

## [Walker-Said on Mougoué, 'Gender, Separatist Politics, and Embodied Nationalism in Cameroon'](#)

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**Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué.** *Gender, Separatist Politics, and Embodied Nationalism in Cameroon*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019. 346 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-472-05413-8.

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Few scholars of Africa will be unfamiliar with the current crisis in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, a secessionist struggle that began as a nonviolent political movement and rapidly escalated into an armed conflict that so far has taken over 6,000 lives and displaced over 730,000 citizens.[1] But fewer will be able to articulate exactly on what premise the claim that the Anglophone region of Cameroon has a distinct “national” identity rests. Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué’s 2019 book, *Gender, Separatist Politics, and Embodied Nationalism in Cameroon*, goes further than previous studies of Anglophone nationalism such as *Negotiating an Anglophone Identity*, by Piet Konings and Francis Nyamnjoh (2003), and Carlson Anyangwe’s *Betrayal of Too-Trusting People: The UN, the UK and the Trust Territory of the Southern Cameroons* (2009) to reject not only a “monolithic” understanding of Cameroonian nationalism but also a simplistic characterization of *Anglophone* Cameroonian nationalism (p. 11).

As the title makes clear, Mougoué examines gender—specifically the role of Anglophone Cameroonian female cultural, political, and religious leaders—and the processes by which women embodied (physically personified and consciously typified) a separate Anglophone Cameroonian identity that was most conspicuous when comparing African women in the two regions of the country. Mougoué does more than simply detail Anglophone Cameroonian women’s manufacture of gender norms—although this is highly informative and flourished with a broad range of evidence from West Cameroon ministerial archives, national archives, and women’s organization records. She demonstrates that Anglophone women’s political aspirations were fundamentally about having West Cameroon’s societies recognized as inherently distinct and even exceptional, and therefore poised to contribute to the constitution of national traditions and the cultural foundations of the entire nation of Cameroon—somewhat paradoxically by their separateness. Mougoué reveals how Anglophone women in various cultural, social, and religious organizations sought to be exemplars by imbuing meaning to everyday tasks, routines, and actions like preparing meals, fashioning one’s attire, educating children, and organizing the household, and then casting certain approaches to these activities as ideal, suitable, appropriate, or respectable. Anglophone women leaders’ prescriptions for such tasks encouraged the imagining of a dignified, devout, sexually reserved, irreproachable Anglophone female identity that could both be superior to their Francophone counterparts and transcend local recognition to project onto the national stage. Mougoué carefully chronicles African

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women's processes of identification and signification and demonstrates that the subjects of her study had a keen sense that nation building required a performance. This highly ambitious study succeeds on various fronts, including in uncovering the role of women's organizations and churches as critical postindependence political institutions that defined social relations and identities as well as in discerning how female social bonds transformed into a political force.

Mougoué employs the term "West Cameroon" to reference the former "Southern Cameroons" that had been governed by British Nigeria until 1960 and joined with the Francophone Republic of Cameroon to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon in 1961 via plebiscite. The era under examination in the book is the "federal period," which refers to the years between 1961 and 1972, when West Cameroon was a federated state in the federal structure of the nation. After 1972, the Anglophone zone (West Cameroon) lost its federated statehood and the government adopted a unitary system. Later, in 1984, the region lost its symbolic star on the Cameroon flag when President Paul Biya changed the national flag from a two-star design, which had signified the union of the Anglophone and Francophone regions, to that of a single star.[2] The gradual but overt erasure of Anglophone political identity within the national administrative structure and state symbolism after 1972 makes understanding the history of Anglophone Cameroonian nation building in the preceding era all the more crucial, as the Francophone government clearly witnessed and reacted strongly against it to uphold a profoundly different national construction for reasons that remain largely undeclared.

Mougoué has chosen to focus explicitly on Anglophone Cameroonian women's actions in the 1961-72 period, which she persuasively argues were the most visible and tangible of the movement to build cultural and national consciousness in West Cameroon. The focus of her research is often women like Anne Foncha—the wife of Anglophone Cameroonian politician John Foncha and founder of the Catholic Women's Association, as well as women leaders of organizations such as the West Cameroon Federation of Women's Social Clubs and Associations, the West Cameroon Council of Women's Institutes, and women leaders of Christian congregations in towns and cities in West Cameroon. These women's visibility in the public sphere and indeed their attainment of leadership positions in the public sphere was radical at the same time as it also conceded to and supported conservative gender constructs. Anglophone women's religious, social, culinary, sartorial, and political activities, displays, and exhibitions were enacted to demonstrate appropriate conventions of western Cameroon life that other women could emulate and use to signify their distinct and separate identity relative to Francophone Cameroonian women. In this analysis, Mougoué weaves in a thorough historiographic review of the literature on nationalism and particularly nationalism in Africa in the period of decolonization, where electoral processes, regional representation, and policymaking by Africans took various ideological and practical forms. She is sensitive to the delicate balance women in West Cameroon in positions of local leadership were forced to maintain: simultaneously entrenching patriarchal foundations on which national stability was believed to rest while urging political representation for women and making "women's" issues like preschool, national costume, maternal and child health, and education and training for women and girls intelligible on the national administrative level.

Mougoué's history of West Cameroon is rooted in analyses of ethnicity as well as gender and she deftly charts when Anglophone Cameroonian female political leaders encouraged citizens to abandon ethnic difference in pursuit of West Cameroonian unity and when ethnicity was highlighted as a

differentiating characteristic from African communities in Francophone Cameroon. Those familiar with the particular ethnic and linguistic diversity of the current-day North West and South West administrative regions of Cameroon will appreciate Mougoué's parsing of the elaborate, sensitive, and deeply locally informed political discourse that framed a "hybrid ethnonationalism" that transcended ethnic and cultural boundaries while conjointly incorporating the varied ethnic and cultural practices of local communities into a vision of a unified "Anglophone nationalism" (p. 5).

Mougoué's source base is very rich and replete with intimate details of these women's marriages, honestly depicting how private life and public life are never truly separate for the political class, and particularly women in that class. Details and anecdotes about how female leaders in religious, educational, and cultural associations were courted, married, and then treated within their marriages reveals a truly radical period of change in West and Central Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, when new female and male graduates forged "modern" marriages in the national spotlight, fully cognizant of the African and cosmopolitan audiences who observed and reported on their lives and work to their own communities.

The most challenging theoretical and historiographic debates in which this book engages include how to more carefully nuance the distinction between "feminine" and "feminist" women's movements, how West Cameroonian women's collective contributions were primarily a "gendered nationalist movement" rather than a "women's movement," and, most relevantly for better understanding the current "Anglophone crisis" in Cameroon, the coexistence of separatism with nationalism (p. 18). In articulating the distinctions between Anglophone women's embrace of a nationalism based on federal statehood and its clear differentiation from secessionism, Mougoué offers a valuable reprieve—admittedly inspired by Jill Vickers—from narratives of separatist or secessionist movements that only reference women in relationship to men's violence (p. 12). The extremely violent nature of the current conflict in Cameroon has prompted observers and journalists to primarily discuss Anglophone women as victims of sexual violence, displacement, and torture, occluding coverage of some important moments when Anglophone women collectively mobilized against separatist insurgency to protest in major urban centers.[3]

Overall, Mougoué's important study not only puts female Anglophone Cameroonian politicians, religious organizers, and cultural leaders at the center of the historical narrative (as the title makes apparent), but it also carefully uncovers the highly distinct and sharply articulate "nationalism" that these women threaded together that currently has resonance in the conflict as it is unfolding in the present day. Indeed, this book is so useful in understanding the intellectual, cultural, and indeed "national" columns of Anglophone Cameroonian identity that it should be read by all who are seeking to understand the armed conflict in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon that has been ongoing since 2016. Anglophone secessionist politicians and ideologues, including Sisiku Ayuk Tabe, Lucas Cho Ayaba, and Ernest Akwanga occasionally articulate similarly complex and nuanced "national" conceptualizations that Anglophone women forged in the federal period, demonstrating the salience and endurance of local notions of the "national" in Anglophone political life.

## Notes

[1].The death toll of 6,000 was recently estimated by the Association Afrique and the Human Rights and Legal Research Center and was confirmed by the International Crisis Group. See Human Rights

and Legal Research Centre, “Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon: Human Rights Watch in a Recent Report Indicts Defence and Security Forces for Killing at Least 10 Civilians and Destroying Properties in the North West and South West Regions,” Human Rights and Legal Research Centre, August 12, 2022,

<https://hrlrc.org/2022/08/12/anglophone-crisis-in-cameroon-human-rights-watch-in-a-recent-report-in-dicts-defence-and-security-forces-for-killing-at-least-10-civilians-and-destroying-properties-in-the-north-west-and-south-west-re/>. See also Clément Boursin, “Cameroun anglophone. Une guerre passée sous silence,” Association Afrique XXI, July 19, 2022, <https://afriquexxi.info/Cameroun-anglophone-Une-guerre-passee-sous-silence>. For reports on earlier death counts for 2019 and 2020, see Jess Craig, “Briefing: Cameroon’s Intensifying Conflict and What It Means for Civilians,” *The New Humanitarian*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/02/06/Cameroon-elections-anglophone-separatist-in-surgency-Ambazonia>.

[2]. The union between Anglophone Cameroon (the British Southern Cameroons) and Francophone Cameroon (Republic of Cameroon) officially took place on October 1, 1961. See Carlson Anyangwe, *Imperialistic Politics in Cameroun: Resistance and the Inception of the Restoration of the Statehood of Southern Cameroons* (Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG, 2008). In 1985, when Anglophone lawyer and political leader Fon Gorji Dinka protested the government’s actions as unconstitutional (i.e., erasing quasi-political independence for the Anglophone zone), he was arrested and imprisoned for nearly a year without trial. See Nolan Quinn, “Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon Was Decades in the Making,” Council on Foreign Relations, August 16, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/anglophone-crisis-cameroon-was-decades-making>.

[3]. For reference to sexual violence and rape in the Anglophone conflict, see Annette Young, “The 51%—Rape as a Weapon of War: Sexual Violence on the Rise in Cameroon’s Anglophone Region,” *France 24*, April 19, 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190419-51-percent-sexual-violence-cameroon-anglophone-region-iran-boxer-brexit-women-impact>; Human Rights Watch, “Cameroon: Security Forces Kill Civilians, Rape Woman,” Human Rights Watch, July 22, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/22/cameroon-security-forces-kill-civilians-rape-woman>; and Moki Edwin Kindzeka, “Study: Abortions From Rapes on Rise in Cameroon’s Conflict Zones,” *Voice of America*, February 20, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/a/study-abortions-rapes-increasing-cameroon-conflict-zones/4796973.html>. For more limited coverage of women’s marches in the Anglophone regions against the violence of the conflict, see Associated Press, “Women Protest Abuses in Cameroon Anglophone Separatist Fight,” *News 24*, September 7, 2018, <https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/women-protest-abuses-in-cameroon-anglophone-separatist-fight-20180907-2>; and International Crisis Group, “Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders: Women in Cameroon’s Anglophone Conflict,” report no. 307, February 23, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/307-rebels-victims-peacebuilders-women-camerouns-anglophone-conflict>.

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