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Christian Mission and Slavery in the Cameroons

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Abstract

While considerable research is available on the transatlantic slave trade and the cruelty suffered by African slaves in the Americas, less attention is given to the practices of slavery and forced labour in Africa. This article tells the story of slavery and forced labour in Cameroon. Douala kings kept slaves in slave villages and used their blood to sprinkle the grave of a deceased Douala prince. The German colonial government used Africans as forced labour to cultivate private plantations. The French government also coerced local Africans to produce food for the the troops fighting Nazism. The Christian missionaries and missions played a mixed role in countering and sustaining these power relations.

Introduction

The discussions surrounding Christian mission and slavery continue to give rise to lively and important debates. Significant studies have been done on the transatlantic trade in slaves to the Caribbean, America South, and even Suriname, highlighting the use of many forms and nuances of slavery, including forced labour. The abolition of slavery by England in 1833 and France in 1848, for example, was meant to lead to the emancipation and safety of slaves and improvement in the socio-economic situation of Africans. But such a goal was at best an illusion; the reality was different as forced labour and extreme forms of cruelty continued in all Africa including in Cameroon.

On the coast of Cameroon

Similar to many African countries bordering the Atlantic Ocean, Cameroon was also affected by the slave trade. The Portuguese were the first to organise slave

ships to buy and transport slaves from the region to the plantations of the New World. They were followed, from around 1590, by the Dutch, and later the French and the English. These processes resulted in the intensification of slave trade on the rivers of Cameroon. Many slaves came from interior countries such as the Bamileke and the Bamoun, nicknamed *Bayon* (people of slaves). Most of them were transported to southern Cameroon by slave routes passing through Yabassi country. They were forced to travel barefoot to the coastal area where they were shipped across the ocean. The captured slaves were of great monetary value. As noted by Franz Hutter (1902:92):

> The value of a slave put into chains was much more important than the tooth of an elephant that he had to bear on his back all along the way to the coast.

While no precise figures of the slave trade from the Cameroon are available, the following comments by Meredith Terretta (2014:31) suggest that significant numbers were involved:

> Because of its inland location, historians have little statistical data on the precise number of slaves originating from the Grassfields region; however, recent scholarship suggests that the combined figures for slaves exported per year at the peak of the trade, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, may have reached as high as sixteen to eighteen thousand.

At the same time, not all these slaves were shipped to work on plantations across the Atlantic Ocean. Many were retained in the slave villages upstream of the Wouri River where they had to cultivate food products for the Douala population, which was largely a fishing community. These slaves were also often victims of exploitation and abuse by the Douala princes. For example, the death of a king led to the Doualas organising raids to capture persons whose blood could be, as per the prevailing custom, sprinkled on the grave of the deceased.

Jamaican and English missionaries in Cameroon

The Jamaican and English Baptist missions were the earliest missions to be set up in the Cameroon. From 1843 onwards and for some forty years they proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God within the Douala society and its surroundings. The first Baptist mission station as established on the island of Fernando Po (now called Bioko), a region where slavery prevailed, and where the slaves were exposed to extreme violence and exploitation by their masters. As noted by Lonerrick and Clarke (1840-1843:220-222):

> Fernando Po is a land of slavery and oppression, there is too much suppression on this island to be relieved by human power. To characterise the chiefs of the mainland, they are all alike: with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters (1 Corinthians 5:9-10). These kings are notorious for trading of slaves. Their hearts are entirely set upon trade but are nevertheless willing to receive instructions and they are sympathetic to the idea of Christian settlements. This means that we need here men with a spirit of Christian martyrdom, who can act devoutly, suffer patiently and labour diligently, and to undertake the all important and difficult duty of making Jesus known to the perishing ignorant person around him.

Joseph Merrick was the first Negro Jamaican missionary to reach the coast of the Cameroons. After a short stay at the newly created missionary station Clarence at Fernando Po, he settled in the African continent where he explored the coastline of Cameroon and established a missionary site at Bimbia among the Isubu people of Bimbia, in order to make it 'the principal seat of the extension of Christ's Kingdom in Africa' (Merrick 1844:348). Merrick had a flair for languages. During his training at the Calabar Theological Institution in Jamaica he studied Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and French. He was also a professional printer, took interest in the local African language, and translated some Bible chapters and books into the Isubu language. In these ways he broke with the prevailing missionary traditions that focused on translating only the New Testament or parts of it, leaving out the Old Testament. On the contrary,

his biblical message was inspired by themes of the Old Testament, such as found in Genesis and Exodus, emphasising a pattern for progressive faith of justice and peace for the Jamaican church. It is likely that he was influenced by the Torah which he could have learnt from Jewish plantation owners in Jamaica (van Slageren 1972:32).

He hired a house where slaves were traded and there he learned how to cope with criminals and live together with those who suffered. Worn out by all his activities and experiences he became seriously ill and went on leave. He died on October 21, 1849, during his return voyage by sea to England. In his short lifetime he laid the foundation for the future mission work. Joseph Merrick was not only the first but also one of the most capable, devoted, and inspiring missionaries in that era. The Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) honoured his memory in a resolution of gratitude:

> He was one of African descent, educated in the Society's schools, who died in vulnerable health while on active service.

The impact of his work and personality was so deep that echoes of his hopes can be found in following generations of Cameroonians serving the ministry (Kamta 2003).

However, while the missionary efforts in Fernando Po and Bimbia only led to ephemeral results, it was in Douala that the church would take a more definitive form as a result of the work of Alfred Saker. Saker, then thirty years old and of English origin, arrived on February 16, 1844, in Fernando Po. He was responsible, as a mechanic, for the technical installations and vessels of the mission. After a year, Saker crossed the border in order to make contact with the people in Douala. He was well received by the chief of Deido who offered him a house and a small piece of land. From then on he began to prepare to settle himself with his family there permanently. He learnt the Douala language and followed Merrick's example and translated the Bible into the local language. He used exegetical books to better prepare himself for this task. After a lot of demanding work, he published the Gospel of Matthew in 1848, the New Testament in 1862, and the Old Testament in 1872. Then Saker had the idea to create an industrial school to benefit young Christians. This

venture contributed in the later years to undermine the foundations of slavery in the Douala society.

In the meantime he created the Bethel Church in Douala in 1855, which he called the 'Native Baptist Church'. Then he went to Fernando Po, which had been taken over by the Catholic Spanish authorities, to transport the Baptist Jamaican colony in the island to the neighbouring continent. It was in the Bay d'Ambas that he was able to find a piece of land to which he gave the name Victoria, and where a small number of Jamaican Baptist people settled and developed a Christian missionary community for the Bakwiri people.

Another influential missionary was Joseph Jackson Fuller, whose influence was perhaps greater than that of any other comparable person who had been working on the coast of Cameroon. Fuller spent forty years there and on his return to England he wrote his autobiography. He had begun his work-life as a a trained carpenter. When, in 1850, no missionary at all was left in the field, he was appointed to become a missionary of the BMS. Fuller proved to be a man full of energy and he was always on the move. He roamed the forest to meet people, including slaves, who had fled the townships for fear of being slaughtered by the Douala during the customary killing for the dead kings. Indeed, during a tour in one of these villages he witnessed a hunt for men who were to be sacrificed on the tombs of the Douala nobles and he was confronted by some of the worst aspects of human misery: people poisoned with drugs for witchcraft and ritual killing. Nevertheless he was able to put an end to these cruel rites through spreading the message of the gospel and exclaiming: 'God's book has come now to the country'.

To sum up: the Jamaican Baptists exercised a decisive influence on the course of the missionary and church history of Cameroon. Their years of Christian endeavour preceded all other missionary efforts and took place from 1841 to 1852. Their engagement ended with the sudden retreat of the Jamaican Baptist Mission from the field. Despite this, a handful of Jamaican missionaries continued to serve the mission. They were employed by the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) of London and were meant to co-operate with British preachers. Their importance, however, is usually not recognised and their presence in Cameroon is not even mentioned in important books about the history of Christian missions including Latourette and Neill. Nevertheless, some forms of

Jamaican experience, especially with regard to their spirit of freedom and emancipation, remained a basic dimension of the identity of the Cameroon Christians and churches.

The Presence of the Basel Mission in Cameroon

Christianity in the Cameroon was spread through different denominational and national filters. When the Germans occupied Cameroon in 1884, the Baptist Mission transferred its missionary responsibilities to the Basel Mission (BM). The BM was, in essence, a transnational and ecumenical form of mission, but depended on German religious and financial support for its work in Cameroon.

In order to become familiar with the missionary situation in Cameroon, the BM tried to organise a school programme, in line with the ideas acquired at the Côte d'Ivoire, where the BM had previously worked, which was basically associated with strict supervision. For this purpose the Basel missionaries drew on linguistic data developed by Alfred Saker. And it was through their own contributions to the study of the Douala language that it grew to such an extent that this language gradually evolved to become a means of evangelical communicating and civilising thoughts throughout the world of southern Cameroon: Bakwiri, Sanaga Maritime, Bassa, the Grassfields (Bafut and Bamiléke), and Bamoun.

The BM was able to employ some good Baptist members as a teaching staff. But there continued to be a lack of qualified teachers and the BM decided in 1890 to organise special courses in Douala for those who were already working with the mission movement. One of the teachers was Theodor Christaller, who was the son of a BM missionary to the Côte d'Ivoire. In agreement with the German government and the BM, Christaller was sent to set up an official teaching programme in Douala. In addition to preparing numerous school books and a Douala language grammar, he also strived to provide higher education in German to those who were already engaged in government service or commerce. Such activities helped the BM to consolidate its position in the city in a relatively short time, while also laying a basis for progressing the work towards the interior of the continent. And while the Douala was traditionally a trading tribe, which jealously guarded its trading monopoly with

the tribes living in the interior of the country, it did not place obstacles to missionaries who wanted to journey to the interior. As a result many missionary stations were established, first a few hundred kilometres from Douala, and subsequently further into the Bamileke and Bamoun countries. The Douala, however, did resist the German colonial government, which disrupted the trade relations of the Douala king in its intent to extend its power over the land and people, but they ultimately could not stop the German conquest.

In addition it is important to note the role of the BM in the expansion of German plantations in the vicinity of Victoria and Buea.

Victoria's Plantation Challenge

The Germans initially consolidated their position in the coastal region, and then proceeded to gradually penetrate the hinterland. In 1885 they began to explore the slopes of Mount Cameroon in the Bakwiri region and to raise the German flag there. This region proved very attractive to the establishment of plantations, and shortly after Victoria came under German colonialism, some German firms undertook the cultivation of plantations in the region. In the process, German trading companies increasingly increased their contacts with the tribes in the hinterlands. During this period the famous botanical garden of Victoria was also created to improve food products and to discover new methods of exploiting the vast Cameroonian lands. German support for commercial enterprises disadvantaged the Cameroonian people. Not only were the populations deprived of their land, but men, women, and even children were recruited in hundreds of thousands as porters, employed to carry baggage or for forced labour in interest of the plantations, with no laws regulating their working schedules.

In order to acquire land in the area the German colonial administration forced the chiefs to cede land as it had done at the beginning of the German occupation of Douala in 1884, when the Germans owned no land in Cameroon. After agreeing upon the sale of the properties of the chief of Douala and the Chief Akwa the Germans declared all 'unoccupied' land to be 'Crown land'. As has been marked by Jonas N. Dah (1983:53-56):

> On July 12th, 1884, the Kings of Duala signed the following famous document with representatives of the German Reich:
>
> We the undersigned, Kings and Chiefs of the territory named Cameroon, situated along the River between the Rivers Bimbia in the north and Kwaka in the south, and as far as longitude 4.10 degree north, have voluntarily decided, during the course of an assembly held at the German factory on the banks of King Akwa's territory, that we are today abandoning totally all our rights relating to sovereignty, legislation and administration of our territory.
>
> The hoisting of the German flag in Dido, Akwa and Bell quarters of Duala finalised the act of Cameroon coming under German protection. The Chiefs were certainly not aware of the implications of what they were signing. Anyhow the chief of Bonaberi or Hichory town – Green Joss – refused to sign the treaty because of conflicts with King of Bell. Green Joss preferred English to German rule of this area but now it was too late, for the king of Bell had claimed that area to be under his rule.

As a result, wherever the colonising German power advanced and appropriated new areas, every uninhabited region was declared crown property. The local African could only own the land that was used directly for the cultivation of consumption goods, which did not take into account grazing and hunting lands, as well as land left to fallow for future cultivation (Mbuagbaw, Brain, and Palmer 1987:70).

At the same time, the exploitation of land for plantation production of crops such as coffee, tobacco, sugar, cotton, and rubber for the German and European markets required adequate supplies of workers that were not available in the immediate region. The expansion of the BM until 1902 was also associated with the plantations that had been established in Victoria. Let us limit ourselves to the most important points. The Mount Cameroon region was transformed into a vast area of German plantations. The commercial companies were granted land concessions of colossal dimensions, initially

10,000 hectares and then even 100,000 hectares and employed some 16,000 to 20,000 workers. It was in 1899 that the first contracts were signed with the Bamileke chiefs to provide the necessary workers for the plantations. At the same time the German colonial government allied with these chiefs to recruit labourers *en masse* to build roads and railways (Terretta 2014:46). Through this agreement, cheap labour had been procured for the commercial companies with wages likely to be less than 200 marks annually for each worker. While the importation of Chinese labour had also been considered by the colonial firms, this proposal was rejected by the German government.

To deal with the problem of recruiting workers, the indigenous population, which was concentrated in indigenous reserves whose size was always decreasing, was first forced to be hired by a commercial company. The local population however was too small to meet the needs of plantation production, and they rioted and revolted against such work. This meant that the necessary workers had to be recruited from other regions such as the Bamileke country. To achieve this goal, the German administration suggested that the BM undertake work among the Bali, where the BM had established a missionary station, and facilitate, under the cover of spreading the Christian religion, control over these people and persuade them to undertake plantation work. The BM's response was that lack of funds prevented it from expanding its work, but it was willing to take an interest in the indigenous people working on the plantations (Rudin 1938:365).

But these workers were not easily hired for such a work in an unhealthy climate. They came down from the high healthy lands to labour in the muddy malarial lands near the coast of Cameroon, where even the diet was unfamiliar. So it came to pass that the Germans began by police and military force to reduce entire communities to slavery. In other words, it was a system of forced labour, caused also by the appalling working conditions that were clearly explained by the high mortality among these unfortunate workers. The German plantation owners could only be successful in their enterprise by making contracts with the chiefs of the interior, most Bamileke tribes, who in exchange for liquor, arms, and gunpowder agreed to recruit their own people. Nevertheless these chiefs were possibly not all the time aware of the full implications of such contracts (Mbuagbaw, Brain, and Palmer 1987:72).

Mainly the representatives of commercial companies feared the ruin of the reservoir of Cameroonian labour. The growing need for workers on the plantations risked undermining the foundations of the proletarian market, the majority of which had to be reserved for porterage service. Traders also wanted to see Cameroonians evolve to become suppliers of German imported products. It was impossible for them to trade with plantation workers. These were often paid in kind or forced to obtain supplies from plantation stalls (van Slageren 1972:73).

While the Christian missions were aware of the bad working conditions and hardships endured by the workers they remained silent for a long time instead of opposing such measures. For example, the Catholic Mission appointed catechists who worked for the management of the plantations. These catechists worked as labour supervisors during the day and taught catechism during their free hours. To support this collaboration, the Catholic Church was given a permanent church in Victoria. Subsequently the Catholic influence spread in the former Protestant field of the BMS, where schools were founded. We are even tempted to suppose that the Roman Catholic Church at that time was nourished by the idea that there was no other way to evangelise the people than to identify with the German colonial system and to adapt to the excesses of the colonial regime.

In this context it is interesting to note also that this mission had a very special seal. On this seal appeared a cross as well as a pickaxe, a hoe, and a scoop and it bore the words: '*Cruce et Labore*'. This was to demonstrate that man is saved by faith and work, in other words, that the Black is saved by his work and that he has to be educated in field work. What it implies even more is that the African has to be first educated to become a human person before he could become a Christian. The missionaries regarded the people of the Cameroons as poor children and they had a hard task to mould them to maturity (Berger 1978:217). This coincided more or less with the BM which had reversed these verbs to say: '*Labora et ora*', that is to say that the Black had first to work before learning to pray. However in 1889, the year that marked the turnover of the view of the BM on the issue of forced labour, this formula was changed to '*Ora et Labor*a' with emphasis on '*Labora*'. As Rudin (1938:315) notes: 'The evidence is overwhelming that missionaries believed it was their duty to teach natives how to work'. Another reason for not engaging in a struggle against this exploitative colonial system was probably the pietistic thinking that reigned in Protestant circles in Württemberg, which made it

difficult for the BM to condemn the principle of colonialism (Messina and van Slageren 2005:40). This point has also been stressed by the Swedish researcher Erik Halldén (1968:5):

> In Württemberg pietism the foremost and internationally known figure is Johannes Tobias Beck. According to Beck the foundation of all missionary calling is an intensive study of the Bible. The mission was to devote itself to an exclusively religious activity excluding every other cultural element. From this point of departure Beck came to criticise the missionary activities of that time in general and the Basel Mission in particular.
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> Moreover Beck's biblicistically coloured criticism of the Basel Mission is not unique. He was preceded here by, inter alia, Rudolf Stier, who was in 1824-1828 a teacher at the mission-seminary in Basel. During this period Stier was involved in a conflict between the Basel Mission and the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in London. From his Biblicistic standpoint he preached the eternal damnation of those who had not heard the Christian Gospel and stressed the necessity of basing one's actions only on the truths to be found in the Bible. In this conflict, as in his writings, Stier showed himself sceptical of confessional and church dogmas. The essential element in the training of missionaries is and must be a thorough schooling in God's word. Accordingly, the work of the missionary becomes a purely religious function, whereby, putting aside every cultural function, he meditates this Bible word to another people and language. For Stier the reformed way of thinking the truth, wherever it might be revealed, must be in conformity with God's will. God's word, i.e. the Bible, was the only mediator of the truth.

In the meantime, all these social ills alerted more advanced German Christians, to the point of provoking discussions in the Reichstag. In this context it is important to mention also the missionary Bitzer, who was really the soul of the resistance.

> Bitzer was aware of what had happened in the first part of the 1890's in connection with the war against the Bakwiri, and he was of the opinion that the Basel Mission must now with all the more forcefulness and firmness represent the interests of the population. Bizer observed at the same time that the land was not be bought from the Bakwiri but taken unwillingly from the original African owners The African owners felt, and according to Bitzer rightly, that when they were surrounded on all sides by plantations, their present and future possibilities of survival were seriously curtailed (Halldén 1968:107).

This protest was the prelude to the BM's campaign in favour of the indigenous population. A campaign that would last until 1907 and during which the abuses relating to the question of the plantations were brought to light. All the facts concerning the colonial identification with speculators and farmers were then systematically published in German circles and in public newspapers.

We are then entitled to assume that the BM did not initially take a position in this matter to do justice to the natives, the so-called fourth social rank, which was being formed in Cameroon. On the contrary, it seems certain that the BM acted to realise the ideal of a society of autonomous African planters. In other words, the BM did not take a position primarily in favour of the mistreated workers but for the autonomous African planters whose land had been used for colonial exploitations. This ideal undoubtedly corresponded to the traditions of the German social environment, where the Mission found its members. But this ideal, however lofty it may be, had no chance of being realised in the dislocated situation of Cameroon at that time (van Slageren 1972:73). In this connection it is important to quote again Halldén (1968:14-15):

> A German missionary is also the bearer of his German missionary character, and may conceivably make use of the spreading of German culture and German Christianity. But at the same time he must in conformity with the ideas of romanticism, defend the individual character of every people, and see that the noblest creation of an African folk-spirit, viz the African property, should have its rightful place. Therefore,

> although the missionaries could not adduce any argument whereby the African right of ownership could be motivated by a European colonial law and guaranteed, it was asserted that the tribe is the owner of the land. In this case however the blacks found it difficult to resist the temptation of selling their property. The result would be a propertyless proletariat.

Nevertheless this ideal, however well-intentioned it appeared, did not correspond to the needs of Cameroonian workers who continued to suffer from the often very rigid German colonial regime in an unhealthy climate. It should be noticed that the missionary activities of the BM were at the beginning carried out under a government which was at first tolerant and granted the Mission freedom and scope of operation. Finally the BM refused to be an easy instrument of colonisation even if individual missionaries worked to support their home government. The vivid way with which the Basel Mission finally opposed the government's expropriation of native land shows to what extent it was conscious of its motivation for work among pagans (Dah 1983:261).

France in Cameroon

From 1914 to 1916 the Germans were attacked by Allied military troops and in 1916 they were driven back by the British and French forces who then occupied the country. In fact, the League of Nations had left it to these two nations to administer Cameroon through the form of a mandate. The greater part was entrusted to France which formed an autonomous territory, dependent on French Equatorial Africa; with the Director-General was placed a Governor or High Commissioner of colonies. He was to ensure order and social security and to provide for the economy and development, to coordinate health work, education, and agriculture. The mandatory powers were yet also required to abolish slavery and forced labour, to respect native rights, and allow members of the League access to the territory. They were even forbidden to establish economic monopolies or to develop the territory as a military or naval base. Despite such good intentions, the mandate system had little real effect. This was largely due to the fact that the League of Nations itself became an increasingly impotent body, relying on moral pressures alone.

It was even dissolved in 1942 and later replaced by the United Nations Organisation (UNO), which took over the mandates for the two parts of Cameroon administrated by France and Britain (Mbuagbaw, Brain, and Palmer 1987:82).

Nevertheless the administrators took the liberty to treat the 'natives' with the following harsh penalties: the whip, the fine, the prison. They also had the right to choose people to carry out work for the common interest of the regions where these people lived or elsewhere, to make roads and new works for the extension of the railway.

Maurice Benoit (no date) has in this connection noted that:

> In 1930 the French administration had absolutely prohibited compulsory labour for public purposes. However, the built-up march of labour legislation, was rather a law making a 'stain of oil' because too many people tended to think that the colonial is more or less 'a slave driver'.

The punishment of the people was possible also because these people were persecuted by local chiefs who no longer accepted, as in German times, their devotion to the Christian faith and to the Church. The Society of Evangelical Missions of Paris (SMEP), which succeeded the BM in 1919, often intervened for the cause of these persecuted Christians. This resounds in some Christian songs, which date from this painful time, such as the following verses:

> Jesus takes me
> Jesus takes me
> Put me in heaven
>
> If I die
> Let me sing like this
> Jesus take me
>
> [...]

Walk well
Walk well
Rest in JAHWEH

Death is a good man
He loves the poor as well as the rich
He unites them
He does not distinguish
He calls them all to the same place
(van Slageren 1972:175-176)

However, it is likely the SMEP and the Catholic Mission of Cameroon preferred pursuing a policy of non-interference in the political affairs and social problems of the Cameroonian people. All missionary efforts were invested in religious education and making the young Bamileke and Bamoun churches fruitful. These missions therefore had the task of promoting the spirit and the social, the moral, and the spiritual mind of the people. Therefore certainly a few young men did use new opportunities, provided through mission or French schooling and becoming part of a Christian community, and managed to resist the chiefs' appropriation of their labour. These mission-educated evolved often as a generation of youth who gained literacy and European-language training from colonial administrations, and used their newly acquired skills to profit from economic opportunities (Terretta 2014:57,80). The Catholic mission experienced the same development in the Bamileke region and in the north of Cameroon.

In the Noun area forced labour during the Second World War (1940-1945)

The Governor General of Dakar, Pierre Boisson, wanting to remain faithful to the Vichy Government, fiercely opposed anything that resembled 'Gaullism' and anything that was Anglo-Saxon. His men did not even hesitate to open fire on French persons during General de Gaulle's famous landing attempt in Dakar in September 1940, nor to shoot Gaullists from the colonies, while whites were also sentenced to death, but they not being present were only sentenced by default. But General De Gaulle soon took control of the situation.

On August 27, 1940, Cameroon deliberately sided with the United Nations. But the government of Free France wanted to mark its respect for previous commitments and, on August 29, General de Gaulle wrote to the British prime minister, announcing the eventual joining of Cameroon: 'I have ensured the administration of this territory with all the powers and obligations that this mandate entails'. Cameroon from 1940 to 1945 continued to be administered as an autonomous territory: economic equality had to be reserved for the Allies. The territory nevertheless remained in the war with all the forces at its disposal and wanted to deserve the beautiful name it had given itself of 'Free French Cameroon' (Lembezat 1954:80-81).

On June 18, 1940, General De Gaulle had however already launched an appeal on the London radio: 'France has lost a battle; it has not lost the war'. By this appeal he called the French residing outside the metropolis to the fight and to resist also those who lived outside their home country. Then, Equatorial Africa decided to adhere to this idea of Free France and the French inhabitants of Cameroon also decided to start the fight until the liberation of the native country. Then, in response to a call sent to him from Douala, General de Gaulle sent his representative to Cameroon: Colonel Leclerc. He arrived in Douala in August 1940 and he managed to set foot on the quays of the port of Douala and in three days he managed to rally all the lands of Equatorial Africa for the struggle for the liberation of France. Aside from the French, more than twenty-thousand Cameroonians, from north to south, from west to east, were enlisted under the orders of Colonel Leclerc into this army of Free France to wage war against the German troops as far as Europe. These Cameroonian soldiers were engaged in the battle of Koufra, Mourzouk, Fezzan, the war campaign of Tripolitaine, Tunisia, France, and Germany. The military section of Leclerc freed also Paris on 25 August 1944 and Straasburg (Ekiabi 1960:182).

Already around 1935 the French administration tried to use the surplus of Bamilkéaux labour for the Foumbot plantations in the plain of the Noun River. There, the Compagnie West Cameroon (CWC) and many other European planters got access to large-scale land management. Such a process corresponded to the objective of the French government to develop Cameroon by promoting the collaboration of private initiatives with administrative organisations. Several thousand men were sent in six-monthly then quarterly shifts to this so-called compulsory work. As the chiefs

functioned as agents of recruitment of the forced labour, we understand that this was preferably sought among the common people. On a moral level, forced labour even had profound consequences at this time. Given that both men and women were requisitioned, the latter especially for sorting coffee, a large proportion of the forced labourers agreed to live in an irregular marital situation. Family institutions - adultery was once considered in traditional environments as a stain affecting the entire village - were then threatened by the development of free unions in both traditional and Christian environments. Men and women lived in promiscuity. Women could earn much more than men by indulging in excessive sexual indulgence. Divorces had become incredibly frequent and marriage had very little value (van Slageren 1972:246-247).

In the background, Governor Carras came to organise the supply of the troops in the field by the forced recruitment of workers from all the Bamileke and Bamoun villages for the production of the necessary food. In the very fertile plain of the River Noun, many plantations were created for this purpose.

On this point J. Despois (1945:640) remarked:

> Traditionally the Bamileke were willing to cultivate there and permitted their wives to work there, but they were reluctant to live in this Bamoun land. For, they are convinced that one cannot live there without becoming ill and their wives imagine that they will become sterile. If they definitively cross the Noun, several are in fact stricken with virulent malaria.

However, as a large part of these workers were Christians, the leaders of these plantations allowed the churches to install catechists there, which gave birth to some churches, some of which exist to this day. But not all these workers were ready to accept the working conditions to which they were subjected and they very quickly joined the men who fought for the end of forced labour and for better remuneration for the work on the plantations. It is also important to underline that the work for the less strong was sometimes too hard. But a refusal carried the possibility of being placed in detention without trial for up to fifteen days in prison and being forced to return to the work. Such practices caused many hysterical illnesses and even suicides. Absconding from work and

fleeing from these plantations was almost impossible as the barriers were guarded by ferocious dogs.

When the post-war social reforms led in 1946 to the abolition of the forced labour and native system, there were massive returns of deported persons from the region of the Noun. They took shelter in urban centres like Bafoussam. These significant returns of young, freed elements allowed, it is true, the economic and social growth visible in the considerable efforts which were made in terms of the development of plantations in the fertile lands of the right bank of the Noun and in terms of home improvement. But at the same time the city became a refuge for those whose marital status was irregular. Even for women the city offered a chance of escape. Several Bamileke women as well as Bamoun women, who also came to settle in Bafoussam for example, engaged in regular prostitution (van Slageren 1972:247).

With the support of the Cameroonian soldiers and the exhausting work of the workers in the plantations of Noun, Colonel Leclerc succeeded in obtaining with the United States, Canada, England, Russia, and other countries still a great victory against Germany. But this was to the detriment of Cameroonian soldiers, many of whom returned to Cameroon after the war with incurable injuries and mutilations. Indeed, the ancient Cameroon soldiers, who returned from the European battlefields, were hopeful of having special privileges from the Cameroon government and society. But the prevailing civil war that later ruined different parts of the country resulted in their endeavours in the Second World War not being recognised (Ketchoua 1962:176). *L'armed hostility pour un national liberation* was in 1955 launched by Um Nyobé, born among the Bassa in the middle of Presbyterian intellectuals, according to the liberal tradition of black Americans. And from the Bassa country the revolt spread to other parts of Cameroon, especially to the Bamileke country. And it is certain that a number of veterans for Free France were also part of the social political movement in order to organise a Cameroonian regime outside France which until then had the mandate to administer Cameroon. This movement evolved into an internecine war which resulted in many casualties and also cancelled the supposed remunerations of the veterans, the former Cameroonian soldiers.

The workers of the forced labour of the Noun area suffered, in their turn, as many evils as those to which they had been exposed during the work required on the plantations. And more than that, when they returned from their villages, they often found their homes demolished and the ties of blood with their families, women, and children broken. It was also the case that a number of people on their return committed suicide by hanging themselves on the doors of their destroyed houses out of anger and frustration.

Conclusion

In this article we have tried to consider slavery and forced labour in the Cameroons in the past centuries as a cruel method to oppress the local vulnerable people. But was it only a historical phenomenon? And what about the persons who continue to do evil? As far as it concerns the Cameroon, there remains also the problem of the former chiefs of the Bamileke people who favoured the raids of their fellow citizens and enriched themselves by this trade, and still many others, such as for example the chiefs of Douala, who had retained slaves in their towns, and made them work for their profit or exploited them for their own honour. These issues are manifested in various forms that eventually should be treated in a subsequent article.

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