

RAMBLE in the JUNGLE

Debating Africa and the World

Issues in Culture, Africa, the Cameroons and Kom

A Reading and Comprehension Textbook for High School

by Wanaku Verdzekov

with editorial counterpoints

STUDENT EDITION

WANAKU LLC

RAMBLE in the JUNGLE: Debating Africa and the World

Issues in Culture, Africa, the Cameroons and Kom

Student Edition

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Readings by Wanaku Verdzekov (pen name). The editorial counterpoints, introductions, vocabulary, questions and appendices were written for this book; the counterpoints are labelled **Editorial counterpoint** and are not by Wanaku Verdzekov.

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How to use this book

Each chapter of this book is an **issue**: a question that thoughtful people answer differently. The questions come from the essays of Wanaku Verdzekov, a writer born in the 1950s in the British-administered Cameroons, educated in mission schools, and later living abroad. The essays are short, sharp and personal. They argue one side.

For every issue you will read **two sides**:

- **The author's essay**, labelled **YES** or **NO** depending on how it answers the issue question.
- **An editorial counterpoint**, written for this book, that argues the other side as fairly as it can. The counterpoints are *not* by Wanaku Verdzekov and do not represent the author's views.

Your job is not to decide which writer is “right”. It is to read closely, find each writer's claims and evidence, weigh them, and then build your own position.

What is in each issue

Section	What it does
Issue question	A yes/no question to argue about.
Learning outcomes	What you should be able to do after the issue.
Introduction	Neutral background: the history and context both writers take for granted.
YES / NO readings	The author's essay and the editorial counterpoint.
Vocabulary	Key words from both readings, with meanings in context.
Comprehension questions	Literal (find it), inferential (read between the lines) and critical (evaluate and respond).
Is there common ground?	Where the two sides agree, and what a middle path might look like.
Debate and writing prompt	A task that asks you to take and defend a position.

Reading strategies for every issue

1. **Before reading**, read the introduction and write down what you already think about the issue question.
2. **While reading**, mark each writer's *main claim*, their *reasons*, and their *evidence*. Note where a writer gives opinion without evidence.
3. **After reading**, compare: where do the writers disagree about facts, and where do they disagree about values?
4. **Return** to your first answer. Has it changed? Why?

A note on the author's style

Wanaku Verdzekov writes the way people talk in a lively argument. Expect rhetorical questions (“You tell me.”), CAPITAL LETTERS for emphasis, invented words (*politricks*), Cameroonian Pidgin and Kom

words. The readings keep this voice. The vocabulary lists and questions point out where it differs from formal written English, which is itself a useful lesson in register.

Written for readers anywhere

You do not need to know Cameroon, Africa or the Kom Kingdom to use this book. Each introduction explains the background, and local words are explained in the vocabulary lists and in Appendix C. The issues themselves (culture, democracy, language, freedom, leadership, justice, identity, education) are debated in every country; try to connect each one to your own community.

A note on sensitive topics

Several issues touch on an ongoing conflict in Cameroon's English-speaking regions. The author supports self-rule for the former Southern Cameroons; the Cameroonian government and many citizens hold different views. This book presents the author's position as one side of an argument and asks you to test every claim against other sources. Discuss respectfully: classmates may have family, friends or experiences on any side.

The issues at a glance

Unit 1 — Culture, Knowledge and Meaning

- **Issue 1.1** Should schools teach “cultural dexterity” as a core skill? YES: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Cultural Dexterity* · NO: Editorial counterpoint, *Manners Are Not a Subject*
- **Issue 1.2** Can ideas like “spirit” or “God” be truly shared across cultures? NO: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Navigating the Intangible* and *When the Student Is Ready* · YES: Editorial counterpoint, *Translators Prove It Can Be Done*

Unit 2 — Development, Democracy and Self-Rule in Africa

- **Issue 2.1** Is party politics a good fit for African communities? NO: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Democracy in “Black” Africa?* · YES: Editorial counterpoint, *Parties Give Families a Choice*
- **Issue 2.2** Do African countries need outside help to develop? YES: Editorial counterpoint, *Hard Work Is Not Enough* · NO: Wanaku Verdzekov, *African Development Is Serious Business*
- **Issue 2.3** Should children first learn to read and write in their home language? YES: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Cultural Amnesia* and *Literacy in Any Language* · NO: Editorial counterpoint, *The Door to the Wider World*
- **Issue 2.4** Do post-independence African states need armies? NO: Wanaku Verdzekov, *African Armies: Killing Your Own People* and *Words for Peace* · YES: Editorial counterpoint, *A State Must Be Able to Protect Its People*

Unit 3 — The Cameroons: History, Freedom and Institutions

- **Issue 3.1** Was oil the main cause of the Cameroons’ troubles? YES: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Trouble in the Armpit of Africa: The Cameroons Puzzle?* (excerpt) · NO: Editorial counterpoint, *Many Roots, Not One Pipeline*
- **Issue 3.2** Does freedom depend on a strong national government? YES: Editorial counterpoint, *Freedom Needs a Strong Centre, Too* · NO: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Doctrine of Freedom in the Cameroons Crisis*
- **Issue 3.3** Do strong institutions matter more than strong leaders? YES: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Institutions of AMBAZONIA?* · NO: Editorial counterpoint, *Institutions Are Built by People*
- **Issue 3.4** Should the Cameroons hold a truth commission? YES: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Truth Commission in the Cameroons?* · NO: Editorial counterpoint, *Truth Can Wait*
- **Issue 3.5** Should young people protest as soon as they see injustice? YES: Editorial counterpoint, *Sometimes You Must March Now* · NO: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Youth Question: What to Do?* and *Set Up to Fail*

Unit 4 — Kom: Tradition, Identity and Education

- **Issue 4.1** Should traditional kingdoms write down their laws and customs? YES: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Power/Authority in an African Grassland Kingdom?* and *Dignity & Royalty of Kom Kingdom* · NO: Editorial counterpoint, *Living Law Should Stay Alive*

- **Issue 4.2** Does self-esteem come mainly from one's culture and community? YES: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Understanding Self-Esteem* and *Broken Self-Esteem?* · NO: Editorial counterpoint, *Self-Worth Starts Within*
- **Issue 4.3** Should schools put wider-world knowledge ahead of local culture? YES: Editorial counterpoint, *School Should Open Windows* · NO: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Kom Culture and the Circle of Life*

Appendices

- **Appendix A** The Cameroons: A Timeline, 1884–2020
 - **Appendix C** Glossary of Kom, Pidgin and French terms
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Fourteen issues fit a semester course at about one issue a week, with time for review and a final debate. Units can be taught in any order, but Unit 3 is easier after students have read Appendix A.

UNIT 1

Unit 1 — Culture, Knowledge and Meaning

Issue 1.1 · Should Schools Teach “Cultural Dexterity” as a Core Skill?

YES: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Cultural Dexterity* (2015)

NO: Editorial counterpoint, *Manners Are Not a Subject* (written for this book)

Learning outcomes

After reading this issue, you should be able to:

1. Define “cultural dexterity” and explain why the author believes it is needed.
 2. Explain the author’s idea of the “Biggest Microphone” and give a present-day example.
 3. Identify the main objections raised in the counterpoint.
 4. Distinguish between cultural rules (etiquette) and cultural values.
 5. Write an argument that recommends how schools should prepare students for a multicultural world.
-

Introduction

We live in what is often called an age of **globalization**: goods, money, people and, above all, information cross borders faster than ever. A song, a video or a news story can reach millions of people in dozens of countries within hours. This brings cultures into contact, and sometimes into conflict.

Educators have argued about how schools should respond. Some call for **intercultural competence**, the ability to communicate respectfully with people from other backgrounds. In 2018, the OECD’s international PISA tests, taken by 15-year-olds in dozens of countries, included an assessment of “global competence” for the first time. Others worry that schools cannot teach something so personal, or that such courses may spread the values of powerful countries.

A related idea is **soft power**: a country’s ability to influence others through its culture, films, music and media rather than through force. Hollywood films, K-pop, Nollywood and football leagues are all examples. The author of the YES reading calls this “the Biggest Microphone”.

The author, Wanaku Verdzekov, grew up in the Kom Kingdom, a traditional kingdom in the grasslands of north-west Cameroon, and later lived in the United States. The essay was written around 2015 and refers to a United States Supreme Court ruling of that year that recognized same-sex marriage nationwide. The author uses it as an example of how one culture’s legal processes shape values that then travel around the world. (Students do not need to take a position on marriage to discuss the author’s argument about cultural influence.)

As you read, ask: *Is understanding other cultures a skill that can be taught, like a language, or something that can only be learned through experience?*

YES: *Cultural Dexterity* (2015)

Wanaku Verdzekov

The Age of Information is also the Age of Cultural Wars. There is a need for a new course for students of today’s global space called **Cultural Dexterity**.

Objective: enable students to jump through all the hoops and loops of diverse cultural spaces (physical and virtual).

Example situation: if you find yourself in Malaysia, remember that you cannot point at someone with your index finger. That's considered really rude and can get you a fist in the face. So how do you point at someone? With your thumb. Ahem!

Why do I bring this up? Because it is a physical behaviour that has been encoded into the DNA of the cultural space occupied by the Malaysian people over a period of time. It is part of the cultural sauce. Note again: it is a "behaviour" that is now encoded in the mores and practical living situations of the Malaysian people. It seems (feels like) the law, if you are on location. But you probably are not in Malaysia. If you are, watch out.

Let's switch gears to another cultural space. Let me just say: the "West", as in what is also known as "Western Culture". Not forgetting that within Western Culture there are sub-cultures, sub-sub-cultures and so on, down to the goat farmer on the hills of a village in Estonia. Where were we?

Oh, let's ask a simple question: how does Western Culture perceive and implement the concept of "behaviour" in its cultural space? In other words, what are the forces in Western Culture that shape the behavioural patterns of citizens within that space?

It turns out the question is not that simple. It is interesting to note how the Information Age has sped up communication, so that news about things happening in faraway places triggers another look at one's own backyard.

As if there is something to be afraid of... which could be a legitimate FEAR. How to describe it? Mmh! Here is how anyone with an analytical attitude would face a problem: try to know everything about it. Then look at the information. Look at it again and again. Turn it upside down, inside out, then sideways and downside up... then begin to comb through it again... until maybe you come up with an answer (sort of).

Before doing all of the above, the main obstacle to solving the problem is simple: ignorance. At one point or another in life, everyone is ignorant of something. And the only medicine for the "dis-ease" of ignorance is making an effort to know everything about something, or something about everything. Either one will work (at least).

So what is the import of the paragraph above? Just this: in the current global context of information overload and instant news feeds, if you are standing on a foundation of Kom rocks (assuming that foundation is rock-solid in the current era), why should you be afraid of "behavioural patterns" imported from other cultural spaces? Of course these patterns are, and have been, imported in 101 ways, mainly (these days) through the whole mass-communication industry. Now hear me out.

In the context of cultural spaces, globally speaking, he who has the **Biggest Microphone** wins the day. Like it or not, it is a fact. Why? Well, you tell me. The human brain is a thing of beauty; I mean, how it works. Even its owners have no idea what their brains are doing. Not to digress, but the effect of the Biggest Microphone on the brain of the audience can stretch as far back as "In the Beginning", where there was the Word.

So in essence, the owners of the Biggest Microphone are also the biggest storytellers in the world. Humans are addicted to stories (the Word).

So when all (or most) of the stories we hear come from a Western cultural space, of course attitudes, beliefs and behaviours (remember how the beautiful brain works) are affected and begin to change or morph into something else: a mix, a mash, a patchwork, a melting pot... or... you tell me.

I found it easier to look at global cultural questions by arbitrarily splitting "Western Culture" in general from "Other Cultures". This might not work for someone else (the brain is a beautiful thing). Given the effect of the dominant cultures owning and using the Big Microphone on audiences around the globe, it is no longer a question of stopping one culture from doing this or that. It is a question of how citizens of the world can navigate the different cultures that exist as they travel through these spaces, physically or

virtually, without stepping on toes, intentionally or inadvertently. That skill is called **cultural dexterity**. Unless, that is, one attempts to level the cultural playing field globally and have everyone everywhere conform to a given set of behavioural patterns. That’s the Cultural War. Is it on yet? You tell me.

In Western Culture, take the particular case of the US Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriage. Note that the process followed to bring this case to that court is itself part of Western Culture. Here is what the US Chief Justice had to say:

“If you are among the many Americans — of whatever sexual orientation — who favor expanding same-sex marriage, by all means celebrate today’s decision. Celebrate the achievement of a desired goal. Celebrate the opportunity for a new expression of commitment to a partner. Celebrate the availability of new benefits. But do not celebrate the Constitution. It had nothing to do with it.”

What I note here is: “Celebrate the availability of new benefits...”

If you ask me, the Chief Justice is letting it be known that the court gave in to the fight for rights rather than to a change in the real meaning of “traditional marriage” (per Western Culture). Note that some other cultures would hold their own traditional marriage, then do another ceremony (in church, or at a resort, the “white-man” way), and call it... what again? That’s again where cultural dexterity comes in. As long as we find ourselves in spaces with a dominant cultural footprint, we will face the question of acquiring, or not acquiring, the skills to navigate the hoops and loops there. And that is when (with no skills) some kind of Nyamfikah behaviour can begin to roost.

Wakikiki

~wv

PS: With a population of 300,000 citizens, Kom cannot be afraid of the influence of any imported behavioural pattern within its cultural space... unless we have not taken the steps necessary to maintain command, control and development of the mechanisms and institutions that make Kom Culture possible and relevant in the daily lives of its citizens. Then the Big Microphone works, all the time, in surprisingly sneaky ways. Ijaa iku tum!

— Wanaku Verdzekov

Written around 2015; lightly edited for this book.

NO: Manners Are Not a Subject

EDITORIAL COUNTERPOINT

This essay was written for this textbook to present the opposing side fairly. It is not by Wanaku Verdzekov.

Wanaku Verdzekov is right that today’s students live in a world where cultures meet every day, on screens as much as in person. A teenager in Lagos, Lyon or Lima can watch the same video within minutes of its release. Misunderstandings between cultures are real, and they can hurt. But it does not follow that “cultural dexterity” should become a new core subject. There are good reasons to be cautious.

Culture is learned by living, not by memorizing

The author’s own example is a rule: in Malaysia, point with your thumb, not your index finger. A course built on rules like this would soon become a list of do’s and don’ts for dozens of countries. Lists like this age quickly and are often wrong, because cultures change and differ inside themselves. Not every Malaysian minds a pointed finger, just as not every Kom elder holds the same view on marriage. Real cultural skill comes from long contact with real people: friendships, travel, work, family. A classroom can talk *about* this experience, but it cannot replace it.

The risk of teaching stereotypes

When a course sets out to teach “how the French behave” or “what Africans believe”, it risks turning whole peoples into cartoons. The author warns against a “Big Microphone” that shapes how the world sees others. A school subject built on cultural profiles could become a small microphone of its own, repeating simplified pictures. Students might leave the course more confident, but not more accurate.

The timetable is already full

Every new subject pushes something else out. Most schools already struggle to give enough time to reading, writing, mathematics, science and a second language. If a school must choose, learning another language may do more for cultural understanding than a separate course: a language carries its culture inside it, with all its humour, politeness and exceptions.

Better tools already exist

Much of what the author wants can be reached through subjects schools already teach. Literature lets students live inside other people’s lives. History explains why peoples see the world differently. Media studies can teach students to ask who owns the “Big Microphone” and whose stories are missing. Exchange programmes, pen-pal projects and community service bring students face to face with difference. These approaches build understanding without a separate subject that must be tested and graded.

Who decides what “dexterity” means?

Finally, “cultural dexterity” sounds neutral, but someone must decide what counts as good behaviour. Should students learn to adapt to every culture’s norms, even ones that treat some people unfairly? Or should they learn to stand firm? The author’s own example, a court ruling on marriage, shows that cultures disagree about deep values, not just manners. A course that tells students when to adapt and when to resist would have to take sides on questions that families and communities, not schools, should decide.

Conclusion

The goal is a good one: young people who can move between cultures with respect and keep their own roots. But that goal is better served by languages, literature, history, media literacy and real encounters than by a new subject with its own textbook and exams. Cultural dexterity is not a lesson to be learned in one term. It is a habit built over a lifetime.

— Editorial counterpoint

Vocabulary

Word or phrase	Meaning in the readings
dexterity	skill and ease, of the hands or of the mind
encoded	built in, like a hidden code
mores	the customs and accepted behaviour of a group
sub-culture	a smaller group with its own customs inside a larger culture
globalization	the growing connection of the world’s economies and cultures
information overload	more information than a person can take in
inadvertently	by accident, without meaning to
dominant	most powerful or influential
soft power	influence through culture and ideas rather than force
stereotype	an oversimplified idea about a group of people
etiquette	rules of polite behaviour
media literacy	the ability to analyse and question media messages
norm	an accepted standard of behaviour

Comprehension questions

Literal (find it in the text)

1. What example of a cultural rule does the author give from Malaysia?
2. What does the author say is “the only medicine” for ignorance?
3. According to the author, who “wins the day” in global cultural spaces?
4. Name two subjects the counterpoint says can already build cultural understanding.
5. What does the counterpoint say may do more for cultural understanding than a separate course?

Inferential (read between the lines)

6. Why does the author link the “Biggest Microphone” to storytelling?
7. In the PS, what condition does the author set for Kom not to fear imported behaviour?
8. Why does the counterpoint warn that a cultural-dexterity course could become “a small microphone of its own”?
9. What does the counterpoint mean when it says cultures disagree about “deep values, not just manners”?

Critical (evaluate and respond)

10. Which writer better explains how people actually learn to live with cultural difference? Use evidence from both readings.
11. Think of a time you or someone you know misunderstood another culture. Would a school course have helped? Why or why not?
12. Who holds “the Biggest Microphone” in your country today? Is that a problem?

Is there common ground?

Both writers agree that young people need to live respectfully in a world full of different cultures, and that they should keep their own roots while doing so. Both are wary of powerful media shaping everyone’s

values. The author worries about the Biggest Microphone; the counterpoint worries that a school course could become one.

They disagree mainly about **method**. The author wants a named course, so that the skill is taken seriously. The counterpoint prefers to weave the skill through languages, literature, history, media literacy and real encounters.

A middle path might be a short **module** or project within existing subjects: for example, a media-literacy unit on who tells global stories, combined with an exchange or community project, and assessed through reflection rather than a test of cultural rules.

Debate and writing prompt

Debate motion: *This house believes that every secondary school should teach cultural dexterity as a required course.*

- Divide the class into proposition and opposition. Each side must use at least two pieces of evidence from its reading and answer the other side's strongest point.
- After the debate, hold a vote, then discuss which arguments changed minds.

Writing task: (400–600 words) Write a proposal to your school's head teacher on how students should be prepared for life in a multicultural world. Recommend a course, a module, or changes to existing subjects. Use at least one idea from each reading, and answer one objection.

Further reading

- OECD, *PISA 2018 Results: Are Students Ready to Thrive in an Interconnected World?* (2020).
- Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004).
- UNESCO, *Intercultural Competences: Conceptual and Operational Framework* (2013).

Issue 1.2 · Can Ideas Like “Spirit” or “God” Be Truly Shared Across Cultures?

YES: Editorial counterpoint, *Translators Prove It Can Be Done* (written for this book)

NO: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Navigating the Intangible* (2012) and *When the Student Is Ready, the Guru Appears* (2011–2014)

Learning outcomes

After reading this issue, you should be able to:

1. Explain the idea that words carry cultural meanings (connotations).
 2. Summarize the main claims of both texts by the author and of the counterpoint.
 3. Evaluate evidence about translation and bilingualism.
 4. Distinguish between “perfect” and “sufficient” understanding.
 5. Write a reflection on a word from your own language that is hard to translate.
-

Introduction

Linguists have long asked whether the language we speak shapes the way we think. The idea that it does is often called **linguistic relativity** (associated with the American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf). A strong version says that speakers of different languages live in different mental worlds; a weaker version, which most researchers today accept, says that language *influences* how we notice and remember things, without trapping us.

Every language has words that are hard to translate. Portuguese *saudade* names a longing for something absent; German *Schadenfreude* is pleasure at another’s misfortune; Zulu and Xhosa *ubuntu* means that a person becomes a person through other people. Translators must decide whether to keep such words, explain them, or find the closest match.

Religious and spiritual ideas are especially hard. Words like “spirit”, “soul” and “God” are linked to particular stories, rituals and histories. When missionaries brought Christianity to Africa, for example, they often had to choose an existing local word for God, which carried meanings from local belief.

The author, Wanaku Verdzekov, grew up speaking itanjiKom, the language of the Kom Kingdom in north-west Cameroon, was educated in English by missionaries, and later lived in the United States. The two short texts here reflect on how culture shapes meaning (Text A) and why no one can know everything (Text B).

As you read, ask: *When two people use the same word, how can they tell whether they mean the same thing?*

YES: Translators Prove It Can Be Done

EDITORIAL COUNTERPOINT

This essay was written for this textbook to present the opposing side fairly. It is not by Wanaku Verdzekov.

Wanaku Verdzekov is right that words carry culture. The English word “spirit” does not mean exactly what a Zulu or Igbo speaker means by the nearest word in their language. But the author’s conclusion, that deep ideas cannot truly be shared, goes too far. Human history is full of evidence that they can.

Humans share more than they differ

People everywhere are born, love, grieve and die. Every known culture has words for mother and child, for joy and fear, for the dead and for what might lie beyond. These shared experiences give us common ground to stand on when we talk about “intangible” things. When a Kom elder and a Scottish grandmother each describe the feeling of losing a parent, they may use different images, but they will recognize each other’s grief.

Translation works, imperfectly but truly

If deep ideas could not be shared, translation would be impossible. Yet the holy books of the world’s major religions have been translated into thousands of languages, and believers in very different cultures read them and find meaning. Philosophers read Plato in Chinese and Confucius in English. The African idea of *ubuntu*, “a person is a person through other people”, has travelled around the world and is now discussed in boardrooms and classrooms far from southern Africa. Something is always lost in translation, but something is always carried across, too.

Meaning grows through conversation

The author suggests that people with different backgrounds will simply talk past each other. But meaning is not fixed at birth; it grows as people talk. When two people disagree about what “spirit” means, they can ask questions, give examples, tell stories, and, as the author herself suggests, draw a picture. Over time, they build a shared understanding that neither had at the start. This is how science, law and friendship all work. The author’s own advice, “draw me a picture”, is proof that the gap can be bridged.

Bilingual people live the answer

Millions of people grow up speaking two or more languages. Many pray in one language, joke in another and study in a third. They move between cultural meanings every day. If ideas could not be shared across cultures, these people would be permanently divided inside themselves. Instead, many say that knowing two languages lets them see an idea from two sides, and understand it more fully than either culture alone.

The author proves the point

Finally, the author’s wider writing is evidence against the NO side. In English, a language not spoken by the author’s ancestors, Wanaku Verdzekov explains Kom ideas such as the Circle of Life, the value of the person in the Kom motto, and the difference between “red” and “white” people. Readers who have never visited Kom come away understanding something new. That is what sharing across cultures looks like.

Conclusion

No two people, even from the same village, understand a word in exactly the same way. Perfect sharing is impossible. But *true* sharing, enough to understand, to respect and to learn, happens every day. The question is not whether meaning can cross cultures, but how much effort we are willing to make to carry it across.

— Editorial counterpoint

NO: Navigating the Intangible (2012) and When the Student Is Ready, the Guru Appears (2011–2014)

Wanaku Verdzekov

Text A: Navigating the Intangible

Talking about intangible things (ideas like “spirit”, “God” or “love”) is a challenge. Language is a powerful tool for communication, but when it meets culture, it can quickly become a barrier. So here is the question: how does our cultural background shape the way we understand these intangibles?

Words carry culture

Words are not just empty buckets for ideas. They are soaked in the culture of the people who speak them. So when we try to put intangible things into words, we are walking on slippery ground.

An African proverb says: “When talking with wise people, few words suffice; when talking with foolish people, you are forced to do much more explaining.” Which raises a question: are we all on the same level when we discuss complex ideas? You tell me.

Take words like “spirit” or “ghost”. Can the man or woman on the street (the MOTS) really grasp what these words originally meant? I doubt it. Language evolves, meanings shift, and misunderstandings follow, especially when people come from different cultural backgrounds.

Culture frames the conversation

If you ask me, our understanding of intangible things is framed by our cultural experience. Talk about “spirit” in English, and the word comes loaded with the meanings of English-speaking cultures. Now bring in someone from another culture (Igbo, Zulu, Hindu...) with their own understanding of “spirit”. What happens?

Dissonance. Each person sees the idea through the lens of their own culture, and the result is more confusion, not more clarity. One trick that sometimes works: ask each person to “draw me a picture” of what they mean. A picture can travel where words get stuck.

Religion and spirituality

God, prayer, spirituality: these ideas also make more sense inside a particular cultural frame. But is that too limiting? Or does it open the door to deeper conversations about what we share as humans? Something to think about.

Your turn

As citizens of a global community, we have a chance to talk seriously about intangible things. So let’s explore how our cultures shape what we understand, and how we can navigate the differences.

The challenge is not impossible. It is an invitation to explore the richness of our different backgrounds. The more we talk, the better we understand each other, and the world around us. So let’s navigate the intangible together. Share your insights. Share your experience.

TM

Text B: When the Student Is Ready, the Guru Appears

Life goes in cycles (sort of).

So humans come and go, turn by turn.

What each turn knows is different, each in its own way.

So generations may differ in what each knows or does not know.

At one point or another,
a generation or an individual knows some things and not others.
That is why no one knows everything.

Everyone who is willing can learn something new every day,
adding to their knowledge.

As each one adds to their knowledge,
that adds to the total of a generation’s knowledge bank.

Now here’s the sticky part:

increasing the knowledge of a large cross-section of a generation
requires measures that some might consider a little extreme.

That sometimes results in authoritarian social frameworks,
set up to speed up the delivery of knowledge.

Since humans are wired to resist authoritarian influence,
not everyone gets on the learning train.

Over time, generational cycles intertwine,
creating a mass of concrete knowledge that is available to anyone.

The other sticky point is that this concrete knowledge
is bigger than any one human brain can hold.

So what to do?

Since humans are adaptive (as almost all created things are),
each one chips away at it as they see fit.

In other words, they use bits and pieces of it as needed.

It could also be just for fun.

Why would I want to know the chemical properties of a rock
if I don't even know the rock exists?

And even if I did, why would I want to know
if I have no use for it?

Or why would I study the breeding habits of a bush rat
if all I do is hunt and kill it?

If I learn the ways of the bush rat, maybe I want to help preserve it.

Why would I want to preserve it?

Is it my business whether the bush rat breeds or not?

These are questions that already have answers.

Some of the answers are well documented, too.

The nagging problem for a single human being
is the inability to know, alone, all there is to know.

I think a lot of wise people come to that realization at some point.

A famous saying goes: "When the student is ready, the guru will appear."

Wish I could be more helpful.

— Wanaku Verdzekov

Text A dates from 2012; its only surviving copy had been polished with an AI tool, and this version restores the author's voice. Text B was written between 2011 and 2014. Both lightly edited for this book.

Vocabulary

Word or phrase	Meaning in the readings
intangible	something that cannot be touched, like an idea or feeling
connotation	an extra meaning or feeling a word carries
proverb	a short traditional saying that gives advice
dissonance	a clash or lack of agreement
lens (figurative)	a way of seeing or interpreting
cycle	a series of events that repeats
amalgam	a mixture of different things
peruse	to read or examine carefully
linguistic relativity	the idea that language influences thought
translation	expressing the meaning of words in another language
bilingual	able to use two languages
ubuntu	“a person is a person through other people” (Zulu/Xhosa)

Comprehension questions

Literal (find it in the text)

1. What trick does Text A suggest for bridging a cultural gap?
2. According to Text B, why does no one know everything?
3. What famous saying ends Text B?
4. Name two examples of shared human experience given in the counterpoint.
5. What idea from southern Africa does the counterpoint say has travelled around the world?

Inferential (read between the lines)

6. Why might an English speaker and an Igbo speaker misunderstand each other when talking about “spirit”?
7. How does Text B’s bush-rat example relate to learning across cultures?
8. Why does the counterpoint say the author’s own writing “proves the point”?
9. What is the difference between “perfect sharing” and “true sharing” in the counterpoint?

Critical (evaluate and respond)

10. Which reading gives the more convincing account of how people come to understand each other? Explain.
11. Choose a word in your own language (or a language you know) that is hard to translate. Explain it to someone who does not speak that language. What did you lose, and what did you carry across?
12. Does learning a second language change the way you think? Give evidence from your own experience or research.

Is there common ground?

Both writers agree that words carry culture, that some meaning is lost when ideas cross cultures, and that effort (questions, pictures, conversation) helps. The author herself suggests “draw me a picture”; the counterpoint treats this as proof that bridges can be built.

Their disagreement is about **degree**. The author stresses the gaps: each person sees through their own cultural lens, so dissonance is likely. The counterpoint stresses the bridges: shared human experience, translation and bilingual lives show that understanding is possible, even if never perfect.

A middle position might say: *ideas can be shared well enough to understand and respect each other, but only if we assume from the start that we may not mean the same thing, and check.*

Debate and writing prompt

Debate motion: *This house believes that the deepest ideas of a culture can never be fully understood by outsiders.*

- Divide the class into proposition and opposition. Each side must use at least two pieces of evidence from its reading and answer the other side's strongest point.
- After the debate, hold a vote, then discuss which arguments changed minds.

Writing task: (400–600 words) Write a personal essay about a word, idea or custom from your culture that outsiders often misunderstand. Explain the misunderstanding, what the word or custom really means to you, and how someone from outside could come to understand it.

Further reading

- Guy Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages* (2010).
- Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (1999), on *ubuntu*.
- Lera Boroditsky, “How Language Shapes Thought”, *Scientific American* (2011).

UNIT 2

**Unit 2 — Development, Democracy and Self-Rule
in Africa**

Issue 2.1 · Is Party Politics a Good Fit for African Communities?

YES: Editorial counterpoint, *Parties Give Families a Choice* (written for this book)

NO: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Democracy in “Black” Africa?* (2022)

Learning outcomes

After reading this issue, you should be able to:

1. Define democracy, political party and one-party state.
 2. Explain the author’s argument that parties conflict with family-based communities.
 3. Evaluate examples of multiparty and one-party rule in Africa.
 4. Identify generalizations in both readings and judge whether evidence supports them.
 5. Write an argument about how political systems can fit local cultures.
-

Introduction

After most African countries became independent in the late 1950s and 1960s, many of them adopted constitutions with several political parties, modelled on those of the former colonial powers. Within a decade, many had become **one-party states**. Leaders such as Julius Nyerere of Tanzania argued that multiparty competition would divide young nations along ethnic lines, and that a single party could still be democratic if members competed inside it. Critics saw one-party rule as a cover for dictatorship.

From 1990 onwards, after the end of the Cold War and under pressure from citizens and foreign donors, most African countries returned to **multiparty politics**. Since then, some have seen peaceful changes of government through elections (for example Ghana, Senegal, Zambia and Malawi), while in others the same leader or party has held power for decades. Surveys such as Afrobarometer have found that most Africans say they prefer democracy to other forms of government, though many are unhappy with how it works in practice.

The author of the NO reading, Wanaku Verdzekov, is from Cameroon, a Central African country that had a single legal party from 1966 until 1990. The essay, written in 2022, argues that in “Black” African societies, the extended family, not the political party, is the natural unit of community life. (The author puts “Black” in quotation marks, questioning the label while using it.) The essay also argues that education and government systems left by colonizers still serve outside interests.

As you read, ask: *Can a political system invented in one culture work in another? If so, what must change?*

YES: Parties Give Families a Choice

EDITORIAL COUNTERPOINT

This essay was written for this textbook to present the opposing side fairly. It is not by Wanaku Verdzekov.

Wanaku Verdzekov asks a fair question: why should communities organized around large families adopt political parties imported from Europe? It is true that parties have sometimes divided families, and that many post-colonial governments copied systems designed for colonial profit. But the answer to bad parties is better parties, not no parties at all.

Parties organize disagreement peacefully

Every community disagrees about something: how to spend money, who should lead, which road to build first. Political parties turn these disagreements into choices that voters can make at the ballot box instead of on the battlefield. A party offers a team, a programme and a record that can be judged. When a party

fails, voters can remove it without removing the country's institutions. That is not a foreign idea; it is a way of solving a problem every society has.

Africa's own experience shows it can work

Several African countries have used party competition to change governments peacefully. In Ghana, power has passed between the two main parties several times since 2000. Senegal has also seen opposition candidates win the presidency and take office peacefully, most recently in 2024. In these countries, citizens from the same family often support different parties and still share meals at the same table. Party competition did not destroy their families; it gave them a way to disagree safely.

"No parties" has often meant one ruler

After independence, many African leaders argued that parties were divisive and foreign, and set up one-party or "no-party" states in the name of unity. Tanzania, Kenya, Zambia, Uganda and Cameroon itself all tried versions of this. Some leaders were sincere; others used the argument to silence rivals. In practice, removing parties often removed the only legal way to challenge those in power. In other Rambles, the author herself criticizes Cameroon's one-party era. The lesson of that era is that banning competition tends to concentrate power, not spread it.

Families can divide, too

The author presents the natural family as the peaceful alternative to artificial parties. But politics built on family, clan or ethnic group can be more divisive, not less. If votes follow bloodlines, then a large family or ethnic group can dominate forever, and smaller groups have no hope of winning. Parties built on ideas, such as how to run schools or the economy, can cross family and ethnic lines and bring together people who would otherwise never cooperate.

Parties can be adapted, not just copied

The author is right that systems must fit local realities. But parties can be shaped to do that: they can be required to have members from many regions, to hold internal elections, to publish their accounts, and to work alongside traditional leaders. Botswana's parliament, for example, sits alongside a House of Chiefs. The choice is not between "European parties" and "African families". It is how to build parties that serve African communities.

Conclusion

The author asks, "Why do we need a party?" The answer is: because people who disagree need a peaceful, fair and repeatable way to decide who governs, and to change their minds later. Parties are imperfect tools, but no one has yet found a better way to let millions of people choose, and un-choose, their leaders.

— Editorial counterpoint

NO: Democracy in "Black" Africa? (2022)

Wanaku Verdzekov

Opinion

Democracy is simple, but humans tend to make things complicated for themselves, for any number of reasons. It is defined in several ways, but the essence is this: "a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives." System, government, whole population, elected representatives... That sounds simple, right?

As a citizen in Africa (the Cameroons, for example), when you hear talk about "government", do you consider yourself part of the government? Yes? No? How? Why? Do you know?

I ask because if a citizen is part of "government", and I see a gendarme (an armed government agent) beating a citizen as if beating a snake, my question is: "Is anyone allowed to beat up the government the way one beats a snake?" And the answer is... crickets.

Families vs parties vs government?

Does anyone else try to find the logic in the words we hear every day about “government”? It is a thing that affects the daily lives of all our brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, aunties, uncles, nephews, nieces... you get the drift. Unlike other communities in foreign places, we (most of “Black” Africa) are mostly a community of FAMILIES, not one of POLITICAL PARTIES.

“Me, my wife and two kids”. Where’s the party?

There are communities that practise “democracy” where the family unit is limited to “me, my wife and two kids”. Belonging to a party artificially extends the family, and at that point power in the community can swing in favour of one “party-family” or another. That can be a convenient way of practising democracy as a party-vs-party tournament.

On the flip side are communities where group dynamics (family, clan, brotherhood, etc.) are different. How does democracy work there?

In “Black” Africa, group dynamics revolve mostly around the natural family, which naturally outranks artificially created political parties. So there is the problem. The first question a GrandPa or GrandMa will ask is: “Why do we need a party?” Of course there would be reasons, and they should be clearly explained. To have democracy, we must have parties? Then the next question is: why do we need democracy? It would be important, and honest, to explain exactly how and why introducing political parties makes sense, when the community problems they were meant to solve have not been solved in half a century of party politics.

Why the fixation on systems?

Is the goal of a political party in a community of families to bring families together, or to set one family against another? If the latter, why? In a few words, what is the core purpose of setting up a political party in a community of natural families? If that is well explained, and everyone agrees on the goals, then maybe it’s time for kids to leave the natural family and join the artificial parties? If we are still talking about democracy, is the party the school where citizens learn how to practise “a system of government by the whole population”? Is that a syllabus that takes a lifetime?

[...]

The systems and vocabulary of colonized behaviour

The systems and vocabulary used to govern formerly colonized nations have not changed, or not by much. Keep this at the back of your mind: Africa was not colonized as a charitable, non-profit enterprise. That means the SYSTEMS DESIGNED for use in the colonies were SYSTEMS DESIGNED FOR PROFIT, as in business profits.

Now, if you “follow the money”, as they say, and the systems have not changed much, where do you think the PROFITS are still going?

A typical example: education

Think the education system set up in colonial times has changed? Think again.

Here’s why it has not changed. The products of colonial education were shaped for efficiency in a context where they were useful: a colonial context, or one like it. In other words, if you trained in medicine, as a nurse or a doctor, it was in line with the procedures your trainer knew. British medical teams did not teach Chinese medicine to nurses in the Cameroons. Nor could they teach the physics of the Boomerang Thunder from Oku, in the montane grassfields of British Southern Cameroons, aka Ambazonia.

The result: colonial (and former colonial) education institutions graduate citizens who then CANNOT FIND JOBS. Should that surprise anyone? Effective education does not happen in a vacuum. It happens within a context, which should be well defined and understood by everyone involved.

Surprise number two: graduates who do not find jobs in our post-colonial system must decide whether or not to migrate. Where to? Will they consider the education they have had, the one that cannot find them

a job in the Cameroons, in Africa? Of course they will. Often, language opens the door, and migrants go where they can at least understand the language.

And when they do, they can generally NOW find JOBS in their new context, mostly in the former colonizing nations, whose systems the graduates are “mysteriously” already used to, because their curriculum was prescribed in colonial times to bring the “black” African from darkness into the light. Now they see the light, but the system at home is all darkness. The result is an easy exodus of trained people back to the root of the system that designed their training. As far back as 2002, a medical journal reported that Nigerian health authorities were worried about the exodus of their doctors and nurses.

[...]

Systems thinking

The colonial businesses created systems for their own use. We can either design our own systems, or heavily adapt the colonial systems to achieve the goals we set (if we have any).

The general idea is that human communities use systems to run their day-to-day business of living. Not having a handle on these systems gives outside forces the chance to hijack them and exercise undue influence and power over the community. That is neither acceptable nor sustainable.

Democracy is “government by the people”, so “let the people decide”?

In post-colonial “Black” Africa, simply saying “let the people decide” is NOT ENOUGH.

Communities need help setting up systems, just as communities in Britain, France and Germany set up systems to manage their daily lives at home, not to go and colonize some territory overseas. Reminder: colonizing agencies set up systems to run the colonized territories for PROFIT. Once it became clear the enterprise would become unprofitable, the simple action was to WITHDRAW.

Our “Black” African local communities need to design systems to run their territories: not just for PROFIT, but mostly for THEMSELVES, and for the FUTURE of their CHILDREN and FAMILIES. It takes a CHANGE in the WAY we THINK about SYSTEMS to keep the ENGINES of our COMMUNITIES humming for a LONG TIME into the FUTURE.

And that’s where we are.

— Wanaku Verdzekov

Written in February 2022; trimmed and lightly edited for this book. [...] marks a cut.

Vocabulary

Word or phrase	Meaning in the readings
democracy	government by the people, usually through elected representatives
political party	an organized group that competes for power in elections
one-party state	a country where only one party is legally allowed
gendarme	a member of an armed police force (in the French tradition)
group dynamics	the ways people in a group relate and behave
supersede	to take the place of; to count for more than
colonized	ruled by another country
curriculum	the content taught in a school system
exodus	a mass departure of people
programme (political)	a party's plan of policies
dominate	to control or have power over
ballot box	the system of voting in elections

Comprehension questions

Literal (find it in the text)

1. How does the NO reading define democracy?
2. What question does the author say a grandparent would ask about parties?
3. What example from medicine does the author use about colonial education?
4. Which two African countries does the counterpoint give as examples of peaceful changes of government?
5. What does the counterpoint say “no parties” has often meant in practice?

Inferential (read between the lines)

6. Why does the author ask whether anyone is “allowed to beat up the government”?
7. According to the author, how do parties affect small families differently from extended families?
8. Why does the counterpoint argue that politics built on family can be more divisive than party politics?
9. What does the counterpoint mean by saying parties can be “adapted, not just copied”?

Critical (evaluate and respond)

10. Both writers make generalizations (about “Black” Africa, the West, families). Find one in each reading. Is it supported by evidence?
11. Which is more important for a fair political system: the type of system, or how honestly it is run? Use both readings.
12. Design a way of choosing leaders for your school or community that respects families and allows disagreement.

Is there common ground?

Both writers agree that systems copied without thought from colonial powers have often failed African communities, that one-party rule has done harm, and that any political system must fit local realities. Both want citizens, not a small elite, to have real power.

They disagree about **parties themselves**. The author sees parties as an artificial import that sets families against each other. The counterpoint sees parties as a peaceful tool for managing disagreement, which can be reformed to fit local culture.

Common ground might be found in **hybrid systems**: parties that must be broad-based and transparent, working alongside traditional or community institutions (as in Botswana's House of Chiefs), with strong local government where families and communities can decide local matters directly.

Debate and writing prompt

Debate motion: *This house believes that political parties divide African communities more than they serve them.*

- Divide the class into proposition and opposition. Each side must use at least two pieces of evidence from its reading and answer the other side's strongest point.
- After the debate, hold a vote, then discuss which arguments changed minds.

Writing task: (400–600 words) You are advising a new country on its constitution. Write a memo recommending whether it should have political parties, and if so, what rules they should follow. Use evidence from both readings and at least one real country as an example.

Further reading

- Afrobarometer, survey reports on attitudes to democracy (afrobarometer.org).
- Julius K. Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity* (1967), on the one-party state.
- Nic Cheeseman, *Democracy in Africa: Successes, Failures, and the Struggle for Political Reform* (2015).

Issue 2.2 · Do African Countries Need Outside Help to Develop?

YES: Editorial counterpoint, *Hard Work Is Not Enough* (written for this book)

NO: Wanaku Verdzekov, *African Development Is Serious Business* (2011)

Learning outcomes

After reading this issue, you should be able to:

1. Summarize the author's argument about work, elites and paradigms.
 2. Explain internal and external explanations for poverty and development.
 3. Evaluate the role of aid, trade and investment using examples.
 4. Identify stereotypes and generalizations in an argument.
 5. Write a balanced policy recommendation on development.
-

Introduction

Why are some countries rich and others poor? Economists and historians have offered many answers. Some stress **internal** factors: education, institutions, corruption, work habits, leadership. Others stress **external** factors: the history of the slave trade and colonialism, unfair trade rules, debt, and the prices of raw materials on world markets. Most experts today see both at work.

There is a long debate about **foreign aid**. The economist Jeffrey Sachs has argued that well-designed aid can help poor countries escape poverty. The Zambian-born economist Dambisa Moyo, in her book *Dead Aid* (2009), argued that decades of aid to Africa have encouraged dependence and corruption, and that trade and investment work better. After independence, Tanzania's President Julius Nyerere promoted **self-reliance** (*ujamaa*), though his collective-farming policy had serious economic problems.

The **Marshall Plan** (1948–1952) was a US programme that gave billions of dollars to help Western Europe rebuild after the Second World War. It is often held up as a model of successful outside help.

The author, Wanaku Verdzekov, is from Cameroon. In this 2011 essay she argues that African development depends on hard work and original thinking by Africans themselves, especially by the educated “elite”, and questions the labels (“West”, “Dark Continent”, “East Africa”) that outsiders have used for Africa.

As you read, ask: *When a country is poor, how much of the explanation lies inside it, and how much outside?*

YES: Hard Work Is Not Enough

EDITORIAL COUNTERPOINT

This essay was written for this textbook to present the opposing side fairly. It is not by Wanaku Verdzekov.

Wanaku Verdzekov is right that no one else will develop a country for its people, and that speeches without work achieve nothing. But the essay's central claim, that Africa's problem is a lack of hard work, especially among its elites, leaves out most of the story. Africans already work extremely hard. What they often lack is not effort, but fair conditions in which effort pays.

Africans already work hard

Walk through any market in Accra, Bamenda or Nairobi before dawn. Farmers walk miles to their fields; traders carry goods on their heads; mothers run households and businesses at the same time. Many people hold two or three jobs. If hard work alone produced prosperity, much of Africa would be rich. The problem

is that a farmer without roads, credit, storage or fair prices can work twice as hard as a farmer elsewhere and still earn a fraction as much.

Rules made elsewhere matter

International trade rules, debt and commodity prices shape African economies from outside. For decades, many African countries have exported raw materials (cocoa, oil, minerals) and imported finished goods, earning less value from their own resources. When the price of oil or cocoa falls on world markets, governments lose income through no fault of their own workers. Debts taken on in earlier decades have forced some governments to spend more on repayments than on schools and clinics. Hard work at home cannot, on its own, change these rules.

Outside help can work

Aid has a mixed record, but some outside help has saved millions of lives. International vaccine programmes have helped protect children across Africa from measles, polio and other diseases. Investment and loans built roads, ports and power stations. The author admires the Marshall Plan, which was itself outside help: American money that helped Europe rebuild after the Second World War. East Asian countries that grew rich, such as South Korea, combined hard work at home with foreign investment, foreign markets and, at first, foreign aid.

Blaming “elites” is too simple

The author criticizes an elite that avoids work. Corruption and poor leadership are real problems. But treating a whole class as lazy is a generalization. Many educated Africans are doctors, engineers, teachers and entrepreneurs working in difficult conditions; many have left because their skills were not used at home. The more useful question is what systems reward honest effort and punish corruption.

Development needs both

The strongest version of the author’s argument is that Africans must own their development: set their own goals and do the work. That is true. But ownership is not the same as going it alone. The most successful development stories combine local effort and local ideas with fair trade, investment and partnerships. Rejecting outside help can be as unwise as depending on it.

Conclusion

Hard work is necessary, but it is not enough. Development also needs fair prices, working infrastructure, honest institutions and partnerships that serve African priorities. The question is not “work or help?” but “what kind of help, on whose terms, for whose goals?”

— Editorial counterpoint

NO: African Development Is Serious Business (2011)

Wanaku Verdzekov

Work

If Africans are not ready to work really hard, and just expect things to change by some sort of white MAGIC, it is never going to happen. There is no magic. There is WORK, WORK and more WORK.

And sincerely, that is what a lot of the so-called “elite” class in Africa does not want to do: WORK. Or do they? Why would you put on a suit in a hot tropical climate when you are supposed to be doing real, hard work to develop your living space?

The body language of most of the African “elite” (whatever that means) reveals a disdain for hard work, which (in my humble opinion) is the only way to make a difference. Without planning, and hard work in carrying out projects to help their own people, all the words the African elite speak just go with the wind. They do not echo on the rocks of Africa, let alone among the African people themselves.

This is not a reprimand of everyone who is (supposedly) educated in, and from, Africa. It is a call to reality: a plea to look at the brutal facts of history and current events, and a summons to take stock of what has been, what is, and what can be.

The so-called African problem is so complicated that no one person can claim to have the solution. Not even Mandela could make that claim. Or did he? I didn't think so. This is a fact all agree on.

Question

So what is the point here? Simply put: the African problem is more complicated than any maths problem you have ever met, even if you have a PhD in maths. Yes, it is that complicated. Are you good at maths? You could take a crack at this problem.

What is the African problem? It is a simple, direct question that is not easy or straightforward to answer. First of all, how does one solve a problem without defining it?

The West: the view

In today's world, dominated by "Western" civilization, humans have got used to defining almost everything from the Western point of view. For example, "the West" represents countries developed to a certain degree, found in the so-called "Western hemisphere". If the Chinese had conquered Europe and the Americas 2,000 years ago, they would have called it the Middle East, and Africa would have become the Far East. Well, that did not happen. Now we are stuck with what we have, unless you want to change it. Good luck.

What does this have to do with Africa? Before the so-called West came into contact with Africa, it knew it only as the "Dark Continent", meaning "no lights", "can't see inside", "impenetrable"... Today we know these labels came from people outside the continent. In those days, was the African continent bustling with activity? Yes: so many restless humans.

African history

There is reading material on the history of Africa before, during and after the coming of Western "intruders". Note that parts of Africa, like Egypt and the Mediterranean regions, were "known" to the West. So the parts of Africa that were "dark" and "unknown" are the parts facing some of the most complicated problems today. In my opinion, those problems swirl around "nationalism" and its failed implementation in various so-called African "states".

In most Western countries, the theory of nationalism has been analysed and practised for decades, to the point where citizens can sincerely say they feel patriotic about their country. Very few African countries, if any, have a convincing doctrine of nationalism that overrides the sectarian and tribalistic tendencies running through the fabric of African society. The result has been some of the worst atrocities of African-vs-African violence the world has seen in recent decades.

So instead of non-Africans waging war on Africans, Africans are decimating themselves. What do Africans expect the West, or the rest of the world, to do? Intervene? How? The UN has faced this conundrum: how do you separate family members who are tearing each other apart? Whose side would the UN (or anyone else willing to help) be on?

Labels

Africa has been labelled in several ways, and the more global attention is paid to this crucible of humanity, the more creative the names for its parts: Maghreb or Mediterranean Africa, Africa south of the Sahara, West Africa, East Africa, Central Africa, Southern Africa, South West Africa. After some years, the people who live in these labelled regions slowly but surely begin to identify with the labels: "I am East African; you are West African; she is Southern African. Oh! See that old lady? She's Central African." And someone complains: "No, I am from Ethiopia," or "No, I am Kenyan," or Nigerian, Togolese, Sierra Leonean...

The question is: are these truly African labels, or just a convenience to fit a Western paradigm? Or is it an African paradigm? There is a contention that the word "Africa" is not even African! Figure that out.

Talking of paradigms: if you don't create one, you are forced to live in one created by someone else, unless you live in a bubble. That is what African "intellectuals" need to do: come up with a paradigm that fits the African people, one that will create a spirit of nationalism, if that means love of country (meaning Africa) and love of fellow country men and women (meaning all Africans). Without that, the whole idea of a United Africa, or even a loose federation of so-called African states, is dead from the get-go.

It is this "coming up with a paradigm that fits the African people's reality" that is the hard, hard work. Speeches and public posturing without real hard work and extensive use of brain cells will not cut it.

Repeat: there is no magic. People can go to church, the mosque or ancestral tombs to pray and offer sacrifices, but without real work, several hours a day towards targeted objectives, nothing will happen. No one needs to reinvent the wheel, but it takes thinking (brain cells again) to use existing wheels to build your own automobile.

It is time for Africa's so-called intellectuals to pool their wits and come up with something original to help bring Africa out of the doldrums. And remember to include ways of funding the exercise. If you use other people's money (OPM), well, you know the drill.

Wanaku

— Wanaku Verdzev

Written in 2011; lightly edited for this book.

Vocabulary

Word or phrase	Meaning in the readings
elite	a small group with more power, wealth or education than most
disdain	contempt; a feeling that something is beneath you
hemisphere	half of the Earth
nationalism	strong loyalty to one's nation
sectarian	divided along group, often religious, lines
paradigm	a model or pattern of thinking
doldrums	a state of no progress
commodity	a raw material traded on world markets
infrastructure	basic systems such as roads, power and water
aid	help, often money, given by one country to another
self-reliance	depending on one's own efforts and resources
entrepreneur	a person who starts a business

Comprehension questions

Literal (find it in the text)

1. What does the author say is the only way to make a difference?
2. What would Europe and Africa have been called if the Chinese had conquered them, according to the author?
3. What task does the author set for African intellectuals?
4. Name two external factors the counterpoint says shape African economies.
5. Which programme does the counterpoint point out was itself "outside help"?

Inferential (read between the lines)

6. What does the author's comment about suits in a hot climate suggest about her view of the elite?
7. Why does the author think labels such as "East African" matter?
8. Why does the counterpoint say a farmer can work twice as hard and still earn less?
9. What does the counterpoint mean by "ownership is not the same as going it alone"?

Critical (evaluate and respond)

10. Which reading better explains why some countries are poorer than others? Use evidence from both.
 11. The author writes that there is "no magic". Does the counterpoint agree? Where do the two writers actually disagree?
 12. Research one African country's development since 2000. Which factors, internal or external, best explain its path?
-

Is there common ground?

Both writers agree that development requires work, planning and honest leadership, and that Africans must own their own development. Both reject "magic" solutions. Both admire the Marshall Plan.

They disagree about **emphasis**. The author puts the weight on internal effort, especially by elites, and on original African thinking. The counterpoint puts more weight on external conditions: trade rules, prices, debt and infrastructure.

A shared position might be: *African-led development, using African ideas and effort, with outside partnerships on African terms*. The question then becomes how to judge which partnerships help and which create dependence.

Debate and writing prompt

Debate motion: *This house believes that African countries need outside help to develop.*

- Divide the class into proposition and opposition. Each side must use at least two pieces of evidence from its reading and answer the other side's strongest point.
- After the debate, hold a vote, then discuss which arguments changed minds.

Writing task: (400–600 words) Write an opinion article for a newspaper titled "What Africa's young people need most". Take a position on the balance between hard work at home and outside help, and support it with evidence from both readings.

Further reading

- Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid* (2009).
- Jeffrey Sachs, *The End of Poverty* (2005).
- Ha-Joon Chang, *Kicking Away the Ladder* (2002), on how rich countries developed.

Issue 2.3 · Should Children First Learn to Read and Write in Their Home Language?

YES: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Cultural Amnesia, Not Imperialism* (2014) and *Literacy in Any Language* (2011–2014)

NO: Editorial counterpoint, *The Door to the Wider World* (written for this book)

Learning outcomes

After reading this issue, you should be able to:

1. Define literacy and explain the difference between speaking a language and being literate in it.
 2. Summarize the author's argument for mother-tongue literacy.
 3. Evaluate practical arguments about language policy in schools.
 4. Compare the goals of cultural preservation and economic opportunity.
 5. Write a proposal on language policy for a school you know.
-

Introduction

About a third of the world's roughly 7,000 languages are spoken in Africa. Most African children speak at least one language at home that is not the main language of their school. In many countries, formal schooling uses the language of the former colonial power (English, French or Portuguese), a policy that began in colonial times and often continued after independence.

UNESCO and many education researchers recommend **mother-tongue-based multilingual education**: teaching children to read and write first in a language they already understand, then adding other languages. Some countries have tried this. Ethiopia teaches primary school in many regional languages; Tanzania uses Swahili in primary school. Others have moved the other way, towards English or French from the first year, often because parents demand it.

The author of the YES readings, Wanaku Verdzekov, speaks itanjiKom, the language of the Kom Kingdom in north-west Cameroon. (Cameroon has around 250 languages, with English and French as official languages.) Text A answers a researcher who was recording oral traditions; Text B argues that literacy can happen in any language. Both refer to local languages of Cameroon (Ngemba, Lamso, itanjiKom) and Nigeria (Efik). Text B also recommends a 1933 book by the African American historian Carter G. Woodson, whose title uses the historical term “Negro”.

As you read, ask: *What is school for: to connect children to their own community, or to the wider world? Can it do both?*

YES: *Cultural Amnesia, Not Imperialism* (2014) and *Literacy in Any Language* (2011–2014)

Wanaku Verdzekov

Text A: Cultural Amnesia, Not Imperialism

Cultural imperialism? I'd say “cultural amnesia”. Check the budget allocation for “culture” in the governing systems of Sub-Saharan African states...

Maybe (just maybe) there is a lack of vision of what to really do “culturally”... or, even worse, a complete misunderstanding of what “culture” in the Sub-Saharan context should really be. The lack of a defined

cultural path for our various communities leaves a cultural space that gets devoured by a prowling, high-octane culture. Guess which one.

Replying to a researcher, Awoh Emmanuel:

Excellent idea! If you ask me, the gaping canyon in the health and quality of education of the masses in our region (considering our tribal heritages) is the disconnect between our precious oral traditions and the watered-down “Western-style” education currently in use (Anglophone or Francophone). That is just my opinion. And for the following simple reason: common sense is not common.

Consider this: if you or your brother or sister are very fluent in Ngemba (you speak it and understand it very well), and someone offers you an algebra class in Ngemba while another person offers you the same class in French or English, which will you take first? Remember that you are fluent in Ngemba, and tell me.

“Education” of the masses (if properly defined and contextualized) should, and must, consider the existing skill set of the target audience. Ignoring that is tantamount to throwing the baby out with the bath water. Refilling the bath with water does not bring back the baby that is already rolling in the potopoto.

My point is to stress the importance of what you are setting out to do: recording information about ourselves, our own people, our own ideas, thoughts, aspirations, philosophies and worldviews. You are helping to record our traditions and cultures, which so far have only been spoken. The transition from oral history to recorded history (still ongoing) is a difficult, painful one for most of our region.

It seems the ability to read and write is still considered an “elite” profession. Why? After more than half a century of post-colonial, try-it-yourself rule? Did we set the bar too high? As in: to educate the masses, ALL citizens have to learn to read, write and speak French, English or some other foreign language in order to be “educated”?

Then there is the question of what an “educated” citizen really is. If you ask me, an educated citizen can be the Baba or Nini who can calculate the square root of 16 in itaŋiKom without the help of a translator, or the stonemason in Kumbo who uses calculus principles learned in Lamso to work out the shape of the stone dome s/he is building to store grain after a bumper harvest.

Excuse my ramble, but our people are precious the way they are. It is just a question of having a clearly articulated vision of how to move from point A (where we are, who we are, what skills we have) to point B (where we all want, and are supposed, to be).

Your research is on point.

Wakikiki

Text B: Literacy in Any Language

When I mentioned to some people that “literacy” is important, not because it is an English word but because the concept can be applied to any language (call it a vernacular if you like), some said I was calling for a revolution.

Well, think about it. The one simple thing that actually changes brain cells from thinking one way to another is the ability to connect signs and symbols to words, sounds and meaning. That is why any civilization with literacy built into its culture seems to move faster than the rest. I have met Chinese people with PhDs who do not speak a word of English, French, German or any other Western language.

So, conclusion: my grandma in Migwachu can be totally “literate” in itaŋiKom, to the point where she can even do some algebra, without speaking a word of English (or any other Western language).

In my opinion, until we (Africans south of the Sahara) understand this simple concept and apply it locally in our different tribes (or places of origin), moving our people from point A to point B will not just be a

pipe dream; we will all get lost in the middle of the pipe and have to wait for a rescue squad (probably from the West again!).

TribalMonk

There are several ways to catch a mouse.

The problem we have is that everyone is so distracted and carried away by events far, far from home (the effect of globalization?) that attention to our own problems takes a back seat. Back in Migwachu, a young person is more interested in Jay-Z's or Beyoncé's new release, or P-Square's dance moves, than in figuring out how a quadratic equation can be expressed in, for example, Efik.

We have a whole class of educated people, but it is not translating into problem-solving on the ground. So what's the point of PhDs that cannot solve socio-economic and political problems?

Carter G. Woodson's 1933 book *The Mis-Education of the Negro* should be revisited by anyone concerned about the same trend simmering in Africa south of the Sahara. A review of the book puts it this way: "Mis-Education criticizes the system, and explains the vicious circle that results from mis-educated individuals graduating, then proceeding to teach and mis-educate others."

Excuse the ramble, but sometimes it's good to share thoughts. You never know.

— Wanaku Verdzekov

Text A was written in December 2014, Text B between 2011 and 2014. Both lightly edited for this book.

NO: The Door to the Wider World

EDITORIAL COUNTERPOINT

This essay was written for this textbook to present the opposing side fairly. It is not by Wanaku Verdzekov.

Wanaku Verdzekov makes a powerful case: a grandmother who can calculate in itaṅiKom is literate, and a child who learns algebra in the language they speak at home will understand it faster. Research supports part of this. But turning it into school policy is harder than it looks, and a home-language-first approach can close some doors even as it opens others.

Which home language?

In many African classrooms, especially in towns, children come from several language groups. A single class in Bamenda, Lagos or Nairobi might include speakers of five or ten languages. Which one should the first reading lessons use? Choosing one language can leave the others behind, and may even stir up rivalry between groups. English, French or a widely shared African language such as Swahili can be the one language every child in the room starts learning together.

Books, teachers and tests

Reading in a language requires books, a standard spelling system, trained teachers and exams. Many African languages have few printed books for children, and some have no agreed way of writing at all. Writing them down, printing them and training teachers takes years and money. Meanwhile, children must pass national exams, usually set in English or French. A child who learns to read only in a home language for several years may struggle when the switch comes, especially if the switch is sudden.

Parents often choose English or French

Many parents, including parents with little schooling, want their children taught in English or French from the start. They see these languages as the route to secondary school, university, jobs and the wider world. The author criticizes this as a kind of forgetting. But parents are not foolish: in many countries, the best-paid jobs, the courts and the internet still work mainly in these languages. Should schools overrule parents' choices?

A shared language can unite

After independence, some leaders chose a colonial language as the language of schooling precisely because it belonged to no single ethnic group. It could be shared by everyone. The author sees English and French as foreign. They are. But for many young Africans today, they are also the languages in which they meet friends from other regions, read the news and imagine a national future.

Home languages still matter

None of this means home languages should be ignored. Research gathered by UNESCO and others suggests that children often learn to read more easily in a language they already speak. The question is how to use that fact wisely: perhaps by teaching in both languages at once, using home languages to explain and English or French to read and write, so that no child is left behind in either.

Conclusion

The author is right that literacy is not an English word, and that African languages deserve respect. But a policy of “home language first” must answer hard questions: which language, with which books, taught by whom, and leading where? Until those questions are answered, the safer path is a bilingual classroom that opens both doors: the door home, and the door to the wider world.

— Editorial counterpoint

Vocabulary

Word or phrase	Meaning in the readings
amnesia	loss of memory
imperialism	one country's domination of others
oral tradition	knowledge passed on by speaking, not writing
contextualized	fitted to its setting
potopoto	Cameroonian Pidgin for mud
vernacular	the everyday spoken language of a place
literate	able to read and write
pipe dream	a hope that will never come true
mis-education	education that harms or misleads
mother tongue	the first language a person learns at home
bilingual	using two languages
standard spelling	an agreed way of writing a language

Comprehension questions**Literal (find it in the text)**

1. What does the author call the problem instead of “cultural imperialism”?
2. In Text A, in which language is the algebra class imagined?
3. Where does the author's grandmother live in Text B, and in what language could she be literate?
4. According to the counterpoint, what do parents often see English and French as?
5. What compromise does the counterpoint suggest at the end?

Inferential (read between the lines)

6. Why does the author say reading and writing are treated as “elite”?
7. What does the author mean by “throwing the baby out with the bath water” in education?

8. Why does the counterpoint say choosing one home language might “stir up rivalry”?
9. Why might a leader after independence have chosen a colonial language for schools?

Critical (evaluate and respond)

10. Which reading takes better account of the real conditions in schools? Explain.
 11. The author defines an educated person by skills, not by language. Do you agree? Write your own definition.
 12. In your country or school, which languages are used for teaching? Is that the right choice? Why?
-

Is there common ground?

Both writers agree that African languages deserve respect, that children learn best when they understand the language of instruction, and that literacy is more than English or French. Both want children to be able to succeed in the wider world.

They disagree about **priority and practicality**. The author wants literacy in the home language as the foundation, and sees the dominance of foreign languages as a form of cultural forgetting. The counterpoint worries about multilingual classrooms, a lack of books and teachers, exams, and parents’ wishes.

Common ground may lie in **bilingual education**: using the home language to explain and to begin reading, while adding English or French step by step, with investment in books and teachers for local languages.

Debate and writing prompt

Debate motion: *This house believes that all primary schools should teach reading and writing in the children’s home language first.*

- Divide the class into proposition and opposition. Each side must use at least two pieces of evidence from its reading and answer the other side’s strongest point.
- After the debate, hold a vote, then discuss which arguments changed minds.

Writing task: (400–600 words) Write a letter to your ministry of education proposing a language policy for the first three years of primary school. Explain which languages should be used, for what, and why. Answer at least one practical objection.

Further reading

- UNESCO, *If you don’t understand, how can you learn?* (Global Education Monitoring Report policy paper, 2016).
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind* (1986).
- Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933).

Issue 2.4 · Do Post-Independence African States Need Armies?

YES: Editorial counterpoint, *A State Must Be Able to Protect Its People* (written for this book)

NO: Wanaku Verdzekov, *African Armies: Killing Your Own People* (2011) and *Words for Peace: No Need for Armies* (2010)

Learning outcomes

After reading this issue, you should be able to:

1. Summarize the author's argument that African states do not need armies.
 2. Explain the idea of civilian control of the military.
 3. Evaluate examples such as Costa Rica and UN peacekeeping.
 4. Analyse how a poem and an essay make the same argument in different ways.
 5. Write a structured debate speech on national security.
-

Introduction

An **army** is a state's organized, trained and armed force for defence. In theory, it protects a country from outside attack. In practice, armies around the world have also been used against their own citizens, in coups, civil wars and repression of protests.

Since the 1950s, African countries have experienced more than 200 attempted **military coups**, around half of them successful. Many post-independence governments were overthrown by their own soldiers, and some countries lived under military rule for decades. Since 2020, a new wave of coups has taken place in West and Central Africa. At the same time, African armies have fought insurgent groups and have supplied large numbers of troops to **peacekeeping** missions of the United Nations and the African Union.

A few countries in the world have no army at all. The best known is **Costa Rica**, which abolished its army in 1948 and spends the money on education and health. Others, such as Iceland and several small island states, rely on police forces or defence agreements with larger countries.

The author of the NO readings, Wanaku Verdzekov, wrote Text A in April 2011, a year of upheaval in North Africa and conflict in parts of West Africa. Text B is an earlier set of limericks (five-line comic poems) on the same theme.

As you read, ask: *What is an army for? Who does it really protect?*

YES: A State Must Be Able to Protect Its People

EDITORIAL COUNTERPOINT

This essay was written for this textbook to present the opposing side fairly. It is not by Wanaku Verdzekov.

Wanaku Verdzekov asks the question that every citizen should ask about their army: who is it for? Too often in Africa's history, the answer has been the ruler rather than the people. Soldiers have fired on protesters, overthrown elected governments and looted the villages they were sent to protect. The author is right to be angry. But abolishing armies would not end these dangers. It would create new ones.

The threats are real

Several African states face armed groups that do not respect borders or human life. In the Sahel, in the Lake Chad region and in parts of East and Central Africa, militant groups have attacked villages, schools and markets, kidnapped students and killed thousands of civilians. Criminal networks traffic weapons,

drugs and people. A state with no organized, trained force would leave its citizens to face these groups alone, or depend on foreign troops, which the author would surely dislike even more.

Armies do more than fight

Soldiers are often the first to arrive after floods, droughts and epidemics, because they have the trucks, helicopters, engineers and discipline that emergencies need. African armies also contribute many of the troops in United Nations and African Union peacekeeping missions, helping to protect civilians in other countries. The author mentions peacekeeping only as a sign of failure. For the civilians protected in those missions, it can be the difference between life and death.

The Costa Rica example is special

Costa Rica abolished its army in 1948 and has remained peaceful, and its example is often cited. But Costa Rica still has a police force with some security units, it sits in a region where it has not faced a major armed insurgency, and it has relied on regional agreements for its defence. Very few countries have been able to follow its path. An African country bordered by active conflicts faces very different risks.

Fix the army, don't abolish it

The problem the author describes is not that armies exist, but that they have too often been controlled by rulers instead of by law. The solution is **civilian control**: armies that answer to elected parliaments, that are paid fairly and on time, that are trained in human rights, and whose soldiers can be put on trial for crimes. Ghana and Botswana, for example, have long records of armies staying out of politics. Reform is harder than abolition, but more realistic.

Who fills the gap?

If a state disbands its army, the guns do not disappear. Former soldiers may join militias or criminal gangs. Neighbouring states may be tempted to take advantage. Private security companies may sell protection to those who can pay. A weak state is not a peaceful state; it is an empty space that others will fill.

Conclusion

The author is right that an army turned against its own people is a betrayal of the nation. But the answer to a betrayed trust is to rebuild that trust, with laws, courts and democratic control, not to leave citizens defenceless. Africa's people deserve armies that protect them, not armies that frighten them, and no army at all may leave them with something worse.

— Editorial counterpoint

NO: African Armies: Killing Your Own People (2011) and Words for Peace: No Need for Armies (2010)

Wanaku Verdzekov

Text A: African Armies: Killing Your Own People

Question: Do post-independence African nations need armies?

It seems like a topic for a citizens' debate. And here is the side I fall on: no need for armies.

What? you might say.

Repeat: no need for armies.

Why?

Question: who are you going to fight or kill? Other Africans? Your own citizens? Who?

Well, that has been the history of the past half century: armies to fight, kill, maim, rape, destroy and blow up Africans, your own people, your brothers and sisters. As long as there are armies, there will be an excuse to put the training and hardware to use, even against your own people.

Yes, we need an army to fight... who again? The US, UK, France, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Italy, China, Australia, Brazil...? Yeah? Really?

If you really think about it, the most likely reason an African nation's army will go into active duty is, first of all, against its own people. A remote second possibility is being called up by the on-and-off African Union to do some peacekeeping in another African nation whose army has, again, turned on its own people.

Now if you look at the issue from every angle, you might conclude (like me) that starting an arms race on the African continent (if it has not already started) is a silly, dumb, stupid and nonsensical idea, for this simple reason: who are you going to fight or kill?

Answer: your own people. AFRICANS.

If at any point in the history of a so-called nation an armed section of the community begins to butcher the rest of the people, then the whole concept of "nationhood" is in the balance. If you need an army to make people belong to a so-called "nation", then there is something viscerally wrong with the foundation of that nation. And that something needs re-examining going forward. Under normal circumstances (some may differ on what is "normal"), there is no need for an army, especially when a lot of people cannot even afford three square meals a day.

By the way, if you are already in one of these African armies, please *think* before you pull the trigger. You might be committing fratricide (you know what that means?).

Blessings

~wv

Text B: Words for Peace: No Need for Armies

In Africa's lands wide and grand,
They build armies to take a stand,
But who do they fight?
Their own, day and night:
It's time that we all understand.

These soldiers, they march with pride,
But often, they're on the wrong side.
Not foes from afar,
But neighbours they scar,
With nowhere for citizens to hide.

Why spend on these guns and these tanks,
When hunger lines stretch with no thanks?
Let's feed every mouth,
And turn lives around,
Put peace and not war in our ranks.

So, think hard before you enlist,
When violence is top of the list.
Your target's not foes,
But those that you know:
It's a truth we can no longer dismiss.

TM

— Wanaku Verdzev

Text A was written in April 2011; the poem in Text B is dated October 2010. Both lightly edited for this book.

Vocabulary

Word or phrase	Meaning in the readings
post-independence	after a country becomes independent
maim	to injure seriously
hardware	military equipment
peacekeeping	keeping peace with international troops
arms race	competition between states to build up weapons
nationhood	being a nation with a shared identity
fratricide	killing one's brother, or one's own people
enlist	to join the armed forces
coup	a sudden, illegal seizure of power, often by soldiers
insurgency	an armed rebellion against a government
civilian control	armed forces answering to elected civilian leaders
militia	an armed group that is not part of a regular army

Comprehension questions

Literal (find it in the text)

1. What question opens Text A?
2. Which countries does the author list as unlikely enemies?
3. What does the poem say money should be spent on instead of guns and tanks?
4. In what year did Costa Rica abolish its army?
5. What solution does the counterpoint propose instead of abolition?

Inferential (read between the lines)

6. Why does the author say that needing an army to hold a nation together shows something is wrong with its foundation?
7. Why does the author mention people who cannot afford three meals a day?
8. Why does the counterpoint say the Costa Rica example is “special”?
9. What does the counterpoint mean by “a weak state is not a peaceful state”?

Critical (evaluate and respond)

10. Which reading better answers the question “Who is the army for?” Explain using evidence.
11. Compare the essay and the poem. Which is more persuasive, and why?
12. Research one country that has reformed its military after a period of abuse. What changed?

Is there common ground?

Both writers agree that too many African armies have been turned against their own people, and that this is a deep betrayal. Both put citizens' lives and needs (food, safety) at the centre. The counterpoint grants the author's anger; the author would presumably welcome an army that truly answered to the people.

They disagree about **the remedy**. The author sees armies as the problem: as long as they exist, they will be used against citizens. The counterpoint sees unaccountable armies as the problem, and argues for reform and civilian control.

Possible common ground: **smaller, accountable forces** focused on disaster response, border security and peacekeeping; strict civilian control; and more spending on the needs the author names, such as food and education.

Debate and writing prompt

Debate motion: *This house believes that post-independence African states do not need armies.*

- Divide the class into proposition and opposition. Each side must use at least two pieces of evidence from its reading and answer the other side's strongest point.
- After the debate, hold a vote, then discuss which arguments changed minds.

Writing task: (400–600 words) Write a speech for or against the debate motion, as if delivering it to your national parliament. Use at least two pieces of evidence from the readings and respond to the strongest argument on the other side.

Further reading

- Óscar Arias, speeches on Costa Rica's demilitarization (Nobel Peace Prize lecture, 1987).
- African Union, documents on the African Peace and Security Architecture (au.int).
- Jonathan Powell and Clayton Thyne, "Global instances of coups from 1950 to 2010", *Journal of Peace Research* (2011).

UNIT 3

Unit 3 — The Cameroons: History, Freedom and Institutions

Issue 3.1 · Was Oil the Main Cause of the Cameroons' Troubles?

YES: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Trouble in the Armpit of Africa: The Cameroons Puzzle?* (excerpt, c. 2016)

NO: Editorial counterpoint, *Many Roots, Not One Pipeline* (written for this book)

Learning outcomes

After reading this issue, you should be able to:

1. Place key events in Cameroon's history on a timeline.
 2. Distinguish between facts that can be checked and interpretations.
 3. Explain the idea of the "resource curse".
 4. Evaluate single-cause and multi-cause explanations of history.
 5. Write a historical argument that uses dates as evidence.
-

Introduction

If you are new to the Cameroons. Cameroon is a country in Central Africa, on the Gulf of Guinea, bordering Nigeria. It was a German colony from 1884. After the First World War it was divided: about four-fifths went to France and one-fifth, on the Nigerian border, to Britain. The British part was run together with Nigeria. In 1961, after a UN vote, the northern part of the British territory joined Nigeria and the southern part ("Southern Cameroons") joined the newly independent, French-speaking Republic of Cameroun in a federation. In 1972 the federation was replaced by a single, centralized state. Today, English is the main official language in the two western regions and French in the other eight. Since 2016, a conflict in the English-speaking regions has pitted separatist groups, who call the territory "Ambazonia", against government forces. See **Appendix A** for a full timeline.

Oil and politics. Oil was discovered in commercial quantities in the Niger Delta, in neighbouring Nigeria, in 1956. Nigeria's civil war (1967–1970), in which the south-eastern region tried to break away as "Biafra", took place in an oil-rich area and cost around a million lives, many from famine. Cameroon began producing its own oil, offshore near the Nigerian border, in the late 1970s. The border area of **Bakassi**, rich in fish and possibly oil, was disputed by Nigeria and Cameroon until the International Court of Justice ruled in Cameroon's favour in 2002.

Economists use the term **resource curse** for the pattern in which countries rich in oil or minerals often suffer more corruption, conflict and slower growth than might be expected, because governments can get rich without relying on their citizens.

The author, Wanaku Verdzekov, supports self-rule for the former Southern Cameroons. Her timeline argues that oil, and the interests of Britain and France in it, shaped the region's politics. Many of its interpretations are marked "my opinion". As you read, separate the dated facts from the interpretations.

As you read, ask: *Can one cause explain a whole history? How would you test that?*

YES: *Trouble in the Armpit of Africa: The Cameroons Puzzle?* (excerpt, c. 2016)

Wanaku Verdzekov

A little history (so we don't repeat the mistakes).

[...]

Now to business... OIL!

1937 – Shell D'Arcy starts business in Nigeria. Shell (Royal Dutch Shell plc) is an Anglo-Dutch multinational oil and gas company, headquartered in the Netherlands and incorporated in the UK. Note the connection between Shell (Anglo-Dutch) and Nigeria (a British colony).

World War II

1939 – WWII begins (1 September 1939 – 2 September 1945).

1945 – WWII ends. The United Nations is established. The United States, the Soviet Union, China, the United Kingdom and France become the permanent members of the UN Security Council.

UPC: the first political party in French Cameroun

1948 – In French Cameroun (remember? a French territory since 1918), a political party called the Union of the Peoples of Cameroon (UPC) is formed. It leads the fight for independence, becomes radical, and is outlawed by the French for resorting to violence.

[...]

Oil is discovered in the Niger Delta: game-changing

1956 – Oloibiri Well #1 is drilled in June 1956 to a depth of 12,000 feet. Oil is discovered by Shell in Oloibiri, in the Niger Delta.

1958 – Oil exports begin.

KEEP THIS IN MIND AS YOU READ.

Southern British Cameroons elects its second Premier, J.N. Foncha

1959 – As Cameroun and Nigeria prepare for independence, Southern British Cameroons nationalists debate whether their best interests lie in union with Cameroun, union with Nigeria, or total independence. On 1 February, Endeley is defeated in elections by John Ngu Foncha.

French Cameroun and Nigeria become independent

1960 – 1 January: French Cameroun becomes independent.

1960 – 1 October: Nigeria gains independence from Britain.

1960 – 3 November: Félix-Roland Moumié, the UPC leader, dies in Geneva, Switzerland, poisoned a few weeks earlier. Assassinated, even in exile! Remember that.

The big question

French Cameroun is independent, and Nigeria is independent. What is the status of the British Cameroons? Talk, talk, talk...

1961 – 11 February: the UN plebiscite. The ballot offers two choices only: independence by joining Nigeria, or independence by joining Cameroun. Total independence is NOT on the ballot. Northern British Cameroons votes to join Nigeria; Southern British Cameroons votes to join Cameroun.

1961 – 1 June: the mostly Muslim Northern British Cameroons formally becomes part of Nigeria.

Foumban: Southern British Cameroons meets French Cameroun

1961 – 17–21 July: the Foumban Constitutional Conference. The plebiscite has already decided “independence by joining”; Foumban is supposed to settle the terms of the joining. Instead, Southern British Cameroons is bamboozled by Ahidjo, the French Cameroun leader, and his team of French lawyers. The Southern British Cameroons representatives, led by John Ngu Foncha (Premier since 1959), are literally run over. The terms are a done deal before anyone sits down.

1961 – 1 October: the mostly Christian Southern British Cameroons gains independence from Britain... by joining...

But hold on! Independence “by joining” a country in a CIVIL WAR?

Here is where things start to get interesting for the citizens of Southern [British] Cameroons. Southern [British] Cameroons gained independence by joining [French] Cameroun, which at the time had an ongoing civil war between the French Cameroun government and members of the UPC, formed in 1948.

A lot of people died in French Cameroun during what is sometimes referred to as a genocide. The French, and the French Cameroun government led by Ahmadou Ahidjo, did some really bad and despicable things to the citizens of French Cameroun, especially UPC members, forcing their leaders either to flee or to be summarily killed, even in exile!

So why? Why all the killing? That is the question. What would really move a human's muscles to twitch and consciously harm another? There must be a reason. Let's find out.

The root cause of the current dysfunction in the Cameroons

Here we are trying to put a finger on the root cause of the dysfunction in our own state, the State of Southern [British] Cameroons, in the current configuration of the Cameroons.

Big players in the sub-region: still Britain and France. The UN... maybe? So far, the big players in this sub-region after the world wars were Britain and France, with the UN a weak third (my opinion). Colonization, decolonization and post-colonial activity sound like politics, but in fact they are mostly about economics (my opinion).

Remember the oil discovered at Oloibiri in 1956? Shell, the Anglo-Dutch company, could only expand its production (and revenues). To the French, in full control of French Cameroun, Shell was “Britain” (my opinion). The discovery seemed like a windfall for Britain. Wouldn't the French want a piece of the oil pie too?

[...]

All hell breaks loose: the Nigerian Civil War

1967 – From July 1967 to January 1970: the south-eastern region of Nigeria breaks away and declares itself independent as Biafra. This is the same region where 13 Southern Cameroons representatives sat in the Eastern Nigeria House of Assembly in Enugu, before “independence by joining” French Cameroun. Britain backs the Nigerian government of Yakubu Gowon. Why? [Think Shell.]

[...]

Cameroun: another sledgehammer referendum

1972 – The Federal Republic of Cameroon becomes the United Republic of Cameroon through another sledgehammer referendum, code-named the “Peaceful Revolution” by Ahidjo.

[...]

Oil: the trigger for trouble?

It is obvious at this point that the trigger for major political change in this sub-region was, and is, oil. It is most probably why the children of the State of Southern British Cameroons are restless about the present and the future. Economic power supersedes political power, it seems.

One cannot eat oil. One cannot drink oil. To imagine the number of our people who have died just so oil can be extracted does not seem like a sustainable plan, at least to me. I think the oil can be extracted and people can still live. So why so much killing? How can one explain this so that even a child can understand?

It seems the French gave Ahidjo a goal: “Do all you can to assimilate the State of British Southern Cameroons into the French African ecosystem, and you can stay in power for as long as we can suck some of that black juice from under Mount Fako.” Biya might be getting the same instructions as we speak. Why would France still be interested in the “Armpit of Africa”, from the Niger Delta to Rio del Rey, even though Shell (or now mostly the Nigerian government) controls most of the Niger Delta's oil?

[...]

You may be asking yourself: is Biya in a similar situation?

Answer: smell the coffee. Potopoto flows from upstream to downstream. Do you think the wicked foot soldiers of the Cameroun government are acting on their own, or on some kind of professional principle? Think again.

We've got work to do, people. And it does not get easier.

Just remember: we cannot eat or drink oil.

TribalMonk

PS: Any mistakes or typos are mine. Please feel free to inform and educate on any details, respectfully. I will update as necessary.

— Wanaku Verdzekov

Written after November 2016; this excerpt covers 1937–1972 and the author's closing argument. Dates have been checked and corrected. [...] marks a cut.

NO: Many Roots, Not One Pipeline

EDITORIAL COUNTERPOINT

This essay was written for this textbook to present the opposing side fairly. It is not by Wanaku Verdzekov.

Wanaku Verdzekov's timeline is a brave attempt to find a single thread in a tangled history. Oil is a good candidate: it is valuable, it was discovered in the region at a key moment, and foreign companies and governments have certainly cared about it. But a single cause rarely explains a whole history. When we look closely at the dates and at other evidence, oil turns out to be one strand in a rope of many.

The timing does not fit neatly

The key decisions that shaped the Cameroons came before Cameroon itself produced oil. The division of Kamerun after the First World War happened long before oil was found in the region. The 1961 plebiscite, which offered Southern Cameroons only two choices (joining Nigeria or joining Cameroun), was set by the United Nations and Britain. Cameroon's own oil production did not begin until the late 1970s, after the federation had already been replaced in 1972. Oil may have raised the stakes later, but it cannot easily explain decisions made before anyone was pumping it.

Language, law and identity mattered

The English-speaking and French-speaking parts of Cameroon had forty years of separate colonial rule. They had different languages, legal systems (common law and civil law), school systems and habits of government. When they joined, these differences did not disappear. Many of the grievances behind the protests of 2016, by lawyers against French-trained judges and by teachers against French-speaking staff in English schools, were about language, law and education, not oil.

Power and centralization

After independence, many African leaders concentrated power in the capital and in a single party. Cameroon's leaders did the same. Replacing a federation with a unitary state in 1972 fitted a pattern seen across the continent, where rulers feared that regions with their own governments might challenge them. A desire for control can explain centralization without any oil at all.

The Cold War and France's wider policy

France kept close ties with most of its former colonies, through military agreements, advisers and the CFA franc. It did this in countries with little oil as well as in countries with a lot. The Cold War also shaped decisions: Western powers preferred stable, friendly governments and feared radical movements such as the UPC. These wider interests explain much of France's behaviour in Cameroon.

Oil still matters

None of this means oil is irrelevant. Oil revenues help keep governments in power, and control of oil-rich areas such as the Bakassi peninsula has caused disputes (Nigeria and Cameroon took Bakassi to the International Court of Justice, which ruled in Cameroon's favour in 2002). Economists speak of a "resource curse", where oil wealth can feed corruption and conflict. But a curse that makes a problem worse is not the same as the cause of the problem.

Conclusion

The author asks us to keep oil "in mind" as we read, and it is a useful lens. But good historians follow many trails at once. The troubles of the Cameroons have roots in colonial division, United Nations decisions, language and law, the centralization of power, the Cold War and, yes, oil. To pull on only one root is to risk missing the others.

— Editorial counterpoint

Vocabulary

Word or phrase	Meaning in the readings
partition	division into parts
mandate	authority given by the League of Nations to govern a territory
multinational	operating in many countries
autonomous	self-governing
premier	head of a regional government
plebiscite	a direct vote by all citizens on one question
bamboozle	to trick or confuse
secede	to break away from a state
referendum	a vote on a single political question
windfall	an unexpected gain
assimilate	to absorb into a larger group
centralization	concentrating power in one central authority
resource curse	the pattern of resource-rich countries suffering corruption and conflict

Comprehension questions**Literal (find it in the text)**

1. When and where was oil discovered by Shell, according to the timeline?
2. What two choices were on the 1961 plebiscite ballot?
3. What change took place in Cameroon in 1972?
4. According to the counterpoint, when did Cameroon's own oil production begin?
5. What did the International Court of Justice decide about Bakassi in 2002?

Inferential (read between the lines)

6. Why does the author write "KEEP THIS IN MIND AS YOU READ" after the oil discovery?
7. What link does the author suggest between Britain's support for Nigeria and Shell?
8. Why does the counterpoint say the timing "does not fit neatly"?

9. What is the difference between a cause of a problem and something that makes it worse, according to the counterpoint?

Critical (evaluate and respond)

10. Make two lists from the YES reading: facts that could be checked, and interpretations. Which interpretation do you find most and least convincing?
11. Is it more useful for a historian to look for one main cause or many? Use this issue as an example.
12. If “total independence” had been on the 1961 ballot, how might history have changed? Explain your reasoning.
-

Is there common ground?

Both writers agree that oil matters to the region, that foreign powers have had interests there, and that the 1961 plebiscite and the 1972 change to a unitary state were turning points. The counterpoint accepts that oil revenues and the Bakassi dispute have shaped politics.

They disagree about **how much weight** oil should carry. The author sees oil as the trigger behind many decisions. The counterpoint sees many causes: colonial division, UN decisions, language and law, centralization and the Cold War, with oil as one of them.

A historian might say both are asking the right question from different angles: *Who benefited from each decision?* is a good test, and sometimes the answer will be oil, and sometimes power, language or ideology.

Debate and writing prompt

Debate motion: *This house believes that oil, more than any other factor, explains the troubles of the Cameroons.*

- Divide the class into proposition and opposition. Each side must use at least two pieces of evidence from its reading and answer the other side’s strongest point.
- After the debate, hold a vote, then discuss which arguments changed minds.

Writing task: (500–700 words) Choose one turning point from the timeline (for example the 1961 plebiscite or the 1972 referendum). Write a short historical essay explaining its causes. Use at least three dates as evidence and weigh at least two different causes.

Further reading

- Appendix A of this book: *The Cameroons: A Timeline, 1884–2020*.
- Michael Ross, *The Oil Curse* (2012).
- International Court of Justice, *Land and Maritime Boundary between Cameroon and Nigeria*, judgment of 10 October 2002.

Issue 3.2 · Does Freedom Depend on a Strong National Government?

YES: Editorial counterpoint, *Freedom Needs a Strong Centre, Too* (written for this book)

NO: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Doctrine of Freedom in the Cameroons Crisis* (2024)

Learning outcomes

After reading this issue, you should be able to:

1. Explain the author's "Doctrine of Freedom" and the idea of self-rule.
 2. Define decentralization, federalism and subsidiarity.
 3. Evaluate when local and when national government is better suited to a task.
 4. Identify claims that need evidence in a persuasive essay.
 5. Write a reasoned argument about how power should be shared.
-

Introduction

If you are new to the Cameroons. Cameroon is a country in Central Africa, on the Gulf of Guinea, bordering Nigeria. It was a German colony from 1884. After the First World War it was divided: about four-fifths went to France and one-fifth, on the Nigerian border, to Britain. The British part was run together with Nigeria. In 1961, after a UN vote, the northern part of the British territory joined Nigeria and the southern part ("Southern Cameroons") joined the newly independent, French-speaking Republic of Cameroun in a federation. In 1972 the federation was replaced by a single, centralized state. Today, English is the main official language in the two western regions and French in the other eight. Since 2016, a conflict in the English-speaking regions has pitted separatist groups, who call the territory "Ambazonia", against government forces. See **Appendix A** for a full timeline.

Local and national power. Around the world, countries share power between central and local government in different ways. In a **unitary state**, most power sits with the central government. In a **federation** (such as Nigeria, the United States or Switzerland), regions have constitutionally protected powers. **Decentralization** means moving powers and money from the centre to regions or municipalities. The European Union uses the principle of **subsidiarity**: decisions should be taken as close to citizens as possible. In 2019, Cameroon passed a law giving the two English-speaking regions a "special status" and more regional powers; critics said it did not go far enough.

The author, Wanaku Verdzekov, supports self-rule for the former Southern Cameroons. In this 2024 essay she argues that freedom begins with citizens taking responsibility at their own doorstep, and that arguments about language and marginalization distract from this.

As you read, ask: *Which problems are best solved by a family or village, and which need a national government?*

YES: Freedom Needs a Strong Centre, Too

EDITORIAL COUNTERPOINT

This essay was written for this textbook to present the opposing side fairly. It is not by Wanaku Verdzekov.

Wanaku Verdzekov's essay has a simple and attractive message: freedom starts at your own doorstep. No government will sweep your yard, so take responsibility and govern yourselves. There is wisdom in this. Communities that organize themselves solve many problems faster than any distant ministry. But

freedom that stops at the village boundary is fragile. It also needs things that only a strong, fair central state can provide.

Rights need protectors beyond the village

Local communities are not always free inside. A chief, a wealthy family or a majority group can abuse a minority, a woman, a stranger or a critic, and local institutions may take their side. In such cases, the victim needs somewhere else to turn: a national court, a constitution, a human-rights commission. In the United States, for example, it took federal courts and national laws in the 1950s and 1960s to end racial segregation that some states defended as their local right. Local self-rule without national protection can become local oppression.

Some problems are bigger than any community

Many of the things that make freedom possible, such as vaccines, highways, electricity grids, a stable currency and defence against armed groups, work only at a large scale. A village can sweep its yard but cannot build a hospital that trains surgeons, or negotiate trade deals. In other Rambles, the author calls for Ambazonia to have its own currency and central bank, which shows that even self-rule needs strong shared institutions above the local level.

Language and marginalization are not just distractions

The author calls arguments about English and French, and about marginalization, “smokescreens”. But for many citizens they are the substance of freedom. If you cannot read the law that governs you, speak to a judge in your own language, or get a fair chance at a government job, you are not fully free, however well your village runs its affairs. These grievances were at the heart of the 2016 protests by lawyers and teachers. Fixing them requires national reform, not only local initiative.

Local power can be captured

Decentralization often hands power to local elites rather than to ordinary people. Studies of local government in many countries have found that when money and power are moved to regions, local politicians can become as corrupt as national ones, with less media attention and fewer checks. Self-rule needs transparency, elections, courts and a free press at every level.

Balance, not choice

Many successful countries combine strong local self-government with a strong centre. Switzerland’s cantons and communes decide a great deal for themselves, but the federal state protects rights, runs the army and manages the currency. The principle of **subsidiarity**, used in the European Union, says decisions should be taken at the lowest level that can handle them well, and at higher levels when they cannot.

Conclusion

Freedom does begin at the doorstep, as the author says. But it does not end there. A person is free when their village lets them live as they choose *and* when a fair state stands behind them if their village does not. Self-rule and a strong, just centre are partners, not rivals.

— Editorial counterpoint

NO: Doctrine of Freedom in the Cameroons Crisis (2024)

Wanaku Verdzekov

At the end of each day, for every citizen, whether they realize it or not, the Doctrine of Freedom is rooted in self-rule.

Once citizens understand that no one, not even the government, is coming to:

- sweep their yard,
- cut the grass on their farms,

- protect or preserve their sources of food and water,
- design or build their homes,
- make comfortable beds for their children...

once they grasp that it is their right to make decisions for themselves as a:

- family,
- community,
- district,
- state, nation, tribe or kingdom,

it becomes clear that what really matters is self-rule.

This understanding renders many other arguments in the Cameroons crisis moot:

- English vs French divisions,
- accusations of marginalization,
- appointments to government posts.

These issues pale beside the fundamental need to regain the power of self-rule, starting from each citizen's doorstep and extending into the community and national spaces. Real freedom begins at home. That's why politics, at its core, is local.

Of course, some people might be seeking something different. That's their concern. It does not change the essential truth about self-rule: citizens taking responsibility for their own welfare and deciding how they want to govern themselves.

If this doesn't happen, then expect to be ruled by others. That reflects a lack of confidence in citizens' ability to manage their own "business". When a people cannot manage their own affairs, others (who can) will. That's exactly what happened during colonization, and it continues today.

It is unfortunate that some communities still have self-governing systems that are now mere skeletons, weakened because colonial systems dismantled them, pillaged resources and replaced them with foreign institutions. These colonial structures have prolonged colonization, physically and mentally, to the point where the Doctrine of Freedom seems like something to import from overseas.

Breaking news: freedom is at every citizen's doorstep. We simply need to pick it up, dust off the colonial years, and move forward.

Colonization is not a charitable act; colonization is slavery.

The antidote to all forms of colonial tendency is self-rule: real self-rule, not a pretend post-colonial fanfare of sandcastle projects. Every human is capable of self-rule. It's not as complicated as some might make it seem. It comes down to a family, a people or a community enabling themselves to live as decently as they see fit, within their own means.

The idea that a benefactor will descend from the sky and magically solve a community's problems is a pipe dream. It won't happen.

In conclusion, the struggles of the people of the formerly colonized British Southern Cameroons, now under the French system of the former French Cameroun government, present different realities for different people. Some explain the fighting, killing, looting, stealing, rape, arrests and imprisonments by pointing to issues like French vs English, or the marginalization of Anglophones.

But these are distractions: smokescreens hiding the true power that citizens need to reclaim from the remnants of colonial control. Many African countries have not yet moved away from the systems and institutions that colonized them.

This leads to the question: who is ruling whom, again?

Refrain: the Doctrine of Freedom begins at the doorstep, with self-rule. Most local communities already have the framework in place. They just need to nourish it, and it will thrive.

Before you leave home in the morning, ask yourself: are you free? Are you self-governing? Is your community ruling itself?

If not, why not?

The Doctrine of Freedom is a state of mind.

— Wanaku Verdzekov

Written in September 2024; lightly edited for this book.

Vocabulary

Word or phrase	Meaning in the readings
doctrine	a set of beliefs or principles
self-rule	governing oneself or one's own community
moot	no longer worth arguing about
marginalization	pushing a group away from power and resources
pillage	to steal by force
antidote	something that cures or counteracts
benefactor	someone who gives help or money
smokescreen	something that hides the truth
decentralization	moving power from the centre to local levels
segregation	forced separation of groups, especially by race
subsidiarity	taking decisions at the lowest level able to handle them
canton	a self-governing region of Switzerland

Comprehension questions

Literal (find it in the text)

1. Where, according to the author, is the Doctrine of Freedom rooted?
2. Which arguments does the author say become “moot”?
3. What does the author say colonization is?
4. What example from the United States does the counterpoint give?
5. Which country does the counterpoint give as an example of balancing local and central power?

Inferential (read between the lines)

6. Why does the author say “politics, at its core, is local”?
7. According to the author, what happens when a people cannot manage their own affairs?
8. Why does the counterpoint mention the author's wish for an Ambazonian central bank?
9. Why does the counterpoint say language grievances are “the substance of freedom” for many citizens?

Critical (evaluate and respond)

10. Make a list of five public services. For each, decide whether it is best run by a village, a region or a nation. Explain your choices.

11. Is the author right that language and marginalization are distractions? Use evidence from the introduction and both readings.
 12. Write your own one-sentence “doctrine of freedom”. Explain it.
-

Is there common ground?

Both writers agree that citizens should take responsibility, that distant governments cannot solve every local problem, and that colonial-style centralized systems have caused harm. The counterpoint accepts that “freedom does begin at the doorstep”.

They disagree about **whether local self-rule is enough**. The author treats it as the heart of freedom, with other issues as distractions. The counterpoint argues that freedom also needs national protections, large-scale services and attention to language and fairness.

A middle ground is the principle of **subsidiarity**: local communities decide what they can handle well, while a fair national framework protects rights and delivers what only scale can deliver.

Debate and writing prompt

Debate motion: *This house believes that freedom depends on a strong national government.*

- Divide the class into proposition and opposition. Each side must use at least two pieces of evidence from its reading and answer the other side’s strongest point.
- After the debate, hold a vote, then discuss which arguments changed minds.

Writing task: (400–600 words) Write an essay titled “What freedom means in my community”. Describe one problem your community solved itself, and one it could not solve without a larger government. Use the readings to explain what that shows about freedom.

Further reading

- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835), on local self-government.
- Council of Europe, *European Charter of Local Self-Government* (1985).
- International Crisis Group, reports on Cameroon’s Anglophone crisis (crisisgroup.org).

Issue 3.3 · Do Strong Institutions Matter More Than Strong Leaders?

YES: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Institutions of AMBAZONIA?* (2023)

NO: Editorial counterpoint, *Institutions Are Built by People* (written for this book)

Learning outcomes

After reading this issue, you should be able to:

1. Define an institution and name the main types of social institution.
 2. Explain the author's argument that institutions outlast individuals.
 3. Evaluate examples of leaders who built or weakened institutions.
 4. Analyse how a writer uses a memorable image ("cook beans for GrandMa").
 5. Write an argument about leadership and institutions in a community you know.
-

Introduction

If you are new to the Cameroons. Cameroon is a country in Central Africa, on the Gulf of Guinea, bordering Nigeria. It was a German colony from 1884. After the First World War it was divided: about four-fifths went to France and one-fifth, on the Nigerian border, to Britain. The British part was run together with Nigeria. In 1961, after a UN vote, the northern part of the British territory joined Nigeria and the southern part ("Southern Cameroons") joined the newly independent, French-speaking Republic of Cameroun in a federation. In 1972 the federation was replaced by a single, centralized state. Today, English is the main official language in the two western regions and French in the other eight. Since 2016, a conflict in the English-speaking regions has pitted separatist groups, who call the territory "Ambazonia", against government forces. See **Appendix A** for a full timeline.

Institutions and "strongmen". Sociologists define **institutions** as lasting structures that organize social life. They commonly name five main types: political, educational, economic, family and religious. In politics, the word also refers to bodies such as parliaments, courts, election commissions and the civil service.

In a 2009 speech to Ghana's parliament, US President Barack Obama said that "Africa doesn't need strongmen, it needs strong institutions". The phrase became famous and much debated. Supporters cite countries where leaders stayed in power for decades while courts and parliaments were weakened. Critics point to leaders who built strong institutions, and to countries with strong-looking institutions that did little in practice.

The author, Wanaku Verdzekov, supports self-rule for the former Southern Cameroons. She calls it by the name its supporters use, AMBAZONIA, and calls the Cameroonian state LRC (for *La République du Cameroun*). She argues that dismantling local institutions after 1972 left a "trust vacuum" that no individual can fill.

As you read, ask: *When something goes wrong in a school, a club or a country, is it usually the people or the system?*

YES: *Institutions of AMBAZONIA?* (2023)

Wanaku Verdzekov

“Humans come and go. Institutions last much longer.”

What does this mean for AMBAZONIA? Answer: everything.

For the past century, our people have been thrown and tossed from one authority to another, and in the meantime the very foundations of our indigenous Ambazonian communities have been deliberately dismantled or thrown into disarray.

Another 40 years in the desert?

Without pointing accusing fingers at Portugal, Germany, Britain or France (and its proxy agent, LRC), the citizens of AMBAZONIA need to recognize the problem in order to analyze and solve it. Absent that, we could be in our own man-made desert for another 40 years.

Was colonization a civilization?

Many colonized Africans grew up assuming that Europeans colonized the people of the “Dark Continent” to bring them “light”. Or, as some African elites thought (and still think), that colonization was a civilizing mission by European agents slicing and dicing land in Africa for themselves. How long has it taken for at least a few Africans to realize that was not the case?

Colonial institutions that have little to do with community members’ lives

British Southern Cameroons, aka AMBAZONIA, has been in conflict with French Cameroun, aka LRC, since 2016. Moreover, this conflict has been apparent since 1961, with a UN-approved experiment to put two formerly colonized African states (colonized by different European states, Britain and France) into one state, for reasons that today make no logical or common sense.

And the kicker is that the current UN dispensation avoids revisiting this issue like the plague. The result: conflict, loss of human life and the perpetuated suffering of the people of British Southern Cameroons, aka AMBAZONIA, under a regime whose institutions have little to do with the daily lives of these communities.

Institutions vs individuals

The simplest trick in the book, from the get-go, was for LRC to dismantle the institutions that held the citizens of British Southern Cameroons together as one unit, one people.

The question citizens may ask is: what is an institution (in the context of Ambazonia)?

AMBAZONIA: left with nothing!

Fact: Ambazonia was colonized (you cannot “uncolonize” it or just forget that it was). So citizens have to deal with past colonial rule, the institutions used to colonize, and also the individuals and positions within those institutions.

But guess what: once LRC took down any and every Ambazonian institution, the positions available to the individuals who ran them were taken down too, leaving NOTHING.

As a reference point, it helps to look at a few definitions of institutions and their importance in “society”. [This points to sociology, whose experts can give more meaning to the chaos in the Cameroons in general, and in British Southern Cameroons, aka AMBAZONIA, in particular, in order to help our people.]

What are the five main types of social institution? The five major institutions in sociology are political, educational, economic, family and religion.

As a citizen of Ambazonia, try to picture which Ambazonian institutions fit these descriptions. Of course, other categories of institutions can be created, or already exist, but the point here is this: when a community of people is organized for success, these institutions are as stable as a rock, providing consistency in policy and a place for younger citizens to bank their hopes.

What if s/he gets hit by a bus?

Absent that, relying on an individual raises the question: what if s/he gets hit by a bus? Then what? Find another workhorse?

The smart thing humans do, and have done for millennia, is create and maintain solid institutions, and protect them as if the life of the community depended on it.

The struggle keeps going in recursive circles

We are witnessing the dismantling of institutions in AMBAZONIA, for reasons I still cannot explain to the younger generation. If these institutions are not rebuilt, let no citizen wonder why the “struggle” keeps going round in recursive circles.

Trust vacuum

REPEAT: the dismantling and breakdown of institutions in Ambazonia creates a TRUST VACUUM that can only be filled by a REDO of those institutions. Again, why are institutions important? No matter what political leverage an individual or group has in AMBAZONIA, as long as some institutions are not on board, there is going to be a hiccup.

Building blocks of states: land, people and institutions

Given that there are many institutions, the question becomes: which are the most essential? We can list the same categories (political, educational, economic, family, religion) and fill in the blanks. If you ask me, at this point Ambazonia should be clear, in all five categories, about what each institution represents and means for them. If citizens do not know, or are not aware, would it matter to anyone? LRC would prefer that citizens have little or no conscious understanding of the building blocks of states: land, people and institutions.

Back to the future

If citizens remember, the beginning of the “active” struggle was triggered by the Teachers’ Union (educational) and the common-law lawyers (legal institution). A few episodes of the struggle have featured religious leaders commenting on, or suggesting, how to bring peace to British Southern Cameroons, aka AMBAZONIA. Most citizens of Ambazonia belong to a religious constituency. So, as an institution, religion plays a part in the restoration of Ambazonia. It is interesting to note that the individuals leading religions do not really matter, because they can be hit by a bus. But the institution remains. The question is: within the State of Ambazonia, what part is this institution (or any other) playing to help end the suffering of the people of Ambazonia, without compromising with the lying, diabolical UN–France–LRC bind that has held since 1961?

Rehash: strong individuals (proverbial “strongmen”) do not cook beans for my GrandMa in Ambazonia. Strong institutions DO cook beans for her.

So...

Ija’iku filasi!

Institutions Last, Individuals Don’t

11 April 2023

Unless we want to ISOLATE ourselves and not deal with the rest of the world, AMBAZONIA needs to create and maintain INTERFACES that other “interfaces” can recognize, understand and work with.

So far, the language and posture of those claiming to represent my GrandPa in AMBAZONIA have not scratched the surface of this interface-building business (not yet).

There is a way to talk to humans, friends and enemies alike. It requires tact and, above all, “cultural dexterity”. Running into other athletes’ lanes in a relay race (politics) is a no-no and can cause unnecessary accidents.

INSTITUTIONS LAST, INDIVIDUALS DON’T.

So where will CHILDREN bank their hopes? In an institution, or in an individual? Some of our ancestors knew the answer. Is the new generation really that ignorant?

Citizens should make wise decisions, unless everyone has become a Nyamfukah.

Ija'iku filasi!

— Wanaku Verdzekov

Written in April 2023 (with a short companion post of 11 April 2023); lightly edited for this book. LRC means La République du Cameroun.

NO: Institutions Are Built by People

EDITORIAL COUNTERPOINT

This essay was written for this textbook to present the opposing side fairly. It is not by Wanaku Verdzekov.

Wanaku Verdzekov puts it memorably: strongmen do not cook beans for GrandMa, but strong institutions do. It is true that a country run by one powerful person is fragile. When that person falls ill, dies or turns bad, everything built around them can collapse. But the essay's contrast between institutions and individuals is too sharp. Institutions do not fall from the sky. People build them, lead them, and sometimes save them.

Every strong institution had founders

The institutions we admire began as the work of determined individuals. Botswana, often praised as one of Africa's best-governed states, owes much to its first president, Seretse Khama, and his colleagues, who chose to build honest courts and a professional civil service when they could have enriched themselves. Nelson Mandela's decision to serve only one term as South Africa's president set an example that strengthened the new constitution. Leaders like these do not replace institutions; they create them and teach others to respect them.

Institutions can be empty shells

Many countries have parliaments, courts, election commissions and constitutions on paper, yet these do nothing to limit the powerful. A court is only as strong as the judges willing to rule against the government. An election commission is only as strong as the officials who refuse to fake results. When people with courage are missing, institutions become buildings with signs on them. The author knows this: she describes institutions in Cameroon that exist but "have little to do with the daily lives" of communities.

Crises need leaders

When a country faces war, disaster or collapse, institutions often freeze. Someone has to decide, persuade and take responsibility. The author herself calls for "interfaces" that other countries "can recognize, understand and work with", and warns against running into other athletes' lanes. Building such interfaces takes skilled, tactful individuals. Even a well-organized movement needs someone to speak for it, negotiate and keep it together.

Leaders and institutions depend on each other

Good leaders build good institutions, and good institutions produce and restrain good leaders. A healthy school, party or church trains future leaders, and a healthy constitution limits their terms and checks their power. It is not a contest between the two. The danger is not strong leaders as such, but leaders who are not accountable to any institution.

Choosing people still matters

Finally, the author urges citizens to make "wise decisions". In practice, that means choosing people: voting for honest candidates, appointing competent judges, trusting capable elders. However strong an institution is, it is always run by someone. Citizens who ignore the character of those people, trusting that the system will protect them, may find that the system is only as good as the people inside it.

Conclusion

The author is right that no people should put all their hope in one person, and that institutions last while individuals pass. But institutions and leaders are not rivals. The real task is to find leaders who will build institutions stronger than themselves, and institutions that will outlast and correct their leaders. GrandMa's beans need both a good kitchen and a good cook.

— Editorial counterpoint

Vocabulary

Word or phrase	Meaning in the readings
institution	an established organization or custom (a court, a school system, the family)
disarray	a state of disorder
civilizing mission	the colonial claim to bring “civilization” to others
dispensation	a system or order of things
workhorse	someone relied on to do all the work
millennia	thousands of years
recursive	repeating in cycles
trust vacuum	a gap where trust used to be
interface	a point where two systems meet and connect
strongman	a leader who rules by personal power
accountable	required to explain and justify one's actions
civil service	the professional staff who run government departments

Comprehension questions**Literal (find it in the text)**

1. What saying opens the YES reading?
2. Which five types of social institution does the author list?
3. Which two groups does the author say triggered the “active” struggle?
4. Which two leaders does the counterpoint give as founders of strong institutions?
5. What does the counterpoint say GrandMa's beans need?

Inferential (read between the lines)

6. Why does the author ask “What if s/he gets hit by a bus?”
7. What does the author mean by a “trust vacuum”?
8. Why does the counterpoint say institutions can be “empty shells”?
9. How does the counterpoint turn the author's own image of beans against the YES argument?

Critical (evaluate and respond)

10. Think of an institution you know well (a school, church, club or council). Would it survive if its leader left tomorrow? Why?
11. Which reading better explains why some countries are well governed and others are not? Use evidence.
12. Was Obama's statement right? Use this issue to argue for or against.

Is there common ground?

Both writers agree that no community should depend on one person, that institutions last longer than individuals, and that citizens must choose wisely. The counterpoint agrees that unaccountable strongmen are dangerous; the author, in calling for tactful “interfaces” with the world, accepts that skilled individuals are needed.

They disagree about **which comes first**. The author says strong institutions protect communities from depending on individuals. The counterpoint says institutions are built and kept alive by people, so leadership and institutions depend on each other.

A shared conclusion might be: *build institutions that train, choose and limit leaders, and choose leaders who strengthen institutions rather than themselves.*

Debate and writing prompt

Debate motion: *This house believes that Africa needs strong institutions, not strong leaders.*

- Divide the class into proposition and opposition. Each side must use at least two pieces of evidence from its reading and answer the other side’s strongest point.
- After the debate, hold a vote, then discuss which arguments changed minds.

Writing task: (400–600 words) Write a profile of an institution in your community. Explain what it does, how it chooses its leaders, and how it would survive a change of leadership. Conclude with one improvement, using ideas from both readings.

Further reading

- Barack Obama, speech to the Parliament of Ghana, Accra, 11 July 2009.
- Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail* (2012).
- Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994).

Issue 3.4 · Should the Cameroons Hold a Truth Commission?

YES: Wanaku Verdzekov, from *Truth Commission in the Cameroons?* (2014)

NO: Editorial counterpoint, *Truth Can Wait* (written for this book)

Learning outcomes

After reading this issue, you should be able to:

1. Explain what a truth commission is and give at least two examples from other countries.
 2. Identify the main claims, reasons and evidence in each reading.
 3. Distinguish between disagreements about *facts* and disagreements about *timing and values*.
 4. Evaluate whether truth, justice and reconciliation can be pursued at the same time.
 5. Write a short argument that takes a position and responds to the strongest point on the other side.
-

Introduction

When a country has lived through years of violence or repression, its people often disagree about what happened, who was responsible and how to move on. One tool that many countries have used is a **truth commission**: an official, temporary body that investigates a pattern of past abuses, listens to victims and witnesses, and publishes a report. More than forty truth commissions have been set up around the world since the 1970s. The best known is South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, created in 1995 after the end of apartheid. It held public hearings from 1996, published its main report in 1998, and could grant amnesty to people who fully confessed to politically motivated crimes. Other commissions have worked in Chile, Sierra Leone, Liberia and, more recently, The Gambia. Supporters say commissions give victims a voice and a nation a shared record. Critics say they can trade justice for storytelling, or be controlled by the powerful.

The author of the YES reading writes about Cameroon (see **Appendix A** for a timeline). The country became independent in 1960 and joined with the former Southern British Cameroons in a federation in 1961, which was replaced by a unitary state in 1972. It has had two presidents: Ahmadou Ahidjo (1960–1982) and Paul Biya (since 1982). From 1966 until 1990 it was a one-party state; multiparty politics returned in 1990. Its early years included a violent conflict between the government, backed by France, and the outlawed Union of the Peoples of Cameroon (UPC).

The author wrote this essay in December 2014, two years before protests by lawyers and teachers in the English-speaking North-West and South-West regions (late 2016) grew into an armed conflict between separatist groups and government forces. UN agencies and human-rights organizations have since reported thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands of people displaced. The government has responded with a Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism (2017), a Major National Dialogue (2019) and a “special status” for the two regions (2019); critics, including the author, argue that these do not address the root of the problem. No national truth commission has been set up.

As you read, ask: *Does the question change depending on whether a conflict is over or still going on? Can a country pursue truth, justice and peace all at once, or must it choose an order?*

YES: Truth Commission in the Cameroons?

Wanaku Verdzekov

There is no way to hide more than half a century (from the 1960s until today) of politically motivated extrajudicial killings, disappearances of citizens, and all the voodoo accounting that takes place at the

highest levels of governance in the Cameroons. The global community now knows that, apart from football, the Cameroons is an icon of corruption in this African sub-region.

The question children ask in this part of the world is: “Agreed, there is corruption here (among other ills), but how do we move forward from where we are?”

Which nation? Where is the Cameroons?

Google “Cameroon” and you will find where it is on the map. The real question is: where are the citizens of this place called the Cameroons on the path of development?

It could be a simple question to answer, since decolonization in the 1960s this sub-region has been “governed” by only two individuals, one literally handing power over to the other. So (if you ask me), realistically speaking, there has NOT BEEN A DEMOCRATICALLY ELECTED LEADER IN THE CAMEROONS SINCE DECOLONIZATION. I hope that did not come as a surprise to you. If it did, take it as Truth Number One.

Belong to the party, or head for the door

When the first Cameroons leader handed power to the current one, the significant thing was the handover of leadership of the only political party in the country: the one party with a central political bureau (similar to the central committee of a communist party), to which every member of government had to belong, or else head for the door.

There was a kind of tussle between the former leader and the current one over leadership of the party. Some say there might have been an arrangement where the former would remain leader of the party and the current one president of the country. But who knows the details of that argument? The former never became leader of the party. In fact, he went into exile in Senegal, where he later died, and he was buried in Senegal too. A truth commission should be able to bring out more details.

After taking over this power from the first president (president of the Cameroons, and leader of the only political party, with a central committee under his thumb), all the next man did was window-dress it: a new name, new party uniforms, new catchphrases, and a pipe dream of a vision that, 35 years later, has come to nothing. Unsurprising (to me, at least).

Why?

Because trying to build something on a bed of lies is a waste of time. It is like trying to grow an iroko tree in the sands of Timbuktu. It won’t happen.

A truth commission

Anyone informed about the situation in the Cameroons (and there is a lot to be informed about) concludes that it is complex to resolve. But here is a starting point: spell out the truth, and let the chips fall where they may. For this to happen, we need people of impeccable, upright character, with experience of running truth sessions and of putting together well-documented reports that can stand the truth test at any time, now and in the future.

The people always want to know the truth

How possible is that? Well, for one thing, you cannot tell the truth about now without knowing how “now” came to be. So an exercise of this kind will take time: time that is also valuable for the citizens of this sub-region to learn the facts that make up the truth of who they really are, from past to present. It could also be therapeutic, easing the distress of a people traumatized by a post-colonial history that is turbulent, continuously unsettling, and does not help citizens focus their efforts on a positive vision of the future.

Simply throwing out the past and thinking that blindly forging ahead will lead to... whatever it is citizens are looking for is like saying “no matter how much experience you have, it makes no difference to your current or future actions”. Well, experience DOES make a difference. And as a people, the populations of the Cameroons have “experienced” some things they need to reflect on. Hence, a truth commission.

200+ tribes and languages?

A truth commission in the Cameroons should be independent of any government interference. It should record its work and make its final report publicly available to all citizens, in as many languages and versions as required, not just English and French, which are foreign languages in this context.

For everyone to buy into the idea, there should be a guarantee that a citizen who only understands a tribal language (there are over 200) can have their say before the commission, and that what they say will also be heard and understood by other citizens in their own languages.

Ahem!

A truth commission will reset the socio-political landscape and let future generations see it as a landmark: the departure point from the mistakes of the past towards the successes of the future. What a truth commission will NOT do is create or spread more lies.

A national conference? It won't happen.

There was a push for a similar exercise called a “National Conference” (a sort of national discussion of the nation’s problems, and how to move on). It never happened. If you ask me, the main reason is that before holding a “national” conference, you have to be sure the “nation” exists. If it really does, what reason under the sun could there be for NOT being ABLE to hold a national conference?

That’s another question for the truth commission, among the many that the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of citizens who were disappeared, killed, tortured, imprisoned without trial or exiled will be asking. That’s the least they need to move on... into a future of hope and promise.

A note on the name

The use of the word “Cameroons” instead of “Cameroon” or “Cameroun” is intentional. The name comes from the Portuguese *os camarões*, which means “prawns” or “shrimps”. Please don’t call me a shrimp. Thank you.

TM

PS: Someone at L’Effort Camerounais was inspired by the same idea of a truth and reconciliation commission, on the South African model, in a 2012 article.

— Wanaku Verdzekov

Written in December 2014; lightly edited for this book. Headings are from the original.

NO: Truth Can Wait

EDITORIAL COUNTERPOINT

This essay was written for this textbook to present the opposing side fairly. It is not by Wanaku Verdzekov.

We should begin by admitting what the case for a truth commission gets right. Families who have lost sons, daughters and parents deserve to know what happened to them. A country cannot build trust on silence, and no one should have to pretend that the killings, disappearances and abuses of the past never took place. The question is not whether the truth matters. It is whether a truth commission, set up now, is the right way to reach it. There are good reasons to think it is not.

A commission needs the fighting to stop first

Almost every truth commission that is remembered as a success began *after* a conflict ended. South Africa’s commission started work after apartheid was over and a new, elected government was in place. Sierra Leone’s began after its civil war had ended. There is a reason for this. A commission depends on witnesses who are willing to stand up in public and say what they saw. While armed groups and security forces are still active, a witness who speaks may be putting their family in danger. A victim’s story told in 2016

could become a target list in 2017. Until people feel safe, a commission is likely to hear only from those who have nothing to fear, and that is not the whole truth.

Who would control it?

The author rightly insists that a commission must be “independent of any government interference”. But who would create it? In practice, commissions are set up by governments, by peace agreements, or by international bodies. If a government that is itself accused of abuses appoints the commissioners, many citizens will not trust the result. If one side of a conflict appoints them, the other side will call it a trial by its enemies. A commission that half the country rejects does not heal a nation; it gives each side a new grievance. Independence is easy to demand and very hard to build.

Truth is not the same as justice

Even the famous South African commission left many victims unsatisfied. It offered amnesty to people who confessed in full, and some families watched the killers of their relatives walk free after telling their story. For those families, truth without punishment felt like a second injury. In a country where people are still grieving, a commission that trades amnesty for testimony may deepen anger instead of calming it. Some victims want courts, compensation and the removal of abusers from office. A commission can distract from these harder demands by offering hearings instead of consequences.

A good idea that is hard to deliver

The author’s wish that every citizen be heard in one of more than 200 languages shows real respect for ordinary people. It also shows the scale of the task. Interpreters, safe hearing venues, secure record-keeping, investigators and years of work all cost a great deal of money, in a country where many schools and clinics are already short of resources. A commission that runs out of money halfway, or produces a report that no one reads, can leave people more cynical than before.

Other roads to the truth

There are other ways to build the record the author wants. Courts can try the most serious crimes one case at a time, with evidence and a right of reply. Human-rights organizations and journalists already document abuses. Local traditions of reconciliation, led by elders, chiefs and religious leaders, can repair relationships in a village long before a national report is written. Reforms such as fair elections, an independent judiciary and real local government can prevent new abuses, which matters as much as recording old ones. When peace is secure, a commission may then have the trust and the safety it needs to work.

Conclusion

The author asks us to “spell out the truth, and let the chips fall where they may”. That is a worthy goal. But a truth commission is a tool, and tools must fit the moment. Launched too early, controlled by the wrong people or starved of money, a commission can reopen wounds without closing them. Truth should not be abandoned; it should be pursued in the right order. First safety, then trust, then the truth commission. For now, the truth can wait a little longer, so that when it finally comes, everyone can afford to hear it.

— Editorial counterpoint

Vocabulary

Word or phrase	Meaning in the readings
truth commission	an official, temporary body that investigates past abuses and publishes a report
extrajudicial	outside the law, without a trial
decolonization	the process by which colonies became independent
central committee	the top decision-making body of a single ruling party
window-dress	to make something look better without really changing it
impeccable	without fault
therapeutic	helping to heal
traumatized	deeply hurt by a shocking experience
amnesty	an official pardon for crimes
grievance	a complaint about something felt to be unfair
cynical	believing that people act only for their own interest; distrustful
judiciary	the system of courts and judges
reconciliation	restoring friendly relations after conflict
sequence (verb)	to put things in a particular order

Comprehension questions

Literal (find it in the text)

1. According to the YES reading, what abuses cannot be hidden?
2. Who does the YES reading say should lead a truth commission?
3. In which languages does the YES reading want the commission's report to be available?
4. According to the NO reading, when did most successful truth commissions begin?
5. What did South Africa's commission offer to people who confessed in full?
6. Name two "other roads to the truth" suggested in the NO reading.

Inferential (read between the lines)

7. Why does the YES writer describe the Cameroons as an "icon of corruption", and what does this suggest about the writer's tone?
8. The YES writer says a truth commission could be "therapeutic". Why might telling the truth heal a society?
9. The NO writer says a victim's story "could become a target list". What is the writer worried about?
10. Both writers use images from nature (an iroko tree in the desert; tools that must "fit the moment"). What does each image suggest about their argument?

Critical (evaluate and respond)

11. Do the two writers disagree mainly about *whether* the truth matters, or about *when* and *how* to find it? Use evidence from both readings.
12. The YES reading was written in 2014, before the armed conflict began; the NO reading was written knowing about it. Does this difference make one argument stronger today? Explain.
13. Which is more important after a conflict: truth, justice or peace? Can a country have all three? Defend your answer.

Is there common ground?

The two writers agree on more than it first appears. Both say that victims deserve to know what happened, that silence and lies weaken a nation, and that any truth-seeking body must be independent and trusted. Both value ordinary people's voices: the YES writer wants testimony in all of the country's languages; the NO writer wants witnesses to be safe enough to speak.

Their real disagreement is about **order and conditions**. The YES writer sees truth as the foundation that must come first, because nothing lasting can be built "on a bed of lies". The NO writer sees safety and trust as the foundation, with truth following once people can speak without fear.

A middle path might combine both: begin now to **collect and protect evidence** (through human-rights groups, archives and journalists), so that the truth is not lost, while waiting to hold **public hearings** until the fighting stops and an independent body can be agreed. Some countries have also used local, community-level reconciliation alongside national processes. As you think about common ground, ask which of these steps could start today, and who should lead them.

Debate and writing prompt

Debate motion: *This house believes that the Cameroons should establish a truth commission now.*

- Divide the class into proposition and opposition. Each side must use at least two pieces of evidence from its reading and answer the other side's strongest point.
- After the debate, hold a vote, then discuss which arguments changed minds.

Writing task (400–600 words): Imagine you have been asked to advise your country's parliament on how to deal with a painful period in its past (real or imagined). Write a letter that recommends *one* approach (a truth commission, trials, local reconciliation, or a combination) and explains the order in which things should happen. Your letter must:

- state your recommendation clearly in the first paragraph;
 - give at least two reasons, supported by evidence from this issue;
 - respond fairly to one objection;
 - end with a practical first step.
-

Further reading

- South Africa, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Final Report* (1998).
- United States Institute of Peace, *Truth Commissions Digital Collection* (online).
- International Center for Transitional Justice, publications on truth-seeking (online).
- Appendix A of this book: *The Cameroons: A Timeline, 1884–2020*.

Issue 3.5 · Should Young People Protest as Soon as They See Injustice?

YES: Editorial counterpoint, *Sometimes You Must March Now* (written for this book)

NO: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Youth Question: What to Do?* and *Set Up to Fail* (2015)

Learning outcomes

After reading this issue, you should be able to:

1. Summarize the author's four steps for young people.
 2. Explain the difference between spontaneous and organized protest.
 3. Evaluate historical examples of youth-led protest.
 4. Discuss the right to peaceful assembly and the responsibilities that go with it.
 5. Write a personal action plan for responding to an injustice.
-

Introduction

If you are new to the Cameroons. Cameroon is a country in Central Africa, on the Gulf of Guinea, bordering Nigeria. It was a German colony from 1884. After the First World War it was divided: about four-fifths went to France and one-fifth, on the Nigerian border, to Britain. The British part was run together with Nigeria. In 1961, after a UN vote, the northern part of the British territory joined Nigeria and the southern part ("Southern Cameroons") joined the newly independent, French-speaking Republic of Cameroun in a federation. In 1972 the federation was replaced by a single, centralized state. Today, English is the main official language in the two western regions and French in the other eight. Since 2016, a conflict in the English-speaking regions has pitted separatist groups, who call the territory "Ambazonia", against government forces. See **Appendix A** for a full timeline.

Young people and protest. Young people have led many of history's protest movements: against segregation in the United States in the 1960s, against apartheid in South Africa (including the Soweto uprising of 1976), during the "Arab Spring" of 2010–2011, and in climate strikes around the world since 2018. International human-rights law protects the right of **peaceful assembly**. Researchers such as Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan have found that, in the twentieth century, non-violent campaigns succeeded roughly twice as often as violent ones.

The author, Wanaku Verdzekov, wrote these two posts in January 2015 for young people in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon, two years before the protests of 2016. *Nyamfikah* is a word in Kom, the author's home language, meaning "bush animal"; the author uses it for people who act without dignity. *Chop broke pot* is Cameroonian Pidgin for greedy, wasteful consumption.

As you read, ask: *Is it braver to act now, or to prepare first?*

YES: Sometimes You Must March Now

EDITORIAL COUNTERPOINT

This essay was written for this textbook to present the opposing side fairly. It is not by Wanaku Verdzekov.

Wanaku Verdzekov gives young people sound advice: know your history, sharpen a skill, build groups you can trust, and think before you take to the street. Planning is valuable, and protests without a plan

can end in tragedy. But history also shows that waiting until everything is organized can mean waiting forever. Some of the most important protests began before anyone had a complete plan.

Injustice does not wait for a plan

When people see an injustice happening in front of them, such as a police killing, a stolen election or a sudden price rise, they often respond at once. In December 2010, a young Tunisian street trader set himself on fire after officials seized his goods. Within weeks, protests across Tunisia had forced the president to leave, and the movement spread across the region. No one had planned it. In Nigeria in 2020, young people poured onto the streets against police brutality under the banner #EndSARS, organizing through social media as they marched.

Organization grows through action

The author advises building small “entities of trust” before acting. But many movements build their organization while they act. People who meet at a protest find each other, share phone numbers and form committees. Leaders emerge from the crowd. In South Africa in 1976, students in Soweto marched against being taught in Afrikaans. Their march was organized quickly, and the brutal response to it turned many of those young people into lifelong organizers. Action can be the school where organizing is learned.

Waiting can serve the powerful

Those in power often tell protesters to be patient, to wait for the right time, to go through official channels first. Sometimes this is good advice; often it is a way of delaying change. If young people wait until they have studied their full history, mastered a skill and built a network, the moment may pass, and the injustice may become permanent. In another Ramble, the author herself warns that those in power are “playing a wait-and-see game, waiting for the kids to die before them”.

Protest is a right

In many countries, peaceful protest is a constitutional right, and international human-rights law protects the freedom of peaceful assembly. Telling young people they must first prove they have thought hard enough can become a way of excluding them from public life. Adults are rarely asked to pass such tests before they vote or speak.

Safety still matters

None of this means protest should be careless. Protesters can plan for safety even when they cannot plan everything: stay in groups, know your rights, keep protests non-violent, record what happens, and have a way to get home. Research on protest movements has found that non-violent campaigns have succeeded more often than violent ones. That is a lesson worth learning before, during and after any march.

Conclusion

The author asks: “When you take to the street, do you know how it is going to end?” Often the honest answer is no. But not knowing the ending has never stopped people from starting. Young people should think, learn and organize. They should also know that when injustice is urgent, the right time to act may be now.

— Editorial counterpoint

NO: Youth Question: What to Do? and Set Up to Fail (2015)

Wanaku Verdzekov

Text A: Youth Question: What to Do?

To our youth:

I have heard the question so many times: “We now know our situation in the Cameroons. Now, what do we do?”

#1 The number one thing to do, as a young citizen of the State of former British Southern Cameroons, is to KNOW at least the outline of our state's history. That is key to knowing where we are coming from.

#2 Sharpen at least one skill. Every human has a skill (even a stopped clock is right twice a day). Yes, you have a skill. Identify it and sharpen it. You will need it sooner than you think.

#3 Establish your own entities of trust. This could be as small as two citizens who know our history and trust each other to be committed to the restoration of our state.

#4 Hold meetings, but avoid anyone who does not bring anything to the table.

These are more than enough tips to keep us busy.

The number one thing NOT to do is take to the street without first having an intellectual conversation with yourself about *why* you are taking to the street. When your intellect is at peace with your reasons for taking any action, your body language will exude dignity, and don't be surprised when even Nyamfikahs respect you.

PS: It is not as if, after restoration, every citizen of our state will walk around with free money in their pockets. On the contrary, if you look at the numbers, we are more likely to be in debt (thanks to 50 years of "chop-broke-pot-ism") than swimming in money. Then what do we gain, some might ask? Freedom, which comes with responsibilities. And if you ask me, as long as I am responsible for cleaning my backyard, I can also clean my front yard, and no Nyamfikah should stand between the back and the front. So it is time for the Nyamfikahs to step aside. No hating, but when a system becomes a nuisance to the way people need to live their lives, it is time to call a Nyamfikah by its name: Nyamfikah!

Text B: Set Up to Fail

"Swag"

I tell my brothers and sisters to speak up and speak out, but not to become a Nyamfikah. You are much more precious than that. Once you have made peace with your intellectual reasons for refusing to accept a system that is set up for you to fail in life, then when you take to the street, even the way you walk (your "swag", as some young people call it) will be dignified. It is not magic. It is just the way real humans (not Nyamfikahs) are wired.

Principles

There are principles that, when followed, work as if by magic. For example, if you are going to start something, make sure you also plan how to finish it. Question: when you take to the street, do you know how it is going to end? If not, it is good to plan that part of the operation before starting.

We are not Nyamfikahs, and we will refuse to be treated as such, just by the dignified way we, our children and everyone committed to our cause carry ourselves.

Sharpening skills

There is much to do, especially individually: for example, sharpening skills. Every citizen will have to do something to earn a living. The era of "chop-broke-pot-ism" will suddenly come to an end. What will you do?

There will be opportunities for ALL kinds of things to be done in the new state. Think of the skills that will be needed, and the list is endless. Between public- and private-sector products and services, higher-education graduates will be so busy there will NOT be time to ask for an export "33" again. You would be thinking (you chemistry graduates) about how to start your own breweries in Mbengwi, Manyemen or Fontem.

Question: will the coming of our new state end "chop-broke-pot-ism" in the eastern Cameroons? That is a question for the experts in that system to answer. Are you an expert in the Camerounese system? You tell me.

Set up

We have been set up for failure. And those responsible know what they are doing. If not, their ignorance is beyond compare. Trust me: the people of the State of former British Southern Cameroons are living in a system set up for them to fail in every human endeavour. And that, my friends, is a wicked thing for one set of “Africans” to do to another.

The ancestors and our children are watching.

TribalMonk

PS: Nyamfikah literally means “bush animal”. In a social context, it describes humans who show tendencies similar to those of a bush animal. If they start walking on all fours, it becomes a psychiatric problem. But an upright-walking human behaving like a bush animal is called a “Nyamfikah”... until the behaviour changes.

— Wanaku Verdzekov

Written on 7 and 8 January 2015; lightly edited for this book.

Vocabulary

Word or phrase	Meaning in the readings
outline	the main points, without details
entities of trust	small groups of people who trust each other
exude	to show a quality strongly
dignity	self-respect and the respect of others
swag	slang for confident style
principle	a basic rule for behaviour
era	a period of time
wicked	morally wrong, cruel
spontaneous	happening without planning
peaceful assembly	the right to gather in public peacefully
non-violent	not using physical force
brutality	cruel, violent treatment

Comprehension questions**Literal (find it in the text)**

1. What are the four things the author tells young people to do?
2. What is the number one thing NOT to do, according to Text A?
3. What principle about starting things does Text B give?
4. Which two recent protests does the counterpoint describe as largely unplanned?
5. What safety steps does the counterpoint recommend?

Inferential (read between the lines)

6. Why does the author say even a stopped clock is right twice a day?
7. What does the author mean when she says your “swag” will be dignified?
8. Why does the counterpoint say “action can be the school where organizing is learned”?
9. How does the counterpoint use the author’s own words about a “wait-and-see game”?

Critical (evaluate and respond)

10. Which reading gives better advice to a young person facing an injustice today? Explain.
 11. Is it fair to ask young people to plan more carefully than adults before speaking out? Why or why not?
 12. Choose one youth-led movement. Research how it began and whether it was organized first or organized through action.
-

Is there common ground?

Both writers agree that young people have a right and a reason to act, that dignity and non-violence matter, and that planning for safety is wise. The counterpoint accepts that “young people should think, learn and organize”; the author accepts that the struggle is urgent.

They disagree about **timing**. The author says: think first, build trust, plan the ending, then act. The counterpoint says: urgent injustice may not wait, and organization can grow through action.

A shared approach might be to **prepare in calm times** (learn your history and rights, build trusted groups, agree on non-violence) so that, when a moment for action comes, young people can act quickly *and* wisely.

Debate and writing prompt

Debate motion: *This house believes that young people should take to the streets as soon as they see injustice.*

- Divide the class into proposition and opposition. Each side must use at least two pieces of evidence from its reading and answer the other side’s strongest point.
- After the debate, hold a vote, then discuss which arguments changed minds.

Writing task: (400–600 words) Choose an issue in your school or community that you think is unfair. Write an action plan in the style of the author’s four steps: what you need to know, what skill you can offer, who you would work with, and how you would act. Include one way to keep the action safe and non-violent.

Further reading

- Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works* (2011).
- UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 37 on the right of peaceful assembly (2020).
- Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu, *The Soweto Uprisings: Counter-memories of June 1976* (1998).

UNIT 4

Unit 4 — Kom: Tradition, Identity and Education

Issue 4.1 · Should Traditional Kingdoms Write Down Their Laws and Customs?

YES: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Power/Authority in an African Grassland Kingdom?* (2023) and *Dignity & Royalty of Kom Kingdom* (2014)

NO: Editorial counterpoint, *Living Law Should Stay Alive* (written for this book)

Learning outcomes

After reading this issue, you should be able to:

1. Explain the difference between oral and written traditions of law.
 2. Summarize the author's arguments for a written record of Kom customs.
 3. Evaluate the risks of codifying customary law, using historical examples.
 4. Identify who gains and who loses power when a tradition is written down.
 5. Write a proposal for preserving a tradition from your own community.
-

Introduction

If you are new to Kom. The Kom Kingdom is one of many traditional kingdoms (sometimes called *fondoms*) in the grasslands of north-west Cameroon. It was founded in the 1700s, has around 300,000 to 500,000 people today, and is led by a king called the **Fòyn** (or Fon), who is both a political and a spiritual leader. Kom tradition traces the people to a founding mother, **Nandón**. The Kom language is **itaŋiKom**. Traditional kingdoms like Kom continued to exist under German, British and then Cameroonian rule, and their rulers still hold authority in many areas of daily life, such as land, customs and disputes, alongside the modern state.

Several readings use Kom words. You do not need to learn them, but the vocabulary list and **Appendix C** explain the most important ones.

Oral and written law. In many societies, law and history were passed on by speaking: through elders, councils, proverbs and professional historians such as the West African *griots*. This is called **oral tradition**. Written law, by contrast, is recorded in documents such as constitutions and legal codes. Many African countries today recognize **customary law** (the traditional law of a community) alongside national law; South Africa's constitution, for example, requires courts to apply customary law where it applies and is consistent with the Bill of Rights.

The AfoaKom. The AfoaKom is a sacred carved figure of the Kom Kingdom. It was stolen in 1966 and later appeared in a New York art gallery; after an international campaign, it was returned to Kom in 1973. The author, Wanaku Verdzekov, is a Kom writer. Text A (2023) answers a Kom citizen's question about the limits of the Fòyn's authority. Text B (2014) is a set of replies about Kom dignity and the need to document Kom law and custom.

As you read, ask: *What is gained, and what might be lost, when a spoken tradition is written down?*

YES: *Power/Authority in an African Grassland Kingdom?* (2023) and *Dignity & Royalty of Kom Kingdom* (2014)

Wanaku Verdzekov

Text A: Power/Authority in an African Grassland Kingdom?

Power and authority in an African grassland kingdom do not (should NOT) come from a colonial construct. We can agree to disagree on that, but as far as the reality on the ground goes, since the 1700s the leadership of our kingdoms has been encapsulated in INSTITUTIONS. In the Kom Kingdom, for example, the Fòyn is the leader of these institutions and a special high priest connecting living Kom citizens with the ancestral world: a physical and spiritual responsibility.

Once the gheli ghi báŋni and the gheli mîndzi realized how awesome this position is, their goal from day one has been to chip away at this power and authority until it can only serve the interests of the gheli ghi báŋni and/or the gheli mîndzi.

One Kom citizen asked: “Would it not be proper for the Fòyn and the custodian of Kom tradition (KwiFòyn) to draw a line and set a limit...?”

NchîniKòm is built on love, not dictatorship

Here is what I learned from my GrandPa: NchîniKòm is built on LOVE, not dictatorship. That’s why, when a Kom citizen hears itaŋíKom spoken anywhere in the world, the reflex is to call the speaker *wâyñ nà wom* (“child of my mother”). This traces back to the mother, founder and matriarch of the Kom family in the 1700s: Nandón. It has sometimes been said that Kom citizens are children of one mother: NANDÓŊ.

Of course, I am not speaking for the Fòyn here. But the Fòyn and the KwiFòyn cannot be effective in their responsibilities if all the children of Nandón are not in accord with each other on many basic issues of concern in the Kom Kingdom today, like the Kom Kingdom’s institutions.

Entitlements as citizens of a kingdom come with responsibilities

So I will turn the responsibility card around to the Kom people and ask: as a Kom citizen, how much NchîniKòm, and how much nchîni gheli ghi báŋni (and/or nchîni gheli mîndzi), makes a good recipe that can benefit our indigenous Kom communities?

I think it’s for Kom’s children to make up their minds on that subject. I may be wrong. But I am not sure the Fòyn or the KwiFòyn have enough time or means to go round each village or nte’ to see what every Kom child is doing or not doing. There is already a framework for that; the only question is whether anyone is using it. And if the framework is not being used, the appropriate question is: why not?

Artificial divides: a total waste of time

Some of our major problems in Kom should NOT actually be problems. But when citizens create artificial divides (CPDM vs SDF, Catholic vs Baptist, Jehovah’s Witness vs Naija “born-again Christians”, vs Fulani vs Hausa, etc.), what I personally see is a WASTE of time and a penchant for ENTERTAINMENT, not REAL DEVELOPMENT.

From talk-talk to a read/write Kom culture

If you ask me again, the challenge for the rest of the century in Kom should be to get every Kom citizen to READ and WRITE, instead of talk-talk. Oral tradition is good, but a READ/WRITE culture is what separates the “winners” from the “losers” of civilization today.

Yvi kitî

Wayn | Afo a yini-a | Nyam ngviyn

Text B: Dignity & Royalty of Kom Kingdom

“Dignity and royalty” of the Kom Kingdom: before the *ghel bangni* showed up in this region, the Kom people knew and understood the words respect, protocol, dignity, royalty... and the difference between a Nyamabo and a Nyamfikah.

Note that Kom called the Europeans *ghel bangni* (Red People), not *ghel fifni* (White People). There is a difference that even so-called “white people” understand: if a human figure is referred to as “white”, it is most probably... a ghost (if you believe in those). Just for the record.

TribalMonk

Unfortunately, the genie has been out of the bottle for a long time now. The AfoaKom statue was stolen in 1966 and sold abroad; it took until 1973 to bring it home. There are art shops and museums around the world selling some of my grandpa's juju heads. The *gheli bangni* have earned PhDs writing and publishing about *nchiniKom*...

Question: are Kom citizens ready to do what it takes, in today's context, to safeguard Kom traditions, customs and culture? You tell me... how.

Not answering for anyone. Just my two shillings here.

As long as there is no documentation or records to point to, applying laws, customs and traditions in the Kom context will stir up feelings like the ones you are expressing here. That is normal in an age when Kom is not an island, but a tribal community in the "globosphere" (so to speak).

Documentation and records? What does that mean? Why is it important? I can say "you tell me", because I think anyone with minimal reading and writing skills will understand. I assume it is understood that reading and writing skills are important for building a framework to document and record Kom tribal laws, customs and traditions for posterity (and all other practical purposes).

I cannot resolve the specific worries in your question, but I will say this. As long as we do not have a written book of reference for the laws, customs and traditions of the Kom people (one every Kom citizen can turn to when in doubt, or point to when there is a conflict of interest), there will always be doubt in the minds of Kom citizens about whether the law is being twisted, abused or obscured by those who can talk the loudest (remember: "oral" history). In other words, in a complex traditional situation, the person with the loudest voice wins, not necessarily the person on the side of the law (or tradition, or custom).

What all of the above means is that we can have a "civilized" Kom space without doing away with Kom traditions, customs and laws. But there is work to do in recording, documenting and codifying them in a way that makes them available to Kom citizens.

Is this kind of work being done? You tell me.

iBoisi

— Wanaku Verdzekov

Text A was written in April 2023, Text B in November 2014 (with replies). Lightly edited for this book; the date of the AfoaKom theft has been corrected.

NO: Living Law Should Stay Alive

EDITORIAL COUNTERPOINT

This essay was written for this textbook to present the opposing side fairly. It is not by Wanaku Verdzekov.

Wanaku Verdzekov makes a strong case for a written "book of reference" of Kom law and custom. Without it, she argues, the loudest voice wins. That danger is real. But writing down a living tradition is not a simple act of recording. It changes the tradition, and it can shift power in ways the author might not intend.

Oral law can adapt; written law can freeze

Customary law in many African societies has survived for centuries because it could change. When a new problem arose, such as a new crop, a new kind of dispute or a new religion, elders could discuss it and adjust the custom while keeping its spirit. A written code, especially one printed and taught in schools,

tends to become fixed. The version recorded in one decade may be treated as “the true tradition” for generations, even if it was only one moment in a long conversation.

Colonial codification is a warning

The attempt to write down African customs is not new. Colonial governments often recorded “native law” so that their officials could apply it. Historians have shown that these records were frequently shaped by the few people the colonizers chose to consult, usually senior men and chiefs who worked with the administration. Customs that gave women, young people or rival families rights were sometimes left out. The written “tradition” then became a tool of the powerful. A new written code could repeat this mistake if it is controlled by a small group.

Who holds the pen?

The author worries that the loudest voice wins in an oral system. In a written system, the person who holds the pen can win instead. Those who can read and write, often the educated and the well-connected, may interpret the book in their own favour, while elders and ordinary people who cannot read it lose their voice. The author wants every Kom citizen to read and write, which would help, but that goal is not yet reached in Kom or anywhere else.

Tradition lives in people, not paper

Much of what makes a tradition meaningful cannot be written: the tone of a proverb, the rhythm of a dance, the judgement of an elder who knows the families involved in a dispute. The author’s own essays are full of these living elements. A written code risks keeping the words while losing the wisdom behind them.

Record the process, not only the rules

There are ways to keep the benefits of writing without freezing a tradition. Communities can record *how* decisions are made (who must be consulted, how appeals work) rather than trying to list every rule. They can record important decisions and their reasons, as a history, while allowing future councils to reach different conclusions. Audio and video can preserve elders’ voices, not just their words.

Conclusion

The author is right that a people who do not record their heritage risk losing it, or having outsiders write it for them. But a tradition is not a museum object. It is a living practice. The goal should be to record Kom tradition in ways that protect it without freezing it, and that give every Kom citizen, not just the literate few, a voice in how it changes.

— Editorial counterpoint

Vocabulary

Word or phrase	Meaning in the readings
authority	the right to give orders and make decisions
construct	something built by people, not natural
encapsulated	contained in
matriarch	female head of a family or group
accord	agreement
entitlement	a right to something
framework	a structure that supports a system
protocol	official rules of behaviour
posterity	future generations
obscured	hidden or made unclear
customary law	the traditional law of a community
codify	to arrange laws or rules into a written system
griot	a West African oral historian, poet and musician

Comprehension questions

Literal (find it in the text)

1. According to Text A, where does leadership in the Kom Kingdom lie?
2. What does *wâyn nà wom* mean, and when do Kom people say it?
3. What did Kom people call Europeans, according to Text B?
4. What happened to the AfoaKom statue, according to Text B?
5. What alternative to writing down every rule does the counterpoint suggest?

Inferential (read between the lines)

6. Why does the author say Kom is “built on love, not dictatorship”?
7. Why does the author think “the loudest voice” wins without written records?
8. Why does the counterpoint say “the person who holds the pen can win instead”?
9. What lesson does the counterpoint draw from colonial attempts to record “native law”?

Critical (evaluate and respond)

10. Which reading better protects ordinary Kom citizens: the author’s written book or the counterpoint’s living tradition? Explain.
11. Choose a custom from your family or community. Would writing it down protect it or change it? Explain.
12. How could technology (audio, video, online archives) change this debate?

Is there common ground?

Both writers agree that Kom tradition is precious, that it faces pressure from outside, and that it must not be left for outsiders to record. Both want every Kom citizen to have a voice, and both value reading and writing.

They disagree about **what should be recorded and how**. The author wants a written book of reference so that no one can twist the law. The counterpoint fears that a fixed code could freeze the tradition and give power to those who control the text.

A middle path might combine both: a written record of **processes and past decisions**, with explanations, alongside audio and video of elders; open to all citizens and revised by a recognized council, so that the tradition is protected without being frozen.

Debate and writing prompt

Debate motion: *This house believes that every traditional kingdom should publish a written code of its laws and customs.*

- Divide the class into proposition and opposition. Each side must use at least two pieces of evidence from its reading and answer the other side's strongest point.
- After the debate, hold a vote, then discuss which arguments changed minds.

Writing task: (400–600 words) Choose one tradition, custom or rule from your community. Write a short entry for a “book of reference” that explains it, then add a paragraph explaining what your written entry cannot capture.

Further reading

- Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (1985).
- Martin Chanock, *Law, Custom and Social Order: The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia* (1985).
- Eugenia Shanklin, “The Odyssey of the Afo-A-Kom”, *African Arts* 23:4 (1990).

Issue 4.2 · Does Self-Esteem Come Mainly from One's Culture and Community?

YES: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Understanding Self-Esteem* (2013) and *Broken Self-Esteem?* (2011)

NO: Editorial counterpoint, *Self-Worth Starts Within* (written for this book)

Learning outcomes

After reading this issue, you should be able to:

1. Define self-esteem and identify its main sources.
 2. Explain the author's view of self-esteem rooted in Kom culture.
 3. Compare individual and community-based explanations of identity.
 4. Evaluate the risks and benefits of group pride.
 5. Write a reflective piece on the sources of your own confidence.
-

Introduction

If you are new to Kom. The Kom Kingdom is one of many traditional kingdoms (sometimes called *fondoms*) in the grasslands of north-west Cameroon. It was founded in the 1700s, has around 300,000 to 500,000 people today, and is led by a king called the **Fòyn** (or Fon), who is both a political and a spiritual leader. Kom tradition traces the people to a founding mother, **Nandón**. The Kom language is **itaŋiKom**. Traditional kingdoms like Kom continued to exist under German, British and then Cameroonian rule, and their rulers still hold authority in many areas of daily life, such as land, customs and disputes, alongside the modern state.

Several readings use Kom words. You do not need to learn them, but the vocabulary list and **Appendix C** explain the most important ones.

Self-esteem. Psychologists define **self-esteem** as a person's overall sense of their own worth. The American psychologist William James wrote about it in 1890; in 1965, the sociologist Morris Rosenberg created a questionnaire still widely used to measure it. Researchers disagree about how much self-esteem depends on the individual and how much on family, community and culture. Some cultures, often called **individualist**, stress personal achievement; others, called **collectivist**, stress belonging and duty to the group.

The author, Wanaku Verdzekov, is a Kom writer. Text A defines self-esteem and links it to Kom identity. Text B responds to an incident in Bamenda, a city in north-west Cameroon, after the 2011 presidential election: a car was burned by a crowd gathered to see the opposition leader John Fru Ndi, after its owner asked, in French, "Fru Ndi, who is that?"

As you read, ask: *Where does your own confidence come from: inside you, or from the people around you?*

YES: *Understanding Self-Esteem* (2013) and *Broken Self-Esteem?* (2011)

Wanaku Verdzekov

Text A: Understanding Self-Esteem

Most people think they know what "self-esteem" means. No dictionary needed. But if you ask me, that assumption falls short. The word goes deeper than that.

So what is self-esteem?

Simply put, self-esteem is how you assess your own worth. You look at yourself and estimate your value: not in money, not in things, but in your own immeasurable worth. In fact, it is realizing that you are worth more than anything money can buy. For those who know itanjiKom, the phrase is “*Kuo ni chuo wi wul*”: an agreement on a human’s immense value.

Each person’s road to self-esteem is different. What matters is the destination. The process keeps going, but when you reach a point of quiet confidence in your own worth, that is when self-esteem takes root and grows.

Watch a person whose self-esteem has been boosted. S/he is transformed. Self-esteem can change individuals, communities, even nations. It raises our consciousness and shapes how we move through the world.

And here is the other side: if you rely on others to do what you can do for yourself, you become dependent on them. That dependence eats away at your self-esteem.

Self-esteem, Kom style

For a Kom person, self-esteem is rooted in cultural identity. Kom is not just a place to live. It gives life a deeper meaning, and that sense of worth stands on:

- a strong kingdom with shared values that guide life and decisions;
- physical symbols and objects that belong to Kom and no one else;
- our own language, signs and symbols, which tell us where we belong;
- a flexible culture that can absorb influences (from neighbouring tribes, from Western civilization, from neo-colonial elements) and still keep its essence.

The core of Kom culture is still intact. But here is the question: how long can it hold out against the pressure from outside before it morphs into something we cannot recognize?

In today’s global world, where cultures shift all the time, how a Kom person feels about themselves inside the bigger global culture directly affects their self-esteem. Someone could even study it and come up with a “self-esteem rating”, from 10 (excellent) down to 0 (no sense of self-worth at all). Until someone does that study, this ramble is just to get us talking about self-esteem: something invisible, but crucial to being human.

So, how is your self-esteem? How do you see your own worth? You tell me.

Let’s keep thinking, sharing and building each other up. Self-esteem is the foundation of a strong community.

TM

Text B: Broken Self-Esteem?

Just yesterday, a few days after the results of the presidential election were announced in Cameroun, someone’s car was set on fire in the town of Bamenda (in the North West Region) by an angry crowd gathered to see the top opposition leader, Fru Ndi, who had come to town.

Various reports confirm what sparked the rage. When the car owner was told the crowd could not make way for him, because they had gathered to see Fru Ndi, he replied: “Fru Ndi, c’est qui?”, meaning “Who the hell is Fru Ndi?”

Growing up in a Camerounese culture where you are told in several ways (in words, in policies, through systematic “abrahamism”, corruption...) that you are a nobody can be very damaging to one’s SELF-ESTEEM. It takes a lot more energy to fix a broken self-esteem than to build one from scratch (when a baby is born). It is something to think about.

Kom Kingdom

If the pride of our people (the Kom people) is not instilled and cultivated in our young, it will disappear before they become real men and women in such an abusive environment.

In my humble opinion, it is the kingdom's responsibility to ensure that all *mukomangoh* can walk tall anywhere on the globe and speak their minds freely, knowing that they speak no evil of anyone, but only want the preservation, survival and development of the Kom Kingdom for the children of tomorrow.

Every human being comes from somewhere: mother, father, family, community, tribe or kingdom. It starts to get murky when Western-style pseudo-states (created by Western cartographers) come into the picture. From then on it is a slippery slope. Before the West came into the picture, there was Kom. After the West is gone from the picture (if it ever goes), there WILL be Kom.

This is a message to all *mukomangoh*: walk tall, straighten your backs, and do not bow to anyone who treats you with disrespect. The pride of being a *mukomangoh* is a self-esteem booster. And there is ample supply for everyone.

A broken system is like a broken calabash: it cannot carry any water. Compare this with a broken self-esteem. Repairing a broken calabash takes grandma's expertise and the precision of the kingdom's expert weavers. In the West, it could cost a fortune in psychotherapy sessions.

iBoisi

~wv

— Wanaku Verdzekov

Text A dates from 2013; its only surviving copy had been polished with an AI tool, and this version restores the author's voice. Text B was written in October 2011. Both lightly edited for this book.

NO: Self-Worth Starts Within

EDITORIAL COUNTERPOINT

This essay was written for this textbook to present the opposing side fairly. It is not by Wanaku Verdzekov.

Wanaku Verdzekov writes movingly about the pride of being Kom, and about how a culture that tells people they are “nobody” can break their self-esteem. Culture and community clearly matter. But the claim that self-esteem comes *mainly* from culture leaves out much of what psychologists have learned, and it risks leaving some people out altogether.

Self-esteem has many sources

Research on self-esteem points to many sources: the love and acceptance a child receives from caregivers, success at tasks that matter to the person, friendships, a sense of control over one's life, and the ability to learn from failure. Culture shapes all of these, but it is not the only thing that matters. Two children raised in the same village, with the same language and traditions, can have very different self-esteem because of their families, their abilities and their experiences.

Cultures can lift people up, or hold them down

Every culture has values that support some people's self-worth and threaten others'. A tradition that honours elders may leave young people feeling unheard. Customs that give men authority may leave women feeling less valued. People who are different (in ability, belief or personality) may find their community a source of shame rather than pride. For them, self-esteem may depend on finding worth *despite* their culture's expectations, not because of them.

Pride in a group can turn against others

When people rest their worth mainly on belonging to a group, they may come to feel superior to other groups. History has many examples of group pride turning into contempt, exclusion and violence. The author wants Kom people to “walk tall” and “not bow to anyone”, which is a healthy message. But self-esteem that depends on the group's standing can also depend on others looking smaller.

What about people between cultures?

Many young people today live between cultures: children of migrants, children of mixed families, students educated far from home. The author's own life crossed cultures. If self-esteem comes mainly from one culture, these young people might seem to have a weaker foundation. In fact, many build a strong sense of self precisely by combining parts of several cultures and choosing their own values.

The author's own advice points inward

Text A itself says that each person's road to self-esteem "is different", that it reaches "a point of quiet confidence" within, and warns that depending on others erodes self-esteem. That sounds less like a gift from culture and more like an achievement of the individual. Culture can provide tools and encouragement; the person must still do the work.

Conclusion

A strong culture can be a wonderful source of pride and belonging, as the author shows for Kom. But self-esteem is built from many materials: love, achievement, relationships, choices and resilience. The most secure self-esteem may be the kind that can survive even when one's community does not approve, because it rests, finally, on the person's own sense of worth.

— Editorial counterpoint

Vocabulary

Word or phrase	Meaning in the readings
self-esteem	how a person values themselves
intrinsic	belonging naturally to something; built in
affirmation	a statement that something is true or good
consciousness	awareness
dependence	relying on someone else
erode	to wear away slowly
opposition leader	the leader of the main party not in government
cartographer	a person who makes maps
calabash	a dried gourd used as a container
resilience	the ability to recover from difficulties
collectivist	valuing the group above the individual
individualist	valuing the individual above the group

Comprehension questions**Literal (find it in the text)**

1. How does Text A define self-esteem in simple terms?
2. What Kom phrase expresses a human's immense value?
3. What four things support a Kom person's sense of worth, according to Text A?
4. What does the car owner's question "Fru Ndi, c'est qui?" mean?
5. Name three sources of self-esteem mentioned in the counterpoint.

Inferential (read between the lines)

6. Why does Text A say dependence can erode self-esteem?
7. Why does Text B say a broken self-esteem is harder to fix than to build?

8. Why does the counterpoint say group pride can “turn against others”?
9. How does the counterpoint use Text A's own words against the YES side?

Critical (evaluate and respond)

10. Which reading better explains where your own confidence comes from? Give an example.
 11. Can a culture harm some of its members' self-esteem while lifting others? Discuss with care and examples.
 12. Young people who live between cultures: is that a weakness or a strength for self-esteem?
-

Is there common ground?

Both writers agree that self-esteem is precious, that it can be damaged by being told you are “nobody”, and that culture and community can be powerful sources of pride. The counterpoint grants that “a strong culture can be a wonderful source of pride”; the author says each person's journey is unique.

They disagree about **the main source**. The author roots self-esteem in Kom identity: kingdom, language, symbols and shared values. The counterpoint roots it in many sources, and ultimately in the individual.

Common ground: *a healthy community gives every member reasons to feel valued, and a healthy individual builds a sense of worth that does not depend on anyone else's approval.* Both are needed.

Debate and writing prompt

Debate motion: *This house believes that a strong culture is the best foundation for a young person's self-esteem.*

- Divide the class into proposition and opposition. Each side must use at least two pieces of evidence from its reading and answer the other side's strongest point.
- After the debate, hold a vote, then discuss which arguments changed minds.

Writing task: (400–600 words) Write a reflective essay titled “What makes me walk tall”. Describe two or three sources of your confidence (family, culture, achievements, faith, friendships) and explain which matters most to you, using ideas from both readings.

Further reading

- Morris Rosenberg, *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image* (1965).
- Nathaniel Branden, *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem* (1994).
- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story” (TED talk, 2009).

Issue 4.3 · Should Schools Put Wider-World Knowledge Ahead of Local Culture?

YES: Editorial counterpoint, *School Should Open Windows* (written for this book)

NO: Wanaku Verdzekov, *Kom Culture and the Circle of Life* (2014)

Learning outcomes

After reading this issue, you should be able to:

1. Summarize the author's criticism of education that is disconnected from community life.
 2. Explain the idea of culturally relevant teaching.
 3. Evaluate the balance between local and global knowledge in a curriculum.
 4. Consider whose culture is represented in a school.
 5. Write a curriculum proposal for a subject you study.
-

Introduction

If you are new to Kom. The Kom Kingdom is one of many traditional kingdoms (sometimes called *fondoms*) in the grasslands of north-west Cameroon. It was founded in the 1700s, has around 300,000 to 500,000 people today, and is led by a king called the **Fòyn** (or Fon), who is both a political and a spiritual leader. Kom tradition traces the people to a founding mother, **Nandón**. The Kom language is **itanjiKom**. Traditional kingdoms like Kom continued to exist under German, British and then Cameroonian rule, and their rulers still hold authority in many areas of daily life, such as land, customs and disputes, alongside the modern state.

Several readings use Kom words. You do not need to learn them, but the vocabulary list and **Appendix C** explain the most important ones.

Education and culture. Across Africa and elsewhere, colonial-era schools were designed to train clerks, teachers and catechists, and often taught students more about the colonizing country than their own. After independence, some leaders tried to change this. Tanzania's Julius Nyerere, in *Education for Self-Reliance* (1967), argued that schools should prepare young people for life in their own rural communities. In the 1990s, the American educator Gloria Ladson-Billings described **culturally relevant pedagogy**: teaching that builds on students' own cultures while also helping them succeed academically and question injustice.

Graduate unemployment is a serious problem in many countries; in Cameroon, young people with degrees often work in informal jobs, such as driving motorbike taxis (known locally as *bendskin*).

The author, Wanaku Verdzekov, wrote these replies in 2014 on an online forum for Kom people. The "Circle of Life" refers to the rituals, such as funerals, libations and births, that tie a Kom community together across generations.

As you read, ask: *What should a school teach that a family cannot, and what should a family teach that a school cannot?*

YES: School Should Open Windows

EDITORIAL COUNTERPOINT

This essay was written for this textbook to present the opposing side fairly. It is not by Wanaku Verdzekov.

Wanaku Verdzekov asks a hard question: what is the point of schools that produce graduates who cannot find work, and who know little about their own community? The author is right that education should connect to real life, and that local knowledge (of plants, crafts, history and custom) is too often ignored. But building school around local culture has costs, and the students who pay them are often the ones with the fewest other chances.

School is a shared ladder

For many young people, school is the only place where they can learn what the wider world expects: the mathematics, science, languages and writing needed for university, trades and jobs in other towns and countries. Families already pass on local culture at home, at ceremonies and in daily life. If school spends much of its time on what children could learn at home, it may give less to those whose families cannot teach them the rest.

Whose tradition?

“Local culture” sounds clear, but most communities contain many cultures. A school in Bamenda or Nairobi may have students from dozens of language groups and several religions. Choosing one tradition to build the curriculum around can leave others out, or make them feel like guests in their own school. The author recognizes this, noting that there are over 200 tribes in the Cameroons, each with its own cultural ecosystem. A curriculum for all of them at once is very hard to design.

Traditions are not always fair

Every tradition carries values that some members challenge. A school that presents a tradition only with pride may teach children not to question it. But one of school’s jobs is to teach students to ask questions, including about their own culture’s treatment of women, young people, outsiders or people who are different. A school built *around* tradition may find this harder than a school that studies tradition alongside other ideas.

The world keeps changing

Young people today will work in jobs that do not yet exist, in economies connected across continents. Digital skills, scientific thinking and communication in widely spoken languages open doors that local knowledge alone may not. In another Ramble, the author imagines a grandmother who can do algebra in itaŋiKom; her grandchildren may need to programme a computer too. Schools must prepare students for a future their elders never saw.

Include local culture, but do not centre everything on it

None of this means local culture has no place in school. It can enrich every subject: local plants in biology, local history in history, local crafts in design, local stories in literature. Many educators call this **culturally relevant teaching**, and it helps students see that their own lives are worth studying. The disagreement is about balance: local culture should be a window *into* the curriculum, not the walls around it.

Conclusion

The author is right that education without roots can feel empty, and that students should be proud of where they come from. But school must also open windows onto the wider world, especially for students who have no other way to see through them. The best schools do both: they honour the Circle of Life at home and prepare students to join circles far beyond it.

— Editorial counterpoint

NO: *Kom Culture and the Circle of Life* (2014)

Wanaku Verdzekov

Humans are wired for stories. Some humans believe, in their hearts, stories that sound true but are actually fiction. Belief and truth can be miles apart. But a human heart can make them neighbours.

TribalMonk

Education and the Kom Circle of Life

Bobé Emma,

While we wait for Bobé George to “throw more light...”, I just want to thank you for turning on the light switch again with this statement:

“I remember in 1993, I helped a PhD research student from the US doing translations, and his field of research was traditional herbs and different methods of traditional healing in our Kom land. I marvelled at how much material he had, but at the time I was wondering why an outsider would be wasting his time on such things...”

What is the purpose of schools and education if what is taught and learned does not translate directly into the lives and living conditions of the citizens of a community? Most educational institutions worth their salt do research, and not just so students can earn PhDs. The research has to help solve a real-world problem. If not, what a waste of everyone’s time!

It is heartbreaking to see our brothers and sisters who have “graduated” from institutions with various degrees end up (as one forum member wrote) unemployed, underemployed or virtually jobless. Meanwhile, more schools are built, more parents struggle to pay fees for children to attend them, only to graduate and go back to the “bendskin” cycle of joblessness again. Is something wrong with this picture? What is it? Does anyone have any ideas?

I do. But it is better if everyone takes a little time to think about this picture. See in your mind how it plays out (not like a movie): take the example of a close family member and put yourself in their shoes. At that point you can really “feel” the problem, and then you can put it into words better.

Meanwhile, our funerals must go on, a juju must dance, someone has to *taal mikum*, KOMrades have to dig the grave, our God-sent Kom women still have to make the most delicious food, and the *ghiBobes* will split a kola nut and pour libations (with *miluuuh fifah*), calling on our ancestors to behold the ups and downs of all the years since they left. Then a child is born. And the music begins again from the beginning.

Education without incorporating the Kom Circle of Life is meaningless in a Kom context (if you ask me). And we are just warming up.

iBoisi

~wv

Debt forgiven? Where did the money go?

If you visit an off-licence beer shop and look at the signs, you might find this: “No credit. For credit, come tomorrow.”

Well, our poor developing (or still underdeveloped) countries did not have credit. Then they got credit, used it, and, because they have not paid back the creditors, their debt is being forgiven? The signs in the beer shop should now read: “No debt. For debt, went yesterday.” And something new: “Free beer for all!”

But there is still this nagging question: where did the money go? Don’t tell me so. The next generation of debtors is on its marks, getting set, ready to go.

If you look closely at these so-called “deals” between nations, there is usually more to them than the public imagines. When money changes hands, it really does. If a debt is not repaid, does the money disappear into a black hole? No. It is somewhere.

So when a lecturer at the Russian Institute of Natural Monopolies, Vladislav Ginko, says, “On the one hand, we get political support of these countries, for instance in the UN. On the other hand, it helps

negotiate military cooperation...”, one should take note and bring it home to one’s own reality: will our local politicians sign, accept or hunt for loans that they know will only be repaid by raising their hands at the UN in support of their creditor?

The tortoise and the giraffe can live in the same neighbourhood, but one cannot necessarily see what the other sees.

So...

iBoisi

~wv

If Kom culture has to live

Bobé Nkfum,

Ayongni. Thanks for taking the time (once in a while) to share your informed opinion about KOM issues.

If one does not know the details of one’s culture, history and everything possible about one’s homeland, that ignorance can lead to a lot of mistakes, mishaps and misjudgements... mis-everything.

I dare say that even at the global level, the conflicts one hears about every day are mostly based on the struggle of one group of people to keep their culture alive and strong and, if possible, to share (impose) it on as many people as possible. That way (since your culture becomes the centre), everyone and everything else revolves around you. Basically, that is what Western culture has done.

But Kom culture does not have to die for Western culture to live. So if Kom culture (and civilization) has to live, what does Kom need to do to make that happen?

Something to think about.

~wv

Without a foundation, no house can stand

There is a real lack of knowledge among many of our people about their own things. It only goes to prove how we have been beating the bush along a path to nowhere. But few will heed the warning to stop, think and look carefully before carrying on with whatever we think “development” is.

Without a foundation, no house can stand. Without a cultural foundation, no civilization can stand the test of time. If our people do not firm up their foundation, more of the soap operas we are seeing will keep on keeping on. The children are watching, waiting for the cultural portfolio with which to build the future.

Question: are the adults doing their part? You tell me.

Look at Botswana

Bits of information about a system of community living, taken out of context, can seem a bit strange to the uninformed. Here is the deal: there are 200+ tribes in the Cameroons, and each has its own cultural ecosystem. Then there is the ecosystem of the Franco-Camerounese “national” public-service culture, which permeates all 200 tribal systems one way or another. Question: under this national ecosystem, how are the tribal ecosystems doing? You tell me.

But before that, take a look at the governing system of the Republic of Botswana. Its legislative branch (those who write and uphold the laws) consists of a House of Chiefs plus a National Assembly. If you ask me, this mix of traditional and Western intelligence creates a hybrid that produces better, more practical and more logical laws, the kind that make common sense common for the average man or woman on the street in each community.

My deli si bo.

— Wanaku Verdzekov

Replies written in an online forum in May 2014; other members' emails are left out. Lightly edited for this book.

Vocabulary

Word or phrase	Meaning in the readings
fictive	invented, not real
research	careful study to find new knowledge
underemployed	working in a job below one's skills
libation	a drink poured out as an offering to the ancestors
vicissitudes	changes of fortune; ups and downs
off-licence	a shop that sells alcohol to take away
creditor	a person or country that lends money
impose	to force something on others
legislative	to do with making laws
hybrid	a mix of two different things
curriculum	what is taught in a school or course
culturally relevant	connected to students' own cultures and lives

Comprehension questions

Literal (find it in the text)

1. What does the author say humans are “wired for”?
2. What did the US researcher study in Kom in 1993?
3. According to the author, what is education without the Kom Circle of Life?
4. What two bodies make up Botswana's legislature, according to the author?
5. What does the counterpoint say local culture should be in the curriculum: a window or the walls?

Inferential (read between the lines)

6. Why does the author think research should do more than help students earn PhDs?
7. What is the author's point in describing the funeral, the juju, the kola nut and the newborn child?
8. Why does the counterpoint say school is “a shared ladder”?
9. Why does the counterpoint ask “Whose tradition?”

Critical (evaluate and respond)

10. Look at one subject you study. How much of it connects to your own community? Should that change?
 11. Which reading better serves students who come from poor families? Explain carefully.
 12. Design one lesson that teaches a school subject through local culture.
-

Is there common ground?

Both writers agree that education must connect to real life, that graduate unemployment shows something is wrong, and that local knowledge deserves respect. The counterpoint accepts that local culture

should enrich every subject; the author does not reject modern knowledge, only knowledge cut off from community.

They disagree about **the centre**. The author wants education built around the Kom Circle of Life. The counterpoint wants local culture woven into a curriculum that also prepares students for the wider world, especially students who have no other access to it.

A shared approach might be **culturally relevant teaching**: a common core of skills (literacy, mathematics, science, languages), taught through local examples, with regular study of the community's history, crafts and traditions, and freedom to question them.

Debate and writing prompt

Debate motion: *This house believes that schools should put wider-world knowledge ahead of local culture.*

- Divide the class into proposition and opposition. Each side must use at least two pieces of evidence from its reading and answer the other side's strongest point.
- After the debate, hold a vote, then discuss which arguments changed minds.

Writing task: (400–600 words) Choose a subject you study (for example biology, history or mathematics). Write a proposal to your teacher for one unit that would teach the same skills through local culture. Explain what students would gain and what they might miss.

Further reading

- Julius K. Nyerere, *Education for Self-Reliance* (1967).
- Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy", *American Educational Research Journal* (1995).
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind* (1986).

Appendix A · The Cameroons: A Timeline, 1884–2020

This timeline gives the main dated events behind Unit 3. It is written to be neutral: it records what happened, not who was right. For the author's own interpretation of these events, see Issue 3.1. Where sources give slightly different dates or figures, the most widely cited is used.

Key names: *Kamerun* (German colony) · *French Cameroun* / *La République du Cameroun* (the French-administered territory and the state it became) · *British Cameroons*, divided into *Northern* and *Southern Cameroons* (the British-administered territory) · *Cameroon* (the present country) · *Ambazonia* (the name used by those who seek independence for the former Southern Cameroons).

Colonial rule

Year	Event
1884	Germany declares a protectorate over the coast of Kamerun and expands inland over the following decades.
1914–1916	During the First World War, British and French forces (with Belgian support) invade Kamerun; the German forces withdraw in 1916.
1919–1922	After the war, Kamerun is divided. The League of Nations gives France a mandate over about four-fifths of the territory and Britain over about one-fifth, a strip along the Nigerian border. Britain administers its part as part of Nigeria.
1946	After the Second World War, both parts become United Nations Trust Territories, which the UN expects to lead towards self-government or independence.

Towards independence

Year	Event
1948	The Union of the Peoples of Cameroon (UPC) is founded in French Cameroun, calling for independence and reunification of the two Cameroons.
1954	Southern Cameroons gains its own House of Assembly and a separate regional government within Nigeria, with E.M.L. Endeley as leader.
1955	The UPC is banned in French Cameroun after riots; an armed conflict between the UPC and French (later Cameroonian) forces begins and lasts into the early 1970s, costing many thousands of lives.
1956	Oil is discovered in commercial quantities in the Niger Delta, Nigeria.
1958	UPC leader Ruben Um Nyobè is killed by French forces. Ahmadou Ahidjo becomes Prime Minister of French Cameroun.
1959	John Ngu Foncha's party wins elections in Southern Cameroons; Foncha becomes Premier.
1 January 1960	French Cameroun becomes independent as the Republic of Cameroun; Ahmadou Ahidjo becomes president.
1 October 1960	Nigeria becomes independent.
3 November 1960	UPC leader Félix-Roland Moumié dies in Geneva, Switzerland, after being poisoned.

Federation

Year	Event
11–12 February 1961	UN plebiscites in the British Cameroons. Voters may choose only between joining Nigeria and joining the Republic of Cameroun. Northern Cameroons votes to join Nigeria; Southern Cameroons votes (about 70%) to join Cameroun.
1 June 1961	Northern Cameroons becomes part of Nigeria.
17–21 July 1961	At the Foumban Conference, delegations from Southern Cameroons and the Republic of Cameroun discuss a federal constitution.
1 October 1961	The Federal Republic of Cameroon is created, with two states: East Cameroon (French-speaking) and West Cameroon (English-speaking).
1966	The ruling parties merge into a single party, the Cameroon National Union (CNU); Cameroon becomes a one-party state.
1967–1970	Civil war in Nigeria, as the south-eastern region tries to secede as Biafra.
1971	The last major UPC leader in Cameroon, Ernest Ouandié, is executed; the armed UPC rebellion ends.

Unitary state

Year	Event
20 May 1972	A national referendum approves replacing the federation with a unitary state, the United Republic of Cameroon. 20 May becomes the national day.
late 1970s	Cameroon begins producing oil offshore, near the Nigerian border.
1982	President Ahidjo resigns; Prime Minister Paul Biya becomes president.
1984	The country's name is changed to the Republic of Cameroon. A coup attempt against President Biya fails.
1985	The CNU is renamed the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM). Fon Gorji Dinka, a lawyer and traditional ruler, is arrested after calling for the restoration of Southern Cameroons.
1990	Multiparty politics is legalized. The Social Democratic Front (SDF), led by John Fru Ndi, is launched in Bamenda; several people are killed at the launch.
1992	First multiparty presidential election; President Biya is declared the winner over Fru Ndi, a result the opposition disputes.
1993–1994	Two All Anglophone Conferences (Buea 1993, Bamenda 1994) call for a return to a federal system.
1995	The Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) petitions the United Nations. Cameroon joins the Commonwealth.
1996	A new constitution provides for regions and decentralization.
2002	The International Court of Justice rules that the Bakassi peninsula belongs to Cameroon, not Nigeria.
2008	Nigeria completes the handover of Bakassi to Cameroon. A constitutional amendment removes presidential term limits.

The Anglophone crisis

Year	Event
October–November 2016	Lawyers in the English-speaking regions strike against the use of French and civil-law judges in common-law courts; teachers strike against French-speaking staff in English schools. Protests spread and are met with force.
2017	The internet is cut in the two English-speaking regions for about three months. The government creates a National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism. On 1 October, separatist leaders symbolically declare the independence of “Ambazonia”; violence escalates into armed conflict between separatist groups and government forces.
2018	Separatist leaders, including Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe, are arrested in Nigeria and handed over to Cameroon. President Biya is re-elected.
2019	Ayuk Tabe and others are sentenced to life imprisonment by a military court. The government holds a Major National Dialogue and grants the two English-speaking regions a “special status”.
2020	Civilians are killed at Ngarbuh (February) and school students at Kumba (October), among many attacks on civilians reported in the conflict.

UN agencies and human-rights organizations have reported that the conflict has caused thousands of deaths and displaced hundreds of thousands of people. Human-rights groups have documented abuses by both government forces and armed separatist groups.

Using this timeline

1. **Before Unit 3:** read the timeline and mark the three events you think were most important. Compare with a partner.
2. **With Issue 3.1:** compare this timeline with the author’s. Which events does the author include or leave out, and why?
3. **Research:** choose one event and find two sources that describe it differently. What explains the difference?

Appendix C · Glossary of Kom, Pidgin, French and Political Terms

Words from the readings that are not standard English. Meanings are given as the author uses them. Kom spellings use the letter i (a vowel between “i” and “u”).

Kom (itaŋiKom)

Term	Meaning
itaŋiKom	the Kom language
Fòyn (Fon)	the king of Kom, a political and spiritual leader
KwiFòyn	the council or institution that guards Kom tradition
Nandónj	the founding mother of the Kom people
wâyn nà wom	“child of my mother”: how Kom people greet each other as kin
NchîniKòm	the Kom way of life; Kom tradition
gheli ghi báŋni / ghel bangni	“red people”: the Kom name for Europeans
mukomangoh	Kom people
AsaeNdosi	“house foundations”: the families or clans that make up Kom
Nyamabo	a person of good standing and good behaviour
Nyamfikah	literally “bush animal”: a person who behaves without dignity or “home training”
nte’	a village quarter
AfoaKom	a sacred carved figure of the Kom Kingdom, stolen in 1966 and returned in 1973
iBoisi, Jvi kiti, Wakikiki	Kom sign-offs the author uses at the end of posts

Cameroonian Pidgin English

Term	Meaning
potopoto	mud
chop broke pot	“eat and break the pot”: greedy, wasteful consumption, especially of public money
bendskin	a motorbike taxi
njangi	a savings group whose members take turns receiving the pooled money
pickin	child
Wuna leave them	“Leave them alone” (to a group)

French

Term	Meaning
gendarme	a member of a military police force
oui, m'sieu	“yes, sir”: used by the author for obedience without thought
n'importe quoi	“any old thing”: nonsense
la galère	a hard, miserable life
Après moi, le déluge	“After me, the flood”: a ruler who does not care what happens after he is gone

Political terms and abbreviations

Term	Meaning
Anglophone / Francophone	English-speaking / French-speaking
Southern Cameroons	the southern part of the former British Cameroons, now Cameroon's North-West and South-West regions
Ambazonia	the name used by those who seek independence for the former Southern Cameroons
LRC	<i>La République du Cameroun</i> : the author's name for the Cameroonian state
UPC	Union of the Peoples of Cameroon, an independence party banned in 1955
CNU / CPDM	Cameroon National Union (single party from 1966) / Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (its successor, from 1985)
SDF	Social Democratic Front, the main opposition party from 1990
SCNC	Southern Cameroons National Council, formed in the 1990s to seek self-rule
BIR	<i>Bataillon d'intervention rapide</i> , an elite army unit
D.O.	Divisional Officer, a government-appointed local administrator
FCFA / CFA franc	the currency used by Cameroon and several other former French colonies
plebiscite	a vote by all citizens on one question
federation	a state in which regions share power with a central government
unitary state	a state in which most power lies with the central government