

René Philombe's Acceptance of the Fonlon-Nichols Prize (1992)

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We are gathered here today to relive throbbing, painful and warm moments, and to pay a new homage to the memory of the man whom all Cameroonians should rightly consider to be a monument of culture. As I said, these moments are at once throbbing, painful and warm because we are celebrating the memory of a great man whom we will never see again in flesh and blood, but whose memory teaches us so many lessons. Bernard Fonlon is, therefore not dead. He is alive and will always be in our midst.

I would like to thank her Excellency, the Ambassador of Canada, who kindly accepted to grace this intimate and simple award ceremony with her presence. I also want to thank Professor Victor Anomah Ngu, the president of the Fonlon Foundation of which I am a humble member. Professor Victor Anomah Ngu has with remarkable brilliance been able to preserve the endearing image of Fonlon. My thanks also go to Professor Richard Bjornson, who was kind enough to travel all the way from the USA, defying the exhaustion of this journey, in order to personally hand over this important cultural prize.

What an honour for me! What pride and what excitement as well! It is very difficult for me to adequately express these three feelings, which I am going through right now. Allow me. Ladies and gentlemen, as I accept the prize bearing the illustrious name of Bernard Fonlon, to relive a very special memory I have of him.

It was in 1963 that I had the opportunity of meeting Fonlon-Nsokika Bernard. At the time, he belonged to that pleiad of Cameroonian intellectuals who, after completing solid studies abroad, courageously accepted to return to the mother-country to dip their industrious hands into the Cameroonian (African) "potopoto" in order to contribute to the building of the nation. This was a courageous act at the time because, back then, Africa

was shaken by violent jolts and unending turbulence: military coups, civil wars, political assassinations, denial of the most basic freedoms and the perversion of justice in all its forms.... All this forced so many worthy intellectuals to flee and led to the horrendous suppression of literature and culture.

The mere presence among us of a man of Fonlon's stature was reassuring. I personally owe him a lot. He was the first academic to take the membership card of the *Association Nationale des Poètes et des Ecrivains Camerounais* (APEC) of which I was secretary general for 20 years. His registration boosted our morale because the other academics residing pompously in the ivory towers of their degrees said with a smile of contempt that those without university degrees had no right to talk about literature or culture. However, our scorners failed to admit that some of the best writers in the world did not have university degrees. It is useless to mention their names: the list will be too long.

Fonlon had no problem mixing with ordinary people. I can still recall his several visits to my humble residence in the Nlongkak neighbourhood. Those visits always gave me goose bumps and worried me deeply. A minister in the bedroom of an insignificant outcast! That was enough to scare anyone. He had no hesitation to extend his humility to sitting down on my bed, to having me take a photograph with him. One day when I told him that our relationship will jeopardize his position as a minister, he smiled and said: "There is no Cameroonian law prohibiting a Cameroonian minister to socialize with a fellow Cameroonian." This reply touched me deeply. I felt strong feelings of brotherhood for him taking roots in my heart.

The openness of Fonlon could easily lead one to rank him among opponents of the regime. He never hesitated to say what he thought. He felt so strongly about freedom of expression that he rebuked African heads of state who reduced their people to silence. This is what he wrote in an open letter to African students:

Men in power who try more or less to stifle thought no matter how seemingly plausible the excuses they put forward, can deprive the world of great assets, cause irreparable harm and be guilty of unpardonable crimes against humanity. This has already happened and our duty is to prevent it from ever happening again anywhere in the world.

And he added in the same acid tone:

No policy is more myopic, more foolish, indeed, more cruel than the one which reduces those who think to silence, which threatens their lives or threatens to have them perish behind bars. On the other hand, leaders would be demonstrating profound wisdom and clear-sightedness if they considered differences of opinion as a perfectly normal thing, as one of the characteristics of a healthy society.

Fonlon agreed with Mao Tse Toung when the latter exclaimed in one of his fine moments: “Let one hundred flowers bloom and leave one hundred schools of thought contend with each other.” But he vehemently opposed the Cultural Revolution started by the same head of state. He implicitly called for the organization of a big forum, a National Conference where all voices will be heard; And he called for this at a time when torture camps in Mantoum, Tchollere and Yoko, euphemistically called civil re-education centres, were fully operational. One has to admire the courage of Fonlon.

As a very devout Catholic, Fonlon Bernard deeply regretted not having taken the Orders. His religious commitment did not, however, make him close-minded. On the contrary, he always maintained excellent relations with clerics from different denominations. And one can say that he led a life of a lay priest till his death. As a champion of tolerance, he refused to get too involved in religious arguments. Faith to him was sacred and inviolable. He wished that nations and people could exist within an ecumenical framework both from the religious and cultural points of view. In his journal, *Abbia*, he gave an excellent example of this spirit by having around him people of all persuasions.

Fonlon Bernard believed that the ultimate goal of university education was to produce authentic academics whether they are men of letters or scientists. And speaking about the intellectual, this is how he envisaged his major attributes. An intellectual is a person who may or may not be educated, but in whom the mind reigns supreme. He is an indefatigable seeker of the True, the Beautiful and the Good. He places these goals above his passions, which blind the spirits and impedes his judgment. Moreover, a real intellectual should rid himself of all rigid dogmatism and be able to watch with a serene eye the depth of things. This is what he wrote on the subject:

...no intellectual worthy of the name can enthrone himself, pontificate and pronounce anathema on all those whose opinions he condemns because they are different from his. Rigid dogmatism is in effect one of those characteristics which best indicate close-mindedness.

In his support of the idea that intellectual and moral independence is the distinguishing attribute of a true intellectual, Fonlon relentlessly protested against fanaticism and pride which transform man into a diabolical force. He never forgave those who, due to lack of courage and intellectual insight, allowed themselves to be prostituted by those in power. This prostitution leads to opportunism. Hence, a so-called intellectual becomes no better than a yes-man. He also told me one day that he did not understand how a well-known journalist, whose name I will not mention, could have dragged into the mud of gratuitous insults, the first Cameroonian head of state, with the same ease that he used to eulogize him when the latter was still the uncontested head of state.

In Fonlon's opinion, an intellectual has to be a friend and servant of man, he must be cool-headed, have a warm and generous heart and must place man at the centre of his preoccupations. Without being a Marxist himself, Fonlon had great admiration for Karl Marx, whom he called the giant Marx. He also admired Socrates whom he often cited for his fearlessness and his stoicism; he put Ghandi in the company of these two thinkers. In his estimation, Mahatma Ghandi "took tough oaths, oaths that called for superhuman strength, especially those of truth and courage."

Fonlon contended that a real intellectual can, at a certain stage in the history of his people play the role of guide and seer due to his special ability to analyze facts and events. Fonlon used to allude in this regard to a letter I wrote to President Paul Biya in 1984 in which I called upon him to clean up the situation he inherited from his “illustrious predecessor,” failure to do which would lead to unpredictable consequences. One can still remember the stupid coup attempt that followed.

In this light, Fonlon has been a great influence on me. With your permission, ladies and gentlemen, I want to come back to his long open letter to the University students in order to illustrate to what extent my friend and brother was preoccupied by the mission which the African intellectual has to carry out. This letter is still topical, and I strongly urge people to read or re-read it. The eminent author of this document asked three questions:

First question: Should the intellectual participate in the elaboration and implementation of state policies? In other words can he participate in the running of the state politics? Or, to put it in plain terms, should the intellectual be involved in politics?

Fonlon answered without hesitation in the affirmative.

Second question: In his involvement in politics, should the intellectual become himself a politician?

This time Fonlon hesitated to answer. The author, like Socrates before him, justifiably feared that politics, as a race for power, could compromise the integrity of the intellectual, could lead him to corrupt and filthy practices. Nevertheless, he added:

But I still believe that it is necessary, if not imperative, that at least some intellectuals have the courage and iron will to penetrate into the political arena in order to establish the freedom of thought and of conscience, in order to establish integrity in the running of the affairs of the state.

As you can see, Fonlon had a quasi-religious respect for the human mind. He did not compromise on that because he believed that more so than the physical and visible body, the mind is what makes man what he really is.

Third question: What role can the intellectual play in the running of the affairs of the state?

Fonlon justifiably gives to the intellectual the permanent role of social critic, custodian of the public conscience, of the vigilant guardian ever ready to sound the alarm in order to wake the sleeping people whenever he perceives danger. The rulers should rather protect this intellectual instead of forcing him into exile, they should love him, not show him useless hostility, and they should give him the time to think and to freely express his ideas.

Let us listen again to Fonlon's voice:

“As for the demagogue, who rouses the crowds, no intellectual worthy of the name will have the slightest inclination to play his role, to degenerate into an evil genius who destroys what others are striving to build. For, in general, thought does not blossom amidst a crowd in the town square, nor on the speech-maker's podium, or in the corridors of intrigue. Thought germinates and grows in reclusion, in hope that is not only fertile but also excelling in intellectual probity.”

Ladies and gentlemen, as we launch today the Fonlon-Nichols award ceremony, it is fitting that we benefit from the great lessons that he has bequeathed us in his numerous works. Let this be an opportunity for us to also reflect on the complex problems facing African countries, in general, and Cameroon, in particular. In a country like ours, the process of democratization and the move towards the multi-party system are forever irreversible. Nevertheless, the government continues to rely on an army that slavishly looks up to it for its monthly pay. The government still orchestrates the shameful flogging of respectable leaders of the opposition as one would flog a naughty child. Our

duty then as men of culture is to denounce barbaric politics in unison and with all our strength.

In a country like ours, we witness the continuous falsification of our history while a moribund government in a bid to buy votes elevates the hangman and his victims to the rank of heroes all at the same time. Our duty is, therefore, not to be silent, but unanimously to protest against this ignominy that dishonours our true heroes and our sovereign people.

In a country like ours, which has been clumsily sailing, for thirty years now in a sea of juridical and constitutional ambiguities, false trials are conducted with amazing ease and speed, leading to the imprisonment of innocent citizens. Our duty is to denounce such foul play.

In a country like ours, freedom of expression is guaranteed by the law while private newspapers, the pets of aversion of this hard-pressed government, are constantly being harassed with restraints, suspension orders and interdictions. Our duty is to call for the end of such arbitrary practices.

In a country like ours, I say, which claims to be governed by the rule of law, ministers can, with a simple stroke of the pen ban so many human rights organizations. Our duty is to join forces and courageously block the path leading to dictatorship.

In this country of ours, where every Cameroonian of goodwill thought that the ogre of tribalism had been dead and buried once for all, a band of intellectuals are determined to see it resurrected by creating a Klu Klux Klan called Essingan, whose mission it is to incite the so-called Beti tribes against the Bamileke and “Anglophone” tribes. Our duty is to say no to such civil wars.

In this country of ours, where the law guarantees freedom of religious practice, a mayor can take away land from a major community and give it to the head of state. Our duty is to stand up altogether to decry this diabolical obscenity.

Finally, in a country like ours, some secondary school and university professors are prohibited from giving certain lectures or from reading certain cultural journals. Students are for no just cause barred from getting politically active. Our duty is, therefore, to ask the disturbing question: “Whither Cameroon?”

Those who prohibit students from getting involved in the political process are simply suffering from “juvenophobia”. Ladies and gentlemen, this is a neologism that I coined to refer to a sickness that prevents some adults from associating with young people, to open up a sincere and frank dialogue with them and to seek to improve their education. This is the disease that explains why some parents dare not get close to their children, lest the latter should ask them: Daddy, why have you become bald? And Mummy, why are you wearing a wig?

The surprising thing is that these very juvenophobes are the first to proclaim loudly “The youth are the spearhead of the nation”! When has anyone ever wished to process a dull spearhead? Is it not in the political grindstone that the sharpening could be done? Ladies and gentlemen, some might think that I have digressed from my initial subject. Indeed I have not. On the contrary, my entire speech could be entitled: “On the footsteps of Fonlon Bernard” ! I invite you to follow his luminous footsteps, to emulate his frankness, to hear the love for open discussions which he took as an intellectual sport, to cultivate and love the True, the Beautiful and the Good. By so doing you will be helping in bringing about radical change to our languishing society.

I am happy and proud today to know that after the sudden death of my brother and friend, a group of academics and non-academic friends decided to immortalize his memory by creating a foundation in Cameroon, which bears his name. At the same time, a prize has also been created in Canada; Fonlon truly deserves this. In 1977, I dedicated one of my anthologies entitled “Petites gouttes de chants pour créer l’homme,” to Fonlon Bernard. This was the least I could do to strengthen our fraternal bonds. He deserved even more. For Fonlon was the architect of the new man in a tumultuous Africa.

I admit that I had overwhelming admiration for Fonlon Bernard. This exemplary academic, this intellectual, whose human qualities are beyond reproach, never felt comfortable in his ministerial garb. He only seemed to be completely at ease in the company of his academic colleagues, ordinary people and students. He detested calling the latter “my flock” because this would sound as if they were sheep. He rather preferred the expression “my children” or “my junior brothers.”

To my knowledge, Fonlon was the first Cameroonian to voluntarily resign from his ministerial post. He did this in dignity. He felt happier to return to the cultural ebullition of campus life.

Fonlon was present during the birth of the University of Yaoundé. He was one of those who carried the newborn baby to the baptismal fount, and then watched it as it took its first steps....Upon hearing the terrible news [of his death], my first thought was to send a letter to President Paul Biya to request that he name this citadel of culture after the illustrious name of Fonlon Bernard. I wish to reiterate this request from this podium. It would be, I am sure, a gesture of encouragement to all the people of culture that we are, whatever our standing.

Long live the Bernard Fonlon Society!

Long live the Fonlon-Nichols Prize!

Long live Cameroonian culture!

René Philombe

Knight of Order of Valour