

# ***Rumours in war: Boko Haram and the politics of suspicion in French–Cameroon relations\****

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## ABSTRACT

Cameroon's autocrat, Paul Biya, declared war on Boko Haram in 2014. Using a variety of ethnographic materials, this article examines the politics of rumours and conspiracy theories that have defined the popular response to this war in Cameroon. It underlines the mobilising force of these rumours on intra-elite struggles within the national context as well as on international relations, particularly on French–Cameroon relations. I argue that rumour-mongering is a central mode of production of suspicion in times of war and social crisis. Yet, the current rumours in the wake of the war against Boko Haram in Cameroon are inscribed within a historical framework of a state-directed politics of paranoia that seeks to define

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‘enemies of destabilisation’. In the end, this politics of suspicion also works to bring otherwise disaffected Cameroonians to support the autocratic Paul Biya as a victim of foreign plots for regime change in Cameroon.

And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled. Matthew 24:6 and Mark 13:7, *Holy Bible* (King James’ Version)

#### THE WHITE TERRORIST BOMBER AND THE MAD MAN

In early July 2015 the French president, François Hollande, visited Cameroon and met briefly with the country’s leader, President Paul Biya. Hollande’s half-day visit in Cameroon was part of his three-day tour of three African states, including Benin and Angola. Shortly after, in early August, I arrived in Cameroon for fieldwork. From the airport, I elected to travel directly to Buea, the headquarters of the South-West Region, one of Cameroon’s two English-speaking regions now embroiled in separatist violence since 2017.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the large and busy city of Douala where I grew up, Buea is a small university town that has remained my primary research station following my undergraduate studies there in the early 2000s.

As we left Douala for Buea, interesting conversations soon developed in the Toyota sedan I boarded. Somewhere around Tiko, our conversation turned to the subject of Boko Haram’s terrorist activities in northern Cameroon. At this point, one of the passengers in the back seat asked us ‘Did you guys hear of that arrest of a white man in Yaoundé?’. Unsure, another passenger at the back, a woman whose accented Pidgin English indicated she was a Cameroonian of French-speaking origin, asked her neighbour, ‘You mean that terrorist caught trying to detonate a bomb in the Tsingaa neighbourhood in Yaoundé?’. The subject of conversation was a story of the arrest of a white man outside the *Grande Mosquée* in the capital city, Yaoundé, only a few days back, by the Cameroonian Police. Shared by word of mouth and on social media, the story became part of several other rumours alleging Boko Haram was a Western conspiracy in Cameroon. The Police and the media tried to persuade the population that claims that the man was a terrorist bomber were false. Instead, the media reported that he had been acting ‘suspiciously’ as he moved up and down puffing on cigarettes outside the Mosque, leading the police to search and question him (see Onana 2005). I was certainly surprised when another man in the backseat answered the first man’s question this way: ‘That white man is said to have been sent by France to cause troubles in our country [Cameroon]’.

In Buea that evening, I recounted my conversations with my fellow travellers to my host. He assured me that Cameroonian authorities and people were quite worried that the French were involved in the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency. In turn, he told me a story of his own. According to him, Cameroonian government officials, particularly within its military establishment, planted an undercover military intelligence officer outside the French Embassy in Yaoundé. He

was instructed to adopt the act of a ‘mad man’, including being clad in rags and talking errantly. For a few months, this officer played this game. One day, he witnessed what he thought were a number of trucks with ‘suspicious contents’ within the premises of the French Embassy. He promptly alerted his superiors. According to this account, the Cameroonian military authorities arrived to discover significant quantities of arms in those trucks. This became a big source of embarrassment for the French diplomatic service in the country. This, my host concluded, significantly strained the relationship between the Cameroonian regime and the French diplomats in Cameroon as well as their superiors in Paris. According to this account, which my host assured me was widely shared, Hollande’s visit to Cameroon in July 2015 was partly an attempt to smoothen things between the two countries because of this incident.

BOKO HARAM AS CONTEXT: THE POLITICS OF RUMOURS AND  
SUSPICION

The two stories above are inscribed in the idiom of suspicion. Both express a sense of unease and disquiet about behaviour or conduct (by the white man and the French government) that was presumably out of place, atypical of the norm or expectation. The stories also exemplify the kinds of rumours proliferating in Cameroon since the country began an ongoing war against Boko Haram in northern Cameroon. Boko Haram’s official name in Arabic, *Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’Awati Wal-Jihad*, translates as ‘People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad’ (BBC 2016). It is part of the multiplex of well-known armed, organised and violent insurgent movements that mobilise a fundamentalist ideology of Islam for terrorist ends. In Africa, it shares this Jihadist outlook with Al-Shabaab in East Africa (Somalia and Kenya) and the Azawad National Liberation Movement (MNLA) in Mali. Boko Haram’s leader, Abubakar Shekau, once pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda and ISIL in the Middle East, only to be disowned by them. The group uses targeted suicide explosions, kidnappings of locals and foreigners alike, as well as predation on the local population (rampant raiding and extortion), all extreme means aimed at instilling fear.

From 2002 and evolving from an initial theatre of action in parts of northern Nigeria (especially in Yobe, Adamawa, Kano and Borno states), the Boko Haram insurgency subsequently extended to other countries in the Chad Basin (Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria) much later. This has created a shared sense of crisis among these West African states. Moreover, while this insurgency currently receives less attention in international affairs, it attained global notoriety between 2007 and 2015. Here, I do not focus on Boko Haram itself as a group nor do I address the local perceptions within its immediate areas of operations in northern Cameroon (for these see e.g. Wassouni & Gwoda 2017). A growing body of scholarship exists that examines Boko Haram in the *longue durée*, contextualising the group’s message and methods in an area defined by histories of predation and religious violence (see e.g. Loimeier

2012; Higazi 2013; Muhammad 2014; Thurston 2017; MacEachern 2018; Anungwom 2019).

I examine the rumours and conspiracy theories that have dovetailed the spectacular rise of this jihadist movement in Cameroon, particularly the alleged role of France in the war. Jesus Christ's words, quoted above, caution and calm his followers against rumours in troubling times. In the spirit of those words, rumours may be particularly propitious to expressing a state of anxiety in times of crisis but their meanings may be slippery or deceptive to the realities from which they arise. Furthermore, Alexander F. Shand (1922) writes that suspicion is a key emotional state and relational lens produced in 'times of war and social disorder'. An early ethnographic theorist on the affective dimensions of social crises, Shand (1922: 195) viewed suspicion as the expression of an unpleasant feeling of distrust harboured by those previously 'deceived and plundered' or languishing in paranoid 'delusions of persecution'.

Both are not mutually exclusive. Delusions of persecution or fantasies have histories of their own. As George Marcus (1999) has argued, communities and people with histories of deceit and plunder, such as the case has been for many post-colonial societies, are inhabited by a paranoia that is 'within reason' (cf. Orock & Walker 2018). Suspicion is therefore a politics of doubt and vigilance on the part of those inhabited by visions of plots and histories of abuse (see also Ochs 2011). It 'produces an active state of cognitive appraisal and scrutiny' (Krosnick & McGraw 2008: 90) about intent (motives) in relation to un/familiarity with and statements by the object of suspicion (see e.g. Hilton *et al.* 1993; McGraw *et al.* 2002). From the ethnographic material assembled in the context of political struggles in relation to Cameroon's war against Boko Haram, I suggest that rumour-mongering is a central mode of production of suspicion in times of war and social crisis. In these circumstances, as in most situations of violent conflict, rumours are a valuable if highly challenging source of information for the ethnographer (White 1990; Robben & Nordstrom 1995; Simons 1995).

Through the workings of Franceafrique,<sup>2</sup> Francophone West African states such as Cameroon remain governed largely through the idiom of secrecy.<sup>3</sup> Fittingly, then, rumour is a staple of political life in Cameroon. Mongo Beti is one of Cameroon's best-known literary figures and an ardent social critic, including of French–Cameroon relations. Beti stresses this political character of rumour-mongering in Cameroon rather sharply. He suggests that in Cameroon's very repressive state, official channels of communication and the media become quickly silent on very sensitive subjects or exaggeratedly activated against targets, giving way to that 'inveterate tradition of Cameroon's dictatorship: rumour' (Beti 1986: 75). The rumours on Boko Haram are intrinsic to the expressions of disquiet and political anxieties by Cameroonian authorities and citizens alike. As Fine & Ellis (2010: 9) remark in relation to the fears of terrorism everywhere, rumours reveal 'the concerns – some hidden, some explicit – of citizens'.

While central to political life in Cameroon's authoritarian state, as Beti suggests above, rumours are of course a more common feature of politics across

the world, particularly so at this moment in time. Technological innovations, particularly the advent of the internet and social media as well as platforms on mobile phones such as WhatsApp make these high-tech rumour mills par excellence. The role of rumours and suspicion in the struggles for political meanings in this Cameroonian example demonstrates both its practical currency and analytical purchase for unpacking contemporary political dynamics in both authoritarian and liberal contexts (cf. Orock & Walker 2018). Moreover, this propensity to rumour-mongering and conspiracy theories in situations of war and/or political conflicts is facilitated by a global atmosphere already very much defined by uncertainty, scepticism and mistrust since the onset of the Cold War (cf. Marcus 1999; West & Sanders 2003). People and institutions (including governments) are more and more uneasy and ever more vigilant towards other people, governments and places that they might see as dangerous or threatening to them. Such postures of scrutiny and vigilance adopted by people, institutions and governments alike crystallise a politics of suspicion (cf. Marcus 1999; Sanders & West 2003) in different and often surprising guises.

Like gossip, rumour is a mode of 'collective deliberations' (Kapferer 1995 [1987]: 18) that defines the meanings of contested issues, questions and interests as well as the social and moral boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, particularly in situations of crisis (see Gluckman 1963; Stewart & Strathern 2004; Pietilä 2007; Bubandt 2008; Besnier 2009). With flexibility and a capacity to adapt, rumours are a persuasive form of communication. They circulate high and low, in 'imperceptible places' and 'able to mutate to fit changing conditions' (Bubandt 2008: 795). In the context of the war on Boko Haram in Cameroon, I argue, these rumours are inscribed in a vision of suspicion long defined by late-colonial and post-colonial authorities around the need to identify enemies of destabilisation against the political order. The current rumours around Boko Haram and the broader vision of suspicion that frames these, I suggest further, are highly fluid and dynamic even as they exercise a considerable affective power on the political imagination and actions of Cameroonians since the onset of the war. My analysis of this politics of suspicion through these rumours combines ethnographic observations with policy reports, statements by Cameroonian state authorities and foreign officials as well as reports in the local and international media.

As the insurgency became thornier for neighbouring Nigeria from 2009 onwards, Boko Haram was also occasionally a subject of concern for Cameroon, given its long north-western border with Nigeria. The rumours that have gathered in the wake of Boko Haram must be taken seriously because they have affected political struggles among the elites in Cameroon as well as French–Cameroon relations. Focusing on these rumours is helpful to delineate and understand past and current political developments in relation to not only intra-elite struggles in Cameroon, but also the country's increasingly tenuous relations with major Western countries, notably France. To take these rumours seriously is therefore, at least in part, to recognise that these are forms

of popular political action that are now affecting French–Cameroon relations, a domain of political analysis normally restricted to the disciplines of history and international relations studies. This Cameroonian case therefore demonstrates how anthropologists and linguists might also be well placed to study the role of rumours (as modes of popular political action) in affecting diplomatic relations today.

This politics of conspiracy and suspicion of France strengthens Paul Biya's autocratic leadership of Cameroon. Despite decades-long lamentations against Biya's misrule, in the lead-up to the 2018 elections this politics of suspicion paradoxically painted Biya as a victim of French plots. That is, between 2014 and 2017, anti-French sentiments and fears of French interventionism worked to rally otherwise disenchanted Cameroonians through spectacles of unity and nationalism against Western imperial powers. These recast Biya in a popular and nationalistic light. Scholarship on post-colonial states in West Africa has indeed underlined the political effects of such spectacle and dramaturgy as important registers of how people live in these repressive and authoritarian contexts (e.g. Mbembe 2001; Tonda 2015).

In *Nostalgia for the Future: West Africa after the Cold War*, anthropologist Charles Piot (2010: 8) recognises that West Africa 'is a landscape wired for "dramaturgy" and "affect"'. However, he argues, the social and political transformations of the 'Post-Cold War Moment' have hollowed West African states in ways that demand additional frames for social analysis beyond the spectacles. Notably, Piot suggests that where spectacles of nation-building emphasised 'unity' in the past, in the Post-Cold War Moment struggles over the meanings of community and power are marked by an additional emphasis on 'crises' (cf. Mbembe & Roitman 1995). Central to Piot's critique on this front is the role of popular forms of discourse, notably rumours, in weaving paranoid political states in West Africa, a position I find to be useful to bring to bear on the Cameroonian situation discussed here.

In his seminal analysis of Togo under Gnassingbé Eyadema's authoritarian rule, we see how governments mobilise 'paranoia and surveillance' to deflect opposition (Piot 2010: 3). Political dissidence is silenced in such paranoid regimes or finds expression in cynical forms of expression. Similarly, ordinary Africans, like people elsewhere, appeal to rumours and conspiracism 'as explanation' (Aaronovitch 2010: 6) of their situation in times of flux and uncertainty (see also Zonis & Joseph 1994; Barkun 2003). As Piot (2010: 18–37) writes further, the culture of state paranoia is 'matched by conspiracy thinking from below'. The 'sidewalk radio' or Radio Trottoir (rumour mill) is 'awash with rumours' and conspiratorial imaginaries about power and the powerful. The circulation of rumours and conspiracy theories on Boko Haram examined here offers insights into some of the ways that this contemporary politics of paranoia (cf. Hofstadter 1963 [1952]; Marcus 1999) plays out in African post-colonial orders. This politics of paranoia shows how elites might 'engineer eruptions of public anxiety' or moral panics in pursuit of their own agendas (Knight 2000: 18) and/or lose control of the process. The current politics of suspicion

on Boko Haram marks new trajectories in Cameroon's political dynamics even as it echoes older ones.

#### BOKO HARAM AS A CONSPIRACY

Paul Biya is a reclusive and absentee leader. He spends a significant amount of time outside the country, staying at expensive hotels in European capitals, particularly in Switzerland, where he is also rumoured to hold citizenship or at least permanent residency. At 86 years old, Biya governs by proxy and spectrality. He appears in person at public ceremonies only occasionally. Cameroonians see him on national television as he is 'welcomed' by high-level government officials on the runway of the Yaoundé Nsimalen Airport, either as he is leaving or returning to the country. For the everyday management of the country's affairs, he depends on a crop of similarly aged, but constantly recycled elite that constitutes the country's mendacious political-bureaucratic class that has run the country since the 1960s. At the helm of the Cameroonian state for 37 years now, Biya's strategy deftly combines violent authoritarian rule – marked by excessive human rights abuses – and extensive looting of the public till by himself and his cronies.<sup>4</sup> This state of affairs has endured unperurbed, leading some to describe the country as a 'stationary state' (Eboko & Awondo 2018). This view of Cameroon as a country in stasis echoes *Jeune Afrique's* (2016) assessment that '*Au pays de Paul Biya, tout paraît immobile*' [In Paul Biya's country, everything appears to be in standstill, my translation].

However, Biya's island of tranquillity is occasionally rocked by momentous popular mobilisations and protests, such as in February 2008. Often attributed to rising food prices, explosive protests erupted in several cities and towns.

Biya's violent crackdowns left more than a hundred people dead (International Crisis Group 2010). In reality, Cameroonians were frustrated by Biya's successful manoeuvres to get the parliament to change the country's constitution by removing presidential term limits. This change allowed him to seek re-election in 2011 whereas Cameroonians had largely hoped to see him leave power at the end of a catastrophic tenure after 27 years.

The rumours on Boko Haram as a conspiracy must be set within this context of Biya's autocratic rule and intra-elite machinations over his succession. In this vein, Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle's early analysis of conspiracy theories on Boko Haram in Cameroon is very useful. Based on the views of students and people in administrative offices in northern Cameroon and set alongside reports in the regional press, Pommerolle (2015: 163) shows that local rumours there attribute the emergence of Boko Haram to high-level political elites of the region as well as to France. She sets her analysis of these accusations against the historical context of French–Cameroon relations. As a former German colony (1884–1919), after the First World War and the defeat of Germany, Cameroon was partitioned in 1919 between Britain (one-fifth) and France (four-fifth). These were then administered as two separate international colonial territories between 1919 and 1960, on behalf of the newly formed



League of Nations and subsequently the United Nations, as Mandate and Trusteeship Territories, respectively. These territories were only partially reunified in 1961, following a United Nations mandated plebiscite held in 1960. For Pommerolle, memories of violence remain strong in defining the historical experiences of French colonial administration and struggles for decolonisation by leaders of the Camerounian nationalist movement, the Union des Populations Camerounaise (UPC).

Furthermore, the post-colonial regimes of Ahmadou Ahidjo (1958–1982) and Paul Biya (1982–present) have been based on a highly personal style of rule (Bayart 1993). The power of both men has been largely dependent on the continued political, economic and military support of France. The terms of this support are set within highly ‘unequal’ relations of dependency outlined in secret bilateral agreements signed in 1958 and renewed periodically ever since (Joseph 1978; Beti 2010 [1972]). Officially, Cameroon’s foreign relations have therefore remained closely tethered to this ‘inherited pattern of unequal relations with the French metropole’ (Kofele-Kale 1981: 198). Hence, it is quite paradoxical that the French government came under suspicion as the sponsor of Boko Haram in Cameroon. After all, French citizens were among the first Westerners abducted by the Jihadists. Also, it was François Hollande who first convened an international summit in Paris to discuss Boko Haram’s terrorism in West Africa. Notwithstanding, at least among the elite, there is an ambivalent sense of both a strong cultural affinity to and jealous animosity of France. This is attested by growing contestation of France’s continuous neo-colonial meddling and direction of internal affairs in Cameroon as in other Francophone West African states such as Côte d’Ivoire,<sup>5</sup> particularly in the domains of economy and politics.

Pommerolle’s explanation for the rise of these conspiracy theories is certainly helpful to my own analysis here. But it remains narrowly confined to the rumours and speculations of Cameroonians in the northern regions of Cameroon. In contrast, I assemble and analyse these rumours, mobilisations and deliberations on Boko Haram as a conspiracy in relation to French–Cameroon relations within the broader national context. These are further enriched by the views and actions of foreign diplomatic representatives in Cameroon. This synthesised ethnographic analysis underlines the dynamic and affective power of these rumours in Cameroon, first on intra-elite struggles and on Cameroon’s relations with Western powers such as France.

### *Intra-elite suspicions: Boko Haram as an “inside” job?*

When I began fieldwork on elites and political mobilisation in Cameroon, between late 2010 and late 2012, it was uncommon for Cameroonians to talk about Boko Haram. Cameroon’s government did not lose sleep over the matter either. This changed dramatically between 2014 and 2015. Boko Haram began abducting Western and Asian expatriates and missionary workers in exchange for ransom, mainly to draw media and international attention to itself. A major sign of concern by political authorities came in Paul Biya’s message to



Cameroonians in December 2013. Biya assessed that the ‘problem of insecurity’ in Cameroon is ‘brought about by the presence around our borders of armed bands, driven by extremist ideologies and lured by profit’. For him, Cameroon’s new security challenge owed to militants who ‘... cross over to our territory where they commit various atrocities ...’ including ‘kidnapping foreign nationals for ransom’.<sup>6</sup> This growing presence of the militants called for serious responses.

The 2014 Paris Summit convened by the French President, Francois Hollande, was the first major international effort on the matter. This summit was, however, marked by two notable ironies. First, Paul Biya declared the war against Boko Haram at this summit in Paris, not in Cameroon. Second, a few days before the summit Boko Haram abducted 10 Chinese nationals working for a Chinese construction company in the area of Waza, in northern Cameroon.<sup>7</sup> Rather than dissuading the militants the prospects of this summit appeared to have emboldened them. Local political authorities, including the family (the wife) of Cameroon’s Vice-Prime Minister, Ahmadou Ali, as well as the chief (Lamido) of Kolofata were attacked and abducted on 27 July 2014. The militants only handed these hostages (Chinese expatriates and Ahmadou Ali’s wife) to government authorities in October 2014 and it remained unclear whether the government paid ransom money.

However, already from mid-2014 onwards, Biya relied immensely on government propaganda to drum support for his war on Boko Haram. State and private media organisations, including those previously known to be quite adversarial to the regime such as *Le Messager* (press) and *Afrique Media* (audiovisual), played key roles in disseminating this propaganda. In this government propaganda, Boko Haram was depicted as a ‘serious threat’ to Cameroon’s national ‘integrity and sovereignty’ (cf. GRIP 2015: 7). News of Boko Haram’s terror activities in the national media elicited signs of frustration and anger from Cameroonians who now commonly referred to the militant’s organisation as ‘*Boko á Rat*’. This playful though spiteful twist of Boko Haram into ‘*Boko á Rat*’ combined the Hausa word (Boko) with two French words (*á Rat*). For these exasperated Cameroonians, this terrorist group was only ‘a band of rats’, not real soldiers.

Alongside this concern with Boko Haram as a national security crisis, ordinary Cameroonians maintained, even deepened, their usual cynical dissimulations of opposition to the regime. Their empty praise-singing, including different ‘*Appels du Peuple*’ [‘The People’s Call’] for Biya to remain their ‘natural’ and eternal leader is, in fact, mockery of a shameless, pretentious and ‘empty’ regime that has adopted official buffoonery as political norm (cf. Mbembe 2001). Yet, the onset of the war against the Boko Haram insurgency marked a critical moment in the field of political struggles for the elite in Cameroon in at least two ways. First, it exposed the cracks in Biya’s fragile coalition of elites in an unprecedented manner. Lacking popular legitimacy, Biya’s regime, like that of his predecessor, Ahmadou Ahidjo, has long depended on public shows of national unity among elites in a ‘hegemonic alliance’ (cf. Bayart 1979). With

growing attention on the Boko Haram insurgency, this alliance was rocked by dramatic displays of mistrust, even in Biya's inner circle.

Second, despite the repressive character of this political order, it also became apparent that coercion and bribery no longer sufficed to hold ambitious elites in check. Many among the country's leading elite jockeyed for visibility and public roles in the government's response to the Boko Haram crisis, mainly in the hope of eventually becoming Biya's successor at the end of the old man's term in October 2018. As an autocratic, paranoid and eternally suspicious leader himself, Biya mobilised the government's anti-corruption campaign to get rid of these covetous potential rivals, even among his closest associates. Many now languish in the notorious Kondégui Prison in Yaoundé, on real or trumped-up charges. Against this backdrop, Boko Haram was first defined as an internal, elite-driven conspiracy among Cameroonian elites, further fragmenting Biya's precarious assemblage of ruling elites.

### *Boko Haram as national politics*

Fanny Pigeaud is a French freelance journalist of African affairs, a specialist of Cameroon politics. She famously wrote a scathing analysis of politics and governance in Cameroon under Biya, titled *Au Cameroun de Paul Biya* (Pigeaud 2011). In August 2014, as the fight against Boko Haram gathered steam in northern Cameroon, she published an article in *Médiapart*, a respectable online news site in France. The piece of reporting was picked up and circulated in the Cameroonian press. In it, Pigeaud articulated a conspiracy thesis that defined Boko Haram as a disguised rebellious movement, based on two, inter-related main claims. First, she argued that incidents of violent attacks attributed by government and media propaganda to Boko Haram were actually the early phase of 'a rebellion' against Paul Biya's regime. As she put it, '*Les indices montrant qu'une rébellion est en cours se font de plus en plus nombreux*' [Indicators of a rebellion in formation are growing by the day]. She based this claim on two observations. To support this first claim she suggested that, in contrast with other Islamic fundamentalist terrorist groups, Boko Haram had never (until that point) claimed responsibility for the attacks perpetrated on the Cameroonian side of the border as had customarily been the case of their activities in neighbouring Nigeria. To strengthen her thesis that Boko Haram was a disguised rebellious movement against Biya, she asserted that the 'inventors' and 'funders' of Boko Haram in Cameroon were well-known. According to Pigeaud, these were elites from the northern regions of Cameroon within the ruling CPDM party who had acquired 'colossal wealth through misappropriations of state funds'.<sup>8</sup>

To support this second claim, Pigeaud wrote that potential suspects in the Boko Haram rebellion include ministers and ex-ministers in the Biya government, notably Marafa Hamidou Yaya. A very powerful figure in Biya's regime for more than two decades, in 2011 he was ousted as secretary-general at the presidency. Shortly after his dismissal, he was charged with misappropriation and embezzlement in the 'Albatross' affair, involving the purchase of a

presidential plane from the Boeing Corporation. In September 2012, Marafa was convicted on these charges and sentenced to 25 years imprisonment, much to the bitterness of his supporters. Pigeaud admitted that her accusations were based on speculations in the national media, particularly from the regional press in northern Cameroon. Yet, she deemed this thesis of a northern conspiracy credible because she felt these northern elites had both the means and motive.<sup>9</sup>

From August 2014 onwards, Pigeaud's speculations defined much of the popular discourse on Boko Haram in Cameroon. In the national media in particular, these speculations drew a wide-ranging, though mixed, commentary. Some were quite vexed, including Marafa Hamidou Yaya's wife, Jeannette Marafa (see Engo 2014), who was among the first to react. Living in self-imposed exile in Paris owing to her husband's political troubles in Cameroon, she wrote to *Médiapart* demanding a right of reply to Pigeaud on behalf of her husband, who she said had become 'a political prisoner'. Published only three days after Pigeaud's story, Jeannette Marafa's reply was, in turn, given wide publicity when it was re-published by Cameroonian newspapers. She dismissed Pigeaud's claims as 'unsubstantiated' and based solely on 'rumours' and 'noise'. Considering how Pigeaud accused her husband of looting public money to fund Boko Haram, Jeanette argued that Pigeaud's conspiracy theory endorsed, at least in part, the regime's witch-hunting of her husband.

In reality, Pigeaud's views rested on far more than simple speculations in the Cameroonian media. A few months before she wrote her article, the leader of Cameroon's National Assembly, Cavaye Yeguié Djibril – a northerner – made a stunning declaration in Parliament on 11 June 2014. He claimed that 'We know that many among us, some working in the shadows, others working actively but duplicitously pretending to help government authorities while aiming to shield the insurgents from disclosure and to bring the country into a chaotic bloodbath.' Djibril called on Cameroonians to be watchful against the 'traitors' who must be seen as domestic 'accomplices in the fight against Boko Haram' and who must be 'severely punished, according to the laws of the land'.

However, these groundbreaking allegations from a leading figure of Biya's regime did not specifically identify a particular region of affiliation of the 'traitors'. Yet, those declarations fuelled strong reactions from elites who are ethnic Bulu from the South and Center Regions, like Paul Biya himself. Barely a week following Pigeaud's article, they wrote a provocative memorandum titled '*Appel de la Lekié: pour une guerre totale contre la secte islamiste et étrangère Boko Haram et ses complices au Cameroun.*'<sup>10</sup> That is, the memorandum called 'for a total war against Boko Haram and its principal accomplices from the northern region' (see *Camernews.com* 2014). Upset by such a regionalisation of the suspected accomplices, Djibril described the signatories who had not dared to sign individually with their names as agents of destabilisation. Such accusations, he warned, were 'dangerous for national unity', possibly degenerating into a '*rwandardisation*' of Cameroon, referring to the terrible genocide in Rwanda. As

Pigeaud suggested, this north-south mutual intra-elite suspicion over the Boko Haram insurgency should be understood within the broader and fragile politics of presidential succession rocking the hegemonic alliance of ruling elites (cf. International Crisis Group 2010).

As said, Biya's abrogation of constitutional limits to presidential terms that allowed him to remain in power past 2011 has provoked widespread frustration, including among members of the elite that publicly chants his praises. His 37-year presidency has been defined by several prominent cases of corruption scandals by his fellow Bulu elites to whom he almost gave free rein. This has created resentment among elite from the north who feel that power should 'rotate back' to them, given that Biya assumed power from a northerner in 1982. While they remain publicly loyal to Biya, leading names among these northern elite are rumoured in the media and diplomatic correspondences to be eagerly hoping to replace him, particularly Marafa Hamidou Yaya.<sup>11</sup> He and his supporters are regularly rumoured (see e.g. *Actu Cameroun* 2016) to curry the support of the French government and leading French industrialists such as Vincent Bolloré. Concomitantly, leading political figures within Biya's own Bulu ethnic regions in the south also refuse to entertain the prospect of presidential power returning to northern elites. Hence, the Boko Haram crisis made these divides patently manifest. As I discuss further, this intra-elite suspicion has only deepened since Biya's recent re-election to another seven-year term following the contested presidential poll of October 2018. Nevertheless, this divisive thesis of Boko Haram as primarily a domestic conspiracy was eventually supplanted by persistent rumours designating France as a common, external enemy seeking to destabilise Cameroon.

#### BOKO HARAM AS A FRENCH CONSPIRACY

On 28 February 2015, about 10,000 Cameroonians staged a '*Grande Marche Patriotique*' [patriotic march] in downtown Yaoundé. This event was organised by a group of Cameroonian journalists under the designation of *Uni pour le Cameroun* or United for Cameroon. Their objective was to demonstrate Cameroonians' patriotism and show support to the troops engaged in the war against Boko Haram. On the back of uniformed white T-shirts adorned by participants at the march, organisers wrote '*Solidarité aux populations et soutien à l'Armée Camerounaise*' ['Solidarity with affected people, support for the Cameroonian army']. In addition, some participants held signs and placards that read '*Touche pas a mon pays*' ['Don't touch my country']. It is not entirely clear what role the government of Cameroon played in this spectacle of support, but several ministers were present at the march. Besides Cavaye Yeguié Djibril, others included the Ministers of Defence (Edgard Alain Mebe Ngo'o), Communication (Issa Tchiroma), Sports (Adoum Garoua), Labour and Social Security (Grégoire Owona) and Finance (Alamine Ousmane Mey), among others. Some diplomatic representatives were also seen at the march, including Canadian and French ambassadors. Remarkably, when Ms Christine

Robichon (France's Ambassador to Cameroon) arrived at the venue, she was greeted with anti-French sentiments in the crowd. One slogan chanted by the crowd was '*Non à la France, Recherché France*' ['No to France, lookout for France'].

Cameroon's media, particularly those with social media platforms, offered abundant commentary on this 'patriotic' spectacle of unity against the forces of destabilisation. Notably, *Camer.be*<sup>12</sup> collated and shared a number of newspaper reports on the anti-French sentiments displayed at the *Grande Marche*. These included a desire to see 'France out' ['*La France dehors*'], to make clear that 'we do not want France' ['*On ne veut pas la France*'], to deny any French intervention in Cameroon ['*Non à l'intervention de la France*'] or even to say simply that they 'do not want François Hollande in Cameroon' ['*On ne veut pas de François Hollande au Cameroun*']. Following these chants, the crowd broke into the praise-singing of Paul Biya, their autocratic leader: '*Paul Biya, notre président!*' ['Paul Biya, our president!'].

Thus, the *Grande Marche Patriotique* dramatised the suspicion that Cameroon's main 'enemy' in the fight against Boko Haram was 'outside', seeking to divide a country that is 'One and indivisible'. As one of the members of the Organising Committee for United Cameroon, Polycarpe Essomba, assessed at the end, 'We are satisfied that we have sent a message to the outside world that Cameroon remains strong and united. Particularly, that in the face of adversity, against the enemy, this enemy will always be confronted by young patriots ready to give up their lives in defence of their fatherland' (my translation). The *Grande Marche Patriotique* drummed public support for Biya, casting him as a victim of French conspiracies, a theme that was already simmering in different avenues of public discourse.

### *Visions of French plots*

By February 2015, when the *Grande Marche Patriotique* was held, the French Ambassador to Cameroon was already familiar with the accusations against her government over Boko Haram. In May 2014, a digital media activist called Armand Roger Biloa Mballe, a Cameroonian whose names suggest possible Bulu origins like Biya himself, wrote an accusatory, 'Open Letter to Madam Christine Robichon' (see Mballe 2014). Asking Robichon to 'Desist from any involvement in Cameroon's internal affairs', Mballe claimed Robichon's outings and actions in Cameroon over the preceding months were part of a campaign against the 'rejection of France and the profound anti-French sentiments among Africans in general and Cameroonians, in particular vis-à-vis your country's imperialism on the black continent' (my translation). Specifically, he argued, Robichon's visits to and support for social causes in the 'squatters' and ghettos of Douala – the country's economic hub – were part of this French interventionism. By going out to meet people who were either persecuted for their sexual orientation as 'homosexuals' or abandoned to themselves economically, Mballe suggested that Robichon was pursuing a 'diplomacy of noise' (rumour-mongering), searching for 'discontented' Cameroonians.

The goal of this diplomacy, he emphasised, was to implant a social time bomb that will be readily 'lit-up' into a destabilising political crisis under the auspices of France. This, Mballe felt, was after all France's 'habit' or line of action in other African countries over the recent decades. Exactly one year later and not long after the *Grande Marche Patriotique*, in May 2015, Mballe wrote a second open letter to Robichon in which he reminded the French Ambassador of his earlier accusations against her country. However, this time he also boasted that France has 'failed to destabilise and destroy Cameroon'. Robichon's public declarations about 'France's friendship to Cameroon' were only cosmetic, he argued. These only betrayed France's recognition of the strength and resolve of Cameroonians in their new 'struggle against French domination in Cameroon'. He concluded that this struggle would only be intensified as part of a broader effort to 'liberate the black continent'. In the end, however, Mballe stopped short of accusing France of sponsoring or creating Boko Haram. This accusation was made by another internet or digital 'warrior', Patrick Mballa.

Like Biloa Mballe, Patrice Mballa's name also suggests affinities to Biya's Bulu ethnic origins although this cannot be determined with certainty in either case. Common to both men is their sense of acting as digital media activists defending the Cameroonian fatherland. Unlike Biloa Mballe, Patrice Mballa (2015) made direct links between France and Boko Haram. In late January 2015, Patrick Mballa reacted strongly to reports that 'eight combatant white men were arrested in the scenes of anti-terrorist combats in northern Cameroon'. He asserted that 'the capture of these eight white men and the seizure of sizeable military equipment, including two tanks, two Antonov cargo planes from Qatar loaded with heavy artillery and munitions' are incontrovertible evidence of an 'invisible, non-African hand disguised as *'Boko A Rats'*. Its aim, he argued, was the political destabilisation of Cameroon' (Mballa 2015). Mballa concluded that France's responsibility in the Boko Haram insurgency in Cameroon was not borne merely out of negligence or failure to control arm sales towards Africa. Rather, he said, 'We all know that the destabilisation of Cameroon is driven by France and her Cameroonian accomplices with the goal of attaining unchallenged control over the extraction of the newly found, world's largest deposits of uranium in northern Cameroon' (Mballa 2015).

This focus on French economic interests in Cameroon is an important direction of the activists' critical accusations against France. For example, in his second letter to Robichon, Biloa Mballe (2015) decries French development cooperation (cf. Lachenal & Mbodj-Pouye 2014) with its former colonial entities in West Africa, including Cameroon. Mballe asserts that French development aid is only a framework for French aid workers in Africa (called '*coopérants*') to engage in the 'theft' of minerals (gold or diamond) and 'the rape of young boys'. For him, Robichon had little choice than to recognise the changing character of French–African relations. These relations were now defined by an important turn towards a new 'struggle against French domination' of Francophone African affairs, a new moment when the vestiges of France's colonial power would be attacked publicly. To buttress this view,



Mballe evokes a dramatic moment of live television on *Afrique Media*. A Cameroonian artist called ‘*Joe La Conscience*’ [Joe the Conscience] sets alight a 10,000 CFA Francs banknote – the colonially instituted currency still used in a large part of French Africa that has been attracting growing condemnation both in Africa and Europe in recent times.

As it turns out, Mballe was right to underline the role of the Cameroonian media in their struggle against French interests. The local media played an important role in whipping up anti-French sentiments between late 2014 and mid 2015. Emblematically, *Afrique Media*, a newly established private television channel significantly stoked these anti-French sentiments. In Francophone African settings French media dominated news coverage for a long time even until 2010. Francophone Africans typically relied on *France24* and *TV5 Monde* for television and *Radio France Internationale* (RFI) for radio. As a self-ascribed ‘*Panafrican TV*’, *Afrique Media* was initially critical of Cameroonian authorities, although it also sought to define itself as counter-weight to the dominance of Western (mostly French) news media.

During my fieldwork, *Afrique Media* was the object of constant harassment by government authorities, particularly from Cameroon’s Minister for Communication, Issa Tchiroma Bakary, and the National Communication Council (NCC), the regulatory body of media in Cameroon. Both authorities constantly threatened to shut down *Afrique Media* for operating without a proper licence.<sup>13</sup> The NCC condemned anti-French comments made by panelists on one of *Afrique Media*’s flagship shows, ‘*Le débat panafricain*’, aired on 1 February 2015.<sup>14</sup> Examples included: ‘Mr. Hollande and others work for esoteric organisations with criminal projects for Africa’ and ‘Paris sub-contracts for the United States to equip Boko Haram in arms’.

This animosity also included this ominous warning to the French diplomats in Cameroon:

This calm moment that the French might be witnessing in Cameroon only precedes a violent tempest to come ... This tempest will not be directed against our own rulers; rather, it will be against the French Embassy in Yaoundé and the French Consulate in Douala. All necessary measures have already been taken by the youth.

Such hostility was also evident in segments of *Afrique Media*’s other notable show, ‘*Le mérite panafricain*’. Aired between February and March 2015, the angry opinions expressed on the show claimed that Boko Haram is a Western plot between the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and France: ‘The CIA is the informant of Boko Haram’, ‘Mr. Sarkozy is a vandal, a thief, a murderer’ and lastly, ‘Paris funds and supports Boko Haram’. Such inflammatory accusations entrenched distrust of France and the French in the country. Political authorities, especially those in the government who appeared to have initially found this French bashing useful, now feared that it could result in physical attacks on French expatriates or their businesses and premises. Joshua Osih expressed this view. A leading voice of Cameroon’s main opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), Osih worried that ‘This hate for France



could trigger violence and internal destabilisation' (quoted in Mbog 2015). Government officials tried to control such hateful commentary but they failed. The French Ambassador, Robichon, had to wage the fight against this rising tide of anti-French sentiments on her own.

### *Countering anti-French sentiments*

Commenting on the political atmosphere immediately following François Hollande's planned visit to Cameroon, Raoul Mbog (a Cameroonian) remarked in one of France's leading daily newspapers, *Le Monde*, that there was an unmistakable 'rise of anti-French sentiment' in Cameroon. This new anti-French sentiment was embedded within 'an assembly of conspiracy theories' funnelled through 'powerful circuits within the establishments of the media, politics and even universities' (Mbog 2015). As spokesperson for France in the country, Christine Robichon was in a bind. Simple official statements of denial issued both on the website of the French Embassy as well as an interview on the private television channel *Canal2 International* on 19 February 2014 failed to dispel this barrage of accusations against her country. However, silence in the face of these accusations could be viewed as an admission of guilt. For example, Osih also asked, 'How come that these rumours on the influence of France in the actions of Boko Haram have never been refuted?'. For Osih, France's failure to recognise her past misdeeds in the country amounts to her denial of her violent colonial past, particularly the war of decolonisation in Cameroon. This denial, he concluded, betrays France's 'lack of respect and consideration for the Cameroonian people' (quoted in Mbog 2015).

Therefore, to strengthen her case for France's innocence against these accusations, Robichon and the French government increased their show of support to the Cameroon government's efforts against Boko Haram. She embarked on a public relations campaign through an increase in her appearances in the national media. These tended to focus on denouncing claims of French complicity in the Boko Haram insurgency. One of the notable French-speaking weekly newspapers in Cameroon, *Repères*, previewed François Hollande's visit to Cameroon in July 2015 by claiming it was mainly to resolve the question of nine French nationals detained by the Cameroonian military over suspicions they were involved in activities related to Boko Haram in northern Cameroon. As this claim could further fuel popular animosity against France, Robichon wrote a reply denying these claims as 'totally unfounded' (see *Repères* 2015a, 2015b).

In addition, she gave even more interviews to leading television channels. Throughout, she insisted that these rumours of French involvement in the Boko Haram insurgency were both false and harmful to otherwise close ties between French and Cameroon (see *Ambassade de France au Cameroun* 2015a, 2015b). Instead, she emphasised France's material support to Cameroon's military operations against the insurgency. In January 2016, with

pomp and with a considerable presence of the media Robichon displayed the material donated by the French government, including 11 P4 tactical vehicles and other military equipment to Cameroon (Ambassade de France au Cameroun 2016). Robichon also publicised France's financial support on social and economic issues defining development cooperation between the two countries. She understood that these post-colonial spectacles of support are necessarily part of the culture of officialdom in Cameroon and duly subscribed to it, lest her show of French support went unrecognised.

However, activists such as Patrick Mballe and Armand Mballe remained unmoved. Quite the opposite. They further denounced such forms of development aid or cooperation as part of the mechanism of continuous neo-colonial domination by the French within structures of *Franceafrique* established since the Brazzaville Conference of 1944 under Charles De Gaulle and Jacques Foccart. As Biloa Mballe remarked to Robichon in his second letter to her,

Your country has a historical case that remains in the collective memory of Cameroonians ... the current wave of anti-French sentiments that, like a blade, traverses and whips up the entire social body of Cameroonians, has attained a point of no return. Your attempts to further mobilise *Francafrigue* networks against this current will be in vain.

Robichon was probably not ignorant of France's 'historical case' with Cameroon, particularly in its deadly repression and plots against the decolonisation struggles of the UPC. This case has defined post-colonial memory in a register of bitterness and crystallised in different waves of anti-French sentiments (Pommerolle 2015). However, the novel and forceful character of their expression through rumours in the context of the war against Boko Haram might have been surprising for her. One of her last public appearances was in June 2016, as Cameroon geared towards the electoral campaigns for the recently held presidential poll of October 2018. Robichon was a guest on the show *Club de Press*, broadcast by the government-owned *Cameroon Radio and Television* (CRTV). A journalist asked her if some foreign, Western diplomatic services in Cameroon were 'manoeuvring' behind the scenes in favour of candidates of the opposition, against the incumbent, Paul Biya. As she was leaving the country, her answer demonstrates her appreciation of the power of rumours in Cameroonian political life. 'Thanks for asking me this question, because it gives me a chance on the airwaves of the CRTV to directly address the rumours and fantasies which are still prevalent in Cameroon's public opinion and even among its political class', she said (CRTV 2016). But, as I demonstrate in the final section below, even fantasies have histories.

BEYOND BOKO HARAM: CHANGING ENEMIES IN A FIXED VISION  
OF SUSPICION

Against the backdrop of the war against Boko Haram in the northern parts of Cameroon since 2014, this article set out to analyse 'the force of rumour in

constituting the political' (Piot 2010: 9) in Cameroon, particularly in regards to French–Cameroon relations. For ordinary and elite Cameroonians alike, political struggles materialise and are interpreted through an economy of rumours and suspicion. This is a country whose 'neocolonial' leaders have long been fixated with the pursuit of 'stability' as a political goal (cf. Kofele-Kale 1981: 198). The organising idea of a state-led politics of suspicion, even through rumour-mongering, has been the paranoid fixation with the need to define the subversive 'enemies' that seek to 'destabilise' Cameroon.

The nervous condition of colonial and post-colonial fear of 'disorder' and their desire for stability and security (cf. Hunt 2016: 7–8) has meant that, historically, political authorities in Cameroon constructed these subversive enemies from *within*. This was attained through violent repression and the establishment of a brutal regime of state surveillance. The UPC's demands for independence from the late 1930s onwards meant it was harassed and repressed as the main agent of subversion and the target of state suspicion by French colonial administrators (cf. Mbembe 1996; Joseph 1977). However, in the late colonial period, the Bamiléké peoples of the Cameroon highlands were designated as the 'enemy' of a French colonial order in Cameroon. For the French, these Bamiléké were the people whose political and economic ambitions must be carefully policed by the new post-colonial authorities in Cameroon (mainly northerners and the Bulu of the South). In 1960, as the newly independent government of Ahidjo was still struggling with the UPC armed rebellion in the forests of the Bamiléké region, Colonel Jean Lambertson, a French military officer famously cautioned that the Bamiléké peoples are the 'disturbing stone in the shoes' of political authorities. Although Lambertson claimed the 'origins and causes of their convulsions remain unclear to all' (cf. Onana 2005: 341), in reality the French strongly resented the dynamism of the Bamiléké spirit of entrepreneurship that threatened French business interests in Cameroon.

After the reunification of British Southern Cameroon (Anglophones) and the French Cameroun (Francophones) in 1961, Anglophones or English-speaking Cameroonians were added to this post-colonial vision of state suspicion that dreads destabilisation. Re-united first as a divided federal republic and then as a single, 'united republic' from 1972 onwards, the English-speaking peoples became the new object of political anxieties for Ahidjo's regime. He feared that Anglophone elites might harbour designs to establish a separate, independent state of their own subsequent to reunification. As a result, Anglophone Cameroonians were largely distrusted by the majority Francophone leadership at the highest level of the state bureaucracy and popularly mocked by Francophone populations as the new 'outsiders', especially for those Anglophones living and working in the large urban centres of Douala and Yaoundé.

This created intense bitterness and misgivings even among Anglophone leaders. John Ngu Foncha, who led the political movement for the reunification of the two Cameroons, expressed his bitterness against this suspicion. In his

letter of resignation from the ruling party, the Cameroon's People Democratic Movement (CPDM), and addressed to Paul Biya on 9 June 1990, he writes regretfully that '*Les Camerounais anglophone que j'ai introduit dans l'union ont été ridiculisés et sont appelés 'les biafrais ... les ennemis dans la maison'* [Anglophone Cameroonians that I brought into this union are now viewed as 'Biafrans ... the enemies within the home']. Ironically, Anglophone frustrations with this state of affairs have generated a budding Anglophone nationalism now commonly described as 'the Anglophone problem' in Cameroon (cf. Konings & Nyamnjoh 1997, 2003). This 'problem' is also the bedrock of the current political crisis and ongoing civil war since 2017 over Anglophone separatist claims to re-establish their own state, the Republic of Ambazonia.

Furthermore, after almost 30 years under the one-party system imposed by Ahidjo, in 1990 an Anglophone political figure, John Fru Ndi, led the political movement to establish the first opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF). This only helped to fuel an extant Francophone suspicion of Anglophone radicalism and subversive impulses. The party gained great popularity and support among the Bamiléké elite and people in the 1990s. As a result, these two historical figures of state-led political suspicion, the Anglophone and Bamiléké elite, were now joined at the hip. Elites from other parts of the country (notably those from Biya's ethnic Bulu in the south as well as northerners) tended to describe the popular struggles for democratisation in the 1990s as part of an inherent 'Anglo-Bami conspiracy' to wrest power through illegitimate means.

In the wake of the Boko Haram insurgency in Cameroon, I have proposed that anthropological analyses of rumours offer useful insights into how this historical logic of state-sponsored suspicion operates in a very dynamic fashion today. As I have shown, oral and written forms of rumours analysed here about the origins and meanings of Boko Haram infuse intra-elite political struggles in Cameroon and popular interpretations of French-Cameroon relations. I have claimed that these rumours, though propagated by media and individuals alike, are embedded and promoted by a broader state-held paranoid fixation with the fear of political destabilisation.

This fear of destabilisation and the politics of suspicion that it assumes have been playing out along two lines. There is the older, more familiar register of domestic suspicion, defined by intra-elite mistrust. However, unlike in the past where the Bamiléké and Anglophone elites had been the object of political suspicion and fear of destabilisation, in their initial iterations the rumours on Boko Haram re-oriented the horizon of intra-elite suspicion elsewhere, onto elites from the northern regions where Boko Haram operates. Even more surprising, also, is that other rumours that alleged a direct role for France in fomenting or funding the Boko Haram insurgency subsequently supplanted the initial rumours on northern elites as primary perpetrators of destabilisation. In this wholly new register of rumours, we see how the vision of state suspicion shifted to delineate an *external* agent (France) as an enemy of destabilisation in Cameroon's crises. As discussed, given the history of French interventionist

politics in her former African colonies, the suspicion of France as a destabilising force seeking regime change in Cameroon through Boko Haram is hardly unreasonable. As Richard Joseph (1978: 4) wrote, political developments in former French African territories illustrate how 'French-African ties serve to maintain in power those local elites permitted by France to inherit legal [colonial] sovereignty'.

In the end, the rumours on Boko Haram delineate the reconfigurations of old and new figures of this political suspicion, both *within* and from *outside*. As said, and from within, the current civil war in the former British Southern Cameroons territories (North West and South West regions) has intensified the suspicion against Anglophones generally, especially those in the diaspora who are seen as critical agents of destabilisation. Likewise, there has been a renewed suspicion towards the Bamiléké owing to the political disputes surrounding the recently held presidential elections in October 2018. Maurice Kamto, a Bamiléké lawyer and professor of international law, has been the object of intense suspicion by Biya's Bulu elite who claim that he and his party, the *Mouvement pour la Renaissance Camerounaise* (MRC), are domestic accomplices in a renewed Western plot to destabilise Cameroon. This has led to violent crackdowns on Kamto and his partisans, who claimed victory in the October 2018 election. Kamto and more than 200 of his MRC partisans were arrested in January 2019 and Kamto is now personally charged with crimes of subversion, including 'incitation to insurrection, hatred for the Fatherland and disturbance of public order'.<sup>15</sup>

Again, rumours have been important modes by which all these intra-elite struggles and the definition of the foreign, interventionist hand appear to be understood. Shortly before the election, the media was awash with reports that leaders of some opposition parties, including Kamto of the MRC, were invited to the US Embassy in Yaoundé and handed significant amounts of money towards their campaigns, all in a US bid to unseat Biya. Government elites decried this sort of American intervention in Cameroon's electoral process particularly because a few months earlier the outgoing American Ambassador to Cameroon, Peter Henry Balerin, made public declarations about the need for the Cameroonian autocratic leader to think of his legacy and leave power peacefully. While the fight against Boko Haram's terrorism was most intense in the country, France had been the object of suspicion of a Western conspiracy to destabilise Cameroon and French-Cameroon relations have been significantly affected by these rumours. Now, however, as Cameroon's military intensifies its attacks against separatist forces in Anglophone Cameroon, it appears that the USA appears to be gradually replacing France as the main foreign enemy of destabilisation in this vision of suspicion.

This paranoid vision of political suspicion, and the proliferation of ever-changing rumours to animate it, create a rather diffuse political context in Cameroon. In these conditions, the analytical focus on rumours helps to situate and define the changing modalities of a politics of refusal, paranoia and political violence in Cameroon today. Crucially, also, the conniving,

popular appropriations and/or reproduction of the state-held politics of suspicion by Cameroonians in the name of nationalism paradoxically enable Biya to deflect their attention away from the failures and abuses of his own rule.

## NOTES

1. Since October 2016, the two English-speaking areas of Cameroon, the North West and South West - formerly known as the British Southern Cameroons until 1961 when they voted to reunite with French Cameroun - have been embroiled in separatist violence over Anglophone demands for a federation or outright secession. Biya has proven incapable of resolving the conflict, whether through insincere and misleading attempts at dialogue or military repression. For more than two years now, what is left in these two regions is 'a dirty war' that has cost thousands of lives and a growing number of displaced persons (see *AFP* 2018).

2. The term '*Françafrique*' is attributed to the former president of the Côte d'Ivoire, Houphouët Boigny, who is said to have coined it to speak of the exceptional character of French-African relations, hence the need to avoid outright independence from France for Francophone African countries. However, in the 1990s, the term was especially mobilised by a number of actors in French civil society organisations against the activities of both leading Francophone African and French political actors, firstly during François Mitterrand's (1981-1995) and then Jacques Chirac's (1995-2007) presidencies. Two of these leading organisations, *Agir Ici* and *l'Association Survie*, brought together a number of African and French actors, including the Cameroonian literary icon and political activist, Mongo Beti, into a single formation of critical voices. They staged a number of protests at important gatherings of these elites, such as during the regular Francophonie or France-African Summits. Additionally, these two civil society organisations produced and published a number of *Dossiers Noirs de la Politique Africaine de la France*, published by l'Harmattan in Paris. A leading voice in *l'Association Survie*, François Verschave, published two monumental companion volumes on the politics of corruption that structures French-African relations (see Verschave 1995, 2000). To these, a number of recent publications could be added, including Pesnot (2014), Airault & Bat (2016) and Bat (2012, 2017), among several others.

3. Consequently, several aspects of these agonising, violent, largely hidden and really shoddy histories of post-colonial relations of complicity are only beginning to surface in recent years (see e.g. Deltombe *et al.* 2011, 2016).

4. Particularly, Biya tends to spend lavishly for travel and lengthy stays at expensive hotels abroad. See, for example, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project's recently published detailed and well-researched account of the effect of Biya's high-cost lifestyle on Cameroon's public purse (OCCRP 2018).

5. On this point, the French journalist of Cameroonian origin, Charles Onana, published a critical and popular account (in Cameroon at least) of the post-electoral struggles in the Côte d'Ivoire and France's outright partisan role against Gbagbo, leading right up to the selective decision to bring Gbagbo and his partisans to international justice at the Hague's International Criminal Court (ICC). See Onana (2011).

In 2013 Onana claimed he had been prevented from holding a conference on the situation in Côte d'Ivoire in Cameroon by a prefectural order that cited the possibility that Onana could be violating Cameroon's diplomatic policy of 'non-interference'. Onana claims - on the basis of rumours shared with him by some of his acquaintances in the Cameroonian police - that the French government had a role in this: '*Il y a eu un coup de fil de l'ambassadeur de France pour que la conférence ne se tienne pas*' ['There was a phone call from the French Ambassador to prevent the conference from being held', my translation]. See *Notre Voie* (2013).

6. Biya's worries were increasingly reflected in regional newspapers in northern Cameroon. See e.g. Moussa (2014).

7. On these abductions, see *Le Monde* (2014), *Jeune Afrique* (2015), and *Radio France Internationale* (2015).

8. '*Quant aux initiateurs et financiers de ce mouvement, ils seraient à chercher du côté des « politiciens originaires du nord » et membres du parti au pouvoir. Leur objectif serait de déstabiliser Biya, voire de le renverser.*' [Regarding the plotters and financiers of this rebellion, these must be sought among politicians from northern Cameroon and members of the ruling CPDM party. Ostensibly, their goal is to destabilise Biya's rule, even to topple him] (see Pigeaud 2014).

9. Pigeaud, '*Cette hypothèse d'une rébellion orchestrée par un ou des barons du régime est plausible: beaucoup d'entre eux ont acquis des fortunes colossales en détournant des fonds publics. Beaucoup ont aussi des vues sur le fauteuil*

*présidentiel. Or une alternance par les urnes paraît aujourd'hui improbable alors que Biya a été réélu pour sept ans en 2011: les processus électoraux sont tous truqués.* [This thesis of rebellious plot by one or more barons of the regime is plausible: many among these barons have acquired colossal fortunes by embezzling public funds. Many have also been coveting the seat of presidential power. Moreover, the prospects for a peaceful transition through elections seem most unlikely at this time with Biya's new electoral mandate of seven years until 2018: the electoral processes are rigged in Biya's favour] (see Pigeaud 2014).

10. 'Call from the Lekié: for a total war against the Islamist and foreign Sect Boko Haram and its accomplices in Cameroon' (my translation). In a country where ethnic and 'regional balance' is more or less the official policy (cf. Nkwi & Nyamnjoh 1999), yet constantly denied as a threat to civic life by officials, this memorandum by elite from President Biya's ethnic Beti group caused quite a stir in public debates over the impact of Boko Haram in national politics. Disseminated widely across the country through both national and regional newspapers, the *Appel de la Lekié* was condemned by elites from non-Beti groups (particularly those from northern areas) as promoting extremism and divisiveness among Cameroonians instead of national unity. Some saw this gesture as playing into the strategy of the Boko Haram group, to sow discord (cf. *Camernews.com* 2014).

11. As said, Biya has been ruthless with his opponents, leading many to keep their presidential aspirations highly concealed, hence the proliferation of rumours on the subject. In leaked diplomatic cables in 2007 by *Wikileaks*, the US Embassy in Cameroon assessed that Marafa was 'a possible presidential candidate – perhaps even the front-runner', the only Cameroonian who dared admit such presidential ambitions, 'albeit privately'. Moreover, the US Embassy added that Marafa was 'also the likely preference of every Western Ambassador in town', including the US Ambassador (*Wikileaks* 2007). This kind of positive assessment certainly marked Marafa out for Biya's politics of judicial repression.

12. *Camer.be* is one of the several (perhaps the most popular Francophone) Cameroonian digital platforms for re-hashing news (as well as gossip) from national and foreign news and popular magazines outlets. For examples of the media reports on the preparations for *Grande Marche Patriotique* and some of the anti-French sentiments expressed at the event and culled by this social media platform, see *Camer.be* (2015a, 2015b, 2015c).

13. In early August 2015, I witnessed motor-taxi riders in the PK 14 neighbourhood in Douala who successfully prevented the police from closing down the offices of *Afrique Media*. See also Schneider (2015).

14. Drawn from a news report by Necdem (2015), though translations are mine.

15. See *Jeune Afrique* (2019).

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