

The Cameroon Worker isn't lazy

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Controversy is a tribute to importance. We do not quarrel over things that do not matter. Whatever the balance of admiration and disfavour assigned to a controversial subject, that subject is sure of one distinction — it has attracted attention. Students of Cameroon history will not become greatly exercised with the annals of Lawrence Tita Ngalam; but they will debate endlessly the claims to greatness of men like Ndoumbe Doualla Manga-Bell, Um Nyobe, Ahmadou Ahidjo, Dr. E. M. L. Endeley, John Ngu Foncha, S. A. George, to name only a few.

An article appeared in *Abbia N'2* under the caption: "The Cameroon Worker." The picture that the author painted of the Cameroon worker, should, in my opinion, lead to serious debate by students of Cameroon history. Unfortunately, however, the article deals only with West Cameroon workers, and particularly, workers of the Cameroon Development Corporation and makes insignificant references to Cameroon workers as a whole. Perhaps the author did not realize that West Cameroon is only a part of the Federal Republic and that a part cannot be equated to the whole. The caption of the article in reference is, therefore, incorrect and misleading.

History Affects Workers: When the whiteman, in search for adventure, profit and glory, set foot on what is now the coastal areas of the Federal Republic of Cameroon, he met a people who were happy and contented in their village life. He met villages, towns and "chiefdoms" that enjoyed the peace and humanism of their native laws and customs. He met a friendly people who were willing to engage in peaceful trade with him; he met a people who were willing to accept his message of christianity.

But the unsuspecting native was not quick to realize that the whiteman did not just come to trade and to christianise. The natives of the coastal areas of the Federal Republic of Cameroon

were not quick to realise that they were dealing with a species of humanity whose acquisitiveness has become an obsession. They were not quick to realise that the whiteman came to colonise, to dominate, to subjugate. This was the beginning of the great tragedy!

It is true that the natives of the coastal areas of the Federal Republic of Cameroon became conscious of the fact that the whiteman was their enemy. But this discovery, this realisation came too late. It came at a time when the whiteman was in the effective majority.

An effective majority need not be a numerical majority. Whatever its size, an effective majority holds the main concentration of power — political, economic and/or military. A good example of an effective majority can be found in the Union of South Africa where three million whites are lorded it over eleven million blacks. Other examples are Angola and the so-called multi-racial states of East Africa.

The Industrial Revolution : As late as the middle of the 19th century, the slave trade provided the only steady contact between the West Coast of Africa (which includes the coastal areas of the Federal Republic of Cameroon) and the outside world. This trade marks the beginning of one of the most colossal sins in the recorded history of man. Towards the end of the same century, the Industrial Revolution took place in Europe.

In our elementary school days in West Cameroon, we knew by heart a popular definition of this Revolution. We were taught that it was "the gradual replacement of the work of men's hands by the work of power-driven machinery." The important word in this definition, as far as this article is concerned, is the word "gradual."

The Industrial Revolution created new needs for European industries. It gave African vegetable products an unprecedented importance. European merchants, therefore, saw in Africa a commercially attractive place. This led to what is known in history as the "Scramble for Africa" — and I may mention in passing that the scrambling still goes on in a different guise.

In this scramble, European merchants sought to establish trading posts from which they would obtain raw materials for their mills and, in which they would sell their manufactured articles. But because these trading posts did not ensure the exclusion of other European merchants from participating in the rich African

trade (a manifestation of their selfish streak), each European nation sought to prevent others from trading. Selfish and bloody wars were fought and innocent Africans lost their lives in them.

Finally, the Berlin Conference of 1885 ended the chaos and a new operation began. This operation is known in history as the "Partition of Africa." We shall neither discuss here the shortsightedness, the evidence of political myopia nor the evil consequences of that partitioning. That must be left to students of history. However, as a result of this partitioning, Cameroon fell under German and later, French and British domination. The Industrial Revolution, therefore, generated the Scramble and the Partition of Africa. But what was the social impact of the Revolution in Europe? How did it affect work patterns in Europe and later, in what is now the Federal Republic of Cameroon?

Revolution Affects Societies : At the time of the Industrial Revolution, Western Europe and the whole of Africa practised what is generally known as "subsistence economy." This was as true of farming under the manorial system as it was true of cultivation by Africans on tribal lands. The main features of work under subsistence economy are as follows : people worked either individually or in family groups ; they started and stopped work at their pleasure and convenience ; they did their work with enthusiasm because everyone realised that it was for the common good ; in the course of working, no one molested them ; each member of the family or group contributed his quota according to his ability. In a nutshell, the pattern of work inclined more towards humanism.

And Working Patterns : With the Industrial Revolution, things changed. It created a situation in which, for the first time in history, people had to get out of bed at a fixed time and report for work at fixed places and hours. It was also the first time that free individuals had to work with other free individuals who were, generally, strangers to them. It was also the first time that free individuals had to subject themselves to strict and impersonal supervision in order to earn wages.

Element of Gradualism : In Western Europe, however, these changes were gradual. The definition given above of the Revolution tells us so. And because the changes were gradual, in time, people learnt to adjust themselves to them. In colonial Africa, the tragedy is that this important element of gradualism was complex

tely absent. The impact of the revolution-inspired, European-owned plantations that were established to meet the demand for raw materials for European mills — was sudden and tremendous. It is known that to break away from the past, to destroy what past generations have laboriously built, often ends in catastrophe. In Africa the catastrophe was great! It brought about what is politely referred to as "social disintegration." And what does this high-sounding phrase mean?

Norms of Society : In any society, there are group standards; there are cultural standards of adequacy, worthiness, gratification and security which every individual is expected to meet. Briefly, these cultural standards are met when, within the context of a given culture, an individual can answer the following questions with satisfaction: "Am I deserving?" "What is it that I deserve?" "What is it that makes life worth living?"

These are universal yardsticks which people use to help them in assessing themselves in terms of their cultural norms. The last of the four standards mentioned above, the standard of security, exists in all societies by dint of the fact that individuals learn to want to be accepted by other people. Each individual learns his culture's conception of the "feeling of belonging."

Now, in some societies, the first three standards — standards of gratification — may be met by the possession of a fine car, having a good wardrobe, going to night-clubs and having a good time with the girls, driving at high speeds, etc. etc. In others, they may be met by the individual if he owns a nice little hut and a number of wives. This simply means that societies differ with respect to the relative emphasis placed on these standards. They also differ with respect to the difficulties in the way of the individual's effort to live up to them as well as with respect to the inter-relationships among the four standards.

Measuring up to and experiencing what these standards embrace gives the individual a feeling of achievement and self-satisfaction. Falling below them or failing to experience most or all what the standards embrace produces a painful sense of failure, of self-devaluation, of shame, rootlessness, insecurity. It produces a psychic pain which only human beings can experience.

An Example : Bakweris are an example of people whose society has faced serious disintegration as a result of colonial rapacity. Among the Bakweris, cultural norms demanded that between the

ages of twenty and twenty-five, youngmen should marry and own their own homes — usually next to their fathers'. Parents became anxious when their son remained single after that age. The culture further assessed a man by the number of sheep, goats, pigs, and cows he possessed as well as by the number of wives he had. The possession of all these brought him to the level of *awang'a moto* — a wealthy man, a man of rank.

With his wealth, it was easy for him to meet his obligations towards his sons. It was easy for him to pay the dowry for his sons' first wives as cultural norms demanded. Other demands of the culture were easily met because both the society and its economy were simple and uncomplicated and demands were not over-taxing.

But with the colonial set-up, with the introduction of the money economy, things became different. People were expected to exchange their goods for money which was in exceedingly low circulation. A greater part of dowries had to be paid in cash — which was very scarce. Furthermore, the importation of European manufactured goods created new tastes and nagging wives made life intolerable for their husbands who were practically unable to meet their demands.

Thus, the family which is the unit of every society was shaken to its very foundations. The great majority of men were unable, with their limited incomes, to provide for their families. They could not measure up to the standards of adequacy prescribed by their culture. Consequently, a keen sense of frustration, self-devaluation and shame overwhelmed them. And, as I explained above, when a man fails to measure up to the standards by which he has learned to judge himself — as bread-winner of the family, as provider of amenities for his wife and children — he feels pain, psychic pain that only human beings can experience. And this was the lot of Cameroonian, especially those in the littoral areas of the Federal Republic. This was the colonialist's civilising mission!

The Plantations : From what has been said so far, it should be easy to appreciate the frustrations that were the lot of Cameroonian under colonialist employment. Now we shall endeavour to examine conditions in the plantations. I stated before that the plantations were inspired by the Industrial Revolution as a means of ensuring steady supply of raw materials for European mills. It would not be wrong to say that the plantations were themselves

an industry and work patterns were geared to those of 19th century industrial Europe with the exception that in the African plantations, brutality by management was more pronounced. In this context, we are bound to conclude that labour in the plantations was organised. It had to be, for, the Industrial Revolution gave birth to a new class of people known as entrepreneurs. And from the earliest plantation days in Cameroon, they were around. There was the plantation manager, there were overseers, headmen and time-keepers. Labourers had to report at a particular time for duty and a certain amount of work had to be assigned to each labourer. This is organised labour. This is why I find it difficult to agree with the author of the article: "The Cameroon Worker", when he says: "Organised labour really came into Cameroon with the creation of the Cameroon Development Corporation in 1947..."

Even if the author meant to say that trade unionism came into Cameroon (he meant West Cameroon) in 1947, the existence or creation of the Cameroons Development Corporation had nothing to do with it. Trade unionism came into West Cameroon as a result of enlightening articles in Nigerian newspapers, more especially the **West African Pilot**. These articles taught Nigerians, including West Cameroonians, that workers have the right to bargain collectively. The Cameroons Development Corporation was not the only organisation that employed large numbers of people who could bargain collectively. And even if the corporation did not exist the growth of collective bargaining in Nigeria would have spread into West Cameroon. This is not revisionism or history by hypothesis; it is simple logic.

Realistically considered, therefore, industries exist for profit. What limits profit injures them and what increases profit promotes them. This fact was well known to the European colonizer, who, in his haste to make profit, subjected his labourers to harsh and oppressive forms of supervision — whipping in particular — in order to increase output. And all this for a very meagre pittance! Those who have seen as many Christmases as I have would remember when labourers in this country used to receive a six-penny piece (10 francs) for eight or nine hours of slave labour. Even in those days when things were supposed to be cheap, what on earth could anyone purchase — let alone a man with dependents — with a six-penny piece?

While it may be admitted that employers do not pay their employees to satisfy their needs, it ought to be accepted that salaries must provide compensation that bears some relation to just equi-

valence for labour provided. It is for this and many other reasons that I find it difficult to agree with the author of the article, **The Cameroon Worker** (see Abbia N° 2 p. 111) when he says: "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 would like to know who healed the wounds, when and how? For, while it may be psychologically inadvisable to spend all our time brooding over our historical misfortunes, I do not consider it necessary to apologize to anyone if there is need to recall them. As a matter of fact, I think it would be to our advantage to remind our children that they are descendants of a wronged people. Such knowledge would certainly arm them with the will to stubbornly resist any outside interference with their rights to full self-determination.

Efficiency in organised labour: And while it is true that efficiency in organised labour depends to a large extent upon the application of principles of psychology which are legitimate and relatively harmless, it is also true that it depends on other psychological principles which are obnoxious to workers. Workers' antagonism, dislike, protest and even hate is primarily directed to personnel control as a part of a larger process which deprives them of their individuality and self-respect. This was true of colonial slave-labour as it will be true of what our present-day leaders are contemplating about — something which they call "human investment." Perhaps it would be well to advise them to make a detailed and scientific study of their programmes before ever attempting to execute them. For this subtle opposition that workers manifest — an opposition which, in modern times is frequently voiced by trade unions — is often made to appear as laziness, as blind antagonism toward progress. But progress for whom?

It is not possible, it must be conceded, to undo overnight what has been done for over fifty years. The attitude of the Cameroon worker is a reflection of his plight in the days of the "sand-sand book," of forced labour for the benefit of his exploiter. Because of this regrettable state of conscious antagonism towards work, one of the monster relics of colonialism, it is absolutely necessary that any programme of community development, call it "human investment" if you wish, any programme that calls for the free co-operation of citizens must be preceded by a campaign of indoctrination, a campaign of re-education. And such a campaign

must be well planned by the department of public relations, if there is any.

Basic Responses : Much as we may dislike the resentment of workers when efficiency and output are concerned, we cannot escape the fact that this attitude arises from the failure of management to equate industrial practice with needs and human nature. "From the soil of oppression grow bitter fruits..." and the attitude of the Cameroon worker is one of them. This attitude is a vivid reflection of the deep resentment that the Cameroon worker has for the inferior status which he is forced to hold in the land that is his by right of birth and toil. It is a reflection of the futility he feels about the likelihood of a genuine change.

Faced with a constant environment of oppression and exploitation, what could the Cameroon worker do? He had to resort to some of the responsible possible for any oppressed people. There are three such basic responses. They are : Avoidance or Withdrawal ; Acceptance or Submission ; and Aggression. We shall endeavour to examine briefly each of these responses.

Avoidance or Withdrawal : This is a form of group behaviour by which an oppressed group (like the Cameroon worker) tries to avoid contact with its oppressors. This is done in order to avoid some of the unpleasantness that is likely to develop from such contacts. It may be expressed in self-hatred or in some of the members of the oppressed group refusing to identify themselves with the problems of their group. This form of withdrawal requires a measure of self-sufficiency from the practitioner. Then again, withdrawal may take the form of escape from unpleasant realities. Alcoholism, drug addiction, and mental break-down are known to be attempts at escaping (or withdrawing) into worlds of fantasy.

The author of "The Cameroon Worker" asks : "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?"

Could we regard these men as escaping from unpleasant realities into worlds of fantasy by means of palm wine? I certainly think so. In a society where the colonialist has created a situation in which the ideal of most young men is to seek "white-collar jobs," and the colonialist educational policy was designed to produce men to do such jobs, it should not occasion any surprise if we saw

men, unable to earn a living from office work, "wasting manpower in palm wine bars... or in the streets of the cities begging for alms when the riches of the Cameroon soil lie untapped." The colonialist did not design his educational policy to produce men who would fend for themselves, but to create men who will be beggars all their lives.

In an independent Cameroon, it is incumbent upon our policy makers to reverse this situation. We cannot afford to continue with policies that are rubber-stamp copies of those of our colonial masters. This is one of the reasons why I look with suspicion on most of the so-called experts we import here. It seems to me that they are exerting so much influence as to make our ministries look as if they are being operated by remote control.

There are many other ways in which avoidance or withdrawal may find expression, but we shall not discuss them here.

Acceptance or Submission : To some members of an oppressed, exploited or maltreated group, it may seem wise to accept what cannot be altered or avoided. This attitude can be summed up in the sentence : "I don't like it but what the hell can I do about it?" This attitude of "conscious resignation" is the most common form of acceptance. It can be generated from a belief that desperate social conditions are divinely ordained — that some people were created to be carriers of water and hewers of wood. This attitude comes naturally to whitemen like the Boers of South Africa who think that the treatment they are giving to native South Africans is biblically justifiable.

But no healthy mind assumes that another healthy mind will welcome an inferior status or its degrading concomitants. And any 20th-century African who welcomes the kind of social degradation that had long been the lot of his ancestors could safely be advised to seek the urgent attention of a psychiatrist.

Aggression : This is a pattern of behaviour whose aim is to discomfort, injure or destroy a person or his values. It may be manifested in some individuals among the oppressed who make themselves mouthpieces or champions of their group by speaking, or writing in its defence, or agitating for its rights. This is a common expression of direct aggression.

Refusal to observe imposed forms of etiquette, physical attacks are also expressions of hostility toward oppressors. In some instances, silence may be a form of aggression, as, for example, when

a servant refuses to respond to a degrading epithet.

Inefficiency and sloppy work done for employers is also a direct means of expressing hostility. We cannot exhaust in this short article, the whole gamut of human behaviour that constitutes aggressive response to humiliating and frustrating circumstances. But it is hoped that the arguments advanced here would enable readers to understand why Cameroon workers have been "going slow" in their jobs. It has nothing to do with laziness or distaste for progress. It is simply a means of destroying the exploiter, a means of expressing hostility toward those who have forced them to live in frustrating circumstances.

Peace, Work, Fatherland : No one doubts that our national motto is an inspiring phrase. But it must be admitted that political independence without economic independence leaves the worker almost where he was in colonial days. In that context, in the situation in which the bulk of invested capital is controlled by foreign monopolies; in the situation in which the average Cameroonian has no means of owning shares in the foreign-controlled businesses that operate in his country, in a situation in which most of our politicians behave more like greedy grabbers than like statesmen who are convinced that the end of government is the welfare of the governed; in a situation in which the Cameroon worker does not hope to receive a share of the additional wealth created by efficiency and relationalisation, the Cameroon worker has a right to ask: "Progress for whose benefit?"

Until such a time that our decision-makers will set up a system of economic relations which will arrest the outflow of our national income and give the worker a more reasonable share of the additional wealth created by his efficiency, the Cameroon worker will continue to show hostility towards his employer, will continue to show his antagonism towards work by arguing that "whiteman work no de finis."

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