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Lynn Schler

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History, the Nation-State, and Alternative Narratives: An Example from Colonial Douala

Lynn Schler

Abstract: This article examines processes of community-building in the immigrant quarter of New Bell, Douala, during the interwar years. Historians of Douala have overlooked the history of New Bell, focusing instead on the political and economic activity of Duala's Westernized elite during this period. This historiographic oversight reflects a preoccupation with elite politics identified as the seeds of nationalism in Cameroon. An examination of the community of immigrants provides us with an alternative conceptualization of a multiethnic collective. By tracing the construction and evolution of public space in interwar New Bell, we can uncover elements of group solidarity binding together this highly diverse population.

Résumé: Cet article examine les processus d'organisation communautaire dans le quartier immigrant de New Bell à Douala, pendant les années d'entre guerres. Les historiens de Douala ont négligé l'Histoire du quartier de New Bell, se concentrant plutôt sur l'activité politique et économique de l'élite occidentale de Douala pendant cette période. Cet oubli reflète une préoccupation de l'élite politique identifiée comme étant à l'origine du nationalisme au Cameroun. Une analyse de la communauté immigrante nous offre une conceptualisation alternative d'une collectivité multiethnique. En retraçant la construction et l'évolution de l'espace publique dans le New Bell de l'entre guerres, nous pouvons mettre en lumière les éléments d'une solidarité de groupe liant de manière solide cette population hautement diversifiée.

THE HISTORIC PROCESSES leading to the emergence of nation-states in Africa have been of great interest to historians of the continent from the eve of independence until the present. The study of the developments leading to the establishment of postcolonial states has been of fundamen-

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Lynn Schler is a lecturer in the Department of African Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

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tal importance both in earning legitimacy for those states in the early years following colonialism, and later on, in explaining their successes and failures as functioning and relevant institutions. The historiographic preoccupation with explaining the birth and expansion of nation-states in Africa has undoubtedly produced an important and useful body of knowledge, but the search for the origins of the African nation-state has also left alternative communities and trajectories of experience out of the historical narrative (Roberts 2000). As Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler have argued, "colonial historiography has been so nationally bound that it has blinded us to those circuits of knowledge and communication that took other routes than those shaped by the metropole-colony axis alone" (1997:28).

The alliance between history and nationalism is not unique to African historiography. Indeed, it has its roots in the European intellectual tradition. But just as the presence of European colonialism is all too apparent in the political, economic, and cultural fields of now independent states, so too is knowledge of the past and present in postcolonial settings still deeply shaped and imprinted with the mark of colonial thinking. Thus a persistent, if unintended, consequence has been historians' examining, and in effect reinscribing, the development of Westernized political institutions and discourse in Africa, with the search for their origins being privileged over other forms of public discourse and collective identities. The narratives presented in nationalist histories do not always represent the majority of African experiences, and the search for what has been left out can lead us to a more inclusive understanding of the African past under colonialism. This effort can also help us understand postcolonial mobilizations, as the social and cultural networks imagined and established by Africans under colonialism have persisted over time and continue to enable "wide dialogue and common action among people with diverse pasts" (Cooper 1994:1545).

Using colonial Douala as an example, this article explores this historiographical predicament by calling into question the commonly accepted linkages made by historians between the Duala elite anticolonial struggle and early nationalism in Cameroon. This conflation of Duala protests with nationalist sentiment has been performed against a backdrop of historiographic disregard for the experiences of nonelite classes in Douala, particularly working-class immigrants. While the significance of Duala politics has been linked to their assumed role as "middlemen" between non-Duala indigenous populations and colonial rulers, the construction of a paradigm of the Duala intermediary reflects an exaggerated emphasis on the significance of Duala political activity and ultimately serves to flatten out the past experiences of non-Duala and their political, cultural, and economic aspirations. This article argues that in contrast to the Duala political mobilization, the experiences of the immigrant community residing in the Douala quarter of New Bell in the interwar period represented an alternative consciousness around which immigrants organized their lives. Current historiography would have us believe that nothing happened in New Bell

before World War II. My examination of New Bell during this period will help demonstrate why some alliances and experiences do not find their way into the historical record, and what steps must be taken to reverse this trend. The goal is to broaden our categories of analysis to allow for a better understanding of how Africans have lived together in multiethnic collectives not necessarily corresponding to nation-state boundaries.

History Written: The Duala Male Elite

Before the post–World War II era, historiography concerning the city of Douala was focused largely on the history of the Duala male elite. This is an often colorful history of ambitious African entrepreneurs who attempted to manipulate the colonial encounter to their benefit from the very first arrival of Europeans on the coast of Cameroon during the sixteenth century. Residing next to one of the best natural harbors in the region, the Duala people were well-positioned to receive docking European vessels and to act as middlemen in the trade between Europeans on the coast and Africans of the interior. Operating initially as slave traders and later as participants in the "legitimate trade," the Duala facilitated the exchange of export goods such as slaves, ivory, and palm products brought from the interior for European alcohol, beads, textiles, tobacco, and salt (Austen & Derrick 1999:70). The city of Douala, named for the ethnic group, grew and expanded along with this trade.

The establishment of formal colonial rule had tremendous consequences for both the Duala people and the city of Douala. First under Germans (1884–1914), and following World War I under the French regime (1916–60), the city of Douala played an important role as an administrative capital until 1901 and throughout the colonial era as the economic capital of Cameroon. Increased activity at the port of Douala, the largest and most active on the coast, created employment prospects in large merchant houses, and Duala independent traders enjoyed the benefits of augmented economic activity. The Duala of the early colonial era also generated a significant income from real estate, as they demanded compensation for the use of their urban property. With the growing presence of permanent European residents and the increasing number of business interests, the Duala earned sizable incomes as landlords. The value of their assets increased along with the steady growth of economic activity throughout the colonial era, and the Duala capitalized on this situation with every turn. Europeans and Africans from outside Cameroon who came to work in the port of Douala became tenants of the Duala at rates rising steadily until World War I. Commerce houses and individuals complained to the colonial administration about speculative practices of landlords and out-of-control rent, which rose as much as 40 percent between 1904 and 1911 (ANSOM 1919–20).

Colonialism also resulted in an expansion of Duala political influence over other local populations. Native courts were established in 1890 to handle minor civil and criminal matters among Africans, and Duala chiefs presided over these courts. This function was beneficial to the Duala both politically, vis-à-vis other local groups subjected to an additional aspect of Duala control, and economically, as the Duala chiefs earned income through fees and fines associated with legal matters (Austen & Derrick 1999:102). The Duala also served as interpreters and bureaucrats within the colonial administration, and this too increased their power over other local populations.[1] Both colonial administrations relied heavily on the Westernization of the Duala in order to make them suitable assistants to European administrative officials and independent merchants. Knowledge of European languages and a mastery of the norms and habits of Western culture encouraged the Duala to see themselves as participants in the same cultural milieu as the one occupied by their colonial patrons.

The position of the Duala between colonial and local cultures was analogous to that of Western-educated elites throughout colonial Africa, as was their ultimate disillusionment with their European benefactors. While close proximity to colonial trade and culture clearly advanced their economic and cultural standing, the Duala soon confronted a profound loss of political power under colonialism. Faced with policies institutionalizing racial boundaries in the areas of cultural and political life, the Duala protested, and this anticolonial sentiment has been identified by historians as the first seeds of nationalist activity in colonial Cameroon. As such, the Duala "pioneers" in the development of nationalist politics have attracted an impressive amount of scholarly attention (Austen & Derrick 1999:2). But a close investigation of the Duala's protest against their loss of rights under formal colonialism forces us to question the linkages made between elite anticolonial activity and the birth of a nationalist movement in colonial Cameroon.

The main catalyst of Duala dissatisfaction with colonial rule was the expropriation of Duala lands on the Joss Plateau in the city center by the German administration. An examination of the Duala response to the expropriation can explain why several historians have pinpointed the protest as protonationalist and a pioneering step toward the establishment of the Cameroonian nation-state (Eckert 1991; Joseph 1977:37; Derrick 1979:433; LeVine 1964:116; Austen & Derrick 1999:2,144). Dealt with extensively in numerous historical studies, the main events associated with the crisis need only be outlined briefly (Austen & Derrick 1999; Eckert 1999b; Derrick 1979; Gouellain 1975; Rudin 1968). In 1910, the German administration formulated an urban renewal project designed to preserve the city center for Europeans by relocating the local Duala population and the growing population of African immigrants to newly built quarters on the outskirts of the city. These new African neighborhoods were to be established a few kilometers inland from the coast and separated from the

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European quarters by a one-kilometer-wide Free Zone. Duala resistance to the plan began immediately following its announcement and continued well into the French Mandate period until the outbreak of World War II. The unrelenting opposition to the expropriation was responsible for its postponement, but the Reichstag ultimately voted in favor of implementation, which began in 1914. The outbreak of World War I and the ousting of the Germans from Cameroon prevented the completion of the project and only the Duala Bell clan was removed from their native lands and relocated into the new African quarter known as New Bell. The Bell clan did not accept their new circumstances passively, and the struggle to regain their customary lands continued into the French Mandate period, albeit without any real success.

Seeing themselves as rightful members of a colonial bourgeois public culture, the Duala modeled their struggle against the expropriation along the lines of Western cultural norms guiding political expression. Thus Duala protests against the expropriation and other colonial policies were most often expressed through petitions addressed to various political bodies. In the interwar period alone, the Duala sent fourteen petitions to the League of Nations, individual European governments, and the colonial administration (Austen & Derrick 1999:144–47). An examination of a portion of these petitions reveals the extent to which the Duala had anchored themselves in the discourse of Western humanism. For example, in a petition to the Versailles Peace Conference dated August 18, 1919, the Duala asked the Allies to grant them "security and guarantee of civic rights for the natives of Cameroon (Douala) and in particular, personal rights of liberty" (ANC-FF n.d.).

The identification of a nationalist agenda in the Duala struggle against the expropriation can also be explained through an examination of the specific language utilized within the actions and claims of the Duala throughout the campaign. In struggling for their own rights, the Duala made treaties and addressed petitions as representatives of a "population" or "people" beyond the ethnic Duala (ANC-FF n.d.). In one petition, the Duala claimed to speak on behalf of "the natives of Cameroon and their chiefs" (Derrick 1979:144). In 1929 the Duala even demanded national sovereignty (Derrick 1979:303). Their appeals to leaders of other local groups for assistance and support in an anti-German struggle have also bolstered the identification of the Duala with ethnic coalition-building during this period (Derrick 1979:84).

Critics of nationalist historiographies find these types of linkages endemic to the histories of colonial elites. As Partha Chatterjee, a scholar of nationalism in South Asia, has argued, colonial middle classes such as the Duala, which were situated simultaneously in positions of subordination and domination, typically constructed a hegemonic discourse that supported their cultural leadership over local populations as a means of combating their own political weaknesses (Chatterjee 1993). As European

power chipped away at Duala influence, the Duala asserted themselves by warning Europeans to maintain their distance from "our Bushmen" (Rudin 1968:423). Frantz Fanon has articulated one of the sharpest critiques of these elites, "dusted over by colonial culture" in their efforts to assume power by representing the entire race, and their "fine-sounding declarations which are devoid of meaning since the speakers bandy about in irresponsible fashion phrases that come straight out of European treatises on morals and political philosophy.... The Western bourgeoisie, though fundamentally racist, most often manages to mask this racism by a multiplicity of nuances which allow it to preserve intact its proclamation of mankind's outstanding dignity" (Fanon 1963:47, 163).

Rather than labeling the Duala protest as nationalist, one should see the anti-expropriation efforts as a response, limited in scope and purpose, to a specific colonial policy aimed at destroying a significant portion of the Duala base of capital. A close examination of colonial reports concerning the expropriation reveals that economic grievances were, in fact, the major driving force behind the Duala struggle. Despite the rhetoric of natural rights and privileges associated with the land, and complaints regarding the lack of legal due process at the time of the takeover, it seems that the Duala would have been willing to cede the land to the Germans had they been offered the right price. The colonial administration proposed to pay the Duala 90 pfenning a square meter for their property, claiming this was the price of the land at the time of the German occupation. The Duala, however, refused to sell the land for less than 3 marks per square meter, the going rate for the land at the time of the expropriation. The Germans were not willing to pay this overvalued price representing the outcome of uncontrolled Duala speculation, and further justified their position by arguing that the increased value in the land since 1885 would not have been possible without European activity (Buell 1928:341–43). The expropriation took place before this issue was resolved, and the indemnity payments were never made by the Germans, who were driven from the colony soon after. Throughout the Mandate period, financial compensation remained the central issue surrounding the ongoing expropriation conflict between the Duala and the French administration. The French maintained the German offer, and the Duala continually refused it (ANSOM 1919–20).

This is not to suggest that the Duala had no concerns other than financial compensation. The economic issue was primary, but there were also cultural factors playing a role in the Duala resistance to the relocation. Yet a consideration of the Duala cultural claims with regard to the land on the Joss Plateau also makes it difficult to attach a nationalist agenda to the Duala protest against the expropriation. Precolonial settlement patterns of Duala villages had established spatial and occupational distinctions between the freeborn and slave communities. Whereas the Duala fisherman occupied *mundongo* land with access to rivers and the coastline, slaves, forbidden from

fishing, were segregated into *kotto* land with no access to waterways (Austen 1995). Maintaining this distinction between themselves and all non-Duala was a vital aspect of self-preservation from precolonial times.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, the cultural and physical proximity to Europeans reinforced Duala sentiments of superiority over other local groups of Africans. Andreas Eckert has argued that the Duala "interpreted their growing contacts with Europeans as a mandate for identifying themselves against interior people in very hierarchical terms: the Cameroonians not in direct contact with the ocean were labeled *bakom* (slaves) even when [they were] not (as was often the case) literally enslaved . . . ." Eckert argues that the most significant of Duala economic ventures under colonial rule, the establishment of cocoa plantations outside the city, was motivated partially by a desire to reassert cultural differences between the historically slave-owning Duala (*wonja*), and their bakom neighbors. He writes that "cocoa planting played a significant social and psychological role in the reproduction of symbolic resources of social power and status . . . . The growing of a foreign plant like cocoa conferred on planters an image of individuals who had access to spheres of technical agricultural and to a wide though unspecific cultural knowledge that was extraordinary" (1999a:113). The expropriation would have forced the Duala to live among the bakom, an arrangement they believed would spell cultural ruin for the Duala people. Thus efforts of the landlord class to preserve their economic and political advantage over other Africans were highly incongruent with the supposed budding of a nationalist spirit.

The labeling of this protest as nationalist has privileged Duala experiences over the experiences of others and given the Duala a prominent status in the history of Cameroon. The Duala themselves have recognized the potential of this historical narrative to empower and legitimize the community. In conducting oral interviews with residents of the city, I was struck by how many of my Duala informants were in the midst of writing their own manuscripts of Duala history, and several produced detailed transcripts of oral histories and genealogy charts on request (Ngangue 1998, Epée 1998, Moumé-Etia 1998). Interviews were smooth processes, with Duala informants seasoned in interview procedures and easily able to recount oral histories dating back to the precolonial period, with some able to testify to events from the fifteenth century. Throughout the city there are also Duala archives which are controlled by ruling families who limit and monitor their access. Well-trained in Western intellectual traditions, the Duala know how history can be used. These efforts at preserving and reproducing the illustrious narrative of the Duala past are part of an effort to legitimize Duala cultural and political claims of the present.

The writing of history can thus be seen as a hegemonic process of preservation and monumentalization. The nation-state requires such monuments; its legitimacy is called into question without them. But hand-in-hand with this process of remembering is also a process of forgetting. As

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Ernest Renan said in 1882, "The essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common and also that they have forgotten many things." In the historiography of Cameroon, the writing of nationalist histories has led to widespread forgetting of alliances and communities that were peripheral to or excluded from the political activity associated with the evolution of the nation-state. In the case of the city of Douala of the interwar period, this can be seen in the history that has *not* been written, the history of African immigrants in the strangers quarter of New Bell.

Histories Not Written: The Strangers of New Bell

Despite identifying the long and passionate protest as the forerunner to nationalist organizing in Cameroon, current historiography focuses on the expropriation as an emergency threatening the interests and soliciting the response of only the Duala clans. There is little mention of the role the African immigrant population of the city played in the events surrounding the "crisis." The historiography leaves us with the impression that the expropriation was a tragic episode in the colonial history of Cameroon, a patent example of colonial oppression valiantly but unsuccessfully opposed by the local population (Vansina 2000). This version of events is plausible only when the history of the stranger population is ignored. A closer look at the events surrounding the establishment of the new quarter reveals that in fact more non-Duala than Duala were implicated in the actual implementation of segregation, and more important, the colonial state faced no opposition at all from these non-Duala masses.

While the Duala employed protonationalist rhetoric to serve their narrow interests, the community of New Bell was actually multiethnic throughout its history. From the start of the colonial period, immigrants originating from both the interior of Cameroon and from other colonies throughout West and Central Africa arrived at Douala with manifold economic, political, and social objectives. During the German period, West Africans came mostly from Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Dahomey, and Togo. With the start of the French Mandate, African bureaucrats and merchants began arriving from Senegal and Guinea. Immigrants from within Cameroon represented over two hundred ethnic groups, but there were particularly large concentrations of Beti, Bassa, Bamileke, and Hausa, the relative population of each varying over time. Most came voluntarily, as employees of large commerce houses or the colonial administration, but others were brought to the city as prisoners, soldiers, or forced labor (ANC-FF 1917–25). Many found work within the colonial economy as dock workers, porters, manual laborers, and civil servants, but various sources reveal that the vast majority earned their livelihood in New Bell's "unofficial" economy as artisans, petty merchants, prostitutes, and alcohol brewers.[2] The immigrant population grew steadily from the beginning of colonial rule and constituted a

clear majority of Douala's population by 1930, if not earlier (Derrick 1979:360; Schler 2001:107–9).

For the non-Duala African population of the city, the creation of New Bell within the framework of the expropriation came as a relief. Unlike the Duala, the population of strangers had nothing to lose and everything to gain from the plan. In fact, many eagerly seized the opportunity to relocate to the new quarter. Colonial reports suggest that housing was provided not only for the Duala but also for fourteen hundred administrative and commerce house workers (ANSOM 1913). Others simply claimed open land and built their own huts. The administration received many requests from non-Duala Africans seeking authorization to live in New Bell immediately following the demolition of the Duala quarter in Joss. Colonial officials supervising the expropriation documented the great enthusiasm of the stranger population regarding the new quarter. As one administrator commented, "One indigene already living in New Bell told me that everyone is very pleased. The nights are much fresher in the new quarter" (ANSOM 1913). While it is easy to suspect German motives in portraying a content indigenous population in New Bell following the controversial expropriation, there is abundant evidence to suggest that the non-Duala residents of the quarter were indeed gratified by their new surroundings. Escaping the high rent of Duala quarters was clearly refreshing. In addition to having suffered the abuses of landlords, the stranger population also had suffered at the hands of corrupt Duala chiefs who habitually abused their tax-collecting privileges in extracting fraudulent sums from non-Duala tenants (ANC-FF 1920; Nguidjol 1998). Settlement in New Bell also freed the non-Duala Africans from the jurisdiction of Duala chiefs exploiting the legal system and demanding high justice fees from newcomers (ANC-FF 1920).

Alongside the financial and political grievances felt by newcomers toward their Duala hosts, there were perceived cultural differences between the immigrant populations and the Duala. The Duala liked to think of themselves as aristocrats and nobles, and they openly referred to members of the immigrant population as *bakom* (Moumé-Etia 1998). This was infuriating to newcomers, sometimes to the point of inciting violence between the two groups, and in extreme cases leading to murder (ANC-FF 1946–53). The Duala also disparaged newcomers by calling them primitive, dirty, or odorous (Mbita 1998). To avoid friction, most newcomers preferred simply to keep their distance from Duala neighbors; as one oral informant claimed, "It was not possible to live next to the Duala who called us slaves" (Ngobo 1998). The residents of New Bell also sensed the cultural distance that Western education created between themselves and the Duala. The Duala were seen as culturally closer to colonizers and even were considered white. One long-term resident of New Bell explained, "Marrying a Duala was like marrying a European" (Ngobo 1998). Residents of New Bell recognized the haughtiness of the Duala, but they did not participate in disparaging them. Instead, residents of New Bell counterat-

tacked by formulating their own negative images of the local elite. The Duala, even by their own admission, were unaccustomed to physical labor, and some who were interviewed acknowledged the need for the non-Duala who were willing to take on the hard work (Moumé-Etia 1998; Ngangue 1998). Immigrants, for their part, viewed the Duala as lazy and feeble, unable to shoulder the difficult physical labor performed by other groups.

Once New Bell was established, relations between the Duala and immigrants were limited, with many residents of the immigrant quarter during the colonial period claiming there was little contact between the two groups. As each quarter had its own market, and immigrants occupied different jobs, there were scant opportunities for proximity, and the public and private spaces occupied by the Duala and stranger populations remained, for the most part, distinct and separate.

Despite New Bell's distinction as the most populated quarter in the city, there is little mention of the quarter in any historical account of the city prior to World War II. Historians have been interested only in the postwar era, when trade union organizing and anticolonial riots took place along ethnic lines (Joseph 1974, 1977). The immigrant quarter makes its entry into the historiography of Cameroon as a hotbed of both nationalist organizing and increasingly prevalent tribalism during the last decade of the colonial era. Nationalist histories in Africa also tend to highlight the rise of tribalism, as modern political organizing and the anticolonial struggle often took place in colonial Africa along ethnic lines. This was due both to colonial efforts to encourage ethnic divisions as part of a divide-and-conquer philosophy, and to the reality that Africans could identify more easily with ethnically based affiliations than with more multiethnic political organizations.[3] Thus historians would have us believe that ethnicity was the most determinant principle organizing participation in public life in the strangers quarter.

Ethnic affiliations did indeed play a central role in individual lives and in the process of community building in New Bell. Most newcomers to Douala relied on kinship or village ties for assistance in acclimating to life in the city. Many came with brothers, sisters, or cousins and joined an aunt, uncle, or fellow villager already residing in the quarter. Newcomers lived with their relatives until they saved enough money to buy their own huts. By and large, these long-term guests did not pay rent to their kinsmen, for as oral informants explained over and over, one did not take rent from a brother (Ongono 1999; Ndjock 1998; Monthe 1998). Frequently huts were even given as gifts to relatives, although they might be sold to members of other tribes (Ongono 1999). In this respect, the associations that immigrants had with kinsmen played a central role in their integration into city life. Beyond finding housing, newcomers received instruction and orientation to an urban lifestyle. Ethnic ties also played a role in the relationship between immigrants and work. The connections a newcomer had with relatives often led to employment in the city. As a result, some occupations

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were disproportionately represented by one particular ethnic group, such as the preponderance of Bulu among the general population of prostitutes, or the domination of the Bamileke among petty merchants known as market-boys or "Bayam-Sellem" (pidgin for "Buy them, Sell them") (Moumé-Etia 1998; Ngobo 1998; Dizain & Cambon 1956). The link between ethnic affiliations and the economic sustenance of communities in New Bell can be seen in the well-documented history of the credit associations and popular banks known as *tchua* that were organized among the Bamileke. Through these financial cooperatives, members of the same village groups or age sets were able to obtain capital for investment in business ventures. The celebrated Bamileke "dynamism" and economic success throughout colonial and postcolonial Cameroon, and in Douala in particular, can be attributed in part to these ethnic-based associations (Dongmo 1981; Gosselin 1970).

But despite the significance of ethnic affiliations among newcomers to New Bell, ethnicity must be regarded as a time- and place-specific construct, rather than an unproblematic signifier of identity. Cities of colonial African have been described as sites of competition and "hardened rivalries" between ethnic groups (Anderson & Rathbone 2000:8). In the case of New Bell, this has resulted in historiographic emphasis on ethnic identity politics and violent conflicts in the years leading to independence. Yet the instability and fluidity of ethnicity in New Bell throughout the colonial period renders the historical significance of the concept difficult to evaluate. The colonial period witnessed the continual realignment of solidarities, as well as the concurrent association of individuals with seemingly incompatible ethnic identities (Joseph 1977:148,174–78; Atangana 1998:76–78). While it is clear that some form of ethnic identification was of paramount importance to most immigrants at some points in their lives in New Bell, the volatility of these identities makes it very difficult to judge the long-term impact of ethnicity on the history of the quarter.[4] In addition, religious, gendered, and class-based distinctions, to name a few, played roles equal to that of ethnicity in building solidarities and communal boundaries in New Bell.[5]

Thus from the time of New Bell's establishment, public space in the quarter was not exclusively regulated by solidarities based on any one of these identities—ethnicity, religion, class, or gender. And while subidentities proliferated and had an impact on community-building, there were also factors and forces converging to create a multiethnic collective in the strangers, quarter, which became stronger over time and ultimately became a *New Bellian* identity. However, this multiethnic community in New Bell of the interwar period was never mobilized for any political cause, and until now only this kind of mobilization has given subjects historical relevance. For the historian, the study of New Bell requires a reorientation of the "conceptual cartographies" framing earlier histories of the city as an ongoing narrative between colonizer and colonized (Mohanty 1991:3). An

attempt to document the history of New Bell in this period also requires the historian to overcome methodological obstacles, since general public discourse in the quarter was not documented or preserved in the same way that the Duala archived their petitions.

The challenge of recovering the New Bell interwar past can be demonstrated by an analysis of spoken language in the quarter during the period under question. In New Bell, the heterogeneous community of strangers spoke pidgin English to one another. Pidgin made its first appearance in Douala in the seventeenth century and became firmly established in the coastal region by the nineteenth century (de Feral 1989:23). As prominent traders, the Duala were the first Africans in the coastal region to use pidgin for international business transactions and political action, and this established the language as the primary mode of communication with foreigners in the city. The Germans, however, did not easily accept the prevalence of this Anglophone-influenced language, and as the colonial presence was extended, all contact with the indigenous population was conducted in German exclusively. Eventually all instruction in schools had to be in German, a policy that was designed to protect the national interests of the regime (Stumpf 1977). The French were equally sensitive to the symbolism embedded in spoken language. For "patriotic, utilitarian, and humanitarian reasons" (Stumpf 1977:10), the administration set to work immediately to instruct Africans in French, and the use of French in schools was mandated soon after the establishment of the French regime.[6]

Despite such colonial efforts, European languages were not adopted in New Bell, and their absence in the quarter made up the boundary separating the immigrant community from colonial authority as well as symbolizing a rejection of these authorities. Unlike European languages, pidgin was not taught by colonial authorities or missionaries and it was not, therefore, linked to or regulated by any power. Pidgin was not written, but only spoken, and this enhanced the flexibility and fluidity of the language. Knowledge of pidgin was acquired in the street, the center of public life in New Bell (Goethe 1999). This made it a perfect tool for the immigrant population. As one oral informant recalled, "I did not know a word of pidgin when I came to New Bell, but three months later, I could speak perfectly. It was a very easy language for communication" (Ngoko 1998). Others recalled that while French was difficult to learn and taught only in colonial schools, anyone could speak the "bad English" (Chantal Chenu 1998; Dibango 1998; Ngoko 1998).

Members of the immigrant community viewed pidgin as a symbol of the distance separating themselves from the European presence in the city. One informant who had been a resident of New Bell during the colonial era explained, "There was French spoken in the city, but pidgin was the form of communication for inferior people" (Ngoko 1998). With their use of pidgin in the quarter, immigrants employed creative, localized strategies for bridging differences in a highly diverse community of strangers, and

this was an important step in the evolution of a multiethnic collective. To some the group solidarity that emerged slowly in the space of New Bell in the interwar era even represented an alternative form of nationhood, as one oral informant hinted when he remarked, "pidgin became a sort of national language during the colonial period" (Ousseni 1998). The nation demarcated by pidgin bore little resemblance to the nation imagined by the Duala elite and recorded in their print culture. Thus for the historian searching for both theoretical language and methodologies for uncovering the local domain of popular political discourse (Chatterjee 1993:226), pidgin constitutes a fruitful starting point in the search for expressions of public life not conforming to Western political models.

The search for alternative source materials also must include a reading of the spatial configuration of the quarter both during and after the colonial period. The historic development and exploitation of physical space in New Bell can provide us with important insights into immigrant initiatives over time and the evolution of the community. Ignored by colonial urban planners until the 1950s, the landscape of New Bell in the interwar years resonated with diffused authority and short-term arrangements. The inhabitants of New Bell established their presence in a spirit of temporality, haphazardly creating living quarters and neighborhoods to meet immediate needs using limited resources. Unlike in Duala and the European quarters, land in New Bell was never privately owned. In the early years following the establishment of the quarter, land was readily available and residents simply claimed plots and built huts. As the community expanded, new hierarchies of power sprang up; colonial-appointed chiefs claimed control over tracts of unclaimed land and required newcomers to obtain permission to build. But the chiefs' control was incomplete at best, particularly before World War II, when the legitimacy of these chiefs handpicked by the colonial regime was questioned (ANC-FF 1941; Koloko 1999; Dieudonne 1998). Most informants claimed that immigrants had little trouble securing plots (Moumi 1998; Eyobo Essawe 1998; Ongono 1999). Because newcomers settled wherever land was available, neighborhoods in New Bell were ethnically mixed, a fact that is not apparent in colonial maps of the quarter. Drawn for the first time only in 1955, the maps designate each neighborhood of New Bell by the local chief serving the area, leaving the impression that the quarter was firmly divided into ethnicized neighborhoods. But a number of informants remembered the quarter differently; "We all lived together," they said (Assama 1998; Nguidjol 1998; Ongono 1999; Onana 1999; Angono Ebe 1999).

Because New Bell lacked monuments of modernity prominent in the city center, public life in New Bell was centered in the street. It was in this arena that rules of urban living were broadcast and masses of unrelated individuals were integrated into a shared experience. Residents could engage in this public space simply by walking through it, and indeed strolling (*balader*) emerged as a main form of entertainment (Biloa 1999). The discourses

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operating in New Bell's street-centered public space were not necessarily verbalized, but rather were visual and performative. Consumption played a crucial role, and the acquisition of material goods aided individuals in securing and displaying their membership in the community of strangers (Glassman 1995). Status was deeply tied to a certain "look."[7] One particularly important marker of status was footwear, as many of the newcomers had arrived in the city barefoot (Loga 1998; Tchope Tassi 1998; Ndjock 1998).[8] White tennis shoes gained particular popularity (Loga 1998). Similarly, European-style clothes were highly sought after and were often the first purchase immigrants made in the city (Tchope Tassi 1998; Kapendia 1998). The meager salaries paid to most immigrants did not grant unlimited purchasing power, but those who did succeed in obtaining fine imported clothing wore it proudly. A 1936 article from *L'Eveil du Cameroun*, quoted by Derrick (1979:408), claimed that "if you see native couples better dressed and smart, they are Strangers, 'non-Dualas.'" As Derrick points out, this could not literally have been true of the vast majority of poorly paid immigrants. Nonetheless, it is clear that immigrants in New Bell learned not only how to dress, but also how to carry themselves and behave in an urban way. Body language served as a primary vehicle of communication. Oral informants claimed that it was easy to distinguish newcomers from long-term residents simply by the way they walked (Ngobo 1998; Eko Flobert 1998). As one woman explained, the urbanized residents "would just stroll. They bought their new clothes, nice shoes and hats, and they would go and be gentlemanly in the streets" (Mbe 1998). Other luxury goods also served as an exhibition of rank in the public spaces of New Bell. In the city, owning a gun was a particularly important marker of status, even though guns were not displayed in the streets of the city; "when you had a gun," said one informant, "you made it known. It was an object for boasting" (Mbody 1998). In New Bell, other sorts of possessions acquired this kind of value. One informant testified that in the 1920s children would cheer in the streets for someone who passed by on a bicycle (Ngobo 1998).

Beyond the street, bars served as primary sites for the construction and dissemination of popular culture and public discourse in New Bell. The daily collective assembly of immigrants in these public spaces played a central role in fostering a sense of community. Bars provided the only off-hours distraction in the quarter, and nearly all oral informants responded to questions concerning leisure time activities with, "we drank" (Mbita 1998; Mbe 1998; Tchope Tassi 1998). The consumption of alcohol in New Bell was so universal that drinking with others ultimately became a symbol of community membership. One informant said of policemen, "When they were not working, they would come and have a drink like everyone else" (Biloa 1999). For most of the colonial period, alcohol was manufactured illegally by women and sold secretly in their living rooms, creating opportunities for large gatherings where urban popular culture was invented and shaped. In these bars, ethnicity did not determine or limit participation in

communal life. Members of all ethnic groups would sit and drink together, tell stories in pidgin, or gamble (Ndjock 1998; Ngono 1999). Bars thus constituted local cultural spaces around which the multiethnic community of strangers convened and crystallized.[9]

Conclusion

The evolution of these highly local, transient public spaces deemphasizing ethnic, class, and religious-based distinctions in New Bell of the interwar years perhaps seems, at first glance, a matter of limited significance. As a historical event, it certainly lacks the drama or flash of Duala petitions to the League of Nations. But the history of neighbors—good neighbors—can nonetheless teach us about African lives and strategies in the colonial era. And while the ethnic coexistence characterizing community life in a highly diverse New Bell was perhaps not a monumental force in the building of the nation-state of Cameroon, it has been highly significant in the lives of those who have lived there and helps to explain how the present nation-state prevails. This examination of the community of strangers in this time provides us with an alternative conceptualization of a multiethnic Cameroonian identity and lays the groundwork for understanding the participation of Cameroonians in postcolonial spaces. Historic inquiry has often searched for the origins of "exclusive ethnic categories" as a foundational characteristic of the history of independent African nations. But the existence of neighborly relations between ethnic groups is no less pertinent and perhaps even more significant in determining everyday experiences of local populations in postcolonial settings.[10] As long as history remains committed to the nation-state as a starting point of inquiry, many places will be made and unmade around this axis. The consideration of New Bell in the interwar period serves to complicate the earlier portrayals of Douala history and broaden our understanding of the urban cultural and political landscape during this time. Indeed, a consideration of the dissonances between these two narratives may prove to be the most fruitful approach.[11] The examination of New Bell in the interwar period offers an alternative to the nationalist narrative dominating the historiography of Cameroon until now, and perhaps constitutes a first step in correcting longstanding inaccuracies.

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Notes

1. Historians from other parts of Africa have acknowledged the power exercised by interpreters in the colonial period. For an example from Guinée Française, see Osborn (in press). See also the introduction in that volume.
2. For example, Douala's 1929 annual report cited approximately six thousand immigrants employed in colonial enterprises, while a campaign against sleeping sickness that same year estimated the stranger population as exceeding twenty thousand. See Gouellain (1975:220) and Derrick (1979:356).
3. For a detailed discussion of the links between ethnicity and political affiliation in colonial Africa, see Vail (1991) and Bravman (1998). For a specific discussion on ethnicity and politics in colonial Cameroon, see Austen (1992).
4. On the volatility of ethnic identities in colonial Africa, see Vail (1991), Chanock (1985), Bravman (1998), and Spear (1993).
5. This could be seen, for example, in the strong religious affiliations binding together Muslims originating from inside and outside Cameroon, and the associations uniting Catholic converts from many different ethnic backgrounds within the colony. Ousman Nouhou provided much information about Muslim unity (interview, 1998). On the Catholic community, see ANSOM (1931). Gendered solidarities could be seen among women in colonial New Bell, as women from different ethnic groups lived and worked together as prostitutes (Lydie Zang, interview, 1999).
6. Valère Epée (interview 1999) was helpful on this topic. See also Stumpf (1977). Similar dynamics have been noted in colonial Togo. See Lawrance (2000).
7. Several historians of colonialism have shown that the adoption of European dress represented an appropriation of power by indigenous populations. For example, see Hendrickson (1996), Martin (1995), and Tarlo (1996).
8. Interviews with New Bell residents Rigobert Loga (1998), Barthelemy Tchope Tassi, (1998) and Michel Ndjock (1998). Evidence of the popularity of shoes among immigrants in Douala can also be found in import statistics for the early years of the French Mandate. In 1921, 4,104 kilograms of shoes, valued at 164,515 francs, were imported into Cameroon. In 1923, these quantities increased to 9,824 kilograms, valued at 415,066 francs. By 1926, the volume of shoes imported had jumped to 61,766 kilograms, valued at 2,080,676 francs. *See Rapport Annuel du Gouvernement Français sur admininstration sous mandat des territoires du Cameroun* (1921, 1923, 1926).
9. The history of alcohol in colonial Africa has been seen by historians as a metaphor for power struggles within local societies as they underwent radical change as a result of the colonial conquest and also as an expression of African resistance to colonial rule. See Ambler and Crush (1992) and Akyeampong (1996). I have argued elsewhere that alcohol consumption in colonial New Bell was not solely a form of dialogue between colonizers and colonized (Schler 2002). Yvette Monga (2000) has argued that in postcolonial Cameroon, popular culture continues to reveal multiethnic allegiances and coexistence and thus provides an alternative to the discourse of tribalism employed by political leaders.
10. At the end of his study of the hardening of ethnic-racial identities and differences in Zanzibar, Jonathon Glassman (2000) reminds us that conflict was not the only characteristic of interethnic relations. See also Ghosh (1995).

11. With regard to the comparison between elite and subaltern historical narratives, Gail Herschatter (1997:27) wrote, "It is not only impossible but also undesirable to try to reconcile them in order to produce a single seamless account. The dissonances between them are arguably where the most interesting mapping can be done."