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A CASE STUDY: RELIGION AND STATE IN

CONFLICT IN CAMEROUN

Presbyterianism and colonialism were introduced into Cameroun during the last quarter of the nineteenth century by American missionaries and Western Europeans respectively. The Europeans were principally Germans, French, and English and consisted of governmental administrators, soldiers, police, planters, traders and missionaries. Also joining this group of foreign peoples was a sprinkling of other missionaries of Swiss, and Norwegian origin. The relations between American Presbyterian missionaries and the colonial communitv were affected by differences in nationality, language, objectives and interests.

Generally speaking, good relation between the government and mission was important to the spread of the gospel, for the government could promote or hinder the activities of missionaries.

The colonial governments in Cameroun, that is, Germany and France (the United Presbyterians were not involved with former British Cameroun) were wary of the foreign missionaries. Both Germany and France doubted the loyalty of the Presbyterians who were Americans and could be too independent of the government or unsympathetic to its policies, programmes and problems. The Presbyterians were in Cameroun five years before Germany arrived to annex the territory in 1884. When the German colonial government issued conditions permitting the Presbyterians to continue their operations in Cameroun, the stage was prepared for confrontation.

In 1889 the government required the Presbyterians: (1) to make German the Officiat language in the schools; (2) to appoint representatives of the missionaries to deal with colonial authorities and (3) to inform the colonial authorities before land was acquired or buildings were

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erected for evangelical work. I Then in 1 889 the government sent its troops against the Bulu people who were determined to defend their trade monopoly. 2 The war continued till 1901 and disrupted the work of the missionaries. The refugees escaping from the German soldiers sought refuge at the mission stations. Jesco Von Puttkamer accused the missionaries of complicity with the Bulu, and threatened severe action against them. 3 However, in 1903 Rev. William C. Johnston initiated the negotiations which restored peace between the Bulu and the Government. 4

There were other issues which aggravated the relations between the Presbyterians and the colonial administration. The governments policies regarding labor and labor conditions, taxation, land and treatment of the Africans \*came under severe criticism from the missionaries. 5 In 1913 Rev. George Schwab, an American missionary on furlough in the United States, published an article in the Chicago Kirchebote on German atrocities in Cameroun. 6 The colonial authority was furious and the Mission tendered an apology.

The missionaries were also dismayed at the immoral relations of  German officials with African women. Most Germans who came to Cameroun were either not married or did not take their families with them. Hence, most German men cohabited with African women. Cases of scandal involving high government officials were frequently reported. Moreover, Governor Puttkamer endorsed the practice of having his troops capture women during raids and maintain them as concubines.7 He maintained that "the practice of keeping African women was general among whites, that it kept a girl out of the evil "harem", gave her a good living, and made for friendly relations between whites and Africans. "8 The home government in Germany however, did not approve of such practices.



I . Harry Rudin, Germans in the Kameruns. 1884-1914 (New York : Greenwood Press, 1986), p. 374.

1. Brochard, Histoire et Geographic du Cameroun (Douata : n.p., 1944), p. 41.
2. Harry Rudin, Germans in the Kamerons, 1844-1914, p. 375.
3. Charles W. McCleary, The Beloved (Fairfíelds, Iowa : Published by his Friends, 1909), P. 239.
4. Harry Rudins : Germans in the Kameruns 1884-1914, pp. 315-345,
5. United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. German Cameroun, Rev. George Schwab Affair. Record Group 142, Box 1, File 4, 1913.
6. Harry Rudin, Germans in the Kametuns 1884-1914, pp. 304-305.
7. Ibid.. pp. 304-305.

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In most cases, the administrators and soldiers paid lobo/a (brideprice) to African parents to cohabit with their daughters. Such unions, however, were not recognized by the courts.[[1]](#footnote-1) For the most part, the colonial community of foreigners preferred Christian girls because of their knowledge of the European language and household work.

The missionaries sought to protect christian girls from the licentious Europeans and in 1897 convinced the government to regulate the hiring of female workers. From that time onwards, the Governor's approval was to be sought before a domestic female worker was hired. Then in 1907, the governor banned unmarried officials from engaging African girls to work in their homes. [[2]](#footnote-2)

Inspite of the estrangement in relations on these matters the missiona ries and the German government officials sometimes cooperated on certain political and social issues. For example, in 1913 the German government appealed to the mission to help it solve a social problem which constituted a scandal of immorality. Several mulatto children had been born out of wedlock to German men and African women. On October 17 the colonial secretary made formal request through the governor to the mission to study plans for regulating the status of mulattoes who were offsprings of German fathers and Camerounian mothers. ll

 The terms of reference for the study centered around the following question: Should the Status of the mulatto children be determined according to customary law or German law? The following supporting questions delved incisively into the problem:

1. Have white fathers any obligation to support their children of mixed marriages ?
2. Should support of mulatto children be made according to German law or according to local conditions ?
3. Should the rights of the children be prescribed as those obtainable in Germany or should custody be vested in the district commander as representative of the German government ?
4. What social position should mulatto children occupy in the territory when they become adults? Should they be considered Camerounians or German citizens? What should be their status in the mission or government service after they have completed their education? Should their position be based on aptitude and achievement or should assurance be guaranteed ? 12

The Rev. William Dager, Secretary to the Mission, made the following recommendations to the Governor in 1914. On the first issue, the mission's view was that the German fathers were morally and socially obligated to support their mulatto children by providing for them a good education and economic security for the future. In addition, mulattoes were said to have shown greater intellectual potentiality, which if properly guided would make them great assets to the colony. On the second issue the mission held that nationality should not be a factor in making a decision about child support. In that regard, an annual allowance of one hundred marks was considered adequate to support a single child. 13

On the question of the custody of the children, the mission advised against the traditionat practice of the woman's family taking charge of children born outside wedlock. The mission proposed that the district commander take custody of the children and put them in foster homes. Foster parents were to be supervised in order that the children received the full benefits of the guardianship."

Referring to the fourth issue, the mission discarded the ' told" notion that birth determines a person's status leads one to complacence and lethargy. Hence, the mission recommended that status for all people in the protectorate be based on hard work and achievement rather than on pre-determined factors such as birth and wealth. Further, the mission emphasized the consequences of a policy which excluded the rest of the population from enjoying similar benefits. It would be "pitting" the envious Africans against the mulattoes in a rather catastrophic and discriminatory manner.



1. Ibid., p. 12.
2. Ibid., p. 26.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

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Finally, the mission recommended that the fathers be given a voice in the education of their children but should not have final decision regarding the direction, planning or goals of that education. The mothers were to be completely excluded from the decision-making process because, according to the recommendation, they were uneducated, poor, and would not be an inspiration to the children. Therefore, the missionaries recommended, that the allowance provided by the father must not be paid to the mothers. This procedure would deprive the children of their benefits as well as encourage other women to conduct themselves in the same manner in order to receive such allowances. These recommendations were accepted by the German government, but they were never implemented when World War I began. [[3]](#footnote-3)

At the beginning of the Presbyterian enterprise in Cameroun, the relations between the missionaries and the commercial class of Europeans were good. They saw themselves as making a major contribution to the Africans —one spiritual and the other material. So cordial were the relations initially that the missionaries, traders and planters expanded into almost the same areas without any friction.

However, sharp disagreement occurred as the years passed by and each establishment consolidated its gains. The missionaries criticized the planters and traders for exploiting African laborers by overworking them and paying lower wages. The missionaries were similarly outraged by the planters' and traders' practice of forcing Africans to work on the Sabbath. Owners of businesses and managers and supervisors of plantations, factories and stores used threats to compel the Africans to work on the Sabbath. [[4]](#footnote-4) By 1905, the government agreed with the missionaries' interpretation that the Sabbath was a day of rest and worship, and declared working on that day optional. Workmen who wanted to attend church services could do so without fear of intimidation, dismissal, financial loss or physical assault. [[5]](#footnote-5)

Perhaps the greatest area of disagreement between the missionaries and the commercial class involved competition in trade. The missionaries engaged in ventures which were money yielding and essential to their establishment. For example, the industrial department of the Mission opened experimental farms of cocoa, rubber, oil palm, pine-apples, poultry and animal husbandry. The missionaries sold the products from the farms on licence issued by the government. In addition, the Frank James Industrial School produced excellent articles of woodt cane, raffia, ivory and metal. In the 1930's the articles enjoyed a local market and an equally tourist trade. Visitors from West African countries, Europe and the United States purchased articles from the school. In fact, the Frank James Industrial School at Elat was, as it were, the "Tuskegee" of Africa. [[6]](#footnote-6) From the sale of its agricultural and industrial goods, the mission was able to support its programmes during periods of budget cuts at the New York headquarters. [[7]](#footnote-7) This situation was typical in the inter-war years of serious economic problems.

Although the French government commended the work of the Mission's industrial school, the government was against the commercialization of the enterprise. [[8]](#footnote-8) The government considered the mission shop a business out of accord with traditional missionary work,

In 1919, a new colonial administration was established in Cameroun following the expulsion of the Germans from the territory. The French ruled Cameroun under the mandate system which was established in 1919 to administer the ex-German colonies. Under the mandate system, the missionaries of all nations were free to establish churches, schools, hospitals and other social services in the territories. [[9]](#footnote-9) The urgent business of the Presbyterians at the beginning of French rule was to cultivate a good working relationship with the colonial administration. It was a tenuous relationship beset by suspicion, national consciousness and conflict. The sole administrator, France, held the right to legislate on all matters relative to the territory. Nevertheless, the Presbyterians relied heavily on the guarantees accorded them under international agreement and hoped the French would respect them.

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In 1920 the French stopped the using of vernacular as the medium of instruction in school, and prevailed in the insistence that French be the recognized Janguage in educational instruction, More embarrassing to the Presbyterians, however, was the apparent disregard by the French authorities of medical degrees from American universities. Members of the French House of Deputies seemed to have come under increasing pressure from French doctors in the colonies and mandates. The doctors claimed that American medical degrees were inferior to the French degrees, and that American doctors competed with them in the colonial medical business. Governor Marchand of Cameroun assured the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions that there would be no problems for American missionaries entering Cameroun as along as he was in authority. [[10]](#footnote-10) However, such doctors were supposed to graduate from recognized medical schools and required to train for six months in France before their arrival in the territories of their choice.

In 1924 the French government declared that the Mission should register the Frank James Industrial School as a trading firm to qualify for the promotion and sale of its products. [[11]](#footnote-11)[[12]](#footnote-12) It would be recalled that the commercial class accused the Presbyterians of encroaching upon their business rights by marketing agricultural and industrial products. Not wanting to portray itself as a business the Mission reduced the scale of production and sale of its goods.

For some undisclosed reasons, the government made an issue of the publication of the vernacular newspaper Mefoe. In 1933 the French authorities insisted that the missionaries have prior authorization to publish and disseminate information" To the missionaries, the French demand was censorship which violated one of the fundamental human rights freedom of speech and press. After consulting with the French authorities, the Secretary of the Mission was satisfied that the administrator's action was not motivated by a desire to interfere in its work, but to know what literature was consumed by the public. Apparently, the action of the government was justified because the Presbyterian press had mistakingly published an article sympathetic to the communist cause. [[13]](#footnote-13)

Other incidents such as delaying approval of the Mission's application for a piece of land to build a school or church strained the relations between the Presbyterians and the colonial government. It took the authorities three years to approve the mission's request for a 25,000 acres piece of land to establish the Cameroun Christian College.

Relations between Protestants and Roman Catholics in general and between Roman Catholics and Presbyterians in particular were marked by the historical social distance between the two groups.[[14]](#footnote-14) This was compounded by the inability of the Colonial government to effectively limit the expansion of mission stations.[[15]](#footnote-15) The result was overlapping missionary activities and conflict between rival denominations, each one trying to gain most of the unconverted people. In Cameroun as in many African countries, the aim of the Catholics was to render the Protestant role in the relations with the villagers and the government second to theirs (Catholics). From their three Prefectures in Buea, Douala and Yaounde, the Roman Catholics developed a three-pronged evangelization approach which threatened to "squeeze out" the Protestants from their field. But their numerical strength in the German ere was not so overwhelmingly superior to that of the Protestants as to effect an imbalanced expansion. Moreover, the colonial government's timely intervention prevented the escalation of hostilities. The failure of the missionaries to observe the principle of "spheres of influence" was a constant source of friction. [[16]](#footnote-16)While both sides recognized the importance of "spheres of influence" as a means of preventing friction, they nevertheless considered it an unnecessary restriction on missionary activities. [[17]](#footnote-17) So the competition, animosity and hostility between the Presbyteríans and Catholics continued with the government providing the leverage from time to time in the maintenance of the peace.

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But in 1913 the relations between the Catholic and the Presbyterian missions worsened. Father Vogel, a catholic priest successfully converted and baptized a boy who had been a Presbyterian from childhood, and whose parents were also members of the denomination. Then without permission, Father Schwab administered the Sacrament of Extreme Unction to patients at the Presbyterian hospital at Batanga. It was alleged that Rev. James Cunningham, a Presbyterian minister used slanderous language, such as calling Father Vogel, a "rascal."31 Revs. Vogel and Schwab filed criminal charges of verbal assault and slander against Rev. Cunningham.

In all, thirty-three charges were filed at the court, twenty-five of them were dismissed because they involved theologiat questions which the court did not feel competent to determine. Further, five slanderous charges were thrown out of court on the ground that the evidence before the court was not substantial enough to merit consideration. However, Rev. Cunningham was tried on the remaining charges : (1) that he publicity referred to Father Vogel as a "rascal" at Kribi, (2) that he publicly insulted Father Schwab at Grand Batanga on February 13, 1913, when he referred to him as "a little fellow who wore a gown like a woman," and (3) that he cast aspersions of drunkenness and immorality on Father Schwab during a sermon he delivered at Kribi.[[19]](#footnote-19)

In passing judgement, the second charge as petty but found Cunningham guilty on the other two charges. He was fined six hundred and sixty marks. An alternative penalty was put at one day imprisonment for every fifteen marks. Furthermore, the court ordered the Catholic mission to publish the courts decision in the Amtsb/att at the expense of Rev. Cunningham. [[20]](#footnote-20) The Catholics were disappointed that Cunningham got away with a fine instead of sending him to jail. In any case, the government demonstrated to all missionaries that it was in charge of the colony.

Despite the difficulties the government had with the Presbyterians, they rated their relations with government generally good. Administrators were often invited to address mission institutes for pastors, or seminars organized by the Mission." Messages of goodwill were regularly exchanged. A mission delegation was sometimes sent to welcome a new governor to the territory. The Mission also celebrated French public holidays such as the '"Saint Joan of Arc Day," and the ''Bastille Day." Such expressions of goodwill promoted harmonious mission-government relations. In appreciation of the missionaries dedicated and selfless service most of them including Rev. George Schwab and Dr. George Thorne were highly honored and decorated by the French government.





34. West Africa Mission, Report of Dager Biblical Seminary, 1951, p. 4.

1. . Ibid., p. 305. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . Ibid.

I l . West Africa Mission Meeting Minutes 1912-1914 : Caring for Mulatto Children in the Colony : Communication from the Colonial Secretary, October 17. 1913. p. I . [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. . Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. . Harry Rudin. Germans in the Kameruns 1884—1914, p. 367. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. . Ibid., p. 368. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. . West Africa Mission, Nkol Mvolan Station Report, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. . Board of Foreign Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Letter to the West African Mission, May 22, 1928, concerning appropriations for the fiscal year 1928/29. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. . Fred H. Hope, to Board of Foreign Mission, September 19, 1924. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. . Kenneth J. Twitchet, The Evolving United Nations (New York : St. Martins press, 1971), p. 198, Campbell, L. Upthegrove, Empire by Mandate : A History of Relations of Great Britain with Permanent Mandates Commission of the League of Nations (New York : Brookman Associates, 1954), pp. 15-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. . Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission, Memorandum, April, 1930. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. . Fred G. Hope to Board of Foreign Mission, September 19, 1924. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. . West Africa Mission, Report of Field Secretary (New York : Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1933). p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. . Ibid. p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. . Roger Chavelier, "One in Charity: French Church Service," The Drum Call 27 (January 1948), P. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. . Norman A. Horner, Protestant and Roman Catholic Missions Among the Bantu of Camerouns : A Comparative Study (Hartford, Conn, Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1956), P. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. . M. Le Mailloux Une Mission Spiritaine : Vicariate Apostolic de Douala, "Bulletine des Missions" 1 16 (1937): 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. . Edward H. Berman, African Reactions to Missionary Education (New York : Teachers College press, 1957), p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. . German Kamerun, United Presbyterian Mission-Catholic Relations : The James S. Cunningham Affair, March 11, 1913, Record Group 142, Box 1, File 4, 1913. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. . Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. . The official publication of the German colonial government. It was established on March 1, 1918 and was the source of decrees and colonial legislation. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)