

FROM ARMS TO SCRIPTURES: MAPPING THE AFRICANS SHIFTING LOYALTIES TO THE PASSIONS OF THE GREAT WAR 1914-1921: THE CASE OF THE CAMEROON GRASSFIELD SOLDIERS

Gam Confidence Chia (PhD)

Senior Lecturer/Researcher, Department of History, Diplomacy and International Relations,
The University of Maroua

ABSTRACT: *The comportment and passions of Africans in Wars that were fought to settle mostly European interest brought about conflicting, contradicting but very interesting scenes in the Human interface. One of such moves was the switch of Camps and positions of loyalties to diametrically different ones. A typical example where such dramatic switches of modes and camps of belonging can be represented is the comportment of the German soldiers in Cameroon especially those from the Bamenda Grassfields during and after the First World War. Their comportment in all its form represents veritable trajectory of shifting loyalties which were hall marks in the general context of continuity in change . When the First World War began in the Balkan peninsular, Britain and France surprisingly transformed Cameroon like many parts of Africa into important battle grounds and this caused the German military contingent along those of its peers in Africa to develop a crucial need for soldiers and military personnel of all sorts. This was aggravated by the fact that, the Poliziestruppe and the Schutztruppe all German military and para military organization formed in 1891 and 95 respectively were not very versed with the African terrain. The need for an urgent solution to this urgent problem urged the German authorities to turn to the natives to negotiate possibilities of mass recruitment. In Cameroon they quickly turned to the Grassfield politics which had been identified as a sure source of men with exceptional bravery and resilience. From the start the Germans had the fortune of conscripting hundreds of men into their military service from these areas who served and interfered in different capacities during the war. As frontline soldiers, carriers, leads or cooks, these Grassfields these conscripts were essentially people of the arms. Following the defeat of the Germans and its allies, many of these people were rounded up as war captives and ferried to Spanish Guinea (Fernando-Po) where they embraced Christianity with the Holy Scriptures (Bible) being its organic text. From 1916 or earlier, till 1921, these men became soaked in Christianity and were yearning for opportunities to make others know about the working of their new found faith. Additionally, they espoused to a new way of life which virtually challenged everything connected to the established customs and traditions in their traditional fiefs or oligarchies. In our case, the movement from Arms to scriptures was done in Fernando-Po but their dreamt opportunities presented themselves when they were returned to the Grassfields in 1921. From this time hence, these returning soldiers, took upon themselves the duties not only to preach aboo Christianity but also to challenge the traditional tenets that dictated the tone of traditional governance then. This is the main thrust of this paper. It tries to fine evidences from primary and secondary sources and complements them with oral accounts to show not only how these men switched modes and functions from arms to scriptures but also how their return strove and succeeded to inscribe a new way of life in Africa with emphasis on the Cameroon Grassfield societies. It argues emphatically that; these men either in their military uniforms or in the scriptural garments, truly represents elements of divorce in continuity. By abandoning their bayonets, these men tactfully divorced from their early mission of being soldiers. By getting soaked in Christianity, they espoused a new philosophy and world view and by challenging the traditional status quo when they were*

sent back home, they ensured continuity on what the Germans and other colonial powers had begun.

KEYWORDS: Grassfields, German soldiers, Christianity, Divorce, Continuity, Loyalties

INTRODUCTION

The German presence in Cameroon was short going by the history of other colonial powers elsewhere but enormous in the way it influenced or shaped political economic and socio-cultural developments thereafter. By any reckoning the German thirty years presence (1884-1916) negotiated a shift in both loyalties and responsibilities for a broad spectrum of classes of people and opinions all of them intricately connected to the concept of change in continuity. Like it was the case in other German colonies elsewhere the German colonial mission was ruptured by the First World War and this left the varying classes of people that were depended on them and those who had been yearning and praying for their departure in a sort of trance. How this situation of trance was sufficiently handled but pale attention has been accorded to the classic switch of modes, responsibilities, conduct and loyalties of the German soldiers that survived the War. If this is true for all of Cameroon, the case is graphic and truly representative for the German soldiers of the Grassfields origins who shared unique but very interesting traits in their growth, conduct and expectations following the German departure. Though these soldiers were recruited at different times from different Fondoms through different methods, the fact that all of them had a worldview that was everything else but Christianity provides a unifying of description of these recruits as animists or religious people.

Though these recruits served in different capacities than frontline soldiers during the War, the fact that they were essentially involved with the issues of War makes it fitting for all of them to be called soldiers or simply people of the Arms. Interestingly, these people of the Arms served the Germans and the War faithfully but the fortunes of War were not favourable for the Germans and this eventually led to their defeat following the fall of Mora on February 16th 1916. Upon this defeat and for some time earlier, most of these recruits were captured and taken to Spanish Guinea precisely to Fernan-Dopo the place reserved by allies powers for War captives. Incidentally, during their sojourn here they freely intermingled with whites of multi-nationalities who treated them with care and passion. Apart from this humane treatment which gave them a veritable sense of worth and revived spirits is to be highlighted the fact that, these men were almost all converted to Christianity. Following the end of the First World War in 1918, arrangements were made for the return of these people to their places of origins. By 1921, a significant number of people all of them either devout Christians or Christian-like in mentality, comportment and outfit returned to the grassfields. In these new outfits and mind-sets, they made enormous usage of the Holy Scriptures both to win souls and to challenge the traditional tenets along with the administration that reigned at that time. This is the main thrust of this paper. It tries to find evidences from primary and secondary sources and complements them with oral accounts to show how these men switched modes and functions from arms to scriptures as well as how their return strove and succeeded to inscribe a new way of life in the Bamenda Grassfields.

The Socio-Historical Environment of the Arms Concept

The arms concept used by this paper does not limit itself only to issues and people that were directly connected to open field combat in any phase of the war rather, it encompasses

everything that was connected to warfare paying particular attention to the people who served as soldiers, leads, cooks, carriers and spies for the German military onslaught. In context, the historical environment that the negotiated and consequently shaped the people into vessels and catalysts of War was coloured by a thick undergrowth of some local and dispensational realities as well as, a German policy which was determined regardless of the changing odds to match the pattern of their prestige.¹ As for local dispensational reality, the Grassfields region where the soldiers in view were recruited had earlier been identified as a reservoir of men with exceptional resilience, bravado and self-abnegation and in that humour, they were essentially and almost entirely held to abundantly free from the spirit of complain and pretence that was overwhelmingly alive among the coastal natives.² To this should be buttressed the fact that; unlike elsewhere except for the Grand northern sector of Cameroon where kingship ascendancy yielded almost automatic loyalties, the grassfield region was replete with a legion of centralized administrations wherein, the fons had extensive powers and rights over the people living within the confines of their traditional fiefdoms. With such powers which were lavishly reinforced by the German system of administration erected by the Germans, it was easy to tap people of substance and trust in times of any accruing emergencies.

Despite the attempts made by the Germans to adulterate local traditions they barely succeeded to scratch the surface. African traditional practices of a veritable genre whose sanctity were/could be justified under the bosom of African traditional religion whose moral stake was boldness of imagination and the veneration of ancestral worship till actively remained alive within the grassfields polities. After the subjugation of the tribal units, during the war of resistances the German administrative system was at least ready to keep alive some aspects of chieftaincy that were in their judgement, useful for the colonial scheme. Unlike the British or the French where the activities of the officials could be confused with that of the missionaries, the Germans though favourable of the activities of the Basel mission, kept a good distance from issues that were involved in converting the natives from their religious tenets to Christianity. What mattered in the German administration was not ones religious inclination but his ability to do the right thing.³ With this the issues of Christianity were not really taken seriously by the natives though some non-negligible efforts were already deployed by the Catholics and the Basel missions to implant Christianity in the grass field. Candidly by August 1914 when the First World War began the record of Christian churches in Cameroon was very scant. Christianity in Cameroon during the days of the Germans suffered not only from the inaccessibility of the interior on account of poor road and communication network but also from the fact that the German administration took turns to ensure that the righteousness of their system of administration and rule was to be made part and parcel of the Christian doctrine. With this they refused the French Holy fathers from carrying out evangelisation in Cameroon and made the German language the standard and only acceptable language of preaching in the Churches. Though this somehow impeded the growth of Christianity in Cameroon the arrival

¹The problem of German pattern of prestige is an issue than ran through the whole life wire of Germanhome and foreign colonial lexicon. From the day of German Unification of 1870-71, there Germans grew to conduct themselves as people of a distinct class that were blessed by creation with the art of leadership and master ship. See Hoyt, Edwin P.(1981) *Guerilla. Colonel von Lettow-Vorbeck and Germany's East African , Empire*. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc.; and London: Collier MacMillan Publishers. With regards to the arm situation in Cameroon the Germans found it sufficiently absurd to train the natives on the art of war.

² The fact that the coastal natives and other people of the south and central Cameroon were often complaining should not be nuanced here. These areas were endowed by nature not only with abundant parcels of virgin and fertile land but equally with an exposure both to the sea and the resources therein. All of this combined made them pointedly self -assertive and vocal towards aliens especially the European with whom they freely mingled. This was a different case in the Grassfields that had luxuriant pastures but such possibilities of extensive land ownership and rights were visibly absent.

³ Right things virtually and literary implied full scale respect or veneration of everything German.

society of the sacred Heart of Jesus missionaries on November 28 1912 negotiated a good bend for the spread of Christianity to the grasslanders but this as pointed out by Jacqueline DeVries barely scratched the surface.⁴ Prior to their arrival a few grasslanders who had migrated for plantation labour like Peter Wame and his wife Yadih Elizabeth had been converted to Christianity and they got baptized.⁵ The of the Sacred Heart of Jesus missionaries to spread the the gospel into the interior coincided and was fertilized by the earlier nursed ambition of these converts who had been yearning to return to their grassfield fiefs with the gospel of Christ. This happy coincidence extended the Catholic brand of Christianity to Nso in 1912 and extended it to Kom in 1912.⁶ On the side-line the Basel mission through the committed work of the Basel Mission that enjoyed extensive administrative support, churches were opened in the grassfields in bali in 1903, in Bafut and Metta country in 1904.

It should be emphasized however that Christianity and the usefulness of scriptures to natives had no great impact viewing its scant representation compared to the grassfields population at the time. To some great extent some traditions had been adulterated but much of what formed the character and moral values of the people especially those who were to be sent to the War front remained essentially intact. This was the case with most of Africa except in places like Spanish Guinea(Fernando-Po) whose world view ran in consonance to the tenets of Christianity and its acolytes. To every great extent most of those who were recruited to the German force from the grassfields were religiously rooted in the African traditional religion which attached a venerated premium in the infallibility of the ancestors. Before engaging in the business of Warfare or arms the grassfields breed of soldiers had a thinking and worldview which was far distant from Christianity and this influenced their multiple nomenclatures and performance in the battle fields.

Changing Nomenclatures and Comportment of the Soldiers

Soldiers of African origins who participated in the First World War on the side of the Germans have been given multi-coloured nomenclature⁷ but the premise under and through which they were mounted and made concrete remains essentially the same. In whole or in part, they were people of a breed apart. This stems from the fact that most if not all were people who were either forcibly recruited or circumstantially wooed to join the German military contingent and in this context, their commitment in any assignment during the war fluctuated with the changing tides and stakes.⁸ The comportment of the Cameroon breed of soldiers in the War campaign had intricate connections to the historical environment (premise) and the grasp of the changing circumstances.

In the realm of this local dispensational realities too is to be rendered **bold** the fact that, in the course of making sense out of the Hinterland theory buttressed by the Berlin West African Conference of 1884-85, the Germans forcibly penetrated the grassfields of Cameroon. Beneath

⁴ De Vries Jacqueline(1998) De Vries, Jacqueline. *Catholic Mission Colonial Government and Indigenous Response in Kom(Cameroon)* Laiden: African Studies Centre

⁵ Ngho V.J.(1996) *History of Cameroon since 1800*, Limbe: Pressbook, p.93.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Confidence Chia Ngam calls those who came from the entire Bamenda grassfields as Homemade Soldiers and argues forcefully that these soldiers were made with home techniques because of urgent realities and not because of any genuine desire on the part of the Germans to train the African in the sophisticated art of Warfare which in their thinking was an issue exclusively kept within the mental grasp of the Whitemen. See this detailed development in "Travails of the Homemade Soldiers from the Bamenda Grassfields. Nexusing Passions of Fulfilment versus Passions of disappointments" papered and presented on the first ever Military colloquium organized by the ministry of Defence in collaboration with the Cameroon History Society in Akwa palace hotel June 2014.

⁸ Ruddins H.(1938) *Germans in the Cameroons: A Study in Modern Imperialism* p. 194-5.

the desire to respect the resolve of the conference laid alive the fact that; the traders were prepared as much as possible to usurp the middle man monopoly without a corresponding desire to pay off the natives for such a damage let alone sub vent the cost of colonial assignment all through the German period in Cameroon. In any case ,this forceful penetration was crucial to the arms concept in a three pronged dimension. Firstly, it encumbered them (Germans) with a multitude of resistances all of them culminating into open conflagration and lasting far longer than imagined. A non-exhaustive list of the resistances against the Germans were the ; Duala war of 1884,Bangwa,Bakweri of 1891-1894,resistance of 1899-1903,Ewondo resistance of 1895-1896,the Kom-German war of 1904-5, Mamfe Resistance(Mpawmanku Wars)of 1904-8, and the Nso resistance of 1906.

In the course of trying to ward off the Germans, the traditional chiefdoms that were only versed with intertribal wars, had to rework their War skills though most of the tactics they used almost throughout their wars with Germany on Cameroon soils were mostly traditional or home grown.⁹Traditional strategies of War were used quite alright but it suffice to mention here that the bow and Arrow fighting methods that was probably borrowed from the chamber groups like the Balis along with extensive usage of Dane arms that were made from the Ndop smiting traditional industries diminished in status. There was therefore a shift in the knowledge of the arms and the ways there were used in any war to a completely new direction. The crucial thing in this development was not the shift in weaponry but rather the identification of warriors and a war-like spirit among able men among the natives. These were some of the men the German sought for since the position of the enemy had technically shifted from the Germans as enemy to the allied forces.

Still closely tied to the idea of the forceful penetration was the fact that; the Germans succeeded in the main to subdue all the groups that tried to resist them notwithstanding the duration this encounter lasted along with the early success registered. This defeat directly implied the inauguration of a new order through and within which the potency of traditional sovereignty became largely encompassed by paradigmatic shifts. In this humour; fissures indicating the fact that the broad spectrum of traditional leadership and all its accessories had been technical pushed by this new system to play the role of a second Fidel with regards to authority or power tenure.

In this new paradigm, Fons, chiefs and some notables patently surrendered their functions to the Germans and were for the most parts ready to perform the role of surrogates. Some of the Chiefs or Fons through defeat like the case of the Fons of Kom,Nso Bafut, Mankon or through treaties of friendship that were for the most part favourable to the Germans like the case of the Fon of Bali, were in whole and in part semblances of real and fictive collaboration. The Bali German pact or the Zintgraff- Galega 1891 treaty negotiated new horizons of loyalties to the grassfields people and created a vital zone of interest in the direction of mutual power contest if the dynamics of power functionality was to be employed and exercised in earnest. Whatever the case, the fact that not only fon Galega of Bali but also a handful of fons who had bowed to the whims and caprices of the Germans prior to August 1914 when the war began was a shift not to be glossed over carelessly. This in whole forms the second dimension of the impact of the above named resistances put up by the natives against the Germans.

⁹ Paul Tuh Kiawi in (2002) “ The Kom German War 1904-5,The War Tactics” M A Dissertation in History, University of Buea. Though he was very particular about the Kom situation, this case analyses and the generalities employed in detailing the War strategies speaks volumes in the direction of the strategies employed.

Going by any logic, it was increasingly becoming clear that dispensational realities were working in favour of an eminent order which ultimately pampered the Germans thereby, making the Grassfields pristine oligarchies vulnerable and poised to provide men as warriors or servants whenever this was to become an urgent possibility. This explains in volumes why the Germans never wasted time in turning to the grassfields when the War began in August 1914. The readiness of the fons not only to provide people to perform unknown services to the Germans either on individual or collective count formed the basis for the recruitment palava.

With regards to foreign borne expectations or pattern of prestige indicated above, the suitability of not only the grassfields but the entire Cameroon to provide people who could be hastily train to play key roles in the War fitted squarely.¹⁰ Working in the context of German world view and philosophy which pointedly kept them within the rich of extraordinary humans requiring no serious help from the down trodden like the African natives, the German woefully failed to train the natives with advanced skills of War. According to this somewhat grotesque and ambiguous policy that was vehemently sustained by the Concept of the Ayang Race, the usage of advanced War weaponry and the complicated matters of War were issues too complicated or barely cosmetic to be mastered by ordinary natives who were already over laden with striking problems of backwardness, hunger and disease. Enveloped in this reasoning constituency the whole episode of the German war with the allies in Cameroon and other parts of Africa became veritable paragon of surprise, contemplation and confusion to the Germans at any point in time. The decision to recruit natives to help them in an assignment earlier considered too advanced for them can be seen in strategic studies as a surprise volt-face but it was an affair borne out of grave necessity than of genuine love for the natives.

In any case, this can be understood from a grasp of the theory of interest in international relations or politics which posits among other things that, mutual relations are not always built on permanent friendship but more on permanent interest. The urgent need for an African genre of soldiers to fight for/with the Germans against the allies in Cameroon was an issue of shifting interest that reflected this game. Nevertheless this volt-face diluted the so called pattern of prestige and elegance which they (Germans) had been struggling to keep alive prior to the outbreak of the war but provided them with the genre of people desperately needed to sustain the war efforts. It was this environment that gave room for traditional men to recruited, trained and rendered solid in the issues of Warfare and arms.

The Germans were pointedly not driven thus far into this blindness of keeping the natives away from the gun as far as possible by just a desire of self-confidence. There were other contributing reasons in the background. One of this was the fact that the international climate and deals stroke earlier were favourable to this position. A case in point is the fact that during the Berlin Conference of 1884, the great powers accepted to do all for the sake of peace to keep war or any European squabbles within the confines of Europe. True enough the Germans were ready to disrespect every aspect of the Germano-Douala treaty especially the clauses that did not keep them at comfort; highlighted in the chiefs memorandum but they were ready to respect the clause that insisted on the domestication of European problems. Buried within this they did not foresee a situation in the looming days where they could be fighting a great power on Africans

¹⁰ A classic and detailed description of the content and form of the German foreign power dynamics has been brought forward by E.Malcolm Carroll(1938) in *Germany and the Great Powers: A study in public Opinion and Foreign Policy, 1866-1914*, New York, Prentice Hall Inc. See particularly chapter one pp. 1-17 "Titles the Dynamics of German Foreign Policy".

soils not to talk of transporting Cameroon natives across the Atlantic and long distances to assist them in the war fronts in Europe.

In the ensuing process however, there was at least one serious thing which the Germans trusted the grassfields natives for. This was the fact that complacent fons like fon Galega of Bali Nyongha as a glaring example were always ready to help them get the desperately needed labourers for their plantations. This trust was reinforced by the fact that; the men recruited for this purposed proved exceedingly very resilient in their manual assignments. The logical reasoning and connections that the bravado and resilience of men from this area could be technical refocus to warfare responsibilities and functions were among the motivating factors that turned the Germans towards this area. This motivation was further sustained by the fact that, there were a handful of ambidextrous men from this area already serving the Poleizetruppe and the Schutztruppe who could provide the immediate nexus for transforming these new recruits into veritable vessels and vectors of the arms concept en vogue. In buttressing the fitness of these guys not only to issues of war but also for the survival of the German plantations that grew by lips and bunds as the Germans administration moved inland Ndi passionately observes that; the men and women who hailed essentially from the grassfields reigned had gained a place of admiration in the hearts of the traders through their selfless servitude in the plantations.¹¹

It should therefore be stressed here that most of the people who were recruited into the service of the arms or guns from the grassfields on the German camps were products of hard time's choices than of genuine love for war. In any case, much was done or already negotiated for a complete shift away both in authority connections as well as the loyalty of these people from the pristine traditional institutions that were integral part of their character formation prior to their recruitment into the service of warfare. These combined circumstances and environment within and through which natives from the Grassfields were transformed into actors of war shaped their comportment throughout as they were transformed into men in arms.

The men in Warfare

The murder of Arch Duke France Ferdinand with his wife in the Bosnian town of Sarajevo on June 28 1914 presented the much dreamt about occasion for the Triple Entente and Tripple alliances to contest for veritable leadership. If this was an occasion of world War as it came to be; Germany never anticipated that Africa could be a veritable theatre of War.¹² The Allied decision to rapidly export the war fields not only out of the Balkans peninsular but also to the rest of Europe and across the Atlantic to Africa provided a tonnage of confusion to the German military planning. In August when the War also became an African problem, the northern Parts of Cameroon got involved. The closeness of Cameroon to Nigeria and the eagerness of the

¹¹ Anthony Ndi Tabuwe age Ca 74, is an astute Historian of the grassfield who has researched widely on topical issues of Cameroon history. Associate professor of History he has scored outstanding points in tracing the contribution of Christian denominations to character formation and general comportment in what he calls fondly as Southern/west Cameroon. I got this in discussing the context of this recruitment of soldiers to serve the Germans from the Grassfields. Discussion which took the form of an indepth interview held in his house on the 15th of July 2016.

¹² See how this has been developed in great details in J.D Taylor, (1919) "Some Effects of the War on Africa," *The Missionary Review of the World* 42, 439.

See, for example, Brian Digre, (1990) *Imperialism's New Clothes: The Repartition of Africa, 1914-1919* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

¹² See, C. Seymour (1926) (ed.), *The papers of Colonel House* Vol. III (London, p, 240.

Dahomean soldiers¹³ to do war business extended the war to Cameroon and for the time being landed the Allied in trouble. In describing the entire drama of the First World War in Cameroon V.J. Ngoh does not mince words in emphasizing that the early fortunes of the war were by every view an assortment of misfortune (bad luck)¹⁴ for the British and French and the natives who were recruited en masse were responsible of putting the allied forces into this realm. As indicated earlier the negative fortunes of War on the allied side did not last for long as they soon regrouped themselves and adopted a common strategy. This regrouping led to the formation of the West African Expeditionary Force which enjoyed a firm coordination of General Charles Dobell of Britain. The attack of this force in Douala was decisive in that it destroyed their trusted power transmission center, thereby rendering any wish or concrete intention by Germany to recruit soldiers and to bring in additional arms from Germany futile.

The quick and only thing by the remaining German force led by Zimmermann at that material moment was to figure out the possibility of recruiting people on the spot who could be drilled on different battlefield assignments. In fact the recruitment of Cameroonians for urgent various war assignments during the first months of the First World War became so glaring so much that about 15000 men are held to have been hired from their traditional fiefdoms to the different battle fields.¹⁵ She adds that all if not two thirds of these numbers in spite of their enormous strides in keeping the war alive soon found themselves captured and ferried to Fernando-Po where they were interned with other Europeans or German prisoners that could number just about 1000.¹⁶ The fourteen Thousands people were Cameroonians in warfare majoring mainly from the Grassfields and the northern part of Cameroon. Nkwi records that during the recruitment of soldier by Germans for their War enterprise (Warfare), about 500 men of substance were recruited just from Kom alone.¹⁷ Many more came from Nso, Bafut, Mankon and Bali and a lot more were simply picked up from the plantations and recycled for War assignments. This number looks frightful but can by no means be taken as gross exaggeration because the Germans were desperately in need of men for multiple assignments. Men were needed as frontline itinerant soldiers, some to serve as cooks, aids, carriers and loads and a lot more to perform errands that were to arise in the different battle fields.

Whether these people who were hurriedly recruited by the Germans were at the War front shooting or were in the Kitchens cooking for the soldiers or were acting as loads and carriers for the military, this paper holds that they were essential men in the process of warfare. To suit the purpose for which most of them were recruited these people once recruited desperately needed some basic drilling on gun operation let alone some essential war techniques.¹⁸ The majority of recruits from the grassfield received short time drills in basic War techniques in the Bamenda military station that was moved from Bali to the Bamenda in 1903. This recruitment sustained the War efforts of the German in the Western front particularly during the Nsananakang campaign that turned out to be the bloodiest in Cameroon soils.¹⁹ This

¹³ The servitude of the Dahomean soldiers in the German camp always leaves a picture of despair. Much of this comes from the cruelty meted on them by the German official and again on account of the fact little was done to improve upon their health condition. The situation went offhand when Gravenreuth was killed and the Douala transmission center switched camps from the Germans to the West African Expeditionary force.

¹⁴ See V.J. Ngoh (1996) *Cameroon history Since 1800*, Limbe, Limbe Pressbook, pp.125-5.

¹⁵ See De Vries Jacqueline (1998) *Catholic Mission Colonial Government Versus Indigenous Response in Kom (Cameroon)*, Leiden: African Studies Centre, pp.16-7.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Walters Gam Nkwi, Post War Societies (Africa) in International Encyclopaedia of the First World War 1914-1918, published online.

¹⁸ Naval Operations in the Cameroons, 1914, BNA, ADM 186/607, p. 158.

¹⁹ Wilson Ebai Ebi has documented a good piece about this War that was known its native jargon as The Mpaw-Manku Wars.

mass recruits were useful to the Germans in a multitudes of ways. With robust energy and exceptional bravery, they negotiated local paths for the German forces. Some of them besides serving as frontline soldier's dug up trenches²⁰ that served like excellent fortresses against the British. Some did not really go to war but were really catalyst of the War in the sense that they served as cooks, and ran errands which gave those in the battle fields enough time to concentrate in vital war assignments. In a nutshell, the recruitment of the people from the Grassfield region and the their urgent transformation through training for various war assignments constituted a veritable headache to the British and the French who were a little very confused and even contradicting on the approaches to be used in fighting the central powers represented in Cameroon by Germany almost all alone.

It should be noted here that the fortunes of war for against Germany mattered little to the newly recruited African in the new service of the Warfare for inspite of the hastily conducted training accorded to them they were yet to come to terms with the real substance of the War. A majority of them though embarrassed by the many assignments given to them by the German War general globally knew vaguely that they were fighting against a group of Whiteman who had the evil mission of enslaving everybody including their fons/chiefs were accorded the attributes of extraordinary mortals.²¹ Though this kind of campaign was by every substance lacking in evidence, it helped a great deal first to woo the fons of the Grassfields and other people from other parts of Cameroon²² into the business of providing brave men for the war and secondly, this acted like a booster to most of them in the War fields.

The overwhelming contribution of the Grassfield recruits to the German War adventure in Cameroon unfortunately had a very short life span because the allied powers offered a far superior force. Though the Germans were able to continue the War till 1916, as early as June 1915, the war tides were no longer working in favour of the Germans. The fall of Douala transmission center made the establishment of any central command by the Germans impossible. Though the recruitment continued for some time after this month colonel Zimmermann who coordinated the central forces was forced a contingent of recruits to escape to Spanish Guinea Fernando-po where the passions and functions of the men in Warfare became metamorphosed to men of scriptures

Fernando-Po, the Firmament of Transformation

The History of Christianity in West and Central Africa is wrought by very interesting and exciting episodes not only about the people who brought it here but also about the places where it found a fertile place to blossom as well as its local apprehensions by the people therein. An important and indispensable area where most Christian firmaments took its roots in the 19th century is the territory adjacent the Cameroon Mountain to the South known as Fernando-Pue to its geostrategic location this territory provided tempting opportunities which the great European powers competed over it for ownership. Its exposure to the Atlantic Ocean along

²⁰ In buttressing the fact that African soldiers used local techniques in fighting a European War George Njung cites a case of Bakumba in the forest region in Cameroon where recruits dug a trench as long as 1kilmetres which became very effective as a defence barrier. See George Njung "West Africa" in *International Encyclopaedia of the first World War, 1914-18*. Online.

²¹ The German diplomacy of conscripting Cameroonians into their Colonial force was full of calumny and conspiracy either to the British and the French apprehension or to the future of Christianity in the territory. In the Northern parts of Cameroon where Islam had a firm grip the Germans fuelled the passions of the Muslims into the War when they deceived the people to think that the War was not against the Germans but a ploy to unseat Islam and the Muslim hegemony that was in place.

²² For the 'loyalty' of the Beti of Cameroon to the Germans throughout the war, see Quinn, Frederick(1987) *The Impact of the First World and its Aftermath on the Beti of Cameroun*, in Page (ed.), *Africa and the First World War*, pp. 171-185.

with its history made it in such a way that Portugal, Spain and Britain at different times ought to colonize it. The efforts deployed by Britain to abolish slavery and slave trade in Africa succeeded in the main stop the practice at open seas and oceans but this continued for quite some time. It was in this context that Fernando gained its status as both a liberal and a Holy ground. Spain a Catholic dominated European power had relinquished its hold on this territory by 1827 and the abolition deal made it in such a way that many Protestant Missionaries migrated and settled here with the aim of establishing a foothold to penetrate the hinterland with the gospel of Christ. The settlement of these missionaries attracted the attention of Britain who exploited the absence of no colonial authority to use it as an area where slaves caught on transit to Europe could be resettle in wait of other measures to be sent back home. Up to about 1890 when Spain negotiated with Britain to take back control of this area, life in this area was patterned according to Protestant theology and in the spirit of free slaves.

The Conversion Debacle

Fernando-Po throughout the German era had a large population of settlers whose worldview was beset by the tenets of Christian religion both Protestant and Catholic. Infact, African traditional religion that was the basis for all character formation and ethics almost throughout the African continent had by this time been systematically shifted to the background. When the Germans started witnessing dangling fortunes during the First World War in Cameroon Britain saw the need for place to keep prisoners of war. Interestingly, Zimermann with a huge contingent of soldiers made the situation urgent and Britain wasted no time than turning to Fernando-Po. It was here that most of the grassfield men who had performed multitudes of functions in the First World War got interned. Some of them had the chance of living out of their traditional ecological bastion for the first time while others who were already serving as labourers in the plantations were already acquainted with a life style that shorn blind traditional submission to non-certificated authorities. If Nkwi and Jacqueline de Vries provides startling figures (15000) servicemen being interned in this area, a greater number were natives from the grassfields. By stroke of faith men who were conscripted and hurriedly trained in grassland Cameroon found themselves faced with exacting but thrilling realities in Spanish Guinea. Though as prisoners of War added to the fact that there were kept aloof from all communication with their kindred back home, life in Fernando-Po negotiated new contours of worth and elegance to most of these people. Britain or the allied forces did not bugged these men with burdensome assignments akin to captives of War but rather gave them an extensive allowance of freedom to perform light duties and to fit themselves into any practice that suited their humour. With this elastic allowance they freely mingled with people not only from other cultures but other races as well and this greatly modified their apprehension of life.

An important element of this social intercourse that ignited a passion of worth and recognition regardless of race and social grade was Christianity. The British and the Spanish missionaries plus a reasonable number of freed slaves who lived in Fernando-Po at the time led exemplary lifestyles. They were common, truthful, outgoing and considerate in the way they ran their public and private businesses. The roots of such virtues could not be traced anywhere else than Christianity. With this, most of the Grassfield Ex –Service profoundly got soaked in Christianity and took upon themselves the duty of learning how to read and interpret the Holy Scriptures. Knowing Christ and living according to the tenets of Christianity entailed an avalanche of issues most of them in discordant to traditional philosophy or world view. It meant first and foremost that these soldiers were no longer expected to submit themselves to traditional authorities and their institutions. It equally meant that they were going to deny the

African way of worship that prized the ever present influence of the ancestors in all private and public business. Furthermore, it meant that once out of Fernando-Po these converts were obliged by the covenant of their newfound faith and way of life to be accountable only to God and not to any worldly constituted authorities especially those of the African genre. This was going to be an arduous task for the ex-servicemen but the missionaries and those who baptised them took of time to train them for all season scriptural encounters. The idea of a one and only God who was merciful, forgiving, fatherly, abundantly loving, omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient appealed to these converts far more than African traditional religion which buttressed more of the gods ever readiness to punish and very little of blessings to be expected from these supreme beings.²³ Fortunately for these Christian convert and the process of Christianity in the Grassfields, the political situation in Cameroon like elsewhere in East Africa did not really settle until 1919.²⁴ The converts therefore had the chance of living and drinking from the cups of Christianity with their kith and kin from Europe and elsewhere for a continuous stretch of five years which was good enough for the inculcation of genuine Christian values. The return to normalcy of order in the World²⁵ necessitated the need for these Men who had been profoundly contaminated (soaked) in Christianity to return to their traditional fiefs.

The Return of Ex-Servicemen with Scriptures

The return of the Ex-service men mostly in Christened outfits and mentality to the Grassfields like elsewhere in Cameroon and Africa at large interestingly turned out to be an encounter of negotiation and survival between bewilderment versus blind attack as well as colonial confusion versus indigenous arm-twisting. In any case, this laid the concrete foundation for the growth and eventual co-existence of Christianity and African traditional religion in the Grassfields.

As indicated in the entry sections of this paper, most of those who were conscripted into the German army were undesirables to their traditional societies. The decision of the Fons/Chiefs to give them to the War exploits technically meant exposing them to death or whatever ordeal that was to come with the war. It was not anticipated that these men could survive the tides of the War let alone coming back in some distant future in the garments of Christianity. This is the context within which their return became a veritable contest between blind attacks on tradition from these converts and bewilderment emerging from the camp of the traditional authorities that had earlier prayed them dead. Concretely, the population of the returnees was increased in the 1920s and 30s by a good number of plantation workers who also returned home loaded with a world view that was either empirically Christian in expression or Christian like in outfit. De Vries notes that 400 Ex- soldiers, 170 women 50 children and 95 servants returned to the Kom Fondom alone.²⁶ This number was reinforced by about the same statistics for Nso

²³The issue of blessings and punishment alive in any religion is indeed a debated one. There is a scholarship which vehemently thinks that Christians insistence on the beatitudes of their faith was a mere ploy intended to brainwashed Africans and to uproot them from a pristine religion that was by every means an integral part of their character formation.

²⁴Most of these people got to Fernando-Po Spanish Guinea in 1915 but even with the end of the War in Cameroon by 1916, the War continued in other parts of the world till 1918. It was only after the 1919 Paris Peace Conference that the fate of this converts could be determined. Of importance to Cameroon and this converts during this conference was the notorious treaty of Versailles signed on June 28 which duelled extensively on Germany and her territories abroad.

²⁵Order in the World as used here was defined by the Wilsonian Diplomacy which laid the frame work for the formation of the League of Nations that only went operational in 1920.

²⁶ This found in D O Podevins Annual report to the Resident in Buea found File No CB 1918/2 of 1919,p.9.of the Buea National Archives BNA Cited and paraphrased by Jacqueline de Vries in *Catholic Mission*,p.38.

and Bali.²⁷ Though it is possible that these people separated to different parts of the country, their determination to spread the gospel and the need to keep the standard of worth and prestige which they claimed to have been conferred on them by the western cultures with its nucleus being Christianity kept them together.

Compared to the population of the grassfields at the time these returnees were quite few in numbers but very enormous in their determination to turn the life pattern of their traditional kin and kith to their direction. With the Christian mind-set being their spur especially the overriding conviction that God was all powerful, knowing and seeing, these converts launched a long range of programmes all of them constituting a litany of direct attacks on tradition. The bewilderment of the traditional folk with the fons/chiefs about these episodes came from multiple fronts. Besides the fact that these men were so free in challenging the views lavishly shared and upheld by the traditional folk about the gods and their ancestors it was a like a nightmare to the traditional authorities of the grassfields to see Christianity once more returning to their lands. This was because most of them had interpreted the defeat and ousting of the Germans with the termination of the few churches that were in the buds within their fiefdoms as complete eradication of not only the Germans but also Christianity as a whole. The return of a class of people whom the traditional authorities desired to be killed created anxious moments among the traditional lots. The case of Michael²⁸ Timneng of the Kom Fandom speaks volumes in the direction of indigenous apprehension of this class of people. This is typified by one oral witness from a Kom Fandom notable who summed up all their feelings when he stated that;

It was like some treachery. We felt we had been betrayed. When I say we I mean palace notables and traditional authorities. This was Timneng who had been among palace guards at the palace. This same Timneng had got recruited into the army by the Fon for the Germans. Timneng goes to Fernando-Po and on his return he brings a contrasting religion whose sole aim was to destroy the old order. Do you think we in the secret house could have been comfortable? No certainly not. There is one thing that you people do not always want to accept. Timneng was not an ordinary man. That is why he was enlisted into the German army. Soothsayers had always said that Timneng had a very bad scheme in the pipeline for the Kom kingdom.... People always advised us to leave him alone so when he came back and took a stand against us we were not taken unawares. We had always thought that he could not bring anything different from bad luck into this kingdom.²⁹

This is a classic case of bewilderment and an indication that the coming of these Ex-service men ignited passions of phobia and rancour in the minds of the traditional folk. There was gradually a rift developing between the seemingly Christianised educated men who seemed to find value in magic and firmaments of power better understood in the prescient of African traditional religion. Safe for differentials tone and diction similar accounts can be rendered about Mamadoua who returned and opened the first Baptist church in Wum in 1922 or about the returning recruits from Nso who grew to eminence in the spread of Catholicism in the grassfields. The traditional folk was further amazed by the fact that Christian often gathered, sang songs of strange dictions and veneration of the Christian God. Together with prayers and a claim of powers and wisdom coming from the Bible and other literature, the whole affair of

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ The man Michael Timneng was born around 1884 in Nijinkom –Kom just when the German officially annexed Cameroon. His mother was called Neng and the name Tim Came from his uncle meaning that he was born out of wedlock. Michael was a Christian name given to him when he became a Christian in Fernando-Po.

²⁹ Chindo Ngounkoule (1994) interview and cited by De Vries in Catholic Mission p.41.

Christianity became a wonder and bone of contention between the traditional authorities on one hand and the British administrators on the other. Whatever the case the shift in authority from the Germans was an affair of diplomacy and changing order negotiated and arrived at far away from the grassfields because of the European "made to belief" conviction that the consent of such people was not required when dealing with issues of international standards. With no clear idea of the deeper implication of the change at the helm of colonial leadership, the traditional folk were so astonished to see the arrival of a different kind of white men speaking a different language and using a different flag.

Although the whole concept of Christianity was hated to the core by traditional authorities, the British authorities depended on the Christian institutions for the training of servants and service men in their administration. They were ready to tolerate Christianity as far as it did not undermine the authorities of the Fons/chiefs and other notables whose power were enhanced to collect taxes under the system of indirect Rule. There was absolutely no way Christianity could flower and blossom without a significant shift in the local perception of power and authority let alone the leadership topography that was in the making. It was this difficult that created some sort of pandemic confusion within the circles of the British administrators.

The Growth of Christianity and Colonial Confusion in the Grassfields

In the context of stiff opposition from the local folk, Christianity gained its way into the grassfield and grappled to survive in spite of the challenges. The British colonial authorities were as a result of this development caught in a web of functional dilemma because both System were required for its survival. Under the Indirect Rule system the authority of the Fons/Chiefs and other traditional regulatory Institutions and association were required to collect taxes and enforce Law and other. Under this very system the British needed to train men to perform white Collar function as clerks, accountants, teachers as well as learned men to provide the nexus of power between them and the indigenous folk. With little of finance and willingness of Britishers to serve in Cameroon the only institutions that could provide these white Collar men were the Christian Institutions. If the British authorities choose to discourage the growth of Christianity, that could imply directly depriving themselves of the badly needed elements and agents of change that were to be the core of their colonial enterprise in the Cameroons. Additionally, that could also imply the declaration of War to Christian and semiliterate population constituted by returnee war veterans and plantation workers who were pointedly few in number but robust in their determination to resist any imposed order. Secondly, if the British were to cast out their fons and all the traditional figments of tradition from power that could mean a complete volt-face from the much trumpeted Indirect Rule which entailed the need for more Finances as well as British administrators in the Cameroon soils to carry on the Mandatory assignment.

With ultimately no way of keeping off any of the two alternatives, Britain decided to play safe treating each case and negotiating their way through any case as the circumstances provided.. An outgrowth of the recruits obsession with the scriptures which animated relations between the British and the traditional authorities on one hand and the Church or returnees on the other was the issue of women more resolutely royal women. Christian doxology saw marriage from a point which was contrasted tradition in a number of things. Marriage as presented by these men of the scripture entailed that one man should be married only to one Woman. It meant that the woman had a right to accept to get married or not and it equally meant that decisions in a marriage home were to be arrived at through a consensus. Together with the elegance of the dressing habits of these recruits or returnees along with the opportunities of emancipation

available with the ambits of the church, royal women and those who saw marriage as a burden, deserted their marriage homes and sought refuge from the Church. The problem with this was not only that polygamy which was the basis of patriarchy in the grassfields collapsed but more that; the institutions and traditional offices which the British depended on for the survival of Indirect Rule became frail. Though a handful of Christians were jailed by the British administrators, It became clear that life throughout the Mandate and the Trusteeship era (1922-61) was going to be on the basis co-existence and not sublime submission to the tenets of the Church, tradition or Britain as earlier wished.

CONCLUSION

The trajectory the Post German Cameroon from the discussion pursued by this study is indeed and interesting one. In it one finds the real mission of human unpredictability where modes and position of power and authority are swinging from one end to the other. For no making of their own, people are recruited into a war whose essence is far remote from their immediate concern. Though sent to War as technical ploy most of them are not killed but rather became Christian a practice which is incompatible with War. The war and plantation assignment which were for the most part penal obligation rather provided rare opportunities for recruits from the Grassfields. If life in the Grassfields has become patterned on Christian heritage tribute is paid to these returnees who defied the odds and became elements of change. Concretely this switch of modes negotiated new horizons for polygamy, patriarchy, Christianity, female emancipation and royal absolutism to strive indicating a switch in modes and functions which embraced continuity and change at all levels.