



*Afrika Zamani*, Nos 22 & 23, 2014-2015, pp. 81-100

© Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa  
& Association of African Historians 2016 (ISSN 0850-3079)

# German Economic Re-appropriation of the British Southern Cameroons'<sup>1</sup> Territory, 1924–46

Nixon Kahjum Takor\*

## Abstract

In 1916 the British took over part of former German *Kamerun* after the capitulation of the Germans to the joint Anglo-French contingent at the end of the First World War in Cameroon. The defeat of the Germans gave the British political control over their sphere of the territory but left an unclear scenario as far as the management of the plantations, the nerve-centre of the German economy, was concerned. Despite initially efforts at appropriating and restricting German ownership of the plantations, problems of technical and managerial knowledge, cost and disinterest caused the British administration to allow German presence and participation in the Southern Cameroon economy. This article examines the circumstances leading to the interruption and then resurgence of German economic control in British Southern Cameroons. It maintains that the overwhelming economic presence of German planters from 1924 to the end of the Second World War in 1945 emanated from a combination of auspicious conditions and British diplomacy to forgive and appease Germany in the interwar period. German implication in Second World War, however, gave the British reasons to re-appropriate the plantations and federate into the Cameroons Development Corporation (CDC) in 1946 for the primary benefit of the inhabitants.

## Résumé

En 1916, les Britanniques ont pris une partie de l'ancienne colonie allemande, Kamerun, après la capitulation des Allemands face au contingent mixte anglo-français à la fin de la première guerre mondiale au Cameroun. Cette défaite des Allemands conférait aux Britanniques le contrôle politique sur leur sphère du territoire, mais laissait une situation peu claire quant à la gestion des plantations, centre névralgique de l'économie allemande. Malgré les tentatives initiales d'appropriation et de limitation de la propriété allemande sur les plantations, les problèmes de connaissances techniques et managériales, les coûts et le désintérêt ont amené l'administration britannique à autoriser la présence et la

---

\* Department of History and Archaeology, University of Bamenda.  
Email: takor.nixon@yahoo.com

participation allemandes dans l'économie du Cameroun méridional. Cet article examine les circonstances qui ont mené à l'interruption puis à la résurgence du contrôle économique allemand sur le territoire britannique du Cameroun méridional. Il soutient que l'envahissante présence économique des planteurs allemands de 1924 à la fin de la seconde guerre mondiale en 1945 résultait d'une combinaison de conditions favorables et de la diplomatie britannique visant à pardonner et à apaiser l'Allemagne dans l'entre-deux-guerres. Cependant, l'implication allemande dans la seconde guerre mondiale a donné aux Britanniques les raisons de se réapproprier les plantations et de se fédérer pour former la société *Cameroons Development Corporation (CDC)* en 1946 dans l'intérêt principal des habitants.

### **Introduction**

Between 1884 and 1916, Cameroon was fully a German protectorate. During the thirty-two years of German rule, the successive administrations, each in their turn, pitched their specific administrative objectives to respond to the broad German colonial agenda. This was essentially to make Cameroon a post for trade as the reports and contact experiences of explorers like Heinrich Barth, Gerhard Rolfes and Gustav Nachtigal had exposed. It was geared toward expanding and sustaining the quantity and quality of agricultural products like cocoa, rubber, banana and palms that were highly solicited by German and other European industrial plants. The key development that has remained as a strategic legacy of the German colonial rule in Cameroon was the introduction of the plantation economy. This was an incidental plan that emerged unpredicted in Bismarck's primary purpose of acquiring colonies to protect German trade and a distant market (Rudin 1938:120).

The German economic presence in Cameroon went through different phases. The first phase, which ran roughly from the 1860s to 1914, was considered as defining and assertive of the type of colonialism they established in the country. Germans employed clever diplomacy to overturn British and French commercial hegemony in the territory and established a buoyant economy, especially around plantation agriculture. The second phase was the interruptive one, which came as a result of German defeat in the First World War and their loss of political and most importantly economic control of Cameroon to the British and French administrations. The third phase, which ran from 1924 to 1939, could be termed the period of economic resurgence. Plantations and trade connections reopened to the Germans. The final phase spanning 1939–46 marked the forestallment of German economic revival in British Southern Cameroons.

The article examines the circumstances leading to the transfer of management of the plantations, the hub of the former German economy, and to some extent trade from the British to the German economic operators. It maintains that the presence of German planters and businessmen from 1924

to the end of the Second World War in 1945 gave them the opportunity to establish significant and strategic economic dominance in British Southern Cameroons. It also shows that in retaliation, and to forestall German economic resurgence, the British took advantage of Germany's defeat at the end of the Second World War to re-appropriate and federate the German plantations into the Cameroons Development Corporation in 1946. In order to gain insight into the German re-appropriation of the British Southern Cameroons' economy, a concise background of the establishment of German economic foothold in Cameroon is necessary.

### **Establishment of a German Economic Foothold**

Historical research on the economic activities of Europeans on the Cameroon coast, from the fifteenth century to the first quarter of the nineteenth century, indicates that attention was limited to trade in slaves and tropical goods. The first group of Europeans to trade on the coast of Cameroon were the Portuguese who entered the Wouri estuary from Fernando Po in 1472 and traded with coastal indigenes in European manufactured goods for commodities like kola nuts, ivory, pepper and slaves. Despite being a commercial forerunner, the Portuguese did not establish a permanent trading post on the Cameroon coast. Attracted by the profitable gains from the slave trade, Dutch traders succeeded the Portuguese at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The Dutch traders opened a trading post at Douala in the Wouri River. Fanso maintains that the importance of the trade in slaves and items like ivory also encouraged other merchants notably from Spain, England, France, Sweden, Denmark and Germany to visit the Cameroon coast and participate in the thriving business (Fanso 1989b:90–1). Among the European nationals that had a grip on the coastal economy, special mention should be made of the British, who according to Hopkins were:

responsible for about two thirds of the total number of slaves shipped by the major powers (England, France and Portugal). Her preeminence in West Africa was one striking illustration of the more general growth of her foreign trade in the eighteenth century, and of the global dominance of her navy. Britain's ascendancy was not seriously challenged until the close of the nineteenth century (Hopkins 1973:91–2).

Fanso corroborates this assessment, noting that 'by the end of the eighteenth century and the start of the nineteenth century, the British were definitely the dominant European businessmen along the entire coast of the Bight of Biafra' (Fanso 1989b). In 1833, Britain, because of its global leadership role and mission to abolish and supplant slave trade with legitimate commerce, contracted a commercial and diplomatic alliance with one of the principal

coastal Kings, Bile of Bimbia. This diplomatic treaty covered Bile's principality, which the British Governor of Clarence, Colonel Edward Nicolls, recognized as including all the coastal territory between Bimbia and Rio del Rey, and became a critical base from which British businessmen took hold of the economy of the territory (Elango 1987:34–5).

The commercial and political developments initiated by Britain, notably the major commercial treaty signed on 14 January 1856 between the British officials and supercargoes on the one hand, led by Her Britannic Majesty's Consul for the Bight of Benin and Biafra and Fernando Po, and on the other hand, the kings, chiefs and traders of Cameroon gave the British unparalleled commercial prominence in the territory (Ardener 1967:76–8). This treaty established by-laws for the better regulation of trading activities and a Court of Equity to resolve commercial disputes (Fanso 1989a:63–6). Until the end of the 1860s, import and export trade on the Cameroon coast was dominated by the British.

In 1864, between 150 and 200 British traders could be found in Douala. There were at the time five British firms permanently established and operating in Douala and other Cameroon coastal townships. The Cameroon coast formed part of the British sphere of influence in the Bights of Benin and Biafra (*ibid.*:64). This was the situation that the Germans encountered, skillfully mastered and speedily overturned to establish a strong economic presence in the coast of Cameroon and later in the hinterlands. The German economic foothold in Cameroon is an account of surreptitious diplomacy, which Hopkins posits 'was partly a reflection of shifts in the balance of economic and political power in Europe following the industrialization and partly the outcome of particular problems which arose during the Great Depression in the nineteenth century' (1973:165).

The German traders probably first had contacts with the Cameroon coast around 1849 when the Carl Woermann Firm of Hamburg began operating on the West African coast. However, it was not until 1868 that the firm became established permanently on the Cameroon coast, with factories and warehouses in the townships of Douala and Victoria. The second German firm to be established on the Cameroon coast was the Jantzen and Thormählen in 1875. French firms also joined the Cameroon trade in the 1870s and opened their trading stations south of the Douala enclave at Malimba, Big Batanga and Campo (Fanso 1989a:64).

German traders, although few in number on the Cameroon coast by the late 1870s, cooperated loyally with the British as well as accepting the measure of British control. This gave English traders no reason to fear the Germans. This was not the same with the French who were moving along the Cameroon coast from the west and the south, establishing factories, claiming territory.

The French also introduced tariffs so high and so discriminatory that they resulted in the virtual expulsion of all non-French goods in their spheres of influence (Rudin 1938:19–20). Britain, Germany and France became the three European powers that competed for commercial and/or economic supremacy on the coast of Cameroon by the turn of the 1870s and the opening years of the 1880s. In this competition, while the English and German firms and agents traded co-operatively under the Union Jack in Douala and Victoria townships and westward to Rio del Rey and beyond, the French operated alone in the districts from Batanga towards their Gabonese enclave (Fanso 1989a:64).

The long presence of the British on the Cameroonian coast, and the series of treaties signed with the coastal chiefdoms showed that the commercial nexus between the indigenes and the British was very strong. This perhaps explains why there were repeated calls for British annexation of the territory on the part of the indigenes during the so-called European Scramble for Africa. A case in point was the letter written by King Bell and Akwa of Douala in 1881 to the British Prime Minister, Gladstone, soliciting a British annexation (Eyongetah, Brian and Palmer 1987:47). In spite of the euphoria that surrounded British presence, the setting up of German firms led to the permanent presence of German traders and businessmen in increasingly larger numbers on the Cameroon coast. Gradually, but in less than a decade, the Germans began to obtain an ever-increasing portion of the Cameroon trade and to challenge British dominance of it (Fanso 1989b). Apparently:

the British had not given thought as to how their trade collaborators, the Germans felt about the possibility of German annexation of Cameroon or to Germany's colonial interest. Though supporting British annexation from the beginning, the German traders were slowly but firmly becoming patriotic. Secretly they began to make plans as to what they would do in the event that Britain did not annex Cameroon but rather let the territory slip into French hands (Fanso 1989a:72).

Adolf Woermann stands noticeable among the German trading actors whose diplomatic tact, tenacious pressure and economic foresight shaped the process of German dominance of the Cameroon economy. Woermann's voice and actions on the issue of German colonial interests in Cameroon, especially from the 1880s, brought a *volte face* in the economic balance of power in the territory. Rudin's account of Woermann's interest in the German annexation of Cameroon is very indicative of the dogged economic mission that occupied the mind of the Hamburg trader in the colonial adventure. Woermann urged the German Chancellor, Otto Von Bismarck on the need to protect trade in the Cameroons and conferred with him about the mission of Nachtigal to the

West African coast. Surreptitiously, he instructed his agents in the Cameroons to make treaties with the indigenes in advance of Nachtigal's arrival (Rudin 1938:157–9). The instructions were contained in a confidential letter of 6 May 1884 addressed to Eduard Schmidt, agent of the Carl Woermann firm. The letter exposed the tactics and purpose of territorial acquisition in Cameroon. Besides, the desire to protect German trade in the Cameroons, Adolf Woermann gave clues about the prospective expansion of German economic gains after annexation when he said:

you [the German traders] should by all means get the cession of very extensive lands as private property-especially those suitable for plantations. There is no doubt that, if the country becomes German, there will be many attempts to establish extensive plantations and so it is always a good thing if the land is already in our private ownership, so that we can re-sell it later. You must naturally try to buy as cheaply as possible. One can get the land for nearly nothing (Ardener 1967:84–6).

This concern about the plantation economy was predicated on the observation of the agents of the Woermann Company trading on the Cameroon coast, which had taken note of the fertility of the volcanic lands around and up the slopes of the Cameroon Mountain (Fanso 1989b). It was also associated with the extended visit around the mountain localities from 24 February to 10 March 1894 of Vice Consul Spengler, Acting Governor Leist (who had just handed over to Zimmerer) and Dr Plehn. Spengler's subsequent report of this trip, as Ardener notes, was 'the go-ahead for the plantation industry on the mountain' (1996:106). It was later to be the prime agenda of the *kolonialwirtschaftliches Komitee*, or the Economic Committee, which held the view that 'the only reason for having colonies was the exploitation of their natural resources' and getting colonial products at reduced rates (Rudin 1938:172). Thus the establishment of plantations was given the first priority after the German annexation although Rudin opines that in 1884 the exploitation of the country by plantations had not been the primary intention of the Germans. However, beginning as early as 1885, under the initiative of the two major German trading firms, Woermann and Jantzen und Thormählen, plantations were founded at Bimbia (Kamerun Land und Plantagen-Gesellschaft) and Bibundi (West Afrikanische Pflanzungsgesellschaft Bibundi) (Ardener 1996:106–51).

The acquisition of lands and opening of plantations in significant numbers came some ten years later. It began through negotiations with village heads and local leadership, but after 1894, with the conquest of the Bakweri villages, under Governor Von Puttkamer, land alienation increased rapidly (*ibid.*:244). However, it was not until 1895, after the defeat of the Bakweri and the expropriation of their lands on the slopes of the mountain north of Victoria,

that the German plantations was opened by the West Afrikanische Pflanzungsgesellschaft (W.A.P.V.) or Victoria Plantations Company. Its share capital was 2.5 million marks. By 1902, twelve more plantation companies had opened and by 1913, there were fifty-eight German plantations in Cameroon with 195 European employees and 17,827 African workers (Fanso 1989b).

The development of these plantations most probably was facilitated by the ease of obtaining land and the concerted support that came from German technical experts, scientific research centres and the German Colonial Society and its Economic Committee. The task of investing science and technology in the development and expansion of plantations was entrusted to the Botanische Zentralstelle, which served as a clearing-house for experimentation. It arranged to have tropical plants sent to the Cameroons from all parts of the world to determine whether they could be profitably exploited there. In the Cameroons, this mission was undertaken by the Botanical Garden in Victoria founded by Governor Soden. The center conducted experiments with about one thousand plants. It also studied the soils, humidity, spacing of plants, seeding, fertilizing, harvesting and combating pests and blights and several other aspects of tropical agriculture (Rudin 1938:253–4).

The German economic imposition in Cameroon also found expression in the creation of large economic concessions. Within the period of German rule, two large concessions, the Gesellschaft Sud-Kamerun and the Gesellschaft Nord-West Kamerun, granted on 28 November 1898 and 31 July 1899 respectively, were opened. These grants of extraordinary rights over extensive areas, each one being nearly a fifth of the whole colony, were made to attract German capital into the interior at a time when a lack of money in Germany and the reluctance of the Reichstag (the parliament) to appropriate funds made it impossible for the colonial government to develop the hinterland (*ibid.*:290). Both companies were obliged by the terms of their grants to explore the lands assigned them, improve transportation in the interior, construct roads and bridges, encourage settlement, and exploit the region.

Although the concessions encountered difficulties and criticisms from different quarters like the Reichstag, German firms, traders, missionaries and indigenous middlemen, they gave the German colonial administration economic monopoly over the exploitation of palm products, ivory, precious woods, rubber and minerals of the territory up until 21 September 1910, when the 1899 concession was abrogated. The Representative of the Gesellschaft Nordwest-Kamerun, Ramsay, noted on 30 January 1902 that 'the larger part of the concession was the property of the company, which consequently regarded all products in the concession, especially rubber and

palm trees as its own exclusive property and strongly opposed their exploitation by others' (*ibid.*:295–6). Not only did the Germans dominate the modern agrarian economy but they also expanded the number of trading stations along the coast and hinterlands of Cameroon. The numbers of trading posts belonging to Woermann alone were over thirty-five in 1905. This proliferation of trading posts came as a result of the policy of the Woermann Firm to give favourable credit to natives in Douala. Besides, Woermann's steamship line increasingly gained importance as the number of ships increased from fifteen in 1896 to thirty-five in 1903 (*ibid.*:162).

It is difficult to capture fully the extent to which the Germans built an economic reputation in Cameroon before the First World War, but the investments in public infrastructure like railways and wharves and the growing numbers of German manufacturers which used raw materials as well as produced articles for sale in the colony were clear indicators of their significant economic foothold in Cameroon. Le Vine observes:

The Germans laid the foundation for the Southern Cameroon's overhead capital, particularly basic transportation and communication infrastructure. This included wharves and docks at Tiko and Victoria, the narrow-gauge railroad serving Victoria plantations and a number of bridges, roads and paths, many of which were constructed to facilitate movement of government officials and traders (Le Vine 1971:5).

This German economic expansion in the Cameroons was briefly halted by developments associated with the First World War. The war bore a heavy toll on the state and stability of the economy, and culminated in the British appropriation of German control of the Cameroonian economy.

### **British Confiscation of German Economic Control of Cameroon, 1914–23**

By 1914 approximately 264,000 acres of land in Victoria and Kumba Divisions of the Cameroons Province had been expropriated, and about 48,000 acres were actually under cultivation. The majority of the estates were held as freehold under German crown grants though some were held on lease from the Government of Kamerun.<sup>2</sup> During the period of the German colonial administration, the policy had been to make land available to commercial companies and to individual German planters for the cultivation of cocoa, bananas, rubber and oil palm under plantation conditions.<sup>3</sup> When the control of Cameroon slipped away from the Germans as a result of Allied victory after the battle of Mora in February 1916, it became difficult to maintain the regular rhythm of economic activities. This situation did not improve even after the territory was provisionally partitioned on 4 March 1916, and this

partition was confirmed with slight modifications on 10 July 1919. For example, the thriving palm kernel trade in the Ossidenge (Mamfe) District was almost dead after the war owing to the destruction of factories particularly the North Kamerun Company's nut-cracking and oil-processing machinery. The volume of palm kernels exported from the district had plummeted from 400 tons in 1913–14 to barely 20 tons in 1916.<sup>4</sup> The demand for produce from the industrialized countries shrank because of the closure of some industries and the conversion of others to the production of arms. In the early stages of the First World War, Germany and countries under German occupation took 100,000 tons of cocoa and 2,000,000 tons of oil seed per annum from Cameroon, but in the later stages of the war, they could obtain only a very small proportion of this quantity. Demand from abroad also fell further because Britain and France adopted a policy of limiting imports by neutral countries to ensure that they were not re-exported to Germany (Tatah 1986:29).

The impact of the war extended to all the sectors of the economy. Trade routes were diverted as was the case of Bali and Bayang traders who habitually traded towards Ikom and Calabar. Instead of passing through Ossidenge, they decided to turn off at Mbiu and make their way via Ossing and Kembong southwards to Ajaiyukndip and Calabar, or northwards to Aiyewamba and Ikom. Besides, the war caused depreciation in the value of the Mark. Not only did some people lose about 25 per cent of their property in cash, they also found the Mark worthless in transactions with the European firms at Ikom where the Mark was not accepted.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most imperative repercussion of the war, and especially its aftermath, was on the plantations, the hub of the economy, which became derelict. In order to prevent the looting of plantations assets and, if possible, to save them from ruin, the British authorities created a plantations department to preserve them and employ labourers who were unable to return to their homes owing to the war and who, if allowed to remain in idleness on the plantations, would have caused damage and proved a source of embarrassment to the administration (Epale 1985:4–5).

As soon as the war broke out, the Governor General of the Federation of Nigeria announced a series of 'war measures' against Germany. The measures included the prohibition of trade with Germany and the confiscation of the property of its nationals in Nigeria (Aka 2002:35). Immediately after the Allied Forces established control over German Kamerun, the estates and possessions of the Germans were confiscated and turned over to the Custodian of Enemy Property appointed following the Nigerian Public Custodian Ordinance of 1916.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, a public custodian was appointed in 1916 to manage all such property in co-operation with a Clearing Office. These measures were at first confined to Nigeria but with the defeat of Germany, and after the Anglo-French partition of the Cameroons, they were extended to the British Southern Cameroons that was incorporated into Nigeria. Concerning the German plantations, there were suggestions during the war that the interest of the inhabitants would be served if the plantations were divided 'into small holdings, to be leased to the natives of the country'. However, this did not impress the Lieutenant Governor of Southern Nigeria who felt that it was 'impracticable to split the plantations into small plots for native owners' because they had neither the skill nor the capital to maintain them at the efficient standard left by the Germans. In the midst of these reflections, the plantations during the war were managed by British military officers until they were vested in the Custody of Enemy Property (Aka 2002:35).

By extension, Articles 120 and 257 respectively of the Versailles Peace Treaty with Germany regulated the fate of ex-enemy property by placing it under the authority of the Mandated Power (in this case Britain). With this in view, Proclamation 25 of 6 March 1920 empowered the Governor of Nigeria to administer the parts of Kamerun under British protection, and to place all property, rights and interests in the British sphere of the Cameroons belonging to any German national under the Custodian. By proclamation 28 of 9 March 1921, a German Liquidation Fund was opened at the level of the Custodian in which all moneys belonging to German nationals was to be credited.<sup>7</sup> These measures dispossessed the Germans in the territory but the British administering authority did not exploit the opportunity to initiate alternative strategies that could sustainably develop the plantations, as was the case in the pre-war years. This difficulty introduced new considerations in the control and management of the plantations. It was in this opportunistic context that the Germans once again emerged and re-appropriated the plantation economy that had been lost as a result of the First World War and the post-war settlements.

### **German Economic Resurgence, 1924–46**

The British management of the plantations remained in force until 1922 when the League of Nations Mandate was put in place and the British decided that it would be in the best interest of the territory and its inhabitants to turn the plantations over to private European concerns. The Lieutenant Governor of the Southern Provinces of Nigeria, H.C. Moorhouse, justified the decision by arguing that 'the future prosperity of the Victoria Division depended on the fate of the plantations. Therefore, the plantations should be taken over by

European and American companies, which alone have the sufficient capital and experience to maintain them at their past high level of efficiency' (Gardinier 1967:548). The British recognized the land sales made by the German Government as conferring rights similar to freehold under English law, and ruled out the idea of returning the plantations to the Germans. This was in spite of German nationalist and pro-nationalists' active campaigns for the return of their colonies.

The British administering authority, through Proclamation no. 38 of 10 October 1922, directed the Public Custodian of Enemy Property to sell the estates, but the ex-enemy – the Germans – were debarred from the scheme. The first auction of the plantations was conducted in London on 11 and 12 October 1922 with most of the estates in the Bakweri region. Few of the estates were sold.<sup>8</sup> The first attempt to sell the plantations was, in the main, fruitless and only a small number of lots were sold. Generally, the London merchants proved indifferent even to favourable conditions of sale that excluded German nationals. Most of the potential buyers were unwilling to put up the large sums of money needed both for initial purchase and for further development of the plantations. Besides, some of the plantations were scarred by the 1922 Mount Fako volcanic eruption and there was lack of clarity about the security of title and uncertainty about the future of the Mandate. In such unyielding circumstances, a second auction was organized in London from 24 to 25 November 1924 with restrictions against German former planters removed (Le Vine 1971:12).<sup>9</sup> Most of the former owners were therefore able to buy back their plantations through the assistance of their home governments<sup>10</sup> and a London estate agent who actually acted as agent for the former German owners (Ngoh 1996:180). At the closure of the second sale, more than 207,000 of the 264,000 acres that had once been in German hands were repurchased by them. The remainder went to British, Dutch and Swiss firms. The auction realized 224,670 pounds, and the actual transfer of the estates to their owners was fixed for March 1925.<sup>11</sup>

By 1926, when all but eleven of the plantations had been sold, a net sum of 524,047 pounds was realized. The proceeds from the sale of the plantations were not used either as compensation to the natural owners of the land, or to promote the economic and social progress of the Southern Cameroons. Instead, they were paid to the British government through the controller of Enemy Debts, London (*ibid.*:37). After most of the plantations in the Southern Cameroons were repurchased by their former German owners, Germans began to return to the territory in increasing numbers and without any restrictions. In 1922, there was a total of forty-one Europeans, in the territory. By 1939, the number of Europeans had increased to 408, of whom 253 were

Germans. While the number of European businessmen increased, that of the colonial administrators decreased. In 1922, there were thirty-two colonial officers and only eleven in 1939 (Epale 1985:78). According to Gardinier, 'in 1926, 136 of the 219 Europeans in the Cameroons Province were Germans, with only 71 British. In 1938, the figures included 265 Germans, 74 British, 27 Dutch, 23 Swiss, 12 Italians, and 6 Americans in a total of 436 Europeans'. He adds that a survey of plantation owners in 1936 showed that the Germans owned 293,678 acres, the British 19,053 and the Swiss 263. The Germans did not only have numerical strength, but also displayed technical proficiency in agricultural management. German managers and technicians were able to have the plantations operating at pre-war capacity within two years of their return. They also expanded their operations and enlarged the port facilities at Tiko and Victoria (Gardinier 1967:549). A new wharf for loading bananas directly onto ocean-bound steamers was constructed. The Germans also constructed a number of relatively clean and comfortable workers' camps, numerous shops, warehouses and office buildings (Fanso 1989b).

The impact of the re-appropriation of the plantations was quickly noticed at the level of employment. Employment of indigenes and other Africans rose from 11,000 in 1924 to 13,500 in 1928, 15,000 in 1935 and 25,000 in 1938 (*ibid.*:87). As edifying as this economic revival seemed, it was a paradox of its substance and had implications for the lives of the lumpenproletariat who provided the much required labour force. Gardinier notes with disgust that 'despite the boom in plantation operations, the territory and its African inhabitants derived but a small share of the proceeds'. Much of the profits of the plantations went to the Europeans. The League of Nations Permanent Mandate Commission (PMC) was informed in 1936 of the gross inequality in wealth distribution in which 95 per cent of the profits from the trade in bananas, the territory's chief export, went to Europeans. The PMC held firmly that the Africans were not sharing in the increasing prosperity of the territory but the British replied that 'the question of the natives getting the full benefit of trade revivals is one of economics and it is difficult to see what useful measure the administration could take to ensure it' (Gardinier 1967:550).

The unequal distribution of profits could be understood by the German system of paying African employees and their economic protectionist practice. Due to restrictive monetary policies that kept the Germans in Cameroon extremely short of cash with which to pay their African employees, German and European planters resorted to the system that had been employed prior to the outbreak of First World War. The system comprised paying Africans in kind rather than in cash. The system was perfected with the introduction of a 'trust book' that enabled African employees to live on credit. It was a

rather vicious practice in which a large proportion of the employees' earnings was paid to them in the form of credit notes negotiable only in the stores of the employing company, and on (edible European) goods imported from Germany. In the majority of cases, Africans were employed to work for ten hours a day on wages below five pence.<sup>12</sup> Wages were strictly defined by a European protectionist practice spearheaded by German planters.

Within the Mandate period, European planters re-established a powerful planters' association that was a replica of the one during the period of German administration. Its principal objective was to protect the interests of European plantation owners against any government policies that were not compatible with those interests. The planters' association became a 'state within a state' because of its powerful influence in shaping government politics. The plantation owners were therefore able to fix the wages of their African employees at rates that brought high profits and without any concern for the interest of the Africans (*ibid.*). There is no gainsaying that the return and revival of the plantations by the Germans made the British Southern Cameroons a *de jure* British administering territory but a *de facto* German colonial economy. This was very much evident in the statistics in the import-export trade sector. In 1931 and 1936, for example, imports from Germany accounted, respectively, for 58.55 and 52.41 per cent of the total. The corresponding volume of exports showed a similar trend, with 70.07 per cent in 1931, 79.52 per cent in 1936, and as high as 81.88 per cent in 1938. Meanwhile, the largest amount of imports from Britain in 1931 was only 22.55 per cent while the volume of exports was recorded in 1936 as being 7.29 per cent<sup>13</sup> Dekorne underlines the extent to which the British Southern Cameroons economy was inclined towards Germany by stating that 'During [the period 1927–33], the two ports of Victoria and Tiko in British Cameroons sent 16,387 pounds of exports to the United Kingdom and seven times that amount (114,966 pounds) to Germany' (DeKorne 2012:34-5). She mentions that

Germany supplied the British Cameroons with far greater quantities of salt, apparel, implements and tools, iron and steel manufactures, rice [...], kerosene, fish, cotton piece-goods, bags and sacks, and cement than the United Kingdom did. The only goods that the British Cameroons imported in greater quantities from the United Kingdom than from Germany were cigars and cigarettes. This general trend held true throughout the 1930s (*ibid.*:35).

Commenting on the inordinate and auspicious German economic control, Aka remarks that 'in effect Britain, owned the cow and Germany milked it. In other words, although the Southern Cameroons was a British colony, it was, for all practical purposes, an economic territory of Germany' (Aka 2002:37). To Aka, this situation appears to be the only striking example in

West Africa, of imperialism without a colony; a situation in which one nation exercises control over the economy of another nation or territory but without exercising overt political control.

A detailed investigation is necessary to fully understand the putative reasons for German economic control in the British-administered territory of Southern Cameroons. It is probable, however, that the free-handed manner with which the Germans controlled the British Southern Cameroons' economy could be explained by the perception and approach of the Allied and Associated Powers to Germany shortly before and after it gained admission into the League of Nations in 1926. The indictment of Germany for the reprehensible aspects of its colonial administration were easily and quickly forgotten. When Germany was admitted into the League of Nations in 1926, restrictions were no longer placed on German citizens. The Allied and Associated Powers were under the illusion that Germany had been disciplined by its defeat in the war; they had no assurances that it would modify its system of colonial administration in the best interest of the inhabitants of the respective colonies.<sup>14</sup> More specifically, the German economic predominance could be analysed from the general British open door economic culture in Southern Cameroons which gave expatriate commercial firms latitude to compete with British commercial firms (Takor 2015:13). It could also be attributed to one catch phrase, 'the British disinterest of Cameroon'. This disinterest is evident in the unequal partition of the territory in 1916 and 1919. Britain took barely a fifth of the territory against the four-fifths acquired by France. The British disinterest in Cameroon, influenced partly by its lack of administrative personnel, could be extrapolated from the League's 1922 Report on British Cameroons, which noted:

Nigeria was already more short-handed than it had ever been, that it was called upon to include in its charge, an additional area amounting to some 33,750 square miles in extent, carrying a population the same as that of the Colony or Protectorate of Sierra Leone and is rather larger than that of Ireland.<sup>15</sup>

British disinterest in the Cameroons might also have been due to the fear that Germany would reclaim Cameroon, and that investments in it would then be seen as 'preposterous spending and possibly wasting British tax payers money and talent' (Kale 1967:13). Regardless of the perspective adopted on British economic performance in the Cameroons during the Mandate period, it is evident that there was an economic asymmetry in favour of Germany. This situation was reversed by the new spate of developments related to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.

### **Forestallment of German Control of the Southern Cameroons' Economy, 1939–46**

The fate of the British administration in Southern Cameroons, especially with regards to the German plantations, came under strategic consideration in September 1939. Fifty-six German divisions attacked Poland, triggering the Second World War. The Second World War, as Cornwell, notes was 'Hitler's war. He planned it, began it, and ultimately lost it' (1985:56). Britain entered the war to retaliate against German invasion of Poland. It ruptured Anglo-German diplomatic relations, which had been deteriorating since Germany joined the League of Nations in 1926, and raised the issue of its former colonies in Africa. Hitler's ascent to power in 1933 as German Chancellor and his resolve to reclaim the lost German colonies was a fundamental stage towards the revision of Anglo-German relations in Cameroon. Germany's determination that the restoration of equality with other European imperial powers could only come through reacquiring its former colonies made the crack in Anglo-German economic relations in Southern Cameroons inevitable.<sup>16</sup> The loss of the British Far Eastern colonies in the initial stages of the war to the Axis powers had temporarily deprived its of important sources of certain raw materials such as rubber. This invariably heightened British interest in the strategic importance of Southern Cameroons as an alternative source of supply. It was therefore not surprising that at the start of the Second World War, the German estates in Cameroon were again expropriated by the Custodian of Enemy Property. A decision was reached once more as how to dispose of the properties (Konings 1996:202).

The British subsequently settled on the decision not to return the plantations to the Germans in the event of Germany defeat. The Axis Powers were eventually defeated in Europe and Asia, following the devastating United States twin-bombing of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. The end of the war introduced a new dilemma vis-à-vis the ownership and management of the German plantations. There was an indigenous claim by the Bakweri Land committee, as Konings pointed out:

The educated Bakweri elite, organised in the so-called Bakweri Land Committee, immediately began agitating for the retrieval of its ancestral lands. It sent several petitions, first to the British Crown, and subsequently to the United Nations, as Britain had assumed responsibility for administration of the territory under United Nations Trusteeship after the war (*ibid.*).

Important as this private or local interest was, it left as many unanswered questions as Jones posits:

The Resident of the Southern Cameroons, the official head of British administration in the territory, suggested that for the time being, the plantations be put on their feet to produce raw materials for the war effort. It was also suggested that for about ten to twenty years after the war, some of the plantations be formed into cooperatives to be financed by the government and managed by Africans or some West Indians trained in the United Kingdom and that the plantations might also be a good means of settling some of the demobilized soldiers. Then it was suggested, as a long-term policy, that all the plantations be converted into a wholesale cooperative society.<sup>17</sup>

By 1939 the estates, with one exception, were all in the hands either of the German incorporated companies or German individual owners and great development had taken place in the cultivation of bananas. On the conclusion of the Second World War, it was the desire of the Nigerian government that the properties of former German business operators should not revert to private ownership but that they should be held and administered for the use and common benefit of its inhabitants.<sup>18</sup> This new consideration was certainly motivated by the general economic policy and objectives of the British Administering Authority at the beginning of the UN Trusteeship to do everything that was 'deemed expedient in the interest of the economic advancement of the inhabitants'. In more practical terms, the Land and Native Rights Ordinance which had been applied to the Cameroons Province since shortly after World War I stated that all lands were declared to be native lands under the control of the Governor, to be held and administered for the use and common benefit of the natives.<sup>19</sup> The British Administering Authority also, though belatedly, observed that there were no non-indigenous groups, which enjoyed a special position in the economy of the territory.<sup>20</sup> It also realized the need to raise the general standard of living while retaining equality of opportunity in the interest of the indigenous producer. It was also to retain the desirable features of control schemes, namely stable prices and orderly marketing, whilst giving the greatest scope, compatible with the realization of these objectives, to free enterprise. The declared policy was to effect a gradual taking-over by the indigenous inhabitants of the functions of non-indigenous inhabitants in the economy of the territory.<sup>21</sup>

It was in this setting that the British Trusteeship Authority announced, in November 1946, that the plantations would be leased to a newly established statutory corporation, the Cameroons Development Corporation (CDC).<sup>22</sup> This corporation came into being with the passage of two ordinances in December 1946. The first of these, the Ex-Enemy Lands (Cameroons) Ordinance No. 38 (1946), declared the plantation lands, 'native lands' to be held in trust for the common benefit of all the inhabitants of the territory, and

the second ordinance, the Cameroons Development Corporation Ordinance No. 39 (1946), provided for the setting up of the Corporation (Konings 1996:202–3). The formation of the CDC and its responsibility to bring economic and social change in the interest of the inhabitants naturally dislocated the imperial grip that Germany enjoyed in British Southern Cameroons in the period under the League of Nations Mandate.

### **Conclusion**

In the second half of the nineteenth century, notably from the 1860s to 1884, the Germans took advantage of British lukewarm and open door economic diplomacy to surreptitiously establish their economic presence in Cameroon. This was done under the courtesy of the Carl Woermann and later Jantzen und Thormählen trading firms. Having gained commercial control of the territory as a protectorate after the Germano-Cameroons annexation treaty of 1884, the Germans expanded their economic interest by investing sumptuous capital, especially in the development of plantations. This article examined the context in which the economy of British Southern Cameroons was handed to the Germans. It maintains that the extension of the First World War to the German protectorate in Cameroon and the eventual defeat of the Germans by the Allied Forces brought an abrupt halt to German economic hegemony in Cameroon. At the same time, the post-war settlements with Germany and the dire need to receive reparations from the latter gave the British Administering Authority the latitude to decide on the fate of the German economy, particularly the control of the plantations. It has been shown that during the course of the war, the British Administering Authority did not deem it practicable to split the plantations into small plots for native owners because they had neither the skill nor the capital to maintain them at the efficient standard left by the Germans. In the absence of immediate substitutes for the German planters, the plantations during the war were unsuccessfully managed by British military officers until they were vested in the Custody of Enemy Property. Inappropriate technical knowledge, insufficient funds and negligence on the part of the British certainly explains why the plantations became derelict.

The article mainly reveals that, concerned with the deplorable state and unable to develop and control the plantations at their pre-war levels, the British decided to sell the estates with an initial caution not to extend the bid to the German planters. This move was geared at completely obliterating the German economic presence in British Southern Cameroons. However, the plans to completely de-Germanize the plantations did not fully materialize as the first auction sale of 1922 did not meet the anticipated target. The article demonstrates therefore, that Germany took advantage of the unrestricted

second London auction in November 1924 to re-appropriate the plantations and by extension the economy Germany had been dispossessed of as a result of the First World War. From 1924 to 1940 when the Germans were interned in Cameroon during the Second World War, the Germans enjoyed comfortable control of the economy. The article has argued that the presence of German planters from 1924 to the end of the Second World War in 1945 gave them the opportunity to establish unparalleled strategic economic dominance in British Southern Cameroons. This was fully expressed in the teeming numbers of German investors, their domination in the import and export trade and contributions to public infrastructural developments like the Tiko and Victoria wharves. This German economic resurgence could be partly attributed to the enabling context created by the gradual but steady British change of attitude from apathy to sympathy for the defeated powers.

The British Administering Authority clearly exploited the opportunity of the Second World War to forestall German economic resurgence. They considered that Germany had abused their magnanimity by once again destabilizing world peace and decided to frustrate the German planters by re-appropriating as Ex-Enemy Lands and federating the plantations into the Cameroons Development Corporation (CDC) in 1946. The creation of the CDC came with new a consideration, which was that German properties should not revert to private ownership but that they should be held and administered for the use and common benefit of the inhabitants of the British Cameroons. This new consideration was certainly motivated by the general economic policy and objectives of the British Administering Authority at the beginning of the UN Trusteeship to do everything that was 'deemed expedient' in the interest of the economic advancement of the inhabitants.

## Notes

1. British Southern Cameroons here refers to the south-western part of the narrow strip of territory occupied and controlled by the British, provisionally between 1916 and 1922 and as a Mandate and later Trust territory from 1922 to 1945 and from 1946 to 1961, respectively. Within these periods, the territory was administered as an integral part (Southern Province and then Eastern Region) of British Nigeria. The territory was roughly coterminous with the Victoria, Ossidenge and Bamenda *Bezirker* or Districts of the German colonial administration.
2. NAB, file AB89, Cameroons under United Kingdom Administration, Report for the year 1958 (Buea, 1959), 125, para. 439.
3. *Ibid.* Para. 438.
4. N.A.B, Ce/1920/2, Ossidenge Divisional Annual Report, Buea, 1916.
5. *Ibid.*
6. National Archives Ibadan, CSO 26/1, 01857, Questions of Sale of Cameroons Plantations, Vol. 1.

7. *Ibid.*
8. National Archives Ibadan, CSO 26/1, 01435, Disposal of German Properties in the Cameroons, Vol. 5.
9. Also see National Archives Ibadan, CSO 26/1, 01435, Disposal of German Properties in the Cameroons, Vol. 5.
10. LONJ 1926 cited in Aka 2002.
11. *Ibid.*
12. St. Major G. Orde Browne, 'Labour conditions in West Africa' (Great Britain HMSO. Cmd 6277, 1941), 143.
13. LON *Annual Report* 1938, 42-43.
14. LNOJ 1926, para. 1531-1532.
15. Great Britain, Colonial Office Report 1922, 5.
16. For more on Germany's claims to colonies see Bullock, A. ed. (1939), *Germany's Colonial Demands*, London: Oxford University Press.
17. Creech Jones, 'The British Cameroons, Labour Party Advisory committee on Imperial Questions', October 1944, 5.
18. NAB, file AB89, Cameroons under United Kingdom Administration, Report for the year 1958 (Buea, 1959), 125, para. 441.
19. NAB, file AB78, Cameroons under United Kingdom Administration, Report for the year 1947 (Buea, 1948), 34, para.43
20. *Ibid.* Para. 42.
21. *Ibid.* Para. 43.
22. This was certainly an initial action to the Trusteeship Agreement on Cameroons under United Kingdom Trusteeship especially the eighth, ninth and tenth articles that placed premium on the economic and social plights of the inhabitants. See UN, Treaty Series No. 20 (1947), Cameroons under United Kingdom Trusteeship. Text of Trusteeship Agreements as approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations (New York 13th December 1946).

## References

- Aka, A.E., 2002, *The British Southern Cameroons 1922-1961: a study in colonialism and underdevelopment*, Platville and Madison: Nkemnji Global Tech.
- Ardener, E., 1996, *Kingdom on Mount Cameroon: studies in the history of the Cameroon coast, 1500-1970*, Oxford: Berghan Books.
- Ardener, S.G., 1967, *Eye Witnesses to the Annexation of Cameroon 1883-1887*, Buea: Ministry of Primary Education and West Cameroons Antiquities Commission.
- Cornwell, R.D., 1985, *World History in the Twentieth Century*, New edition, Hallow and Essex: Longman.
- DeKorne, H., 2012, 'The Builders of Identity: Education, Language, and the Elites of Cameroon, 1916-1961', BA with Departmental Honours in History, Wesleyan University-Connecticut.

- Elango, L.Z., 1987, 'Trade and diplomacy on the Cameroon coast in the nineteenth century, 1833-1879: the case of Bimbia', in Njeuma, M.Z., *Introduction to the History of Cameroon in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, London: Macmillan Publishers.
- Epale, S.J., 1985, *Plantations and Development in Western Cameroon 1885-1975: a study in agrarian capitalism*, New York: Vantage Press.
- Eyongetah, T., Brian, R. and Palmer, R., 1987, *A History of the Cameroon*, New Edition, London: Longman.
- Fanso, V.G., 1989a, 'Trade and supremacy on the Cameroon coast, 1879-1887', in Njeuma, M.Z., *Introduction to the History of Cameroon in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, London: Macmillan Publishers.
- Fanso, V.G., 1989b, *Cameroon History for Secondary schools and Colleges Vol. 1: from Prehistoric times to the nineteenth century*, London: Macmillan Publishers.
- Gardinier, D.E., 1967, 'The British in the Cameroons, 1919-1939', in Gifford, P. and Louis, W.R., eds, *Britain and Germany in Africa: Imperial Rivalry and Colonial rule*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Hopkins, A.G., 1973, *An Economic History of West Africa*, London: Longman, 1973.
- Kale, P.M., 1967, *Political Evolution in the Cameroons*, Buea: Government Printers.
- Konings, P., 1996, 'Privatisation of agro-industrial parastatals and Anglophone opposition in Cameroon', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 34 (3): 199-217.
- Le Vine, V.T., 1971, *The Cameroon Federal Republic*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Ngoh, V.J., 1996, *History of Cameroon since 1800*, Limbe: Preprint.
- Rudin, H.H., 1938, *Germans in the Cameroons 1884-1914: a case study in modern imperialism*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Takor, K.N., 2015, 'British firms on the Cameroons coast 1916-1961: an assessment of the open door policy', *Pantikar Journal of History* 2 (1) August, 1-23.
- Tatah, S.N. 1986, 'Trade in Southern Cameroons under British Administration 1916-1945', post graduate Diploma in History, Department of History, University of Yaoundé.