

## ✓ CHIEFTAINCY, LABOUR CONTROL AND CAPITALIST DEVELOPMENT IN CAMEROON

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Two major prerequisites for capitalist development are (i) the securing of a regular and adequate supply of labour and (ii) the establishment of managerial control over the labour process, so as to raise labour productivity. Their realization may be particularly problematic in areas where the capitalist mode of production has not yet deeply penetrated and where the majority of the population has neither been completely divorced from the means of production nor internalized the norms and values of capitalism. Rural producers, who are still strongly rooted in non-capitalist forms of organisation and value-systems, may resist their entry into the capitalist labour market and their habituation to the capitalist work rhythm and ethic. Chieftaincy in Africa has played a significant intermediary role between capital and labour in the realization of these objectives.

As far as the establishment of capitalist control over labour supplies is concerned, there is now an abundant literature on the intermediary role of chiefs in the 'freeing of *male* labour' from pre-capitalist societies for capitalist development, particularly in the early colonial period: although some initial resistance has been reported, chiefs were soon compelled to assist in satisfying the growing capitalist demand of male labour and, eventually, quite a number of them were able to 'capitalize' in various ways on their intermediary role. Unfortunately, much less attention has been paid in the literature to the frequently concomitant opposition of chiefs to *female* migration and proletarianisation because of women's vital productive and reproductive labour and their subordination to 'patriarchal' controls in many African pre-capitalist societies (cf. Stichter & Parpart, 1988). In 1952, just a few years before the introduction of estate tea production in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon, Phyllis Kaberry published her classic study *Women of the Grassfields*. Throughout her book she emphasizes the contradictory position of women in society. On the one hand, there is the general recognition that women play an indispensable role in society as child bearers and food producers. On the other hand, they are subordinated to patriarchal controls in society. These contradictions in women's position, however, may not be as puzzling as they appear in first sight. Control over women's vital productive and reproductive labour constituted the basis of men's prestige, power and wealth in society. In a recent study on women in the Grassfields, Goheen (1993) perceptively observes:

Women grew the food crops and were expected to provide the necessities of daily life from their farms. Women's productive labour forced men to participate in (lucrative) trading networks; their reproductive labour increased the size of the household and thus the status and the labour force of the male head. Any surplus value women produced over and above that required for household needs and petty barter was in the hands of men, who retained all the profits.

Chiefs in Africa have often tried to safeguard male control over women's productive and reproductive labour in non-capitalist society, as being an essential part of African 'traditions'. Women who succeeded in escaping from patriarchal controls and migrated to towns had to endure social ostracism as 'prostitutes' for the rest of their days (cf. Obbo, 1980). Chiefs continually appealed to colonial authorities to use the power of the state to help keep women under control. The colonial authorities, relying on the chiefs for the maintenance of order in the rural areas, were inclined to side with the chiefs. They responded with legislative and administrative measures to strengthen patriarchal dominance (cf. Chauncey, 1981). From time to time, single women living in colonial towns were rounded up by the police and forcibly returned to their villages (cf. Obbo, 1980; Ruell, 1960; Walker, 1982).

Articulation theorists, like Meillassoux (1975) and Wolpe (1980), have argued that the chiefs' exclusive supply of male labour to capitalist enterprises was functional to capital accumulation, as women's continuous productive and reproductive responsibilities in the non-capitalist sector tended to lower labour costs in the capitalist sector. While these theorists often assume a joint interest of chiefs and employers in keeping women confined to the non-capitalist sector, the actual situation might have been more complex and, certainly, more dynamic. Chauncey (1981) and Parpart (1986) mention that the copper mines in Zambia initially favoured the employment of single male labour. By 1944, however, mine owners agreed that *married* labour's greater stability and productivity more than compensated them for the extra costs of housing and feeding the workers' wives and children. They, therefore, became increasingly committed to married labour. Thus, contrary to the articulation model, the ability of capital in Zambia to extract greater surplus value depended on its success in relocating women's reproductive labour to the urban areas. In reply to the chiefs' complaint that the increasing female migration to the Copperbelt towns threatened both their authority over women and food production, the colonial state implemented a series of measures to prevent the urban migration of women. This resulted in one of the most serious confrontations between the state and capital during the colonial period.

In this article, I will argue that tea estates were among the rare capitalist enterprises during colonial rule that gave preference to female labour over male labour. The managerial attempt to recruit female pluckers on a newly created tea estate in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon gave immediately rise to a serious confrontation with the local chief who feared that female employment on the estate would endanger 'traditional' patriarchal control over female labour and, subsequently, insisted on the exclusive recruitment of local male labour.

As far as the establishment of capitalist control over the labour process is concerned, it would appear as if the attempts of management and state to co-opt chiefs and 'tribal elders/representatives/heads' in the hierarchy of authority over the labour process has been understudied.

In the British African colonies, the first of such attempts seemed to have occurred in the early thirties. These attempts must be situated in a context of growing concern in the British Colonial Office with massive labour migration, poor working and living conditions of labourers, and first strike waves in their colonies. Consequently, various suggestions were made to solve the 'labour problem'. One of these suggestions was the institutionalisation of channels of communication between the workers, the management and the administration. On 17 September 1930, Sydney Webb (Lord Passfield) circulated a dispatch to all colonial governors, urging the legalisation of 'sympathetically supervised and guided' trade unions and the creation of Labour Departments in the different colonies (cf. Meebelo, 1986: 191-92; Freund, 1981: 174). Most colonial officials and employers, however, were openly antagonistic to the development of trade unions and postponed their introduction. They argued that the necessary conditions for the emergence of trade unions were lacking: most workers were illiterate and still firmly encapsulated in 'tribal' organisation and culture. They, therefore, believed that 'traditional', ethnically-based channels of communication would be more suitable in the African environment than 'modern', class-based channels of communication such as trade unions.

In his pioneering study, Epstein (1958) describes the creation of a system of 'Tribal Elders' by the mine management in Zambia. The miners were requested to elect representatives of their own ethnic groups on a Council of Tribal Elders. This council was supposed to represent the interests of the workers before the company and to communicate company policy to the workers themselves. Epstein claims that this managerial strategy of co-opting tribal elders as brokers in the mine hierarchy was rapidly challenged by the workers. First, the miners tended to identify themselves as workers rather than as 'tribesmen', at least in the field of industrial relations, and to develop class-based interests. And secondly, these newly elected brokers soon tended to be denounced as management stooges and to lose any support they might have ever enjoyed. Equally as important as the rejection of tribal representatives was the adoption of organisational forms which gave expression to the class interests of the miners. Thus Epstein mentions that during the 1940 disturbances workers at Mufulira picked leaders from among their ranks to express their grievances. Following the Second World War, the Labour Department assisted the workers in the organisation of a trade union. As noted by Epstein, with the formation of the union came the eclipse of the system of tribal elders/representatives. There were many conflicts between the young, educated union leaders and the older, illiterate tribal representatives, both sides trying to capture the loyalty of the miners.

that workers continue to have multiple identities and loyalties in the workplace: they are both workers and 'tribesmen'. In principle, therefore, chieftaincy could still play a mediating role alongside the union. Nevertheless, they found that the mediating role of chieftaincy in the mines has eroded for various reasons. Tribal heads do no longer occupy an important position in the mine hierarchy. Internal divisions in the ethnic groups have also weakened chiefly authority and responsibility with regard to internal community affairs. Simultaneously, one may observe the emergence of 'big men' in the mines serving as ethnic brokers and the formation of ethnically-based voluntary associations. Such associations not only assume those obligations of the tribal chiefs that were directed towards mutual assistance, they also effect a transition to modern, more participatory forms of political decision making.

The tribal elders/representatives/heads in the Zambian and Ghanaian mines were more or less managerial creations. Their authority had no basis in 'tradition' and their mediating role between labour and capital rested ultimately on managerial recognition. Interestingly, both Epstein and Lenz and Erlmann note that most of them tried to establish, or claimed to have, close relationships with royal families in the rural areas. In fact, they owed their prestige among the people to the fact that they tended to be close kinsmen of chiefs. And indeed they usually described themselves as chiefs. To legitimise their authority among the people, they tried to 'traditionalise' their appointment through the adoption of chiefly ceremonies, rituals and attributes. All this seems to indicate the persistence of 'traditional' political values among ethnic communities in an industrial milieu.

Most authors also refer to the strategy of management and state to involve 'real' chiefs in labour control, especially during critical situations, such as strike actions. These were usually paramount or other prominent chiefs who continued to wield considerable power over the workers. They tended mostly to side with the management and the state and helped quelling strikes. Crisp (1984: 102), for example, reports that in 1949 the Chamber of Mines in Ghana invited a group of prominent northern chiefs to the mines who told the northern workers to ignore any strike call of southern union officials as the latter were pursuing purely political objectives. Sometimes, however, these chiefs seem also to have identified with the workers and to have defended their interests. According to Crisp (1984: 109), northern chiefs, who were requested in the early fifties to assist the recruitment drive of the mines, were becoming increasingly critical of conditions in the mines. Mine managers found to their horror that in their visits to the south the chiefs were actually 'allying themselves with the union' and making demands for higher wages.

What all these authors have in common is that they assume that the intermediary role of chieftaincy between labour and capital has either come

In 1953 the union organised a referendum concerning the fate of ethnic representation. With the strong urgency of the union leaders, the miners voted overwhelmingly to abolish the system.

Crisp (1984: 70) remarks that despite the promulgation of a Trade Union Ordinance in 1941, the first Commissioner of Labour in Ghana, Captain J.R. Dickinson, remained strongly opposed to the encouragement of unionisation. Stressing the importance of maintaining good relations between the administration and the traditional elite, he recommended that as the chiefs were accustomed to representing their people, they should also act as the representatives of workers living within their areas of jurisdiction. He seems even to have believed that this system would have 'all the effect of the Trade Unions and comes to the same thing in the end'. This was not a view shared by the Colonial Office, the Governor, or indeed the workers who insisted that trade union officials should act as brokers between labour, management and government. Subsequently, Dickinson's proposal was quickly abandoned. Crisp (1984: 76) and Robotham (1989: 42) mention that the gold mines in Ghana promoted a system of compound chiefs for each resident ethnic group in the mines. Crisp (1984: 119, 182) asserts that this system was created by the management in order to divert from the real power conflicts within the mines that run along class lines. He is, however, of the opinion that despite several attempts of the management to boost the authority of the tribal heads after 1937, the latter nevertheless remained an impotent component in the structure of authority established in the mining industry.

Crisp's opinion has been criticized by Lenz and Erlmann (1989). They provide evidence that at least some of these tribal heads in the Ghanaian gold mines have played an important role as brokers between the workers, management and (local) government. Moreover, unlike Epstein and Crisp who tend to view tribal elders/heads in the Zambian and Ghanaian mines predominantly as expressions of strategies of control from corporate capital and colonial administration, they stress the ambivalent role of these brokers in the relationship between workers and management. On the one hand, tribal heads tended to be part of the mine management, and, as such, they functioned as controllers of labour. On the other hand, they also tended to defend and represent the interests of the members of their ethnic group and rendered several services to them: provision of accommodation and job opportunities for new migrants, settlement of internal disputes, support in cases of emergencies like sickness, accidents and deaths, and mediation in conflicts with management, local authorities, and other ethnic groups. Lenz and Erlmann even mention that an important Dagara chief in the Tarkwa Goldmines was for some time both involved in the management and the union, sitting on the union's executive in his capacity of chief advisor for the Dagara community. Contrary to Epstein and Crisp, they seem to suggest

'traditional' authority structures. By conferring (non-hereditary) titles to the modern parvenus, they are co-opted in the existing hierarchy and expected to hold their newly acquired offices for the benefit of the community in general. And secondly, in the wake of the promulgation of Decree no 77/245 of 15 July 1977, the 'traditional chiefs' have been turned into auxiliaries of the administration and reduced to the lower ranks of the local bureaucracy.

### **Chieftaincy and Control of Labour Supplies at the Ndu Tea Estate**

During the early fifties the British administration started to promote estate tea production in its trusteeship territory in Cameroon. As a result, the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC), a huge agro-industrial parastatal (Konings, 1993), opened a tea estate at Tole, near Buea, in the coastal plantation area. In 1955/56 a British-Indian multinational enterprise, the Estates and Agency Company Ltd (EAC), which by that time already owned eleven tea estates in India and Sri Lanka as well as mines and a chain of hotels in different parts of the world, was invited by the British administration to examine the possibilities of creating a tea estate in the Bamenda Grassfields, the 'traditional' labour reserve to the coastal plantations.

Eventually, the EAC discovered that the soils and climate at Ndu were suitable for estate tea production. Accompanied by two local parliamentarians, an EAC negotiation team then approached the chief of Ndu, His Royal Highness William Nformi, and requested him to allocate land for the creation of a tea estate. The two deputies tried to convince the chief of the benefits of estate tea production: it would stimulate local development and halt the growing flow of labour to the coastal plantations. The chief told the negotiation team that although he highly favoured any project that would stimulate local development, he nevertheless feared that employment on the estate might have a negative effect on his subjects' loyalty to 'traditional' value systems and authority patterns. He was, therefore, determined to make the actual allocation of a vast land of approximately 1,660 ha for estate tea production conditional upon the company's acceptance of the following rules: non-employment of female labour and the exclusive recruitment of *local* male labour.

The chief's rejection of female employment on the estate was a great disappointment to the EAC negotiation team. It had informed the chief that the company preferred female pluckers to male pluckers. There were several reasons for the company's preferential demand of female labour, including the following:

to an end or has been seriously eroded in Africa. This is particularly due to the emergence of new values, institutions, and holders of power in society and capitalist enterprises which have made this role superfluous. This study tries to explore to what extent this assumption holds true, taking into account the emphasis in recent anthropological studies on the apparent resilience and dynamics of neo-traditional values, institutions and authority patterns in 'modernising' societies (cf. Geschiere, 1989; van Binsbergen, 1993). To this end, I carried out intensive fieldwork in 1991 on the role of chieftaincy in labour recruitment and labour control in estate tea production at Ndu, a small Wimbun town in the north-eastern part of the Bamenda Grassfields in Cameroon. Wimbun society, like most other societies in the Bamenda Grassfields, is characterised by a highly complex socio-political form of organisation headed by powerful, even sacred, chiefs (or *Fons* as they are called throughout the Grassfields) (cf. Jeffries, 1962; Chilver & Kaberry, 1967; Nkwi & Warnier, 1982). Fisiy (1992: 191-92) stresses the 'traditional' and 'religious' foundation of their authority:

The founding of most of the chiefdoms in the Bamenda Grassfields is based on a myth of origin that tended to confer temporal power on those repositories of traditional authority. For the Fon, the source of legitimacy is shrouded in myth and ritual orderings which give a spiritual content to the exercise of his authority. This is because the lineage through which the myth was initially transmitted had contact with the deities and the ancestors. This has safeguarded the sanctity and spirituality of the institution of the Fon...This conceptualization of the institution of the Fon, based on sacred attributes, has tended to sustain powerful chiefs who still maintain a firm spiritual and moral grip over their people.

The chief of Ndu is the most influential of the Wimbun chiefs, and is, for this reason, seen by some as the leader of all the Wimbun. Although steeped in tradition and religiosity, chiefly power is nevertheless subject to various checks and balances. The chief is responsible for, and accountable to, his people. He used to be assisted in the execution of his responsibilities by quarter-heads, councillors and a number of other important (hereditary) title and office holders and seeks regular advice from these 'traditional' holders of power in the area of his jurisdiction.

It is, however, necessary to point out that of late chiefly power has been challenged by two new forces (cf. Fisiy, 1992). First of all, there is the emergence of a modern elite in Ndu, who want to have a greater say in the affairs of the local community. Apparently, the actual policy makers in Ndu are at present the members of the local 'Development Committee', an informal body of people who have made a successful career as teachers, businessmen, party and trade union officials, and so on (cf. Probst & Bühler, 1990). With their knowledge, wealth and influence, they act as advisors to the chief, who is at present a university graduate himself. As a result of these recent developments, the members of the traditional elite, who tend to be illiterate, are more and more compelled to play a marginal role in the decision-making process. The strategy to resolve the emergence of rival sources of power is to incorporate the modern elite into the

- there was a general belief in management circles that, compared to men, women were *naturally* more suitable to tea plucking (they had 'nimble fingers'), more docile (they were habituated to subordination) and cheaper (their income was defined as supplementary to that of the so-called breadwinner, the husband). The company's long experience with tea plucking in India and Sri Lanka had strengthened these managerial beliefs (cf. Elson & Pearson, 1984; Kurian, 1982). The idea of enjoying similar benefits on a tea estate in Cameroon must have been particularly attractive to the management.

- tea plucking had to a large extent become identified with 'women's work', due to the high employment rate of women on the tea estates in Asia and elsewhere.

- the EAC management appeared not to be sensitive to the possibly different position of women in the African and Asian socio-cultural situation. No wonder that the EAC negotiation team questioned the chief why women in Cameroon could not be engaged in tea plucking like their sisters in Assam.

The chief, nevertheless, bluntly told the EAC negotiation team that the employment of women on the estate would endanger 'traditional' male control over women's productive and reproductive labour: female workers would be inclined to neglect food production on the family farms and to become 'harlots'. In the end, however, he agreed that some women might be employed on the estate for specific activities, in particular weeding, on a casual or temporary basis provided that their employment would not affect their productive and reproductive responsibilities in non-capitalist society. There is no doubt that Ndu men appreciated the chief's firm defence of 'traditional' norms, for there is ample evidence that they continued to impede Wimbun women's employment on the estate. Most women, who started work on the estate on temporary weeding contracts, originated from the neighbouring Nso area. They faced a tough time on the estate. Several reports mention that the male workers engaged in various modes of resistance against the employment of these women on the estate. On 8 November 1962, the first estate manager, Mr J.M.H. Barrable, lodged a complaint with the union about the men's obstructive behaviour:

Recently, there were many women who reported that they had been threatened in various ways should they work on contracts on the estate... This is not in the interest of the estate. At certain times of the year, work becomes out of hand due to the quick growth of weeds, and only by employing contract workers can this be held in check.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Mr J.M.H. Barrable, Estate Manager, Ndu Tea Estate, to General Secretary NEWU, dated 8 November 1962, in file CUIAW 7, Joint Consultative Committee Members' Meetings and Outcome.



In 1982, the old chief died. His successor was a university graduate. His installation illustrates the growing tendency in the Bamenda Grassfields from the seventies onwards to enthrone well-educated youths who, it was believed, could blend 'modern' values with 'traditional' values. Rather than adhere conservatively to the local culture, these chiefs would be inclined to subject some long-standing customary tenets to strict scrutiny and eventually modify them to keep pace with the changing times. Well aware of the changing position of women in Cameroonian society, the new chief in 1983 allowed the CDC, which had taken over the estate from the EAC in 1977, to employ women as pluckers on a *permanent* basis. Interestingly, I found that male opposition to female employment on the estate has not disappeared altogether after this agreement between the chief and the CDC management. This is clearly reflected in the records of the shop stewards' meetings:

On 6 April 1983, one of the shop stewards wanted to know why male workers are being terminated but females do a continuous job.

On 10 June 1986, it was remarked that one should be very careful in employing women on the estate because some of them tended to abandon their husbands in order to work on the estate.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, many male workers told me that although they had become accustomed to female employment on the estate, they would never allow their wives to work on the estate.

The persistent male opposition is also manifest in the size and characteristics of the female labour force on the estate. The number of women employed on the estate continues to be small: only 6.5% of the estate's total labour force are women, 73% of them having been recruited after 1983. They tend to be much younger and better educated than the men. These are precisely the women who tend to resist the 'traditional' female roles and patriarchal controls in non-capitalist society. Although they would prefer a job that is less arduous than plantation labour and more in line with their educational achievements, they have been forced to work on the estate for the meantime.

Apart from rejecting female employment on the estate, the chief insisted during the negotiations with the EAC team on the exclusive recruitment of *local* male labour, preferably from Ndu and nearby villages. He argued that this rule would not only halt the migration of local male labour to the coastal plantations, but also forestall the construction of labour camps, common to the coastal plantations. This rule seemed to be of mutual advantage. For the company it was a cost-saving device: it was thus exempted from investing in workers' accommodation and other social

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<sup>2</sup> CDC Ndu Tea Estate, Records of Minutes of Staff Representatives' Preparatory Meetings, 1981-1991.

management, however, has sometimes unilaterally withdrawn some of the benefits to be enjoyed by the chief and even stopped paying the chief the annual 'land rent'.

From the very start of estate operations, the chief and the estate manager joined hands to obstruct the development of trade unionism on the estate. It is not surprising that this powerful alliance initially deterred the workers from supporting any initiative to forming a union on the estate, notwithstanding their low remuneration and frequent maltreatment in the labour process. It was only on 27 July 1958 that a union was founded thanks to the great determination and organisational skills of what Millen (1963) has called an 'outside' leader. Of course, it was by no means unusual in developing countries that a non-employee was invited to create and lead a trade union because of the general absence of educational qualifications and organisational skills among the labour force.

This 'outside' leader was Mr E.Y.K. Barthson who had been active as a journalist in Lagos. Though raised in the Wimbun area, he was not a Wimbun by birth. Living in Ndu at the time of the construction of the estate, he soon became interested in organising the 'exploited and oppressed' workers into a trade union. He was able to enlist the support of a tiny core of estate employees, especially clerical workers and supervisory staff members, most of them having had some experience with trade unionism on the coastal plantations. Members of this group elected the first union executive. Mr Barthson was then unanimously elected as the union's General Secretary. Being a non-Wimbun, he has adopted an ambivalent attitude. On the one hand, he has tried to integrate himself in the local community: he speaks the local language fluently and has adapted to local customs and norms. On the other hand, he has always preserved a certain measure of autonomy towards the chief and Ndu chauvenism.

Following the union's foundation, the chief and management continued to intimidate the workers and to discourage them from joining the union. In October 1962, two union members were summoned to the Traditional Council and asked 'to pay the six important things' (a severe punishment meted out to those who had either committed grave crimes against the chief or violated important laws and customs in the local community). One of them, a certain Jonah Karngong, had previously caused the imprisonment of one of the chief's sons. The chief later requested the estate manager to terminate the contracts of all the active union members on the estate. The union's General Secretary, Mr Barthson, then wrote to the Senior Labour Officer to intervene 'as the workers are not at rest and look very belligerent at this attitude of management and the chief'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Letter from Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, General Secretary NEWU, to Senior Labour Officer, Buea, dated 22 October 1962, in file CUPIAW 7, Joint Consultati

The oppositional activities of the chief and the management could not prevent the growing popularity of the union among the workers, as it continued to champion the defence of the workers' cause. More and more workers accused the chief of 'betraying' workers' interests and of totally identifying with the objectives and actions of the management. The union's successful organisation of a first strike in 1962 enhanced the confidence of the workers in the union leadership and eventually forced the chief and the management to recognise the union.

The strike started on 18 June 1962, after the estate manager had refused to discuss a long list of grievances presented by the union. It was quite violent. There were bloody clashes between the strikers and strike-breakers and between the strikers and the forces of law and order. Following the arrest of twenty-three workers, the strikers assembled at the Ndu market armed with sticks, cutlasses and spears and singing war songs, determined to free their colleagues. Nobody except the union's General Secretary was able to calm them down.

The chief tried to intervene in the strike on 22 June 1962. However, his urgent request to the union to start negotiations with the estate manager at his palace was turned down by the union's General Secretary. He told the chief that if the estate manager was interested in negotiations, he should approach the union directly.

The strike lasted till 20 July 1962. On that day a settlement was arrived at by the Senior Labour Officer who acted as a conciliator. This settlement resulted in various improvements in the working conditions on the estate. It was followed by a rapid increase in union membership. Gradually, the chief and the management came to accept the union as the 'normal' intermediary channel between the workers and the management. Henceforth, the relationship between the union leadership and the chief has usually been quite cordial. There are from time to time consultative meetings between the union leadership and the chief. Some of the union leaders are members of the 'Development Committee', the informal organisation of the Ndu elite which advises the chief on development issues. Others are hereditary and non-hereditary title holders in the Wimbum secret societies. In 1987, one of the chief's sons, a clerical officer, was elected president of the union. His close connection with the chiefly family was one of the principal reasons for his election.

Following his recognition of the union, the chief's role in labour control on the estate has been mainly restricted to occasionally warning the workers to be well-disciplined and productive in the labour process and assisting in

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Committee Members' Meetings and Outcome; and Letter from Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, General Secretary NEWU, to Estate Manager, Ndu Tea Estate, dated 6 November 1962, in *ibid*.

quelling strikes. For example, on the occasion of the workers' welcome ceremony to the CDC management on 9 April 1977, the chief told the workers:

I say honesty is the key to success. That all workers should be serious at their work and that I shall not support anybody caught as a thief. <sup>4</sup>

The state and management have always called upon the chief during the frequent strike actions on the estate. They believe that the chief still has a spiritual and moral grip over his subjects and, therefore, constitutes a valuable asset in labour control.

It is, however, necessary to point out that the chief's role has not always been conducive to labour control on the estate. From time to time the chief has advised the management to study the 'traditional' Wimbun norms and customs.<sup>5</sup> This would enable them to better understand the dilemma of workers who are still strongly rooted in 'traditional' organisation and values: their continuous loyalty to their customs might conflict with the capitalist work ethic. In this connection, he tended to plead for a certain measure of managerial 'leniency' towards workers who had to absent from work because of 'traditional' obligations. The following example shows that the management has sometimes complied with the chief's advice:

During the annual harvesting period of maize in August-September, the men are customarily obliged to assist the women in the transport of the harvest from the farm to the compound. When this period approaches, the rate of absenteeism on the estate tends to rise. On the chief's advice, the EAC management was inclined to be less rigorous in its control of absenteeism during this period. It tended to sanction only those workers who seemed to take undue advantage of its 'leniency', i.e. were absent for more than a few days.

The chief also tried from time to time to promote the interests of his own family and local community (Ndu). This tended to create tensions and conflicts among the workers on the estate. The chief of Ndu initially claimed that all leading positions on the estate, which were not reserved for expatriates, should be occupied by members of his family, irrespective of their professional qualifications. This claim was successfully contested by the union's General Secretary. The chief of Ndu then dropped this claim and instead started to advocate that the management should give preference to Ndu workers over other workers if any vacancies for such positions occurred. This caused a lot of unrest among the workers in the early seventies when a struggle for ascendancy was going on between two supervisors, one of them hailing from Ndu. Although the Ndu man was less

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<sup>4</sup> Speech of the Fon of Ndu on the occasion of the workers' welcome ceremony to the CDC management at the Ndu Tea Estate on 9 April 1977, in file MTLSDILSI/NK/17. Ndu Tea Estate -General Correspondence.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

qualified for holding a senior post on the estate, he was eventually appointed since the management wanted to please the chief of Ndu.

This does not mean that the chief of Ndu has never defended the interests of all the workers on the estate. For example, following the take-over of the estate by the CDC in 1977, he condemned the frequent transfers of Ndu Estate workers to the corporation's coastal estates.

## Conclusion

Contrary to the existing studies of ethnic authorities in the Zambian and Ghanaian mines, this study has demonstrated that chieftaincy in the Bamenda Grassfields has continued to play an important intermediary role between capital and labour. This seems to be particularly due to the fact that capitalism has not yet penetrated deeply in this area and chieftaincy still occupies a powerful, even sacred, position in society. In these circumstances, estate management tended to rely on the local chief for both the supply of land and labour and control over labour in the labour process.

This explanation seems to be supported by my previous research on the role of chieftaincy in capitalist development in Ghana and Cameroon. In Northern Ghana, where similar circumstances prevail as in the Bamenda Grassfields, I found that local chiefs equally continued to play an important intermediary role in the supply and control of labour on the newly created public irrigation projects and capitalist rice farms (Konings, 1986). However, in the coastal areas of Anglophone Cameroon, where the introduction of a plantation economy during German colonial rule (1884-1916) had largely undermined pre-capitalist institutions and value-systems and chieftaincy tended to be a colonial creation (cf. Ardener, 1962; Geschiere, 1993). I found that local chiefs have played a less significant intermediary role in the supply and control of labour than in the Bamenda Grassfields. It is, therefore, not surprising that when the CDC management started to employ predominantly female pluckers on the newly created Tole Tea Estate in 1954, local chiefs did not protest despite the pervasive ideology of patriarchal dominance in their communities (de la Vega, 1971; Konings, f.c.).

Unlike Epstein and Crisp, who tend to view the intermediary role of chieftaincy in the Zambian and Ghanaian mines almost exclusively as an expression of labour control strategies on the part of the management and the state, chieftaincy in Ndu has never been merely instrumental in labour control and functional to the demands of capital. While the chief tended to be a reliable partner in development and to side with the management, he also projected himself as the custodian of 'tradition' and the champion of the interests of his (Ndu) subjects. Consequently, he strongly resisted the

managerial preferential demand of female labour and was inclined to 'condone' his subjects' persistent loyalty to certain 'traditional' norms and values which conflicted with the capitalist work ethic. Moreover, he tended to pressurize the management to advance the careers of Ndu men on the estate, a practice leading to frequent conflicts between Ndu workers and other workers. This tendency of chiefs to defend 'traditional' values and local interests when development projects are introduced in their local communities, was also manifest in Northern Ghana (Konings, 1986).

There is, nonetheless, sufficient evidence to endorse the view of Lenz and Erlmann that the intermediary role of chieftaincy has been weakened in the course of time. There was, first of all, the development of trade unionism on the estate which attempts to transcend ethnic allegiances and to defend the class interests of all the workers versus the state and the management. The chief's initial strong opposition to the union which, undoubtedly, arose from his persistent concern for the preservation of 'traditional' authority and values, proved eventually to be futile as he himself was soon accused of being a management stooge while the union leaders were hailed as the 'true' representatives of the workers' interests. There was also the emergence of new power holders on the estate who could serve as ethnic brokers as well as of several ethnic associations which tend to promote ethnic solidarity and assistance. As a result, the chief's intermediary role has become more marginalised. At present, his assistance in labour control on the estate is mostly required by the management, the state and the union during critical situations, especially when the workers are engaged in collective modes of resistance against their control and exploitation. Following any failure of the union and the Labour Department -the 'modern' brokers between capital and labour- to settle labour disputes, there is a final appeal to the 'traditional' broker to use his still existing religious and moral authority over the workers for the re-assertion of managerial control over the labour process.

And finally, my study seems to confirm the remarkable resilience of chieftaincy and its capacity to adapt to changing situations ( van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal, 1987). The present chief of Ndu offers an excellent example of the present tendency in the Bamenda Grassfields and elsewhere in Africa of enthroning well-educated youths who are capable of 'modernising' traditional value-systems. Soon after his installation, he allowed women to work on the estate on a permanent basis, which was evidently an admirable contribution of chieftaincy to the emancipation of women in the Bamenda Grassfields. He has also established a cordial relationship with the union leadership, inviting it for regular consultations. In fact, he has been able to integrate this potentially rival source of power in both the 'modern' and 'traditional' structures of authority in the local community: some union leaders are members of the elitist 'Development Committee' and others have been co-opted as non-hereditary title holders in the local community's 'traditional' hierarchy of authority.

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