

Chiefs and the Crisis of Transition from German to British Administration in the Bamenda Grassland of Cameroon, 1916 – 1922

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Abstract: The ruthlessness with which the German administration was imposed on Cameroon stirred panic and insecurity in the territory. Such brutality rather than kindle and sustain indigenous insurgency to colonial rule instead intimidated and cowed them into the German supreme tenet. Accordingly many chiefs were surprised when in 1916 Germany was defeated in Cameroon as the First World War intensified. Although an atmosphere of mixed feelings, fear, skepticism and uncertainty loomed, there remained a haughty degree of optimism that the Germans were to launch a reprisal. This situation was particularly demonstrated in the Bamenda Grassland region of Cameroon where some of the traditional authorities (chiefs) who had been incorporated into the German administration were hesitant to accept the British as their new colonial masters. The likelihood of a German return placed them in a 'dilemma of uncertainty' to accept the British and risk German vindictive hand. This shillyshally attitude of the traditional authorities was a heavy blow to the British authorities who could not take it kindly. This article concludes that such a mind-set was not because of any fondness of the Germans to the British but the phobia from the pre-war esteem of the German rule of spiteful episodes. Data from oral, archival and related literature provided evidence to this conclusion.

Keywords: Chiefs, Germans, British, First World War, Bamenda Grassland.

1. INTRODUCTION

In July 1884, the Germans annexed the coast of Cameroon very much against the trend of events given that British traders had dominated the Cameroon coast before 1884. The British reluctance to annex Cameroon made the German traders of the Woermann and Jantzen and Thormaehlen firms to pressure their home government for the annexation of Cameroon. Otto Von Bismarck, the German Chancellor, who was initially opposed to colonies in Africa, accepted the annexation and occupation of Cameroon.¹ Annexation was followed by the rapid expansion of German economic and commercial activities along the coastal region. The interior of Cameroon, especially the Bamenda Grassland, remained unvisited and unknown to the Germans until when Dr. Eugen Zintgraff, seeking an overland route to Adamawa, traversed the Bamenda Grassland [Che-Fombong, 1982:37].

Zintgraff set out from Douala for the Grassland region in 1888 and finally arrived Bali in January 1889. While in Bali Zintgraff contracted a blood pact with Chief Galega of Bali-Nyonga and decided to make Bali the headquarters of the future administration of the Western Grassland. This decision was influenced by the friendly attitude of the Bali in their desire to establish direct trading contacts with the Germans [Chilver, 1967:483]. From Bali, Zintgraff travelled north

¹ The Woermann and Jantzen and Thormaehlen firms arrived the coast of Cameroon in 1868 and 1870 respectively. This resulted in trade rivalry with British firms such as John Holt, R. W. Kings and Amba Bay Trading Company.

through Bafut into the Adamawa area and then returned to the Grassland area where he signed a treaty of protection with Galega, the Fon of Bali-Nyonga, on 23 August 1891.

By endorsing this treaty, Galega 1 surrendered all his powers to Zintgraff in return for Zintgraff's recognition and protection of Bali suzerainty over all the other ethnic groups of the Western Grasslands. The Fon of Bali was also attracted by the possibility of making use of superior German weapons to subjugate the neighbouring chiefdoms in order to consolidate his own position and authority in the region. German interest in the Grassland was sustained not by the existence of raw materials but by the abundance of man power for the coastal plantations and the army. Economically, the Bamenda Grassland was a disappointment to the German trading firms since it was "devoid of worthwhile surpluses in palm oil, not significantly blessed with resources of ivory and rubber or indeed with any natural products except kola nuts"[Ibid]. It was therefore in order to exploit the manpower that Zintgraff obtained a piece of land on which he established a base for his operations and made the Fon of Bali a licensed labour recruiter. The Bamenda Grassland was therefore a labour reservoir for the Germans

In 1902 the Germans set up a military station in Bamenda, eclipsing the Bali station. Bamenda was chosen principally because the central position of Bamenda facilitated the recruitment and protection of labour from the surrounding ethnic groups. It was from the Bamenda fort that many of the Bamenda Grassland chiefs were subjugated. The Bafut resistance which started in 1901 as the Bafut/Mankon -Zintgraff War collapsed by 1907 when the Germans destroyed the chiefdom forcing their ruler into exile. The Kom resistance in 1904 also met with the cruelty of the Germans and in 1906 the Germans assisted by 200 Bamum warriors, Bali Scots and Babungo porters shattered the dream of the Fon of Nso as he struggled to maintain the autonomy of his chiefdom [Adig 2012: 163-165]. The ruthlessness with which the Germans treated the defeated chiefs and their subjects forced them into submission.

By 1906, therefore, all the chiefdoms in the Bamenda Grassland had completely fallen under German control. The immediate consequence was the loss of sovereignty by the Grassland traditional rulers. With this loss of sovereignty, chiefs had to play second fiddle to the colonial administration. However, due to the strong sway chiefs continued to have over their subjects, the Germans found it expedient to rely on them to satisfy their own colonial exigencies. Hence the German colonial policy in the region virtually followed the "indirect rule" principles.

The chiefs were charged with the execution of imperial policies. They recruited labour for the coastal plantations, assured the performance of public works, collected taxes, maintained rest-houses along the main routes with public labour and couriers or "flag-posts". Many of the chiefs were issued registers establishing their status as official tax collectors receiving ten percent tax rebate, or as minor agents of government to be protected from the opposition and attacks of neighbours or carriers [Ibid:145-148].

The system certainly overworked the chiefs charged with tax collection and recruiting labour as they had to cover long distances, travelling from village to village, compelling their subjects to pay their taxes or perform equivalent labour. Apart from the distances the chiefs covered, their subjects began to regard them as traitors or stooges of the Germans while the Germans on the other hand jailed, tortured and exiled all the chiefs who failed to execute their duties accordingly. This was the situation that forced the chiefs to accept German domination in the Bamenda Grassland on the eve of the First World War.

2. THE INTRODUCTION OF BRITISH RULE IN THE BAMENDA GRASSLAND

On August 2, 1914, the Germans declared war on France and two days later Britain declared war on Germany. Shortly afterwards a three-front attack was launched on German Kamerun by forces based in neighbouring territories. French troops, under General Aymerich, attacked from French Congo while General Dobell led a seaborne expedition against Douala, using British, French and Nigerian troops. A third column invaded the German protectorate from the North.

In the Bamenda Grassland, the war protracted because the principal chiefs who collaborated with the Germans resisted the British aggression for quite some time. The Bali-Nyonga, Kom, Bafut, Nso and other influential monarchs provided the Germans with porters, warriors, scots, spies and local charms. However, in October 1915 when the British General Cunliffe invaded Bamenda from the northeast and southwest and defeated the Germans, the chiefs decided to abandon the Germans for the British. The Bamenda military station under the command of Major Crookenden received food and

information on German military dispositions from the chiefs. Even Chief Galega who had signed a treaty and accepted a blood pact with Zintgraff decided to back the British cause at the end of the war. The British therefore defeated the Germans in the Bamenda Grassland [Ibid, 207-209].

The March 4, 1916 military accord between Charles Dobell, commander of British troop and Joseph Aymerich, commander of French troops, ended the wartime joint Anglo-French administration of Cameroon and partitioned Cameroon into two. The Bamenda Grassland became part of the British Cameroon and G.S.Podevin was appointed to take over from Major J. Crookenden as the first civil administrator.

Podevin had the task of winning over the friendship of the local chiefs and their subjects and restoring peace or a functioning administration following the uprooting of the Germans. Ethnographic and linguistic information about the Bamenda Grassland was not ready because the military officers did not collect the published journals. German records disappeared and General Cunliffe's Muslim agents failed to collect any useful information capable of giving Podevin some idea of his new administrative division [Che-Mfombong, 1980: 57]. The knowledge of missionaries about the region had been lost as the military deported them. Other problems which confronted Podevin included the lack of administrative personnel, the vastness of his area of jurisdiction and the poor communication infrastructure. To solve these problems and effectively replace the Germans, the British attempted to woo the chiefs who were the custodians of the people at a time when the chiefs could not believe that the cruel and very powerful Germans were already defeated.

3. CHIEFS IN A DILEMMA

Like the Germans, Podevin wanted to govern the Bamenda Grassland by the "principles of Native Administration". In one of his first reports to the Resident of the Cameroons Province in 1916, he informed the Resident that he had obtained the confidence, loyalty and support of the most influential and powerful chiefs of the area namely, those of Bali, Kom, Bafut, Nso and Babungo [NAB, cb/1916/1]. This was too early a conclusion because the chiefs were in fact confused whether to accept British rule or not. It is true that the common man in Cameroon around 1918 preferred British rule to that of the Germans because they realised that fairness was the British watchword and that the British never punished a man without giving him a fair chance of defending himself, compared with the extremely brutal and extempore methods adopted by the Germans. The masses could not therefore cherish a return to German barbarism. Due to the belief that German rule in Cameroon had been very harsh, the new British "masters", in 1916, expected a grand welcome from the Cameroonians in their own part of the territory.

But what they had was a very cool reception. The Cameroonians had misgivings about the British occupation because they were not sure that the British would remain permanently without being sent out by a stronger German force. Others attributed the war time high cost of living on the bad British rule, and not as the outcome of the War. Also the new British Administrators were not as liberal with gifts to the natives as their German counterparts had been. From another perspective the civil liberty introduced by the British reduced the authority of the chiefs over their subjects, so that the chiefs began to regret the departure of the Germans. To all these intricacies was added the group of Cameroonians who were Pro-German before, during, and after the War. They did not hide their preference for the Germans, even while they were under British rule.

With regards to the chiefs, especially the important ones, it was doubtful whether some of them preferred British to German rule. This was so because the German administration supported the big chiefs and retained their loyalty and goodwill by a system of gifts upon a generous scale. The big chiefs were also satisfied with the big entities created by the Germans which brought together erstwhile pre-colonial independent chiefdoms under paramount rulers. This was the case with Bali Nyonga under Galega 1 whose empire was enlarged with more than thirty widikum chiefdoms [Chilver 1967:485]. The Nso, Bafut and Kom empires were also enlarged with tributary or vassal villages. But since the British occupation, not a penny had been allocated for "presents to chief" and no encouragement whatever had been offered. Bamenda Division, for instance, was visited twice by the Resident between 1916 and 1919, but on both occasions not a single government "dash" was given to a chief. Such points told well with the Bamenda chiefs. A "state umbrella" with a gilt fringe, did not cost much but it carried a lot of weight if presented to a big chief by a Resident during inspection [NAB, A1918/24].

Apart from British stinginess, some of the chiefs especially the smaller chiefs of the vassal chiefdoms in the Bafut, Nso, Bali, Kom empires suspected that Podevin and his entourage like the Germans, could subjugate their villages under the paramount chiefs for administrative reasons. This fear was manifested in the unrest in Bali, Meta, Moghamo and Kom areas. In Meta and Moghamo, the unrest was more pronounced because the villages the Germans had forcefully brought under Bali suzerainty had taken advantage of the war and broken away, refusing to recognize Bali authority over them. The villages of Bamendjung, Bamyensi, Bambunji and Babajang therefore refused to collaborate with Podevin or accept the British out of fear that he may sacrifice their independence. Podevin who was determined to establish the status quo invaded the villages and arrested and imprisoned the rebellious chiefs in April 1916. The consequence of these punitive measures was the reestablishment and protection of the authority of the paramount chiefs. It was therefore time to secure the confidence and loyalty of these chiefs and their subjects.

It was against this background that an actual survey of public opinion was started around Buea and Victoria by the Senior District Officer for Victoria in 1918. He tried to ascertain the general feeling of the people towards British rules as compared with that of the Germans. The masses of the people blamed the wartime economic hardship on the British. They could not understand why a bottle of kerosene which before the war cost 2d should now cost 2s:6d [NAB, cb/1916/1 para. 13]. The chiefs in comparing British with German rule also complained that they were not receiving the respect from their people as before and that they were no longer supported by the government.

According to a report [NAB, A1918/24] Podevin interviewed two chiefs of the Bamenda Grassland whom he considered loyal to the British. These were the chiefs of Bafut (President of the Bamenda Native Court) and the chief of Babungo. The Chief of Bafut an extremely intelligent old man was initially very reluctant to discuss the subject but when Podevin pressed him, he stated that he preferred British to German rule. When the DO enquired whether he would sign a document to that effect, he replied, "you are now my master and what you order me to do, I will do, but if the Germans come back what is going to happen to me if they find out that i have made a statement and signed it?." The DO assured him that there would be no likelihood of such a thing being discovered and that this statement would not be seen by any of the native staff. The chief of Bafut thereupon signed his name (not his mark) to a statement which the DO had drawn up. But the DO was worried that one should be expected to obtain the so called statement of allegiance in such an abominably spurious manner from chiefs and natives whom the British were trying to persuade to respect their flag and administration [Ibid].

Even then, that was not the end of the story. The next day, the chief's two messengers returned and informed the DO of the necessity of respecting the confidentiality and secrecy of the document the chief had signed. The DO pulled out the document from his drawer and set it on fire in front of the messengers requesting them to transmit the information to their master. The significance of such an incident lay in the futility of wanting to get assurance from somebody who was not in a position to give an independent and fearless opinion [Ibid. para.4 Sub Section (i)].

The interview with chief Sangi of Babungo was not so dramatic although it was equally significant. Upon being asked whether he preferred British to German rule, and after a full demonstration of what the postwar settlement might be, he answered "your interpreters is one of my boys, some of your messengers belong to my country, if the Germans came back to Kamerun and found out i had helped you in this way, they would hang me. If you ask me to sign that paper I will do so, but will you help me if they come back? I know that the war is not yet finished. I should like to wait until it is" [Ibid, (ii)].

The DO for Bamenda did not insist upon chief Sangi signing any document as he, the DO was not in position to give the chief any such assurance. Yet the DO endeavored to make the chief believe that no such possibility of German come back need be feared.. Having extricated himself from these two embarrassing interviews, the DO decided not to attempt the third [Ibid].

According to Ndifontah [nd:128] the Bali people were so associated with the Germans that it was any one's guess which way their true loyalties lay. Any allegiance extracted from the chief of Bali would have been very worthless considering that certain villages which had been tributary to Bali were now breaking as a result of the departure of the Germans. However, when the German war situation was deteriorating, the Fon of Bali decided to welcome the British troops. He provided ample supplies of food, carriers, information and even showed them the main roads of the region. With this double dealing, it was difficult to count on the Bali who expected a German counter attack at any time [Adig, 2012:208].

Nkwi [1986:33] relates how Chief Ngam of Kom could not be trusted too. Although he and his people resisted German occupation for about seven months, when the area was finally subdued, the Germans considered chief Ngam a strong man whose authority and power over kom they could encourage in every way and use to their profit. The Germans therefore went out of their way to demonstrate their support for chief Ngam. The following dramatic incident is of interest. Certain men were intriguing against the chief and were particularly trying to seduce his wives. De Vries [1998:33] recounts that, when Chief Ngam reported the matter to the Germans, the seven offenders were arrested. The Germans took them to confine them in the Banyo prison but on their way, they escaped from their guards. Sometimes later, they tried to return to their houses but some Kom natives heard about it and hunted them down, recapturing four. They were then sent to Mamfe where they were hanged in the presence of chief Ngam. Again as Amaazee [2002: 52-53] posit, during the war Herr Adamotz, the German Officer for Bamenda called on chief Ngam to supply 100 men to fight against the British. He responded very gladly and was rewarded with £5 in German money. The chief stayed all the time in Liakom when the Cameroon war was being fought, but when he saw that the English were wining, he favoured them by doing some useful intelligence work for Major Crookenden. On one occasion he helped a convoy of suppliers to get through hostile country and was rewarded with a bag of salt. Such a man could not be trusted, so there was no need asking him for a declaration of allegiance.

In Nso, the state of affairs was not very different. Although the population was happy with the exit of the Germans, the chief was not because he could not imagine that the Germans who defeated his kingdom in 1906 could be defeated by another nation. Secondly he was not sure that the British could assist him like the Germans did to impose his lucrative over lordship over the tributary chiefdoms. Again a few catholic adherents escaped with the German missionaries to the internment camp in Fernando Po. Over 900 baptized and 1500 catechumens from the Bamenda Grassland were taken care of by the missionaries in the Fernando Po internment camp [Adig, 2012:208-209]. With these people in the hands of the Germans it was difficult for the Fon of Nso to declare his allegiance to the British. He expected a German counterattack at any time. The result was that between 1916, when British and French forces captured Cameroon, and in 1922, when Britain was granted a League of Nations mandate over of Cameroon, the British had to contend seriously with pro-Germanism in the Bamenda Grassland of the British Southern Cameroons.

4. CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates the phobia that loomed in the atmosphere in the Bamenda Grassland especially amongst the traditional authorities when the British took over the administration of the region from the Germans as the First World War progressed. During the transition period from 1916 to 1918, the indigenous authorities were placed in a dilemma and a risk of choice in declaring either for Germany or Britain who were both potential "masters". Their reluctance to accept British rule was not out of any admiration of German admiration of their territory but largely out of fear of a possible German reprisal and their apparent revengeful and punitive measures in Cameroon. For one reason, the people were very optimistic that Britain could not defeat the 'almighty Germany'. Again, the Bamenda Grasslanders attributed the wartime economic difficulties to the British and not the Germans. In addition, the introduction of British rule was not immediately accompanied by gifts which the Germans had used for some time to woo the recalcitrant chiefs. That was a big set-back to Britain as a colonial power which was regarded as unmatched to the Germany which was most probably to defeat her. The British laissez-faire policy as practiced in neighbouring Calabar-Nigeria and which had attracted the Cameroon coastal chiefs in 1878 to request for British annexation of the territory turned to be faintness and an embarrassment from the Bamenda Grassland chiefs. The pre-war experiences of German rule as a colonial authority was a legacy of fear, brutality and vindication in the minds of all Cameroonians and which the people of the Grassland were not prepared to challenge. Placed in such a position, Britain only had to grapple with the many unenthusiastic chiefs as she embarked on the degermanisation of the region and the establishment of British influence. Such predicaments lasted until 1918 when Germany was finally defeated from Cameroon and ended any speculation of probable German return. But total loyalty to Britain only came in 1922 with the introduction of the Indirect Rule policy after she was granted a League of Nations mandate authority over Cameroon. The British policy received the approval of the chiefs especially the bigger ones who were empowered and integrated into new administration.

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