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## **The Education System in Cameroon: Confronting the Effects of Colonialism and Building the Future**

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### **Abstract:**

This article examines the challenges and policies surrounding the development of a national education system in Cameroon, particularly in the post-colonial era. It explores the historical disparities in educational opportunities between rural and urban areas, largely influenced by colonial legacies that prioritized urban centers. The study highlights the profound impact of linguistic and cultural diversity on education, emphasizing the challenges posed by the dominance of colonial languages mainly French and English over indigenous languages. The persistence of Western educational curricula has further complicated efforts to develop a system that reflects national identity and local cultural heritage. In response, the Cameroonian government has implemented policies aimed at integrating local languages into the curriculum, modernizing educational infrastructure, and promoting inclusive pedagogical approaches. Measures have also been taken to foster national unity, combat discrimination, and enhance equal access to education. Despite these efforts, structural and systemic challenges remain, necessitating continued reforms to ensure an equitable and culturally representative education system. This study underscores the need for policies that balance linguistic diversity with national cohesion while addressing the long-term influence of colonial educational structures.

**Keywords:** Colonial legacy, linguistic diversity, Cameroonian education system, educational reform, indigenous languages.

## **Introduction**

The relationship between the history of colonialism in Africa and the educational systems that emerged after independence has always been closely related (Lomba, 2015; Fanon, 1963). The aim of Western education was to impose cultural, linguistic, and intellectual hegemony, without taking into account the educational needs and local reality of the colonized peoples (DeKorne, 2012). Colonial educational policies produced a complex legacy that African countries faced great difficulties in dealing with after independence (Mbembe, 1992).

Cameroon represents a prominent example of this problem, as the country found itself faced with the challenges of dealing with the legacy of two colonial languages and two different educational systems (Ndille, 2018; White, 1996). The situation has been further complicated by social and cultural pluralism in Cameroon, which has more than 200 languages and ethnic groups spread throughout it (Echitchi, 2019).

This research seeks to address the challenges faced by decision-makers in Cameroon in building a national education system, while highlighting practical steps that they took to achieve this goal (Ashu, 2020). The research is based on a socio-historical approach to analyze the nature of the colonial educational legacy, evaluate the policies adopted by the Cameroonian state to confront these challenges, and lay the foundations of an educational system that serves the needs of society (Mignolo, 1998).

Decision-makers had to find a balance between the duality of the linguistic and cultural colonial legacy and ethnic diversity in Cameroon, with the aim of designing an educational system that meets the needs of citizens and ensures the maintenance of harmony and stability among the various social components of the state (Tambo, 2000).

### **1- Review on the nature and impact of colonial education and its effects on post-colonial educational systems.**

The European colonial movement began in the late 19th century and extended to the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century where The colonial powers entered into expansionist plans to expand and extend their settlements across the Asian-African continent and other places around the world.

The goal of Western colonialism was political hegemony, which in turn facilitates control over its primary resources to benefit from them economically. The European colonizers were very keen to eradicate the culture of the African settlements by consolidating their Western cultures and beliefs. This was not the case in a direct way, but rather Western colonial education was the best method chosen by the colonizers in implanting their policies and cultures among the African peoples in order to erase the local culture to be treated smoothly (Echitchi, 2019).

Education had several roles, including cultural consolidation and social hegemony. It was also adopted as a means to consolidate the status and legitimacy of colonial rule among African countries.

The West has adopted the pretext of educating, spreading civilization, and eradicating ignorance and illiteracy among Bedouin African communities. This reason was the basic excuse that the West used to penetrate African lands and impose on them Western education, which in turn protects their social and economic interests and does not extend any connection at all to the interests of the colonized peoples (Nyenti, 2017).

This colonial policy was adopted, ratified, and made peoples and societies believe in it. Even some of the colonized peoples themselves acknowledged the validity of this colonial policy, by implanting Western education among them. The matter did not happen overnight, but rather it occurred throughout the long colonial period, and in some African countries it extended even after independence. The policy of Westernization was taught in colonial schools (Ashu, 2020; Loomba, 2015; Mbembe, 1992). Under colonial educational policies, subjects were taught that had no relation at all to the society with which they lived daily or what they passed down from their ancestors. Education was limited only to learning the language and mastering it to facilitate the interconnection between employment of local workers and colonial forces and to facilitate communication with members of colonialism (Dekorne, 2012).

The educational system was based on amplifying Western culture in the eyes of Africans and instilling a sense of shame and inferiority to their barbaric culture. This was also the goal of Westernization for expansion and cultural and economic dominance. As for the Africans, they were in a circle of ambiguity, feeling lost, and trying to cling to the first end of a rope extended to them to pull them out of the darkness. (Jua, 2003)

For them, the Western teacher was their savior and the only way to save them from their ignorance, and this is what the colonial planners hoped to achieve. Among the policies adopted by the West is to force learning the colonizer's language, use it as a language of education, and ensure its use among peoples. For example, French, Portuguese, English and Spanish were colonial languages that were imposed on peoples as languages of education at the expense of local languages. This linguistic imposition was a reason for marginalizing and ignoring local languages, which affects the deviation from local culture and opens the door for Western culture to move towards exploring and adopting it (Loomba, 2015; Mbembe, 1992).

The educational curricula only reflected the concepts and opinions of the West, their history and European cultural and religious values, and the colonizer was careful not to mention or integrate local cultures and mother languages into the educational field. This led to the marginalization of local values, and here was the beginning of the processes of social eviction and the creation of a cultural gap between societies. (Jua, 2003)

As for the Western educational distribution, it was unequal and uneven. Rather, it was distributed in the places that only one benefited from it or needed to penetrate into. As for the other remote areas, it further declined, and there was the creation of social class. Therefore, there was no educational equality keen to spread civilization and education, as stated by before. Among the immediate and primary results and goals of Western education was the creation of a local educated elite, but its role was to follow colonial interests. (White, 1996)

The colonial powers ensured the cultivation of important places for the African educated elite in several economic, political, and administrative fields, and their missions continued even after the colonial period. On the other hand, there was a local tendency or awakening that led to the beginning of resistance and the search for how to adapt it to the policies followed colonially and educationally(Dekorne,2012).

Local communities expressed their rejection of the Western educational system and were looking for alternatives to preserve cultural values. The other part of the educated elite used this acquired knowledge and skills to encode it and use it for anti-colonial activity after that. This Western education was the reason for awakening awareness among the people, through the keenness of the activity of the educated elite to spread this amount of knowledge among uneducated Africans and use it for their personal national interests to expel the colonizers from their lands. (Jua,2003)

Indeed, popular resistance succeeded in expelling the colonizer, and that was the middle of the twentieth century. Immediately after World War II, there were global independent collective movements working to put an end to and stop colonialism.

The colonial countries were keen to restore their rule and build their own political systems and even their own education to protect their interests and reflect their values. This leads them to delve into several changes and politicize new laws in all fields. Education after independence was an area that required many reforms and changes that reflect the national cultural components in order to achieve development goals for the individual and the nation. (Kouega,2007)

Laws have been adopted that aim to achieve inclusivity, accept linguistic diversity, and address inequality in educational opportunities and distribution after colonialism. A huge amount of colonial legacy has been created, full of Western policies, laws and cultures tending to intellectual hegemony, in order to allow an opportunity to complete colonial hegemony from a distance.

This influence continued even after independence, as it included linguistic policies, educational institutions, and social and educational classes. The influence of the legacy was a party to the creation of studies and discussions about the nature of national cultural and linguistic identity and how to correct educational disparity and restore its balance(Dekorne,2012).

It is necessary to study and address the historical context of colonial education and its complex and difficult relationship with post-colonial education, which is still embodied in many aspects of the definition and composition of the educational system in many countries to this day.

This colonial impact in the educational field affected many African countries and had deep-rooted effects even after independence as a result of systematic colonial systems during military domination. Most newly independent African countries suffer from several challenges, such as the lack of integration of the educational system, lack of funding and infrastructure, and lack of competencies, which in turn affects the quality of education. For example, in South Africa, a policy of racism was followed in education, which was limited to white classes at the expense of blacks. There was a clear educational

division, and this is considered a sign of Western education. The state fought this unequal and biased division to provide broad education and equal educational opportunities after independence. (Kouega,2007)

As for Kenya, the focus of Western education was directed and limited to the economic returns and the needs of the colonizer from purely colonized lands. In turn, the state also tried to expand the educational system throughout the country, improve its quality, and attempt to develop the infrastructure and find a solution to financing problems. As for Nigeria, it adopted the English language as the official language of education, with colonialism using education to follow its interests only. The use of English continued after colonialism, but many problems remain in the educational field affecting the quality of education and its ineffectiveness. (Mazrui,1978)

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the impact of Belgian colonial education was greater and more difficult, as they faced a great challenge in spreading and expanding the educational scope, which in turn was limited only to the ruling class, which of course was used to meet the needs of colonialism greedy for natural resources and other things, and this had the effect of facing a major shortage in educational infrastructure. (Ngugi,1981)

The same applies to Sudan and Zimbabwe, which were under pressure and British colonial rule, which in turn established the English language as the official language, and education was restricted and limited only to the needs of the colonizer. All of these different examples of African countries represent how difficult it is to form an independent educational system after colonialism and the extent of the severe impact they are still suffering from today. We take into consideration the Cameroonian state to study it as a clear example that is familiar with the Western policies followed and the extent of their greed in exploiting education for purely colonial purposes. The best example is Cameroon. (Mazrui,1978)

Cameroon is considered a country that suffered from dual colonialism and thus the dominance of two educational systems, French and English. How were the French educational political systems embodied on Cameroonian lands, and what was the role of the English system? On the other hand, it is necessary to shed light on colonial policies and their implicit goals of preserving continued benefit even after colonization through... Ensuring the presence of the effects of systematic and complex colonial policies that have goals far beyond the immediate needs. (Ngugi,1981)

## **2- Colonial (French and British) educational policies in Cameroon.**

The establishment of French and English education policies is due to colonial influence during its domination of the region. Two educational systems, French and English, were adopted and consolidated in occupied Cameroon through the adoption of their various educational systems, which in turn reflects the interests and endeavors of each of the colonial systems.

Among the French educational policies that the colonizers focused on are language policies, which depend on imposing the French language as the primary language in society as a whole and the basic language of education. This is what led to the isolation and marginalization of local languages from formal educational systems. As for the

approach adopted by the French regime in urging Cameroonian society to adopt the customs, traditions, and even values of French society at the expense of local cultures and Cameroonian values, by adopting a policy or assimilationist approach (Mignolo ,1998).

The latter was purely central education, as it was controlled by France and was distributed to specific places and did not include all parts of the country. The imbalance in the educational distribution process led to the creation of a rift in society and the emergence of classism. French education was concentrated in urban areas, especially directed to the elite, for social and economic reasons.

The goal of Western colonialism as a whole was an attempt to exhaust all human and material resources economically and socially. The colonial educational system was the tool used to protect and achieve the interests of the West from spreading its religion, establishing customs and traditions, and even adopting foreign languages. The French educational system was focused on establishing the French language as the language of education and teaching, and this is what it succeeded in doing, as this influence continues to this day, as Cameroonians continue to use French as the primary language in the educational system. (Fanon, 1963).

There was a kind of discrimination in education directed at European settlers and among the indigenous Africans. This is considered a type of racism that leads to the isolation of Africans from obtaining job opportunities and learning opportunities. Of course, French education served the economic colonial needs, as education was made to serve its interests only. For example, the coastal countries were affected by education due to their need and due to the importance of those regions in trade. It could also include the countries over which the transportation and road network was distributed in order to facilitate the process of trade, transportation, and management (Grosfoguel, 2011)

As for educational curricula, France only adopted French curricula and educational books, which led to a violation of the educational content that is in line with French educational standards. France also adopted the use of a program of dividing educational curricula, starting from primary to higher education. This French educational system also contributed to making education monitored and controlled by the central system, which does not allow the intervention of local authorities at all. All of these French systems and policies demonstrated and contributed to defining the Cameroonian educational system after Independence and how it affects the method and content of education in the African country of Cameroon. (Mignolo,1998)

As for British colonial education in Cameroon, it was less strict about allowing the use of local languages, and English was the language of instruction only. The indirect British rule on Cameroonian lands provided the population and local authorities with some freedom, and this was reflected in the British educational system, which is characterized by some flexibility in terms of Using and adopting local cultures and languages (Fanon, 1963)

On the other hand, missionary organizations played an important role in following up on the process of the educational system, as they were responsible for directing educational institutions as well as working to develop curricula and educational systems. Only the



areas under British rule were full of cultural and ethnic diversity, which led to many differences in terms of the educational policies pursued.

Within the British colonial educational systems and policies followed in Cameroon and their direct effects on society and the educational system as a whole, the policy of central governance through which education was conducted by the center of colonial administration and had a direct influence. This policy allowed for the unification of educational systems, but in return, it led to limiting the role of the government and Local education in achieving unified educational integration.

British colonialism also followed a policy that restricted Africans' access to education and vice versa, i.e. limited education's access to Africans. Its effect was to create gaps between societies in terms of educational attainment and between one society itself and it even had a role in restricting advanced studies (White ,1996). Britain was also focusing on vocational and technical education for what was sufficient only in the economic field, but the broad scientific and educational field had no place in it. The technical training policy that was compatible with the colonial economy had achieved and produced skills and crafts to carry out specific professions. As for the scientific yield, there is none of that. However, the policy of the language of Il followed, they only achieved and succeeded in consolidating and adopting the English language as the official language of education, even after colonialism, and this influence was continuous and permanent until the present time, like one carved on stone (Grosfoguel ,2011).

Western education also followed different policies throughout the educational path, as there was an educational system and path specific to Europeans and another specific to Africans, because they obtained a less advanced education, and this was the reason for leaving a significant impact in terms of educational attainment and resources between the two groups. As for the educational policies followed by the missionaries who had an important role in spreading religious beliefs within the educational system. They built many schools and oversaw their management, with a focus on Western religious teachings. All of these policies framed and followed by British colonialism establish a clear vision on the historical foundations that have a direct relationship to Cameroonian education and how it was transmitted throughout the country. Post-independence period. (Tchomb,2011)

### **3-Challenges and difficulties facing the construction of the national educational system in Cameroon.**

There are many difficulties and challenges that decision-makers faced in order to succeed in creating a national educational system in Cameroon after independence. This is a result of the influence of the colonial legacy in general and Western education in particular. There are challenges that many countries that have always suffered and are still suffering from. They were colonies that were Western colonies for a certain period. For example, there are difficulties and challenges at the economic level, such as the struggles that families faced in providing education for their children and the difficulty of supporting them financially (Nyenti, 2017). Problems always appear between the disparity in educational opportunities between rural and urban areas, and this is due to the unfair division of Western education that focused on the Urban regions to meet their needs and profits, forgetting the needs of remote areas. This reflects the greed of the Western



colonizer and his focus on his own profits, forgetting the human rights of individuals to education.

Among the challenges faced by all decision-makers at the educational level, and in all newly independent countries, is the problem of educational infrastructure in particular and a shortage of teachers, especially in Bedouin areas due to provide an easy access to quality and successful education. The challenges faced by the Cameroonian state may be considered particularly at the level of cultural and linguistic diversity (White 1996). Whether it is internal among the diversity of Cameroonian ethnicities or external as a result of the multiple passages of Western colonial regimes over Cameroonian lands and generations, this linguistic and cultural heritage diversity was a clear and prominent challenge to decision-makers in preserving this diversity due to the use and dominance of many European languages in the educational system and their widespread use in society as well. The latter negatively affects and is a clear and still existing threat to the status of indigenous languages and national cultural heritage. This last challenge highlights many sub-challenges that have a direct relationship to Western influence on the linguistic and cultural educational level (Tchombe, 2001).

The most prominent difficulty that may arise are problems at the level of identity of students who use Western vocabulary, which is negatively framed in shaping their Cameroonian identities, and the difficulty of getting to know their original history, national culture, and identity. There may be other challenges, represented by the difficulty of communication between teachers and learners, due to the difference in languages used at the school level, in society, or at home (Nyenti, 2017). There may also be a problem with the loss of cultural and linguistic diversity due to the dominance of Western languages adopted by the state (English and French). This leads to a decline in the status of their original languages in parallel with the consolidation and rise in the status of the use of European languages. Here, the original languages face the threat of extinction as a result of the succession of generations, and not preserving its use by peoples and educated people in particular, as they are considered the pillar of future generations. The factor of educational curricula followed in Cameroonian countries is also considered a major concern faced by individuals, learners, and even decision-makers, due to their following European curricula, which negatively affect local traditions and customs. Education has a great place in consolidating the cultures that are systematically followed in educational systems, and this is among the results of the presence and continued preservation of the entity of the Western occupation within Cameroonian society after independence (Mignolo, 1998).

For example, the writer Ngugu Wa Thiango, in his book entitled: "Decolonizing the mind", presented a comprehensive vision on the importance and place of the local language in preserving the cultures of nations and the ease of liberating them from the domination of Western cultural colonialism. On the other hand, the writer James E. Banks explained in his book entitled: City, the various difficulties and opportunities that it has a strong relationship with cultural diversity and how to skillfully integrate them into the local educational curricula. As for the writer, Freire Paulo, he showed and focused on the importance of liberalizing education, by modernizing the educational systems to be compatible and more integrated with the original local cultures, in his book under the title : *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.(Freire,1970)

All these historians focused on demonstrating a clear and comprehensive vision about all the challenges facing societies in general and individuals in particular as a result of linguistic and cultural diversity in the educational field, after highlighting how to deal with entrenched Western inheritances that still operate in secret.

#### **4- The different actions/policies taken by Cameroonian governments to build a national system**

The policies and measures taken by the Cameroonian government to maintain a national educational system are considered complex and difficult to comprehend due to the intervention of many temporal, political, and economic factors to understand the nature of the situation and how to deal with it in parallel with the time of events. (Fonkeng,2007)

In the context in general, and with a focus on the impact of the colonial legacy and local multilingualism in the educational field, it can first include policies that are related to developing and renewing educational curricula in order to begin new path of change that provides the desired harmony(Ndille,2018). The Cameroonian government has focused on renewing and restructuring educational curricula to gain a broad reflection of local languages and cultural heritage. They have also focused on modernizing curricula to consolidate and instill historical content that reflects local and national realities and encourages mutual understanding of cultures.

Decision makers also focused on integrating local languages into the educational system by supporting and enhancing the use of multiple local languages and highlighting their status among learners to ensure their understanding of their original culture and heritage, and also to enhance cultural and linguistic communication between different ethnicities. There have also been many routine measures taken by each newly independent country to develop its educational system, such as pumping financial sums into the educational field and developing the educational infrastructure at the various levels across the country in order to ensure access to education for every citizen, wherever he may be. Ensuring educational training and activating educational research also includes training and training teachers and providing them with various devices and means that facilitate teaching for them. As for Cameroon, most of its problems or the most important factors that the Cameroonian state focused on were the ability to find solutions due to linguistic and cultural diversity, which in turn led to divisions internally and externally in Cameroonian territory and on many levels, whether at the linguistic, educational, cultural or ethnic level. (Freire,1970)

The Cameroonian state has taken a number of measures to enhance optimism and develop a positive spirit and acceptance of others among all levels and diverse samples in society. Decision-makers have adopted policies and curricula that praise diversity and how to live and coexist peacefully with the presence of other cultures in common educational curricula(Tambo,2000). They also focused on strengthening and highlighting its place. Cameroonian national identity and the sense of the importance of belonging and participation in one homeland, which is Cameroon, by combating discrimination and segregation and encouraging solidarity and acceptance of others by forming groups and forums that focus on exchanging cultures and ideas to develop communication between members of communities. They also focused on activating and promoting the use of local languages in order to ensure ease and flexibility of communication with all members of

the country who have always been separated by the inherited languages of Western countries(Ndille,2018).

Governments have also been resorting to focusing on equality in access to education, equality in sharing economic life, and equality in providing job opportunities, regardless of the repercussions and divisions that the country is witnessing after independence. They have tried for a long time to enable learners and members of Cameroonian society to benefit positively from the cultural and linguistic diversity that exists throughout Cameroonian territory, and not negatively, such as division, extinction, or even social leakage. (Fonkeng,2007) Governmental and non-governmental organizations have also played a contributing role in reducing conflicts between diverse groups and urging mutual respect and tolerance. All of these measures, which include many fields, aim to preserve cultural and linguistic diversity, which in turn leads to enriching and building an integrated society capable of social coexistence and understanding. This in turn, it leads to the development of the national educational system that meets all the needs of the citizen and reflects the components of an equal and integrated Cameroonian state. (Tchombe,2001)

Indeed, the influence of the colonial system is clear and evident and continues to appear in the foundations, structures and content of the post-colonial Cameroonian educational system. He left behind a deep and rooted influence with his colonial language, which is still used and considered an official language of teaching. The depth of the influence also appears in the educational curricula followed and even the distribution of job opportunities and the type of competencies and professions available (Tambo, 2000).

This profound impact of the adoption of the colonial languages, French and English, also created a major challenge that threatens to preserve local linguistic diversity from extinction and local cultures from disappearing. Here, the colonial language played a decisive role in building an educational identity that was dominated by a Western educational and cultural character. It was not an easy matter for him. For Cameroonian students who find a clear difference in European education and that directed at Africans, that is, local education, a new challenge has been created, represented by bias and preference for Western education, and therefore they will not be provided with the same educational opportunities. (Ndille ,2018) This article also highlights some of the immediate challenges that decision-makers and Cameroonian governments face to reform and anchor the ship of Cameroonian education to safety, despite the obstacles facing these competent authorities, government and people of ethnic diversity and cultural and linguistic colonial diversity. Here, it also highlights the ongoing reforms in providing and ensuring more resources are poured into the educational field to correct deficiencies, while ensuring equal education is provided. Cameroon has always been characterized by many cultural and linguistic diversities, and the latter is considered a unique feature, as it requires many challenges and achievements that must be worked on in developing an educational system that focuses on accepting the culture and language of others and depends on mutual respect between the different races and considering them as an addition to Cameroonian society and benefiting from this. Diversity, which in turn promotes equal opportunities for all and avoids the dark side of this event that calls for separation and divisions. In light of the history of colonial domination in Cameroon, we can consider the Cameroonian educational system a mirror that reflects the historical events that the colonial peoples went through and left a profound impact on the educational system, which in the future is considered an opportunity to build a society

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that includes creative students and pioneers to advance their society. Because education is the key to change that creates a spirit of acceptance diversity and enhancing opportunities to achieve real success.

## Conclusion

The development of Cameroon's national education system has been significantly shaped by its colonial past, leading to persistent disparities in educational opportunities, particularly between rural and urban areas. The dominance of colonial languages—French and English—has contributed to the marginalization of indigenous languages, posing challenges to cultural identity and national cohesion. Additionally, the reliance on Western curricula has hindered efforts to develop an education system that reflects local traditions and historical realities. Despite these obstacles, the Cameroonian government has undertaken various reforms to address these issues, including integrating local languages into the curriculum, modernizing infrastructure, and fostering inclusivity in education. However, structural challenges remain, necessitating continued policy revisions and resource allocation to ensure equitable access to quality education for all citizens.

## Recommendations:

- **Strengthening Indigenous Language Education:** Implementing bilingual or multilingual educational policies that promote indigenous languages alongside official languages to preserve cultural identity and enhance learning outcomes.
- **Curriculum Decolonization:** Revising educational curricula to incorporate local history, traditions, and knowledge systems while reducing overreliance on Western frameworks.
- **Teacher Training and Capacity Building:** Enhancing teacher training programs to equip educators with the necessary skills for multilingual and culturally responsive teaching.
- **Educational Infrastructure Development:** Investing in rural education infrastructure to bridge the gap between urban and remote areas.
- **Policy Continuity and Monitoring:** Establishing mechanisms to assess and refine educational policies to ensure sustainable and effective implementation.

These measures will contribute to the creation of a more inclusive and culturally representative education system, fostering national unity and long-term development.

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