

## **Bagigla Malda, Joseph ZOA and Evina BESSALA : atypical itineraries of veterans of the German Colonial army in Cameroon**

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**Abstract:** Literature devoted to the Great War campaign in Africa in general and in West Africa in particular is mainly focused on the battle history. Indeed, military operations led by European military officers during the campaign are more detailed than the historical trajectory of the native combatant who served in various colonial forces. This approach unfortunately creates a scientific gap, in a context of global Great War perspective. To fill this historical void, this proposal bring into light the post war period by high lighting the African soldier's itinerary who was enrolled in belligerent units. Drawing from the theoretical framework of the New Military History and using mainly primary record like archival materials and publications, itre-interrogates the First World War through social angle. Then, the itinerary of a German Kamerun (now a day's called Cameroon) soldier, in this circumstances Joseph Zoa, after the departure of their colonial military masters will be done in other to have an holistic view of the natives career within the colonial military system and their social impact on the new sociopolitical environment. Examining the First World War context is an occasion to understand wider implications of the conflict as well as to link past with the present generations. It is also an occasion to pay tribute to those men and women who sacrificed themselves but forgotten by the national and international memories.

**Keywords:** Great War, Kamerun, veteran, post war, reinstatement

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### **Introduction**

In German Kamerun, the Great War campaign was a confrontation between European colonial powers namely Belgium, France, Germany and Great Britain. Cameroon was turned into a huge battlefield and suffered heavy casualties and Prisoners of War [1]. This disgermanisation campaign was a particularity in Great War campaign aftermath issue in West Africa because, it emerged two Kamerunian soldiers, with different trajectories due to the epilogue of the conflict on the field. Indeed, military operations led by the Allies toward German's positions in the Northern front localities like Banyo, Garoua and Maroua resulted to an exchange of prisoners. However, the case of the Mora garrison was an exception because, soldiers from this company benefited from a special status; none Kamerunian combatants were treated as War Prisoners after the siege [2]. On the other hand, the Southern fronts, notably in Yaounde, the situation was different. Soldiers from the various colonial troops were considered as captives, and then exchanged on the banks of river Nyong [3]. However, apart from this aftermath aspect, the post-war issue is not well known by

military historians. This situation creates a void in the apprehension of Great War in a context of global apprehension of this tragic historical period. A central question for this research is: following the departure of the Germans, how veterans were rehabilitated and adapted themselves to the new socio-political and military contexts created by the French and British rules. The position of this article is that, the post-conflict period began the demilitarization of Kamerunian soldiers. This process transformed them from combatants into agents of social change in their new life.

### **Materials and method**

Verifying this hypothesis requires to study the trajectories of some Kamerunian veterans after the Great War campaign and how they influenced the society. Through the New Military History approach, which according to Peter Paret: "stands for an effort to integrate the study of military institution and their actions closely with other kind of thematic like society[...]"[4]. In other words, paying greater attention to interactions between the military domain with social,

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political, cultural domains, this article will deal with Kamerunian veterans' deeds in the civil life, after the First World War. Emphasis will be on the reinstatement of some Cameroonians, such as Joseph Zoa and Evina Bessala, who served in the Schutztruppe, the German's colonial army.

To prove this issue, efforts will be made through a collection of materials from a variety of sources such as books, papers, Archives, iconographies and oral materials related to the World War I campaign in Cameroon and in Africa. Written sources include literatures published by some of the protagonists of Cameroon's campaign like, Brigadier General Georges from the British colonial forces, entitled: "The Great war in West Africa". In this book, he gave a systemic description of the military operations in each front of German Kamerun, emphasizing in strategies, tactics and logistics used by the belligerents. Sources from the National Archives of Yaounde, such as the straight forward report of the Mora siege written by Hauptmann Ernst Von Raben; Commandant of the German's Garrison of Mora translated by Captain J. Lemoigne of the French colonial infantry. He gives details on daily resistance campaign on the Mora fort. In the same way, Sergeant Fritz Damis from the 3rd Company of the Mora garrison and assistant to Captain Von Raben published a diary entitled: "Auf Dem Moraberger" in which he gives details concerning Von Raben's surrendering agreement with the Anglo-French forces. Jean Pierre Messina on his part wrote a book entitled "Lestémoin Camerounais de l'Évangile", a biography of some Cameroonians who served in the Catholic Church among them Joseph Zoa a veteran from the German forces. Oral materials would involve testimonies of indirect actors like relatives of some Cameroonians' veterans native from Mora. These personalities are quite appropriate to give informations on their brothers who served in the German forces.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **I- Native combatant status at the Germans garrison of Mora**

The British and French colonial forces targeted German positions in the northern front. Commanded by Captain R.W Fox and Commandant J. Ferrandi, columns from northern Nigeria and the Lake Chad territory attempted to capture the Mora stronghold[5]. Hauptmann Ernst Von Raben at the head of the 3rd Schutztruppen Company (Picture no1) dispatched military staff to the Mora Mountain, in order to have tactical advantages over his enemies[6]. The siege began with harassing attacks of the mountain flanks, through patrols along Germans defensive lines. From 27<sup>th</sup> August 1914 to the 15<sup>th</sup> February 1916, both belligerents spread their units for the control of this strategic position. German forces were made of 14 Europeans, 125 natives soldiers accompanied with their wives[7]. In spite of the recruitment of 65 newcomers at

the eve of the war, their training was insufficient to fight the coalition forces whose superiority in numbers was evident.

Paradoxically, the Kamerun Schutztruppen transformed this weakness into an advantage; in the tactical domain for example, their inferiority contributed to facilitate their mobility around the mountain and it enabled them to conduct reconnaissance operations inside enemy's lines and made their defense position impregnable. This situation was verified during the siege, where although multiple assaults were attempted by the coalition, Mora stronghold was undefeated till the end of the conflict. The statu quo caused by the tenacity of German forces, obliged Allied commanders to propose a surrender deal to Captain Ernst Von Raben, through a letter from General Cunliffe on 15<sup>th</sup> February 1916. The Anglo-French military officers proposed the German opponent to surrender, since their comrades on the southern front had been defeated and had evacuated Kamerun[8]. According to Sergeant Fritz Damis of the 3rd Schutztruppe Company, the letter stated surrender terms; officers were authorized to keep their swords and NCOs[9] including native soldiers with their families, could freely return to their homes. In addition, Hauptmann Ernst Von Raben demanded the British the payment of 60 000 Shillings in salary arrears to the native soldiers[10].

Von Raben's demands were accepted. Describing German's surrender which took place on the 18<sup>th</sup> February 1916 (Picture n°2), Golf Dornseif noticed an impressive number of military equipment held by the Germans including cartridges, guns and machine gunners was displayed. White officers accompanied with 165 native non commissioned officers soldiers. British colonial military officers kept their words by respecting the surrender agreements and invited their opponents for a dinner marking the end of the war, a celebration boycotted by the French military officers[11]. It is in this context of colonial transition inaugurating of a new era and freed from their masters, that Kamerunian soldiers with their wives henceforth began a new life. Some of them were reintegrated into the British colonial army, the West Africa Frontier Force, while others were returned to civil life, among them Bagigla Maldé, Evina Bessala and Joseph Zoa.

### **II-Evina Bessala and Bagigla Malda: from the Schutztruppen to the French's colonial administration.**

Evina Bessala, son of late M. Bessala and Mrs. Abomo, was a Kamerunian born in 1900 in Emvella, a village of the District of Djoungolo in Yaounde[12]. He was recruited in 1911 as soldier in the German colonial army when he was 14 years old and served there for five years as a sergeant[13]. He participated actively in the defense of the Mora front. At the end of the war, he

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decided to stay in the northern part of the country and a new career was offered to him by the French. He was employed as a prison warder in Mokolo, a locality of the Margui Wandala division. He worked for this colonial service for 12 years, in a context where, security domain and overall prison warder agents were understaffed; an annual report on the security and the situation of prisons in the northern part of the country revealed these administrative and security shortages faced by the colonial authorities. Indeed, for the control of Kaélé with a population of 80,000 inhabitants, the National Guard, which both served as prison warder and police services, had only five units to maintain law and order [14]. To overcome this problem, colonial authorities decided to recruit new agents among the Great War veterans. After serving in the penitentiary department, Evina Bessala was appointed to the colonial administration, precisely in the Mora subdivision office where he spent the rest of his life.

German settlement in Mora necessitated the recruitment of some natives from surrounding villages to reinforce the colonial military police system. According to interviews with Ltidiwé village elders [15], their locality sheltered the 3rd Company of the Schutztruppe during Great War hostilities and many youths from fought beside this military unit [16]. Unfortunately they are not mentioned in the war archives, but their names still remembered by the inhabitant. This is the case of Ladé Adissé, Hirdé Nagouï, Djuité Awoula, Wandala Malda, Nepba Malda and Bagigla Malda. Wandala Malda and Nepba Malda, who were brothers, died after a fierce encounter against French units during the siege, Bagigla Malda for his part, escaped death by the skin his teeth to death. After the departure of Germans, the French colonial authorities employed him as a civil servant [17]. Besides, he benefitted from the agreement accepted by Hauptmann Von Raben, and founded the village of Galbi [18] which he ruled until his death. Nowadays, his grandson called Djoubari administers Galbi.

### **III- First World War epilogue in the German's stronghold of Yaounde: Joseph Zoa, from the German colonial army to the church.**

The taking of Yaounde by Allied troops on the 1st January 1916, marked the Great War epilogue on the southern front. Many casualties were registered; both belligerents detained prisoners of war. According to Brigadier General Georges, all of them had been well treated during their detention [19]. Jean Paul Messina on his part refutes this claim. He says that after the withdrawal of German troops from Yaounde, the coalition forces notably the French soldiers were particularly inhumane towards native soldiers and civilians who served in the German colonial administration [20].

Accused of complicity with the enemy, they were jailed without any form of trial. On the other hand, German military officers who were the main target of the Allies were simply interned out of Cameroon. This controversy is illustrated by the story of Joseph Zoa, a former Kamerunian soldier enrolled in the Schutztruppe on the 21st October 1914. He had been captured during the battle of Yaounde with three other colleagues and sentenced to death while their chiefs, the Germans, under whom they fought, were simply exchanged with the other white prisoners on the banks of the Nyong River [21]. Two other natives were also alleged to have been executed by the French colonial forces. Joseph Zoa's life had been saved thanks to the intervention of the officer's mistress, a native woman who spoke Ewondo like him [22]. This sentence based on the racial motives totally in violation of the international conventions on war, confirms once more the hypothesis that the native soldiers were a tool within the colonial forces. Eyelom analysis confirms this position when he says: "On les utilisait uniquement pour défendre les honneurs des nations européennes. On fit d'eux des misérables soldats noirs combattant pour les aspirations de l'homme blanc. Ils furent placés sur la première ligne de feu comme des chairs à canon." [23].

Regarding their reinstatement, specific information on the reconversion of the southern front's soldiers who participated in the Great War in German Kamerun is lacking. The victors' military reports noted that the process was immediately assured. In fact, the Germans' departure caused administrative and security problems. To fill these gaps newcomers essentially militarized, decided to give priority to these essential issues. For this, the Allies officers with the troops placed under their command assumed the parallel duties of administrative and security functions. As has been observed, on the coalition's side, the demobilization and the reinsertion of soldiers into civil life were not a reality. But on the German side, the reconversion was eased by the absence of constraints like military instructions and expeditions because of the German departure. Only the case of Joseph Zoa is well known. This former German colonial soldier integrated civil life by opting for the priesthood [24]. In 1923 the Catholic Apostolic Vicar of Cameroon, His Lordship François-Xavier Vogt, appointed him as a catechist in the locality of Ngulmakong. There, he created with the assistance of the Vicar a new Catholic mission. In 1929, the church authorities decided to send him to Nlong where he established another missionary post and there, he devoted all his life to the service of the Church.

### **Conclusion**

At the end of this reflexion, it can be retained that, the Great War epilogue determined the trajectories of Cameroonian soldiers of German garrisons during the post conflict period. This situation influenced the reconversion process into the new civil life defined by

the French and the British coalition rulers. Illustrative cases show that, soldiers from German garrisons were not only combatants but also agents of social changes. Some of them created village, created parishes and served in the colonial administration. What ever else it may stand for, a combatant's destiny depended on his capacity to resist enemies' assaults and later, on the victor's sentence. That was the case in Mora where soldiers and their assistant benefitted from special treatment from the victors. In the southern front, ex combatants of the German colonial army were captured and received poor treatment from the Allied. Evina Bessala and Joseph Zoa were examples that demonstrated if it is necessary that, the Geneva Agreement on war prisoners issue had been subjectively applied according to racial and social considerations. This situation raises questions concerning the image of native soldiers in the colonial military system, an individual who lived in a context before his reinstatement remains essential. Responses to these questions will reveal more about those who gave their lives defending interest, which were not their concern, participating in a conflict in which colonial masters considered them as tools.

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