

Charles Atangana and Ewondo chiefs, a Document

by FREDERICK QUINN

In the post World War II period a number of African figures have become world personalities in politics or the arts, yet for the pre-war period, few Africans are so widely known. Until recently, most historical writing about the pre-World War II period was classical colonial history, and did not focus on a serious evaluation of individual African rulers or chiefs. Anthropological studies, while discussing some of the societies in detail, infrequently mentioned individual chiefs or rulers and the specific influence and important change their personalities sometimes brought to a society.

Charles Atangana is an important Cameroonian figure belonging essentially to the pre-war period, and he rose from an obscure position to become the most influential chief in the Yaounde region. His career spanned both German and French administrations in Cameroon. He was born about 1884 of Ewondo¹ parents at a time when neighboring groups were able to freely raid in the Yaounde territory, and likewise at a time when the Germans were first entering the Yaounde area. Atangana, the eleventh of twelve sons, was a year old when his father, a *mvog*² chief, died. The boy was raised by his brother, who persuaded him to attend the Pallotiner Mission School in Kribi. The young man set off on foot for Kribi, where he attended school, was baptised, and took the name of « Karl » which he changed to its French equivalent after 1920. Atangana's rise in importance was tied to his work with the German administration. He was a nurse and interpreter in Buea, the colonial capital, and interpreter for Major Hans Dominik, who directed the Yaounde

¹The Ewondo people are part of the larger Beti group, which includes, among others, the Eton, Bane and Mvulle.

²lineage unit.

station. He also spent a year and one-half at the Colonial Institute in Hamburg.

His most important position under the Germans was as Superior Chief of the Ewondo and Bane, an appointment realized March 25, 1914 before World War I began. The future of the German colonies was thus uncertain. During the war Atangana and many of the chiefs accompanied the Germans on their exodus to Spanish Guinea. Several thousand Beti made the march, some later remaining in enclaves along the coast or on the Spanish island of Fernando Po. Later, Atangana and Abe Max Fouda, and several other Beti leaders spent six months in Spain and a few weeks in France, attempting to negotiate their interests and awaiting the settlement of World War I.

When the Treaty of Versailles was signed and it was certain Germany had lost its colonies, the chiefs returned to Fernando Po after requesting the Spanish king to write to the President of France to intervene for their safe conduct to Cameroon. Atangana and the others soon continued to Douala, but were isolated under surveillance at a public works project in Dschang until 1921. By then the French were recruiting labourers to resume building the Douala-Yaounde railroad, and Atangana was restored to his post and participated in the recruitment. He remained Superior Chief until his death in 1943. His personal authority was considerable, more than any other Ewondo had ever held, since a hierarchy of chiefs was unknown in the traditional society that was largely governed by periodic reunions of lineage heads. Many Ewondo accounts describe his generosity to Roman Catholic missions, his interventions on behalf of his subjects before both German and French administrations, and his considerable generosity.

However, given his earlier ties with the Germans, it is doubtful that the French administration ever accorded him the confidence he enjoyed under Dominik. Also, the new administration was not anxious to create powerful chiefdoms, preferring to use the chiefs in the administrative role of tax collectors, road builders, and agents of the government. Likewise, the Beti groups increasingly petitioned for their own chiefs, and the establishment of each new "chef de groupement" meant lessening of the control exercised by Charles Atangana.

The emoluments of office were always his, the position of honour, decorations, and the important annual stipend from the administra-

tion. He had the advantage of living in the capital and this meant both close contact with the administration and that he received both close contact with the administration and that he received these advantages. Born with no traditional title to the people he later administrated, and witness to the gradual diminishing of the power of the chief, Charles Atangana, by his considerable wit and resourcefulness, parlayed a difficult situation into one of advantage to himself and those he administered.

The following document, in manuscript form in File J in the IRCAM librarian's office is dated September 24, 1929. It is a discussion by Charles Atangana of the evolution of the chief's role in the Yaounde region. It includes a listing of the powers of the "nkukuma" one word for chief, the creation of village mayors under the Germans, a discussion of the administration of justice and tax collecting, the movement of Atangana to the most important chieftainship, the changing role of the chiefs and their relations with the Administration, and the first post World War I reorganization of the chiefs.

The document is of special interest because it is one of the few discussions of the "chefferie" by an important Cameroonian leader of the pre-World War II period. However, its contents are debatable at several points. The Abbe Tsala's *Dictionnaire Ewondo-Français*, (Lyon, 1956, p. 453) translates "nkukuma" as "rich", but not "king", an interpretation the document's author gives it. The document suggests that the Beti chiefs' exodus to Fernando Po was forced; another widely held interpretation is that it was a voluntary withdrawal, the chiefs hoping for an eventual German victory. Moreover, it does not deal with the traditional « Essie, » the council which was considerably more powerful than the chiefs in the pre-German period. But its focus is on the 1920-1929 period, and for a discussion of the Yaounde "chefferie" in this period by its most important member, it is a valuable source document.

This article is Copyright and Distributed under the following license



**Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike
CC BY-NC-SA**

This license lets others remix, tweak, and build upon your work non-commercially, as long as they credit you and license their new creations under the identical terms.

[View License Deed](#) | [View Legal Code](#)

Cet article est protégé par le droit d'auteur et distribué sous la licence suivante



**Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation
Commerciale - Partage dans les Mêmes
Conditions CC BY-NC-SA**

Cette licence permet aux autres de remixier, arranger, et adapter votre œuvre à des fins non commerciales tant qu'on vous crédite en citant votre nom et que les nouvelles œuvres sont diffusées selon les mêmes conditions.

[Voir le Résumé Explicatif](#) | [Voir le Code Juridique](#)

Copyright and Take Down notice

The digitized version of Abbia seeks to honour the original intentions of the paper publication. We continue to publish under the patronage of the Ministry of Arts and Culture: permission for this was given by the minister of Arts and Culture on 9 August 2019 Ref 1752/L/MINAC/SG/DLL/.. It has not proved possible to track down the surviving authors so we are making the material available under a more restrictive noncommercial CC license. We have setup a takedown policy to accommodate this. More details are available from [here](#).

La version numérisée d'Abbia vise à honorer les intentions originales de la publication sur papier. Nous continuons à publier sous le patronage du Ministère des Arts et de la Culture: permission a été donné par le ministre le 9 August 2019 Ref 1752/L/MINAC/SG/DLL/. Il n'a pas été possible de retrouver les auteurs survivants, c'est pourquoi nous rendons le matériel disponible sous une licence CC non commerciale plus restrictive. Nous avons mis en place une politique de démantèlement pour y faire face. Plus de détails sont disponibles [ici](#).