

Professor Bernard Fonlon: Testimony/Perspectives from Canada

An Interview with Prof. Fernando Lambert

by Dr. Gilbert Shang Ndi

Professor Fernando Lambert is Professor Emeritus at the University of Laval (Québec, Canada) where he was the Endowed Chair of the Department of Francophone Literatures. He spent many years in Cameroon, first working as a Latin and African Literature teacher at Collège Vogt (Yaoundé) from 1955 to 1970 and later as a university researcher in the field of African literature, working in collaboration with some of the leading figures of the first generation of Cameroonian intellectuals at several level levels. I first met Professor Lambert during a colloquium organised by the University of Laval in 2012 on Francophone literatures and his touching recollections of Professor Bernard Fonlon made me contact him in 2016 for this email interview. This is my translation of the original French version.

Ndi: On which occasions(s) did you meet the late Prof. Bernard Fonlon?

Lambert: I first met Prof. Fonlon at the University of Yaoundé. We had several occasions to exchange and discuss African Literature. At that time, in the 1970s, one spoke of Negro-African Literature of English or French expression). I took up several research fellowships as visiting Professor at the Department of African Literature when the Director was Professor Thomas Méloné (who was later on replaced by Prof. Louis-Marie Ongoum). It was there that I spent a large part of my four-year sabbatical accorded me by my home institution, the University of Laval, Québec. Bernard Fonlon received me at his residence in Yaoundé known as the “Villa Rouge”. In turn, I lodged him at my residence in Québec when he was working on a joint research project with a colleague from the Carlton University of Ottawa. I also co-supervised a PhD thesis with him.

Ndi: You spent quite some time in Cameroon. What would you say about the intellectual space in Cameroon at the time? Let us take the domain of literature, what could be the possible role of the pioneer breed of intellectuals such as Prof. Fonlon?

Lambert: At first I worked as a Latin and French literature teacher at Collège Vogt from 1955 to 1970 and from 1965, I also work on African Literatures. As early as 1955 I had commenced some field research on Cameroon oral literatures. At the beginning of the 1960s,

I joined a group of professors from the University of Yaoundé working in the fields of anthropology and ethnology.

The birth of the University of Yaoundé and the Higher Teachers Training College (known as ENS) served as an immense impetus to university research and gradually Cameroon researchers started joining research projects. Pioneer researchers like Father Théodore Tsala (known for composition of a scientific dictionary of the Ewondo language and the study of Ewondo traditions) and Father Léon Messi (known for collection of folk tales) paved the way for the succeeding generation of researchers: Father Engelbert Mveng, Marcien Towa (in Philosophy), Lucien Manga, Thomas Mélone, Louis-Marie Ongoum, Prosper Abega (in Linguistics), including historians and others.

As a member of this group of researchers, Prof. Fonlon was a pioneer university researcher. In 1963 he created the well-known journal *Abbia, Cameroon Cultural Review*. This trimestrial publication was a bilingual and the first platform through which Cameroonian researchers could publish scientific works. It was an initiative that was ahead of its time. This journal produced 40 editions in the space of 20 years {and is now available on the Vestiges website <http://www.vestiges-journal.info/Abbia/> eds.}. Thus, Prof. Fonlon was an initiator and animator in the domain of Cameroonian and African studies, especially in the ambit of literature, language, and culture. He belongs to the first cohort of researchers and promoters of research in these domains.

Ndi: What would you say concerning his own peculiar intellectual or scientific production? I am asking this question because sometimes one has the impression that Prof. Fonlon is remembered and known for his ethical probity and perhaps rather less for his actual research output. What would you say of his contribution as a researcher in the domain of Negro-African literatures?

Lambert: This would require an inventory of his articles especially those published in *Abbia* and *Presence Africaine*. His research interests focused on a variety of issues: literature, the language of writing and dissemination, culture, criticism, etc. He was also a committed intellectual of his time, interested in politics at the federal state level, especially with regard to the bilingual educational system, the role and status of the African critic, and also concerning the clientelist state, and much more. He even tried his hand at creative writing, with some poems and short stories. He paved the way for research and enabled the younger generations to follow suit. His much-acknowledged stature as an intellectual made him an engaging master given his vast wealth of knowledge, his individual manners and his enthusiasm.

Ndi: In your opinion, to what extent could one say he incarnated the model of the “genuine intellectual”, the title of one of his oft-quoted texts that became almost metonymic of his personality, especially after his death?

Lambert: He was amongst the first wave of intellectuals who studied in Western-style schools in his country. In Cameroon as well as many other countries, many of these intellectuals studied in the catholic or protestant seminaries, according to strict Greco-Latin traditions and they were taught to value methodical approaches and rigor. Many of them whom I knew used to converse with each other in classical Latin with a degree of ease that astonished even the Latin teacher that I was back then. Bernard Fonlon was known as an articulate and organized personality, a seasoned and as a well-read intellectual not only in Cameroon but also at the international level.

Ndi: With regard to your correspondence with him, do you think the fact that he became a member of the government under presidents Ahmadou Ahidjo and (subsequently) Paul Biya affected his convictions in any way?

Lambert: Bernard Fonlon was always a freethinker even with regard to his public discourses. He was never subjected to any system with which he did not concur, was resistant to any form of compromise, strongly attached to his principles, committed to his society and always steadfast to serve. The university context satisfied these desires, and he carried the same values onto the political field whenever he was given the opportunity. His main objective as a minister was to serve the Cameroonian people. He never used public service to private ends. He always showed proof of commendable honesty and integrity. He respected everyone but always preserved his independence of thought and action.

Ndi: What could have been the impact of his training as a seminarian on his socio-political convictions? (You have told me some of his eccentricities. Perhaps you could share them for the benefit of our readers.)

Lambert: I am sure that his seminary days contributed in shaping his personality, in developing his immense sense of generosity and his full commitment to whatever he engaged in, especially with regard to the young generation and other activities he undertook. His spirit of altruism, his concern for others was a constant aspect of his character. He also owed to his schooling in the Greco-Latin classics his intellectual curiosity, interests in literary and social research, a desire to contribute to the highest-level educational achievement for the

Cameroonian youth and a taste for culture in all its forms, especially music. From his seminary days and the time, he spent studying English literature, he conserved a high sense of ritual and the accompanying rites; I use the word 'rites' in its religious as well as anthropological senses. For example, from his English teachers, he faithfully maintained the habit of coming to class in his academic robe. He was the only person in the department to do that and for him and his students, this robe symbolized the fact that he was exercising the function of a trainer and master.

Ndi: Many Cameroonians considered Prof. Fonlon as a perfectly bilingual individual and a paragon of Cameroon's bilingual heritage. He is the one who translated the current national anthem of Cameroon from French into English. As someone who knew him quite closely, did he actually share with you his specific philosophy on bilingualism?

Lambert: From the point of view of Western languages, Prof. Bernard Fonlon was perfectly bilingual. He considered French and English above all as languages of communication and culture. He did not place one above the other. He also had his mother tongue and probably knew other African languages. As a man of his time, he considered the fact of being plurilingual a great asset. For him, French and English opened him up to new horizons and to new vistas of knowledge which he wanted to share with his students.

But he was also conscious of the fact that these two languages also constituted a field of political competition and even rivalry amongst various players. He faced this situation as a minister during certain negotiations concerning the implementation of some projects with the assistance of international partners. He even talked about a case where he was threatened with having an agreement with one particular Western country jeopardized if he signed any contract on such projects with another foreign country.

Ndi: Our conversation is taking place at a time when the English-speaking regions of Cameroon is experiencing unrest due to the non-respect by the regime of president Paul Biya (in power since 1982) of the bi-jural, bicultural and bilingual heritage of Cameroon. {Editors note: readers should remember that the conversation took place in 2016}. Some English-speaking Cameroonians feel marginalized and Bernard Fonlon remains one of the very few English-speaking Cameroonians to have occupied high-level positions in the Cameroonian government. At the local level, the water project bequeathed by Bernard Fonlon as heritage to his hometown Kumbo has been at the centre of a controversy pitting the traditional

authority against state administrative authority. It is as if all that Bernard Fonlon incarnated is falling part. What would you say to that?

Lambert: French and Canadian newspapers have variously covered the ongoing situation in West Cameroon. English-speaking Cameroonians complain that the status that was and is still reserved for them by the Cameroonian Constitution in its official text is being diminished or gradually ignored. This has understandably led to a feeling of marginalization. It is to be recalled that the history of national politics has been rather fluctuating: from the original federal republic, it went on to be one that was united and unified. The two originally constituent states, East and West, rapidly found themselves in a rather fragile and weakened union partly as a result of the behavior and choices of the rulers from the central part of the country. Over time, it seems, the Western part has seen itself isolated meanwhile this part of the country initially showed proof of immense dynamism and devised innovative means for the training and wellbeing of its population; the central authority sidelined distinguished citizens from Western Cameroon who could have added much value to the country in terms of national development. How then do we come back to a more satisfactory equilibrium amongst the entire constituent parts of the country? Easier said than done. The solution is quite complex and challenging to implement.

With regard to the contribution of Bernard Fonlon to his country and to his home community, it poses the general problem of the lack of a gratitude towards those who have contributed to development at the levels of the nation, towns and villages. It is not just enough for history to remember them. It is important “to materialize” in one way or the other their contribution to their society. This could be done in several ways. But the proverb goes that: “Out of sight, out of mind.” It is a duty to conserve the memory of one’s benefactors and forbearers and to turn them into models and heroes. Prof. Fonlon deserves a worthwhile and befitting posterity.

Ndi: Both Cameroon and Canada are bilingual in English and French. Moreover, they are both members of the International organization of Francophonie. But these two countries have experienced different historical trajectories – the prominent difference being the minority status of French-speaking Québec with regard to the English-speaking majority in Canada, quite the opposite in the Cameroonian case. Would you like to comment on the bilingual status of the two countries from your experience?

Lambert: Bilingualism is a social, cultural and political reality which has to benefit all the citizens of the country, cater for their needs and enable them to access all public services. In Cameroon as well as in Canada, bilingualism has created a complex situation. In many African countries, official bilingualism sometimes only considers English, French or other foreign languages. Meanwhile, in reality, African languages, as in the case of Cameroon, remain the mother tongue of a sizable portion of the population. In Canada, the bilingual status takes into account the two main European languages, whereas immigration, a means to renew and develop the society, has led to the arrival of speakers of other African, Asian, and European languages, not forgetting the resurgence in interest in the languages of the native populations of Canada. In some way, official bilingualism in Canada is used as a political tool but the complex reality presents further challenges that need to be ultimately addressed.

It is true that the question of bilingualism, English-French, in Cameroon as well as in Canada has already led to the issue of majority and minority, English being the minority language in Cameroon whereas in Canada this is the case with French. The two minority cases have led to similar consequences: the minority language is subjected to the pressure of the majority language and that necessitates a reaction of defence and self-affirmation from part of the minority people. In that sense, the situation in West Cameroon is quite similar to that of Québec. The question is how to resist invasion so as to continue living with one's minority language.

Bilingualism evidently constitutes an invaluable tool in the management of the country but that also calls for a great sense of obligation from the governing class. At all cost, it is worth ensuring that state services are available to the entirety of the population.

Ndi: What do you know about the circumstances that led to the death of Prof. Fonlon? In what way did the passing on of such a colleague affect you?

Lambert: I was aware that Prof. Fonlon had certain health issues and problems over the years that he could control thanks to medicines. I was witness to his situation during his time at my place in Québec. Nevertheless, I was astonished and greatly upset when I learnt of his death in a hospital in Ottawa. I knew he was in Canada at the time but little did I guess that his health was suffering. I was very touched by his death. I lost an invaluable friend for whom I had considerable respect. Bernard Fonlon was a very sociable person, with a high sense of humanism, a figure of great standing, an intellectual of great renown, a Cameroonian full of respect for his country even when he did not always agree with the way the country was being managed by its rulers.

Ndi: The Association of African Literature, better known under its English language acronym “ALA”, runs the Fonlon-Nichols Award, granted to those who have shown proof of “excellence in creative writing and contributions to the struggle for human rights and freedom of expression. It is given every year to an African writer. The Award was established in 1992 to honour Bernard Fonlon and Lee Nichols for their contributions to both African literature and the freedom of expression.” A due homage do you think? {Eds see <https://africanlit.org/the-fonlon-nichols-award/>}

Lambert: I have been a member of the African Literature Association for many years. I was still active in the association when the Fonlon-Nichols Award was created thanks to the efforts of Dr. Stephen Arnold from Alberta University and some friends of Prof. Bernard Fonlon. After the death of the latter, specialists of African literature in Canadian and American universities decided to honour the memory of their highly esteemed Cameroonian colleague. From 1993, this Award has been given to outstanding African writers. In the strongest terms, the Award constitutes a very eloquent acknowledgment by his colleagues for the contribution of Professor Fonlon to the field of university research, knowledge and development of African literatures, criticism, culture, human rights and freedom of expression. The Award entirely captures the remarkable personality of Bernard Fonlon.

Ndi: Any last word?

Lambert: My wish is that the memory of Prof. Fonlon should be kept alive and this high standing Cameroonian should continue to inspire and guide his today’s compatriots especially the youth whose following he very well knew how to command.

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