

## French-Cameroon Immigrants and the Pan-Kamerun Movement

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### Abstract

*This paper investigates the militancy of French-Cameroon immigrants in the Pan-Kamerun Movement that surfaced in the Southern Cameroons few years after the Second World War. It explains why both economic and social (protest) migrants from French Cameroon still desired a connection with their birth places and homes of origin. A careful analysis of the data from archival and secondary sources reveals that their militancy in the movement was not because of the dream for a Greater Kamerun or the British neglect of the socio-economic development of the Southern Cameroons but because of their status as “strangers” and other related problems which they faced. The study concludes that they championed the course for a Greater Kamerun because they wanted to be citizens in their new homesteads.*

**Key Words:** *Immigrants, Pan-Kamerun Movement, “Strangers,” French Cameroon, Southern Cameroons, Reunification.*

### Introduction

The most significant event of the First World War in Cameroon was the Anglo – French partition of the German protectorate (Kamerun) in 1916. During the war, British, French and Belgian troops invaded and defeated the Germans by February 1916. The defeat and expulsion of the Germans was followed by the partition of the territory into British and French spheres.

The British sphere consisted of two disjointed narrow strips of territory in the west, stretching from Lake Chad to the Atlantic coast and bordering on Nigeria. It comprised about one fifth of the total area and population of German Cameroon. Britain further divided her territory into two: British Northern Cameroons and British Southern Cameroons. The French sphere consisted of the remaining four-fifth of the territory and populations. The League of Nations later approved the partition and Britain and France had to administer their respective spheres as separate mandate ‘B’ territories of the League of Nations.

French Cameroon immigrants refer to the inhabitants of the British Southern Cameroons whose birth places, homes of origin or ethnic bases were in the French administered Cameroon. These were people who migrated for one reason or the other and settled permanently in the British territory of Southern Cameroons before and during the Mandate and Trusteeship periods. They were both economic and protest immigrants because the reasons for their migrations included ‘pull’ and ‘push’ factors such as the lucrative plantation jobs, trade opportunities, British liberal policies and abundant fertile land in the Southern Cameroons, as well as population pressure, conscription into the army, *Indigénat*, de-Germanisation, forced labour (*Corvée and Prestation*), high taxes, police harassment and the imposition of artificial chiefs in French Cameroon (Nfi, 2012). These immigrants became interested in the Pan-Kamerun Movement in their host

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territory. The Pan-Kamerun Movement or the Cameroons Unification Movement developed among Southern Cameroons intelligentsia after the Second World War. Its members called for the recreation of the Greater Kamerun through the elimination of the artificial Oliphant-Picot boundary<sup>1</sup> and the reunification of British and French Cameroons. The movement opposed the balkanization of Kamerun and believed that this colonial division was detrimental to the development of the two territories and the freedoms of the indigenous peoples. They were out to remake German Kamerun hence their spelling of Cameroon with 'K'. French Cameroon immigrants featured prominently in this movement.

The abundant literature on the Pan-Kamerun Movement is almost silent on the interest of the immigrant population in the movement. Le Vine (1964), Welch (1966), Chem-Langhëë (1973), Kofele-Kale (1980), Chem-Langhëë and Njeuma (1980), Njeuma (1992), Amaazee (1995) and others attribute the birth of the Pan-Kamerun Movement either to the British neglect of the socio-economic development of the Southern Cameroons and the resultant Igbophobia by the victim population or to the 'Kamerun Idea', the nostalgia about German Kamerun. Where French Cameroon immigrants are mentioned, the researchers limit themselves to the role played by these immigrants in the reunification process. This is the case with Amaazee (1994).<sup>2</sup> This study therefore complements their findings by focusing on the reasons for French Cameroon immigrant's militancy in the Pan-Kamerun Movement.

### Reasons for Immigrant's Militancy in the Pan-Kamerun Movement

As indicated above, it may appear a paradox that immigrant populations escaping from inadequate economic opportunities and political persecutions in French Cameroon had to work for the reunification of their host territory and their home of origin. French Cameroon settlers in the Southern Cameroons were victims of many forms of abuses, discrimination, tribalism and segregation. They were not considered as citizens or British protected persons. In response, they created pressure groups to carter for their grievances. In 1947 they created the French Cameroon Welfare Union (FCWU) under the leadership of Robert Kum Dibongue and Joseph Henry Ngu.<sup>3</sup> In 1949, they joined Endeley's Cameroon National Federation (CNF) and in 1951, they withdrew from the CNF to create the Kamerun United National Congress (KUNC). These pressure groups advocated the reunification of the Cameroons and the elimination of the Anglo-French boundary. They dominated the Kumba Pan-Kamerun Congress of 1951 and wrote many petitions between 1949 and 1953 to the United Nations in favour of reunification.

The British authorities saw the Pan-Kamerun Movement as a group of disgruntled Southern Cameroon elite who could be made to change their stance and the movement fundamentally weakened if greater autonomy was granted the Southern Cameroon within the Nigerian Federation. The British High Commission to the Southern Cameroons, E. J. Gibbons even declared in 1951 that "much of the drive behind the movement will disappear once N N Mbile (the prominent British Cameroon leader of the movement) has secured election to the House of Assembly and begins to turn his attention to more practical issues" (NAB) file vb/b (1951)1:7) However, what threatened the British authorities was the militancy of French Cameroon immigrants on this issue. They were more committed to the movement and this benefitted from the support of *Union des Population du Cameroun* (UPC), a communist oriented political party in French Cameroon. The commitment and militancy to the Pan-Cameroon Movement was influenced by the following problems:

**Land Disputes:** When the immigrants arrived in the Southern Cameroons, their major problem was the lack of adequate accommodation and land for farming. There were no resettlement homes erected for them. They were not granted permission to reside among the indigenes. To further aggravate the situation, immigrants were not initially allowed to buy land or to build or farm permanently. These restrictions were based on the existing land tenure system (Meek, 1957). During the colonial period, the plantations and cash crop economy made the colonial masters to encourage the occupation of land by “strangers” for the cultivation of cash crops. This change of policy attracted many French Cameroonians to the fertile volcanic soils in the Victoria and Kumba Divisions of the Southern Cameroons. By 1933, about 169 immigrants already had large Cocoa farms in Kumba Division. The influx of immigrants and their involvement in commercial farming was followed by land disputes between the indigenes and “strangers”. The indigenes argued that if they permitted “strangers” to plant cocoa on land assigned to them, their claim to land property would be reinforced. The Bakweri Land Claim Committee and the Bakossi Land Syndicate were thus formed to protect indigenes land rights in the Victoria and Kumba Divisions respectively.<sup>4</sup>

Following the creation of the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) in 1946 and the construction of the Kumba-Mamfe road in 1947 there was an influx of Nigerians into the plantation zone. This made labour cheap in the CDC plantations. As a result, most French Cameroonians decided to quit the plantations and create private farm or plantations. Due to the fertility of the soils and the lucrative nature of their agricultural businesses, these immigrants did not nurture an imminent desire to return to their areas of origin. Consequently land disputes with indigenes intensified. This was so because non-indigenes were generally hard working, a quality that brought more wealth to them, sometimes to the chagrin of some indigenes who felt threatened by their superior economic power. In a memorandum to the District Officer (D. O.) for Kumba in May 1953, the president of the FCWU wrote:

...Our compatriots in the British Cameroons were casting covetous eyes on the excellent results achieved by French Cameroonians from their farming operations and that they were making strenuous efforts to reap the fruits of these men’s labour. There are numerous instances where certain envious and improvident individuals sought and are still seeking to bring about, by subtle means, the eviction of industrious persons of French Cameroon origin who have developed excellent farms in their areas (NAB, si(1951)3, FCWU)

According to Robert Kum Dibongue, farmers from French Cameroon were subjected to a merciless and unremitting fleecing by the landlord in Kumba Division. The solution to this problem was the recreation of the Greater Kamerun so that immigrants should not be “strangers” in their own country.

**The Scholarship Problem:** One of the problems that immigrants faced because they were not British protected persons was the exclusion of their sons and daughters from the CDC scholarship scheme set up in 1949. In the various petitions of the FCWU in 1949 and 1951, the immigrants argued that they were equally responsible for the CDC revenue that was used to sponsor the Southern Cameroonians in schools and colleges. They indicated that the ex-German plantations being exploited by the CDC were opened by their kin and kith and that if not for their sweated labour there would have been no plantations for the CDC to operate (NAB, si(1951)10,

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FCWU). Immigrants, therefore, requested the CDC scholarship for their off-springs in these words;

We contribute a considerable part of the revenue from which the scholarship awarded to promising Cameroonians youths are financed. We submit, therefore, that it is but equitable and just that our children should be allocated equal opportunities in the matter of these scholarships with those of the local inhabitants (NAB, si(1951)10, FCWU).

The immigrants further stated that except for the very recent advent of the Igbo and other groups from the Eastern Province of Nigeria, almost all African enterprises such as petty trade, handicraft and motor transport in the Southern Cameroons were in the hands of French Cameroonians. As such they merited compensation through scholarships for their pupils. When this problem was first raised in 1949, the British authorities refused to see it as such. They reminded the immigrants that CDC scholarships were reserved exclusively for persons of British Cameroons origins. When the Commissioner for the Southern Cameroons, Gibbons, realized that the immigrants were increasingly becoming vocal on the subject of reunification because of this scholarship issue, he requested the CDC to revise the conditions for its scholarships. In 1951 the revised conditions indicated that persons eligible for the CDC scholarships had to be; “indigenes of the Southern Cameroons, children of indigenes of the Southern Cameroons and children whose parents have been resident in the British Cameroons throughout the child’s primary and secondary education and provided the candidate in question has taken his or her primary education in the British Cameroon and secondary education either in the British Cameroon or Nigeria” (NAB, si(1951)10, FCWU). This was one of the frustrations of the immigrants that pushed them into the hands of the promoters of the Pan-Kamerun Movement

**Employment:** Another issue that featured prominently on their list of grievances was the problem of employment. The immigrants knew that because the overwhelming majority of the indigenes received not more than six years of education, they could also dominate the civil service and the teaching profession in the Southern Cameroons like the Nigerians. For example, in 1936, of the total 163 clerical staff in the government services, 130 were Nigerians while only 33 were indigenes. In 1938 there were 35 trained teachers in the territory out of whom 23 were Nigerians, 10 indigenes and 2 French Cameroonians (Aka, 2001). The immigrants were unable to understand why qualified French Cameroonians should be discriminated against in the matter of appointments in the administration when they were also Kamerunians They petitioned the recruitment of Nigerians on the grounds that they were not Kamerunians. As such they were determined to reunify Kamerun and guarantee jobs for all qualified Kamerunians

Again, even the employed immigrants, when on leave or retirement, were only entitled to government transport assistance from their town of service in the Southern Cameroons to the frontiers unlike the indigenes who benefitted from government transport from their work places to their villages of origin. They were responsible for their transport from the frontier to their ethnic or home base in French Cameroon. This was an important financial burden for workers from distant areas like Yaounde, Bafia, Babimbi, Kribi, Edea and Yabassi. Worse-still, upon the return of these workers from French Cameroon they were given no concession regarding reducing or easing custom duties on their personal belongings. The difficulties encountered by workers as they moved within Kamerun were the subject of many petitions. For example, in a

petition to the UN Visiting Mission in 1952 French Cameroonians led by B. S. Ambahne complained that:

We cannot understand why a man whose parents are from Douala but who was born and educated and employed in Buea for example should not be given his leave pay right to Douala. That such officers are subjected to detailed search by the customs is an occasion to make us believe that we have lost our rights to free movement within our own country (Regional Archives Bamenda, NW/Bb/1952/2)

Immigrant militancy in the Pan-Kamerun Movement was therefore also due to the difficulties they encountered at the borders as they moved between the two Cameroons. Their problem was not only the inadequate socio-economic infrastructure in the Southern Cameroons, Igbo domination of economic activities, the inadequate constitutional reform in Nigeria or even the “Kamerun Idea” per se. Their problem was harassment at the borders and the desire for freedom of movements.

**The Frontier Problem:** Out of the sixty-six petitions and supplementary petitions to the UN Trusteeship Council from the British Cameroons in 1949, eleven were on the question of the frontier (Ngoh, 1996). The petitions on the frontier issues came mostly from the immigrants. The frontier problem consisted of the high duties, restrictions in the flow of currency from one sphere of the Cameroon to another and the harassment of traders by customs and frontier police agents. The intra-Cameroon Anglo-French boundary had many custom frontier posts where customs officials, the police and *gendarmes* often extort money from people or, at other instances, searched them and seized their goods. (Johnson, 1970)

From 1952, there were even reports of the custom officers raiding homes of suspected smugglers inside towns and villages far removed from the customs frontier (NAB,vb/b1952/1KUNC). In fact, smuggling was a sign of protest and resistance to the obnoxious Anglo-French frontier and many French Cameroon smugglers died in water or in “bushes” as they struggled to escape custom harassments. Goods were abandoned in forests, dumped into rivers or completely destroyed when these smugglers were confronted by customs officers. These officers even stormed opened markets in the villages in jeeps and land rovers and seized all suspected contraband goods they could find. It was for this reason that the FCWU, in a petition to the UN in 1952, asked for free travel across the boundary without molestation of persons or seizure of goods and money (Gobina, 1990).

Besides, frontier customs barriers distorted traditional trade between the border people. The traders of Bamileke origin resident in the Southern Cameroons could not continue with their trade in Kola as well as other forms of small trans-frontier commerce because of custom barriers. Again, due to the extreme natural difficulty in the way of contact between the Southern Cameroons and Nigeria, as well as the paucity of fishing facilities from Victoria to Calabar and Port Harcourt, French Cameroon became the most convenient route for the evacuation of produce from the British side. Frontier harassment, therefore, prevented immigrant traders in Victoria and Kumba and Bakossi Cocoa farmers from evacuating their goods by the French-Cameroon railway to Douala (NAB, vb/b (1951), KUNC). These traders became particularly strong advocates of reunification because of frontier obstacles to trade. The recreation of Kamerun was to free them from these problems and revive traditional cross border and long distance trade between the peoples of Kamerun

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**Representation in Native Administration:** The clamour for the integration of immigrants in Native Authority Administration began in 1922. In towns like Tiko, Victoria, Buea and Muyuka, French Cameroonians wanted to participate in the management of local councils and customary courts. Indigenous chiefs and their subjects resisted these requests. However, in the Victoria Division, the situation started improving in 1935 when the Newtown Council in Victoria was reorganized with provision for Yaounde and Bakoko members (Monono, 2001:74). In 1939, the Cameroon Welfare Union (CWU) and the Kamerun Union of Settlers (KUS) advocated the integration of the more progressive settlers into the Native Authority Councils even as observers. In 1942, A. Mandoline, a businessman of Beti origin, was co-opted into the Victoria Federated Council.

The FCWU in Tiko, led by Lucas Ayissi, sent a petition to the UN Visiting Mission in 1949 on the representation of immigrants in the local government of Victoria Division in these words;

We the French Cameroons living in the British Cameroons in our humble petition, beg that we too should enjoy the same advantage of education and for the tax we pay in this land of our sojourn and also we should have representatives in the government to voice out the difficulties of the sprinkling, population of French Cameroonians (Monono, 2001:75)

In 1957, the KUS observed in a petition that there were more settlers than indigenes in the council areas of Tiko, Buea, Victoria and Balong in the Victoria Division and argued that settlers be given equal, if not more, representation in these councils. The FCWU in a letter to the DO for Victoria also argued that because of tribalism and discrimination, “strangers” who were paying seventy-five percent tax in the division could not be represented in the local councils (Monono, 2001: 80). “Strangers” who paid the highest tax and had more population were largely excluded from the local governments to the chagrin of these immigrants.

The non-representation of immigrants in the Local Councils and Native Courts led to other forms of discrimination. Settlers who violated indigenous customs and traditions, especially marriage and land laws, were tried in Native Courts and sanctioned severely. They were victims of common law offences such as theft, adultery, rape, illegal possession of arms and contraband. Many were jailed or repatriated from the territory because they were involved in these crimes. As a result of these severe sanctions, life became difficult for many immigrants.

Another source of discontent was harassment from Native Authority Sanitary Inspectors. These inspectors were too hard on the settlers. They invaded the homes of settlers and fined them, claiming that their homes were dirty (NAB, si(1957), KUS:2). It was noticed that indigenes that lived in a more dirty condition were not brought before the courts by the sanitary inspectors. The settlers were also over taxed and harassed by tax collectors. Liquor business known to be dominated by the immigrants had the Liquor Ordinance fees constantly increased (Ibid:4). These and other forms of discrimination suffered by the immigrants persisted because they had no political power and were not represented in the decision making structures.

**The Question of Franchise:** The most crucial problem that preoccupied French Cameroon immigrants was the lack of franchise. In Victoria and Kumba Divisions, these immigrants were known to constitute the ‘king-post’, which supported the economy of these divisions. These immigrants had, thanks to their industry and enterprise, prospered, and contributed to a very

large share of the revenue of these divisions. One of the Governors of the Southern Provinces of Nigeria had in a public meeting in Victoria made it clear that but for the revenue contributed by the immigrants, the Victoria treasury, would become insolvent leading inevitably to the curtailment of essential social services (NAB, si(1951)10, FCWU: 8). Despite their contributions to the economy of the Southern Cameroons, they could not vote or be voted into Local Councils, Native Courts or Nigerian Legislatures.

In July 1951, the immigrants reminded the British of one of the axioms of democracy “no taxation without representation. In a petition to Governor Sir John Stuart Macpherson, the FCWU condemned their disenfranchisement in the following words;

Since we are paying head and income tax, we fail to see why we should be denied representation in the management of this country affair...as a result we cannot understand why immigrants from French Cameroon should be disfranchised ( NAB, si(1951)10, FCWU: 6)

Apart from the taxes they paid, the FCWU petition of 1951 against the disfranchisement of immigrants also indicated that the population living in the areas covered by the Victoria Federated Native Authority and the Bakweri Clan Native Authority was worth being represented in decision-making institutions. According to the UN report of 1949, there were 4, 494 indigenes and 3, 451 settlers in Victoria Division. The FCWU wanted the enfranchisement of these settlers.

The immigrants also protested their exclusion from participating in the 1951 general elections following the Macpherson Constitution of that year. The immigrants were not given the chance to vote or be voted in the Eastern House Assembly in Nigeria. They requested for a special constituency for immigrants but nothing was done. The British responded to their numerous petitions by indicating that the status of British subjects or British protected persons was a necessary qualification for the franchise and persons born in French Cameroon or having acquired French citizenship were automatically disqualified. Immigrants could only vote if they had acquired the status of British subject through naturalization after five years of residence in the Southern Cameroons (Ibid: 28). On the issue of a special electoral unit for French Cameroonians, the British authorities considered it impractical since the immigrants were scattered all over the territory. The issue of franchise for French Cameroon immigrants remained crucial until independence as political leaders favoured and opposed it depending on their political options. It was the disfranchisement of French Cameroonians that constantly reminded them that they were “strangers” in their own land and that the solution was the recreation of the Greater Kamerun.

### **Conclusion**

French Cameroon immigrants were the most vocal members of the Pan-Kamerun Movement. While the Southern Cameroonians joined the movement because of British neglect of the socio-economic development of their land and Igbo domination, French Cameroon immigrant saw reunification as a solution to their daily problems as “strangers” in the Southern Cameroons. They were denied the franchise, excluded from decision-making institutions, denied jobs, chased out of fertile land, denied CDC scholarships, harassed, persecuted, jailed, repatriated or expelled and exploited at the frontiers because they were not British subjects or British protected persons. All these discriminations could not be accepted because they believed that they were at home in

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Kamerun. It was the need to end these discriminations that they championed the course for a Greater Kamerun. This was through their membership in all the pressure groups and political parties that had reunification as objective.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The Anglo-French Boundary in Cameroon was also called the Oliphant-Picot line because the partition of Cameroon started in London in 1916 when Lancelot Oliphant, a senior official of the British Foreign Office and George Picot from France, drew a line on the Cameroon map dividing it into two.

<sup>2</sup> Amaazee, V.B., 1994, 'The Role of French Cameroonians in the Unification of Cameroon, 1916-1961' *TransAfrican Journal of History*, No. 23, pp.195-234.

<sup>3</sup> Dibongue was from the Akwa clan in Douala. He migrated to the Southern Cameroon in 1918 and served the British as an administrator. J.H Ngu was a Bamileke from Dschang and served the British as a prison administrator.

<sup>4</sup> Created in the 1940s, the Bakweri Land Claim Committee did not go beyond agitations and petitions but the Bakossi Land Syndicate which existed since the 1930s moved from petitions to anti-settlers violence that resulted in the Bakossi-Bamileke War of 1966-1967.

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