



Ethics and Public Policy Laboratory/Laboratoire d’Ethique et de Politiques Publiques
Université Catholique d’Afrique Centrale

EthicsLab Conference - December 14-15, 2020
UCAC Campus - Yaoundé (Nkolbisson)

Rethinking the Cameroonian State from the Ethnic Paradigm?

African societies continue to face major challenges, including that of their political agency. Since independence, the African continent has not made significant progress in both political and economic terms. It remains globally on the fringes of international political and economic affairs. In this context, one of the major challenges for African societies in general is how they should (re)define and ultimately undertake their own political destiny. Equally, how they should themselves assume their political obligations towards their own citizens instead of discharging their duties and having them insured by other states or institutions. There are undoubtedly various ways of tackling these challenges. One of these, interestingly, would be for these societies to dissociate themselves from the colonial political legacy in the form of the nation-state and reconnect with the roots and sociological characteristics of the African continent. This would force them to rethink an African state model, which, while freeing itself from the model of the Western state in Africa, would accelerate the emergence of a genuine political agency of African societies of which the state is the instrument and the most suitable vehicle.

The political agency of African societies requires a redefinition or even a reinvention of the state as a modern form of political organization. And for good reason, the state embodies the general will of a people and presents itself as the instrument par excellence of its political action. It is thanks to the state that a people is able to determine its own destiny, to protect the fundamental rights of its citizens, to guarantee their aspiration to happiness, and to assume the responsibilities which allow to advance these protections and these aspirations. Rethinking or reinventing the state is therefore fundamental if we are to overcome the other economic and social challenges facing many states in sub-Saharan Africa today. It is even the primordial intellectual task to be carried out, as the state significantly affects all other parts of our social and economic life, which begins with the recognition of the failure of the Western state model in Africa.

The Western state model that was imported and implemented across Africa is based on several assumptions: building nations by annihilating tribes or ethnic groups; developing political programs that transcend social and cultural differences; linking the legitimacy of the state to an individualistic vision of the citizen expressed by universal suffrage, the so-called “one person, one vote”. But this model, looking back on six decades of experimentation since the independences, has failed to some extent; not because these postulates implemented have led to ineffective results *per se*, but above all because they have been in constant conflict with the social and sociological reality of a good number



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of African societies, where the group, and not the individual, represents the base of the social order. To the extent that the way of thinking/implementing political programs or of building the legitimacy of the state and therefore its sustainability develops around national construction, the latter is therefore the cornerstone from which the African state must be rethought.

While rethinking the state or inventing any other new form of political organization that can guarantee authentic political agency to African societies, it is important to (re-) start from the ethnic paradigm which represents a sociological reality that must be re-examined and re-legitimized. If ethnicity is seen only through the prism of internal conflicts in Africa, i.e. as a cultural entity that reflects only its tribal accents, then it becomes an obstacle to the emergence of an authentic African state. On the other hand, if ethnicity is considered as the political base from which the state must be reshaped, then it potentially carries with it the seeds of a legitimization of political action and expression that would embody the African state. It is therefore important to move away from the tribalization of the ethnic group, which has plunged many African states into conflicts. Instead, we should move towards what we call a “politicization” of ethnicity, where ethnicity is constructed and seen as a relevant political paradigm and not reduced to an identity or cultural marker. This can have various implications. On the one hand, in the very way of thinking about the nation where national consciousness is no longer antithetical to ethnic consciousness, but simply its political extension. On the other hand, in the way of measuring or establishing political legitimacy within African societies, where the legitimacy of the political process would no longer be based exclusively on universal suffrage per se, but on a combination of “universal suffrage between ethnic groups” and “rotating power sharing between various ethnic entities”.

If the issue of political agency is common to a large part of African societies, it comes in different ways depending on the political and historical particularities of each state in Africa. The purpose of this conference is in part to examine how these types of questions and the issues they raise relate to the Cameroonian political context. Like many African states on the cusp of ‘formal’ independence, Cameroon ‘mimically’ adopted the same model of state and nation building that required, in Cahen's words (1999), that the tribe die so that the nation may live. It is as if the eclipse of the tribe or even of the ethnic group was the sine qua non condition for the emergence of a nation, which would itself become the foundation from which an authentic state would be built. But the return and the omnipresence of the ethnic group in the Cameroonian political landscape questions the efficiency and even the theoretical relevance of this post-independence strategy which consisted in replicating the model of the Western state in Cameroon instead of thinking and inventing a Cameroonian state model. This conference examines the challenge posed by ethnic renewal in Cameroonian society and polity, and analyze how Cameroonian society can assume and ensure its political agency by rethinking and rebuilding a Cameroonian state from the ethnic paradigm. In other words, it is a question of thinking of a form of political organization, which can combine in a subtle way the liberal



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principle of respect for the fundamental rights of each Cameroonian citizen, the political need for unity and stability of the Cameroonian State, and respect for requests for recognition of ethnic identities in the Cameroonian public sphere.

This conference will examine various aspects of the challenges posed by the emergence or construction of an authentic Cameroonian state that takes the ethnic paradigm seriously. Without limiting ourselves to this, we welcome contributions or proposals that will explore the following three areas:

Ethnology: How to define notions like family, clan, tribe, ethnicity and are there any fundamental distinctions or differences between these notions? Is ethnicity an essentially cultural concept? Is ethnicity a political concept?

History: How were the peoples residing in present-day Cameroonian territory organized politically? What does a brief history of the state in Cameroon reveal? From a historical point of view, what are the distinctions that exist between different modes of political organization such as chiefdom, sultanate, ‘lamida’, empire, state, etc.?

Political theory/philosophy: Is there a major normative distinction between the Cameroonian state and the state in Cameroon? Isn't the form of political organization that the state represents normatively obsolete and sociologically unsuitable for the Cameroonian context? Is ethnicity necessarily the enemy of the state? Is the state the ultimate form of political organization? Should we rethink statehood or get rid of the state altogether and invent a new form of political organization that reflects the sociological reality of Cameroon?

Proposals of 1000 characters maximum, in French or English, should be sent to thierry.ngosso@unisg.ch; belpiger@yahoo.fr; ethicslab@ucac-icy.net by December 2, 2020 at the latest. Contributors of selected proposals will be notified by December 4, 2020 at the latest. Due to the covid-19 pandemic, this call is open exclusively to researchers currently residing in Cameroon. Depending on our budget, in addition to offering lunch and dinner to all contributors of selected proposals, we may cover the transportation costs of those not residing in Yaoundé and in some cases, we will provide accommodation for those residing at more than 300km from Yaoundé.