An African Reaction to World War I : the Beti of Cameroon.
Monsieur Frederik Quinn

Résumé
F. Quinn — Une réaction africaine à la Première Guerre Mondiale : les Beti du Cameroun. Les Ewondo et Bëne de la région de Yaoundé firent preuve, de 1914 à 1916, d'un très grand loyalisme vis-à-vis de l'administration allemande, plusieurs milliers d'entre eux accompagnant la retraite jusqu'en Guinée Espagnole. Les chefs Max Abé Fuda et Karl Atangana passèrent plusieurs années en Espagne avant d'être réinstallés par l'administration mandataire qui avait besoin de leur autorité pour rétablir la situation sociale compromise par la guerre.

Citer ce document / Cite this document :

Document généré le 02/06/2016
An African Reaction to World War I: 
the Beti of Cameroon

Most histories of World War I deal with the conflict in Europe, and those accounts which treat its effects elsewhere in the world do so largely from the viewpoint of the Versailles peace settlement and its consequences. The focus of this essay is on World War I in Cameroon and its effects on a single African society, the Beti, a rain forest tribe of approximately 500,000 people who live around Yaounde, the inland capital.

Traditionally, the Beti were a hunting and growing society, and Beti political organization was characterized by several thousand autarchic lineage groups, each ruled by a headman, functioning independently of other Beti groups for most of their existence. Control of these units passed patrilineally from father to oldest son; a typical compound included the headman, his wives, unmarried brothers, slaves and male clients, who attached themselves to the headman, offering services as warriors or hunters in turn for assistance in raising brideprice. Such a lineage unit might include 20 people, but much smaller and considerably larger compounds were known.1

German contact with the Beti began in 1887 when two military explorers, Kund and Tappenbeck, completed the twenty-two days march inland to the hilly region around what would become the ‘Jaunde’ post. ‘Jaunde’ was a deformation of the word Ewondo, the name of the Beti clan inhabiting the region. Initially some Beti groups resisted the Germans, chiefly through ambushing German caravans or retreating into the rain forest when work gang recruiters approached, but by the turn of the century, German control of the region was complete.2

2. Useful on the German period of Cameroon’s history are Harry R. Rudin, Germans in the Cameroons, a Case Study in Modern Imperialism, 1884-1915, New
For the Beti, perhaps the most important effect of contact with the Germans was that a number of young men were sent to missionary schools on the coast and returned as interpreters, clerks and eventually soldiers. As the Germans completed the road to the coast and extended their trails inland, they required both workers and revenues for public works, and for collecting both African intermediaries were needed.

Of the Africans who worked at the post, Karl Atangana was the most important. Atangana was born in the late 1880s, the eleventh of twelve sons of a Ewondo headman, which would have left him out of the line of succession to his father’s post. He worked briefly as a houseboy for the Germans, and was sent by them to mission schools on the coast, after which he returned as an interpreter. Atangana became the chief African auxiliary to the German station chief, Major Hans Dominik, for about a decade, and in 1911 was sent to Hamburg to the Kolonial Institut, where he collaborated with Dr. Martin Heepe on an important two-volume collection of Beti folklore, history and linguistics called the *Jaunde-Texte*. In 1914, shortly before the war broke out, he returned to Cameroon and was named by the Germans as Oberhauptling (paramount chief) of the Beti.1

Less than a decade after the Germans had established the Yaounde post as a fully functioning administrative district, World War I erupted, bringing an end to the German overseas empire.

II

The land war in Cameroon began on September 27, 1914, when the Germans surrendered without a fight the coastal port of Douala to invading British forces, after having blown up the telegraph station and withdrawn to blocking positions in the interior. Yaounde became the provisional capital of the colony for the next fifteen months until the

---

allies reached it and the Germans again withdrew, this time southward through the rain forest to Spanish Guinea.¹

The German strategy was one of gradual retreat toward the interior, ambushing and harassing the allied columns advancing through the rain forest. The Germans had considerable terrain to hold with fewer men and lighter arms than their opponents. At the same time they knew the land, their African troops were loyal throughout the conflict, and the Germans generally controlled where the fighting took place, a definite advantage in such warfare.²

Still the Germans never really had a chance. Their total force in late 1915 was estimated at 4,000 men, of whom the majority were probably Beti. The British-French contingent opposing them was more than double that size.³ The Allies’ plan was to move through Beti lands as quickly as possible and encircle Yaounde. The main thrust came from a large British column approaching from the southeast. There was also a French unit moving east from Edea and Eseka and additional French troops pushing northwest from the Congo. Other allied troops descended from Northern Cameroon.

It took the Allies almost nine months to move to within fifty miles of Yaounde and the approximate southern limits of Beti lands. The German-led African troops held off the allied advance for about a year. In June 1915, eight months after Douala had fallen, the British column had moved about 125 miles inland and was within fifty miles of Yaounde, gaining about a mile a day. Before the end of the month they were driven back to the point from which they had originally embarked on May 1, sustaining a twenty-five percent casualty count, in addition to damage wrought by dysentery and fever. If the British advance was checked, the French had no better luck in the east. They were still 140 miles east of Yaounde in late June.⁴

Warfare was suspended during the rainy months beginning in July; then in late November a final dry season offensive was launched on the capital. The advancing British column, pushing from the west, met heavy resistance from the Germans, but moved to within sight of Yaounde by late December 1915.

Although they had constructed an elaborate system of trenches to defend the town, the Germans withdrew from Yaounde without a fight, as they had from Douala. It would have been pointless for the Germans to risk a last-ditch encounter. Their handiwork of over two decades would have been destroyed, and numerous casualties incurred, with no prospect of any offensive to improve their position. The British entered

³. E. Gorges: 268-269.
⁴. Ibid.: 237-239.
Yaounde without opposition on January 1, 1916, and during the next ten days, the remaining units of the allied encircling movement arrived from other points.¹

The last military encounter of any significance in Beti lands was a rear-guard action on the Nyong River January 8, 1916, when Gorges, the British commander, wrote:

‘. . . the retreating Germans returned all our prisoners of war, amongst them being some British and French officers and civilians, native soldiers, and a few noncombatants who had been taken by the Germans at various stages of the campaign. All had received fair and humane treatment during their capture.’

Mora, the last northern stronghold in German control, surrendered on February 18, 1916, ending World War I in Cameroon.²

Karl Atangana, seventy-two of the Beti chiefs, and several thousand Beti accompanied Governor General Ebermaier southward, eluding allied efforts to halt their exodus. The Beti chiefs did not believe the Germans would lose the colony and expected them to return after a peace settlement was negotiated. The Beti were reluctant to abandon the Germans, fearing what might happen to the Germans if they went it alone through the rain forest. At the same time, Atangana and his associates encouraged potential rivals to accompany them as a precautionary measure, fearing their own places might be otherwise usurped. They left as replacements kinsmen they believed would surrender their positions readily on the chiefs’ return.

Their loyalty to the Germans notwithstanding, the Beti found World War I a deeply unsettling experience. Their own feuds were of short duration and involved small groups, with simpler arms and less devastating results than in modern warfare. A Beti who knew the period said,

‘. . . the First World War made a bad impression on the Beti. They spoke with horror of the White man’s war. They had never seen anything like it. Their own wars involved only a few people over a short period of time and were consequently less destructive.’³

World War I in Cameroon was a time marked by the breakdown of authority, both colonial and traditional. The Beti say there was an increase in stealing, and there were a number of individuals going about the countryside wearing police costumes and extracting payment from villagers. Witchcraft accusations increased, and there were rumors that a new secret society had appeared among the Beti. In the absence of traditional or colonial authority, members of this Leopard Society tried to influence the temporal and metaphysical order through sorcery and

³. T. Tsala, personal communication, April 8, 1969.
witchcraft and resorted to brigandage and intimidation as well. They were said to wear tails of palm branches, to put calabashes on their heads, paint themselves with leopard spots and carry wooden leopard’s paws with nails for claws. With these they scratched the ground in front of a hut to tell someone inside, ‘You are en palabre with the leopards.’

III

In February, 1916, Governor Ebermaier and Colonel Zimmerman, who commanded the troops, ‘and a large number of Germans and natives’, completed their exodus to the south and turned themselves over to the Spanish. They were favorably received by the Spanish, and the Beti were given a parcel of land at Bekoko near San Carlos where many stayed throughout the war. The Germans moved to Fernando Po and on April 16 two Spanish ships carried 797 Germans to Holland. Others went to Spain for internment. Pere Skolaster, a Pallotiner missionary whose figures cannot be checked, estimated that 20,000 Africans, including soldiers, went to Spanish Guinea with the Germans. Governor Ebermaier’s figure was 975 Germans, including 400 noncombatants and 14,000 Africans, of whom 6,000 were soldiers.2

After they had moved to Fernando Po, Karl Atangana and six other Beti chiefs decided to visit Spain. Their trip, financed by the Germans, had two purposes: to await the war’s settlement, when it was hoped Germany would regain its colonies, and to recoup a million to a million and a half marks which fifty Beti chiefs and notables had banked through the Basel Mission, a Swiss Protestant missionary group. The German government paid for their transportation to Madrid in 1918, lodged them at the Hotel Aurora and provided spending money.3

The small group of Beti spent most of the next two years in Madrid and one month in Barcelona. They visited the German Embassy in Madrid and arranged repayment of the Beti accounts in Spanish pesetas which they later changed to French francs. The political side of their mission was less successful for, as the Versailles talks continued, it became increasingly evident that the Germans would not regain their colonies. The Beti saw the Spanish king, Alfonso XIII, four times, and asked ‘Nkukuma [chief] Alfonso’ to intercede with the French on their behalf. If he ever did, it was without success.

Spain deeply impressed the Beti chiefs. They were twice dinner guests of the royal family, and the king reportedly offered them a place in the administration of Spanish Guinea. The chiefs visited several high Spanish government officials, including the Foreign Minister, carefully

1. T. Tsala, oral interview, Mvolye, February 2 and May 6, 1968.
studied the Spanish government and parliament as a model of how Europeans governed their countries, and discussed ways that commerce and industry, such as they saw in Spain, could be developed in Africa. ‘We talked and talked about what we saw,’ Max Abe Foudda, one of the chiefs who made the trip, recalled fifty years later, ‘and asked among ourselves how we could bring these things back to our country.’ Photographs of the period, which Atangana’s family kept, picture the Beti delegation in a number of settings in Madrid.1

They fared less well in Paris, for their fidelity to the Germans caused the French government to question the Africans’ potential loyalty and value to the French. The Beti answer was simple: the Germans had been Cameroon’s colonizers and the Beti had worked loyally with them to the benefit of both parties; now they would do the same with France.

IV

Finally, on June 8, 1920, the French government allowed the Beti to return to Cameroon. Atangana was given several money orders from Germans who had fathered children while in Cameroon and who wanted to provide for their education. The Beti chiefs’ last impression of Europe was when the ship docked for several hours at Las Palmas. Max Abe Foudda, one of the Beti chiefs, saw a Spanish two-story hacienda which he liked, sketched a plan and built a replica of it when he returned to Nkobewa, forty miles southwest of Yaounde. It served as a model for other chiefs’ houses in the rain forest as well. Meanwhile, other Beti chiefs and their followers had been gradually filtering back to Cameroon from Spanish territory, bringing with them new types of banana plants, pineapples and macabos they found on the coast.2

In March 1916, three months after the German exodus, the British and the French established their respective zones of influence in Cameroon, abandoning a short-lived effort to govern the territory jointly through a condominium. Later, in 1922, Cameroon officially became a League of Nations mandate. As part of the Versailles settlement on former German possessions, France received a large section of what would now be called Eastern Cameroon. Despite the fact that they had taken Douala, Yaounde and much of the coast and rain forest, the British withdrew from most of the conquered territory and simply added a portion of Western Cameroon to their Nigerian territory. This land included the former German capital of Buea and the rich plantation lands in the vicinity of Mount Cameroon.3

1. Id.: photographs in possession of Max Abe Foudda; family of Charles Atangana, Mvolye.
3. Max Abe Fouda, oral interview; Jean Faustin Beteyene, oral interview;
The first years of French rule in Cameroon were an unsettled time for the Beti and other Africans. Karl Atangana and seventy-two of the most important Beti chiefs and several thousand Beti clerks, soldiers and families had departed from Cameroon leaving the Beti without leaders experienced in dealing with Europeans. ‘Individual insubordination and disorder are the general rule among the tribes’, a French administrator observed, and there were several examples of raids conducted or old feuds resumed by Beti and other African groups.

The French hold on Cameroon at this time was fragile, local populations were not yet under their control and conditions could have permitted the growth of ‘des tendances frondeuses’, but there were no revolts among the Beti.2

The chaotic state of Cameroon in this transition period was outlined in an American missionary’s letter, written in March, 1916, from Metet, a mission station south of Yaounde. Former soldiers roamed freely about the countryside, raiding compounds, seizing women and looting goods. ‘Policemen’ and ‘messengers’ with scraps of paper written in bad French or sometimes still in German took livestock and possessions from villagers.3

In the absence of effective European control, many African chiefs used policeboys, guards the administration allowed them to keep, as messenger-soldiers. A commander in Yaounde in 1919 said that ‘le pays est pratiquement livré au contrôle des police-boys’, and that almost anyone who could put together some semblance of a military costume could pass himself off as an agent of the administration, pillaging and taking goods as he pleased.4

The French policy toward local administration was vague and experimental during the first few years of the French presence in Cameroon. France was faced with both a serious lack of European personnel and a leadership vacuum among the Beti. Subdivisions were in charge of soldiers who, ‘if they had been brave soldiers, could not but make mediocre administrators’. The eastern region of Cameroon in the immediate postwar years was controlled by a French company with strength reduced to five or six Europeans. The Germans had divided the same region into three districts with more than fifty European personnel.

The Governor-General in 1919 said he saw no solution to the problem until the situation in Europe became more clear and administrators for the mandated territory became available. Meanwhile, he exhorted such


1. Cameroon National Archives (CNA) 11.828 (1918) : Exposé de la politique générale, attitude des chefs, esprit des populations.

2. Ibid.


French military and civilian administrators as were there to base their policy on Gallieni’s *tache d’huile* or *toile d’araignée* concepts. It was only by the broadest poetic license, however, that the efforts of the former French soldiers at native administration might be considered as expanding an oil spot or building a spider’s web.

To lead the African side of the administration, the French appointed Joseph Atemengue as chief of the Ewondo and Bène, an appointment that lasted until 1922, when they recalled Atangana. Originally, the French were suspicious of Atangana, whom they called ‘*une créature des Allemands*’. A French report said ‘the presence of Atangana on Fernando Po, very near in other words, and the surveillance his family exercises’ on Atemengue contributed to the latter’s difficulties in establishing himself in his new chief’s role.

French accounts of the other Beti chiefs they found or appointed in this period are not very enthusiastic. There were two themes in the administrator’s evaluation of chiefs, their ‘sincerity’, which meant their loyalty to the administration, and their ‘energy’, which meant their enthusiasm for collecting taxes. A French report of the 1918 period said,

> ‘Le fait le plus caractéristique de la mentalité de ces chefs est généralement chez la plupart, une admiration qu’ils ne cherchent pas à dissimuler pour l’administration allemande. Presque tous leurs discours commencent généralement avec les mots “In German time…”’

Charles Atangana (as he now called himself) and the chiefs who had accompanied him to Spain had arrived by boat in Douala in December 1920. They were met by a representative of the French government who took them to government headquarters for questioning about why they had left Cameroon, why they were now returning and what was their real attitude toward the Germans. No legal charges were filed against them, and five of the chiefs were sent to the mountain city of Dschang not far from West Cameroon, where they worked with road building crews from December 1920 to December 1921. Max Abe Foudda, who had accompanied Atangana to Madrid, supervised the 1,000 workers building the Dschang-Nkongsamba road, and Atangana was engaged in similar projects.

One of Atangana’s first acts after returning to Cameroon was to

---

2. CNA 11.828 (1918), Exposé de la politique générale.
4. Max Abe Foudda, oral interview.
marry his German-educated daughter, Katerina, to Atemengue, now chief in Yaounde. Such marriages were commonly arranged between headmen in traditional Beti society to the advantage of both, but this one was not successful. Katerina fled her much older spouse after a few years and returned to her father, in whose house she lived until his death in 1943.¹

V

In December 1921, the French recalled Atangana to Yaounde as Chef supérieur of the Ewondo and Bène. By then they had no reason to suspect his motives in cooperating with them. They needed someone to organize the road, railroad and public building programs, and set up a tax collecting system that would bring in revenues. Joseph Atemengue, who had replaced Charles Atangana, had no special skills as an organizer and was not a forceful personality. He was moved to the prestigious post of chief judge of the local African court, where he served to the satisfaction of both French and Africans.

When Atangana returned to power, he tried to install a sort of cabinet government such as he and the other Beti chiefs had seen in Spain. The system, called *nsi meyong*, after the location near Mvolye where the group convened, lasted from 1922 to 1925. Several Beti groups sent representatives to live there and to act as liaisons between Charles Atangana and the French, and their own people. Some of the Beti were given special duties, such as overseeing tax collection and advising where schools should be placed. The cabinet system did not work, in part because Atangana was reluctant to delegate authority and in part because the other Beti did not have much experience in administering in the European manner, and the whole system of administration was dropped in 1925.

Seen in retrospect, the effects of World War I and its aftermath were substantial in central Cameroon. First, the war meant the breakdown of political authority, both traditional and European. The German exodus in 1916 meant the removal of almost all important African chiefs and soldiers of the region, and it left the country void of leaders. The accounts of disorder in the rain forest, the roaming bands of mutineers and soldiers without armics, the settling of old scores between tribes, the Leopard society and its efforts to regulate the temporal and metaphysical order, are suggestions of the social climate of Northern Europe at the end of the Thirty Years’ war, which was a period of political and cultural disorganization too. This period of unrest for the Beti lasted almost a decade because French control in the Yaounde region, although nominal since 1916, was not accompanied by a fully functioning administration

¹ Max Abe Foumda, oral interview, and *Histoire des Beti (Ewondo)*, MS, Yaounde, 1968: 6.
backed by a policy of economic development and public works, until the mid-1920s. Thus the transition from German to French rule was anything but smooth in central Cameroon, and was marked by a profoundly disjunctive epoch, the consequences of which are only beginning to receive scholarly attention both in Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa.

F. Quinn — Une réaction africaine à la Première Guerre Mondiale : les Beti du Cameroun. Les Ewondo et Béne de la région de Yaoundé firent preuve, de 1914 à 1916, d'un très grand loyalisme vis-à-vis de l'administration allemande, plusieurs milliers d'entre eux accompagnant la retraite jusqu'en Guinée Espagnole. Les chefs Max Abé Fuda et Karl Atangana passèrent plusieurs années en Espagne avant d'être réinstallés par l'administration mandataire qui avait besoin de leur autorité pour rétablir la situation sociale compromise par la guerre.