

# THE CAMEROON WORKER

by J. A. KISOB

## 1. Scope and Limitation :

It is the intention in this discourse to trace the brief history of the development of organised labour in West Cameroon, from the middle forties to the present day, putting into the limelight, where appropriate, the highlights of this development, in order to illustrate the general trend. Because of understandable historical reasons, the illustrations have been drawn from West Cameroon. References will, however, occasionally be made to the whole Federation.

It should be possible to show what part the workers have played and are expected to play in the national reconstruction. One of the cardinal questions for which an answer is sought is, "Is the Cameroonian worker naturally lazy?". In subsequent instalments, an attempt will be made to discuss, in greater detail, problems of social organization, social policy, trade unionism and their impact on the general framework of labour organization.

## 2. Historical background :

It is very difficult, in any narrative on present day problems of plantation labour, to avoid referring to their conditions before the first world war. This is so because it is the conditions, in the early days of the introduction of plantations, at the beginning of this century, that have been responsible for these problems.

At the turn of the last century, the scourge of the slave trade left an indelible scar on the face of the African continent and its consequences have created modern problems in other parts of the world. While Africa hailed the end of this dreadful traffic in humans, the scramble for Africa produced yet another state of affairs similar in nature to that of the bleak past.

In order to feed the hungry machines in the new industrial Europe, raw materials were in great demand from tropical Africa. European owned plantations produced the answer and guaranteed a steady flow of raw materials to these industries.



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The Cameroon under its colonial masters saw the establishment of huge plantations in the coastal areas of the country. A network of roads and railway lines into the interior was laid in an effort to facilitate the evacuation of produce. These programmes in turn lacked the manpower to put them under way. The huge plantation holdings on the fertile volcanic slopes of Mount Cameroon required a vast and steady supply of labour.

The drive to provide manpower led to such injustices as forced labour, enslavement, extortion and depopulation. Many, in defence of this policy, have contended that the end justified the means. This may be partially true of material benefit, but human beings have certainly suffered on account of these operations.

The study of past colonial history reveals that all colonial masters, without exception, committed wrongs against the aborigines of their colonies in the form of forced labour, arbitrary requisition, punishment by whipping. The attitude of the colonial masters is summarised in the following words by a German in his defence of Germany's claim for the return of her former colonies to her, after the treaty of Versailles.

*The whip or cane is used in all colonies where there are primitive races to deal with, the native territories under British and French rule not excepted. It is really impossible to do without it altogether, for the native in many respects resembles a child. Efforts to substitute punishment by fines or imprisonment produced most discouraging results<sup>1</sup>.*

The practice of despoiling tribal areas, particularly in the more healthy highlands, of their male population, during that period, is not without its parallel in recent times; for it will be remembered that, in the late forties, as a consequence of the drive to reopen the closed German plantations now owned by the Cameroon Development Corporation, Messrs Elders & Fyffes and Pamol Limited, the Department of Labour issued licences to authorised recruiters empowering them to export labour from the Bamenda areas to the plantations.

Safeguards were provided and regulations enacted by the Nigerian Government but these, in practice, were ineffective. However, the consequences of these and other operations will be discussed when examining the effects of regimented and voluntary migrant labour on the social life of the coastal towns and on that of the home towns of the workmen.

(1) German Colonization Past and Future :  
By Dr. Heinrich Schnee, London, 1926.

However, in recalling these unhappy past episodes in colonial history, I do not do so with the purpose of making capital out of them or of unnecessarily opening up healed wounds; I do so merely with the purpose of revealing the source of the forces which have given rise to the present-day attitude of our people towards work.

Tropical conditions have no doubt made their contribution to the lack of the ability to exert oneself to the full. The very high temperatures and the weakening effects of malaria are not conducive to hard work. A certain amount of blame can be laid also on the lack of balanced diets. The nutritive value of some of the local food stuff is very doubtful. Although food of the right type exists, the worker's purchasing power sometimes prevents him from procuring it. Efforts are being made to remedy this situation and among these are the provision of social amenities for workers, the eradication of malaria, and the provision of adequate food and consumer goods at reasonable prices. It is apparent that there is something else, almost inherent in workers, which militates against their productivity. A thorough search reveals that the reason is to be found in their past.

Is it not true that, today, wage labour is usually referred to as "the whiteman's work" even though the benefits of such work are for the development of our fatherland? Or is it not commonplace for workers to deliberately go slow, the attitude being that there should be no hurry to complete a task. One often hears the pidgin expression, when the foreman urges workers to press on, "whiteman work no de finis". Diligent and hard workers are even rebuked by their comrades in disparaging terms such as *na you papa work?* In other words, *is it your father's work, why all the hurry? If you die you are immediately replaced!*

The present concern is to find out why there is this attitude towards work and to seek to trace, in this study, some of its causes, with a view to rousing the working population to fight against this unfortunate attitude. There is also the hope that the conclusions drawn from this study may throw light on the general behaviour pattern found in the growing cosmopolitan towns. The war has to be waged on all fronts and politicians, I think, have a major role to play.

On the occasion of the celebration of the first anniversary of Cameroon reunification, on the 1st of October, 1962, the President of the Federal Republic, His Excellency Ahmadou Ahidjo, in appealing to the nation, offered the following advice:

... in order that this exciting task should succeed completely, in order that this unique experiment which is being watched by Africa and the world should emerge triumphant,

it is imperative that all of us — leaders, public servants, businessmen, workers, the peasant population — should continue to pursue our task with devotedness, mutual understanding and self-restraint.

These words constitute the theme of this discourse which is addressed primarily to the workers and the peasant population of Cameroon.

### 3. Early work patterns and their development:

Hitherto, the economic life of the people and their work patterns were very simple. Family ties and tribal solidarity were the principal forces. Production was determined by the direct relationship between effort and the satisfaction of basic needs. These basic needs were few and the family economic unit could cope with them. There was very little planning and work seasons determined the rhythm. There was little specialization except in crafts such as wood and metal-work handed down from one generation to another.

There was no wage problem such as exists in the disciplined work systems of present-day industrialized communities. Since family security depended on the family group catering together for the wants of its members, any dismembering of the family, the economic unit, particularly by depriving it of its male members, weakened or destroyed the basis of the family economy.

With the introduction of the plantation system, a new society began to take shape. Money economy has created local markets; towns have developed and the much cherished extended families are beginning to break up. Social relations are becoming more complex requiring the provision of more of the social amenities hitherto provided by the extended family. This change is dramatic and is producing certain problems, mainly sociological, which require study and understanding.

Organised labour really came into Cameroon with the creation of the Cameroon Development Corporation in 1947; for, it was true to say that, before the Cameroon Plantation Workers' Union was founded in 1947, there were no trade unions worth the name in the Western sector of the Federation of Cameroon. In the German Plantations there were small pockets of labour on private holdings, owing allegiance to their plantation masters, the conditions of work in each case being determined, by and large, by the will of the master.

(1) Quoted from the unpublished speech of H. E. the President on 1st October, 1962 over the National Broadcasting system.

But there is some evidence that the Government of the day did provide protection to workers who did not have a square deal from their masters. A British Government report from Berlin in 1894 had this to say :

*The power of punishing their labourers is doubtless exercised by many masters, but it is never recognized by the German authorities, and complaints are often brought by the workmen to the courts, accusing the masters of ill-treating them, or of withholding their wages. These appeals for protection to the judicial authorities are rightly regarded as a great step in advance, and a special inspector has been appointed to look after the welfare of the poorer work people and to report any ill-treatment which comes under his notice. A few years ago no labourer would have dared to bring a civil or criminal action against his master, now they do so... a sure sign of the civilizing influence exercised by the Government and the missions over native public opinion (p. 37) <sup>1</sup>.*

#### 4. The new era and the changing work pattern :

When the plantations were auctioned after the first war and were repurchased by their former German owners, they continued to be managed on the old pattern till they were sold to the Government of Nigeria at the beginning of the second world war and held in custody, for the benefit of the people. With the handing over of the huge German holdings, to the administration, by the Custodian of Enemy Property, and subsequently, by ordinance, to a public corporation, the Cameroon Development Corporation, on 1st January, 1947, a new era dawned for the plantation workers. Their group problems became common problems and they now looked up to the management of the Cameroon Development Corporation for their needs. Their position was further strengthened by the enactment, by the Nigerian Government, of legislation declaring the plantation areas *Labour Health Areas*.

A Labour Office was established in Buea in 1946 to ensure the strict observance of the provisions of this legislation, of the Labour Code Ordinance and of other International Legislation. These legislations called, among other things, for the provision of adequate housing, medical facilities, fair wages and other modern conditions of work.

There were, however, other reasons for establishing a labour office. The experience gained in Nigeria, particularly after the

(1) Report on the German colonies in Africa and the South Pacific (C 7582-7), 1894.

Nigerian Railway Workers' general strike in 1942, showed that Government must take the initiative to help in organising employer-employee relationships and, particularly, healthy trade unions, along modern lines. This Government intervention may be regarded as an unusual development but it was the best means of ensuring that the economy was not wrecked by irresponsible strikes not infrequently engineered by politicians and others for selfish ends. At this stage a word about the Cameroon Development Corporation is necessary.



Mr. E. K. LOTTIN, Labour Officer, addressing Cameroon Development Corporation Workers' Union at Tombel, West Cameroon, during a reconciliation meeting to settle a trade dispute. With him are representatives of the Management, the Trade Union and the Government Information Service.

#### 5. The importance of the Cameroon Development Corporation :

The Cameroon Development Corporation is a singular example of a large scale industrialized plantation enterprise employing well over 17,000 men and women. We all know that the Corporation was rightly regarded, during the period of Cameroon's struggle for political emancipation, and even today, as the hen that lays the golden eggs. Needless to mention the fact that, but for the existence of the Cameroon Development Corporation, the Cameroon people's arguments against accusations and warnings,

particularly at the United Nations, that their country was not viable, would have been weak. Clearly, therefore, an understanding of its labour organization and of the political, social and economic consequences of its working constitutes a very essential study. The part played by the C. D. C. workers is one of the important factors that have made the "hen" survive.

INFOCAM - BUEA



Workers representatives at the reconciliation meeting at Tombel, West Cameroon.

#### 6. The activities of the Cameroon Development Corporation and similar organizations :

In recent works by Warmington, a research student, the activities of the Cameroon Development Corporation have been described as a new type of industrialization. He has claimed that industrialization is not merely the setting up of huge mechanized plants but also the springing up of secondary movements consequent on the introduction of machines.

The situation is similar to that which existed in Great Britain before the Industrial Revolution except that, in the Cameroon case, subsistence farming has been largely replaced by commercialised and skilled farming using family and hired labour. The worker is becoming specialised and his increasing needs are calling for an appraisal of the direct relationships between effort

and the satisfaction of the said needs. There has been a dramatic transition from tribal economy to industrialized society and plantations and cooperative farms now abound.

A wage earning class has been created and other industrial consequences are springing up. There are the problems of labour organization, of management, of high costs due to the instability

INFOCAM - BUEA



Rubber tapping on a C. D. C. plantation; it needs a lot of skill.

of the labour force. Trade Unions and Employers Associations have sprung up and human relations have become one of the main concerns of the revolution.

It is with this background that the worker in the great vine yard of Cameroon should be examined. There are several ques-

tions to be investigated but the primary question is whether or not the worker is contributing his best.

**7. The Dignity of Work :**

The problems of the day are not due particularly to plantation workers. Villagers and public servants have their own share of the blame. Are they as productive as they should be? By contrast with our past economic life, we have now been challenged by a new mode of existence calling for a reassessment of our abilities and our attitudes towards work.

How many village folk make an honest effort to earn the bread of the day? How often do you not see able-bodied folk wasting manpower in palm wine bars, some reaping where they did not sow, or in the streets of the cities begging for alms when the riches of the Cameroon soil lie untapped?

Notwithstanding what has been said, special tribute should be paid to the women folk. Still equipped with the traditional implements of tillage, they toil from dawn to dusk tilling mother earth. When the harvest is ready, wives provide for the family; the proceeds of their labour supply not only the essential needs of the home but also their children's school fees and their husbands' tax. Is the role of the men that of drones sapping the blood from the women's veins? Whither Cameroonian men folk!

We find in the words of the Head of State when he appealed to public servants on their duties and obligations, a situation which requires immediate remedy :

*That sense of discipline, of subordination, of hierarchy which, in former days, constituted the esteemed insignia of the Cameroon civil servant is getting duller and duller. And in its place insolence, unmannerliness and insubordination have installed themselves.*

These and many others are some of the grave problems facing our nation.

Nearly all Countries in Africa, Cameroon included, are described as underdeveloped. Rightly so, but we can lay the blame for our present state on history, on the lack of capital and on the lack of technical know-how. Now the question is, are we prepared to give our best? The people of the whole world are looking on us, some with sympathy and, as a consequence, are granting us aid. We must make up this generosity by contributing that "capital" which is to be found in our veins.

**8. Peace, Work, Fatherland :**

Let us hearken to the National call sounded by the three meaningful words : Peace, Work, Fatherland. We have emerged from slavery and colonialism and are now masters of our salvation or makers of our doom, whichever we choose.

Let labour leaders give sound leadership. Demand for better conditions should be backed by greater production. There should be a spirit of give and take and the employer-employee relationship should be cordial and based on sound understanding. In this atmosphere of peace, we must gird our loins and work for the reconstruction of our fatherland. Idleness kills the spirit; laziness is a crime and pride in the work we do should be everybody's ambition. Let integrity and efficiency be our watchword. Why should this blessed country endowed with all the gifts of nature be allowed to languish in squalor, in the midst of plenty?

Finally, let us, be guided by the words of the Head of the Federal Republic of Cameroon when, on the occasion of the 3rd anniversary of independence, he said :

*Fellow Cameroonians, our country calls us, she calls us to the work-yard of national reconstruction, to a task difficult but exciting, she calls us to free her from servitude, from economic tutelage, from misery, from disease and from ignorance!*

*Fellow Cameroonians, here is the national challenge.*

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(1) From the President's broadcast, edited and published by the Office of the Commissioner General for Information.

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