

Reviewed by Dibussi Tande

Churchill Ewumbue-Monono. *Youth and Nation-Building in Cameroon: A Study of National Youth Day Messages and Leadership Discourse (1949-2009)*.

At first glance, Churchill Ewumbue-Monono's *Youth and Nation-Building in Cameroon*, which is primarily a collection of Youth Day speeches going back to the colonial era, seems deceptively unexciting. However, a closer reading of the book shows that the author has compiled a valuable document which is more than just a walk down memory lane for history buffs. It is a compelling insight into how various colonial and post colonial governments in Southern Cameroons/West Cameroon and then bilingual Cameroon Republic attempted to use the Youth Day as a tool for political advocacy and youth mobilization around key political and ideological goals; adherence to the ideal of the British commonwealth, unification of British and French Cameroons, creation of the single-party state, the dissolution of the federation, etc. In fact, the book is a history of post-independent Cameroon, albeit from the perspective of the political class.

As the author points out in the opening pages of the book,

The development and dynamics of the policy and institutional environment for the management of youth affairs have closely followed the various stages of the country's political history: the colonial period (1949-1960), the Cameroon federation period (1961-1972), the Ahidjo Unitary State period (1972-1982), the One-Party Democracy New Deal period (1982-1992), and the period of the New Democratic Order (1992-2009). (p. 7)

Divided into three main parts, the book begins with the author explaining how Youth Day celebrations tie in with on-going discussions at international and continental level about the role of youths as agents of development (Part I: The International and National Policy Framework for Youth Governance).

Part I also delves into the origins of the Youth Day in Cameroon. This is a particularly interesting section because it addresses a common claim made in certain Anglophone/Southern Cameroons circles (e.g., a recurrent theme of the Cameroon Anglophone Movement in the 1990s) that the historically significant "Plebiscite Day", commemorating the Southern Cameroonian vote to join French Cameroun in 1961, was later transformed into a meaningless "Youth Day" by the Ahidjo regime in an attempt to obscure the origins of the bilingual Cameroon republic and reinforce the marginalization of Anglophone Cameroonians within the union.

However, Ewumbue-Monono's research backed by archival documents and the declarations of West Cameroon politicians shows that the Youth Day was a creation of the government of West Cameroon which decided in 1964 that the Youth Day would henceforth be celebrated on February 11. It was only in 1966 that Ahidjo decreed that the Youth Day would become a national holiday. This was after a positive report by a delegation from the Commissionership for Youth and Popular Education in Yaoundé which had been specifically dispatched to witness the 1965 Youth Day celebrations in Buea and assess the day's potential as a tool for youth mobilization and the promotion of leadership ideology.

Part II, which constitutes the bulk of the book, consists of Youth Day speeches beginning with the British Commissioner's address to the youths of Southern Cameroons on Empire Day, 1949, to President Biya's 2009 Youth Day Speech.

Part III, the Epilogue, contains a reflection titled "The Youth and African Renaissance: New Challenges for a Changing Continent" where the author reviews existing international instruments for promoting youth governance, and argues that "In spite of their active participation in the early liberation struggle, youth governance in Africa has been slow largely because of the absence of an aggregated continental framework policy".

An Insight into Prevailing Political Views

It is no secret that Cameroonian history is generally not well-documented. In fact, it is a history that has been the victim of excessive revisionism – official and unofficial – primarily because of the general absence of primary archival material. From this perspective, Ewumbue-Monono has made a significant contribution to Cameroonian history by compiling these speeches which allow us to view that history through the timeless and incontrovertible words of the country's colonial and post-colonial leadership... No revisionism is possible here, although the context of these speeches cannot be ignored. It is particularly interesting to see how Prime Ministers John Foncha and Ngom Jua, along with Presidents Ahmadou Ahidjo and Paul Biya, articulated and explained away the key issues, challenges of their times. Here are a few examples.

Example 1: Foncha selling the idea of the single party in 1964:

We do not believe in the multiplicity of political parties within one country. We believe in a set up of one-party system in which freedom of speech can be practiced without fear of victimization. We believe in criticizing and correction from within.

Example 2: Augustine Ngom Jua defending the creation of the single party in 1966:

This consciousness, which formed the very basis of our reunification six years ago, materialized last year with the formation the national party – the Cameroon National Union – the foundation of which was laid the leaders of all political parties without coercion. The advantages of national unity are numerous and are already showing themselves to the population in many ways. The organization of the new party may be slow, but we are sure that the right material is being used to provide it with a concrete foundation. Anything worth doing is worth doing well.

Example 3: Ngom Jua trying to alleviate growing concerns about the unification experiment in 1966:

February 11 1961 brought into being a new Republic, a Federal idea, indeed new dimensions of freedom. This day, February 11th 1961 or Plebiscite Day was the day we realized our conscience for the State in its deepest conception. This implies a full realization of the people's ideas. We did not vote for re-unification out of fear; we had a free choice and the choice we made was what our consciences felt right.

Example 4: Ahidjo justifying the creation of the unitary system in 1973:

The promises of the United Republic of Cameroon... could be summarized in a few words: a national unity definitively sealed and a greater efficiency in the action for development.

Example 5: President Biya explaining his New Deal policy in 1984:

"New Deal, the ambition of which is to make Cameroon an integrated society, founded on the unity of ideas, the quest for efficiency and sound values – a society which fosters the full development of the Cameroonian and which is the centre of cultural advancement in Africa"

Example 6: President Biya trying to keep the youths off the streets in 1991:

You are lucky to be living in a free country; do not jeopardize your luck by following tantalizing mirages.

Make good use of this freedom. People can fully express themselves without taking to the street, without causing destruction and without looting. Expression through acts of vandalism, illegal demonstrations, excessive demands, rowdiness and disorder is not worthy of responsible youth. Say no to confrontation. Accept nothing else but dialogue and frankness. I exhort you to be vigilant in the face of manoeuvres aimed at exploiting you for unavowed ends, which place your future and life in jeopardy.

Schools, and the University in particular, should not be diverted from their fundamental goals. The school should remain a place where people are prepared for individual collective, social and national responsibilities. No one should use the school for goals than those of instruction, education and training. Think of you future, of yourself ad also of those who will come after you. Like you, they will need structures and facilities for their education and training.

Broken Promises

A detailed analysis of these Youth Day speeches reveals a litany of broken dreams and promises from Cameroon's leadership in the last half a century; from Jua's promise in 1967 that construction work on the Kumba-Mamfe-Bamenda road would "begin soon", to the unfulfilled promise of Ahidjo's *Parti Unique* and the *Unité nationale* ideology, and the dashed dreams of Paul Biya's *New Deal* policy and its promise to instill "Rigor and Moralization" in the Cameroonian political system.

End Note

Churchill Ewumbue-Monono's book is definitely a goldmine not just for researchers and historians, but also for the general reader interested in the origins and evolution of the Youth Day in Cameroon and how it ties in to the political evolution of Cameroon. Hopefully, it will serve as a springboard for more in-depth research on the changing nature of the Youth Day since its inception and its appropriation by the political class to promote its political ideology.