



Colonial Legacy and the Challenge of a National Educational System in Cameroon

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Abstract :

There has always been a close relationship between the history of colonial rule in Africa and the evolution of educational systems established after independence. The education system of Cameroon encountered difficulties while trying to handle dual colonial languages together with its numerous ethnic communities. Relying on a descriptive historical analysis approach, the objective of this study is to further examine the multifaceted impact of colonialism on post-independence Cameroon especially the political, cultural and linguistic legacies that the Cameroonian government had to cope with to build a national education system.

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1. *Introduction*

Building an educational system that contributes to national social and economic progress is one of the greatest challenges facing governments of newly independent countries. However, colonial rule had imposed policies that established a complex and deeply rooted legacy in many aspects of their former colonies, especially at the cultural and linguistic levels. The latter was a reason for creating interconnected obstacles for educational decision-makers and political governments who are working to build and reform a single and coherent educational system that reflects all the components of the homeland.

This challenge related to education was particularly thorny and complex in independent countries such as Cameroon. It was one of the countries that inherited a complex legacy due to the succession of three colonial governments: German, French and British. This issue became more complicated and difficult as a result of the nature of the local social fabric before colonialism, which was multi-ethnic and multi-lingual, with almost 200 languages and ethnic groups spread throughout Cameroonian territory. From this situation, the problem of reforming the educational system that reflects national unity became a huge and fierce challenge, especially in Cameroon.

Educational policy makers had to deal with this huge local and cultural diversity, in addition to the duality of the colonial heritage of languages and cultures in order to develop an education that not only meets the demands and needs of Cameroonians, but also works to

achieve cohesion of ethnic groups and social harmony.

This work specifically addresses how the colonial legacy contributed to creating this atmosphere charged with obstacles and difficulties and in turn also contributed to hindering the construction of an educational system that unifies the nation and strengthens national identity after the colonizer succeeded in distorting all their local components. It also refers here to some implementable and potential policies that can help confront these challenges and limit this colonial hegemony by building an integrated educational system.

This article relies on the descriptive analytical approach as it sheds light on the various effects of the heavy colonial legacy on education in independent Cameroon, with a focus on the cultural, political and linguistic fields. This research used content analysis as a basic research tool to identify educational trends in terms of policies and curricula across different periods. There was a semi-comparison between the French educational system and English education in order to identify the differences resulting from the policies of each colonizer in Cameroon. Some government legislations that are also related to education were mentioned, such as Law 1993 and Law 2001, to clarify the path of educational development.

The aim is to provide a comprehensive descriptive picture of the interconnected dimensions of colonialism and its legacy and to highlight the continuous and ongoing impact in education. This work seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the failures of

Cameroonian education in the context of the colonial legacy.

2. Review of Literature

Scholars of African history commonly agree that colonialism led to the distortion of local cultures and languages which in its turn impacted the sort of educational systems after independence. Mamouni (1964) condemned colonialism for its role in building the education of independent countries on diluted cultural and linguistic foundations. Mamouni agrees that colonialism and its unfair policies were the cause of the deterioration of the quality of education and its decline within every newly independent African country, by applying colonial policies that marginalized both local cultures and languages. Education was unequal in urban areas and non-existent in rural areas. In addition, they deliberately shaped it to be of a lower standard than that provided to Europeans. This created internal and external educational disparities, and certainly shows the West's contradiction in principles towards achieving equality. (Mamouni 1964).

By reforming the local education system, Mamouni(1964) stressed that students would not only achieve psychological well-being but would also be intellectually liberated and overcome the inevitable dependency on the colonizer , the point of inferiority and deficiency established by colonial educational policies. He views those colonial policies imposed alien cultures on the African educational curricula to ensure the continuation of their influence even after the colonial era. These colonial cultures had almost no connection to local customs and

values, and thus alienation was created within all educational institutions. He believes that the European standards caused the formation of a system that supports divisions and inferiority that only served colonial purposes. (Mamouni,1964)

Clignet (1971) pointed out that colonial policies were previously designed to achieve the continuity of the colonizer's presence in his colonies by monopolizing the historical, cultural and original content with the focus on integrating Western values. As for Mbaku, he criticized the content of educational curricula that still reflect Western colonial ideologies and are not comprehensive and do not reflect the history of local cultures. Despite government efforts, the curricula are still restricted by colonial controls, which has allowed the existence of educational systems that work to embody political indoctrination and does not work to achieve development and innovation. (Mbaku,1997)

Colonial education played a role in the psychological oppression that formed an inevitability for students psychologically within African society as a whole. Fanon stressed the economic and psychological impact of colonialism, which in turn negatively affected the educational system (1967). Colonial policies left behind psychological oppression for local students, which made them feel cultural and belonging alienation, in addition to the permanent feeling of inferiority and dependence on colonialism, which is inevitable. Therefore, a direct and inevitable relationship exists between colonial policies and psychological oppression, in addition to political, social and economic inevitability, which requires getting rid of the psychological

determinism by reforming and improving educational curricula to facilitate the transition from Western values to local African values (Mamouni 1964; Memmi, 1957).

A number of scholars in fact have discussed the post-colonial setting in Cameroon that contributed to the paralysis of Cameroonian education after independence, highlighting the linguistic, psychological and cultural challenges left by the colonizer. For example, Fonkengs (2007) pointed out that when the Cameroonian government took initiative in building educational structures, they adopted the educational structures of the colonizer, thus facilitating the perpetuation of its presence after independence. Educational policy makers were also keen to favor the interests of the ruling elites at the expense of sustainable national development, and thus there was an educational system that served the minority, i.e. the small elites, and neglected the broader social needs. (2007, p.45). Fonkengs referred to the centralization of politics, which was an influential colonial legacy, as it was the reason for the unequal concentration of educational resources in Cameroon. This situation led again to political tensions that further exacerbated divisions and affected the quality of education (2007, p. 48).

Zang also stated his opposite opinion that the Cameroonian government used education as a tool to achieve balance between the internal regions and the different ethnic and cultural pluralities. However, he later stated that the government's efforts failed to achieve its intentions, due to its failure to focus on the colonial roots that were the cause of the problem. Here, there was a continuation of regional differences resulting from the duality

of French and English colonial policies, especially when the Anglophone area was marginalized, and this created a political division that undermined and weakened national unity. (Zang, 2011, p. 292)

Nkwenti (2015) pointed out that the Cameroonian government used the colonial linguistic heritage to gain political control. They gave priority to French, followed by English and then local languages. Here, the government worsened the situation by creating more regional and cultural disparities. Nkwenti stated that efforts to unify the education system hampered this linguistic sequence and weakened national cohesion (p. 247). On the other hand, he condemned the role of education policy makers in designing educational curricula that primarily served the interests of the small ruling elite, thus restricting them from constructive, critical thinking and restricting the mission of education, which is to strengthen and empower political power. (Nkwenti, 2015, p. 251)

Dubreuil (2020) indicated that colonial ideologies are toxic and harmful, as colonialism worked to achieve cultural hegemony by applying education as an available means. For example, he referred to French colonialism with its strict assimilation policies that imposed its language and culture as the only means of education, and they succeeded in promoting their French components. As for the British side, it allowed the presence of local languages with the English language, so here is an indication that there is a structural difference between the French and English regions that has established sustainable cultural disparities in all of Cameroon. Mary (2018) criticized

French policy more than British policy, seeing the latter less extreme. Tchombe (2001) demonstrated the role of colonial authorities in undermining local cultural pride through the use of curricula that taught history and values of European countries. This situation contributed to the isolation of Cameroonian students from their local cultural identity and the colonizers' perception of Africans as primitive and directed them to believe in their cultural inferiority (Cosmas, 2021, p. 33-35).

Theresa (2019) compared the British and French colonial policies and noted that the French colonialists worked to form local intermediaries from the urban elite who had previously studied within their curricula and schools to serve their colonial interests. The British, on the other hand, built their policy on spreading low-quality education by relying on missionary efforts that focused on religious content more than academic content. (Tchombe, 2019, p. 78-80)

In spite of existing literature, the delicate Question of how dual-colonial policies in Cameroon grained the seeds for a failed national educational system still requires further studies. Hence, this work aims to further shed light on the multifaceted impact of colonialism politically, culturally and linguistically on the Cameroonian education system so that officials found extremely difficult to cope with them.

3. Historical Overview on Colonial Education in Cameroon 1884-1961

Indeed, colonial influences created linguistic and cultural disparities and divisions that always exacerbate political and

educational tensions. The multi-colonial era in Cameroon has always left behind a complex and fragmented legacy of cultural and linguistic diversity.

The early form of education in Cameroon was led by the missionaries who focused on spreading Christianity. This early education included a minority and focused on spreading religious content rather than addressing the general needs of the community as a whole.

The Germans claimed occupation of territories in Cameroon in 1884 and allowed the continuation of education by missionary groups who had been present before the Germans entered Cameroon. With the passage of the colonial period, the Germans realized the importance of using education as a tool to impose the dominance of their German culture, so they were keen to begin establishing educational institutions in the most important regions of the country. In 1910, the German government issued laws obligating local citizens to rely on the German language alone in education, and they also set a period of five years for education in the primary stage (Ngho, 1987).

The government was also keen to pump financial sums into missionaries to work on developing the educational infrastructure in order to expand the spread of education, provided that their German culture and policy expand and dominate. The policy was based on reducing the traditional cultural influence to achieve greater benefit in addition to economic drain (Ngho, 1996).

During this colonial period, France focused on establishing an educational system that aimed to apply the assimilation policy that worked on the complete integration of Cameroonians into French cultural values. By 1924, France had worked to achieve a central education that replaced the German language with French. Here, distinct systems were formed during this colonial period: a French and urban system that was keen to emulate the French urban educational institution, and another system directed at Cameroonians, greatly influenced by French cultures. The Ministry of National Education was established in 1957. They also changed the duration of the primary period from five to six years, and they succeeded in expanding the construction of educational institutions. Despite all the government educational achievements, education remains an exclusionary French education that reflects everything French with the absence of everything local (Ngoh, 1987).

The British relied on a decentralized and indirect approach in running their educational institutions in Cameroon. The latter was run by the neighboring country Nigeria, which had previously been colonized at the same time as Cameroon by Britain. British education worked on educating local civil groups to work in administrative positions in order to develop the colonial system, especially the economic one.

The British launched the free education project at the primary level for six years, and

this was an important factor in spreading education. Despite many successful achievements in spreading education, they did not succeed in forming higher education beyond secondary school. Cameroonian students were required to travel to Nigeria to complete their education. (Mineduc, 1989).

4. Colonial Legacy in Cameroon and its Impact on the Education Sector

Cameroon's independence in 1961 was the beginning of a difficult confrontation for decision makers in achieving a national and unified education system for each of the inherited colonial education systems. The multi-faceted colonial experience in Cameroon had a lasting legacy on the educational sector. This legacy does not stop at cultural and linguistic divisions but extends to include structural and systemic disparities within the functioning of the education system.

4.1 Cameroon's Post-Independence Education in the Context of Political Disunity

There were two colonial systems from which Cameroonians suffered consequences in the education system after independence, which in turn hampered central control and comprehensive unity (Tchombe, 2001). Among the challenges that education reformers faced is the major political division. In the two parts of Cameroon, both colonial France and Britain had used education as a key tool to impose their political influence. Such colonial policies made it difficult for Cameroon after independence to build an

independent and strong educational system. (Ngoh, 1987)

For example, France formed an educated elite that played a limited -political role remotely from Paris (Norton, 2006). The British side had a decentralized approach and its educational policies allowed local leaders to rule in villages and small towns. This political approach focused on meeting economic needs rather than establishing a strong political government. There were establishments of primary schools to spread education that provided administrators to work as administrators in lower positions. As for higher education, it did not exist in the British territory of Cameroon, which forced students to travel to the neighboring country to complete their studies. (Fanso, 1989)

This colonial legacy led to the political marginalization of English speakers and their educational marginalization overall. Every decision issued by the Cameroonian government reflected the government's inclinations towards the interests of the minority of the French central elite. This led to the continuation of political tensions and protests to this day in the English-speaking regions, where educational curricula were used that allowed for the implementation of such practices (Dubreuil, 2020).

Efforts for a National Education System after 1972

After the change of federal rule in 1972, when Cameroon was transformed into a unified state, the education system went through some

radical changes that worked to unify the two inherited colonial French and English educational structures. The new constitution provided for a central educational policy under the slogan of "national unity" but it clearly ignored the cultural and linguistic differences and specificities of the English-speaking regions. A single ministry was appointed in which the educational administrations were merged, but the French language and curriculum became the first and main language of instruction in almost all Cameroonian regions, which aroused the resentment of the English speakers, i.e. the western side, as they considered it a direct marginalization of their identities. (Fonchingong, 2005)

In 1975, the government issued the "National Education Plan", which worked to unify the time distribution for all educational stages to be a system (6_5_2) in an effort to reconcile the two educational systems. However, the plan quickly failed due to lack of resources and weak training of teachers on these integrated curricula. Indeed, the crisis and the gap between rural and urban areas worsened (Ndongko, 1985). With the beginning of the eighties, there was a severe global economic crisis, which had a direct cause in reducing the Cameroonian education budget by more than forty percent, according to World Bank reports (1987).

On the other hand, conflicts and protests continued in the western regions, i.e. the English-speaking regions, which began to demand educational reforms that would

integrate English as a language equal to French. The University of Buea was then established in 1993 to affirm the symbol of English identity, but unfortunately it also continued to suffer from a severe lack of funding. (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003)

There were many international efforts, for example the UNESCO program that was in (1995), which supported basic education, but structural divisions are still making their way forward. In 2000, a UNESCO report announced that the English regions still suffer from a severe shortage of English language textbooks, exceeding 65%, compared to 20% in the French regions (UNESCO, 2000). These recent statistics highlight the continued presence of the colonial legacy, which has even become a basic tool for deepening inequality in social and political life, which unfortunately reflects the failure of the Cameroonian state and government to build a unified and comprehensive education system that reflects all Cameroonian cultural diversities (Nsamenang & Tchomb, 2011).

4.2. Colonial Cultural impact on Cameroon's Post-Independence Education:

The cultural influence of the colonizer on the education system is also one of the continuing and more deeply rooted aspects after independence, as education was also used to integrate the locals into their Western culture, which had a profound impact and numerous cracks in the national identity in general and social and cultural values in particular, and is still evident in Cameroonian

society. The local culture was an obstacle to the goals of German colonialism, and therefore their efforts towards education increased more to exclude local traditions. Most of the local population was excluded from education and only a small local elite monopolized it, while adopting everything related to German values. This situation led to a gradual separation between the local community as a whole and the educated elite. (Rudin, 1938)

As for the French colonizer, he focused on absorbing French culture by strongly integrating French cultures into the educational curricula. There was a sense of cultural inferiority among the younger generations because they were taught subjects such as history that reflected French heritage and did not speak at all about the local (Dubreuil, 2020). There were French curricula that reflected republican values while completely excluding the great and rich local cultural diversity of Cameroon (Daughton, 2006).

In contrast, Britain, with its flexible approach that allowed the use of local languages, created what was called cultural equilibrium (Fanso, 1989). It is a policy to make the decentralization strategy successful and not to protect local cultures (Tchombe, 2001)

After independence, there was a challenge to preserve and reshape identity, but through education and its curricula, a process of discouraging the continuation of Western cultural hegemony took place. All curricula

developed by the government after independence reflected Western cultural values and the absence of local cultural values and national cultural heritage. (Ngoh, 1987)

Cultural challenges did not only include educational curricula, but also reached educational structures in which education in urban areas focused on European values and ignored rural areas and deprived them from education, which exacerbated the cultural gap in Cameroon. (Daughton, 2006) This situation also led to the continuation of divisions, which in turn hindered the modern educational system.

There were government initiatives to integrate local cultures and heritage into the educational curricula, and the government also worked to document its heritage to protect it from extinction. Unfortunately, the results of these efforts are still limited due to the deep impact of the colonial legacy and the fragility of educational resources. (Dubreuil, 2020) The educational system requires a comprehensive evaluation to serve the cultural and local heritage to restore everything that is lost and to strengthen national identity.

This is due to the role of the colonizers in strengthening their political and economic dominance over the local population. They did not stop there, but they had fundamental effects that focused on changing their vision of themselves and their cultures. Education was also used as a tool, accompanied by curricula that reinforced the feeling of inferiority and direct dependence on Western cultures.

Education during the German period worked to impose a cultural and intellectual invasion. This educational policy created a persistent feeling among students of the inferiority of their cultures and the feeling of psychological alienation was an inevitable result of that (Ngoh, 1996). Rudin (1938) described German education as preparing the indigenous population to become machines in the service of the system rather than empowering them academically.

As for the French assimilation policy, the psychological impact was more extensive and deep-rooted. Fanon (1967) indicated that German colonialism invaded minds before invading their land, through French curricula that focused on French history and ignoring the local Cameroonian history. Consequently, French colonial policies led to a collective feeling of inferiority, so educated generations began to reflect their vision according to the perspective of the colonizer (Dubreuil, 2020).

The English system, which was less strict in imposing values, had a similar psychological impact to the French approach. British schools adopted the teaching of their English values in addition to their language, which created a gap between. (Tchombe, 2001)

Ngoh (1987) also pointed out that the psychological dominance of Cameroonians after independence was due to the continued adoption of colonial curricula by the state. He also criticized the insufficient efforts of successive governments who sought to liberate

the curricula from the colonial legacy. The latter caused the continued feeling of cultural and psychological dependence on Europeans. There were reforms by the government but deep-rooted psychological challenges made it difficult for Cameroonians to adapt and accept the reforms to overcome these influences. (Tchombe, 2001)

Fanon (1967) proposed an idea to overcome the deep French influence of colonialism, which is to reform education based on curricula that reflect cultural values and local history. The latter is considered a challenge that still faces Cameroonians to this day, and if these psychological influences are not confronted and work is not done to reshape a national identity in the content of educational curricula, education will continue to reflect all the psychological and cultural dependencies that the colonizer inherited from Cameroon.

4.3. Education in the Context of Colonial Linguistic Legacy

The linguistic heritage in Cameroon was very heavy on the local population, as the latter used language as a tool within their colonial policies through which they confirmed their power in strengthening their political and cultural hegemony. In addition, the use of the European language was imposed as the primary language of education, which led to local linguistic and cultural marginalization. Unfortunately, the profound impact of this complex legacy is still evident to this day.

Starting with the German period, which relied, albeit late, on adopting its language,

German, in education, in order to impose its political sovereignty and completely ban local languages. Rudin (1938) described this rule as focusing on forming an elite of local groups that support their colonial system. As for Ngoh (1996) stated that their policy was classified as a direction that encouraged inferiority among the Cameroonian population by ignoring their own languages and culture, which led to cultural alienation and belonging.

After the French and British control, during the First World War, the language policy became more different and divergent. The strict French policy came, which focused on the French language alone in teaching and administration, with the local language ban in education. As Fanon (1967) described it as a colonial project that erases cultural identities to achieve psychological hegemony. Dubreuil (2020), said that the language policy of the French rule was designed to accelerate the population's connection to all French components to include the entire country, of course at the expense of their original identities. This policy resulted in an educated and cultured generation that does not acknowledge the place and importance of his mother tongue is not recognized.

On the other hand, Britain was lenient in using the local language alongside English. Fanzo (1989) pointed out that this tolerance was not out of interest and respect for the country's components and language as much as it was to serve the interests of his decentralized government during the colonization of the

neighboring country Nigeria. The English language was a symbol of development and social and economic civilization, while the local languages always occupied a secondary role, which caused divisions between the same region. After liberation, many challenges emerged that faced the colonial linguistic legacy. After this dual linguistic and colonial dependence by the government, disparities, tensions and divisions increased more and more between the regions. Ngoh (1987) added that regarding 200 marginalized local languages in the education system, this led to the awareness of the sense of belonging to an education that does not reflect their identities. Tchombe (2001) also pointed out the failure of government initiatives to integrate local languages into education was due to the lack of sufficient expertise and resources. The 2001 Law was issued, which stipulates the integration of local languages into the education system, but Dubreuil (2020) commented on the failure of the initiative and pointed to the continued dominance of the two colonial languages, even reaching educational resources and curricula. Fanon concluded the field (1967) with his opinion that liberating education from the colonial linguistic legacy depends on reprogramming curricula that reflect local cultures and languages. Ngoh (1996) added that the important and fundamental challenge is to achieve a balance between the two official languages and local languages to achieve international and local development.

5. Conclusion

French and British colonial policies had a heavy political impact on the education system in Cameroon. The latter was represented by the adoption of two educational systems that reflected the regional division between the French and English regions. Through the dual policy of 1963 and the reform policies of 1993, the government tried to integrate the two educational systems, but they failed to overcome the central French hegemony, which led to deepening the marginalization of English speakers and fueled more separatist tendencies, as explained by Konings (2003).

On the cultural and linguistic level, education helped to consolidate the dominance of the two European languages, and local languages were banned from being used in the curricula. These two languages were considered a symbol of modernity, while on the other hand, Cameroonian languages were stigmatized as backward (Zang 1993). This situation created generations living in a cultural schism between the European school and Cameroonian society.

The government launched many initiatives to confront this legacy, such as the University Reform Law of 1993 and working to unify the educational structure and raise its quality. These initiatives collided with many radical challenges, such as the economic crisis, which contributed greatly to reducing Financing, along with the continued dominance of the French model. These reforms

remain superficial and formal, as they do not go deeper into addressing the cultural and political roots of colonialism.

This work shows that a true and effective unification of the Cameroonian educational system is still elusive, due to the continued colonial legacy of exporting political and linguistic challenges. To achieve and shape a national educational identity, policies must be adopted that reflect cultural diversity and work to reduce the psychological dependence left by the colonizer.

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