
Celebrating Unity and Debating Unity in Cameroon's 2010

Independence Jubilees, the "Cinquantenaire"

*Les manifestations et le débat autour de l'idée de l'unité pendant les jubilés de
l'indépendance du Cameroun en 2010 : le "Cinquantenaire"*

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Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/18128>

DOI : [10.4000/etudesafriaines.18128](https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafriaines.18128)

ISSN : 1777-5353

Éditeur

Éditions de l'EHESS

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 6 juillet 2015

Pagination : 331-358

ISSN : 0008-0055

Référence électronique

Kathrin Tiewa et Emmanuel Yenshu Vubo, « Celebrating Unity and Debating Unity in Cameroon's 2010 », *Cahiers d'études africaines* [En ligne], 218 | 2015, mis en ligne le 01 janvier 2015, consulté le 20 mars 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/18128> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafriaines.18128>

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Independence Jubilees, the "Cinquantenaire"*

As 1st January 2010 was approaching the government of Cameroon prepared to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the country's independence. Simultaneously, Anglophones of all shades of political opinion and who make up roughly a fifth of the population were observed to openly question the relevance of the date when this applied only to the French speaking component of the polity (which had gained independence on 1st January 1960). Very close to that date the same government talked of the celebration of the independence and reunification of the two components of the bicultural and bilingual state and went ahead to effectively celebrate the event on the 20th of May 2010 (a date which had no relation to the two events). Some low key events, however, had taken place earlier in the year. Although there was some talk of celebrating the reunification jubilee on 1st October 2011 (English speaking Southern Cameroons joined the French speaking Cameroons on that date fifty years earlier), no events were planned and none took place. On the contrary, radical Anglophone activists with autonomy and even secessionist claims have made it a duty to celebrate that date every year and actually commemorated what they consider the golden jubilee of their independence on 1st October 2011. These contrasting trends between official position and unofficial demands for recognition reflect the uneasy and complicated situation of the union between the two components of Cameroon. Although this situation, *i.e.* the marginalization of Anglophone interests by the mainly Francophone elite, has been styled by many scholars as the Anglophone problem (Konings 1996, 1999; Konings & Nyamnjoh 2003; Nkoum-Me-Ntseny 1999; Olinga 1994), it can be aptly described as

* This work derives from research undertaken by the authors within the context of a doctoral research by Kathrin Tiewa and a book project by Emmanuel YENSHU VUBO (2012). We wish to thank the research assistants, interviewees, collaborators and friends for insights, criticisms and the support that have enriched this paper. We also wish to thank the participants of the Point Sud workshop which took place in Bamako, 7-12 January 2012, during which a first version of this paper was presented, for interesting and comparative perspectives on this research.

the union question that has occupied a prominent place in Cameroonian politics.

This paper hopes to examine the multiple dimensions of the jubilee problematic. It wishes to examine the way the 50th anniversary of Cameroon's independence was celebrated from the point of view of performances around the theme of unity that came to dominate the celebrations. The stress will be on the symbols (dates, emblems), activities and interpretation of events during the independence jubilee celebrations while analyzing the significance of the failed promise of reunification celebrations in 2011¹, the attempt by Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) activists to stage a celebration in their own way on 1st October 2011 and the reaction from regional government officials. The major argument is that the events and symbolisms focused predominantly on official interpretations of unity that have shifted since the advent of the unitary state in 1972 when a referendum was held to move from a federal form of government to a centralized one. In the particular context of the celebrations, the theme of national unity was transformed from an earlier meaning as a consensus around a common historical memory of reunification to one which is more preoccupied with transcending ethnic differences, an idealistic vision coined by the current head of state, Mr. Paul Biya. In this new version of discourses on unity, dissenting voices (especially from the Anglophone component of the polity that question this conception of unity) have become a permanent feature of the socio-political landscape. The focus will be on the series of events organized during the first half of 2010 (January to May), some reference to the celebration of 50 years of the Cameroonian army and the attempted celebration of the reunification's golden jubilee by Anglophone secessionists. An analysis will be made of discourses, actions, events and symbolisms around the unity theme as well as the role historical interpretations play within this framework. We argue that, instead of celebrating dates with clear-cut historical significance in their own right, the state had focused on a theme with no direct relevance to the events and that this was consistent with a re-reading of history from the perspective of the present. The analysis is made in relation to the discussions (classical and contemporary) on the nation as that relates to unity, history (and historicizing) and memory as well as Gramsci's concept of hegemony understood as modes of social control available to dominant groups. With regard to the latter, only the ideological component (consensual control) will be retained because, as the argument goes, in the absence of this component there will only be domination or naked power (coercion) and not hegemony.

1. In fact, this 50th anniversary of the Reunification was celebrated only on 28th February 2014, a date arbitrarily fixed by Mr. Biya and with no relation to the historic event itself. We will however limit ourselves to the unity theme of the 2010 celebrations.

Historical Background

In the “African Year” 1960, French Cameroons was the first of 17—mainly francophone—African countries to gain independence from the colonial power. As of 1st January 1960 when that event took place, Guinea was the only one of such countries that had achieved independence before (in 1958). In fact, Guinea was the only country that voted for independence outside the French orbit in the 1958 referendum organized by Charles de Gaulle. Other countries of the French colonial sphere opted for continued association that would eventually involve, as in the case of Cameroon, secret treaties² that eventually transformed them into a “chasse gardée—a private estate jealously guarded against encroachment by other world powers” (Meredith 2011: 70). This continued presence of the former colonial power was meant to project the prestige of France as a world power (Beti 2006: 138-142) in a tradition that had been inaugurated in the decolonization period. General de Gaulle, French president at this period, was clearly of the opinion that France could only continue to be a great power “qu’unie aux territoires d’outre-mer qu’elle a ouverts à la civilisation” (Benot 2001: 89). Such relations characterized as special, “liens spéciaux” (*ibid.*: 150-170), historic ties or colonial heritage (in Cameroonian parlance) have played a determining role in the destiny of former French colonies especially in terms of style of government, autonomy and sovereignty (*ibid.*). Yet the Cameroonian case is more complicated than that. The territory between Nigeria (which also gained independence on 1st October 1960) and the former UN trust territory of the French Cameroons was administered by the British as UN-Trust Territory and integral part of Nigeria as the British Northern and Southern Cameroons. Britain had hoped to integrate this region into its colony of Nigeria with which it would gain independence (Fanso 2009: 142) but leading politicians in the Southern Cameroons had opposed this because of their marginalization within the context of Nigeria’s decolonization politics and the maltreatment of natives by Nigerian officials and traders. After toying with the idea of reunification with the French Cameroons, they became less unanimous about such an option as several competing ideas occupied centre stage in the political arena. To begin with, there were four options: unification of the territories of Northern and Southern Cameroons within a single nation; integration of the two territories, which had been administered as part of the British colony of Nigeria, into the latter, as autonomous regions; secession from Nigeria to become independent, either jointly or as two segments of the same country; reunification with the former French Cameroons in the argument “that all the sectors of the former [German] Kamerun³ be reunited to form a single independent

2. For more on these treaties see T. DELTHOMBE *ET AL.* (2011: 456-464).

3. The German spelling “Kamerun” refers to the territory which was administered by the Germans before WWI and which was much larger than the territory of Cameroon’s frontiers today.

state” (Chem-Langhëë 1995: 17). Whereas some local politicians supported the idea of secession, students and migrants from the territory under French rule opted for reunification (Nfi 2011). Although the United Nations decided to grant independence to the two British Cameroons territories, the choice was narrowed down to two alternatives, integration into newly independent Nigeria or reunification with the equally newly independent Republic of Cameroon (formerly French Cameroons). This restriction was highly contested, especially by secessionists, but plebiscites were organized to decide on the issue on February 11th and 12th 1961⁴. The majority of the electorate of Northern Cameroons voted in favour of integration with Nigeria and became the Saradauna Province on 1st June 1961. In like manner, the majority of the electorate of Southern Cameroons opted for reunification with the Republic of Cameroon and became the federated state of West Cameroon within a Federal Republic of Cameroon on 1st October 1961 with Ahmadou Ahidjo as President of the Republic.

Although there were disagreements on the form the state would take at Reunification from the very beginning (*i.e.* from 1959 onwards), developments would lead to a model Ngoh (2011: 31) has called “a centralized federation” which was marked by developments that eventually culminated in a centralized state. Between 1966 and 1970 the ground work for the unitary system was laid and in 1972 a referendum was held to decide on the transformation of the Federal Republic into a unitary state, the United Republic of Cameroon. The results of the referendum were in favour of the new constitution⁵ although the conditions under which these elections took place have come to be challenged by some activists of English speaking extraction. They argue that the referendum was in violation of the clause of the federal constitution that prohibited any revision without an approval from a majority of deputies from the federated state of West Cameroon. The climate of terror in the Ahidjo regime did not favour a free debate on the issues to be voted for either. The unitary state then came to life and ushered in a new discourse about unity that came more and more to be synonymous with the unitary state and its formation.

The question of re-unification of the former territories of the German colony of Kamerun was one of the key issues debated in the move towards independence and constituted, thereafter, the core concept around which unity was built. In this way, the idea of unity was also a decisive point in the first president’s—Mr. Ahmadou Ahidjo’s—discourses on nation-building. It gave the impression that nation-building was not possible without reunification. Delthombe *et al.* (2011: 489) suggest that Ahidjo himself,

4. Although most scholars refer to the 11th as the date of the plebiscite, in the predominantly Muslim Northern Cameroons people were allowed to vote on the 11th and the 12th, reserving the 11th for the men and the 12th for the women (KLEINHEINZ 2011: 83).

5. For more information, see B. CHEM-LANGHËË (1995).

in some form of political opportunism, had appropriated this idea from the UPC that had used it to counteract the ethnically divisive politics of the French colonial administration: "L'indépendance acquise, le nouveau régime reprend à son compte l'idée, portée par les upécistes, de transcender de tels clivages." After the 1972 referendum, the same idea was transformed from one meaning the process of territorial unification to that of administrative centralization. Mr. Paul Biya, who became President of the Republic in 1982 and who has governed the country ever since has continued to foster this conception of unity although only with a faint reference to the idea of unity as the reunification consequent on the plebiscite of 1961. "Unity", which has become the ideological cornerstone of the national project in Cameroon, occupied centre stage in the Golden Jubilee celebrations of Cameroon's independence in 2010.

The Setting of Dates and Oblivion

The Golden Jubilee celebrations in Cameroon were specific and different from the celebrations in the other countries and an event in Paris that collectively celebrated the independence of the former French colonies on 14th July 2010, coinciding with celebrations of the French national day. While the expectation was that 1st January 2010 would be the Jubilee day (because French Cameroons became independent on that day) and there were actually some preparations towards that day, official declarations as to when the celebrations would take place were only clear by 4th February 2010 when the organizing committee was named. If they were to take place on that day, they would coincide with New Year's Day and that would have even been surprising as 1st January has never been celebrated as National Day, having been replaced by 20th May since the 1972 Referendum on the Unitary State. Moreover, this would have raised the question of the independence of the English speaking component of the polity which had only been decolonized by uniting with the French speaking Republic of Cameroon on 1st October 1961. In fact, critics and activists were actually interpreting the imminent celebrations of 1st January as the final act in the annexation/assimilation of the Anglophones through a process of relative reference to a history which was essentially tilted towards the Francophone component, or failing that, a *de facto* exclusion of Anglophones from the polity. That may explain why the Head of State, Mr. Paul Biya, in his end of year address to the nation on 31st December 2009 promised 2010 to be a festive year and a prelude to the "*Cinquantenaire de la réunification*" which was to be celebrated in 2011. He, however, predicted 20th May to be the culminating point ("*apothéose*") of the celebrations (Biya 2009). He called on the nation to treat 1st January 2010 as "un jour de recueillement en mémoire de ceux, aujourd'hui disparus, qui ont contribué à bâtir notre

Nation, mais aussi un jour d'allégresse [...]” (*ibid.*). The Ministry of Culture, on its part, organized a rather restricted event on the eve of 1st January 2010 to mark the day. This was essentially made up of artistic displays (music, dance) with little reference to the significance of the celebration itself as had been promised by the President himself in the 2009 end of year address.

On the contrary, the focus was on celebrations scheduled for 20th May 2010. The Jubilee celebrations, in themselves, appeared to be belated, half-hearted and ill-prepared. The choice of 20th May was politically expedient but it did not solve the puzzle because the Independence Day celebrations would be moved to a date with no relation to the event itself. Putting the events on the regularly celebrated referendum day, also known in French as “*fête de l'unité*” (with no official English equivalent), clearly eclipsed the independence dimension by the very normality of the habitual yearly celebrations of the National Day. This is what an official in a Ministry (whose identity we wish to keep anonymous on request) had to say: “On fait le Cinquanteaire mais on ne le vit pas, on ne le ressent pas.” He also referred rather to neo-colonial dimensions (especially the Cameroonian government’s close ties to France) of the celebrations by insinuating that the former colonial power had imposed the idea of celebrating the jubilees on African states rather than this being an original idea of the regime. The origin of an observable lack of enthusiasm to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of Independence may therefore be twofold: the banality of the event (as celebrated as every yearly May 20th event) and its imposition by an ex-colonial power. It is by shifting to the Referendum Day that the regime introduced the unity theme into the Golden Jubilee celebrations of Cameroon’s independence and, as such, its problematic came to confront the state as of rather primordial importance than the question of independence itself.

By highlighting the day of the referendum which abrogated the federal arrangements at the very basis of the union and judged by many to be a stage-managed process, the government seemed to be paying more attention to an invented history with no popular content as opposed to real history with land mark events such as the independence of 1st January 1960, the plebiscite of 11th February 1961⁶ and Reunification of 1st October 1961. This is what P. Connerton (1989: 14) has described as “organized oblivion” where historical realities are suppressed and rather banal controversial ones highlighted and overemphasized. In this regard, what is forced to be forgotten at the official level are dates when the real decolonization took place: independence and reunification dates. Cameroon is one of the rare countries where the date of independence is not celebrated whereas most countries

6. This is the most prominent of a cluster of dates on which the peoples of the former British Trust Territories chose the way of gaining independence within a plebiscite (CHEM-LANGHÉE 1995; NJEUMA 1995; PERCIVAL 2008). Since 1965, however, this day has been celebrated as Youth Day (*Fête de la jeunesse*).

celebrate such as national days. Reunification had been commemorated as one of several public holidays before being suppressed after 1972 when the two Independence days were shelved aside and the National Day fixed at 20th May to celebrate the process of administrative centralization and the advent of the unitary state.

The day of the Plebiscite itself has come down to be celebrated as a Youth Day with no reference to the original event. In the latter case it is not the elimination of the date but rather the distortion of the meaning by a replacement of the symbolic content of events. It is in this way that there is an official attempt to re-tell history by giving dates totally different meanings. In fact, the regime seems to be applying the cynical truism by Gramsci (Fusaro 2010: 26) that "in a given state history is the history of ruling classes". This version of history is then declared to be official. The hegemonic group in a multi-cultural society therefore uses its version of memory to "harmonize and to standardize reluctantly accepted versions in order to create an identity where differences prevail" and thus legitimizes itself (Saar 2002: 273). It is in this way that Mr. Paul Biya, through his idea of "integration hopes to invent an" ideal Cameroonian from some form of unitized memory.

The continuous invention of meanings (not to confused with the invention of history itself) for historical facts by selective commemoration and prioritization of dates has been accompanied by a certain constitutional process through changes in the name of the state. After reunification in 1961 the new state took on the name Federal Republic of Cameroon but was later on known as the United Republic of Cameroon after the advent of the unitary state in 1972. This idea of unity was a token reminder of an original notion of association at the base but also in the fashion of the times (with examples from Tanzania in the background). In the same vein, the transitory clauses of the 1972 constitution indicated that articles of the federal constitution that had not been expressly abrogated would continue to apply⁷. In that way the fears of assimilation expressed at the onset of the union were temporarily assuaged. The word "united" would thus serve as a reminder that there was a union rather than the absorption of one entity by another, the administrative centralization code-named unitary state having taken central stage in the nation-building process and subsequent constitutional developments where it is considered sacrosanct. In 1984, Mr. Biya, in a policy he called national integration, introduced a constitutional amendment which deleted the qualifier "united" from the designation of Cameroon. "Integration" was decreed to be the higher form or the ultimate endpoint of unity. Differences were considered to have ended and everyone became

7. In reality this could hold only within two spheres, namely the legal system that has continued to be bi-jural and the educational system that has officially decided to operate two sub-systems unrelated to each other.

a citizen on his own right: no minority, no majority. That is why the political slogan of “unity”, which would be symbolically maintained in the name of the state as the United Republic of Cameroon and almost understood as restricted to the Reunification process of 1961, would soon lose this meaning. In fact, its political usage within the Biya regime has come increasingly to mean the loss of specific ethnic identities in favour of a national consciousness. This is reflected in a speech in Buea at the onset of his long presidency when he called on Cameroonians to give up their specific identities in favour of a greater national consciousness or identification. The Constitutional revision of 1996 continued to re-affirm the commitment to the centralized state in a version which has been styled “*État unitaire décentralisé*”, which at close range will be an oxymoron, it being centralized (*unitaire*) and decentralized (*décentralisé*) at the same time.

Performing Unity, Celebrating Unity

In spite of the confusing starting point, the organizing committee coined many slogans to express one idea of “unity” that dominated the entire celebrations of Cameroon’s independence jubilee: “Diversity is our strength”, “together for an ever greater Cameroon”, “one people, one nation, one future”, “today unity and peace, tomorrow prosperity”, “different backgrounds, a common future”, “let us celebrate 50 years of tolerance and pacific coexistence.” Many different slogans of this type in both official languages, English and French, were to be seen on big posters and banners, decorating big cities such as Yaoundé, Douala and Buea.

The Head of State, Mr. Paul Biya, in an exceptional performance, addressed the nation on May 17th, 2010, three days before the peak of the Jubilee-festivities, or the “apothéose”⁸ as he himself called it. Confirming the slogan of unity which had already been propagated and claimed nationwide, he declared that: “[...] il existe aujourd’hui une *nation camerounaise* et [...] son unité est notre bien le plus précieux”⁹. In this address he seemed to fuse two visions of unity that had been running concurrently and confusedly. In the section of his speech devoted to unity wherein he questioned whether at independence Cameroon was already a nation, the first answer was to link the nationhood question to reunification which was presented as the basis of the nation, giving the impression that Reunification alone accounted for or could account for the creation of a sense of national belonging. On the contrary, he has also come to envision unity as the transcendence of ethnic differences much away from the conception of unity as the unification of the once divided components of the German Kamerun. This

8. See *Prospective Nouvelle*, n° 063, Mai 2010, p. 8.

9. *Ibid.* Italics in the original.

is consistent with his view as developed within his book, *Communal Liberalism*, published in 1987 and in which he had affirmed that:

"Our country has certainly made progress in promoting national unity on the basis of such positive elements as belonging to a single race, sharing the same territory and history, adopting *bilingualism*, etc. However, this unity is still fragile; therefore it is time to switch from mere *national union* to real *national integration*, from the present *co-existence of ethnic groups* to their transformation into a *New Ethnic Group* suited to our country [...]" (Biya 1987: 30; italics added).

[...] I intend, from now on, to do everything to make profound social changes capable of giving birth to a new community that is more united and more aware of its uniqueness vis-à-vis other peoples; in short, a real Cameroonian nation" (*ibid.*: 31).

This vision which has been described by A. Finkelkraut (1987: 99) as fusionist and ethnic and by others (Pandey & Geschiere 2003: 19) as the culturalist or *volk* moment of the nation is based on the idealistic belief that it is possible to transcend ethnic differences that are presented as essentially problematic. By replacement: "déracinement d'abord [...] dressage ensuite [...]" (Finkelkraut 1987: 86). Its clarion call is for the tribal man to be replaced by the citizen free of tribal trappings (Mbonimpa 1994: 11). This vision is idealistic in essence and absurd because as Mbonimpa argues, "il est facile de montrer que le 'citoyen' abstrait n'existe nulle part" (*ibid.*). In the version as presented by the president, the bicultural reference to unity only comes through bilingualism and the main idea is what has come to be called national integration which is presented as a higher stage in national unity. Such a vision is challenged by many who point to the rampant tribalism that is characteristic of government and several divisions that are sustained by the regime¹⁰.

Already introducing this slogan in his New Year's speech on December 31st, 2009 he had declared that: "Notre unité nationale n'est pas un vain mot. Une preuve? Lorsque les Lions Indomptables s'illustrent dans des compétitions internationales, quel est le Camerounais qui ne ressent pas une immense fierté, quel que soit son lieu d'origine?" (Biya 2009). The idea that national unity is not an empty phrase may sound celebratory given that this is coming some 21 years after the book mentioned above was written. The example of the national football team was later to become an essential point of reference in the imagery of unity. Consistent with this line of thought, former heroes of the national team (Christened Indomitable Lions) were given the opportunity to perform in a show-down match. Such allusions were also surely meant to tie in with the pre-World Cup phase to be held the same year in South Africa in the same year and in which Cameroon was going to participate. In that way, political capital would be made out of appealing to the sentiments of a large number of football lovers in Cameroon

10. For more on this see YENSHU VUBO (2012: 33-52, chap. 2).

rather than the celebrations that seemed not to be an affair of the capital¹¹. Football has often played a prominent part in the politics of Cameroon and often used to build a sense of nationalism either real or imagined (Clignet & Stark 1974; Mokeba 1989; Mbeutcha 2009; Vidacs 2010, 2011). At some moments of the country's history it has been used to wade off challenges to the regime from contesting forces and dissenting voices. At the heat of political effervescence in the early part of 1990 marked by protests and calls for political reform, the national team's performances at the World Cup in Italy diverted attention from issues and succeeded to slow down the momentum of the contestation. It is no wonder that Mr. Biya has used football as some form of opium to garner some form of stability when his power is at stake. References to heroes of the national team were therefore a strategy to evoke a certain glorious past to which citizens could feel a sense of commonality although this contrasts with the poor and lackluster performances of the national team for some time prior to 2010. Moreover, the momentous collective support to the national team is occasional, ephemeral and epiphenomenal. Besides, the fading fortunes of the national team by the 2000s cast doubts on the efficacy of the appeal by the president (Nkwi 2010: 152-173).

Other events are also worth mentioning here. In the frame of the celebrations, a marathon which started in Yaoundé on May 11th, 2010, nine days before the "*Fête nationale*", also aimed at accentuating unity. On May 11th an ecumenical service took place in the Yaoundé city centre bringing together people, regardless of their religious beliefs, inviting to commemorate the 50th anniversary of independence in religious terms. May 13th marked a cultural highlight, dubbed *Les danses du Cameroun* (Dances of Cameroon), an event organized by the Ministry of Culture. The performances, which lasted over three hours, brought together traditional dance groups from all regions of Cameroon. May 15th hosted a *Mega Concert (Grand Concert)* in the Yaoundé Multi-Purpose Centre (*Centre Polyvalent*) which lasted about eight hours. Singers and musicians of the independence period as well as younger musicians performed in French, English and in local languages. These events tended to highlight a low keyed cultural side to the events as far as the public was concerned as their very restrictiveness rid them of any possibility of public participation and popular effervescence. This confirms the fact that this was an event of the select political class limited to the capital.

The same could also be said of the conference dubbed "Yaoundé International Conference: Africa 21" that took place on the 18th and 19th of May with celebrities such as Kofi Annan, Boutros Boutros Ghali as well as some

11. Some persons interviewed said that they were disappointed by the fact that the celebrations did not reach their towns and the fact that the majority of events had been organized solely in the political capital Yaoundé and only broadcast directly on the national TV-channel, CRTV (Cameroon Radio Television).

African leaders who had been invited to debate on the situation of Africa in the 21st century. The latter also attended the May 20th celebrations as guests of the President of the Republic and were witnesses of a grandiose three-hour march-past composed in the main of the military, the ruling RDPC (CPDM)¹², some schools, civil society groups and opposition parties. Formed in 1985 through a transformation of Ahidjo's Union nationale camerounaise (UNC), the Rassemblement démocratique du peuple camerounais (in English, Cameroon People's Democratic Movement) has occupied a governing position since its foundation, first within the *de facto* one-party rule up till 1991 and, secondly in a hegemonic position since then. It has maintained a close relationship with the state apparatus inherited from the one party days and contributes with the support of the military apparatus (army, gendarmerie, police) and the administration in maintaining Mr. Biya in his more than 30 years rule. Within what can be termed a politics-the military-administration complex, it occupies centre stage as the antechamber through which the government controls the rest of society. Appointments into public office are closely tied to party affiliation while the party itself recruits top ranking officials into its higher organs. Its association with the military was evident in the presence of top military officials during its congress that held in 2011 as if they were there to play allegiance to the party. Public events such as the National Day therefore witness both party and the military in combined parade that is smacks of a show of strength of the regime in its political and military dimensions. In the process other participants such as opposition political parties are simply dwarfed and often represent a token appearance.

In the Tanzanian context Askew has elaborated on the performance of culture which represents the "dominant ideology". In the Cameroon case, the unity theme was the dominant ideology selected by the hegemonic group and which became "materialized through its performance" (Askew 2002: 2) within the festivities: on a spiritual level, with the inter-religious celebration, on a cultural/traditional level with the dances, on a musical and linguistic level with the Grand Concert, at the sport's level with the football match, on the reflexive level with the international conference, this rather focusing on the unity of the entire continent, and on the political level with the Parade (unity of all military, civil and political actors for the sake of the nation represented by the President). The slogans, which could not be missed within the capital Yaoundé continuously reminded the passers-by in French as well as in English of their unity.

In addition, a number of symbols were introduced or re-introduced to mark unity. The logo of the Jubilee (*Cinquantenaire*) was chosen through a nation-wide competition in which the design of the third-placed Anglophone

12. The *Rassemblement démocratique du peuple camerounais*/Cameroon People's Democratic Movement is Biya's government-party.

graphic artist, John Shaddai Akenji, won. The first and second placed Francophone winners were attributed prizes of five and two million FCFA each, but their designs were not chosen to represent the occasion. The fact, however, that an Anglophone in the frame of the performance of unity was granted the possibility to design the logo of the occasion is noteworthy, and is, in itself, a symbol of emphasized unity. The logo, a golden amulet with the outline of the Cameroonian state, held by two open hands with a “50” in the middle and a dove with an olive branch in its beak flying at the top of the country’s contour, a shining sun-like sparkle illuminating the country from behind and the coat of arms below the picture, made for polysemous interpretations. One interpretation of the two hands was that each of them stood for each of the linguistic components of the polity, the one hand for the Anglophones, the other for the Francophones, this representing a unity of purpose that of holding the country safe and sheltered. In terms of symbolic meaning, this was going to be the object of over-blown interpretations by state officials. The author of this logo could attribute only messages of peace, love, liberty and “the expert hand that [had] built the country” (one is not sure whether this may not be some veiled praise-singing to the regime) into his creation. The symbols of peace (olive branch in the beak of a dove) were immediately highlighted by the organizers, this concept having been one of the main slogans of the regime for long until it has become an obsession (PRC 2010: 10).

“Au plan de symboles et de sens, l’usage de la colombe portant un rameau d’olivier symbolise la paix, la réconciliation, la victoire et surtout la longévité, la force et l’espérance. L’olivier est réputé éternel, d’où le vœu de la consolidation des liens perpétuels entre les fils du Cameroun pour un avenir radieux tourné vers le développement présent. La palme de la paix qui surplombe le visuel du logo montre effectivement qu’en 50 ans de souveraineté, nous avons œuvré pour la paix et l’unité, aussi constituons-nous en Afrique un îlot de stabilité et un havre de paix” (*ibid.*).

As one can notice, the idea of peace is highlighted and falls in line with the recurrent tendency in official circles to present Cameroon as a haven of peace. One may also interpret a distant reference to the post-independence days that were marked by an insurrection in the West (formerly Bamileke division) and Sanaga-Maritime regions. It may only be inferred that, after that tumultuous period, Cameroonians had been reconciled among themselves. This may also not hold true because the events of that period are no more topical. The references to victory, force, hope and longevity make less sense in context except as slogans. In this process of creating ideological discourses the unity that the day of 20th May was supposed to be celebrating is attached to the slogan of peace. This reference is inscribed into the newly transformed vision of unity as articulated by Mr. Biya:

“[...] un grand pas en se mettant ensemble dans la recherche et l’assomption de vouloir vivre collectif afin de ne former qu’une seule et même nation”;

"Le territoire national sans frontières régionales, il symbolise l'abolition de barrières ethniques entre les Camerounais qui forment alors un tout indivisible"; "[...] des mains enfin élevées vers le ciel en une louange et une prière adressée à Dieu afin que la paix et l'unité continuent de gouverner la destinée de la Nation"; "Aussi la célébration des cinquantenaires de l'indépendance et de la Réunification de la République du Cameroun vise-t-elle à marquer et magnifier un objectif chèrement acquis, à savoir l'unité nationale et la cohésion sociale" (*ibid.*: 11; italics added).

This logo was eventually crafted into giant forms and placed at prominent places in the main towns of the country starting with the capital city, Yaoundé.

Furthermore, the ubiquity of the Head of State, President Paul Biya, either personally (at the conference and at the March past) or in larger-than-life photographic portraits (at the events that took place in the Centre Polyvalent of Yaoundé, such as the Dances, the Grand Concert but also the football match in the stadium of Yaoundé) imposed himself as a symbol of unity. According to the Cameroonian constitution "[t]he President of the Republic [...] elected by the whole Nation, he shall be symbol of national unity".

Finally¹³, the cloth printed as official on the occasion of the Jubilee which served as decoration for many of the events, but which also served as base for uniforms of performing choirs, parade-groups and private individuals displayed many symbols which again imposed or simply repeated "unity": the slogans, the logo, the Monument of Reunification¹⁴, the Prime Minister's Lodge in Buea¹⁵ and the "Palais de l'unité" (witness the unity theme), the current Presidential Palace, the former palace (former colonial governor's residence, also occupied by President Ahidjo), which today is the National Museum, a football-player and a torch-bearer. Also the dates, 1960-2010 and 1961-2011 decorated the cloth next to the theme of the festivities "Cinquantenaire de l'indépendance et de la réunification du Cameroun—50th anniversaries of independence and reunification of Cameroon". The three colours of the national flag, green, red and yellow studded the material's pattern, but also served as the base colour of the three different material versions, *i.e.* green, red and yellow¹⁶.

With a multifaceted demonstration and performance of unity, the Cameroonian government, *i.e.* the organizers of the Jubilee-festivities, tried to

13. The examples are by no means exhaustive.

14. The Monument of Reunification was printed as one of the big highlighting symbols on the cloth but also, as the only symbol, in miniature at the base pattern of the entire design.

15. The Prime Minister's lodge was built for the German colonial governor, Von Puttkamer. For more information, see MVENG (1963).

16. Interestingly, however, the symbolic value of the one star which symbolizes unity in the national flag, was not emphasized as it was not printed next to the other symbols on the cloth.

counteract accusations of priority-politics in favour of its Francophone component. “[...] [S]tate agents and culture producers extract, modify, manufacture, and fuse together elements from history, performance practice, social values, and shared experiences to create a national identity” (Askew 2002: 25). The manipulation of the historical event, the golden jubilee of independence, by organizing actors towards partisan politics, *i.e.* through pro-governmental campaigns, is noteworthy in view of the fact that the event took place not long before the Presidential elections. Some interviewees pointed to the fact that the Jubilee fabric had been appropriated by the RDPC (CPDM). Administrators of territorial units (governors of regions and divisional officers), who had been given a certain amount of cloths to distribute, limited this to party members, they being in the majority supporters and members of that party. In Ngoumou, it was observed that T-shirts with the Jubilee logo were also distributed and beneficiaries were offered a tip if they wore them. The cloth itself was difficult to obtain privately and went out of stock within weeks before National Day. The charge per cloth lay at about 8,000 FCFA. Some observers also claimed that the Jubilee festivities served as a prelude to the election campaigns of the impending presidential election of October 2011. This assumption is also supported by the fact that the majority of Biya’s 40,000-word speech at the occasion of the *Cinquantenaire*, dwelled on economic plans to be achieved by 2035, and not so much on independence, history and national heroes as many Cameroonians would have expected.

The unity slogan was the “*idée directrice*” (Maurice Hauriou) of an event, intended to be interactive through the different media with which the message was communicated (slogans, theatre, dances, etc.). It was also identity endowing as many Cameroonians attended the events that were expected to be a medium to attract citizens at the occasion of the golden jubilee, and community-forming at the same time, as the contents of the event were particular. Through the central “unity” theme, the date of the event was legitimized (Gebhardt 2000: 22), as the date itself, as illustrated above, had been rid of its historical value in reference to independence. The fact that the theme was “unity” and not “independence” may also explain, why the festivities, as they had been organized in Yaoundé, referred only weakly—if at all—to the march towards independence or historical facts. The observer’s attention was rather drawn to the cultural diversity of today. It was only in a theatre performance that took place on May 14th at the Multipurpose Centre of Yaoundé that historical figures and heroes of independence were referred to¹⁷ in the context of the official festivities. The non-governmental and second most popular TV-channel, “Canal 2” occasionally broadcast documentaries about historic circumstances in which

17. Unfortunately, as the sound system of the Centre was not designed to carry voices, the content of what was said within the theatre performance cannot be recounted here.

independence had been achieved, educating viewers on the role of UPC (Union des populations du Cameroun) and how its heroes and prominent leaders such as Ruben Um Nyobé, Roland Moumié and Ernest Ouandie, among others, fought for independence outside the neocolonial solution proposed by France. The government owned national TV channel, CRTV, also timidly broadcast history-related programmes such as "Le Cameroun a 50 ans, la vue de l'Ouest" on May 14th, 2010 and a documentary on Independence and Reunification in Ebolowa on May 29th, 2010. TV-programmes of the same type, however, were not broadcast at prime times, such as in the evenings, but rather during the morning hours, as the evenings were reserved for the life-broadcast of the events in the capital.

The performance of the unity-in-cultural diversity perspective, rather than that of historical circumstances may serve as another example of what we have referred to above with Connerton's "organized oblivion". The human being only remembers what he can reconstruct as past within the frame of consciousness and sense that the culture in which he lives offers him¹⁸ (Assman 1991: 18). Within the context of the Cameroonian *Cinquantenaire* actors became witnesses of a new "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). The moment of asynchronicity, the event of the Jubilee festivities, did not present an opposition to everyday life through emphasizing the historicity of "independence" itself and therefore defining itself as a commemorative event *a priori*. The way in which Assman (1991: 19) defines the second dimension of time (everyday vs. "event"), therefore, does not hold true for Cameroon in this case. The institutions of asynchronicity define the contemporary and co-constituting horizons of past and future and prevent them from absolutely transforming themselves into an "eternal present" within a one-dimensional reality¹⁹. Assman calls this remembrance. The real history with reference to independence was not commemorated; it was rather the political act of the referendum which merged the federated states of East and West Cameroon in 1972. In the sense of "organized oblivion", it is also worthy to note that a majority of Cameroonians are decreasingly conscious of differences between historical events and their dating. Not only are the two independence events which their country has experienced relegated to the status of almost forgotten facts; there is an increasing confusion (intended or not) between the reunification event proper and the celebrated advent of the unitary state with conscious attempts to eclipse the former in the popular mind. The school curriculum does not allow for that depth of history and as eye witnesses are gradually disappearing, ignorance follows as a consequence (interview with history-teacher at

18. "Der Mensch erinnert nur, was er innerhalb der Sinnrahmen, die ihm die Kultur, in der er lebt, anbietet, an Vergangenheit rekonstruieren kann".

19. Translation by the author K. T. "Die Institutionen der Ungleichzeitigkeit grenzen die Gegenwart inclusive der sie mitkonstituierenden Vergangenheit und Zukunftshorizonte ab und verhindern, daß sie sich zur, ewigen Gegenwart' einereindimensionalen Wirklichkeit verabsolutiert".

the Efoulan secondary school, Yaoundé, January 29th, 2010). Apart from the organization of pompous festivities and a rich program to perform unity, the day as “National Day” or 38th version of “*Fête de l’unité*” did not differ from the preceding versions except for four facts: the production of a logo for the jubilee, the organization of an international conference dubbed “Africa 21” (18-19th May), the special cloth of the Jubilee and a presidential address to the nation on 17th May 2010. These events stand out because they were the object of both intended and perceived attention.

The intensity of the unity symbolism during the celebrations coincides with claims of unity and integration President Paul Biya has made ever since he came to power in 1982. That was captured in the new slogan of national integration that came to replace the concept of national unity. If the latter had a historical base and was meant to bolster the complications of co-existence between English-speaking and French-speaking communities, the new slogan was officially sustained but was clearly lacking in any rationale with historical bearing. The reference to “integration” itself was interpreted by radical Anglophone activists in a fashion that goes to the early days of the foundation to be synonymous with assimilation, the fear of which has led to different forms of resistance. It may also explain why these developments alongside the constitutional modifications that altered the name and form of the state have come under sustained criticism from this period onwards.

Debating Unity and its Politics

Whereas the May 20th celebrations, dubbed *Fête de l’unité*, were instituted in commemoration of the 1972 referendum, they have continued to be celebrated without that background. That is why the transfer of the independence Jubilee celebrations to that date was problematic. The question to be raised is: what was the event of 20th May 2010 celebrating? Obviously, it was a unity without the reality of it. It was neither referring to the idea behind the referendum nor any dream of a national identity superseding and transcending ethnic or ethno-regional cleavages. For one thing, the paradox of state-building (also confusedly used to mean nation-building) has even been one of supporting and encouraging ethnic boundaries while professing the slogan of unity in a sort of double-speak (Kegne Pokam 1986; Yenshu Vubo 1998). In more recent times, new oppositions on the basis of division between natives (autochthones) constituted around the new category of “indigenous minorities” have been instituted with the 1996 constitutional revision and non-natives (*allogènes* or strangers) have been called to the foreground of modern politics in Cameroon. This process, which Sindjoun (1996: 99) describes aptly as the segmentation of national identity and which Monga (2000) feels is a set-back on the nation building project by “de-emphasizing the concept of Cameroon both as a geographical entity and as

a nation", has been taking place in the background of conflicts real or imagined between competing power blocks (Yenshu Vubo 2006, 2011: 84-96) and competition over power and local resources (Socpa 2010).

In such a situation, there is no agreement on the idea of unity. That is why the celebrations in May 2010 were a display of the state's pomp and its version of narratives about history captured in slogans with no relation to reality. One may even go further to contrast these celebrations with the regular celebration of events with no historical significance such as the events marking the coming to power of President Paul Biya or the creation of the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM/RDPC). This contrast can be described as the sublimation of the trivial and the trivialization of the historically important. The symbolism here is consistent with a history of personalization of power that has characterized the state in Cameroon since its foundation. In the past the first president even celebrated his twenty years of coming to power in 1978 while September 1, 1966, the date when his party, the Cameroon National Union, was created was made a public holiday. The political choices have thus increasingly become less collective and more and more individualistic.

It is in this way that there is an official attempt to appropriate historical narratives by distracting the meanings of certain dates²⁰. This becomes more significant when events with no direct bearing on society such as the Golden Jubilee of the Army was also celebrated with pomp in December 2010 and in a place where that army was not founded. In fact, many activists questioned why an army founded in French Cameroons in 1959 would be celebrated in Anglophone territory when no such army existed there at the time. By celebrating the rather state-centered event of 20th May and the foundation of army, the regime sent the message that the state and not society was the locus of the celebrations. The celebration of the army was given a highly popular tinge with all the ambience of a state visit, the complex of politics and the military. Most evidently, with the regime's reliance on the military, it was in the President's interest to dignify the military's work with a big (even though belated) celebration and his personal attendance. In his speech, *inter alia* he made political promises to the people of Bamenda to develop infrastructure. With this region traditionally supporting the oppositional SDF (Social Democratic Front)—party, the idea of him conducting an election campaign imposes itself onto the observer. The commemoration of the military with displayed intensity suggests the construction of a give-and-take atmosphere towards the impending presidential elections of October 2011.

20. HIRST & MANIER (2002: 38) have referred to this matter as "memory wars". In the same sense BOND and GILLIAM (1994: 17) have stated that "battles [are] fought over whose aesthetic principle is most appropriate for constructing the past in the most convincing fashion, that is, with the most hegemonic power".

October 1st, 2011 passed more or less unnoticed. In fact, throughout 2011 no reference was made to that event until the end of year address to the nation on 31st December 2011 where the President again promised to have the celebrations take place in Buea. He explained the failure to have the celebrations in 2011 as promised by referring to the presidential elections of 9th October. In fact, at the approach of 1st October 2011, the attention of politicians in general and the president in particular was tilted towards the presidential elections. The whole year itself was marked by these elections (mobilization, debates over voting, campaigns, elections, controversy over the results) to the extent that the issue of celebrating Reunification was totally eclipsed. The unity theme did not seem to be a main preoccupation of the power elite, the preoccupations of the President being with organizing elections to maintain himself in power and, by doing so, putting personal interests over issues of national importance. This drift can be described as a hardly veiled personality cult, anachronistic and reminiscent of some statist regimes of the Cold War days or the few surviving ones. By ignoring to come back to this historic event and by concentrating on personal issues of maintaining himself in power, the President seemed to have been trying to write history in the present and only in relation to himself. This is where the character of the person, Biya, is significant for the understanding of the celebrations.

President Biya has singled out himself as a man with a character that can be described as ambivalent or evolving along definitely diverging trajectories. During his tenure as senior government official between 1962 and 1982 when he succeeded Ahmadou Ahidjo as president (Beti 2006: 145), he was reputed as upright, discreet, austere in character, honest and devoted to his duties (*ibid.*: 158). This is the dimension which he projected through slogans of rigour and moralization on taking office in 1982 and which is insistently harped upon by idolaters, admirers and supporters who have continued to present him since then as the “*l’homme providentiel*” (*ibid.*: 120). On the other side of the spectrum, Mr. Biya is presented as weak, unimaginative, lacking in resolve, subservient to the former colonial power, France, and, above all, overshadowed by persons around him who are driven by no other passion than cupidity (*ibid.*: 161). In this regard, he would be basically described as lacking in initiative.

Mid-way between these two extremes, he has been portrayed by others as enigmatic, hence the title of his biography by Mattei (2010) whose second chapter is devoted to this aspect (“*l’énigme Biya*”). This should, it is said, make of him a mysterious and unpredictable person, “*un être imprévisible et mystérieux*” (*ibid.*: 41). One should be careful not to take this enigmatic aspect at face value because it often serves an eminently political purpose especially to keep opponents off guard. In the Gaullist tradition of a presidency with enormous powers, President Biya is said to rule by discretion and to control the political agenda. The constitutional clause that makes of him the one who defines the politics of the nation gives him wide-ranging

powers. In that way, he could determine the agenda of most state activities starting with commemorations such as the ones we are dealing with.

This personalization of power through the constitution has also been reinforced by a tradition of autocratic rule inaugurated in the Ahidjo days, this being characterized by a combination of violent repression, an artificially crafted personality cult, the imposition of a personal political outlook and the reworking of historical narratives to tie in with the personal trajectory of the president in power. It is in this way that we can understand the organization of this event in a light that will make of him a person at the centre stage. If it is clear that Mr. Biya cannot redefine history to give him a historic role in the independence struggle, he at least downplays or waters down the role of heroes that can only be mentioned anonymously or selectively. By bringing the theme of unity to the foreground, he imposed his own idea of national consensus: "[...] Paul Biya pense que le Cameroun ne doit pas vivre comme une fédération des provinces, mais comme une entité unique et globale [...], l'unité du peuple camerounais" (*ibid.*: 293). During the 2014 festivities, slogans about his person were even more prominent than those of the historic figures of independence and he was made to be the real agent of the country's unity. For instance, he was projected in one slogan as "*un homme au service de la nation*" that can be compared to Ahidjo's reference to himself as "father of the nation". In fact, as one of the rare public appearances that he ever makes, these celebrations are projected as those of the President with people carrying pictures of him and placards carrying glorifying messages to him.

Beyond the false impression of a strong man bolstered by the idea that the president is a sort of a master of history or one who does not yield to pressure and, as such, controls the political agenda, a close look points to improvisation. This was reflected in the inability to properly organise the twin events of the independence of the former French Cameroons and its subsequent Reunification with Southern Cameroon. In fact, the events of 2010 looked as if they had been thought of in hindsight or were simply grafted unto the global celebrations France has imposed on its former colonies and which finally took place on 14th July 2010. The celebrations of 2014 were as uncertain as Mr. Biya is unpredictable not because of any secret agenda but due to the fact that no proper planning had ever been done. What finally came out of such a celebration looked rather like a carefully planned Presidential visit and were even perceived by local people as such. Moreover, the celebrations even take place on a date (February 28th, 2014) that had no clear relationship to the events in question.

One alternative to this approach is provided by activists of the Southern Cameroon National Council (SCNC) whose leaders have come to articulate the claims of the Anglophone community and who have made it a point of duty to celebrate the October 1st event in their own way each year. The SCNC developed in the 1993-1994 years out of the mobilization of some Anglophone elites and the articulation of Anglophone interests within the

All Anglophone Conferences (AAC I and II). Convened by three Anglophone members of a Technical Committee set up by the president to review the constitution, viz. Mr. Ekontang Elad, Dr. Simon Munzu and Dr. Carlson Anyangwe, these conferences brought together a wide spectrum of prominent English speaking Cameroonians with the view to negotiating constitutional reforms that would provide solutions to the problems of the latter as a marginalized community within the polity of Cameroon (Konings & Nyamnjoh 2003: 82-93). It is its standing committee that became the Anglophone Council in the 1993 that would become the Southern Cameroons National Council a year later with the mandate of achieving the “autonomy of a country, Southern Cameroons, and of a people, Southern Cameroonians” (SCNC press release in Konings & Nyamnjoh [*ibid.*: 91]). When its proposals for reform were rejected (with the adoption of the 1996 review), the Council has resorted to a more radical stance that publicly advocates secession in the absence of reforms that would guarantee better conditions for Anglophones. It has shunned the resort to arms to achieve its separatist objective as reflected in its motto: The force of Argument and not the Argument of Force. The affirmation by Konings and Nyamnjoh (*ibid.*: 104-105) that “fractionalization within the SCNC is a frequent source of internal conflict [...] harmful to the Anglophone cause” and that “leadership problems and growing disagreements within the Anglophone movement on the strategy to be employed [...] contributed to the loss of momentum in the Anglophone struggle by 1996” is as true then as now. Nonetheless, they have continued to make their voices heard especially in the challenge to the unity claim and the commemoration of historical events.

In fact, while other politicians were preoccupied with campaigns towards the 9th October 2011 polls, activists converged in Buea in the morning of 1st October 2011 to commemorate what to them was the 50th anniversary of their independence. The regime had anticipated this event and had stationed troops all over the town to ward off any celebrations of that kind. The group made up mostly of people old enough to have witnessed the reunification event itself converged into the town only for some of them to be arrested, dispersed or take refuge in the Nigerian consulate of Buea. This was not abnormal since the regime has often reacted in like manner to similar such attempts to celebrate this day by activists in other towns. One can thus contrast the official refusal to celebrate or commemorate an historic event with a repressive suppression of any public reference to the same event. Evidently, the planned celebration by the SCNC had been foiled but this only highlighted the paradox of reference to a unity that had become controversial and contested.

The selective attitude towards historical events by the regime as well as its conceptualization of unity (as contained in discourses) have thus become mere rhetorical devices or persuasive strategies by the regime in its attempt to achieve hegemony. This is an adaptation of the Gramscian idea. We can say that African ruling classes (as those of Cameroon) are

very much in need of hegemony because of a persisting crises of legitimacy which was evident in decades of dictatorships (civilian or military) which are characteristically "dominations pure and simple". What can be said of the regime in question is a resort to techniques of consensual control with much softer coercive control. Although this paper is not devoted to comprehensive developments in government in Cameroon, suffice it to say that some of the techniques of consensual control are the resort to consensus building within competing segments of the political class (party in power as well as the opposition), the presentation of the political class as the carrier of a single national historical project (above others that may be sectarian: the Anglophone or radical nationalist views of history), the promotion of political strategies that downplay the use of force (the idea of "*démocratie apaisée*") and the insistence on integration (as transcendence of ethnic cleavages) in building a single national project. It wants to be "dominant in two ways, that is, it is 'leading' and 'dominant'" (Gramsci in Thomas 2009: 223). This hegemonic drive is met as we have seen with a counter-hegemonic drive in a dialectical thrust.



The Golden Jubilee celebration of Cameroon's independence could be described as emptied of the historic and symbolic content. On the contrary, the performance of unity was, generally speaking, quite convincing in terms of show, artifacts and symbolism. The promise of a real gesture, however, by marking the anniversary of reunification commemoratively, and therefore not only performing unity but living unity, was broken. By displacing the celebrations from the real dates when the event celebrated took place and commemorating a constitutional event (the institution of the unitary state), the Biya regime confirmed its tendency to rewrite history by concentrating it around himself, especially coming up to the elections in 2011, an attitude inaugurated by the Ahidjo regime and which has only been replayed in a rather different context by the successor. Similar in many respects to the ideological dimension of autocratic rule, it is the symbolic expression of what can be called historical reconstruction of a revisionist type or the selective production of memory through commemorative ceremony in the realm of what Connerton (1989: 14) has called "organized oblivion" when a certain social memory is "taken away".

E. Renan (1947-1961) had pointed out, in his landmark essay, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* that forgetfulness, especially in its official historicizing dimension and as an obligation, was instrumental in national projects. He affirmed notably that "[I]'oublie, et je dirai même l'erreur historique, sont un facteur essentiel de la création d'une nation"; "L'essence d'une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun, et aussi que tous aient oublié bien des choses." The difference with the context

under discussion, as he argued, was that this was more a product of the historical accident of fusing that can be localised and that did not aim at creating nations. In that way forgetting was about the positive historical experiences that the nation-building process had brought over history. Even then he warned that this was a double-edged sword as historical research could put the nation-building project into test: “C’est ainsi que le progrès des études historiques est souvent pour la nationalité un danger”, a view also echoed by Wieviorka (2010: 218-219): “Plus l’histoire devient, comme les autres sciences, réflexive [...] plus elle s’éloigne de la nation.” This has led in recent times to the rise of schools of thought that foster historical narration way from the nation, where these are called alternative histories, histories from below, the concern with memory or subaltern studies (*ibid.*: 196-215). The resort to a sort of ideological history as nations and states that frame them are wont to do risks being challenged by such currents. In the Cameroon case, we are face-to-face with a project of political engineering whose aim is hegemonic.

M. Wieviorka (*ibid.*: 211) has cautioned against this attitude in the following terms: “[...] le passé n’a pas d’unité que le présent voudrait mettre en avant, sauf à être un récit mythique, une construction artificielle, sans légitimité, alors, pour interpeller l’histoire”; “La nation n’est pas une entité définie pour toute, un grand personnage campé définitivement pour toute, et il peut exister, en un moment donné, des représentations contradictoires [...]” (*ibid.*: 196). Where there is what Gramsci calls hegemony or the ability to achieve control by a dominant power group this selective celebration can succeed to replace real history by appeal and suppression of alternative visions. However, politics also has a counter hegemonic drive that is produced by forces that contest the legitimacy of those who wish to achieve hegemony. Interpreting the events from the Gramscian perspective one would have to note that several counter hegemonic forces made up of intellectuals, radical nationalists (especially the surviving factions of the Union des populations du Cameroun) and opposition political parties contest this drift towards symbolically distorting history through ceremony. In this way, they propose a more historically rooted interpretation and symbolisms and through that alternative models for the society by their “struggles against forced forgetting” (Connerton 1989: 15). More than anything else, the celebration pointed to the contradictions of an affirmed hegemonic project and the reality of contested meanings. In this way, those who control the State could be faulted for producing pure ideology of the type Marxists used to think of as false consciousness and thus alienating itself to exist above society.

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ABSTRACT

Cameroon celebrated the golden jubilees of Independence (as many other franco-phone African countries) in 2010 (in reference to French Cameroon's independence of 1960) while Reunification (to commemorate the former British mandate territory of Southern Cameroons' union with the former French Cameroons) was planned for 2011. The former held on National Day, 20th May 2010, anniversary of the advent of the unitary state in which events, performances, discourses (speeches, discussions, interpretations of symbols), slogans and gadgets (banners, logo) highlighted the theme of unity that has acquired different meanings over time. That neither of historical date of importance was commemorated in its proper anniversary and that unity occupies a prominent place raises questions about the significance and appropriateness of the commemorations.

RÉSUMÉ

Les manifestations et le débat autour de l'idée de l'unité pendant les jubilés de l'indépendance du Cameroun en 2010: le "Cinquantenaire". — Le Cameroun a célébré le cinquantenaire de son indépendance (comme beaucoup d'autres pays francophones) en 2010 (en référence à l'indépendance du Cameroun français de 1960) alors que la Réunification (pour commémorer l'ancien territoire sous mandat britannique de l'Union Southern Cameroons avec l'ancien Cameroun français) a été planifiée pour 2011. Le jubilé de l'indépendance eut lieu le 20 mai 2010, jour de la fête de l'Unité, anniversaire de l'avènement de l'État unitaire et fête nationale autour du thème de l'unité, un thème qui a évolué avec le temps. Le fait qu'aucune des dates historiques ne fut commémorée aux dates anniversaires et que l'idée de l'unité ait occupé une place centrale dans ces événements suscite une interrogation sur la signification et l'opportunité du Cinquantenaire.

Keywords/Mots-clés: Cameroon, history, independence, jubilee, reunification, unity/Cameroun, histoire, indépendance, jubilé, réunification, unité.