

## **Globalisation and Academic Freedom in Cameroon with Focus on the Anglo-Saxon University of Buea**

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### **Abstract**

The contention of this paper is that the establishment of the Anglo-Saxon University of Buea in 1993 raised hopes among Cameroonian academics for the commencement of an alternative system of Higher Education where academic freedom and autonomy would be upheld in contrast to Cameroon's existing totalitarian system of Higher Education. However, the University of Buea tended out to be a bastion of the violation of academic freedom and autonomy. This situation can be explained in terms of the profound crisis of nation building that confronted Cameroon in the 1990s. As has been argued elsewhere, academic freedom in Cameroon's Anglo-Saxon university was primarily subverted by academics themselves with an agenda of conserving their positions and improving their political fortunes. The Anglo-Saxon university of Buea therefore dashed the hopes of many by its flagrant violation of academic freedom and autonomy. This paper is divided into three main parts. First, the author explores conceptual issues in order to illuminate the concepts of academic freedom and autonomy and show how these have been the concern of the international community and the focus of several international conferences. Second, the author takes a look at the higher education reforms in Cameroon that led to the establishment of the Anglo-Saxon university of Buea. Third, the political circumstances in Cameroon, characterized by a clamour for autonomy and the secession of Anglophone Cameroon from Francophone Cameroon, is highlighted to enable us appreciate the repression in the Anglo-Saxon university by appointees of the Cameroon government. The paper concludes that academic freedom remains an ideal that is difficult to achieve against a background of deepening socio-economic and political crisis.

### **Introduction**

The processes of globalisation and liberalisation, particularly in their political and economic forms, impacted directly on the academic freedom and autonomy of African universities. In Africa where the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank imposed Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), there was a marked deterioration in people's standards of living, reduced access to public services, devastated environments, and plummeting employment prospects. The economic crisis and SAP, which themselves inform several other factors inimical to academic freedom, are some of the most important factors restricting and militating against academic freedom in Africa (CODESRIA 1995, 1996, Federici 2000). What this implies is that the issue of academic freedom and autonomy has an international dimension, which impacts directly on the domestic.

The World Bank's Structural Adjustment philosophy encouraged the withdrawal of the state from the economy. The sector that suffered most from this policy was the social service sector, which was considered non-productive and therefore wasteful. Higher Education suffered as it continued to be grossly under funded. The World Bank's attempts at dictating and shaping the direction of Higher Education unquestionably represent the violation of academic freedom and university autonomy. What is more, political liberalisation also threatened one-party and military dictatorships in Africa and the attitudes of such governments towards the academia tended to be confrontational. Thus, the international and domestic environment conspired to militate against academic freedom and autonomy (*Africa Watch*, 1990, 1991, CODESRIA (1995).

This paper attempts to examine how the economics and politics of globalisation impacted on academic freedom and autonomy in Cameroon with special reference to the Anglo-Saxon University of Buea. The economic crisis in the 1980s greatly affected Cameroon and the lone state University of Yaoundé came under tremendous strain. This resulted in the 1993 university reforms which took shape in the deconcentration of the Higher Education in Cameroon through the creation of five other state universities in Dchang in the Western Province, Douala in the Littoral Province, Ngaoundere in the Adamawa Province and Buea in the Anglophone South West Province. What is special about the Anglo-Saxon University of Buea?

Cameroon's lone University of Yaoundé was established in 1962 and was modeled along the French tradition typified by excessive centralisation. Although in metropolitan France, the French system has already undergone a number of reforms and modification, in Cameroon, it remains largely centralised and is a replica of the organisation and functioning of the central administration and this leaves the university with little autonomy (MINESUP, 2005, "Association des Universités partiellement ou entièrement de langue française" (AUPELF) 1992). The administrative structure and functioning of the University of Yaoundé was therefore perceived as a replica of Ahidjo's one party state and it was increasingly treated with cynicism by academics. Another problem with higher education was the refusal by the postcolonial state to allow any autonomous trade union of university lecturers to function.

Even after the acceptance of multipartyism in 1990 and the recognition of the rights of association, Cameroon's university was excluded from this privilege of forming a union. Following the formation of several political parties and associations, university teachers forcefully came up with the National Union of Teachers of Higher Education (SYNES) in 1991 but the government snubbed them. SYNES was therefore compelled to submit a complaint in 1996 to the ILO concerning the Government's long-term refusal to register it. SYNES was finally recognized only in 1999 and thereafter, annual congresses are held.

The contention of this paper is that the establishment of the Anglo-Saxon University of Buea raised hopes among Cameroonian academics of the commencement of an alternative system of higher education in Cameroon, which will idealize the principles of freedom and autonomy, and would transform Cameroon's totalitarian model of Higher Education. However, Buea tended out to be a bastion of the violation of academic freedom and autonomy and this can be explained in terms of the profound crisis of nation building that the Cameroon nation-state is confronted with. As has been argued elsewhere (*cf.*, Ibonvbere 1993: 36-73, Chege, 1996/1997: 32-40, Mamdani and Mamadou 1994), academic freedom in institutions of Higher Education in Africa are also subverted by academics themselves with an agenda of conserving their positions and improving their political fortunes. This paper is also constructed on this premise. In order words, this paper also argues that apart from the crisis of nation building, Anglophone academics have directly contributed in eroding the academic freedom and autonomy of the Anglo-Saxon University of Buea. The Anglo-Saxon university has therefore dashed the hopes of many by its intermittent harassment of lecturers and students in flagrant violation of the academic freedom and autonomy of the university since its inception in 1993.

This partition of this paper is as follows. First, the author will explore conceptual issues in order to illuminate the concepts of academic freedom and autonomy and show how these have been the concern of academics and the theme of several international conferences. Second, the author will look at the higher education reforms in Cameroon that led to the establishment of the Anglo-Saxon university of Buea. Third, the political circumstances in Anglophone Cameroon, characterized by a clamour for autonomy and the secession of Anglophone Cameroon from Francophone Cameroon, would be highlighted to enable one appreciate the persistent repression of deviant academics in the Anglo-Saxon university by appointees of the Cameroon government. Fourthly, the state of academic freedom and autonomy in the Anglo-Saxon University of Buea, characterized by the violation of the statute establishing the University of Buea and the intermittent harassment of both lecturers and students will be analyzed. The last part of this paper is the conclusion and recommendations.

## 1. Conceptualizing Academic Freedom and Autonomy in higher Education

Universities are by definition and long established tradition meant to be places where all learning activities are normally governed by creative skepticism, constant questioning, disputation and argumentation. They are established to serve “as veritable centres of teaching, learning and the production of knowledge for national developments” (*The Scholar*: 2000). These are encouraged, not as ends in themselves, but as means for ensuring the discovery of novel and better solutions to both old and new societal challenges. University dons must therefore be free to pursue their objectives without unnecessary hindrances. The increasing harassment of intellectuals, particularly following the introduction of the Structural Adjustment measurements from the mid-1980s, is inimical to intellectual production. Academic freedom is therefore very important and the international community has organized several conferences to brainstorm on the issue.

The first of such meetings was the Lima Conference on Academic Freedom and Autonomy of Institutions of Higher Education organized by the World University Services in 1988. The second was the Kampala Symposium on Academic Freedom and the Social Responsibility of Intellectuals organized by CODESRIA in 1990. From these two conferences was produced the Lima Declaration on Academic Freedom and Autonomy of Institutions of Higher Education and the Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibilities. In 1996, another conference on academic freedom was held in Nigeria at the University of Ibadan and it issued an important communiqué underscoring the importance of academic freedom and autonomy of institutions of higher learning (*CODESRIA Bulletin*, 1996: 4-5). What does academic freedom and autonomy stands for?

The two are not necessarily the same but they are linked together, protected and flourish in an environment of democratic governance within the institutions of higher learning and research, and the respect for constitutional, human, economic and social rights (*CODESRIA Bulletin*, Nov. 1, 1990: 5, Sawyerr 1996). Academic freedom means the freedom of members of an academic community individually and collectively to pursue, nurture and disseminate knowledge through research activities, study, discussion, documentation, production, teaching, lecturing and writing in private and in public. Academic freedom is grounded in and derived from human rights, and a professional right of all persons who function within the academic community as researchers, teachers, students and workers. Academic freedom is the very basis for the functioning, survival and flourishing of an academic community. As a derivative of human rights, statutes, edicts or constitutions cannot abridge it. Academic freedom is the right to pursue the production and dissemination of knowledge without fear of persecution, harassment and intimidation. Academic freedom includes freedom of association and movement (*Ibid*) and as we shall see, this was denied to Cameroon universities for a very long time.

What specifically does autonomy entail for the University system? Autonomy is defined in terms of the freedom of universities to govern themselves, appoint their key officials, determine their conditions of service for their staff, control their students' admissions and academic curricula, control their finances and generally regulate themselves as independent legal entities without undue interference from the government and its agencies. Universities should be free from government administrative control. The University Governing Council should appoint and dismiss Vice-Chancellors, determine remuneration packages and conditions of service of all categories of staff after due negotiations with their unions. The role of the government should be limited to the provision of a baseline remuneration package below which no university will pay its staff. The university should not be treated as part of the civil service (De Moor 1993). Academic freedom and autonomy go hand in hand and are the fundamental prerequisites for the functioning of the academic community and the fulfillment of the responsibilities and duties of the institutions of higher learning and research. “The respect for the rule of law, democratically derived, is fundamental to the promotion and flourishing of academic freedom and autonomy” (*Ibid*).

Ali Mazrui notes, "in relationship to the wider world, a university has to be politically distant from the state" to be free; secondly, it has to be "culturally close to society" and third, a university "has to be intellectually linked to the wider scholarly and scientific values in the world of learning" (Mazrui 2005: 62). That universities can be funded by the state and still maintain its political distance and freedom is feasible and is the practice in the developed world. British universities still depend heavily on the state, even when they have large endowments. In the United States, government funded universities are supported mainly at the state rather than at the federal level and billions are contributed to higher education by the federal government without compromising academic freedom.

However, in Africa, there appears to be the feeling that because the government funds universities, it must dictate its internal policies to the letter. Consequently, governments tend to hamper the university system from performing their noble objectives by the overbearing interference of the state in their day-to-day affairs to the extent that they become no better than mere appendages to government parastatals. Government circulars have been allowed to override university laws and procedures on several issues ranging from day-to-day administration, disbursement of funds, staff discipline, appointments and promotions and appointments of Vice-Chancellors and other principal officers. These activities of African regimes have rendered the governing councils powerless to perform their statutory functions. Sometimes, government decides to appoint all members of the governing council of the university who have to be responsible to government and act according to government directives.

Under totalitarian regimes, universities were meant to comply with government directives. Any form of dissent in the attempt to seek clarification on sometimes conflicting, if not unimplementable directives, got equated with being confrontational and "disobedience to properly constituted authority". The policy-making organs in universities gradually became forums for rubber-stamping government's directives. University administration becomes instruments for enforcing compliance with orders from government. The resulting destruction of the traditional values of academic freedom in African universities satisfied the yearnings of some government officials who wanted to always clip the wings of arrogant academics and Vice-Chancellors who wanted to stay in power.

The systematic encroachment of University autonomy and its twin essence, academic freedom, began with the imposition of military rule and the one-party system in Africa. In Cameroon, Ahidjo's authoritarian regime stripped individuals and groups of their rights to self-governance and denied them freedom of association, of self-expression and conscience and this was carried over to institutions of Higher Learning with the collaboration of individuals from within the university of itself.

## **2. The 1993 Higher Education Reform in Cameroon and the Birth of the Anglo-Saxon University of Buea**

Higher Education in Cameroon was plunged into tumultuous crises following the re-introduction of multipartyism in Cameroon in 1990. By 1991 the problems of higher education had nearly reached the point of explosion. There was an exponential rise in the student population of Cameroon's lone University of Yaoundé from 9,000 in 1977 to 45,000 in 1991 (Njeuma *et al*: 2003: 215-223, Ngwana 2003). There was relative stagnation in infrastructure; teacher-student ratio was uneven and continued to worsen from 1/25 in 1962 to 1/54 in 1991. These problems were compounded by a deepening economic crisis, characterized by a depleted State treasury, late and irregular payment of student bursaries and staff salaries, and a low rate of execution of the university budget. Student agitation and political demands became rife to the extent that classes were brought to a gradual halt in the University of Yaounde in 1990 (*Ibid*).

Anglophone agitation for their own university gained the central stage of political discourse and found justification in the argument that the national University of Yaoundé, which was intended function as a bilingual institution, was more French in outlook and had little to show that was English. Bilingualism as a language policy in the university was not effective since teaching was carried out predominantly in French thereby creating a situation of imbalance between the two languages. Programmes in the University of Yaoundé were essentially designed after the French university system and were taught predominantly in French. Likewise, the programmes corresponded in structure and content to those of the French university system. This drastically reduced the success rate for Anglophone students, limited their access to the University, increased their frustration and set many of them across the frontier to Nigeria and elsewhere in search of university education. The Anglophone problem was thus part of the university crisis of the early 1990s. It therefore became imperative to decongest and to decentralize the University of Yaoundé and address the issue of the Anglophone clamor for a typical Anglo-Saxon system of education that would halt Anglophone exodus. In January 1993 the government of Cameroon launched a major reform of its higher education system by creating six full-fledged universities:

- the Anglo-Saxon University of Buea in the South West Province,
- University of Dschang in the West Province,
- University of Douala in the Littoral Province,
- University of Ngaoundere in the Adamawa Province,
- the National University of Yaoundé I in the Centre Province and
- University of Yaoundé II in the Centre Province.

The creation of the University of Buea, conceived in the Anglo-Saxon tradition and therefore an English-speaking university, answered the call of Anglophone students and parents for a university system of education consistent with the education system prevailing in Anglophone primary and secondary schools and other Anglophone countries.

The Anglo-Saxon university was conceived by the civil society comprising Anglophone academics under the banner of Anglophone Parents Teachers Association, the Cameroon Anglophone Movement etc. The original status provided for full administrative and financial autonomy that characterized Nigerian universities in the aftermath of independence. It was believed that the Anglo-Saxon university of Buea would incarnate and display the true virtues of a university system, which Anglophones claimed to emanate from.

There is a strong myth generated and held by Anglophone scholars according to which Francophone-oriented universities are essentially dysfunctional and authoritarian; and Professor Bernard Fonlon's treatise on the *Genuine Intellectual* (1978) carries the Anglophone vision of a university, which they had never had the opportunity to introduce in Cameroon owing to their minority status and to the fact that such decision laid in the hands of the hegemonic Francophone state. The establishment of the University of Buea created the hope for something entirely new that would serve as a model for Cameroon's universities.

Presidential Decree no. 93.034 of 19 January 1993 established the Anglo-Saxon University of Buea. The Decree determined and defined the administrative and academic organisation of the University in the Anglo-Saxon tradition. In essence, it created an Anglo-Saxon university and endowed it with ample freedom to elect its principal officers from the Vice-Chancellor down to Heads of Departments, and determine its academic orientation from overbearing government interference. This was definitely a novelty in Cameroon, which is predominantly Francophone in outlook and tradition, and is highly centralised with every institution subordinated to the central administration.

The corporate bodies of the University of Buea established under the decree included the Council, the Senate, the Congregation, the Faculty Board, and the Departmental Board. The Council was the supreme governing body of the University and was charged with the general control and superintendence of policy, finances and property of the University including its public

relations. The Vice-Chancellor was to be appointed by decree from among members of the professorial rank of Anglo-Saxon training following the recommendation of Senate and Council. The Congregation of the University was an assembly of senior academic and non-academic staff charged with examining matters related to the welfare of staff of the University and exercise any other such functions as might be defined by Senate and Council. The Faculty Board was responsible for the selection of Faculty Dean from staff of Professorial rank and in their absence, associate professor. The person so elected had to be approved by Senate and confirmed by decree and was to hold such office for three years renewable once. A department was to be governed by an assembly of the department composed of full time lecturers and elected students. The chair was to be a professor and in the absence of that rank an associate professor. The position of chair was for a three-year period renewal once.

The creation of the Buea University known by its acronym UB raised hopes in Cameroonians of an alternative university system. The general organisation of the University of Buea, its rigid respect of the University calendar, its seriousness in course delivery among other things soon started attracting Francophone students who had to undergo special language courses before qualifying for admission. But could UB operate according to the decree of its creation, which endowed it with freedom and autonomy in a highly centralised hegemonic Francophone order? And most importantly could academic freedom and autonomy be allowed to flourish in the Anglo-Saxon University of Buea against a background of increasing Anglophone clamour for political autonomy and stateism?

### 3. The Resurgence of the Anglophone Problem

The Anglo-Saxon University of Buea took off at a particularly difficult socio-political and economic conjuncture and this appears to have impacted negatively on the academic freedom and autonomy promised in the statute that established the university. The year of the establishment of UB was also the year of political agitation for constitutional reforms intended to obtain greater autonomy for Anglophone Cameroon.

In response to President Biya's announcement to reform the constitution, Anglophones seized the opportunity to ventilate their grievances against over-centralisation that was eroding their values. Four prominent Anglophones namely Simon Munzu, Elad Ekontang, Benjamin Itoe and Carlson Anyangwe<sup>1</sup> took the initiative to convene an All Anglophone Conference (AAC) "for the purpose of preparing Anglophone participation" in the announced national debate on the reform of the constitution. Other issues related to the welfare of Anglophones, their posterity, territory and Cameroon as a whole was to be looked into (AAC 1993). Munzu, Ekontang, Itoe and Anyangwe turned out to be the ideologues of the Anglophone cause or better still the *ingénieur identitaire de la communautaire Anglophone*, to use Sindjourn's elegant expression (Sindjourn 1995: 90, 93). The Anglophone turnout for the conference was impressive and was indicative of their frustration and disillusionment with the union with Francophones. Over 5000 Anglophones attended including academics, religious, business, traditional rulers and socio-professionals and the political elite.

The expectations from the conveners of the conference were high just as the imaginations and the fantasies of the delegates ran wild about "the persecuted pure Anglophones" and "the tyrannical imperfect Francophones". The All Anglophone Conference issued the Buea Declaration, which in essence, called for a return to the federal form of government. They justified federalism on grounds of unbridgeable cultural differences between Anglophones and Francophones. (AAC 1993).

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<sup>1</sup> Munzu and Anyangwe were University Professors of law at the University of Yaounde 11. Benjamin Itoe was a Magistrate and a former Minister of Justice while Elad Ekontang was a practicing lawyer. These four lawyers came to the limelight during the famous tripartite conference of October-November 1991, which was convened by the Biya government to diffuse tension in the country after a protracted period of civil disobedience campaigns organised by opposition parties (cf Awasom 1998).

On 27 May 1993, a select AAC Anglophones Standing Committee of 65 members tied a draft federal constitution, which they submitted to the Biya government for consideration (Standing Committee of AAC: 1993). President Biya snubbed the draft federal constitution, and in a series of interviews in Cameroon and France, he stated that federalism was inappropriate for a country like Cameroon.

Government's refusal to entertain the federal proposal of Anglophones pushed the Anglophone delegates to moot the possibility of outright secession.<sup>2</sup> Anglophones held another meeting, the Second All Anglophone Congress (AAC 11) in Bamenda on 29 April 1994 and resolved to proceed to the unilateral declaration of independence of Anglophone Cameroon if the Biya regime persisted in its refusal to engage in meaningful constitutional talks (Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997: 221-227).

The Anglophone pressure group, the Southern Cameroon National Congress, emerged from the dust of the All Anglophone Congress and quickly developed its motto, "the force of argument and not the argument of force." This motto was intended to indicate the non-violent nature and method of the movement to achieve statehood for the Southern Cameroons. This agenda was new and was formulated from the failure of the Biya administration to exercise flexibility and imagination in handling the Anglophone problem.

Although the SCNC adopted the motto of the force of argument, that did not spare them from government harassment in 1997 following an alleged attack on military installations in the Anglophone North-West Province in 1997. Its youth-wing President, Ebenezer Akwanga, was arrested, detained and subsequently tried and imprisoned for 20 years for allegedly possessing illegal weapons and engaging in acts of sabotage. More than a score of other SCNC activists were sent to the Yaoundé high security prison at Kondenge where they are serving long terms of imprisonment. The Biya administration refused all forms of dialogue with the SCNC and preferred to crush the movement by all means.

Because of government high-handedness in handling the SCNC, the Anglophones in the Diaspora, particularly the United States, reorganized themselves and opened a website, the [www.SCNC](http://www.SCNC) forum under the coordination of J.J. Asongu, in 1999. The website encouraged discussions and updated its subscribers about developments in the Southern Cameroons on the struggle for statehood. The SCNC in the Diaspora decided to change the name of its discussion forum from SCNC forum to SCNATION in 2001. The change of name followed the unilateral declaration of the independence of the Southern Cameroons in December 2001 by Justice Alobwede, which was accompanied by a government crack down on the secessionists. The independence declaration was treated as a non-event by the Biya administration and the Anglophones made no attempt to set up any governmental structures. The region only received troop reinforcement and was subjected to an undeclared state of siege.

The SCNC in the Diaspora therefore transformed its website from SCNCforum to SCNATION. It proceeded to set up a High Commission in New York with J.J. Asongu as its first High Commissioner. To the SCNC, the status of the Southern Cameroons is a nation, which is under the colonial administration of La République du Cameroun, as they prefer to call Francophone Cameroon. The struggle of the Southern Cameroonians, as they prefer to call Anglophone Cameroon, is the struggle for international recognition of their statehood and the expulsion of La République du Cameroun from their territory. The initiative for the progress of the Anglophone secessionist movement has therefore been displaced from the national arena to the Diaspora where it has a stronger and an unimpeded impulsion. What were the implications of these developments on academic freedom and autonomy for the University of Buea?

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<sup>2</sup> The Anglophone leadership actually set 1 October 1996 as the day for the declaration of independence for Anglophone Cameroon. The threat turned out to be a bluff because nothing actually happened on that day except to the speech of Ambassador Henry Fussyong, the Chairman of the Anglophone Movement for sovereignty known as the Southern Cameroon National Council (SCNC). Fussyong invited Southern Cameroonians to celebrate 1 October 1996 as a day of prayers during which a special prayer should be made to God to "save Anglophones from political bondage". He stated that the independence of the Southern Cameroons was "non-negotiable and irreversible" (Cameroon Post, 8-14 October 1996).

#### 4. The Stymie of the Autonomy of the Anglo-Saxon University of Buea

Given that universities are usually hotbeds of political agitation, the Anglo-Saxon University of Buea had to evolve under strict government surveillance. The first powerful signal from the government after the establishment of the University of Buea was to underscore the point that its statute was a mere piece of worthless paper by appointing a subservient pro-government Vice-Chancellor who had the potentials of checking the restless Anglophones. Dr. Dorothy Limunga Njeuma, an Associate Professor and former Vice-Minister of National Education, was appointed Vice-Chancellor in violation of decree no. 93/034 of January 19, 1993, establishing the University of Buea which required that a Vice-Chancellor shall be appointed from professorial rank following the recommendation of Senate and Council of the University. Dorothy Njeuma is still Vice-Chancellor in 2005 and has therefore been enjoying an indefinite term of office in violation of Article 26(b) of the statute of the University which states that the Vice-Chancellor shall hold office for four years renewable once". The law therefore did not allow any individual to hold the office of Vice-Chancellor for more than eight years. After four years as Vice-Chancellor, no mention was made of the renewal of Dorothy Njeuma's tenure of office. After the end of her second tenure, there was total silence about her replacement; other ambitious professors on the line-up might have to wait for a very long time indeed and are likely to retire without ever smelling the position of Vice-Chancellor.

The other principal officers of the university comprising Deans, Vice-Deans, and Heads of Departments have never been elected by their peers but are appointees of the Vice-Chancellor and the government. Just as the government appoints all the principal officers of the universities, so can they be disappointed by being dropped at anytime if they do not live up to expectations especially by showing pro-opposition sympathies. Individuals who enjoyed the support of the Vice-Chancellor could accumulate several offices. In a memo written by an aggrieved lecturer to the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, the lecturer criticized the Dean's dictatorship and accumulation of power:

It is most bizarre that the intellectual beacon of an arts faculty and a practicing historian to boot, would, fail to apprehend how critical thinking impacts on...relationships and perceptions in an under-developing third world milieu....I however understand why an academican politician taking refuge in the ivory tower your "letter of observation" is so suffused with such self-demeaning sycophancy for the status quo. Rector of intensive English. V.C.'s representative at the GCE board, Dean, Vice-Dean, Editor of EPASA MOTO....We do not recall receiving under your dynasty any queries from you on this subject...(Confidential Memo dated 29<sup>th</sup> September 2004 to Dean, Faculty of Arts, UB)

So, the Dean could accumulate so many positions because of his special relationship with the Vice-Chancellor

The Vice Chancellor's weight was increased by her politburo status of the ruling government party, which enables her to intimidate even Ministers. Most staff and students who express critical opinions are dealt with utmost severity "while dimwit loyalists and shameless bootlickers are given advantages in research grants, travels and favorable placings in the university hierarchy" (Kai Schidmt-Saltau in *the Post*, 8 June 2000). Perhaps it would be pertinent to highlight selected cases of the persecution of critical scholars.

Professor F. Nyamnjoh won the prestigious African Studies Fellowship of the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands in 1999 to conduct research on the burning and topical "Anglophone Problem in Cameroon". Instead of being congratulated on such feat, the Vice-Chancellor found fault with the award and refused to grant permission to Professor Nyamnjoh to travel on grounds that the government of the Republic of Cameroon did not recognize anything like "the Anglophone problem". The University of Buea being a State University, such a research could not be condoned. Professor Nyamnjoh was accused of harboring SCNC sympathies and his request was turned down. The University of Buea was therefore determined to shape and direct the thinking of its lecturers in violation of their freedom to think unimpeded.



Dr. E.S.D. Fomin and this writer fell out of favor with the chair of the history department, a protégé of the Vice-Chancellor, for continuously taking critical stance on “the Anglophone problem”. We were accused of secessionist (SCNC) sympathies, we were harassed and persecuted culminating in our being sacked, and our salaries suspended in 1999. All attempts at having the problem resolved by a succession of Ministers of Higher Education ended in smoke because of the powerful position Buea’s Vice-Chancellor in the politburo.

Professor Kai Schidmt-Saltou, a German philosopher teaching in the University of Buea also suffered from a sack for criticizing the repressive atmosphere in the University of Buea under Dorothy Njeuma. He used the columns of several Anglophone newspapers to lambaste the University of Buea authorities after his sacking. Kai Schidmt-Saltou noted that:

A university is essentially a place for academics and not politics. But in UB subtle politics of the CPDM brand is the main stock in trade. The result is that those who hold contrary political opinions from the VC’s are persistently excluded from positions of leadership...The UB administration uses authoritarian methods to get its way. The whole surrounding is mostly organized by fear. It is really a society of fear that that reigns at UB. So, you can’t talk of participation (*The Freedom Forum*, 3 Jan. 2001: 7)

Kai Schidmt-Saltou argued that truth could not prevail in an atmosphere of political intolerance, absolutism and academic repression, as is the case in UB where even staff and students unions are banned, where lecturers of outstanding repute are administratively lynched-denied promotion and research grant and made to feel really persecuted.

The right of students to form unions and go on strike was recognized under the 1990 liberal legislation that introduced multipartyism in Cameroon. When the University of Buea started in 1993, students were allowed to form their union and elect their executives, making UB an exceptional university in Cameroon where Rectors were generally suspicious of student unionism and hesitant to allow students to unionize on their campuses. Following a succession of strikes against the University of Buea administration in 1993 and 1994, the student union was disbanded and its leaders sacked and refused re-admission in any State University in Cameroon for life.

Following the first student strike in the University of Buea in 1993, the university administration designed an undertaking form that students and their parents or guardians had to sign. Students had to sign an undertaking never to indulge in strikes or actions that would impede studies in the university. The relevant section of the document read:

I, the undersigned...DO HEREBY SOLEMNLY UNDERTAKE:

1. to abide by [stipulations of articles 45, 46, 61, 62, 64, 65 and 66 of decree No. 93/027 of 19 January 1993....
2. to refrain from any form of strike action whatsoever, and from any activity likely to jeopardize the smooth functioning of any of the establishments of the university (Cf. University of Buea, Ref. Memo no. 3851/75-4/UB/WOOO of 10 September 1993: Undertaking by Students).

This totalitarian document was illegal because the right to resort to industrial action was constitutionally provided for. Nonetheless, such an undertaking did not stop students from go on strikes,

The 2005 strike is of paramount importance because it brought the overzealous UB administration into direct confrontation and contradiction with the Ministry of Higher Education. The students’ strike actually started in the l’université de Yaoundé 1 in early April over the problem of lack of or deteriorating infrastructure on campuses; the strike gradually spread to all state universities. On April 27 2005 students of the University of Buea joined the strike in solidarity with their comrades of Yaoundé 1. What is remarkable about the strike is the different

approaches to it by the government and the various university administrations. In Yaoundé 1, the Minister of Higher Education, Professor Fame Ndongo and the Rector of the University of Yaoundé 1, Professor Sammy Chumbaw went to meet the striking students for dialogue and actually addressed them under torrential rain. The Prime Minister and Head of Government, Ephraim Inoni later received the striking students, and the government pledged to bring a speedy solution to the students' problems. In the University of Buea, the situation was completely different. The Vice-Chancellor insisted that the strike was pure political manipulation with the support of dissident faculty members. On April 28, troop reinforcement from neighboring Douala and elsewhere arrived Buea and took positions everywhere on campus. Then a display of tear gas, batons, gun boots and live ammunition by the troops cost the lives of two students, Gilbert Nforlem and Aloysius Abuoam and several casualties. The troops went on rampage and both students and non-students around student residential areas suffered (*Press Release, SCNC, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2005*).

The 2005 strike further unveiled the totalitarian qualities of the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Buea. She refused to dialogue with the students despite instructions from hierarchy to do so. She rather went ahead and issued a communiqué, which was read over the radio and in all churches on Sunday inviting all students to resume classes immediately and threatening to dismiss those who failed to do so. She also indicated her determination to fine students for any properties destroyed in the course of the strike and to have all students to sign an undertaking before re-admission into the university. Students ignored her communiqué and continued the boycott of classes.

The Minister of Higher Education had to travel to the University of Buea to diffuse the tensed situation there. He opened direct dialogue with the students and made several concessions in a bid to appease them including recognition of their union and its executive, and the unconditional resumption of classes. In other words, students were not to sign any undertaking nor pay any money for damages caused during the strike. The University of Buea boss remained defiant and protested that the Minister's action was a direct condonement of student defiance of duly constituted authority. She has already made press statements to the effect that the 2004/2005 graduating batch of students will not have any official convocation because all of them were involved in strike action and they are therefore wanting in character, even if they are worthy in learning. (*The Post, 11 July 2005*).

Even after the Minister's recognition of the University of Buea Students' Union, (UBSU), that was hastily created following a month-long strike (April 27 -May 27), that rocked the University the union has not been able to put its feet on the ground as the University authorities keep picking holes in its actions (*The Post August 2, 2005*) Since its inception, executive members of UBSU have received numerous letters from the University administration calling them to order. On July 11, the Vice Chancellor of UB, wrote a letter to Walter Onekon Angwere, UBSU President, asking him and his group to leave the town of Dschang immediately where they were attending the all-University Games of Cameroon. In the letter, titled "Unauthorized Actions Undertaken by UBSU Executive, the Vice-Chancellor stated that "the official delegation of the University of Buea to the 2005 University Games holding in Dschang [did] not include members of [the students'] union. She admonished the student union "to immediately leave Dschang as [their] presence and activities [had] evidently become a nuisance to the Local Organizing Committee of the Games and an embarrassment to the University of Buea." The Vice Chancellor accused its president, Angwere and his executive of making some assumptions and berated the UBSU for using the University logo. According to her, "the University logo is designed only for official use by the University and its legal structures. The use of the logo on the letterhead of your union is not authorized. You are, therefore, required to stop using it immediately". She informed the UBSU that they did not have written authorization from the competent administrative authorities, nor with the competent authorities of the University of Buea to operate despite recognition from the Minister of Higher Education. She insisted that UBSU constitution had not been approved by the competent authorities, contrary to statements made in a June 27 memorandum the students' union addressed to Heads of Departments of the University. Consequently, the Vice Chancellor said the memo is not only out of place but null and void. She said, "Students [were] not permitted

to give instructions to their academic hierarchy in any university in the world". It should be observed here that the point is not giving instructions but whether the idea of student unionism is accepted by the UB administration. The administration is duty bound to guide student unionism in good faith instead of getting into competition and confrontation with it.

Essentially, the University of Buea administration is quite oppressive and its relationship with students was far from cordial. The administration was equally hostile that the trade union of teachers of Higher Education known by its French acronym, SYNES.

### **5. The University of Buea Administration and the National Union of Teachers of Higher Education (SYNES)**

Academic freedom for universities also entails the right to unionise. Following the reintroduction of multipartyism in Cameroon in 1990, the government concedes to the idea of the birth of autonomous trade unions. However, when Teachers of Higher Education applied for the recognition of their own union, the government was adamant. In 1996, the teachers took the matter to the International Labour Organisation and it was only in 1999 that the Union was recognised and could therefore operate legally without fear of police harassment.

The National Union of Teachers of Higher Education (SYNES) by organizing a survey. The polls revealed that teachers of higher education were in extreme destitution. It was realized that 60 per cent of the teachers did not own personal vehicles, 80 per cent did not own a house, 61 per cent were periodic victims of harassment by the Electricity and Water Corporation for being delinquent payers of their utility bills. In the work environment, only 30 per cent had an office, 63 per cent did not have access to toilets, 90 per cent did not have telephones and 90 per cent did not have computers. Working conditions were horrible, as 82 per cent did not receive chalk or paper from their service; only 4 per cent of practical for the sciences could be conducted; 88 per cent of academic development did not subscribe to any professional journal. While the government trumpeted economic growth, nothing was seen in terms of improving on the lot of academics and numerous memos written to that effect fell on deaf ears. Ninety five per cent of lecturers consulted voted in favour of industrial action for their plight to be advertised for necessary government action. The National Executive Bureau of SYNES therefore had to comply to the will of its members and a notice of strike action was deposited with the Prime Minister and the Minister of Higher Education on November 2 1999. It was decided that teachers would abstain from teaching at the rate of one week per month until such a time that the government looked into their plight. The strike action was actually launched in earnest at the beginning of the second semester. The first warning strike took place for two days starting from March 21 2000. According to a press release by SYNES, the strike was successful in all state universities with the exception of the University of Douala whose Rector decided to postpone the reopening of the university by a week.

The participation rate of the strike was as follows:

Name of State University	Percentage of participation in strike
ENS Annex Bambili	95
University of Yaounde 1	95
University of Yaounde 11	80
University of Ngaoundere	70
The Anglo-Saxon University of Buea	95
University of Dschang	95

Source: SYNES Communiqué, 22 March 2000

The strike was quite successfully despite the pseudo-syndicates created overnight to oppose the strike.

The reaction of the Vice Chancellor of the University of Buea was singular in the sense that she took the whole matter as a personal one and started issuing a series of threats. In a letter to the University of Buea Chapter of SYNES, the Vice-Chancellor stated, "the strike action called by SYNES UB Chapter resulted in work stoppage and that it was surprising because of "actions taken by the Head of State to improve on the conditions of service of teaching staff of universities". She further intimated that the strike action was an exclusively University of Buea affair and she requested SYNES Buea to provide her administration with an explanation for this unwarranted disruption of activity as well as a list of teachers of the institution who had decided to go on strike. Letter of VC, Buea to SYNES President, Buea Chapter, 20 March 2000). SYNES UB refused to be intimidated and reminded the VC that the strike action was national and was called by the National Council of SYNES that met in Yaounde on 23 February 2000 of which all six state universities were represented. SYNES UB expressed surprise at the VC's attitude of trying to localise the strike and the veiled threats contained in her letter and advised her to direct her letter to the national executive of SYES (SYNES UB Chapter Memo from President to VC, 27 March 2000). Tension between the UB administration was therefore created by the strike action and the exchange of acrimonious communiqués.

At the beginning of the 2000/2001 academic year, SYNES Buea decided to seek an audience with the UB VC to concert for a better take-off of the school year that would be devoid of suspicion, bitterness, victimization and witch hunting. However, things changed dramatically with the dismissal of three assistant lecturers who were active members of SYNES. Dr. Egbewatt Nkongho, Dr. Stella Nana-Fabo and Dr. Paul Mbufong were all terminated in application of article 1, paragraphs 2 of Order no. 145 bis/CAB/PC of 15 March 2000. Although the official charge was that they had not published articles, the real reason was their SYNES activity. Dr. Mbufong, for instance, had supervised many M.A. theses in the area of applied linguistics and had been the coordinator of the use of English Programme for five years. He had actually submitted four articles in the English Department, which were simply abandoned. Although the university was understaffed and had to depend on part-time lecturers to run most of its programmes, it could still afford to do away with its experienced staff on grounds that they had not published.

Other forms of victimisation were also noticeable in UB. Application for further studies of SYNES members was often outrightly rejected. Even the extra teaching hours of SYNES members that required remuneration were arbitrarily reduced and their names systematically cancelled on various university committees. They were also relieved of their duty post by the Vice-Chancellor, the most glaring example being the case of Dr. Jonie Fonyam, the President of the UB Chapter of SYNES. SYNES members names were dropped from the teaching programmes of their specialisation. The university community therefore came to be divided into "dissidents" and loyalists depending on whether a lecturer heeded to the strike calls of SYNES or not.

Against a background of sacks, SYNES Buea made it clear to the UB administration that the issue of employment security was of paramount importance and that if the administration did not review its position; it would be compelled to go on industrial action. The VC was adamant insisting that she was simply applying the law governing the fate of teaching staff in the university. Given the tension on the rise with newspaper speculations of an impending strike in the University of Buea, the Minister of Higher Education, Jean-Marie Mebara decided to reinstate the sacked UB lecturers and transferred them to the University of Douala.

The highhandedness of the VC of UB became a cause of concern and National Union of Teachers of Higher Education during its third ordinary congress that took place in Dschang on 6 to 7 October 2001 under the theme: "The Management of State Universities Called into Question". SYNES had to address a special resolution to her. The Secretary General of SYNES wrote:

The National Union of Teachers of Higher Education (SYNES), with due respect, has the displeasure of drawing your attention to the atmosphere of intolerance and victimization that reigns between SYNES and your administration, with a view to smoothening our relationship in the future.

SYNES blamed the VC for obstructing the meeting of the UB Chapter on campus and even went as far as refusing the posters advertising SYNES Congress. The resolution passed read:

Mindful of their continuous effort to create an atmosphere to dialogue between our union and the administration of the University of Buea, the only campus where SYNES is banned,

Mindful of your arbitrary decision last year to terminate the contract of three assistant lecturers of the University of Buea because of their overt affiliation with SYNES,

Mindful of the Minister of Higher Education's decision to reinstate the three victims of your wrathful decision,

Mindful of your silence about complaint from members of our union, who suffer unjustly from all kinds of discrimination and especially from damaging administrative reports when they apply for scholarship and grants,

Hereby convey to you on behalf of the participants of the 3<sup>rd</sup> congress of SYNES their utter condemnation of your overall characteristic attitude of blatant hostility toward our union.

SYNES expressed surprise at the attitude of the Buea administration which was not in line with the policy of the government which favoured dialogue with the civil society and particularly teachers trade unions. The Minister of Higher Education often attended the opening congresses of SYNES and the Prime Minister and Head of Government periodically granted audience to the SYNES executive. SYNES then stated that "if the university of Buea [was] still one of the six state universities in [Cameroon]", then..."the vice-Chancellor of the university of Buea, appointed by the government, [had] the duty to act in compliance with government policy" called (SYNES, Third Ordinary Congress, Resolution, 1st October 2001).

SYNES touched on an important aspect of university life with direct inspiration from the decree setting up the University of Buea. It called on the democratization of university administration by giving a greater voice to lecturers in the management of their own affairs. Consequently, it called on government to allow state universities to elect Head of Departments, Deans and Rectors who would be more response to the needs of their colleagues. It called for decentralization and proposed to the Minister of Higher Education to adopt a formula for the drawing up of the budget of state universities in such a way that preference should be given to academics matters and scientific research as opposed to administrative expenses (SYNES, Third Ordinary Congress, Resolution, 1st October 2001).

SYNES Buea was not indifferent to the protracted one month-long strike April 27 -May 27 2005, in the University of Buea. SYNES therefore held an extraordinary meeting on May 25 2005 to review the situation and observed, for over 30 days, the University of Buea leadership [had] been either unable or unwilling to resolve the crisis. The communiqué noted among other things that the crisis had overstretched because of the absence of dialogue. It called on all lecturers and students to stay at home until the crisis was resolved (See Appendix A). It was at this point the Minister of Higher Education had to step in to bring the crisis to an end against protest from an intransigent and overzealous University of Buea administration.

## Conclusion

This paper sets out to examine the state of academic freedom and autonomy in the Anglo-Saxon University of Buea in Cameroon against a background of a highly centralized Francophone system of Higher Education. The University of Buea rose from the ashes of demonstrations in the 1990s leading to the 1993 reforms of Higher Education in Cameroon. The existing lone University of Yaoundé had been subjected to strains and stresses imposed by demographic and infrastructural problems. The only envisagable solution was the deconcentration of the University of Yaounde and this gave rise to the establishment of five full-fledged state universities, including the Anglo-Saxon University of Buea established along Anglo-Saxon lines to satisfy the Anglophone quest of a university in their own tradition.

If the presidential decree establishing the university of Buea is anything thing to go by, it provided hopes for the beginnings of greater freedom and autonomy in Cameroon's institutions of higher learning. The decree establishing the University of Buea provided for a wide margin of freedom and autonomy for the University of Buea and allowed for the election of all its principal officers. This was a novelty in the Cameroon system of higher education, which is highly centralized and is rigidly controlled by the government with all officials from the higher to the lowest being government appointees. But the liberal statute establishing the University of Buea were never implemented by a regime that does not believe in autonomous and contesting sources of power in the country.

Like in other state universities in Cameroon, all the principal officials of the University of Buea from the Vice-Chancellor to the Head of Departments were appointed directly from Yaounde with indefinite tenures of offices in violation of the decree establishing the university. What is more administrators who were not elected but were appointees of the government attempt to retain their positions by the persecution of staff and students in a bid to exhibit over zealotness and retain their positions. The University of Buea administrators therefore constitute the first violators of academic freedom and autonomy of intellectuals. Instead of behaving as responsible pedagogues towards their students, the University of Buea administrators are in constant confrontation and competition with them. Dictatorial attitudes like compelling students and their parents to sign an undertaking not to go on strike as a condition for admission or registration into the university are clear acts of intimidation that are not amicable to academic freedom.

The freedom of university lecturers to unionize is a constitutional right and after a lot of foot dragging, the government finally conceded in recognizing SYNES, the Union of Teachers of Higher Education in Cameroon. The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Buea distinguished herself as the only university administrator in Cameroon that persistently attempted to stymie the activities of SYNES on the university campus and subjected its members to various forms of intimidation and persecution including the disqualification of lecturers for promotion by writing negative administrative reports, demotions from position of responsibilities and open refusal of their dues and privileges. It is for this reason that SYNES had to raise an alarm and call the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Buea to order during g its third ordinary congress that was held in 2001. Thus, the Anglo-Saxon university that was planned to be a center of excellence and freedom has turned out to be the most repressive institution of higher education in Cameroon with a strong Stalinist coloration. There is only one solution to this abnormal situation at the University of Buea: the implementation of the 1993 decree establishing the University of Buea to the letter which provided for an institution with elected officials by their peers and a large degree of academic freedom and autonomy.

## Appendix A

SYNES Communiqué on UB Stalemate (*The Post*, 1 June 2005)

- Considering that some lecturers who have either taught or attempted to teach less than a handful of students in class have been identified, their car numbers circulated amongst students, and their homes identified for punitive action;
- Considering that the misleading press release by the Minister of Communication and Spokesman for the government dated 24/05/05 stating that the students were being prevented from attending classes by Molyko inhabitants could unintentionally involve the parents and the population at large into a spiral of violence and vendetta;
- Considering the impasse resulting from allegations of mysticism on campus by the students on the one hand and the Vice-Chancellor's avowed fears of her personal security on the other hand;
- Considering that we cannot be unconcerned when our beautiful University which we have strenuously built over the years is being destroyed nor be indifferent to our students being killed by the security forces;
- Given that a trade Union has as its main objective the protection of its members' interests;

SYNES HEREBY RESOLVES:

1. Lecturers shall, for their own security, henceforth stay away from classes until the crisis is resolved.
2. The Governor of the South West Province should exercise restraint in the deployment and use of security forces on campus unlike was the case on Tuesday the 24th of May 2005.
3. We condemn in the strongest terms the use of live ammunition in containing students' strikes.
4. We strongly condemn the destruction of private and public property by students.
5. Madam the Vice-Chancellor, accompanied by her close collaborators under appropriate security, should go and talk the students into campus for dialogue. Alternatively, Madam the Vice-Chancellor, in typical Anglo-Saxon culture, should tender her resignation.
6. Any students arrested and detained by the security forces should be released forthwith, in order to create a conducive atmosphere for dialogue.
7. We condemn the simplistic invention and prejudicial use of a North-West -South West divide which is being strenuously used by University hierarchy to explain away an otherwise complex and delicate situation which has unfortunately resulted in the extreme polarization of staff and students of the University of Buea and the larger population.

Done at Buea the 25th May 2005.  
Secretary President  
Richard Akoachere, Dr. Jonie Fonyam

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