



Spring 2005

## Safe Harbor

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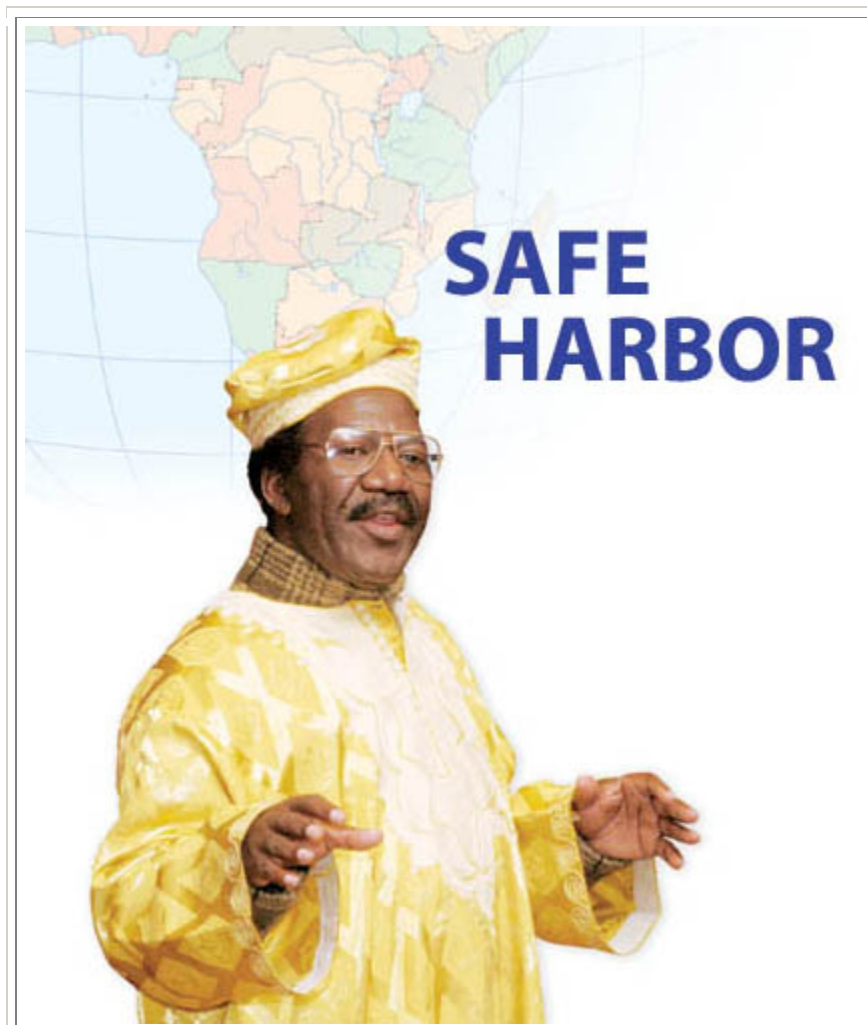
### **Recommended Citation**

Steele Brokaw '71, Nancy (2005) "Safe Harbor," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, 2002-2017: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol14/iss1/2>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [iwumag@iwu.edu](mailto:iwumag@iwu.edu).

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Persecuted in Cameroon for speaking his mind, E. Tatah Mentan finds refuge as IWU's first "Scholar at Risk." (Photo by Marc Featherly)

**By Nancy Steele Brokaw '71**

Outside, an Arctic blast has sent the temperature plummeting to zero but inside a classroom in Shaw Hall on this January day the air is warm and the ideas are hot. Emmanuel Tatah Mentan is listing three major components of President Bush's national security strategy on the board.

Mentan turns to the class. "Who can tell me the dangers inherent in this policy?" he asks. As his students respond, he flashes an engaging grin and provides nods and words of encouragement. Sparking a free flow of open-minded dialogue about government policy is an obvious priority for Mentan in his classroom. He remembers inspiring those same kinds of debates as a teacher in his native Cameroon. The difference is that, there, it nearly cost him his life.

Mentan's yearlong visit to campus as a visiting professor of political science was made possible through Illinois Wesleyan's participation in the international Scholars at Risk (SAR) program. SAR is a global network of more than 80 universities and colleges that arranges short-term academic positions for scholars of any discipline and from any country who suffer violence or other threats because of their work, prominence, or exercise of basic rights.

Mentan, who holds a Ph.D. in political science and has 20 years of teaching experience, is the first scholar

hosted by IWU since it joined the SAR network in 2000. He describes his stay here with words like “stimulating,” “quiet,” and “comfortable,” though when he talks of his former life in Cameroon, the pain and anger he feels at being forced to leave his homeland are palpable, as is his longing to return there one day.

A nation of 16 million located in sub-Saharan Western Africa, Cameroon was invaded and occupied by France and Britain after World War I. It became independent in 1960. Since that time there have been sporadic movements toward democratic reform, but “political power remains firmly in the hands of an ethnic oligarchy,” according to the CIA’s World Factbook. Its national anthem declares that Cameroon is a “land of promise.” Mentan agrees that Cameroon is, indeed, full of promise — both in terms of abundant natural resources (oil, cocoa, tea, timber, and coffee) and in its people’s potential. But, he says, it is a land lacking in promise for anyone with an open, inquisitive mind.

In the village where he was raised, Mentan grew up with exactly such a mind. Born in 1948, he spent his boyhood “running football” (playing soccer) and studying law and politics. After completing the equivalent of U.S. high school, Mentan passed an elite exam that enabled him to attend the university in Yaounde, Cameroon’s capital. His interest in political science continued, though his specific areas of study were journalism and mass communication.

“Cameroonian journalists are also political scientists,” Mentan explains. “But after graduation, the expectation is for one to become a state functionary. To emerge with dissenting ideas is seen as ingratitude.”



Mentan and education professor Irv Epstein (left) conduct a scholarly exchange in the lounge of the Center for Liberal Arts. Epstein is a member of the Scholars at Risk national advisory committee. (Photo by Mark Romine)

After working for awhile as a news reporter in Yaounde, his habit of asking hard questions quickly landed him in trouble. The government snatched him from his job and sent him to a radio station in a remote northern region where there was no one with whom he could discuss his ideas. In fact, many of his colleagues “were spies from the government,” he says. “They (the government) thought I would cool off my boiling ideas about freedom of the press.”

Mentan says, “It’s hard to understand in the U.S., but in Cameroon, we have an intellectual hemorrhage. It comes from the instruments of government control. Some of us are trained, we come back and then are sent off to where we are useless, even to ourselves.” But Mentan was not content to stay useless. Without getting the required government approval, he broke a sensational story about a border dispute between Cameroon and its southern neighbor, Gabon. “It exploded and was picked up across the nation,” he recalls. “That virtually cost me my life.” After being tipped off that

he was about to be arrested, Mentan fled across the border to Nigeria with only his books and clothes.

Enrolling at the University of Nigeria, Mentan earned both a master’s and doctoral degree in political science. With the appointment of a new president in 1982, Mentan and other exiles were welcomed back to Cameroon as a conciliatory move by the new president. But despite promises of new freedom, he returned to find the government was still keeping a close eye on him. After a frustrating year in which he was basically allowed to do nothing, Mentan was permitted to take a job teaching journalism at the University of Yaounde. There he met a student, Charity, who became his wife and the couple settled into what appeared to be a normal life, starting a family that has grown to include five daughters.

Mentan wasn’t fooled, however. “I felt the government all around me,” he says. With a family now to worry about, Mentan decided to apply for an exit visa to return to Nigeria but was turned down. Despite his fears, he

continued to encourage his students to pursue both sides of a story, not just the government's. Both his academic training and his convictions wouldn't allow him to do otherwise, he explains.

Mentan also continued to chart dangerous waters in his scholarly research. Twice, he had work stolen. One manuscript, nearly completed, examined assassination as a tool of political control. "A student must have made it known what I was writing on," he says. "My office was searched and the manuscript was stolen in the middle of the night." Written in longhand, there were no backup copies. He still mourns its loss.

On May 6, 1990, Mentan did a radio interview in which he demanded, he says, "That for the here and now, the people express their views." For this, he was arrested, interrogated, and "tormented" by government officials. "You have to sign a document in order to be released (from jail)," he says. "If you do not sign it, they will just take a gun and shoot you." He knew fellow academics who had met exactly that fate. Mentan signed the paper without bothering to read it.

For eight years, Mentan continued to teach at the University of Yaounde, with one eye always over his shoulder. Then, in 1998, he contributed a chapter in a U.S. publication in which he described Cameroon as a "flawed democracy" and he found himself back in the government's crosshair. Adding to the danger, Mentan was also conducting research at the time "on the torture of people who don't espouse the (Cameroonian) president's point of view."

In the fall of 2000, the two eldest of the Mentans' five daughters left to join Charity, who was working towards a master's degree in public affairs as a Hubert H. Humphrey fellow at the University of Minnesota. The Mentans were sensing that the danger in Cameroon was growing greater and sending the older daughters to join their mother provided assurance, as Mentan puts it, "that our family would not become extinct." Although Mentan and the couple's three younger daughters desperately wanted to join them, they had been denied visas and remained behind in Yaounde.



The police attempted to frame Mentan on a weapons charge by giving his children a tear-gas canister. Fortunately, the children knew to discard it, and when authorities raided Mentan's home they found nothing. But he realized that a line had been crossed. He had been fearful before, but realizing that now his children were in danger as well made him "tremble."

Despite the failure of their gas-canister ruse, police soon came for him, anyway, escorting Mentan from the university to jail, where he was brutally tortured. "The things they did there, I do not like to talk about," he says. When pressed, he will point out scars on his legs from being beaten by an iron bar and tells of blisters on the soles of his feet so painful they made him cry.

Mentan was released in the middle of the night. Returning home, he knew that he had to get himself and his daughters out of Cameroon as soon as possible. In January 2001, U.S. Embassy officials granted him asylum. Although forced to leave his daughters behind in the care of their grandmother, Mentan hoped that his absence would assure their safety until arrangements could be made for them to join the rest of the family in America.

That reunion finally occurred, nearly two years later, in Minnesota. Mentan remembers how his family embraced and wept with the realization that their separation was finally over. The feeling of relief, he says, was coupled with a profound gratitude that their faith in God had helped carry them through the ordeal.

Since then, two more years have passed and — after teaching stints at the University of Minnesota and the

University of Missouri, St. Louis — Mentan is delighted to find himself at Illinois Wesleyan. Upon first arriving here last fall, he says he wondered if he was dreaming.

“Here were disciplined students, reading under trees, staying in the library until 1 a.m.,” he says. “The students were energetic, attentive, and most of all, eager to learn, wanting to learn.” He discovered the same energy among the faculty. “I attended lectures of my colleagues,” Mentan says. “I was excited by their devotion to task.”

Irv Epstein — professor of Educational Studies and a member of the Scholars at Risk national advisory committee — believes that Mentan’s presence on the campus has more than validated IWU’s involvement in the program. “Tatah is having a big impact on Illinois Wesleyan’s campus in terms of making more visible our understanding of African studies and human rights generally. He’s not simply a wonderful role model for students and colleagues but also a prescient observer and scholar. His academic insights are very valuable.”

Among those insights, Mentan offers an assessment of IWU’s style of shared governance. “It’s not someone ‘up there’ who is handing down orders,” he says. “Instead, when there’s a problem, it’s approached in a clinical, shared way. The camaraderie among the faculty — this is something I enjoy very much.”



Mentan chats with students in The Ames Library. Mentan compares the atmosphere of IWU’s campus to a village in his homeland. “We Africans, we like this family feeling,” he says. (Photo by Mark Romine)

So at home is Mentan at Illinois Wesleyan that he often finds himself walking back to campus in the evenings from his nearby apartment (“I am a foot runner — no car”). “I love to read,” he says, admitting he often stays in The Ames Library with the students until 1 a.m. “I may doze off,” he says, “but then I wake up on the comfortable couch and read some more.” In general, the feeling of comfort he’s experienced at IWU makes him feel as much a part of a family as a university.

“I like it here,” Mentan concludes simply. “It’s quiet like a village. We Africans, we like this family feeling.”

Still, he misses his own family, and travels to St. Paul to visit them whenever he can. He keeps especially close track of his daughters’ numerous activities and achievements. The children, now ages 10 to 18, “are so Americanized already,” he observes. “They are more American-African than African-American.” His two oldest will be starting college in the fall, probably at the

University of Minnesota. He confesses, “I don’t feel easy, seeing them go off.”

This semester, Mentan is teaching a class on “Human Security and Global Governance” and a seminar on “Peace and Conflict Areas.” He has done some traveling and speaking with other SAR participants and has become a passionate advocate of the program and its worth, not just for him and other “scholars at risk,” but to everyone associated with higher education. “Academia is like a human being,” he says. “If a finger is hurt, the danger of infection is a threat to the whole body.”

That theme is echoed in his new book, *Dilemmas of Weak States: Africa and Transnational Terrorism in the 21st Century*, printed this winter by Ashgate Publishing in London. Among other things, this book argues that Africa is in danger of becoming a weak link in the global war against terrorism. As Mentan puts it, “Africa is both agent and victim of transnational terrorism.”

In many African nations, the same factors exist that led to the rise of international terrorism in the Middle East

and Central Asia, says Mentan, who urges U.S. policy-makers to do more to assist economic stability and the spread of democracy in the region. In a recent interview published in the SAR newsletter, Mentan said, “The process of democratization in Africa has degenerated. ... Inept, corrupt, and repressive rulers are reinforcing their grip on state power. There are very slim chances of democratic forces ever coming to power except by violent means. And, we know that those who foreclose peaceful change always make violent change inevitable.”

Although he is currently applying for university positions in the U.S., Mentan says his immediate plans are still uncertain. When the time is right, though, he believes he will go back to the faraway place that was once his home. “My daughters,” he says, “if I pull them back (to Africa), their minds will be here.” He will wait until they “achieve a certain level” of maturity before focusing on his intention to return to Cameroon.

“The evil system (there) must change,” he says, “and it must be fought from the inside.”

Mentan, once the young man with boiling ideas and high ideals, refuses to cool down or yield to apathy. He will not turn his back on his homeland, despite the problems, despite the dangers. His struggle is an old one — the journey toward freedom.

“For me,” Mentan says, “if there are no obstacles, life loses its meaning as a struggle to overcome the odds. However, with God and very concerned people on my side, I shall always smash the obstacles.”