

Preface

I barely made it back to Cameroon alive after a gruelling apprenticeship at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, that left me gasping for breath because of the rigorous nature of the academic atmosphere I experienced on that campus. It was with enthusiasm, then, that I returned to my native country, Cameroon, excited to begin serving a rich and ambitious student population by practising and imparting on to them what I had learned from some of the very best Africa could offer. I have always loved teaching and still do. However, my search for a position in the country's university system, at the time, 1990, exposed me to another side of life in Cameroon—the nasty—as I came to realize that things were not what they should be, at least as I had grown up experiencing and expecting. I grew up happily during the Southern Cameroons and West Cameroon days, and became an adult full of hopes during the United Republic of Cameroon era, only to be frustrated by the ongoing epoch of The Republic of Cameroon.

My years away as a university student had deprived me of opportunities of being initiated into the chaotic, corrupt, and totally tragic administrative structures that climaxed years after the demise of the Ahmadou Ahidjo regime. Thanks to a few altruists I met upon returning home, especially Professors Linus Asong and Ba'bila Mutia, and the late Engineer Charles Fofang, I was navigated through the maze of corruption and man-made hurdles until somehow I got recruited into the university system as faculty. It was the beginning of my education into the uncharted waters of a nation's shameful labyrinthine alleys of disorganization and mismanagement—dysfunctionalism. There was absolute turmoil from the ministries down to the chancellery. Shocked, because of the order I had seen within the educational set-up on Nigerian university campuses, I managed to serve the university for seven years before throwing in the towel. It was that or lose my mind in an effort to survive, transformed into a sycophant, where it was my right as a qualified and devoted professor to exercise my duties freely.

In April of 1997, I left Cameroon for the diaspora, abandoning an otherwise burgeoning career as a university professor because of the stifling conditions under which one was working. It was frustrating, an atmosphere that was further exacerbated by government policies that destabilized the mind by adding financial woes to already stress-warped thought processes as one worried about the direction in which one's career and even the nation were headed. Nobody, apparently, from the minister of higher education to the vice chancellor, seemed to care about anything, not even for the students that one was supposed to be serving; it was all politics and a dirty game of survival in usually shady positions of power and wealth.

Away from home, I had to begin afresh, painfully aware of how much I could have achieved already were my country—Cameroon—a sane society instead of the wasteland that, like most of Africa south of the Sahara, it was being turned into by a corrupt club of banditti masquerading as leaders. The beginning was not easy, of course, like every beginning, but with God, and a programmed society with a sacred constitution designed to serve its population,

I was able to begin a new life, even with a heart throbbing for Cameroon, for my people. I had to survive.

From beyond the national boundaries, and having had contact with different societies around the world, I have come to consider it a duty to review my homeland in an effort to see how far down the drain it has gone. The idea is to jumpstart our loving and hardworking citizens out of a state of stupor, orchestrated by heightened corruption, into realizing what procrustean leadership has done to a once thriving nation. This effort is all the more urgent as the vast majority of young adults today were born during this era of social decay within the country and so know no better. Cameroonians born in the seventies and after, have never known a local police force, for example, that was not prone to corruption; they have never known that there was a time when a person went to prison for giving a bounced check. To this generation, therefore, supposedly the future of this nation, all the citizens think they need is a job and some money to keep finding their way through the maze of sleaze and professional ethical squalor that marks social life in Cameroon today. My idea, therefore, is to let Cameroonians know that there could be better, that there had been better, and that corrupt practices need not be the way of life. In a corrupt society, only a few—the conniving and powerful—continue to enrich themselves even as others think they are making it too. But in a law-abiding nation, I have come to realize that the vast majority make it; yes, all who can afford to discipline themselves and seek gainful employment. This is the case because everybody benefits from the social, economic, and political stability of the nation, which are the ingredients that fertilize the environment and lead to lush existence instead of the haphazard efforts at survival that characterize Cameroon under Mr. Paul Biya's regime; a regime, like most in Africa, fashioned, guided, and still being influenced by unpatriotic despotic zeal along with imperialist whims.

Because this is an honest effort at bluntly diagnosing a nation's woes in a bid that somehow Cameroonians, and Africans as a whole, may begin working towards a better tomorrow, personal names have often been intentionally left out and only mentioned where the deeds of the individuals amount to common national knowledge. Names are also mentioned where it is believed individuals deserve recognition for their effort, in one way or another, towards improving upon the situation anywhere in the country. Our frustration and dissatisfaction are with the system and those people who through selfishness and neglect of their duties and responsibilities have fuelled the collapse of our nation, or else looked the other way while mayhem established itself as a system in a nation that has known better days. Most petty individual perpetrators of the ongoing state of anomy are themselves only victims of the system. They are the debris of a national disaster, drowning men and women clutching at straws of corruption and chaos for survival even though their niggling actions, comparatively speaking, have helped fan the flames of national destruction by raising corruption in Cameroon, and Africa as a whole, to shocking heights. Some individuals, accordingly, are bound to have their pride wounded by this effort, and so frown at it, but one has no choice. The plight of the suffering masses, and not a powerful but corrupt minority, is our concern here, and so this venture is more of a duty to us than otherwise. This is especially the case because being able to look at Cameroon from beyond, has brought to the fore so many

unhealthy practices in the face of which one cannot afford to remain mute. After all, it is said one needs a mirror to see oneself better. Accordingly, by looking at other systems overseas a reflection of the chaos in most countries within the mother continent slaps one in the face.

Accordingly, a “true” portrait of Cameroon is a combination of what it is when experienced both from within and from without, especially when cultural and socio-political values are compared and contrasted with the situation in other nations. In this regard, it is a painful fact that Cameroonians are made to dream that there is cooperation between the Cameroonian government and certain Western governments, such that people even dare to hope the West will bring about positive change in Cameroon. How often have Cameroonians hoped, for example, that by getting involved and working with either the government or the opposition, the United States will help in bringing about the end of certain political malpractices in the country? Cameroonians were to realize belatedly, that Cameroon, at best, was only a blip on the radar scope of the State Department which did not even feature on the agenda of the particular United States government at the time? As Alex Thomson has rightly pointed out, after the cold war, “Apart from a desire to spread liberal democracy and capitalism across the globe, African affairs troubled few within Washington DC’s circle of foreign policy makers” (151). Equally devastating to these hopes is the fact that not even Britain’s government seems to remember Cameroon, its former protectorate, else how does one explain the Baroness of Asthal’s blunder when in her capacity as Britain’s Under-Secretary of State in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office she referred to Cameroon as a Francophone country (Jua 92), thereby displaying her ignorance of the bilingual nature of the Cameroon nation which her country once colonized. In this light, Cameroon, in the main, has been examined against the backdrop of imperialist activities within Africa in the past and today. The idea is to see if one can agree with those who think it is time Africa be held responsible for her plight today instead of being continually accorded the role of victim in the hands of Western nations, organizations, and their activities on the continent.

We, as Africans, especially those south of the Sahara (we are always carved out thus, as if we are that other Africa), are at a point in our history when the truth must out in a forceful and more direct manner. Our concerns now must transcend petty individual egos as we take stock in an effort to see how we can salvage a continent that was bastardized by colonialism only to be repeatedly abused by irresponsible leadership, and one dares to say the citizenry also, as people have now fallen so low as to condone corruption by doing whatever it takes to make ends meet. The result is the collapse of order as African states are reduced into veritable political wastelands.

This then is a continental stock-taking, done through the Cameroonian experience, in the main, provoked by the denigrating images encountered abroad of a hospitable and hardworking people—Africans. Many African countries can be used effectively to portray the tragic political wastelands characteristic of Africa today, but Cameroon is ideal for at least two main reasons. Primarily, the continent of Africa is too complex, and more so are the problems and their causes, for any one volume to make claims of attempting to address the happenings in each country within the entire continent. For this reason, a

country considered significantly representative is used as an example for addressing the pulverizing crisis situation in Africa today. Cameroon fits the mould. Secondly, Cameroon is the choice because this is a country that became independent with minimal crisis, comparatively speaking. It was nurtured by Ahmadou Ahidjo, albeit dictatorially, into a thriving economic bastion in Africa, only to be completely bastardized by a parvenu, Paul Biya. This choice of Cameroon notwithstanding, when it is appropriate, illustrations are taken from other African countries.

It is unfortunate indeed that the damning portraits of Africa, somehow, rarely make it back to the continent such that Africans can react to them accordingly. As a result, many Africans sit back thinking so-called advanced countries are truly out to help them, even as conniving African leaders bleed their countries dry with the help of armed forces that only obey without thinking. It is common knowledge that it is more complex from a soldier's standpoint than this may reveal, but then, too much is too much. Africans, especially those from African countries still dangling from the reversed umbilical cords gripped by their colonial plunderers, must stop dreaming, wake up, and face the truth about how African nations can survive without Western superintendents breathing behind them for whatever reason. Freedom and development are qualities that are never handed to a people; they must be wrenched out of the hands of the oppressors, be they from within or without. But first, in the vein of the Igbo saying alluded to by Chinua Achebe, we need to know where the rain beat us so we may begin thinking of knowing where to dry our national bodies ("Role of the Writer" 157).

At best I am a social critic and not a political scientist as such. Even then my love for the subject is natural, such that as a boy of about five I remember asking my father what it took to be Ahidjo. Ahidjo had been in power for so long that his name became synonymous to "head of state", a position that looked like the highest form of success to a child. It was no surprise then that I nursed thoughts of reading political science in college. Alas when the time came, Ahidjo was still head of state and had established a notorious reputation for himself as a bloody dictator such that it did not require any effort for me to be dissuaded from my dream career. It was a turf permanently scanned and purged by Ahidjo after the manner of the biblical Pharaoh who went as far as to kill all children under a certain age in the hope of eliminating the newborn king. Rumours confirmed that Anglophone Cameroon had only one Political Scientist at the time, Mr. Samuel Fonyam, and it was said his every move was closely monitored by the regime. Accordingly, I ended up, after other interesting twists of fate, studying in the Department of English at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The program, however, was such that beyond the department, one was able to follow lectures by guest speakers and also take courses in other departments like Philosophy, History, and Classics. Subjects like African Political Thought, and Modern Political Thought, to name two, nursed my interest in politics, and so have events in the world, especially Africa, but more so Cameroon. Though somewhat fretful about my competence to delve into a territory outside my area of professional expertise as such, the will to educate, highlight, and redirect my suffering compatriots was overwhelming. Along with my confidence in the training given me at Ibadan, to dare and master, I set to work, emerging with this

venture: *Africa's Political Wastelands: The Bastardization of Cameroon*. My goal, however, was to produce a work that the professional and the lay person alike, the latter especially since they form the baulk that needs conscientization, could read, enjoy, and benefit from without being weighed down by heightened professionalism as is typical of works by scholarly experts intended for their peers. Accordingly, if the least I have achieved is to highlight our problems as Africans through the Cameroonian experience such that we can begin questioning and examining our daily actions and how they impact upon Africa's image and welfare as a whole, I would have succeeded.

To those who feel that because some of us left Cameroon when we did we betrayed a struggle, my answer is that I knew where it pinched the most, and so it was better for me to keep running while continuing the struggle, than to have stood my ground and ultimately fallen without a fight. To retreat, regroup, and then do battle is the strategy of many a successful warrior, and to learn from the masters is not a sign of weakness.

This book is, therefore, not an attempt to insult anybody; rather, it is an honest examination of the Cameroonian national conscience, as a microcosm of the continent of Africa, in the hope of transforming us all into national prodigals willing to make amends, for we have all erred in one way or the other against the image of our nation and continent as a whole. Accordingly, every Cameroonian must sit back and review his or her lifestyle, and answer to his or her own conscience if he or she can call himself or herself a responsible citizen. If not, then we must begin changing as individuals by charting new social, political, and ethical courses, and subsequently broaden out in the way we apply these trends in the face of other Cameroonians, and before long, we would be serving Cameroon and Africa better. We are a noble people by our traditional ways, and so we must revert to our ways or perish aping others along paths charted for us by alien values and experiences as the trends today indicate.