

**Security or Insecurity, the Gendarmerie and Popular Reaction in West Cameroon,
1961 – 1964**

**Walter Gam Nkwi
University of Buea, Cameroon
E-mail: nkwiwally@yahoo.com**

Abstract

The Gendarmerie is not new in French Africa. Its activities in Cameroon since the re-birth of multi-party politics in 1990s sent shock waves across erstwhile West Cameroon and rekindled old memories of brutality and popular reaction. As a paramilitary force, it was intended for security purposes when it was introduced but paradoxically, it turned out in its activities in West Cameroon to be a source of fear and insecurity. This article examines those activities of the Gendarmerie paying close attention to the overall tradition and origin of Gendarmerie in West Cameroon. What were the circumstances which led to the introduction of the Gendarmerie in West Cameroon? What was the overall strength of West Cameroon security forces before the Gendarmerie was introduced? Primary sources from the National Archives Buea, Cameroon and secondary sources from libraries were consulted and from them, the paper contends that the Gendarmes were strongly abhorred by most West Cameroonians, because of their activities on the civilian population, police and custom officers. The paper also contends that in as much as there were security functions embedded in the Gendarmerie corps, it turned out to be more an insecure force to the population and even to some police and customs corps than anticipated.

Introduction

The democratic process in Africa south of the Sahara since the 1990s has been well documented to the extent that whatever one attempts to do now towards that direction will appear as the obvious. Far from being the obvious, this article takes 1990 as its datum point and traces the Gendarmerie from this period, even though it was introduced into erstwhile West Cameroon in 1961. The democratic process in Cameroon in the early 1990s witnessed violence and brutality of the civilian population from the Gendarmes. The use of the Gendarme by the incumbent government to clamp down on opposition and gag pro-democratic citizens raised a lot of questions on the mandate of the force. Apart from that, the Gendarmes constantly harassed citizens by requesting bribes on the country's main highway

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and travel documents like the national identity card which is a compulsory document held by any Cameroonian of 18 years and above. These activities enkindled old memories of activities in West Cameroon since 1960s, most of which have rarely been documented. This is the gap which this paper hopes to fill.

Cameroon, like most African countries, is a colonial construct. It was colonised by Germany in July 1884. During the First World War, the Germans were elbowed out of the territory. In 1916, the territory was provisionally partitioned between France and Britain. Britain took 1/5th of the territory while France took 4/5th. While France administered her portion as part of French Equatorial Africa, Britain administered her own section as an appendage to Nigeria. In 1922 these portions became Mandatory Territories under the supervision of the League of Nations but remained in their different respective administrative spheres. In 1946, they became Trust Territories under the newly formed United Nations Organisation which under Article 76(B), were to prepare the people of the territory towards self-government and independence (Fanso, 1989). This, in conjunction with other factors emanating from the Second World War, expedited the move towards independence. While French Cameroon had her independence in January 1960 and Nigeria in October 1960, the British Southern Cameroon was to decide in a plebiscite either to join French Cameroon or Nigeria. The plebiscite ended in favour of British Cameroon re-unifying with French Cameroons on 1st October 1961 (Ngoah, 1996). Between 1961 and 1972, British Southern Cameroons was known as West Cameroon.

Shortly after the reunification, a pseudo-military force known as the Gendarmerie was quartered in all the administrative divisions of the territory. That force, like the police, was charged with maintaining safety and security of the state and her citizens. The Gendarmerie became a federal subject and although Ahmadu Ahidjo, the first President of Cameroon deleted the maintenance of law and order from the constitutional proposals for federal powers, in the 1960s this force caused panic and apprehension amongst West Cameroonians who had been used to the British and Nigerian Police Forces (Kah, 2010). To that effect, there was a litany of complaints from all the administrative divisions of West Cameroon against this force.¹ Despite the importance of this all too familiar historical event, no study has been undertaken detailing with the activities of the Gendarmes in Cameroon history. Using mostly archival data gathered from the Buea National Archives, Cameroon, this article hopes to contribute to the historiography of Cameroon.

The essay begins in 1961 because the Decree instituting the Gendarmerie in West Cameroon was signed in that year. It was also in that year that the State of West Cameroon came into being after reunification with French Cameroon. West Cameroon formally known as British Southern Cameroons was made up of six

administrative divisions. These were: Bamenda, Wum, Nkambe, Mamfe, Victoria and Kumba.² By 1964, most of the complaints concerning the atrocities of Gendarmes had petered out but resurfaced in 1990.

In this article I will start by confronting the dynamics which were responsible for the introduction of the Gendarmes in West Cameroon after reunification. In the second section, I will show what the overall strength of West Cameroon security forces was before the introduction of the Gendarmerie in order to appreciate the level of security and/or insecurity in the territory. The third part of the article examines the misdemeanour committed by Gendarmes in West Cameroon. The fourth section focuses on the general reaction shown towards the Gendarmerie, specifically by civilians, police and customs officers and consequences that followed.

The Tradition and Origin of Gendarmerie in West Cameroon

When the Cameroons under the British and French Trusteeship united in October 1961 and became the Federal Republic of Cameroon, Article 5 of the Federal Constitution supported the introduction of the Gendarmes which had become a federal affair. This had been deliberated and effected in Federal constitutional discussions at Foumban in July 1961. That conference included internal and external security among federal responsibilities (Ngoh, 1999). At Foumban, the Southern Cameroon Attorney General warned the Buea delegation of the dangers of federal domination in these areas, including federal incorporation of all police powers.³ John Ngu Foncha, however, intimated that “The drawing up of this constitution ... [was] a matter for Cameroonians themselves and it will be foolish to look to anyone else for help” (Ngoh, 1999). That notwithstanding, the constitutionality of Gendarmes in West Cameroon cannot be over emphasised. Politicians were of the view that “structures such as the security forces [gendarmes] exist to carry out necessary functions which could be for the good of the whole society” (Basse, 2002: 33), even if, in the long run, these activities turn out to be the other way round and more so that it was necessary to harmonise structures in the two federated states (Basse, 2002: 35). It therefore, meant that the introduction of Gendarmes in West Cameroon was a step towards harmonising Federal structures.

The first President of the Federal Republic of Cameroon, Ahmadu Ahidjo had started off by dividing the Federal Republic of Cameroon into six administrative inspectorates manned by Inspectors of Administration (Johnson, 1970). The state

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of West Cameroon was only one of the six inspectorates and was headed by Jean Claude Ngoh. His powers were plenary in character and reported directly to Ahidjo. The application of Decree No. 61-DF-15 of 20 October, 1961 which carved out the six administrative inspectorates virtually metamorphosed West Cameroon into an administrative region (Ngoh, 1999). What was more pressing was the security situation in West Cameroon on the eve of reunification with French Cameroon and also at a time when Nigeria was scheduled to gain independence by 1st October, 1960.⁴

The introduction of Gendarmerie in West Cameroon caused great concern to the politicians of the day. One area of grave concern for Southern Cameroons, following discussions for reunification with the Cameroun Republic, was the question of general security when the British withdrew their forces in October 1961. The status and functions of the West Cameroon Police was certainly to find itself in a new dispensation, coupled with the return of Southern Cameroonians serving in Nigeria and other countries. The deployment of the Gendarmerie in the Southern Cameroons was generally seen in the best of defence and responsibility to the territory and its citizens filling the void left by the British Police Force. Yet after the withdrawal of British forces, several opinions were instead presented and debated. This would not have posed any problem if the Southern Cameroons had decided to join Nigeria in the 1961 plebiscite but since they voted for reunification, the country had to address this issue with Southern Cameroons (Johnson, 1970: 205; Milne, 1999).

The Kamerun National Congress Party (KNC), however, held a different view. During a conference in Mamfe in 1960, the party recommended that for security purposes, Nigerian troops in the Southern Cameroon should be retained even after the independence of Nigeria in 1960.⁵ Other views were expressed in memoranda by the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) and the Cameroon Peoples' National Convention Party (CPNC) all of which called for the British to assist in ensuring security was not at risk during the period of transition. Her Majesty's government was requested to remain in the Southern Cameroon for a few more months to undertake a rapid training and equipping of a military force that would provide security for the Southern Cameroons.⁶

That request had little meaning after the plebiscite results showed that a majority of Southern Cameroonians were in favour of reunification with the Cameroun Republic and not integration with Nigeria. The British had long dreamt of British Southern Cameroon joining the Federal Republic of Nigeria and when their dreams went contrary, they simply abandoned the territory to its own security (Johnson, 1970). Meanwhile, discussions between the Southern Cameroons and the

Cameroon Republic on general security of the territory culminated in the Tripartite Talks of August 1961. At the end of the talks, decisions concerning the maintenance of public security and law and order were taken in order not to have a lack of military security following the withdrawal of British forces from the Southern Cameroon on 1 October 1961.⁷

There were also heated debates on the status and functions of the Southern Cameroons Police if the Gendarmes were stationed in West Cameroon. Ordinary people were also concerned about the coming of the Gendarmerie and the confusion this would create in their functions and those of the Southern Cameroon Police. These were worries that would not have arisen if the territory voted for integration with the Federation of Nigeria. Members of the opposition party in parliament like Ajebe Sone from Kumba East proposed that the Southern Cameroon Police should work with the Gendarmerie to control the excesses of the latter because rumour had it that some of them were involved in 'terrorist' activities in the Cameroon Republic.⁸ To clarify the concerns of the people, Premier J.N. Foncha and the Minister of Social Services, A.N. Jua, dispelled rumours that the Southern Cameroon Police would become ordinary Native Authority orderlies or a gang of messengers. Hon. Jua quoted Article 18 of the Federal Constitution to brace his argument. The article stated that if any law was passed in the Federation which was considered by members of any one state contrary to their own constitution, those members could vote against it. He argued that if this happened, the law would not go through.⁹

Hon. Jua, in citing the article 18 of the Federal Constitution, meant that if a law was subsequently passed to denigrate the Southern Cameroon Police in a reunited Cameroon, the parliamentarians to the Federal Assembly would vote against it and block the reform. These arguments notwithstanding, the status of the Police was still to be clearly defined because at reunification, the Police and Gendarmerie were to function in the state of West Cameroon which would create some problems. Foncha, the leader of KNDP, said that at reunification, the Police would perform the same functions as they did before reunification but the story turned out to be different because after reunification, open clashes were recorded between the Police and Gendarmes in places like Mamfe and other towns of West Cameroon. The Police, though still very important, have come to play secondary roles to the Gendarmes in the modern Cameroon state.

From the above, it could be suggested that the gravity and intensity of insecurity was given an additional fillip following the withdrawal of the Nigerian and British

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forces that had been serving in the British Cameroon. The forces that remained in West Cameroon were pitifully small, at least to meet the West Cameroon security needs. This in effect justified the federal governments' view that Gendarmes were needed in West Cameroon, although West Cameroonians were quite sceptical about the presence of Gendarmes in their territory. Some, in fearful anticipation of flooding the state with troops from the east, referred to the Gendarmes as "armies of occupation" (Johnson, 1970). The fears of West Cameroonians as well as the doubts raised by West Cameroonian politicians at the time, notwithstanding, 400 Gendarmes were stationed in West Cameroon following reunification in October 1961. According to Article 5 of the Federal Constitution, the Gendarmerie in West Cameroon came under the federal authorities and not under the state authorities of West Cameroon. As a matter of fact, the Gendarmerie in West Cameroon were introduced because the British and Nigerian Police Force had been withdrawn and also because it was thought wise to harmonise federal structures.

The activities of Gendarmerie in West Cameroon

No sooner had the Gendarmerie entered West Cameroon than the West Cameroonian authorities started questioning the structure which would accommodate this force. In line with this, a security meeting was held in Buea on 25 January, 1962. In that meeting, it was suggested that the West Cameroon Police Mobile Wing should be merged with the national Gendarmerie platoons in the territory.

Admittedly, this was in agreement with the Federal Constitution, but the suggestion received a sharp and unequivocal negative reply from the West Cameroon Commissioner of Police to the Prime Minister. In a correspondence to the Prime Minister, the Commissioner of Police, H.M. Ntune, rejected the suggestion and pointed out categorically that the Mobile Wing had not failed in its responsibilities and so, saw no grounds for the merger. Instead, he pointed out that the Gendarmerie, because of their brutal treatment of the population, had become unpopular in West Cameroon at the first instant.¹⁰

Two issues could be deduced from Ntune's reaction: first, the seeds for a struggle for power between the federal and state authorities in the sphere of maintenance of law and order were sown. The brutalisation of the population, as Ntune suggests, gives the first impressions of insecurity and fear. The suggestion to merge the West Cameroon Mobile Wing with the national Gendarmerie fell in line with Article 6 and if the West Cameroon Police authorities started behaving the way they did, it was but logical to say that this was an indication of their criticism of the centralised Federal Constitution. Secondly, the West Cameroon authorities called into question

the actual nature of the federation. The behaviour of the Gendarmerie in the territory brought panic amongst the population in several ways.

The Gendarme officers in West Cameroon were often accused of arrogance and more often than not, brutalising the people. In some quarters it was held that:

The gendarmes in West Cameroon behaved with brutality and reckless arrogance as if they were an occupation force in a vanquished territory. The brandishing of weapons, the show of power and the throwing of weight around areas inhabited by the population gave rise to great concern and disquiet.¹¹

Indeed, the institution of the Gendarmerie as a federal service and the subsequent behaviour of its officers, if the above words are taken seriously, confirmed the allegation that they were like an “occupying force”. The wordings “occupying force” is, nevertheless and rather too heavy to describe the activities of the Gendarmerie. This is because the Gendarmes were constitutionally supposed to be in West Cameroon but their activities were not spelt out in the constitution.

However, the activities of Gendarmes continued to raise concerns and fears amongst West Cameroonians. In one instance, the Gendarmes were accused of harassing the population of Nkambe Division over private debts.¹² In another instance, they were accused of detaining and flogging citizens and extorting money from them.¹³ These were situations difficult to take at face value. Private debts are debts owed by individuals to individuals which might have come about as a result of borrowing. They are most of the time based on trust. It becomes therefore, a more serious issue to say that the Gendarmes were harassing people over private debts. At what point in time did that specific event occur and how much were these debts? Until one gets the total number of debts and the people who complained about their debts, that story remains at best, an unfounded rumour. To say that people were detained, flogged and money extorted from them is as unscientific as the issue of harassing people over debts.

It has also been maintained by West Cameroonians that the Gendarmes harassed Nigerian subjects who were found in West Cameroon. The brutal treatment of Nigerians by the Gendarmes drew an angry protest from the Nigerian Consul in Buea. In a confidential correspondence to the Prime Minister of West Cameroon, the Consul decried the contemptuous behaviour of the Gendarmerie, stating that it was time the Gendarmes were called to order.¹⁴ This was closely followed by a strongly worded letter from the Prime Minister of West Cameroon, J. N Foncha to

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the Minister of Armed Forces, Sadou Daoudou, in February 1963, which reiterated the point of Gendarme brutality.¹⁵

It was in reaction to the unruly behaviour of the Gendarmes that the Federal Inspector of Administration for West Cameroon, Jean Claude Ngoh, convened a meeting in Buea in August 1962 with the objective of explaining the functions of the national Gendarmerie *vis-à-vis* the police force of West Cameroon. In that meeting, the Commander of the national Gendarmerie pointed out that the Gendarmerie had not come to substitute the West Cameroon Police Force, but rather “to ensure a complement for the security of the country”. In other words, the Gendarmerie was to act as a supplement to the West Cameroon police.¹⁶

Meanwhile, in an earlier dispatch, the commandant of the Gendarmerie in Buea explained that the duties of the Gendarmerie in West Cameroon included the search for suspects and subversive documents. This was necessitated by the conviction that subversive elements from East Cameroon had infiltrated West Cameroon, disposed of their identification papers and mingled with the population of the territory. Such a situation gave an extra dimension to the activities of the Gendarmerie, which formally included the checking of identification papers and tax tickets, the objective of which it was to insure that citizens had paid their taxes.¹⁷

Whether the speech of the commander of national Gendarmerie was ever understood by his boys remains a moot question. The fact is that the Gendarmes continued with their strange behaviour. They were accused of unethical behaviour by drinking in beer parlours while in uniform and also using official vehicles for private matters.¹⁸ This behaviour was unheard of in the state of West Cameroon, especially within the police force. Despite those complaints, there was no ocular proof that any Gendarme was called to order. Gendarmerie authorities requested that all such complaints be referred to Yaounde, the capital of Cameroon.¹⁹

Disagreement over these issues came about partly as a result of the traditions of the Gendarmerie in Cameroon. This might be explained by the fact that before the reunification, the Gendarmerie in French Cameroon was used to maintain law and order. In fact, in their annual report for 1956, the French Administering Authority defined the functions of the Gendarmerie as including amongst others, “overseeing public security and maintaining order and executing laws” and “handling crimes”.²⁰ The results were that the differences between federal and state authorities in West Cameroon over who should enforce the law and which should prevail – state or federal law – were exposed. In any case, the Gendarmes, in executing their functions, clashed with the police, civilians, customs and landlords.

Gendarmes and the West Cameroon Police

Generally, it was assumed that the Gendarmes and the police were charged with the maintenance of law and the execution of order. Unfortunately, “overzealous Gendarmes were often insensitive to the legal or statutory limits of their jurisdiction and thereby, occasionally came into conflict with the West Cameroon Police.”²¹ On one occasion, Gendarmes reportedly forced their way into a West Cameroon jail guided and guarded by the West Cameroon police to retrieve one of their suspects. The prisoner was forcibly removed from jail and allegedly beaten and hospitalised.²²

In Mamfe division, police constable John Ndze became a scape goat of the Gendarmes brutality. He was handcuffed and beaten by Paul Bissiang. In fact, according to Confidential Note C. 205/172: “John Ndze was allegedly beaten by Paul Bissiang and hand-cuffed for taking bribe from one passenger in a vehicle to Ekok from Mamfe. This passenger never had a passport and was supposed to be repatriated as the tradition obtained. But he was not returned.”²³

Although the Gendarmes were assumed to be brutal, the case of John Ndze illustrates the fact that they were out to correct some of the ills of the society. John Ndze had allegedly taken bribe from a passenger and Paul Bissiang corrected him by handcuffing him and getting him beaten. The two of them had committed errors given the fact that Ndze had collected bribe and that Bissiang had beaten him. Since two wrongs cannot make a right and since one cannot right a wrong by doing wrong, it is fair to say here that Paul Bissiang was wrong to have meted out such punishment to his uniform colleague. This point was lucidly made in September 1963 by Senior District Officer for Mamfe, S.N Ekobena in the following words: “I consider it wrong for the constable [John Ndze] to have been hand-cuffed since a decision had not been made as to whether he was guilty.”²⁴

The wide range of Gendarme activities operated in both rural and urban areas only further led to conflicts with the West Cameroon Police. Upon its introduction in West Cameroon, the Gendarmerie handled all traffic cases involving both civil and military personnel without consultation with the police. In a correspondence to the Commissioner of Police; the Commander of the Gendarmerie in West Cameroon reiterated the priority of the Gendarmes over the West Cameroon police in traffic cases involving civilian and military personnel. According to the commander, in such cases, “the investigation must be carried out by the Gendarmerie.”²⁵ He went on to reiterate the prerogative of the Gendarmerie in initiating an inquiry in traffic

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cases in which only military personnel were involved. As if to buttress this point, the Gendarmes went out of their routine security searches to contravene drivers and collectors but refused to appear in court when they were convoked.²⁶

This was like the usurpation of the role of the West Cameroon Police by the Gendarmes. This point was elucidated by the Commissioner of Police who, in a confidential letter to the Prime Minister, wondered if there were any provisions in the Federal Constitution empowering Gendarmes to investigate traffic cases in West Cameroon, a duty that was in his interpretation of the law, strictly that of the West Cameroon Police.²⁷ In the Commissioner's view, the laws pertaining to West Cameroon were the responsibility of the police; hence they should investigate any violation of such laws. The interference of the Gendarmes, therefore, in a realm that was believed to be exclusively the preserve of the West Cameroon Police, poisoned the rapport between the two forces and rendered cooperation difficult.²⁸

In order to redress the situation, the Commissioner suggested that the Prime Minister define the duties of the Gendarmerie to ensure that they performed them strictly within limit. What the Commissioner failed to grasp, however, was that the Gendarmerie was a federal subject placed under the authority of the Federal Inspector of Administration.²⁹ Moreover, the activities of the Gendarmes indicated that they were ignorant of West Cameroon laws concerning the police and traffic cases. It is no wonder that Ntune took it as a point of duty to reaffirm the fact that the police had the responsibility of investigating all traffic and criminal cases in West Cameroon.³⁰

Despite the caution and meetings, it was common to hear of the Gendarmes beating up members of the police force as well as civil administrators. Acting Senior District Officer for Kumba lucidly made this point in a confidential letter to the Federal Inspector of Administration, in the following words:

I consider it wrong for another officer (Gendarme) of the same government to beat up his colleague because of the advantage of being in uniform. This, I consider, a case of taking laws into one's hand... such behaviour must be curbed (as) it only brings ill feelings and bad relations. The idea is going around that the gendarmes are above the law. As such they cannot be taken to any court ...³¹

Such friction between the two forces arose partly from disagreement over which of them had to implement law and security and also confusion as to when state or

federal law should prevail. Overall, the issue of security was a federal matter. Even the customs officers had problems with the Gendarmes.

The Gendarmes and Customs Officers

The Gendarme misbehaviour which caught the consternation of the public in a higher degree involved the Customs, especially D.N. Njele, Chief of Service for Mamfe. In a report written by Customs Superintendent, Henry G.J. Kinni on 2 January, 1963, Kinni said *inter alia*:

The chief of gendarmes left and not long a number of gendarmes surrounded the chief (sic) de secteur's car and said that their chief (sic) wanted him in his office. As chief [sic] de secteur's car opened the door of the right hand side of the car and dragged out chief de secteur where he was sitting and driving (sic) to their office. In the office the butt of a rifle was used at the back of chef de secteur which landed him flat on the ground with his face and kicks of boots came on one after the other. Chief [sic] was later on taken into one small room as he was crying so loudly with much pains and in this room his mouth was bandaged up with a piece of cloth...[a] good blow of hand was landed on his face of which I saw his left eye still red with blood on the 27th.³²

Revelations made by Kinni's report concerning the torture of Njele by the Gendarmes are too exact to have been coincidental assumptions or speculations. In other words, the Gendarme atrocities in Mamfe were a true reality and the case of Njele was just the tip of an iceberg and at the same time, marking the apotheosis of Gendarme misbehaviour in West Cameroon. That was exemplified in its ripple effects, which kept a good number of correspondences amongst the administrators at the time.

One of the memoranda written on 30 December, 1962 by the Senior District Officer, Mamfe to the Inspector of Administration about a report which had just reached the executive of Mamfe community concerning the way the Gendarmerie handled Mr. D.N.N Njele, *chef de secteur* on 23 December 1962³³ emphasised that the following points were made clear in their last meeting:

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- 1) How the Gendarmerie go about beating women merciless [sic] in their houses in town at night without any reasons for such ill-treatment (sic).
- 2) How the Gendarmerie mishandled police constables at two occasions (one at Ossing and one at Bachuo Akagbe)
- 3) The Mamfe community would be grateful for any efforts you may put in to bring the Gendarmerie menace to an end at no distant.³⁴

From the report, the District Officer, Ekobena was acting as the sounding board of the people. It was clear that the Mamfe community was bored with the Gendarmes especially Paul Bissiang and was requesting that they should be transferred out of Mamfe.

In a reply to the Senior District Officer, Mamfe, the Inspector of Administration said: "I have the honour to inform you that a copy of his report has been handed over by me to the Federal Minister of Armed Forces, [Sadou Daoudou] at the time of my last trip to Yaounde." The District Officer was not yet satisfied and had to write again to the Inspector of Administration on 19 January, 1963 wanting to know whether a copy should be sent to the Minister of Armed Forces or it should be reported directly to the Tribunal in Mamfe.³⁵ The District Officer wanted that the Gendarme boss should be dragged to court but it was unfortunate because the latter was obviously working in complicity with the Inspector of Administration.

No doubt when Ekobena pushed the case further, speculations were rife that he was transferred out of Mamfe. Thomas Mbua Ndoko, who had been the Private Secretary of Jean Claude Ngoh, Inspector of Administration, replaced him.³⁶ If that was true, then he might have owed his promotion to his boss. That did not change the situation. He wrote to his former boss in the following words:

Further to my confidential letter No 131/149 of 24 April 1963, I wish to inform you that continued stay of gendarme Paul Bissiang at Eyumojock will seriously damage the good reputation of the Gendarme. Paul Bissiang's transfer from Mamfe Division would take very early effect (sic).³⁷

Admittedly, pressure yielded fruits as Paul Bissiang was transferred by 1963. On 28 September, 1963, the chief and councillors of Bachuo-Akagbe wrote to the Prime Minister of West Cameroon thanking him for transferring Bissiang and bringing in the new Commander of Brigade, Tchundjang Cyrille.³⁸ According to them, peace had finally been restored. Chief Sam Etchu, who signed the report

appealed that many Gendarmes could be placed under Cyrille. By 1964, a host of Gendarmes were transferred to Widekum, another town found in West Cameroon.

The “thank you” letter to the Prime Minister had hardly been digested as the Gendarmes launched another attack on almost all the customs officers that were found in Mamfe. The following custom staffs were assaulted by the Gendarmes:

- 1) S.B.M. Nsail – Customs Officer
- 2) T.E. Mbuagbaw – Customs Clerk
- 3) J.M. Kalaji – Customs Guard
- 4) Martin Elokobi – Customs Guard
- 5) Aloysious Tume – Custom Guard
- 6) J.A Minang – Customs Guard
- 7) P. Njukeng – Customs Guard
- 8) S.M.N Puperzor – Customs Guard
- 9) J. Epey – Customs Guard
10. H. Salifu – Customs Guard.³⁹

However, the Gendarmes-Customs antagonism did not go on *sine die*. On the 23 January, 1963, the Senior District Officer for Mamfe convened a meeting with all these forces in order to reach a compromise. He pointed out that cordiality should exist between the two forces because each one of them had its own duties. Therefore, there was no way by which the Gendarmes could take over the customs⁴⁰ and [vice versa]. He ended up by quoting the text which lays down certain duties that the customs and Gendarmerie must perform.⁴¹ The Gendarmes activities with the police and customs also affected the civilians as well.

Gendarmes and the civilians

As far as their relations with the civilian population were concerned, the Gendarmes’ behaviour was horrifying. A case in point was with the women. In December 1962, the women of Ma-Obasi in Mamfe wrote directly to the Prime Minister of West Cameroon, John Ngu Foncha complaining how the Gendarmes rough handled them. They said:

We are suffering in the hands of the gendarmes. Their system of governing [sic] this place is not in our satisfaction...Their bigman, so called Paul [Bisiang], is all that too naughty. In this our Ejagham tribe a(sic) you know we are not in the habit of meeting girls or women in the bush for useless action [sex] you

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cannot now get a single article seller on our hear [sic] of cruelties [sic] of gendarme in Eyomujock. We feel within our hearts...that this gendarme station at Eyomujock be posted elsewhere.⁴²

The Memorandum which the women of Ma-Obasi addressed to the Premier of West Cameroon was symptomatic of the Gendarme brutality towards them. One of these methods of brutality was rap and the person often responsible for this was their *bigman*, Paul Bissiang. This was illustrated in the way he handled one Alice Ben Ekong. On several occasions Ekong bemoaned to W.N.O Effiom, Member of Parliament for Mamfe in the West Cameroon House of Assembly on Bissiang's sexual and inhuman advances towards her. On 22 March, 1963, Bissiang "caught Ekong in his office and attempted to rape her and in another instance, he threatened to shoot her if she persistently rejected his sexual drives."⁴³ If it is true that he could behave in such a manner, one wonders what his subordinates could have done.

The entire civilian population felt the pinch of Gendarmes' severities in Mamfe. Writing to the Minister of Natural Resources on 24 March, 1963, Chief Nkamanda and Co, amongst other things, said:

We the people of Eyomujock received this group of Gendarmes with open hands. But for the fact that they beat us time on no occasion. People who are willing to come for market are afraid to attain the market again. Women and schoolgirls are being treated anyhow failing to accept to their request when the Gendarmes are beating people and knowing the native will run to help their fellow friends, they began to shoot guns here and there.⁴⁴

The Gendarmes went as far as eloping with peoples wives. The Senior District Officer for Mamfe, S.N. Ekobena reported such an instant in the following words: "This is to certify that the bearer, Simon Gaston, Trader and Farmer in Foubot came to Mamfe in search of his wife named Tonga Marguerette and daughter Teresia Jean Marie said to have been taken by Matchia Martin, Nurse Gendarmerie Peleton, Mamfe."⁴⁵

It was certain from the above that Matchia Martin had eloped with Gaston's wife and Ekobena was reporting this to the Inspector of Administration. The Gendarmes were noted for abusing the basic rights and freedoms of West Cameroonians. This was done primarily through the introduction of what was assumed as new practices in West Cameroon that the Gendarmes had to enforce. For instance, it was maintained that the Gendarmerie not only ensured that West Cameroonians carried

around with them their tax tickets, which was a practice hitherto unknown in West Cameroon, but their activities also curtailed the fundamental freedoms of citizens of West Cameroon. Such was the case with the brutal treatment of the Acting Education Officer for Kumba on 17 February, 1964 at the hands of the Gendarmes for allegedly not producing his tax ticket on demand. In spite of the fact that the said officer explained that he was on official duty, he was rough-handled and allegedly “marched-off at gun point....”⁴⁶

It was against that background that West Cameroonians kept on complaining about the notorious activities of the Gendarmes. An earlier meeting had taken place in Buea in 1962. That year, the KNDP National secretariat under the auspices of Zachary Abendong wrote to the Inspector of Administration. According to him, ever since the Gendarmes were posted to this territory [West Cameroon], they have created an atmosphere of fear which never existed since the departure of the German military rule from 1884-1916. “I think the people of West Cameroon will be happy with the police and the military but without the Gendarmes.”⁴⁷

Hon. Abendong was writing in direct response to complaints that had reached the KNDP secretariat and also from the point of view of what he heard from people while on tour. That drove him to conclude that the people of West Cameroon would be happy with the police and the military without the Gendarmes. This was because he probably felt that the opinion of West Cameroonians were not in accordance with the Gendarmes. It was grossly an exaggeration to maintain that it was the Gendarmes who introduced the practice into West Cameroon that West Cameroonians should be travelling with tax tickets. After the partition of the territory between the French and British in 1916, tax tickets, identity cards and laissez passers were some of the documents which citizens were obliged to have on them while moving around (Alpse, 2012). So to say that it was the Gendarmes who introduced it remain a matter of speculation. Apart from the civilians, Gendarmes had problems with landlords, another type of civilians.

Gendarmes and Landlords

Landlords who had rented out their houses to the Gendarmes also had problems with Gendarmes. This was because they (Gendarmes) consistently refused to foot their rents. On 15 June, 1962, one of the landlords, Martin Forbin, wrote to the Central Administrative unit of Gendarmerie, Yaounde, through the District Officer, Mamfe. In that letter, Forbin stressed that he had not received the rents of his house from 1st January to 30th June 1962.⁴⁸ He further stated that: “I have written through

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the *Le Commandant, Le Compagnie De Gendarmerie* at Bamenda twice but no reply has been received.”⁵³ He wrote again on the 16th October, 1962, lamenting that the payment of his house was being defaulted by the Gendarmerie. After waiting to the end of the year, Forbin wrote on the 22nd January, 1963, bemoaning that since the Gendarmes entered his house in January 1962, he had received only one quarter of his rents which was 42.000 FRS and was still owed nine months and cost to the neighbourhood of 126.000 FRS.⁴⁹

Another landlord, Anthony M. Abang wrote on the 31st of October, 1962 to the Chief Commander of Gendarmerie at Yaounde lamenting that the rents for his house at Widekum had not been paid. In his seven point report, his point 2 was unequivocal: “Sir, I have long expected for the rents of my house at Widekum which was given up to the Gendarmerie on their request was with good faith to the state and I do not expect to be treated in the reverse.”⁵⁰ This was an indication that he was frustrated because his rents had not been paid.

It was based on such frustration that he finally decided to champion the plight of the landlords and on 30 May, 1963 wrote on behalf of the landlords to the Federal Inspector of Administration in the following words:

Sir, the most dangerous point and regretting to us, also to the hearing of the public who were aware of the arrangement that the gendarmes have taken over our houses since January last year and our tenants were asked to leave the houses is that now that the Gendarmes have been asked to reside at Widekum instead of them going in our houses, they have passed to a different house (sic).⁵¹

One discernable fact which is plausible in the above citation is that the Gendarmes had handed over the houses they were renting to tenants of their choices. This was annoying to the landlords, given the fact that those Gendarmes had taken over their houses and as if that was not enough, they now filled those houses with tenants who were directly under their authority. The activities of the Gendarmes therefore, had far reaching consequences on West Cameroon.

Conclusion

Shortly after reunification in 1961, West Cameroon and Cameroonians embraced the Gendarmerie – a pseudo-military force which had been established in East Cameroon since the French colonial administration. The activities of that force were detested by West Cameroonians in all the administrative divisions of West Cameroon. By 1964, considerable calm was restored but the atrocities never

petered out completely. This enquiry has established that instead of maintaining law and order, the Gendarmerie paradoxically brought fear and panic to West Cameroon. The insecurity unleashed by the Gendarmerie has not in any sense ceased to exist as complaints are always heard in Cameroon highways about Gendarmes who extort money from highway drivers and those who mistakenly travel without their tax tickets or national identity papers. Following this, it is within the boundaries of common sense to hold that the Gendarmerie, instead of maintaining security which was their *prima facie* function, went beyond it and appeared as a source of insecurity not only to the civilian population of West Cameroon but also to the West Cameroonian police and customs officers.

Notes

1. Letter No 1566/52 A, 5 March 1962. From the Federal Minister of Armed Forces to Federal Inspector of Administration, National Archives Buea, henceforth cited as NAB.
2. File Vc/b (1962)2, constitutional talks in Southern Cameroons. NAB.
3. Ibid.
4. Representation of His Excellency, The President of the Republic of Cameroon by West Cameroon Government Requesting the Rectification of certain matters Tending to Hinder the Smooth and Effective Functioning of the Federal Republic, Top Secret N₀ 323/CFI/CAB/PR,/NAB
5. Ibid.
6. Federal Republic of Cameroon, Top Secret N₀ 323/CFI/CAB/PR,/NAB
7. Pc/i/1964 Petitions and Complaints against the activities of Gendarmes in West Cameroon.
8. Confidential letter from the District Officer Nkambe to the Federal Inspector of Administration, Buea 2nd October, 1962, NAB.
9. Ibid.
10. Pc/i/1964/7, Complaints against Gendarmerie/Military. Confidential Letter from the Consul for the Federation of Nigeria to the Prime Minister, 13

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November 1962, NAB.; Pc/:/1962/8, Gendarme Relations with West Cameroon Polices, NAB.

11. Confidential Letter from J.N. Foncha to the Minister of Armed Forces, PMO 330/s.1/24 January 1968; Letter from the Minister of Armed Forces to the Vice President of the Republic, Prime Minister of West Cameroon, no. 38/MINFA/cf/9, NAB.
12. Minutes of a meeting held in Buea on August 1, 1962 concerning the functions of the Gendarmerie in matters of judicial police in West Cameroon, NAB.
13. Pc/i/1964/8, Gendarmerie Relations with Cameroon Police, NAB.
14. PC/i/1964, Petitions and complaints against the activities of Gendarmes in West Cameroon 1964, NAB.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. PC/i/1963/7, Gendarmerie Relations with Cameroon Police, NAB.
18. Confidential Letter from the S.S.P. Kumba to the Commissioner of Police, Buea, 29 January 1962, NAB.
19. Confidential c. 205/172, Incident involving Paul Bissiang, Gendarme and P.C. 641 John Ndze Police, 9 February 1963, NAB.
20. From S.N. Ekobena to Federal Inspector of Administration, Buea. 9 September 1963: Incident involving Paul Bissiang, Gendarmerie and P.C. 641 John Ndze Police, 9 February 1963, NAB.
21. Note from F.N. Nding, secretary to the Prime Minister in reply to confidential letter from Commissioner of police on Investigation of Traffic Cases and Motor Accidents on Gendarmes, 22nd January 1964, NAB.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Letter from the Commandant Gendarmerie, Buea, to the Commissioner of Police, No. 921 of 17th August 1962, NAB.

25. Confidential letter from the Commissioner of police to the Secretary of the Prime Minister, West Cameroon, 10th January, 1964, NAB.
26. Ibid.,
27. Confidential letter from Acting Senior District Officer Kumba Division to the Federal Inspector of Administration, C. 107/222,4th October, 1963, NAB.
28. The Incident concerning the Customs (D.N. Njele) and Paul Bissiang – a Gendarme Officer at Eyunjoek. A Report written by customs superintendent H.G. Kinni on 2nd January 1963; Also see “Gendarmes Torture Collector of Customs,” *Cameroon Times*. 4 January 1963, NAB.
29. Confidential Reference No. 34/cf. Mamfe 30 December 1962 to the Senior District Officer, Mamfe title Gendarmerie Menace, NAB.
30. PC/i/1964, Petitions and complaints against the activities of Gendarmes in West Cameroon 1964, NAB.
31. From Senior District Officer, Mamfe, S.N. Ekobena to Inspector of Administration, Buea, Letter No. 1566/52 A, 5 March 1962 NAB.
32. Confidential Reference No. 131/50 “Gendarme Paul Bissaing, MDL, Head of the Gendarmes at Eyumojock. From Thomas Mbua Ndoko to Federal Inspector of Administration.
33. Ibid.
34. Gendarmes Brutality in West Cameroon, Incident Involving Paul Bisiang and councillors of Bachuo-Akagbe, No. 641 PC/1/1962, NAB;
35. Confidential s. 1/14/9 – Customs and Excise Head Quarters to the Federal Secretary Ministry of finance, NAB.
36. File, Pc/I 1962/8, Minutes of the meeting convene by Senior District Officer, Mamfe, S.N. concerning the activities of Gendarmes in Mamfe, NAB.
37. Ibid.
38. File Pc/i/1962/6, Letter concerning the relations of Gendarmes and women – From Ma – Obasi and Co to Premier Foncha, December 1962.NAB.

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39. Confidential Reference No. 131/50 “Gendarme Paul Bissiang MDL, Head of the Gendarmes at Eyumojock. From Thomas Mbua Ndoko to Federal Inspector of Administration, NAB.
40. Chief Nkamanda and Co, to the Minister of Natural Resources, concerning the Gendarmes activities, 24 March 1963, NAB.
41. Letter From S.N. Ekobena to Federal Inspector of Administration, Buea. 9 September 1963: Incident involving Gendarmerie and eloping with peoples, wives. 9 February 1963, NAB.
42. Confidential letter from Acting Senior District Officer Kumba Division to the Federal Inspector of Administration, C. 107/222, 4th October, 1963, NAB.
43. Confidential ref: No. Demo/HQ/B.32, The Gendarmes Brutality in West Cameroon” from KNDP National Secretariat, 28 December 1962 Hon. Z.A. Abendong to Inspector of Administration, NAB.
44. File Pc/i/1964 Petitions and Complaints against the activities of Gendarmes in West Cameroon. NAB.
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46. File Pc/1/1962 Gendarme Brutality in West Cameroon, No. 641, NAB.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid
50. Ibid
51. Ibid.

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