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# THE GENDARMERIE, (IN-)SECURITY AND POPULAR REACTION IN WEST CAMEROON, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF CAMEROON 1961–1964

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**Abstract:** The presence and activities of the Gendarmerie is as old as French influence in Africa. Since the re-birth of multi-party politics during the 1990s in Cameroon, the military crackdown in erstwhile West Cameroon rekindled old memories of Gendarmerie brutality and popular reaction. As a paramilitary force, it was charged with the provision of security but instead instilled fear and insecurity in the West Cameroon state. This article examines the activities of the Gendarmerie and pays close attention to the tradition and origin of this paramilitary force in West Cameroon. What circumstances led to the introduction of the Gendarmerie in West Cameroon? What was the strength of the West Cameroon security forces before the introduction of the Gendarmerie in 1961? In providing answers to these questions we consulted documents from the National Archives Buea in Cameroon and secondary sources from libraries. These sources reveal that the Gendarmerie force was abhorred by many West Cameroonians. This was because of the brutality of Gendarmes on the civilian population, police and custom officers. The paper also contends that, although the Gendarmerie corps was out to ensure peace and security, it became more or less an insecure force to property and the lives of the West Cameroonian population, as well as to the police and custom officials in West Cameroon.

**Keywords:** *Security, Insecurity, Gendarmerie, Cameroon, West Cameroon*

## Introduction

The democratic process in Africa South of the Sahara since the 1990s has been well documented, including the challenges by African and Western scholars. In Cameroon during the early 1990s, the democratic and multiparty transition witnessed violence and the brutal treatment of the civilian population by the men in uniform. Many people questioned the use of the Gendarmes to gag pro-democratic expressions by the discontented masses. Apart from brutality activities, the gendarmes also intensified the collection of bribes from helpless citizens on the highways because they did not provide documents like the national identity card, which is a compulsory document for every Cameroonian citizen.

Cameroon like other African countries is a colonial construct. The country was colonised by Germany in July 1884. During the First World War the Germans were elbowed out of the territory and in 1916 the territory was provisionally partitioned between France and Britain. Britain took 1/5 and France took 4/5. While France administered her portion as part of French Equatorial Africa, Britain administered her own section as an appendage of the Federation of Nigeria. In 1922 these portions of Cameroon, taken over by Britain and France, became Mandatory Territories under the supervision of the League of Nations. In 1946, one year after the end of the Second World War, the British and French spheres of Cameroon became Trust Territories under the newly formed United Nations Organisation (UNO). According to Article 76 (B) of the UNO Charter, these two administering authorities were to prepare the people of the territory towards self-government and independence (Fanso 1989). This, together with other factors that emanated from the Second World War, expedited the move towards independence and or self-government. While French Cameroon obtained her independence on 1 January 1960 and Nigeria on 1 October 1960, the British Southern Cameroons which had been administered from the Federation of Nigeria since 1922 decided in a plebiscite on 11 February 1961 to reunite with the Republic of Cameroon on 1 October of the same year (Ngho 1996). From 1961 to 1972, the English-speaking component of the federation was known as West Cameroon and the French component re-baptised as East Cameroon.

Shortly after the reunification of Cameroon a pseudo-military force, the Gendarmerie, which had been in operation in East Cameroon prior to the reunification, was quartered in all administrative divisions of West Cameroon. The object was, like that of the police, to maintain safety and security of the state and her citizens. The Gendarmerie was a federal security force and in the 1960s this force caused panic and fighting amongst West Cameroonians, who had until then been used to the British and Nigerian police force (Kah 2016). To that effect, there was a litany of complaints from all administrative divisions of West Cameroon against this force.<sup>1</sup> In spite of this, no study has been undertaken detailing the activities and atrocities of the Gendarmes in the political and security history of West Cameroon in particular and Cameroon history in general. Using mostly archival data gathered from the Buea National Archives, Cameroon, this article is a contribution to the historiography of Cameroon. The essay begins in 1961, because the Decree instituting the Gendarmerie in West Cameroon was signed that year. It was also in this year that the State of West Cameroon came into being after reunification with the Republic of Cameroon. West Cameroon, formerly known as British Southern Cameroons, was made up of six administrative divisions, namely Bamenda, Wum, Nkambe, Mamfe, Victoria, and Kumba.<sup>2</sup> In 1964 most of the complaints concerning the atrocities of the Gendarmes had petered out but they resurfaced in 1990 following the reintroduction of multiparty politics in Cameroon through the launching of the Social Democratic Front (SDF) party on 26 May 1990.

In this article we analyse the dynamics, which were responsible for the introduction of the Gendarmes into the West Cameroon state after reunification. In the second section we interrogate the overall strength of the West Cameroon security forces before the introduction of the Gendarmerie in order to appreciate the level of security and/or insecurity in the territory. In the third part, the article examines the misdemeanours of the Gendarmes as they went about their activities in West Cameroon. The fourth section focuses on popular reaction towards the Gendarmerie, specifically by the civilians, police and custom officers, and the consequences.

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1 Letter No 1566/52 A, 5 March 1962. From the Federal Minister of Armed Forces to the Federal Inspector of Administration, National Archives Buea, henceforth cited as NAB.

2 File Vc/b (1962)2, constitutional talks in Southern Cameroons, NAB.

## **The State of Security in West Cameroon before the Introduction of the Gendarmerie**

When the Cameroons under the British and French Trusteeship reunited on 1 October 1961 to become the Federal Republic of Cameroon, Article 5 of the Federal constitution supported the extension of the Gendarmes to West Cameroon, which had now become a national force in the Federation. This had been deliberated and was agreed upon in the Federal constitutional discussions at Foumban in July 1961. This conference included issues on internal and external security among federal responsibilities (Ngoh 1999). At Foumban, the Southern Cameroons Attorney General warned the Buea delegation of the dangers of federal domination in security matters especially areas with regards to federal incorporation of all police powers.<sup>3</sup> On matters of security and competence, John Ngu Foncha intimated that “The drawing up of this constitution is [was] directly the concern of Cameroonians and it will be foolish to look to anyone else for help” (Ngoh 1999). That notwithstanding, the constitutionality of Gendarmes in West Cameroon cannot be over emphasised. It was in the know of the politicians and “structures such as the security forces [gendarmes] exist to carry out necessary functions which could be for the good of the whole society” (Bassey 2002: 33), even if in the long run these activities turn out to be the other way around and the more so as it was necessary to harmonise structures in the two federated states (Bassey 2002: 35).

The introduction of Gendarmes in West Cameroon was a step towards harmonising federal structures in Cameroon. The first President of the Federal Republic of Cameroon, Ahmadu Ahidjo, had started off by dividing the Federal Republic of Cameroon into six administrative inspectorates manned by Inspectors of Administration (Johnson 1970). The state of West Cameroon was only one of the six inspectorates and was headed by Jean Claude Ngoh. His powers were plenary in character and he reported directly to Ahidjo. The application of Decree No. 61-DF-15 of 20 October 1961, which carved out the six administrative inspectorates, virtually metamorphosed West Cameroon into an administrative region (Ngoh 1999). More pressing was the security situation in West Cameroon on the eve of

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3 File Vc/b (1962)2, constitutional talks in Southern Cameroons, NAB.

reunification with French Cameroon, especially given that Nigeria was scheduled to gain independence by 1 October 1960.<sup>4</sup> The challenge was therefore that once Nigeria received its independence, British Southern Cameroons would revert to a Trusteeship status before deciding their future in a plebiscite.

The introduction of the Gendarmerie in West Cameroon aroused the curiosity of the territory's politicians. One area of grave concern for Southern Cameroons, following discussions about reunification with the Cameroun Republic, was the question of general security when the British withdrew their forces from the territory on 1 October 1961 after the plebiscite of 11 February 1961. Following these security rearrangements, the status and functions of the West Cameroon Police was to be revised in order to suit this new dispensation. The dispensation also witnessed the return of Southern Cameroonians serving in Nigeria and other countries. The deployment of the Gendarmerie force from East Cameroon into West Cameroon in 1961 was justified with the argument that the British forces were on the verge of departure from the territory since it had voted for reunification with the Cameroun Republic. However after the departure of the British forces, several other options were discussed. Security problems would not have arisen had it been that Southern Cameroons during the plebiscite had opted for integration with Nigeria. If this had been the case, the security matters of the territory would have been as designed by the British. Since the territory voted for reunification with the Cameroun Republic, there arose the issue of blending diverse security cultures and this is what provoked the security problems (Johnson 1970: 205; Milne 1999).

On the burning issue of security for the West Cameroon state, the Cameroon People's National Convention (CNPC) held a different view. During a conference in Mamfe in 1960, the party recommended that Nigerian troops in the Southern Cameroons should be retained even after the independence of Nigeria on 1 October 1960.<sup>5</sup> Other views on the same issue were expressed by the Kamerun National

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4 Representation of His Excellency, The President of the Republic of Cameroon by West Cameroon Government Requesting the Rectification of certain matters Tending to Hinder the Smooth and Effective Functioning of the Federal Republic, Top Secret NO 323/CFI/CAB/PR,/NAB.

5 Representation of His Excellency, The President of the Republic of Cameroon by West Cameroon Government Requesting the Rectification of certain matters Tending to

Democratic Party (KNDP) and the CPNC. They variously called for British assistance to ensure that security was not at risk during the transition period. Her Majesty's government was requested to remain in the Southern Cameroons for a few more months to undertake a rapid training and equipping of a military force that would provide security for the Southern Cameroons in the future.<sup>6</sup>

The request by the political forces of British Southern Cameroons had little meaning after the plebiscite results showed that a majority of Southern Cameroonians had voted in favour of reunification with the Cameroun Republic and not for integration with Nigeria. The British wish had been for Southern Cameroons to vote for integration with the Federal Republic of Nigeria. When the reality was the contrary; they left the territory to sort out its security problems (Johnson 1970). With reunification a forgone conclusion, the worrying security demands between East and West Cameroon culminated in the Tripartite Talks of August 1961 in Yaoundé. At the end of the talks, decisions concerning the maintenance of Public Security and law and order were taken so that there should be no lack of military security following the withdrawal of British forces from the Southern Cameroons on 1 October 1961.<sup>7</sup>

There were also heated debates on the status and functions of the Southern Cameroons Police if the Gendarmes were to be stationed in West Cameroon. Ordinary people expressed their concern with the deployment of the Gendarmerie and the confusion this would create in their functions vis-à-vis those of the Southern Cameroons Police force. These were worries that would not have arisen if the people had voted for integration with the Federation of Nigeria. Members of the CPNC opposition party in parliament, like Ajebe Sone from the Kumba East constituency, proposed that the Southern Cameroons Police force should work with the Gendarmerie to control the excesses of the latter because rumour had it that some of them were involved in "terrorist" activities in the Cameroun Republic.<sup>8</sup> To clarify the concerns of the

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Hinder the Smooth and Effective Functioning of the Federal Republic, Top Secret NO 323/CFI/CAB/PR,/NAB.

6 Federal Republic of Cameroon, Top Secret NO 323/CFI/CAB/PR,/NAB.

7 Pc/i/1964 Petitions and Complaints against the activities of Gendarmes in West Cameroon.

8 Confidential letter from the District Officer Nkambe to the Federal Inspector of Administration, Buea, 2 October 1962, NAB.

Premier J. N. Foncha and the Minister of Social Services, A. N. Jua, dispelled a rumour that the Southern Cameroons Police force would become an ordinary Native Authority or a gang of messengers when the Gendarmes would be sent to West Cameroon after reunification. Hon. Jua quoted Article 18 of the Federal Constitution to brace his argument. The article stated that if any law was passed in the Federation, which was considered by members of any one state to be contrary to their own constitution, those members could vote against it. He argued that if this happened, the law would not go through.<sup>9</sup>

In citing article 18 of the Federal Constitution, Hon. Jua drew attention to the fact that if a law was subsequently passed to denigrate the Southern Cameroons Police force in a reunited Cameroon, the parliamentarians from the territory to the federal assembly would vote against it and block the reform. These arguments notwithstanding, the status of the Police force was still to be clearly defined because at reunification the Police and Gendarmerie were to function in the state of West Cameroon and this would create some problems. Foncha, leader of the KNDP, said that at reunification, the Police force would perform the same functions as they did before reunification but the story turned out to be different because after reunification open clashes were recorded between the Police and Gendarmes in places like Mamfe and other towns of West Cameroon. The Police force, though still very important, has eventually come to play a secondary role to the Gendarmes in the modern Cameroon state.

From the arguments above, it could be suggested that the gravity and intensity of insecurity was given an additional fillip in the Southern Cameroons following the withdrawal of the Nigerian and British forces that had been serving in the territory. The forces that remained in West Cameroon were pitifully small, at least to meet the West Cameroon security needs. This in effect justified the Federal governments' view that Gendarmes were needed in West Cameroon, although West Cameroonians were quite sceptical about the presence of Gendarmes in their territory. Some even warned of the dangers in seeing the Gendarmes as "armies of occupation" should the state be flooded with troops from the East (Johnson 1970), in reference to East Cameroon. The fears were due to the fact the people were not used to

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9 Confidential letter from the District Officer Nkambe to the Federal Inspector of Administration, Buea, 2n October 1962, NAB.



Gendarmes, which was an essentially a para-military force found only in Francophone Africa.

Notwithstanding the fears of West Cameroonians and doubts raised by West Cameroonian politicians, 400 Gendarmes were sent from East Cameroon to West Cameroon following reunification on 1 October 1961 and according to Article 5 of the Federal Constitution, the Gendarmerie in West Cameroon came under the federal authorities and not under the state authorities of West Cameroon. As a matter of fact, the Gendarmerie in West Cameroon was introduced because the British and Nigerian police forces had been withdrawn and also because of the urgent need to harmonise the federal structures.

### **The Gendarmerie and Performance in West Cameroon, 1961–1964**

No sooner had the Gendarmerie entered West Cameroon than the West Cameroonian authorities started questioning the structure, which would accommodate this force. In line with this, a security meeting was held in Buea on 25 January 1962. In the meeting it was suggested that the West Cameroon Police Mobile Wing should be merged with the national Gendarmerie platoons in the territory. Admittedly, this was in agreement with the federal constitution, but the suggestion received a sharp and unequivocal negative reply from the West Cameroon Commissioner of Police. In a correspondence to the Prime Minister, the Commissioner of Police, H. M. Ntune, rejected the suggestion and contended that the Mobile Wing had not failed in its responsibilities and so should not be merged with the Gendarmerie. Instead, he pointed out that the Gendarmerie, because of their brutal treatment of the population, had become unpopular in West Cameroon at the first instant.<sup>10</sup>

Two issues could be deduced from Ntune's reaction, first, the sowing of the seeds of a struggle for power between the federal and state authorities in the field of the maintenance of law and order. The brutalisation of the population as Ntune suggested gave the first impressions of insecurity and fear caused by the introduction of the

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<sup>10</sup> Pc/i/1964/7, Complaints against Gendarmerie/Military. Confidential Letter from the Consul for the Federation of Nigeria to the Prime Minister, 13 November 1962, NAB; Pc/:/1962/8, Gendarme Relations with West Cameroon Polices, NAB.

Gendarmerie into West Cameroon. The suggestion to merge the West Cameroon Mobile Wing with the national Gendarmerie fell in line with Article 6 of the Federal constitution and if the West Cameroon Police authorities started behaving the way they did, it was but logical that they were criticising the centralised nature of federal constitution established at Foumban. Secondly, the West Cameroon authorities called into question the actual nature of the federation. The behaviour of the Gendarmerie in the territory brought panic to the population in several ways.

The Gendarme officers in West Cameroon were regularly accused of arrogance and brutalising of the people. In some quarters it was argued that:

The gendarmes in West Cameroon behaved with brutality and reckless arrogance as if they were an occupation force in a vanquished territory. The brandishing of weapons, the show of power and the throwing of weight around areas inhabited by the population gave rise to great concern and disquiet.<sup>11</sup>

If these impressions are taken seriously, then the Gendarmerie force introduced into West Cameroon after reunification was more or less an occupation force. Yet, the phrasing “occupation force” seems too heavy to describe the excesses of the Gendarmerie in the state of West Cameroon. This is because the Gendarmes were constitutionally supposed to be sent to maintain law and order in West Cameroon. The extent to which this para-military force fulfilled its role can also be judged from the reaction of the population it was to protect including their property.

The activities of Gendarmes continued to raise concerns and fears amongst West Cameroonians. In one instance, the Gendarmes were accused of harassing the population of Nkambe Division over private debts.<sup>12</sup> In another case, they were accused of detaining and flogging people and also extorting money from them.<sup>13</sup> Some of these

11 Confidential Letter from J. N. Foncha to the Minister of Armed Forces, PMO 330/s.1/24 January 1968; Letter from the Minister of Armed Forces to the Vice President of the Republic, Prime Minister of West Cameroon, no. 38/MINFA/cf/9, NAB.

12 Minutes of a meeting held in Buea on 1 August 1962 concerning the functions of the Gendarmerie in matters of judicial police in West Cameroon, NAB.

13 Pc/i/1964/8, Gendarmerie Relations with Cameroon Police, NAB.

issues cannot be taken at face value. Private debts are debts owed by individuals to other individuals. They are mostly contracted on trust. It becomes a serious issue to say that the Gendarmes harassed people over private debts. At what point in time did such a specific event occur and how much were these debts? Was this an isolated event or it was a regular occurrence? Was the debt reported to the Gendarmes by the person owed? These are questions that need clarification to establish if the Gendarmes were invading people's private spaces.

Other issues were raised against the Gendarmes in West Cameroon. It was for example argued that they harassed Nigerians who settled in West Cameroon. The brutal treatment of Nigerians by the Gendarmes drew an angry protest from the Nigerian consul in Buea. In a confidential correspondence to the Prime Minister of West Cameroon, the consul decried the contemptuous behaviour of the Gendarmerie, stating that it was time the Gendarmes were called to order.<sup>14</sup> This was closely followed by a strongly worded letter from the Prime Minister of West Cameroon, J. N. Foncha, to the Minister of Armed Forces, Sadou Daoudou, in February 1963, which reiterated the point of Gendarmes' brutality.<sup>15</sup>

In reaction to the unruly behaviour of the Gendarmes the Federal Inspector of Administration for West Cameroon, Jean Claude Nghoh, convened a meeting at Buea in August 1962 with the objective of explaining the functions of the national Gendarmerie vis-à-vis the police force of West Cameroon. In this meeting, the Commander of the national Gendarmerie pointed out that the Gendarmerie had not come to substitute the West Cameroon police force, but rather "to ensure a complement for the security of the country." In other words, the Gendarmerie was to act as a supplement to the West Cameroon police.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, in an earlier dispatch, the commandant of the Gendarmerie in Buea explained that the duties of the Gendarmerie in West Cameroon included the search for suspects and subversive documents. This was necessitated by the conviction that subversive elements from East Cameroon had infiltrated West Cameroon, disposed

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14 PC/i/1964, Petitions and complaints against the activities of Gendarmes in West Cameroon 1964, NAB.

15 PC/i/1964, Petitions and complaints against the activities of Gendarmes in West Cameroon 1964, NAB.

16 Ibid.

of their identification papers and mingled with the population of the territory. Such a situation gave an extra dimension to the activities of the Gendarmerie, which formally included the checking of identification papers and tax tickets, the objective of which it was to insure that citizens had paid their taxes.<sup>17</sup>

As to whether what the commander of national Gendarmerie said in the meeting convened by the Inspector of Administration in West Cameroon was ever understood by his boys remains a moot question. The reality is that the Gendarmes continued with their strange behaviour. They were accused of drinking heavily in beer parlours while in uniform and also using official vehicles for private matters.<sup>18</sup> This behaviour was unheard of in the state of West Cameroon, especially within the police force. Despite these complaints, there was no case to show that any Gendarme was called to order because of professional misconduct. Gendarmerie authorities requested that all such complaints be referred to Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon.<sup>19</sup>

Disagreement over these issues came about partly as a result of the tradition of the Gendarmerie in Cameroon. This might be explained by the fact that before re-unification, the Gendarmerie in the Cameroun Republic was used to maintain law and order. In fact, in an annual report of 1956 the French Administering Authority defined the functions of the Gendarmerie as including, among others, “overseeing public security, maintaining order, executing laws” and “handling crimes.”<sup>20</sup> The results were the differences between federal and state authorities in West Cameroon over who should enforce the law and which should prevail, state or federal law. Whatever the case, the Gendarmes in executing their functions in West Cameroon clashed with the police, civilians, customs and landlords. The most outstanding of all these conflicts were their constant clashes with the police, which was disturbing to the public both forces were supposed to protect.

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17 PC/i/1963/7, Gendarmerie Relations with Cameroon Police, NAB.

18 Confidential Letter from the S. S. P. Kumba to the Commissioner of Police, Buea, 29 January 1962, NAB.

19 Confidential c. 205/172, Incident involving Paul Bissiang, Gendarme and P.C. 641 John Ndze Police, 9 February 1963, NAB.

20 From S. N. Ekobena to Federal Inspector of Administration, Buea. 9 September 1963: Incident involving Paul Bissiang, Gendarme and P.C. 641 John Ndze Police, 9 February 1963, NAB.

## Gendarmes versus the West Cameroon Police

Generally, it was assumed that the Gendarmes and the police were charged with the maintenance of law and the execution of order. Unfortunately, “overzealous Gendarmes were often insensitive to the legal or supposed limits of their jurisdiction and thereby occasionally came into conflict with the West Cameroon Police.”<sup>21</sup> On one occasion Gendarmes reportedly forced their way into a West Cameroon jail, guided and guarded by the West Cameroon police, to retrieve one of their suspects. The prisoner was forcibly removed from the jail and allegedly beaten and hospitalised.<sup>22</sup>

In Mamfe Division, one police constable, John Ndze, became a scapegoat of Gendarme extreme brutality. He was handcuffed and beaten by a Gendarme called Paul Bissiang. In fact, according to a confidential Note C. 205/172 “John Ndze was allegedly beaten by Paul Bissiang and hand-cuffed for taking bribe from one passenger in a vehicle to Ekok from Mamfe. This passenger never had a passport and was supposed to be repatriated as tradition demanded. But he was not returned.”<sup>23</sup>

Although the Gendarmes were assumed to be brutish, the case of John Ndze illustrates that they wanted to correct some of the ills of society. John Ndze had allegedly taken a bribe from a passenger and Paul Bissiang corrected him by handcuffing him and getting him beaten up. The two of them had committed errors, given the fact that Ndze had collected a bribe and that Bissiang had beaten him and mistreated him in public. Since two wrongs cannot make a right and since one cannot right a wrong by doing wrong it is fair to say here that Paul Bissiang was wrong to have meted out such punishment to his uniformed colleague. This point was lucidly made in September 1963 by the Senior District Officer for Mamfe, S. N Ekobena, in the following words: “I consider it wrong for the constable [John Ndze] to have been hand-cuffed since a decision had not been made as to

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21 Note from F. N. Ndang, secretary to the Prime Minister in reply to confidential letter from Commissioner of police on Investigation of Traffic Cases and Motor Accidents on Gendarmes, 22 January 1964, NAB.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

whether he was guilty.”<sup>24</sup> It would have been necessary to report to the police authorities to sanction John Ndze rather than disgrace him in public.

The Gendarmerie operated in both rural and urban areas, which further led to conflicts with the West Cameroon Police. Upon its introduction in West Cameroon, the Gendarmerie handled all traffic cases involving both civil and military personnel without consultation with the police. In a correspondence to the Commissioner of Police, the Commander of the Gendarmerie in West Cameroon reiterated the priority of the Gendarmes over the West Cameroon police in traffic cases involving civilian and military personnel. According to the commander, in such cases, “the investigation must be carried out by the Gendarmerie.”<sup>25</sup> He went on to reiterate the prerogative of the Gendarmerie in initiating an inquiry in traffic cases in which only military personnel were involved. As if to buttress this point, the Gendarmes went out of their routine security searches to contravene drivers and collectors but refused to appear in court when they were convoked.<sup>26</sup>

This behaviour of the Gendarmes was an usurpation of the role of the West Cameroon Police over such issues. This point was elucidated by the Commissioner of Police who, in a confidential letter to the Prime Minister, wondered if there were any provisions in the Federal Constitution empowering Gendarmes to investigate traffic cases in West Cameroon, a duty that in his interpretation of the law was strictly that of the West Cameroon Police.<sup>27</sup> In the Commissioner’s view, the laws pertaining to West Cameroon were the responsibility of the police; hence they should investigate any violation of such laws. The interference of the Gendarmes, therefore, in a realm that was believed to be exclusively the preserve of the West Cameroon Police, poisoned the rapport between the two forces and rendered cooperation difficult.<sup>28</sup>

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24 Letter from the Commandant Gendarmerie, Buea, to the Commissioner of Police, No. 921 of 17 August 1962, NAB.

25 Confidential letter from the Commissioner of police to the Secretary of the Prime Minister, West Cameroon, 10 January 1964, NAB.

26 Ibid.

27 Confidential letter from Acting Senior District Officer Kumba Division to the Federal Inspector of Administration, C. 107/222, 4 October 1963, NAB.

28 The Incident concerning the Customs (D. N. Njele) and Paul Bissiang – a Gendarme Officer at Eyunojock. A Report written by customs superintendent H. G. Kinni on 2

In order to redress the situation, the Commissioner suggested that the Prime Minister define the duties of the Gendarmerie to ensure that they performed them strictly within limit. What the Commissioner failed to grasp, however, was that the Gendarmerie was a federal subject placed under the authority of the Federal Inspector of Administration, who was responsible to the President of the Republic and not the Prime Minister of West Cameroon.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the activities of the Gendarmes indicated that they were ignorant of West Cameroon laws concerning the police and traffic cases. It is no wonder that Ntune took it as a point of duty to reaffirm the fact that the police had the responsibility of investigating all traffic and criminal cases in West Cameroon.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the caution and meetings, the Gendarmes continue to disrespect the police by among other things beating them up in public. The Acting Senior District Officer for Kumba lucidly made this point in a confidential letter to the Federal Inspector of Administration, in the following words:

I consider it wrong for another officer [Gendarme] of the same government to beat up his colleague because of the advantage of being in uniform. This I consider is a case of taking law into ones hand ... such behaviour must be curbed [as] it only brings ill feelings and bad relations. The idea is going around that the gendarmes are above the law. As such they cannot be taken to any court ...<sup>31</sup>

Such friction between the two forces arose partly from disagreement over which of them had to implement the law and maintain security. It was also due to confusion over where and when state or federal law should prevail. On the whole, the issue of security was a federal matter and this explains why the Gendarmes acted the way they did. One will, however, not expect them to beat up fellow law enforcement officers under the guise of maintaining security in West Cameroon.

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January 1963; also see "Gendarmes Torture Collector of Customs," *Cameroon Times*, 4 January 1963, NAB.

29 Confidential Reference No. 34/cf. Mamfe, 30 December 1962 to the Senior District Officer, Mamfe, title Gendarmerie Menace, NAB.

30 PC/i/1964, Petitions and complaints against the activities of Gendarmes in West Cameroon 1964, NAB.

31 From Senior District Officer, Mamfe, S. N. Ekobena to Inspector of Administration, Buea, Letter No. 1566/52 A, 5 March 1962, NAB.

This was a very unfortunate situation, which encouraged rather than handled insecurity. Even custom officers were not spared the wrath of the Gendarmes.

## **The Gendarmes and Custom Officers**

The Gendarme misconduct, which caught the consternation of the public, was extended to the custom officers. This was the case with D. N. Njele, chief of service for Mamfe. In a report written by the customs superintendent, Henry G. J. Kinni, on 2 January 1963, Kinni said *inter alia*:

The chief of gendarmes left and not long [after] a number of gendarmes surrounded the chief [sic] de secteur's car and said that their chief [sic] wanted him in his office. Without any waste of time the chief de secteur was dragged out of his own car and taken to the gendarme station in Mamfe. In the office the butt of a rifle was used at the back of chef de secteur which landed him flat on the ground with his face and kicks of boots came on one after the other. Chief [sic] de secteur was later on taken into one small room as he was crying so loudly with much pains and in this room his mouth was bandage up with a piece of cloth to stop [sic] the crying. The lights were put off and a good blow of hand was landed on his face of which I saw his left eye still red with blood on the 27<sup>th</sup>.<sup>32</sup>

The revelations made by Kinni's report concerning the torture of Njele by the Gendarmes are too telling of the overzealousness of the Gendarmes in West Cameroon. In fact, Gendarme atrocities in Mamfe were a living reality and the case of Njele was just a tip of the iceberg. Mamfe, which was a border town between Cameroon and Nigeria, witnessed some of these brutish activities of the Gendarmes in an apparent show of force and in justification of preserving the peace in a border area. Their brutality was exemplified by the numerous correspondences between the West Cameroon administrators.

One of the memorandums written by the Senior District Officer of Mamfe Division on 30 December 1962 to the Inspector of

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32 Confidential Reference No. 131/50 "Gendarme Paul Bissiang, MDL, Head of the Gendarmes at Eyumojock. From Thomas Mbua Ndoko to Federal Inspector of Administration.



Administration for West Cameroon concerned a report to the executive of the Mamfe community concerning the way the Gendarmerie had handled Mr. D. N. Njele, *chef de secteur* on 23 December 1962.<sup>33</sup> He emphasised some of the points, which had been made clear during their last meeting:

- I. How the Gendarmerie go about beating women merciless [sic] in their houses in town at night without any reasons for such ill treatment [sic]
- II. How the Gendarmerie mishandled police constables at two occasions (one at Ossing and one at Bachuo Akagbe)
- III. The Mamfe community would be grateful for any efforts you may put in to bring the Gendarmerie menace to an end at no distant.<sup>34</sup>

This report of the District Officer, Mr. Ekobena, was in line with the expectation of the population, who were weary of Gendarme atrocious activities. It was clear that the Mamfe community was uneasy with the Gendarmes, especially Paul Bissiang, and requested that they be transferred out of Mamfe.

In a reply to the Senior District officer of Mamfe, the Inspector of Administration wrote: "I have the honour to inform you that a copy of his report has been handed over by me to the Federal Minister of Armed Forces, [Sadou Daoudou] at the time of my last trip to Yaounde." The District Officer was unsatisfied and again wrote to the Inspector of Administration on 19 January 1963, wanting to know whether a copy should be sent to the Minister of Armed Forces or it should be reported directly to the Tribunal in Mamfe.<sup>35</sup> The District Officer wanted that the Gendarme boss should be dragged to court but it was unfortunate because the latter was obviously working in complicity with the Inspector of Administration. When Ekobena pushed the case further, it is possible that he was transferred out of Mamfe. Thomas Mbua Ndoko, who had been the private Secretary of Jean Claude Ngoh, Inspector of Administration, replaced him as the

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33 Ibid.

34 Gendarmes Brutality in West Cameroon, Incident Involving Paul Bissiang and councillors of Bachuo-Akagbe, No. 641 PC/1/1962, NAB.

35 Confidential s. 1/14/9 – Customs and Excise Head Quarters to the Federal Secretary Ministry of Finance, NAB.

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Senior District Officer of Mamfe.<sup>36</sup> He might have owed this promotion to his boss and certainly was given instructions to support the activities of the Gendarmes while there. The situation did not change as he wrote to his former boss arguing that:

Further to my confidential letter No 131/149 of 24 April 1963, I wish to inform you that continued stay of gendarme Paul Bissiang at Eyumojock will seriously damage the good reputation of the gendarme. Paul Bissiang's transfer from Mamfe Division would take very early effect [sic].<sup>37</sup>

Admittedly, the pressure through correspondences and petitions yielded fruit, as Paul Bissiang was transferred in 1963. On 28 September 1963 the chief and councillors of Bachuo-Akagbe wrote to the Prime Minister of West Cameroon thanking him for transferring Bissiang and bringing in the new commander of Brigade, Tchundjang Cyrille.<sup>38</sup> According to them peace had finally been restored. Chief Sam Etchu, who signed the report, appealed for many Gendarmes to be placed under Cyrille. By 1964, a host of Gendarmes were transferred to Widekum, another town in West Cameroon.

The "thank you" letter to the Prime Minister had hardly been digested as the Gendarmes launched another attack on almost all the custom officers that were found in Mamfe. The following custom staffs were assaulted by the Gendarmes:

- 1) S. B. M. Nsail – Customs Officer
- 2) T. E. Mbuagbaw – Customs Clerk
- 3) J. M. Kalaji – Customs Guard
- 4) Martin Elokobi – Customs Guard
- 5) Aloysious Tume – Custom Guard
- 6) J. A. Minang – Customs Guard

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36 File, Pc/I 1962/8, Minutes of the meeting convened by Senior District Officer, Mamfe, S.N. concerning the activities of Gendarmes in Mamfe, NAB.

37 Ibid.

38 File Pc/i/1962/6, Letter concerning the relations of Gendarmes and women – From Ma- Obasi and Co. to Premier Foncha, December 1962, NAB.

- 7) P. Njukeng – Customs Guard
- 8) S. M. N. Puperzor – Custom Guard
- 9) J. Epey – Customs Guard
- 10) H. Salifu – Customs Guard.<sup>39</sup>

However, the Gendarmes–Custom antagonism did not go on *sine die*. On 23 January 1963 the Senior District Officer for Mamfe convened a meeting with all these forces to reconcile them. He pointed out that cordiality should exist between the two forces, because each one of them had its own duties. There was no way by which the Gendarmes could take over the custom<sup>40</sup> and vice versa. The administrator concluded by quoting the text that laid down certain duties the Custom and Gendarmerie must perform.<sup>41</sup> The Gendarmes activities with the police and customs also affected the civilians as well, which explained why they must not be in conflict with one another because it affected the civilian population.

## Gendarmes and the Civilian Population

The Gendarmes' relations with the population were horrifying. This was particularly bad with women. In December 1962, the women of Ma-Obasi in Mamfe wrote directly to the Prime Minister of West Cameroon, John Ngu Foncha, complaining how the Gendarmes had rough handled them. They said:

We are suffering in the hands of the gendarmes. Their system of governing [sic] this place is not in our satisfaction... Their big man, so called Paul [Bissiang] is all that too naughty. In this our Ejagham tribe a[s] you know we are not in the habit of meeting girls or women in the bush for useless action [sex] you cannot now get a single article seller on our hear [sic] of cruelties [sic]

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39 Confidential Reference No. 131/50 “Gendarme Paul Bissiang MDL, Head of the Gendarmes at Eyumojock. From Thomas Mbua Ndoko to Federal Inspector of Administration, NAB.

40 Chief Nkamanda and Co., to the Minister of Natural Resources, concerning the Gendarmes activities, 24 March 1963, NAB.

41 Letter From S.N. Ekobena to Federal Inspector of Administration, Buea, 9 September 1963: Incident involving Gendarmerie and eloping with peoples, wives. 9 February 1963, NAB.

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of gendarme in Eyomujock. We feel within our hearts women that this gendarme station at Eyomujock be posted elsewhere.<sup>42</sup>

The Memorandum of the women of Ma-Obasi addressed to the Premier of West Cameroon was symptomatic of the Gendarmes' brutality towards them. One of these methods of brutality was rape and the person who was more often responsible for this was their *bigman* Paul Bissiang. This was illustrated by the way he handled one Alice Ben Ekong. On several occasions Ekong bemoaned to W. N. O. Effiom, Member of Parliament for Mamfe in the West Cameroon House of Assembly, about Bissiang's sexual and inhuman advances towards her. On 22 March 1963, Bissiang "caught Ekong in his office and attempted to rape her and in another instance, he threatened to shoot her if she persistently rejected his sexual drives."<sup>43</sup> If he could behave in this way, how could one report his subordinate to him when he or she was wronged? Paul Bissiang was an embodiment of insecurity, to say the least.

The entire civilian population felt the pinch of Gendarmes' severities in Mamfe. Writing to the Minister of Natural Resources on 24 March 1963, Chief Nkamanda and Co. amongst other things said:

We the people of Eyomujock received this group of Gendarmes with open hands. But for the fact that they beat us time on no occasion. People who are willing to come for market are afraid to attain the market again. Women and schoolgirls are being treated anyhow failing to accept to their request when the Gendarmes are beating people and knowing the native will run to help their fellow friends, they began to shoot guns here and there.<sup>44</sup>

The Gendarmes went as far as eloping with people's wives. The Senior District Officer for Mamfe, S. N. Ekobena reported such an instant in the following words: "This is to certify that bearer Simon Gaston, Trader and Farmer in Foubot, came to Mamfe in search of his wife named Tonga Marguerette and daughter Teresia Jean Marie said to

42 Confidential letter from Acting Senior District Officer Kumba Division to the Federal Inspector of Administration, C. 107/222, 4 October, 1963, NAB.

43 Confidential ref: No. Demo/HQ/B.32, The Gendarmes Brutality in West Cameroon" from KNDP National Secretariat, 28 December 1962, Hon. Z. A. Abendong to Inspector of Administration, NAB.

44 File Pc/i/1964 Petitions and Complaints against the activities of Gendarmes in West Cameroon, NAB.

have been taken by Matchia Martin, Nurse Gendarmerie Peleton, Mamfe.”<sup>45</sup> Surely, Martin had eloped with Gaston’s wife and Ekobena was reporting this to the Inspector of Administration. People the Gendarmes were to protect instead turned out to be their prey.

The Gendarmes were noted for abusing the basic rights and freedoms of West Cameroonians. This was done primarily through the introduction of what was assumed as new practices in West Cameroon. For instance, it was maintained that the Gendarmerie not only ensured that West Cameroonians carried around with them their tax tickets, which was a practice hitherto unknown in West Cameroon, but their activities also curtailed the fundamental freedoms of West Cameroon citizens. Such was the case with the brutal treatment of the Acting Education Officer for Kumba on 17 February 1964 at the hands of the Gendarmes for allegedly not producing his tax ticket on demand. In spite of the fact that the said officer explained that he was on official duty, he was rough-handled and allegedly “marched-off at gun point ...”<sup>46</sup>

West Cameroonians kept complaining about the misconduct of the Gendarmes. An earlier meeting had taken place at Buea in 1962, where the KNDP National secretariat under the auspices of Zachary Abendong wrote to the Inspector of Administration about the notoriety of the Gendarmes. According to him, “ever since the Gendarmes were posted to this territory [West Cameroon] they have created an atmosphere of fear which never existed since the departure of the German military rule from 1884–1916. I think the people of West Cameroon will be happy with the police and the military but without the Gendarmes.”<sup>47</sup>

Hon. Abendong wrote in response to incessant complaints sent to the KNDP secretariat as well as from the point of view of what he heard from the people while on tour. This had made him to conclude that the people of West Cameroon would be happy with the police and the military without the Gendarmes. This was probably because he thought that the opinion of West Cameroonians were not in accordance with the Gendarmes. It was grossly an exaggeration to maintain that it was

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45 Confidential Ref: No. Dem.HQ/B.32. The Gendarmes Brutality in West Cameroon: From KNDP national secretariat, 28 December 1962, Hon. Z. A Abendong to Inspector of Administration, NAB.

46 File Pc/1/1962 Gendarme Brutality in West Cameroon, No. 641, NAB.

47 File Pc/1/1962 Gendarme Brutality in West Cameroon, No. 641, NAB.

the Gendarmes who introduced the practice that West Cameroonians should be travelling with tax tickets. After the partition of the territory between the French and the British in 1916, travelling with tax tickets, identity cards and *laissez passers* were some of the documents citizens were obliged to move with. To claim, therefore, that it was the Gendarmes who introduced it, is still a matter of speculation. Gendarmes also had problems with landlords.

## **Gendarmes and Landlords**

Landlords who rented out their houses to the Gendarmes had problems with some of them. They consistently refused to pay the rent. On 15 June 1962, for example, one of the landlords, Martin Forbin, wrote to the Central Administrative unit of the Gendarmerie, Yaoundé, through the District Officer Mamfe. In this letter Forbin stressed that he had not received rent for his house from 1 January to 30 June 1962.<sup>48</sup> He also said that, "I have written through the M. *Le Commandant, Le Compagnie De Gendarmerie* at Bamenda twice but no reply has been received."<sup>53</sup> He wrote again on 16 October 1962, lamenting that the payment of his house was being defaulted by the Gendarmerie. He waited till the end of the year to write again on 22 January 1963, bemoaning that he had only received a quarter of his rent, which was 42,000 francs. The remaining amount of 126,000 francs was for nine months.<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, Anthony M. Abang wrote to the Chief Commander of the Gendarmerie in Yaoundé on 31 October 1962, complaining that the rent for his house at Widekum had not been paid. In his seven point report, point 2 was unequivocal: "Sir, I have long expected for the rents of my house at Widekum which was given up to the Gendarmerie on their request was with good faith to the state and I do not expect to be treated in the reverse."<sup>50</sup> Mr Abang was so frustrated with the non-payment of his rent by the Gendarmerie, that he championed the fight of the landlords by writing to the Federal Inspector of Administration on 30 May 1963, intimating that:

Sir, the most dangerous point and regretting to us, also to the hearing of the public who were aware of the arrangement that the

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48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

gendarmes have taken over our houses since January last year and our tenants were asked to leave the houses is that now that the Gendarmes have been asked to reside at Widekum instead of them going in our houses, they have passed to a different house [sic].<sup>51</sup>

One discernible fact in this petition is that the Gendarmes had handed over the houses they were renting to tenants of their choices. This was annoying to the landlords, given the fact that these Gendarmes had taken over their houses and, as if that was not enough, they now filled those houses with tenants who were directly under their authority. This means that they were more or less the de facto owners of these houses. The activities of the Gendarmes therefore had far reaching consequences on West Cameroon.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that shortly after reunification in 1961 West Cameroonians embraced the Gendarmerie – a pseudo-military force, which had been established in East Cameroon during the French colonial administration. The activities of this force were detested by West Cameroonians in all administrative divisions of West Cameroon. By 1964, a considerable calm had been restored but the atrocities never petered out completely. This enquiry has established that instead of maintaining law and order, the Gendarmerie paradoxically brought fear and panic to West Cameroon. The insecurity unleashed by the Gendarmerie has not in any sense ceased to exist as complaints are always heard on Cameroon highways about Gendarmes, who extort money from highway drivers and those mistakenly travelling without their national identity papers. With all these complaints it is within the boundaries of common sense that the Gendarmerie, instead of maintaining security which was their *prima facie* function, went beyond and appeared as a source of insecurity not only to the civilian population of West Cameroon but also to the West Cameroonian police and custom officers. The paper contributes to the historiography of conflict and security in Cameroon especially as far as the military is concerned.

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51 Ibid.

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