

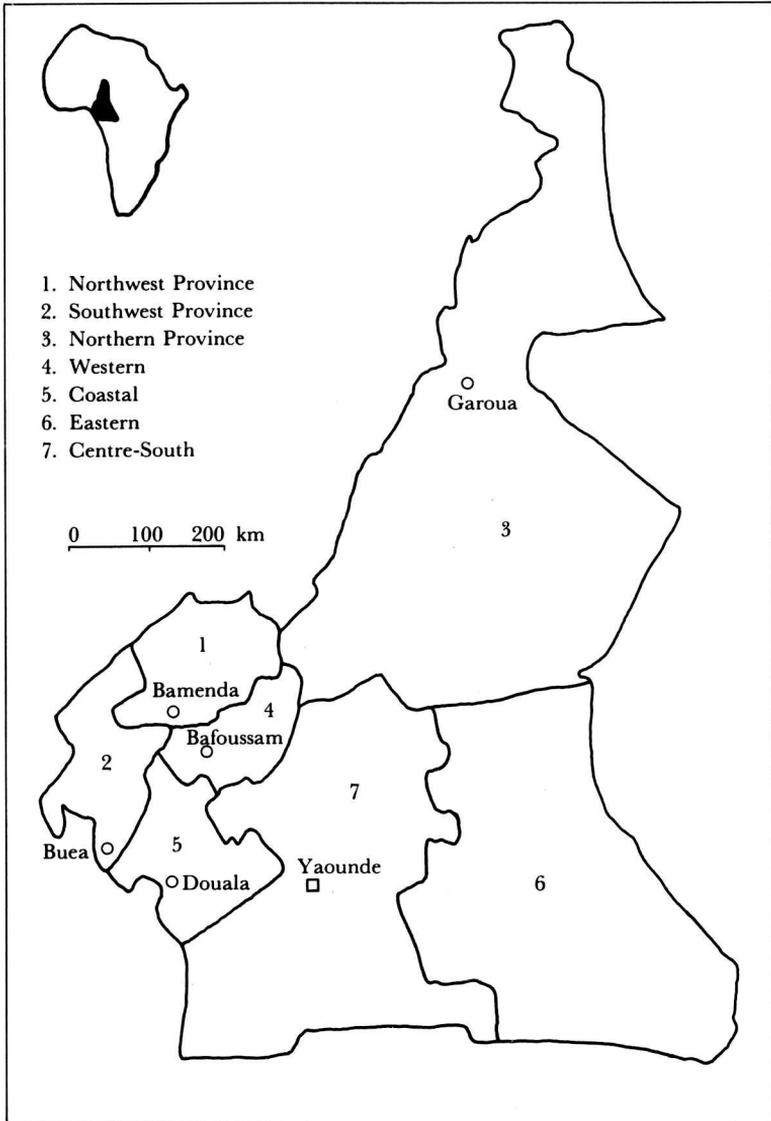
E Pluribus Unum?
The Language for a National Literature
in a Multilingual Community

LORETO TODD

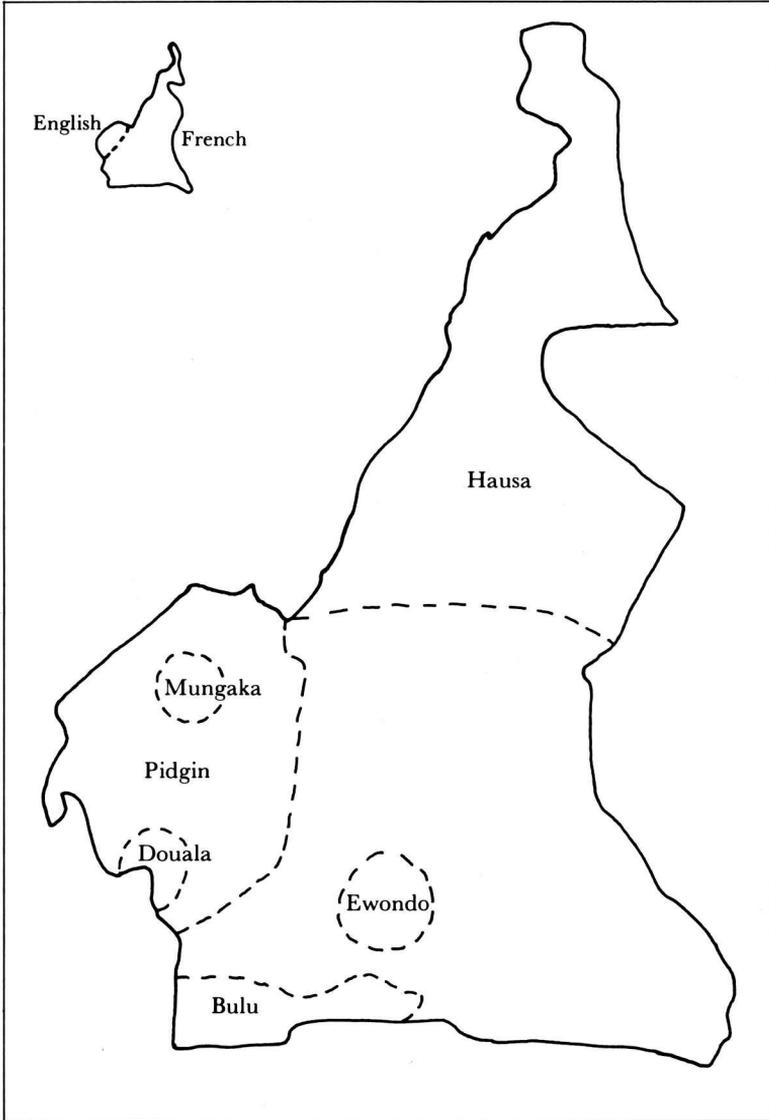
1. *Background to Cameroon*

TODAY, CAMEROON IS A REPUBLIC of just over eight million people. Its official languages are French and English and its education policy envisages a bilingual population. Such a brief summary, however, glosses over the facts that Cameroon has had a complex colonial history and is also one of the most multilingual countries on earth. We can only trace Cameroon's recorded history back to the eighth century when Islam and the Kanem-Bornu Empire spread into the northern half of the country. The earliest recorded history with Europeans occurred in 1472 when Fernão do Po reached the coast and named the river flowing into the sea near Douala (see Map 1) "Rio dos Camarões" or River of Shrimps. Throughout the nineteenth century, the British behaved as if Cameroon came under their jurisdiction, but in July 1884 the Germans annexed the country and proclaimed "Kamerun" to be part of the German Empire.

As a result of World War I Germany lost Cameroon, which was mandated to France and Britain by the League of Nations. On 1 January 1960 the francophone zone (see Map 2) gained its independence and one year later a plebiscite was held in the anglophone zone. The northern part of the zone voted for unification with Nigeria and the southern part for unification with francophone Cameroon. A federal bilingual Republic came into being in October 1961 and this was replaced by a United Republic in 1972. The language situation is even more complex.



MAP 1
CAMEROON'S ADMINISTRATIVE REGIONS



MAP 2
VEHICULAR LANGUAGES IN CAMEROON

No-one is absolutely certain how many languages are spoken in Cameroon.¹ The semi-official publication *Cameroon Today* (1977) suggests that there are 200 languages in daily use in Cameroon; *L'Atlas linguistique du Cameroun* (1976) claims that there are at least 300 languages; and Professor Mbassi-Manga (1983) puts the number at 600. Such multilingualism is, as one might expect, allied to multiculturalism. Each ethnic group has its own repertoire of history, legend, folk narrative, dance, and ritual; and superimposed on these are the cultural traditions associated with western Europe and with Islam.²

Cameroonians have come to terms with such multilingualism in two ways: they have learned to be polyglots³ and they have learned the value of lingua francas. Apart from the official languages, French and English, and the prestigious Arabic, Cameroonians use five modified vernaculars (Bulu, Douala, Ewondo, Hausa, Mungaka) for wider communication within specified areas (see Map 2) and one lingua franca, Pidgin English, which is used extensively in western and coastal regions and in all urban centres.

2. *Choice of Language for a National Literature*

Cameroonians are extremely interested in literature and the arts. For over thirty years they have produced a "bilingual cultural review," *Abbia*, and have written novels, plays and poetry.⁴ The majority of these writings have been in French and English, but these languages, like the highly respected but infrequently used Arabic, are associated with privilege and education. They are respected and admired by all but read and appreciated by few. These three languages are also associated with colonial governments or specific religions, and a number of Cameroonian critics have reiterated Obiajunwa Wali's views that Africans who utilize non-African languages are "whoring after foreign gods."⁵ Some writings have also appeared in the vernacular languages of wider communication but these are all associated with a particular ethnic group and with a specific religion: Hausa with Islam, the others with Christianity. Only one other language exists which is understood by large numbers, which is not associated

with any specific religion, tribe, or region and which has the additional advantage of being understood by people on the trade routes from the Gambia to Gabon. That language is Pidgin English.

3. *Pidgin English: Is It Viable?*

There are many misconceptions about pidginized languages. They have been dismissed as “bastard jargons,” “lingos,” and even as “inferiority made half articulate.” Such judgments, however, tell us more about the people who make them than about the languages they describe. Cameroon Pidgin English is part of dialect continuum of pidginized and creolized varieties found in coastal regions of West Africa. It is used in Cameroon for barter, trading, joking, preaching, teaching, and singing and is the most widely used lingua franca in towns, prisons, Catholic churches, the armed services, and the police force, as well as in all large factories and plantations. It is acquired by many Cameroonians at a very early age and is spoken with the same speed and fluency as any naturally-acquired vernacular. It is the vehicle for a large and growing oral literature which includes myths, animal stories, supernatural tales, worksongs, and proverbial wisdom, a few examples of which should be enough to convince most readers that Cameroon Pidgin is a flexible, evocative language capable of expressing cultural and literary aspirations.

Text 1

Sense no be dasso for one man⁶

(Wisdom is not just for one person)

Some day been dey now, Troki been tink say ee go gada sense. Ee sabi say sense pass money, pass chop, pass all. Ee go ee, go ee, go ee, take small sense for any man wey ee meetam. Any sense wey ee getam, ee putam for some big big pot. Any day any day so so lookout for sense. Ee walka for all corner sotey ee tire but ee been get sense pass mark sotey ee pot done fullup.

(Once upon a time, Tortoise decided that he would collect wisdom. He knew that wisdom surpassed money, food, everything.

He went about everywhere, taking wisdom from everyone he met. All the wisdom that he got, he put in a very large container. Every single day always on the lookout for wisdom. He walked everywhere until he was tired but he had got so much wisdom that his pot was full.)

When dat pot done fullup for sense Troki been bigin fear. Ee fear say some man go thief dat ee sense. De ting vex Troki time no day. Ee wonder what ee fit do. Den ee tink say: 'Na so! I go take dis my pot hide-am for stick.'

(When the pot was full of wisdom Tortoise began to be afraid. He was afraid that someone would steal his wisdom. This worried Tortoise terribly. He wondered what he could do. Then he thought: 'That's it! I'll take my pot and hide it up a tree.')

Ee go ee. Ee take dat pot for ee hand, go reach de stick begin climb. Ee no fit climb stick. Ee take de pot putam for man hand, ee no fit climb. Ee putam for woman hand, ee no fit climb. Ee no sabi what ee fit do. Some small pikin been dey, ee talk say: 'Papa, if you want climb stick with dat you pot, you go get for tie-am for you back.' Troki laugh time no day. Ee talk say: 'You, you pikin, you tink say you get sense pass you papa self?' But ee take de pot tie-am for back and wonders ee fit climb stick one time. Ee sit down for stick, knock ee head, knock ee head sotey. After some time ee talk say: 'Me, I been tink say I done get all de sense for dis ground for dat my pot but dat small pikin been get some sense wey me I never get.' Ee sit down so, so so sit down. Den ee take ee pot throw-way-am for ground. All dat sense been scatter for all corner. All man fit findam keepam. Troki been vex time no day how-way ee been walka for ee house. Ee tink say: 'I been tink say all dat sense na my own. No be so, no be so. Sense no be dasso for one man.' Na my story dat.

(He set out. He took the pot in his arms, went to the tree and began to climb. He couldn't climb the tree. He took the pot in his right arm, he couldn't climb. He put it in his left, he couldn't climb. He didn't know what he could do. A small child was there, he said: 'Papa, if you want to climb the tree with that pot, you'll have to tie it on your back.' Tortoise laughed heartily. He said: 'Child, do you think you are wiser than your own father?')

But he took the pot and tied it on his back and amazingly he could climb the tree immediately. He sat down on the tree, thinking and thinking. After some time he said: 'I thought that I had all the wisdom in the world in my pot but that little child had some wisdom that I didn't possess.' He sat there, always sitting. Then he took the pot and threw it to the ground. All that wisdom scattered everywhere. Everyone can find it and keep it. Tortoise was very sad as he walked home. He thought: 'I thought all that wisdom was mine. It wasn't, it wasn't. Wisdom is not just for one person.' And that's my story.)

Text 2

Sweet Talk

Proverbs

1. *Dog ee lass na God go cleanam*
God cleans the dog's rump
God helps those who cannot help themselves.
2. *Man wey ee burn ee biabia na ee go first hear de smell*
A man who burns his beard will be the first to notice the smell
A man who indulges in foolish activities will pay for his folly.
3. *Poor man like for make palava for-sake-a ee no get noting for loss*
A poor man likes to make trouble because he has nothing to lose
Revolutions start among the poor.
4. *Troki want fight but ee sabi say ee hand short*
Tortoise wants to fight but he knows his arms are short
It is good to know your limitations.
5. *One hand no fit tie bundle*
One hand cannot tie a bundle
Co-operation is necessary for the success of all.

Text 3

Mimbo House

A Drinking House/Pub

(This is an extract from a play written in Pidgin by a young dramatist called J. T. Menget, who uses the pseudonym 'Jetimen'.)

MR BLUEMOON: Service! Service! Se-r-vi-ce!

SERVICE: (*from without*) Sa-a-ah!

MR BLUEMOON: Why you no fit bring de glass quick? Dis massa done open 'e beer leav'am 'e di cold for sika glass. See de time you di clean bar, for a passtime. If you no want work more tell me.

MUNDE: How you want say make 'e work? 'E work for bar den 'e work for bed; work for sun-time, work for night. Two man work one man do'am. (*Laughter from customers.*)

MR BLUEMOON: Munde, shut up dey. Who call you here?

SERVICE: Munde, carry your bad luck go. Who ask you for put you moup for we palava, you cris dog? (*Turning to Mr Bluemoon.*) If you check say I no di work fine, talk make I go me. See me bad luck O? All bar-service dem done run lef me here. De whole lass night I no sleep for sika . . . em em . . .

MUNDE: (*interrupting*) Aha! I no been talk? How 'e fit sleep weti de work wey 'e di do for bed? Answer dat one. (*Laughter again from customers — now more in number*)

SERVICE: De day wey dis sas-moup Munde, Massa St. Bottle and Njimulu come for dis bar I di suffer bad. I done tire. Pay me, make I go.

MR BLUEMOON: (*less stern*) Dat St. Bottle, Njimulu and dat dem sabi hambock bad. See weti wey dem do for night.

SERVICE: Na dem bring me dis bad luck. De whole bar wan fight yesterday for sika dem. Dat dem woman, 'e no sabi wetin 'e wan for show. Dat ashawo woman!

MR BLUEMOON: I tink I go drive dem for here. I no wan enter trouble for sika money. St. Bottle sef di owe me five thousand franc. Service, no giv'am credit more.

MUNDE: Dat na tif talk, properlie. If dat three people no enter you bar, de business go broke.

MR BLUEMOON: Make de business broke na. Munde, carry you bad luck komot for here. I say komot for here you beg-beg man. (*He pushes Munde who staggers backwards, then hits Munde who runs a distance away*)

MUNDE: You call who beg-beg? No be you be tif? Number one cheati-man. You sell ting for dear price. You no fit pay Service well, you no fit wear clean . . .

4. *Problems Involved in Using Pidgin*

For close on a century Pidgin has been widely used in the west of Cameroon as a vehicle for oral culture and, more recently, it has been exploited as a medium for humorous drama, satire, and political speech making. Our few examples give an impression, albeit a very superficial impression, of its viability. It has, however, three inherent limitations which will have to be overcome if the language is to be utilized as a significant medium for Cameroon's culture. First, it has no recognized orthography. Most people *speak* rather than *write* Pidgin, with the result that most Cameroonians devise their own orthographic conventions when writing. This point becomes clearer if we look at the various representations for the simple sentence meaning: "Let's walk quickly." Most speakers would produce an utterance which can be transcribed phonetically as:

/mek wi waka kwik kwik/.

Francophones, however, would be inclined to write:

Mek oui waka kouik kouik

whereas anglophones might produce:

Make we walka quick quick

and some blend the English and French systems to produce:

Meck wi waka kouick kouick.⁷

Several attempts have been made to regularize the spelling of Cameroon Pidgin but none of the recommended orthographies are well known to Cameroonians. If one uses the orthography employed in the writing of Standard English, one runs the risk of making the Pidgin look like an inferior form of English, an impression given by the following extract from a Pidgin story:

Den dem com' tak' de t'ing go. No man no be'n as' 'usai' dem fit put'm. (Then they came to take the thing away. Nobody asked where [which side] they could put it.)

The use of a phonetically-based script would have the advantage of representing the Pidgin as a language in its own right, but such a system as:

Trōki sabi sei sens pas mōni, pas ʃɔp, pas əl

would be incomprehensible to the majority of Cameroonians. A useful compromise would be to adopt the spelling conventions used by Fyle and Jones⁸ in the *Dictionary of Krio* since Krio is a mutually-intelligible creole English used extensively as a lingua franca in Sierra Leone. The Krio system introduces only two symbols which do not occur in the standard English orthography, namely /ɛ/, the vowel sound in "get" and /ɔ/, the vowel sound in "got."

The second limitation is that Cameroon Pidgin has not been standardized and so it evinces regional variations. Thus, a speaker from Douala may use *lif* as an existential verb:

God lif — God exists

whereas a speaker from Bamenda would prefer:

God dei.

Similarly, Fulani speakers may say:

Woman for me — My wife

whereas other Cameroonians would use:

Ma woman.

Lexical and syntactic differences certainly occur in the different regions of Cameroon where Pidgin is employed, but such differences are finite and diminishing. Pidgin is too useful a lingua franca for its users to allow mutually unintelligible varieties to emerge. Usefulness has exerted a standardizing influence and this

influence has been reinforced by the Pidgin used on the radio. This Pidgin is the preferred usage of young, urban dwellers who earn good salaries and who move about the country as their job or as opportunity dictates. Their variety is already a seminal standard.

The third problem associated with the literary use of Pidgin is the most intractable. Many Cameroonians have been taught to think of Pidgin as "bad English," "bastard English," "bush English" and some intellectuals have gone further and described it as "linguistic dirt" and a stumbling-block to rational thought and logical expression.⁹ Most parents use Pidgin, most know that their children use Pidgin, but few would be willing to allow their children to go to a school where Pidgin was used as the medium of instruction. We thus have a paradoxical situation: Pidgin is used in the home to tell stories, to put strangers at ease, and as the language most likely to be understood and least likely to cause offence; on the other hand, most Cameroonians feel that education should be conducted through the medium of English or French. To overcome this problem, people will have to be persuaded that no variety of language is *intrinsically* superior to any other, that since Pidgin is a viable medium for oral literature it is capable of being used in the written medium, and that the use of Pidgin for a written literature need not rule out the use of other languages, including the vernaculars. Many Cameroonians are already well-disposed to such views and many more could be easily convinced. If some catastrophe occurred in Cameroon and English was wiped out, the country could continue to function and function well; if Pidgin, on the other hand, was wiped out national administration would falter and probably fail.

There is perhaps one further point that should be mentioned here and that is the fact that the choice of English or French as a literary medium offers a much larger potential audience than the selection of Pidgin. At first glance this is true, but two additional facts need to be considered. First, the majority of readers of African literature are African and the majority of Cameroonian writers are read almost exclusively in Cameroon. Secondly, Pidgin is reasonably intelligible to speakers of English, a view reinforced by the behaviour of Segun Oyekunle, a Nigerian

writer, who published his Pidgin play *Katakata for Sofahead* not in Lagos but in London.

5. *Advantages Inherent in the Choice of Pidgin as a Literary Medium*

If Cameroonians adopted Pidgin as a medium for their literature, they would have a medium which has already proved itself capable of reflecting the country's traditional culture and wisdom. Furthermore, it would be a *national* medium in the sense that it would be unmarked for region, religion, colour, culture, or social class. It is true that a literature in Pidgin might be more limited in its appeal than a literature in English, but it could be understood by communities in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, and the Gambia as well as by many West Indians, and such a potential audience is greater than for writers who select Afrikaans, Danish, Dutch, Gaelic, or Greek.

It is also likely that Pidgin would be used with greater flexibility and vitality than either English or French, because although it has a vocabulary derived largely from English, its similes, metaphors, and world view are essentially African. Most people in Cameroon use it and think of it as a Cameroonian language. This view was expressed most succinctly to me by a young woman who always related anecdotes, especially those involving her little sister, in Pidgin rather than in English. When I asked why she did this she said:

I translate Mary's stories into Pidgin because its expressions are closer to the spirit and feeling of the Bansa language than Standard English. Let us suppose that Mary is sympathizing with my father for being scolded unnecessarily by my mother. She says:

Lah a gyai *wo-on oomba*

No mind *you yaa*. (Don't let it upset you)

No matter how you translate that into Standard English, the meaning and the sympathy which the italicized words convey have no equivalent.

6. *Conclusion*

It would be arrogant for any non-Cameroonian to attempt to impose a language choice on future writers. A number will con-

tinue to use English and French; a few will tap the literary potential of their mother tongues either by writing in the mother tongues for a small community or by reflexifying Cameroonian languages, as Nigerian novelist Gabriel Okara did with Ijaw in *The Voice*; others, and I believe many, will realize that Pidgin is already an incipient, albeit unrecognized, national language that could with care be moulded into a medium fit to carry the weight of Cameroon's literary output.

NOTES

- ¹ It is by no means easy to distinguish between related dialects of one language and related languages. Even if mutual intelligibility is selected as the deciding factor, intelligibility does not always work both ways. Speakers of Language A, for example, may understand speakers of Language B but there is no automatic guarantee that speakers of Language B will understand speakers of A. Comprehensibility is tied up with such non-linguistic phenomena as power, prestige, type of interaction. What is certainly clear, however, is that if Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian were spoken in Cameroon, they would be regarded as closely related dialects and not distinct languages.
- ² Western influence is strongest in the south and west, Islamic influence in the north of the country.
- ³ Most Cameroonians speak at least three languages, their mother tongue, a vehicular language (often Pidgin), and one of the official languages. It is not unusual to find people, including people who have never been to school, with a mastery of five or six languages. Let us take a specific example: if a child is born in a village like Djottin (in the Bamenda region), his mother tongue is Noni, he learns Lamnso to communicate with people in the neighbouring town, Pidgin to understand sermons and to go to Confession, English as soon as he goes to Primary School, and French within four years of starting Primary School.
- ⁴ Among the novels written are *La Vie de Boy* (Ferdinand Oyono) and Kenjo Jumbam's *The White Man of God*; plays have been written by Owona-Mbia and Jetimen; and poetry by 'Sankie Maimo and Augustine Ndangam. These are only a few of the many writers publishing their works in Cameroon as well as abroad.
- ⁵ "The dead end of African Literature," in *Transition 10* (1963), pp. 13-15.
- ⁶ Texts 1 and 2 were collected by me in the Bamenda region and transcribed according to the orthographic conventions of Standard English. Text 3 was written by Jetimen. His orthographic conventions are similar to those employed for English.
- ⁷ All the quoted variants were produced by students at the University of Cameroon, Yaounde, when they were asked to transcribe the spoken variant as clearly and unambiguously as they could. All were fluent speakers of Pidgin.

- ⁸ The *Krio-English Dictionary* compiled by Clifford Fyle and Eldred Jones and published by Oxford University Press in 1980 will probably have a standardizing effect on the orthographies of all English-related pidgins and creoles in West Africa. It is so expensive, however, that very few Africans can afford it.
- ⁹ The use of Pidgin English as a national language was debated in several issues of the *Cameroon Tribune* in 1982. One writer described Pidgin as "linguistic dirt" and a "canker worm" in Cameroon society. Others recognized it as a "saviour" and a unifying force. It is probably true of this as of many debates on language that "it generated more heat than light."

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