

The global resonance of a local biographical experience: Bernard Njonga's entrepreneurial commitment



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Bernard Njonga (1955–2021) was a

Cameroonian activist whose biographical experience constantly resonated with contemporary global issues.[\[1\]](#) This leader of the peasant world is one among the subject-entrepreneur conceptualized during my doctoral research, which refers to latent historical actors emerging on the edge of the dominant system who are driven by the founding vision of an alternative society. Their biographical experiences revolve around a model of so-called entrepreneurial commitment to reveal a high prevalence of the subject logics, which they strive to foster through the setting up of an enterprise, NGO, or other private company on the one hand, and through the development of a critical narrative regarding the

ruling elite on the other hand (Amougou, 2023, 2019). I'd like to briefly retrace his life's journey to show the extent to which his understanding of societies in the South is part of a global sociological perspective.

Birth and transition to adulthood in a collapsing world

Bernard was born in 1955 in Bangoua, in the western region of Cameroon. At the time, Cameroon was about to embark on a violent process of decolonization that would make the region the scene of a violent war that would be at the root of the invention of Françafrique (Deltombe et al., 2016). These geopolitical stakes, which are at the heart of the emergence of the postcolony

(Mbembe, 2001), necessarily influence young Bernard's childhood and, incidentally, have a definite impact on his socialization path: "The situation was so uncertain that at night women and their children hid in the bush, leaving their houses empty [...]. The nationalists who were fighting for Cameroon's total independence were doing everything to convince the population of the justness of their cause and benefit from wider complicity within it" (Njonga, 2016, p. 18, translated from the French by the author).

LA GUERRE DU CAMEROUN

THOMAS DELTOMBE
MANUEL DOMERGUE
JACOB TATSITSA

L'INVENTION DE LA FRANÇAFRIQUE

PRÉFACE
ACHILLE MBEMBE



Photo of the book *La guerre du Cameroun: L'invention de la françafrique*, by Thomas Deltombe, Manuel Domergue and Jacob Tatsitsa

The photo above, showing African soldiers with their French instructors, illustrates the global stakes of a conflict long officially presented as essentially local. It provides an insight into the decolonization movements that African countries were to undergo in the wake of the 1960s. It is nevertheless a historical shock that follows on from other, more ancient ruptures experienced by these societies in the face of the encounter with the *white man*. For example, Chinua Achebe's 1994 novel *Things fall apart* shows how the daily, pre-colonial life of an Ibo village in southern Nigeria is turned upside down by the arrival of the British and the imposition

of their religion and civilization. This shock, described by several African writers in different ways, foreshadowed the need for a global sociology in the wake of Africa's independence, in order to provide a better account of people's experiences and the new configuration of social dynamics. Demonstrating the convergences and divergences between postcolonial critical sociology and global sociology, Marian Burchardt (2022) asserts that:

Postcolonial critical sociology reminds us of the fact that under the global condition, no social relationship unfolds outside of power relationships that are global in scope. Global sociology, by contrast, reminds us of the

pitfalls entailed in the idea that this global power relationship always needs to be the central subject of our studies. Such a focus reduces actors in the social worlds of the Global South to passive subjects of global capital whose everyday life is determined by that subject position.

Faced with a world that is collapsing, another reality is simultaneously striving to emerge, logics of action. These lead individuals-actors to adopt concrete positions that oscillate between logics of integration, strategy and subjectivation (Dubet, 1994). Thus, in contrast to his father, who refused to take a position and hardly spoke out on the war of independence,

Bernard—admittedly with the benefit of hindsight—asserts that he would probably have joined the nationalists.

While there is no immediate link between his involvement in civil society and the Nationalists' political struggle, the orientation of his work with the peasants reveals affinities with this first social movement to give Cameroon a political identity (Joseph, 1977). The war of decolonization raging in Cameroon is the most immediately visible form of the conflict of meanings born of the *colonial situation* (Balandier, 2020). Bernard's life story overlaps with the experiences of other individuals who, belonging to an almost similar generation, will

enter into symbolic opposition with the dominant power structures (Amougou, 2019).

Commitment to the peasant cause predisposed by external factors

In *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber (1905/2014) substitutes probabilistic determinism for Newtonian-type absolute determinism, which posits a symmetrical relationship between cause and effect. In opposition to the latter, the German sociologist coined the concept of elective affinity to demonstrate the heuristic interest of the predisposing factor in place of the mechanical factor. Just as this author demonstrated the elective affinity that links Protestant

ethics and the spirit of capitalism, so I'd like to show the role played by European actors and NGOs in Bernard's fork in the road, which led him to resign from the civil service in the mid-1980s to commit himself to the farming community.

In concrete terms, Bernard Njonga graduated from high school in 1979 and entered an agronomy school. On graduating, he was assigned to the *Institut de recherche agronomique pour le développement* (IRAD), and was immediately taken aback by the authoritarian atmosphere of the system in place. However, many civil servants in junior positions are frustrated, but don't resign. If Bernard deserves credit for resigning to found the *Service*

d'appui aux initiatives locales de développement (SAILD) in 1987, it's also because he had the privilege of rubbing shoulders with Belgian engineers during his formative years, being recruited by a Western NGO and, last but not least, being able to rely on his new networks to launch his organization. In other words, Bernard benefits from international networks which, after opening his eyes to the workings of peasant societies, provide him with substantial logistical and financial support. Thanks to the support of Swiss and Italian partners, Bernard embarks on a new life experience that directly broadens his horizon of action: "We started by coaching certain peasant leaders, opening them up to others here in Cameroon, Burkina-Faso and

Senegal. The aim was to stimulate them to promote initiatives in their villages" (interview, Yaoundé, January 2013, translated from the French by the author). This biographical bifurcation inaugurates a new form of commitment at the heart of the transformations taking place in Cameroon, while at the same time resonating with global issues.

A fight against the import of frozen chickens, linked to global issues

Very often, small local initiatives can lead their authors to the heart of global issues that were little suspected at the outset. This apprehension of large-scale phenomena or global entanglements based on an analysis of local

logics of action is at the heart of global sociology (Bahl, 2023). Despite the grip of authoritarian governance, the peasant world seems—at least partially—"uncaptured" (Hyden, 1985) by the dominant powers. Bernard takes advantage of this loophole by training leaders who seem increasingly autonomous. However, the success of his association and the creation of the newspaper *La Voix du Paysan* remain greatly attenuated by his powerlessness in the face of neoliberal policies and issues. This is how the tension between the dynamics "inside" and those "outside" came to affect a program launched in 1996 to support farmers in raising chickens. After a promising start, chicken sales

began to stagnate, and the project ended in failure in 1999. With farmers no longer able to sell their produce on the market, Bernard and his team investigated the causes of this “unexpected” failure. They discovered that it was due to the massive importation of frozen chicken into Cameroon. This flood of chicken cuts “unfit” for consumption is the work of importers acting in collusion with the administrative elite. After two years of unsuccessful denunciation, Bernard draws up a rather mixed assessment of the overall situation:

Massive imports, from 60 tonnes in 1994 to 22,150 tonnes in 2003. A disaster for the national economy, with currency losses of 10.5

billion and the loss of 110,000 rural jobs. A disaster for local producers, 92% of whom had given up poultry farming. A breeding ground for corruption and embezzlement, since 300 or even 400 tonnes of every 100 tonnes authorized for import were actually imported (Njonga, 2016: 96, translated from the French by the author).





Public protest against fraudulent imports of frozen chickens, with José Bové in Yaoundé. Copyright: Images provided by courtesy of ACDIC.

But Bernard Njonga's team did not give up. To lead this new battle, Bernard Njonga handed over the management of SAILD to a colleague, and in 2003 founded the *Association citoyenne de défense des intérêts collectifs* (ACDIC). With the help of international partners, he conducted research into the origin of these frozen chickens, which took him all over Belgium, Brazil and France. Braving threats and intimidation, Bernard's team,

accompanied by farmers' associations, waged a battle against the system of connivance oiled from the top of ministerial departments to customs officers, via local traders and importers. Several campaigns are underway at national, regional and international level. Supported by anti-globalization activist José Bové and African peasant leaders who came to Yaoundé, this battle culminated in the publication of a ministerial decree in 2006 banning the massive importation of frozen chicken cuts into Cameroon. To this day, the impact of this mobilization is visible in Cameroon's marketplaces, where local farmers' chickens can be seen in place of imported frozen chicken cuts.



Campaign against the “fraudulent” import of frozen chickens, and promotion of local chicken. Copyright: Images provided by courtesy of ACDIC.

However, the favorable outcome of the battle against frozen chicken imports has not altered the overall direction of development policies. On the contrary, the gap between local entrepreneurs or producers and the authorities has been constantly reshaping itself since the advent of the so-called emergence policies in 2010 (Amougou, 2021). Nevertheless, the fight against the fraudulent importation of frozen chickens into Cameroon shows how an action initiated in a Southern country can be linked to the challenges of a globalized world, and how the regulation of the international system has an immediate impact at national level. This articulation

of the local with the global is at the heart of contemporary social movements, where the figure of the activist expert in the proper use of rational calculation is said to be in retreat in favor of the activist concerned with being the principal author of his life and actor in his world (Pleyers & Capitaine, 2016). Speaking at the National Assembly on May 23, 2018, French MP François Ruffin, among other initiators of the *Nuit Debout* movement, drew at length on Bernard Njonga's fight against the import of frozen chickens in order to argue for the need for protectionism for French agriculture and that of Southern countries. By concluding his speech with the phrase: "[It's a lesson for Cameroon, for the countries of the](#)

South, but also for us“, the French politician confirms the hypothesis of the global resonance of Bernard Njonga’s biographical experience and, in so doing, confirms my interest in the perspective—and necessity—of a global sociology.

[1] This text is based on my article published in the Journal des Anthropologues (Amougou, 2021). It is nevertheless revised and adapted to the problems of global sociology.

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