

BOOK REVIEW:

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## A Life of Peace Education: Dr Venantius Kum Ngwoh and the Pathways to a Culture of Peace in Cameroon

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Book: Venantius Kum Ngwoh, *Pathways to the Culture of Peace*. Buea: CINEC Publications, 2021

### Abstract

This is a revised version of the book review (speech) I presented during the lunch of the said book on 26 January 2022 which was held at the St. Charles Lwanga Catholic Church Parish Hall in Molyko Buea-Cameroon. The book was written in the context of the Anglophone crisis which began with the Anglophone Teachers and lawyers Strike in October 2016 which has since 2017 plunged the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon into an armed secessionist movement. The book was published and lunched in what may now be termed the peak of the crisis; should this enable the reader understand the context in which the book review was originally written.

This is a magnificently and painstakingly written peace of work by a renowned scholar of Buea-Cameroon. Dr Kum Ngwoh is a household name in the culture of peace in this country and most of us know him in one or more of the capacities in which he has advocated the re-institutionalization of the culture peace. This he has done for many years; from a religious studies and history teacher, to university lecturer, in addition to serving as a catechist in his local church to being a traditional ruler of his people with all implications; to a full-time career as a

peace educator with the creation of the Centre for Citizenship and Non-Violence Education (CINEC). I must also mention that the book under review is not the first of his publications in his efforts to implant a culture of peace in our generation and those to come. Those he taught in the 1990s and 2000s often called him “Life Jacket” being part of the title of a study manual he wrote on *Advanced Level Religious Studies*. The PhD Thesis he defended at the Department of History at UB was on Conflict Resolution between the farmers and grazers in the Menchum Division of the North West Region of Cameroon. Recently amongst others, I know of a book titled *The Advocate for Citizenship Education* with a carefully chosen subtitle; *The Habits of the Heart* which he first published in 2016 and another one whose title caused a great stir in the corridors of UNESCO Building which houses our Department; *Non-Violent Action and the Anglophone Problem: A Memorabilia*. This book which I gladly prefaced, came out in 2017 in the heat of what has become known as the Anglophone crisis; a moment in a conflict that technicians in conflict analysis and peace education would describe as “passing the distancing and divergence stages and getting to the peak of the curve in which we experience the art of undermining others, destruction of things/property, destruction of people and evidently destruction of ourselves.”

Never in the history of this country or this great people had we ever reached this stage of bestiality and brutality. I grew up never knowing the difference between an anglophone and a francophone; I grew up never knowing the difference between a graffi man and a sawa; I grew up never worrying whether there was a problem being catholic, Baptist or Presbyterian; or Christian and Muslim. I grew up never worrying whether there was a problem if a man went to church on Sunday or stayed back playing draft and drinking palm wine at the idle park. Many of us will bear with me that until the Anglophone crisis degenerated into something else, we had never heard the sound of a gun except during funerals when our brothers of the northwest cultures did their 21-man gun salute to the departed; or as I experienced sometime in Santa “when our very own young kids, stopped our buses, ordered us

at gun point to lie in the dust, stealing from us amidst thunderous gun shots in the name of fighting for the struggle... what a pity. If I grew up not knowing these, then our parents even lived in a better el dorado; a time when doors were always left open at night in which travellers would choose any house to spend the night with food and warm water before they continued their journey the next day. They never bothered returning home at a particular hour except when their wives placed a curfew.

Indeed, such were the times when the culture of war, conflict, hatred, insecurity were unknown to us. Such were the times when we left Kumba and went to GHS Mbengwi, or Nkambe without our parents even accompanying us on the first trips; such were the times when fresh from training, a civil servant from the south will begin his career in Mora in the far north, stay there and live with the people without bothering to ask for transfer. Such were the times when speaking French neither made us fools nor speaking English made us Biafrans or *les Bamenda*.

Anyone would bear with me that this culture has eluded Cameroon and particularly the two Anglophone Regions. You would bear with me that now we can only cry out in nostalgia "in those our good old days..." or "lament at what is going on ...this country don spoil." We not only suspect one another but as the days go by, we begin to fear even our own shadows. We cut our brother's hands, we shoot humans as if we were hunting game, we take pride in implanting permanent psychological trauma in children who want to go to school by shooting some dead or on days when we have not smoked enough marijuana and tramadol, we ask them to undress at gun point and some of us help to disseminate such videos of shamelessness and animality that has crept in our society. The culture of uncertainty, insecurity, conflict and now war has completely taken over our beautiful country, our emerging towns and our stunning and scenic villages and countrysides. Hatred and animosity now dominate our essence. Like Saint Paul said in Romans 1:29-31,

We have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. We are now full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. We are gossipers, slanderers, God haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful. Each day we invent new forms

of evil; we disobey our parents. We have become senseless, faithless, heartless, merciless. Although we know God's righteous Decree that those who do such things are worthy of death, we not only continue to do them, but we also approve of those who practice them and shield them.

This is the society in which you and I now belong. Certainly, if you ask Chief Dr. Venantius Kum Ngwoh, he would tell you that this is a culture of war. As he states in the instruction to the book "... these groans and moans of war have gone on *pari-passu* with cravings and yearnings of peace with several beggars of peace variously known as peace ambassadors, peace advocates, peace makers, peace educators, peace seekers, peace keepers" and I would add, peace matches.

As our author has argued, "yet for sometime now, these persons have continually been fumbling in the dark, for although they desire peace, they seem not to know how to get it. That is why it is absolutely necessary to teach peace not just in academic and formal settings like the school, church and conference room, as he and I as well as the clergy and owners of Peace NGOs have been doing, but also and most especially in informal locales such as market places, hospitals, village squares, motor parks, and Okada parks for those of us from Squares in Bangem and three corners Fiango. We need to teach peace in order that civic values, virtues and attributes like nonviolence, tolerance, self-control, love and respect should be inculcated in every man and woman.

Dr Kum Ngwoh did not use the word culture in his title just for the sake of the word. Culture is the art and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively. It is the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society. Culture also includes the material objects that are common to that group or society. But most importantly, it constitutes a large and diverse set of mostly intangible aspects of social life, beliefs, systems of language, communication, and practices that people share in common and that can be used to define them as a collective.

When Dr Kum talks of Pathways to the culture of Peace, he is certainly advocating three things;

(1) that with all the prefixes of peace this and peace that, our previous approaches to peace have been unsuccessful. "In his words such approaches have only "been a continuous fumbling in the dark"

(2) that although Culture is distinct from social structure and economic aspects of society, it is tightly connected to them and that both culture and thus the culture of peace is what is continuously informing social life and economic development which I understand as the improvement in the living conditions of the masses to which most of us belong. So where the culture of peace eludes a people as it has done to us, nothing can work. Fear takes over, prices of basic commodities skyrocket, working in a farm, travelling to the village, going to school and returning alive or even having "one square meal" [if there is anything like that] becomes a matter of "my brother, my sister na God ohhhh."

(3) By referring to the term culture of peace, we need to make Peace an intangible aspect of our social life; of our belief systems, our systems of language, communication, and practices. We need to share peace and make it what must define us as a collective of people called Cameroonians. Until the escalation of this conflict, Cameroonians were known abroad as peace loving people. Today we are referred to as terrorists to our own selves. Citing the UNESCO 1989 Yamoussoukro Declaration, Chief Dr Kum Ngwoh is advocating that "We should develop a culture of peace which must be based on the universal values of respect for life, liberty, justice, solidarity, tolerance, human rights and equality between women and men."

These three points and most especially the last one, falls in line with the Mission of the NGO Citizenship and Non-violent Education Centre (CINEC) as the author tells us and justifies his intention to use this book "to divert the minds and hearts of citizens of Cameroon wherever they are; whether in the remotest parts of this country or in Norway, Canada, the USA, Nigeria, Belgium or South Africa by reading this book we would transform ourselves

“from vengeful and violent behaviour to non-violent conduct that can promote and sustain peace and make citizens live their full human potential in peace, love, harmony and self-confidence.” Again quoting UNESCO, Dr Kum’s insistence on a culture of peace stems from the fact that “since war begins in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that defences of peace must be constructed.” How else can the minds of men be reformed if not through this book?” he questions.

Dr. Kum Ngwoh has presented us with the basic tool for a mind changer; an intellectual champagne which if consumed even in over dose will simply make us finer people; An academic intercourse which would only lead to a pregnancy and thus a child who will ensure sustained living together or “bien vivre” as our brothers call it. We not only need peace, but we need peace to once again become a culture of the people of this country.

Dr Kum talks of pathways to arrive at a culture of peace. In this book, he has presented many of these in ten solidly expressed chapters.

In the first chapter, the reader is thrilled to the historicity and pictograph of the peace crusade as well as a historiography of the culture of peace. You would find in it carefully expressed conceptual and historical explanations of peace making, peace movements, the famous Pax Romania, the Truce of God in the Middle Ages; the grand design for peace in Europe in the 1400; the creation of peace foundations; the concept of human rights and the theories of peace. This section is most important to history, international relations and peace education students and practitioners

In chapter two the author has discussed the art of recognizing peace through peace symbols. Such symbols discussed include national symbols, international symbols, royal symbols of insignia of office, cultural peace symbols like the dove, the white poppy, the olive branch, the *keng*, the white peace gong, the V hand symbol, the palm tree and our very own kola nut, palm wine calabash, gong and drum. It is my prayer that this chapter if not the whole book should be read by our soldiers but especially by most of our now famously known as “amba boys” to

enable them understand that not all war time is battle time and that there are breaks for reflection, opinion collection, re-strategizing and alternative routes taking.

In chapter three, the author again goes more academic with the meaning, history and resource material for the culture of peace. He comes up with a justification for why we need a culture of peace and elaborates the world faiths which serve as pillars of peace such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Bahia as well as African Indigenous Regulatory and spiritual institutions. As an African decolonial epistemologist, I find the inclusion of the African regulatory societies' role in promoting the culture of peace very essential. While Christianity talks of turning the other cheek with the possibility of receiving two dirty slaps while the perpetrator awaits his own punishment on his dead bed, the African cultural principles stand for immediate punishment for wrong doing. It was possible that people could tell in a village a person who had gone against the norm. Either the gods stroke him with *Motoli* or with a dreaded skin disease. In such a way people thought twice if they had to hurt their neighbour and so peace was preserved permanently.

In chapter four, the author discusses the major domains in which the culture of peace can be built. Such as peace education, gender equality and women empowerment, social cohesion and tolerance, equitable and sustainable development, and civic education. You would bear with me that one of the reasons why we are where we are today is because one faction feels that it is not getting its own rational slice of the national cake. With the culture of tolerance and patience we could have had reason to act otherwise.

In chapter five the author discusses women and youth in the culture of peace as main stakeholders and especially in our situation as victims. Chapter six tells us the key tools in building a culture of peace. He talks of non-violent action, tolerance, civil-military relations, and dialogue. In chapter seven he expands the concept of the culture of dialogue and its relation to the sustenance of peace, exposing different levels from family to council meetings

to village assemblies to development association meetings, focus group discussions to council sessions to political meetings, parliamentary sessions, ecumenism, fact finding missions, commissions of inquiry, sovereign national conferences and you may add “major national dialogues.” He exposes how these can be used for sustaining a culture of peace and discusses how the state of Cameroon has used most of them in resolving the on-going Anglophone crisis.

In chapter eight Dr. Kum tells us practical ways to build a culture of peace and the role of various stakeholders like teachers, military officers, civil society organizations, and political parties. He also discusses how we can initiate the very young into a culture of peace. In chapter nine he discusses important peace agents and in chapter ten he discusses the culture of peace through poetry and peace quotes. Most intriguing to me is this poem which the author says is part of an anthology which won first prize from our very own Mualimu George Ngwane’s National Book Development Council. It reads

Africa, crisis ridden puppet  
 I cry for you in grief  
 Listen to me  
 You desert Arab and forest negro  
 It is for you I weep  
 I lament for the high price  
 Paid for peace in return for no peace  
 Mother Africa, where has gone  
 Your concious humility of old  
 That animus and chaos should  
 Take the place of amity and certainty?  
 Where is the sacredness of human life?  
 That beastliness and bloodiness  
 Should sharpen your reason  
 And strangle your conscience?

From the above, you would see that our author, is not only a historian, citizenship and religious studies teacher but a peace advocate who has used prose and poetry to pass on the message of peace. The book is thus an excellent read for all classes of people. Its language is simple, the print is fine and attractive and the contents, head filling-cognitively speaking. Chief Dr. Venantius Kum Ngwoh,

has spent years of burning the midnight oil putting this piece together as a contribution to the search of permanent peace in our society; the culture of peace. He has done his huge part as a peace builder and educator, it is our own responsibility, in in our various capacities to take home several copies of this book and for church leaders, school owners, NGO promoters to take back with them not just a few copies but several cartons and distribute to those who did not have the opportunity to be here. One thing, if you buy a book, don't just write your name on it and put on your shelf. Read it and change to change others. I conclude on a hopeful note with this except from another poem of his;

Don't let it end this way  
Part not in conflict  
Let not the other go in pain  
Make peace, Take the lead, Stoop low  
It won't kill you,  
It won't ruin you,  
It won't weaken you,  
It'll only make you stronger

As Mahatma Gandhi says, making war which the bible calls "an eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind. A people free to choose, will only choose peace. I encourage each of us to be a peace maker in everyday life; to display peace in everything we do; be peace and most importantly live in peace.