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Cameroon Preliminary Report 1

An urban minority in quest of its identity in the context of globalisation

A week ago, I came back from a 3-week visit to Douala (Cameroon) which had been undertaken together with a group consisting of: a colleague from the University of Basel (Dr. Guy Thomas, historian), my franco- and dualaphone assistant (Chantal-Nina Kouoh, translator), and 16 students from Basel and Zurich who were working on various themes related to Douala culture, language, world view and social life. This was, as far as I am concerned, the climax of a teaching module initiated at the University of Zurich before LAGSUS started. But through my involvement with LAGSUS ["Language, Gender and Development", Volkswagen Foundation, see <www.lagsus.de>] my current interest had shifted – not in replacement of, but in addition to – from my interest in the Douala language itself as a token of Western Bantu to (i) the question of how an urban minority sees the present and future role of its own language and culture, being immersed in a thriving metropolis with its mix of languages and cultures from all horizons including French, English, many Cameroonian languages, and Chinese (tongue in cheek, I am told they hardly mix with the local population), and (ii) whether, gauged from a detached LAGSUS perspective, this interest in their own traditions and language is a hindrance or an asset to development.

Is the private academy (Mutibe) that had invited our group merely introverting backwards on its own past, or is there some truth in proverbs, such as "The new is born from the old" (Douala) or "One makes a new mat while sitting on the old" (Tura)? Recall the second point of Strategic Issues in my January report where I quoted a passage from a recent Cologne doctoral dissertation, saying, "how ethnicity is invested with new meaning in post-colonial Namibia as a political option with a view of overcoming social and economic marginalization".¹

The answer is not simple and depends on whom you are talking to and on the context in which you ask such a question. Development has many faces: global, regional, national, local. Visiting industrial plants and talking to business people gives you another picture than when listening to the representatives of the Ngondo (the superordinate cultural instance of the Sawa² people and organizers of the annual Ngondo Festival of the same name, see www.peuplesawa.com) or to a medical doctor³ talking about the limits of western medicine in diagnosing and treating malaria. Except that in those different arenas you may find yourself talking to the same person under different hats. The idea that you have traditionalists on the one hand and "modernists" or "globalists" on the other is far removed from the reality!

As far as the Douala people are concerned, their forefathers saw themselves as players in the global arena since the early times of European imperialism, and, one must say, they were quite eloquent and clever players – eloquent in our languages more than we could ever hope to be in theirs. But in the end, they paid a heavy price for their extroversion. The glorious and tragic story still influences the views of many of their descendants. (See the site of <<http://duala.africapolyglotta.net>> for a summary.)

¹ Ute Dieckmann, from an announcement of a talk at Basler Afrika Bibliographien, transl. TB.

² Douala sáwá 'seaside, shore' Sawa is the name used to refer to the coastal region extending from Douala westwards and, by metonymy, a collective name for the people sharing this geographical space and its common culture and history. For a deeper understanding of the "Sawa" concept, you will find a number of excellent articles on the Sawapeople site; e.g. (to mention just one) "Construire le concept de Sawané" by Paul Messenier (21.12.05).

³ To mention just one of several exclusive talk events that were organized on our behalf during our stay. According to Dr. Jocelyn Ebongué, medical science needs to incorporate an anthropological dimension in order to be able to meet the needs it is confronted with on the field.

The local dimension of development and the concern with intergenerational cohesion

It is in the local dimension of development that the question of language and culture takes its primary significance. What is called "autochthony" by some (Ceuppens & Geschiere 2005), and what we find under this label as "African renaissance" in a variety of local versions all over Africa (e.g. the Tura Lexicon Festival in Ivory Coast; the rediscovery of Luruuli language and identity and its educational promotion in Uganda), is it what also motivates the teaching of Duala and other Cameroonian languages in private high schools in Douala which has been going on for decades now? Whatever the answer is, these things have nothing to do with outdated ethnocentrism in the sense of a withdrawal to the safe haven of traditional values, nor can they be reduced to folklore or to a nostalgic return to the past or ancestral language habits. In talking to my Duala interlocutors, who are all well aware of global issues and actively participating in corresponding activities, my original hypothesis has been amply confirmed that today's endogenous ethnic promotion - I am using this term for lack of a more adequate one - expresses "a concern for public recognition beyond one's own ethnic limits and a concern to participate in globalization without being absorbed by it" (TB, LAGSUS strategic issues, January 2006).

Several of my interlocutors, some of them leading figures in Douala (not only Duala!) society and public life, said exactly that in their own words. Their primary concern is not with "saving" the language, or "saving" Duala culture (although this is important), which is a misunderstanding generally carried by the labels "vitality" and "revitalization". But rather their primary concern is with people – young people, "our own children", the next generation. This, if anything, has to do with sustainability; it is the usual way in which the notion of sustainability is expressed and translated in African tradition, and in which it still makes sense without having to be explained.

If these voices are representative – which they certainly are, but one also has to beware of premature generalization - then the identity problem is just as real as the material problems besieging African societies and just as impossible to ignore. On the global scene, omnipresent through the Internet, young Africans of the new generation are bound to compete not only with each other, but also with other players on the world scene. Globalization is not just drinking Coca-Cola or the local brand of Guinness, or surfing in a cyber café. You are not just sharing the goods of the global age; you are inevitably also facing its challenges – economic and others. And you are lured into thinking that you are disadvantaged by your birth certificate, and in some respects you undeniably are if you are born in a black African country.

"If, as a young person, you miss out on this challenge, what remains?" This is the question one of my interlocutors casually asked while we were transcribing a recorded session of traditional teaching. "Nothing," he went on, "you lost everything. That's why we need to rediscover the value of our own heritage and its truth, and we need to help our children discover it, too." Evidently, this was not said with a view of turning the wheel of history back or of denying the young their own future.

But to be a player on the global scene, you must know who you are, to which team you belong, etc. You need an identity. To be African is not enough; it does not give you distinct enough of an identity. Globalization cannot bestow an identity upon anyone. Even to be Cameroonian or Ivorian is not enough - it is not least negative attitudes to migration which have made these labels with young people sound suspicious and counterproductive.

This may be an explanation for the engagement of many contemporaneous Duala people in their own tradition, identity and culture. Evidence from other research contexts points in this direction, too. Thinking about the future begins with the past – another form of migration, so to speak. Intergenerational continuity and intellectual cohesion between the generations may be a way of apprehending sustainability which is specific to Africa and which is deeply rooted in African culture. But it is here that another axiom comes in to play: intergenerational

cohesion does not start with one's own generation but rather with the generations that preceded.

Can anyone seriously object to this? I am asking myself first. If not, what place should this axiom be given in our thinking about development, cooperation and partnership? If yes, is there an alternative response to the quest for identity and to the concern with intergenerational cohesion?

Global paradox and the powerful smallest players

This reminds me of what John Naisbitt, well-known thinker of globalization and global communication, said a decade ago in his 1994 bestseller *Global paradox*. Alongside globalization, he identified a trend for what he called, somewhat ambiguously, "retribalization", and, in this connection, for the survival of language diversity – though also alongside a (naively imagined) removal of language barriers.

"The Bigger the World Economy, the more Powerful Its Smallest Players," said Naisbitt in his catchy subtitle to *Global Paradox*. It is as if this paradox had become the leitmotiv of a powerful undercurrent sweeping across traditional societies all over Africa (or in parts thereof?). An innovative aspect of this undercurrent, which distinguishes it from earlier nativist or "back to the sources" movements and their primarily local or national manifestations, is its claim to recognition, visibility and audibility in the global arena. Although the movement is rooted in local oral tradition and its modes of transmission, that is, the ways in which it is taught and practised, draw strongly on local media and on communicative practices of oral society, including drums, language game and ritual, it produces its own textbooks (Wei 1999; Mwongeza 2004) and printed manifestos. It also mobilizes the media and is increasingly present on the World Wide Web. One may guess that this is part of an emergent de-localization of local identity, of internationalization, and, additionally, of an increasing awareness of the potential for diasporas scattered all over the planet awaking to the need of recovering their own identities.

*"Culture matters"*⁴

Another key term in this connection is "culture". I should like to add a quote from another authority in matters of global development - James Wolfensohn, who was President of the World Bank until last year:

"... The issue of culture and development is not one that we regard as controversial. We start from the proposition that you cannot have development without recognition of culture and history. In a world that is becoming increasingly globalized, in a world where there are pressures for cultural homogeneity across all countries, what is abundantly clear is that it is essential for us to nurture, to prize, to revere, and to support the culture and the history of the countries in which we operate. Very simply, we do not believe that you can move forward unless you recognize the base and the past from which we have come.

This is not some wild, exotic idea. This is not a view of an elitist. This is a view that you find in villages and in slums and in part of countries where people, however bereft of physical resources, are turning back to their culture and their history."⁵

This quote, and particularly its last sentence, aptly summarizes my observation across the societies with whom I have been in closest contact over the past few years in various parts of the continent. What is particular about the encounter with Duala society is that it confirms that

⁴ See next footnote.

⁵ Quoted in *Voice for the World Poor: Selected Speeches and Writings of the World Bank President, James D. Wolfensohn*, The World Bank, Washington, D.C., 2005, p. 174). [In turn quoted from a talk entitled "Culture matters. It is the "how" and not the "what" and "why", by T.A. Obaid, Executive Director of UNFPA, Traverse lecture at the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Berne Dec. 13, 2005.]

what I think I have observed is not limited to remote rural areas where this very remoteness could have been the reason for the observation.⁶

Development as sense-making

In the LAGSUS context, Nercissians & Fremerey (in press) have put an emphasis on development as "sense making activity". Ever since I read it, I have been asking myself: What does this mean in empirical terms?

It strikes me that two of my Duala interlocutors, quite explicitly and spontaneously, also use this same expression of sense-making in connection with their vision of development and with the question of how to face the future for themselves and their children. Both see in it an essential prerequisite to the future of their country, and of Africa in general. However, their interpretation seems to differ. Their views of the resources that should be drawn upon for making sense do not seem to match exactly.

One of them recognizes ethnic tradition as a vital source of making sense out of the present, providing the missing basis for facing the challenges of the global age. Awareness of one's history, together with a re-appraisal of ancestral wisdom and analogous reasoning, will provide this basis - the past as the sense-making resource of the future. The other, a leading public figure of Douala (not Duala!) society and a mother of two adolescent children, who obviously does not talk about these things in an abstract or idealistic way while still recognizing their importance, emphasizes the danger of a fixation on the past. Making sense of the future – the term she used – does need to take the past into account but cannot draw on it alone. (Perhaps the other interlocutor would have come up with similar comments if I had explicitly asked him.)

The question that arises here is again that of inter-generational cohesion and continuity.

I could add to these sources an impressive number of voices from Douala that add weight to the view that we are indeed witnessing a trend that cannot be dismissed as merely ephemeral and anecdotal. From a socio-historical viewpoint, it seems surprising that it is the generation of those who had their education in the paradigm of modernisation, with its off-hand rejection of African languages and tradition as being obstacles to development, who have become eloquent advocates of the rehabilitation of this heritage as an asset to development, e.g. in medicine, law and other fields.

Years ago, when I had first presented the LAGSUS idea to a Swiss specialist audience, some time after the 1992 Rio Summit, the comment from then-trendsetting circles had simply been "No! There is no possible connection between language and sustainability." I had noted then in my diary that this "No" could only be justified if one assumed a purely materialistic view of development. It seemed to me at that time that this was indeed an essentially correct description of the Western view of Third World development.

Whatever it means empirically (the question still remains on the agenda), development as "sense-making activity" appears to me as a sign of a deep and fundamental change in understanding development, one which opens the door for the recognition of a much needed contribution of the humanities in their various fields of specialization, including, but no longer limited to the social sciences. Surely, the African insistence – whether it comes from rural societies such as the Baluli and the Tura, or from urban minorities such as the Duala or even from majorities such as the coastal Swahili – on reclaiming lost cultural territories as a precondition for unreservedly joining the global development bandwagon cannot be ignored. It must also be read as an African protest against a predominantly or exclusively materialistic view of development.

⁶ It should be added that the notion of culture as a vital asset to development is repeatedly echoed in recent statements by Walter Fust, the Director of the Swiss Agency of Development and Cooperation.

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