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Acteurs de l'histoire au Nord-Cameroun XIX^e et XX^e siècles



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PREFACE

by

Lisbet HOLTEDAHL

I am deeply touched by the honour bestowed on me when I was asked to introduce you to this special volume of the Ngaoundéré-Anthropos Review. "*Acteurs de l'Histoire au Nord-Camroun. XIX^e et XX^e siècles*".

This volume represents three milestones. *The first milestone* is that we present here the research work by the very first students majoring from the Faculty of Art, Literature and Social Sciences of the University of Ngaoundéré. Within a very short lapse of time the northern part of Cameroon has its University with its Faculty of Art, Literature and Social Sciences in 1993, its first bachelors in 1996, its Master degree candidates in 1997 and now a Doctoral School. The studies of the northern region are flourishing as witnessed by the articles. The studies also witness the very hard and genuinely motivated work of young students. The material in the articles is very rich. The biographical approach has allowed the young researchers to offer to us a rich contextualised presentation of individual lives and careers. They give us an insight into new aspects of local history and the socio-cultural development of the region. We have learnt important lessons about power relations between ethnic groups, between colonial powers and traditional political systems, about local communities' relationship to authorities through time, and last but not least about women's and men's role in the societal transformation. The light which this volume throws on political and societal changes in a cameroonian periphery is complementary to more "traditional" studies focusing on social systems, political organisation, etc.

The reading also gives a very special pleasure because of the intimacy which we feel exists between the students and the people with whom they have worked. Until twenty years ago, most

of the knowledge produced about the societies of the northern provinces was done by researchers from other countries, especially within anthropology and archaeology. But this very interesting material has not reached the local populations. Until recently young people from the North of Cameroon, in order to take higher education, had to leave home and enrol either at the Universities in Europe or America or at the University of Yaoundé in the south, which, seen from the North, was a remote area in all senses of the word. The acquisition of the "universalistic academic language/knowledge" did not necessarily favour or encourage the intimate relationship with local people or individuals in the way we see in this collection of articles.

As I see, it lies in this volume a new and important trend in the whole approach to knowledge production and in the context which frames the production itself. At one level, it is political. The University was created in order to promote development in the North, and students are living and writing in the societies, which are being studied. This allows an immediate feedback from the local society to the research work and to the articles. It will necessarily constitute a very welcome running criticism of the results, the presentations and the explanations, and so sharpen the ears and eyes of the young researchers and the whole research community. *This is the second milestone.*

In Northern Norway, where I have worked for many years, the establishment of the University of Tromsø as a tool for regional development has led to an entire rewriting of the history of not only the region but also of the whole Nation. It has been proved that universal academic analytic tools, whether they belong to historical or anthropological research, can not "compensate" closeness and feedback from the people possessing the local knowledge. The more dialogue-based the research, the higher the quality.

A couple of years ago the Norwegian King came to Northern-Norway to apologise on behalf of the whole country for the wrongdoings made not only by political authorities, but also by the

hegemonic academic centres in the south. He met the Sami population who had suffered from a violent assimilation policy from the authorities. And he met some of the people who had opposed the Germans and suffered terribly during the Second World War. In this area people had been affiliated through trade and common culture to their Russian neighbours for centuries. During the war these neighbours were communists, who collaborated with the population in the North against the Germans. During the Cold War period they were unjustly described as traitors in the history books on the region. The history was not based on sufficient insight into the local and regional political specificities of the northern and oriental part of the country.

The Anthropos programme is based on the idea that there is no universal academic research paradigm. The idea is rather that the production of knowledge and analysis of data must be intelligibly related to all actors in the research process: the "researchers", the "informants" and the "readers" they belong or not to the same society or whether they possess or not the same cultural perception. There exist no analytical grasp or "universal" methodology, which can help us to avoid the cultural they belong or not to the same society possess or not the same cultural perceptions. One cannot avoid through whatever analytical grasp or methodology the cultural barriers that are currently generated between academy and society and which are reproduced by the academic society itself. It is only by assuring transparency and continued dialogue between academy and local population, and by the dissemination of scientific knowledge, that academic knowledge can be validated. If there is no feedback from the population, then there is no critical eye. Without "a critical local eye" academic centres are at the risk of producing global hegemonies and controllers of not only knowledge, but also of power.

The third milestone raised by this volume is the testimony given of how central the peripheries are to the development of academic knowledge. It is the "centres" which are far away and which are "latecomers" in the framing of local societies as important actors in the construction of the global society and in the production of cultural knowledge.

The richness of the biographies of this volume testifies the singularities of historical development of the society of Northern-Cameroon. The epistemological tradition that considers representativity and generalisations at the empirical level as necessary is often ethnocentric. What one should look for is the comparison of genuinely different empirical historical developments.

It is the effort to currently handle inter-cultural dialogue-based production of knowledge, which constitutes the big and important challenge for the humanist scientist. A collective of people and voices is what constitutes the sources of cultural knowledge. The objective of the dissemination of the "academic" knowledge to local societies must be incorporated in the research process from the first to the last step. Only by doing this will society and academia articulate in a proper humanistic way.

These simple insights do not seem to be taken very seriously in many parts of the academic systems. As long as this is so, the global academic hegemony will take more care of itself than of global decentralisation of knowledge production and through this, human welfare.

PREFACE

par

Lisbet HOLTEDAHL

Je suis profondément touchée par l'honneur qui m'a été donné de rédiger l'avant-propos de ce premier numéro spécial de la Revue Ngaoundéré-Anthropos intitulé «Acteurs de l'Histoire au Nord Cameroun. XIX^e et XX^e siècles».

Ce volume a *trois mérites*. Le *premier* est la présentation des résultats de recherches effectuées par les tous premiers étudiants de la Faculté des Arts, Lettres et Sciences Humaines de l'Université de Ngaoundéré. En un très court temps, la partie septentrionale du Cameroun a eu son Université avec sa Faculté des Arts, Lettres et Sciences Humaines en 1993, ses premières licences en 1996, ses premières maîtrises en 1997 et aujourd'hui son Ecole doctorale. Le nombre des études sur le Nord-Cameroun augmente considérablement. Les recherches sont aussi redynamisées par la motivation des jeunes étudiants. Les articles sont, dans l'ensemble, très riches. L'approche biographique a permis aux jeunes chercheurs de nous offrir une présentation très documentée d'histoires de vie, bien situées dans leur contexte. Ils nous fournissent un aperçu de nouveaux aspects de l'histoire locale et du développement socio-culturel de la région. Nous avons appris beaucoup de choses concernant les relations entre les groupes ethniques, les relations entre le pouvoir colonial et les systèmes politiques traditionnels, les communautés locales et les autorités dans une perspective historique et enfin, mais surtout, le rôle des femmes et des hommes dans les mutations sociales. L'éclairage porté sur des mutations politiques et sociales d'une périphérie camerounaise par les articles de ce volume est complémentaire à des études plus «traditionnelles» concernant les systèmes sociaux, l'organisation politique, etc.