ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Propaganda for the Manufacture of Consent that Never Worked: British Media and the 1961 Southern Cameroons Plebiscite

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Abstract

This study is an analyses of propaganda messages from the British newspapers and journals on the British administered UN Trust Territory of Southern Cameroons at the time the people were debating on the future of their homeland. The paper critically investigates newspaper reports on events in the territory and French Cameroon at the time when the people were to choose in a UN-organised plebiscite between gaining independence with Nigeria and gaining independence by joining the Republic of Cameroon. Data was collected from the Buea National Archives and from secondary sources or written sources especially books on the decolonisation of British Southern Cameroons. The study reveals that the British media used all propaganda messages possible to woo the electorate to choose independence with Nigeria but the electorate voted for reunification with the Republic of Cameroun to the chagrin of the British. It can therefore be concluded that wherever the colonists in Africa were convinced and determined to chat their path to freedom, colonial pressure and propaganda could be surmounted. In Southern Cameroons, the forces in favour of reunification with the Republic of Cameroun and the desire to quit Nigeria could not be influenced or shaken by British newspaper stories.

Key Words: Media, Propaganda, Reunification, Southern Cameroons, Nigeria, Plebiscite

Introduction

The colonial and decolonisation history of Cameroon annexed by Germany in July 1884 was amongst the most interesting and captivating because of the many episodes and controversies that attracted the attention of propaganda media. Cameroon was one of the few territories annexed by Germany. It was one of the few colonies that were partitioned following the defeat of Germany in Africa during the First World War.[1] The Anglo-French partition of Cameroon consequently made the territory one amongst the few with a triple colonial heritage. Lastly, it was one of the few colonies where the UN had to intervene through a plebiscite in the British administered portion to determine the nature of independence or termination of the UN Trusteeship.

This interesting journey full of decisive episodes started in July 1884 when the Germans signed a treaty with the Chiefs along the Coast of Cameroon. Few years later, they conquered the interior thereby creating Kamerun. When in 1914 the First World War started in Europe, Britain and France decided to invade German Kamerun and by 1916, Germany was defeated. The war in Cameroon was dominated by Anglo-French media propaganda on the German persecution of the Africans. The belligerents decided to partition Cameroon and expropriate all the German colonies in Africa justifying the expropriation as humanitarian. They carried out widespread campaigns to expose the various reprehensible aspects of German colonial administration and indicted Germany for unbridled atrocities committed against the Africans (Aka, 2002, p.23). This was mere propaganda because Belgium and Portugal were guilty of similar crimes elsewhere on the African continent.

The partition of Cameroon was therefore disguised as a humanitarian gesture to free the people from German atrocities. France was given four-fifth and Britain the remaining one-fifth. When the war ended, the Versailles Peace-Makers in 1919 approved of the partition and the League of Nations through article 22 of its covenant gave the respective

[1] Other partitioned colonies included German Togoland and German East Africa.

portions to Britain and France to administer as Mandate Territories of the League.

When the British took over British Cameroons, they decided to divide it into two; British Northern Cameroons and British Southern Cameroons, for administrative convenience. The two territories were attached to Nigeria and while the British Northern Cameroons was administered from Northern Nigeria, the British Southern Cameroons became an integral part of Southern Nigeria or Eastern Nigeria from 1946. This was in line with the provisions of the Mandate Agreement which in its article 9 gave the administering authorities the right to "constitute the territory into customs, fiscal and administrative union with adjacent territories under their sovereignty or control provided always that the measures adapted to that end did not infringe on the provisions of the mandate (Gardinier, 1967, p.525). British administration was characterised by the propaganda on the relevance of Indirect Rule (Nwabughuogu, 1981) and Hitler's propaganda campaign during the interwar years to turn Cameroonians away from the British and French. German Newspapers and journals such as *Afrika Nachirichten* circulated in Cameroon thus promoting pro-German sentiments (Ngoh, 1987).

The British Southern Cameroons also experienced propaganda during the Second World War. This time, the objective was to get Africans fight for Britain during the war. The war time experiences and the introduction of the Trusteeship System by the UN provoked nationalist agitations in the territory. The outcome of the feelings and desire for self-rule was the birth of pressure groups and political parties clamouring for economic and socio-political changes.

The nationalists in the British Southern Cameroons were divided on the nature of the independence for their motherland. There were essentially three camps; the majority separatists or autonomists who wanted independence for the a Southern Cameroon state, the integrationists who wanted the Southern Cameroons to gain independence with Nigeria and the minority reunificationists who worked for the reunification of British and French Cameroon (Ngoh, 1996). These differences were reflected in the activities of pressure groups and political parties. While the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) of J N Foncha and the *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC) of Roland Moumie and its offshoot One Kamerun (OK) of Ndeh Ntumazah wanted reunification with French Cameroun, the Kamerun National Congres (KNC) of Endeley and the Kamerun Peoples Party (KPP) of N N Mbile wanted integration with Nigeria. The Traditional Rulers acting within the Southern Cameroons House of Chiefs were the main proponents of a separate and independent state of Southern Cameroons.

As the differences and division persisted in the 1950s, the UN decided to organise a plebiscite in 1961 to enable the electorate to choose between the various options available for independence. Even though there were three options, the plebiscite alternatives did not include an independent Southern Cameroon state which many observers believe was the most popular option. The electorates were to choose between independence with Nigeria and independence by "joining the independent Republic of Cameroun". The "Third Option" was not included among the plebiscite alternatives because the British who administered the territory want the people to vote for union with Nigeria which they had worked for since 1922 when they started administering the territory as an integral part of Nigeria.

The British wanted the Southern Cameroons to gain independence with Nigeria because as they claimed, the Southern Cameroons was not economically viable enough to survive on its own. The British also went further to argue that an independent Southern Cameroons given its weak economy was to serve as a gate way for communism in the Central African Region. Furthermore, independence with Nigeria would have served as a confirmation of advantages the British presented in 1922 in favour of a union between Nigeria and the Southern Cameroons. These advantages included amongst others the desire to reunite some ethnic groups divided by the Anglo-German, Nigeria-Cameroon boundary Agreement of 1893 and the

need to let Southern Cameroonians benefit from the socio-economic infrastructures already available in Nigeria (Aka, 2002, p.22). The British stance in the independence debate in the Southern Cameroons was therefore in favour of union with Nigeria and the British were ready to use all means available including the media to manufacture consent and achieve this objective. The reunification debate in the British Southern Cameroons was therefore characterised by British media propaganda about the situation and issues in Cameroon with the objective of persuading the electorate to vote against reunification with the Republic of Cameroon.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the Propaganda model of media control which was introduced by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky in their book *Manufacturing Consent – The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988). The theory states how propaganda works in a mass media. The model tries to understand how the population is manipulated and how the social, economic, political attitudes are fashioned in the minds of people through propaganda. Herman and Chomsky mostly concentrated on American population and media for their research but this theory was very applicable in the Southern Cameroons in 1961.

In their book *Manufacturing Consent*, Herman and Chomsky say a propaganda model focuses on this inequality of wealth and power and its multilevel effects on mass-media interests and choices. It traces the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government to get their messages across to the public. According to the theory media operates as a business which sells its products (readers and subscribers) and rather than performing the function of disseminating news for the public, the news is misshaped, adulterated and reformed from its original form. Herman and Chomsky call the factors which misshape news filters.

In the case of the Southern Cameroon Plebiscite, the British media tried to manufacture consent against French Cameroon, the enemy or target by over emphasising and misshaping the stories that could hamper the cause of reunification. Atrocities in French Cameroon, UPC revolts and assassinations, border clashes between borderland communities and the excesses of the authoritarian regime in Yaounde were blown out of proportion by the British media. Generally the British media carefully exploited the issues that dominated the political debate on the eve of the plebiscite.

Issues that dominated the Plebiscite and Reunification Debates

Both the proponents of integration with Nigeria and those of reunification with the Republic of Cameroon knew that they had five fundamental realities to deal with in the plebiscite campaigns and the results of the plebiscite were to be determined by the way they exploited these issues. In the first place, there was a deep-seated antipathy towards certain Nigerians, especially the Igbo who were accused of counterfeiting, profiteering, land expropriation, adulteration of medicines, kerosene and palm wine and domination of socio-economic activities in the Southern Cameroons. In fact, the Igbo behaved in the Southern Cameroons as colonial masters and treated the territory as a conquered territory. Southern Cameroon was "a colony of a colony" (Amaazee, 1993).

The second fundamental reality that both the integrationists and reunificationists had to deal with was the general attachment the Southern Cameroonians or electorate had to "British ways". Many people in the territory believed that the British system of administration, the common law and "British liberties" were superior to the French repressive rule in next door Republic of Cameroon. There was also a feeling of community with certain French Cameroon peoples especially the Mungo, Mbo, Bakossi, Bamileke, Balong and Tikar ethnic groups that were separated from their kith and kin in the Southern Cameroons by the Anglo-French partition boundary of 1916.

Another reality was the general antipathy towards "French ways". French policies of land expropriation, imposition of chiefs, assimilation, *corvee, prestation, indigenat*, high taxes were highly

criticised in the Southern Cameroons where thousands of immigrants fleeing from these various forms of French economic and political persecutions were settled. The settlers expressed their dissatisfaction with French exactions and their admiration for British liberties.

Lastly there was a general fear for "terrorism" which was organised by militants of the UPC party against the French colonial authorities and the Ahidjo regime in French Cameroon. From 1955 when the UPC was banned in French Cameroon and its militant took refuge in the Southern Cameroons, there were rumours that the UPC *Maquisards,* as these terrorists or guerrilla fighters were called, could invade and occupy the Southern Cameroons at any time. This fear was founded because scenes of the civil war in French Cameroon were horrific as skulls of victims were displayed on roadsides and market squares in French Cameroon (Ardener, 1961).

It was this fifth reality, insecurity in French Cameroon and the fear generated by the possible spread of UPC "terrorism" to the Southern Cameroon that the British media targeted to counter all the arguments of the reunificationists. It was hoped that the general "attachment to British ways" would neutralise the antipathy towards Nigerians, and likewise, antipathy towards "French ways" would neutralise the feeling of community spirit with certain French Cameroon peoples. The reality that needed adequate British media propaganda was insecurity and political instability in French Cameroon and the fear that reunification could lead to chaos or war. The British media was rigorously used to paint a very gloomy picture of reunification and render this plebiscite alternative very unattractive.

The British Media in the Anti-Reunification Campaign

The need for British media propaganda in favour of independence with Nigeria and against reunification with French Cameroon became clear in 1959. In January 1959, general elections were organised in the Southern Cameroons and the pro-reunification political parties, the KNDP and OK, obtained a majority in the Southern Cameroon House of Assembly.[2] The proponents of independence with Nigeria represented by the KNC-KPP alliance were defeated and a reunificationist, John Ngu Foncha, became the Premier. In British Northern Cameroons, the UN at the request of the British organised a test plebiscite in November 1959 asking the people to choose between independence with Nigeria and the possibility of determining their future at a later date. The Northerners in a majority rejected independence with Nigeria as they voted in favour of determining their future at a later date (Ngoh, 1996, p.224). The results of the elections in the Southern Cameroons and the plebiscite in Northern Cameroon were all clear signals that the British needed to work hard to convince the electorate in both the Southern and Northern Cameroons to vote in favour of Nigeria in the upcoming plebiscites.

The British media immediately departed from its positive reporting on Cameroon. The last positive observation from the British media about the Cameroons came in December 1958 when a correspondent of *West Africa* who covered the Victoria Centenary Celebrations between December 6th and 14th, 1958, made the following comments about Cameroon and the celebrations:

> … Everyone must surely have left Victoria with the impression that the Southern Cameroons is one of the most hospitable countries of West Africa…and if the objective of this wonderful centenary was to encourage tourists of the future, then there could have been no better publicity than the celebration of this past week (NAB, Press Release no. 238).

In 1958, "terrorism or UPC guerrilla warfare and political instability were already the order of the day

[2] The KNDP-OK reunification alliance won 14 seats while the KNC-KPP alliance won only 12 seats out of the 26 in the Southern Cameroon House of Assembly.

in French Cameroon with ramifications in the Southern Cameroons but the British media did not see it as an obstacle to tourism and reunification because reunification was still considered by the British as a far-fetched and unachievable dream. Besides, it was not yet certain that reunification was to be one of the plebiscite alternatives. The British media therefore had all reasons to present the Southern Cameroons as an Eldorado and an attractive destination in West Africa.

With the 1959 election results and the rise of the reunificationist John Ngu Foncha to the post of Premier, the British media came up with an arsenal against reunification. It started with some British and Nigerian colonial administrators, political scientists and commentators predicting and *West Africa* echoing their predictions that Foncha's government would not last six months (Aka, 2002, p.234). These observers were simply saying that reunification would be a lost cause since Foncha was the leading reunificationist.

The anti-reunification media war started in September 1959 when the *Annalist*, the official organ of the United Kingdom Information Office in Nigeria, condemned the publication of the Central Committee of the Korean Democratic Youth League called *Information Bulletin Korea Youth* because of an article titled "British and French Imperialist quit Cameroon at once". In the article, Korean youths voiced their support for the reunification of the Cameroons accusing the British for stationing aggressive troops in the territory and frustrating Cameroonian aspiration for reunification. They called for the immediate withdrawal of British troops. In the article, the Korean youths also indicated that "the just struggle for the unification and independence of the Cameroons is enlisting the unanimous support and encouragement of the mighty socialist camp headed by the Soviet Union and the peace-loving people throughout the World" (NAB, Press Release no.521).

In order to discredit this article as sheer communist propaganda, the *Annalist* in one of its September 1959 issues and in an article titled "Communist Distortion of Cameroons Problem" described it as a "piece of clumsy Communist propaganda". The *Annalist* went further to indicate that "both British and French Cameroons are Trusteeship Territories of the United Nations, and it is a fantastic distortion of the truth to describe the present situation as one in which British policy is aimed at frustrating Cameroonian aspirations". The *Annalist* cautioned Cameroonians that the communists were out to propagate the false idea that they were the only true liberators and sincere advocates of colonial freedom (Ibid). The objective of the reaction of the Annalist was to isolate the reunificationists and prevent them from benefiting from foreign Korean or Communist aid.

Besides, in an article in the *Economist* of October 17, 1959 titled "Under which Flag", the reporter questioned the decision made the John Ngu Foncha not to join Nigeria by the time Nigeria becomes independent in 1960. The paper gave the impression that reunification was a leap in the dark. The paper went ahead to argue that it was better for the Cameroons to stay with Nigeria and with British values than to venture in to a new French culture. In fact nothing positive was mentioned about reunification. This was clearly an indication that the colonial media was serving the master in the struggle to convince Southern Cameroonians to accept independence with Nigeria.

Another British paper, the *Daily Express* fabricated a story in December 1959 in which it was purported that Prime Minister John Ngu Foncha in an interview with a correspondent of this paper had declared that he:

> Is no longer interested in reunification and the continuation of terrorism in the Eastern Kamerun might oblige me to make significant changes in my plans and agree to team up with the opposition party in advocating the integration of the Southern Cameroons into an independent Federation of Nigeria instead of seeking the reunifications of the different sectors of the Kamerun (NAB, Press Release no, 609)

This fabrication was not for nothing. It was an

attempt to manufacture and engineer consent as the British media propagandists knew that the outcome of the plebiscite could be determined by the position of Foncha as an individual. This was possible because the Grassland people with 52 percent of the population considered Foncha as their messiah and were ready to accept whatever he stood for. The reason for Foncha's purported change of stance was the escalating UPC rebellion in French Cameroon and the recrudescence of violence at the borders with French Cameroon. The violence and atrocities in French Cameroon occasionally sent a chill down the spines of even some of the most ardent proponents of reunification (Johnson, 1970). The British ordered the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, with a Radio House in Buea, to read this press information for several days with the hope to discourage the desire for reunification.

Aware of the damaging effects of such newspaper propaganda on the course of reunification, John Ngu Foncha had to react energetically and promptly. In a Press Release on December 21, 1959, he denied the claims in the following statement:

> I wish to deny this report most emphatically and to say that both my party the KNDP and myself still abide to our policy of reunification. We are convinced that in seeking to see all the sectors of Kamerun reunified into a single Federal Republic, we are interpreting the wishes of our people and working in their interest (NAB, Press Release no 704, December 1959).

Foncha further states that:

> There is already a growing contact between Eastern and Western Kamerun and I consider that any attempt now to misquote or misrepresent my views or those of my party is to undermine the confidence which the government and people of Eastern Kamerun as well as the masses of Western Cameroonians have placed in me and the KNDP. I therefore would take a serious view of any further mischievous reports made by foreign correspondents and would like this to be a warning to them all (Ibid).

Foncha's reaction was energetic and consoling to the reunificationists. The Press Release was circulated all over the Southern Cameroons and given the widest publicity.

This energetic reaction did not end the anti-reunification and anti-Foncha propaganda in the British media. On April 19, 1960, the British protected Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation announced that Foncha in a press conference in Buea stated that his Excellency the Governor-General of Nigeria had assured him a Cameroon Army would be formed before October 1, 1961 (NAB, Press Release no,773). This was deliberate manipulation of information on a sensitive issue that threatened the new state. Foncha had to counter the information by reporting that he only proposed to the Governor-General that a Cameroonian Force be trained before the departure of the British. The need for a defence force in the territory was obvious given the insecurity in French Cameroon and any poor handling of information on the subject could have political repercussions.

The *London Times* in its edition of April 22, 1960 reported that Foncha was accusing British Expatriates for working against his government by stifling his peoples march to independence. On May 7, 1960, Foncha wrote to the editor of the *London Times* refuting the report. According to him, "it was a careful attempt to disrupt the smooth functioning of his government" in order to weaken his popularity and that of the reunification option which he stood for (NAB, Press Release no, 803). In fact throughout the 1960s visiting journalists of the *Times* and *Telegraph* castigated Foncha in their reports because he was not ready to accept a compromise with the opposition as proposed by the British authorities. Many of the write-ups on Cameroon were on Foncha's dogged character as he would not take "no" for an answer (Milne, 1999, p.418). The objective was to make him unpopular and persuade many of his followers to decamp.

Despite the anti-reunification propaganda of the British press, a majority of the Southern

Cameroonians voted for reunification at the February 1961 plebiscite. This to the British was unthinkable or unbelievable because of the 'noise' they made against reunification and the reports on massacres coming from the Republic of Cameroon. In reaction to the massive vote in favour of reunification, the *London Times* on June 19, 1961 carried a long write-up on Cameroon titled "Storm Clouds over the Cameroons". The article summed up what the British believed were the uncertainties of reunification. It castigated Foncha for precipitated reunification and for taking the peace loving people of the Southern Cameroon in to the chaos of the Republic of Cameroon (Ibid, 432). This attack on Foncha came on the eve of the Foumban Conference where the terms of reunification had to be negotiated.

After the July 1961 Foumban Constitutional Conference that defined the terms of the union, Edwin Ardener (August 1961) in an article in *West Africa* titled "Crisis of Confidence in the Cameroons" predicted that the victory of Foncha's KNDP in the plebiscite was a blind endorsement; that the constitutional arrangements had been taken largely on trust and that the people would in the end disagree with the details. He was referring to what the British propaganda press considered as Foncha's inadequate preparation for the constitutional talks. He was merely provoking the electorate with the hope that they could reject the Foumban accord.

However, during the second half of 1961, substance was given to the British fears about insecurity when 12 Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) workers were brutally murdered at Ebudu, Tombel at the borders with the Republic of Cameroon. The murder which occurred on August 8, 1961 offered the British propaganda machinery with another opportunity to attempt to prevent effective reunification scheduled for October 1, 1961. In the *West Africa* issues of August and September 1961 the British predicted that "reunification would be followed by terrorist invasion of the Southern Cameroons". They gave the impression that UPC "terrorist" were importing weapons and stocking inn their hideouts in the Southern Cameroons (Nfi, 2011, p.55). The reporters invited British expatriates in the territory to send home their wives and all female staff. The official homes of these expatriates were hurriedly fenced and made "terrorist proof" (Epale, 1985, p.197). These were all propaganda actions intended to shape the minds of the people and cultivate anti-reunification attitudes.

At this level, the Yaounde and Buea governments also decided to use the media to contradict newspaper claims from London on the possible breakdown of law and order after reunification. A communique issued by the Yaounde government in August 1961 denounced "with the greatest energy the manoeuvres of the London sensational papers concerning possible disturbances in the Southern Cameroons". The objective of such intoxicating information was the "creation of 'fear psychosis' in order to frighten away foreign capital investment" (Epale, 1985, p.198). The Buea government also condemned newspaper publications in London on alleged insecurity in the Southern Cameroons. Foncha's Press Statement was as follows:

> Of recent, an unwarranted alarm has been raised in the British Press about terrorist activities in the Southern Cameroons and very incorrect accounts have been made by irresponsible agents of certain British Newspapers relating particularly to the personal safety of white families in the Southern Cameroons.
>
> I wish to deny emphatically that terrorism is sweeping through the Southern Cameroons and to say that the reports originate from disgruntled persona-non-grata who, unaccepted and unable to continue to stay in the Southern Cameroons after unification on October 1st wish to discourage every other persons from staying, and to instill doubts in the minds of foreign investors who might be interested in investing in the territory.
>
> I call on the British Press to adopt a much more responsible approach than their agents, in reporting developments and

activities in the Southern Cameroons (Epale, 1985, p.68).

These fierce reactions from Yaounde and Buea consoled the populations. Again, no major incident perturbed the march towards reunification. The Foumban Constitutional Conference, July 1961, went on unperturbed in a zone that was known to be a UPC fief. At the conference, the terms of the union were inscribed in the constitution that created the Federal Republic of Cameroon. On October 1st, 1961, the Southern Cameroons became independent and reunified with the Republic of Cameroon to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon. The feast was grandiose in Buea and many other towns of Cameroon. There was no breakdown of law and order as the manufacturers of consent had attempted to make the people believe. Seemingly the British Press had targeted the wrong issues for propaganda during the reunification debate. The British Press did nothing to combat the deep-seated antipathy towards Nigerians and the Igbo in particular. All attempts to dislocate Grassfields subnationalism that considered the plebiscite as a battle between Foncha from the Grassfields and Endeley from the coast failed. These were the principal factors in the defeat of the British propaganda in the 1961 plebiscite.

Conclusion

This study analysed the various publications of the British Media organs on Cameroon on the eve of the plebiscite in which the people had to vote either for independence with the Republic of Cameroon or with Nigeria. The British Press organs such as the *Daily Express, West Africa, Annalist, London Times, The Telegraph* and others tried to manufacture consent and influence votes against reunification either by exaggerating what they considered the short-comings of the Foncha regime or misshaping information on insecurity that reigned in the Republic of Cameroon. Foncha was presented as immature, uncompromising and unready to take instructions from the British officials. Reunification was described as the "insecure and even dangerous, second alternative" of the plebiscite (Ardener, 1961) and the British concluded that Southern Cameroonians being so scared of reunification would only choose the first alternative, that is, integration with Nigeria. This was not the case because the propaganda messages could not counter crucial realities like Igbophobia and Nigerian domination of socio-economic life in the Southern Cameroons. Furthermore, Foncha's popularity with his kith and kinh of the Grassfields could not be shattered by the press arsenal focused on insecurity. The various newspaper stories were not accessible because of the high level of illiteracy amongst the electorate while on the other hand, the reunificationists benefitted from enormous financial and moral support from the Republic of Cameroon. It was for these reasons that the British anti-reunification propaganda failed in 1961.

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