
*Negotiating an Anglophone Identity* is a critical analysis of Anglophone Cameroonians’ “demands for the rearrangement of state power”, an excessively centralised state which, according to the Anglophones, has militated against their interests and aspirations as a distinct political constituency following their reunification with Francophone Cameroon in October 1961. Patently, this book is the culmination of the authors’ longstanding interests not only on the politics of Anglophone identity in Cameroon, but also, and more generally, on the fascinating scholarship that has focused on the politics of belonging and autochthony in postcolonial Africa. In this book, Konings and Nyamnjoh invite the reader to reflect critically on still-contentious notions such as nation-building, the plight of minority peoples in postcolonial states, and indeed, on the problematics of citizenship in the postcolony.

Since the early 1990s, a period that has come to represent what some scholars have termed Africa’s ‘second liberation’, a growing body of literature has sought to analyze the resurgence and dynamics of democratic movements, particularly those that have engaged in a passionate clamour for the overthrow of dictatorship and the blatant abuse/disrespect of peoples’ rights both as individuals and groups. *Negotiating an Anglophone Identity* represents, par excellence this genre of scholarship, taking as its object of analysis, the reemergence of Anglophone activism for democracy, as well as demands for the reconfiguration of state power in Cameroon.

This book is the first comprehensive volume to be published on the Anglophone problem in Cameroon. It is thorough in both its depth of analyses and breadth of topics and to a large extent, accomplishes the objectives set at the introductory chapter. The book makes a particularly strong case in affirming the existentiality of an Anglophone crisis in Cameroon, contrary to official or government rhetoric of denial that has tended to trivialise Anglophone demands for a re-ordering of state power. But there is more. The book’s key objective is to historicise and analyze the construction of a distinct Anglophone identity among citizens of the former British-controlled Southern Cameroons. The authors contend that while Anglophone consciousness is an imagined construct, it is nevertheless rooted in territoriality, language, inheritance of a different colonial tradition, and of course a shared sense of history, distinct from the experiences of Francophone Cameroon.

Konings and Nyamnjoh contend, and with substantial evidence, that whilst the Anglophone leaders bargained for a federal state with Francophone Cameroon upon reunification as a mechanism to safeguard their minority status and identity, the leaders of Francophone Cameroon instead, perceived federation as a momentary episode towards a highly centralised unitary state - a vision still echoed and defended today by members of the Francophone-dominated regime. But the stark denial by successive Francophone regimes of an Anglophone identity (or problem) belies their hegemonic search to deconstruct and obfuscate Anglophoneness.

The book consists of eight chapters covering various themes such as the nation-state project in postcolonial Cameroon, internal politics in the Southern Cameroons during the colonial period leading up to reunification with French Cameroon, the development of Anglophone consciousness during the federal and later on, one-party era, the resurgence of Anglophone clamour for a return to a federal state or secession since 1990 and most compelling of all in my opinion, the strategies of the Biya government to deconstruct Anglophone identity. The book sets out to show the genesis, character and orientation of an Anglophone identity in Cameroon and how this has been negotiated amongst other identities, through space and time from the colonial era to the present. It relies substantively on both primary and secondary materials from various archives, as well as data obtained from interviews of Anglophone political actors. The authors also make use of an internet forum, where Anglophones in the diaspora exchange views about politics in Cameroon and the Anglophone struggle in particular.
One of its central arguments is the contention that “divisions among the Anglophone political elite and their struggles for power” are partly responsible for reunification with French Cameroon and for the present Anglophone predicament. Building on this argument, Konings and Nyamnjoh reject the view by some historians such as Ngoh (1996) and Njeuma (1995) who tend to blame the Anglophone architect of reunification, John N. Foncha, for “negotiating poorly” with his Francophone counterparts. The authors also convincingly argue that “leadership problems and growing disagreements within the Anglophone movement” on the strategy to achieve their objectives have contributed in weakening the Anglophone cause as a whole. Of crucial importance to this is the Francophone-dominated government’s shrewd tactics of divide and rule, and its ability to make use of the internecine feuds within the Anglophone movement, particularly the apparent politicultural differences between northwestern and southwestern Anglophones.

One of the major strengths of the book is its balance of argument, as evidenced particularly by the chapter on Anglophone and Francophone responses to the views of Anglophone movements. In this regard, Konings and Nyamnjoh assert that while there are “significant differences between the Anglophone and Francophone responses to the Anglophone struggle”, it is nonetheless simplistic and even dangerous to present the entire Anglophone population as supporters of the Anglophone cause and Francophones as its opponents. In fact, they maintain that Francophones are more united in their vision for a decentralised state, than Anglophones are on their struggle for a return to the federal state. Worthy of mention are the authors’ strategic use of two case studies to illustrate Anglophones’ struggles for their identity and socio-economic legacy. To this end, Konings and Nyamnjoh discuss the struggles for the GCE Board and ongoing Anglophone resistance to government’s planned privatisation of a giant agro-industrial complex, the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) located mainly in Anglophone Cameroon.

Very little or nothing is heard of the voices of ordinary Anglophones, either in terms of their contributions or the impact of the Anglophone struggle on their lives. Konings and Nyamnjoh’s contention is that, as in other parts of Africa and the Third World, nationalism in Anglophone Cameroon has been championed by the elite. Despite this, the authors acknowledge the importance of ordinary peoples’ voices, if a comprehensive account of the complex issues are to be rendered. The use of more illustrations such as maps of the evolving status of Anglophone Cameroon and graphic symbols of Anglophone identity would have added more nuance to their work. Nonetheless, these concerns do not diminish in any significant way the author’s proficient analysis of diverse themes, which crisscross the spheres of identity politics, nation-building, and sociopolitical movements.

This book will be useful for scholars interested in contemporary politics in Cameroon. It will also be beneficial to students of African studies who specialise on ethnicity, identity issues, the politics of belonging, autochthony; and, indeed, citizenship in postcolonial Africa. Scholars interested in understanding what today is generally known as the Anglophone problem in Cameroon will find this book not only introductory and informative in its detail but also brilliant in its analysis.

Jude Fokwang
University of Toronto,
Toronto, Ontario.