

# Dynamics of Anthropology Teaching and Practice in Cameroonian Universities (1962–2023)

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## Introduction

The first African universities were established to provide skilled labour for the newly independent nation-states (De Haas 1994). This applies also to Cameroon, where between 1960 and 1980, university graduates easily found employment in the civil service. Even those with degrees in anthropology were quickly employed in the various ministries. Unemployment was not a problem, as vocational schools recruited graduates from all levels of education.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the civil service was saturated with a critical mass of university graduates and began to absorb graduates selectively through a competitive process. Those who failed floated on the labour markets. By 1986, the employability of university graduates had declined considerably. When President Paul Biya signed a decree allowing the civil service to recruit 1,500 university graduates, many found employment in the civil service with little or no substantive work experience. As the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s imposed several restrictions on recruitment, the state was forced to reduce its recruitment.

In a major publication on the university reform, it is stated clearly that the 1993 university reforms aimed to produce graduates with practical skills that could generate independent employment (Republic of Cameroon 1993). The reforms brought together sister disciplines to provide a broad-based education. Major combined degrees such as History-Geography and Philosophy-Sociology were designed to train teachers for secondary schools. Some courses in anthropology were also taught as part of the new combined degree in philosophy and sociology. While philosophy became a subject for teaching in secondary schools, anthropology or sociology did not. Students who obtained a combined

degree in Philosophy-Sociology went on to graduate studies in anthropology, but ended up as teachers in secondary schools.

The reforms provided only a short-lived solution to a growing unemployment problem. By the late 1980s, the educational field was saturated to the point where the state required universities to design curricula to produce graduates with self-employment skills. In addition, professionalisation efforts sought to provide the practical skills vital for self-employment.

For anthropology, the question was how the discipline could offer vital and critical survival skills to students. The collapse of modernisation theory in the 1960s had already generated a new debate on alternative responses to development issues. This debate opened a new window of opportunity for anthropology. Anthropology's ideas and micro-analytical perspective were explored as alternative paths to development. Would anthropology offer the answers? How could anthropology respond to the growing demands of development agencies?

In response to these questions, anthropology programmes at the University of Yaoundé and in other universities across the country attempted to address these concerns. The classical training in anthropology has been redesigned in light of the new requirements, that is, to train students with vital survival skills. The university, as a realm of ideas and idealism or a marketplace of ideas, has opened up to the demands of the world of actions, policies and practices (Nkwi 2006). While our colleagues in North America and Europe argued that applied anthropology was not anthropology, those of us who taught and interacted with the world of action believed that anthropology can only be meaningful and valuable if it listens to the everyday voices of communities and developers bringing about meaningful change. Academic anthropology has indeed inextricably been linked to development anthropology. Moreover, for anthropology to rehabilitate the colonial image in Africa, it must use its knowledge to address the many and diverse issues facing the social transformation of the continent.

## Historical review of the development of the discipline in Cameroon

The teaching of anthropology at the University of Yaoundé dates back to the creation of this institution. Its status and existence today as an autonomous discipline within the Cameroonian university system is the result of a long struggle. It is, therefore, essential to evoke history to understand the motives

and context that favoured the reforms and changes which subsequently affected the teaching of anthropology at the University of Yaoundé and the other public universities created since the 1993 reform.

Historically, anthropology in France and the rest of Europe referred to physical anthropology, while social and cultural anthropology was considered a sub-discipline of sociology or the French school of *ethnologie*. The role played by anthropology during the colonial period created a climate of suspicion detrimental to the discipline. This also applied to Cameroon where anthropologists were employed by the French and British colonial administrations. Accused of having served as a secular arm of the colonial enterprise (Talal Asad 1973), anthropology was regarded and described by African intellectuals, academics and nationalists as a colonial and even dangerous discipline that was unrelated to sociology. Conversely, sociology was the discipline perceived as being of great use in the process of African modernisation.

The struggles of Cheikh Anta Diop and other African scholars to restore the dignity of African cultures became a great inspiration to those who continued to study anthropology despite hostility. Even though great personalities such as Busia and Kenyatta, both trained anthropologists, had become political leaders in their respective countries by the 1960s, this fact did not help to rehabilitate the image of anthropology. It was generally deemed that anthropology was interested in tradition and thus backwards looking. Hence it was not thought to contribute to the development of postcolonial Africa. As a result, many Africans who had studied anthropology in North American and European universities were confronted with a university system that was hostile to the discipline when they returned home. By contrast, the label of the sociologist was more acceptable and marketable than that of the anthropologist.

At the University of Yaoundé, anthropology started modestly in the form of introductory courses on family, marriage, kinship and other related subjects between 1962 and 1980. At the time, the University of Yaoundé was the only public university in the country. The teaching programmes were designed in French and the overwhelming majority of teachers and students were from French-speaking Cameroon (Marchand 1962). In an attempt to accommodate students of English-speaking origin from the country's North-West and South-West regions, bilingual training courses were provided. The objective was to reduce the linguistic divide between French and English-speaking lecturers and students. It is for this reason that the University of Yaoundé has since been considered a bilingual university.

As from 1993–1994, after the university reform, anthropology gained importance with the enrolment of an increasing number of anthropology students and, consequently, the recruitment of university lecturers teaching anthropology. As most lecturers were trained in France, anthropology was taught following the French school of *ethnologie*. Only in the late 1970s, with the recruitment of Paul Nchoji Nkwi as assistant professor trained in Switzerland, was the curriculum enlarged to include other strands of anthropology, such as the British and US American strands of social and cultural anthropology (Keesing 1981). In the last two decades, culture as a fundamental concept has been the basis for the local rooting of anthropology, echoing Goodenough (1970), who approached culture from a cognitive perspective and defined it as a sum of representations, ideas and symbols shared by members of society.

As a result of the 1993 university reform, the teaching of anthropology was formalised with the creation of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. In 2007, an independent Department of Anthropology was created. Nowadays, the specialisations offered to students in the ten state universities in Cameroon are cultural, medical, development, visual and political anthropology. The remainder of this article examines the events that have shaped the increasing visibility of anthropology in Cameroon through the various university reforms (1993, 2007 and 2023).

## The 1993 university reform

From 1990 onwards, the number of students at the University of Yaoundé increased significantly. Built at the end of the 1962 to accommodate 10,000 students, the student population in the 1991/92 academic year was estimated at more than 50,000. Faced with this constant evolution in the number of students, since 1982, following numerous student strikes with a view to obtaining better living and study conditions, the government attempted to alleviate this situation by promulgating and implementing a decree organizing the operation of student associations (Decree No. 82/83 of 19/2/82). In 1990, with the advent of the multiparty system, Cameroonian university students concentrated in the single state university of Yaoundé had become a major threat to the ruling party. They were in fact easy prey for the new opposition political parties which promised them much better living and studying conditions and a bright professional future. To deal with this situation, the government in place was obliged to create new universities to decongest that of Yaoundé. This solution

was obviously based on the principle of “divide and rule” (Mbembe 1985; Socpa 2003; Bella 2015: 318–323). In the process, five new universities were created, including the universities of Yaoundé II (Soa), Douala, Dschang, Ngaoundéré and Buea. In addition, the former University of Yaoundé was renamed the University of Yaoundé I (Decree N° 93/027 of January 1993).

Preceding the 1993 reforms a debate took place within the Ministry of Higher Education on the employability potential of the disciplines and curricula taught at the University of Yaoundé. The objective was to provide students with skills and experiences that could help find solutions to the unemployment crisis. Thus, each discipline was invited to reflect on the possibility of reforming the university system with a focus on capacity building and skills acquisition. In this context, the anthropology curriculum was redesigned with new specialisations to provide students with a basic understanding of the discipline’s applicability and practice.

### **The status of anthropology in academia before the 1993 reform**

Since the creation of the Federal University of Yaoundé, some anthropology courses have been taught at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (FALSH). Designed according to the French university system, anthropology (following the French tradition) was taught as a sub-discipline of the social sciences. All sociology students were required to take courses in anthropology. Although there was no separate department, the study of anthropology was an essential component of the degree in sociology.

The decree creating the Federal University in 1962 stipulates in its article 11 that the Faculty of Letters and Humanities shall award Bachelor of Arts degrees to students who have passed the examinations leading to the award of the five higher education certificates that make up the Bachelor’s degree (Republic of Cameroon 1974; Republic of Cameroon 1982). The following degrees were to be awarded: Classical Literature, Modern Literature, History and Geography, and three Humanities degrees: Philosophy, Sociology, and Psychology.

To obtain a degree in sociology, students had to receive an anthropology certificate, as the sociology degree comprised the following certificates:

- Certificate in the History of Civilizations,
- Certificate in General Sociology,

- Certificate in General Psychology,
- Certificate in Anthropology,
- Certificate in Political and Social Economy.

From the beginning, conscious efforts were made to integrate anthropology in the first years of the Federal University of Cameroon. The following courses were included in the sociology curriculum under the heading “History and Methodology”:

- Major theories in sociology (*ethnologie*),
- Definition of sociology and social sciences,
- Sociology and psychoanalysis,
- Sociological research, field research methods and techniques,
- *Ethnologie* and sociology, the significance of archaism.

The reforms of the 1980s merged the three humanities degrees into one philosophy degree. These reforms proposed to remove sociology and anthropology entirely from the curriculum, a move strongly resisted by sociologists and anthropologists, whose action led to the creation of a separate sociology department at the University of Yaoundé in which both disciplines were taught. Indeed, these reforms allowed students to take joint courses in philosophy and sociology during the first two years of their studies. In the third year, they specialised in sociology while obtaining a combined philosophy/sociology degree. Anthropology courses were reduced to a single course entitled Sociology of Traditional Africa. Students interested in anthropology could only start taking basic courses in the third year, with the possibility of concentrating on anthropology in the fourth and fifth years. The courses focused on the anthropology of Cameroon and the world, but also included courses with an applied orientation, such as urban anthropology, applied anthropology, and anthropology of development.

Although the students obtained degrees in philosophy-sociology, they were taught basic anthropology because most teaching staff were anthropologists who had been trained abroad notably in France, Switzerland, Belgium, Germany and the United States of America. Yet because anthropology had no visibility, most trained anthropologists preferred the academic profile of sociologists or historians (Nkwi and Socpa 2007; Fokwang 2008).

## **The status of anthropology teaching from 1993 to 2023 in Cameroonian universities**

### **The mission of the discipline**

Anthropology as an academic discipline focuses on human biological and cultural variation in time and space. It has six subfields across different universities in Cameroon: social or cultural anthropology; biological or physical anthropology; archaeology; linguistic anthropology; medical anthropology; and anthropology of development. The mission is to increase and disseminate knowledge of anthropology through empirical research, teaching and publications. The goals and obligations are to reach and educate our primary constituencies (graduate, masters and doctoral students) and the wider public. The ultimate goal is to routinely address, associate, cooperate and collaborate with students within and outside the Universities. The development sector has been identified as the primary target job market for anthropology students.

### **Employment opportunities**

With the 1993 university reform, anthropology – in common with other disciplines – was required to prepare students for the job market. Graduates are trained to create self-employment jobs as international consultants and researchers. They are prepped to be employed in national and international organisations and NGOs in competing positions with students from other universities, professional schools, and other countries.

### **Graduation requirements at the Master's and Doctoral level**

Each candidate is attributed a supervisor of the thesis by the Department. Candidates are required to present a research thesis at the end of the programme. The thesis needs to make a scientific contribution to research by handling original topics and providing a critical analysis which aims to solve critical socio-anthropological problems and to contribute to human and environmental development. This implies that candidates focus on their original proposals and topics of research by building on the academic coursework, workshops, seminars, internship facilities and research experience so as to produce critical analyses and contributions in their theses. The thesis is submitted three to six months after the coursework has been completed and successfully validated.

Each candidate is expected to present two to three seminar papers before completing the courses and the final thesis. This enables the candidates and their supervisors to appreciate and devise critical evaluations and suggestions for improvement of the research and critical analysis of the work and other future works of the candidate.

Candidates need to earn at least a C grade, that is, a Grade Point Average (GPA) of two (2.0) points out of four (4.0), to be eligible for graduation. Unsuccessful candidates are given two more chances to graduate. This means that the maximum period for graduation for a candidate is four years. The Master's degree shall be awarded to candidates who have successfully completed the course requirements and defended a dissertation from such research work before a panel (Kekedi 1979). Graduates must have completed a total of 120 credits (2/4) which allows them to register in the PhD/Doctorate cycle.

### **Anthropological curricula**

The anthropology curricula in Cameroonian universities are structured around standard core courses and specialised degrees. The curricula are developed by a commission of senior ranked anthropology staff of the universities who are encouraged to consult the teaching programmes of other universities in the world, but also to propose courses that are aligned with local realities. The standard core courses are generally the same in all universities that offer anthropology and include the following:

- Introduction to general anthropology
- History of anthropology
- Research methods in anthropology
- Cultural dynamics
- Kinship systems
- Belief system
- Culture and personality
- Current theories in anthropology

The specialisation courses differ by university, depending on the specialisations of the senior staff. Yet, given the focus on applied anthropology, many universities offer anthropology of development and medical anthropology as possible specialisation degrees.



Table 1: *Cameroonian universities and their specialisation courses*

Specialisations	Universities
Cultural anthropology	University of Yaoundé I University of Douala University of Maroua University of Bertoua University of Ngaoundéré
Anthropology of development	University of Yaoundé I University of Douala University of Maroua University of Buea University of Ngaoundéré
Medical anthropology	University of Yaoundé I University of Douala University of Maroua University of Ngaoundéré
Visual Anthropology	University of Maroua University of Ngaoundéré
Social anthropology	University of Buea

Evolution of anthropology department staff in Cameroonian universities today

When the Sociology Department was created in the 1980s, Jean Pierre Warnier, a French anthropologist and specialist of Grassfields societies in Cameroon, served as its chairman for twelve years. By 1986, the sociology department had twelve staff members, including seven anthropologists. In 1993, the discipline was given autonomous status as a section in the new Department of Sociology and Anthropology and was entitled to award degrees (B.Sc., M.Sc., PhD) in anthropology.

In 1986, almost all staff members were trained abroad. Only two had been trained entirely in Cameroon. The others had received their degrees from universities in the USA, France, Switzerland, Germany and Belgium and came from various countries. While this was a great asset to the department, they re-

turned to a university system that offered them little incentive for research and teaching. The lack of resources further aggravated the situation and negatively impacted their careers which seemed to stagnate once they became lecturers.

As a result of the university reform of 1993, the number of public universities in Cameroon has increased from one (Federal University of Yaoundé) to eight, with an additional four being created in 2022. As we complete this article (December 2023), there are autonomous anthropology departments in three public universities (University of Yaoundé I, University of Douala, University of Ngaoundéré) as well as three anthropology sub-departments in the universities of Buea, Maroua and Bertoua. The anthropology teaching staff at these six universities comprises 20 professors of magisterial rank, including five full professors and 15 associate professors. While a good number obtained their PhDs abroad (France, Belgium, Netherlands, Great Britain), several were trained at the Department of Anthropology of the University of Yaoundé I, which renders this Department a pillar in the training of anthropologists in Cameroon. By 2022, the following specialisations were represented at the level of associate and full professors in the anthropology departments in the different universities (descending in order of frequency): cultural anthropology, medical anthropology, development anthropology, social anthropology, food anthropology, and religious anthropology (see Appendix).

Moreover, the anthropology department in Yaoundé has also been instrumental in supporting anthropology departments in other universities. Indeed, to make up for the lack of teachers in the newly created universities, anthropology lecturers from Yaoundé are constantly invited to participate in inter-university mobility and to lecture and serve as jury members for master's and PhD examinations (Ekambi and Saïbou 1993).

Inter-university cooperation, also between universities in Cameroon and other parts of the world, is very intense. For example, the Anthropology Department of the University of Yaoundé I entertains several collaborations with universities in France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands and Switzerland. While some are formalised by framework cooperation agreements and aimed at capacity building on the level of staff and students, others are more informal and rest on the initiative of individual staff members. The following table gives a brief overview of the international collaborations of the Anthropology Department of the University of Yaoundé I over the past twenty years and the staff members who have benefited from these (see table 2). These examples and many others attest to the importance of inter-university cooperation for Cameroonian students and lecturer-researchers.

**International inter-university cooperation: the experience of the anthropology department of the University of Yaoundé I**

Currently, anthropology training curricula in Cameroonian universities emphasise applied issues. Beyond theoretical training, practical training aims to provide professional skills that transform students into cultural brokers for development and consultants for organisations seeking their expertise. The training is tailored to the requirements of the end-users: government, national and international organisations. Applied areas include medical and health issues, development issues, systems analysis, urban development, local development and environmental issues.

Experience has shown that international organisations and NGOs are calling upon more and more anthropologists to help bring about meaningful change in rural communities. The Cameroonian government, intergovernmental agencies and international NGOs, such as the German Agency for International Collaboration (GIZ), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV), the French Association of Volunteers for Progress (AFVP), CARE International, as well as several UN agencies (e.g. UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, WFP, WHO) and many other international organisations, have called on anthropologists. These development partners have often offered anthropologists better working conditions and more appropriate remuneration than the academic environment in Cameroon.

*Table 2: International inter-university cooperations at the University of Yaoundé*

Partner Institutions	Projects	Partners/Spin-offs
Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (USA)	Funding of the annual conferences of the Pan African Anthropological Association (PAA)	Creation of networks: NAWA (Network of African Women Anthropologists) NASA (Network of African Students Anthropologists)
Leiden University (The Netherlands)	Funding of doctoral studies	PhD studies of five former students of University of Yaoundé I

Partner Institutions	Projects	Partners/Spin-offs
University of Zurich (Switzerland)	Funding of doctoral studies	Partner: Prof. Tobias Haller PhD studies of one former student of University of Yaoundé I
	Funding of research and teaching collaboration	Partner: Dr. Michaela Pelican Collaborative research and teaching programme benefiting MA students of the Department of Anthropology, University of Yaoundé I One PhD thesis
University of Frankfurt (Germany)	Funding of three PhD theses	Partner: Dr. Ute Röschenhalter Two PhD theses
University of Cologne (Germany)	MoU between the University of Yaoundé I and the University of Cologne Funding of research and teaching collaboration	Partner: Prof. Dr. Michaela Pelican Capacity building of lecturers: Training programme in grant writing. Collaborative research and teaching programme involving six students from the Universities of Yaoundé I, Dschang, Bamenda and six from the University of Cologne <sup>1</sup>
Musée de l'Homme (France)	Student supervision	One PhD thesis defended in the framework of formal cooperation between the UYI and the Museum of Man
University of Kyoto (Japan)	MoU between University of Yaoundé I and Kyoto University	Partners: Prof. Otha (KU) Prof. Misa Hirano-Nomoto (KU) Prof. Maurice Aurélien Sosso (UYI)
Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (Japan)	MoU and Agreement of cooperation and exchange between University of Yaoundé I and TUFS	Partners: Prof. Kayako Hayashi (TUFS) Prof. Takanori Oishi (TUFS) Prof. Maurice Aurélien Sosso (UYI)

1     See Pelican and Ngeh in this volume.

## Which way to go?

The future of anthropology in the coming decades will depend on how the discipline addresses the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One of these significant challenges is to meet the needs and demands of a rapidly changing world. The rehabilitation of the discipline's image is well on the way to full recovery. Still, the integration of anthropological knowledge into the development process of African nations must become a permanent feature. The 1990s opened a window of opportunity and only quality research and training will keep that window open. If action research is of paramount importance to policy makers, the work of applied anthropologists must feed into the teaching programmes within the academy.

If the teaching of anthropology in Cameroonian universities is experiencing a significant increase in the number of students, this is mainly due to the vision that anthropology as an applied discipline can offer jobs in the private and public sectors that seek to address developmental issues. To do this, curricula must address theoretical, conceptual and practical needs relevant to employability.

Indeed, anthropology can only gain respectability among the social sciences if its performance as an applied discipline meets the standards. Such an achievement will depend on the commitment to solid training in theory and practice. Anthropology's survival will also depend on its ability to both strengthen and transcend the micro-analytical approach and reach a more interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary understanding. The more students are trained in comparative, multidisciplinary methodology, the better equipped they will be to work with others whose knowledge and understanding of anthropological ideas is limited or biased. Anthropologists must learn to work in multidisciplinary teams because the development problems of today and tomorrow are no longer the concern of a single discipline. Only by opening up to inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration can anthropology assert itself as a strategic discipline in the development equation.

## Conclusion

The experience of teaching and practising anthropology at the University of Yaoundé I has served as a model for the newly founded Cameroonian universities. Thanks to cross-disciplinary teaching, many students enrolled in other

fields of study are interested in anthropology. The training of this new generation of students will undoubtedly help develop a new advocacy and marketing of anthropology beyond its disciplinary confines. As our students enter certain professions, such as the military, the police, and private entrepreneurship, one can hope this will create a niche for the discipline in the future.

The employment of our students by non-governmental organisations to carry out various tasks opens another window of opportunity for the discipline. As NGOs are increasingly involved in grassroots development activities, they will continuously need anthropological knowledge. If training is tailored to the practical needs of development organisations, the academy will strengthen its role and place in the development equation. It has been said that the lost decades of African development are due to the neglect of the micro-analytical approach, and it is hoped that anthropology will provide the necessary knowledge to make a difference.

In the age of globalisation, Africa faces the dilemma of confronting cultural invasion and the revival of African cultural values. Many nation-states will ultimately face the difficulties of straddling African and foreign cultures, borrowing what is essential and retaining what is beneficial. Africa's renaissance will depend on its ability to confront invasive cultures whose technological advantage will undermine African values and norms. If African nations are to preserve cultural values and norms now and in the future, they must invest in strengthening and employing anthropology students. The recent reforms in Cameroon that have enabled anthropology to become a discipline in its own right are commendable.

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Decrees

Decree No. 82/83 of 19/2/82 fixing the roles of the organisation, the functioning and the management of the company, and the control of the students' associations in the faculty of the Grandes Ecoles.

Decree No. 93/027 of January 1993 creating new state universities in the Republic of Cameroon

Appendix

*Anthropologists of magisterial rank in Cameroonian universities between 1993 and 2023*

N°	Names	Institutional Affiliation	Specialisations
Rank of Full Professor			
1	Nkwi Paul Nchoji	University of Yaoundé I	Medical anthropology Cultural anthropology
2	Mbonji Edjenguèlè	University of Yaoundé I	Cultural anthropology Development anthropology
3	Socpa Antoine	University of Yaoundé I	Medical anthropology Social anthropology
4	Mebenga Tamba Luc	University of Yaoundé I	Cultural anthropology
5	Kum Awah Paschal	University of Yaoundé I	Medical anthropology
Rank of Associate Professor			
6	Njikam Margaret S.	University of Douala	Medical anthropology
7	Ngima Mawoung G.	University of Yaoundé I	Food anthropology
8	Essi Marie José M.	University of Yaoundé I	Medical anthropology
9	Ndjio Basile	University of Douala	Cultural anthropology



N°	Names	Institutional Affiliation	Specialisations
10	Moussima Nganjo	University of Ngaoundéré	Anthropology of art
11	Akoko Robert MBE	University of Bamenda	Anthropology of religion
12	Edongo Ntede P. F	University of Bertoua	Cultural anthropology
13	Ndzana Bertrand	University of Ngaoundéré	Development anthropology
14	Deli Tize Teri	University of Yaoundé I	Development anthropology
15	Afu Isaiah Kunock	University of Yaoundé I	Development anthropology
16	Ismaela Datidjo	University of Dschang	Cultural anthropology
17	Otye Elom Ulrich	University of Ebolowa	Cultural anthropology
18	Wogaing Jeannette	University of Douala	Social anthropology
19	Abouna Paul	University of Yaoundé I	Cultural anthropology
20	Ngo Liken Julienne	Ecole des Sciences et de la Santé (ESS – UCAC)	Medical anthropology

