

CAMEROON

Dependence and Independence

Mark W. DeLancey



CAMEROON

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For
Blaine and Floy,
Bob and Dave



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1

Introduction

To some observers Cameroon is a glowing success in recent African history, a site of political stability and economic growth and development. To others, it is a neocolonial entity, existing under the domination of France, with little benefit of its independence accruing to the bulk of the population, and with revolution and division boiling close to the surface. This former colony of Germany, France, and Great Britain is now an independent, medium-sized West African country located on the Atlantic coast slightly north of the equator. Nigeria, Chad, the Central African Republic, Congo, Gabon, and Equatorial Guinea are its neighbors.

Cameroon faced most of the same economic and political problems of other African states at the time of independence in 1960. Per capita income was low and the economy was largely dependent upon the export of a few agricultural products to Europe. There was little industrial production, insignificant mineral production, and little promise of increase in this respect, and the infrastructure was woefully undeveloped. There were the ethnic divisions thought to be a political problem for almost every African state, exacerbated in Cameroon by a colonial history that had divided the country into English- and French-speaking groups. Also, unlike movements in most African states, the Cameroon independence movement had been characterized by serious violence; civil war was going on at the time of independence. Like other African states, Cameroon became a new country with untried political institutions, largely an inheritance from the French Gaullist experience. Although education levels were higher in Cameroon than in many other African countries, it suffered the common problem of a shortage of trained and educated personnel to staff all the bureaus, offices, and ministries of an independent government and economy. In both economic and political affairs, Cameroon remained closely tied to or dependent upon the major ex-colonial ruler, France.

Yet today, about three decades after independence, Cameroon seems quite different from many African states. Its economic situation appears

bright. Cameroon is not a debtor nation, it produces sufficient food to feed its populace, the economy is improving, with industrial production increasing in amount and diversity, petroleum has been found and is being exploited and other mineral resources may soon go into production, infrastructural development has taken place, and most measures of the quality of life have improved. The five-year development plans have received praise for realism and for coherence. In politics, Cameroon has become famous for its political stability and for its peaceful and constitutional change of head of state and government. Complaints about human rights and political freedoms are issued by several observers and citizens, but in comparison to many African states Cameroon's record is rather good. A recent coup attempt marred, but did not destroy, this reputation.

Cameroon, as a political unit, was created in the 1880s. Prior to that time there were numerous states, nations, or political entities in this area, each with its culture, history, government, and economy. The precolonial period was dynamic, characterized by the migration of peoples, the rise and fall of governments, and economic relationships that tied together large numbers of the entities. However, conflict was a part of life, and war and conquest between African groups were common.

The development of the region, especially in the forested areas of the coast, was affected by the Atlantic slave trade and the legitimate trade that followed. The areas in the interior were affected by the expansion of Islam and the spread of African empires toward the coast. But in the 1880s another influence became significant: German colonial domination and exploitation spread northward from the coast. For the first time, boundaries, albeit different from those today, were drawn and a potential identity, Kamerun (the German spelling), established.

The German period, though brief (1884–1916), was of great importance to Cameroon. More than a new name and a set of internationally recognized boundaries were involved, for the Germans undertook major infrastructural development and their activities continued the process of tying the Cameroon peoples and their economic systems to the world capitalist economy. In so doing, the Cameroonians, through force and voluntarily, undertook massive migration movements, increasing greatly the interactions, economic and social, between them. Through German and mission schools there arose the beginnings of a new, national elite.

The British and French invasion of Kamerun during World War I brought an end to German rule. The colony was divided between the victorious powers, the larger share of land and population going to the French, the smaller to the British. Kamerun, though separated into two mandates, the British Cameroons and French Cameroon, could still serve

as a focus of identity for those living there, but new alternative foci were also made available. Much of the writing on this period emphasizes the divisive aspects of mandate-trust rule (which lasted from 1922 to 1960), but as we shall see, numerous processes were under way that continued to nurture the growth of a single Cameroon identity.

The British sector, divided into northern and southern parts, was attached to Nigeria and for much of the era of British rule was treated as an integral part of Nigeria. In most respects this was a period of sluggishness in economic development, though important changes did occur in peasant and plantation agriculture. A large proportion of the population became involved in cash crops (coffee, cocoa, and bananas). Eventually the administration took control of vast German-owned plantations to form a major economic institution, the Cameroons Development Corporation. Large-scale internal population migrations, begun in the German period, were complicated by the movement of thousands of Nigerians, mainly Ibos and Efik-Ibibio, into the coastal part of Southern British Cameroons. These migrants were to play an important part in the further development of a sense of Cameroon identity and were a key factor in the decision of Southern Cameroons to join at independence the Republic of Cameroon rather than the Republic of Nigeria. (Northern British Cameroons opted for the latter.)

British rule brought with it a tendency to anglicize the populations it dominated. This is most obvious in the use of the English language in schools and administration; but it was also manifest in other aspects of life, from the legal system to the system of weights and measures, from the commercial tastes of consumers to attitudes toward politics and international affairs. Such practices and values were spread not only by the actions of the colonial administration but also through the rapidly expanding activities of Christian missionaries.

Similar processes and developments took place in the French sector. There was greater economic growth in the French portion in terms of infrastructure, education, and general standard of living, but, as on the English side, the major emphasis was on agriculture. In the French sector, the most serious changes took place in peasant agriculture, though there were important developments in plantation agriculture. These changes, as well as the growth of important urban centers, led to large-scale internal migration. This was complicated by the in-migration of French settlers and citizens. These in-migrants, though fewer than the Nigerian immigrants in the English sector, were to play a similar role in the development of a Cameroon identity and sense of nationalism.

French rule contained a strong impulse to gallicize the populations it dominated. The tendency to impose an alien culture on the colonized, stronger in French than in British colonialism, was intensified by the

more rapid economic and social development that occurred in the French sector. Again, use of the rulers' language was the major indicator of this tendency, but its manifestations occurred in a variety of aspects of life, from business practices to philosophy of education, from rural development strategies to filing systems. This dual heritage, English and French, can be viewed as sources of both advantage and disadvantage for independent Cameroon.

Though the mandate-trust period was in many respects divisive, several factors continued to foster the growth of a pan-Cameroon identity. Among these were the negative roles of French and Nigerian migrants and the positive roles of Cameroon migrants who crossed the Anglo-French boundary to find work, to attend school, to settle, or to visit friends and family in the other sector. Trade, often illegal, continued between the two sectors, and there are some examples of Cameroonians opening businesses and other investments across this border.

Thus, in the post-World War II era, as independence and nationalist movements arose on the African continent, there was in Cameroon nationalist rhetoric a specifically Cameroon theme, that of Cameroon reunification, of rejoining the parts (or some of the parts) of old Kamerun. The Cameroon independence movement was also unusual in that a large amount of violence, indeed, a war of liberation, was involved. The role of the United Nations made this story somewhat different from that of other West African states, as did the role of settlers (French and Nigerian) influencing the direction and the content of Cameroon's drive for independence.

During the colonial era a new elite with its origins in the German period and in traditional rule had arisen in Cameroon. In the postwar period this elite, like those in other African states, asserted its demands. As elsewhere, these demands occasionally conflicted over issues of the desirability and timing of independence and over the type of relationship that would exist after independence between ex-ruler and ex-colony. But eventually, the French turned over sovereignty to the Republic of Cameroon and, a few months later, when the British turned over Southern Cameroons, the Federal Republic of Cameroon was created. A new state, born in German colonialism and nurtured through British and French administrations, became independent and reunited in 1961.

Upon achievement of independence, Cameroon faced a new set of problems, challenges, and goals. Among the most immediate was the resolution of the civil war, but related and of a more long-term nature was the problem of national unity, of building a Cameroon nation. There were numerous identities available to the peoples within the border of Cameroon. For the new central government it was necessary to derive policies and take actions that would concentrate the interests of the

populace on only one of those identities, the Cameroon nation. The competing alternatives to be overcome were those of colonial past, anglophone and francophone Cameroon; of religion, Christian and Islam; of economically differentiated regions, north and south; of ethnic group or older national identity, such as Fulani, Bamiléké, or Ewondo, grassland or forest.

Equally significant was the problem of defining and building an acceptable set of legitimate institutions to rule the newly independent country. The problem of state building arises directly as a result of colonial rule, a period of imposed foreign rule over a wide variety of separate preexisting political systems. The colonial rulers had weakened or destroyed the previous systems without providing for the construction of a new, overarching system for the colonial entity. This problem, common to most African states, was made more complex for Cameroon by the history of two (or three) colonial rulers, each having provided a heritage of political attitudes and proto-institutions superimposed on the varied background of African attitudes and institutions. State building is only one aspect of the general goal of building national institutions in the political, economic, and social spheres.

State building and nation building, though separated here for discussion, are obviously closely interrelated, and each is in turn tied to the third major area of concern for the Cameroon government: the overwhelming need for economic growth and development. Scholars debate which takes precedence, economic or political change, but the reality is that the two are mutually dependent and that one occurs only in the presence of the other. The development of loyalty to a new nation and the growth of support and belief in a new set of institutions take place in a setting that provides economic reward. The chances of these institutions and identities being accepted are greater when they are presented in an era of apparent economic growth and the spreading of benefits to an ever-increasing proportion of the population. Yet such economic success seems to require that institutions be workable and acceptable and that the polity be not disrupted by conflicts over the selection of a focus of identity. A vicious cycle could emerge whereby economic failure (or the appearance of failure) leads to disruption of the polity, but such disruption only makes it more difficult for economic success to occur. Moreover, a failure of the political system or the sense of national identity would lead to an inability for the economy to provide rewards and thus to a further decline (or failure to build) support for the nation and its institutions. The reverse, a positive cycle, leads to economic development, the emergence of a national identity focused on Cameroon, and the building of a set of national institutions.

What factors explain the existence of a positive cycle in some political-economic entities and a vicious cycle in other entities? A variety of explanations is possible. The socioeconomic history of the entity at the time of independence, the international environment within which the entity exists, and the wisdom of its leadership are among the variables most often mentioned. Of course, good luck is thought by many to be the most significant factor.

What, then, is the background in which the Cameroon of today exists? How has this entity come into existence and under what conditions? What success or failure has it met in solving the problems of nation building, state building, and economic growth? What factors explain these developments? Is the appearance of economic and political success a reality or a facade? If it is a reality, what explains this positive history? If a facade, how have we been deceived, and what is the reality of the Cameroon political economy? Let us now examine these alternatives.

2

Precolonial and Colonial Heritage

The colonial experiences of Cameroon—German, French, and British—have not only been the basis for the definition of the entity Cameroon, but they have also made numerous contributions, negative and positive, to the country's social, economic, demographic, and political history. External influences on Cameroon did not, however, begin with the establishment of colonial rule. That was directly preceded by periods of product and slave trade between the Cameroon coast, Europe, and North America, as well as the beginnings of a widespread Christian missionary movement in the area. In the early 1800s slave trade declined, to be replaced with so-called legitimate trade, mainly in palm oil but also in ivory and other items. Both product and slave trade was conducted similarly: Goods or people were purchased, traded, or stolen inland at their sources and then were passed through a series of intermediary dealers until they arrived at the coast. There, under well-established procedures, African businessmen sold or traded the goods and slaves to Europeans. The Europeans were not allowed to participate in the inland trade but stayed on ships or in small shops or in coastal villages.

A variety of European countries were involved, with the predominant one changing from time to time. A variety of European manufactured items—cloth, liquor, firearms, iron, and other metals—were the reciprocal part of the trade. These imports competed with and often damaged local industry along the coast of Africa, and in general they did not provide benefits in terms of introducing new technologies or increased productive capacity for the Africans. Such trade did have the effect of turning African attention away from internal and continental trade and production and toward participation in the European economic system. This process, beginning as a minor consideration in the early years of the slave trade, becomes a major consideration during the colonial and early post colonial periods.

Along with the European traders came the missionaries. The first of the Christian groups to undertake prolonged efforts in Cameroon was the Baptist Missionary Society of London. In 1844, one of the Baptists' Jamaican missionaries, Joseph Merrick, established the first station in Cameroon at Bimbia. Soon after, an Englishman, Alfred Saker, established a station at Douala.¹ Baptists purchased land on the Cameroon coast from the chief of Bimbia in 1858 and founded the religious city-state of Victoria.²

By the time the Germans took control, there were a few Christians in Cameroon, some schools had opened, a tiny group of literate persons existed, written forms of at least two African languages had been devised, and a small group of artisans had been established. There are some indications that members of this Christian, literate, and skilled group, especially from Victoria, were to become part of a new elite of clerks, teachers, craftsmen, pastors, and other appendages of the colonial era, an elite that would in time become a significant factor in the growth of Cameroon nationalism. These first steps of Christians in Cameroon owe much to the efforts of a group of African-Americans, the Jamaicans—one of many examples of the continuous ties that have existed and exist today between black Africa and the black Americas.³

To twentieth-century social scientists, it would seem clear, based on African affairs in 1880, that the Cameroon coast would become an English colony if it were to lose its independent existence. The majority of trade and traders were British; in fact, along the coast there was widespread use of pidgin English. Moreover, there was the presence of the English missionary group and settlement at Victoria, which looked to the British fleet for protection. Indeed, there were even times when local leaders requested that some sort of official British presence be established over the region.

THE GERMAN ERA

These factors notwithstanding, the region became a German colony. On July 14, 1884, Gustav Nachtigal signed treaties with two Duala chiefs and raised the German flag at Douala. Although this act did not bring an immediate end to competition for the region, did little to settle the definition of boundaries, and did not even give a name to the colony, it did give the Germans a definite advantage in the struggle among various European countries to gain supremacy over the land, peoples, and commerce of the region.

There followed a brief period of competition among European countries, mainly to make treaties with as many local chiefs as possible in order for one country or another to prove that it was actually occupying