

The Anglo-French Cameroon Boundary as an Opportunity Zone for Borderland People, 1916-1945

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Abstract: Based largely on archival sources, this article attempts to demonstrate that, the Anglo-French boundary that divided Cameroon into two in 1916 was not solely an object of division. The border people made the best of their border position even though they were separated from their traditional markets, kith and kin and farm lands and suffered the disruption of community life. The paper argues that some smart Cameroonians exploited the boundary situation to better themselves. They got involved in contraband trade and smuggling, made use of different currencies and learned more than one indigenous or colonial language. The boundary therefore produced some of the most successful traders and bilingual or multilingual Cameroonians. Like elsewhere in Africa, the Anglo-French boundary in Cameroon was not entirely destructive.

Keywords: Anglo-French, Cameroon, Borderland, Contraband, Currency, Language

INTRODUCTION

In July 1884, Germany occupied the coast of Cameroon. A few years later, the Germans penetrated and explored the hinterland and conquered the interior ethnic groups thus creating German Cameroon (Kamerun). This Cameroon territory was settled by a multitude of ethnic groups. It was one of the most pluralistic in terms of indigenous African societies. These diverse ethnic groups were separated by polities,

languages, customs, geographical location and even religious differences. However the polities, especially those in the interior, interacted among themselves and had some kind of diplomatic and trade relations [1]. Both unifying and separating forces therefore existed in the territory before the Germans carved it into a political entity

According to Chem-Langhëë and Njeuma [2], the Germans did very little to instill in the minds of the inhabitants of Cameroon the spirit of "Kamerunism", the notion of "Kamerun citizenship" or the idea of a common political destiny. However, one cannot deny the fact that the 32years of German administration provided Cameroon with well-defined boundaries, which made it a single entity and gave its inhabitants the same system of administration, education, foreign language and culture. It may not therefore be an exaggeration to conclude that by the time German rule came to an abrupt end in February 1916, some progress had been made towards forging a national identity.

This national identity was achieved through the socio-economic projects of the Germans. The

German schools, vocational centers, railways, trade companies like the Gesellschaft Nordwest-Kamerun and Gesellschaft Sud-Kamerun, German plantations along the coast and German mission stations brought together peoples from almost all ethnic groups and regions. As they studied, trained, traveled, worked, traded or worshipped together, they adopted a common culture and language, the German language. Also, the roads, bridges, railways, navigable rivers and ports realized by the Germans, redirected trade and facilitated the movement and integration of peoples, thus eliminating the human and natural barriers to political integration that existed before German rule [3]. The indigenes of the territory were therefore more politically integrated by 1916 than was the case before German colonization

Unlike the partition of Africa in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Anglo-French partition of German Cameroon in 1916 was therefore more revolutionary because it did not only divide ethnic groups, it dislocated a modern, new and nascent "nation" that was at its take-off stage. The negative consequences of the Anglo-French partition of Cameroon were therefore expected to be more

devastating given that the borderland people were much more integrated by German socio-economic infrastructures by 1916 than was the case before.

Following the defeat of Germany in Cameroon by the Allied Powers (France, Britain and Belgium) in 1916, the Anglo-French boundary commission went to work. It was instructed to “lay down the frontiers in accordance with the natural features, rivers, hills and watersheds” [4]. While respecting these instructions, the commission divided Cameroon into two unequal territories. French Cameroon was four-fifths of the territory and British Cameroon, the remaining one-fifth. The British further divided British Cameroon into two; British Northern Cameroons and British Southern Cameroons.

In the southern portion which is the focus of this study, the non-respect of ethnic, kingdom, economic, cultural or traditional political frontiers produced important political and socio-economic consequences. Ethnic groups, families and brotherly chiefdoms were divided. Polities with similar cultures were placed under different new colonial masters. Many communities were separated from their markets, farmlands or traditional sources of food and even job places. With these divisive consequences, the Anglo-French boundary in Cameroon was therefore a source of discontent. However, while some border peoples spent time protesting and resisting the boundary, others who were smart used the border zone as an opportunity zone, a zone of transition. To such people, the borders were a source of wealth or progress and not a source of malaise.

Opportunities Offered by the Borders

Paul Nugent and Anthony Asiwaju [5] have underscored the double paradoxes that characterized African colonial boundaries. The first is the paradox between the hard lines drawn on the map and the reality on the ground, which is the invisible frontier. The second paradox is that between frontiers, which are supposed to be zones of division and demarcation and the reality, which is that they tend also to be zones of interaction and contact. It is this second paradox that is of interest in this study. Some of the opportunities that the Anglo-French boundary in Cameroon (southern portion) offered to the borderline people were the following.

Smuggling

As early as November 1921, a fiscal boundary was set up between the two Cameroons. British and French authorities set up customs stations on the major trade routes crossing the Anglo-French boundary. In the British sector of the southern borders, the customs post were at Victoria, Tiko, Misselele, Mudeka, Mpundu, Mombo, Mundane, Bombe, Ebudu, Mbonzie, Muesog,

Nyan, Mwabi, Misso, Hunyopa, Santa, Balikumbat¹. The French equally had many custom posts as the two powers counted on custom duties as a source of income. With this highly fortified borders and attempts by the two colonial masters to control trade between the two Cameroons, the once legitimate transactions and long distance trade between the peoples turned into smuggling.

Smuggling was also promoted by the contrast between the British and French economic and trade policies. The French policy was as follows; In the name of ‘tariff assimilation’, the French extended to Cameroon the tariff protecting French industry, thereby effectively forcing French Cameroonians to buy French products and to sell their produce to France at world market prices [6]. This meant that African products in French Cameroon received a higher protected price while imports were cheap due to low duties. On the other hand the British policy did not protect British Southern Cameroons products or reduce duties on imports. Therefore European imports were very expensive in the Southern Cameroons while local products were too cheap. Consequently the smuggling of European or French products from French Cameroon to the Southern Cameroons and African products from the Southern Cameroons to French Cameroon was a very lucrative trade.

Smuggling was by the border peoples and the non-border people were attracted to the borders by the lucrative nature of the trade. Bangwa, Kom and Bali traders smuggled palm oil from Mamfe to Dschang and Nkongsamba markets. They returned with French Matches, Cigar, Cigarettes and Tobacco² Bamileke, Mbo, Bakossi and Douala smugglers carried Cigar, Cigarettes, Kerosene and hot drinks to Tiko and Victoria and brought back Cocoa, Coffee and British cloth³. Coast to Coast smuggling between Douala and Victoria was the most profitable because of the vast differences in customs duties and prices in these border towns and the creeks along the coast which prevented the coast guards from effectively eradicating the trade. For example, in 1928, the cost price of a case of Tobacco weighing 200lbs in Victoria was £33.15 while the same case in Douala cost £14.10. The average canoe engaged in the smuggling trade carried about 15cases of Tobacco costing the purchaser at Douala about £218. The price of this cargo in Victoria was between £505 and £510. A smuggler could therefore dispose of his goods easily and quickly to his recognized purchasers for say £400, thereby making a profit of nearly £200 on

¹ National Archives Buea(NAB)., file, Pe/a/1961, Customs Miscellaneous, p.1,

² NAB, file, Pe/a/1921/6, Smuggling of cigarettes, p.8

³ NAB, file, Pe/a/1933/1, Eastern Frontier Preventive Service., Quarterly Report, p.13

his trip⁴. In addition to this, the smuggler, on his return, carried a cargo of *Gari* for sale at Douala where there was great demand for food at very high prices⁵ the border therefore became a source of wealth and prosperity for the Mungo people and other communities along the coastline bordering the two territories. Bamileke people who were great traders migrated to these border towns (Tombel, Tiko, Nkongsamba, Mbanga and Santa) so as to take part in this lucrative smuggling. Amongst them was Paul Sinju *alias* Paul Bamileke who became a wealthy influential trader and politician in Tiko due to smuggling [7].

Border people also benefited from smuggling indirectly. For example, Bamileke, Mbo, Bakossi women at the borders were paid to transport contraband goods across the borders unnoticed by the customs officials. These women carried contraband goods in their farm baskets and bags in broad day light as if they were only carrying their farm harvest back home [8]. These women profited from this trade because unlike men, women were not required to obtain travel permits or papers to cross the borders and also because both the British and French custom officials were lenient with the women. Border women therefore became porters of contraband goods as interior smugglers paid high for their services.

Smugglers from the interior usually organized themselves in armed groups and defiantly approached customs posts and patrol stations determined to fight and kill if stopped by the customs, rather than lose their goods or pay duties. This was the case with Kom, Ndog and Bali smugglers who attended Dschang, Babajou and Nkongsamba markets. The confrontation with the frontier customs guard usually ended with the smugglers dumping their goods in the bushes and escaping. Such dumped goods were collected by the frontier people and sold or handed to the officials of the customs preventive service who often compensated them. The customs officials also used the border peoples as porters to transport seized goods to the customs stations. All these services permitted the border peoples to earn some income from smuggling. Smuggling therefore provided jobs and increased the incomes of the frontier communities directly and indirectly

Threshold Areas

According to Wilson and Hasting [9], border zones can be threshold areas inhabited by bandits and others wishing to escape the control of the state. The Anglo-French boundary gave prominence to some border settlements. This was the case with Tombel,

⁴ NAB, file, Pe/a/1928/1, Smuggling of Tobacco

⁵ *Gari* from Calabar was in high demand in both Victoria and Douala

Mbanga and Santa. These towns were cosmopolitan and of recent growth thus offering many advantages for exploitation by the border groups.

The growth of Tombel was entirely due to uncontrolled immigration and the town was populated almost exclusively by “native” strangers. From an administrative point of view, Tombel was regarded by officials on either side of the boundary as “a center of the smuggling industry, a repository for stolen goods and a welcomed refuge for tax evaders and fugitives from French justice”⁶ This was so because all the main paths from the town of Tombel into the French territory carefully avoided the customs stations. As a result, experienced smugglers usually found little difficulty in evading the periodical police visits, which patrolled the boundary.

Apart from its service as a hide out for smugglers and thieves, Tombel was also a safe destination for border peoples in French Cameroon who were victims of *corvée* or forced labour, *indigénat* or political persecutions. Bakossi and Bamileke victims of (UPC) forced labour and the persecuted militants of *Union des Populations du Cameroun* escaped and became settlers in Tombel, Nyasoso, Ndom, Mbule, Ngusi, Mahole and Ebonji at the borders⁷ These people escaped French persecutions and benefited from the liberal British system in the Tombel area. Their increasing numbers and their land grabbing culture eventually led to the 1966 Bakossi-Bamileke war in Tombel [10].

Elsewhere, Santa was another Tombel. This was a cosmopolitan town that developed on grazing land formerly used by the chiefdom of Babajou in French Cameroon. The founder of Santa, Boma Chia is said to have bought this land from the chief of Babajou and this was followed by the settlement of Akum and Bamileke refugees in Santa⁸. After the UPC rebellion of 1955, many Bamileke people at the borders escaped to Santa. The continuous persecution of UPC militants in the Bamileke land and the “war of liberation” in French Cameroon pushed many French Camerounians to cross the borders and settle in Santa [11]. The official opening of the Santa Coffee Estate in December 1951 also made Santa a destination for thousands of Bamileke who stepped across the border to free

⁶ NAB, file, Bc5/1937/vo/1.11/55), Anglo-French Boundary Commission

⁷ Militants of the *Union des Populations du Cameroun* escaped to the Southern Cameroons following a ban on the party's activities in French Cameroon in May 1955. The Party was later banned in the Southern Cameroons in 1957 and its French Cameroon militants escaped to Nigeria, Ghana and Guinea

⁸ NAB, file, Ib/1936/7, Chia Boma and others, p.7

themselves from the obnoxious French colonial policies and pick up jobs in the estate. Border towns were therefore opportunity zones for the border smugglers and political activists who used these towns as refuge centers whenever they were threatened by the colonial masters or exploited economically.

Not only smugglers and political activists benefited from their proximity to the borders. Tax evaders in French Cameroon often took advantage of their nearness to British Cameroon to escape from tax harassments to the Southern Cameroons border villages. This was the case in Elong village in Mwangwekan which was cut into two by the Anglo-French boundary. The chief of the village, Ngounte with the bulk of his subjects were placed in the British territory while 22 of his notables and a part of the village were subjects of the French Administration. Each time French officers came to collect taxes, Ngounte arranged for his people to escape and take refuge in the British zone because taxes were higher in the French zone [11]. They did the same for *corvée* and *prestation*.

Corvée in particular was responsible for mass exodus of border peoples from French Cameroon to the Southern Cameroons. The Bamum migrated and settled in the border villages of Bamessing, Bambalang, Bangolang, Balikumbat and Bafanji. In 1924, the French administrator for Dschang District, Ripert, reported a mass exodus of people from the borders to join their relations on the British side. He admitted that the mass exodus was caused by forced labour and had to change the labour policy of his district. He reduced to almost zero the quota of workers to be supplied by ethnic groups at the borders with the Southern Cameroons [8]. This change of policy in Dschang and elsewhere reduced the burden of forced labour and taxation on the frontier peoples. The borders therefore appeared as a blessing to these border peoples.

Border villages were also attractive destinations for immigrants and strangers who were ready to escape from administrative supervision and exigencies. These strangers made the Mungo (Nkongssamba and Mbanga Administrative units) a zone of refuge. There is the example reported by a French administrator who during his tours in 1933 around the Loum-Tombel area discovered a very recently constructed village. The village was just a few meters from the boundary and had about 30 houses and 40 persons. On the signal of the arrival of the French administrator, all the villagers took flight to the British zone [10]. These people were notably immigrants from Yaounde, Douala and Bafia as it turned out to be and they certainly did not have any proof of tax payment.

In order to check exodus from French Cameroon to the border villages in the British territory,

smuggling and petty theft which prevailed in and around Tombel and Santa, the French instituted the *laissez-passer* and the British recommended a stricter control of passports at the borders.⁹ The British also recommended a penalty for all those who entered the British territory without the requisite passport. The British administration therefore elaborated a strict system of control on the boundary around Tombel and Santa with some modifications in the interest of the border peoples so as to allow the people free passage to and fro over the boundary at least for a period of time. The French authorities refused to allow the entrance in to French territory of any person without a passport or *laissez-passer*. While both administrations attempted to reduce the rate of smuggling and refuge in border towns like Santa and Tombel, they took into consideration border peoples with property astride the boundary.

Persons in the border towns who were in legitimate possession of property on both sides of the boundary were given special considerations regarding the length of their official passes to cross the boundary. In 1930, the acting Resident, L. Sealy-King in an attempt to reduce the difficulties encountered by border people with property on both sides of the boundary, increased the duration of their passes from 6 weeks to one year. This, the Resident explained as follows; It would, I consider, be unreasonable to expect owners of property on both sides of the frontier to have their passes renewed at such frequent... Incidentally the holders of such passes would be much inconvenienced at having to have their passes renewed at such frequent intervals, as many of them would have to travel for 2-3 days on foot to get even as far as Kumba and if for any reason they fail to get their passes renewed they are liable to a fine of £50 or to imprisonment for six months¹⁰

To make matters easier for both the administration and the administered, the Resident suggested that it would be necessary to appoint the DO Kumba as an Assistant Immigration Officer. In the whole of the Cameroon Province, there was only one Assistant Immigration Officer who also acted as the collector of customs Victoria, answerable to the Principal Immigration Officer, Lagos. Such measures, it was presumed would render immigration work in the Province workable. Due to their border position, borderland people therefore had the special advantage of obtaining permits for a longer period than those in the interior on either side of the boundary.

Use of two currencies

⁹ For details on the *Laissez-passer*, see Kaptue, 1979, pp.160-181

¹⁰ NAB, file, Of/a/1939/, Anglo-French Boundary Commission. Registration of Pillars, p21

Another important advantage that the inhabitants along the Anglo-French boundary in Cameroon had and exploited fully was the official use of both the British and French currencies. Trade and exchange in the Southern Cameroons was carried out with the use of the British Pound while in French Cameroon, the Franc CFA was the medium of exchange. However, border markets in Bansa, Babajou, Balikumbat, Bangolan, Tiko were characterized by the free usage of both currencies, that is, the Pound and the Franc

By 1935, tax collectors and tax payers along the northern borderland of this boundary, on the French side encountered several difficulties. The border people in the Adamawa region found it very difficult to acquire French currency. This was because their closeness to the boundary made it easier for them to interact with their brothers on the British side than with those on the French side [12]. They frequented border markets where they sold mainly cattle and their regular customers were Nigerians and British Cameroonians who paid in the British currency. Border people on the French side who also went to these border markets could hardly afford to pay for the major trade commodity, cattle (Ibid ; 234). It is important here to say that trade and other contacts had been going on between the peoples and they had been frequenting the same markets along before the imposition of the boundary. Therefore the problem was not one of currency conversion but that of unavailability of the Franc CFA.

When the people tried to pay their taxes to French tax collectors in the British currency, the collectors refused to accept payment. The collectors reported the difficulty to the French administration. The French resolved that trade should be allowed to continue between the border peoples and that the border people could pay their taxes in the British currency, the only currency which they had at their disposal. This was the content of a letter from Periquet to the French Minister of colonies [12]. To that effect, both the French minister of Finance and the Minister for colonies wrote a report to the president of the French Republic. This was because of the French monetary regime that had been put in place in December 1925 stipulated that only the French currency should be used in the French colonies. Border peoples were also permitted to pay their taxes in British currency. The outcome was lucrative black market in currencies at the borders and the free use of two currencies at the border town and markets. This increased the volume of trade and socio-cultural intercourse along the borders. This was an advantage that the interior peoples did not have during the colonial period.

Language Intercourse

Border peoples also benefited from the intercourse between English and French languages at the borders. Several factors were responsible for this cohabitation. The free movement of people across and along the border, trade at the borders and evangelization were the principal factors for language intercourse. People of the divided ethnic groups, chiefdoms, families and brotherly groups tended to move across and along the border at will. The Bamileke, Mbo, Bakossi, Tikar and Mungo people stepped across the border and settled among their kith and kin bringing along either English or French language. This was very common amongst the Bakossi who migrated across the borders to take part in cultural manifestations especially initiations into the *Ahon* society [8]. The Tikar, Bamileke and Mungo also stepped across the frontier for farming and fishing. This floating population with ties on both sides of the borders was a factor of language intercourse and the spread of English and French languages.

Trade in the border markets also facilitated contacts between the speakers of English and those of French. The weekly markets in Tiko, Babajou, Bansa and other border areas, united people or traders from the two Cameroons who carried out exchange in the two languages. However the most important factor that promoted the use of French and English by the frontier people was evangelization.

The partition line divided some mission stations from their out-stations but the missionaries continued to visit these stations which were politically out of their spheres of evangelization. For example, the Basel mission in British Cameroon continued to depend on the pastors from the French territory until 1925 when the British authorities lifted the restriction on, and allowed the German Basel missionaries to go back to their mission stations in the Southern Cameroons. Christians and catechumens of Bakossi and elsewhere under Pius Epie continued to trek to Dschang or Douala to pass their confession or be baptized by French priest [12]

Again Pidgin English was widely used by both French and British missionaries for evangelization. It was even Rev. Father Joseph Plisoneau of the Nkongsamba Diocese, 1920-1930 who first wrote a Pidgin English series of Gospel books with commentaries, a catechism and a Bible history book [8]. At one time in Dschang, the use of Pidgin English by the Catholic community in the churches developed to such an extent that the colonial government felt it had to intervene to save the French Language. In a sternly worded letter to the *Vicaire Apostolique de Dschang*, the French administration warned that they would penalize the catholic mission in other ways if the use of Pidgin English in their churches was not stopped immediately; Ce serait faire preuve d'un libéralisme

mal compris d'aider la diffusion d'une langue étrangère qui concurrence le français, foule la langue indigène et va à l'encontre du but poursuivi...

J'ai l'honneur de vous prier de vouloir bien intervenir auprès de votre personnel de façon à ce que les faits signalés ne se reproduisent plus à l'avenir et d'avance, pour la cause que nous défendons...¹¹

It is important to say here that Pidgin English became a common medium of communication widely used and understood across the Anglo-French boundary in Cameroon because of trade, cultural intercourse amongst divided ethnic groups and missionary activities. 75 percent of the people at the borders from Mbo land to Douala used Pidgin effectively by 1940[12]. In a letter from Dugast to the Commissioner of the French Republic, on September 1938, he indicated that all the chiefs of the borderland notably the Mungo, could read and write French and English (Ibid). This could be true because due to the immigrant nature of the border populations, the chiefs had to master some Pidgin English because of the many Anglophones settled in their districts.

At border control posts and during tax collection exercises, border people were sometimes obliged to express themselves in both the French and the English languages to officers from both sides of the border to avoid harassment. There were cases in the Bangwa, Mungo and Elong villages where people from the British zone with proof of tax payment were harassed and forced by the French tax officers to pay tax again on the French side. These frontier people had to learn to communicate in both English and French in order to avoid such embarrassments.

Apart from French and English, multilingualism in the local languages, particularly languages of groups on either side of the colonial boundary, aided Trans-frontier relations and movements in several ways. Firstly, those who spoke the language of the neighbouring communities on either side of the frontier easily identified themselves to the colonial authorities as members of the community on which side they were. Many traders from Nso and Ndog made use of their knowledge of Bamum and this made it easier for them to pass from one side to the other and not be delayed by the patrolmen [6] People of the Douala cluster used their knowledge of Duala to maintain their constant visits to the French territory from Kumba and Victoria Divisions. Both the British and French preventive men along the frontier are said to have always been less severe with peoples who were residents of the communities of their side of the frontier

¹¹ NAY, APA 1108/A, Circonscription de Dschang

when they crossed back from the other side. They knew or identified them from their languages.

In other words, multilingual persons used their skills in the local languages to enjoy the privileges of local residents of both sides of the frontier. Secondly people engaged in illegal activities across the frontier, such as smugglers, criminals and other fugitives, used their knowledge of local languages to obtain information and assistance from the local residents about the movements of the police, customs and preventive men seeking their arrest. The local inhabitants protected them because they were fellow tribesmen. Only the language they spoke identified them as fellow tribesmen. Thirdly, the smugglers and other illegal users of the frontier, who were arrested by the border patrolmen, easily got away with their contraband goods, offences and crimes, if they were quick to identify themselves to the officers who arrested them. Frontier people therefore made use of their multilingualism to transform the colonial boundary in to a zone of opportunities.

CONCLUSION

Like the other colonial boundaries on the continent of Africa, the intra-Cameroon border was not entirely a curse to the indigenous peoples. It was a source of contraband trade and smuggling which turned out to be very lucrative activities. This may explain the interest border peoples in Dschang, Mbouda, Mbanga, Tiko and Kumba developed in trade. Border people could easily escape colonial harassments and seek refuge across the frontier. Frontier settlements such as Bamessing, Bafanji, Bambalang, Santa, Tiko and Tombel became heterogeneous and cosmopolitan. Frontier settlers and indigenes became multilingual as trans-frontier trade and socio-cultural intercourse brought them in contact with two colonial languages and a multitude of local languages. The level of bilingualism or ability to speak French and Pidgin was therefore high amongst the communities at the Anglo-French borders. These were benefits that the Anglo-French intra-Cameroon boundary brought to the borderline peoples.

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