Land of My Dreams

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Abstract

An unrelenting policy of francophonisation of the two Anglophone regions of Cameroon spawned a secessionist movement, culminating in a declaration of war in November 2017 against secessionists by the Cameroon nation-state. "Land of My Dreams" is a short story about a mother and daughter living through this war in Bamenda, Cameroon's North West region. It captures the trauma of war on the Anglophone populations of the North West and South West, and highlights how the scars of war are written on and in the bodies of women and girl-children. The mother is consumed with colonial and recent post-colonial histories, and her day-to-day engagements can only draw on that past to anchor the setbacks of the present. Her ten-year-old daughter is acutely aware of the present but engages with their current predicament as a means to imagining a different Cameroonian and African future not only for her family but especially for her female gender.

A warm spurt bathes my thighs, and a heat wave spreads through my body like ink on blotting paper. My inner thighs tickle and I brush one against the other. Liquid settles in the moon-shaped depression where the foam mattress cuddles my bum. My nightgown slowly clings to my natal cleft, and I gently close my thighs. I feel the cloth linger, caressing my perineum. I am drifting in and out of sleep when a cold tingling rushes my skin. I shift from lying on my back to my side and a trickle travels down my thigh onto the bedsheet. A chill forces me upright and I lift the blanket off my body. I look down at my nightgown. I was not dreaming after all.

I jump out of bed and scramble to my feet.

I have wet my bed.

Again.

The last time I lost control, I told myself that was the last time. I told myself I was strong enough, old enough to stop bedwetting. But strange things have been happening lately. You see, a man came to our house. A stranger. We had never seen him in our quarter. A total stranger. He opened the gate, walked to

the main entrance, opened the door without knocking, stepped into the parlour, and asked whether my parents were home. No polite greeting like a normal human being would proffer. A normal person would say, "Ah salut oh. Wuna deh house?"[1] Not this man. Something about him frightened me. I stared at his face and all I could think of were those moments my mother would ask in exasperation, "Are you deaf? Are you mute?" Those questions required no answer as mother and child understood none was necessary. "Wuna papa and mami deh house?" he asked again. My head bopped up and down, but the man wouldn't take his eyes off me. I wrested my body from his scrutiny, ran through the parlour and upstairs to tell my parents there was a strange man at the door. They went downstairs to welcome the visitor. I motioned to my siblings and cousins who joined me at our favourite spot at the top of the stairs where we would sit to watch the spectacles of life unfold downstairs.

"Massa,[2] ah salut," my father greeted.

"Wuna deh house?" the stranger replied.

Daddy gestured to a chair. They all sat down.

The stranger began to speak - "Papa Angela, these are troubled times. We have to work together to reach our goals, for things to change. The right hand must wash the left hand. That's why I am here, in person, in your house, to collect your financial contribution to the cause."

The children huddled on the stairs around me eyed each other. One by one, we shrugged and spread our palms out as the priest would in Sunday prayer. For one, the stranger had switched from Pidgin to straight English.[3] Secondly, I was surprised the stranger knew my name. Only family, friends, and people in our quarter called my mother, Mami Angela, and my father, Papa Angela, in honour of their last child – me. I once asked my mother, "If you have another child after me, what would they call you?" That woman looked me straight in the eye and told a bald-faced lie, "No one can ever replace you," she said.

"Massa, excuse me. I am a bit confused. What cause are you talking about?"

The stranger retorted, "Is there another cause besides the current Anglophone Crisis? On 30 November 2017, the president of *La République*[4] declared war on us and when someone declares war on your home, you don't run into your bedroom and cover your head with your wife's wrappa.[5] We must get

our independence back and to help us wage and win this war of independence; we need money to buy sugarcane and groundnuts.[6] How do you expect us to break free from the chains of this colonial monster? Everything else we've done has failed. Now that we are at war, I don't have to remind you what needs to be done to send them packing from our homes, from our land. The contribution I require from you today, right now, is five hundred thousand francs."

"Massa, I don't have money. You know things are bad. Where do you expect me to get that kind of money?"

"Mr. John, the fight for liberation is not cheap. You spent millions to build this big house. I know exactly how much you are paid each month by this colonial government. A big civil servant of La République like you. Need I say more?" His unblinking eyes fixed on my father. "I am here for your contribution..."

"Massa, who sent you?"

"I am not here to talk politics or play games with you . . ."

The *ndzang*[7] dance ringtone of my mother's Tecno phone suddenly filled the room. She looked at the stranger. The man nodded.

"Hello."

"Yes, allo ma."

"George, where are you? You don finish?"[8]

George was my cousin. He had travelled to Mbengwi to seek admission to secondary school. He was on his way back when three young men accosted him while he was waiting at a motor park for transportation. One of the boys instructed him to call his mother. George looked confused. "Who are you?" George asked. "Didn't you hear me? I said call your mother!" And so, he called.

"George, has something happened? George, na weti?[9] Why you no di answer?"

"Give me the phone," the stranger said.

He stood up and stepped outside the door. His lanky figure framed the door and a long shadow in the shape of a coffin fell across the dining table. He proceeded to have a conversation, speaking so loudly we wondered why he bothered to go outside. We could hear him instructing someone to let the boy go. He stressed he had everything under control and repeated the blunt order: "Leave that pikin[10] make yi go." He stepped back into the living room and a screen of sunlight fell across the plastic tablecloth, enlivening his face. He tossed the phone to my mother and turned towards my father, but remained standing.

"You say weti now, Massa? I don't have time to waste here."

"Massa, I have already told you that I don't . . ."

" 'I don't' no di buy petrol. 'I don't' no di buy gun. 'I don't' no di fight BIR.[11] 'I don't' no di do anything. I no want hear dat your 'I don't' again."

"Massa, you want say make I lie?" my father pleaded with the stranger.

"Look, as a sign of good faith I have instructed my boys to let your relative go. Don't make me change my mind."

"Massa, we don't want that. I beg, please give me some time to see what I can do. I honestly don't have anything in the house to give you right now. Please."

"Ah go come back the day after tomorrow."

The stranger's departure reminded me of the steady and relentless darkening of the sky during the rainy season. The impending nightfall would hasten the tired legs of peasants returning home from toiling on the farm accompanied solely by loud chirping crickets. That seasonal evening shadow crept progressively through our entire house. Adults and children alike sat in silence – a rare occurrence in a home where our screams, cries, and laughter filled every waking hour, often driving our mother to distraction. This was the day that thing the old people can't stop talking about – that thing called The Anglophone Crisis[12] – found its way to our door and wormed itself into the intimacy of our dreams. We did not imagine; indeed, could not have known then, how much worse things would get.

That day, the stranger shattered the veneer of peace our parents had scrupulously moulded around us within the walls of our home. It was also the first night I wet my bed. The man would come back, each time with a different companion, to collect money and to ask Daddy for guns. I have only ever seen guns on CRTV[13] and Africa Magic programmes. Why would this man think my father had guns in our house? They searched every room and never found any guns, but that did not stop them from coming back. The last time we spied him walking towards our house, my younger brother, Peter, took off like a gazelle intent on outsmarting a lioness. He tore through our neighbour's cornfield, feet snapping cornstalks, slapping the earth "tat! tat! tat! tat!" as he ran, and calling out to Mommy at the top of his lungs.

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"Daddy, Daddy, Daddy that man is coming," Peter burst into our room, screaming at his father, gesturing towards the door. "Mommy, we saw him up there on the road. He is coming to the house. Mommy, he is coming."

"Peter, slow down. Slow down," I said.

"But Mommy, that bad man is coming to our house. We saw him up there by the main road. He is coming."

Out of breath, Peter bent down and grabbed both knees to steady himself. His back arched and his stomach heaved with each breath like a malaria patient wrenching to vomit. Peter struggled to steady his breathing and calm his trembling hands. My husband took one look at his son and sprang to his feet. He rifled through the mess on the cane cupboard at the foot of our bed with both hands. Two books, a Manu Dibango CD, a box of matches, a flashlight, and a beer opener flew out of his fingers in rapid succession, landing on various objects in the room. Peter jumped up and caught the cow horn hurtling towards me before the cone-shaped tip of the cup could do damage to my right earlobe.

John finally found his wallet underneath the Guardian Post newspaper he had finished reading before going to bed and dashed out of the room. He ran downstairs and out through the back door. The sound of loud clucking protests and wing flaps drifted upstairs from the backyard. He apologized for interrupting the chickens' midday rummage, skirted around the hen snapping bolt-upright, wings outspread to protect her clutch, and picked a path through the garden. I could barely see his head. The tall leafy cornstalks parted open and closed behind him like Venus flytraps. Only the top of his head appeared and disappeared above the leaves as he raced along the furrows. In all the years I have known him, I have never seen my husband run, let alone that fast. By the time the stranger knocked on the front door, he had reached the main road and was safely on an *okada*[14] which spirited him away.

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My parents abandoned our house, located 15 kilometres from the city, and hastily moved us to a small one-bedroom apartment in town. At bedtime, they slept in the bedroom, and we piled all the cane chairs into one corner of the parlour, spread foam mattresses on the floor and lay down for the night. During the day, we bumped into each other so often that the one thing I looked forward to was leaving the apartment and going to school.

One fateful morning, my life changed forever. I woke up and dutifully did my chores – fold blanket and bedsheet; roll up foam mattress; tie foam mattress with a cloth string; store mattress upright in the corner; brush teeth; wet palms and moisten hair; wash face, arms and legs with cold water; apply Vaseline to face, arms, thighs, and legs; put on uniform; comb hair. Satisfied with my morning ritual, I told my mother I was ready to leave for school. Not long ago, she would have asked whether I was back from mass—the 6 a.m. Short Mass. My answer would have been a solemn yes. At ten years of age, I was preparing for my First Holy Communion. The preparations for this big day included catechism classes, and come rain or shine, the 6 a.m. week-day mass. I slept in some Saturday mornings – the only day the 6 a.m. mass was optional – but on Sundays, our entire family attended High Mass. I had stopped attending that 6 a.m. mass since our relocation. "It is too dangerous," my mother would say. Today, when I told her I was ready, I expected her to give me breakfast: bread with fried egg and brewed Diawara tea or puff-puff with pear and tea. My mother opened her mouth and made a joke instead.

"You are not going to school today."

I blinked; my mouth wide open.

"You heard me. Now, close your mouth."

Who is this woman? I wondered.

"It's too dangerous."

"Mommy, everything I do now is too dangerous. You have stopped me from going to mass. I don't know what will happen with my Holy Communion. Now you are saying I can't go to school. How will I prepare for my Common Entrance Exam? How will I gain admission to a Catholic boarding secondary school next year? You know I want to attend Our Lady of Lourdes."

"Little One, do you think I don't want you to go to school?"

My ears perked up. I know I'm in dangerous territory when my mother calls me "Little One". To my horror, she dropped to her knees, her frame bearing down on her calves, the heels supporting and holding up her rear. I caught a glimpse of the soles of her feet and toes peeking out from underneath her *kaba*.[15] My mother bowed her head in the manner of an old woman kneeling in front of a patriarch for a favour only he could grant. She held my little hands in her palms. They felt warm and comforting.

"You know there's an extended ghost town in effect this week. Not just on Mondays anymore. They're calling for another lockdown. They're forbidding children from going to school . . ."

"Why? Why is going to school such a bad thing?"

My mother, still kneeling, held me close to her chest. I sobbed loudly on her shoulder. Snot dangled from my nostrils and drew squiggly lines down her nape.

"Nothing bad or wrong with going to school," she whispered, her lips close to my ear. "Right now it's just too dangerous for you to go to school. You've heard about school children ambushed and beaten on their way to school, their books taken away from them, some kidnapped, some even killed."

"I have, Mommy," I nodded. "But Paul and Grace are in school."

"True, but your brother and sister are at boarding school. They have people protecting them within the walls of their schools. You know many schools have been destroyed. Yours, thank the gods, is still standing. But if you go to school, you will be alone, and we won't be there to protect you. Do you understand?"

I nodded. I tried to wipe away the mucus now pooling around her collar, but she gently steered my hand toward my face.

"Now wipe your eyes. Come, I think we still have a few eggs," she said, firmly clasping my hand and walking me over to the kerosene stove.

She grabbed Le Boxeur match from the windowsill, held the matchbox with her left hand, and popped open the box with the nail of her right middle finger. She selected a safety match, closed the box, struck the red head of the matchstick against the grey coarse surface, and tossed the matchbox on the ground near the stove. She held the stick firmly between her thumb and index finger, skilfully moving the flame around the wick, all the while complaining as she often does these days. "This flame should be blue, not red, not orange; BLUE, and we need a new wick," she mumbled. I agreed wholeheartedly, since it is the girls' job to scrub the soot off those aluminium pots. My mother spooned refined Mayor cooking oil into a frying pan and placed the pan on the stove. She cracked two eggs into a plastic bowl, added a generous heap of sliced onions and a pinch of salt, fork-whisking everything with rapid movements of her wrist, and poured the blend into the smoking frying pan. She let it sizzle and then flipped the omelette over, but would occasionally press down on the sides and mostly on the thick middle of the omelette with the tines of the fork. I've never understood why

she does that. She gave me half the omelette with four slices of the Kumba bread that I prefer to boulangerie bread. I like Kumba bread because it does not lose its softness the way stale baguettes can harden to stone. Mommy also took out the Rosa margarine tub hidden from view in the cupboard and placed it on the table. I sat down, made the sign of the cross, and said a prayer: Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy goodness, through Christ, Our Lord. Amen. My mother sat next to me but did not join me in prayer. She looked worried and distant. To be honest, Mommy and Daddy had looked that way for quite some time now. The mother I knew would have scolded me for not making the sign of the cross after I finished the prayer. I had no appetite, but I was eager to eat the food she had prepared just for me. I scraped margarine off the bottom of the tub with the tip of my teaspoon, spread it on one slice of bread; cut and placed half of the omelette on top of the margarine, and topped it with another slice of bread. I held up my pain chargé with both hands. I was about to take a bite when the ndzang dance tune intruded on our thoughts. Mommy's younger sister was calling to check on us. They spoke for a few minutes and the line went dead.

"Network problem," Mommy said, shaking her head.

I smiled. Network problem is the euphemism adults use to describe the internet blackouts the government uses to punish us in the NoSo.[16] My mother's phone rang again, and I could hear my aunt, the one who lives in Douala, asking whether we were all right. My mother often talked about how grateful she was that her sister lived with her husband and children in Douala, far away from the war, but that didn't stop Mommy from accusing her sister of enjoying the protection of a "wicked" government. My aunt had learned to ignore her big sister when she said such hurtful things; worse, when her sister called her an honorary francophone. "You are talking nonsense. This war has made you crazy. You think saying such rubbish will stop me from checking on you?" my aunt would retort with a wry laugh on the other end of the line. Today, my aunt was desperate for news about their younger brother who had vanished some months before. Some said he had joined the Amba Boys[17] and was living with them in the bush. Some said he was a coward who had run away from the fight to hide in the village. The last we heard, he was stuck somewhere in Befang; some said at Bombe near the Nigerian border, but no one really knew his whereabouts. My mother dreaded each new speculation, but especially resented the malicious gossip surrounding his disappearance.

"Hmm, my sister, our wanderer returned yesterday," Mommy resumed the conversation. "He is sleeping. You should have seen him. He looked like a ghost. All bones. He says they have destroyed the bridge and large portions of the road to the village. He had to cross in the river. Thank God, it is the dry season. He would've been stuck on the other side. There's no movement, unless you are lucky enough to find a brave okada driver. He was cornered by a group of young men and he survived by surrendering his ID card. They destroyed it right in front of him, so he took to the backroads avoiding checkpoints, spending nights in open fields. Thank God, it is the dry season. He says he didn't mind the mosquitoes but he worried about snakes and wild animals. Sometimes he heard gunshots and worried about stray bullets. He passed through villages that have been burnt to the ground and their farm crops deliberately destroyed. You hear all these stories about people abandoning their old and disabled while fleeing into the bush, trekking for days, carrying a few possessions on their backs and heads. You hear about women giving birth in the bush. Alone. Folks abandoning dead ones, leaving them to rot in the open. God forbid! You hear about these things, but he saw the devastation in different places with his own eyes. Your brother trekked for one week. I have no idea how he fed himself. He hasn't told me the whole story. As for me, I've just explained to Angela why she cannot go to school . . ."

My aunt must have said something that made my mother very angry.

"Stop telling me to send my children to you or to whomever!" she shouted into the phone. "My children will die here with me. I will not send them to that place to be spat on. War profiteers are using subventions from your government to open private schools with which to bleed us dry . . ."

"Oh, now it is my government?" my aunt yelled back at her sister.

My mother held her phone away from her ear.

"Yes, your wicked, corrupt government. Those people are making bundles of money on the backs of our children in their so-called Anglophone schools. Those warmongers do not want this conflict tearing families apart to end. Our people are living in the bush like animals, scattered everywhere, taking shelter where and when they can. Those of us not living in the bush have no jobs, no means to make a living. Your government curfews and Ambazonia lockdowns are killing us. Even I, your sister, had to abandon my home. We are packed like Titus sardines in this small apartment. Others are jam-packed in Anglophone ghettos

over there. Aren't you the one telling me stories of our daughters, sisters, and mothers prostituting themselves to feed their families over there; of our women killed by unscrupulous men and discarded like doti?[18] *Chei*!"

"My sister, what has this government done for me? You know how I live here. You know how much I suffer here and you keep saying you people, you people . . . Stop saying that to me or maggots will eat your intestines."[19]

"Yes, you people say we are the cause of rent hikes and high food prices in your cities. We are the cause of food scarcity in your markets. You people have no shame! Why would I send my children to a place like that? This morning I had to hold my girl child in my arms and tell her she cannot go to school. In the time of our grandmothers, girl-children were used to being left behind. Those were supposed to be bygone days. I never imagined a day would come when I would have to tell my girl child to stay home from school. How did we get here?"

"Big Sis. Mama, I beg you. I am asking you to send my children to live with me. Let me worry about their schooling here while you worry about staying alive there."

"I'll think about it."

"Good. Wake up my brother. I want to hear from the horse's own mouth."

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My sister always says that when our mother starts ranting about "that government," you can cook a pot of egusi soup and it would be ready before she's done. My mother has changed. She was never a quiet woman, mind you. But this war that came to our land has transformed her into a different person. If she wasn't my mother, I would've said she was going mad. She's unusually irritable. She cries a lot at night, especially when she thinks we are fast asleep. She talks endlessly about La République and the Amba Boys, stressing that neither side will surrender until we are all dead. When she is stuck at home because of lockdown, she repeats the same things over and over: "Those people send teachers with no knowledge of English to teach our children in a language our children don't understand. Those teachers cannot explain math and science concepts in a language our children understand. Those people just want to destroy our children with their franglais, as if we are not assimilated enough. Those people want to stunt our children's development the same way their lawyers and judges degrade us with French law. Bilingual country, my foot! Everywhere we look those people are in our courts, our schools, our civil service, our administration; everywhere we

turn, French and francophone policies are breathing down our necks, choking the very air we breathe!" At that point in her rant my mother, like clockwork, would leave the house to pace up and down the front lawn. Today, I waited. When she stepped outside, I followed suit. She walked towards the end of the veranda, and I slipped away in the opposite direction.

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The roads were eerily quiet as I walked to school. A sea of blue would have filled the streets by now, the girls in sky-blue dresses with white-collar trim and white belts neatly tied around the waist, the boys in sky-blue shirts with white-collar trim and khaki shorts. Some children would be chatting or singing church songs; some gossiping about the conversations they overheard last night; some would deliberately ignore the chatterboxes, aware they might become targets of more gossip; some would be running all the way to school, shouting a good morning as they sped by; others might be walking and eating the puff-puff or piece of bread they had grabbed off a plate before rushing out the door. I decided to take a short cut, the one I always use when I am late returning from school.

"Don't you know there's no school today?" came a woman's stern voice. "Did your parents not hear the lockdown order?"

A wall of moving flesh swathed in a faded wax print obstructed my path, blocking out the sunlight. A strong smell of smoke sailed up my nostrils where my face came to rest on the wrappa securely knotted around the woman's waist.

"Turn around and go back home," she commanded.

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A few months ago, after my brother disappeared, my womb stitched its mouth shut. I interpreted its grief as a benevolent sign to spend the money for monthly pads on more pressing family needs. This is something that happens to young widows, my mother had said with a nonchalant sweep of her hand. The womb protects the widow in her mourning, my mother had reassured me. Where was that reassurance when I needed it? A few hours after chatting with my sister, the news came. "School children have been kidnapped." Again. Little One was nowhere in sight. I felt dizzy and my feet wobbled. I was stuck on bended knee, my head in my palms, when a bolt hit my body and the shock ripped through the stitching. My womb offered no resistance and for the first time in months, it wept a crimson tide, marking my wrappa like a thousand ink splotches on blotting paper.

Endnotes

1. "Wuna," Pidgin English expression meaning "you" (plural); "Wuna deh house?" is a form of greeting meaning, "Are you at home?"; Similarly, "Wuna papa and mami deh house?" means, "Are your father and mother at home?"
2. A form of address meaning "Mister" or "Sir" in Pidgin English.
3. Colloquial expression, meaning Cameroon Standard English.
4. Term used by secessionists to refer to francophone Cameroon and/or the government of President Paul Biya. Francophone Cameroun earned the right to self-determination as La République du Cameroun under Ahmadou Ahidjo. La République du Cameroun and the British Southern Cameroon merged as two federated states of East Cameroon and West Cameroon in 1961. In 1972, Ahidjo transformed the federal republic into a unitary state and changed the name of the country to La République Unie du Cameroun (a united republic in name only to many Anglophones). Two years after he succeeded Ahidjo, Biya passed a law in 1984 changing the name from La République Unie du Cameroun to La République du Cameroun. This represented a reversion to the French colonial legacy and, as such, led Anglophones to see themselves as a colony of La République.
5. A loincloth.
6. Sugarcane: euphemism for guns; groundnuts: euphemism for bullets.
7. A Beba women's dance. Men cannot and do not take part in the ndzang; they can watch, sing, dance or offer praise from the side lines, and like the other spectators, must stand outside and away from the intimate circle of women dancing the ndzang.
8. "You don finish?" meaning, "Are you done?"; "Have you accomplished the task?"
9. A question meaning "what?" in Pidgin English; "na weti?" also means, "what is it?"; "what's wrong?"
10. Pidgin English meaning "child".
11. Acronym for Batallion d'intervention rapide (Rapid Intervention Battalion), an elite Special Forces army unit.Thousands of these forces have been deployed in the Anglophone regions since 2017. Their presence was reinforced with the creation, by presidential decree on 21 February 2018, of the fifth RMIA (Région militaire interarmées). The RMIA5, with its command centre in Bamenda, was specifically created for military operations in the North West and South West regions.

12. The Cameroon nation-state has been plagued for decades by what has been referred to as "The Anglophone Problem." The most recent Anglophone crisis that erupted in 2016 began with a strike of Anglophone lawyers from 11 to 14 October, and a peaceful demonstration on November 8 called for by the Anglophone Common Law Lawyers' Associations. A strike of solidarity was then called for by the Teachers' Trade Unions of the English Sub-system of Education for the same day of November 8. The government responded to the peaceful demonstrations with military force and, since November 2016, the violence has been raging in the North West and South West regions with spillover effects in other regions and neighbouring countries. Confrontations between military forces and a longstanding secessionist movement subsequently led, on 1 October 2017, to a declaration of independence of the self-proclaimed state of Ambazonia and of the ruinous war declared by President Paul Biya against the Ambazonia separatist forces on 30 November 2017.
13. Cameroon Radio Television; government-owned and controlled media company.
14. Name for motorcycle taxis; popular for their cheaper pricing and their drivers' ability to weave through traffic and ferry passengers to their destinations faster than a car.
15. Kaba ngondo is the traditional dress of Sawa women in Douala and the coastal region of Cameroon. A free-flowing dress from the neck to the ankles made from different materials but especially from colourful wax or other less expensive cotton prints, this attire is popularly known throughout Cameroon simply as kaba. It can be worn for daily use or designed for specific occasions, ceremonies, festivities and women can make specific fashion statements with their kaba.
16. Term used during the insurgency to refer to the English-speaking North West and South West regions.
17. Combatants of armed groups of separatists who are fighting for the self-proclaimed state of Ambazonia.
18. Pidgin English expression meaning dirt; garbage.
19. Beba expression meaning "You will have chronic diarrhoea."