

# Politicization of Cultural Diversity and Its Impact on Nation-Building in Cameroon: A Political Philosophical Analysis

by

Lavngwa Moses Seemndze  
mskewai@yahoo.com

Department of Arts, Education and Humanities-Saint Monica (The American) University,  
Buea, Cameroon; Department of Sociology, Psychology and Philosophy,  
University of Dschang-Cameroon

## Abstract

This study argues that when cultural diversity is politically manipulated, it fails to serve as a unifying factor and becomes ethnocentrism: an ideology that animates superiority over others and breeds exclusion, rivalries, lust for revenge and violence; centered on the problems challenging political life and nation-building in Cameroon resulting from imposed colonial demarcations and an incapacity to manage cultural diversity. Thus, the study assumes that only a well-educated and balanced leader (philosopher) can use cultural diversity to produce a congenial environment for socio-political cohesion, common good and national culture which forms a springboard to nation-building. Hence, the study intends to establish a nexus between cultural diversity and nation-building, by employing political and philosophical principles.

**Key Words:** Cultural diversity, ethnicity, ethnocentrism, nation-building, Cameroon, political violence.

## Introduction

The Cameroon political scene is facing a myriad of problems. These result from a combination of the imposition of colonial values and demarcations, and also our incapacity to properly manage ethnic diversity towards nation-building. Cameroon has over 250 ethnic groups and a colonial legacy of German, French, and British cultures. Despite her multi-ethnic nature, ethnic groups had lived in harmony until colonial invasion and the introduction of multiparty politics in 1990, when people began fighting for political supremacy and access to resources. Although constitutionally there is equality between ethnic groups, the last three decades have seen one dominant ethnic group playing the card of political opportunism that foments so much rivalry.

All categories of diversity have histories, many of which are histories of colonization and domination. In Africa, ethnicity remains a powerful force to reckon with, although it varies from time to time and from rural to urban areas (Mbiti, 1969). Cultural diversity in Cameroon assumes a triple history: pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial. In the pre-colonial era, ethnic groups were more rural and homogeneous, and lived peacefully with less competition for resources. In the colonial era, small ethnic groups were forced to merge irrespective of linguistic/cultural differences and geopolitical boundaries. In the post-colonial era, there is a *mélange* of alien and indigenous cultural values. Thus, ethnicity has a great impact on politics and nation-building in Cameroon. The concept of ‘electoral village’ where urban dwellers cast their votes along ethnic lines implies that the village or ethnic group constitutes vital variables in the political system (Nkwi, 1997).

The main problem of this paper is that cultural diversity in Cameroon has been manipulated for selfish political or economic gains. Ethnic groups jealously safeguard their common ancestry by excluding others. This poor management of ethnicity breeds ethnocentrism - a tendency that favors members of one ethnic group against others. Such tendency animates unhealthy rivalries, encourages divide and rule politics and ethno-political violence. The marginalized ethnic groups tend to use violence as a viable means to correct the situation especially during electioneering. This violence is quelled by repressive regimes through the use of absolute power which corrupts absolutely. Thus, “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” (Boyle, 2007:34). It becomes justifiable should citizens oppose such governments that expose them to danger (Hobbes, 1997).

This paper opines that there is a nexus between cultural diversity, ethno-political violence and nation-building. It assumes that the politicization of cultural diversity is responsible for political violence. It is, therefore, imperative to seek for measures to defuse ethno-political violence. Hence, Plato’s concept of a philosopher king could be useful in the proper management of cultural diversity toward nation-building. At this level, a few conceptual clarifications are expedient.

## **Conceptual Background**

Ethnicity refers to a feeling of belonging to a particular ethnic group. The adjective ‘ethnic’ (from the Greek noun *ethno*) means race, people, nation, and ethnic group. Ethnocentrism refers to a conviction of cultural superiority (Bernal et al., 1993). As a person matures, his perception of ethnicity undergoes transformation which is concomitant with cognitive development. Children at the cognitive state of development which Jean Piaget depicts as *pre-operational* (2-7 years) identify with a group perceived as their own, while rejecting those who are different (Aboud & Doyle, 1983). With time, they grow more tolerant towards others. However, with cognitive maturation, the perception of ethnicity becomes a mental construct which includes language, customs, cultural facts, and general knowledge of one's ethnic group (Bernal et al., 1993). A strong perception of ethnicity influences one’s self-esteem. It can lead to dangerous and potentially violent delusions of superiority that tend to justify genocide as in Rwanda in 1994 (Tarimo, 2008).

Cultural diversity presupposes a society of various ethnic, linguistic, social, customs, and religious differences. It demands a positive approach of tolerance. Such ethnic diversity obliges recognition, tolerance and respect of the modes of behavior and customs of each ethnic group (Brown & Shumba, in Nsamenang & Tchombe, 2011). Cultural diversity poses a major challenge to nation-building. Nation-building implies constructing or structuring a national identity using the power of the state (Deutsch & Foltz, 2010). Nation-building aims at the unification of people within the state so that it remains politically stable and viable through fostering social harmony, economic growth, military conscription and national content mass schooling (Darden & Grzymala-Busse, 2006). Thus, cultural diversity would either enhance or disrupt nation-building, depending on how it is managed. How is this manifest in the diversity of Cameroon?

## **Reality of Cultural Diversity in Cameroon**

Cameroon has distinct regional, cultural, linguistic, religious, and political traditions as well as ethnic variety. The colonization of Cameroon by Germany, Britain and France increased her cultural diversity. Cameroon counts over 250 ethnic groups (Molem, 2008; Mvesso, 2005). Recently and according to *Ethnologue*, there are 285 languages whereby 280 are living and 5 are extinct. Of the living languages, 12 are institutional, 101 are developing, 89 are vigorous, 57 are in trouble, and 21 are dying (Lewis et al., 2015).

The highlanders constitute 38 percent of the total population and include the Bamilekes and the Bamouns of the West Region. The North West Region has about 100 ethnic groups that share the same patrilineal descent systems except Kom which is matrilineal (Nkwi, 1997). The main ethnic groups or fondoms (ruled by a paramount Fon or divine king) include Nso, Bafut, Kom, Mankon and Bali. The South West Region has chiefs who were installed to aid colonial administration among the main ethnic groups of Bayangi, Bakosssi and Bakweri. It is remarkable that of all the main ethnic groups of the South West Region, only the Bangwas (Fontem) are ruled by a Fon.

The tropical forest (Sawa) includes mainly the Bassa and Dualla of the Littoral Region which account for about 12% of the population. In the southern tropical forests, the Centre has main ethnic groups like Ewondo, Bulu, and Fang (Beti subgroups), and the Bakas of the East Region. They account for 18% of the population. The Fulanis account for 14% of the population. The Kirdis (non-Muslims) in the North account for 18% of the population. The Extreme North is inhabited by the Hausas and the Toupouris who discourage female education via *Boka Haram* propaganda.

Besides ethnic diversity, there are several cross boundary languages. According to article 1 (3) of the 1996 Constitution, English and French have the same status and the State shall guarantee the promotion of bilingualism throughout the country. In reality, French is dominant in eight regions; meanwhile English is dominant in two. The less educated people speak Wes Cos a pidgin of English which functions as a *lingua franca*, especially among market women. The Fulfulde language dominates the North and its peoples are predominantly Muslims, while the south and the west are predominantly Christians. There are also large numbers of animists in the East. Schools in Cameroon encourage the learning of local languages. Most people are bilingual and few are multilingual. Linguistic diversity remains a legacy of colonialism.

## Colonialism and Cultural Diversity in Cameroon

The colonial approach to Cameroon cultural diversity varied between the British with indirect rule and the French who opted to assimilate their subjects into French culture. Colonial masters marked arbitrary boundaries that cut across ethnic lines irrespective of historic, linguistic and cultural differences. At independence, the process of nation-building became problematic for Cameroon as for most African states, since it was difficult to redefine the populace of ethnic groups that had been carved out by colonial powers without regard to ethnic, religious, or other boundaries (Deutsch & Foltz, 2010). National identity needed to be deliberately constructed by molding different ethnic groups into a nation, since colonial practices of divide and rule had resulted in ethnically heterogeneous populations (Mylonas, 2010).

However, Cameroon was plagued by ethnocentrism; that is, unhealthy rivalry between ethnic groups within the same nation. This almost resulted in near-disintegration, such as the continuous attempts of the Southern Cameroon National Congress (SCNC) to secede from *la Republic du Cameroon*. These attempts are in part due to ethnic differences which are aided by colonial mismanagement of the situation. The Rwandan genocide (Tutsis and Hutus) as well as the recurrent problems of Sudan are also related to a lack of ethnic, religious, or racial cohesion within the nation. It has often proved difficult to unite states with similar ethnic but different colonial backgrounds. Seemingly, only in Cameroon has there been a certain degree of success in uniting Francophone and Anglophone territories.

Also, the country was divided along ideological lines at independence. The *Union de Peuples Camerounais* (UPC) was in violent revolt against the Ahidjo regime that would be at the helm of power for twenty-seven years under a single party, the Cameroon National Union (CNU). There was total concentration of power around one person and one institution, '*la presidence*' (Bayart 1985:141). Hence, the existing political and linguistic map of Cameroon is a colonial creation. Thus, ethnic groups in Cameroon lack the internal political cohesion necessary for survival. At independence, decolonization would disintegrate the state into regional factions (Nkwi, 1997).

Colonial masters failed to acknowledge that there is always conflict between moral ethnicity and political ethnocentrism. Through this, the political elite regarded the manipulation of ethnic loyalty as the cheapest and most reliable strategy to acquire and consolidate power. The challenge was not to eliminate ethnicity, but to develop plural forms of nationalism to incorporate ethnic variations. In terms of nation-building and creating a conducive and enabling environment, the question of properly managing ethnicity has conditioned Cameroon politics since independence. Governments hope that ethnicity can unite self-respecting peoples in a spirit of confidence, mutual trust, respect, equality and peaceful co-existence. Practically, the response to ethnic conflicts has been reactive rather than proactive.

The establishment of one party system by colonial masters was to reduce ethnic conflicts, but the results were not impressive. Hence, ethnic nationalism encouraged transition from groups of common culture to groups of political will. The question remains: How can we eliminate narrow group politics when ethnic rivalries continue in post-independent Cameroon? Hence, we can think of the heterogeneous nature of regions and rural-urban migration that results in interethnic mixing. The legacy of colonialism continues to characterize politics in Cameroon. How then is cultural diversity politicized in Cameroon?

## **Politicization of Cultural Diversity**

Cultural diversity should act as a pole around which people are mobilized and compete effectively for state-controlled power and economic resources. Unfortunately, ethnic groups gather around the leadership of the predatory elite to form political action-groups in order to garner support and maximize their corporate, political, economic, and social interests. When ethnic groups are not properly politicized, ethnic identities become ethnocentric. In this project, political leaders use ethnic identity for selfish political maneuvers. Thus, ethnicity is reformulated to suit political agendas and nominations leading to a politics of exclusion, with competing loyalties for political positioning, political violence and ethnocentrism.

### **Ethnocentric Politics**

In Cameroon, the problem of ethnocentrism is a real canker worm that has eaten deep into the fabric of society. Ethnocentrism is the tendency of manipulating ethnic identities for selfish political and economic ends. It implies sharing exclusively among members of one's clan. To simply wish it away, to condemn it without comprehending its roots and dynamics, or take no action to challenge it, only serves to strengthen it (Bernal et al., 1993). The failure to modify ethnic identification in favor of national identity breeds ethnocentrism. As said already, this failure can be traced to colonial masters whose leadership was scrutinized on ethnic lines.

Colonial methods of governance created divisions, subdivisions and districts. Till today, citizens are lured by the clamor for each ethnic group having its own divisional officer or governor based on linguistic and cultural considerations. Many leaders are either victims or accomplices of ethnocentrism. Yet, they remain reticent about the ways in which they have been affected by ethnocentrism. Some approach it with extreme caution while others openly align with ethnically oriented governments. Ethnocentrism and partisan politics cannot promote mutuality, integral human development, human rights, the common good, and social justice. The challenge for leaders is how to address this canker worm in a constructive way without being overtly partisan or ethnocentric.

Accordingly, ethnocentrism makes most African leaders become ethnic chiefs rather than statesmen. It determines who gets jobs, who gets promoted, and who gets accepted into renowned and elitist institutions of a country. For them; "To give a job to a fellow ethnic member is not nepotism, it is an obligation. For a political leader to choose his closest advisers and bodyguards from the ranks of his own ethnic group is not patronage, it is common sense. It ensures security, continuity, and authority" (Lamb, 1984:9). The beneficiaries of ethnocentric politics deny the fact that it actually exists and it obstructs development and nation-building. For them, the time is ripe for reaping political positions and gains as a compensation for their loyalty.

## Competing Identities and Loyalties for Political Positioning

Cultural identities and loyalties are compensated during political nominations. Identity politics is both factionalizing and depoliticizing. It valorizes the group's 'groupness' by recognizing its specificity and reifying identities of culture and language that they are products of oppressive structures (McNay, 2008). There is no real identity that is separable from ethnicity and differences that have become socially recognized. Identity requires differences in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness to secure self-certainty (Connolly, 2002). The danger of identity politics is that it casts as authentic to the group an identity that is defined by its opposition to an Other. Thus, "Politicized identity thus enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, restating, dramatizing, and inscribing its pain in politics" (Brown, 1995:74). Thus, the politicization of ethnic loyalties appeals more to blood ties.

Sometimes politicians use cultural slogans to arouse emotions of the people in order to make them accept what they do not understand. Interest groups tend to invoke traditional sentiments to reinforce their appeal. The success of political leaders in winning popular backing depends upon the trust which they inspire, and ultimately on their ability to obtain material benefits for their faction in terms of contracts. In this case, "we are dealing with a kind of patronage politics, with economic resources used as a political tool to enable the leadership to buy support for their policies" (Cohen, 1981:23). Power is centralized on one person leading to the emergence of an ethnic ruling class which is not the same as Plato's proposal of an enlightened philosopher king who should rule the ideal city (cf. Plato, *Republic*, 473d). Unfortunately, the introduction of this ruling class in Cameroon is based on selfish interest.

Interestingly, in an attempt to encourage elite and regional integration, the government tries to appoint ministers and governors from major regions and ethnic groups in order to bridge the Francophone-Anglophone divide. But recently, more important positions were deliberately assigned to representatives of a particular clan (Ngayap, 1983). Thus, every cabinet reshuffle follows the logic of geopolitical zoning, linguistic and ethnic character and party loyalty, rather than competence and merits. Thus, political sloganeering and the 'motions of support' syndrome are frameworks under the manipulation of the elite and ethnic groups (Molem, 2008). The general understanding is that their time has come to share in the national cake. After all, does an old proverb not say that when one's brother climbs a palm tree, he would most surely eat the most ripe and fat palm nuts?

The rebirth of multiparty politics in Cameroon in the 1990s after 27 years of single party rule fuelled ethno-political tensions. Under the influence of ethnic politics, voters do not appeal to the criteria of economic performance, health services, education and the common good. Those whose constituencies perform well are sure of securing their posts or gaining better appointments while those whose results are dismal subject themselves to the vagaries of the ethnic and linguistic arithmetic. The logic of national integration has become an 'ethnic alchemy' (Monga, 2000:10) that characterizes socio-political life. While perception of ethnic balancing has the advantage of pacifying a highly complex polity, it also entails mismanagement and economic stagnation. Cameroon's ethnic diversity, instead of serving as a melting pot for state construction and development, has been used by unscrupulous politicians to foster divide and rule politics or the politics of 'belonging' and 'exclusion' (Molem, 2008:199).

## Politics of Belonging and Exclusion

Ethnic and linguistic factors remain critical to Cameroon politics of belonging and exclusion given her extraordinary heterogeneity. Taking the cue from Greece, it is indisputable that during Plato's time, one's identity as a member of a particular city weighed heavily to an extent that citizens of other cities were thought of as foreigners, even if those outside the Greek community were seen as more foreign (LeMoin, 2014). The ethnic groups in Cameroon are politically independent and autonomous. They have different laws and customs, and, even if they agree on certain issues, they often go to war with each other. Plato insists that children belong to the state first before their biological parents or clans (cf. Plato, *Laws*, 804d). In Cameroon, one belongs to an ethnic group first and to the nation second (Awasom, 2004). By the logic of incorporation, Bamilekes with complex identities are trapped at the Francophone-Anglophone frontiers, and they want an identity via the slogan of the 'eleventh province' (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2004).

Similarly, the secessionist threats by the minority English-speaking Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), which clamors for independence from the rest of French-speaking Cameroon smacks of a search for belonging. This feeling of being excluded adds complexity to an already thorny ethnic political situation in Cameroon. The upsurge of autochthony and exclusion characterizes politics in Cameroon (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2004). The Anglophone problem which dates back to 1961 is one of the root causes of political tension in Cameroon when political elites of two colonial territories (French and British) agreed to form a federal state of equal partnership and preserve the cultural heritage and identity of each other. This objective failed and Anglophones have become totally integrated and assimilated in the French culture. Anglophone consciousness has led to a feeling of being 'marginalized', 'exploited', and 'assimilated' by the Francophone-dominated state (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2004). They strongly advocate for the restoration of statehood and independence of Southern Cameroon, and the resurgence of multiparty politics has become an instrument to express their grievances.

Anglophone grievances for a sense of belonging have three main perspectives – political, economic and cultural. Politically, they feel excluded from key government and party positions. Thus, they have an inferior role in decision-making. As regards the economic domain, they complain of the neglect of their region's infrastructure, the lack of public investment in their region, and the rape and drain of their region's economic resources. Culturally, French is given preeminence as the special language and inherited French institutions and bureaucratic practices control state administration and public life, even in the Anglophone territory itself, thus the government continues to trivialize these grievances by adopting a divide and rule strategy (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2004).

The aim is to deconstruct Anglophone identity through ruthless repressions of their activities. The politics of belonging and exclusion could be depicted by 'autochthonization' or 'parochialization' (Molem, 2008) or the 'son of the soil' syndrome (Jua, 2004). Most Cameroonians are treated as if they are strangers in their own country. Furthermore, the politics of belonging and exclusion corresponds to three distinct socio-political and cultural core zones viz; south-central, western, and northern.

First, there is the south-central zone (Centre, South, and East) where dominant ethnic groups are the Beti and Bulu (Amundsen, 1999). Political opponents are perceived as '*les ennemis dans la maison*'. The Beti hegemony was proven right following a survey where most senior administrators, the military and other top government functionaries hailed from the Beti ethnic group (Tumi, 2003). Frequent changes in the Constitution (1996 & 2008) and manipulations of state institutions (media, Supreme Court, etc.) are perceived as efforts of the ruling government to remain in power for eternity.

Second, the western zone (West, North West, South West and Littoral) has different clans like the Bamilekes, Mankons, Bangwas, and Basas. It demonstrates multiparty tendencies. The Bamilekes are reputed for their enterprising and capitalist oriented tendencies. The La'kam stand for the ideals of the Bamilekes. The Sawa and revitalized Ngondo cater for the interests of Bassas and Duallas. The Sawa movement protests against domination by the so-called 'strangers' (Awasom 2004). In the Northwest and Western regions, conflict between farmers and grazers coincide with ethnicity. The South West Elite and North West Elite Association (NOWELA) are intended to protect the interests of their Anglophone brothers. The seeds of violence are sown by government officials who categorize non-indigenes as *graffis* (grasslanders) or *kam-no-gos* or strangers (Molem, 2008). This happens despite the fact that the Constitution (1996) states that every person shall have the right to settle in any place and move freely.

Third, the north zone (Adamawa, North and Extreme North) has Fulanis and the Kirdis (non-Muslim). It is characterized by Muslim domination in terms of religion, culture, administration, land and wealth. Recently, elites called *Nordists* set out to defend the interests of all Northerners (cf. Awasom, 2004). We can say that the ethnicization of party politics or the politicization of ethnicity has led to conflicts between "autochthonous" (indigenous) and migrant populations (Molem, 2008). Therefore, there is an atmosphere of fear, suspicion, and silent hostility that can lead to the seedling of ethno-political violence.

## **From Ethnic Competition to Ethno-Political Violence**

Ethno-political violence is a deliberate political strategy by desperate groups intended to effect change in the political system that marginalizes them. Conflicts are responses to failed projects within which ethnicity is entangled and held as a scapegoat for almost everything that went wrong. Conflicts involving ethnic interests are locked in rivalries about access to power which end up in ethno-nationalism and ethno-political violence. People do not kill one another merely because of ethnic differences, but because these differences that promote unhealthy competition (Tarimo, 2008). Since political leaders appeal to ethnic identities to fulfill their ambitions, the practice of politicizing ethnicity becomes a major cause of ethno-political violence.

The bloody clashes of 1992, 1997, and 2008 in Cameroon display the anger of the underprivileged. Multiparty politics has the undesirable effect of realigning the citizenry into ethnic postures. The problem of ethnic violence during electioneering is caused by unequal access to resources and political positions. Violence before, during, and after elections shows the cracks in the state apparatus orchestrated along ethnic lines. The frequent molestation and harassment of indigenes of other regions are instructive of the institutionalization of ethnocentrism and regionalism.

Many political activists, journalists and polling officers during the 2007 twin elections, who found themselves in predominantly ruling party and opposition strongholds, became victims of ethnic conflicts. Auto-defense networks, thug action and ethnic militias were prevalent features. Fortunately, the pluralistic politics of violence seen during the 1990s seem to dissipate after the opposition's repeated defeats which are attributed to unfair election conditions, fraudulent government tactics, political and media oppression, and opposition party disunity. Some have argued that the opposition's failure to form and maintain a more unified platform places it at a serious disadvantage to win elections in Cameroon (Molem, 2008).

Ethno-political violence has driven many people from their homes. Personal property and public institutions and structures have been vandalized. Any protesters go through torture and other forms of cruel treatment in prisons. Some have been maimed and there are extra-judicial killings. Instead of evolving, our democracy has regressed to produce ethnic leaders more intent on leading their people in warfare than building their nation-state. This condition is aggravated by lack of the rule of law, unabated corruption, extreme poverty, unemployment, and irresponsible leadership. Thus, the politicization of ethnic diversity which manifests itself through ethnocentrism, ethnic political positioning, politics of belonging and exclusion, is responsible for ethno-political violence in Cameroon. This situation demands a proper management of ethnic diversity if Cameroon is to achieve her vision 2035 which has as its main objective to make Cameroon an emerging country by 2035, with the specific objectives being to: eradicate poverty by reducing it to less than 10 per cent thanks to accelerated and job-generating growth, as well as a bold policy on income redistribution by increasing, extending and improving social services, including health, education, training, water, electricity, roads, etc., and equal access to such services; become a middle income country in order to increase the average income by consolidating, over a long period, growth rate which should reach 10 per cent between 2015 and 2020, thanks to increased diversification of economic activities; become a newly industrialized country, which is a phase when Cameroon will transform from a primary phase to a secondary import substitution phase with the manufacturing industry accounting for more than 23 per cent of the GDP; and become an emerging country, which is the phase when its economy will be mainstreamed into the global economy in terms of trade (substantial exports) and finance (opening of local financial markets to foreign investments) [Platform 2035: Getaway to Emerging Economy, <http://www.platform2035.com/index.php/cameroon-2035/cameroon-vision-2035>].

## **Role of Cultural Diversity in Nation-Building**

We indicated already that the strength of cultural diversity is like a two-edged sword. When manipulated for selfish gains, it can be the root cause of internal problems connected with unhealthy competition and violence. If appropriated properly, diversity could be ingredients required for the realization of the ideal of civil society, political integration and participation, development, concern for the common good and building a national culture. Since ethnic diversity is a reality in Cameroon, there is need for trans-ethnic cooperation towards nation building. The concept of regional balance may undermine the particularistic ethnic factor, but this would be conducive for nation building. Just like ethnicity is central to the emergence of conflict, it can also be used for conflict resolution as well as development.

We should respond to ethnic demands by equitably distributing national resources in order to ensure economic and social justice. Failure to accommodate ethnic claims leads to political instability. Ethnicity cannot be suppressed by the state. In acknowledging the role of ethnicity in nation building, one must grapple with what constitutes the role of the philosopher king/queen in politics, concern for the common good and national culture. What kind of political leadership is required in a pluralistic Cameroon?

## **The Role of the Philosopher King amidst Cultural Diversity**

While recognizing the fundamental flaw in humankind to oppress others, Plato believed in the appointment of one knowledgeable supreme guardian (the philosopher king/queen), an individual, who with proper education, is competent enough to decide on legislative policies. Such a person would be incorruptible, and the only desire is the thirst for knowledge that surmounts any other vice (Plato, *Republic*, 473d). Plato's arguments resonate in Cameroon in much the same way as they did in Athens. Hence, Plato showed no fondness for democracy because he believed that not all members of society are capable of making wise decisions (cf. *Republic*, 543a-569c). His principle is that only philosophers possess the principle portion of the soul that desires for truth and wisdom. Such rulers are in short supply in Cameroon because of favoritism and ethnocentrism. Our experience of a certain brand of *la démocratie avancée* (advanced democracy) put to question the plausibility of this kind of governance.

In Plato's view, unless philosophers become kings or kings and rulers take the pursuit of philosophy seriously with a combination of political power and philosophic intelligence, there can be no cessation of troubles for our states or the human race (Plato, *Republic*, 473c-d). Here, philosophy and political power coincide as a cooperative alliance towards nation-building. What role should a 'philosopher-king/queen' play in a multi-cultural society like Cameroon? This article contends that to have an ethnically and linguistically diverse nation-state ruled by 'philosopher-kings/queen' amounts to attaining a culture of dialogue. That is why those in charge of ruling must be well educated, first, in the "methods of organizing and preserving commonwealths" and "public administration" (Cicero, 1999:6).

Thus, philosopher kings/queens must arise and address the fundamental cultural inequalities and rivalries that have a negative effect on socio-political integration. This proves the hypothesis that cultural diversity is linked to ethno-political violence and nation-building. Governments should act in their citizens' interests rather than become ethnic despots. The idea of a meritocracy - a system that allows people to progress based on their own qualifications, rather than on privileges of wealth or status - remains a strikingly relevant idea for Cameroon. The philosopher ruler through specialized training and expertise should serve in the civil service as an executor of policy or adviser to government. He/she must be firm of mind and will so as not to be harassed and plagued by the fear of rousing the fury of a boss or of losing a job. What is worse, sometimes is the fact that intellectuals in this position fall victim to the seductions of greed, and degrade themselves into yes-person, sycophants and servile flatterers whose single ambition is the sacrifice of self-respect and integrity. Thus, the philosopher king/queen in this position will often need guts to ensure that their expert knowledge is not used to serve expediency or to achieve outright evil ends. There is no denying that given the chance and the green light and dedicated to the public weal, he/she can do a world of good to promote sound government (Fonlon, 1978). But, should he participate in public affairs as politicians do in their own rights?

For some, because of what power politics has done even to the best-intentioned of people, philosophers should steer clear of this corrupting and often sordid enterprise. This idea is erroneous! It is imperative that intellectuals should steel their will and enter the arena of politics in order to usher in integrity in the conduct of public affairs. This is because in political life, especially in Cameroon, we need persons who are willing to raise questions about the policies as well as the methods for implementing them. Thus, even electoral politics requires more than first-class technicians who are not inclined to ethnic manipulations. They can exchange political and intellectual ideas without cultural sentiments. This demands dialogue, negotiation and judicious compromise. The essential mission of the scholar is to be the Conscience and not merely the Agent of society (Fonlon, 1978). Thus, scholars should share and participate in active politics and become the 'the salt of the earth' (Mtt. 5:13f), as Christ put it. Such inspiration can be gotten from the shapers of the world like Socrates and Plato of ancient history, and Nelson Mandela in modern times, who integrated their cultural situations for the sake of development.

### **Integration of Cultural Diversity into the Nation-State**

We intimated that ethnocentrism is the cause of political violence which retards socio-economic development and hence, nation-building. Ethnocentric strategies are often connected with the resources of modern economy, such as in gaining employment, education, securing loans, and seizing appointments for lucrative offices (Tarimo, 2008). The main challenge is how to overcome ethnocentrism and use cultural diversity for socio-economic development. Any project, be it political, social, economic, or religious, which involves the mobilization of people must take into account the cultural contexts in which individuals live.

The process of nation-building must begin from what people are and not from where they are. Sadly, many claim that political organization based on cultural identity is primitive. In most cases, such approaches suggest that we can only make progress if we eradicate ethnicity. Thus, leaders erroneously believe that cultural diversity will disappear when the process of urbanization and socio-economic development gain momentum. For them, cultural affiliation is some sort of an atavistic residue to be erased by modernity. Such consideration cannot enhance development because political leaders stress on "assimilation, rather than pluralistic inclusion and acceptance of difference as the only approach to national unity" (Sharkey, 2007:39). Also, ethnicity is wrongly seen as an impediment to political integration and nationhood. Rather, it is ethnocentrism that inhibits the process of nationhood.

The truth is that the process of development may bring changes in cultural traditions but these changes, however, cannot destroy cultural affiliations that are even stronger in urban areas due to their level of exposure. Such affirmation supports the argument that urbanization, high levels of education, and high social status do not necessarily decrease cultural identities. Cultural diversity should unify the state because it leads to political integration and socio-economic development. It is unrealistic to think that a state can ignore its multicultural nature without repercussions. It is our contention that cultural diversity needs not be destroyed; what should be destroyed, instead, is ethnocentrism - the practice of manipulating ethnicity selfishly. Hence, the central doctrine of Christianity is 'love your neighbor' – not 'love your ethnic group' (Popper, 1945:45). Thus, how can cultural diversity help in constructing a nation-state?

First, family, clan, and ethnic groups are still the essential structures of social relationships that can be used for building a nation-state. Second, one's ethnic identity should be respected and recognized in a positive manner. Third, we must understand that nationhood offers more benefits than ethnicity (Lamb, 1984). Fourth, we must be able to define the relationship between an ethnic group and nation-state. Fifth, we have to appropriate inherited cultural traditions to help come to terms with the cultural realities for the sake of political integration. Finally, our approach to nation-state must weld together several ethnic groups into a large cohesive political community (Tarimo, 2008). Thus, cultural diversity helps in forming a cohesive political society. As such, there is harmony between the state and ethnic groups where all can jointly work towards achieving the common good in the midst of cultural diversity.

## **Cultural Diversity and the Common Good**

A certain degree of individualism, self-centeredness or egoism is a real setback to human relationships in Cameroon and to the cultivation of the common good. Individual survival seems to be high, leading to corruption and laxity in morals. Common life has been reduced to the satisfaction of greed for money, power and material well-being. Disloyalty to the common good undermines morality and leads to social isolation. The question remains: Should one be loyal to the community, nation, ethnic group or to self? The traditional African society used to value communal life and concern for the common good. This ethos went through a dramatic change during colonialism. It became difficult to appeal to the idea that the better-off should contribute to the welfare of the disadvantaged for the overall good of the community. This attack on the values of community has affected all aspects of life in Cameroon. How can cultural diversity remedy this situation of individualism? How can the common good be upheld?

Cultural diversity should shape the meaning of the common good towards nation-building. While cultural sentiments may undercut the nationalistic approach, they may also be a force that enhances concern for the common good. The notion of common good dates back to great thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. Plato abhors individualism because it defeats his concern for the common good. His caste system assigns roles and duties to people for the sake of the common good to an extent that an individual loses identity for the city's best interests and common well-being. Accordingly, only such individuals are smart and expert enough by birth and by training to properly manage the city (cf. Plato, *Republic*, 473c-d). For Rawls (1973), the common good is a certain general condition that is equal to everyone's advantage. It is the good to which all members of society have access to, and from whose enjoyment no one can be easily excluded irrespective of their cultural background. Hence, everyone can aspire for attainment of the common good – some desired purpose, which is significant from the social point of view. As a rule, all cultural relationships are recognized from the unity of common and individual values of people. These general managing principles symbolize the common will of society or General Will (Rousseau, 1988).

At the theoretical level, the doctrine of the common good sounds lofty, but the reality can become such a daunting task for people to attain. Who says that since everyone benefits from the common good, therefore, they would all willingly respond to establish and maintain it? What about cultural diversities and ethnic affiliations that may hinder us from successfully establishing the common good?

The first problem is that the very idea of the common good is inconsistent with a pluralistic society since different ethnic groups have diverse ideas about what constitutes the good life. Such disagreements undercut commitment to the common good. Also, the "free rider problem" occurs whereby those who do not partake in the common good still benefit from it (Douglas, 1980). Furthermore, individualism sets in where different ethnic groups based on self-interest only protect what is theirs. Finally, appeals to the common good are confronted by the problem of unequal sharing of burdens between cultural groups and frustrating ethno-political tensions and rivalries. Does this mean that the common good is not feasible in the midst of cultural diversity?

Appeals to the common good cannot be dismissed out rightly in Cameroon because in African ethics, the common good does not derive from preferences of particular ethnic groups. It refers to issues of peace, happiness or satisfaction (human flourishing), justice, dignity, and respect, and gains unrelenting support by everybody. Also, there is spontaneous and universal denunciation of acts such as murder and cruelty which are certainly inspired by beliefs in the common good. The foregoing discourse explains Plato's idea in creating the ideal city whereby the individual would become loyal to and reliant on the city thereby eliminating competitiveness between the city and private interest. Plato argues that the craving and ownership of private property has the potential of corrupting the guardians who act solely for the city's best interest. Thus, none should own any property beyond what is absolutely necessary (Plato, *Republic*, 416d). Communal property cannot tear the city into pieces and citizens can be free of such quarrels which private possessions bring (cf. *Republic*, 464d-e). The state and the individual must cooperate to stress society's duty towards the common good.

Accordingly, "Our country did not give us birth or rearing without expecting some return from us. She did so with the understanding that she has a claim on the largest and best parts of our minds, talents, and judgment for her own us" (Cicero, 1999:5). This means that we must give our best back to the community. Hence, common concern for the common good can lessen ethnic tensions since ethnic groups form a strong foundation on which a strong nation is built. To do this effectively, it is necessary to know how to distinguish between the goods of the ethnic group and those of the nation. To develop such a paradigm does not mean that cultural differences must be suppressed. It is by suppressing ethnocentrism. When ethnocentrism is put aside, ethnic identity will instill in people a keen and lofty sense of dedication to the service of the common good, the immediate community, and not just the ethnic group, but humanity in general.

But how should this sense of dedication and service to the common good be manifested in the concrete Cameroonian situation? Accordingly, those who possess special skill in agronomy, engineering, economics, science, education and most especially philosophy should place it at the disposal of the whole community. Their studies, research and thinking should result not merely in increased learning for themselves, but in the discovery of new knowledge and solutions to the problems that face their community and humankind at large. They should contribute to the continued moral and spiritual enrichment and renewal of society. They should address society's joys and sorrows; problems, perplexities, dilemmas, conflicts, triumphs, blunders, tragedies, catastrophes in a more accommodating way (Fonlon, 1978). In this context, the elites should stand above ethnocentric sentiments by transforming a mindless and heedless community into that intellectual public that has concern for and values the common good in all its endeavors. When this happens, cultural diversity becomes a point of departure for building a national culture.

## Cultural Diversity and National Culture

Despite the fact that Cameroon is a territory populated by diverse peoples, a national culture can still be maintained which is a contributing factor to nation-building. Cameroon has remained jealous of her cultural heritage and resolved to preserve it (cf. *Cameroon Constitution*, 1996). National culture refers to: “The whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence” (Fanon, 1963:233). In the midst of ethnic conflicts, the institutionalization of national culture is the most appropriate way to solve them.

In Cameroon, a sentiment of common national identity is particularly strong in major institutions and events of socialization such as schools, soccer matches, shared history, symbols and in times of international disputes. The process of nation-building depends on the creation of national paraphernalia such as flags, anthems, national days, national stadiums, national airlines, national languages, and national myths (Hippler, 2005). Hence, the preamble of the Cameroon Constitution reads thus: “We, the people of Cameroon, proud of our linguistic and cultural diversity, an enriching feature of our national identity, but profoundly aware of the imperative need to further consolidate our unity, solemnly declare that we constitute one and the same Nation, bound by the same destiny” (Cameroon Constitution, 1996: Line 1). This pride in our linguistic and cultural diversity already sets the pace for a national culture. It makes Cameroon unique as a nation of people with the same history and destiny. The perception of ethnic diversity taken from this perspective can generate a national culture.

This implies that ethnicity is not evil in itself as portrayed by the forces of colonization and post-colonial politics (Tarimo, 2008). Ethnic identity is an increasingly important source of social capital for our national culture. But how can our national culture safeguard its diversity and yet remain open to dialogue? Accordingly, one must master proper national culture before engaging in the universal culture (Njoh-Mouelle, 1988). A culture that respects rational dialogue follows rules rather than merely acting in accordance to rules. The political value of cross-cultural dialogue sounds like a way out of ethnic conflicts. One major impulse towards promoting a national culture emanates from the fact that a fundamentally dialogical character of human life implies that identity is always formed through dialogue with others. Hence, difference must be respected and engaged (Taylor, 1992).

In this context, cultural diversity becomes a source of innovation, creativity and exchange. There is a reciprocal relationship between diversity and dialogue. Diversity leads to the discovery of features that are common to all, since cultures - like individuals - encounter an irreplaceable element of their own humanity in others. Thus, cultural diversity unites individuals, societies and peoples under one national culture which is promoted by Law No. 98/004 of April 1998 which states that education in Cameroon shall introduce children to the democratic culture and practice, and that it shall promote artistic and cultural training of the child (Part 1, Sec. 5(8)).

Thus, if culture is the expression of national consciousness, then national consciousness is the most elaborate form of national culture. From this perspective, the promotion of national culture is based on government policy which is expressed in Article 1(2) of Decree No 2005/177 of 27 May 2005, which urges the Minister of Culture to formulate and implement government policies on cultural development, national integration and the dissemination of national culture and languages at the local level (Also confer Article 22 of Law No 2004/018 of 22 July 2004). By these laws, local authorities are to organize cultural festivities; offer assistance to cultural groups, and participate in regional programs for the promotion of national languages. The problem, however, is that no serious efforts are made to ensure the implementation of these policies towards building a national culture (Molem, 2008). Thus, nation-building has been seriously hampered by ethnic tensions and conflicts. That notwithstanding, Cameroon can still boast of a national culture that can be used as social capital for nation-building.

## Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that cultural diversity can breed ethnocentrism which leads to ethno-political violence that affects political integration, common good and national culture. The appropriation of cultural diversity is a double-edged sword: when managed properly, it becomes a blessing, but when politicized for selfish interests, it becomes ethnocentrism which is a curse. To deal with ethno-political violence is not to get rid of ethnicity, but to eliminate ethnocentrism. Cameroon needs a well-educated leader, a philosopher king/queen who can devise culturally informed modalities that appreciate and tolerate cultural and linguistic differences. Such a leader can use cultural diversity to produce a congenial environment for socio-political cohesion, for the common good, and for building a national culture which serve as a springboard for nation-building. It is our esteemed contention that the source of our problems is not exactly ethnicity or cultural diversity per se; it is ethnocentrism which was fuelled during colonial administration and which has continued in post-independent multiparty Cameroon that continues to inhibit meaningful development and nation-building.

## References

- Aboud, F.E. & Doyle, A.B. (1993). "The Early Development of Ethnic Identity and Attitudes." In *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science* 15, no. 1.
- Amundsen, I. (1999). "In Search of a counter hegemony, group consciousness, political pressure, and democratisation in Cameroon", in *Holtedahl*, Lisbet, Siri, Gerrard.
- Awasom, N. (2004). "Autochthonization politics and the invention of the crisis of citizenship in Cameroon", in Mbaku, J. & Takougang, J. (eds), *The leadership challenge in Africa: Cameroon under Paul Biya*. (Trenton, NJ).
- Bernal, M.E. et al. (1993). *Ethnic Identity: Formation and Transmission among Hispanics and Other Minorities*. (Albany: State University of New York Press).

- Bayart, J.F. (1993). *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*. (London: Longman).
- Boyle, B. (2007). "Platonic thoughts". *Wilson Quarterly*. 31, 107-108.
- Brown, B. & Shumba, A. (2011). "Managing Africa's multiculturalism: Bringing the "Madiba Magic" into the African school curriculum", in Nsamenang, B. & Tchombe, T.S. *Handbook of African Educational Theories and Practice: A Generative Teacher Education Curriculum*. (HDRC): Bamenda).
- Cicero, M. (1999). *On the Commonwealth: And On the Laws*. (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press).
- Cohen, A. (1981). *The Politics of Elite Culture: Explorations in the Dramaturgy of Power in a Modern African Society*. (California: University of California Press).
- Connolly, W. (2002). *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- Darden, K. & Anna Grzymala-Busse, A. (2006). "The Great Divide: Literacy, Nationalism, and the Communist Collapse." *World Politics*, Volume 59 (October): 83-115.
- Deutsch, K.W. & Folt, W.J. (eds.). (1966). *Nation Building in Comparative Contexts*. (New York, Atherton), retrieved on January 19, 2016 from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nation-building>.
- Douglass, B. (1980). "The common good and the public interest." In *Political Theory*, 8 (1).
- Fanon, F. (1963). "On National Culture", in Fanon, F. *The Wretched of the Earth*, 206-248. (New York: Grove Weidenfeld).
- Fonlon, B. (1978). *The Genuine Intellectual*. (Yaounde: Bumakor).
- Government of Cameroon. (2004). *Law No 2004/018 of 22nd July 2004 on Local Government*.
- Government of Cameroon. (2005). *Decree No 2005/117 of 27 May 2005 establishing Ministry of Culture*.
- Government of Cameroon (1996). *The Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon*.
- Government of Cameroon (1998). *Law No. 98/004 of April 1998, laying down guidelines for education in Cameroon*.
- Hameso, S.Y. (2001). *Ethnicity in Africa: Towards a Positive Approach*. (iUniverse.com).
- Hobbes, T. (1997). *Leviathan*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co.).

- Hippler, J. (ed.). (2005). *Nation-building : a key concept for peaceful conflict transformation?*. Trans.
- Stone, B. (London: Pluto), retrieved January 19, 2016 from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nation-building>
- Lamb, D. (1984). *The Africans*. (New York: Vintage Books).
- Le Vine, V. (2004). "Political Cultures", in Le Vine, Victor T., *Politics in Francophone Africa*, 87-117. Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner.
- LeMoin, R. (2014). *Philosophy and the Foreigner in Plato's Dialogues*. A PhD dissertation in Political Science submitted at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- Lewis, M. et al. (eds.). (2015). *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. 18<sup>th</sup> Edition. Dallas, Texas: SIL International. Retrieved on January 11, 2016 from <https://www.ethnologue.com/>
- Lonsdale, J. (1981). "States and Social Process in Africa: A Historiography Survey," *African Studies Review* 3, 2 (June-September).
- McNay, L. (2008). *Against Recognition*. (Cambridge: Polity).
- Mbiti, J. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy*. (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers).
- Mbuagbo, O. T. (2002). "Cameroon: Exploiting Anglophone Identity in State Deconstruction". *Social Identities* 8 (3), 1-10.
- Molem C. S. (2008). "Cultural Diversity in Conflict and Peace Making in Africa" retrieved on November 10, 2015, from [www.hsrc.ac.za/en/research-data/mtree-doc/1035](http://www.hsrc.ac.za/en/research-data/mtree-doc/1035)
- Monga, Y. (2000). "Au village": Space, culture, politics in Cameroon". *Cahier D'études Africaines*, 160.
- Njoh-Mouelle, E. (1972). *Education et développement en Afrique*. (Yaoundé : SOPECAM).
- Mylonas, H. (2010). "Assimilation and its Alternatives: Caveats in the Study of Nation-Building Policies", In *Rethinking Violence: States and Non-State Actors in Conflict*, eds. Adria Lawrence and Erica Chenoweth. (BCSIA Studies in International Security, MIT Press).
- Ngayap, P. (1983). *Cameroun, qui gouverne? De Ahidjo a Biya , L'heritage et L'enjeu*. (Paris: Harmattan).
- Okullu, H. (1987). *Church and Politics in East Africa* (Nairobi: Uzima Press Limited).
- Plato, (1974). *The Republic*. (London: Penguin books Ltd).
- Popper, K. R. (1945). *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. (London: Routledge).

Rawls, J. (1973). *A Theory of Justice*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Rousseau, J.J. (1988). *The Social Contract*. Cranston, M. (Trans.). (New York: Viking Penguin).

Sharkey, H.J. (2007). "Arab Identity and Ideology in Sudan: The Politics of Language, Ethnicity, and Race," *African Affairs* 107, 426 (December) 21-43.

Tarimo, A. (2008). "Politicization of Ethnic Identities and the Common Good in Kenya", retrieved on November 10, 2015 from [http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/focusareas/global\\_ethics/kenya.htm](http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/focusareas/global_ethics/kenya.htm).

Taylor, C. (1992). "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition": An Essay*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

Tumi, C. (2003). *L'Effort Camerounais*. Newspaper of the National Bishops Conference of Cameroon. Retrieved on November 21, 2015 from <http://www.l,effort.camerounais.com>