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Christian Mission Agencies and the Question of Slavery in German Cameroon, 1884-1916

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Abstract

Mission agencies claimed to exhibit enlightenment motifs of progress, liberty, civilization and unity of humanity. This amounted to a paradoxical association between the mission agencies and the anti-slavery campaign in Africa like elsewhere. In German Cameroon, Catholic and Protestant missions engaged in the battle against slavery, while at the same time colluding with the colonial government to perpetuate it in transformed ways. Expectedly, as German missions took measures to surmount slavery, they surprisingly peddled its perpetuation in diverse ways. This paper critiqued the involvement of mission agencies in the campaign against slavery in German Cameroon from 1884 when Germany annexed the territory to 1916 when her imperial rule was forcibly terminated. It opened with an introductory background that contextualizes the mission-slavery question connection. This is followed by an examination of the efforts of the missions in fighting slavery in Cameroon. The paper further discussed missions' dependence on indigenous converts in carrying out their numerous activities, along with their complicity with the colonial government in enslaving and exploiting Cameroonians in ways that were beneficial to the German colonial enterprise. The paper therefore submitted that German missions' battle against slavery was bedevilled by the fact that they gave significant importance to the imperial designs of their government, with little commitment to improving the wellbeing of Cameroonians. Little wonder colonial and missionization exploitation which is inseparable from the modern understanding of slavery was at its highest during the German era.

Key Words: German Cameroon, German missions, slavery.

Introduction

While the campaign against traditional slavery and slave trade were on-going in Africa, new slavery-like practices that were either clandestine or overt, emerged. This modern slavery which took varied forms was characterized by numerous abuses and exploitation under colonial agents and mission agencies. Since the battle against slavery was used as justification for the mass deployment of missionaries to Africa, mission agencies engaged in the struggle to halt and eradicate traditional slavery. In the German protectorate of Cameroon, mission agencies such as the Basel Mission, Pallottine Fathers, German Baptist Mission, American Presbyterian Mission and Sacred Heart Fathers attacked the traditional slavery institution. In recent years, research has increasingly turned its focus toward modern forms of slavery, making it seem probable that mission agencies played a key role in campaigning against the traditional and modern forms of the institution. The controversial collusion between missions and colonial agents, which fed the development and perpetuation of new slavery-like practices in both colonial and mission work, however, has not commanded the same degree of attention.

In their works, Rudin (1968), Dah (1983), Werner (1969), Messina & Slageren (2005) and the like described missionaries as anti-slavery actors. However, as this paper argued, the situation is rather the contrary. Modern slavery-like practices such as free labour, low payment, harsh working conditions among others which heightened during German colonialism, were interwoven in mission work. Apart from training workers for colonial services, missionaries promised Cameroonians spiritual freedom, while at the same time promoting the gospel of hard work, loyalty, docility and submission. These eased the placing of indigenous workers at the mercy of missionaries, traders, planters and government, with little regard for their livelihood. This contrary minority view may be informed by the labelling of missions as the by-product of the cruel and exploitative German colonialism (Woodberry, 2008; Pierard, 1993; Sander, 2011; Ryland, 2013; and Ziltener & Kunzler, 2013). From a historical perspective, I deliver the argument that missionaries while struggling to abolish traditional slavery, they involved in new processes of labour production and exploitation, whose characteristics were even worse than the slavery they condemned.

Contextualizing Christianity and Slavery

Within the context of Biblical scriptures, the age-old slavery institution is not explicitly and absolutely condemned. This probable absence of clear divine rejection of slavery has over the centuries provoked an ecclesiological debate on whether God is for or against the institution. This scriptural debate, which has also gained an academic perspective, has the potential to inform any analysis on the church's engagement in the crusade against slavery in its old and modern forms. In the ancient Greco-Roman culture, the slavery institution preceded the birth of the Christian faith. Generally, early forms of slavery were admirable as the enslaved were not pushed to the political and socio-economic margins of society. This is what (Shelley, 1995, p. 4) referred to as the "slavery of the Biblical world", which was scripturally regulated and accepted in the early Church.

When the dreadful modern forms of slavery emerged together with the trade in slaves, some clergymen built on the Biblical regulation of the institution to justify and promote the practice. This was how the Church became an accomplice in the perpetuation of

unjust and exploitative modern forms of slavery. Throughout the many centuries when slave trade and slavery intertwined, many clergymen justified them on Biblical grounds. This was therefore a period when a wall of separation did not exist between the Church and the exploitative and unjust slavery institution. Amponsah (2013) noted that missionary Jacobus Johannes Capitein defended slavery as “necessary for the eventual salvation of Africans” (p. 431). This Capitein’s defense of slavery is not an isolated episode in the missionary enterprise, given that it was inbuilt in the latter’s agenda, at least for some eighteenth-century mission agencies. Indeed, in eighteenth century Europe, Christianity’s pro-slavery stance was not a masked issue. Such interplay between missions and slavery has been well documented. Cocceius, a Dutch professor of theology, backed slavery by arguing that a biblical rejection of it did not exist (Vink, 2007, p. 468). Existing scholarly literature revealed that this mission backing to slavery was intended to aid missionary work in mission fields. Expectedly, the anti-slavery campaign that gained intensity in the nineteenth century did not immediately benefit from mission collaboration. This was because knocking down of the Church’s subscription to slavery was halting, though a new class of missionaries who were committed to the crusade against slavery and slave trade had emerged.

In clerical circles, there were opposing voices to slavery. Clergymen who attacked the institution preached the equality of humans who were all created in God’s image. They used scriptural texts such as Exodus 21:16, Galatians 3: 28-29, Colossians 3:11 and 1 Timothy 1:10 to condemn slavery. In their submissions, it was stressed that the biblical regulation of Ancient slavery should not be interpreted as condoning the modern conception of the institution. What emerges from this theological debate is the stark reality that scriptural ambiguity and regulation was used by clergymen to argue for or against slavery. But given that the institutionalized church contributed to the emergence of the capitalist system (Beitone, 2012, pp. 531-532), slavery was interpreted by priests and pastors as a source of wealth for church growth. And when Catholic and Protestant mission agencies began to move towards a general rejection of slavery, the latter had already gone deep into the mission enterprise. Hence, turning mission agencies against the slavery on which the Church had fed was not going to be an easy task. Little wonder the fight to abolish slavery and slave trade was largely underpinned by humanitarian motives than moral and theological reasoning.

However, it was within the foregoing debate along with the international crusade against slavery and slave trade that the Church, largely through its mission agencies, came on board the anti-slavery campaign. Expectedly, the missions’ participation in battling slavery was going to be halting given that some missionaries remained diehard supporters of the slavery institution, only engaging in its abolition from a command perspective rather than conviction. In Germany where mission agencies were created and eventually became involved in the slavery question in Cameroon, there existed pro-slavery Christian circles that argued for Christianity’s compatibility with slavery. This view had not completely disappeared when German missions were associated with the fight against slave trade. Among the ranks of German missions, there were, perhaps, some missionaries who still held on to the biased biblical permissibility of slavery. Worse still, at this time, German missionaries were presented as masked actors of the cruel and exploitative German colonialism (Woodberry, 2008; Pierard, 1993; Sander, 2011; Ryland, 2013; and Ziltener & Kunzler, 2013). According to Sander, the German missions in Africa were the direct by-product of German imperialism and were made

to serve the imperial interests of the fatherland (2011: 5). In this same vein, (Ryland, 2013, p.179) established in his study on the Rhenish Mission in German Southwest Africa that “Rhenish missionaries served the aims of empire by aiding in the destruction of Herero communities and lives during the German-Herero war.”

This involvement of German missions in advancing the course of German colonialism along with the holistic nature of the mission enterprise made their battle against slavery difficult. While struggling to abolish chattel slavery, the colonial government and mission agencies, as I argue, developed and promoted new forms of slavery. In this context, missionization and modern slavery became inseparable, tallying with what Dal Lago and Katsari (n.d.) described as the utilization of slaves for “religious purposes” (p.13). While there is huge scholarly disagreement on the meaning of slavery, its existence and mutation over time and space has been recognized. According to Anti-Slavery International (2007), slavery has evolved and manifested itself quite distinctly in different periods of history. So, while the fight against forms of chattel slavery was on-going in the nineteenth century, contemporary practices of the institution were surfacing. In German Cameroon, the missions battled chattel slavery while indulging in contemporary forms of the institution in the manner in which they exploited indigenous labour. In this wise, Falola wrote that “While chattel slavery is virtually dead in most parts of the world, new categories and processes of exploitation have emerged in ways that bring us back to the characteristics that defined slavery in the past.” Without claiming to define the institution, this study understands slavery in its chattel and contemporary forms, showing how mission agencies intertwined with it as abolitionists and perpetrators in German Cameroon.

German Cameroon’s Mission Landscape

The planting of the Christian faith in Cameroon is traced to the 1840s when the English Baptist missionaries began Christianizing the southern region of the would-be Cameroonian territory. In 1879, the English Baptists were joined by the American Presbyterian Mission (APM) whose pioneers started work among the Bulu (Efoua, 1981). When Germany annexed Cameroon in 1884 the English Baptists were forced to leave the territory while the APM was allowed to continue its mission work. With the exception of the APM, the German Government preferred German missions to work in its colonies (Werner, 1969, p.10). Consequently, the pre-war Christian landscape in Cameroon was dominated by German Protestant and Catholic missions.

With names linked to the cities that served as their headquarters, these German Protestant missions were mostly ecumenical and confessional in character. The Basel Mission which was one of such missions was formed in 1815. When Germany proclaimed a “protectorate” over Cameroon in 1884, the Basel Mission, after tortuous negotiations with the German Government and English Baptists, replaced the latter in Cameroon in 1886 (Werner, 1969, p.11). The German Government promised to guarantee the Basel Mission free scope for its work in the territory. This made the Basel Mission to be seen as a promoter of German interests in the territory. When the Native Baptists left behind by the English Baptists severed links with the Basel Mission in 1889, they were placed under the Neuruppine or German Baptist mission (Funteh, 2008, p. 23). The latter took over Baptist churches and sent missionaries to Cameroon among them Carl Bender, Paul Gebauer, C. Hofmeister Rhode, Adolf Orther and Herman Kayser.

Concerning the Catholics, their missionary efforts were represented in Cameroon by the Pallotine Fathers who began work in the territory in 1890 under Father Heinrich Vieter's headship (LeVine, 1964, p. 73). After founding Marienberg near Edea, the Pallotines opened many other Catholic stations in Cameroon in places such as Kribi, Bonjongo, Douala, Grand Batanga, Yaounde (Mvolye), Ikassa, Victoria, Dschang, Ossing, etc (Messina & Slageren, 2005, pp. 146-147). In all, the Pallotines had 157,934 faithful, 17,650 catechumens and 19,576 pupils on the eve of the termination of German colonialism. This was the outcome of the work carried out by thirty-four priests, thirty-six brothers, twenty-nine sisters and about 223 indigenous catechists. In 1912, the Sacred Heart Fathers from Germany joined the Pallotines in Cameroon. It was a great German congregation of Catholic missionaries that was given the task to plant the Catholic faith in the interior of the territory. Its pioneer team which comprised of Fathers Gerhard Lennartz (team leader), August Mannersdorfer, Robert Mannersdorfer, Johann Emonts and two brothers planted their first mission stations in Kumbo and Njinikom in 1912 and 1913 respectively (Ndi, 2005).

It is clear from the preceding that after thirty years of its imperial rule, missionary work in Cameroon was thriving. Apart from the APM, all the other missions had German origins. These German Protestant and Catholic missions were operating mission stations, schools, health units and provided many other services. Apart from performing this holistic mission work, missionaries came on board the abolition of slavery at a time when the colonial enterprise with which they associated was indulging in new slavery-like practices. This amounted to mission complicity in either approving or indulging in these new forms of colonial slavery, causing their participation in the anti-slavery campaign to be controversial. Hence, the sections that follow will critique the engagement of the above mission agencies in the anti-slavery campaign.

Missions as Anti-Slavery Crusaders

The Christian mission enterprise era in Cameroon which coincided with the international crusade against slavery and slave trade was preceded by a well-established history of slavery and servitude. Although slavery was common throughout pre-missionary Cameroon, the forms it took differed from community to community. Before the coming of the missionaries, slavery, apart from its social bases, had evolved into an economic institution. While some people kept slaves for social considerations, others did so for economic reasons. The motive notwithstanding, the commitment to acquire slaves was huge, necessitating the employment of numerous methods: kidnappings, buying, raids, warfare, tribute and disposition of unwanted law transgressors (Fanso, 1989, p.70). Overall, slaves in Cameroon just like elsewhere performed all sorts of duties such as farm work, carriers, tapping, among many other derogatory economic functions. Indeed, the characteristics that defined slavery were exploitative and dehumanizing. This explains why when Britain, mostly for economic reasons, began the crusade against slavery and slave trade; it quickly became clear that these ills had to be abolished in Africa.

From the 1840s, the English stationed their ships on the Cameroon that patrolled the coast. Besides, British officials signed treaties with coastal chiefs abolishing slavery

and slave trade. While efforts at ending slave trade were fruitful given that it was successfully replaced with legitimate trade, slavery rather persisted and even took new forms. Attempts by the London Baptist Mission to eradicate slavery failed as the institution was mutating from its chattel forms to modern forms. This explains why slavery in both forms was still running its course in Cameroon when Germany annexed the territory in 1884. Interestingly, the German government signed ratified the 1885 Berlin Act which among other things called on European colonial powers in Africa to commit themselves to the anti-slavery campaign. Indeed, one of the reasons given by Europeans to justify the colonization of Africa was the desire to roll back slavery. As Rudin (1938, p. 390) noted, the Reichstag passed a motion ordering German participation in fighting slavery in its colonies. It was this anti-slavery context that urged some German missions that were already acting as vanguards of the German colonial enterprise to send representatives to the Anti-Slavery Conference that was held at Brussels in 1890. The Final Act of the conference which commissioned mission agencies to battle slavery was approved by the Reichstag in 1891. In this regard, the fight against slavery and slave trade in Cameroon became a legal commitment on the part of the German colonial government and all mission agencies operating in the territory. In this section, the measures that were taken by mission agencies to suppress slavery in Cameroon are discussed.

Scholars such as Messina, Slageren, Ndi and Ngoh have lauded the work of missionaries in the fight against slavery in German Cameroon. This has so far been the popular contention in the literature on Cameroonian Christianity. Within the context of biblical scriptures and building on humanitarian motives, moral reasoning, and the Western acclaimed civilizing mission of colonialism, mission agencies committed themselves to abolish the chattel slavery that was running its course in coastal and interior Cameroon. This tallied with Brian Stanley's view that there was an unusual "liaison between the missionary and anti-slavery movement" during the colonial era. The Basel Mission that negotiated its coming to Cameroon through the German government made an effort to combat slavery. From its creation in 1815, the Basel Mission had collaborated with the Church Missionary Society that was committed to the anti-slavery course. This along with the belated backing of the German government and the now accepted scriptural rejection of slavery urged the Basel Mission to engage in the anti-slavery campaign in Cameroon. The German Baptist Mission and the Pallottine Fathers equally had such an anti-slavery mission in Cameroon. It has been argued by some scholars that they had great concerns for suffering slaves and were willing to bring the institution to an end (Dah, 1983; Rudin, 1968).

Rudin made it clear that the Basel Mission had among its goals the eradication of slavery as it existed in Cameroon during the era that preceded the coming of the Germans. Generally, the Protestant and Catholic missionaries made pronouncements that slaves were beings created in God's image and likeness and deserved to be treated with dignity. Clearly, the forms of slavery that were practiced by indigenous Cameroonians were the object of missionary criticism and attack. But while the missionaries sought to abolish this age-old institution, the colonial government with whom they had to collaborate in the struggle was rather reluctant to steadfastly attack slavery for fear of antagonizing the indigenous people. It was only after a tortuous debate in Cameroon and Germany that the colonial government decreed the regulation

of chattel slavery in Cameroon. It would be folly to say that missionaries were not at the centre of this debate in which they stressed their anti-slavery stance.

In 1892 under Governor Zimmerer, the colonial government in Cameroon acknowledged the persistence of slavery in the territory. But the government made it clear that the institution in the forms in which the Germans had met it was not a cause for concern as slave and free were treated equally. Simply put, the government argued that it was not necessary to waste time and resources to battle a harmless institution. Consequently, in response to a questionnaire in 1892, Governor Zimmerer underlined how impossible it was to abolish slavery, proposing that no legislation aiming at its abolition be passed by the Reichstag. A similar reluctance to take commitment towards tackling the slavery question in Cameroon was equally expressed by succeeding governors, especially Jesko von Puttkamer whose tenure of office was the longest. As this slavery debate dragged on, mission agencies through their representatives in the Advisory Council remained consistent in demanding an official regulation of the institution. In 1902, a Chancellor's decree regulating slavery was passed; it went only as far as prohibiting slavery for debt and the sale and exchange of slaves. Clearly, therefore, the missions had failed to lobby the administration into outlawing slavery and freeing slaves in practical ways. However, they did press the government to create a station at Jaunde in order to check the flow of slaves to the coast in conformity with the provisions of the Final Act of the 1890 Brussels Conference.

Apparently, the missions, contrary to the anti-slavery movement that was at the origin of missionary revivalism in Europe in the early nineteenth century, were in tacit agreement with the government's argument that the slavery institution in Cameroon was not totally dehumanizing. Rather, they linked the practice, as Rudin (1968, p. 395) noted, to laziness and the absence of a culture of hard work among the indigenes. In this light, they resolved to associate faith with work as a panacea for slavery since they saw it as their duty to teach indigenes how to work. In the thinking of Rudin (1968).

While the government...dealt with the question of slavery, Christian missionaries strove to make natives feel that work was an honourable thing as well as a moral necessity. They argued that slavery...would cease only when natives had learned a new attitude towards work (p.395).

In the Moslem-dominated north where there was an entrenched slavery culture with the traditional elite owning many slaves, the government consistently rejected demands by the Basel Mission and Pallottine Fathers to extend their missionary work into this area in view of rolling back the institution. It is worth noting that the government governed this part of Cameroon indirectly through traditional Moslem leaders and did not want the system to be threatened by any missionary presence. These demands came during the tenure of Puttkamer, and the missionaries failed woefully in their attempt to challenge the slavery culture in the region. So, in Northern Cameroon like in other parts of the territory, chattel slavery was running its course amid fruitless efforts by missionaries to eradicate it.

That notwithstanding, the connection between a new work attitude and the abolition of slavery is ambiguous and controversial, and puts to serious questioning the sincerity of missionaries in desiring the termination of slavery. One may well ask what success was achieved in this fight against slavery via the faith-work strategy, but the answer is obvious. It is no news that indigenous slavery-like practices persisted irrespective of

the consistent pursuance of the “new attitude toward work” approach by the so called anti-slavery ecclesiastical corps. Could it be that this policy had masked intentions that were intended to aid the exploitative German colonial enterprise? More light on this will come later when we will analyze modern forms of slavery in the context of labour abuses in mission circles.

For now, let us end this section by analyzing the efforts of missionaries in rolling back modern slavery-like practices that were carried out by planters, traders and the government. In the Advisory Council, missions’ representatives criticized the cruelty of recruiting labour and fiercely condemned the practice of forcing indigenes from the homes and obliging them to trek long distances to work in plantations under harsh conditions with extremely low wages. Quite often, the missionaries called for an end to forced labour and the improvement of the wellbeing of workers in the plantations. The numerous deaths that were recorded in the plantations due to harsh working conditions is a justification that these labourers worked under slavery-like conditions, though they did not have an official slave status. Little wonder the indigenous people in an effort to curb forceful recruitment resorted to surprised attacks on recruiting agents. I already mentioned that modern forms of slavery such as wage less labour, low wages, and cataclysmic working conditions were in full gear during the colonial era, competing with the old forms of slavery the colonialists claimed to abolish. This was the kind of modern slavery that the Basel Mission and the Pallottine Fathers attacked during German colonialism. After acknowledging that the Basel Mission defended the interest of indigenes in Cameroon, Rudin (1968: 367) observed that it did much in protecting labourers from exploitation by traders, planters and government. In its report to Germany in 1903, the Basel Mission criticized planters indulging in forced labour. Similar criticisms against planters and traders who employed indigenes in their works came from the Pallottine Fathers and American Presbyterian Mission.

Evidently, it was due to the involvement of missionaries in spreading the gospel along with the mastery of local languages that made those who were victims of modern slavery-like practices to take their grievances to mission stations. Expectedly, the planters, traders and government who wanted to depend on indigenous labour in exploiting Cameroon objected this attack by missions on the servitude that characterized their labour practices. (Dah, 1983, p. 149) wrote that this mission’s opposition to forced labour recruitment occasionally resulted in bad relations with the government. They were accused of placing missionary principles over and against the colonial interests of their fatherland. But when critically analyzed, as the final section of this work reveals, the missionaries, planters, traders, and government were all involved in the exploitation of labour in ways that were not different from what characterize slavery. One may then ask why missionaries attacked the cruel colonial labour policy, but the answer, as I argue in the next section, is obvious: they competed in the use of indigenous labour which was replete with modern forms of slavery.

Missions as Peddlers of Slavery

One would think that the belated regulation of chattel slavery would actually take slavery to moribund in German Cameroon, but that was not meant to be. While battling chattel slavery, new forms of slavery, especially wage-less labour, forced labour; cruel working conditions and the likes were on the rise in the territory. These modern forms of slavery were fed and implemented by administrators, planters, traders, soldiers and

missionaries; all of whom may be described as agents of colonialism. And the furthering of the exploitative colonial interests by these agents could not be pursued to attainment point without developing and implementing these new slavery-like practices. In this section, I argue that the missions as partners of German colonialism fitted into this new slavery framework, not only by unconsciously or consciously easing its implementation by planters, government and traders, but also by depending on it in carrying out their mission work. The fact that Catholic and Protestant mission agencies were represented in the Advisory Council where colonial exploitative policies were designed will add more credibility to this daring and unusual contention which associates missionaries with the heightening of modern slavery.

I already mentioned how missionaries, without little sincerity, claimed again and again that abolishing slavery and checking colonial abuses were at the heart of their mission work. The scholarship on Cameroonian Christianity, especially the period under study, by scholars who are insiders of churches that resulted from colonial mission agencies exaggeratingly laud the efforts of missionaries as fighters of slavery in Cameroon (Dah, 1983; Messina & Slageren, 2005, Werner, 1969). In these works, there is a consensus view that missionaries committed themselves to the eradication of slavery. But you are about to read a contrary view in this paper that re-analyzed mission's intertwining with the slavery question in German Cameroon. Mission work in Cameroon was not limited to spreading the gospel. It was a huge holistic endeavour characterized by the construction and running of stations, schools, health facilities, farms, commercial engagements and the like that required an outstanding skilled and unskilled labour force. Mission agencies such as the Basel Mission, Pallottine Fathers, German Baptist Mission, Sacred Heart Fathers and the American Presbyterian Mission that involved in this pluralistic mission work were in need of indigenous labour, perhaps even more than the planters and traders. So modern slavery-like practices in which missionaries were actors emerged and flourished in a context of labour competition among various colonial actors: government, planters, traders and missionaries.

Throughout the German era, the total number of white missionaries (most of whom were Germans) that were deployed to Cameroon by the missions put together was about 275. These clerics who had chosen mission work as their profession were products of missiological seminaries in Germany, Switzerland, and America. As trained missionaries, they received admirable wages and all sorts of allowances for the sacrifices they had to make for planting Christianity in a colonial context. Though well waged and motivated, the fact that missionaries and funds were not commensurate with the tasks they were commissioned to accomplish pushed them to rely, just like other colonial agents, on indigenous labour. This is the context in which the clashing labour interests of missionaries and planters and traders should be understood. Dah (1983) and Messina & Slageren (2005) observed that missionaries had a commitment to protect indigenes from exploitation by colonial agents. Though this ties with missionaries' public pronouncements, missionaries were also in dire need of the same labour for their numerous tasks. In order to out-smart their rivals in recruiting labour, the missionaries through reliance on scriptural texts promised spiritual freedom to the Cameroonians on whom they depended for their numerous works. In his acclaimed work on German colonialism in Cameroon, Rudin (1968, p. 377) maintained that "native Christians had a thorough knowledge of Christian belief and practice and an understanding that they must sacrifice personal advantage for the good of mission work." To put it another

way, the missionaries promised spiritual freedom while physically exploiting the local population to accomplish mission work.

Little wonder they erroneously or knowingly tagged indigenes as “lazy” and immediately streamed their efforts towards what Dah aptly describes as the “gospel of work.” By labouring hard to inculcate the spirit of hard work in the indigenes who were wrongly labelled as lacking a culture of work, the mission agencies, without any exception, succeeded to make those they purportedly converted to Christianity the voluntary instrument of their own exploitation. Controversially and unexpectedly, missionaries, traders, planters and government were beneficiaries of this hard work missiological goal. This was how the huge missionary enterprise that was manned by less than 300 white missionaries became dependent on indigenous labour, which was exploited in the manner that tallies with what Falola described as modern slavery. He wrote that “new categories and processes of exploitation have emerged in ways that bring us back to the characteristics that defined slavery in the past.” Clearly, missionization and modern slavery became inseparable, tallying with what Dal Lago and Katsari (n. d., p. 13) captioned as religious slavery.

We are now able to appreciate how white missionaries harnessed the labour of indigenous peoples either for their profit or for that of the mission agencies that employed them. It is a truism that missionaries did not coerce Cameroonians to work under them. Clearly, they relied on free and contract labour in implementing their various projects in the domains of evangelization, construction of church, school and hospital buildings, running of mission stations, educational and health facilities, transportation of goods, and the numerous economic projects in the spheres of agriculture and trade. But there is supporting evidence that both contract and free labour, as was exploited by missionaries, had many common features, and lacked the capacity to triumph over slavery. It is therefore paradoxical that missionaries attacked traditional slaving networks, while at the same time developing and implementing new forms of servitude. In German Cameroon, as I daringly insist, slavery in the new forms it took was compatible with mission work. Those who offered free labour to missionaries or accepted the meagre wages for their labour were caged in the capitalist-informed Christian spiritual promises akin to slavery. Indeed, the missionaries’ successful continuation of slavery by other means was fed and sustained by the spiritual promises they made to the Christian faithful. The manner in which they treated their workers (teachers, evangelists, servants, commercialists, labourers and carriers) is indicative that mission work was built on the premise that freedom, as espoused in the New Testament, was spiritual and not physical. In this light and as I am going to further analyze, the missionary was not a perfect being in the midst of heathens as claimed by the mission agencies that dispatched them.

In the words of Rudin, “missionaries had their own small plantations and gardens; they employed thousands of workers in various capacities” (Rudin, 1968, p. 377). But Dah, Werner and Messina & Slageren admitted these indigenes were either wage-less or low waged workers. Good enough, Falola questioned the ideology of free labour and poor wages by arguing that they amount to “servile conditions” (p. 18). Surprisingly this was the problematic and slavery-like labour ideology on which missions relied for their works in Cameroon. The saddest perspective of this ideology of free labour and poor wages which was preached to indigenous Cameroonians through the already discussed gospel of hard work was the ill-treatment of workers by the missionaries. Some of these

workers who served as teachers, evangelists, carriers, commercialists, gardeners, builders, and labourers in plantations owned by missions offered their indispensable services under dehumanizing conditions. I am amazed by the failure of most scholars of Cameroonian Christianity to pay any attention to these abuses. Rather, they claim that missionaries committed themselves toward the protection of indigenes from exploitation and mistreatment by colonial agents.

Werner Keller is among the few scholars who, in a daring episodic manner, tacitly acknowledged that slavery-like practices characterized Basel Mission work in Cameroon. He observed that defections among indigenous workers were common in mission work, attributing them to poor wages, free labour and cataclysmic conditions of work (Werner, 1969: 40). He also stated that as far as accusing the Basel Mission for practicing forced labour when he wrote that “Others...had been forced to work for the mission” (Werner, 1969, p. 40). But he questioned why in spite poor or no wages along with harsh working conditions, thousands of indigenous people still offered their services to missionaries:

One is astonished that so many young people decided to become church workers in spite of the low payment, which, as a matter of fact, was not more than a pocket allowance. For a long time, they received only five marks a month. There were some congregations, however, which paid up to fifteen marks. As a rule, the congregations were responsible for remunerating and maintaining their teachers. A great many of them, however, neglected to accept this obligation. As a result, they lost their teacher (Werner, 1969, p. 40).

This indigenous volunteerism and willingness to involve in this kind of religious slavery marked by free labour and low payment was fed by the gospel of hard work ideology pursued by the Basel Mission. I earlier contended that through such a policy, the missions were out to make those they purportedly converted to Christianity the voluntary instrument of their own exploitation. The rule that made congregations responsible for remunerating their workers, as evident in the above citation, points to the fact that members of mission congregations had to bear the cost of constructing infrastructure and paying indigenous mission workers. Seen this way, Etoga Eily’s submission that missionaries fought hard to roll back the exploitation of indigenes and their subjection to inhuman working conditions by colonial agents controversially presents missionaries as anti-slavery crusaders. Eily went on to laud the efforts of missionaries as people who were at the centre of the socio-economic development of local populations (1968: 204). The contrary minority argument I am stressing is that missionaries were “wolves in sheep clothing”, as they fiercely competed for the slavery-like exploitation of local populations in various ways. Walter Rodney (1972, p. 308) is not therefore exaggerating when he said that “there is no doubting the fact that missionaries were agents of colonialism in the practical sense”.

The foregoing is still just part of the story. Missionaries also promoted modern slavery-like practices in Cameroon through what Rudin (1968: 379), just like many other scholars, labels as their “very close co-operation with European exploiters.” It has been established that missionaries served imperialists’ purposes in ways that facilitated the dehumanizing exploitation of the local population, whether or not they saw themselves in that light. As vanguards of German colonialism, missionaries, in open and masked ways, provided conducive conditions for new forms of slavery to be perpetuated by

other colonial agents such as planters, traders and government. This is understandable because there was an apparent unwavering allegiance of missionaries to the German colonial authorities that sponsored some of their activities. It is my contention that such loyalty to the German government, especially the Basel Mission and Pallottine Fathers that were dominant mission agencies in the territory, compromised their anti-slavery campaign. The hard unrewarded or poorly rewarded work of Cameroonian masses who were employed by planters, traders and government was partly dependent and aided by mission work. Much has been written about the role of the missionaries in the training of workers for employment by colonial exploiters to work under derogatory conditions, sometimes under the whip.

Although the missions were already well informed that the capitalist system that was running its course in Cameroon was out to enslave the majority for the benefit of a few European egoists, they still concluded partnerships with government to train workers to serve the system. It is to be noted that the traders who were instrumental in the annexation of Cameroon and the crafting of an administration worked out an educational system with preference given to arithmetic, reading, writing, agriculture and religious instruction. The goal of this kind of education was to churn out semiskilled workers for the plantations, trade, transportation of traders' goods, and for the construction of colonial infrastructure. This system of education that was obviously connected with the modern slavery institution was largely left in the hands of missionaries for implementation. With government financial grants, the missions engaged in education not only as a missiological instrument, but also as a mould for the much-needed labour force. This amounted to modern forms of slavery as the products of mission schools worked as teachers, commercialists, plantation workers, clerks and the like under colonial exploiters in dehumanizing conditions. Rudin (1968, p. 379) seemed to admit this line of thinking when he writes that "missionaries did not give much critical thought to that side of their work which often amounted to a very close cooperation with European exploiters."

This complacency in masked modern slavery should not be limited to the training of workers for exploitation by colonial agents. The training which went alongside religious instruction and the gospel of hard work was also intended to instil in the would-be indigenous servants of the colonial system the spirit of commitment and submission. In schools, therefore, the missionaries stressed humility, docility, acceptance, and hard work. This, in the light of the labour abuses that unfolded in Cameroon, is indicative that missionaries were perhaps in support of the dehumanizing working conditions, constantly preaching to workers that in spite their exploitation, spiritual salvation awaited them in the next world. Little wonder the workers' submissiveness heightened irrespective of their horrible treatment at their job sites. To be added to this is missionaries' collusion with planters in opening the interior as a source of labour. For instance, the Basel Mission set up a mission station in Bali in 1903 at the request of Dr. Esser, a planter who owned many plantations at the coast that were in dire need of workers (Dah, 1983, p. 152). No wonder many Balis ended up in the plantations as instruments of their own exploitation.

Nonetheless, one fact is crystal clear: missionaries in various ways condemned the slavery-like exploitation of indigenes. However, the sincerity of this campaign against colonial abuses by such a partner in the crime of modern slavery is seriously doubted. It is without doubt that the modern slavery that characterized German colonialism grew

over the years, attaining cataclysmic proportions during the long tenure of Governor Puttkamer. This modern slavery, as already argued, was also a defining factor of the missionary enterprise. In this regard, the missionaries do not merit the credit given to them by Dah (1983), Werner (1969), Messina & Slageren (2005) for defending the interest of the local population in Cameroon during the German era. Rather, using Cameroon's case, I subscribe to Brian Stanley's submission that slavery persisted in transformed ways in colonial Africa. He partly attributes this to the apparent failure of the missionary and anti-slavery project to "deliver the pattern of improvement of the African race" (Stanley, 2003, p. 2). It is not therefore astonishing to contend that missionaries consciously and unconsciously aided the development of modern slavery which was a cornerstone of German Colonialism. The symbiotic relationship between missions and the colonial exploiters dragged Cameroonians into slavery-like practices marked by humiliation and suffering, which thrived on the Christian virtues of forgiveness, submissiveness, hard work, and patience.

Conclusion

This paper critiqued the involvement of mission agencies in the campaign against slavery in German Cameroon from 1884 when Germany annexed the territory to 1916 when her imperial rule was forcibly terminated. Daringly recognizing missions as colonizing forces, the study found that missionaries brought indigenous people on board their activities to perform jobs underpinned by slavery-like practices. The analysis also exposed that missionaries, as partners of German colonialism, served imperialist purposes, and in various ways did much to ease colonial exploiters' maltreatment of indigenous workers in plantations and many other services. They trained workers for government tasks and did very little to check their abuse by the planters, traders and government. It is therefore the conclusion of the study that while missionaries reluctantly sought to abolish chattel slavery, the masked modern forms of the institution that characterized German colonialism were too intimately woven into the evangelical, economic and social fabric of mission work. However, as the study further revealed, this heightening of new forms of slavery in and through mission work was more of an intended and conscious goal of the mission enterprise than an accidental outcome of their work. However, in some rare occasions, modern slavery in the territory was an incidental inhuman result and by-product of the missionary holistic approach.

The findings and conclusions of this paper have enriched the notion that the slavery institution has historically developed, taking new forms at different times and places. So far, the existing scholarship on the subject in Cameroon including works focusing on missions hardly categorize this inhuman treatment of Cameroonians as modern slavery. Whether the mission agencies accept it or not, missionaries in their collusion with other colonial agents facilitated and involved in the dehumanizing exploitation of Cameroonians in ways inseparable from the modern understanding of slavery. Sadly, the churches that accrued from their ecclesiastical moulds inherited these modern slavery-like practices, perpetuating them in modified forms and ways. In this era when modern forms of slavery are fiercely condemned, a thorough investigation on the current forms of religious servitude running their course in churches is a worth taking academic initiative.

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