

The Powerlessness of Cameroon's Reunification Monuments

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Abstract

This study attempts to investigate the symbolism and popularity of the Reunification Monuments constructed in Yaounde and Mamfe some years after the political reunification of the two Cameroons. These monuments were constructed to commemorate the reunification of Cameroon, considered by many as the most significant event in postcolonial Cameroon history. This study intends to investigate why the monuments became victims of neglect, indifference and even scorn from Cameroonians only a few decades after reunification. An analysis of the data collected from interviews and secondary sources reveals that the monuments remain unpopular like the reunification history itself largely due to the failure of the powers that be to project this aspect of Cameroon history. The monuments have, therefore, remained powerless, as they have not immortalized the reunification of Cameroon, as is the case with reunification monuments elsewhere.

Key Words

Reunification, Monuments, Plebiscite, Southern Cameroons, *Republique du Cameroun*

Introduction

Cameroon became a German protectorate in July 1884 following the signing of the Germano-Duala Treaty between German traders and some Douala Chiefs along the coast of Cameroon. German administration in Cameroon ended in 1916 when Anglo-French forces defeated the Germans in the territory following the outbreak of the First World War in Europe in 1914.

When the war ended in Cameroon, Britain and France decided to partition Cameroon into British and French dominated areas. In the partition, France received four-

fifths of the territory and Britain, the remaining one-fifth. The international community through the League of Nations recognised the partition and requested the powers to administer their respective areas as Mandate Territories of the League of Nations. Britain decided, for administrative convenience, to partition British Cameroons into two: British Northern Cameroons and British Southern Cameroons. The British territories were administered from Nigeria: Northern Cameroons from Northern Nigeria and Southern Cameroons first from Southern Nigeria and later the Eastern Region of Nigeria.

After the Second World War, some of the nationalists in both British and French Cameroons expressed their desire for a reunification of the Cameroons. In French Cameroons, the desire and struggle for reunification were championed by the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC) led by Reuben Um Nyobe while in the British Southern Cameroons, reunification was one of the objectives of the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) of John Ngu Foncha and One Kamerun (OK), led by Ndeh Ntumazah. In both territories, the colonial powers treated the reunificationists as enemies, opposed the struggle and mounted formidable obstacles to its achievement. On January¹, 1960, French Cameroon became independent as la Republique du Cameroun. In February 1961, the UN organized plebiscites in the British Northern and Southern Cameroons requesting the indigenes to choose between gaining independence as part of Nigeria (integration with Nigeria) and independence with la Republique du Cameroun (reunification with French Cameroon). A majority of Northern Cameroonians opted for union with Nigeria while a majority of Southern Cameroonians voted for reunification with la Republique du Cameroun. On October 1, 1961, Southern Cameroons became independent and reunified with la Republique du Cameroun to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon.²

The reunification of Cameroon attracted international attention for several reasons. Firstly, it occurred at the time the Central African Federation of Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia and Southern Rhodesia created by the British in 1953 was collapsing because of zonal peculiarities, economic differences and the “divide-and-rule” politics of the colonial master. Secondly, the African-initiated federations such as the Mali Federation formed by Senegal and Sudan in 1959 were also proving unworkable. These were indications that African unity, highly cherished by the Pan-Africanists, could not easily be achieved. For these reasons, the reunification of Cameroon was welcomed by anti-colonialists, Pan-Africanists and African countries that were hoping that the reunified Cameroon would be the fulcrum of a wider Africa because it would blend the best of what was inherited from Britain and France. They expected Cameroon to offer the inspiration that would unite the rest of Africa. Speaking in 1961, Cameroon’s first President Amadou Ahidjo said “reuniting today people of both French and English expression, Cameroon will be a veritable laboratory for an African Union which will unite people who speak two languages. She will be a bridge between these two Africas, and her role can only be increased in forthcoming African Assemblies” (Dibussi Tande, 2006). This statement was an indication that political actors in Cameroon were aware of the importance of their decision. Cameroon’s reunification was therefore given moral support by the anti-colonialists as a desired political development in Africa.

Ahmadou Ahidjo, considered rightly or wrongly by observers as the principal architect of the reunification, received praise and acclamation all over Africa. In 1972, the University of Lagos conferred on him an Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree partly because of his role in the reunification of Cameroon. The Lagos University authorities citation stated that after achieving independence for what was then French Cameroon, Ahidjo initiated “intensive diplomatic campaigns at the United Nations to have a referendum conducted in that part of the Cameroons under British Trusteeship. The result was the reunification of East and West Cameroon...” Ahidjo was also described as “...one of Africa’s most illustrious and best known leaders (who) welded together diverse cultural entities into a homogeneous modern state...” (Aka, 2002:266)

To crown these awards, Cameroon was honoured by the member states of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) as it was the only country that provided two Secretaries-General to the OAU successively in the 1970s. They were Nzo Ekhah-Nghaki, 1972-1975 (from Anglophone Cameroon) and Eteki Mboumoua, 1975-1980 (from Francophone Cameroon). Africa therefore celebrated the reunification of Cameroon and the authorities in the country could not remain indifferent to this African recognition of the significance of Cameroon’s reunification

The Erection of Reunification Monuments

To immortalize this significant event, two reunification monuments were erected in Yaounde and Mamfe. There was also the reunification bridge over the Mungo River constructed in 1969 to link the towns of Douala in East Cameroon and Tiko in West Cameroon and to give concrete meaning to the political reunification of October 1961.³ In 1972, a newly constructed stadium in Douala was also christened “reunification stadium”. There were also “reunification streets” in Bamenda, Kumba, Mamfe and other towns of West Cameroon. At individual levels, several traders, tourism promoters and especially liquor vendors in the major towns of West Cameroon baptized their sales points “Reunification Hotel” and/or “Reunification Bar” in memory of this great event. However, the most conspicuous structures were the Yaounde and Mamfe monuments. The Yaounde monument was in the administrative and political capital of Cameroon while the Mamfe monument could be remembered because it was at the heart of the Mamfe town (Reunification Roundabout) that hosted some of the decisive pre-independence nationalist conferences in 1953 and 1959.

The Yaounde monument was designed by Gedeon Mpondo and the Jesuit Priest Engelbert Mveng and constructed by the French architect, Salomon, between 1973 and 1976 (Ngo Binam and Kay, 2003). It is located in Ngoa Ekelle in the Yaounde Third District near the French Embassy, the Ministry of Defense and the National Assembly. It is a mass bloc of an old man brandishing the national torchlight with five children on him. The second part consists of a spiral tower behind the old man.

The Mamfe monument, however, is a little-known monument constructed at the heart of the town during the years of giddy euphoria to commemorate the birth of the bilingual Cameroon. Unlike the Yaounde monument which bears no inscriptions,

on the Mamfe monument (which is simply a wall) is clearly and boldly written “Built in commemoration of West Cameroon Independence and Re-unification of Cameroon, October 1961”. In the early years it was expected that the two monuments would be sustainable touristic attractions like the Eiffel Tower. These monuments were also to be the best places and sites to commemorate, remember and evoke the history of reunification because as Boursier (2001) puts it “*les monuments constituent les traces visible du passé pour l'éternité, et la volonté de transmission de la mémoire aux generations futures*”. That is, monuments constitute visible and eternal traces of the past preserved in order to ensure the transmission of the history they represent to future generations. The two also represented the hopes and dreams of a bilingual Cameroon that would serve as an example to the rest of Africa. In terms of symbolism, the Mamfe monument, despite its small size, was as important as the Yaounde monument and like the Yaounde monument, it rapidly became a victim of neglect, indifference and even scorn from the people of Mamfe and the rest of Cameroon

Plate1: The Yaounde Reunification Monument



Plate 2: The Mamfe Reunification Monument



People's Perception of the Monuments

The Yaounde reunification monument is the principal monument and historical site in the political capital of Cameroon. In a study carried out by Ngo Binam Bikoi and Kay Nicole in 2013, it was realized that the Yaounde reunification monument was not known by a majority of the Yaounde inhabitants. (Ngo Binam and Kay, 2013) The monument was not a popular site for tourists and even the city dwellers manifested no attachment to the edifice. The study also revealed that the city dwellers had a negative perception of the monument as it was virtually in a no-go-zone. (Ibid) An interview conducted in Mamfe by this author in June 2011 with forty city dwellers between the ages of twenty and sixty revealed that less than ten percent of them knew that there existed a reunification monument in their town. None of the persons interviewed had visited the monument before. The monument itself had never been given a face lift since construction. The Mamfe and Yaounde monuments were also abandoned as no commemorative activities were ever organized at the site despite the monuments' obvious importance. The neglect, indifference and scorn from the people in the neighborhood of these monuments could be accounted for by the following considerations

Firstly, the monuments were constructed at the time some Cameroonians were disgruntled with the Ahmadou Ahidjo's regime following the dismantling of the federal structures in 1972 in favour of a unitary state. It should be recalled here that the reunified Cameroon was a Federation of two states; West (Anglophone) and East (Francophone) Cameroon. In May, 1972, Ahidjo abolished the federation through an unpopular referendum and instituted a unitary state to the chagrin of most Anglophones. Between 1973 and 1976 when the Yaounde and Mamfe monuments were constructed, the Government was busy marketing the advantages of this unitary state over the federation created in 1961 (Ngoh, 2004). The bicultural character of the republic represented by the two states and the cohabitation of Anglo-Saxons and Francophone administrative, judicial and educational systems were buried in favour of seven provinces in a unitary state. Many observers took the reunification monuments for unitary state monuments. This confusion persisted in Yaounde because the monument did not carry any inscription or writing in favour of reunification. Instead, the old man with five children at the heart of the monument seemingly depicted or represented the unitary state more than reunification. A better monument for reunification would have been a man with two children representing Anglophone and Francophone Cameroons.

The location of the monuments was also a problem. Many could not explain the choice of Yaounde and Mamfe. Given the historic role of the towns of Buea and Foumban in the reunification process, many observers questioned the construction of monuments in Yaounde and Mamfe.⁴ Foumban hosted the historic constitutional conference from July 17 to 21, 1961 that produced the draft constitution for the Federal Republic of Cameroon. Buea was the capital of the British Southern Cameroons and the town that hosted the declaration and celebrations of reunification on October 1, 1961. It was therefore largely expected that these towns should host the reunification monuments. However, Mamfe is known to have hosted the 1959 Plebiscite Conference during which the proponents

of reunification successfully marketed the advantages of their stance while Yaounde was the capital of the reunified Cameroon. These arguments were not sufficient to favour Mamfe and Yaounde against Buea and Foumban as the best towns to host the reunification monuments.

The disdain for the Yaounde monument was also due to its location in this town. Unlike the Eugene Jamot and Charles Atangana monuments⁵ which were constructed at the heart of the city and at conspicuous sites, the reunification monument was constructed in an elitist quarter near the military headquarters, an institution that was known for its suppression of the nationalists and reunificationists in particular between 1955 and 1972 (Ngo Binam and Kay, 2013). It was also located near a mortuary and the French Embassy, where many believed anti-reunification plans were nursed by the colonial master. This perception also rendered the monument unpopular and consequently led to their neglect. It should be recalled here that the UPC that worked for reunification in French Cameroon was a *bête noire* of the colonial authorities because the party wanted immediate independence and immediate reunification, options which the French were not ready to tolerate, at least before 1958. The various French High Commissioners and Ambassadors in Cameroon between 1952 and 1972 were therefore championing anti-nationalist and anti-UPC activities.

Monuments are generally considered the best places for the commemoration and remembrance of the historical events they represent. They represent the most visible traces of the past for future generations. Unfortunately, Cameroon's reunification monuments were abandoned by the authorities immediately after construction ended. Since 1976 when the Yaounde monument was completed, the Yaounde regime had never celebrated October 1 as reunification day. Even in 2011, when the government flamboyantly announced the celebrations of the Golden Jubilee of reunification, no commemorative activity was organized at the monument to remind the younger generations of the historic reunion of Anglophone and Francophone Cameroons on October 1, 1961.⁶ This could be explained by the fact that at independence, the French handed over power to the loyalists and moderate nationalists who were not diehard reunificationists like the UPC militants in French Cameroon.⁷ The moderates led by Ahidjo (1960-1982) and Paul Biya (1982-?) were not excited with reunification, which was actually forced on them. The two regimes of Ahidjo and Biya therefore placed more emphasis on the May 20, 1972 reform that ushered in the unitary state, thereby dismantling the 1961 federal institutions. Ahidjo, and later, Biya ignored reunification and celebrated May 20th from 1973 as Cameroon's national day. This gradually blurred reunification in the memory of Cameroonians. Reunification monuments therefore became obsolete.

The powerlessness of Cameroon's reunification monuments could also be traced from the history of reunification itself. In French Cameroon, the UPC that advocated reunification was in fact the *bête noire* of the colonial master. Consequently, everything was done to prevent reunification. Reunificationists were molested, tortured, jailed and exiled. In July 1955, the UPC leaders were forced into exile in the British Southern Cameroons.

The UPC as a political party was not therefore part of the historic 1956 elections that led to the formation of the first indigenous government in French Cameroon. The moderates who led the government in French Cameroons since 1957 did not have reunification as part of their political program. In fact, Andre Marie Mbida, the first Prime Minister of French Cameroon, is said to have argued in 1958 that the idea of reunification was far-fetched. To him it was a dream that could not be realised. (Ngoh, 2002:161) His successor, Ahidjo, did not also make reunification a priority. In his speech to the Cameroon nation on January 1, 1960 and in the presence of John Ngu Foncha, he did not mention reunification or even his ambition for the 'annexation' of the Southern Cameroons. (Nfi, 2012) Therefore, those who finalized the Reunification process, Ahidjo and Foncha, were not the initiators. (Abwa, 2011). The exclusion of the UPC, principal initiators of the reunification idea, from the final constitutional conferences that resulted in the birth of the Federal Republic of Cameroon in 1961 contributed to the unpopular image of the visible symbols or traces of reunification

Nothing was done to popularize the reunification idea. Again, the people of French Cameroon were not directly involved with the 1961 plebiscite organized by the United Nations to enable Southern Cameroonians to choose between independence with French Cameroon (reunification) and independence with Nigeria. In fact, they were not given the opportunity to vote for or against reunification. With all these sore points, the reunification episode remained strange to them and this was to reflect on their relationship with the reunification monuments.

In the Southern Cameroons, the British also opposed reunification and mounted all possible obstacles to its realisation. They administered the Southern Cameroons as an integral part of South Eastern Nigeria, obliging the people to depend on Nigeria for political advancement, education and other socio-economic infrastructure. However, by 1953, the nationalists were divided into three camps. The first and most popular group wanted the Southern Cameroons to gain independence as a separate state without connections to either Nigeria or French Cameroon. The second group advocated for independence with Nigeria while the third and least popular group wanted the territory to gain independence through reunification with French Cameroon.⁸ Since the British considered independence with Nigeria as an indigenous approval of her 1922 decision to rule the territory as an integral part of South Eastern Nigeria, the British decided to woo the people towards accepting independence with Nigeria. To achieve this goal, Britain convinced the United Nations to pair independence with Nigeria versus independence with French Cameroon (reunification) in the 1961 plebiscite, since reunification was the least popular of the options, and the British could not imagine a vote in favour of reunification. The most popular option for independence for the Southern Cameroons, that is, an independent Southern Cameroon State, was eliminated from the plebiscite alternatives. Many Southern Cameroonians therefore voted for reunification at the 1961 plebiscite not because they cherished and understood it but because they were not given the opportunity to opt for an independent Southern Cameroon State. Cameroon's reunification monuments are therefore unpopular—like the reunification episode in Cameroon history.

Last but not least, some Anglophones lost respect and interest in the monuments because according to them, reunification did not bear the desired fruits. It did not bring the much desired decentralization which Foncha, the leader of the KNDP, promised them. Instead, Ahmadou Ahidjo concentrated powers in his hands and in Yaounde in a dictatorship.. The violation of the 1961 federal constitution, the exclusion of the Anglophone from policy-making and effective power-sharing since 1972, and Biya's unilateral creation of the Republic of Cameroon in 1984⁹ to replace the United Republic of Cameroon were the institutional and constitutional roots of the Anglophone discontent and regret for reunification.¹⁰ Reunification also resulted in the decline of towns like Mamfe, which was an important river port, and Victoria, a seaport. Anglophone economic institutions like the Produce Marketing Board (NPMB) disappeared a few years after reunification. Anglophone values of honesty, righteousness, freedoms, discipline, self-reliance, community spirit and hard work vanished, as they were literally assimilated by the majority Francophones. Mamfe people in particular had nothing to jubilate over as few years after reunification they lost commercial contact with Nigeria as the town gradually dwindled from a buoyant commercial center into a "ghost town" (Tata, 2003). It was in this context that the reunification monument in Mamfe was scorned at and the various reunification streets, hotels and bars in Anglophone Cameroon neglected and abandoned

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to show that the sustainability of monuments and historical sites depend on the values attached to them and the historical importance or popularity of the events they represent. The reunification monuments that were constructed in Yaounde and Mamfe in the 1970s were welcomed as the best physical and visible representation of the most significant event in Cameroon history. The construction of the monuments came at a time when the international or the African community was heralding the Cameroon experiment that was expected to serve as an example of African unity. Unfortunately, the monuments remained powerless and failed to immortalize the reunification of the two Cameroons. This was so because no commemorative events were ever organized by the site of these monuments and also because the government of Cameroon opted for the regular celebration of "national unity" achieved as a result of the May 1972 referendum rather than reunification achieved in October 1961. Cameroon's reunification monuments have thus remained unknown, no-go zones, dirty, neglected, powerless and unable to immortalize reunification, whose history is also unpopular and which some Anglophones today even consider as an unfortunate occurrence due to its negative consequences for West or Anglophone Cameroon.

Endnotes

¹For more on a comparative study on Nationalism in the two Cameroons, see V.G. Fanso, "Anglophone and Francophone Nationalism in Cameroon", *The Round Table: The Common Wealth Journal of International Affairs*, no.350, 1999, pp.281-286

²For an eye witness account of the 1961 plebiscite in some parts of the Southern Cameroons, see J. Percival, *The 1961 Cameroon Plebiscite: Choice or Betrayal*, (Bamenda, Mankon; Langaa RPCIG, 2008)

³In 2002, the bridge collapsed when an oil tanker exploded on it.

⁴Most of the pre-reunification talks and constitutional conferences were in Buea and Foumban. In fact the conference that identified the structures of the federation was held in Foumban in July 1961.

⁵The Eugene Jamot monument was constructed in honour of Doctor Jamot, a Frenchman who rigorously fought against sleeping sickness in Cameroon before the Second World War, while the Charles Atangana monument was in honour of the Yaounde chief, who had collaborated with the German and French colonial masters

⁶In his traditional address to the nation on December 31, 2012, President Biya said " Je voudrais dire que le cinquantenaire de notre reunification, intervenue, comme vous le savez le 1er octobre 1961, sera célèbre avec toute le solennité nécessaire", see P.Biya, 2012, "Discours la nation du 31 December", *Cameroun Tribune*, no10003/6204, du 3 Janvier 2013, p.4

⁷For more, see J.M.Zang-Atangana,, *Les forces Politiques au Cameroun réunifie*, (Paris, L'Harmattan, 1989)

⁸For more on this division, see Bongfen Chem-Langhëë, "The Kamerun Plebiscite: Perceptions and Strategies", PhD Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1973

⁹In 1984, President Paul Biya unilaterally changed the name of the country from the United Republic of Cameroon adopted in 1972 to the Republic of Cameroon. This was the same name French Cameroons had at independence in 1960. Many Anglophone interpreted the change of name as a tacit withdrawal of Francophone Cameroon from the 1961 union.

¹⁰For more on Anglophone discontent after 1972, see Tata S. Ngenge, "The Institutional Roots of the Anglophone Problem in Cameroon", J-G Gros (ed), *Cameroon, Politics and Society in Critical Perspectives*, (New York, University Press of America, 2003), pp.61-68

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