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Review: Meredith Terretta: Nation of outlaws, state of violence: nationalism, grassfields tradition, and state building in Cameroon

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Meredith Terretta (2013), *Nation of Outlaws, State of Violence: Nationalism, Grassfields Tradition, and State Building in Cameroon*, Athens: Ohio University Press, ISBN 978-0-8214-2069-0, 368 pp.

Terretta's monograph offers an in-depth historical analysis of the rise of Cameroon's independent movement, the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC), and its increasingly violent struggle against French colonialism. Her central claim is that the UPC's fight for freedom derived its strength and meaning from political processes that unfolded at the local and international level. Drawing on previously unknown archival material, she charts the local, transregional and global trajectories of the UPC and its effect on ordinary citizens.

Terretta begins her analysis at the local levels in the Bamileke region and shows how the leitmotifs of the independence struggle ("freedom" and "nation") were deeply engrained in spiritual Bamileke traditions. The economic successes of the Bamileke led to the emergence of a political consciousness that was winning over an increasing number of Africans. Changes in French labour laws allowed Africans to form independent trade unions for the first time. Many union activists subsequently helped form the UPC in 1948. Between its formation and its ban in 1955, the UPC emerged as the largest political force in pre-independence Cameroon. Stressing the commonalities between the country's nascent literate black elite and ordinary citizens, the UPC provided an entry point to political participation for a much broader constituency than any other party. The cosmopolitan make-up of the UPC leadership deserves particular attention. Many local UPC leaders had grown up far from their birthplaces. The experience of crossing communal boundaries allowed them to communicate their ideas across diverse audiences and afforded the movement additional legitimacy in the eyes of the population.

Cameroon's status as a UN Trust Territory provided an equally important impetus to the UPC project. UPC leader Um Nyobé and his followers justified the goals of the UPC by linking them to the normative imperatives of international law and by raising awareness of Cameroon's legal predicament. Article 76 of the UN Charter foresaw eventual autonomy for the Trust Territories, thus giving added legitimacy to the goal of an independent Cameroon. The appearances of the UPC leadership before the UN General Assembly also featured prominently in the speeches of local UPC representatives. Thousands of Cameroonians began to petition the UN in protest of France's brutal colonial conduct. Between 1946 and 1960, more than fifty thousand petitions reached the Trusteeship Council in New York.

Despite its local support and international visibility, the colonial government banned the UPC in 1955 and deposed those Bamileke chiefs who had been UPC sympathizers. Governmental interference in the selection process of traditional leaders subsequently became a major source of the ruthless violence which characterized Cameroon in the 1960s. Terretta illustrates that “far from being a civil war launched by commoners against chiefs and notables, violence [...] trailed in the wake of a series of politically unthinkable deposition of chiefs and notables from their legitimate rule” (156). The UPC reacted by starting a violent campaign against those chieftaincies where traditional leaders were sympathetic to the government. The armed wing of the UPC, the *Armée de Liberation Nationale du Kamerun* (ALNK), turned large sections of the Bamileke region into no-go areas. Following the declaration of a permanent state of emergency by the Ahidjo government, violence became endemic and spiralled out of control: “Like those of the UPC soldiers, the tactics of state security forces quickly metamorphosed from a controlled fight against the rebels into disorganized, undisciplined and often criminal attacks on civilians, thus contributing to a culture of violence” (220).

For the UPC and its armed wing, there was no happy ending. Despite initial support by the Nkrumah government, the UPC proved too weak to withstand the military might of the Ahidjo government. International support by communist parties, the UN Trusteeship Council and the pan-African movement fizzled out. There was no happy ending for the people of Cameroon, either. The extreme brutality of the ALNK provided the government with a pretext to crack down on any potential regime opponent. Torture and executions thus became a regular feature of the political landscape. Eventually, an autocratic government became firmly entrenched in power. Advocates of political pluralism and peaceful coexistence were forced to exit the political arena for good.

Terretta has written a well-researched addition to the growing literature on African nationalism(s). Her book is part of a series of monographs that re-examine African independence movements. Her study contains hitherto unknown material about the social origins of the UPC. The most innovative contribution of the book is the international dimension of the UPC’s anti-colonial struggle: the effect of the United Nations, the Nkrumah government and the pan-African movement on the UPC. Finally, Terretta provides Cameroonians with a history that the country’s various postcolonial governments tried to hide.

However, historians are likely to be disappointed by the author’s insufficient engagement with previous historical accounts. In her analysis, Terretta rightly touches upon the works of Richard Joseph and Achille

Mbembe – two giants in the debate about the UPC’s struggle for freedom. How does her work relate to theirs? Unfortunately, those who are less well versed in the historical details of Cameroon’s struggle for independence are left wondering about the wider implications of her findings for the study of Cameroonian nationalism and of African nationalism in general. The conclusion is too abrupt and raises the unresolved question about the country’s current predicament. While Terretta’s study is the work of a historian, offering some thoughts on the political implications of the UPC struggle for the future of Cameroon would have been a better way of ending the book.

- Sebastian Elischer