either in Arabic or in French, or in both. Can this localised recognition not become national?

One of the most troublesome handicaps in the lack of a national language is experienced by our delegations to international conferences, and especially by our missions charged with negotiations with some other countries. What obtains is that our delegates cannot while negotiating consult among themselves as their opposite numbers often do.

During negotiations with a country like Japan, or Russia, the discussions are done either in French or English. If a difficulty springs up in the course of negotiations, and the Japanese consult themselves on the spot, the Cameroonians must either use pidgin English which all in the Cameroon party may not know, or take time off to discuss together in French or in English.

To this, there is the added difficulty that all the members of the Cameroon delegation may not speak a common official language. These are some of the difficulties we must continue to experience, for many years, if we do not sit up, organise and launch out a definite programme.

This programme could take account of the following suggestions. First and foremost, the National Committee on Education should appoint a technical committee which shall be charged with the following duties: They will assemble all that was good in the Cameroon functional education, that is the education before the whiteman came. Select one of the local languages. This language

will become the national language; then study how this language shall be taught first to all our nationals between the ages of 5-21, and between the ages of 21 and 45. For the first lot, 5-21, the major problem will consist in incorporating the language in the school curriculum. For the second group, there will be some difficulties in bringing them to accept to go back to school, to study a national language, when there is still the other official language, French or English, to be learnt.

To me, this is no problem. If all Cameroonians are devoted to the **idea**, they will not only proclaim it and accept it. This idea shall become like the idea of winning a war, the object and focus of the nation's energy. Thus of course, the idea would operate in the minds of men who voted, who planned, who would engineer the undertaking, procure the equipment, and shall we say, would suppress any resistance of objectors to the project. In short, Cameroonians must be devoted to the **idea** of involving a language of National Culture. The whole nation must accept to reorientate itself. For the present generation, it will seem difficult but consider the greater advantage to posterity and to future Cameroon.

We are attempting to melt the French and the English Cultures together with the indigenous Culture.

One of the relics of the English system is to work one shift a day. This practice, if adopted, will help to speed up the process of Cameroonisation of our Education. And Civil Servants and workmen in general will do one shift a day. These workmen: civil servants, traders, farmers, etc. constitute the body of teachers and students. After establishing the roll of the teachers and taught, what remains will be to organise the school time-table from 2.30 p. m. to 0.0. hours.

I do not like the term 'compulsion', but supposing, as I said earlier, every Cameroonian accepts the National plan, then what remains for him, is to devote himself to his conviction. This conviction will condition all other subsequent actions, and Cameroonians will enjoy going to work in the morning and going back to school in the afternoon to learn English or French, and to learn the Cameroon National language.

Without exaggeration, this plan taken seriously, in less than five years, all Cameroonian between the ages of 5 and 21 will speak English, French and "Cameroonian" and all Cameroonians between the ages of 21 and 45 will speak French, English and "Cameroonian" in five years at most.

A B B I A

I am sure that what I have said above is not only a result of examples, drawn from history. The modern world has living examples of developments that were a result of a revolution. For the revolution to be effective, it must become a doctrine, a **philosophy** living in and animating every Cameroonian. Only this philosophy can make all Cameroon people march in the same direction to build a viable nation.

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