

#GreatWarInAfrica: Honour motivated some Cameroonian soldiers who fought for Germany during the First World War

George Njung looks at the role honour played in the decision of Cameroonians to fight for European belligerents in the First World War in Cameroon.

Until recently, historians of WWI in Africa have paid scant attention to the relationship between the question of honour and Africans' military actions. The motivations of African colonial soldiers have been lumped into the political economy of colonialism. These soldiers, scholars argue, were either responding to the monetary benefits of fighting for the colonial state, they were paying blood tax, or they were being coerced into military service by the colonial apparatus that must keep up with the capitalist rational of colonialism (Parsons 1999; Echenberg 1995). A challenge to the social-labour frame has been posed by what Jay Winter (1992:88) calls "a new cultural history of the Great War." The social history frame tends to present African soldiers as a *tabula rasa*[i] for European military training. Yet, there was little or no military training in Cameroon for the thousands of local soldiers deployed on the battlefield by both European belligerents. Nor was there enough material motivation to cause Africans to kill both Europeans and themselves on the battle front. Although war must rate as one of the central shaping experiences of humanity, the exclusive social history frame has failed to draw (African) military history fully into the body of kirk (Purseigle and Macleod 2004).



Cameroonian unit on parade during World War One

The basic question is how do we account for the excitement of Cameroonian soldiers in the Cameroon campaign of WWI? When Britain and France ignored Germany's appeals to limit confrontations to Europe and chose to invade German Cameroon in September 1914, the Germans only had about 1500 Cameroonians in the *schutztruppe*[ii]. But in no time, they raised a local army of over 10,000 men. Preliminary research shows that many of these soldiers were coerced and conscripted into the German military apparatus. But research shows also that many more might have been responding to "the honour of men" enshrined in militarism: that the honour of man lay in his willingness and ability to take up arms, fight, kill and/or be killed. It is estimated that about 20,000 Cameroonians enlisted for military services in the Allied camp to fight the Germans in Cameroon. And again, these soldiers received little or no material motivation to fight. It must have been the issue of military honour that motivated them.

If military invocation elsewhere has been explained on the basis of intangible factors such as patriotism and honor, is this not also applicable to Africa? As everywhere in the world, both

tangible and intangible forces dragged African soldiers to war. [Writing recently in 2011](#), Michelle Moyd has sought to understand how tangible factors such as monetary benefits, entitlement to sexual pleasure with women, and intangible ones such as honour, determined the positive response of East Africans as men of combat in the German *schutztruppe*. But she also demonstrates how *askari* militarism rested on several interrelated types of honour. *Askaris* were driven by their masculine subjectivities into military service. The point, Moyd notes, is that pillars of self-understanding (forms of honour and identity) fuelled Africans to perform combat roles in either the German military formation or in anti-colonial wars. Evidently, Moyd was inspired, among many others, by the brilliant works of John Ileffe on *Honor in African History*. For Ileffe, honour was the chief ideological motivation of African behavior prior to, during and after colonial rule. He defines honour as “a right to respect”, including the willingness and ability of the individual to enforce such respect. The question of honour appeared to have been entangled in military masculinity, of men’s efforts to gain and defend respect. In many African polities, men were men because they readily took up arms and defended themselves, their women and children against external forces.

I once asked a Kom (Cameroon) notable in 2012 what he considered to be the urge behind Cameroonian combat roles in the war. Without even a pause, he immediately answered “to gain respect”. He opined that soldiery was always a masculine invocation, in which men sought to uphold their honour through fighting. Thus in line with other African soldiers in the war, I propose that we should seek to understand the Cameroonian soldiers’ behaviour in the war, not simply on the basis of material attractions or even coercion during European mobilisation and conscription, but also from the soldiers’ own philosophies of their world and subjectivities to it. To show that honour was more important than material means and coercion, Cameroonian soldiers did not abandon their German colleagues even when they were defeated and left the territory in 1916. At the time when clearly the Germans had no pay for them, over 6,000 Cameroonian soldiers followed the Germans into refuge to Rio Muni in Spanish Guinea. There could hardly have been a more honourable and professional act by a group of soldiers.

These questions of honour facilitated the ease with which Europeans mobilised, recruited or conscripted and deployed Cameroonians for military service in the territory during the war. But they also complicated the situation, in terms of either the preference of Cameroonians to fight for the Allies or their reluctance to fight for the Germans, the immediate result of which was flight into the bushes to evade European recruiters. This is a complicated issue that requires further historical research.

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[i] Or blank slate

[ii] Protection Force

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