

Review of

Walter Gam Nkwi, *Voicing the Voiceless: Contributions to Closing Gaps in Cameroon History, 1958 – 2009* (Bamenda: Laanga Research and Publishing CIG, 2010), 200 pp.

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Voicing the Voiceless: Contributions to Closing Gaps in Cameroon History, 1958 – 2009 represents a new and innovative contribution to the historiography of Cameroon. The author is Walter Gam Nkwi, a Cameroonian historian who graduated from the University of Buea with a master's in African history. He is currently a research fellow at the African Studies Centre at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, writing a doctoral dissertation on “the social history of communication technology, mobility and social hierarchy among the Kom of the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon from 1928 – 1998.” The book suggests that although histories of the voiceless have become a popular genre, at least in some circles, such histories have not gained much consideration in Cameroon historiography. The voiceless here represents “those set of people who have contributed towards the production of history but who have not received a commensurate reward in the historical research and writings” (p. 1). The voiceless are people who undeniably play significant roles in the historical drama and yet are not presented as such in the public arena precisely because they are not at the center of power. Their voices are not heard and their contributions to the production of history are not documented. Traditional archival sources render them invisible. To the powerful, these people are indeed voiceless.

This text is rooted in a theory of the subaltern, which historically traces back to the work of Southeast Asian scholars, particularly those of Indian persuasion, the most famous being Gayatri Spivak. With respect to historiography, “subaltern” refers to those groups of people who have been systematically disempowered and oppressed, people whose voices have been unheard

and presences unrecognized because of a politics that privileges the interests of those who benefit the most from colonial power. Some postcolonial thinkers generally use the term to refer to marginalized groups and the lower classes. Spivak, however, goes beyond a simple and reductionist conception of the term, since, for her, it is not just a “classy word for the oppressed,” but it comprehensively marks the multiplicity of limitations that colonial dynamics impose on certain peoples, including the kind of stripping of recognition that enables and is enabled by cultural imperialism. According to Walter Gam Nkwi, while this theory of the subaltern has influenced and shaped the intellectual landscape of Southeast Asia, it remains underexplored by scholars of Cameroon, and more broadly, African history. Therefore, Nkwi stages his work as an intervention, as he seeks to contribute to the growth of such studies from an African perspective and with a focus on Cameroon. In his approach to theorizing the subaltern, he focuses more on contextual analysis, and therefore positions himself in a similar vein of thought as Spivak: The voiceless can also be “those in the corridors of power who more often are neglected in the subaltern discourses” (p. 2). Nkwi has infused the discourse of the subaltern with flexibility and elasticity and that is what makes him most interesting and innovative.

Methodologically, Nkwi uses both oral and written sources in unveiling history. His written sources come from the Buea national archives in Cameroon and several archives in Europe, including Public Records Archives, Kew Gardens, London; Mission 21 archives at missionsstrasse, Basel; and The Afrika Studei Centrum library, Leiden, Netherlands. Nkwi’s participation in international and national workshops, like one on “governing elites in Africa” and another on “historicizing migrations,” which took place from August to September 2003 in Dakar and Saint Louis in Senegal, sharpened his views on various ideas treated in the book.

The book is a sort of multi-thematic volume structured in seven chapters, each of which begins with a short introduction and ends with a short conclusion. Nkwi has gathered and coalesced into a multivocal conversation a set of themes in Cameroon history that according to him have received little attention from scholars thus far. This includes, for example, Anglophone rural women's roles during the struggle for the independence of the Cameroons. In the chapter dedicated to this topic, Nkwi reveals how a traditional society of rural women known as Anlu, which "in its traditional setting was meant to protect women's rights and in a sense maintain social equilibrium in the fondom" (p. 20), influenced the outcome of the 1959 elections in the Kom Fondom located in the Bamenda Grassfields in what is today the northwest region of Cameroon, part of the former British Cameroon. These women played an important but formally undocumented role in the history of Cameroon.

In another chapter, Nkwi analyzes the national politics of belonging and competition in football, which provides a very important explanation of elite norms and ethno-regionalism. As he sees it, ethno-regionalism and sentiments of belonging have been manipulated firstly by state officials who have used them to consolidate their grip on the society and secondly by elites as a means to access the corridors of power. Nkwi more pointedly treats the political issue of belonging in another chapter dedicated to the role of football in Cameroonian history. Here, he highlights how football has gone beyond a simple sporting activity to become a matter of high political importance and interest, a political tool in the hands of the government used within ongoing debates on ethnic loyalties and the consequences of (particular figurations of) belonging. He puts it so clearly when he says that "it is not enough to play football in Cameroon, but what matters more is one's ethnic background and how a competition in which Cameroon is involved is used by political stalwarts to moderate the political climate at home" (p. 151).

Furthermore, Nkwi investigates the role of the telephone and its operators in the history of Cameroon beginning from the pre-colonial to the end of the Mandate period, during which telephone lines were included in local communication settings. Through his intricate and highly informed analysis, the reader learns about the different communication tools that were available within local communities before the coming of the colonists. The other topical issues addressed by the author include the notion of civil society in Cameroon since 1990 and folk songs as an instrument of constructing the collective memory of the people. He also examines the boundary conflict in Africa, with a focus not on such conflicts between nation-states, but between two local ethnic groups within Anglophone Cameroon—the Babankin Tungoh and Bambili—showing how this interior indigenous conflict influences the national polity.

The main contribution of the author to the historiography of Cameroon resides in the fact that he succeeded in demonstrating how subalterns have shaped the construction of the history of Cameroon from 1958 – 2009. This contribution is particularly desirable in this time of Jubilee, during which Cameroon like many other African countries is celebrating its 50 years of independence and planning for the next 50 years of its evolution. Because he has highlighted and addressed underexplored thematic issues of great importance, and in so doing has paved the way for other (Cameroonian) scholars to examine them further, Nkwi has worked simultaneously to textualize *and* stoke the people’s collective memory so that that which is important may not be vanished by the politics of inattention.

Subaltern status has everything to do with the politics of (mis)representation and (mis)recognition. Attending to the marginalized ought to involve attending to conditions of marginality, which include how and by what means the marginalized have been (and ought to be) represented. Therefore, robust resistance to the historiographical status quo and its inattention to

the subaltern entails a reimagining of methodology that holds dear the manifold ways in which marginalized peoples give voice to their existence. Non-textual sources are therefore indispensable to postcolonial historiographical work. One of the strengths of Nkwi's text is in this regard, since it insists on the importance of oral sources to the process of writing the history of Africa.

While the wide-ranging character of this text is noteworthy, this quality may be at once a strength *and* weakness. The author has embraced and compiled too many issues that are too complex to be treated extensively in a single text. Unfortunately, this makes some of Nkwi's conclusions and positions a bit simplistic and caricatural.