
Monsieur Richard Joseph

Résumé
R. Joseph — Un prétendant royal: le prince Douala Manga Bell à Paris, 1919-1922. Après la guerre de 1914, Alexandre Douala Manga Bell, fils et héritier du chef Rudolph Douala Bell, élevé en Allemagne et suspect de ce fait aux yeux de l'administration mandataire, fut astreint à résider à Paris, pour s'y franciser. Les rapports entre le prince et la France en furent dès l'abord marqués de l'ambiguïté qui allait caractériser toute sa carrière: dès les années 1920 se manifestent les grands traits de comportement public et privé et de personnalité qui devaient faire de lui le premier leader politique reconnu à l'échelle d'ensemble du Cameroun.

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For at least two centuries before the imposition of colonial rule on the Cameroons coast in 1884, trade between the interior in first slaves and ivory, then palm products and ivory, was conducted by European traders through the intermediary of the Duala people. It was the Duala chiefs who signed the treaties with German emissaries in 1884; and although the Duala’s sphere of influence did not extend more than a few miles into the hinterland, on the basis of these treaties the Germans were able to carve out a territory extending all the way to Lake Chad. In 1911, the German administration decided to expropriate the land inhabited by the Duala immediately adjacent to the coast for what was given as hygienic reasons, but where the economic motivation was difficult to disguise. The Duala stoutly resisted the expropriation and took their case directly to the Reichstag. However, early in 1913 the German Government decided to implement the expropriation. By the time of the outbreak of World War I, the Duala had become quite a thorn in the side of the German colonial administration. Charged with having communicated with other inland chiefs to foment a rebellion against the colonizers, the Paramount Chief of one of the two main clans of the Duala, Rudolph Manga Bell, was tried and hanged.1

With the conquest of the Cameroons between 1914 and 1916 by French and British troops, the territory was first governed jointly by the two allied powers and then provisionally divided between them with the larger section—including the key port of Douala—given to the French. In January 1919, the victorious Entente nations convened in Paris to settle the many issues raised by the war including the disposition of German colonies. Compared with the considerable public and private debate that had transpired in Great Britain on this question


Cahiers d’Études Africaines, 54, XIV-2, pp. 339-358.
throughout the war, the virtual silence in France was deafening. 2 By the
time the Council of Ten convened, however, the French Government had
clearly adopted an annexationist policy towards the conquered territories
of Togoland and the Cameroons. On this point there was no conflict
between France and its Anglo-Saxon allies. Where controversy did
emerge—and took another six months to settle including a fair amount
of arm-twisting—was on the issue of the internationalization of the
former German colonies. The French originally resisted the establish-
ment of a League of Nations Mandate in these possessions, but by mid-
1919 were forced to concede on this point. 3

During the jostling among the English-speaking allies—with President
Wilson and General Smuts on opposite extremes and Lloyd George in
the middle—certain proclamations were publicly made regarding the
rights of the inhabitants of former German territories in any post-war
settlement. On 5 January 1918, in an attempt to pre-empt both the
expected declaration of President Wilson as well as the criticism of the
British Labour Party, Lloyd George declared: ‘The governing considera-
tion [ . . . ] must be that the inhabitants should be placed under the
control of an administration acceptable to themselves, one of whose
main purposes will be to prevent their exploitation for the benefit of
European capitalists or governments.’ 4 Three days later, the world
learned of the Fifth of Wilson’s Fourteen points: ‘ . . . in determining
all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the population concerned
must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government
whose title is to be determined.’ 5 How did a colonial power ascertain
the views of the subject peoples prior to the introduction of electoral
procedures (or even after it, as Southern Africa today demonstrates)?
Quite simply, the chiefs were contacted and ‘requested’ by administrative
officials to make suitable testimonials. In the usual case where these
dignitaries were unlettered in the colonial language, such a statement—
decrying the abuses of the Germans and praising the wonders of the
new colonial power—was presented for their signature or mark. In
the case of French Cameroun, however, this procedure ran into an
unexpected snag.

In the years 1918-19, although their people numbered less than

2. One has only to compare the considerable literature on this debate in the
English-speaking world—including W. Roger Louis’ book, Great Britain and Ger-
many’s Lost Colonies, Oxford, 1967—with the scanty material on which André
Kaspi has based his article, ‘French War Aims in Africa 1914-1919’, in Gifford
ing to R. W. Logan, French cabinets had throughout the war invoked the constitu-
tional right to withhold information if it was not compatible with the public
interest in order to justify their refusal to state France’s peace aims’; cf. The
German Colonies in Africa, 1914-1918’, in Gifford and Louis, eds., 293.
5. Ibid.
20,000 in a territory of between two and three millions, the Duala chiefs-tains were still by any measure among the most important in the territory. Yet, while they willingly expressed their condemnation of the Germans and vented strong opposition to any return of their former rulers, as far as the future destiny of the territory was concerned, the Duala chiefs seemed to have something in mind that did not quite fit French designs. In a letter from the Governor-General of AEF to the Colonial Ministry in Paris in December 1918, the following telegram from Governor Fourneau of Cameroun was included:

'Reçu des quatre principaux chefs de la ville de Douala, déclaration suivante—
Citation—Tous chefs et indigènes cité Douala soussignés réunion avec alliés cri allégresse victoire sur vos ennemis—Nous vous remercions incessamment pour la victoire qui nous a libérés—Nous attendons tous les représentants alliés et les accueillerons avec plaisir.'

This willingness of the Duala chiefs to meet with 'all allied representatives' was not exactly the sort of document the French wished to put forward at the Peace Conference due to convene in a month's time. In a second telegram included from Fourneau in the same letter, the Governor hastened to add various items of information intended to qualify the significance of the first telegram: the declaration was only from the Duala chiefs; the Duala were very pretentious and possessed no authority beyond that of their own group of about 'ten thousand inhabitants'—and they were trying to take advantage of their location at the key exit point of the territory. He also added, significantly, that some of the Duala chiefs 'rêvent faire Cameroun tout entier second Liberia dont eux-mêmes prendraient le commandement.'

At the end of 1918, therefore, while the French government was seeking to retain its very considerable share of the Cameroons and Togoland, and resisting American and British initiatives which appeared to set limits to its future sovereignty over these territories, it was also faced with the increasing challenge by the Duala to its colonial rule in Cameroun. With respect to the latter conflict, a new problem of uncertain dimensions emerged to confront the French in 1919: the continued presence in Germany of Alexander Douala Manga Bell, the eldest son of the Duala chief executed by the Germans in 1914. At the

6. Archives Nationales, Section Outre-Mer (hereafter ANSOM), AP 11/29-30. Unless otherwise indicated, letters and other communications cited are from this weighty carton in ANSOM.
7. Ibid.
8. The considerable political protests against French colonial rule among the Duala, and the emergence of a nationalist consciousness among this coastal elite, can be seen in their many protests to the Permanent Mandates Commission as discussed by Victor Le Vine in Cameroons: from Mandate to Independance, Berkeley, 1964:114-117. This development will be more fully treated in a study planned by this author on protest movements in Cameroun during the interwar period and a doctoral thesis by Jonathan Derrick of SOAS, London University, on the Duala.
age of four and a half, Alexander had accompanied his father, Rudolph, and his grandfather, August Manga Bell, during their visit to Germany in 1902 to protest against the oppressive administration of Governor von Puttkamer. He was then left behind to be brought up and educated in Germany.\(^9\) Since that time he had never returned to Cameroun, had forgotten the Duala language, and, most importantly, had briefly served in the German army. In a letter dated 31 January 1919, Governor Fourneau of Cameroun set forward his thoughts on the problems posed by the young Duala (then only 21 years old) in a way that so much represents the preoccupations of the French during the next two years as to be worth substantial citing:

\[\text{Il serait utile au moment de la signature de la paix de connaître exactement quels sont les desseins d'Alexandre Bell et dans le cas où il exprimerait le désir de venir au Cameroun de pouvoir discerner jusqu'à quel point nous pouvons compter sur sa collaboration. Dans ce but, il sera du plus haut intérêt de faire séjourner Alexandre en France pendant une période assez longue, avant de lui permettre de revenir à Douala [\ldots].}
\]

\[\text{Sa mère Emma Bell m'a fait exprimer le désir que son fils restât un an en France avant de revenir ici. Il est absolument nécessaire qu'en arrivant à Douala, Alexandre non seulement sache parler français mais se soit encore débarrassé de la mentalité que ses anciens maîtres lui ont fait acquérir pendant un long séjour en Allemagne [\ldots].}
\]

\[\text{Si comme je le pense Alexandre a l'intention de revenir au Cameroun, il incombera au gouvernement français de lui faire allouer sur le budget de l'État la somme qui sera nécessaire pour couvrir les frais d'une année de séjour en France.}\(^9\)

In June of 1919, there were dispatches between the Colonial Ministry and General Dupont of the Entente Mission in Berlin concerning the intention of Manga Bell to travel with his family to Paris on the 19th of that month and on the French government's decision to send him an advance of 2,000 francs to cover the expenses of his trip, a sum to be subsequently re-imbursed.\(^11\) During that same month, another communiqué from Fourneau, now in Paris, stated that Alexander Bell should be 'recalled' to Paris; and that the decision that he should no longer return to Germany and should be 'frenchified' (francisé) was supported by his regency council consisting of Mandessi Bell and the 'old notables' of his family. After discussing the 'fallacious pretext' used by the Germans in 1914 as the basis of the Duala chief's execution, Fourneau concluded with three significant points: that as soon as Alexander Bell had undergone sufficient contact with French customs and habits 'to give satisfaction to Duala public opinion, in conformity with French interests',

\[9\] The seventeen years Alexander Bell spent in Germany are still largely obscure, except for details obtained by the French authorities or that can be gleaned from interviews with his surviving relatives.

\[10\] Letter to 'Monsieur le Ministre des Colonies', 31 January 1919.

\[11\] Telegram of 19 June 1919 from Henry Simon to General Dupont, Berlin, and from Dupont to Simon, 19 June 1919.
he should be permitted to ‘resume’ power in Douala; that M. Allégret (a Baptist pastor in Paris with whom Alexander would be lodged) should carry out a ‘discreet surveillance’ on him while organizing his studies, etc.; and that if possible the young Duala should be accompanied from Berlin to Paris. ‘It is important’, he urged, ‘to have Alexander Bell in hand from the beginning.’

Before proceeding with a discussion of the three years after 1919—most of which Alexander Bell spent in Paris—it should be pointed out that these can be analysed on different levels. For the purposes of this particular study, here are the three relevant perspectives in increasing order of importance. First, there are the insights from a strictly biographical point of view into the formative years of a striking individual whose aristocratic habits, authoritarianism as well as fickleness came to be well-known throughout Cameroun as well as in Paris where he represented his country in the National Assembly between 1946 and 1958. Secondly, roots of the later ambivalent political attitudes of Alexander Bell towards the French can be discerned in his early sojourn in Paris. Finally, and most importantly, the experiences of this young Camerounian during these three years highlighted a number of political considerations that were to bedevil the French colonial authorities throughout the interwar period: German demands for the return of their African territories; the strident Duala opposition to France’s refusal to reverse the pre-war German expropriations of their land; and the political rôle envisaged for Camerounians under French rule, especially the traditional and modern élites.

After the French Colonial Minister, Henry Simon, had made a circuitous opposition at the Peace Conference to the inclusion of France’s new possessions under the mandate system, Prime Minister Clemenceau acquiesced on 30 January 1919 to the new system after receiving the concession that France would be able to raise troops in the mandates in times of war.¹³ However, by mid-1919 there was a certain vagueness—even hesitancy—about France’s position. In the opinion of André Kaspi, France had accepted the mandate system, but with ‘mental reservations’.¹⁴ It is not surprising, therefore, in view of these diplomatic manoeuvres—and the temerity of the Duala in sending a petition to the Paris Peace Conference stressing the need to secure their individual and property rights¹⁵—that the initial reactions of the French authorities were to link the imminent arrival of Alexander Bell in Paris with these

¹² ‘Note’ by Lucien Fourneau, 17 June 1919.
¹³ A. KASPI: 391, states—incorrectly I believe—that this compromise concerned the recruiting of troops ‘for purposes of maintaining order and defence of the territory’. In fact, the special clause which modified the demilitarization of the ‘B’ mandates related strictly to Clemenceau’s demands with respect to the outbreak of ‘general war’. Cf. W. Roger LOUIS: 137-138.
¹⁴ Ibid: 392.
international developments. In a report of a talk Governor Fourneau had with Bell, we find the following comment:

'... il y a lieu à se demander si ce ne sont pas les Allemands qui l'ont incité à venir de suite à Paris pour exposer des vues au nom du Cameroun, à la Conférence de la Paix, et demander l'autonomie par exemple.'

The Colonial Ministry was therefore faced with two simultaneous tasks: to re-mould Manga Bell along French lines including teaching him French, and to exercise a scrupulous surveillance of his activities. A practical solution suggested by Fourneau was based on the knowledge that Bell's late father was an active member of the Swiss-German Basler Mission: 'Alexandre Bell [...] serait pupille du ministère des Colonies, confié à la mission protestante de Paris qui serait responsable de ses progrès en français et devrait tenir le Département au courant.'

On his arrival in Paris, Bell was accompanied by his wife and child and an older relative, Elong Ngando. The fact that Elong Ngando had also lived several years in Germany, was married to a German woman, and was considered a sort of adviser to Alexander, incited the French to closely watch his 'actions and gestures'. During the first four months of his stay in Paris, Bell and his companions were surrounded by willing benefactors, all helping him to become settled in Paris, and all dutifully noting his every remark for the slightest indication of his views towards Germany, France and Cameroun. These helpful 'spies' included a number of agents of the Ministry of the Interior, as well as the former Cameroun Governor, Fourneau, and an administrateur en chef, Réallon. What their reports revealed was that there was nothing 'abnormal' about the behaviour of Alexander Bell, that he had shown considerable openness in his talks with them, and, most importantly, that they had failed to uncover any evidence of 'pro-German sentiments' in the young Duala. Two factors which served partially to blunt French suspicions about Alexander Bell were, first, the fact that he was so Europeanized; and, second, their belief that he was more interested in pursuing medical studies in Paris than in returning to take up the mantle of his late father's chieftom.

Alexander Bell was well aware of the predicament he was in and took every opportunity to convince the French of his loyalty and to avert their suspicions about his future intentions. In a letter to Fourneau

17. As it turned out, Bell and his entourage did not stay long in the lodgings provided by Pastor Allégret and the task of surveillance devolved onto governmental agents.
18. 'Le Ministre des Colonies à Monsieur le Commissaire de la République à Douala', 19 September 1919. His name is also given as Elong nya Ngando or Ugando.
on 7 September 1919, he pointed out that his father’s ‘assassination’ had made a lasting impression on his subjects, by whom he had been greatly loved, and had ‘sûrement effacé l’empreinte, heureusement superficielle, de la manière boche’.

He then went on to proclaim his joy over the placing of his ‘fatherland’ under the ‘protection’ of France. After pointing out how much he had been impressed by the ‘grandeur d’âme’ of the French despite his recent arrival, and the lasting memory of the friendly welcome they had given to him, he affirmed his sincere friendship for France and indicated how well he could serve here by demonstrating to his subjects the great difference between the French and German character. As a symbol of his renunciation of Germany and his loyalty to France, he dispatched his German passport a few days later with a request that he be furnished a French one instead.

To allay French suspicions that his opposition to the Germans was only a recently-acquired sentiment, Alexander described to Fourneau his attempts while at the University of Kiel—most of which were unfruitful—to publish his opposition to the use of forced labour and corporal punishment by the Germans in the Cameroons, and to present his views in person to German colonial officials.

On 17 October, in a conversation he and Elong had with Réallon, they both stressed the antipathy they and other Duala felt for the Germans because of the persecution inflicted on their compatriots immediately preceding the war. Elong Ngando even went on to discuss the organization of German colonial propaganda, and the plans in operation to employ returning Camerounians in this cause.

Pressed for concrete information, he gave the name of a Duala employee of the Berlin subway, Ludwig Dibabe, as the coordinator of these activities among Camerounian expatriates, and also gave the names of other Duala still in Germany. The most influential of the Duala, he also confided, was Moukouri Makembe, who had compiled a list of other Duala still in Germany.

When he was asked by Réallon if he himself had such a list, Elong Ngando then stated he had possessed one but left it in Germany.

In a sense, the French surveillance and interrogation of Alexander Bell was inevitably a frustrating endeavour for what they mainly wished to ascertain could not be achieved without there always remaining a measure of doubt. Thus, after his many conversations with the young Duala, Réallon was prepared to affirm ‘avec presque certitude qu’il ne sera pas un instrument des Allemands contre nous’.

20. Letter to Governor Fourneau from ‘Prince Alexander Manga Bell’, 7 September 1919. It appears that Bell did have a basic knowledge of French when he arrived in Paris from Germany. He also employed the services of a number of French-speaking—especially West Indian—associates.


22. ‘Note’ by Lucien Fourneau, 1 September 1919.

23. ‘Note’ by Réallon, 14 October 1919.

24. Ibid.
likely to be Bell’s attitude once he had returned to Cameroun and become re-integrated into Duala society? Despite these attestations of Manga Bell’s loyalty to France, the new Governor on the spot in Cameroun, Carde, began taking a very anti-Duala stance and casting doubt on Bell’s trustworthiness. In a report drawn up in September 1919, he referred to Alexander as ‘ce jeune homme imprégné de germanisme et qui aurait servi contre nous dans l’armée allemande’.25 He even discounted the notion that Bell was opposed to the Germans because of his father’s execution: it was doubtful, he argued, that this incident was a significant one for the young man in view of the great distance that had separated father and son and the fact that Alexander Bell only had ‘childhood memories’ of his father. Then, returning to the unanswerable question which so much typified the ‘paranoia’ of the French colonial authorities in Cameroun after 1919, he added:

‘En un mot je me demande quelles garanties il pourrait nous donner alors; surtout—cela serait une naïveté de ne pas le prévoir—que les intrigues de nos ennemis, qui n’ont pas cessé depuis la guerre, vont trouver dans la paix des facilités de recrudescence.’

Although most of the French officials concerned with Alexander Bell during these years were willing to express confidence in his loyalty to France, this belief was apparently not sufficiently strong to modify the strict control exercised over his movements and those of his family. In September 1919, Bell wrote to the Colonial Ministry to request a passport and safe conduct for his wife ‘la Princesse Alexandre Manga Bell, née Andréa Jimenez Berroa’, to travel to Hamburg for the purpose of rejoining her mother during the last months of her pregnancy.26 But the French had only too recently aided the Bell family to leave Germany to permit the sudden return of his wife. In June of the following year, Bell’s wife made a request to the préfecture in Versailles for a passport to go to Berlin. However, the financial difficulties into which Alexander Bell had become embroiled contributed to the fears of the Ministry of the Interior of any hidden motives behind this proposed trip: ‘Ce voyage, dans un moment où semble commencer à se faire sentir le besoin d’argent, pourrait être dangereux s’il est vrai que les scrupules du prince sont ceux dont on a facilement raison.’27 The Colonial Ministry duly supported the suggestion made that a passport should not be granted to Bell’s wife.28

25. Letter No. 66. Cf. from Garde to the Colonial Minister, 22 July 1919.
26. Letter to the Colonial Minister, 12 September 1919. Bell referred to his wife as being of ‘Spanish origin’, while the authorities used the term ‘mulâtresse’, claiming she was the offspring of a German father and a Cuban mother.
It was only the absence of Alexander from Paris in October 1921—having returned to Cameroun—which induced the French authorities to relent and permit his wife to rejoin her mother in Germany, accompanied by her young child. But if the ban on a return to Germany was eventually lifted for Bell’s wife, it was kept just as firmly in place for the ‘Prince’. In his attempt to have this ban removed, he even enlisted the services of the Senegalese deputy, Blaise Diagne. Diagne wrote to the Minister for the Colonies in January 1922 requesting authorization for Bell to travel to Hamburg to visit one of his children who was ill and to bring back his family to France so that they could travel with him to Cameroun.

The deputy made a strong plea on Bell’s behalf, fully recognizing the political ramifications of the case:

‘Mon intervention n’avait d’autre but que de hâter les formalités à remplir [. . .]. Je ne comprends pas, en effet, qu’on fasse des difficultés pour lui délivrer cette pièce [. . .] il est désormais protégé français et n’a aucune visée politique. Mais il s’est marié avec une Allemande et il désire—ce qui est légitime—aller chercher sa famille avant de rejoindre son pays natal [. . .]. Il y a là une question d’humanité qui ne vous échappera pas.’

But even the intervention of Diagne was in vain, demonstrating that a year and a half after having had Alexander Bell ‘in their hands’, the French still considered it too risky to allow him to slip into those of his former tutors.

One of the quainter aspects of Manga Bell’s conflicts with the French Colonial Ministry—albeit with significant implications—concerned his use of the title ‘Prince’. Nearly all his letters to French authorities were signed ‘Prince Alexander Bell’, a designation which the French, in turn, strictly avoided using, except in the earlier-cited communication from the Ministry of the Interior. In August 1919, Bell sent an interesting letter to Fourneau, from which the following excerpts have been drawn:


29. Letter to the Colonial Minister from the Chambre des Députés, 12 January 1922.
30. Ibid.
Je désire pour moi et mes successeurs conserver nos anciens titres ainsi que nos armes et nos couleurs bleu-clair, ou, blanc.

Selon nos mœurs, la femme du souverain a le titre de « Nyango di Mwanedi », « Nyango » c’est la femme du Sanaga . . . ‘

[s.] Dualla Manga nya Bonanjo
Sango di Mwanedi

In his subsequent letter to the Governor Bell referred to a meeting he had had with him on the subject of the above declaration and now set out to give some more ‘explanations’ for it. He first pointed out that he did not seek to ‘officially preserve’ his indigenous titles out of vanity: this desire was the result of ‘mature reflection’. After extolling his love and loyalty for France he added that it was with the aim of making a profound impression on his subjects that he had decided to preserve the title used by the Germans: in this way he would gain his people’s confidence and his ‘propagande’ would be thereby facilitated. Bell was obviously willing to play upon French reactions to any favourable comparisons drawn between themselves and the former colonial rulers in Cameroun; but this was a tactic which he sometimes employed rather awkwardly. Thus, in his letter to the Colonial Ministry which accompanied his surrendered German passport and his request for a French one, he added incongruously: ‘Je profite de cette occasion pour attirer votre attention sur le fait que les autorités allemandes ont reconnu mon titre de Prince.’

Despite the many requests by Alexander Bell that he be officially referred to by his title and the fact that—according to Simon—he signed his name ostentatiously ‘Prince Manga Bell’, the Colonial Ministry refused to follow him ‘sur ce terrain’. As was true of other aspects of this case, the authorities on the spot took a harsher line on this question of titles. Here is how the Governor-General of AEF regarded the issue:

‘Certiens de nos compatriotes ne se donnent-ils pas des allures nobiliaires, comme « comtes du pape » ou « princes abyssins ». Je ne doute pas que celui qu’entend porter Alexandre Bell ne lui procure dans le quartier Marbeuf ou dans celui de l’Europe, des admiratrices et des curiosités qu’il est encore d’âge à satisfaire; mais pour l’administration il n’est et ne sera jamais que Alexandre Bell, simple particulier, fils du chef décédé du quartier Bell de la ville de Douala.’

31. Letter to ‘Monsieur le Gouverneur’ of 19 August 1919. Edwin Ardener has provided a number of clarifications of this text for which I am most grateful. The manga, which Bell described as the African phaque (error for the French word phoque meaning seal) is in fact the manatee. Sango, literally ‘father’, means chief in this context. Sango a mwanedi nya Bonanjo could be translated ‘Father-ruler [king] of Bonanjo [Bell Town]’. This letter indicates two abiding concerns of Alexander Bell: to obtain recognition of his title of ‘Prince’ and—perhaps compensating for his very European upbringing—to demonstrate his knowledge of and pride in his people’s traditional customs.

32. Letter to Fourneau dated 7 September 1919.
33. Letter to the Colonial Minister, 12 September 1919.
34. ‘Le Ministre des Colonies à Monsieur le Gouverneur Général de l’Afrique Équatoriale Française’, 30 October 1919.
35. No. 455. ‘Le Gouverneur Général de l’Afrique Équatoriale Française à
Where the authorities in Paris did act vigorously on this question concerned the financial dealings of Bell (to be discussed later) during which his use of the title ‘Prince’ appeared to have implications beyond those strictly pertaining to the private holdings he had inherited from his father. In a letter to the Prosecutor involved in the litigation regarding one Bell’s transactions, the Minister for the Colonies affirmed:

‘... comme il semble résulter de la teneur de l’acte, ces droits ont été cédés par M. Manga Bell en qualité de « Prince » sur des territoires dépendants de l’ancienne colonie allemande du Cameroun, le Gouvernement Français ne reconnaît à ce dernier aucun droit sur les territoires en question en dehors de ceux qu’il peut avoir à titre privé, pas plus qu’il ne lui reconnaît le droit de porter les différents titres qui lui ont été donnés dans l’acte sus-visé.”

As was mentioned earlier, the French took comfort in the fact that Alexander Bell was so thoroughly Europeanized, that he was married to a woman who was ‘correctement élevée’, and that he was ‘habitué lui-même à la vie d’Europe, instruit et désireux de poursuivre ses études...’ After only a few meetings with him, Fourneau believed he had convinced Bell that ‘son retour à Douala ne pouvait lui réserver que de pénibles désillusions’. The French authorities therefore concentrated on encouraging him to pursue his medical studies in France. Yet, would the son of Rudolph Manga Bell who insisted on being called Prince, and whose people were among the most politically astute on the West Coast of Africa, confine himself to becoming a medical practitioner? Shortly after his arrival in Paris from Germany, Bell was to cause considerable alarm among his new hosts by his dispatch to Cameroun on 10 July 1919 of a proclamation in German, to be translated for the Duala people by the executor of his father’s will, Mandessi Bell. When he was confronted by Fourneau in Paris on this matter, Bell graciously handed over the proclamation which reads as follows:

‘Compatriotes, Frères et Sœurs du Peuple de Douala,
Je vous salue plein de profonde reconnaissance et de joie envers le Tout-Puissant et me réjouis du moment prochain où je vous reverrai. Dix-huit années se sont écoulées depuis que je me suis exilé de notre chère patrie.
Ma langue m’est maintenant étrangère, mais mon cœur, qui a toujours pensé fidèlement à notre chère patrie, bat pour vous, frères et sœurs. A vous garçons et fillettes, jeunes gens et jeunes filles, hommes et femmes dans la force de l’âge, j’adresse la prière d’être travailleurs [...].
N’imitez pas trop les Blancs dans leur extérieur. Cela ne vous va pas du tout

Monsieur le Ministre des Colonies, Brazzaville, 4 November 1919. Angoulvant quite deliberately crossed out ‘admirateurs’ and wrote in ‘admiratrices’. Inter-spersed throughout the reports from agents of the Ministry of the Interior were references to Bell’s alleged frequenting of brothels (maisons closes).
38. Ibid.
et ce n'est pas digne. L'Afrique n'est pas l'Europe. Conservez ferme les belles coutumes de nos ancêtres. N'imitez pas les Blancs sans réflexion [...].

Ne dites pas autre chose que oui, oui, non, non. Je suis avec ceux d'entre vous qui en veulent à nos oppresseurs. Gardez la paix avec vos voisins et ne pensez qu'au bien de notre cher pays.

D'après ma date de naissance, je dois avoir maintenant 21 ans et demi et j'espère bientôt avec votre consentement redevenir votre chef. C'est animé d'une grande joie que je suivrai ma destinée.

A vous les anciens de notre pays, j'adresse la prière de m'assister toujours dans mes fonctions. Vos conseils me seront toujours précieux. J'espère beaucoup, pour notre pays, dans le nouveau protectorat français. Je l'ai senti à l'accueil amical et humain qui m'a été fait comme représentant du peuple de Douala. Que personne ne soit contre les Blancs car les Français ne nous veulent pas de mal.40

It was Fourneau's task in Paris to ascertain the reasons which had motivated Bell to send this proclamation to his people. In his report to the Ministry, he attested to the fact that the young Duala did not feel he had done wrong in taking this step, which he claimed to have undertaken on his own initiative without the advice of anyone. 'Faut-il s'exagérer la portée de son acte?' Fourneau inquired. 'Je ne le pense pas', was his own reply.40 He also added that Bell had been informed of the obligation henceforth to receive official sanction for such undertakings, and had given his assurance that this was the only such proclamation he had sent to Douala.41 But once again the local administration took a stronger line on Manga Bell's actions. In a telegram to the Ministry, Angoulvant stressed the fact that the proclamation had been addressed to the inhabitants of Douala, whereas Bell could only become chief of a quartier of the city, and then only after having been enthroned and having received the approval of the head of the colony.42 He then added that it was necessary that Bell be given a better understanding of the real situation and that his advisers be invited to demonstrate greater restraint.43

While the main fears of the French revolved around the German links they felt Alexander might have retained, a secondary concern was with the political rôle that he as the inheritor of an important traditional office might seek to assume in their new colony. Thus, although Henry Simon referred to Bell as appearing 'acquis à notre cause', he still felt it necessary to inform the Cameroun Governor that Alexander and his uncle should be made to realize when they returned to the territory that although the French counted on their collaboration, they should not hope for 'un rôle de direction qui ne s'accorderait pas avec notre conception coloniale'.44 But in sending these instructions to Carde in

39. 'Proclamation en allemand donnée par Alexandre Bell', 10 July 1919.
40. Lucien Fourneau, 'Note', 1 September 1919.
41. Ibid.
42. Telegram No. 52 Ct. from Douala to the Colonial Ministry, 23 August 1919.
43. Ibid.
44. Letter to the Governor-General of AEF, 30 October 1919.
Cameroun, the Minister was only preaching to the converted, for Carde’s anti-Duala feelings only intensified whenever he discussed the imminent arrival to head the Bell clan of the young ‘germanic’ pretender. In the opinion of Carde, the ‘royal power’ in Douala was weakening; and what elements had not been swept away by police force, would be certain to disintegrate as they came into contact with ‘les temps nouveaux’. Furthermore, it was in the interest of the French to assist their disappearance. In Douala, he argued, there was no clan or family with a real authority which could be of any utility to the authorities. Indeed, even within their own milieu, these groups were weakening as their ‘people’ began to emancipate themselves: ‘Il y a des courants qui ne se remontent pas.’ It is not possible, Carde asks rhetorically, that Alexander possessed ‘excessive pretensions’? Has he not possibly derived from his welcome in France the ambition to play a ‘preponderant rôle’ while we are only willing to offer him ‘a modest collaboration without great prestige’? In the eyes of Carde, the authorities in Paris had an important task to complete before Alexander Bell set foot in Douala: ‘... il faut écarter toute perspective de confier à ce jeune homme des fonctions prépondérantes à Douala.’ Of course, Carde concludes, the Bell family possessed many buildings in Douala as well as agricultural holdings inland; all difficulties would consequently fall away if the young man returned home ‘avec la seule pensée de faire fructifier son patrimoine.’

Despite this preference expressed by the authorities for a Voltairean solution to the problems posed by Alexander Bell, attempts by the ‘Prince’ to do just that only gave rise to new controversies. It must be added, of course, that even the French refused to recognize any distinction between the public and private life of Manga Bell, and this was all the more true on the subject of his finances. Even prior to his arrival from Germany, Governor Fourneau readily discussed the ways in which the 2,000 francs sum the Government was lending him to defray the costs of his travel to France was ‘intéressante au point de vue politique’. During the next three years—indeed, even before the end of 1919—Alexander Bell had astounded the authorities by his considerable irresponsibility in financial matters, as the money sent to him by Mandessi Bell in Douala, loans procured from the local administration as well as from the Ministry in Paris, failed to keep abreast of his soaring expenses:

45. In his attitude towards the Duala, Carde was not unique among Cameroun Governors, during the period of French as well as German rule. Governor von Puttkamer (1895-1907) held the Duala in particular disesteem. The antipathy the Duala engendered in their colonial rulers was clearly related to their persistent rebelliousness.
47. Carde could have been referring here to the descendants of Duala slaves, the Duala having not only controlled the export of slaves during the pre-colonial period, but practised significant ‘internal’ slavery themselves.
royalty must not only exist; it must be seen to exist. Just to give an indication of the scope of Manga Bell’s life-style, by June of 1920 he had not only rented a house in Sèvres, and an apartment at the Hôtel Lutétia in Boulevard Raspail, but his household had now expanded to include his wife and children, his mother, two sisters, two brothers, his mother-in-law and his domestic servant.49 His debts were considerable and his creditors beyond count. A careful tally was kept by undercover agents of the sums owed by Bell to his tailor, automobile mechanic, grocer, butcher and even milkman.50

Alexander Bell acted as a magnet for the variety of political controversies involving Cameroun and the Duala people; he also had the misfortune of attracting the attention of several different Ministries of the French Government. We have already seen that the Ministries of the Colonies, Foreign Affairs and the Interior were involved in various problems concerning him. His financial dealings now brought him within the purview of the Ministry for Justice. In November 1919, before he had even returned to Cameroun since his departure eighteen years previously, Bell entered into a notarized agreement with a French financier and businessman, Charles Mille, in which the ‘Prince’ conceded to Mille—in return for a stipulated remuneration—the monopoly in the sale of products from his holdings in Cameroun: ‘défenses d’éléphants, plantations, fruits, caoutchoucs, huiles, graisses, ivoires, acajous et autres essences, cotons, bananes’ for a period of ten years.51 M. Mille was duly informed by the Colonial Ministry that whether qua ‘Prince’ or qua his private inheritance in Cameroun, the rights conceded to him by Bell were worthless.52 After Alexander returned to Paris from Cameroun in 1920, Mille discovered—not surprisingly—that he was having difficulty gaining an interview with the young man. Furthermore, he learned that Bell had entered into a similar contract with the Compagnie Forestière de Sangha-Oubangui and consequently informed the Ministry that he was bringing charges against Bell for ‘abus de confiance’.53 When in mid-1920, Manga Bell sought to take his family to Cameroun and attempted

50. Ibid. Carde took an exceptional interest in the cost of Bell’s life-style, including the 10,000 francs he allegedly had to send his wife monthly during his absence in Douala. In addition, according to Carde, Bell had taken to Paris from Douala, along with the five additional members of his family, three domestic servants to supplement his Martiniquan servant. The cost of the Douala-Paris trip, for the group, amounted to an estimated 20,000 francs. Cf. Letter to the Colonial Minister, No. 32, CF., 29 March 1920.
51. Cf. copy of the agreement sent to the Colonial Ministry by M. le Greffier de la Justice de Paix du 2e arrondissement de Paris. The date of the actual contract was 8 November 1919.
53. Letter from Mille to the Minister for the Colonies, 23 July 1920. A year later, Mille preferred charges against Bell for the issuance to him of a cheque for 5,073 francs without sufficient funds to cover it. Cf. Letter of the Minister for the Colonies from ‘le Garde des Sceaux’, Ministry of Justice, 26 July 1912.
to borrow the necessary funds from the Colonial Ministry, the following revealing letter was sent by Diagne to the Minister on his behalf:

‘Le jeune homme qui, mentalement, ne me parait pas des mieux équilibrés, mena la grande vie, louant à grands frais une auto et un grand appartement à l’hôtel Lutètia, destiné à devenir son cabinet d’affaires. Vivant d’expédients, pressé d’argent, il passa avec les hommes d’affaires pour des sommes dérisoires, les récoltes de plusieurs années de plantations de cacao faisant partie du patrimoine familial, des contrats qui peuvent paraître, du reste, sans valeur, en raison de leur caractère dolosif.

Les fonds ainsi rassemblés étant bientôt épuisés, Manga Bell ne put s’en procurer à nouveau et la débâcle commença [...]. Ce fut bientôt la misère et actuellement il ne possède pas de quoi donner à manger aux siens, au sens littéral du mot [...]. Je vous serais donc très obligé d’examiner la possibilité de leur faire retenir un passage sur l’un des premiers bateaux en partance pour le Cameroun [...]. Le gouvernement local ferait avance des frais de voyage Paris–Douala, à charge de remboursement par les intéressés dès leur retour à Douala.”

It has been stated at different points throughout this discussion that the colonial administrations in Cameroun and AEF took a stronger line on many of the issues involving Manga Bell than did their colleagues in Paris. The reasons for this are not difficult to trace; but since a full analysis would involve us in the labyrinthine world of relations between the Duala community and the French administration, I shall only give an outline of the situation. Beginning in 1919 the authorities and the Duala community diverged on two basic issues which came, in fact, to overlap a great deal. The first stemmed from the refusal of the Duala to join in the public acclaim for the establishment of French colonial rule. Before long, the authorities realized that the pre-war anti-German activities among the Duala in Cameroun were being succeeded by a broader anti-colonial agitation. Thus, in November 1919, Angoulvant stated that Alexander’s place was not in Douala at the head of his clan because ‘il y serait exposé, sous des influences diverses, à se laisser insensiblement entraîner à une attitude qui nous obligerait à prendre contre lui quelque jour des mesures de rigueur’.

Reinforcing this incipient political challenge which the local authorities were detecting in their dealing with Duala leaders, was the resuscitation of the German expropriation issue. Briefly, the German colonial administration had sought to expropriate the coastal land belonging to the Duala people and to resettle them further inland in 1911. Between 1911 and 1913 the expropriation was held up by the protests and petitions of the Duala. Although the German government decided early in 1913 to proceed with expropriation, by the outbreak of the war they had only succeeded in disploding the Bell clan from two districts (plateaux) they occupied,

54. Letter to the Minister for the Colonies, 16 July 1920. Although it is quite understandable that Diagne interpreted Manga Bell’s almost fantasy life as a sign of the young man’s mental instability, in fact, Bell was able successfully to continue this life of ‘financial brinkmanship’ for almost another half-century.
55. Letter from Angoulvant to the Minister for the Colonies, 4 November 1919.
Joss and Bali. Settlement of this contentious issue had been postponed by the British and French forces which occupied Douala after 1914. With the termination of the war, the French administration came to recognize the value—to themselves—of the German decision and decided to maintain the *status quo*. In deciding to uphold the German expropriation, the French—in the eyes of the Duala people—had simply taken the place of their former masters, and thus the full fury of their opposition to this original action was now vented on those they viewed as the new expropriators.

In July of 1919, Carde informed the Ministry that the expropriation would possibly lead to litigation by the Duala, and ‘sûrement conflag’.

To add to the many rôles thrust upon Alexander Bell by the war and continued imperial rivalry, he was being regarded by some of his people—and the French authorities—as the knight-errant who was returning to drive the usurpers from his people’s kingdom. Before he had even arrived in Douala, Alexander was *a fortiori* the major disputant on the side of the dispossessed: he was the son of the leading Duala chief martyr for the cause; his clan, that of the Bell, had suffered the greatest loss at the point at which the expropriations had been halted by the war; and finally, much of his own personal inheritance fell within the expropriated sphere. It took nearly a decade of bickering between the two sides before the French proceeded to effect settlement of the dispute; and it was significantly a letter from Alexander Bell to the Governor on 12 February 1920 which indicated to the authorities that the Duala leaders had come to accept the irreversibility of the expropriation, and now sought indemnisation for their lost lands and buildings.

Caught as he was in the vortex of French-Duala conflicts, Alexander Bell found himself treated simultaneously as a potential enemy and friend of the French. It was perhaps only his grandiose self-image which enabled him to navigate safely the resulting currents between Paris and Douala.

The first three years of Douala Bell’s return from Germany, as extraordinary as they may appear, should really be viewed as a microcosm of his later life. The latter subject is so vast—and indeed worthy of a full biography—that it can only be treated sparingly here. However, it might interest the reader to learn of some of the ways in which Prince Bell continued to play a central—if at times unfortunate—part in the subsequent political developments in the territory right up to his death in 1966. As Governor in Cameroun until 1923, Carde saw it as his task to undo some of the harm he believed the authorities in Paris had brought about in having treated Bell in too regal a fashion. For Carde, had the

56. Letter from Carde to the Colonial Minister, 22 July 1919.
57. Letter from Carde to the Colonial Minister, 29 March 1920, p. 7.
58. Letter from Carde to the Colonial Minister, 11 March 1920, p. 2.
59. This point which Carde repeats *ad nauseam* was also strongly underlined in Angoulvant’s covering letter to one of Carde’s voluminous reports on the misdeeds
young Duala been given a ‘modest appraisal’ of his situation he would not have slipped into his ‘megalomania’. Carde was particularly perturbed at the unwillingness of Alexander Bell to be content with the ‘comfortable bourgeois life’ which his inheritance made possible, and his desire instead to pursue a princely existence out of all proportion to his means. Although Carde seemed disturbed as well by the potential wealth of Manga Bell, his main concern was that the ‘Prince’s’ excessive needs would induce him ‘to renew relations with our enemies’. On this subject the Governor could wax eloquently : ‘... le créancier pourra exercer sur la nature molle de ce noir anormal les pressions qu’il voudra.’ The reason Carde kept a careful tally of Bell’s expenses was because he was so stupefied by their divergence from the young man’s income that he felt certain that Bell would prove too weak to refuse the subsidies offered him ‘whatever their source’. Despite his close watch, however, no such dealings with the Germans were ever discovered.

Of course, financial foibles did not exhaust the aristocratic habits of the returning Pretender: Alexander Bell insisted on being treated with the respect becoming a man of his station. In December 1919, shortly after his first trip to Cameroun after leaving Germany for Paris, he was strolling one day through the streets of Douala with a following, ‘un peu pompeuse mais correcte’. He and his companions then chanced upon two French officers and—as was then the custom—the Africans were expected to make a deferential bow.60 Noticing that the young Duala had not acted in the expected fashion, one of the officers, Lieutenant Grimaud, upbraided him for his insubordination and for good measure delivered him a blow with his cane. This incident quickly escalated into a contentious issue despite the precipitate apologies made by the officer in question when informed of the august personnage he had had the effrontery to assault. After several communications between the Governor, the Head of the Occupation Corps in Cameroun, and the Colonial Ministry, the officer was sentenced to 30 days simple confinement. This was later stiffened to *arrêt de rigueur* after the Governor himself protested over the leniency of the punishment. A directive was finally issued to all military officers in the territory that Africans were under no obligation to salute them. But this was not the only such case: a similar issue arose in 1937 when Bell was slapped by a medical captain named Delom. In a report on the matter by the Governor at that time, Boisson, we find a recapitulation of some of the concerns discussed earlier, viz., that Alexander Bell was felt to be ‘singularly difficult’ to control, but that his doubtless loyalty coupled with his pending application for French citizenship could later be ‘usefully exploited’. Boisson also indicated the privileges insisted upon by the Bell chief went beyond the

of Alexander, the Bell clan and the Duala people. Cf. Letter to the Colonial Minister, 29 March 1920, from which the following comments are drawn.

60. Letter No. 103 Cf. to the Colonial Minister from Carde including communiqués between Carde and lieutenant-colonel Pinchon, 20 December 1919.
right not to have to salute French officers or to submit to any physical chastisement from them:

‘... il faut bien reconnaître qu’il est, dans la vie courante, “encombrant”. En tout il veut échapper à la loi commune. Je ne citerai que quelques faits caractéristiques: les inspections qu’il s’autorisait à passer à l’hôpital indigène, un permis de chasse qu’il sollicite dans des conditions extra-légales et dont il use en dehors de toute réglementation; enfin, tout récemment, une intervention de sa part pour soustraire une femme indigène de son quartier aux suites d’un procès-verbal dressé par le Service d’Hygiène. Alexandre Bell a purement et simplement confisqué le procès-verbal pour, a-t-il dit, “le remettre à son avocat”.

French attitudes towards Alexander Bell can be divided into two categories: those of the interwar period and those which emerged just prior to the outbreak of World War II and were maintained throughout the postwar period. During the former period the authorities were deeply distrustful of the ‘Prince’ despite his fulsome declarations of loyalty to France. Between 1920 and 1938, for example, the French government refused to compensate him for his personal property sequestered after World War I despite innumerable legal efforts undertaken by Bell and his lawyers. The local administration even refused to officially recognize him as chef supérieur of the Bell clan. In 1938, however, as the menace posed by Hitler’s demands for the return of German colonies loomed larger, the administration began wooing the support of the traditional and modern élites and, to this end, began softening its opposition to the outstanding claims of Alexander Bell. Here is how a contemporary student of the Duala explains the shoddy treatment meted out by the French authorities to Bell before the approaching war radically altered their priorities: ‘I suspect it was his brilliance which made the French so slow to make him a chief despite his frivolity; they no doubt felt he was too clever to be really loyal and would be less pliable if given power.” What the French discovered after 1938, however, was that by occasionally flattering the aristocratic pretensions of the ‘Prince’ he could be induced to employ his cleverness and popularity, not to mount a challenge to their colonial rule as was so much feared by Carde and Angoulvant, but as a loyal and useful instrument of that rule.

Early in the war, Alexander Bell travelled to Dakar to fulfil his duties as a new French citizen by enlisting in the army. Ironically, while Senegal became aligned with the collaborationist Vichy regime, Cameroun had become one of the bulwarks along with Éboué’s Chad of the Free French Forces of General de Gaulle. Immediately after the war, however, Alexander Bell emerged as a strong ally of the administration. In September 1945, his candidacy to the French Constituent
Assembly was deftly supported by the authorities to undercut a brewing revolt among the Duala against the representation of Camerounians in the Paris Assemblies. After his election, Alexander Bell more than fulfilled the hopes the French now placed in his collaboration: he testified before the San Francisco Conference of the United Nations in October 1946—along with Dr. Louis-Paul Aujoulat, the representative of the first (European) electoral collège in Cameroun—of the support purportedly enjoyed within Cameroun of France’s Trusteeship Agreement. For the next decade, Bell was strongly criticized throughout the territory by the nationalist party, the UPC, for having upheld the false French claims of the support—for even knowledge—in Cameroun of this Trusteeship Agreement; and for having supported an Agreement which, providing for the administration of Cameroun as ‘an integral part of French territory’, violated the fundamental purpose and principle of the trusteeship system. But the extraordinary popularity of Alexander Bell was little affected by these attacks as was proved in January 1956 when, despite the generalisation of nationalist sentiments throughout southern Cameroun, he easily won re-election to the National Assembly.

There was perhaps one occasion in which the ‘Prince’ demonstrated the political rôle he might have assumed had his talents not been so squandered on frivolity. In 1957 he resigned his deputyship on the floor of the National Assembly in protest against the claims then being made by the first Prime Minister of Cameroun, André-Marie Mbida, that the Cameroun people were not in favour of the early accession of their country to independence. He vowed that the forthcoming electoral race for his seat would prove if he or Mbida was correct; and it was the former page in the court of Wilhelm II who was victoriously returned to the French Parliament. At this point, however, French resistance to the demand for independence of the trust territories was already waning, the radical nationalists were engaged in a long and bloody guerrilla war in the Camerounian forests, and Alexander Bell had little to show beyond his reputation as a bon vivant in Parisian night-clubs for the thirteen years he had enjoyed the fervent electoral support of his people. Born in Africa but nurtured in Europe, Prince Douala Manga Bell chose to inhabit—metaphorically and literally—his own demi-monde.


Bell, élevé en Allemagne et suspect de ce fait aux yeux de l'administration mandataire, fut astreint à résider à Paris, pour s'y franciser. Les rapports entre le prince et la France en furent dès l'abord marqués de l'ambiguïté qui allait caractériser toute sa carrière ; dès les années 1920 se manifestèrent les grands traits de comportement public et privé et de personnalité qui devaient faire de lui le premier leader politique reconnu à l'échelle d'ensemble du Cameroun.