

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL TOPIC “COEXISTENCE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN CAMEROON”

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This special topic is a part of the research outcome of the project, “Comprehensive Area Studies on Coexistence and Conflict Resolution Realizing ‘African Potentials’”,⁽¹⁾ which was launched in 2011 by the Center for African Area Studies, Kyoto University. The topic comprises three papers developed from research presentations made during the “Fourth International Forum: Conflict and Coexistence in Africa”, which was held in Cameroon in 2014.

This project has carried out inter-disciplinary research with a focus on the knowledge, systems, and values which African people have created and implemented for conflict settlement and realization of coexistence, which can be called “African Potentials”. “These African Potentials have long been generated through encounters and clashes with European and Arabic Islamic societies, and continue to undergo constant transformation, a process we term ‘Interface Functions’. As we identify and evaluate African Potentials, we will also explore how they are articulated through external factors through Interface Functions” (Ohta, 2014: 2). In other words, African Potentials were not simply derived from their traditions but have been fostered and developed through social changes over the years. This project focuses on the imagination and creativity of the African people, which have not been paid much academic attention in the past, and discusses putting the conflict resolution and peace-building initiatives back into their hands, many of which have been handled by the systems and values brought from the West.

A characteristic feature of this project is that joint research projects were actively organized by Japanese and African researchers. One of the symbolic activities was the annual international forum held in different parts of Africa, which brought Japanese and African researchers together. The first forum was held in Nairobi, Kenya in 2011, the second in Harare, Zimbabwe in 2012, the third in Juba, South Sudan in 2013 followed by the fourth in Yaoundé, Cameroon in 2014. The final forum of the series, the fifth one, was held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 2015.

The fourth forum carried out in Yaoundé was co-hosted with the Department of Anthropology, University of Yaoundé I, and African Potentials were discussed with an attendance of fourteen African researchers and seventeen Japanese researchers. In his keynote speech, Francis B. Nyamnjoh, who is a Cameroonian scholar teaching in the University of Cape Town, presented an attractive concept called “incompleteness” and discussed the unlimited potential of the creativity and imagination of the African people (Nyamnjoh, 2015). Following the speech, eight African researchers and seven Japanese researchers made presentations divided into five panel sessions.

The papers featured in this special topic are on “Coexistence and Conflict Resolution in Cameroon” written by three Cameroonian researchers who partici-

pated in the international forum in Yaoundé. Cameroon has been regarded as one of the politically stable countries in Africa, owing to the absence of major wars and conflicts since its independence. However, there are various challenges behind that stability, such as the economic gap between the northern and southern regions, the presence of two major religions, Islam and Christianity, and over two hundred ethnic groups, the gap between wealthy and poor, and political corruption. Being surrounded by such an environment, the people in the country have attempted to maintain coexistence through trial and error.

The first paper by Antoine Socpa aimed to discuss ethnicity and politics in Cameroon through ethnic stereotypes with a focus on the relationships between the two ethnic groups, namely the Beti (Béti) and the Bamileke, which have conflicted with each other in political contexts. The antagonism between the two groups has been fueled by political discourse since the late 1990s, but the paper states they have built a coexisting relationship by creating new customs, such as *land dowry*, at the grassroots level.

The second paper by Luc Mebenga Tamba illustrates the conflict and its solution in the society of the Beti, an ethnic group that lives in southern Cameroon. The paper ethnographically analyzed how the tense relationship developed through the death of a family member in the Beti, which was gradually resolved and led to peaceful coexistence through the funeral rites. He examined dialog, speech, the oath, and sharing as the traditional basis for peace among the Beti.

The third paper by Godefroy Ngima Mawoung discusses the relationship between the Bantu farmers and the Bakola/Bagyelli, who are hunter gatherers. They have shared the same land and forests, with occasional conflicts, for many years, by tactically managing their differences and have continued to coexist. Despite the various socio-economical changes in the region in which they live, they still regard each other's presence as a "necessary evil" and continue cohabitation.

Presumably, other parts of Africa have many examples of "African Potentials" similar to those illustrated in these papers, and such potentials enable them to build peace through prevention and solutions to both micro and macro conflicts. We expect this special topic to serve as a catalyst to attract attention to the people's practices for conflict resolution and the realization of coexistence in various parts of Africa.

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