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Gender and plantation labour in Africa: the story of tea pluckers' struggles in Cameroon

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Gender and Plantation Labour in Africa

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Gender and Plantation Labour in Africa
The Story of 'Tea Pluckers'
Struggles in Cameroon

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Abbreviations

BCCI	Bank of Credit and Commerce International
BLCC	Bakweri Land Claims Committee
BNA	Buea National Archives
CCCE	<i>Caisse Centrale de Coopération Économique</i>
CDC	Cameroon Development Corporation
CDCWU	Cameroon Development Corporation Workers' Union
CNU	Cameroon National Union
COMDEV	Commonwealth Development Corporation
CPDM	Cameroon People's Democratic Movement
CTE	Cameroon Tea Estates
CTUC	Cameroon Trade Union Congress
CUPIAW	Cameroon Union of Plantations, Industrial and Agricultural Workers
DO	Divisional Officer
DUAW D/M	Divisional Union of Agricultural Workers of Donga-Mantung
DUTU D/M	Divisional Union of Trade Unions of Donga-Mantung
EAC	Estates and Agency Company Ltd
ECC	Estate Consultative Committee
FADUTU	Fako Divisional Union of Trade Unions
FAWU	Fako Agricultural Workers' Union
FCFA	<i>Franc de la Communauté Financière Africaine</i>
FED	<i>Fonds Européen de Développement</i>
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
IDA	International Development Association
ILO	International Labour Organisation

IMF	International Monetary Fund
JCC	Joint Consultative Committee
JIC	Joint Industrial Council
MAWU	Meme Agricultural Workers' Union
NEWU	Ndu Estate Workers' Union
NUCW	National Union of Cameroon Workers
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programme
SCNC	Southern Cameroons National Council
SDO	Senior Divisional Officer
SODECOTON	<i>Société de Développement du Coton</i>
SONEL	<i>Société Nationale d'Électricité</i>
UDEAC	<i>Union Douanière et Économique d'Afrique Centrale</i>
WCTUC	West Cameroon Trades Union Congress

Gender and labour on Cameroon's tea estates

Introduction

This book explores the relationship between gender and plantation labour in Africa in general, and Cameroon in particular. Although gender has become one of the most dynamic areas of Africanist research today, as evidenced by a growing number of books and articles dedicated to the subject (cf. Imam *et al.* 1997; Mikell 1997; Allman *et al.* 2002; Cornwall 2005; Cole *et al.* 2007), many works on plantation labour in Africa seem to have under-studied or even to have ignored issues of gender.¹

The introduction of plantation labour during colonial rule in Africa had significant consequences for gender roles and relations within and beyond the capitalist labour process. One of the major concerns of this study is to demonstrate that these effects have turned out to be quite ambivalent, being marked by both profound changes and remarkable continuities. On the one hand, plantation labour has offered young men and women an opportunity to free themselves from existing patriarchal control in their local communities and build up a relatively autonomous existence. On the other, it created a new form of patriarchal control, with plantation workers, both male and female, becoming subordinated to male-dominated managerial controls in the labour process. And, last but not least, what some Western feminist scholars doing research on female workers in Africa found difficult to understand (Pittin 1984) is that, though gender relations on the plantations and other capitalist enterprises continued to be characterised by male dominance, female workers never stopped joining male co-workers in a variety of protest actions against the control and exploitation they both experienced in the labour process (Abdullah 1997).

Two tea estates that were established in the Anglophone region of Cameroon in the 1950s, namely the Tole and Ndu Tea Estates, are the focus of the book. A study of these estates is particularly interesting in that one of them, the Tole Tea Estate, employs mainly female pluckers while the other, the Ndu Tea Estate, employs mainly male pluckers. This allows for an examination of any variations in male and female workers' modes of resistance to the control and exploitation they met in the labour process.

This introductory chapter is divided into four sections. The first discusses the changing conceptions of gender in Africa while the second describes the ambivalent impact that tea plucking has had on gender roles and relations within and outside the labour process. The third section investigates the relationship between gender and labour resistance on the two tea estates and the fourth provides insight into the book's organisation and the research methodology used.

Gender in Africa

What is somewhat curious is that despite gender's ascendancy in both academic and policy-making circles in Africa, it is still often misconstrued in African Studies as a synonym for 'women'. I therefore feel obliged to express here my understanding of gender.

In brief, the term 'gender' refers to the social and historical construction of masculine and feminine roles but it also signifies relationships *between* and *among* men and women and their relative positions in society. Gender roles and relations have descriptive and prescriptive elements, describing what men and women do and how they relate, and/or what they are expected to do and how they should relate. They depend on a particular socio-economic, cultural and political context and are affected by other factors such as age, race, class, ethnicity, life-cycle position and marital status. Clearly, gender is a highly variable concept and there is nothing fixed or monolithic about gender roles and relations (Lindsay 2003; Cornwall 2005). Moreover, while gender is socially and historically constructed, its meaning is continually contested and always in the process of being negotiated in the context of existing power relations.

Although female roles have continued to be the primary focus of gender studies in Africa, some African scholars, like Amadiume (1987) and Oyewumi (1997), remain suspicious of the term itself, seeing it as an ethnocentric concept that is ill-suited to the African context. They argue that Western feminists' hierarchical notions of gender difference, as evidenced in particular by their claims of the global existence of patriarchal ideologies and male dominance,² did not exist in pre-colonial African societies. They instead maintain that in the African 'corporate' and 'dual sex' forms of social organisation (Mikell 1997), there is complementarity based on separate but equally significant contributions to the well-being of the community. According to them, cooperation rather than conflict between men and women was a prominent feature of African cultures: it was an inter-gender partnership that was reinforced by colonialist and imperialist threats.

Other African scholars, like Imam *et al.* (1997) and Nnaemeka (1998), caution, however, against a problematic presentation of a harmonious pre-colonial idyll: 'Women's position in pre-colonial Africa turns out to have been neither a happy complementarity with men's roles nor the dumb beast of burden remarked on by the early anthropologists' (Imam *et al.* 1997: 7). Gordon (1996: 29) attempts to arrive at a more realistic picture of gender roles and relations in pre-colonial African societies:

Although both men and women were subject to clearly defined obligations and rights within their households and lineages, elder males tended to have more power over the labour and fruits of the labour of other household members. Women often had considerable autonomy, however that helped dilute tendencies towards male dominance. In some societies women had parallel authority structures to those of men, which allowed women control over their own spheres of activities. Also, because in many societies husbands and wives did not routinely pool their property or other assets, women had a measure of economic independence and control over productive assets.

There may be differences of opinion as to the existence of a gender hierarchy in Africa during the pre-colonial era but there is general agreement among Africanists that the colonial encounter impinged

profoundly on gender identities in Africa and encouraged the development of hierarchical gender roles and relations. Colonial gender ideals were 'coloured' by the sexual division of labour that existed in Western nations and were vigorously promoted by Christian missions and schools: men were defined primarily as monogamous household providers (the breadwinners) and women essentially as dependent and submissive housewives (Mies 1986; Hansen 2002; Lindsay 2003). Such gender notions that stressed women's reproductive and nurturing roles were clearly seen in the colonial educational system. Girls' education lagged behind that of boys and it was usually geared to acquiring domestic skills that would make them better wives and mothers (Parpart 1988a: 212).

One should not overlook the fact that, besides their reproductive labour, women in many African societies were invariably expected to carry out a disproportionate amount of the productive labour. Although they usually lacked any formal control over land, women played a prominent role in food production, a situation that led Boserup (1970) to refer to Africa as a region of female farming *par excellence*. During the colonial period, women's labour tasks even intensified. Following the introduction of cocoa and coffee into Anglophone Cameroon in the colonial era, men became more actively involved in farming in order to control any cash earnings. This often led to the displacement of female food production from the fertile lands around homesteads to areas further afield and male attempts to secure the (unpaid) assistance of their wives in cash-crop production (Goheen 1989, 1993, 1996; Fisiy 1992).

It would be a grave error to assume that African women tended to meekly accept the roles assigned to them in colonial gender discourses. Several historical studies suggest that they contested and negotiated their roles, and were actively engaged in reconfiguring their own identities. Colonial conceptions of domesticity could have led to marked constraints on the relative socio-economic independence that women had previously enjoyed in some parts of Africa, notably West Africa.³ Little wonder then that many of these women, like the Yoruba women in southwestern Nigeria, who had always been involved in commerce, were inclined to resist the idea that Christian women remain at home (Sudarkasa 1973; Mann 1985). In his study of the Friends African Mission in Kenya, Thomas

(2000) argues that female students subverted the ideology of domesticity disseminated at the mission school and strategically used the school to 'delay marriages and control their choices of partners' and move beyond the domestic sphere, using the skills they acquired in dressmaking, needlework and cooking to provide an independent source of income of their own.

Colonial gender ideals seem to have produced several contradictions. For example, those that emerged during the colonial era between the realities of women's contributions to household provisioning and the inability of some men to sustain dependent wives continue in post-colonial Africa. Colonial gender discourses and practices tended to be complex as well, providing African women not only with constraints but also opportunities. In her study of women's participation in public life in Anglophone Cameroon, Adams (2006) convincingly demonstrates how British colonial and missionary policies in the late-colonial period did not seek solely to domesticate local women and create good Christian wives and mothers but also to offer them new opportunities through education, salaried employment, travel abroad and activism in local and international organisations.

As elsewhere in Africa, educational and employment opportunities and other factors contributing to women's emancipation have considerably increased in the Cameroonian post-colonial state. Nevertheless, there are still striking continuities in male dominance in the country (Endeley & Happi 2004). One significant development, however, is that the current neoliberal reforms in some cases seem to have undermined the economic base of patriarchy in Africa. While such reforms have often increased women's workloads, they have also increasingly made women the household's primary provider, as men are no longer able to claim to be the breadwinners and to be supporting their dependent wives and children (Gordon 1996; Jackson 2001; Silberschmidt 2001).

Unlike women, men were rarely the subject of research on gender in Africa. Only recently have Africanists begun to address how shifting meanings of gender have affected African men and how understandings and practices of masculinity have been contested and transformed in the colonial and post-colonial eras (cf. Cornwall & Lindesfarne 1994; Jackson 2001; Lindsay & Miescher 2003).

African male elders exercised authority not only over women but also over younger men. Just as women, young men formed a dependent labour force for their elders' farms and, as long as they remained unmarried, they could not claim a share of the compound and its land or control their own labour. Socio-economic transformations in the colonial period were crucial in changing definitions of masculinity and it is now a commonplace assertion that the new opportunities created by colonialism and commercialisation have provided young men with the cash to assert their autonomy.

From South Africa to Kenya and Cameroon, men who were once forced to provide services for their elders as a route to marriage and social adulthood are now able to earn money for their own marriage payments themselves, generally by migrant labour but also through independent marketing or skilled trades (Berry 1985). Young men have always aspired to adult masculinity but adult masculinity was only the start of men's gendered aspirations. In the process of attaining senior masculinity, a married man hoped to father and educate his children, to progressively exercise greater influence in lineage and community affairs and to build his own house. Wage labour speeded up the process of individual attainment of senior masculine status, with some senior men becoming prosperous and influential enough to be known as 'big men' (Lindsay 2003).

Gender and tea plucking in Anglophone Cameroon

The introduction of plantation agriculture in Anglophone Cameroon in the colonial era had enormous implications for gender roles and relations in the region. It was during the German colonial period (1884-1916) that a plantation economy was established in the region and it has remained a dominant feature of the regional economy ever since (Konings 1993, 2011a). The vast majority of the privately owned German plantations were located on the very fertile, volcanic soils around Mount Cameroon in today's South West Province of Anglophone Cameroon. Their establishment followed the expulsion of the original occupants of the expropriated lands, in particular the Bakweri, into prescribed native reserves.⁴ Although the area came under British mandate and trusteeship authority after the First

World War, German planters continued to operate in the region until the Second World War when the properties of German planters were confiscated and turned over to the Custodian of Enemy Property.

After the war, a decision had to be reached on what to do with these plantation lands. Despite Bakweri agitation for the repossession of their ancestral lands, the British decided in November 1946 to lease the approximately 100,000 ha of land to a newly established agro-industrial parastatal, the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC). Since its foundation, the new corporation has doubled its cultivated area from about 20,000 ha to more than 40,000 ha with the assistance of huge loans from several well-known financial institutions, including the World Bank, the European Development Fund (FED), the Commonwealth Development Corporation (COMDEV) and the (French) Central Fund for Economic Cooperation (CCCE) (Konings 1993).

Plantation agriculture is labour intensive and the CDC – the second largest employer in the country being only surpassed by the government – initially employed between 20,000 and 25,000 workers. At present, it employs about 14,000 workers with rubber, palm oil, bananas and tea as its main crops.

Just as other capitalist enterprises established in the colonial era, the plantations in Anglophone Cameroon recruited male labour almost exclusively for a considerable period of time. The following factors accounted for this situation. The colonial gender discourse tended to describe paid labour outside the home as being masculine, and it gradually started to define men as the 'breadwinners' and women as 'dependent housewives'. Several authors have also rightly argued that colonial officials and employers were initially inclined to support resistance by male elders to female migration and wage employment that could undermine the latter's control over women's vital productive and reproductive labour (Obbo 1980; Moore 1988; Gordon 1996). Some of these authors equally added that colonial employers promptly recognised that keeping women's productive and reproductive labour in their communities would serve capital accumulation by reducing male labour costs (Meillassoux 1975; Sefa 1979; Wolpe 1980).

Although these arguments assume joint interest among male elders and colonial officials and employers in excluding women from migration and wage labour, it should be pointed out here that the situation may well have been more complex and certainly more dynamic. Its complexity is demonstrated by the fact that neither male opposition nor colonial state actions could completely prevent women's migration, especially to regional towns. Urban life presented the opportunity for female migrants to escape patriarchal controls and build up a relatively autonomous existence following a personal crisis in their family status, such as widowhood or divorce, and/or deteriorating economic conditions in the rural areas. Everywhere in Africa, migration had painful consequences for women as they had to endure the stigma of being branded 'prostitutes' or 'loose women' for the rest of their lives (Obbo 1980; Stichter 1985). Ruel (1960: 236-37) reported, for example, that some Upper Banyang chiefs travelled to the southern towns of Anglophone Cameroon in 1953 to round up, with the help of the police, women from their own ethnic group who had been found 'loitering' and to repatriate them. The chiefs, however, discovered that even when they succeeded in forcibly returning these women to their home towns they simply went back to the cities again.

The dynamics of the actual situation are demonstrated by Chauncey (1981) and Parpart (1986) for the copper mines in Zambia and provide evidence that the mine owners favoured employing only single men until the 1940s. However by 1944 these same owners agreed that married men's greater stability and productivity more than compensated for the extra costs involved in housing and feeding the latter's wives and children. As I have shown elsewhere, the German plantation owners and, above all, the CDC management in Anglophone Cameroon became increasingly committed to a policy of encouraging male workers to bring their families to the estates with them in an effort to reduce the high labour turnover and increase productivity. Interestingly, some of the CDC workers' wives also found employment on the estates on a casual, seasonal or even permanent basis (Konings 1993).

Labour migration to the plantations enabled young men to escape from the control of their elders, earn an income of their own and pay their bridewealth. Initially, most workers had no other intention than to sell their labour for a fairly short period of time, according

to a pattern they themselves chose. Having achieved their goals, they were eager to leave the plantations and return to their home towns, either temporarily or permanently. Most of the plantation inspection reports from the British mandate period seem to agree that the payment of bridewealth was indeed one of the most important goals of the plantation labour force (Konings 1993: 61). Plantation labour thus became the medium by which young men could speed up their attainment of adult masculine status. Later on, when workers became more deeply integrated into the capitalist mode of production and started working for longer periods, plantation labour became a vehicle for reaching senior masculine status and, in some cases, particularly after being promoted to the level of supervisor or higher, for attaining the much-cherished status of 'big man'.

From a gender perspective, the establishment of two tea estates in Anglophone Cameroon in the 1950s signified a landmark in regional plantation production. While plantation agriculture continued to rely mainly on male labour, the two newly established tea estates brought about a radical break with this traditional labour recruitment pattern, in particular regarding plucking, which is the central activity in tea production. From the very start, one of the estates recruited predominantly female pluckers and the other predominantly male pluckers.

The first estate, the Tole Tea Estate, was created in 1954. It was owned by the CDC until it was privatised in 2002. It is situated, like most other CDC estates, in the present South West Province and has continued to employ mainly female pluckers. The second estate, the Ndu Tea Estate, was set up in today's North West Province in 1957 and was owned by a multinational enterprise, the Estates and Agency Company Ltd (EAC) until 1977 when it was taken over by the CDC. Since the German colonial era, this region had been a supplier of male labour to the southwestern plantations (Konings 1993). When it was established, the Ndu Tea Estate was the only large-scale plantation in the North West Province and has continued to employ mainly male pluckers.

This striking gender difference in the labour forces employed on these tea estates is by no means accidental. It is the outcome of the bargaining process between estate managers and the male elders of

the local communities about two potentially conflicting factors: on the one hand, the managerial preference for female pluckers and, on the other, the existing patriarchal control over women's vital productive and reproductive labour in the local communities.

There has long been a demand for female labour on tea estates throughout the world (Kurian 1982) and tea estates were, in fact, among the few capitalist enterprises during colonial rule that gave preference to female labour. The rationale for this was, apparently, the managerial belief that, compared to men, women were naturally more suited to performing certain tasks (they had 'nimble fingers'), were more docile (they were said to be used to subordination) and cheaper (their income was defined as supplementary to that of the so-called breadwinner, i.e. the husband) (Elson & Pearson 1984). This managerial demand, which formed a direct threat to patriarchal control over female labour, proved more successful on the Tole Estate than on the Ndu Estate. This was because colonialism and capitalism had had a more disruptive effect on social formations in the South West Province than on those in the North West Province. Consequently, patriarchal opposition to female employment on the newly established tea estates was less vehement in the South West Province than in the North West Province.

Historical accounts of the South West Province clearly show that the local communities in this area were exposed much earlier to education, Christian churches and capitalist enterprises and with more effect than those in the North West Province, and these far-reaching transformations were to form a severe threat to the authority of male elders and patriarchal controls. Moreover, the introduction of plantation agriculture in the South West Province had a disruptive effect on local communities, resulting in large-scale expropriation of land and a steady flow of migrant labour, especially from the North West Province to the South West Province. Furthermore, chieftaincy was typically a weak institution in the segmented societies of the South West Province, often as a result of it being a colonial creation (Geschiere 1993), and it lacked the bargaining power needed to defend the interests of the local community against the colonial state and plantation owners. When the Tole Tea Estate was set up in 1954, the CDC management was not dependent on the goodwill of the local chiefs to supply land or

labour. Despite the still existing, but somewhat weakened, patriarchal dominance in their communities, these chiefs were in no position to contest the managerial decision to employ female pluckers as they had no authority over the CDC estates. In addition, by the time the Tole Tea Estate was established, female employment on the southwestern plantations was no longer a new phenomenon. The gradual employment of workers' wives had been followed by the recruitment of women who lived in villages near the estates. The serious shortage of labour on the CDC estates in the early 1950s encouraged the management to recruit even more women. It is certain that the managerial decision to employ female pluckers on the estate strengthened the process of female labour migration from the North West Province.

Compared to the South West Province, there was a later and lower degree of educational, missionary and capitalist penetration in the North West Province. When it was set up in 1957, the Ndu Estate was one of the few capitalist enterprises in the regional economy. As a result, local institutions and value systems underwent less erosion and the ideology of patriarchal dominance continued to be pervasive in local communities. Chieftaincy, in some cases both reinforced and distorted by the delegation of labour recruitment and revenue collection tasks for the Germans and British respectively continued to be a powerful institution in the centralised states of the North West Province (Nyamnjoh 2003; Warnier 2009). It was still capable of resisting any serious capitalist onslaught on local value systems and patterns of authority. Unlike the CDC management, the EAC management depended heavily on the goodwill of local chiefs and elders for land and labour. During the negotiation process, the Chief of Ndu strongly opposed a managerial proposal to employ female pluckers on the estate. He instead insisted on employing local male labour as a strict precondition for the setting up of the estate in his area of jurisdiction – an action intended not only to stem ongoing male migration to the southwestern estates but also to forestall the construction of labour camps that were common there. In this way, the chief hoped to safeguard patriarchal control over women's productive and reproductive labour as well as to ensure male workers' continued integration into the local community and their loyalty regarding the traditional code of ethics and authority.

The social division of labour has, in practice, never been as rigid as depicted above. On the Tole Estate, management experienced chronic difficulties in attracting a regular and adequate supply of female pluckers. In peak production periods, therefore, some male workers on the estate who were inexperienced at tea plucking were instructed to temporarily assist the female pluckers. An increasing number of permanent male pluckers were then also taken on. As for the Ndu Estate, the chief eventually agreed with the management that some women might be employed for specific activities, particularly weeding on a casual or temporary basis, provided this employment would not affect their productive and reproductive roles in the local community. In the early 1980s the chief's successor – a university graduate – finally allowed the CDC management to recruit women as permanent tea pluckers on the estate.

The creation of the two tea estates in Anglophone Cameroon effected important changes in gender roles and relations. They increased women's participation in the capitalist labour market, promoted the process of their escape from patriarchal controls and offered them the opportunity to establish an autonomous existence. Clearly, female labour migration undermined patriarchal controls in local communities more than male labour migration, since the male elders lost control of women's vital productive and reproductive labour. It also led to a reversal of existing labour migration patterns. In the past, young men used to migrate to the southwestern plantations while women were expected to stay at home to carry out their productive and reproductive tasks. With the creation of the tea estates, women started migrating to the Tole Tea Estate in the South West Province while men had the chance to work at the Ndu Tea Estate in their own region of origin. Male workers remained integrated in their local communities and could therefore realise their ideal of acquiring adult and senior male status (and even, in some cases, the status of big man) through local employment.

As will be shown later in this book, the women who were hired by the Tole Tea Estate tended to be older unmarried, widowed or divorced women who, rather than becoming dependent on family elders for their survival, preferred to migrate to the estate where

they could be sure of a regular monthly income.⁵ These women, who continued to receive less respect than married women and were often branded as 'loose' women, became *de facto* household heads with children to support and thus challenged the colonial gender discourse of male breadwinners and dependent women. In sharp contrast to male workers, female workers were facing a series of gender inequalities, such as continuing productive and reproductive problems outside the workplace and discrimination in the workplace by male co-workers, managerial staff and trade unionists.

Gender and labour resistance on Anglophone Cameroon's tea estates

Plantation labour appears to have ambivalent consequences for male and female workers. On the one hand, it enables them to escape from the control of male elders in their local communities and build up a relatively autonomous existence, which means they have a high stake in plantation labour. On the other hand, however, it subordinates them to a new form of patriarchal control, namely managerial control, and offers them relatively low rewards for their (hard) labour. Their poor conditions of service clearly pose a severe threat to the realisation of their ideals. While young men strive to achieve adult and senior status, women aspire to become breadwinners themselves. Female workers are typically subject to more intensive managerial control and exploitation in the labour process than male workers: the exercise of managerial control is male dominated and female workers tend to experience gender inequalities and discrimination in the labour process. Women also tend to receive less pay than men, enjoy fewer training possibilities and chances for promotion, and are fired in times of crisis and reorganisation. This book explores whether male and female workers are inclined to resist control and exploitation in the labour process.

There used to be a firm belief in management circles, especially on tea estates and in so-called 'world market factories' in developing countries (Kurian 1982, 1989; Bandarage 1984; Joeke 1985; Heyzer 1986) that women were more docile and submissive than men because they had become accustomed to patriarchal controls in their local communities. Clearly, this managerial view that sees women

as passive creatures in a male-dominated society runs the risk of distorting women's actual roles in these societies and ignoring common domestic struggles (Stichter & Parpart 1988).

Various accounts indicate conflicts between husbands and wives over land, labour and capital. Kaberry (1952: 146) reports that women in the North West Province of Cameroon were often at odds with their husbands over their earnings from sales of food, with the latter insisting on their traditional entitlement to women's cash earnings. African women have also regularly engaged in informal and collective modes of resistance to male abuses of power (Cohen 1980; Scott 1985; Isaacman 1990). Individual, informal actions have included refusing to cook or have sexual intercourse, withdrawing domestic and agricultural labour, temporarily or permanently returning to the parental home, spreading gossip about their spouses, migration, calling the supernatural, and manipulation (Parpart 1988a). Collective actions by women have occurred in different areas of Africa, including Cameroon (Ardener 1975; O'Barr 1984; Parpart 1988b). Some of these women's 'wars' in the North West Province, called *anlu*, *fombuen* and *ndofoumbgui*, have been documented (Nkwi 1985; Diduk 1989; Shanklin 1990; Fonchingong & Tanga 2007; Fonchingong *et al.* 2008). These were manifestations of collective resistance by women to male abuses of power and colonial and post-colonial onslaughts on women's access to land and control of the agricultural labour process.

Some scholars agree with international management that female workers are less inclined to resist control and exploitation in the labour process, albeit for different reasons (Safa 1979; Berger 1983; Elson & Pearson 1984). They argue that women's entry into the capitalist labour process has not freed them from their productive and reproductive roles outside the workplace. Female workers are, therefore, inclined to identify themselves primarily as 'mothers, wives and daughters' rather than as 'workers' and to be less committed to workers' organisation and action. Although it cannot be denied that female workers' domestic responsibilities and family attachments may form a certain obstacle to active participation in workers' organisation and action, the theory has serious flaws. As was already mentioned, the majority of the Tole female pluckers do not have husbands and so cannot afford to regard their work on

the estate as secondary or rely on a male breadwinner. Being household heads, most are highly dependent on their own income from wage work and are therefore likely to view themselves as workers and to participate as far as possible in formal and/or informal actions to improve their conditions of service. Married female pluckers are equally likely to do so. They cannot depend on their husbands' wage income because many male workers refuse to make any substantial contribution to the upkeep of their families.

There are also a growing number of empirical studies that provide proof that female workers identify themselves primarily as workers and participate in actions aimed at improving their living and working conditions. Berger (1983, 1992) showed that women working in factories, particularly in the garment and textile industries, were a very militant and politically active force in South Africa, while Presley (1986) reported that Kikuyu women who were employed on settler farms were involved in labour protests from the 1920s until the 1960s. Through an uninterrupted series of work stoppages and strikes that were usually aimed – like the protests of South African female workers – at improving wages and working conditions, these women gained confidence in the power of their collective efforts, which was reinforced by the heightened political militancy of post-war Kenya. Research on the agro-industrial plantations of Bud in Senegal (Kane 1977; Mackintosh 1989), Nigeria (Jackson 1978), Tanzania (Mbilinyi 1988) and Malawi (Vaughan & Chipande 1986) demonstrates that female workers were engaged in different forms of action.

There are various divisions between and among male and female workers, but this has never prevented pluckers on Anglophone Cameroon's tea estates from displaying a large measure of solidarity and engaging in common actions to protect their mutual interests.

One such division between male and female workers is based on the pervasive ideology of male dominance in society. This is evidenced, for example, by male workers' attempts to gain benefits from the male-dominated management in the workplace at the expense of women, their reluctance to work under female supervision, and regular harassment of female colleagues. Gender discrimination and male abuse of power inside and outside the workplace have frequently been opposed by female workers. For

instance, female pluckers at the Tole Tea Estate have forced the management to replace male supervisors with female ones in the female-dominated plucking section. As research on gender in Africa has clearly demonstrated, such a gender cleft has never prevented men and women from cooperating in the well-being of their communities and joining in struggles against external enemies. Studies on female workers in Africa have confirmed that they were willing to engage in common actions with their male counterparts in defence of their mutual interests (Abdullah 1997).

There are also divisions among male and female workers based mainly on age, education, occupation, marital status and ethnic and regional origin. Ethnic and regional heterogeneity could potentially be a source of conflict in the workplace in Africa, with rivalry being sparked by suspicions of favouritism in hiring and promotion or due to disagreements with supervisors or co-workers. Nevertheless and as has been shown elsewhere, there have been few incidences of serious, protracted ethnic clashes on the estates in Anglophone Cameroon (Konings 1993, 1998). Ethnic, regional and other divisions have never prevented male and female workers on these estates from undertaking joint actions against their employers. Their solidarity appears to have been promoted by the sharing of similar living and working conditions, a *lingua franca* (Pidgin English) and good communication on the estates.

Male and female workers have been engaged in various modes of resistance against their control and exploitation in the labour process. Crisp (1984: 57) identified three broad types of labour resistance that are relevant to labour actions on Anglophone Cameroon's tea estates as well. On the basis of three main criteria, namely visibility, inclusiveness and scale of resistance, and duration, he distinguished between:

- *Informal actions.* Informal actions are intermittent, on an individual or small-scale basis and happen in a covert manner. Since the publication of van Onselen's (1976) book on labour protests in the mining compounds of Rhodesia, there has been increased attention in African labour studies to the wide variety of informal modes of resistance inside and outside the labour process, ranging

from desertion, absenteeism, malingering, sabotage, theft, the smoking of hemp and the excessive use of alcohol, to more positive examples such as the development of an individual, anti-employer work culture and the adoption of religious beliefs as forms of resistance to the capitalist mode.

- *Collective actions.* Collective actions such as strikes, riots, demonstrations and go-slows are more inclusive, overt and of specific duration. They usually give workers a feeling of power and control over their own lives. The history – and often the mythology – of past collective actions may shape contemporary workers' struggles.
- *Institutional actions.* Institutional actions, such as union actions, are collective, normally overt and require continuous commitment. State and management have always tried to emasculate the threat inherent in trade unions and have devised various strategies to transform trade unionism from being a vehicle of labour resistance into an instrument of labour control.

Similar to Ghanaian miners (Crisp 1984), Anglophone Cameroonian tea-estate workers have repeatedly taken the initiative against management and the state, moving between informal, collective and institutional modes of resistance depending on the perceived economic and political environment. This has forced management and the state to respond with new strategies of control.

Since the first days of estate tea production, the trade-union leadership and the Labour Department have constantly instructed workers that their trade union was the normal intermediary between workers and management. As a result, workers usually turn to the union in the first instance for representation and defence of their interests. Female workers turned out to be as keen as male workers to support union actions but their level of participation in union affairs has always been conspicuously lower than that of their male counterparts as a result of the patriarchal union structure and women's multiple productive and reproductive responsibilities (Pittin 1984; Parpart 1988b; Abdullah 1997). One should, however, bear in mind that support for the union by both male and female workers has never been unconditional. They have expected union

leaders to act promptly and actively during individual and collective disputes and to produce results. When such expectations were not realised, workers began to bypass the union and resort to alternative modes of resistance, such as informal and collective actions.

It was particularly after the serious national economic crisis that hit the CDC in the mid-1980s and the subsequent structural adjustment measures that the existing contradictions between the union leadership and the rank and file became more pronounced. The union leadership, composed mainly of male clerical and supervisory staff, has tended to be less militant than the predominantly illiterate and less well-educated workers. Union leaders have been more inclined to play the 'responsible' role in the field of industrial relations propagated by the colonial and post-colonial state, relying chiefly on peaceful negotiations with the management to defend their members' interests rather than on militant strike actions.

During the crisis, the CDC management and the state put enormous pressure on the union leadership and shop stewards to postpone their representation and defence of workers' interests and to cooperate closely with the management in the overriding task of economic recovery. In the end, the union leadership proved to be prepared, albeit somewhat reluctantly, to assist the management in planning and implementing two principal strategies for economic recovery, namely cost reduction and an increase in productivity. The first strategy involved drastic cuts in overheads, including a serious curtailment of workers' wages and fringe benefits as well as frequent transfers and layoffs of workers. The second strategy involved the tightening of managerial control over the labour process and increases in task work. Confronted with a dramatic deterioration in their conditions of service and intensified managerial control, the workers rapidly lost whatever confidence they still had in the union leadership. Although they never abandoned their informal and collective actions altogether, there was nevertheless a growing tendency among them to become survival-oriented in the climate of insecurity with intensified managerial control and alternative means of income generation becoming precarious. Increasing numbers of pluckers began to acquiesce to whatever stringent economic recovery measures management introduced for the sake of merely keeping their jobs.

The CDC tea estates were privatised in October 2002 and renamed the Cameroon Tea Estates (CTE). Contrary to government expectations, the privatisation of the tea sector has failed to increase the quality, output and sales of tea or to improve the workers' conditions of service. Significantly, the unions were not consulted on the privatisation and the new management even refused to enter into meaningful negotiations with the union leaders about the introduction of drastic changes to the labour process, including the intensification of managerial control over the labour process, huge increases in task work, a 50% slash in wages and the non-payment of various fringe benefits. Given this situation, male and female workers were no longer interested in keeping their jobs at all costs and started resorting to a variety of informal and collective actions, notably protracted strikes.

Organisation of the book and research methodology

Having set out the most important themes that will be explored in this book, I will now explain how it is organised and how the research findings that it is based on were arrived at.

The book starts with a general chapter on the history of tea production and marketing in Cameroon. It describes how tea in Cameroon is almost exclusively produced on agro-industrial estates and represents only a marginal share of total cash-crop production. Rising costs of production and relatively low labour productivity have badly affected its competitiveness on the world market. Structural adjustment measures and the privatisation of the tea sector have apparently largely failed to change this situation and the tea is therefore mainly sold locally and in the neighbouring countries through formal and informal (smuggling) channels.

The main body of the book is composed of three parts. The first two examine whether there have been any variations in the roles played by Tole female workers and Ndu male workers respectively both within and outside the labour process. The focus here is on the main characteristics of the labour force on the two estates, workers' control and exploitation in the labour process, gender relations and relations with their communities of birth, and the various modes of labour resistance, in particular informal, collective

and trade-union actions. The final part describes the secretive, corrupt privatisation of the two tea estates that gave rise to a dramatic deterioration in already precarious living and working conditions and unprecedented labour militancy.

The present study is based on several fieldwork periods in Anglophone Cameroon between 1985 and 2005 and is part of a larger project on plantation labour in the region (Konings 1993, 1998, 2011a). Various research methodologies were employed. Firstly, I consulted primary and secondary sources in libraries, archives, departments and ministerial offices. The valuable materials on plantation labour at the National Archives of Buea (BNA), the Provincial and Divisional Delegations of Labour in Buea, Limbe (Victoria) and Nkambe, and the CDC archives in Limbe-Bota were particularly useful. Secondly, I interviewed (in English or Pidgin English, the *lingua franca* in Anglophone Cameroon) considerable numbers of workers, managerial staff members, union leaders, government officials and other informants. And finally, I observed the daily activities taking place on both estates. I was assisted by some local research assistants who were familiar with the research areas and proved to be extremely helpful in tracing relevant informants and gaining their confidence.

Notes

1. Some notable exceptions include, for example, Mackintosh (1989), Mbilinyi (1991) and Jain & Reddock (1998).
2. Patriarchy has been defined in various ways. Used in its broadest sense, it refers to a form of social organisation in which there is a structural dominance of men over women. It may take different cultural forms and expressions and be subject to changes over time. See Bozzoli (1983) and Gordon (1996).
3. For a different situation in Uganda and other East African countries, see Bantebiya-Kyomuhendo & McIntosh (2006).
4. For the Bakweri, see, for instance, Courade (1981/82), Geschiere (1993), and Ardener (1996).
5. Sender & Oya (2007) also argue that there is a significant relationship between labour market participation and female divorce or widowhood in rural Mozambique.

Production and marketing policies on Cameroon's Tea Estates

Introduction

This chapter provides a brief historical review of tea production and marketing in Cameroon. The first section argues that tea production in Cameroon has some distinctive features. First of all, it started quite late in the colonially established plantation economy in the area and then remained concentrated in the Anglophone part of the country for a long time. As a multinational enterprise, the Estates and Agency Company Ltd (EAC) was initially involved in regional tea production before the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC), the huge agro-industrial parastatal enterprise that had been operating in the region since 1946/47 came to gradually monopolise tea production until 2002 when the sector was privatised. The second section of this chapter discusses how locally produced tea was not competitive on the world market due to its high production costs, which resulted in local producers being compelled to sell an increasing proportion of their output on domestic and West and Central African markets.

Tea Production in Cameroon

Anglophone Cameroon has always been the centre of tea production in Cameroon. The political history of the region since European occupation has, however, been complex (Ngoh 1996, 2001; Konings & Nyamnjoh 2003). It belonged to the German Kamerun Protectorate from 1884 to 1916 and was occupied by British forces during the First World War. After that, it became a British Mandate and subsequently a British Trust territory until independence and reunification in 1961. Being part of what was variously called the

‘Cameroons Province’ or ‘Southern Cameroons’ during the British era, it was then integrated into the administrative system of Nigeria. The 1954 Nigerian Constitution, which outlined the framework for a Federal Nigeria, gave it a quasi-federal status and a limited degree of self-government within the Federation of Nigeria. It attained full regional status in 1958, which placed it on parity with the other regions in the federation. In a United Nations-supervised plebiscite in 1961, it voted for reunification with Francophone Cameroon and joined the Federal Republic of Cameroon. Following reunification, the Southern Cameroons was renamed the Federated State of West Cameroon and the former French Cameroon was called the Federated State of East Cameroon. Eleven years later, in 1972, the Federation was abolished and replaced by a unitary system of government, namely the United Republic of Cameroon.¹ The erstwhile Federated State of West Cameroon was divided into two provinces: the South West Province and the North West Province.

A large number of large-scale private plantations were established during the German colonial period, mainly around Mount Cameroon in the present Fako Division of the South West Province (Epale 1985). German planters cultivated a variety of crops, including cocoa, rubber, palm products, kola, tobacco and coffee. Apparently, they also considered growing tea on a plantation basis. Rudin (1938) mentions that a tea seed bed was constructed in the famous Botanical Gardens in Victoria (present-day Limbe) on the coast. However by the end of the German colonial period, no tea estate had yet become operational.

After the First World War, the British authorities allowed German planters to go on producing until the Second World War but never encouraged them to grow tea. During the interwar period, the only British contribution to tea development was the creation of an experimental farm at Tole, a village on the slopes of Mount Cameroon near Buea, that used seeds from the Victoria Botanical Gardens. Covering only 66 acres, the estate did not constitute an economically viable unit and the original plants grew into trees as little was done with them. Of great significance, however, is the fact that the 1928 planting formed the basis for the subsequent tea cultivation in the area, with most of the original trees being used for their seeds.

The Second World War boosted local tea cultivation. Tea growing came to be considered a 'war effort production' and helped alleviate the local tea shortages caused by the war. To this end, tea production at Tole was expanded for some years and although this renewed interest was important during the war period, production nevertheless remained modest, with output rising from a few thousand pounds in 1943 to £26,208 in 1947 (Bederman 1967). The Second World War also encouraged tea cultivation indirectly. The confiscation of German-owned plantations at the start of the war led to the founding of the CDC in 1946. This newly created parastatal was to become the first agro-industrial enterprise in the country engaged in tea production and it eventually acquired a monopoly in domestic tea production. Compared to the corporation's other crops, notably rubber, palm oil and bananas, tea has always been a minor crop (Konings 1993: 51-53).

After its foundation, the government ordered the CDC to produce tea on the Tole Tea Estate, which had started during the Second World War. In early 1948, however, the CDC's management decided to discontinue production until Tole was economically viable and it was not until 1954 that it started redeveloping the estate as part of its policy to diversify estate production.

While the local authorities continued promoting local tea development, they became somewhat sceptical about the CDC's renewed involvement in tea production. Basung (1975) provides ample proof of the favourable conditions for tea production in the region. Following the British Cameroon's attainment of a limited degree of self-government in 1954, the local authorities even asked the Nigerian Federal Government to allocate land for development projects in the area, including the establishment of tea estates. At the same time, however, they had come to realise that the CDC barely had the funds and experience required to successfully engage in tea production, and they therefore rejected the corporation's redevelopment efforts and strongly recommended that foreign tea companies be invited to reactivate the Tole Estate:

The Executive Council notes with particular regret that there is a danger that the corporation's investment in Tole will be wasted. The council also notes the following considerations:

- (a) the prospects of the corporation securing additional capital in substantial quantities and on favourable terms appears slight, especially in the present market conditions.
- (b) such capital as the corporation receives can all be usefully employed in the development of crops with which the corporation has considerable experience, i.e. bananas, oil palm, rubber, cocoa and pepper; and
- (c) the corporation has no reservoir of experience in tea estate management, and in all circumstances will be better advised to concentrate its scarce capital resources upon the crops in which it has got experience.

Accordingly, the Executive Council urges the corporation to give consideration in its meeting at the end of March to inviting private enterprise to carry on at Tole farm where the corporation has left off. In this connection, the council notes that Mr John Arbuthnot, MP, who recently visited the estate and who himself has tea interests in Ceylon, considered that either his own, or some other, company might very well be interested in operating the estate with possibly a separate Cameroons company in which the Southern Cameroons Production Development Board would be a shareholder. I am to say that the Southern Cameroon Government would welcome such an arrangement, which would clearly be of benefit to the people of the territory, and would save the development so far carried out at Tole.²

In the end, however, the Federal Government of Nigeria sided with the CDC management, arguing that its tea development plan would contribute to the diversification required in the corporation's production and to its long-term economic viability. The government went on to allocate the funds required to continue the redevelopment of the Tole Estate,³ which was back in business by 1958 after ten years of suspended production. In the same year, a tea factory was completed that processed 12 tonnes of tea in its first year of operation (see Table 2.1) and by the beginning of the 1960s, the estate had reached its planned target of 320-340 ha.

Anxious to promote tea development in the area, the government decided to investigate the possibility of creating estates outside the southwestern plantation region. Towards the end of 1956, it invited an eminent tea specialist, Dr T. Eden, to tour the Bamenda Grassfields (today's North West Province) and report on the tea-growing potential of the region. His report was favourable but was predicated on the future development of communications between the Bamenda Grassfields and the coast. It concluded that 'fairly extensive areas' of land, mainly in the eastern part of the Bamenda Grassfields, were quite suitable for growing tea.⁴ During Dr Eden's investigations, a lease for 1,600 ha was granted by the chief of Ndu, a small town between Kumbo and Nkambe in the eastern part of the Bamenda Grassfields, to a multinational enterprise, the Estates and Agency Company Ltd (EAC), which launched its activities in January 1957. At the time, it was the only large-scale plantation in the Bamenda Grassfields,⁵ an area of 416 ha that had been planned between 1957 and 1961, prior to the opening of a factory on the Ndu Estate in 1962.

After independence and reunification in 1961, the new political leaders were also interested in increasing tea production in an attempt to accumulate capital and diversify agricultural production. Several specialists were commissioned to conduct survey missions with a view to finding sites suitable for implementing tea projects although initially these missions were confined to Anglophone Cameroon. Mr Lhomme-Desages, a consultant from the *Institut Française du Café, du Cacao et Autres Plantes Stimulantes* (IFCC), was the first expert to investigate a number of sites in both federated states and his report was important for future developments in the country's tea production (Lhomme-Desages 1964). On the basis of his findings, the Federal Government invited a German company, the *Agrar- und Hydrotechnik GMBH*, to undertake a feasibility study in 1966 on the setting up of a tea estate at Djuttitsa near Dschang in the Bamileke area (Njike 1983; Konings 1986b).⁶ The conclusions were positive and construction of the estate began in 1977. It is the only tea estate in the Francophone part of the country. Just as the two tea estates in the Anglophone area, the Djuttitsa Tea Estate used to be owned by the CDC.

Table 2.1 *The CDC tea estates' cultivated area, production and trading accounts, 1947-1995*

YEAR	AREA CULTIVATED (Ha)	CROP PRODUCTION (Metric tonnes)	CROP TRADING ACCOUNTS (FCFA million)
1947		12	
1948		1	
1954	69		
1955	49		
1956	61		
1957	85		
1958	108	12	
1959	153	24	
1960	243	46	
1961	333	84	
1962	344	102	
1963	344	149	
1964	344	189	
1965	320	319	
1966	320	428	
1967	322	478	155.1
1968	386	662	184.8
1969	387	445	
1970		628	
1971	331	603	297.0
1972	322	711	246.0
1973	322	796	279.2
1974	325	872	301.7
1975	326	935	346.1
1976	326	975	344.0
1977		1,003	510.0
1978		1,710	1,113.1
1979		2,015	1,200.6
1980	1,083	1,950	1,190.0
1981	1,149	1,882	1,288.6
1982	1,233	2,131	1,702.6
1983	1,382	1,801	1,421.5
1984	1,505	2,103	1,784.0
1985	1,465	2,299	2,625.0
1986	1,508	3,206	3,214.0
1987	1,507	2,797	1,855.0
1988	1,507	2,882	1,466.0
1989	1,507	2,452	1,474.0
1990	1,509	2,407	1,927.0
1991	1,509	2,941	
1992	1,509	3,351	2,676.0
1993	1,512	3,417	1,350.0
1994	1,512	3,903	1,593.0
1995	1,574	3,568	2,274.0

Source: CDC Annual Reports and Accounts, 1947-1995

The management of the CDC and the EAC seemed equally interested in expanding tea production. For example, in 1964, the CDC management requested that a team of experts, under the leadership of Mr R.J.M. Swynnerton from the Commonwealth Development Corporation (COMDEV), draft a development plan for the corporation, including a tea development programme. This was to be included in the corporation's application for long-term loans from the World Bank and other international financial institutions.

The most salient recommendations in the Swynnerton Mission Report on tea production were that there should be a considerable expansion of production from 320/340 ha to about 1,200 ha in the period of the plan (1964-1975) and that smallholder schemes connected with the CDC estates and its factories be introduced. The latter was not a new idea in the history of tea production in Cameroon as both the CDC and the EAC had previously proposed such projects in the Bamenda Grassfields.⁷ However the Swynnerton Mission advised the CDC management to adopt a smallholder programme as an essential element of its development policy. This was not altogether surprising as Swynnerton himself had been the architect of tea smallholders' schemes in Kenya (Heyer 1981; von Bülow & Sörenson 1988). These recommendations were eventually incorporated to a large extent in the CAMDEV I programme (1967-1974), the corporation's first long-term development programme that was executed with substantial loans and credits from the World Bank, the IDA and the FED (Konings 1993). Three tea projects were included: a 200 ha smallholder tea project at Bulu, a village a few miles from the Tole Estate, with output to be processed by the Tole tea factory; and two agro-industrial estates each of 400 ha near Kumba (one at Tombel and the other at Essosong).

This programme was a complete failure and the three schemes had to be abandoned because the locations chosen proved unsuited for tea cultivation and the economic conditions for tea production had meanwhile deteriorated:

On the whole, it appears that economic conditions for tea production have been deteriorating noticeably in the last few years following the high increase in production costs, while tea prices remained stationary and will probably not rise in the long or medium term.

Under these circumstances, only projects of a comparatively large size, implemented by using planting material obtained from cuttings yielding more than two tonnes of dry tea per ha, would permit to ensure a satisfactory return.⁸

In 1968, the CDC management estimated the cost of production for 1 kg of tea on an estate of 400 ha at FCFA 264, which far exceeded any expected market price of FCFA 205. It was rightly concluded that production on estates of limited size was no longer profitable. Interestingly in the light of these economic conditions, field studies conducted near Bangangte and Mbouda in the Bamileke area in that same year (1968) recommended a focus on smallholder production rather than estate production in the study area, on the assumption that production costs on smallholder schemes would be lower than on estates.⁹ However, it soon became clear that these schemes could not be implemented because the local population strongly opposed tea cultivation as it would compete with their robusta coffee cultivation, which was less labour intensive and more profitable.

Field studies conducted in the Santa area of the Bamenda Grassfields in 1969/70 adopted an approach different from that chosen for the Bangangte and Mbouda areas. They envisaged two projects: one large-scale estate and one smallholder scheme. This plan eventually had to be abandoned too because it proved impossible to locate an unoccupied site in the Santa area that would allow the development of an estate of adequate size.

After the founding of the United Republic of Cameroon in 1972, there were no new developments in local tea production until 1977 when the CDC gained a monopoly on production in the country. It was asked by the government to take over and run the Ndu Estate and to set up a new tea estate at Djuttitsa near Dschang. The EAC had been forced to sell its estate to the government at the end of 1976 as a result of managerial, financial and marketing problems as well as serious labour unrest (see Chapter 9).

Understandably, government calls on the CDC to set up a tea estate at Djuttitsa were widely seen as problematic. First of all, many observers were puzzled as to why the government had decided to grant the CDC a vast land concession (1,660 ha) for tea production

in an area that was so densely populated (250 inhabitants per km² in 1976) and vitally important to national food and coffee production. Few believed that the wage employment created in the area would compensate the local peasantry for the loss of their lucrative farming activities. Secondly, the profitability of the new estate was seriously in question because of the continuing high production costs and relatively low productivity on the Cameroonian tea estates. And thirdly, the new estate was going to be set up at a time when the Tole and Ndu Estates were facing major marketing problems (Njike 1983; Konings 1986b). The Djuttitsa tea project was still implemented, however, with the assistance of some of the international financiers in the CAMDEV II programme, the corporation's second long-term development programme (1978-1982), in particular COMDEV, FED and the CCCE. The construction costs for the estate and factory were estimated at FCFA 3.272 billion. The project was completed in 1985/86 with a total area planted of 444 ha. At that time, the CDC management was still planning to expand tea production, subject to good market prospects, and undertook tea trials in the Santa and Nkambe areas of the Bamenda Grassfields to this end.

This brief historical review of tea production in Cameroon shows that tea has remained a relatively minor crop. In the 1990s total annual output of tea varied between 3,000 and 4,000 tonnes (see Table 2.1) but this accounted for only a tiny proportion of total domestic cash-crop production (Table 2.2). Other African tea-producing countries, like Kenya and Malawi, have always produced considerably larger quantities of tea (Table 2.3) and also have well-established smallholder schemes. For example, there were no fewer than 199,535 smallholder outgrowers of tea in Kenya in June 1984 who were cultivating 56,173 ha of tea (Betz 1989).

There used to be only two tea smallholders in Cameroon, both of whom delivered their produce to the Tole Estate. The first was Mr Lyonga, a Bakweri, who was a former senior CDC staff member. In 1975 he set up a two-hectare experimental tea plantation at Likomba, a village about 12 km from the Tole Estate, gradually expanding his farm to 25 ha without any technical assistance from the CDC. He employed 35 labourers and had an average annual output of 36 tonnes, which gave him a gross annual income of

FCFA 7.5 million in 1987. The second was Mr Bame, a Ngemba from the Bamenda Grassfields, who had previously been a senior overseer at the Tole Estate. In 1981 he established a one-hectare experimental tea farm at Bugarju Bush, a village close to the Tole Estate, and planned to expand it to 5 ha. He began harvesting in October 1986 and sold 65 kg of tea to the Tole Estate between then and January 1987.

The lack of interest in smallholder tea production in Cameroon can easily be explained by the fact that it has never received very much assistance from the government or the CDC. In addition, tea is in competition with the long-established food and cash crops in the region and is a labour-intensive crop that requires substantial capital inputs. CDC managerial staff once claimed that an investment of more than FCFA 1 million was necessary to produce one hectare of tea.

Table 2.2 *Cash-crop production in Cameroon, 1985/86*

CROP	CULTIVATED AREA (Ha)	OUTPUT (Metric tonnes)
Cocoa	426,120	118,320
Coffee	341,045	97,152
Cotton	89,232	115,544
Bananas	3,410	74,000
Palm Oil	68,939	91,000
Rubber		18,469
Tea	960	2,114
Tobacco		2,262

Source: Ngu (1989: 125).

Table 2.3 *Tea production in selected countries, 1983*

COUNTRY	OUTPUT (Metric tonnes)
India	587,800
Sri Lanka	179,300
Indonesia	92,600
Kenya	119,700
Uganda	3,200
Tanzania	15,600
Malawi	32,000
Japan	102,700
Turkey	70,000
USSR	143,000
Argentina	37,000

Source: Rote (1986: 154).

A significant recent development has been that a member of the Anglophone elite started investing in large-scale tea production in the first few years of the new millennium. Alhadji Baba Ahmadou Danpullo, a Mbororo-Fulani business tycoon, has since created a 4,000 ha tea estate – the so-called Ndawara Highland Tea Estate – and a modern tea factory in the Boyo Division of the North West Province. This privately owned tea estate has led to a massive land expropriation of local peasants and Mbororo-Fulani graziers. Following the privatisation of the CDC tea estates in 2002, the Ndawara Highland Tea Estate became part of the Cameroon Tea Estates headed by Alhadji Baba Ahmadou Danpullo (see Chapter 10).

Tea Marketing in Cameroon

The bulk of Cameroonian tea used to be sold on the London Tea Exchange, with the remainder being sold locally or in Nigeria. In 1966, the CDC decided to sell as much tea as possible in Cameroon and in the neighbouring *Union Douanière et Économique de l'Afrique Centrale* (UDEAC) countries after an UDEAC agreement placed heavy duty (60%) on all imports from countries outside the UDEAC zone. The Muslim areas of northern Cameroon and the Muslim nation of Chad consumed most of Cameroon's tea. In sharp contrast to the

CDC, the EAC, which also owned tea estates in India and Sri Lanka, continued selling most of the Ndu tea on the world market. Having been rated on several occasions as one of the best teas in the world, Ndu tea had no difficulty finding buyers on the world market.

The EAC was forced to review its marketing policy in the early 1970s. One reason for this was the drop in tea prices on the world market, which had been stable since the end of the 1950s. It was not until 1975/76 that tea prices on the world market began increasing steadily to a level where they were extremely favourable between 1979 and 1984 (Cowen 1986: 373-274). A second reason was the almost doubling of production costs owing to huge increases in the costs of labour, fertilizer and oil. As a consequence, Ndu tea was no longer competitive on the world market and these adverse economic conditions led the EAC management to concentrate on the same markets as the Tole Estate.

Unfortunately, a growing gap started to emerge between supply and domestic/regional demand. The market in Cameroon was unable to absorb the increasing output from the Tole and Ndu Estates, and the market in Chad was often inaccessible. Chad's early withdrawal from the 1966 UDEAC agreement and its subsequent lengthy civil war made tea imports from Cameroon difficult, at least those through formal trading channels. Both the Ndu and Tole Estates were thus regularly saddled with large stocks of unsold tea, which led one of the EAC directors to lament in 1974:

We have large unsold stocks in the warehouses. The company is now having to cut deep into its prices to continue the outflow of tea to its main markets. Tea is the only commodity in the world market today which fetches a 14% lower price than it did in 1970 and the cost of production has at least doubled, while the world production has continued to increase their depressing price levels.¹⁰

And, the 1983 CDC Annual Report noted: 'The tea market was stagnant (and the year ended with a stock of 523 tonnes) as a result of the war in Chad'.

From 1986/87 onwards, there was a deepening crisis in the Cameroonian economy that brought the CDC to the verge of collapse and badly affected its tea trade. The sharp fall in commodity prices and the rapid slide in the value of the US dollar against the

CFA franc were largely responsible for this (Konings 1996a). As a result, Cameroon, which had registered a phenomenal growth rate of 7% in its GDP until 1986, was forced to adopt a structural adjustment programme (SAP) in 1988. The CDC's net loss rose from FCFA 3.853 billion in 1987/88 to FCFA 4.685 billion in 1988/89.¹¹ Tea had formerly sold at FCFA 1,500 per kg but its price dropped to FCFA 625 in 1987, far below the cost of production. While the 40% rise in the value of the CFA franc against the US dollar made locally produced tea even less competitive on the world market, the post-colonial state's apparent lack of control over cheap tea imports from East Africa created problems for its domestic market.¹² In 1987 the corporation had about 1,000 tonnes of unsold tea in stock.

In line with the structural adjustment programme, the government was no longer inclined to render financial assistance to its ailing agro-industrial parastatals (Konings 1996a, 2011a). On the contrary, in 1989 it asked the CDC management to sign a Contract Plan that would force the corporation to meet certain efficiency standards and be self-supporting and profit-making.¹³ Since then a series of measures have been taken by the CDC management to improve the corporation's marketing position. These include:

- raising labour productivity, by increasing task work, intensifying managerial control over the labour process and introducing technically advanced farming techniques;
- lowering production costs by cutting workers' wages and fringe benefits and switching from costly oil/gas to firewood supplied by the corporation's own fuel plantations;
- reducing marketing costs and promoting sales and using larger chests rather than small packets and frequent advertising campaigns.

These steps, together with a ban on cheap imports, have helped to stimulate local tea sales and many government institutions now regularly order local tea. However, most of the tea is bought by large Muslim traders from northern Cameroon who smuggle it into Chad and Nigeria.

The government, which is highly dependent on French support and aid, managed to obtain a FCFA 7 billion low-interest loan from the CCCE for the ailing company in June 1992 on condition that the corporation reorganised the tea sector and improved its marketing of tea. In late 1992 an agreement between the CDC and COMDEV was announced that transferred the management of the three tea estates to COMDEV for a ten-year period. COMDEV would run the tea sector as an autonomous enterprise and pay royalties of FCFA 80 per kg for any tea sold.¹⁴ However in the end, the government refused to ratify this agreement for political reasons.¹⁵

From 1992 onwards, persistent rumours circulated in Anglophone Cameroon that the government was about to either sell, shut down or privatise the CDC. While World Bank sources confirmed that external financiers were putting pressure on the government to do so, the government continued to deny the rumours (Konings 1996b). However, the government issued a decree on 15 July 1994 announcing the privatisation or liquidation of a first batch of 15 public enterprises, particularly in the transport and agro-industrial sectors. The CDC was one of the most conspicuous victims of this decree and the announcement of its privatisation caused commotion among Anglophones as they perceived this enterprise as the 'lifeline' and 'pride' of their region (Konings 2009a, 2011a, 2011b). Widespread civil-society protest in Anglophone Cameroon was one the principal factors responsible for the continued postponement of the privatisation of the whole or parts of the enterprise and it was not until October 2002 that the government finally sold the CDC tea estates to a South African consortium, Brobon Finex PTY Ltd. The estates were then renamed the Cameroon Tea Estates (CTE). This privatisation exercise seems not to have brought about the expected increase in tea production and sales due to blatant mismanagement and an unprecedented degree of labour protest against intensified managerial control and exploitation in the labour process (see Chapter 10).

Notes

1. The United Republic of Cameroon became the Republic of Cameroon in 1984. See Law no. 84/1 of 4 February 1984.
2. Letter from Acting Commissioner of the Cameroons, Buea, to the Secretary of CDC, Bota, dated 7 March 1956, in BNA, File Qc/g (1956) 2, Ministry of Natural Resources.
3. Letter from Commissioner of Southern Cameroons to Mr J. Arbuthnot, MP, dated 29 March 1956, in *ibid*.
4. Report on the Suitability for the Cultivation of Tea of Lands in the Bamenda Areas, Southern Cameroons, by T. Eden, D.Sc. FRIC, published by the Southern Cameroons Production Board, 1957, in BNA, File Qc/g (1957) 2, Ministry of Natural Resources.
5. Another estate in the Bamenda Grassfields, the Santa Coffee Estate, had been dissolved by this time. See BNA, File Se/a (1955) 1, Southern Cameroons Production Development Board: Management of Santa Coffee Estate.
6. The Bamileke are the main ethnic group in the Francophone part of the Grassfields. For more information on them, see Dongmo (1981) and Warnier (1993).
7. For more on the previous smallholder schemes proposed by the CDC and the EAC in the Fondong and Tadu areas, see BNA, File Qd/a (1960) 6, Proposed Fondong Tea Estate, and BNA, File Qc/g (1963) 3, Tea Development in Bamenda.
8. Ministry of Planning and Territorial Development, Tea Production Projects, Bangangte, Mbouda, Santa, Synthesis Memorandum IFCC, February 1972.
9. *Ibid*.
10. Memo of Mr V.K. Reddy, Director of Estates and Agency Company Ltd, to Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, General Secretary of Donga-Mantung Agricultural Workers' Union, dated 27 February 1974, in File NEWU 18, Vol. 1, Trade Disputes.
11. See CDC Annual Reports and Accounts for the years 1988 and 1989.
12. World Bank, *Cameroon Agricultural Sector Review*, Confidential Report no. 7486-CAM, March 1989, p. 34.

13. See Report of Consultation Meeting with the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance at Provincial Level by Mr P.M. Kamga, dated 28 October 1989, in File MEPS/SWP/BU.134, Vol. IV, General Correspondence CDC.
14. Tea would thus be the second major crop of the corporation to come under foreign management. In 1987 the corporation had entrusted the management of the banana sector to Del Monte (Fonsah & Chidebelu 1995).
15. Some close observers believed that the (French) CCCE had put pressure on the government to cancel this agreement because it favoured a French takeover of the management of the tea sector.

Part I

The Tole Tea Estate

Female workers

Introduction

The construction of the Tole Estate in 1954 marked a turning point in the history of the CDC. It was the first estate to produce tea. And even more important, it was the first estate to recruit predominantly female labour. Although female employment was no new phenomenon on its estates, estate work had remained virtually a male preserve. In this chapter I shall address the following issues: (i) Why did the management prefer female labour to male labour on the estate? (ii) Which category of women tended to sell its labour power to the management? (iii) What was the management's remuneration for the women's work? And (iv) how did the female workers cope with their ongoing productive and reproductive roles at home?

Managerial option for female pluckers

In 1952, just two years before the redevelopment of the Tole Estate, Phyllis Kaberry published her classic study *Women of the Grassfields*. Though focused on the Bamenda Grassfields, her findings seem largely applicable to the present South West Province as well. Throughout her book she emphasises 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. Women are themselves fully aware that they are in some ways the 'backbone of the country'. They take great pride in their skill and competence as farmers as well as their responsibility for feeding and caring for the household. Men are often the object of derision, being referred to as incompetent, even worthless, unable to care for themselves and too irresponsible to take care of their children. One of the women told Kaberry:

A woman is an important thing. A man is a worthless thing indeed, because a woman gives birth to the people of the country. What work can a man do? A woman bears a child, then takes a hoe, goes to the field, and is working there; she feeds the child (with the work) there. A man only buys palm oil. Men only build houses (Kaberry: 1952: 150).

The men did not hesitate to confirm women's vital role in society. One day Kaberry questioned the chief of Nso about the rationale for the following customs: the existence of a 'cry-die' of four days for a woman and only three for a man; the planting of four cocoyams at the birth of a girl and only three for that of a boy. The chief answered:

A woman is a person who gives birth to a person. Women are very important people. Women are like God because they give birth to the people (Kaberry 1952: 150).

In contrast to all this, women also appeared to be subordinated to patriarchal dominance. Kaberry found that women exercised considerable freedom in the management of land and the crops which they produced, but they did not own the fields (see also Goheen 1993, 1996). They were normally accorded access to land and other means of production in order to fulfil the economic roles expected of them, but this access was conditional and could be withdrawn. Their access to land depended on their acceptance of the feminine roles and labour obligations assigned to them by the male household heads. If a wife persisted in efforts to leave her husband, she would be stripped of her land rights in the husband's village and forced to separate from her children. Although women's productive and reproductive roles were of vital importance to the family and to society at large, they were expected to obey male orders and to accept male decisions. When questioned on this matter by Kaberry, the councillors of the chief of Nso replied:

Yes, a woman is like God, and like God she cannot speak. She must be silently. It is good that she should only accept (Kaberry 1952: 152).

Of course, this does not mean that women were without power individually and collectively to resist male abuse of power. For example, women's control over the household food supply demonstrated men's day-to-day dependence on the women's work and good nature.

These contradictions in women's position may not be as puzzling as they appear at first sight. Control over women's vital productive and reproductive labour constituted the basis of men's prestige, power and wealth in society. Goheen (1993) writes in this regard:

Women grew the food crops and were expected to provide the necessities of daily life from their farms. Women's productive labour freed 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 the profits.

It is therefore not surprising that with the introduction of the capitalist system men tended to strongly resist female migration and employment. They tried instead to intensify the exploitation of female labour by seeking women's assistance in local cash crop production (Bukh 1979).

Despite the existence of strict patriarchal controls over female labour, the Tole Estate management decided to recruit female pluckers in 1958 when a number of the tea bushes planted had reached maturity. There are a number of factors that appear to have influenced managerial decision:

- (1) The then expatriate managers were hardly familiar with gender roles and relations in Africa. However, they were often acquainted with, and had been employed on, tea estates in India and Sri Lanka, where plucking was done mainly by women. If women in Assam were plucking tea, why could women in Cameroon not do so?
- (2) Due to the high employment rate of women on tea estates in Asian countries and elsewhere, tea plucking had to a large extent come to be identified as 'women's work'.

- (3) On the basis of the Asian experience, there was a general belief in international management circles that female pluckers tended to be not only cheaper, but also more productive and more subservient than male pluckers (Kurian 1982; Elson & Pearson 1984; Heyzer 1986). The idea of enjoying these benefits on the Tole Estate must have been particularly attractive to management.
- (4) At the time the Tole Estate was opened, there were already some women working on the CDC estates, usually on a casual or seasonal basis. These were mostly the wives of estate workers and women from the surrounding villages.
- (5) And finally, the management was confronted by a serious shortage of male labour on the plantations during the 1950s due to the spread of local coffee and cocoa production. This gave the impetus to a larger recruitment drive among women (Gwan 1975: 178). In 1957 it was reported that

the rapid changeover from subsistence farming to cash crop farming in the banana areas of Victoria and Kumba, and the coffee areas of Bamenda Province, has affected the labour market. Workers from these areas who previously sought wage-earning employment on plantations now work for themselves or their families An increasing number of women are taking up light employment of an agricultural nature. And for them the main centre at the moment is the Tole Tea Estate which employs some 400 women in light weeding, pruning and plucking.¹

Not unexpectedly, managerial efforts to recruit an adequate supply of female labour proved rather disappointing for a considerable time (see below). Gradually, however, the number of women who were willing to work on the estates increased. Evidently, this was because plantation labour was one of the rare jobs opportunities in the capitalist sector for *illiterate* and *lowly educated* women eager to escape the 'back-breaking' work and patriarchal controls in the local communities (Obbo 1980).

The estate labour force rose steadily up to the mid-1980s, when the economic crisis gave rise to mass layoffs (see Table 3.1). In 1988 the estate employed 1,604 permanent workers, 63% of them

being female workers. Table 3.2 shows that female workers are concentrated almost entirely in the field; only a small minority are employed in the tea factory as sorters and packers, in the child care centre, clinic or office. A clear division exists between the predominantly illiterate female pluckers and the educated female office workers and nurses. The latter tend to look down upon the pluckers and treat them rudely when they visit the office or clinic. This is a continuing source of conflict.

Ethnic/regional origin of female workers

The Tole Estate is located practically at the heart of the Bakweri area. Apparently, managerial recruitment efforts among the Bakweri women initially yielded poor results. Like the men in the Bamenda Grassfields, Bakweri men tended to oppose

their wives' violation of the African tradition (by abandoning food production) and they consider it to be humiliating when their wives earn more money than they themselves (for it tends to make them more autonomous and more disobedient) (De Vega 1971: 85).

Unlike the men in the Bamenda Grassfields, Bakweri men also had some more specific reasons for resisting women's employment on the estate. Plantation production had had some devastating effects on Bakweri society. It had caused the loss of most of its lands. From the time it was seized, the Bakweri have been protesting in various ways against this expropriation and agitating for the return of their lands (Courade 1981/82); Konings 2011a and b). Bakweri men are therefore most reluctant to sell their labour power to the expropriators of their ancestral lands or to allow their wives to work on the estate. In addition, plantation labour had caused a tremendous increase in divorce rates. Bakweri women tended to divorce their poor husbands and marry or cohabitate with the more affluent migrant workers (Ardener 1962). It is hence not hard to understand why Bakweri men tried to prevent their wives from working on the estate: a wage income would enable their wives to repay the bridewealth and lead inevitably to an increase in divorce rates!

Bakweri women themselves, too, often demonstrated little interest in working on the estate, because they and their husbands were benefiting in one way or another from the adjacency of the estate. Some of them were letting rooms and renting out land, or selling food and drink to the estate workers. Others were illegally squatting on the estate's uncultivated lands. And still others were pilfering tea and firewood from the estate.

Table 3.1 *Tole Tea Estate labour force, 1965/66-1990/91*

YEAR	NUMBER OF WORKERS
1965/66	790
1968/69	778
1974/75	1,129
1975/76	1,329
1976/77	1,232
1977/78	1,106
1980/81	1,415
1981/82	1,315
1884/85	1,639
1985/86	1,526
1986/87	1,546
1987/88	1,578
1988/89	1,276
1989/90	1,217
1990/91	974

Source: Tole Tea Estate Office.

Table 3.2 *Gender distribution of workers at the Tole Tea Estate, 1988*

SECTION	MALE WORKERS		FEMALE WORKERS		TOTAL LABOUR FORCE
	No	%	No	%	
Office	14	64	8	36	22
Clinic/Child Care Centre	5	30	12	70	17
Workshop/Stores	98	96	5	4	103
Building/Maintenance	50	93	4	7	54
Factory	71	92	6	8	77
Field	363	27	968	73	1,331
TOTAL	601	37	1,003	63	1,604
Monthly Paid Workers	82	65.5	43	34.5	125
Daily Paid Workers	519	35	960	65	1,479
TOTAL	601	37	1,003	63	1,604

Source: Tole Tea Estate Office.

Bakweri women who did seek employment on the estate did so mostly on a casual basis, especially during the seasonal peaks in tea production, to obtain some cash. Table 3.3, however, shows that the number of women seeking employment on a permanent basis is rising. During my fieldwork on the estate in 1986, a Bakweri managerial staff member explained this rising trend as follows:

The Tole Tea Estate management had been able to convince the people in the neighbouring villages that it was more advantageous to work permanently on the estate than to steal the estate's produce and firewood.²

Table 3.3 *Regional composition of the labour force at Tole Tea Estate, 1969 and 1986*

REGION	1969		1986	
	No	%	No	%
NORTH WEST PROVINCE				
Menchum	215	27	415	25
Momo	170	21.8	478	29
Mezam	56	7	134	8
Donga-Mantung	39	5	80	5
Bui	2	0.2		
TOTAL	482	61.0	1,107	67
SOUTH WEST PROVINCE				
Fako	37	5	199	12
Ndian	69	9	134	8
Manyu	68	8.5	100	6
Meme	62	7.5	53	3
TOTAL	236	30.0	486	29
FRANCOPHONE CAMEROON	19	2	27	1
OUTSIDE CAMEROON	57	7	56	3
GRANDTOTAL	794	100	1,676	100

Source: De Vega (1971); and Tole Tea Estate Annual Report 1986.

This claim seems to be falsified, however, by managerial reports of a recent increase in theft by the local population. A more likely reason for the rise in female employment on the estate is that the Bakweri men have become less opposed to it during the economic crisis, as it supplements the family income. They are badly in need of cash, because the cooperatives are no longer able to pay them for the delivery of cash crops due to liquidity problems.

When first confronted with the problem of procuring an adequate supply of local female labour, the Tole Estate management was forced to recruit mainly Nigerian women. This occurred at a time when there was widespread resentment to the dominant position of Nigerians, especially the Igbo and the Ibibio, in the regional economy (Kleis 1980; Konings 2005). These strong anti-Nigerian feelings, together with the government's subsequent implementation of a stringent Cameroonisation policy, forced the large contingent of Nigerian male workers on the CDC estates to leave. In these circumstances, the management's ongoing employment and recruitment of Nigerian women was frequently criticised. After being charged again in 1968 with violating the government Cameroonisation policy, the management's defence was as follows:

At Tole Tea a number of Nigerian women, who formed the core of tea pluckers, have been working as casual labourers for over three years. It was then hoped to attract Cameroonian women to Tole to replace them. This hope did not materialise and a decision was taken to absorb them permanently with effect from March 1966. There is absolutely no truth whatever in the allegation of attempts by Nigerian women to prevent the employment of Cameroonians at Tole Tea Estate. This corporation is now facing a shortage of women tea pluckers at Tole. A recent drive to recruit 150 pluckers to cope with the flush period has met with little or no response.³

From the end of the sixties onwards, however, the contribution of Nigerian women to estate labour declined drastically as a result of the increasing flow of women from Anglophone Cameroon to the estate (see Table 3.3). The 3% of Nigerian female workers now remaining consists mainly of women with a long career on the estate.

The present North West Province has ever since been the main supplier of female labour to the estate (see Table 3.3). In contrast to the South West Province, it has a relatively high population density, virtually lacks 'modern sector' employment, and can boast a long tradition of predominantly female agricultural production. The employment rate of northwestern women on the estate is therefore higher than that of southwestern women, and it has risen

from 61% in 1969 to 67% in 1986 (see Table 3.3). The majority of northwestern female workers on the estate hail from two divisions, the Momo and Menchum Divisions. These are relatively inaccessible areas where Fulani cattle grazing and male coffee planting have threatened women's access to land for food production and have increased their work load (Fisiy 1992).

It is noteworthy that ethnicity has never been an issue of protracted, overt conflict among female or male workers. One reason for this remarkable phenomenon, which seems to be characteristic of all CDC estates (Konings 1993), is the persistent policy of the CDC management, as well as of church and union leaders, to mobilise and organise workers on a multi-ethnic basis. This policy has evidently created a certain measure of understanding for one another's socio-cultural background and fostered bonds of companionship and friendship. A second reason is the generalised use of Pidgin English, which helps overcome any barriers of communication. A third reason is that the workers themselves express a clear preference for ethnically mixed living and working arrangements (see also Ardener *et al.* 1960; DeLancey 1973; and Kofele-Kale 1981). During my fieldwork the majority of workers expressed the belief that frequent contact with people from other ethnic groups and cultures might broaden their horizons and enrich their lives. Some workers also claimed that there would be fewer disputes and less competition and jealousy on ethnically mixed estates than in living quarters based on ethnic affiliation, and less fear of witchcraft. The most important reason, however, would appear to be their sharing of similar living and working conditions on the estate, which is a classic example of an 'occupational community'.

Although workers of different ethnic origins usually get on well on the estate, ethnic consciousness and organisation has by no means disappeared. Workers from the same village and region continue to maintain particularly close ties and to organise on ethnic basis for recreational and saving purposes and for mutual assistance. Mixed marriages are still rare on the estate (2%). Ethnic rivalry arises occasionally in suspicion of favouritism in hiring or promotion or in disagreements with foremen and co-workers.

Case no. 3.1 *A complaint of ethnic favouritism in employment in 1986*

Mr Johnson Bituaka is a native of Ndop in Mezam Division. He was employed as a watchman at the tea factory. After he and two of his colleagues at the factory had lodged a complaint with the Labour Office at Buea concerning their conditions of service, Bituaka was punished by the Acting Estate Manager, Mr V.K. Ngha, a man from Wum, and transferred to the field as a plucker. Interestingly, his colleagues, both hailing from Wum, were not transferred.

His former post was given by Mr Ngha to another Wum man. This man was later arrested for stealing tea from the factory. Mr Ngha then assisted his Wum brethren in raising money with a view to hiring the services of a lawyer for the thief's defence.

Bituaka alleged that Mr Ngha had recently (i) locked out all the pluckers who had arrived at work late, except those from his own region, and (ii) promoted one of his tribesmen to the post of Assistant Overseer, even though the other candidates were more senior and more qualified.⁴

Case no. 3.2 *A complaint of the stirring up of ethnic sentiments by the trade union*

In November 1967 the Tole Tea Estate was in a 'state of confusion' after two Banyang men, Mr Emmanuel Ojong (Chief Staff Nurse) and Mr Philip Bissong (Office Clerk) had 'betrayed' the workers. They were accused of having reported to the police that some people in the camp were selling wine without a licence. The union secretary, Mr Aloysius Niba, appeared to have said that consequently *all* the Banyang working on the estate should be transferred.⁵

Demographic characteristics of female workers

The female workers exhibit a number of distinct features (see Table 3.4). They tend to be relatively old: 60% of the women are above 35 years of age. Most of them are illiterate (78%). As older women, they never had the opportunity to benefit from the enormous expansion of educational facilities for women following independence and reunification (Clignet 1976; Cooksey 1982).

Table 3.4 *Demographic characteristics of Tole Tea women in 1986 (percentages)*

AGE	15-25 years	7.5
	25-35 years	32.5
	35-45 years	41.0
	45-55 years	17.0
	55 years and older	2.0
		100.0
MARITAL STATUS	never married	9
	married	32
	widowed	27
	divorced/separated	25
	free union	7
		100
NUMBER OF CHILDREN	none	5.5
	one	8.0
	two	9.5
	three	16.0
	four	19.5
	five	17.0
	six	11.0
	seven	9.0
	above 7	4.5
		100.0
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	illiterate	78.0
	primary education	20.5
	post-primary education	1.5
		100.0
RELIGION	Presbyterian	46
	Roman Catholic	38
	Baptist	6
	Independent churches/sects	4
	African beliefs	6
		100
LENGTH OF EMPLOYMENT	0- 5 years	17.0
	5-10 years	19.5
	10-15 years	39.0
	15-25 years	19.5
	25 years and above	5.0
		100.0

Source: Konings, P., Survey among Tole Tea Women, 1986.

Many female workers are unmarried (68%). A minority has never been married and the remainder is either divorced/separated, widowed, or residing in 'free unions'. Even some of the married female workers live on their own, their husbands living elsewhere. Interestingly, most of the non-married women did not preclude the possibility of marrying (again) in the future. Only a few women said that they preferred to live without a man or to engage in 'free unions', even though many 'had experienced untold hardships and sufferings during marriage'. While female workers tend to be unmarried, they are still likely to be heads of households with children to support. Only 5.5% of all the women, married and unmarried, claimed to be childless: 53% of the women had between one and four children, 41.5% had more than four children. Children continue to be a source of pride, prestige, labour, and socio-economic security in old age. Childlessness is a disaster, often leading to a divorce, and is often attributed to witchcraft.

Female workers tend to be committed to work: 63.5% have been employed on the estate for more than 10 years. This supports Safa's thesis (1979: 447-448) that women, who are heads of households, are likely to develop a strong commitment to their work role and to become highly stabilised.

Above all, the vast majority of the women are Christian (94%). The remaining 6% claimed to still adhere to the religion of their ancestors. In practice, of course, this distinction between 'Christian' and 'pagan' is overdrawn, for most women are still strongly rooted in local religious belief systems. Allegations of witchcraft are still rife in the camps. Some women are suspected of being witches; others are well-known 'witch-doctors' or 'spiritual leaders' trying to eradicate witchcraft from the camps. One of the most renowned spiritual leaders in the camps is Mrs Magdalene Mondoia, who is called 'Madam Jesus'.

She claims that God has given her several visions as well as the power to detect and destroy witchcraft. She acquired a national reputation in 1985/86 when she was invited twice to Yaoundé to advise President Biya.⁶ Unlike male workers, female workers tend to join Christian associations. These appeal to women because they render religious and material support to women in need and distress and create leadership positions for women. The absence of any Muslim women in the estate labour force must be attributed to their seclusion (Pittin 1991).

These features present us with a clear picture of the kind of women likely to be employed on African plantations (Stichter 1985; Bujra 1983, 1986): illiterate, Christian, and 'husbandless' (cf. Bryceson 1980: 23). While they usually enter the labour market at a later stage in their life-cycle, especially after getting divorced or widowed, they tend to demonstrate a strong commitment to their job during their working career, being responsible as household heads for the upkeep of families.

The managerial decision to engage female employment on the estates enables these women to escape from patriarchal controls and find an alternative means of survival. In societies where land is still overwhelmingly controlled by men, marriage is one of the most important avenues for women to obtain relatively secure usufruct rights (Davison 1988). Dissolution of a marriage, whether through death or divorce, therefore creates a crisis in a woman's existence. It deprives her of her right to land, thus endangering her means of survival.

In most local communities in Cameroon, a widow was previously inherited by her deceased husband's heir. If she accepted him as her new husband, she continued to enjoy her previous land rights. If she refused, she was normally forced to leave the compound of her family-in-law, though an exception was usually made for widows who had passed child-bearing age (Guyer 1985). This situation prevailed until 1966, when a new marriage law was enacted which denied any claims of the heir to the widow and her 'property' (Melone 1971). A widow is now legally free to decide what she wants to do after her husband's death. The new law has fostered a steady increase in the number of widows who refuse to marry the heir. If they decide to leave, they lose any land rights and can no longer expect help from their families-in-law. They are then obliged to either request land from their own families or look for alternative means of survival.

Divorcees also form a vulnerable group in society. During the pre-colonial and colonial period there was an inseparable link in many ethnic groups between divorce and the repayment of the bridewealth. In 1964, however, a change in the existing legislation made getting a divorce no longer conditional upon repayment of bridewealth. Nevertheless, receivers of bridewealth can still be sued

for (partial) repayment. Consequently, the family continues to bring strong pressures to bear upon a woman who is determined to divorce her husband. Divorcees may be deprived of access to land and are often compelled to migrate to avoid family claims and secure an income of their own.

Young, single women are usually expected to work as unpaid labour on the family farms. However, they might be given the use of some land by the family head or her mother to acquire some income.

The majority of the divorcees and widows on the estate told me that they had decided to migrate and seek wage employment because of an unsatisfactory marriage, lack of family support, conflicts over land following the dissolution of their marriage, insufficient land and income to feed themselves and their children, and accusations of witchcraft. Some young, educated female workers, however, said that they simply refused to accept their 'traditional' role of dependents performing unpaid family labour and preferred instead to build up an autonomous existence.

Case no. 3.3 *A young, single female worker*

Rose is 27 years old and originates from Momo Division. Soon after completing her primary education, she had two children from two different men. Both of them refused to marry her. Her mother gave her some land, but she did not derive sufficient income from her farm to feed herself and her children. She then decided to migrate to Limbe. Unfortunately, she could not find any suitable job there and prostitution was her principal means of survival for about two years. She was quite happy to later be offered a job as a plucker on the estate.

Case no. 3.4 *A divorced female worker*

Mary is 43 years old and hails from Manyu Division. She suffered a lot during her married life. Her husband was constantly drunk and bluntly refused to contribute to household expenses. He even forced her to hand over part of her small income from petty trading. When she had the nerve to complain, he beat her severely. After 15 years

of miserable married life, she could no longer endure the situation and decided to leave him. One of her friends took her along to the estate, where she was given a job as a plucker.

Case no. 3.5 *A widowed female worker*

Priscillia is 47 years old and comes from Menchum Division. After the death of her husband she decided to stay on with her family-in-law. However, she soon came into conflict with her in-laws about the land she cultivated. Her relationship with the in-laws deteriorated further when one of her brothers-in-law fell seriously ill. She was then accused of having bewitched him and was forced to leave the compound. She called upon one of her brothers in the South West Province who was employed at the CDC banana estate at Ekona. Her brother managed to get her employed at the neighbouring Tole Tea Estate.

There are also a number of female workers on the estate who deserted their husbands without obtaining a divorce. Their husbands have often tried to reassert control over them by getting them dismissed from the estate:

I am the husband of Martha Ashu and the head of the family. I wish that the services of my wife with the estate will be terminated with immediate effect. My reason of writing this letter has resulted from domestic matters which I do not want to reveal to you.⁷

Some of the husbands even appealed to the local administrators for assistance in the dismissal of their wives. In response to one of these appeals in 1976, the Divisional Officer of Buea demanded the termination of the employment contracts of Mrs Elisabeth Abibang and Mrs Prisca Ecumuwan, both of them pluckers at the Tole Estate:

I have received a complaint from the husbands of above named ladies that they absconded their marital homes and fled to your estate and took refuge under your employ. It is to be noted that these are married women with children. They have left their children

and husbands to be suffering without any cogent reasons. In these circumstances, therefore, I am hereby soliciting your usual co-operation to cause the appointment of these ladies terminated forthwith and they be asked to report to my office on the 16th of August 1976 without the least delay. Failure to report to my office on the above mentioned date, a warrant of arrest will be used against them. As a guide line, I will wish to suggest to you that before any lady is employed on your estate, she must first of all produce a genuine duly signed divorce certificate that she is not a married lady. This is a cardinal point which has to be taken into consideration for the employment of women on your estate so as to bring a stop to unpleasant situations of this nature.⁸

The Provincial Delegate of Labour, however, rejected this demand on the grounds that it had no backing in law and instead advised the husbands to refer the matter to the law courts.⁹

There are also a few female workers who divorced their husbands during their working career on the estate. They became estranged from their husbands, who were employed elsewhere. Of late this has become an urgent problem: management's frequent transfers of workers during the present economic crisis have separated many legal spouses. The estate manager claimed this was often the unintended consequence of the fact that the female workers had either not properly informed the corporation of their marital status or had signed a contract with the corporation using their maiden names.¹⁰

The position and social status of the unmarried female workers differs from those of the married female workers. Unmarried female workers tend to be relatively free from customary patriarchal controls, but they are still held in low regard, being labelled as 'loose women' or 'prostitutes'. Married female workers, on the other hand, who form a minority among the female labour force on the estate (32%), are more respected, yet they are subjected to considerable male controls. These controls may be manifest in 'old' and 'new' forms on the estate. First, there is the persistent fear among husbands that wage employment will make their wives too 'headstrong' or independent. Deep conflicts may arise when the wife earns more than the husband. Secondly, there is a marked tendency towards reduction of household responsibility by husbands, who insist that

according to African 'tradition' women are responsible for the maintenance of the family (Stichter 1985: 148). And thirdly, there are still some husbands who claim that they are entitled to their wives' wage income. Men originating from the Bamenda Grassfields in particular maintain this claim. Kaberry (1952: 146) had already mentioned the husbands' appropriation of their wives' cash earnings as an important strategy of establishing male control over women:

Women can keep small sums of money, but the question of rights to money becomes crucial when larger sums are at stake – Bamenda men insist on the husband's rights to cash earnings.

These husbands may afterwards return part of the money to their wives for household expenses.

The unmarried female workers also tend to maintain fewer links with their birthplace than married female workers. Obviously, their escape from patriarchal controls impedes their access to land and their contacts with their kin in their birthplace. Their 'exit-option' from wage employment is usually not a return to their home town but rather an often precarious and insecure switch to petty trade in the urban centres. However, I observed during my fieldwork that married female workers are also hardly able to keep up intensive contact with their family members. Geographical distance and a six-day working week are serious obstacles to regular communication. Most female workers visit their home towns only during the annual leave period, or on special occasions such as the funerals of close kin. Some regularly remit a certain sum of money for the upkeep of their parents and any children of their own whom they have left behind in the home town to learn the local language and customs (a considerable number of children in the camps do not master any language but Pidgin English), and for the development of the home area. And finally, it may also happen that they take a young daughter of one of their relatives along to the estate to look after their small children and help in the household (see below).

Remuneration of female workers

Most studies of wages and conditions of service in the plantation sector agree that remuneration of field workers for their arduous labour is abysmally low. In her book on plantation labour in Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular, Loewenson (1992: VIII) expresses her bewilderment at the paradox of modern plantation agriculture, namely the coexistence of ‘corporate wealth and labour squalor’:

Driving through plantations, it is easy to be impressed by the visible signs of efficient production. Hillsides are lined with precise rows and crops are robust and abundant. Large-scale production seems a model of agricultural development. But is it? Hidden from the casual view are the conditions of the real producers, the farm labourers. At what cost to workers does this ‘efficient’ production take place? Where does malnutrition, ill health and social poverty feature in the balance sheets of plantation production?

This general picture of low remuneration and poverty applies to a large extent to female workers on the estate as well. However, one should make certain qualifications. First of all, one should compare the income of female pluckers with that of other low-income groups. Their income might be more *secure* (a regular monthly income) and *higher* than that of many petty traders and peasant farmers. In the mid-1970s, Virginia DeLancey (1978: 11) compared the average incomes of wage-earning and non-wage-earning women on the Tole Estate, the latter of whom are engaged mainly in petty trade and food farming. She found that the wage-earning women had double the cash income of the non-wage-earning women: they also had higher savings levels and, significantly, invested heavily in their children’s education. Secondly, one should not forget that any wage employment, however lowly paid it may be, tended to be regarded as a ‘privilege’ during the economic crisis because of the mounting unemployment and non-payment of cash crop farmers.

Female workers initially were paid less than male workers (see Table 3.5). Apparently, the management wanted to implement the system of unequal payment for men and women that prevailed on

Asian tea estates (see above). This was justified on the somewhat spurious grounds that female workers needed less time (7 hours) to complete their daily task than male workers (8 hours).¹¹ In 1967, however, a Federal Labour Code was promulgated which prohibited employers from paying men and women differently for equal work. Estate management then introduced equal rates for male and female workers.

On 15 July 1968, the government issued Decree no. 68/DF/272. This important decree guaranteed minimum wages for agricultural and non-agricultural workers throughout the country, with effect from 1 August 1968; moreover, it established three wage zones at different levels of wages in the country (Lecaillon & Germides 1977). A bilateral agreement between the CDC management and the union, however, preserved a uniform wage structure on all the CDC estates: wage and salary rates throughout the corporation were to be those of Zone II of the Primary Sector.

Table 3.5 *Rates of pay of daily rated employees on CDC estates, 1 October 1963*

CATEGORY OF WORKERS	DAILY WAGE/ SALARY (FCFA)
General labour	135
Female workers	118
Artisans	
- Class III	320
- Class II	450
- Class I	615
Assistant Overseer	
- male	198
- female	171
Headman	
- male	156
- female	130
Timekeepers	173
Checkers	145

Source: Personnel Circular no. 5, Rates of Pay – Daily Rated Employees effective from 1 October 1963, Bota: CDC Personnel Division, 30 November 1963.

In 1969, the government installed a tripartite board, the so-called National Joint Bargaining Board for Collective Agreements and Wages, which was charged with the responsibility of drawing up a standard nationwide classification of occupations and fixing the minimum wage/salary rates for each of the established categories of workers (Le Faou 1985: 118). In October 1970 it adopted a classification of workers containing 12 categories. Tea pluckers were put in Category 1. After sustained workers' protests, however, the Board was forced to reclassify tea pluckers in Category 2 (see Chapter 6). In 1971, it fixed minimum wage rates for each of the established categories of workers. Consequently, Category-2 workers, like female pluckers, earned in 1985 a *basic* monthly wage of approximately FCFA 25,000-28,000 (see Table 3.6).

Substantial upward and downward deviations from the basic wage may occur, however. Completion of the daily task set by the management entitles a worker to the daily basic wage; non-completion of the task is punished by pro-rata payment, that is, the worker is paid below the daily basic wage, the exact amount depending on the proportion of the task he/she has been able to complete. In addition, management has introduced a (graduated) production bonus which rewards the worker for each kilogramme of tea leaves plucked above the norm (see Chapter 6).

The two wage sheets presented in Table 3.7 give us an indication of the incomes of female pluckers in 1986 and 1991. They clearly show that female pluckers have enjoyed no wage increases during the period 1986-1991 in spite of a considerable rise in the cost of living.¹² Instead there have been drastic cuts in their income, as a result of the corporation's unprecedented financial crisis.

During the period of crisis, the management regularly appealed to the workers to make sacrifices for the sake of the corporation's survival and eventual recovery. On 6 January 1990, the union agreed with management upon the curtailment of certain fringe benefits enjoyed by the workers (see below) and the introduction of a compulsory savings scheme.¹³ As a consequence, workers who earned less than FCFA 100,000 a month were obliged to contribute 15% of their basic wages and seniority bonus to this savings scheme. These savings were to be refunded in full - though without interest - at the time the worker permanently left the corporation for whatever reason.

Table 3.6 *Monthly salaries for the primary sector, Zone I, on 1 July 1985 (FCEA)*

CATE- GORY	GRADE (ÉCHELON)*					
	A	B	C	D	E	F
I	24,069	24,369	24,681	24,984	25,289	25,594
II	25,526	25,911	26,668	27,199	27,741	28,278
III	27,659	29,380	30,476	31,832	33,182	34,538
IV	32,781	37,617	42,465	47,245	52,160	57,002
V	54,025	58,760	63,489	69,534	72,947	77,664
VI	74,973	79,535	84,099	88,660	93,229	97,792
VII	80,822	86,207	91,602	96,987	102,371	107,767
VIII	107,767	119,899	132,005	144,127	156,255	168,371
IX	159,483	170,956	182,457	193,935	205,414	215,909
X	178,454	193,145	207,847	222,538	237,240	251,931
XI	251,931	264,520	277,124	289,723	302,317	314,917
XII	314,917	327,516	340,110	352,698	365,303	377,902

Source: Eben (n.d.: 36).

Note *: Each category is divided into 6 grades (*échelons*) which take into account merit and seniority.

Notably, despite their relatively low – and declining – incomes, female workers tend to make large voluntary contributions to the credit union. It is evident from Table 3.7 that some women transferred not less than a quarter of their gross monthly wages to the credit union. These are indeed substantial amounts of money. Even though women, and especially unmarried women cannot really afford to extract such huge amounts from their monthly wages, they still do so in order to cover lump sum expenditures, such as health care, school fees and clothes.

Previous studies of saving among CDC workers in general and Tole female workers in particular have also underscored the great importance these workers attach to saving (Warmington 1958; M. DeLancey 1977, 1978; and V. DeLancey 1978). As in other CDC estates, there is a large variety of savings institutions on the Tole Estate.

Table 3.7 *Monthly wages of two tea pluckers at the Tole Tea Estate in 1986 and 1991 (FCFA)*

	1986	1991
Category	2E	2E
Hourly Wage Rate	114.01	114.01
Hours Worked	192	189
Normal Wage	21,890	21,548
Public Holiday	1,824	917
Overtime (150%)		1,757
Bonus/Allowance (Plucking Bonus)	2,800	2,040
Seniority Bonus	3,589	3,583
Gross Taxable Wages	30,979	29,990
Pension Fund	919	839
Compulsory Savings		3,955
T.P.S. PAYE Tax	762	714
Surtax	257	250
Council Tax	88	164
Land Bank Tax	1,615	799
Union Check-off	210	215
Car/Motor/Bicycle Allowance		2,800
Contribution for Palm Oil		3,730
Hospital Maintenance Fees		1,680
Credit Union	7,085	8,400
Total Deductions	13,749	19,749
Net Payment	17,230	10,241

First of all there are several kinds of ‘meetings’, of which the ‘country’ meeting, the neighbourhood meeting and the meeting of friends are the most popular. These meetings consist of group of workers either of the same sex or of both sexes. The members elect a president, a treasurer and a secretary each year. They meet at least once a month, often on the first Sunday after ‘pay day’. The meetings usually start with a discussion of current matters of importance to the group and end with purely social activity. In most cases an

important part of the meeting is the depositing of money by members into the 'meeting bank'. Each meeting has its own rules concerning the contributions of its membership: in some meetings a fixed amount has to be saved, in others the members themselves determine each time what they can afford to save, and in still others there is no obligation to save each time the members meet. Savings are subsequently deposited into a savings account in a commercial bank. Generally speaking, the meeting is 'broken' once a year, the deposit removed from the savings account and the individual savings (with interest) returned to the members, usually in November, so that they may use the year's savings for Christmas expenses, such as new clothes and the joint purchase of a 'Christmas cow' to be slaughtered and shared out for Christmas dinners. The members like to express their solidarity to the outside world. Female members do so by wearing the same wrappers.

These meetings remain popular among the workers, for they allow them to borrow money relatively easily and quickly in times of need, often up to the entire amount of one's savings. Interest rates though are usually higher in meetings than in credit unions.

One of the 'country' meetings on the estate whose membership is exclusively female is the 'Walana Wa Ndinga Wapwe' (literally: Bakweri women of Joy Association). This meeting of Bakweri women has branches in several towns of the South West Province. Its members meet every Sunday. They are required to contribute FCFA 300 to the 'meeting bank' and an extra FCFA 50 to the 'bereavement bank'. They may borrow up to a maximum amount of FCFA 50,000. Interest rates charged are 10% a month.

Another popular saving institution on the estate is the *njangi*. This is a rotating credit association composed mainly of a group of women of the same or different ethnic origin who trust each other. About 58.5% of the women interviewed claimed to be *njangi* members. They usually meet on pay day or soon after, either with or without the social gathering common at the 'meetings'. They have agreed that each will pay a fixed amount every month into a common fund. This contribution is usually higher than in meetings. On an agreed occasion, one of the members will receive the entire fund until each member has had her turn. When everybody has had her turn, the *njangi* is 'broken', but usually the process starts again with the same members.

The credit union was introduced on the estate in 1974. Its membership has grown rapidly: from 200 members in 1974 to 1,450 in 1987 (94% of the estate's labour force in that year). It is the only institution into which savings are deposited without first passing through the hands of the saver. Soon after its creation the management agreed to introduce a 'check-off' system, i.e. a system whereby a worker authorises the employer to automatically deduct a certain amount of his/her wages for transfer to the credit union, and to recover credit union loans from defaulting members. Loans are provided at low rates of interest, though not always promptly enough to meet an emergency.

Notably, although women constitute 65% of the credit union membership on the estate, they do not own more than 51% of the credit union shares and savings (see Tables 3.8 and 3.9). This must be attributed to the fact that male workers are able to contribute higher amounts to the credit union than female workers, as they tend to spend less on household expenses such as food, and to occupy the best paid jobs on the estate. Conversely, male workers also tend to borrow more often from the credit union than female workers: 55% of the beneficiaries of loans, granted by the credit union during the period 1983-1987, proved to be men (see Table 3.10). Men are allowed to draw more loans from the credit union than women because of their higher savings. They are also less reluctant than women to spend part of their savings on long-term investments and the purchase of 'luxury' goods, such as radios or bicycles, because they still hold their wives responsible for the maintenance of the household.

Women, on the other hand, tend not to apply for credit union loans except in times of extreme need, especially for the purchase of food and the payment of school fees and health care. Men also tend to have easier access to credit union loans than women, because the credit union leadership has been dominated by male workers, partly due to their higher educational achievements. In 1988 women had only two representatives on the credit union board, one acting as secretary and the other as treasurer - evidently functions that are usually assigned to women.

Table 3.8 *Membership Tole Tea Co-operative Credit Union, 1983-1987*

YEAR	MALE		FEMALE		TOTAL MEMBERSHIP
	No	%	No	%	
1983	333	35	619	65	952
1984	364	35	676	65	1,040
1985	366	35	679	65	1,045
1986	385	35	713	65	1,098
1987	508	35	942	65	1,450

Source: Compiled from Tole Tea Co-operative Credit Union Membership Register.

Table 3.9 *Distribution of shares/savings in the Tole Tea Co-operative Credit Union, 1983-1987 (FCEA)*

YEAR	MALE		FEMALE		TOTAL AMOUNT
	Amount	%	Amount	%	
1983	46,586,155	49	48,455,365	51	95,041,520
1984	55,863,753	49	58,143,905	51	114,007,658
1985	68,212,669	49	70,996,859	51	139,209,529
1986	77,963,387	49	81,144,586	51	159,107,973
1987	83,859,121	49	87,281,940	51	171,141,061

Source: Compiled from data supplied by the Tole Tea Co-operative Credit Union.

Table 3.10 *Beneficiaries of loans granted by the Tole Tea Co-operative Credit Union, 1983-1987*

YEAR	MALE		FEMALE		TOTAL NUMBER OF BENEFICIARIES
	No	%	No	%	
1983	739	60	491	40	1,230
1984	576	49	601	51	1,177
1985	662	51	639	49	1,301
1986	359	59	248	41	607
1987	760	58	554	42	1,314
TOTAL	3,096	55	2,533	45	5,629

Source: Compiled from data supplied by the Tole Tea Co-operative Credit Union.

Table 3.11 *Purpose of loans granted by the Tole Tea Co-operative Credit Union, 1983-1986*

PURPOSE OF LOANS	No	%	Amount (FCFA)	%
Education	1,575	36	136,317,000	35
Health	1,238	28	86,011,000	22
Consumer goods	1,238	25	78,648,000	20
Building	359	8	76,168,000	19.5
Farming	64	1.5	8,329,000	2
Others (marriage, trading)	63	1.5	6,881,000	1.5
TOTAL	4,417	100.0	392,345,000	100.0

Source: Compiled from data supplied by the Tole Tea Co-operative Credit Union.

Table 3.11 sets out the reasons for the loans granted by the credit union during the period 1983-1986. It shows that not less than 89% of all the credit union loans were taken out for the purpose of education, health, or consumer goods. This illustrates the importance

the predominantly illiterate workers attach to the education of their children, as well as the inadequacy of the medical services provided by the estate and the regular lack of cash for food and clothing.

Some of the women interviewed told me that they suffered ill health and old age, but could not stop working as they were determined to send their children to secondary school or even university. A relatively small number of women had been able to invest some of their savings in a house, land, an off-licence bar on the estate, or trade. Such investments serve not only as a kind of social security for retirement and old age, but also as an important alternative means of capital accumulation.

After saving part of their wages and paid their taxes, female pluckers are left with about FCFA 10,000-20,000 (see Table 3.7). A substantial portion of the remaining cash is spent on pay-day. This day is a real feast day on the estate. It is in fact the only day in the month that workers can afford to have a good time and spend 'freely'. Directly upon receiving their wages, women flock to the 'labour club' and the numerous off-licence bars on the estate, drinking, merry-making, and dancing till everyone is tired or drunk. Some women buy clothing from itinerant traders who sell a variety of goods in the camps on pay-day. Others buy meat, a food item workers normally cannot afford, and snacks for children. At the end of the day women have spent a lot of cash. This leads to the almost universal buying of food on credit throughout the remainder of the month, and thus widespread indebtedness.

The management does not deny that the women receive low cash wages, but it stresses that the variety of non-cash benefits supplied by the corporation, such as accommodation, medical care, and 'chop farms', supplement their incomes. These services were free of charge until 1 February 1990. Workers were then asked to contribute to most of the services, to help reduce the corporation's costs during the economic crisis.

On the one hand, workers are inclined to appreciate the provision of accommodation on the estate, for rents are quite high in Cameroon, particularly in the urban centres. On the other hand, they point to various shortcomings provided.

First, there is a serious shortage of dwellings. In 1987/88 the estate employed 1,578 workers, but it owned not more than 760 dwellings spread over three labour camps, namely Tole Old Camp,

Tole New Camp, and Sachsenhof. As a consequence, the allocation of rooms has often been surrounded by bribery and corruption. This is hardly surprising, for workers who could not be accommodated in the camps were forced to hire rooms themselves in the neighbourhood at exorbitant rents, varying from FCFA 3,000 to 5,000, without receiving any rental allowances from the corporation. From 1 February 1990 onwards, accommodation in the camps has no longer been free of charge; workers, classified in Categories 1 to 3, must contribute FCFA 1,000 a month to their accommodation and pay in full for the electricity and gas supplied by the corporation.

Second, the dwellings provided are quite small. Their size is about 20 square metres. They have wooden walls and cement floors; their roofs are covered with corrugated zinc sheets. Such accommodation is simply too small for families with a large number of children and dependents. Moreover, the residents hardly enjoy any privacy: the walls are so thin that one can hear one's neighbours.

Third, the quality of the accommodation provided leaves much to be desired and needs urgent improvement. Camp houses are in a deplorable state. However, the management claims that there are no funds to maintain the houses during the economic crisis.¹⁴ The sanitary conditions in the camps, too, are now below standard. There are only 24 latrine/shower blocks in the camps, which does not suffice to serve the large population. Moreover, most of these blocks appear dirty and unkept. Both the sanitary workers and the 'camp committees' seem to neglect their duties. One of the main responsibilities of these committees is to look after cleanliness in the camps. At present, however, they seem to have stopped mobilising the camp population for regular clean-up campaigns.

Workers and their families also formerly enjoyed free medical care. The estate has a clinic at Tole Old Camp and an aid post at Sachsenhof. One of the four doctors employed by the CDC visits the clinic twice a month. I was told by the head of the clinic that 400 to 500 patients call at the clinic each week. The most frequent diseases in the camps are, in descending order, diarrhea, malaria, intestinal worm infections, pneumonia, arthritis, dysentery, and measles. A number of these diseases result from poor sanitation, poor personal hygiene, and poor nutrition. The clinic's maternity ward handles

between 150 and 200 deliveries a year. The clinic has an ambulance to transport the sick to nearby hospitals. Even though medical care used to be provided free of charge, the workers have never been fully satisfied with the medical services provided. The clinic suffers regular shortages of essential drugs. Workers are therefore often forced to buy drugs in neighbouring towns at considerable cost. Moreover, some medical staff members lack the necessary qualifications, tend to be rude to the workers, and refuse to attend to calls in the late afternoons or nights unless they are paid overtime. As a result, quite a number of women prefer to deliver in the excellent maternity ward of the Roman Catholic clinic at Buea, in spite of the costs involved. Dissatisfaction arose when management started charging for medical services supplied. These charges include a registration fee at an annual rate of FCFA 1,080, payable by the worker and all his/her household members, a monthly contribution of FCFA 2,100 for medical care, and a consultation fee of FCFA 500. These are indeed substantial charges. Nevertheless, medical services have apparently not been improved, for workers continue protesting against the lack of drugs.¹⁵

A long-standing policy of the CDC management has been to allocate land freely to the labour force for food cultivation, the so-called 'chop farms'. In practice, however, individual requests for land have often been declined by estate management. Consequently, some workers try to acquire land themselves in the nearby villages. During my fieldwork I found that only 57% of the female workers had been allocated land by estate management (see Table 3.12).

Table 3.12 *Tole Tea women and access to land for food cultivation*

TYPE OF LAND ACQUIRED	%
CDC land	57
Rented land	23
Family land/land given freely	5
Landless	15

Source: Konings, P., Survey among Tole Tea Women, 1986.

The majority of the remaining female workers (23%) had rented land from local peasants. As land in the vicinity of the estates tends to be scarce and expensive, most land hired by these women was quite small, fragmented and often located at considerable distance from the estate. Some female workers (5%) had been extremely lucky to acquire land for free from relatives or friends. However, a substantial number of women (15%) had failed to hire land, and were therefore compelled to buy food from the local markets. These women can only afford to buy cheap, low-protein food like garri, which may give rise to malnutrition.

Not surprisingly, most of the women who did acquire a plot of land in one way or another said they experienced difficulties in combining wage work with farming. Their normal working day is eight hours, but during the peak season they are often obliged to stay in the field for 11 hours. During the peak season, they have hardly any time to go to their 'chop farms'.

There is no doubt that the provision of 'chop farms' forms a welcome addition to the workers' income. But it should also be acknowledged that it causes an enormous increase in the women's daily work load (see Table 3.13). After completing their arduous tasks on the estate, women first go to their 'chop farms' and then begin the daily household chores. Married women seldom expect any help from their husbands. No wonder this dual work load can result in serious physical and psychological breakdowns. After some years of plucking, women tend to suffer from backache, which is called 'duty disease' on the estate. Time for relaxation and recreation is scarce in the lives of these women.

Tole Tea women: Wage workers and mothers

It is often maintained that wage work is not compatible with women's continuing responsibility for child bearing and child rearing (DeLancey 1980, 1981). In this connection, it is argued that, compared with independent economic activities such as farming and trading, wage employment lacks the necessary flexibility: women have to start work each day at the same hour and are obliged to stay in the workplace until quitting time.

Table 3.13 *Daily activities of female pluckers*

TIME	MONDAY-FRIDAY
5.00 a.m. - 6.00 a.m.	Prepare and serve breakfast; dress children ; walk to the estate
6.30 a.m. - 3.00 p.m.	Tea plucking
8.00 p.m. - 10.00 p.m.	Serve food; put children to bed; prepare food for breakfast; go to bed after bathing
SATURDAY	
5.00 a.m. - 6.00 a.m.	Prepare and serve breakfast; dress children ; walk to the estate
6.30 a.m. - 12.00 a.m.	Tea plucking
12.00 a.m. - 4.00 p.m.	Have a snack; work on chop fam; collect firewood; walk back home
4.00 p.m. - 6.00 p.m.	Wash clothes
6.00 p.m. - 8.00 p.m.	Bath children; serve a snack to the family; put the children to bed
8.00 p.m. - 10.00 p.m.	Have a rest before going to bed
SUNDAY	
7.30 a.m. - 3.00 p.m.	Sweep the house and the kitchen; prepare and serve breakfast; iron clothes for going to church or to Muea market (once a month); collect water; prepare, cook, and serve food
3.00 p.m. - 4.00 p.m.	Iron the remaining clothes
4.00 p.m. - 5.00 p.m.	Have a rest
5.00 p.m. - 8.30 p.m.	Prepare and serve a snack after having bathed the children; prepare food for the next day; go to bed

This argument has some validity. It cannot be denied that wage employment may create more obstacles to women's reproductive role than independent economic activities. This is, of course, one of the reasons that African women often prefer informal sector employment to formal sector employment. However, the argument fails to take into account that there might be factors in a particular socio-cultural setting that reduce role incompatibility. This is certainly the case at the Tole Estate.

First of all, child care on the estate, like everywhere in Africa, is not only the concern of the household. Once the child is weaned, relatives, neighbours and friends may look after the child during the mother's absence. The period of breast-feeding may therefore be the most problematic.

Second, Cameroonian legislation and CDC policy create relatively favourable conditions for working mothers on the estate. The 1967 Federal Labour Code, as well as the national social insurance laws, provide for maternity and family benefits. Women receive 14 weeks maternity leave at full pay (extended to 20 weeks if the birth results in maternal ill health) as well as maternity allowances. They are entitled to a family allowance of FCFA 1,800 a month for each child, which is paid by the National Social Insurance Fund through the office of the CDC.¹⁶ In addition, the Labour Code stipulates that for 15 months following the birth of the child the woman be granted a break of one hour per day.

The management does not allow the women to take their nursing children to the field, though a few women do it all the same. Usually the women go home during breaks (if they are not too far away) to tend to their children or give a quick feeding. It is, however, not uncommon to see other children bringing hungry babies to the resting mothers during breaks (DeLancey 1978: 8).

The estate provides a crèche in Tole Old Camp, at a cost of FCFA 1,000 a month. Children are admitted on the following conditions: They should be between two months and five years of age and be brought to the crèche along with food and napkins. Twice a week they are served some beverages by the estate. The building contains some baby-cots and beds, a playpen, and some furniture. Two women look after the children in the crèche. They have never received any training. Some of the children who were enrolled in the crèche went on in 1987 to a newly opened, privately run, nursery school in the camp.

Significantly, relatively few children attend the crèche and the nursery school. In 1987/88 there were 48 children in the crèche and 85 children in the nursery school. The workers seem never to have been satisfied with the services rendered by the crèche and the nursery school, and they prefer to use other methods of child

care. In October 1990, the workers accused the crèche attendants of 'child abuse and general carelessness' and launched an appeal to the government to take over the existing, below-standard, nursery school.¹⁷

Most women continue to rely on relatives, friends or neighbours for the care of their pre-school children. Quite a few women had taken along a young relative specifically to help around the house and care for the children. Very few women said that they have to pay cash for child care. They usually provide food, shelter, clothing, pocket money, and often school fees. This probably amounts to a larger total sum than if they would simply employ someone to do the job, but it also gives them more control over, and greater flexibility in, scheduling the child care duties. In addition, it is often expected that those who are earning money should try to help other relatives better themselves by assisting them in getting an education or occupational training or by giving them opportunities to find future employment.

Generally speaking, female workers seem to manage in their reproductive role on the estate. This does not mean that problems are absent. The mothers with the youngest children face more difficulties than those with older children, and they tend to stay home more often. The estate management usually displays a certain degree of 'understanding' for the problems of its female workers. If a child is sick and requires extra attention, the management takes a 'lenient' attitude towards the mother's absence from work. Clinic hours are held each morning, and mothers are allowed to bring a sick child to the clinic for treatment at that time. If the illness is not severe, the child will be treated, after which the mother must return to work with no excuse. However, if the child is very sick and requires the mother's attention, the mother will be given 'excused duty' and may stay home to care for the child while earning full pay. Problems are also likely to occur when the mother is not able to find someone to care for the young children.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to show that plantation work plays a rather ambivalent role in the lives of female workers. On the one hand, it has positive meaning. It enables illiterate and unmarried women in particular to escape from patriarchal controls and achieve a relatively autonomous existence. As household heads, they are highly dependent on wage work for the reproduction of their families, and they display a high commitment to their job. This commitment is further strengthened by the fact that they maintain few links with home and are often deprived of land rights. On the other hand, it has negative consequences. It is very tedious and poorly paid, and it is unlikely to foster much job satisfaction. It requires so much energy and time that the women have difficulty coping with their other roles outside the workplace. Above all, it fails to provide them with a suitable income, and it offers few prospects for promotion or social advancement. These negative features are hardly conducive to labour productivity and pose problems of labour control.

Notes

1. British Colonial Office, Annual Report to the United Nations for the Year 1957, p. 89, par. 406.
2. Interview with Mr D.W. Motumba, Senior Field Assistant of Saxenhof, 5 May 1986.
3. CDC Press Release no. 34, dated 24 April 1968.
4. See Letter of Mr Johnson Bituaka, Tole Tea Estate, to General Manager of CDC, dated 26 May 1986, in File MTPS/SWP/BU.95/S.1, Vol. IX, Complaints from CDC.
5. See Letter of Workers' Union, Tole Tea Estate, to Senior Labour Officer, Buea, dated 20 November 1967; and Letter of Mr E.M. Ojong, Chief Staff Nurse at Tole Tea Estate, dated 26 November 1967, in File MTLs/WCD/BU.95/S.1, Vol. I, Complaints from CDC.
6. *Cameroon Outlook*, 5 February 1986, p. 1.
7. Letter of Mr M. Ashu to Estate Manager, Tole Tea Estate, dated 7 January 1984, in File MTPS/SWP/BU.95/S.1, Vol. X, Complaints from CDC.

8. Letter of Mr Joshua Ngange Akali, Sous-Prefect, Buea, to the Tole Tea Estate Manager, dated 26 July 1976, in File MEPS/SWP/BU.134, Vol. IV, General Correspondence CDC.
9. See Letter of Mr E.K. Lottin, Provincial Delegate of Labour, to Sous-Prefect, Buea, dated 17 August 1976, in *ibid*.
10. See CDC, Tole Tea Estate, Minutes of Estate Consultative Meeting held at the Club on 13 October 1990.
11. See Bederman (1967: 320); and Minutes of an Extraordinary Meeting held in the Conference Room at Bota on 16 December 1978 to discuss incentive schemes for the tea estates, in File MTPS/SWP/BU.95/S.1, Vol. IX, Complaints from CDC.
12. For instance, the food index in Cameroon rose from 100 in 1980 to 172.5 in 1988; and the clothing index rose from 100 in 1980 to 374.4 in 1988. See ILO (1988), *Yearbook of Labour Statistics*, Geneva: International Labour Organisation, p. 912.
13. See Agreement between the CDC and CDC Workers, dated 6 January 1990.
14. See CDC, Tole Tea Estate, Minutes of the Consultative Meeting held at the Club on 13 October 1990.
15. *Ibid*.
16. A few qualifications should be made here. First, if the woman is married and the husband is also employed, the family allowance is usually paid to the husband. Many women complain of this practice, because the husband often appropriates this money and spends it as he likes. Second, there are a number of households which do not receive a family allowance, though they are legally entitled to it. This is mainly because they cannot afford to pay the (high) bribes demanded by clerks responsible for processing the necessary legal documents. Finally, there may be long delays in the payment of the allowance. On 20 January 1991 the CDC workers in the Fako Division complained that they had not received their family allowance for five quarters. See Letter of Staff Representatives, CDC, Fako Division, to President of FAWU, dated 20 January 1991, in File MTPS/IPTPS/SWP/BU. 95/S.1, Vol. XIII, Complaints from CDC.
17. CDC, Tole Tea Estate, Minutes of Estate Consultative Meeting held at the Club on 13 October 1990.

Management of female workers

Introduction

Tea plucking is labour-intensive. The establishment of managerial control over the labour process is, therefore, essential for an increase in productivity and the quality of work. According to Friedland *et al.* (1981: 8), the labour process should be conceived

not simply as the physical organisation of work but as the meeting ground of the two major social categories: wage labour and capital The relationship between workers and owners/managers pivots on the production of value by one category (labour) and the appropriation of that value by the other category (capital).

The existence of exploitative relations of production in the labour process poses the problem of control. The management can only appropriate and maximise the surplus value produced by labour by subordinating workers to its authority over the labour process and intensifying their labour productivity.

In the first section of this chapter I shall briefly describe the physical organisation of work on the estate. In the second section I shall outline the most important strategies employed by management and the state to establish control over female pluckers. I shall argue that control over the labour process involves a new form of gender subordination: the giving of orders is mainly a male prerogative while the role of women is defined as the carrying out of orders.

The physical organisation of production

Tea is a crop which requires labour inputs all year round. Tasks in the field are the most labour-intensive, and the most important operations are:

- *Planting.* Tea is a perennial crop with a productive life of more than 50 years. The quality of seedlings is of decisive importance for the total returns a tea estate aims to generate. The traditional source for the Cameroonian estates were seedlings grown in nurseries and transplanted when they were between 1.5 and 2 years old. At present a new procedure is being applied. This involves the large-scale multiplication of vegetatively propagated (VP) clones from mother bushes selected on the basis of yield capacity and other important characteristics (Eden 1965; Gyllström 1977). It has been shown that such VP cuttings have given two to three times greater yields than those obtained from seedlings. On the CDC estates the bushes are planted together, making it possible to create a flat, raised surface at the top of the bushes, often called the 'plucking table'. Output starts three years after planting and full maturity is achieved after 5 to 7 years, depending on planting material.
- *Maintenance.* This includes weeding, fertiliser application, and pruning. At present weeding is usually done by applying chemicals. Weeding requirements are virtually eliminated when a dense plucking table has been established. Pruning of the tea bushes has to be done regularly so as to maintain the yields and keep the plucking table at a manageable height. It is a tedious and delicate job which is carried out by experienced workers.
- *Plucking.* The most labour-intensive and most important task on the estate is the plucking of the flush, or the immature leaf, that appears on the bush. The amount of flush depends on the variety of the bush (whether it is high-yielding, as in the case of the vegetative propagation variety, or the normal tea seedling with a lower yield). Whatever the nature of the bush, however, the yield at

any particular time is also influenced by the level of rainfall. Thus there are seasonal variations in the flush, and corresponding shifts in the demand for plucking labour.

On the tea estates in Cameroon, there are two peak seasons and two slack periods of tea plucking. The two peak periods are: April-July and October-December. The slack periods are: December-April (coinciding with the dry season) and July-October (the period of heavy rains). During the peak seasons top pluckers can pluck more than double the daily norm and, consequently, earn incomes well above the basic wage. During the slack periods, however, many pluckers experience great difficulties in completing the daily task (and earning at least the basic wage) (see Chapter 3).

There are many systems of plucking (Kurian 1989: 302). The most common systems in use on the tea estates in Cameroon are fine and coarse plucking. Fine plucking refers to picking only the top two leaves and the bud. A coarse pick takes in more leaves. Fine plucking yields higher quality tea than coarse plucking.

The standard of plucking preferred by the management has an impact on both the labour demand and on the degree of supervision required. Fine plucking tends to lower the amount of leaf brought in, as greater care has to be taken to pluck only the finest leaves. This involves stricter supervision both at the point of plucking and in the weighing and sorting procedures.

The choice of a standard is complicated and it reflects the perspective of the management on the economics of estate production. If favourable prices are expected on all kinds of tea, this could result in a higher degree of coarse plucking. However, if high prices are especially to be had for 'finely plucked' tea, then a greater effort is made to attain the high plucking standard even if this is at the cost of the quantity of leaf plucked. The CDC management started selling most of its tea to Northern 'middlemen' (see Chapter 2). The latter's demand for large quantities of lower-quality tea, together with the management's determination to maximise output and reduce production costs during the economic crisis, tended to lower the standards of plucking on the estate.

Plucking requires both training and skill. It is gradually learnt on the job. Poor plucking techniques may damage the tea bush and lower the yields.

- *Checking and weighing.* After plucking, the green leaf is delivered to a collection centre, where it is checked and weighed. Subsequently, it is transported to the factory.

Tasks in the factory are less labour-intensive. The processing of tea involves the following stages:

- *Withering.* The green leaf is spread evenly on platforms for 18 hours and hot air is blown over it. This process is designed to reduce the moisture content by about forty per cent.
- *Rolling and sifting.* The withered leaf is passed through mechanical rollers, which break the leaf cells so that their juicy content can start fermenting. The rolling machine can handle about 20 kg of leaf in 30 to 40 minutes. After rolling, the leaf is sifted to separate the fine from the coarse pieces. The coarse tea is returned to the rolling machine.
- *Fermentation.* The rolled and sifted tea is then taken to the fermentation room. In this well-ventilated, cool but humid room, the leaf is placed in trays for fermentation. Nothing is added to the leaf; it ferments naturally. The fermentation stage lasts 1 to 3 hours.
- *Firing and drying.* To prevent over-fermentation, the fermented leaf is heated in a dryer. During this process, which takes about 15 to 20 minutes, all but 4 to 6% of the remaining moisture is extracted from the leaf. The dry tea now has 20 to 23 per cent of the weight of the original green leaf.
- *Sorting and grading.* The sorter extracts tea stalks and separates the coarse tea once more from the fine grain. All the coarse tea is cut into smaller pieces and sorted again. The grader is comprised of six large sieves which separate the finished tea into sizes ranging from very fine to very coarse. The bottom tray collects what is called tea dust, whilst the tray next to the bottom contains the highest quality tea (which is sold locally as Blue Label). For tea connoisseurs, this is the *Broken Orange Pekoe Fannings*. The third tray from the bottom has the *Broken Orange Pekoe* (sold as Yellow Label); the fourth tray from the bottom has the

Broken Pekoe Souchong (leafy); and the fifth tray from the bottom, or the second from the top, has *Broken Pekoe* (stalky). The top tray collects the coarsest grade which is marketed in Cameroon as Red Label and enjoys great popularity.

- *Packaging and packing.* Each grade of tea is stored separately and is also packaged and packed separately. All the tea is sold either in bags of several sizes, or tins, or plywood chests.

Generally speaking, there is a clear division of labour on the estate, both in the field and in the factory.

In the field the women are usually responsible for the plucking of the tea, whilst the men do what the management and the male workers alike consider to be the heaviest jobs in the field, including pruning the tea bushes, fertilising, planting new fields, and nursery establishment and maintenance.

In the factory women are very few in number (see Table 3.2). They are responsible mainly for the 'lightest' and 'least mechanical' jobs, particularly sorting, grading and packeting. Factory machines are operated exclusively by male workers.

Whilst the sexual division of labour in the factory is more or less 'fixed', that in the fields is in practice more 'flexible'. This flexibility is closely connected with the central position of plucking in estate operations and the seasonal shifts in the demand for labour in the plucking section.

During the periods of high flush, all available labour is mobilised by the management for plucking. If the female pluckers are unable to complete the work, male workers with less experience in tea plucking, such as weeders and pruners, are asked to assist, as well as a number of casual workers, especially women from the surrounding villages. During the slack periods, when the flush is at its lowest, female workers are often assigned other jobs in the field, like weeding and even road construction.

In the past, the management has also been forced to hire a number of *permanent* male pluckers, because of inadequate supplies of female labour (see Chapter 3). These men usually resent plucking, which is looked upon as 'women's work' on the estate. They have little choice, however, for there are hardly any other job openings on the estate.

Managerial strategies of labour control

Management has been greatly concerned with establishing control over the female pluckers, who occupy a crucial position in the labour process. To this end it has constantly devised and revised various strategies of labour control, assisted by the state authorities who have a common interest in the maximisation of output and capital accumulation.

The creation of a male-dominated command structure

One of the principal managerial strategies has been the creation of a clear-cut hierarchical command structure on all the CDC estates (Konings 1993, 2011a). The Tole Estate differs in some respects from other CDC estates because its hierarchical organisation is a 'bearer of gender' (Whitehead 1979: 11). Although the majority of estate workers are women, the principal order-givers are invariably men. This means in effect that after having escaped from patriarchal controls in their local communities, female workers become subordinated to a male-dominated command structure in the workplace.

Gender hierarchy on the estate, in fact, is still quite pervasive. Whilst this is to some extent explicable in terms of men's previously greater access to training, that is not a sufficient explanation. The fact is that qualified women have frequently been passed over for further training and promotion. Evidently the management must have felt that giving orders was a male prerogative and that the incorporation of patriarchal controls into the workplace would create a more effective system of control over female workers than the elevation of women to managerial positions.

The top stratum of the hierarchy is still exclusively occupied by men. It consists of the *estate manager* and *field assistants*. The estate manager is responsible for the administration of the estate. He is assisted by a few (senior) field assistants who oversee various sections of the estate. Through the provision of attractive conditions of service the top stratum is set apart from the lowest levels of estate management and the labour force: besides the high salaries, it is entitled to a wide range of benefits, including spacious, well-

furnished bungalows located at a distance from the labour camps, household servants, annual bonuses, cars and car loans, generous leave, travelling and outstation allowances, and excellent medical treatment inside and outside the country. Such benefits, of course, considerably augment their real incomes and widen the gap between high and low income groups on the estate. During the severe economic crisis, however, there have been severe cuts in their benefits.¹ It is likely that these cuts will have some negative consequences for their work motivation and loyalty towards the corporation.

The middle stratum, the supervisory staff, has been subject to certain changes in gender composition. The top positions in the middle stratum, the *senior overseers* and *overseers*, were formerly monopolised by men, but the lowest positions in the middle stratum, the *senior heads* and *heads* of separate labour gangs, were open to women at an early stage. Gradually, however, some women were appointed overseer and even senior overseer. Significantly, all appointments of women to supervisory positions continue to be in the female-dominated sections of the estate, particularly in the plucking section. It is still unthinkable that women would be appointed to a supervisory position in a male-dominated section of the estate.

The middle stratum constitutes an essential communication link between the top stratum of the hierarchy and the workers, and at the same time it maintains discipline at work. Despite its vital position in the organisation of production, those who occupy it do not enjoy a standard of living even approaching that of the top stratum. In particular the headmen and headwomen, who are in Category 3 of the Standard National Classification of Occupations, receive a salary not conspicuously different from their subordinates (see Table 3.6). Overseers, and especially senior overseers (Categories 4-8), on the contrary, are better rewarded for their services. Unlike the top stratum, the middle stratum is accommodated in the labour camps, although its members are entitled to more rooms than their subordinates. Like the top stratum, it has not escaped from drastic cuts in benefits during the economic crisis.

The intermediate position in the estate hierarchy tends to be ambiguous. The supervisory staff is often 'caught in the middle' between demands of the top stratum and those of the workers. This is well illustrated by the fact that a good number of supervisory staff members have been elected trade union officers at the local level on account of their educational achievements and leadership capacities (see Chapter 5). There is also ample evidence that some supervisory staff members, in particular headmen and headwomen who are close to their labour gangs, tended to side with workers during collective disputes.

At the bottom of the hierarchy is the labour force, which is expected to respect constituted authority and unconditionally implement orders from its immediate supervisors.

From the very inception of the estate, however, male supervisory control over female workers has been problematic. Some women felt reluctant to approach the often rather authoritarian male supervisors. Consequently, a number of their grievances were not immediately addressed and lingered on until they surfaced in individual and collective actions. Other women were quite inventive in manipulating their male supervisors. During my fieldwork male supervisory and managerial staff often complained to me:

Women are more difficult to control than men. They tell you all kinds of excuses for their absence from work or low productivity. And we men never know for sure whether these excuses are true or not.

In addition, women were often sexually harassed by their male supervisors. They were often threatened if sexual favours were not granted. One of the victims of sexual harassment told me:

When a woman refuses the supervisor's advances, she stands little chance in the field. The supervisor will either give a bad report to management about you or will ill treat you in the field.

Women are usually afraid to report this matter to management. Sometimes, however, they are forced to do so. This was the case with one female plucker who was victimised by her supervisor at work for ending their sexual relationship:

In response to your warning letter dated 20th July 1979, I would indeed like you to understand certain things that have been happening between me and my direct boss. I hope the theme of this letter is not misconstrued Regarding the case with my overseer, Mr M., I could make it clear that he was my boy friend. When I decided to drop him, he took revenge by punishing me at work. It should be recalled that I joined the CDC in the year 1965 and since then I have never received an official warning except this year that I have received two from my work with Mr M.²

Some women, however, try to exploit their sexual relationships with male supervisors to the utmost, going to the extent of making 'illegal' demands for the supply of sexual favours. Quite a number of male supervisors have been caught in the course of time who either marked their 'girl friends' present while they were absent or promoted them to a position for which they did not qualify.

The problem of male supervisory control over female workers has been one of the principal reasons for the gradual appointment of women to overseer and senior overseer positions in the plucking section.

In their written and oral communications with workers, the management regularly propagates ideological views to either support or obscure the male-dominated hierarchal order (Konings 1993). On the one hand, there is the *ideology of paternalism*. This tries to persuade the women that the relationship between male managers and female workers at the workplace is similar to the relationship between male elders and women in the local communities. It insists that female workers should behave towards supervisory and managerial staff members as if they were their fathers. Moreover, it admonishes the women to be grateful to the management for its 'concern' with their well-being and its provision of a variety of 'benefits' during their working career, including employment, accommodation, health care, recreational facilities, 'chop farms', and gratuities. It encourages the women to adopt in return a loyal and deferential attitude towards the management. On the other hand, there is the *ideology of the 'corporative collective'* which glosses over the existing hierarchical order and fosters a company-based sense of 'oneness' or 'family'. Since his appointment in 1974, the first

Cameroonian General Manager of the CDC, Mr J.N. Ngu, has constantly tried to impress upon the workers that the corporation, being a parastatal, belongs to all Cameroonians, and that a 'team' or 'family' spirit should prevail in the corporation, as a necessary prerequisite for an increase in production and improvement in the standard of living of all its workers.³

The introduction of a system of rewards and punishments in the labour process

In addition to the male-dominated hierarchical command structure, the management has introduced a system of rewards and punishments in the labour process, to control female workers and increase their productivity,

To mobilise the women in the labour process, the management has devised a series of regularly revised incentive schemes, in particular the payment of bonuses for seniority, regular work attendance, completion of task, over-task work and so on (see Table 3.7); it has provided promotion and training opportunities for deserving women and has created a gratuity scheme. *To punish* the women for undisciplined and unproductive behaviour in the labour process, the management has taken a series of disciplinary measures, including pro-rata payment for uncompleted work, verbal and written warnings, transfers and dismissals.

Following independence and reunification in 1961, the management made a determined effort to increase output and capital accumulation and started a crusade against undisciplined and unproductive workers. This crusade was actually intensified from the end of the 1960s onwards at the instigation of the foreign financiers of the corporation's post-colonial development programmes (Konings 1993). On 23 October 1969, the management promulgated the so-called Internal Regulations,⁴ which laid down the various rules governing management-labour relations inside and outside the workplace and the whole scale of sanctions at the disposal of the management to punish any violations of these rules. One of the most important rules concerned absenteeism:

Workers who are absent for two executive days without authorisation are considered to have abandoned their posts and their names will be removed from the corporation's employment register.

Every worker is supposed to know these Internal Regulations and adhere to them unconditionally.

The post-colonial managerial crusade against undisciplined and unproductive workers was revived during the economic crisis. After the conclusion of a Contract Plan between the corporation and the government in 1989, the General Manager of the CDC stressed that the corporation could no longer tolerate any undisciplined and unproductive behaviour in its struggle for economic recovery:

In the Contract Plan drawn up and signed by the Government of Cameroon and the Corporation, the corporation is required to meet certain standards of efficiency and be self-supporting and profitable. In striving to meet its own part of the agreement the corporation has to take certain measures which at times have to touch on personnel and industrial relations. Such measures can be expected to be difficult to digest as they will certainly mean belt-tightening. That is why we shall have to be generally very strict on discipline and sanction any manifestation of laxity. We shall have to do more and more to stop or at least reduce the undermining of the corporation's assets. Pilferage, however, shall meet with maximum sanctions. Maximum efforts shall be required of employees so as to continue producing more at lower and lower cost; laxity and laissez-faire which are characterised by an alarming rate of absenteeism and uncompleted tasks shall not be tolerated. A World Bank report has situated the loss of man-hours in recent years to the millions. These absentees and de facto part-time workers are on the corporation's pay roll just for the social benefits which they get at 100% without contributing their fair share.⁵

The economic crisis could indeed contribute to the maintenance of discipline at work and the increase in labour productivity. In a situation of mass layoffs of workers throughout the country, workers may be inclined to work hard and in an orderly manner to keep their jobs.

The management has also regularly intervened in the labour camps with a view to restoring order and ameliorating the quality of life, for it believes that the continued existence of disorder and dissatisfaction in the labour camps may negatively affect labour control and labour productivity. The following example shows how a female plucker was punished by the management for a 'criminal' act by her son in the camp:

You are suspended from work for 8 days. The reason for your suspension is that your son, Salifu, was caught for hooliganism during a film show at the club on 1 February 1982. If your son or any of your children is caught committing any other crime, your appointment with the CDC will be terminated.⁶

During the 1980s the management started installing camp committees in all the CDC estates. These committees are responsible for the maintenance of hygiene and discipline in the camps. Committee members have been mostly involved in the settlement of petty disputes among the camp population. Their decisions are usually upheld by the management:

You are suspended from work as a punitive measure for two days. The reasons for your suspension are: (i) it is illegal to inflict corporal punishment on your wife, (ii) you have no right to go against the decision of the camp committee, and (iii) two days ago you caused this woman bodily damage despite warnings from the camp committee. You are warned that should you continue to beat your wife again and refuse to adhere to the decision of the camp committee, your services with the corporation will be terminated.⁷

The frequent management interventions in the labour camps are clear manifestations of the considerable power that estate management tends to wield over the entire lives of their subordinates.

State and labour control

The state authorities are interested in labour control for two main reasons. First, they share management's concern with the increase in output and capital accumulation. And second, they want to establish control over civil society and so curb any challenge of the workers to the present political status quo (Bayart 1979, 1989).

Two periods can be distinguished in the state's labour control strategies after the reopening of the Tole Estate in 1954. The first period is that of the 'Anglo-Saxon model' identified by Peter Kilby (1969). This model may perhaps be more properly described as the *liberal-paternalist-colonial model* because of its differences from the British original (cf. Waterman 1982: 22). The second period, from the end of the 1960s to the political liberalisation era in the 1990s, showed a distinct tendency towards the *corporatist model* common in much of Latin America, characterised by increased state intervention in the system of industrial relations and the subordination of trade unionism to the state (Konings 2009b).

In short, the liberal-paternalist-colonial model advocated, in principle, absence of state intervention in the system of industrial relations ('laissez-faire'). In practice, however, it considered the enactment of minimal legislation and the creation of certain institutions to be necessary for safeguarding labour control in the colonial setting and maintaining stable, orderly relationships between the employers and the workers (Waterman 1982; Shivji 1986).

Its emphasis was on 'free collective bargaining' between 'representatives of labour' and 'representatives of management'. Legislation and regulations were of a 'permissive' character where trade unions were concerned. One significant difference from Britain at that time was the colonial requirement of compulsory registration of trade unions. Another was that the protection from action for civil wrongs was not granted to *all* trade union actions but only to that related to labour disputes as strictly defined. These limitations were aimed at government control of 'irresponsible' political protest (see Chapter 5).

The law had a 'protective' character where minimum conditions of employment were concerned. The Labour Code laid down conditions on contract of employment, length of notice, forms of wage payment, hours of work, the employment of women and children, and so on.

The institutions created by the state were largely of a more positive or 'stimulative' character, intended to provide a framework for voluntary bipartite collective bargaining between workers and employers. The basis, of course, was the Department of Labour which played an active role in assisting, advising and training trade unions in British Cameroon (see Chapter 5).

From the end of the 1960s, the post-colonial state began intervening intensively in the system of industrial relations in an effort to regulate and centralise almost any aspect of the system (Kendrick 1979). The right to strike was virtually outlawed and trade unions were subordinated to the single party (see Chapter 5). This intensive intervention stemmed not only from the fact that the political elite perceived the liberal-paternalist-colonial model as an obstacle to the predominant task of national reconstruction and the maximisation of capital accumulation. It was also, as Bayart (1979) has rightly observed, a clear expression of the 'total' control the Cameroonian post-colonial state attempted to achieve over civil society as part of its 'hegemonic project'.

Several brands of ideology have been propagated by the post-colonial state to persuade workers to cooperate with managerial efforts to raise labour productivity. The most important, the ideology of 'national development', exhorts workers to make 'sacrifices' (in the sense of foregoing wage increases) and to cooperate with management for the sake of rapid capital accumulation (Sandbrook 1982).

Finally, the post-colonial state frequently used force in its pursuit of labour control. The management habitually calls on the forces of law and order when there is a threat of strike action. A considerable number of 'agitators' and 'ring leaders' have been rounded up by the gendarmes and severely beaten. In 1980 the union warned the Tole Estate manager that he should approach the union and workers' representatives rather than the police and gendarmes for the settlement of labour disputes.⁸ This does not seem to have had any effect, for the use of force as a means of labour control has continued up to the present day.

Conclusion

Female workers occupy a vital position in tea plucking, the central activity of production. The management has preferred female labour to male labour in the plucking section, in the belief that women were *naturally* more suited to plucking and more submissive to managerial authority. Nevertheless, it has felt the need to control female workers. I have shown that one of its principal labour control strategies, the establishment of a male-dominated hierarchical command structure, did not yield the intended result. Gender conflicts cropped up in the relationship between male supervisors and female pluckers, posing problems of control. The estate management has since tried to solve this problem by appointing more and more women to supervisory positions in the plucking section.

After independence and reunification in 1961 the management even intensified its controlling actions in an effort to increase labour productivity and capital accumulation. It received constant support for such efforts from the state in the form of legislative measures, ideological indoctrination and even the outright use of force.

Notes

1. See Agreement between the CDC and CDC Workers, dated 6 January 1990.
2. Letter of Mrs Esther Itchiaha Simon to Estate Manager Tole Tea Estate, dated 20 July 1979, in File MTPS/SWP/BU.95/S.1, Vol. IX, Complaints from CDC.
3. See, for instance, CDC Press Release no. 39, dated 22 September 1975.
4. CDC, Règlement Intérieur (Revu), October 1982.
5. See Report of the Consultation Meeting with the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance at Provincial Level by Mr P.M. Kamga, dated 28 October 1989, in File MEPS/SWP/BU. 134, Vol. IV, General Correspondence CDC.

6. Letter of Senior Field Assistant, Tole Tea Estate, to Mrs Martha Meme, Plucker at the Tole Tea Estate, dated 4 August 1981, in File MTPS/SWP/BU.95/S.1, Vol. IX, Complaints from CDC.
7. See Letter of Mr C.M.T. Babeï, Acting Estate Manager at Mabeta Rubber Estate to Mr Joseph Mokube, Tapper Section I, dated 27 June 1985, in File MTPS/DTPS/SWP/LB.2, Vol. XX, Complaints from CDC.
8. See Letter of Provincial Inspector of Labour, Buea, to Administrative Personnel Controller of CDC, dated 20 August 1980, in File MTPS/SWP/BU.95/S.1, Vol. IX, Complaints from CDC.

Female workers and trade unionism

Introduction

In the previous chapters I argued that female workers have become largely dependent on plantation labour for the reproduction of their families, yet are poorly remunerated for their hard work and are subject to intensive control in the labour process. In the next two chapters I examine whether these women have engaged in any forms of resistance against their control and exploitation.

Trade unionism is one of the principal institutional modes of labour resistance. A trade union was already in existence on the CDC estates when the Tole Estate was reopened in 1954. In 1968 shop stewards were introduced on the CDC estates. What role has trade unionism played in the defence of the female workers' interests? And have female workers actively participated in trade union activities? These are important questions, for it has often been observed that women's union participation, and their mobilisation as union activists, universally tends to be low (Elson & Pearson 1984; Pittin 1984; Ecevit 1991; Abdullah 1997).

In the first two sections I describe the actual role played by the union and local shop stewards in defending workers' interests. In the final section I evaluate the female tea pluckers' perception of how the union is representing their interests and their active participation in trade union activities.

Trade unionism on the CDC estates

Following the reopening of the Tole Tea Estate, most workers on the estate joined the already existing trade union on the CDC estates. I have dealt elsewhere extensively with trade unionism on the CDC estates (Konings 1993, 2011a). Hence, I shall briefly discuss those

elements in the history of trade unionism that are directly relevant to understanding female workers' perception of union performance and their participation in trade union activities.

'Free but responsible' trade unionism, 1947-1972

In July 1947 a union was registered on the estates of the newly established CDC, in accordance with the 1938 Nigerian Trade Union Ordinance. This Cameroon Development Corporation Workers' Union (CDCWU) was soon to become the largest manual workers' union in West Africa, claiming a membership of 19,700 in 1952, approximately four fifths of the total labour force (Warmington 1960: 24).

Contrary to the CDC management, the British Trusteeship Authority had not opposed the formation of this union, if only because it saw it as a more sophisticated means of labour control. In fact, the Labour Department had advised the union leaders on administrative problems and moreover had launched an intensive programme educating them in the principles of 'sound' trade unionism. Sound trade unionism was equated with what I have designated as 'free but responsible' trade unionism. The Labour Department continually encouraged CDCWU leaders (i) to stay away from 'politics', particularly with regard to the emerging nationalist movements, and to restrict themselves to economic and industrial demands; and (ii) to solve their conflicts with the CDC management in a cordial manner, i.e. through negotiation and collective bargaining rather than strikes. The freedom to strike was only to be exercised if all other means of settling disputes, including conciliation and arbitration, had failed. The Labour Department was soon assisted in its educational efforts by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), to which the CDCWU became affiliated. The union leaders received regular invitations to attend ICFTU courses, in which they were repeatedly exposed to the ideology of 'free but responsible' trade unionism (Beling 1968).

These educational efforts proved effective. The union leadership, composed mainly of male clerical workers and supervisory staff members, generally played a 'responsible' role. In contrast with the predominantly unskilled and semi-skilled union members, it was inclined to rely on 'peaceful' negotiations with the employer rather

than on militant strike action. Moreover, its level of educational attainment enabled it to play the 'complex game' of collective bargaining. The substantial number of supervisory staff members in the union leadership often also had a personal interest in pursuing a moderate, productionist and apolitical trade union policy, to retain the good offices of the corporation's management.

The union leadership has always endeavoured to raise collective demands with the management through negotiation and collective bargaining and has continued to regard the strike weapon as a last resort. It generally seized any opportunity to improve its relationship with the management. On 3 June 1962, for example, it signed a 'Heads of Agreement', in which it came to terms with the management upon a number of issues, including the following: the improvement of the existing machinery for negotiation and consultation through the creation of a Joint Industrial Council (JIC) and consultative committees at the various levels of the corporation's organisation; and the establishment of a check-off system within the corporation whereby a worker authorises the employer to deduct the union dues from his wages and transfer them directly to the union.¹

The union leadership continued to be quite moderate, and wage demands were based on meticulous calculations of rises in the cost of living. Moreover, its claims were often accompanied by promises of union assistance in managerial efforts to raise productivity. It made several requests to the management to introduce or renew incentive schemes, with a view to increasing labour productivity and income (Wells & Warmington 1962: 168).

Like the management, the union leadership generally condemned the numerous 'unofficial' strikes that occurred on the CDC estates during the period 1947-1972 (Konings 1993). It strongly resented these strikes, which were beyond its control and which threatened to disturb its 'cordial' relationship with the management. It usually tried to end the strikes. In exceptional cases, however, particularly if the demands of the strikers proved justified, it might declare them official.

Whilst the union leadership was in principle prepared to play a 'constructive' role, it was nevertheless compelled to declare a considerable number of trade disputes during this period. In fact, it

regularly threatened management with strikes and, in some cases, actually called workers out on strike. Two factors are largely responsible for this situation. First, the management often refused to meet and consult the union on important issues, to give in to 'justified' union demands, and to respect long-standing workers' rights. Second, the rank and file exerted constant pressure on the moderate leadership to use the strike weapon more freely to 'bring management to its knees'. The union leadership could hardly ignore these pressures, as its income depended on the voluntary contributions of its members until 1963, when the check-off system was introduced.

The most important issues of conflict between management and the union were:

- *wages and conditions of service.* This has been a constant bone of contention. Owing to management's hard-line attitude in wage negotiations, the union leadership was compelled at an early stage to develop a more aggressive bargaining style, backing up its demands with strike threats. After protracted negotiations, it actually called its members out on strike in 1949, 1955, and 1966 (Warmington 1960; Konings 1993). These strikes were successful. A majority of Tole workers took part in the 1955 and 1966 strikes. As soon as these strikes were over, however, the union leadership tried to restore its 'cordial' relationship with management.
- *the management's gradual withdrawal of a number of social welfare services.* Ordinance no 39 (1946), which provided for the foundation of the CDC, stipulated that the corporation should not only aim at maximisation of capital accumulation, but also devote special attention to the workers' social welfare (Epale 1985). As a consequence, the newly established corporation invested a substantial proportion of its profits in a social welfare scheme, including the construction of schools, hospitals and stores (selling consumer goods to the workers at controlled prices). However, following independence and reunification in 1961, the CDC management decided to scrap a number

of these services with a view to increasing capital accumulation. The union leadership reacted to this violation of the 1946 Ordinance in two ways. On the one hand, it vehemently opposed the handing over of schools and hospitals to the government, all the more because it was never properly consulted. On the other hand, confronted with persistent cuts in the corporation's social welfare budget, it decided to take over some of the social welfare services from the management and to initiate a few other ones. It took over the corporation's palm oil scheme, which involved the sale of palm oil to the workers at low cost, as well as some of the remaining stores which had constantly been running at a loss. In addition, it introduced a credit union scheme on the CDC estates which became very popular among the workers (see above). There is no doubt that the provision of these services has generally enhanced the standing of the union among its members.

- *the increase in task work as well as regular transfers and layoffs of workers.* Under constant pressure from the corporation's foreign financiers, the management began in the late 1960s (i) to increase task work to an extent that a growing number of workers were unable to complete their task and earn the basic wage, and (ii) to transfer and lay off 'surplus' labour. The union used to support managerial efforts to raise labour productivity, provided that increases in task work would remain 'reasonable' and increased output would be rewarded by higher wages. However, it made very clear to the management that it was not prepared to tolerate 'excessive' increases in task work and the frequent occurrence of pro-rata payment. It also opposed any redundancy plans and often threatened to call strikes on this issue. Moreover, it accused the management of using redundancies as a means of getting rid of militant workers and union representatives.

These conflicts strengthened the managerial belief that the union was more often than not an exponent of 'reckless' and 'irresponsible' trade unionism. The management therefore heartily welcomed the

post-colonial state's efforts to halt 'unbridled' strike action and to replace the 'colonial' model of autonomous trade unionism by a 'new' model of state-controlled unionism.

The 1967 Federal Labour Code, which brought about a harmonisation of labour legislation in the Federal Republic, virtually outlawed strikes. In the matter of collective disputes, the Labour Code requires that all channels available towards peaceful settlement - principally, the conciliatory offices of the Labour Inspector, and arbitration - be exhausted before a strike may be called. 'Illegal' strike action may be punished with the termination of workers' employment contracts.

When the Cameroon National Union (CNU) emerged as the only party on 1 September 1966, it soon became evident that the creation of one central labour organisation and the subordination of the trade union movement to the party would be the next steps in President Ahidjo's 'hegemonic project' (Bayart 1979).

The CDCWU leadership demonstrated a great commitment to the achievement of trade union unity in the Federal Republic, but remained strongly opposed to state controls. It was only after considerable pressure from the CNU party and Labour Inspectorate (the former Labour Department) that it agreed to drop its claim of union autonomy, albeit still reluctantly (Konings 1993).

Trade union unity and union subordination to the party were eventually achieved by the creation of the National Union of Cameroon Workers (NUCW). In February 1972 a Confederal Bureau was elected to manage its affairs. Its president became a member of the Central Committee of the CNU.

The subordination of the NUCW to the party is manifest in the Statutes, which stipulate that the party's Political Bureau must be represented at all levels of the NUCW and that no decision should ever be taken by the NUCW without the Political Bureau's approval.

Article 9 of the NUCW Statutes assigns a four-faceted role to the trade union movement in national development: (i) to strive for the implementation of labour laws in the enterprises; (ii) to ensure discipline of workers within the enterprises and to organise therein the systematic pursuit of an increased output; (iii) to broaden and strengthen dialogue between employers and workers with a view to a peaceful settlement of labour disputes; and (iv) to co-operate

closely with the government within the framework of options prescribed by the party for the attainment of national objectives of social and economic development.

It is obvious that the party assumed that the 'new' trade union model was going to transform trade unionism from a vehicle of labour resistance into an instrument of labour control and a 'responsible' partner in national development. Following the creation of the NUCW, the union leadership was co-opted into the labour control structure - albeit in a subordinate position. It was supposed to play a major role in national development, especially through the education of workers in the 'need' for increased production and constant 'dialogue' with the employers.

The NUCW was organised at both national and divisional levels. The latter comprises (i) the *divisional trade unions*, unions belonging to the same field or related fields of activities within the various administrative divisions of Cameroon, and (ii) the *divisional unions of trade unions*, federations of unions within the same administrative divisions irrespective of their fields of activities.

After the establishment of the NUCW, the CDCWU was dissolved in September 1972. Its membership was then taken over by two newly established divisional unions of agricultural workers in the South West Province: the vast majority of the former CDCWU membership was absorbed into the Fako Agricultural Workers' Union (FAWU), and the remainder into the Meme Agricultural Workers' Union (MAWU). As the Tole Tea Estate is situated in the Fako Division, I will restrict myself in this chapter to a discussion of the FAWU.

It should be noted that the role of the FAWU is far more limited than that of the previous CDCWU. Since the reorganisation of trade unionism in the country, all important decisions concerning labour are taken at the national level. The NUCW is represented in national tripartite commissions, boards, and councils dealing with labour matters, such as the National Labour Council and the National Bargaining Board for Collective Agreements and Wages (Le Faou 1985). Divisional unions, like the FAWU, are no longer concerned with collective bargaining and collective agreements. They concentrate instead on the actual implementation of labour legislation and decisions of these national institutions at the

divisional level. In addition, they represent their members within the NUCW machinery, educate them in the 'need' for social peace and high productivity, and deal with individual and collective grievances.

State-controlled trade unionism, 1972 to the present

From the very start, the FAWU experienced numerous internal and external problems which prevented it from executing its 'new' responsibilities satisfactorily, at least until 1975. The new union immediately faced serious financial problems. The existing check-off system had been suspended, pending the national reorganisation of trade unionism. Workers were requested to sign new forms in which they consented to the automatic deduction of the union dues from their wages. Very few trade union officers, however, had organised the actual signing of these forms. Moreover, the introduction of a new system for the distribution of the check-off contributions aggravated the union's financial crisis. In accordance with the NUCW Statutes, the FAWU would receive 50% of its members' contributions, the remainder being divided among the national centre (30%) and the Fako Divisional Union of Trade Unions (FADUTU) (20%). A state-controlled National Committee for Trade Union Contributions in Yaoundé was made responsible for collecting and allocating the check-off contributions throughout the country, resulting, not surprisingly, in frequent and often protracted delays in the committee's due remittances to the divisional unions, as well as in massive embezzlement of funds.

One of the gravest consequences of this crisis was that the new union was no longer able to pay the salaries of its full-time officers. Even when it started receiving its share of the check-off contributions in 1974, its monthly income only allowed for the payment of four full-time officers - all men, save for the check-off clerk. This meant that the newly elected president, Mr C.P.N. Vewessee, scarcely received any assistance in running the union. He soon became president of the Fako Divisional Union of Trade Unions (FADUTU) as well, thus monopolising the most important trade union functions in the Fako Division.

The union lacked funds for the continuation of its welfare services. Consequently, it stopped selling cheap palm oil to its members and closed down its stores. This inevitably contributed to the union's loss of standing among the workers.

There is substantial evidence that the CDC management took advantage of the reorganisation of trade unionism and the new union's internal problems. Firstly, it ceased to respect previous agreements with the former CDCWU and almost entirely ignored the new union, as shown by its persistent refusal to invite the union leadership for negotiations and consultations. Secondly, it undertook a new offensive against 'unproductive' and 'militant' workers, transferring and laying off a substantial number of them during the corporation's reorganisation in 1973.

The union petitioned the Provincial Inspector of Labour several times to assist both parties in overcoming the complete breakdown in industrial relations. Shortly after the election of full-time union officers on 8 May 1974, the Provincial Inspector of Labour finally appealed to the CDC General Manager 'to restore the formal cordial relationship which existed between your management and the defunct CDCWU and to extend the same mutual understanding to the FAWU'.² This appeal did not receive any positive reaction until 7 April 1975 when the newly appointed General Manager, Mr J.N. Ngu, invited the union's executive committee to his office and promised it that 'the union and management link would now be restored'.³

The General Manager kept his word. After this meeting there was a noticeable improvement in joint consultation at all levels. Notably, certain issues of vital importance to the workers, such as redundancy and retirement, continued to be decided upon in 'secret' meetings between the union president and the General Manager, without previous consultation of the union executive and shop stewards. As these decisions often turned out unfavourable to the workers, rumours rapidly spread among the rank and file that their president had been 'bought over' by the General Manager. Although the president continued to render services to his members, representing their individual and collective grievances, the vast majority of the rank and file had lost faith in him.

Under constant supervision of the party and the NUCW Confederal Bureau, the union tended to give priority to the education of its members in the 'need' for social peace and high productivity. During one of the regular Workers' Educational Seminars in 1982, Mr Vewessee declared:

The union places priority in the education of the workers in order to enhance and obtain maximum and quality production ... Since the exploitation of our natural resources is basically in the hands of Cameroonians, the word 'confrontation' should no longer have a place in the trade union vocabulary, as this has been replaced by the words 'dialogue and consultation'.⁴

Mr Vewessee seems to have always been in high esteem within management circles as a controller of labour. He has regularly been asked by management to explain 'sensitive' issues to the workers, even to CDC workers outside the Fako Division, and to assist in quelling any 'illegal' strikes. He has usually advocated severe punishment for 'ringleaders' of 'illegal' strikes, including termination of contract. After the suppression of such strikes, however, he has sometimes identified himself with the 'genuine' grievances of the workers and tried to solve them in subsequent negotiations with the state and management. In this way, he aims to demonstrate to the workers that the union's settlement of conflicts through the 'correct' procedures was more likely than strike actions to satisfy justified workers' demands.

The severe economic crisis that hit the corporation since the mid-1980s has further undermined the union's representation and defence of workers' interests. In view of the continual deterioration of the corporation's financial position, the union was requested by the management in 1987 (i) to make suggestions on what contributions the workers could make to lowering the corporation's production costs and its economic recovery, and (ii) to 'sensitise' the workers on the prevailing economic crisis and elicit their support for any necessary austerity measures. On 3 August 1987 the union agreed with management upon a series of measures to combat the crisis, including a substantial increase in task work (see Chapter 6). When these measures proved inadequate, a new agreement was

concluded between union and management on 6 January 1990, involving drastic cuts in workers' income and fringe benefits (see Chapter 3). The union leadership thought that its acceptance of these draconian measures would save the jobs of its members. This again proved to be wishful thinking. Between 1990 and 1991 the management implemented a new reorganisation plan involving mass transfers and layoffs.

Interestingly, in the wake of the political liberalisation process in the 1990s, one could observe the gradual emergence of conflicts between the unions and the state: a number of trade union leaders, especially in Anglophone Cameroon, began to strive for a return to the 'colonial' model of trade union autonomy, which they tended to perceive as the best safeguard for the representation and defence of the workers' interests. Clearly, this was a significant change in the close post-colonial state-union relations. Even after Paul Biya had taken over power from Ahidjo in 1982, the union continued to strongly support the new government, and it faithfully followed any changes initiated by the party. When the party changed its name from Cameroon National Union (CNU) into Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) at its Bamenda Congress in 1985, the NUCW soon followed suit by changing its name into Cameroon Trade Union Congress (CTUC). The union leadership also adopted the party's ideological 'innovations': it championed the party's 'new' rhetoric of 'rigour, moralisation and democratisation' among the workers (Mehler 1993; Konings 2009b). In the early 1990s, however, the first signs of dissent disappeared. Faced with the deteriorating economic situation and increasing calls in society for political reforms and political pluralism, some union leaders began criticising the regime in power and challenging the union's subordination to the party.

The FAWU president, Mr C.P.N. Vewessee, was actually the first union leader who openly dared to attack the regime and demand a return to trade union autonomy. Two factors may explain his bold stand. First, Mr Vewessee hails from the North West Province that became the centre of Anglophone Cameroon's opposition to the regime and the cradle of the struggle for political pluralism in the country (Takougang & Krieger 1998; Konings & Nyamnjoh 2003). After the introduction of the multi-party system in Cameroon in

1990, he joined the opposition. Secondly, having been one of the leading members of the former CDCWU, he has never been in favour of state control over the union, but was forced to accept it in the then prevailing political situation. In February 1991, he declared:

The workers expect an independent and strong trade union organisation that would be autonomous in relation to all political parties and state bodies and institutions ... This will relieve the trade union of the rubber-stamp element in the country's political life. If the trade union does not become more militant and resolute in its demands, then the CTUC won't be of much help to the workers.⁵

And on 1 May 1991, Labour Day, he added:

The trade unions in this country have been bedfellows with the single political party and unable to do anything in the protection of employment. The 'New Deal' dream has been a nightmare because rigour and moralisation have only helped to make billionaires and millionaires out of a special group in the public service who are appointed to financially milk public enterprises. Political pluralism and an independent free trade union movement are the only hopes to free this country from greed and regression.⁶

He strongly condemned the corrupt leadership of the CTUC for its continuing alliance with the ruling party and its complete neglect of the defence of workers' interests during the economic crisis and the structural adjustment programme. His relentless efforts yielded some success. On 2 April 1991, the CTUC recognised the rights of its members to join the political party of their choice.⁷ Without a doubt this can be seen as a landmark in the history of trade unionism in Cameroon. Unfortunately, although the Cameroonian government officially started commending trade union autonomy, it nevertheless made renewed attempts to keep the unions under control. First, the 1992 Labour Code stated that any newly formed trade unions should be registered. This enabled the state to deny legal existence to any trade union suspected of supporting the opposition. Second, the government continued to intervene in the existing unions and to harass any members and leaders engaged in oppositional actions (Konings 2009b).

Shop stewards on the Tole Tea Estate

In 1968 shop stewards were introduced on the Tole Estate. In the first part of this section, I describe their position and functions on the estate. In the second part, I discuss their performance on the estate.

The role of shop stewards on the Tole Tea Estate

As in other CDC estates, there used to be a local union branch on the Tole Estate. All the sections of the estate were represented in the branch executive. Like the union executive, the branch executive consisted mainly of male supervisory staff members and clerical workers. Apparently, no illiterate worker, either male or female, has ever been a branch executive member. Warmington (1960: 27-28) claims that the branch executives on the CDC estates were never elected by democratic procedures:

What normally happened was that the branch general meeting, so far as one was held, would be an informal one, attended only by a selection of 'leaders of opinion' in the branch – usually some of the more senior employees – who decided among themselves the best people to nominate and appoint to the branch executive for the coming year, and those who in fact would best serve the interests of the workers as their representatives of the union.

The most important responsibilities of the branch executives were (i) to implement the union's policy at the branch level, and (ii) to raise local individual and collective grievances with the estate management. There used to be informal and formal consultative meetings between the branch executive and the estate management, though usually not on a regular basis.

The 1967 Federal Labour Code introduced shop stewards, the so-called Staff Representatives, in the (larger) enterprises throughout the national territory.⁸ This did not, in fact, involve a complete break with the past. What actually happened was that the local union representatives were now given a legal status and that their position was regulated and protected by law. The Code clearly defined their

conditions of eligibility and their functions, obliged the employer to grant them some time for the proper execution of their functions and to hold regular consultative meetings with them, and gave them some legal protection against reprisals on the part of the employer.

The Code laid down the following conditions of eligibility: candidates should be over 20 years of age, be able to express themselves in French or English, have been employed without interruption in the enterprise for at least 12 months, and never have been convicted of a criminal offence. In the wake of growing state control over the unions after 1967, some other conditions of eligibility actually carried more weight, and these were reaffirmed by the First National Council of Cameroon Trade Union Congress (CTUC) held at Yaoundé from 2-4 October 1986:

The CTUC should (a) ensure that candidates for the elections of Staff Representatives are effectively members of our trade union organisation and our great national party; (b) take into account their moral-conduct discipline and professional experience; and (c) ascertain lastly that the candidate enjoys his full civic and civil rights. The CTUC therefore has the duty to do everything necessary to ensure that the Staff Representative should henceforth be, not just a troublemaker who distinguishes himself at his place of work through his bad behaviour or dictates to his employer under fallacious pretexts, but rather a model worker in the full sense of the word.⁹

Evidently, some of the conditions, like fluency in English or French, professional experience, and the possession of certain moral qualities such as 'discipline and responsibility' inevitably resulted in the continuous nomination of a substantial number of clerical workers and supervisory staff members as candidates during Staff Representative elections.

The union is responsible for the organisation of Staff Representative elections, but it is obliged to carry out this responsibility in close co-operation with the management and the Labour Inspectorate. In the past it had the prerogative of 'screening' the candidates proposed by the workers and to present a final list. This procedure enabled the union to discard any workers' candidates who were suspected of being militants or troublemakers, and replace

them with loyal and responsible ones. At times, the management tried to influence the election process and impose its own candidates upon the union.

During the 1987 Staff Representative elections some changes were introduced into the election procedure. Like the party, the union declared that it had abandoned the list system. It claimed that workers would now be offered a multiple choice of candidates (though still nominated by the union) in a secret ballot. In practice, however, it appears to have manipulated the election and election procedures, for, after the elections, the Divisional Inspector of Labour, Mr Charles Ebot Ayuk, blamed the union for 'the abnormalities in the choice of candidates and the unfair manner in which elections were carried out at the Tole Tea Estate'.¹⁰

Similar to the former union branch elections, each department or section in the enterprise elects its own representatives. Although the Staff Representatives are supposed to work in a team, each of them is expected primarily to defend the interests of the workers who voted them into office. Being employed in the same section/department as their electorate, they are thought to be in a better position to understand any individual and collective labour problems arising in that section/department and raise them with the management, the union, and the Labour Inspectorate. There is no hierarchy in the team of Staff Representatives; each of them has equal rights and powers. They and their elected substitutes hold office for two years and may be re-elected.

This rule that each section/department elects its own representatives has had some important consequences for the representation of women's interests on the estate. On the one hand, it gives female candidates in the female-dominated sections of the estate, especially the plucking section, a good chance of being elected. Female candidates in the tea plucking section tend to be almost exclusively supervisory staff members because of the high degree of illiteracy among female pluckers. The plucking section is entitled to two permanent and two substitute Staff Representatives. Table 5.1 shows that all these positions, except one, were occupied by women in 1983.

The elected Staff Representatives are charged by the Labour Code with the following responsibilities:

- to refer to the employers any individual and collective demands which have not directly been acceded to, in respect of conditions of employment, workers' protection, application of collective agreements, classification of occupations, and wage rates;
- to refer to the Inspectorate of Labour and Social Insurance any complaint or representation respecting the application of the laws and regulations which the said Inspectorate is responsible for enforcing;
- to ensure that the rules relating to the hygiene and safety of workers and to social insurance are observed, and to recommend any necessary action on these matters; and
- to transmit to the employer any useful suggestions for improving the organisation and output of the enterprise.

Table 5.1 *Staff Representatives elected at the Tole Tea Estate on 18 January 1983*

SECTION/DEPARTMENT	Permanent Staff Representatives	Substitute Staff Representatives
Field - Plucking	Rose Enjeh Muyuka Justine Ngum	Regina Amah William Atabong
Field – Weeding/Pruning	Mathias Anyacheck	Victor Bambot
Office/Clinic	John Tangwa	Galega Gladys
Factory	Sampson Nganjing	Michael Tawung
Workshop	John Linonge	Isaac Ndonga

Source: Letter of Administrative Personnel Controller CDC to Provincial Inspector of Labour, dated 18 January 1983, in File MTPS/SWP/BU.180/S.1, Vol. III, Election of Staff Representatives – CDC.

This shows that the Labour Code assigns a double role to Staff Representatives: (i) the representation and defence of workers' interests at the local level, and (ii) the promotion of output in the enterprise. This role is therefore quite ambivalent and delicate. Staff Representatives are subject to constant pressures from above and below. Workers usually expect them to defend their interests at all costs, even to the extent of violating the law on strike action. The

Labour Inspector, the employer, and the union, on the other hand, view them as the lowest chain in the control structure over labour and continually urge them to negotiate with the employer in a peaceful manner and to help increase labour productivity. The divisional union in particular plays a pivotal role in the control of Staff Representatives, by 'inculcating a sense of responsibility in them in the discharge of their duties' and constantly overseeing their activities.¹¹

Certain provisions in the Labour Code serve to guarantee proper execution of the Staff Representatives' duties. In agricultural enterprises the employer must grant them 16 (paid) hours a month for the performance of their duties. In addition, he is obliged to meet with them at least once a month for the airing of grievances and to discuss suggestions for improvements in work organisation. The Labour Code aims at protecting them from reprisals on the part of the employer by requiring that prior authorisation be given by the Labour Inspector before they may be dismissed or laid off. It also demands that they be given priority in keeping their jobs or being transferred to another service when workers are laid off.

The performance of shop stewards on the Tole Tea Estate

Few Staff Representative elections on the Tole Estate seem to have passed without difficulties. In the very first elections in October 1968 there were problems with the list of candidates proposed by the union. The workers, both male and female, threatened not to cast their votes unless other candidates who enjoyed their support were nominated. In the end, the union leadership was forced to withdraw the original list and to present a new one more acceptable to the workers.¹²

The elected Staff Representatives have met formidable obstacles in the execution of their duties. The management appears to have never fully trusted them, most probably out of fear that they might challenge its control over the labour process. The CDC Administrative Personnel Controller, Mr I.N. Malafa, used to warn them that 'their duty was not only to defend the workers, but also to urge them to have a productive spirit and respect constituted authority at all times'.¹³

Initially the management often refused to consult the Staff Representatives, a practice facilitated by the emasculation of trade unionism after the imposition of state control. It did not hesitate to intimidate or even victimise any of them it suspected of being militant champions of workers' interests (Konings 1993). It was not until 1 January 1976 that the CDC General Manager, Mr J.N. Ngu, ordered estate managers to hold regular informal and formal meetings with the Staff Representatives:

Estate managers are requested to pay more attention to the development of good relations in their area of work than hitherto and one way of furthering this is to make regular use of Joint Consultative Committees. Informal meetings should also be encouraged in order to deal with matters which call for immediate attention.¹⁴

Although the General Manager's request did encourage some communication between management staff and Staff Representatives, the relationship between the two parties continued to be strained (see below).

The FAWU, too, has been of little help to the Staff Representatives in the execution of their duties, except for organising short educational courses. Many Staff Representatives feel frustrated, and sometimes even embarrassed, by the union leadership. They claim that the union president, Mr C.P.N. Vewessee, looks down on them in view of their low standard of education, and that he victimises any of them who cause trouble to the management or oppose his one-man rule over the union.¹⁵ He seldom informs them of the union's activities or consults them on matters of direct relevance to the workers. On the other hand, he does regularly order them to communicate to the workers painful decisions arrived at by the management and union leadership, whereby they run the risk of being accused of betraying workers' interests.

There have also been attempts by non-union members to obstruct the work of the Staff Representatives. It was recorded that a small group of non-union members began discrediting the incumbent Staff Representatives in 1979. This group was composed mainly of supervisory staff members, clerks, and a handful of workers, all of

them men. It was backed by the Senior Field Assistant, Mr V.K. Ngah, who was inclined to see the Staff Representatives as threats to management and workers alike.¹⁶ The group held the Staff Representatives responsible for:

- the increase in the plucking task in 1980 from 18 kg to 26 kg of green leaves (see Chapter 6). This created problems for both pluckers and supervisory staff. Pluckers had trouble completing their task, and supervisory staff had problems in achieving the production target and bonus as well as in controlling the workers.
- the maintenance of the same plucking task on Saturdays as on other working days. The Senior Field Assistant and some overseers did not like being in the field on Saturdays and preferred a reduction in the Saturday task.
- the exposure of certain financial misdeeds committed by some clerks to gain sexual favours from female workers.¹⁷

The group attempted to stir up the workers against the Staff Representatives. The Senior Field Assistant even refused to settle individual disputes with the Staff Representatives, hoping this would create the impression among the labour force that the Staff Representatives were incapable of handling their cases. In a letter to the CDC Personnel Controller on 14 December 1981, the group demanded the immediate dismissal of the incumbent Staff Representatives and expressed its intention to participate in forthcoming (1982) Staff Representative elections.¹⁸ When the union refused to nominate any of them as candidates, the group urged the workers to resign from the union 'as it was opposed to the holding of open elections on the estate'. The workers, however, refused to co-operate; they had no confidence in this group and identified it with management.

Confronted with the persistent distrust of management, lack of union support, and opposition of non-union members, the Staff Representatives could hardly have been expected to execute their duties satisfactorily. One may, however, observe a considerable variation in their individual representation of workers' interests.

Some of them have come close to the 'model worker' preferred by the management, union and Labour Inspectorate (see above). For example, one of the female Staff Representatives, a clerk, was selected in 1990 as a candidate for the 'Best Employee Contest' on the estate because of her exemplary behaviour:

She concentrates on her job, hardly makes any mistakes, never complains about doing anything, even if she will not be paid overtime, renders accurate information, her records and personality are neat. She leads a good social life. In short, she has been classified as the best office worker this estate has had recently.¹⁹

Generally speaking, this type of Staff Representative tends to avoid anything which may disturb his/her good relationship with the employer, to be careful in his/her handling of workers' grievances and demands, and to constantly impress upon the workers the necessity of hard work and co-operation with management.

Others use their position as an avenue to power and capital accumulation. They lord it over the workers who have voted them into office, demonstrate how important they are, and neglect the representation of individual grievances to management, union, and Labour Inspectorate unless they are remunerated in one way or another. Still others concentrate almost exclusively on representing the interests of friends, relatives, and members of their own ethnic group. Finally, there are those who are sincerely committed to the representation of the workers' interests, even to the extent of calling out a strike as a last resort. One of these was Michael Tayong.

Case no. 5.1 *A bold Staff Representative*

Michael Tayong was a pruner. He acquired a bad reputation in management circles after his election as a Staff Representative in the pruning section. In 1977 he was charged by the estate management with having organised a go-slow of pruners which aimed at a reduction in their task. On that occasion the management failed to obtain the labour Inspector's approval for his dismissal, but was allowed to transfer him from the pruning section to the factory.

Only one year later (1978) he was elected as one of the Staff Representatives in the factory. In the course of that same year the management changed the shift system in the factory from two shifts to three shifts of 8 hours, starting from midnight. As a result, the workers lost their entitlement to a 'basket allowance' as provided for in Article 45 of the 1976 National Collective Agreement Governing Agricultural Activities and Related Activities:

Every worker who works at least eight hours at night stretching over mid-night or ten hours in the day shall receive a basket allowance, the amount of which shall not be less than twice the hourly wage of category 4a for workers in categories 1 to 4 and twice the hourly wage for the incremental position 'a' of the category of the workers concerned for workers in category 5 and above.²⁰

On 24 September 1978, Michael Tayong and six other workers held a secret meeting in the camp at which they decided to no longer follow the new factory roster. The 21 male and female workers, who were to start work at midnight (the first shift) the following day, did not report for work until 6 a.m. When the estate manager was informed of the strike action, he warned the strikers in writing and appealed to the Staff Representatives to advise the workers to keep to the new roster. However, the workers ignored his warning and went on reporting at 6 a.m. until 28 September, when they were driven out of the factory with the aid of the police and dismissed.

The next morning, Tayong, together with another Staff Representative, Mr Apollinaire Yamawe, tried to organise a solidarity strike of all the Tole Tea workers on behalf of their dismissed colleagues. Their efforts largely failed, however, as the pluckers and most other workers started work at 8 a.m. One of the main reasons for this failure was that the workers did not want to risk losing their jobs for an issue that applied only to the factory workers, especially when it was already dealt with by the authorities concerned (see below).

The union president strongly condemned this illegal strike action. Before the start of the strike, he had already raised the issue with the CDC General Manager, having received a complaint from the Staff Representatives. He pleaded for the reinstatement of the 21 dismissed workers, but endorsed management's decision to terminate Tayong and transfer Yamawe to another estate.²¹ In his recommendation to the Ministry of Labour in Yaoundé, the Provincial Inspector of Labour warned the Minister that 'the social situation at the CDC Tole Tea Estate is really boiling and will soon explode if no immediate action is taken to arrest the situation'.²² In the end, the Minister approved his recommendations.

The workers have always been dissatisfied with the performance of some Staff Representatives. This often gave rise to tensions and conflicts both within the team of Staff Representatives and between the bad performers and the workers. The severest conflict developed after the election of new Staff Representatives in January 1982.

Soon after these elections, two factions emerged within the team of Staff Representatives. The leaders of these factions were Pauline Abid, an overseer in the plucking section, and Mathias Anyacheck, an acting headman in the pruning section. These factions were not based on gender. Mathias Anyacheck enjoyed the support of some female Staff Representatives as well as of a substantial number of female pluckers. One reason was that Pauline Abid was not popular among the female pluckers. She was known as an extremely authoritarian overseer who strictly controlled her subordinates. Another reason was that she had not been nominated by the pluckers during the Staff Representative elections. Her name nevertheless appeared on the union list of candidates. No wonder that the workers believed that she owed her election to the union president, Mr C.P.N. Vewessee. That impression was reinforced when she soon began styling herself as the 'captain' of the team of Staff Representatives and demanding that all individual grievances on the estate be channelled to the management through her.

Clearly, this self-proclaimed leadership was a violation of existing legislation and the Statutes of the NUCW, which stressed the equal rights and powers of the Staff Representatives and prohibited the creation of a hierarchical order in the team. There was no doubt in the minds of the workers that Pauline Abid could never have claimed

this illegal post without the approval of the union president. They were well aware that the latter had already appointed some of his loyal 'followers' among the Staff Representatives as 'spokesmen' or 'captains' on other CDC estates and had charged them with controlling the activities of militant Staff Representatives (Konings 1993).

Pauline Abid was feared by most Staff Representatives. She was a very domineering woman who maintained close links with management staff and the union president. Some of the Staff Representatives ascribed mystical powers to her and took her for a witch. She continuously threatened her opponents in the team of Staff Representatives, even removing a few of them from office. She did not hesitate to co-opt into the team one of her favourite colleagues in the plucking section who had not been voted into office.

Mathias Anyacheck, who also acted as a witch doctor in the labour camps, was not afraid to contest Pauline Abid's power position. He in fact became the mouthpiece of the growing opposition against Pauline Abid's 'dictatorship'. This oppositional role did not endear him to the union president, who seized the first chance to victimise him. His request for promotion to the rank of headman was rejected by the management, on the union president's recommendation; he was instead demoted from acting headman to worker in the pruning section.

On 4 October 1982 an open confrontation took place between Pauline Abid and Mathias Anyacheck. That morning Anyacheck had taken time off to discuss two collective disputes with the union president. On his return to the camp, he ran into Pauline Abid. She shouted at him that he was plotting her overthrow and that he had reported her and her followers to the union president. When he denied this, she threw one of her files at him and threatened to bring about his downfall. The workers perceived this open confrontation as a big scandal. They were annoyed that such internal struggles for power in the team of Staff Representatives were interfering with the representation of their interests.²³

The growing discontent with Pauline Abid's 'ambition for power' was fuelled by the exposure of some misdeeds committed by her and two of her followers in the team of Staff Representatives. The

workers alleged that she had passed false reports to the management and that a number of female pluckers had been punished by the management as a result. Moreover, she was to have proposed to the management the transfer of several workers, though Staff Representatives have no authority to do so. And last but not least, she was to have collected a contribution of FCFA 50 per worker for organising a witch-cleansing session, but this session had never taken place and she had never accounted for the money. She was also blamed for having condoned misbehaviour by Messrs Lucas Fomuso and Johnson Bituaka, two of her followers.

Mr Lucas Fomuso was the camp warden on the estate. Like Pauline Abid, he had been nominated Staff Representative by the union president rather than by the workers. The workers alleged that he was demanding bribes for allocating rooms in the camps. Obviously this would have been a lucrative business in view of the serious shortage of rooms there. Mr Johnson Bituaka had formerly been a factory watchman but had later been transferred to the field as a plucker (see Chapter 3, Case no. 3.1). He was accused by the workers of misconstruing facts and misinforming them of decisions taken by the team of Staff Representatives.

On 1 November 1982, the Senior Field Assistant, Mr V.K. Ngha, decided to intervene by calling a meeting with the Staff Representatives. During this meeting he expressed his disapproval of the power struggle going on in the team and advised the three Staff Representatives just mentioned to hand in their letters of resignation to the union president on grounds of incompetence and misbehaviour.²⁴

His intervention presented Mathias Anyacheck and his faction with an excellent opportunity to mobilise the workers for removal of these three Staff Representatives. They organised a mass meeting of workers on 11 November 1982 which unanimously voted to replace the three Staff Representatives. The next day they informed the union president of this decision. The union president, however, replied that he could not accept the decision unless it was signed by the majority of the workers, as prescribed by Ministerial Order no. 10 of 17 June 1968.

The signatures were delivered and the union president held a meeting with the corporation's Personnel Officer and the Staff Representatives on 16 November 1982 to investigate the matter.

This meeting was interrupted by the workers who came out en masse demanding the transfer of the three Staff Representatives to another estate. The workers believed that the union president was opposed to their unanimous decision and was trying to keep Pauline Abid and her two followers in office. The Personnel Officer, Mr J.S. Ekwa, eventually persuaded them to return to the camp after assuring them that he would discuss their complaint with the Provincial Inspector of Labour at Buea.²⁵ The Staff Representatives agreed to calm the workers down, on the condition that their three colleagues accused of misbehaviour would be transferred. Failure to do so would inevitably result in strike action.

As the matter dragged on and strike action threatened, the Provincial Inspector of Labour decided to settle the matter once and for all. On 3 December 1982 he met on the estate with Staff Representatives, the union president, and management representatives. He strongly condemned the power struggle among the Staff Representatives and the misbehaviour of some of them. He also pointed out to the management that the procedures for handling workers' grievances were not being respected on the estate. As the atmosphere in the meeting grew more and more tense due to the menacing presence of a large number of workers outside the meeting room, the Provincial Inspector decided to summon a mass meeting of workers on 7 December 1982 before taking appropriate measures to resolve the matter.

At this mass meeting, the workers declared that the union president was the main cause of the troubles because he (i) had imposed Staff Representatives who were not the workers' choice, and (ii) had elevated one Staff Representative to the illegal position of 'captain'. The Provincial Inspector persuaded the workers not to single out any incumbent Staff Representatives for punishment, especially in the form of replacement or transfer, but to hold new elections on 18 January 1983. Afterwards, he warned the union president that

candidates to be put forward must be those of the choice of the entire workers after due consultation in a general meeting of the electoral bodies. You are no doubt familiar with the tone of the present agitation.²⁶

In the elections, Mathias Anyacheck and some of his followers were re-elected, while Pauline Abid and her two unpopular allies were defeated (see Table 5.1). Immediately following their victory, Anyacheck and his followers sent a petition to the Provincial Inspector of Labour requesting the removal of the union president:

We, the entire workers of the Tole Tea Estate move a vote of TOTAL AND COMPLETE LOSS OF CONFIDENCE in Fako Agricultural Workers' President, Mr Vewessee, and his leadership, call on the Provincial Inspector of Labour and Social Insurance for the South West Province, the President of the NUCW, Yaoundé, and the Minister of Labour, Yaoundé, to take action and change this present union president, Mr Vewessee, so as to redeem CDC workers and avoid future problems of this nature and save the union and workers from suffering further.²⁷

No action was ever taken on this petition, however.

Conflicts of this nature have not occurred any more since 1983, notwithstanding the fact that the economic crisis has badly impinged upon the Staff Representatives' representation of workers' interests. Both management and union leadership constantly pressure them to focus on the increase in labour productivity rather than the protection of the workers' interests, for the sake of the corporation's economic recovery. At the time of the economic crisis their most important responsibilities became: (i) to attend the frequent meetings organised by management and union leadership to discuss possible worker contributions to the struggle for economic recovery, and (ii) to assist the union leadership and the management in implementing a series of unpopular measures taken at these meetings (see above). Little time remained to discuss and settle the numerous complaints of the workers. Most workers therefore had no more confidence in the Staff Representatives.

Participation of female workers in trade unionism

The vast majority of the female workers on the Tole Estate are union members. Female membership (87.5%) is even slightly higher than male membership (84.5%). Of course, this high rate of female

membership does not necessarily imply a high degree of participation in the union, nor a high degree of union popularity.

The following answers given by the women help explain the high rate of female membership:

It is a tradition that you *automatically* become a union member as soon as you start working.

The union is the *normal channel* of communicating your problems to the management.

On the one hand, the women tend to perceive trade union membership as virtually a 'must' or 'automatism'. This is quite understandable. First, new workers are usually immediately approached by the union to sign check-off forms. Shop stewards, who are also supervisory staff members, use their authority to 'convince' new workers in their section that they should sign the forms and join the union. Once they are check-off members, it is quite difficult for the predominantly illiterate women to resign from the union because of existing bureaucratic procedures: resignations have to be directed to the President of the CTUC Confederal Bureau at Yaoundé. Secondly, after the subordination of the union to the party, there were enormous pressures on workers to join both party and union. Workers who did not possess union and party membership cards ran the risk of being troubled by the forces of law and order at the numerous checkpoints on the roads in Cameroon. It is hence not surprising that most non-members claimed to have been 'overlooked' by the union, in the sense of having not (yet) been asked to sign check-off forms.

On the other hand, a large number of women equally seem to have developed a 'trade union consciousness', since they tend to look upon the union as the normal channel of communicating their individual and collective grievances to the management and the Labour Inspectorate. This is doubtless the result of the relatively long history of trade unionism on the estate. The union leadership, the management, and the Labour Inspectorate have always impressed upon the workers that the union is the intermediary between workers and management, and that they should therefore rely on the union

for solving individual and collective disputes. Indeed, management generally refuses to deal with the workers directly. It should be emphasised, however, that although the women have usually accepted the union's intermediary role, they have never supported the union unconditionally. If union leadership and shop stewards act promptly and energetically upon receipt of a complaint and 'deliver the goods', they can be sure of massive support among the women. However, if they neglect the representation and defence of the women's interests, they can expect women to circumvent the union and seek alternative ways of defending their interests, such as engaging in informal and collective actions.

Not surprisingly, during my fieldwork I found that most women (76%) had lost confidence in the state-controlled union. The remaining women have several complaints about the union's performance as well, but still considered it of some help in representing their individual and collective grievances. Especially older women were still well aware of the considerable strength and achievements of the autonomous CDCWU and deeply regretted the present union decline.

The women have always been inclined to actively participate in any collective action called by the union in defence of the occupational interests of their own section or the total labour force. In these actions they have fought side by side with the male workers. However, they play a subordinate role in the administration of the union and seldom participate in daily union affairs.

Like uneducated men, uneducated women have never shown interest in standing for office, showing instead great dependence on the educated union leaders for representing their grievances. Formal and informal rules have effectively barred them from competing for office. Moreover, those educated women, in particular female supervisory staff members, who did stand for office at the local level, have always formed a tiny minority in the male-dominated team of Staff Representatives. Nevertheless, a few 'strong' women, like Pauline Abid, played an exceptionally dominant role at the local level.

The vast majority of female pluckers said they preferred female Staff Representatives to defend their sectional interests, since 'it was easier for women to approach them' and 'they tend to understand

women's problems better than male Staff Representatives'. The example of Pauline Abid, however, clearly illustrates that female pluckers will not hesitate to shift their allegiance to male Staff Representatives should female ones fail to defend their interests.

No woman has ever played a leading role in the union at the corporation level. This is not only due to the relatively small proportion of women in the total CDC labour force and their lack of educational qualifications, but also to the persistent ideology of male dominance. It would appear that women have never contested the superior bargaining strength of the male clerks who have dominated in the union leadership and who are derisively called the 'academicians'. But there is still a considerable socio-cultural gap between illiterate female pluckers and this type of leadership, and women have always remained somewhat suspicious of the union leadership's representation of their interests.

Well aware of the women's conditional support, the male leaders have always stressed that they were committed to defending the interests of *all* workers and that women would benefit equally to men when general concessions from management were gained. During the period of autonomous unionism, they fought for improvement in the living and working conditions of all workers and achieved substantial results. Like the male members, female workers highly valued such achievements. Unsurprisingly, the male leaders tended to pay less attention to specific problems women face in the labour process, such as initial differences in remuneration between men and women, lack of training and promotions for women, sexual harassment, and child care. However, if women themselves reported such issues to the union, the union leadership did often raise them in its meetings with management. There is no evidence that the predominantly illiterate women have ever protested against the male leaders' neglect of their specific problems, or have contemplated the creation of a women's union to represent their interests vis-a-vis the employer and male co-workers (cf. Pittin 1984; Abdullah 1997).

Finally, the vast majority of the illiterate female workers seem little acquainted with the union's policies and day-to-day activities. For example, I found that the female workers were not aware of any changes in union policies during political liberalisation, such as

the leadership's pursuit of a return to union autonomy. Mass meetings at which the workers are consulted about or informed of current union issues by Staff Representatives and union leaders, are rare; if they occur, few women attend them. Most women told me that they are not keen to do so because of their multiple responsibilities and their illiteracy. It is only during serious disputes with management that they turn out en masse for these meetings. On such occasions, they often surround the negotiation room together with their male colleagues in order to 'check up' on the proceedings and – above all – the union leadership's representation of their interests.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to demonstrate that the widely accepted notion of a general lack of 'trade union consciousness' among female workers needs some qualification, at least as far as female workers at the Tole Estate go.²⁸

It is true that women's participation in daily trade union affairs is low. Female pluckers at the Tole Estate participate little in the decision-making process and rarely compete for office. Undoubtedly this must be attributed among other causes, to their illiteracy and lack of time as well as to the union's patriarchal structure.

However, I disagree that low participation in trade union affairs necessarily implies a low degree of 'trade union consciousness'. Female pluckers at the Tole Estate have learnt to perceive the union as the 'normal' intermediary channel for settlement of their individual and collective grievances with management. And they are ready to participate actively in any action taken by union leadership in defence of their occupational interests.

I have stressed that their support for the union is still highly conditional and instrumental. They expect the union to represent their interests effectively and 'deliver the goods'. If such expectations are not met, they are inclined to bypass the union. The establishment of state control over the union has brought about a crisis of confidence in the union leadership and Staff Representatives. Women's growing dissatisfaction with the union's representation of their interests is manifested in their attempts (i)

to appeal directly to the Labour Inspector for the settlement of individual and collective grievances and (ii) to revert to alternative modes of resistance, in particular to informal and collective actions.

Notes

1. The check-off system was introduced into the corporation in February 1963; and, in 1966, 94% of the CDC workers were check-off members. See CDC Annual Report and Accounts for the year 1966.
2. See Letter of Mr E.K. Lottin, Provincial Inspector of Labour, Buea, to General Manager of CDC, dated 8 May 1975, in File MEPS/BU.338, Vol. I, Divisional Union of Agricultural Workers of Fako.
3. Minutes of Executive Meeting of the FAWU and MAWU held in the CDC General Manager's Office at Bota on 7 April 1975, in *ibid*.
4. See Closing Address by Mr C.P.N. Vewessee, President of FADUTU, during Divisional Workers' Education Seminar for Fako Trade Union Leaders held at Limbe, 7-11 December 1982, in File MTPS/WCD/BU.246/S.1/403, Divisional Union of Trade Unions of Fako.
5. *Cameroon Post*, 20-27 February 1991, p. 11.
6. *Ibid*, 2-9 May 1991, p. 15; and *The Star*, 7 May 1991, p. 1.
7. *Cameroon Tribune*, 9 April 1991.
8. The subject of Staff Representatives was taken up again in Order no. 10/MTPS of 17 June 1968; Articles 131-137 of the 1974 Labour Code; Order no. 21/MTPS of 28 October 1981; and Order no. 24/MTPS of 27 July 1987.
9. See Speech by the President of the Executive Bureau of the CTUC during the Sensitisation Campaign for the Election of Staff Representatives of November 1987, in File MTPS/IDTPS/SWP/BU.180, Vol. III, Dpt. Staff Representative Elections.
10. See Letter of Provincial Delegate of Labour, Buea, to Minister of Labour and Social Insurance, Yaoundé, dated 18 January 1988, in File MTPS/SWP/BU.325, Vol. VI, National Union of Cameroon Workers.
11. See CDC Press Release no. 3, dated 22 February 1983.
12. See Letter of Mr R.A. Duncan, General Manager of CDC, to Senior Labour Officer, Buea, dated 26 August 1969, in BNA, File Si (1959) 9, Trade Unions.

13. CDC Press Release no. 1, dated 10 January 1983.
14. CDC Circular G.2, dated 1 January 1976, Joint Consultative Meetings.
15. See Letter of Staff Representatives, Tole Tea Estate, to Provincial Inspector of Labour, Buea, dated 19 January 1983, in File MTPS/SWP/BU.180/S.1, Vol. III, Election of Staff Representatives – CDC.
16. See Letter of Mr C.P.N. Vewessee, President of FAWU, to General Manager of CDC, dated 17 November 1982, in File MTPS/SWP/LB.2, Vol. XVI, Complaints from CDC.
17. Letter of Mr C.P.N. Vewessee, President of FAWU, to CDC Administrative Personnel Controller, dated 14 December 1981, in File MTPS/SWP/VA.2, Vol. XV, Complaints from CDC.
18. Letter of Mr C.P.N. Vewessee, President of FAWU, to CDC Administrative Personnel Controller, dated 14 December 1981, in File MTPS/SWP/VA.2, Vol. XV, Complaints from CDC.
19. See Minutes of the Best Employee Contest held at the Estate Manager's Office on the 15th November 1990.
20. République Unie du Cameroun (1983), *Les conventions collectives de travail au Cameroun*, Yaoundé: Éd. SOPECAM.
21. See Letter of Administrative Personnel Controller of CDC to Provincial Inspector of Labour, Buea, dated 2 May 1979, in File MEPS/SWP/BU.124/S.2, Industrial Trade Disputes - CDC; and Letter Administrative Personnel Controller of CDC to Provincial Inspector of Labour, Buea, dated 20 October 1978, in File MTPS/SWP/BU.180/S.1, Vol. III, Election of Staff Representatives - CDC.
22. Letter of Provincial Inspector of Labour to Minister of Labour and Social Insurance, Yaoundé, dated 26 June 1979, in File MEPS/SWP/BU.124/S.2, Industrial Trade Disputes - CDC.
23. For this account, see several letters and reports in File MTPS/SWP/BU.180/S.1, Vol. III, Election of Staff Representatives - CDC.
24. See Minutes of Research Meeting with Permanent Staff Representatives of Tole Tea Estate held on 1 November 1982, by Mr V.A. Bacha, Secretary, in *ibid.*; and Letter of Mr C.P.N. Vewessee, President of FAWU, to General Manager of CDC, dated 17 November 1982, in File MTPS/SWP/LB.2, Vol. XVI, Complaints from CDC.

25. See Letter of Mr Justin S. Ekwa, Personnel Officer, to General Manager of CDC, dated 27 November 1982, in File CTUC/FAWU/10/Vol. 3, Complaints.
26. Letter of Mr E.K. Lottin, Provincial Inspector of Labour, to President of FAWU, Limbe, dated 10 December 1982, in File MEPS/SWP/BU.189/S.1, Vol. III, Election of Staff Representatives - CDC.
27. Letter of Tole Tea Representatives to Provincial Inspector of Labour, Buea, dated 19 January 1983, in *ibid*.
28. For a similar observation in the special South African situation, see Berger (1983 and 1992).

Informal and collective actions of female workers

Introduction

African women have clearly demonstrated a capacity to protect their interests individually and collectively. Collective actions of women have occurred in several African countries (Ardener 1975; O'Barr 1984; Parpart 1988b). Some of such actions have been documented in the Bamenda Grassfields, the region of origin of most Tole Tea women (Nkwi 1985; Diduk 1989; Shanklin 1990; Fonchingong *et al.* 2008). These were in essence manifestations of women's resistance against male abuse of power and the increasing loss of female control over the means of production (land) and the labour process in the colonial and post-colonial period.

Female pluckers on the Tole Estate have likewise proved capable of a variety of informal and collective actions to protest against their control and exploitation in the labour process, having perceived that union leadership and Staff Representatives were neglecting their interests and had failed to produce results.

The actions of the female pluckers challenged the initial managerial assumption that women would be more docile than men. The Tole Estate, in fact, soon acquired a bad reputation in management circles. Time and again the management was forced to admit that 'the Tole Tea Estate is one of the most troubled spots on the CDC plantations'¹ and that 'output on the estate has remained almost pathetically low'.²

In this chapter I want to focus on the variety of actions that female pluckers waged against managerial efforts (i) to maximise labour productivity, (ii) to assert control over the labour process, and (iii) to minimise wages and other conditions of service. These

efforts, which are obviously crucial to capital accumulation, were intensified during the economic crisis and became central to the corporation's adjustment measures.

Actions of female pluckers against managerial efforts to increase labour productivity

Female pluckers have always been inclined to oppose managerial efforts to raise the level of task work. The management usually attributes their resistance to 'laziness'. The pluckers for their part give a different explanation. Most of them stressed that

Women are used to working hard, but they do not want to become slaves. Therefore, we pluckers insist on being treated as human beings in the field.

It appears to me that women tend to reject the capitalist work ethic, which may lead to growing 'dehumanisation' and 'exploitation' in the labour process, and insist on the use of non-capitalist criteria for a definition of 'hard work'. In their local communities, they were compelled to work hard, but could at least control the pace of work and did not feel 'alienated' in the labour process.

Female workers also gave a number of other reasons for opposing an increase in task work:

It is usually followed by an increase in pro-rata payments.

It leaves us hardly any time and energy to carry out our domestic duties.

It raises conflicts among workers themselves (envy and competition) and between workers and supervisory staff (disciplinary actions).

It is interesting to observe that for a considerable period of time female pluckers have successfully resisted managerial attempts to raise the level of task work. Table 6.1 demonstrates that plucking norms on the estate have hardly been increased by management between 1963 and 1980. Female pluckers have employed several strategies to achieve this remarkable result. One strategy was complaining that the current task level was 'too high'. Another was to resort to strike action.

The first recorded strike relating to task work occurred on 11 January 1963. The pluckers went on strike after repeated complaints about ‘excessive’ task work and ‘continuous’ pro-rata payments. They demanded an immediate abolition of task work.

Table 6.1 *Plucking norms and incentive bonus at the Tole Tea Estate*

YEAR	PLUCKING NORM		INCENTIVE BONUS
	Peak Period	Slack Period	
1963	35 lb	30 lb	FCFA 3 for every lb of leaves plucked above the norm
1969	18 kg	16 kg	FCFA 7 for every kg of leaves plucked above the norm
			FCFA 10 for every kg of leaves plucked in extra time
1980	26 kg	14 kg	FCFA 15 for every kg of leaves plucked between 27 and 45 kg
			FCFA 20 for every kg of leaves plucked between 46 and 55 kg
			FCFA 25 for every kg of leaves plucked above 55 kg
1987	32 kg	18 kg	FCFA 15 for every kg of leaves plucked between 33 and 45 kg
			FCFA 20 for every kg of leaves plucked between 46 and 55 kg
			FCFA 25 for every kg of leaves plucked above 55 kg

Sources: Memorandum of Agreement between CDC and CDCWU, November 1963, Appendix B.1, Tea Pluckers and Pruners, in BNA, File Qe (1958) 1, Trade Disputes; and Letter of Mr C.P.N. Vewessee, President of FAWU, to General Manager of CDC, dated 10 October 1988, in File MTPS/IDTPS/SWP/BU.95/S.1, Vol. XII, Complaints from CDC.

The strike began without union approval. The union leadership therefore refused to intervene on the strikers’ behalf. The strikers subsequently nominated ‘spokesmen’ for the representation of their grievances with the management. Feelings ran high during the strike. As there were strong indications that the strikers might resort to violence, the management decided to call on the forces of law and order. One police officer responsible for restoring order on the estate made the following report on the strike:³

When I arrived at the estate, Corporal Gbong reported to me that only a few of the workers had turned up for work in the morning. He further stated that when those who stayed at home noticed some of their co-workers had defied the sit-down strike agreement, they ran to the farm, seized tools from the working group and forced them back to the camp. The constables around were protecting the overseers and headmen as well as the management and the factory. I noticed upon arrival that the workers had gathered in about four groups. Two groups were seated at the camp and one group went round the farm to ensure that no one was at work. Another group tried to gain entrance into the factory but the police barred the entrance. When I noticed that the people were determined to have their way as they carried cutlasses, sticks, stones etc and that if the people tried to disperse them an ugly situation might arise, I advised the manager that the engine should be stopped. This was done and the mob retreated quietly to the camp. During this encounter, five gendarmes arrived under the command of the Chief Marechal de Logis. The gendarme officer worked hand in hand with me and his men patrolled the area along with the policemen.

CDC officials arrived earlier and were holding discussions with spokesmen of the workers in the manager's office under police guard, with a view to ironing out their differences. They finally agreed on certain points and the spokesmen went down to the camp to address the workers. We all wanted to see their reactions when the decisions arrived at in the meeting would have [been] delivered to them. The Assistant Commissioner arrived at Tole Farm at about 11.15 hrs with more reinforcement of 13 men including a rifle and smoke party. The spokesmen addressed the workers and they all agreed to go back to work as usual on the 12th of July 1963. The spokesmen signed an undertaking to the CDC officials to this effect. The Police Riot Unit together with the Assistant Commissioner, myself and the gendarme officers waited at the scene until the workers quietly retreated to their homes in the camp. No arrests were made. All being quiet, policemen were posted to guard the factory and this will continue until tomorrow morning.

In its negotiations with the spokesmen of the strikers, the management recognised some of the grievances raised by the pluckers during the strike, but it consented to neither a reduction nor an abolition of task work. This outcome, of course, was hardly satisfactory to the pluckers. After the strike they continued protesting against 'excessive' task work. During the 1960s their protests were often supported by the CDCWU (see Chapter 5).

Though confronted with increasing controls on the part of state, management, and union, the pluckers did not abandon their protest actions during the 1970s. On the contrary, they intensified their actions in 1977 following a successful campaign by pruners for a reduction in their task. The pruners had staged a strike in 1976 in response to frequent instances of pro-rata payment and succeeded in achieving a considerable task reduction. However, they did not stop agitating, and even started a series of go-slows in 1977 aimed at a further reduction.⁴ Encouraged by the pruners' success, the pluckers organised several actions as well. On 28 November 1977, they refused to do overtime, even though many leaves were still on the bushes. When ninety-three pluckers reported late for work the following morning, they were sent home by the Senior Field Assistant, Mr V.K. Ngah.⁵ The pluckers, in turn, staged a number of go-slows between November 1977 and March 1978, and these resulted in frequent pro-rata payments.⁶

At the same time, they began agitating for a review of the incentive bonus scheme (see table 6.1). When this scheme was introduced on the estate, wages were quite low, FCFA 121-138 a day, and any incentive bonus formed an attractive addition to the pluckers' meagre incomes. With wage increases over the years, however, the unreviewed bonus no longer served as an incentive.⁷ In 1978 the prevailing plucking norm of 18 kg of green leaves provided the pluckers with the basic wage of about FCFA 400. Taking into account the bonus of FCFA 7 for any kg of green leaves plucked above the norm, an extra 18 kg of green leaves plucked would add no more than FCFA 126 to the basic wage (see Table 6.1). It is not surprising that pluckers bitterly complained that management did not want to give workers an appropriate reward for the desired increase in labour productivity.

Management ignored their complaint. The pluckers then refused to stay in the field to work overtime. Neither the supervisory staff nor the Staff Representatives could change their minds.⁸ At a mass meeting on 2 September 1978, the pluckers instructed Staff Representatives to press both for a review of the plucking bonus scheme and the payment of full wages to the pluckers who had received pro-rata payments between November 1977 and March 1978.⁹ The management informed Staff Representatives that it was ready to negotiate on a review of the plucking bonus, but it would not concede to the second demand.

After long negotiations, union leadership, Staff Representatives and management agreed on 8 July 1980 upon an increase in both task work and incentive bonus (see table 6.1). This did not stop a number of female pluckers from protesting a few years later (1982) against this agreement and insisting on a reduction in the task.¹⁰ The management strongly resented this attitude to work and began meting out severe punishments to 'undisciplined' and 'lazy' women. In October 1982, for instance, it summarily dismissed one plucker, Mrs Esther Egouach, for inciting her colleagues to stop working before closing time due to bad weather. This was a widow with 8 children who had never received a warning in her 21 years of service.¹¹

In January 1987 the union leadership, Staff Representatives and management agreed on an increase in the level of task work from 26 kg to 32 kg of green leaves, as an adjustment measure to the economic crisis (see table 6.1). While the new norms were implemented on the Djuttitsa and Ndu Estates in June-July 1987, female pluckers on the Tole Estate continued to resist this decision. Eventually, the CDC General Manager was compelled to personally call upon the union to persuade the Tole tea pluckers to accept the decision.¹² It was not till October 1987 that the Tole tea pluckers reluctantly accepted the increase in task work at a mass meeting organised by the union.

One year later, on 3 October 1988, 469 pluckers laid down their roots. The estate manager inquired why they went on strike, but received no reply. The Staff Representatives tried but failed to persuade the pluckers to resume work. The strikers told Staff Representatives instead that they no longer had confidence in them

‘because they had teamed up with the management’.¹³ Subsequently, they marched to the Provincial Delegation of Labour at Buea, singing battle songs and waving placards protesting against the high plucking task. On their arrival, the Provincial Delegate of Labour urged them to go back to work and settle their grievances through peaceful negotiations. He then walked back with them to the estate. On the estate they met the union president, Mr C.P.N. Vewessee, who had been informed of the strike by the management. He was jeered when he asked their motives for going on strike. The strike leaders then stated some of their grievances:

- that they were unable to complete the new plucking norm of 32 kg, even though they stayed in the field from 6.30 a.m. to 6 p.m. As a result, they were continually being paid pro-rata.
- that they had accepted the new norm on condition that not only task workers but also other CDC workers would be made to contribute to economic recovery. During the mass meeting in October 1987 they had been told by the union leadership that it had proposed a compulsory savings scheme for workers who were not paid by results: these workers would be compelled to save 10-15% of their monthly wages to help the corporation’s economic recovery. The union proposal, however, had not yet been implemented by management. Consequently task workers, like the tea pluckers, felt no longer bound to the new norm.

In reply, the union president pointed up the illegality of their action and requested them to heed the General Manager’s deadline of reporting for work next day. All but seventy-nine strikers decided to resume work. The refusers were sacked by the management. In a letter to the CDC General Manager, the union president pleaded for leniency towards the striking workers, but asked for severe disciplinary measures against the ringleaders as a deterrent to anyone planning ‘illegal’ strikes. He then tried to enlighten the General Manager on the differing views of pluckers and union leaders on the existing plucking norm:

To give a good picture of what the workers want, it is necessary for me to briefly state that the lesser the task, the higher the overtime bonus. From past plucking records, during the flush period, some pluckers were able to pluck 90 kg, 80 kg, 70 kg and the least bring 45 kg. If the task is brought down to 26 kg as the workers are demanding, a worker bringing 90 kg will of course be earning more than three and a half day's wages in a day and that can only have the effect of exaggerating the present cost of production from 800 FCFA to about 1,000 FCFA per kg when nobody is buying the tea at 500 FCFA.

While the union is out to see that workers are not being exploited, we fail to see any justification on the part of the workers who would want to insist on the review of the present task and the defined quality which is two leaves and a bud. Besides, if the manager does not insist on this quality, there is no doubt that the tea bushes will be destroyed in less than five years.¹⁴

In addition to such sporadic collective actions, female pluckers have continuously engaged in various individual, informal actions to challenge the managerial pursuit of increased labour productivity.

During my fieldwork I regularly observed various forms of output restriction, including late arrival at work, departure before closing time, malingering and so on. Supervisory staff have even caught women making love in the fields during working hours. For example, on 11 October 1986, the estate manager sanctioned two female pluckers, as 'it has been proved without any doubt that on 8 October 1986 you had sexual intercourse with a boy in the field during working hours'.¹⁵

Without doubt the most serious threat to increased productivity on the estate is *absenteeism*. The rate of absenteeism has always been conspicuously high. This is due particularly to the large proportion of female workers in the estate's total labour force. Women tend to be absent from the estate more often than men because of their multiple responsibilities outside the labour process, such as their care for (sick) children, their work on the 'chop farms', and so on. Already in 1967, Bederman noted the high rate of absenteeism on the estate:

At no time will the complete labour force be working. The average absenteeism rate among women is about 16% while it is 10% among the men (Bederman 1967: 320).

Alarmed at this high rate of absenteeism, the estate manager warned the workers in 1983 that he would no longer tolerate their 'laxity' towards work attendance:

It has become a very bad hobby on the estate that workers decide on when to go to work or not. This is very pronounced in the plucking section where we have a total of 900 pluckers but we have never, I say never had 700 pluckers present on one single day for the past six years. In so doing very often one is tempted to recruit more casual workers as the leaf often goes off-hand. With immediate effect any person who takes three voluntary absences within one month gets a warning and if any worker gets three of such warnings his or her name will be removed from our books.¹⁶

The implementation of a series of disciplinary measures, however, seems not to have effected a drastic reduction in absenteeism. On 13 October 1990 the estate manager requested the assistance of the Staff Representatives in his fight against absenteeism:

While disciplinary measures are being considered as the last resort to check the high wave of absenteeism, Staff Representatives will in the first instance carry out a sensitisation campaign.¹⁷

At the same time, he prohibited one of the most common practices of 'absconding' from the estate:

The practice whereby permission for absence is sought by somebody else, when the real person is already away, ignorant of whether the request will even be granted or not was condemned. All permissions must be approved before the persons leave the estate.¹⁸

One wonders, however, whether management will ever be able to control absenteeism as long as women carry the dual burden of productive and reproductive labour. The rate of absenteeism on

the estate appears to have reached alarming proportions during the economic crisis. The estate manager reported to the union that absenteeism was responsible for the loss of over 1,700 man-days in July-August 1992. He estimated that the corporation's financial loss at about FCFA 11 million. He warned the union president that he would not hesitate to dismiss more than a hundred workers if the union and the shop stewards failed to end this situation. Apparently, the managerial crusade against undisciplined and unproductive workers has not yet been successful.

Actions of female workers against managerial efforts to establish control over the labour process

The female pluckers have never questioned the hierarchical organisation of production. They are habituated to the existence of a hierarchical order both within the household and the society at large. Their actions are normally oriented towards what they perceive as an 'inhuman' or 'uncompassionate' exercise of constituted authority.

During my fieldwork I discovered that the women draw a sharp line between 'wicked' and 'nice' supervisors, and they direct their anger at the former. 'Wicked' supervisors are those who treat them as mere objects of production and display a large measure of insensitivity to the workers' plight. They may be differentiated into two types. Firstly, supervisors who are notorious for being authoritarian and bossy. They tend to command their subordinates without taking into account their opinions and advice into account. Secondly, supervisors who are overzealous in the exercise of their duties. They are merely interested in raising output, and therefore supervise their subordinates closely and uncompassionately.

'Nice' supervisors, on the other hand, are those who treat their subordinates as human beings in the labour process, taking their personal and domestic problems into consideration in exercising their supervisory powers. They generally do not supervise so strictly as not to leave the women some measure of autonomy in executing their allotted task. One of the pluckers gave me the following description of 'nice' supervisors:

Nice supervisors show compassion and use their discretion. If they are informed that my child is ill, they will not bully me if I cannot concentrate on my work.

Wicked supervisors usually experience greater difficulties in controlling workers than nice ones. Female workers tend to engage in a range of informal modes of resistance against authoritarian and overzealous control.

Women tend to be 'stubborn' towards wicked supervisors. They regularly bluntly refuse to carry out an order given by such supervisors, even if such a refusal might lead to a serious breakdown in the production process or a considerable loss of output. Insubordination is often accompanied by insults and abuse, and in some cases by physical attacks on supervisory staff. Women also play tricks on wicked supervisors or discredit them with their superiors with false accusations of bribery, corruption and other vices.

A quite common way of stonewalling supervisors is to invoke their authority when they are around, but as soon as they have turned their backs to mock and ridicule them as well as 'relaxing' and 'playing around'. A more vicious means of 'lashing out' is the threat of using mystical powers against supervisory staff. It is hard for the latter to know whether such a threat is real or merely a bluff. In 1988 a supervisory staff member alleged that one of the female workers had threatened to kill him by witchcraft;

I wish to report to you as boss of this estate that Rose Ebanja is threatening my life. She is not only doing this. She has taken an irrevocable oath to kill me. Here is part of what she was saying: You will see, I will show you that women can be above men. Mr Kaba has been recently transported to Bamenda dead, the next corpse to be transported to Bamenda is yours. I am saying this and you all take it like a joke but when he will die you will be surprised. I will spend the bit I have and even a loan for this purpose. He must die.¹⁹

The female workers have also been engaged from time to time in collective actions against authoritarian and overzealous managerial and supervisory staff. Such collective actions are usually aimed at the latter's removal from office.

One of the demands of the pluckers during the 1963 strike described above was the immediate transfer of the estate manager, Mr K.P. MacNicol, and an overseer in the plucking section, Mr Lawrence Bana. They were held responsible for 'excessive' task work, frequent pro-rata payments and dismissals of workers. In 1969 pluckers agitated for the transfer of Mr E.A. Eloundou, at the time a Senior Field Assistant on the estate. They accused him of (i) having destroyed a number of baskets of green leaves, which according to him had been crushed beyond redemption by the pluckers and (ii) having kicked the women involved.²⁰ The estate manager blamed one of the Staff Representatives in the plucking section for this disturbance. She had never approached him on the issue, but had incited the women to agitate. Moreover, he suggested that

the real basic trouble lies in a general resentment at the sharp fall in bonus earning opportunities 12 months ago when higher plucking standards were required by the management. It was Mr Eloundou's unenviable task to bring about these improved standards.²¹

In the end, he asked Mr Eloundou to improve his relationship with the women.

Apparently, he did not do so, for his relationship with the women continued to be strained, even after his promotion to estate manager. On 23 November 1976, the workers threatened to go on strike, if Mr Eloundou was not immediately transferred. The following charges were raised against him:²²

- *maltreatment of workers.* The workers alleged that Mr Eloundou treated them 'with scorn'. They cited an incident on 17 November 1976, when he bullied the Staff Representatives and refused to discuss task work with them. They stated that they were no longer willing to work under him, since he seemed uninterested in listening to their problems.
- *irresponsibility.* The workers claimed that immediately after a conciliation meeting with the Provincial Delegate of Labour on 16 November 1976, Mr Eloundou rushed to the field and threatened to sack any workers who failed to complete the daily task. He even issued warning letters to

several of them. Owing to his irresponsible behaviour, output had continued to fall on the estate.

- *total disregard for his subordinates.* The workers maintained that Mr Eloundou failed to provide them with opportunities for training and promotion. Accordingly, whenever vacancies occurred for training and promotion, he gave preference to qualified people from outside the estate. In April 1976 the workers had already declared a trade dispute after his appointment of a fresh recruit to the position of overseer. On that occasion they had demanded the introduction of a training scheme for deserving workers.²³

The matter was settled upon the intervention of the Provincial Inspector of Labour.

During the period 1977-1979 there were regular threats of strike action following the alleged victimisation of militant Staff Representatives and workers,²⁴ but no strikes actually took place on this issue.

On 11 May 1978 the workers declared a trade dispute against Mr Anthony Bame, a senior overseer in the plucking section. They demanded a transfer because he 'had become a nuisance to the workers'.²⁵ They charged him with (i) maltreatment of female pluckers during working hours, (ii) bribery and corruption, and (iii) creating confusion in the plucking section. To substantiate their accusations, they cited a letter from one Mrs Olga Bih that read as follows:

This Anthony Bame has been asking me since last year (1976) whether I was not interested in becoming a headwoman. He told me one day that there was a chance for me to become a headwoman and asked me to give him FCFA 6,000 on 4 November 1977.

During his investigations the Provincial Inspector of Labour discovered that Mrs Bih's story was fabricated, as part of a 'plot' to bring on the downfall of this overzealous overseer. He consequently summoned the workers to withdraw their trade dispute because all their allegations had turned out unjustified.

Collective actions against supervisory and managerial staff members have no longer been occurring during the economic crisis. Female pluckers seem to realise that such actions have become risky as well as ineffective. The management actively encourages the supervisory and managerial staff members during the crisis to strictly control their subordinates, to use their authority to the fullest and if necessary to discipline any worker without compassion. It is evident that management will no longer tolerate any collective action which aims at transfer or dismissal of authoritarian and overzealous supervisory and managerial staff members. Subsequently, the female pluckers have switched from collective to informal modes of resistance against their subjection in the labour process.

Actions of female workers against managerial efforts to minimise wages and other conditions of service

As we have seen in Chapter 3, wages and conditions of service were negotiated between management and union until 1969, when a National Joint Bargaining Board for Collective Agreements and Wages was installed by the government. In October 1970 this Board adopted a classification of workers into 12 categories, with minimum salaries attached to each category. Its classification was introduced into the corporation in 1971.

The classification adopted has been a continuous source of conflict on the Tole Estate. Like other field workers on the estate, female pluckers have protested against the category they were classified in. This led to numerous collective trade disputes and threats of strike action.²⁶

The pluckers were initially placed in Category 1, the lowest category comprising unskilled labour. This caused a great deal of disgruntlement among the pluckers who looked upon their classification as a serious underestimation of the skills required for plucking and an attempt to underpay them. After numerous complaints to the management, they declared a collective dispute on 9 April 1976.²⁷ Following a close examination of the issue, the Provincial Inspector of Labour ruled on 28 May 1976 that the pluckers should be placed in Category 2 (semi-skilled labour), with effect from 1 April 1976.²⁸

In June 1976 the Tole Tea workers joined a general strike of the CDC workers. This strike, which was not supported by the union, arose from the matter of payment of gratuities and 1971-1973 wage increases, but it soon became a manifestation of the CDC workers' general discontent with the low remuneration for their hard work. The workers resumed work only when management had agreed that workers' representatives would be allowed to attend the verification of the payment of gratuities and the wage increases by a delegation of the Ministry of Labour.²⁹

In early 1992, all the CDC workers in the Fako Division, including the Tole female pluckers, started to agitate for (i) the abrogation of the January 1990 agreement between the CDC management and the union leadership which had resulted in a drastic reduction in their fringe benefits and the introduction of a compulsory savings scheme, and (ii) the immediate payment of seven quarters of family allowance arrears. The CDC management, however, refused to withdraw the agreement. The only concession it was eventually willing to make was to offer a 3% reduction in the compulsory savings rate so as to partly compensate the workers for tax increases. This offer was unacceptable to the workers. When the management declined to reconsider, CDC workers in the Fako Division, including the Tole female pluckers, went on strike from 21 to 26 May 1992. After this strike, the management agreed upon various amendments of the 6 January 1990 agreement as well as a 24% reduction in medical costs.

Besides collective action, female pluckers have engaged in many kinds of informal actions in protest against low remuneration. These included output restriction, sabotage and involvement in 'illegal' income-generating activities. Some women do not keep to the plucking standards. They add bad leaves to the good ones, a practice which enables them to complete their task earlier and to achieve more weight and income. Others steal tea from the factory and sell it to middlemen. Still others cut tea bushes and prunings to use them for firewood.³⁰ These and other 'illegal' activities are not only expressions of protest, but also provide welcome additions to the women's meagre incomes.

Conclusion

The material presented in this chapter challenges the common managerial assumption that female workers in the developing countries are easier to control than male workers. The Tole Estate management, in fact, has never succeeded in creating a docile female labour force. Female pluckers have always been wont to defend their occupational interests independently, whenever they perceived that the union was unresponsive to their demands. They have engaged in a variety of informal and collective actions to challenge their control and exploitation. Spectacular collective actions, of course, tend to be more risky than informal actions in a situation where the state strives to achieve 'total' control over civil society and where strikes are virtually outlawed. Strikes only occur as a last resort when other means of defence are unavailable or have failed.

The actions of female pluckers may not always have achieved their direct objectives, but they should not be judged solely in terms of their effects on pay and conditions of work. They should also be conceived as important opportunities for raising women's capacities for self-organisation and self-confidence.

Notes

1. Report of the Conciliatory Meeting between CDC Management and the Tole Tea Workers on 25 November 1976, in File MEPS/SWP/BU.124/S.2, Industrial Trade Disputes - CDC.
2. 'See CDC, Tole Tea Estate, Minutes of the Estate Consultative Meeting held at the Club on 13 October 1990.
3. Report on the Tole Tea Estate Strike by Mr E.N. Balon, Assistant Superintendent of Police, to Commissioner of Police, Buea, dated 12 July 1963, in BNA, File Qe (1959) 14, Labour Strikes.
4. For the actions of the pruners, see File MTPS/SWP/BU.95/S.1, Vol. IX, Complaints from CDC; and File MTPS/SWP/BU.124/S.2, Industrial Trade Disputes - CDC.
5. See Letter of Mr E.K. Lottin, Provincial Inspector of Labour and Social Insurance, to Administrative Personnel Controller of CDC, Bota, dated 3 January 1978, in File MTPS/SWP/BU.124/S.2, Industrial Trade Disputes - CDC.

6. See Letter of Staff Representatives, Tole Tea Estate, to Provincial Inspector of Labour, Buea, dated 2 September 1978, in *ibid*.
7. See Letter of Mr C.P.N. Vewessee, President of FAWU, to Administrative Personnel Controller of CDC, dated 19 September 1978, in FAWU, File no. 2, CDC.
8. See Letter of Estate Manager, Tole Tea, to Provincial Inspector of Labour and Social Insurance, Buea, dated 29 August 1978, in *ibid*.
9. See Letter of Staff Representatives, Tole Tea Estate, to Provincial Inspector of Labour and Social Insurance, Buea, dated 29 August 1978, in *ibid*.
10. See Letter of Administrative Personnel Controller of CDC, to Provincial Inspector of Labour and Social Insurance, Buea, dated 17 December 1982, in File MTPS/SWP/BU.95/S.1, Vol. IX, Complaints from CDC.
11. See Letter of Staff Representatives, Tole Tea, to Provincial Inspector of Labour and Social Insurance, Buea, dated 15 October 1982, in File MTPS/SWP/BU.180/S.1, Vol. IX, Election of Staff Representatives - CDC.
12. See Minutes of Meeting held on 3 August 1987 on Further Measures to Combat the Economic Crisis.
13. See *Cameroon Post*, 27 October 1988, p. 1.
14. Letter of Mr C.P.N. Vewessee, President of FAWU, to General Manager of CDC, dated 10 October 1988, in File MTPS/IPTPS/SWP/BU.95/S.1, Vol. XII, Complaints from CDC.
15. See Letter of Mr E.A. Eloundou, Estate Manager, Tole Tea, to Misses July Mbong and Celine Ekoe, dated 11 October 1986, in File MTPS/IPTPS/SWP/BU.95/S.1, Vol. XII, Complaints from CDC.
16. Circular Letter from Estate Manager, Tole Tea, to Staff Representatives, dated 15 July 1983, in File MTPS/SWP/BU.95/S.1, Vol. X, Complaints from CDC.
17. CDC, Tole Tea Estate, Minutes of Estate Consultative Meeting held at the Club on 13 October 1990.
18. *Ibid*.
19. Letter of Mr Jacob T. Fomunyen, Bota Palms Estate, to the Acting Manager, Bota Palms Estate, dated 20 April 1988, in File MTPS/IDTPS/LB.2, Vol. XXIV, Complaints from CDC.

20. See Letter of Mr R.E. Ejume, Acting General Secretary of CDCWU, to Personnel Manager of the CDC, Bota, dated 19 December 1969, in File CDCWU, Vol. 2, no. 56/59.
21. See Letter of Mr R.P. MacNicol, Senior Manager, Tole Tea Estate, to Area Manager, Bota, dated 27 November 1969.
22. See Letter of Tole Tea Estate Workers to General Manager of CDC, Bota, dated 23 November 1976; and Report of a Conciliatory Meeting of CDC Management versus Tole Tea workers, in File MTPS/SWP/BU.124/S.2, Industrial Trade Disputes - CDC.
23. See Letter of Tole Tea Estate Workers to Administrative Personnel Controller of CDC, dated 9 July, in *ibid*.
24. See Letter of Tole Tea Estate Workers to Provincial Inspector of Labour and Social Insurance, Buea, dated 10 December 1979, in *ibid*.
25. See Letter of Staff Representatives, Tole Tea Estate, to Estate Manager, Tole Tea Estate, dated 11 May 1978, in File MEPS/SWP/BU.95/S.1, Vol. VIII, Complaints from CDC.
26. For these trade disputes and threats of strike action, see File MTPS/SWP/BU.124/S.2, Industrial Trade Disputes - CDC.
27. See Letter of Tole Tea Estate Workers to Provincial Inspector of Labour and Social Insurance, Buea, dated 9 April 1976, in *ibid*.
28. See Letter of Mr E.K. Lottin, Provincial Inspector of Labour and Social Insurance, to Administrative Personnel Controller of CDC, dated 30 May 1976, in *ibid*.
29. For a report of this strike, see *ibid*.
30. For these activities, see File MTPS/SWP/BU.95/S.1, Vol. X, Complaints from CDC.

Part II

The Ndu Tea Estate

Male Workers

Introduction

In 1957 the Estates and Agency Company Ltd (EAC), a British-Indian multinational enterprise, started construction of a tea estate at Ndu, a chiefdom situated in the Donga-Mantung Division, one of the more isolated areas in the Bamenda Grassfields. The creation of this estate had a significant impact on local and regional development. It transformed Ndu from a small, economically unimportant town into a regional economic centre. Moreover, it was at that time the only agro-industrial enterprise in the entire Bamenda Grassfields and one of the few enterprises in the region offering wage employment.

Like most other areas in the Grassfields (Nkwi & Warnier 1982; Fisiy 1992; Warnier 2009), the Donga-Mantung Division was characterised by highly complex socio-political forms of organisation headed by powerful, even sacred, chiefs. The establishment of the estate was, therefore, inevitably, the outcome of a negotiation process between the chief of Ndu and the EAC. In return for the chief's supply of land and labour, the EAC promised to invest substantial capital resources in tea production in the local community.

Strikingly, in contrast to the Tole Estate, the Ndu Estate started to employ almost exclusively male pluckers. This raises a number of important questions: (i) Why did the EAC management opt for the recruitment of male pluckers? (ii) Which category of men tended to sell its labour power to the management? And (iii) are there any differences in remuneration between Ndu male pluckers and Tole female pluckers?

Ndu society

Ndu is located between Kumbo, the capital of Bui Division, and Nkambe, the capital of Donga-Mantung Division. It is linked with these two and other important towns in the North West Province by the Ring Road. This is a gravel road, and during the height of the rainy season some sections of it are motorable only in four-wheel drive vehicles.

The local population belongs to the Wimbun, the most important ethnic group in the Donga-Mantung Division. There is scarcely any published material on this group (Jeffries 1962; Chilver & Kaberry 1967; Nkwi & Warnier 1982; Pool 1989; Probst & Bühler 1990). These sources mention that after their migration from their mythical home Kimi to their present habitat, the Wimbun faced horrendous raids by the Fulani and encroachment on their land by the neighbouring Nso.

The Wimbun comprise between 60,000 and 70,000 people and are divided into three distinct clans, the Tang, the War and the Wiya. Although oral tradition has it that the three clans arrived in the area from different points of origin and at different times, they nonetheless speak one language. Ndu is the largest of the Wiya chiefdoms.

In contrast to societies in the southwestern plantation area such as the Bakweri, the Wimbun possess a complex hierarchical socio-political organisation. Each village has a chief, or *fon* as he is nowadays called throughout the Grassfields. Each of the Wimbun clans had a senior chief who was recognised by the British for administrative purposes. The chief of Ndu, who was then regarded as head of the Wiya clan, is still the most influential of the Wimbun chiefs and is for this reason seen by some as the leader of all the Wimbun.

The chief is assisted in the execution of his responsibilities by quarter-heads, councillors and a number of other important (hereditary) title and office holders. These assistants are almost invariably men, except the princess interrex and holders of ritual incumbencies. Title and office holders can be grouped together in (a) members of the ruling dynasty, (b) members of retainer lineages among whom the personal attendants of the chief are recruited, and (c) descendants of groups of immigrants who, in the course of time, became voluntary allies to the chief.

The complex system of titles and offices, some imported, is expressed most vividly in the different colourful designs of the caps worn by the men. These titles and offices are vested in the lineages and in the various men's fraternities such as the *nwarong*, a secret society responsible for maintaining law and order in society; *ngirri*, the society of princes; and the two warrior and hunting societies *nfuh* and *samba*.

The striving to rise within these institutions to attain a position of influence and prestige is common throughout the population and thus furnishes internal flexibility to an otherwise stiffly stratified social system (Probst & Bühler 1990). In fact, traditional institutions have from time immemorial co-opted within their ranks prominent people of the community. The most common mechanism is to honour such persons with a non-hereditary title. Titles and membership in titled societies became important pieces of 'symbolic capital', and thus an object of accumulation. Titles served both to incorporate ambitious and powerful men into the traditional government and to facilitate the personal careers of these men (Goheen 1993, 1996; Aletum & Fisiy 1989).

Agriculture was – and still is – the mainstay of the local economy. There used to be a clear sexual division of labour. The role of men was usually limited to clearing new farms and transporting the harvest. The women did all the rest of the work. Girls assisted their mothers from a very early age. Women grew a variety of food crops to feed the family and – increasingly – to market a surplus and earn an income of their own. These food crops included maize, guinea corn, cocoyam, cassava, groundnuts, beans, sweet and Irish potatoes. Women were socialised in their food-producing role to such an extent that they tended to be proud of this very demanding responsibility; and their prestige within the family and village depended on the quantity and quality of food they produced.

The men used to hunt and trade in small livestock (poultry, pigs, sheep and goats), kola nuts and palm products (palm oil, palm wine, and raphia). They engaged in the long-distance trade in kola nuts to Nigeria, which used to be an important source of income before the start of labour migration and coffee production. Following the example of the nomadic Fulani (Mbororo and Aku) in the area, they also began to raise cattle.

After the Second World War, there were two important changes in the men's roles:

- First, there was a steady increase in male labour migration to the southwestern plantations (DeLancey 1973: 123). Local labour resources had hardly been exploited after the establishment of colonial rule because of the isolated position of the Wimbun area in the Bamenda Grassfields (Ardener *et al.* 1960: 205). Serious shortages of labour on the southwestern estates after World War II encouraged active labour recruitment among Wimbun men. Gwan (1975: 148) claims that about 5-6% of southwestern plantation labour during the 1960s and 1970s came from the Donga-Mantung Division.
- Secondly, the introduction of Arabica coffee provided a new, major source of revenue to the men and insurance against old age. Cash crop production, together with population growth, expansion of cattle herds of the Fulani, who share the region with the Wimbun, and the creation of the tea estate, have caused mounting pressure on the land. As a result, women experience difficulties in finding land for food cultivation (Fisiy 1992).

The creation of the tea estate in 1957 had an enormous impact on Ndu society. Most of my informants referred to it as a milestone in the history of Ndu. The estate provided local wage employment and, in its wake, a whole range of other income-generating activities, especially in trade, commerce and services. It thus transformed Ndu from a small, insignificant town into a bustling regional commercial centre.

Agreement between EAC and the chief of Ndu

In the early 1950s the EAC owned eleven tea estates in India and Sri Lanka as well as mines and a chain of hotels in different parts of the world. In search of further investments, it participated in 1955 in a mission of British investors to Anglophone Cameroon. During a visit to the Bamenda Grassfields, the EAC representatives

collected soil samples in the Ndu area. These samples were later analysed in the company's Head Office in London and it was discovered that the soils at Ndu were suitable for tea production.

Soon afterwards, in March 1956 an EAC team led by one of the company's directors, Mr. Sydney Bolster, returned to Anglophone Cameroon. It was commissioned to survey the Ndu area for the purpose of setting up an estate. When the team arrived at Bamenda, the Provincial Administrator instructed the Senior Divisional Officer (SDO) of Nkambe to conduct the team to Ndu.

The SDO, however, was personally more in favour of establishing a tea estate at Nkambe than at Ndu, for it would contribute to the rapid development of the divisional capital. Therefore he decided to ignore the instruction given by his superior and to direct the team to Nkambe instead of to Ndu. Unaware of the SDO's intentions, the team arrived at Nkambe and started to survey the area in the vicinity of the town. The local population had not received any information about the objectives of the team's mission. When rumours spread that its farming and grazing lands were about to be expropriated, it revolted and started to erect barricades to block the team's access to its lands. The team then explained its mission to the local chiefs, but they disapproved of the project, on the grounds that it would endanger women's food production and the Fulani's cattle grazing (Ngege 1983).

The team was shocked when it learnt from the chiefs that it has been misdirected by the SDO. It took off at once for Ndu. Accompanied by two local parliamentarians, Messrs J. Nsame and J.T. Ndze, it approached the then chief of Ndu, His Royal Highness William Nformi. It told the chief that it planned to survey the area and requested that he allocate land for the creation of a tea estate. The two deputies were able to convince the chief of the benefits of the introduction of tea production in his area of jurisdiction: it would stimulate local development and halt the growing flow of labour to the southwestern plantations. The chief then offered EAC a vast land of approximately 1,660 ha between Ndu and Tatum, a Nso village located at the border of the Ndu and Nso territory. One of his motives for allocating this specific site was to prevent the Nso from further encroaching on his land: the estate would serve as a permanent boundary between the Ndu and Nso territory

and put an end to the numerous land and boundary disputes (cf. Nkwi 2011). Consequent upon the chief's decision, farmers and graziers in the allocated area had to be displaced. The company agreed to compensate them for the loss of their lands.

The chief stressed that the land was not sold but rather given 'freely' to the company for the purpose of cultivation (and could, therefore, always be reclaimed). Nonetheless, he made it clear to the team that he, as the custodian of the land, could customarily expect some 'token compensation' from the beneficiary for the benevolent provision of the land. It was finally agreed that the company would pay the chief an annual amount of FCFA 660,000 and also provide him with some additional benefits such as the free supply of transport, electricity, water and wood.

This agreement signified the start of a close alliance between the estate management and the chief. The chief has always been greatly concerned with what was happening on 'his' land and strongly believed that the company's prosperity would be of enormous benefit to the local community. He has regularly performed a number of rites to protect the company against any misfortune. He has also played an important role in labour control (see Chapter 8). This does not mean that the relationship between the chief and the company has remained without conflict. Most conflicts arose from the company's infringement upon the original agreement, in particular its unilateral withdrawal of certain benefits to be enjoyed by the chief. It has, in fact, never supplied electricity and water to the chief's palace. In 1967 it suddenly stopped paying the annual 'land rent' to the chief; and it was only after several complaints of the chief that it proposed to replace this land rent with a monthly allowance of FCFA 16,000. Although this implied a drastic reduction in his income, the chief eventually accepted this offer after the management had explained to him that it intended to invest its scarce financial resources in the further expansion of the estate. In 1976, it withdrew all the benefits of the chief, because of 'its incapacity to meet its obligations during the financial crisis facing the company'.

Following the takeover of the estate by the CDC in 1977, the monthly allowance of the chief was re-introduced and even raised to FCFA 25,000, but in 1982 payment was stopped. The chief's

successor, installed in 1982, has often protested to the state authorities and the CDC management against the withdrawal of his benefits, threatening at times to reclaim the land, 'as it was never sold'. This threat now seems to be without any effect, as the state can now claim any land needed for development purposes (Fisiy 1992), and automatically acquires any land occupied by a parastatal body.

During the negotiations the chief expressed his fear that estate employment might disturb his subjects' loyalty to 'traditional' norms and authority patterns. Therefore, he made the actual creation of the estate conditional upon the company's acceptance of certain rules in respect of labour recruitment.

The first rule was that employment on the estate should be a virtual *male monopoly*. The chief rejected out of hand the team's proposal to employ female pluckers on the estate, as it might challenge '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 women might be employed as casual and temporary weeders on the estate, especially during the agricultural off-season in the local economy. It was only in 1983 that his newly elected successor – a university graduate – allowed the CDC to employ women as permanent tea pluckers.

There is ample evidence that male workers on the estate supported the chief's negative attitude towards female employment. Most women who started to work on the estate on temporary weeding contracts were not Wimbun but Nso, living in Tatum. They faced a tough time on the estate. Several reports mention that male workers engaged in various modes of resistance against their employment. On 8 November 1962, the first estate manager, Mr J.M.H. Barrable, lodged a complaint with the union about this behaviour of the men:

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.¹

It is also reported that some male overseers were inclined to maltreat these women. In 1962 the women even threatened to stop weeding on the estate, if one overseer, Mr Michael Monde, was not sacked. They accused him of persistent use of abusive language and underpayment:

These are important points about contract women. They finished their work and Mr Michael Monde told the manager to pay them half money and tell them that they were bad women. All the women say that if Mr Monde shall not be sacked they will not more come to rake contract work.²

Male opposition to female employment on the estate has never disappeared altogether. This is clearly reflected in the Minutes of the Staff Representatives' Preparatory Meetings during the 1980s:

On 6 April 1983 a member wanted to know why male workers are being terminated but females do a continuous job.

On 10 June 1986 it was remarked that employment of females should be well examined because there are some of them who abandon their husbands and come to work on the estate.³

During my fieldwork in 1991, many male workers told me that they had become used to female employment on the estate, yet they would never allow their wives to work there.

Paradoxically, though largely excluded from wage employment on the estate, women seem nevertheless to have been able to take advantage of the estate's establishment. They started to sell a proportion of the food they produced to the estate workers, particularly to those who for one reason or another lived near the estate without wives (see below). This has greatly assisted their efforts to secure an income of their own and break the previous male monopoly over financial resources. The increasing land scarcity, however, poses the problem of acquiring more land for food production.

The second rule on labour recruitment was that employment on the estate should be confined to *local* men, preferably from Ndu and nearby villages. The chief argued that this rule would not only halt

male labour migration to the southwestern plantations, but also forestall the construction of labour camps, common to the southwestern plantations. This rule seemed mutually advantageous. For the company it was a cost-saving device: it did not need to invest in workers' accommodation and other social welfare services. For the chief it was a controlling device: he wanted to ensure that the estate workers continued to be integrated into the local community, to spend their wage income in the local economy, and to adhere to 'traditional' norms and customs. This is evident from one of his speeches in 1977, in which he reiterated the main reasons for his persistent opposition to the construction of labour camps:

The construction of labour camps tends to be harmful because

- (1) the workers would not have in mind to develop themselves because this had happened to our children who had gone to the coast and had brought nothing.
- (2) they would not participate in communal development in their respective quarters.
- (3) they would not have time to help their neighbours.
- (4) most people's wives and young girls would be taken into the camps.
- (5) a lot of stealing would occur as goats and fowls will be carried into the camps.⁴

For the workers, however, it was a source of contradictions. They in fact became subordinated to a dual authority: managerial authority at work and chiefly authority in the local community. As a result, they are often faced with a difficult dilemma: whether to adhere to the capitalist work norms or to the 'traditional' norms, both options being surrounded with sanctions on the part of the respective authorities. To mitigate this conflict, the chief has always advised the management to study the local norms and customs and take them into consideration in its labour control strategies (see Chapter 8).⁵

The EAC accepted these rules from the chief of Ndu with regard to labour recruitment and was subsequently allowed to proceed with the construction of the estate. Construction began in January 1957 with a loan of £100,000 from Barclays Overseas Development.

There has been a steady increase in the estate's cultivated area and labour force (see Table 7.1). The EAC owned and managed the estate for twenty years. At the end of 1976 it sold the estate to the Cameroonian government (see Chapter 9). From 1 January 1977 onwards, the estate became part of the CDC, which has continued to respect the rules governing labour recruitment agreed upon by the chief of Ndu and EAC.

Table 7.1 *Ndu Tea Estate: Cultivated area, output and labour force*

YEAR	CULTIVATED AREA (HA)	OUTPUT (MT)	NUMBER OF WORKERS
1957			70
1958	70		300
1959	300		500
1960	386		600
1961	416		600
1962			629
1963		16	554
1964		164	588
1965		244.6	603
1966		216.8	609
1967		271.4	744
1968		448.9	793
1969		532.9	782
1970		552.1	737
1971/72		679.7	747
1972/73	422	620.8	781
1973/74		741.3	801
1974/75		801.6	846
1975/76		1,001.5	896
1976/77	575	459.8	947
1977/78		711.4	1,045
1978/79		879.5	1,042

1978/79		879.5	1,042
1979/80		1,007.2	1,237
1980/81		1,005.5	1,456
1981/82		1,145.5	1,580
1982/83		961.5	
1983/84		985.6	
1984/85	592	1,181.0	1,563
1985/86		1,446.8	
1986/87		1,471.6	1,750
1987/88		1,490.0	
1988/89		1,125.4	
1989/90	613	1,200.3	1,133

Source: Ndoumba Manga (1984); Ndu Tea Estate records.

The male labour force on the Ndu Tea Estate

The estate has never had any shortage of labour; much to the contrary, during periods of low production and reorganisation a number of workers have had to be laid off. This was because the estate was located in an area where wage-earning opportunities were few, yet manpower resources abundant (see Table 7.2).

Table 7.2 *Population of North West Province, Donga-Mantung Division and Ndu Plain*

YEAR	NORTH WEST PROVINCE	DONGA-MANTUNG DIVISION	NDU PLAIN
1953	429,038	84,592	8,316
1964	573,848	102,100	
1967			16,962
1976	980,531	184,516	28,631
1987	1,206,780	222,436	

Source: Ndoumba Manga (1984: 59); and 1987 Population Census (Provisional Results).

In accordance with the agreement concluded with the chief of Ndu, the company's original policy was to recruit its labour force from Ndu itself and neighbouring villages within a radius of 5 kilometres from the estate. It was thought that these workers would have no problem walking to the estate daily. Initially this policy was strictly implemented. Relatively few workers were required during the first phase of setting up the estate (see Table 7.1); and the estate management and the chief had agreed that priority should be given to men displaced from the estate land.

However, when employment opportunities on the estate increased after the tea bushes came to maturity, the management also started employing men from more distant villages who demonstrated great skills in tea plucking. Some of them lived as far as 20-30 km from the estate. No wonder the union soon demanded that the management either construct labour camps or provide transport for the workers (see Chapter 9). The management, however, refused this demand.

Many of these workers then started to hire rooms in Ndu and to build houses in the area surrounding the estate. New settlements emerged in this way. The largest was Kakar/Three Corners situated between Ndu and the estate. This has become a very lively place, with a growing number of shops, bars and restaurants. Most residents are married workers, and some live with their wives and families. They are usually older workers who arrived at a time when land was not yet in short supply. They obtained sufficient land from the local quarter-heads to build a house and establish food farms (and in some cases even coffee farms). Others live there without their wives and families. They arrived later when land had become an urgent problem. They usually acquired a building plot, but no farming land. Consequently, they tended to opt for double residence: during the working week they stay on their own in the settlement and at weekends they return to their villages of origin, where their wives grow food and they themselves often own coffee farms.

According to Ndoumbe Manga (1984: 186-187), 73% of the estate workers originate from the Donga-Mantung Division. All of them are Wimbun, 51% being inhabitants of Ndu itself. Other ethnic groups in the Donga-Mantung Division, such as the Mbembe, Misaje, Mbem and Mfumte, live at a considerable distance from the estate and

continue to supply labour to the southwestern plantations. However, 23.5% of the estate workers originate from the neighbouring Bui Division, all of them being Nso who live in villages bordering the estate. Only 3.5% of the estate workers originate from other Divisions, including some clerical and supervisory staff members who have been transferred from the Tole Estate to the Ndu Estate.

Interestingly, although the labour force at the Ndu Estate is ethnically less heterogeneous than that at the Tole Estate, it has nevertheless been more prone to overt ethnic tensions and conflicts, especially during the EAC period. This may be due to two factors:

- First, *Ndu chauvinism*. The Ndu chief and people formerly claimed that the estate was ‘theirs’ and that for that reason Ndu workers should be given priority when vacancies occurred for leading positions on the estate (see Chapter 8).
- Secondly, *EAC personnel policy*. During the EAC period workers in the factory were predominantly Nso. This gave rise to an explosive situation in the factory. Nso workers tended to lord it over the minority of Wimbun workers, often provoking them with assertions like ‘*Fen ker ver*’ – ‘we are here in control’. In 1972 they plotted the overthrow of Mr Samuel Nduwa, a Wimbun man, who was not only an overseer in the factory, but also a Staff Representative and the president of the union. They strongly resented their subordination to a Wimbun man, the more so because he dared to give them frequent warnings for indiscipline and low productivity and expose their large-scale theft of tea from the factory. They falsely accused him of misappropriating estate labour and almost succeeded in having him dismissed. After this incident, the union leadership and Staff Representatives persuaded management to transfer a number of the Nso workers to the field and recruit factory workers henceforth on a multi-ethnic basis.⁶

Following the takeover of the estate by the CDC in 1977, ethnic clashes of this nature have no longer occurred. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the CDC management has always attempted to forestall

the emergence of ethnically based divisions among the workers. During my fieldwork in 1991, I was constantly assured that workers of various ethnic groups get on well with each other.

The labour force on the estate expanded until 1986/87, when it reached 1,750 workers. Owing to a series of reorganisations during the economic crisis, it decreased to 1,333 workers in 1990/91 (see table 7.1). Table 7.3 shows that not less than 93.5% of the present labour force consists of men. They form an overwhelming majority in all sections of the estate except the clinic. The question may be raised: what men tend to sell their labour power to the estate?

Table 7.3 *Ndu Tea Estate labour force in 1990*

SECTION	MALE		FEMALE		TOTAL NUMBER
	No	%	No	%	
Factory	154	94.5	9	5.5	163
Engineering	36	100.0			36
Office	39	88.5	5	11.5	44
Clinic	5	45.5	6	54.5	11
Field	825	94.0	54	6.0	879
TOTAL	1,059	93.5	74	6.5	1,133

Source: Ndu Tea Estate Records.

Generally speaking, they are usually men who have failed to be selected as the successor to the family head. In Ndu, as elsewhere in the Grassfields, there is only one such successor, who is not necessarily the eldest son. He is chosen either by the father before his death or, in cases where the father has died before nominating a successor, by a family council composed of male elders. After his installation as head of the family, he is in control of all family members and family property.

Estate work is highly valued by the non-successors, as one of the few local wage-earning opportunities for men. The income gained from estate work enables them to escape from the successor's control

and to build up an independent existence. It serves as an important avenue to social mobility in the local community. The majority of non-successors use a proportion of their wage to achieve specific objectives which can 'compensate' them for the loss of the successorship and enhance their status within the local community. One may usually observe a certain sequence in the pursuit of these objectives: one first attempts to build a house and marry one or more wives who may look after the cultivation of food, then to set up a coffee farm and raise cattle, and eventually to invest in the acquisition of honorific titles which give the non-successors, like the hereditary office and title holders, access to power and wealth in the community. This is not an easy project, of course. It takes years of hard labour for the low-waged estate workers to achieve at least some of these objectives.

The demographic characteristics of the estate's male labour force seem to confirm the importance of estate labour for non-successors (see Table 7.4). Male workers have low educational levels: the vast majority are either illiterate (56.5%) or have left primary school before completion (31.5%). They display a long-standing commitment to their job: 53% of them have been employed on the estate for more than 10 years. And 90.5% have been able to marry one or more wives despite the considerable increase in bride-price: while the bride-price among the Wimbun varied between FCFA 50,000-120,000 in the 1970s (Tanto 1978), by the early 1990s it had risen to FCFA 150,000-300,000. Through marriage, male workers are assured of food, and this allows them to save a portion of their wage income for investment in the objectives outlined above. Male accumulation is, therefore, still partly based on their control over women's productive labour (Goheen 1993, 1996).

Women continue to be largely excluded from estate employment. Only 6.5% of the present labour force consists of women (see Table 7.3). About 73% of them are pluckers who have been recruited since 1983 following the conclusion of an agreement between the chief of Ndu and the CDC on permanent female employment (see above). They differ in a number of respects from both the male pluckers on the Ndu Estate and female pluckers on the Tole Estate: they are younger (87% are below 35 years of age) and better educated (77% have completed primary school and 14% have enjoyed some secondary education). They are women who want to escape from 'traditional' farm work and patriarchal control, but have not yet been

able to find any employment other than plantation work. They tend, therefore, to be less committed to their job than male pluckers on the Ndu Estate and female pluckers on the Tole Estate. Some of them are constantly on the lookout for wage employment that is less arduous than estate work and more in line with their educational achievements. Others intend to move into trade or commerce when they have accumulated sufficient capital in their present job. Still others stop working on the estate as soon as they have found a lover or husband who is able to maintain them.

Table 7.4 *Demographic characteristics of the Ndu Tea Estate labour force in 1986 (%)*

	MALE	FEMALE
AGE		
15-25 years	3.5	36
25-35 years	25	51
35-45 years	38.5	9.5
45-55 years	28	3.5
55 years and older	5	
	100.0	100.0
MARITAL STATUS		
never married	8	
monogamously married	76.5	
polygamously married	14	
widowed	1	
divorced/separated	0.5	
	100.0	
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL		
illiterate	56.5	9
primary education	39.5	77
technical education / apprenticeship	2.1	
secondary education	1	14
post-secondary education	0.5	
	100.0	100
RELIGION		
Baptist	62	
Roman Catholic	21	
Presbyterian	5	
Independent churches	4	
Muslim	1	
African beliefs	7	
	100	

LENGTH OF EMPLOYMENT

0 - 5 years	125	87
5 - 10 years	34.5	9.5
10 - 15 years	7.5	3.5
15 - 25 years	31.5	
25 years and more	14	
	100.0	100.0

NUMBER	1,136	86

Source: Compiled from Ndu Tea Estate Employment Records.

Remuneration of male pluckers on the Ndu Tea Estate

The wages of male pluckers were formerly lower on the Ndu Estate than on the Tole Estate. While the CDC, being a parastatal, tended to follow government wage rates closely, the EAC initially refused to do so. For example, in 1964, the basic wage rate approved by the government for the Donga-Mantung Division was FCFA 120 per diem, but the Ndu Estate management decided to pay its workers no more than FCFA 105.

From the workers' point of view, this was a 'starvation wage', as the cost of living in the Donga-Mantung Division was among the highest in Anglophone Cameroon, due to the area's isolated position.⁷ The estate management usually tried to justify this wage differential as follows:

- The plucking task was lighter on the Ndu Estate than on the Tole Estate and, therefore, more lowly remunerated (compare Tables 6.1 and 7.5). It should, however, be pointed out that the management appeared less interested in changing the situation than the workers. The management, in fact, was for a long time deaf to the repeated union request for an increase in task work and remuneration, as it wanted to keep labour costs low. It was not till 12 April 1970 that it agreed with the union upon payment of an eight-hour wage, in return for an increase in task work (see Table 7.5).

- The EAC had invested substantial capital resources in the creation, expansion, and upkeep of the estate and, therefore, could ill afford any increase in wage rates.⁸

I have already mentioned that in 1968 the government established three wage zones in the country with differential levels of wages and simultaneously created guaranteed minimum wages for agricultural and non-agricultural workers throughout the national territory (see Chapter 3). The CDC then adopted a policy of '*zone unique*', involving a uniform wage structure for all its estates, irrespective of the zone in which they were situated. As a result, wage and salary rates in the entire corporation were henceforth to be identical to those of Zone II of the Primary Sector, entitling its workers to a minimum wage of FCFA 23 per hour (FCFA 184 for an eight-hour working day). Unlike the CDC workers, Ndu workers were classified in Zone III of the Primary Sector, receiving a minimum wage of only FCFA 19 per hour (FCFA 133 for a seven-hour working day).

Surprisingly, when the CDC took over the Ndu Estate in 1977, it did not immediately apply the corporation's '*zone unique*' policy to the Ndu workers, on the grounds that previous approval from the Ministry of Labour was required. This Ministry, however, delayed taking a decision. Only in 1987 did it give its approval, thus entitling Ndu workers to a wage rate equal to that of other CDC workers (see Chapter 9). In 1970 the pluckers were classified in Category 1 of the standard national classification of occupations (unskilled labour). Like the Tole female workers, Ndu male pluckers strongly protested against their classification in the most lowly remunerated category and demanded classification in Category 3 (skilled labour). In 1975 the Ministry of Labour decided to reclassify them in Category 2 (semi-skilled labour) – one year ahead of the reclassification of Tole female pluckers in Category 2 (see Chapter 3).

Table 7.5 *Plucking norms and incentive bonus at the Ndu Tea Estate*

YEAR	PLUCKING NORM		INCENTIVE BONUS
	Period	Amount of leaves	
1961	Monday-Saturday	20 lb	3 francs CFA for every pound plucked above 20 lb
1969	Monday-Saturday	15 kg	10 francs CFA for every kg plucked over the basic task
1970	Monday-Saturday	17 kg	10 francs CFA for every kg plucked over the basic task
	Saturday	10 kg	
1977	Peak period	18 kg	7 francs CFA for every kg plucked over the basic task; 10 francs CFA for every kg plucked at extra time
	Slack period	16 kg	
1980	Peak period	26 kg	15 francs CFA for every kg plucked between 27-45 kg; 20 francs CFA for every kg plucked between 46-55 kg; 25 francs CFA for every kg plucked above 55 kg
	Slack period	14 kg	
1987	Peak period	32 kg	15 francs CFA for every kg plucked between 33-45 kg; 20 francs CFA for every kg plucked between 46-55 kg; 25 francs CFA for every kg plucked above 55 kg
	Slack period	18 kg	

Source: Ndu Tea Estate Records.

Ndu workers used to receive not only lower wages than the CDC workers, but also fewer fringe benefits. In the absence of labour camps, the workers were not provided with accommodation and other amenities such as recreational facilities. It was only in May 1974 that the EAC management finally agreed to the union's repeated demand for the introduction of a loan scheme that would enable the workers to build houses and buy means of transport such as bicycles and motorcycles. However, the funds allocated for this purpose were simply not great enough to be of much assistance. Moreover, the scheme was soon postponed indefinitely because of the serious financial crisis that affected the estate at the end of the EAC era.

At the start of its operations at Ndu, the EAC built a dispensary for the workers and their families. This dispensary has never been well equipped and often lacked the necessary medicines. Serious cases were referred to the Bansa Baptist Hospital at Kumbo, hospital and transport costs being reimbursed by the estate. In 1965, the General Secretary of the union, Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, made the following complaint to the Inspector of Labour for West Cameroon about the lack of medical facilities on the estate:

Our wives and the sick on the Ndu Estate itself have to go to Bansa Baptist Hospital for delivery and treatment even in the absence of proper ambulance service which was once on the estate. We have repeatedly appealed in vain to management to extend the small dispensary on the estate into a proper health centre by adding a maternity ward. What the management once did instead was to make an award of £ 1,000 to Bansa Baptist Hospital for the building of a maternity ward in Nso itself.⁹

The matter was frequently discussed in the period 1969-1974 and the company promised that a hospital staffed with qualified medical staff and a doctor would be in full operation before the end of 1973.¹⁰ This promise was never kept. The only thing the company did was construct a maternity ward in 1973.

In 1969 the union called on management to open a workers' shop selling consumer goods at controlled prices. The management eventually did so, but the shop was never well-stocked. Consequently, the union decided in 1974 to take over this shop and transform it into a workers' consumer co-operative shop. Unfortunately, the shop was soon forced to close down because of the shopkeeper's maladministration and fraud. The same year, the union introduced a credit union on the estate. In contrast to the shop, this credit union has been functioning well (see below).

As in most CDC estates, the EAC management allocated 'chop farms' to the workers. This was highly appreciated by the workers, especially by those whose homes were far away from the estate and whose efforts to acquire land near the estate had failed. After the CDC had taken over the estate in 1977, the management instructed workers to quit the 'chop farms'. A soil surveyor was then asked to

demarcate the land unsuitable for tea production. Although it was promised that this land would be re-allocated to the workers for the purpose of establishing chop farms, this was never done. The management seems to have been afraid that the bush fires set on the 'chop farms' at the beginning of the farming season might destroy the tea bushes.

The wages and fringe benefits of Ndu workers have been further eroded during the economic crisis. Like other CDC workers, they were asked to contribute 15% of their basic wages and seniority bonus to a compulsory savings scheme, to pay for the health services supplied, and so on (see Chapter 3). Moreover, owing to the increase in task work in 1987 from 26 kg to 32 kg of green leaves, a number of workers now experience difficulties completing their task and earning the basic wage.

Table 7.6 *Ndu Tea Estate Co-operative Credit Union Ltd: Membership, shares/savings, and loans granted during the period 1984-1989*

YEAR	MEMBER-SHIP	SHARES/ SAVINGS (FCFA)	LOANS GRANTED	
			No	Amount (FCFA)
1984	1,072	88,954,028	1,013	77,556,000
1985	1,041	102,379,866	885	89,390,000
1986	1,124	123,254,980	881	111,541,000
1987	1,115	140,308,596	860	108,446,000
1988	1,222	166,677,964	930	131,401,000
1989	1,225	194,117,595	756	115,051,000
TOTAL		815,693,019	5,325	633,295,000

Source: Computed from Ndu Credit Union Records.

Table 7.7 *Ndu Tea Estate Co-operative Credit Union Ltd: Loan classification, 1984-1989*

PURPOSE OF LOAN	AMOUNT (FCFA)	% OF TOTAL LOANS GRANTED
Building	345,898,000	54.5
Education	131,432,000	21.0
Consumption	67,324,000	10.0
Health	36,405,000	6.0
Marriage	30,636,000	5.0
Trading	16,405,000	2.5
Farming	5,005,000	1.0
TOTAL	633,105,000	100.0

Source: Computed from Ndu Credit Union Records.

Generally speaking, though wages are rather low, workers seem nevertheless happy with the regular monthly income derived from estate work. Worst off are usually the young ones at the beginning of their working career: they mostly do not yet own land and therefore depend on the market for the purchase of food. The vast majority of the workers, by contrast, are not entirely dependent on their wages for their reproduction: they do own land for food production. Best off are the ones who also own land for coffee production (though in 1991 they had not been paid by the co-operative for two years), or those who raise cattle or trade in kola nuts, palm wine, livestock, and so on.

Like Tole workers, Ndu workers tend to save a substantial proportion of their monthly wages in a variety of savings institutions. Membership of the credit union has grown from 200 in 1974 to 1,225 in 1989, approximately 94-95% of the total labour force. Interestingly, while Tole workers spent 89% of their credit union loans on education, health, and consumption (see Table 3.11), Ndu workers used only 37% of their credit union loans for these purposes during the period 1984-1989 (see Table 7.7). They rather preferred to spend no less than 54.5% of these loans on the building of a house which, as I have shown above, is one of their primary objectives during their working career.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the introduction of estate tea production into Ndu society has had some important consequences. One of them was the establishment of a 'development coalition' (Bates 1981) between the local chief and the EAC management. Another was the creation of wage employment for local men who wanted to escape from the family head's control and build an independent existence.

Like Tole female pluckers, Ndu male pluckers are highly dependent on a wage income for their reproduction and social mobility project. Consequently, they display a high degree of stabilisation and commitment to their job. Unlike Tole female pluckers, Ndu male pluckers are still largely integrated into the local community and subordinated to local norms and authority patterns. As a result, the assertion of managerial control over the labour process appears even more problematic on the Ndu Estate than on the Tole Estate.

The close links with the local community tend to make Ndu male pluckers even more inclined to take action than Tole female pluckers. Such links may (a) stimulate workers' efforts to resist capitalist norms and authority and to preserve a certain degree of autonomy within the capitalist labour process; (b) fuel workers' demands for better conditions of service as they try to invest any capital derived from wage employment in their social advancement within the local economy; and (c) provide workers with an 'exit-option', protecting them against severe managerial disciplinary action, in the form of dismissal.

Notes

1. Letter of Mr J.M.H. Barrable, Estate Manager, Ndu Tea Estate, to General Secretary of NEWU, dated 8 November 1962, in File CUPIAW 7, Joint Consultative Committee.
2. Letter of Tatum Branch of NEWU, to General Secretary of NEWU, dated 30 June 1962, in File CUPIAW 21, Miscellaneous Correspondences and Documents.

3. CDC Ndu Tea Estate, Records of Minutes of Staff Representatives' Preparatory Meetings, 1981-91.
4. 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 MTLIS/DILSI/NK/17, Ndu Tea Estate - General Correspondence.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Report of an Investigation of a Complaint against Mr Samuel Nduwa, Staff Representative and General President of CUPIAW, for allegedly misappropriating estate labour, in File MTLIS/WCD/BU.95/S.6, Complaints - Ndu Tea Estate.
7. See Letter of Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, General Secretary of CUPIAW, to Senior Labour Officer, Buea, dated 3 September 1965, in File CUPIAW 7, Joint Consultative Committee.
8. See Memorandum on the Conditions of Service of Workers on the Estate (Estates and Agency Company Ltd) Presented to the Estate Manager by Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, General Secretary of CUPIAW, on 13 November 1964, in File BU.99/1b/30, Vol. II, CUPIAW.
9. An Address of Welcome Presented to the Senior Labour Officer, Mr E.K. Lottin, by the CUPIAW, Ndu Estate, on the Occasion of his Visit to Ndu Estate on 26 April 1969, in File MTPS/WCD/BU.99, CUPIAW.
10. Memo on some aspects of conditions of service, promotions and upgrading of workers and certain aspects of social and economic development at the Ndu Tea Estate and the expansion of company activities on Ndu Tea Estate, presented to the Director of the Ndu Tea Estate, Mr V.K. Reddy, by DUAW D/M on 9 February 1974, in File NEWU 18/1, Trade Disputes.

Management of male workers and their informal modes of resistance

Introduction

The physical organisation of production and managerial strategies of labour control on the Ndu Estate show great similarities with those prevailing on the Tole Estate (see Chapter 4). In this chapter I shall therefore focus on the differences in labour control regimes between both estates. One of the most interesting differences has been the attempt of the Ndu Estate management to co-opt the local chief into this control structure.

Despite such differences, however, labour control at the Ndu Estate appears to have been no more effective than that at the Tole Estate. Like Tole female pluckers, Ndu male pluckers have continued to resist control and exploitation in the labour process. In this chapter I want to restrict myself to the Ndu pluckers' informal actions. I shall argue that although the forms of informal action may be similar on both estates, there is nevertheless some difference in scale and intensity: Ndu male pluckers seem to be more often and deeply involved in informal modes of resistance than Tole female pluckers due to their closer links with the local community.

Labour control regime on the Ndu Tea Estate

Like the Tole management (see Chapter 4), the Ndu Estate management introduced a strict hierarchical command structure buttressed by a system of rewards and punishments. There is, however, some evidence that managerial control on the Ndu Estate tended to be somewhat more coercive and arbitrary than that on the Tole Estate, especially during the early EAC period. This is not

altogether surprising, of course. Labour control regimes on foreign-owned plantations in Cameroon and elsewhere were often marked by extreme authoritarianism and racism during the colonial and even (early) post-colonial period (Mbengue 1979; Beckford 1972; Burawoy 1985).

The first EAC managers seem to have still behaved like the 'white masters' of the 'good old colonial days'.¹ Racism formed the foundation of their almost dictatorial and often quite arbitrary exercise of power. They still believed that physical punishment was the only effective method of disciplining their 'lazy and undisciplined' African employees and of habituating them to the capitalist work rhythm and ethic. Particularly Mr Auty, the first factory manager, was notorious for beating and abusing his subordinates. In June 1962, one of his victims reported:

On 3 May 1962, while drying, Mr Auty beat me twice. On 15 May 1962 he knocked Ramon Nfor when rolling tea. On 30 May 1962 he kicked Augustine Nchukwi with his foot.²

On 17 September 1962, Mr Samuel Nduwa, at that time one of the union branch secretaries, asked the General Secretary of the union to take action against Mr Auty:

Our branch does not want to work any longer with Mr Auty. We want him to leave this estate as soon as possible, failure of which we are going on strike. This man treats us like slaves. He beats us at work and abuses us.³

The first EAC managers were also quite reluctant to discipline any African supervisory staff member who was charged with persistent 'maltreatment' of workers. The union often complained that the management had given extreme powers to supervisory staff:

You have given your senior men 'the power of life and death' with regard to any junior person's employment on the estate, not realising how dangerous it is to good management. At the same time you made it a policy to refuse any junior worker right of defence or appeal when once a headman has complained against him.⁴

For a long time there was no code of rules governing industrial relations on the estate. Obviously, its absence encouraged the arbitrary exercise of power on the part of managerial and supervisory staff.

Gradually the EAC Board of Directors realised that the 'colonial' type of management, with its distinctive dictatorial and racist features, could no longer be maintained – and indeed was counterproductive – in the post-colonial period since it provoked the Labour Inspectorate and workers alike. It then began appointing managers who were more likely to function well within the changing industrial relations scene after independence.

Being in a different situation from the Tole Estate management, the Ndu Estate management co-opted the local chief as an intermediary in the control of labour. Consequently, the chief continued to admonish the workers to be productive and well-disciplined in the labour process. In 1977, for example, he declared:

I say honesty is the key to success. That all workers should be serious at their work and I shall not support anybody caught as a thief.⁵

He also assisted the management in quelling strikes. There is no doubt that he is still capable of exercising considerable control over the workers' behaviour because of the continuing powerful position of chieftaincy in the local community. Only when he seems to 'betray' his subordinates' interests to the management do the union leadership and workers tend to oppose him and take action in defence of their interests, even against his will.

It is noteworthy that the picture presented here differs from the few other studies of chieftaincy in the field of industrial relations. Epstein (1958) and Crisp (1984) have demonstrated that the colonial state and management tried to forestall the development of trade unionism in the mines of Zambia and Ghana, by introducing 'chiefs' and 'tribal elders' as brokers between management and workers of various ethnic groups. The usual justification given for this strategy was that chiefs and elders were the 'customary' representatives of the people in Africa. The idea behind it, however, was that 'tribal' chiefs and elders could be more easily co-opted in the control

structure over labour than trade union leaders, who were under persistent suspicion of radicalising workers in the colonial context. The strategy failed for two reasons, however.

First, the miners tended to identify themselves as workers rather than as 'tribesmen', at least in the field of industrial relations. And second, these newly appointed intermediaries, who could claim little 'traditional' legacy for their authority, were soon denounced as management stooges and lost any support they had ever enjoyed. I have demonstrated elsewhere (Konings 1993) that the initial efforts of the British Trusteeship Authority and CDC management to use chiefs in the South West Province as intermediaries in industrial conflict were to no effect, as chieftaincy in that region was more or less a colonial creation and hardly respected (Geschiere 1993). Unlike these chiefs, chiefs (*Fons*) in the North West Province have continued to be quite powerful, as their authority is based upon 'tradition' and has a spiritual and ritual content. In this respect, Fisiy (1992: 191-192) rightly observes:

The founding of most of the chiefdoms in the North West Province 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. Only members of this ruling lineage could lay claim to chieftaincy. This has safeguarded the sanctity and spirituality of the institution of the Fon This conceptualisation 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 colonial and post-colonial state have left the power position of chieftaincy in the North West Province largely intact and have used its sacred character for the control of the local population. It is only recently that chiefly authority has started to decay in the North West Province. Fearing the physical, ritual and moral sanctions that could befall them, Ndu workers will not challenge the local chief's authority, unless he neglects the defence and representation of their interests.

Whereas the co-option of the chief generally strengthened managerial control over labour at the Ndu Tea Estate, there were also some factors that weakened it:

- First, there were the *relatively frequent changes in the ownership and management of the estate*. Changes in the ownership of the estate have occurred three times before the privatisation of the CDC tea estates in 2002. During the EAC era (1957-1977) there was an internal change in ownership: in 1972 the Indians on the EAC Board of Directors acquired majority shares in the company and took over control of the estate from the British. Indian control, however, was short-lived. Soon confronted with the severest financial crisis in the estate's history, the Indians decided at the end of 1976 to sell the estate to the Cameroonian government which, in turn, handed it over to the CDC (see Chapter 9).

Changes in the management of the estate were even more frequent. Estate management was most stable under British control: between 1957 and 1972 there were only two management appointments, while under Indian control from 1972 to 1977 there were six (see Table 8.1).

Table 8.1 *Ndu Tea Estate managers, 1957-1991*

NAME	PERIOD OF SERVICE	NATIONALITY
J.M.H. Barriable	1957-1967	British
R.J. Murray	1967-1972	British
P.G. Sausman	1972-1973	British
P.F. Baxter	1973-1974	British
K.P. MacNicol	1974-1975	British
M.B. Gardiner	May 1975-September 1975	British
B.C. Alijah	September 1975-October 1975	Ghanaian
K.V.S. Krishna	October 1975-January 1977	Indian
E.A. Eloundou	1977-1983	Cameroonian
R.J. Murray	1983-January 1986	British
P. Bonnie/K. MacNee	January 1986-October 1986	British
R.D. Ouvry	October 1986-1988	British
R.W. Scott	1988-1990	British
S.M. Munju	1990-1991	Cameroonian

Source: Ngenge (1983: 130); and Ndu Estate records.

Obviously, these relatively frequent changes in the estate's ownership and management were not conducive to the establishment of managerial control over the labour process. Quite the contrary: workers often felt insecure and became restive. In 1975 the Staff Representatives strongly condemned the rapid turnover of estate managers under Indian control:

The idea behind the constant changes of management has been to weed the Englishmen out of the company so that Indians should dominate as is practicable in the London Head Office – to the disadvantage of the workers as new managers need time to settle down. Since the departure of Mr R.I. Murray in 1972, we have seen new managers coming and going in short periods The workers feel that this confusion of having a new manager almost every new year has made work very uneasy for them and created a lot of insecurity for all on the estate.⁶

They also often threatened strike action on this issue.

- Second, there was *the estate management's lack of executive powers*. During the EAC period estate managers could not even take a minor decision without consulting the Head Office in London. This was strongly resented by the workers as there were constant delays in the decision-making process on urgent issues related to their working and living conditions (see Chapter 9).

During the deepening crisis on the estate in 1974, the Indians started to consider appointing a local managing agent in Cameroon, who could serve as an intermediary between the Head Office in London, the estate, and the government. Following the summary dismissal in that same year of Mr J. Leclercq, the head of the company's sales office in Douala,⁷ they decided that his successor was to act as both the company's sales agent and management agent in Cameroon. Mr Njoh Litumbe, a Bakwerian, who was acting at that time as the company's auditor in Cameroon, was chosen to occupy this important post. Managerial staff on the Ndu Estate were enjoined to strictly follow up Mr Litumbe's instructions.

The estate workers soon arrived at the conclusion that Mr Litumbe was trying to take advantage of his new position in the company and use it to pursue his own personal interests. He had created a company of his own, the Emil Agency Company Ltd, and one of his partners, Mr Ben Alijah, a Ghanaian, was made responsible for the sale of Ndu tea. When the Ndu Estate was facing serious financial problems in 1975/76, the Emil Agency Company sought to take over the estate. Consequently, it was presumed that Mr Litumbe was no longer interested in saving the company from imminent collapse, but rather in acquiring it as cheaply as possible. He continually refused to ratify any agreement reached between the estate management and the union which entailed an increase in labour costs.⁸ Little wonder that he and his partner, Mr Alijah, were hated by the workers. Staff Representatives demanded time and again that the contract between EAC and Emil Agency Company should be abrogated and that Mr Litumbe should cease to be the company's managing agent in Cameroon. The administration of the estate, they recommended, should be completely handed over to the resident estate manager who was in direct contact with the workers and had first-hand knowledge of the situation on the estate.

Although the CDC managers had more extensive powers than the EAC managers, in particular in the field of industrial relations, the first CDC manager of the Ndu Estate, Mr E.A. Eloundou, was regularly accused by the Labour Inspectorate and workers of 'calculated manoeuvres to to postpone the implementation of certain decisions reached through constant reference to the Head Office'.⁹

- Thirdly, there were *several contradictions within the command structure on the estate* which severely affected efficiency and labour control:

(a) There was a clear division between expatriate and Cameroonian managerial staff. At the start of EAC operations at Ndu in 1956/57, the Director at the time, Mr S. Bolster, had assured the chief and workers that eventually all managerial posts on the estate would be Cameroonised, except the post of estate manager. Soon afterwards, in 1959,

the government also insisted on a gradual Cameroonisation of managerial positions. Nonetheless, the EAC, like some other foreign enterprises in Cameroon (Ayina 1983), hardly bothered to keep its promise of Cameroonisation, for instance by creating training schemes for deserving workers. This caused a lot of frustration among Cameroonian supervisory staff members who were aspiring to managerial positions. From the very start, the union has protested at the absence of any Cameroonisation policy on the estate and repeatedly called for the implementation of training schemes.

In the early 1970s there were some indications that the union was about to reap the fruits of its persistent efforts. Two supervisory staff members, Messrs Simon Ndzi and Christopher Nsai, were sent to the Cameroon College of Arts, Science and Technology (CCAST) at Bambili for further training. This experiment did not prove a complete success due to the two men's poor educational background. In 1971 it was agreed between the EAC and the union that all the expatriate assistant managers were going to be replaced by Cameroonians and that the successor of Mr R.J. Murray (see Table 8.1) was going to be the last expatriate estate manager.¹⁰

However, when the Indians took over control of the estate in 1972, they failed to adhere to the terms of this agreement, despite persistent union protests. In October 1975, they even appointed an Indian estate manager, Mr K.V.S. Krishna, and two Indian assistant managers. It was only after the estate had been handed over to the CDC in 1977 that the first Cameroonian estate manager, Mr E.A. Eloundou, was appointed. In 1983, however, the CDC General Manager transferred Mr Eloundou to the Tole Estate and again recruited an expatriate to replace him, namely Mr R.J. Murray, who had already served as an estate manager during the EAC period (see above). Mr Murray's appointment frustrated one of the Cameroonian field assistants' expectations of succeeding Mr Eloundou. Together with some other managerial staff members, he then began to scheme against Mr Murray, in order to discredit him with the CDC General Manager and bring about his downfall.

(b) There were also clear divisions within the Cameroonian managerial staff itself, often based on ethnic considerations. This may be illustrated by the tensions and conflicts among supervisory staff members competing for managerial positions on the estate. Apparently, the chief of Ndu originally 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 contested by the General Secretary of the union, Mr E.Y.K. Barthson. The chief then dropped this claim and instead began advocating that management give preference to Ndu workers over other workers when vacancies for such positions occurred (see Chapter 7). This caused a lot of unrest among the workers in the early 1970s, when a struggle for ascendancy was going on between two supervisors: Mr Michael Monde, a man from Ndu and Mr Christopher Nsai, a man hailing from Mbinon (Nso), though he was part Wimbun part Noni by birth.

Mr Nsai possessed higher professional qualifications than Mr Monde and was immensely popular among the workers because of his humane and compassionate exercise of his duties. Mr Monde, on the other hand, was hated by most workers because of his extremely authoritarian exercise of his duties. Together with some Ndu workers, Mr Monde tried to impress upon the management that Mr Nsai was unqualified for holding a senior post on the estate since he was not a native of Ndu and was moreover incapable of controlling his subordinates. Although Mr Nsai enjoyed the support of the vast majority of the workers, Mr Monde was eventually promoted. The management appears to have ignored the workers' choice on the grounds that it had more faith in Mr Monde's style of leadership and wanted to please the chief of Ndu.¹¹

- Fourthly, there was *less state control over labour at the Ndu Estate* than at the Tole Estate. The isolated position of the Ndu Estate made direct state intervention in the system of industrial relations, especially through the Ministry of Labour, a difficult and lengthy process. During the British

Trusteeship period there was a Labour Department at Buea, but major decisions in the field of industrial relations, such as registration of a trade union, were taken by the Federal Ministry of Labour at Lagos. Following the creation of the Federal State of West Cameroon in 1961, Buea became the seat of the Inspector of Labour for West Cameroon. At the time, there was only one Divisional Labour Office for the whole of the Bamenda Grassfields, located at Bamenda. The Divisional Inspector of Labour hardly had the time, and often lacked the transport, to visit the Ndu Tea Estate regularly. In addition, he remained accountable for all his actions to the Inspector of Labour for West Cameroon at Buea. These were clear obstacles to his assisting in the settlement of labour disputes on the estate. Not surprisingly, the Ndu workers sometimes preferred to strike rather than wait for his intervention.

A certain improvement in the situation occurred after the creation of the (United) Republic of Cameroon in 1972. The erstwhile Federated State of West Cameroon was then partitioned in two provinces and the Divisional Inspectorate at Bamenda was transformed into the Provincial Labour Inspectorate for the North West Province. Finally, in 1976, a Divisional Labour Inspectorate for the Donga-Mantung Division was opened at Nkambe. The line of communication between the Divisional Labour Inspectorate at Nkambe and the estate is nevertheless still far from satisfactory. During my fieldwork in 1991, I found that the Divisional Inspector was hardly aware of what was going on at the estate. His contacts with the estate remained largely confined to interventions during strike actions. He explained that the poor state of the road between Nkambe and Ndu as well as lack of transport continued to be strong impediments to regular visits and inspections. For the same reason estate workers rarely called upon the Divisional Inspector for the settlement of individual grievances.

The communication problem, however, is not the only reason for the rather limited contribution of the Labour Inspectorate to labour control on the estate. Over the years estate workers have learnt to distrust the Labour Inspectorate. Particularly during the period of Indian control of the estate (1972-1977) they suspected

some labour officials of collaborating with management. For example, in 1972, the Labour Inspectorate delayed publication of the Joint Classification Board's report on the categorisation of Ndu Estate workers (see Chapter 9), and the union president, Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, immediately accused it of taking sides with the management:

What excuse have I in the circumstances when your office has failed in six months' time to produce the outcome of our discussions on the categorisation of Ndu workers for signature? Thereby also making it difficult for the appeals made by dissatisfied employees to be heard. I am, however, happy that the initiative which stultified the law and made it a mockery of it, came from quarters that are supposed to uphold it. You will, of course, agree with us that incidents of this nature cannot inspire confidence or respect for the Labour Office, as they are morally indefensible because it makes the workers feel that the Labour Officers are taking sides with the management and that the delay in not complying with the stipulations of the law was a deliberate and calculated act on the part of the management and the Labour Department to deprive workers of their right.¹²

The impact of the party on labour control on the estate seems not to have been very intense either, except perhaps indirectly – through the union (see Chapter 9). The party was hardly visible on the estate. Of course, all the workers were forced to buy membership cards, yet there were no party meetings. Local and regional party leaders usually turned up at the estate on two sorts of occasions. First, they came when workers were on strike. They were then in the habit of strongly condemning 'illegal' strike action and advising workers 'to exercise patience'. Secondly, they turned up when the party needed money for specific purposes. Workers mostly resented these 'extortions' of money by the party elite. For instance, in 1983 a vehement conflict developed between workers and party leadership about the amount of money workers had to contribute to the construction of the Bamenda Congress Hall which was planned to accommodate the forthcoming national congress of the party. In a circular letter, the CDC General Manager had fixed the donation of the lowest paid workers in the corporation at FCFA 2,000, but the

party leadership insisted that Ndu workers, like other workers in the Donga-Mantung Division, should contribute FCFA 15,000. Ndu workers replied that they were not going to pay more than other CDC workers and warned that they would not hesitate to strike if a higher amount than FCFA 2,000 was deducted from their wages. Under pressure of the party leadership, the Staff Representatives later agreed to contribute FCFA 7,000 in two instalments. A considerable number of workers then refused to pay anything. Apparently, no action was taken against them.¹³

Informal actions of male pluckers

Like female pluckers at the Tole Tea Estate, male pluckers at the Ndu Estate have been persistently engaged in many kinds of informal actions to protest against their control and exploitation in the labour process. During a meeting with the Staff Representatives in 1979, the estate manager listed the most common actions:

- (1) continuous late arrival, (2) frequent absenteeism from work, (3) exhibiting lack of interest in work, (4) low output, (5) poor work, and (6) disrespect for managerial and supervisory staff.¹⁴

While these modes of informal resistance are also commonplace on the Tole Estate (see Chapter 6), Ndu workers seem to engage in this form of action even more than Tole workers.

Absenteeism

In 1968 the estate manager lamented that absenteeism had reached the alarming rate of 25% on two or three days in the week.¹⁵ Despite frequent written warnings to offenders, the situation had not improved in 1969. He then urged the first elected Staff Representatives to instruct the workers that 'regular work attendance was a necessary prerequisite for the well-functioning of the enterprise'.¹⁶ However, their propaganda efforts soon proved even less effective than disciplinary measures.

It is, of course, extremely difficult to habituate workers to regular work attendance when they are still strongly rooted in local forms of organisation and value systems. A few examples may suffice to

illustrate the close link between absenteeism and continuing encapsulation in the local community:

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. Gradually becoming aware of this cultural constraint, the EAC management was inclined to be less rigorous in its control of absenteeism during this period. It generally sanctioned only those workers who seemed to take undue advantage of its 'leniency', i.e. were absent for more than a few days. Under constant pressure of its foreign financiers to raise labour productivity, the CDC management frowned upon this behaviour of the workers and tried to control it from the very beginning.

During the period June-September 1982 the funeral rites of the previous chief took place at Ndu. Workers tended to absent from work as they were expected to participate in these ceremonies. The CDC management soon intervened, warning the workers as follows: 'As far as absenteeism, conditions have greatly deteriorated because of the situation at the Fon's palace (Fon's death); no permissions for the celebrations will be granted'.¹⁷

Ndu has the largest market in the Donga-Mantung Division. Market days are not only of great economic importance, but also social happenings. During market days workers are often either absent or leave the estate before closing time.

In cases of sickness or death of close kin, workers do not feel obliged to ask management permission to stay at home, but simply absent themselves from work. As recently as 1988, they were severely warned by the management to abandon this practice.¹⁸

The workers have even devised ways of 'covering up' absenteeism. In the factory there was formerly a high degree of solidarity among the workers. They were few in number, belonged predominantly to one ethnic group (Nso), and were engaged in several common activities, both legal and illegal, such as common

membership of savings and recreational associations, as well as of a gang involved in the theft of tea from the factory. They had created a system whereby a worker who had just completed his shift would continue working if his colleague had a good reason to be late or absent. The absent worker was then marked present. As a result, it often happened that workers worked two shifts (16 hours) without being replaced. In 1972 the management suddenly prohibited this long-standing practice because it had come to the conclusion that the increasing rate of unpaid overtime had a negative effect on productivity. It stipulated that any worker who continued working after the change of shifts would be paid overtime. The workers strongly disapproved of this prohibition. They complained to the management that it was out to create divisions among them and destroy their solidarity. Though workers were very bitter on the issue, the management did not reverse its decision. The Divisional Inspector of Labour at Bamenda supported the management, arguing that 'a practice, which encourages workers to work continuously for sixteen hours on the same day, makes a mockery of the Statutory Hours of Work Regulations'.¹⁹

Other common forms of informal action

Besides absenteeism, there are several other forms of informal action on the estate. I shall briefly review the most important of them:

- *insubordination.* There have been numerous incidents on the estate whereby workers refused to obey direct orders from supervisory staff members. For instance, some workers refuse to work during heavy rain in the cold, wet season at Ndu. They maintain that nobody ever works under such conditions in the local community. Others refuse to do overtime on Saturdays during the peak plucking season, even though they may receive double pay. They tend to look upon the Saturday afternoon as a period of resting, visiting friends and relatives, and working on their own coffee farms.²⁰ Insubordination has sometimes been accompanied by physical attack. Quite a number of workers have reportedly molested and beaten up supervisory staff members.

- *low output and poor work performance.* During the EAC period tasks were considerably lighter at the Ndu Estate than at the Tole Estate (compare Tables 6.1 and 7.5). Nevertheless, some male pluckers at the Ndu Estate tried to reduce the task even further by employing the same tactics as their female counterparts at the Tole Estate: they never stopped complaining that the task allotted by the management was ‘too heavy’ and equally engaged in a variety of output-restricting actions such as slowdowns. Other male pluckers left the fields as soon as they had completed the task, though the bonus for over-task was higher on the Ndu Estate than on the Tole Estate (compare Tables 6.1 and 7.5). This gave them ample time – many workers were able to complete their task before noon during the EAC period – to engage in a number of income-generating activities in the local community, such as work on their coffee farms, trade, and so on.

After the takeover of the estate by the CDC in 1977, Ndu workers had to accept the standardisation of task norms applied on all CDC tea estates. Due to the substantial increases in task work during the 1980s, some of them now experience great difficulties in completing their task and earning the basic wage.

Despite severe disciplinary measures, a number of pluckers still come to work late or stop working before completing their task. Some refuse to improve their work performance and continue to pluck carelessly, thus destroying the tea bushes, or pluck bad leaves – so as to finish early and/or increase plucking weight (and income).

- *theft and fraud.* Dissatisfied with their meagre wage income, some workers engage in criminal acts such as theft and fraud. Theft of tea evidently occurs on a larger scale on the Ndu Estate than on the Tole Estate. Several supervisory staff members appear to have been involved in the racket. In 1972, Staff Representatives reported to the estate management:

Senior people (headmen/overseers) in the factory have organised the stealing from the factory and selling tea at Tatum. They sold 50,000 francs worth of tea to one Malam at Ntumbaw. They have been passing tea to Chad through Rudolf when he was a Ndu Estate driver which he sold, bringing the money to share.²¹

Quite a number of workers have also stolen firewood from the estate. Others have been engaged in fraudulent practices, mostly in close collaboration with clerical and supervisory staff.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to show that, although the labour control regime at the Ndu Estate in some respects differed from that at the Tole Estate, the Ndu Estate management has not been more effective in controlling labour than the Tole Estate management. Ndu male pluckers, in fact, seem even more involved in informal action than Tole female pluckers. This is particularly manifest in the considerably higher degree of absenteeism on the Ndu Estate than on the Tole Estate. This difference in scale and intensity of informal action between Ndu and Tole pluckers may be attributed largely to the fact that Ndu workers continue to be strongly rooted in local forms of organisation and values which are often in conflict with capitalist organisation and values.

Notes

1. See various letters of the union's General Secretary, in File NEWU 18/1, Trade Disputes.
2. See Report of Mr. S. Nduwa to General Secretary of NEWU, dated 2 June 1962, in File CUPIAW 21, Miscellaneous Correspondences and Documents.
3. See Letter of Mr Samuel Nduwa, Branch Secretary of NEWU Three Corners, to General Secretary of NEWU, dated 17 November 1962, in *ibid.*
4. See Letter of Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, General Secretary of CUPIAW, to Estate Manager, Ndu Tea Estate, dated 20 November 1963, in File CUPIAW 1, Formation and Registration of NEWU.

5. 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 MTPS/DILSI/NK/17, Ndu Tea Estate - General Correspondence.
6. Memo of some aspects of grievances and frustration presented by the Ndu Tea Estate Staff Representatives to a Commission of Enquiry appointed to probe the affairs of the Ndu Tea Estate on 11 September 1975, in File NEWU 18/1, Trade Disputes. See also Minutes of an Emergency Meeting of Staff Representatives in the Union Office on 21 September 1974, in File CUPIAW 38, Staff Representative Elections and Other Matters.
7. He was charged with serious misconduct and fraud. See, for instance, Circumstantial Report on the Ndu Tea Estate by the Divisional Inspector of Labour, Bamenda, dated 10 December 1972, in File DUAW D/M 10, Working Conditions, Wages and Wage Structure.
8. See Mémorandum sur les implications d'une éventuelle fermeture du complexe de thé de Ndu: Une analyse du problème et une suite de propositions, in File NEWU 18/1, Trade Disputes.
9. Letter of Divisional Inspector of Labour, Nkambe, to Estate Manager, Ndu Tea Estate, dated 11 May 1983, in *ibid*.
10. See Minutes of an Emergency Meeting of Staff Representatives in the Union Office on 21 September 1974, in File CUPIAW 38, Staff Representative Elections and Other Matters.
11. See Letter of Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, General Secretary of CUPIAW, to the Labour Delegate, Buea, dated 28 July 1972, in File MTPS/WCD/BU.99, CUPIAW.
12. See Circumstantial Report on the Ndu Tea Estate by the Divisional Inspector of Labour, Bamenda, dated 10 December 1972, in File DUAW D/M 10, Working Conditions, Wages and Wage Structure.
13. See Letter of Staff Representatives, CDC Ndu Tea Estate, to Acting Estate Manager, Ndu Tea Estate, dated 21 October 1983, in File MTLIS/DILSI/NK/17, Ndu Tea Estate - General Correspondence.
14. See Minutes of ECC Meeting held on 7 November 1979, in CDC Ndu Tea Estate, Minutes of ECC Meetings, 1977-91.
15. See Letter of Mr R.J. Murray, Estate Manager, Ndu Tea Estate, to Senior Labour Officer, dated 1 March 1968, in File CUPIAW 10, Working Conditions, Claims, Wages and Wage Structure.

16. See Minutes of the Meeting between Management and Staff Representatives held in the Ndu Estate Office on 11 January 1969, in File MTPS/WCD/BU.180/S.6, Staff Representative Elections - Ndu Tea Estate.
17. Minutes of EEC Meeting held on 20 July 1982, in CDC Ndu Tea Estate, Minutes of EEC Meetings, 1977-91.
18. See Staff Representatives' Preparatory Meeting held on 7 December 1988 at the Ndu Estate Health Centre, in CDC Ndu Tea Estate, Record of Minutes of Staff Representatives' Preparatory Meetings, 1981-91.
19. Letter from Factory Headmen to Estate Manager, Ndu Tea Estate, dated 13 October 1972, in File CUPIAW 10, Working Conditions, Claims, Wages and Wage Structure; and Circumstantial Report on the Ndu Tea Estate by the Divisional Inspector of Labour, Bamenda, dated 10 December 1972, in File DUAW D/M 10, Working Conditions, Wages and Wage Structure.
20. See Staff Meeting held in the Estate Manager's Office on 2 November 1979, in CDC Ndu Tea, Minutes of EEC Meetings, 1977-91.
21. Report of an Investigation by Staff Representatives, Ndu Tea Estate, of a complaint made against Mr Samuel Nduwa, Staff Representative and General President of CUPIAW, for allegedly misappropriating estate labour, dated 19 June 1972, in File CUPIAW 38, Staff Representative Elections and Other Matters.

Male workers and trade unionism

Introduction

The establishment and development of trade unionism on the Ndu Estate has not been an easy process, since most Ndu workers were initially not acquainted with trade unionism. The initiative to create a trade union on the estate was taken by what Millen (1963) has called an 'outside' leader. His organisational efforts were obstructed for some time by the estate management and the local chief. Both perceived trade unionism as a direct challenge to their authority over the workers.

Gradually, these initial obstacles were overcome. Two factors seem to account for the workers' acceptance of the union as an intermediary between labour and management. The first involved the great organisational skills of the 'outside' leader. In his recruitment drive he relied on the small group of clerical workers and supervisory staff members who had been active trade unionists on the southwestern plantations and who wielded considerable power over the estate workers. Second, the union could quickly show itself capable of pressurising management and bringing about improvements in workers' conditions of service.

Like the Tole female pluckers, Ndu male pluckers have continued to support the union leadership as long as it represented their interests effectively and 'delivered the goods'. If the union failed to live up to their expectations, however, they did not hesitate to bypass it.

In the first section of this chapter I shall describe the emergence and development of trade unionism on the Ndu Estate during the period 1958-1991: as on the Tole Estate, there has been a transition from autonomous to state-controlled unionism. In the second section I shall document the history of male pluckers' trade union and collective actions.

The emergence and development of trade unionism on the Ndu Tea Estate

When the Tole Estate was reopened in 1954, trade unionism was already well-established on the CDC estates. When the Ndu Estate was created in January 1957, trade unionism was still an unknown entity to the vast majority of the newly recruited, predominantly illiterate workers, except for the few who had been previously employed on the southwestern plantations. A trade union was not founded on the estate until 27 July 1958. It was called the Ndu Estate Workers' Union (NEWU). Its founder was Mr E.Y.K. Barthson.

Case no. 7.1 *Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, Founder of NEWU*

Interestingly, Mr Barthson was not employed on the estate when he founded the union. Outside leadership, of course, used to be a common phenomenon in developing countries where workers often lacked the educational qualifications and organisational skills to become trade union leaders (Millen 1963).

Mr Barthson had been active as a journalist in Lagos. When the EAC team under the leadership of Mr S. Bolster was prospecting the Nkambe-Ndu area for the purpose of setting up the tea estate, he served as a secretary to Mr Ndze, one of the local deputies who eventually persuaded the chief of Ndu to allocate land to EAC (see Chapter 7).

During the construction of the estate it occurred to him to organise the workers into a trade union. His idea received the support of a small core of estate employees, particularly clerical workers and supervisory staff members, most of whom had had some experience with trade unionism on the southwestern plantations. Members of this group elected the first union executive. Mr Barthson was unanimously elected as the union's General Secretary.

This was the start of his long trade union career. He has been dominating the trade union scene in the Donga-Mantung Division up to the present time. He has also occupied important trade union

posts at the national level. He was one of the founding members of the West Cameroon Trade Union Congress (WCTUC) and the National Union of Cameroon Workers (NUCW). He has always tried to combine his trade union leadership with active involvement in local politics and business. As he was scarcely remunerated for his services during the first years of the union's existence, this combination enabled him to earn a decent income.

His ethnic origin could have been problematic in local politics and trade union activities. He was not a native of Ndu, but a Noni from Bui Division, though raised in Tabenken, the most important Tang-clan village in the Wimbun area (Pool 1989). Being a 'stranger', he has adopted an ambivalent attitude. On the one hand, he has tried to integrate himself within the local community. He has lived at Ndu for a long time, he speaks the local language (Limbum) fluently, and has adapted to local customs and norms. On the other hand, he has never identified with the local community to an extent of being unable to preserve a certain measure of autonomy vis-a-vis the local chief and Ndu chauvinism.

Like the CDCWU, the NEWU embraced the moderate ideology of 'free but responsible unionism' propagated by the Labour Department (see Chapter 5). It is reported that after the union's application for registration, the Labour Department forwarded to it the Labour Code, a series of ordinances concerning labour and trade unionism, and the Guide Book for Trade Union Officials which instructed trade union leaders in the principles of 'free but responsible unionism' and advised them on administrative matters.¹ The union's loyalty to this ideology was strengthened by Mr Barthson's close contacts with the CDCWU leadership and the union's early affiliation to the ICFTU. The union's moderate stand is manifest in its principal objectives as stipulated in its constitution:

- to associate with the management of the estate on matters of common interest both to the management and the workers.
- to be charitably disposed to the management and promote peaceful management-workers relations.²

Notwithstanding its moderate objectives, the new union was immediately opposed by both the estate management and the chief, who regarded it as a threat to their authority.

The first estate manager, Mr J.M.H. Barrable, was by all accounts an extremely authoritarian manager who was opposed to trade unionism altogether. He strongly believed that union leaders could not be trusted since 'they were only out for trouble with management'. His relationship with the union became very strained when he started to victimise and even dismiss active union members. Some of his clients in the labour force began intimidating their colleagues to discourage them from joining the union or paying their union dues. These 'boss's men' often provoked union members by telling them: 'we will not join the union and we will contribute nothing to union funds, but when the union asks for amenities we will enjoy them too'.³ In response to such provocations, the union executive resolved on 7 June 1961 that union membership should be compulsory since all the workers benefitted from the union's achievements. The estate manager, in turn, immediately threatened to take action against anybody who tried to enforce this resolution:

Under no circumstances would I agree to this as I am a champion of individual freedom ... I sincerely hope that no cases of force or threat come to my notice in regard to getting people to join the union, as I do not wish to take action against a person or persons concerned in such a case.⁴

The union regularly protested against the estate manager's 'obstructive attitude'. In 1962, for instance, the union's General Secretary, Mr Barthson, warned him:

I am directed by our Executive Committee to advise you that the full-scale offensive you have launched against us is viewed with complacency. You have already dismissed many trade union leaders, the last two being Mathew Nfor and Kassimu. We view their dismissal with concern.⁵

Although the estate manager eventually accepted the union's existence on the estate, their relationship never became cordial.

The chief, too, was initially quite hostile to the newly formed union and tried to thwart its development. During a Traditional Council meeting in 1962 he even announced that all active union members should be dismissed from the estate.⁶ In October 1962, two union members were summoned to the Traditional Council and required '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 asked the estate manager to dismiss both men.⁷

This vehement opposition by the estate management and the chief formed a serious obstacle to the General Secretary's organisational efforts during the first years of the union's existence. This did not, however, discourage Mr Barthson; quite the contrary, he became even more determined to organise the workers. His strategy was to approach the supervisory staff first. These were usually literate men who had previously worked on the southwestern plantations and had some trade union experience. When they decided to join the union, they invariably became leaders of union branches and members of the union executive.⁸ They would then try to convince their subordinates of the benefits of trade unionism on the estate and, if necessary, put some pressure upon them to join the union.

Organisational efforts and union activities were initially also hampered by:

- *lack of funds.* The union was completely dependent on the voluntary contributions of its membership. The initial membership fee was 2s6d, while the monthly subscription was 6d. The workers, however, were irregular in the payment of their monthly dues and the dues collectors were often dishonest, refusing to hand over the money collected to the union. So the union's income was insufficient to pay a salary to the General Manager, employ staff, build an office, or purchase necessary equipment. On special occasions, the union was forced to raise extra funds. For example, the General Secretary depended on donations of the rank and file for travelling to the Labour Office at Buea. As early as 1961 voices were heard in the union

demanding that the check-off system be introduced on the estate.⁹ But it was not until May 1967 that the management permitted its introduction. This resulted in a substantial increase in the union's income, enabling it to pay a monthly salary of FCFA 15,000 to its General Secretary, employ some staff, and embark upon the construction of its secretariat.

- *delay in its registration by the state.* The union could not function properly on the estate until it was officially recognised and registered by the state. It could therefore achieve few tangible results in the defence of the workers' interests, which could have promoted its organisational efforts among the workers. The management refused to negotiate with the union until it was registered by the state. In these circumstances, it is understandable that the union's General Secretary put a lot of energy into getting a registration certificate. This was no easy undertaking since the Registrar of Trade Unions was then located in Lagos. The registration took three years. The receipt of the certificate on 17 April 1961 was exuberantly celebrated.

The union leadership and the management then agreed upon formation of a Consultative Committee. In his address at the Inaugural Meeting of the Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) on 6 April 1962, the union's General Secretary stressed the importance of these meetings for the settlement of workers' grievances:

The development of effective and efficient machinery through which workers' discontent and unrest may be expressed; the machinery for workers' consultation on an estate like this cannot be overemphasised and is of paramount importance.¹⁰

On 20 July 1962 he added that 'the union undertakes to ensure that until the procedure of the joint consultation scheme has been exhausted there shall be no stoppage of work of either a partial or of a general character'.¹¹

Nevertheless, it would appear that even after this agreement the management often attempted to ignore the union. On 30 April 1963, the union's General Secretary rebuked the estate manager for his persistent refusal to consult the union:

You have made many false promises in the past to the extent that you refuse to even respect legal agreements to which you are a party. Our stock of patience is exhausted.

You have stubbornly refused at times to negotiate with us or refused to recognise that trade unions are nowadays a permanent feature of the industrial landscape. You have failed to realise that we are both of us the social partners in industry and that good relations between us would lead to an increase in productivity.¹²

In the wake of the union's registration, however, workers' confidence in the union leadership grew. The union's persistent struggles for improvement in their living and working conditions, and in particular its organisation of a strike against authoritarian management in 1962 (see below), increased its popularity among the labour force. This is clearly manifest in the growth of union membership from 240 in 1961 to 644 in 1962. In 1968, a year after the introduction of the check-off system on the estate, it was estimated that more than 90% of the estate workers were dues-paying union members. There is evidence that Ndu male workers tend to demonstrate a higher degree of participation in union affairs than Tole female workers:

Each time we convene an Annual Conference we get nearly every registered and potential member present and eager to attend so that it looks more like a general meeting than a conference as stipulated in sections 5 to 7 of our constitution. On the other hand, previously we had encouraged General Meetings of workers every month. At these meetings workers prefer to discuss not only difficulties facing them on the estate but all matters that should be handled by the Annual Delegates Conference.¹³

Generally speaking, men have more time to participate in trade union affairs than women. Moreover, compared to the large CDCWU, the NEWU was only a relatively small union, and this allowed for closer contact between leadership and rank and file, as well as more ready participation in trade union affairs. Active participation in the union enabled Ndu workers to exercise a considerable measure of control over the union leadership's representation of their interests.

In 1963 the union changed its name from Ndu Estate Workers' Union (NEWU) into Cameroon Union of Plantations, Industrial and Agricultural Workers (CUPIAW). Its intention was to offer industrial and agricultural workers outside the estate an opportunity to join the union. This has never happened, however. There were few other wage workers outside the estate and, above all, the union had no funds, manpower and transport facilities to actively recruit members outside the estate.

On 31 October 1968 the first Staff Representative elections were organised on the estate. The majority of the Staff Representatives then elected were supervisory staff members and clerical workers with a relatively long working career and union experience on the estate (see Table 9.1). Two of them, Messrs Samuel Nduwa and Johnson Tanto Massa, had been employed on the estate from the start. They had risen through the ranks to the post of overseer and had simultaneously occupied leading positions in the union. The function of Staff Representative and membership of the union's executive often went hand in hand. For example, Mr Johnson Tanto Massa, has combined both posts from 1968 up till 1987.

Table 9.1 Permanent and substitute Staff Representatives elected at the Ndu Tea Estate in 1968

NAME OF STAFF REPRESENTATIVE	AGE	LENGTH OF SERVICE (years)	LENGTH OF UNION MEMBERSHIP (years)
S. Nduwa	34	11	11
G. Silva	23	7	0.5
J.T. Massa	31	10	11
E. Nfor	45	8	8
J.N. Shey	28	10	11
M. Konsah	34	9	9
P. Yukah	27	5	8
B. Weriba	31	10	8
E. Webngong	31	11	11
I. Nfor	30	5	5
E. Tata	22	2	2
E.N. Tamnjong	33	11	11
C.W. Felixson	24	4.5	4.5

Source: File CUPIAW 38, Staff Representative Elections and Other Matters.

Upon creation of the National Union of Cameroon Workers (NUCW) in 1972, the CUIPAW was, like the CDCWU, dissolved. On 15 September 1972 a Special Regional Committee charged with the reorganisation of trade unionism in the Donga-Mantung Division arrived at the estate. A few days before its arrival, Mr Barthson instructed supervisory staff members how to behave during the committee's presence:

The committee members will record all workers who will adhere to the new union under the banner of our Great Party, the CNU. All they expect is to see a general sign of Unity among the workers. You will have to demonstrate to the organising team that you are a United People and that you believe in Unity and Peace. You will not show that there are any differences among yourselves.

The Organising Committee is already well-informed of the situation in your area They will make proposals to you and your reaction will be to applaud, clap or approve what has been proposed.

Please, advise your workers properly about this matter in their various gangs during working hours. Every worker will prove that he is a true Cameroonian citizen by producing the following documents: (a) tax tickets, (b) national identity cards, (c) current (1972) CNU membership cards.¹⁴

Following the reorganisation exercise, Ndu estate workers became part of the Divisional Union of Agricultural Workers of Donga-Mantung (DUAW D/M). DUAW in turn became the largest constituent union of the Divisional Union of Trade Unions of Donga-Mantung (DUTU D/M). Like Mr Vewessee in the Fako Division, Mr Barthson came to dominate the trade union scene in the Donga-Mantung Division: he was elected president of both DUAW and DUTU). However, he soon experienced great difficulties in combining these two functions with his posts in the NUCW Confederal Bureau in Yaoundé: he rose from Assistant Secretary for Juridical and Contentious Matters to Confederal Organising Secretary and Chairman of the National Occupational Committee. In 1974 he resigned the presidency of the DUAW, being replaced by Mr W.M. Wanchem and later by Mr Johnson Tanto Massa, both of them Staff Representatives at the Ndu Tea Estate. In 1980 he

resigned the presidency of DUTU, being replaced by Mr I.N. Ngala, the president of the Divisional Union of Private Education Workers and vice-president of DUTU.

Just as occurred in the Fako Division (see Chapter 5), trade unionism in the Donga-Mantung Division was crippled after the reorganisation by lack of funds. Rebates from the National Committee for Trade Union Contributions in Yaoundé were either not forthcoming or irregular, preventing the union from paying staff members, holding regular meetings, and organising activities like courses. During a joint meeting of Staff Representatives and DUAW Executive on 25 February 1976, the union's poor functioning was discussed at some length:

The president, Mr Martin W. Wanchem remarked that because of our failing to meet for a very long time many things have gone wrong. Some members have been made dysfunctional; some have suffered in performing union duties because of lack of funds to pay transport allowances and sitting fees during meetings as it used to happen in the past.

One of the executive members, Mr S. Nduwa, said that all along the functions of the administration had not been carried on properly so much that the union had been run without estimates. The president claimed that he was being ignored in the administration in that he was not being consulted on many matters and he continued that, instead, he saw Mr P.P. Nunyi, was acting as president and secretary. So he saw that he was neglected and became annoyed.¹⁵

In the absence of any regular meetings of both the DUAW and DUTU Executive, the representation of the Ndu Estate workers' interests was mostly left to the vice-president (later president) of the DUTU, Mr I.N. Ngala, and the Staff Representatives.

On 1 August 1986, the president of DUTU, Mr Ngala, once again explained to the Minister of Labour the disastrous situation of trade unionism in the Donga-Mantung Division and threatened to withdraw the transfer of any union dues to the National Committee for Trade Union Contributions in Yaoundé if the rebates were not regularly paid.¹⁶

From 1987 onwards, DUTU and DUAW have been further weakened by internal struggles for power among the leadership.

In 1987, the president of DUTU, Mr Ngala, was transferred to Bamenda. During an extraordinary congress of DUTU on 6 March 1987 he requested the election of a new president. Representatives of the DUAW, who were predominantly Ndu Estate workers, nominated Mr Barthson, who was subsequently declared president. Apparently, Mr Barthson still enjoyed great popularity among the Ndu Tea Estate workers.

Mr Barthson's election was immediately contested by the president of the CTUC. The latter declared Mr Barthson's election 'null and void' since the Confederal Bureau was not represented at the extraordinary congress as required by the CTUC Statutes. However, there is no doubt that his rejection of the election result mainly derived from the fact that Mr Barthson had just been dismissed from the Confederal Bureau for his bold exposure of corruption and maladministration in the CTUC. Understandably, the CTUC president disliked the prospect of a new power position for Mr Barthson within the union.

The CTUC president was backed by the divisional administration and Mrs J.R. Massa, president of the Council Workers' Union, the smallest constitutional union of DUTU, and at that time vice-president of DUTU. She had aspired to the union's presidency and was assured of the support of the divisional administration and party leadership.

The Senior Divisional Officer (SDO) of Nkambe eventually decided to intervene in the conflict and ordered that new elections should be held the year after (1988) in which multiple candidates, including Mr Barthson, could compete.¹⁷ In these elections on 26 March 1988 Mr Barthson was re-elected DUTU president. On that occasion, Mrs Massa did not even stand for office. The leaders of DUAW, who had continued to support Mr Barthson during the conflict, had made it clear to her that 'we are not going to submit ourselves to the whims and caprices of a small union with its self-centred leaders and friends'.¹⁸

At the same time, there were also struggles for power within the DUAW. Ndu Estate workers once dominated leadership positions within the DUAW, but they were defeated in the 1987 elections. Mr George Majam, an officer in the Nkambe Area Cooperative Union Ltd (NACU) at Mbiyeh, managed to win the presidency. There were

two reasons for Mr Majam's victory. First, he was a member of the royal family at Ndu and therefore received the votes of the electorate that was close to the chief of Ndu. Second, his main competitor, Mr Johnson Tanto Massa, the former DUAW president, had lost all support among the Ndu workers in 1987 after he, together with Mr Vewessee of the FAWU, had agreed with the CDC management upon an increase in task work from 26 kg to 32 kg of green leaves for the sake of economic recovery.

Ndu Estate workers soon became disappointed in the new leader. Mr Majam was accused of 'drinking tea' with the management and of having 'sold out' the workers during the economic crisis (see below). This was also one of the main causes of his strained relationship with Mr Barthson, the DUTU president. Obviously, disunity among the union leadership has contributed to union decline during the economic crisis.

Trade union and collective action of male pluckers, 1958-1991

The history of trade union and collective action on the Ndu Estate may be divided into two broad periods:

First, the period of 'free but responsible unionism', 1958-1972. This was a period of growing reliance of rank-and-file workers on the union leadership for the representation of their interests. Their confidence in the union leadership is evidenced by the almost complete absence of any independent collective action during this period.

Second, the period of 'state-controlled unionism', 1972-1991. This was a period of growing contradictions between rank and file and union leadership. Loss of confidence in the union leadership is manifest in the increase of independent collective action. This period may be subdivided into:

- (a) *the period of Indian control over the estate* (1972-1977). This was a period of collapse in financial viability and managerial control on the estate, leading to unprecedented workers' militancy: workers pressed foreign management into the defensive and even challenged its authority. The high degree of workers' militancy during this period is

probably unique in the history of state-controlled unionism in Cameroon. During this period one may observe the emergence of the first conflicts between the rank and file and union leadership/Staff Representatives.

- (b) *the period of CDC control over the estate* (1977-1991). This was a period of reassertion of managerial control on the estate and increasing union atrophy. During this period the contradictions between the rank and file and union leadership/Staff Representatives came more and more into the open, but the economic crisis was setting limits to the workers' independent collective action.

Trade union and collective action during the period of 'free but responsible unionism', 1958-1972

During the first years of its existence the union exhibited great restraint and 'refused to be provoked by the diabolical actions of the management',¹⁹ which often maltreated and exploited the workers and declined to recognise the union. On 18 June 1962, however, the union's General Secretary, Mr Barthson, wrote to the estate manager that the union was not going to tolerate this situation any longer and wished to declare a trade dispute:

You will bear us witness that we have done our utmost to avoid any conflicts with you; we have done our utmost to inject good relationship between you and us which has been so woefully lacking, but since you do not appreciate our good intentions and the goodwill on our part as one designed to maximise productivity and promote happy industrial relations; and since you have remained hard-hearted and are determined to treat workers as beasts, we are resolved to take extreme measures within the ambit of our recognised rights to achieve our objectives.

Certainly, where workers work under poor and appalling conditions, such as those on the Ndu Estate; where workers are denied the right of democratic participation of the control of their working lives; where workers are not given even spoon-fed amenities and work not only on wages at starvation level, but can be beaten and kicked by their employer, such as is the practice on the Ndu Estate;

where workers are treated as automatons and are arbitrary dismissed at any time without the right to defence or fair trial, the answer and only answer to these is a LABOUR DISPUTE.²⁰

Subsequently, he presented the estate manager with a long list of demands. These included the introduction of a system of grading and rewarding the various categories of workers, the implementation of disciplinary measures other than arbitrary dismissals, the regulation of working in rain, the specification of sick leave, the construction of labour camps, the provision of protective clothing, such as overalls and raincoats, and a tools allowance, the creation of a personnel department, the payment of arrears and higher wages, the reduction in weeding task, a change in working hours, the setting up of a scheme for training and promotion, and the improvement of incentive bonus schemes.²¹

When the estate manager refused to discuss the demands, Mr Barthson called the workers out on strike the next day. As we have indicated, this strike was of great significance in trade union development on the estate. It convinced many workers of the importance of organisation in defence of their interests. It also enhanced their confidence in the union's General Secretary. He became a hero practically overnight.

There were violent clashes between the strikers and strike-breakers and between strikers and police. Twenty-three workers were arrested and imprisoned at Nkambe. The strikers then assembled at the Ndu market, armed with sticks, cutlasses and spears and singing battle chants. They threatened to march to Nkambe to free their colleagues. Only the union's General Secretary managed to calm them down.

The chief of Ndu attempted to intervene in the strike on 22 June 1962. He called upon the General Secretary to start negotiations with the estate manager at his palace. The General Secretary turned down his request. He told the chief that if the estate manager wanted to start negotiations, he should approach the union directly.²²

Government officials and police then pressured the management and union leadership into reaching an agreement. During a short meeting between both parties on 23 June 1962, the management promised to discuss all the grievances if the strike was called off.

The union's General Secretary finally agreed to do so for the duration of negotiations, but he warned the management that the strike would be resumed should they fail.

When the negotiations began on 27 June 1962, the union's General Secretary did nothing besides threaten the management. The estate manager then declined to proceed with the negotiations. He made plain to the General Secretary that he would not discuss any issue 'so long you insist on using threats of violence against senior members of the estate'.²³

As the estate manager persisted in his refusal to resume talks, the union's General Secretary again called out the workers on strike on 2 July 1962. The strike lasted until 20 July 1962, when a settlement was reached in a meeting with the Senior Labour Officer, who acted as a conciliator. The management approved some of the issues raised by the union, such as the grading and remuneration of artisans, the specification of sick leave, and the provision of protective clothing and a tools allowance, but rejected others, in particular the construction of labour camps, the creation of a personnel department, and an increase in wages.

After the settlement of this important strike, the union continued to fight for further improvement in the living and working conditions of its members. It focused on the most common demands of the workers, such as an increase in wages and salaries, the provision of transport, housing and other social welfare services, and the codification of conditions of service. While the union leadership was generally quite moderate in its attitudes and demands, it was often forced to declare collective trade disputes and threaten strike action before the management was even willing to discuss such issues.²⁴

In November 1964 the union's General Secretary drew up a 38-point *Memorandum on the Conditions of Service for Workers* on the estate. In a letter to the estate manager, he explained the aim of the Memorandum:

The aim is to have a Code of Conditions of Service for your employees which is awfully lacking, and not your usual 'verbal contracts' which are abrogated by you any time unilaterally to the detriment of any employee concerned. You have been known over

the years to be the employer who gives a condition in the morning and withdraws it in the afternoon. We want a code, in fact, a workers' 'Bible' of conditions of service.²⁵

The management, however, continued to postpone any discussions on this Memorandum. On 5 May 1966, the union declared a trade dispute on this and other issues.²⁶ In a long and heated correspondence, the union's General Secretary alleged that the management appeared not to be interested in its employees' conditions of service, as it refused to hold a Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) meeting on the issue. He finally called a strike on the issue in October 1966. Because of the persistent industrial unrest on the estate, the EAC Head Office decided to terminate the contract of the first estate manager, Mr J.M.H. Barrable, in 1967.

Immediately upon taking office, the new manager, Mr R.J. Murray, was presented with a list of demands by the union, including the establishment of a company store, a workers' club, a football pitch, a maternity ward, and a provident fund scheme. He asked the union to exercise patience as the estate was already burdened with the payment of certain schemes recently introduced by the government, such as family allowances.

The appointment of the new estate manager resulted in some improvement in management-union relations, which was manifest in the more or less regular joint consultations and negotiations. In 1969, however, a severe conflict developed between management and workers. In this conflict the workers directly challenged the managerial prerogative of dismissing employees. The immediate cause of this conflict was a serious violation of the company's rules by a certain headman called Mr Simon Ndzi. This headman was hated by the workers because of his extremely authoritarian and overzealous behaviour. He habitually marked 'unproductive' workers absent, thus causing them to lose their daily wage. Not surprisingly, the workers wanted revenge. On 30 October 1969 they heard that Mr Ndzi had sent a worker to the market during working hours to do his shopping. The Staff Representatives immediately demanded Mr Ndzi's dismissal. They reminded the management that it had dismissed workers for the same breach of the rules, sometimes on Mr Ndzi's recommendation.

The management, however, considered the matter rather trivial and issued a warning to Mr Ndzi. The workers then walked out on strike and threatened not to resume work until Mr Ndzi had been dismissed. Their strike was fully supported by the union. Given this situation, the estate manager asked Mr Ndzi to withdraw from work while he sought advice from the Inspector of Labour for West Cameroon.

In reply to the estate manager's letter, the Inspector of Labour advised that since Mr Ndzi had already been served a warning for misconduct it would be unreasonable to dismiss him for the same act, regardless of pressure from the workers. The estate manager convened a meeting with the Staff Representatives on 31 March 1970 to inform them of the Inspector of Labour's advice. The Staff Representatives then agreed to Mr Ndzi's reinstatement, albeit in a different capacity, with effect from 6 April 1970.

The workers did not accept this agreement, however, and forced the Staff Representatives to revoke it. On 4 April 1970 the estate manager reproached the Staff Representatives for their unreliability and warned them against the consequences of any strike action on the estate.

On 6 April 1970 Mr Ndzi came to work on the estate. As soon as he started work, the workers staged a work stoppage of four hours until he had left the estate. The management then asked the Labour Inspectorate to intervene. In a meeting with the Staff Representatives on 11 April 1970, the Divisional Inspector of Labour cautioned them to use corrective measures when a fellow worker was doing something wrong, rather than to trying to create a precedent which, if followed rigidly, would eventually affect all and sundry. Moreover, they should be firm and stick to whatever decision they had taken and educate the workers on the issue. After long deliberations, it was resolved that Mr Ndzi (i) be offered a different job on the estate, such as the post of day watchman, where he would not be in command of workers, and (ii) be requested to render a formal apology to the workers for his behaviour.

The workers rejected these decisions outright. To regain control over them, the management was left with no other choice than to dismiss Mr Ndzi.²⁷

The same year (1970) the Inspector of Labour for West Cameroon visited the Ndu Estate after being informed that the workers were restive and were planning strike action. In a meeting with management, union leadership and Staff Representatives, a number of long-standing workers' grievances were discussed, including the following:

- *salaries and wages.* The union demanded a 50% increase in view of rising costs of living at Ndu. The management initially declined to grant any increase, explaining that it wanted to invest all available funds in expanding the estate. In the end, it agreed upon a 3-5% increase for all categories of workers.
- *hours of work and task.* The plucking task at the time was 15 kg of green leaves. The management deemed this equal to seven hours' work and remunerated it as such. The union stressed that workers on the southwestern plantations received eight hours' wage after completing their task, and therefore demanded similar remuneration on the Ndu Estate. The management refused to give in unless the task was raised. The parties finally agreed upon an eight hours' remuneration, in return for an increase in task work from 15 kg to 17 kg (see Table 7.5).
- *a code of conditions of service.* The union complained that its *Memorandum on the Conditions of Service for the Workers* submitted in 1964 (see above) had never been responded to by either the management or the Labour Inspectorate. The Inspector of Labour maintained that this item should be struck off the agenda, as National Collective Agreements were presently being drawn up by the tripartite partners and were to serve as future codes of conditions of service.
- *Cameroonisation.* The union stated that since the creation of the Ndu Estate, no Cameroonian had ever been promoted to a post of responsibility. The Inspector of Labour advised the management to upgrade qualified Cameroonians to posts of responsibility.²⁸ When the management failed to heed this advice, the issue of Cameroonisation continued to be a prime source of conflict between union and management, especially in the period of Indian control (see Chapter 8).

Trade union and collective action during the period of 'state-controlled unionism', 1972-1991

(a) The period of Indian control, 1972-1977

The year 1972 was the starting point of both Indian control and state-controlled unionism on the estate. Contrary to expectations, however, there was an increase in workers' militancy during the period of Indian control (1972-1977). A number of factors may account for this situation:

First of all, there was the problem of managerial control. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the rapid turnover of British estate managers, together with the managing agent's pursuit of private interests, paralysed the administration of the estate and created unrest among the workers.

Second, there was a growing financial crisis on the estate (see Table 9.2). Costs of production had risen so much that the tea had to be sold below cost price in the world market, causing substantial losses. The company then tried to withdraw from the world market, but experienced great difficulties in selling the tea locally because of lack of demand. From 1975 onwards, there were continuous stocks of 350-400 tonnes of unsold tea. In 1976 the banks stopped providing overdraft facilities to the ailing company. As a consequence, the estate management was unable to pay wages and wage arrears regularly, fuelling workers' unrest.

Thirdly, there was a general belief among the workers that the Indians were only interested in cheating the nation and exploiting labour. The workers had discovered that after taking over the estate the Indians had secretly begun repatriating the profits made by the estate since 1969, with the assistance of the BICIC bank in Douala. In October 1976 it was estimated that the repatriated profits amounted to over FCFA 100 million. As a result, the estate was left with no working capital during the 1975-1976 crisis.²⁹ Moreover, after his appointment in October 1975, the Indian estate manager took a series of unprecedented measures to increase labour productivity (see below). The workers therefore hated the Indian management more than they had the British.

Although trade unionism was strongly weakened after its reorganisation in 1972, the union leadership and, above all, the Staff Representatives still attempted to defend the workers' interests as much as possible. Nonetheless, there is evidence that some conflicts did emerge between workers and the moderate union leadership/ Staff Representatives during the period of Indian control.

Table 9.2 *Estates and Agency Company Ltd: Cash flow statement, 26 December 1975-30 June 1976*

INCOMES	FCFA
Tea Stocks	64,250,000
Estimated Output	155,750,000
Sundry Debtors	14,000,000
Bank Overdrafts	50,000,000
Cash/Bank Balances	1,380,000
TOTAL INCOMES	285,380,000
OUTGOINGS	
Estate Salaries	82,000,000
Estate Fuel Requirements	118,000,000
Estate Liabilities	50,000,000
Douala Office Expenses	5,000,000
Sundry Creditors	43,683,000
Estimated Com mitments January-June 1976	15,000,000
Bank Interest and Commission	8,800,000
Bank Commitments	79,880,000
TOTAL OUTGOINGS	302,363,000
NET DEFICIT	16,983,000

Source: File MTLS/DILSI/NK/17, Ndu Tea Estate – General Correspondence.

In the period 1972-1974 the union leadership and Staff Representatives raised a number of long-standing grievances which had never been satisfactorily settled, including completion of the hospital project, expansion of the estate, Cameroonisation of

managerial staff, introduction of a training scheme and a housing scheme, provision of rent allowances and transport facilities, construction of a workers' club, and review and codification of conditions of service.³⁰ When Mr V.K. Reddy, the EAC Director responsible for the Ndu Estate visited the estate in February 1974, he bluntly declared that the estate could not meet such demands in view of its rising production costs and marketing problems:

Your suggestions contained in the memo could only be feasibly implemented at the expense of closing the estate for lack of operational funds. Frequent references to meetings and tentative programmes dating back to 1969 etc. have been made. Perhaps you may consider that the buoyant conditions then existing have been eroded continuously over the years.

The days of haphazard appointments, categorisation, capital investment both for the operational and social programmes must now be a thing of the past. In these very difficult times it is the continued security of operation that should be uppermost in our minds, not emphasis on the benefits to a few at the expense of the many.³¹

The workers were shocked by his reply and the union declared a collective trade dispute on 23 March 1974. The Provincial Inspector of Labour eventually intervened in this dispute and organised a conciliatory meeting on 11-12 May 1974. On that occasion, all the grievances presented were discussed at great length. The management then reiterated its promise to implement most of the workers' demands. However, it again failed to keep its promises. For example, during his visit to the estate in November 1974, the company's chairman informed the workers that the company was to hand over the hospital project to the government. The workers, infuriated, told the chairman that if the company intended to do that, it had better hand over the whole estate to the government.³²

Mounting workers' discontent came to an explosion during the company's handling of the issue of categorisation of the estate's labour force and the payment of categorisation arrears. A Joint Classification Board, under leadership of the Inspector of Labour for West Cameroon, Mr E.K. Lottin, sat on 31 January 1972 to

classify the workers of the Ndu Estate. Although the Board's report should have been published within eight days, the workers did not get hold of it until 15 November 1972 when the Staff Representatives discovered that six copies of the report were locked up in the estate manager's office. The estate manager claimed that the Divisional Inspector of Labour, Mr J.F.G. Fomban, had forwarded them to him in September 1972, but had prohibited him from distributing them among the workers. It is noteworthy here that Mr Fomban had previously been accused by estate workers of constant disregard of workers' interests and of siding with the white management in labour disputes.

After inspection of the report, many workers protested against the categories assigned them by the Board. The Minister of Labour then appointed another Joint Classification Board to look into the appeals. The Board was to sit in August 1974, but its meeting had to be postponed because the company's managing agent, Mr Njoh Litumbe, had not nominated a management representative on the Board as required by law. Not until 27 January 1975 could the Board start work, and it announced its decision on 1 February. The estate manager thereupon calculated arrears of about FCFA 8 million (later this proved a miscalculation, the real amount being FCFA 23,198,523). He subsequently sought permission from Mr Litumbe to pay both the arrears and the categorised salaries and wages. On 15 February 1975, Mr Litumbe replied that the company was unable to pay the arrears and had appealed to the Minister of Labour against the Board's decision.

The workers had exercised patience during the period of classification and reclassification, but they could no longer be controlled by the Staff Representatives after Mr Litumbe's reply. The Staff Representatives held several meetings with management on the issue, but no solution could be found. The workers threatened to go on strike if the Board's decision was not implemented before 30 April 1975.³³

Early May 1975, Mr Fomban, who had meanwhile been appointed Provincial Inspector of Labour for the North West Province, rushed to the estate to calm the workers down. He advised them to show restraint, as the Minister of Labour was still considering the appeal lodged by the company against the Board's decision. The workers finally agreed to abide by the law and postpone their strike action.

The workers waited in vain until November 1975. They then decided to strike on 15 November 1975. One day before the strike, however, the Provincial Inspector of Labour, Mr Fomban, received the Minister's final decision that the report of the Joint Classification Board be respected and rejecting the company's appeal. The newly appointed Indian estate manager, Mr K.V.S. Krishna, subsequently agreed with union officials and Staff Representatives on 16 November that the November wages would be paid according to the categorised rates. On 28 November, however, he received a message from the Head Office ordering him to pay the November wages at the old rates. He discussed the matter with the company's lawyer, Mr L.K. Sendze, who advised him that the company had no choice but to pay the workers in accordance with the Minister's decision. Subsequently, the estate manager went to the Douala office and made it plain to Mr Litumbe that non-payment of the categorised wages would inevitably result in strike action. Mr Litumbe nevertheless directed him to comply with the Head Office's order. Upon his arrival at the estate on 6 December, he put up a notice informing the workers that their November wages would be paid at the old rates.

The same day estate workers informed him that they would not accept their November wages at the old rates and were set to go on strike on 8 December.

On the day of strike, 8 December 1975, a meeting was organised by the Provincial Inspector of Labour attended by the union executive, Staff Representatives, and management. During this meeting a telex message was received from the company chairman. He instructed the estate manager to pay the difference between the old and new rates for November 1975, totalling FCFA 280,970, into a special account in the bank or with the workers' solicitors, pending the outcome of a meeting of the EAC Board of Directors with the Minister of Labour between 15 and 20 December 1975. It was also agreed that a five-man workers' delegation would meet the chairman at Douala to discuss all the grievances.

In the afternoon practically all the workers had assembled on the premises of the estate manager's office. Mr Peter Nunyi, a Staff Representative and union executive member, addressed them and appealed to them to accept their November wages at the old rates pending the arrival of the company chairman from London.

The workers, however, rejected his appeal outright and insisted on being paid the new rates as agreed on 16 November. They alleged that Messrs Njoh Litumbe and Ben Alhijah were responsible for the chairman's refusal to implement the Minister's decision and demanded their dismissal. They stated categorically that they would not resume work until they had been paid according to the new rates. They shouted down the Provincial Inspector of Labour when he tried to point out the costs of strike action. They told him that they could not care less; they only wanted their November wages at the new rates as previously agreed.

During the turmoil a telex message was received from Douala office informing the estate manager of the chairman's final approval of payment at the new rates. When the news was announced to the workers, they all 'went mad with joy and applauded for a long time'.³⁴

The following day, 9 December 1975, the Minister of Labour instructed the Provincial Inspector of Labour to examine with the Staff Representatives and the estate manager the method of paying the categorisation arrears. In view of the precarious financial position of the estate, it was decided that the arrears would be paid in twenty-four installments (months), starting in March 1976.

After the conclusion of this agreement, there was no improvement in industrial relations on the estate. Instead the atmosphere got tenser. This was because the estate manager, anxious to increase labour productivity, started introducing new changes in the labour process without consulting the Staff Representatives.³⁵

- the weighing of tea baskets was to be brought back from thrice to twice a day. Tea pluckers opposed this instruction for two reasons: (i) it meant carrying the heavy baskets for longer periods, and (ii) it resulted in a reduction of weight of the green leaves plucked due to loss of moisture.
- working hours were to be raised from 45 to 48 hours a week. This actually involved an extension of Saturday work from five hours to eight hours. Moreover, overtime was no longer allowed except as ordered by the management.

Workers began organising in the various sections of the estate without the knowledge of the Staff Representatives. Apparently, they had lost confidence in the team of Staff Representatives, after

some team members had failed to report on their recent meeting with the company chairman at Douala. The workers submitted a series of petitions to the management and threatened to go on strike on 15 January 1976 if the proposed changes in the labour process had not been withdrawn by then and the categorisation arrears paid.

In their petitions the workers announced they did not intend to carry out the new work instructions, thereby directly challenging management authority over the labour process. One petition read as follows:

We the workers of this Division are very sorry to see how Ndu Estate is going backward. We have worked on the estate for more than 20 years but we have never been treated as at the moment.

Have you seen that the managers who worked here before were fools? Does it mean according to you that we were not working for all these years? You were sent here to work with people who have been working and not with people who have just begun to work.

For only two months you have been here your notices of instructions are more than thirty. Which one will we follow?

We will weigh our tea three times as in the past and not two times as you have said now. We don't want you to confuse us.

We will not work for 8 hours on Saturdays as you say. Have you asked in the whole of Cameroon and you were told that even one firm up to government departments work on Saturdays for 8 hours? Or do you want to make a new law on this estate? We have no camps and live several miles away. On Saturdays we go home to see our families and relatives and also to get food and to attend to other family matters and cannot work for 8 hours on Saturdays. We have never worked for 8 hours on Saturdays since this estate started.

We want our arrears to be paid without fail on the 15th of January 1976 and not in installments as you are saying. We have struggled for five years to get our correct category and you want to add 5 years to make 10 years. This has never happened and we don't want you to treat us as slaves because Cameroon is independent.

You are very happy that you have seen fools in Cameroon on Ndu Estate. It is not good that when a man starts to dance and the drum is stopped, he should continue to dance without the drum beats. If you want us to dance together we will see who is going to get tired. We are not from India and we don't want Indian laws in this country. If you want laws, follow the laws of our country. A word to the wise is enough.³⁶

The Indian estate manager and his two Indian assistants looked upon these petitions as clear expressions of workers' determination to topple the estate administration. They tendered their resignations to the company chairman on the grounds that they lacked the necessary support and co-operation from the workers in the crisis. The chairman, however, did not accept their resignation.

On 14 January 1976, the newly appointed Divisional Inspector of Labour for the Donga-Mantung Division, Mrs A.Tantoh, was informed by the estate manager that field workers had stopped working at noon. She proceeded to the estate the next day. At her arrival, she heard that the workers had already left the fields at 10 a.m. She decided to organise a meeting of all the parties concerned. At this meeting the estate manager promised to restore the practice of weighing three times a day. In return, the workers discontinued their strike action. They nevertheless insisted that Saturday work should not exceed five hours and that the arrears should be paid as soon as possible.³⁷

On 16 February 1976, Mr V.K. Reddy, the EAC Director responsible for the Ndu Tea Estate, informed the estate staff that the company wanted to close down the estate because of its deteriorating financial position. Staff Representatives and union leadership were shocked by this 'disturbing news'. On 25 February 1976, the Staff Representatives and DUAW Executive resolved that the government should take over the estate, leaving the management to the CDC.³⁸ In a memorandum to the Governor of the North West Province on 2 March 1976, they again called upon the government to save the estate since it 'has the reputation of producing the best tea in the world market and, moreover, is the only agro-industrial establishment in the North West Province'.³⁹

The estate manager's announcement at the end of March 1976 that he was unable to pay the wages and the first installment of the categorisation arrears prompted an almost complete collapse of managerial control over the workers. On 19 April 1976, the Vice-President of DUTU, Mr I.N. Ngala, threatened the estate manager that if the workers had not received their March wages and their accrued arrears by 22 April 1976, the union would have no other choice but to commence industrial action without further notice.⁴⁰ The Indian managers were extremely desperate as illustrated by their telex message to the Head Office in London on 21 April 1976:

We feel that the company finances are extremely bad as by evidence collected so far. The Staff Representatives and Mr Ngala (vice-president DUTU) feel otherwise. The present situation on the estate is extremely dangerous and could cause a strike and anything else could happen and we feel it impossible for us to do anything. There is no sign of any wages/payment for the company. We are not in any way responsible for this situation of crippling financial condition. We feel we are wasting our time when we have better work to do elsewhere. Please be good enough to give us our terminal benefits and send us home to India in view of this grave situation you have put us in for no fault of ours. We will have no other choice but to hold you responsible for us.⁴¹

The union's deadline of 22 April 1976 arrived without the workers having been paid. The workers went on strike. The party president in the Wimbun area pleaded with the Staff Representatives to wait and see what the company would do about payment and ask the workers to resume work for the meantime. After long deliberations, the Staff Representatives finally agreed.

The workers, however, disapproved of the Staff Representatives' consent. The next day, 23 April, they started a 'go-slow' and simply ignored the Provincial Inspector of Labour's admonishments to discontinue their action. On 28 April, the estate manager issued a circular letter which reproduced a telex message from the company chairman ordering a lockout of workers:

The chairman says the workers should be sympathetic with management in the present financial situation. If go-slow tactics still continue, the manager should stop all works and ask the workers to go home and wait till matters improve. Under these circumstances, I wish to point out that 29 April will be the last day of plucking, followed by weeding on 30 April. From 1st May 1976 until further notice workers will not be offered work, except essential services.⁴²

On 4 May, the Governor of the North West Province decided to intervene in the explosive situation on the estate. In his address to the workers, he strongly condemned their militancy in the crisis facing the estate:

In the face of this crisis you are required to adopt a proper attitude until things get normalised. You should think of your long-term interests. Your actions, including demand of payment of categorisation arrears in financial crisis, fringe benefits, and go-slow strike means forcing the estate to close and this is deemed by government as a sabotage. You should be patriotic, have a co-operative spirit and have faith in the representatives of government. What I expect is the development of a proper understanding between workers and management. From the reports I have received it seems that you rather want to dictate to management.⁴³

He asked the workers to resume work immediately and to pluck more than the daily task of 17 kg, while he would take care of their problems. The vice-president of DUTU, Mr I.N. Ngala, and the Staff Representatives promised him that the workers would pluck at least 40 kg a day. After the departure of the Governor, however, a number of workers proceeded with their go-slow action and even threatened anybody who refused to participate in their action.

No action was ever taken by the Governor to solve the workers' problems. Their problems became aggravated when the management proved incapable of paying their monthly wages. They lost patience and pressured the union leadership and Staff Representatives to take action. On 13 September the DUAW Executive and the Staff Representatives informed the Governor of their intention to call out a strike:

We have the honour to bring to your humble attention the hopeless situation of Ndu Tea Estate workers resulting from non-payment of their legal salaries for about 4 months now as well as the arrears of categorisation. You promised to intervene on 4 May 1976 if given time by the workers. The teas which the company was complaining as being unsold produce in Douala have all been sold; yet, the workers cannot be paid. We wish to state here categorically that if by 30 September 1976 our monies are not paid, we will be left with no alternative than to resort to industrial action.⁴⁴

On 1 October 1976 a strike commenced which would be the largest and undoubtedly the most significant in the estate's history. It lasted no less than 49 days. Ndu workers could hold out because they could survive on their food farms and other activities in the local community. The strike eventually led to the dramatic withdrawal of EAC from the estate. At a mass meeting on 18 November, the Governor of the North West Province announced to the workers that the government had decided to buy the estate at a price of FCFA 400 million and to hand it over to the CDC from 1 January 1977. The workers were happy with the decision taken by the government. They called off the strike and resumed work on 19 November. One of the most important clauses in the Heads of Agreement signed between the EAC and the Cameroonian government was Clause 5, which stipulated that

the estate is being sold on a going concern basis and accordingly the employment contracts of all the workers are deemed to be continuous and unbroken. The Vendor hereby agrees to indemnify the Purchaser for any claim arising out of workers' service with the Vendor up to the date of take-over.⁴⁵

This clause assured the workers that the CDC would employ them and pay all the wages and arrears due them.

(b) The period of CDC control, 1977-1991

On 1 January 1977, the CDC took over the management of the estate from the EAC. This was the first time that the CDC had extended its activities into the North West Province. Mr E.A. Eloundou, who had been managing the Tole Estate for five years, was appointed manager of the Ndu Estate. He was the first Cameroonian to occupy this post.

The CDC management immediately tried to reassert control over the workers, which had been seriously undermined during the late EAC period. It hoped to achieve this in two ways. First, it promised to uphold all contractual rights the workers had enjoyed during the EAC period. And second, it was determined to implement on the Ndu Estate the disciplinary measures that prevailed on other CDC estates. This is evident from the CDC General Manager's speech during the handing-over ceremony:

CDC has taken over this estate with all its personnel. Your contractual rights under the management of Estates and Agency Company Ltd will be protected, and paid as they fall due. Arrears of pay as well as accrued leave will be calculated and notified to each worker and eventually these rights will be paid or leave granted as the case may be. Your conditions of service are continued and you are now part of the CDC personnel. CDC has over 15,000 employees in the South West Province. In order to employ and utilise with efficiency such large labour force, orderly conduct by workers without exception is indispensable. Hence the great importance that we attach to discipline. CDC does not countenance indiscipline and I would like to receive early reports that you are as disciplined as the rest of CDC workers.⁴⁶

After he had taken office, Mr Eloundou started to examine the contractual rights that the workers had enjoyed during the EAC period. During the Inaugural Meeting of the Estate Consultative Committee (ECC) on 8 March 1977, he asked the Staff Representatives whether the Indian management had withdrawn any established rights from the workers during the crisis. The Staff Representatives then mentioned certain bonuses and gratuities (96 hours) for each year of

service. They also claimed entitlement to the wages lost during the 49 days' strike in 1976 (see below) and accrued overtime for December 1976.⁴⁷ They referred to the existence of certain credit facilities during the EAC period which enabled workers to buy building materials, kerosene, palm oil, tea, and other items. And finally, they insisted that the CDC should fulfill some promises made by the EAC management, in particular the purchase of sufficient drugs for the health centre, the conversion of the health centre into a hospital, and the provision of transport facilities to workers.⁴⁸ The estate manager assured them that the CDC Head Office would investigate their claims and pay the accrued rights.

Apparently, some workers had no faith in the estate manager's assurance. On 15 April 1977 a group of eight workers sent a letter to the estate manager informing him that they were going on strike until they were paid their accrued rights and benefits. Without consulting the union executive and Staff Representatives, the estate manager handed over the letter to the police. Some of the workers who had signed the letter were arrested. This aggravated the situation and the workers went on a solidarity strike on 18 April. In a meeting in the manager's office, attended by management representatives, the Divisional Inspector of Labour, the Vice-President of DUTU and the Staff Representatives, the strike was declared illegal and an immediate return to work was demanded because the management was already handling the issue. The majority of the workers, who had rallied outside the manager's office, ignored all pleas to call off the strike and prevented anybody who was willing to resume work from doing so. Two of the strikebreakers were severely beaten up and had to be taken to hospital for treatment. To avert further violence, the estate manager ordered the workers to go home and report for work on 20 April. Any worker not turning up for work that day would be considered to have broken his employment contract.⁴⁹

On 20 April most workers returned to work. The organisers of the strike were called to account for their action. They explained that they had been annoyed at the continual postponement of payment of their accrued rights. By the time they realised that they had not followed the correct procedures for settlement of a labour dispute, they could no longer stop the workers from taking part in an 'illegal'

action. The management showed no leniency and dismissed them on the spot. Afterwards it also summarily dismissed the 79 workers who had not reported for duty that morning. Obviously, these harsh disciplinary measures were meant as a deterrent to the workers. It was clear that the CDC management was not going to tolerate any further 'unbridled' militant action on their part.

This experience did not discourage the workers from making some more dubious claims. In March the Staff Representatives had demanded that workers be paid for the 49 days they struck in 1976, as they had then followed all procedures for calling out a legal strike (see above). On this occasion, the estate manager told them he was in no position to judge whether that strike was legal and advised them to refer the matter to the Labour Inspectorate. On 12 May 1977, the Provincial Inspector of Labour ruled that the workers were not entitled to payment for the 49 days they were on strike, as the strike was illegal. The Staff Representatives and DUTU leadership were furious. They accused the Provincial Inspector of being responsible for the strike himself and threatened to take the matter to court. They alleged he had been bribed by the management to disregard the correct procedures for settlement of the protracted dispute on payment of categorised wages and accrued arrears, and that this had eventually led the workers to strike.⁵⁰ The case never came up for hearing, for the Provincial Inspector's decision on the illegality of the strike was upheld by the Minister of Labour on 26 June 1978. The CDC management then refused to pay the workers for the 49 strike days.

Despite the introduction of new disciplinary measures, the CDC management continued to experience difficulties in controlling the workers. A number of vehement conflicts occurred between the management and the workers.

One conflict developed right after the CDC takeover when the management changed the task and bonus system, without consulting the Staff Representatives. Since 1970 the plucking norm on the Ndu Estate had been 17 kg of green leaves and the incentive bonus FCFA 10 for every kilogramme plucked above the basic task (see Table 7.5). The CDC management decided to introduce on the Ndu Estate the same task and bonus system as existed on the Tole Estate (see Table 6.1). Consequently, the task on the Ndu Estate was raised

to 18 kg and the incentive bonus reduced to FCFA 7. On 21 June 1977, the Staff Representatives blamed the estate manager for this unilateral decision, which amounted to a deterioration in workers' conditions of service.⁵¹ On 25 May 1978, DUTU declared a collective trade dispute on the issue. The matter dragged on until 13 December 1979 when the Divisional Inspector of Labour instructed the management to restore the bonus to its original rate, as it constituted an acquired right, and to pay the accrued arrears. The management, however, kept postponing payment. Under constant pressure from the workers, the Staff Representatives issued an ultimatum to the estate manager on 27 December 1980 stating that they would call a strike if the accrued arrears were not included in the December wages.⁵² A timely visit of the Divisional Inspector of Labour to the estate on 30 December 1980 helped calm down the workers. The management was summoned once more to do everything possible to pay the arrears in due time. They were finally paid in February 1981.⁵³

Another conflict developed in 1977 about the inequality in remuneration between Ndu workers and other CDC workers. On 2 August 1977 the Staff Representatives complained to the Divisional Inspector of Labour that the CDC management had introduced the same conditions of service and disciplinary measures on the Ndu Estate as were in existence on other CDC estates, but refused to extend the '*zone unique*' policy to the Ndu Estate (see Chapter 7). As a result, workers on the Ndu Estate (which remained in the Third Zone of the Primary Sector) were more poorly remunerated than workers on other CDC estates (placed in the Second Zone of the Primary Sector). Ndu workers, of course, strongly resented this wage differential:

On the take-over of the estate by the CDC, we realised that there exists a policy of paying all CDC workers on one wage zone known as *Zone Unique*. We have been shocked by the fact that when our union demanded the application of the Zone Unique Policy, the answer was negative.

It should be noted that when the CDC took over the estate various tasks which were negotiated between management of the former

company, union and Labour Department were abolished, certain acquired rights and facilities were seized from us.

When we asked why all these were happening to us, we were told that whatever system Tole Tea Estate is following, we should also do so. We then obeyed all these for the fact that whatever facilities they are enjoying we will also enjoy some.

It now seems as if they will only want us to follow their work policy and when it comes to something which we will benefit from it, this will be refused. If this is how we should be treated, then we think that there is nothing like 'Social Justice'.

We would like people to know that Ndu Estate workers are a set of people who are prepared to work hard for a master if he shows a sign of social justice. When we receive a new master, we usually remove our caps and worship him. We can continue to make you gain for our life being. But if you make us put our hats back on our heads, then we are no longer prepared to remove them for you.⁵⁴

In reply, the Divisional Inspector of Labour explained to the Staff Representatives that the CDC management was not empowered to employ the '*zone unique*' policy to the Ndu Tea Estate. The Minister of Labour, however, could authorise a company to apply a single minimum wage to all its establishments situated in different wage zones. Ndu workers should therefore patiently await the Minister's decision. On 21 March 1978, the Staff Representatives complained to the CDC Administrative Personnel Controller that even workers who had been transferred by the corporation from the Ndu Estate to other CDC estates did not enjoy the benefits of the '*zone unique*' policy.⁵⁵

No further correspondence on the issue was forthcoming from the Ministry of Labour and the CDC Head Office. The workers then pressured the vice-president of DUTU, Mr I.N. Ngala, to declare a collective trade dispute on 19 May.⁵⁶ The Divisional Inspector of Labour, however, immediately warned the vice-president that he could not call a strike, as the matter was already under consideration. As we have seen, it was not until 1987 that the Minister of Labour

approved of the application of the '*zone unique*' policy to the Ndu Estate, in return for workers' acceptance of an increase in task work from 26 kg to 32 kg of green leaves.

Another conflict developed after the CDC takeover of the estate when the management began to transfer workers on a large scale. As the Ndu workers maintained close links with their local community, most of them, particularly the older ones, looked upon a transfer to other CDC estates as a severe punishment by the management. It directly threatened their family life and the investments they had made in the local community with the money earned on the estate. This is clear from the following case:

I object to the proposal by the CDC management to transfer me for the following reasons. I started working with the estate in April 1957 and have now risen to the rank of a Senior Field Overseer and have held this position since 1972. I am 47 years old and have a huge family - two wives and nine children; five children are in primary school, one in secondary school at Nso, two under school age and one above twenty-one. It would be inconvenient for me to be moving with this huge family, up and down the country. I have an old mother who is entirely dependent on me as I am the only son. I maintain a livestock farm of cattle at Ndu (about 50 heads) and this farm needs constant attention by me.⁵⁷

Ndu workers were often transferred to non-tea estates, where they soon got dismissed because they were unable to cope with the unfamiliar work. One well-known predicament of some workers who were transferred to coastal estates frightened their previous colleagues on the Ndu Estate:

- Mr A.S. Nfor transferred to Bota and terminated;
- Mr Cletus Kwiyup transferred to Tole and terminated;
- Mr Noah Ngarka transferred to Tombel where he died;
- Mr Emmanuel Ngwani collapsed on receiving a transfer note to proceed to Dschang and has since lost his job;
- Mr Manases Taji transferred to Tombel where he was beaten by workers and is now lame;
- Mr Zacheus Ngawyi transferred to Mukonje and terminated when he asked for his rights;

- Thirteen headmen transferred to various estates in the South West Province and after several send-off parties at Ndu, terminated and re-instated as new labour.⁵⁸

Little wonder, then, that Staff Representatives were wont to accuse the CDC of implementing a policy of 'transfer to eliminate'.

Among the transferred workers there were also a number of Staff Representatives and trade union officials. Staff Representatives were sometimes transferred without the management having sought prior authorisation from the Labour Inspector, as the Labour Code requires. It has been a persistent policy of the CDC management to transfer or dismiss militant union leaders and Staff Representatives in order to cripple the union (Konings 1993). On 16 August 1982, the DUAW Executive and Staff Representatives made the following complaint to the CDC General Manager:

Mr Joseph B. Sabgu has been transferred to Missellele Rubber instead of Tole Tea. There seems to be no doubt that the corporation is carrying out a systematic exercise, the intention of which is to amputate the strength of the union and persecute trade union leaders in this Division. CDC transfers are only directed at trade union leaders and Staff Representatives and the following are among those of the victims: Messrs E.N. Tamnjong, W.C. Felixson, and late S.K. Nduwa. This is creating serious industrial tension on the estate. We strongly wish to advise that the Trade Union has already declared a trade dispute and you know that the procedure for transferring a Staff Representative has not been fulfilled in this new transfer.⁵⁹

The union leaders and Staff Representatives usually sought the assistance of the Labour Inspectorate. This sometimes had the desired result. On 5 September 1981, for instance, the Divisional Inspector of Labour refused to authorise the transfer of Mr Samuel Nduwa, a long-time union leader and Staff Representative (see above), since the management had failed to provide convincing reasons for his transfer.

During the period 1981-1982 a vehement conflict erupted between management and a small group of senior workers on established rights. The estate manager suddenly suspended certain

benefits that the group had previously enjoyed, particularly the supplying of water, firewood and kerosene. The group lodged a complaint with the Divisional Inspector of Labour at Nkambe, but the latter's intervention was unsuccessful. On 12 April 1982, the president of DUTU, Mr I.N. Ngala, accused the estate manager of having violated the Collective Agreement's provisions on acquired benefits, and went on to declare a trade dispute. The Divisional Inspector of Labour eventually proposed that the Minister of Labour appoint a Joint Interpretation and Conciliation Committee to handle the dispute.⁶⁰ The Minister, however, once again delayed taking any decision. The issue has hence never been resolved satisfactorily.

Interestingly, soon after the estate manager started to employ permanent female workers, a dispute arose between the women and the managerial staff in the West section of the estate about pro-rata payments for 'uncompleted and unsatisfactory' work performance. On 20 August 1983, they protested in a very rowdy way against this treatment and then left the fields. Both management and Staff Representatives condemned this 'mob action', but they agreed that the women should be disciplined rather than dismissed for their 'illegal' strike action 'because of their ignorance of the Labour Code and Internal Regulations'.⁶¹

By the end of 1985 a more profound conflict had developed between the total estate labour force and a few Cameroonian managerial staff members. It arose from the fact that the Cameroonian assistant manager, Mr L.H. Abety, was plotting the overthrow of the British estate manager, Mr R.J. Murray (see Chapter 8). Abety and some of his collaborators among the managerial staff were systematically obstructing Mr Murray's production programme and this resulted in a considerable decline in output. As a result, Mr Murray had fallen ill and was granted sick leave by the CDC General Manager for treatment in Britain. On 31 December 1985 he handed over the administration of the estate to his assistant, Mr Abety. The workers were not happy with this transfer of power. Mr Abety was hated for his extreme authoritarianism, his rigidity, his severe sanctions for minor offences, and his constant pro-rata payments. Mr Murray, on the other hand, was held in high esteem. He knew how to deal with all categories of workers, and moreover he had become very popular among the local population after he initiated

a scheme of supplying water to the villages in the neighbourhood of the estate. Mr Abety had once tried to stop this scheme by complaining to the CDC General Manager that it was not a budget item. This had stirred up bad feelings among the workers and the local population. The union president, Mr I.N. Ngala, received a pile of letters from the workers in the course of 1985 threatening strike action if Mr Abety and his collaborators continued to obstruct Mr Murray's instructions.

Immediately after Mr Abety's takeover of the estate management on 31 December 1985, the workers became restive and began planning strike action. As the situation became critical, the union organised a meeting on 3 January 1986 attended by the chief of Ndu, Mr Murray, Mr Abety, and the Staff Representatives. During this meeting the union president and Staff Representatives blamed Mr Abety and his collaborators for the explosive situation on the estate. Mr Murray informed the meeting that he had decided to cancel his journey to Britain under pressure from the workers and that he had retaken full responsibility for the estate's administration, despite fierce opposition on the part of Mr Abety. It soon became clear that no settlement of the conflict could be arrived at during this meeting. The union president then proposed to request the CDC General Manager's intervention.⁶²

The next day the Divisional Inspector of Labour received word that the estate workers were announcing a strike on the issue. He went to the estate and arranged for a joint meeting with the management and the Staff Representatives on 6 January, with a view to averting the impending strike action. However, on 5 January Mr Murray committed suicide.

In the early morning of 6 January 1986 all the workers, their wives and children, and even sympathisers from neighbouring villages assembled in front of the estate office, sitting in silence. They declared a day of mourning for Mr Murray. They informed the Divisional Inspector of Labour that they were going on strike the following day if Mr Abety was still on the estate, since he was responsible (through some magical means) for Mr Murray's death. The Divisional Inspector was able to convince Mr Abety that he had better leave the estate immediately for his own safety. When the workers heard he was gone, they rejoiced and promised to resume

work on 8 January. After this incident, the CDC General Manager came to the estate where he had a meeting with the entire labour force. Another expatriate was appointed estate manager and the workers seemed quite satisfied with the situation.⁶³

In the economic crisis the contradictions between the rank and file and the union leaders/Staff Representatives came increasingly to the fore. On 3 July 1987, the DUAW president, Mr Johnson Tanto Massa, agreed with the CDC management upon an increase of task work from 26 kg to 32 kg of green leaves, in return for the application of the '*zone unique*' policy to the Ndu Estate. When he informed the Staff Representatives of this agreement on 8 July, they remarked that the application of the '*zone unique*' policy did not compensate the workers for the disproportionately high increase in task work. Nonetheless, they finally agreed to implement the new task for the time being on condition that the union would appeal to the CDC General Manager for a reduction in task.⁶⁴

The workers protested against this agreement in various ways. They refused to re-elect Mr Johnson Tanto Massa president during the DUAW executive elections shortly afterwards. In addition, they started a go-slow in November, resulting in all of them being paid pro-rata. The estate manager, accompanied by the DUAW president and two newly elected Staff Representatives, then went around the fields and addressed the pluckers. The pluckers finally agreed to raise output after the manager had promised to allow some of their representatives to visit the other CDC tea estates to investigate whether their colleagues on these estates were also carrying out a 32 kg task.⁶⁵

During a mass meeting on 16 September 1987 a team of management and union representatives commissioned by the CDC General Manager informed the workers that the corporation was incurring huge losses because of the deteriorating terms of trade. It therefore proposed a series of austerity measures to combat the economic crisis, including a compulsory savings scheme. The workers rejected these proposals outright.⁶⁶

In December 1989, the newly elected president of DUAW, Mr G.N. Majam, agreed in the CDC Head Office at Limbe-Bota to the introduction of a compulsory savings scheme and a drastic cut in workers' fringe benefits (see Chapters 3 and 7). On his return, he

informed the Staff Representatives of these decisions. They strongly disapproved and refused to communicate them to the workers. When Mr Majam himself tried to address the workers, he barely escaped being beaten up by the angry mob. Because of Majam's utter failure to obtain the workers' consent, the CDC General Manager himself, together with some union and management representatives, had to come to the estate to seek their co-operation. In a mass meeting, the visiting team stressed that, in view of the corporation's precarious financial position, non-acceptance of the drastic measures would inevitably lead to the closure of the estate.⁶⁷ This left the workers with no other choice but to comply.

From the beginning of the 1990s the management has persistently refused to consult the Staff Representatives. It kept telling them that increase in labour productivity was more important during the economic crisis than the representation of workers' interests. It wanted to do business only with the DUAW president, Mr Majam, who was generally believed to have been 'bought over' by the management. After his painful confrontations with the workers, Mr Majam tried to avoid direct contact with them and to control them through the Staff Representatives. He ordered Staff Representatives to discipline any worker who was not 'co-operative' and to report him/her to the management. He could still count on a few followers among the Staff Representatives, whom he allegedly encouraged to spy on their colleagues. This created a lot of friction within the team of Staff Representatives and between the team of Staff Representatives and the workers.⁶⁸ The workers no longer had confidence in their union leaders and Staff Representatives.

The workers went on strike on 4 January 1991 without informing the Staff Representatives and the union leadership. After the severe cuts in their income, they were angry that their family allowances had not been paid for 18 months and that they had not enjoyed Christmas advances as had their colleagues on other CDC estates.

On 5 January, the Divisional Inspector of Labour tried to settle the dispute. He organised a meeting with the workers, but they refused to attend. Only a few Staff Representatives and supervisory staff members turned up. On 7 January, Staff Representatives organised a new meeting attended by the Senior Divisional Officer (SDO), the Divisional Inspector of Labour, the chief of Ndu, and

the supervisory and managerial staff. Very few workers were in attendance. In his speech, the SDO chastised the workers for going on strike during the economic crisis:

Concerning the Ndu Tea Estate it should be considered by the workers as their property and milking cow from where they earned their living. In this wise, he cautioned the workers to treat the estate with care whatever circumstances notwithstanding. He questioned whether it was appropriate to burn the estate because of reclamations that were not worth the sum total of the returns obtained by the entire workers from it. ...

Making reference to the council union workers as well as the Mbiyeh Co-operative workers (who had been for up to 12 months without salaries) the Administration castigated the attempts of the workers to cripple the CDC, a corporation that provided for their salaries every month.

He urged the workers to return to work, as their grievances had already been transmitted to the appropriate quarters. The Staff Representatives stated that they could not guarantee a speedy resumption of work, for they did not enjoy the workers' confidence and therefore had no control over them. The chief of Ndu then promised the administration that he would order the workers to return to work the next day, 8 January. The workers indeed came to the estate on that day, but they left by 9 a.m. Only after payment of family allowances were paid on 9 January did they finally resume work.⁶⁹

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to demonstrate that Ndu male pluckers, like the Tole female pluckers, have developed a 'trade union consciousness'. Though the local chief and estate management initially tried to oppose development of trade unionism on the Ndu Estate, male pluckers gradually came to understand the importance of trade union organisation for defending their interests. While, like the Tole female pluckers, they have never competed for office, they do seem to have displayed a higher degree of participation in the

day-to-day affairs of the union than Tole female pluckers. This has enabled them to exercise a higher degree of control over the union's representation of their interests than the Tole female pluckers.

Like the latter, Ndu male pluckers have never supported the union unconditionally. When it became seriously weakened by its subordination to the state, they started to lose confidence in the leadership and Staff Representatives, and reverted more and more to independent collective action. Their degree of militancy during Indian control over the estate (1972-1977) is probably unprecedented in the history of state-controlled unionism in Cameroon. The economic crisis, however, left little room for collective action, and this undoubtedly resulted in an increase of male pluckers' informal actions.

Notes

1. See Letter of Senior Labour Officer to Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, General Secretary of NEWU, dated 30 September 1958, in File CUPIAW 1, Formation and Registration of NEWU.
2. Constitution of NEWU, in *ibid.*
3. See Letter of Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, General Secretary of CUPIAW, to the Delegate of Labour, Buea, dated 30 April 1971, in File MTLs/WCD/BU.95/S.6, Complaints - Ndu Tea Estate.
4. See Letter of Mr J.M.H. Barrable, Estate Manager, to General Secretary of NEWU, dated 21 October 1961, in File CUPIAW 3, Executive Committee.
5. Letter of Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, General Secretary of NEWU, to Estate Manager, Ndu Tea Estate, dated 8 October 1962, in File CUPIAW 7, Joint Consultative Committee Members' Meetings and Outcome.
6. See Letter of Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, General Secretary of NEWU, to Senior Labour Officer, Buea, dated 22 October 1962, in *ibid.*
7. See Letter of Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, General Secretary of NEWU, to Estate Manager, Ndu Tea Estate, dated 6 November 1962, in *ibid.*
8. See Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee of NEWU held in Mr Isiah's House on 10 August 1958, in File CUPIAW 1, Formation and Registration of NEWU.

9. See Minutes of General Meeting of the NEWU held at Ndu on 15 October 1961, in File DUAW D/M 10, Working Conditions, Claims, Wages and Wage Structure.
10. Statement of General Secretary of NEWU at the Inaugural Meeting of the Joint Consultative Committee on 6 April 1962, in File CUPIAW 7, Joint Consultative Committee.
11. Statement of the General Secretary of NEWU on 20 July 1962, in File MTPS/WCD/BU.99, CUPIAW.
12. See Letter of Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, General Secretary of NEWU, to Estate Manager, Ndu Tea Estate, dated 30 August 1963, in File CUPIAW 3, Executive Committee.
13. See Letter of General Secretary of CUPIAW to Registrar of Trade Unions, dated 17 July 1968, in File MTPS/WCD/BU.99, CUPIAW.
14. Letter of Mr E.Y.K. Barthson to All Field Supervisors, Ndu Tea Estate, dated 12 September 1972, in File CUPIAW 52, Cameroon Labour Congress, NUCW.
15. Resolutions taken in a Joint Meeting of the Staff Representatives and Executive Members held in the Ndu Estate Health Centre on 25 February 1976, in File CUPIAW 38, Staff Representative Elections and Other Matters.
16. Keynote Address by Mr I.N. Ngala, President of DUTU D/M on the Occasion of the Extraordinary Congress of the Trade Union Movement of Donga-Mantung on 6 March 1987, in File MTPS/DILSI/NK/5, Vol. I, Divisional Union of Trade Unions, Donga-Mantung.
17. See Letter of Mr A.B. Njerim, Administrative Secretary of DUTU, to Organising Secretary of CTUC, dated 26 December 1987, in *ibid.*; and Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee of the DUTU D/M summoned by the SDO, Nkambe, to resolve the disparities in the DUTU D/M, dated 12 October 1987, in *ibid.*
18. See Statement on the Issue of the Leadership in the Trade Union Movement in Donga-Mantung Division by DUAW Executive on 11 October 1987, in File DUTU D/M 2, Divisional Trade Union Bureau (Executive Meetings).
19. Letter of Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, General Secretary of NEWU, to Mr John Arbuthnot, MP, Chairman of EAC, London, dated 13 April 1962, in File NEWU 18/1, Trade Disputes.

20. Letter of Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, General Secretary of NEWU, to Mr J.M.H. Barrable, Ndu Estate Manager, dated 18 June 1962, in *ibid.*
21. See Circular by Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, General Secretary of NEWU, in the Matter of a Trade Dispute, dated 18 June 1962, in *ibid.* See also Memorandum of Agreement in the Trade Dispute between the Ndu Tea Estate and the Estate Workers' Union, in BNA, File Qe (1958) 1, Trade Disputes.
22. See Letter of Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, General Secretary of NEWU, to His Highness the Chief of Ndu, dated 22 June 1962, in *ibid.*
23. See Letter of Mr J.M.H. Barrable, Estate Manager, to General Secretary of NEWU, dated 28 June 1962, in *ibid.*
24. See for these trade disputes and strike threats, File BU.99 1b/30, Vol. II, CUPIAW.
25. See Letter of Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, General Secretary of CUPIAW, to the Manager, Ndu Tea Estate, dated 16 May 1966, in *ibid.* The memorandum can be found in File MTPS/WCD/BU.99, CUPIAW.
26. See Letter of General Secretary of CUPIAW to All Workers of Ndu Estate, dated 5 May 1966, in File BU.99 1b/30, Vol. II, CUPIAW.
27. See Report on Trade Dispute at Ndu Tea Estate Presented to the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Labour, Yaoundé, by the Delegate and Regional Inspector of Labour, West Cameroon, on 13 July 1970, in *ibid.*; and Minutes of Tripartite Meeting held in the Office of the Manager, Ndu Tea Estate, on 22 January 1970, in *ibid.*
28. Minutes of Tripartite Meeting held in the Office of the Manager, Ndu Tea Estate, on 22 January 1970, in *ibid.*
29. See Mémorandum sur les implications d'une éventuelle fermeture du complexe de thé de Ndu: Une analyse du problème et une suite de propositions, in File NEWU 18/1, Trade Disputes.
30. Memo on some aspects of conditions of service, promotions and upgrading of workers and certain aspects of social and economic development at the Ndu Tea Estate and the expansion of company activities on Ndu Tea Estate, presented to the Director of the Ndu Tea Estate, Mr V.K. Reddy, by DUAW D/M on 9 February 1974, in *ibid.*
31. Memo of Mr V.K. Reddy, Director of EAC, to Mr E.Y.K. Barthson, dated 27 February 1974, in *ibid.*

32. Memo of some aspects of grievances and frustration presented by the Ndu Tea Estate Staff Representatives to a Commission of Enquiry appointed to probe the affairs of the Ndu Tea Estate on 11 September 1975, in *ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*
34. Report on Intended Strike Action by the Workers of Ndu Tea Estate, in File MTPS/DILSI/NK/8, Ndu Tea Estate - Collective Trade Disputes.
35. See Minutes of the Junior Cameroonian Staff Meeting held at the Ndu Estate Health Centre on 8 January 1976, in *ibid.*
36. Petition of the Workers of Kugha Section, East Division, Ndu Estate, to Estate Manager, Ndu Tea Estate, dated 13 January 1976, in *ibid.*
37. See Report of the State of Unrest amongst the Workers of Ndu Tea Estate, by Mrs A.Tantoh, Divisional Inspector of Labour, Nkambe, dated 17 January 1976, in *ibid.*
38. Resolutions taken in a Joint Meeting of the Staff Representatives and DUAW Executive Members held in the Ndu Estate Health Centre on 25 February 1976, in File CUPIAW 38, Staff Representative Elections and Other Matters.
39. Abstract of a Memo Presented to the Government by the Staff Representatives and Executive Members of the NUCW, Donga-Mantung Division, on 2 March 1976, in File NEWU 18/1, Trade Disputes.
40. See Letter of Mr I.N. Ngala, Vice-President of DUTU D/M, to Estate Manager, Ndu Tea Estate, dated 19 April 1976, in *ibid.*
41. Telex Message from Ndu Estate Management to EAC Head Office, London, dated 21 April 1976, in File MTPS/DILSI/NK/8, Ndu Tea Estate - Collective Trade Disputes.
42. Circular no. 26 from Estate Manager to All Notice Boards, Ndu Tea Estate, dated 28 April 1976, in *ibid.*
43. Report on Address to Ndu Tea Estate Workers by the Governor, North West Province, dated 4 May 1976, in *ibid.*
44. See Letter of Staff Representatives and DUAW Executive to Governor, North West Province, dated 13 September 1976, in *ibid.*

45. Heads of Agreement between EAC Ltd (Vendor) and the Government of the United Republic of Cameroon (Purchaser) concerning the sale of the Ndu Tea Estate, signed at London on 19 November 1976, in File MTLN/DILSI/NK/17, Ndu Tea Estate - General Correspondence.
46. Speech by the General Manager of CDC on the occasion of the handing-over ceremony of Ndu Tea Estate on 1 January 1977, in File NEWU 18/1, Trade Disputes.
47. See Minutes of the Inaugural Consultative Meeting of the Ndu Tea Estate held at the Estate Manager's Office on 8 March 1977, in File DUTU D/M 15, Vol. II, Staff Representative Elections and Other Matters Connected Therewith.
48. See Welcome Address Presented by the Workers of the Ndu Tea Estate to the New CDC Management on 4 April 1977, in File MTLN/DILSI/NK/17, Ndu Tea Estate - General Correspondence.
49. Report of CDC Ndu Estate on Strike, 18-19 April 1977, by Mr G.N. Katu, Labour Controller, in File MTPN/DILSI/NK/8, Ndu Tea Estate - Collective Trade Disputes.
50. See Letter of Mr G.F. Layu, Barrister and Solicitor, to the Provincial Inspector of Labour, Bamenda, dated 7 July 1977, in File NEWU 18/1, Trade Disputes.
51. See Minutes of ECC Meeting held on 21 June 1977 in the Estate Manager's Office, in CDC Ndu Tea Estate, Minutes of ECC Meetings, 1977-91.
52. Minutes of a Meeting with the Labour Delegate held at the Ndu Tea Estate Office on 30 December 1980, in File DUTU D/M 15, Vol. II, Staff Representative Elections and Other Matters Connected Therewith.
53. See File MTPN/NWP/DILSI/NK/28, Vol. I, Quarterly and Annual Activity Reports (General).
54. See Letter of Staff Representatives, Ndu Tea Estate, to Divisional Inspector of Labour, Nkambe, dated 2 August 1977, in File MTPN/DILSI/NK/8, Ndu Tea Estate - Collective Trade Disputes.
55. See Report of Collective Trade Dispute (CDC *Zone Unique* Policy), dated 7 June 1978, in *ibid*.
56. See Letter of Mr I.N. Ngala, Vice-President of DUTU D/M, to Divisional Inspector of Labour, Nkambe, dated 19 May 1978, in File NEWU 18/1, Trade Disputes.

57. Investigative interview conducted at the CDC Ndu Estate concerning the transfer of Samuel Nduwa, Permanent Staff Representative of the 2nd Electoral College, in Float File, Vol. II, DILSI, Nkambe.
58. See Letter of Staff Representatives, Ndu Tea Estate, to Divisional Inspector of Labour, Nkambe, dated 15 September 1980, in File NEWU 18/1, Trade Disputes.
59. Letter of Trade Union Leaders and Staff Representatives DUAW D/M, to General Manager of CDC, dated 16 August 1982, in File DUTU D/M 15, Vol. II, Staff Representative Elections and Other Matters Connected Therewith.
60. See Circumstantial Report on the Declaration of a Trade Dispute over the Withdrawal of Acquired Benefits, Presented to the Minister of Labour, Yaoundé, by the Divisional Inspector of Labour, Nkambe, on 2 June 1982, in File MTLIS/DILSI/NK/17, Ndu Tea Estate - General Correspondence.
61. See Minutes of ECC Meetings on 23 August 1983 and 2 December 1982, in CDC Ndu Tea Estate, Minutes of ECC Meetings, 1977-91.
62. See Minutes of an Important Meeting held in the Staff Club on 3 January 1986, in File NEWU 18/1, Trade Disputes.
63. Circumstantial Report on Social Climate at the CDC Ndu Tea Estate, Presented to the Minister of Labour, Yaoundé, by the Divisional Inspector of labour, Nkambe, on 24 January 1986, in File MTPS/NWP/DISLI/NK/28, Vol. I, Quarterly and Annual Activity Reports (General).
64. Minutes of a Meeting held with Cat. 7-12 Staff and Staff Representatives on 8 July 1987, in File MTPS/DILSI/NK/5, Vol. I, DUTU D/M.
65. See Letter of Estate Manager, Ndu Tea Estate, to Deputy General Manager of CDC, Bota, dated 17 November 1987, in File MTPS/DILSI/NK/45, Vol. I, Elections of Staff Representatives.
66. See *Quarterly Report*, July-September 1987, in Float File A, Continue, Vol. III, DILSI, Nkambe.
67. Minutes of Staff Representatives' Meetings on 23 December 1989 and 2 January 1990, in CDC Ndu Tea Estate, Record of Minutes of Staff Representatives' Preparatory Meetings, 1981-91.

68. Minutes of Staff Representatives' Preparatory Meeting held on 5 November 1990, in *ibid.*
69. Circumstantial Report on the 'Reduction of Production' Strike at the CDC Ndu Tea Estate from 3-8 January 1991, Presented to the Minister of Labour, Yaoundé, by Divisional Inspector of Labour, Nkambe, on 9 January 1991, in File MTPS/DILSI/NK/8, Ndu Tea Estate - Collective Trade Disputes.

Part III

The Cameroon Tea Estates

Privatisation and labour militancy: The case of Cameroon's tea estates

Introduction

Privatisation is an essential part of an overall neo-liberal reform package aimed at creating transparency and accountability in the management of national affairs as well as a favourable environment for opening up African economies to market forces and private-sector development (World Bank 1989, 1992; Sandbrook 2000).

Privatisation calls for a re-evaluation of relations between the public and private sectors in Africa. Under pressure from international donors, governments have been urged to reduce state ownership and enhance private-sector development. International donors tend to attribute the massive growth of state enterprises since independence and their generally poor performance to the bad governance of Africa's neo-patrimonial regimes. They claim that statist conceptions of development have resulted in a widespread politicisation of economic decision-making and rent-seeking behaviour among the parasitic political elite (World Bank 1997; Olukoshi 1998; van de Walle 2001). Privatisation would help cut public-sector inefficiency and waste, solve the problem of rising budgetary deficits, stimulate private-sector development, attract more investment and new technology, and revive economic growth.

There is a growing body of literature on privatisation that discusses the mixed results these practices have had in Africa and the serious problems and controversy they have encountered (cf. Mkandawire 1994; Bennell 1997; Campbell White & Bhatia 1998; Tangri 1999; van de Walle 2001; Pitcher 2002; Rakner 2003). Privatisation problems in Africa are attributed not only to technical and financial constraints but also to the fact that privatisation did not offer the break with the previous dynamics of the post-colonial state that the Bretton Woods institutions and bilateral donors had

expected. Cameroon is a clear example of the failure of privatisation to free the parastatal sector of government neo-patrimonial logic (van de Walle 1994; Walker 1998; Konings 2003b, 2007). There is considerable evidence that the Biya regime was initially extremely reluctant to sell state-owned enterprises, which it saw as a threat to its patronage politics and the maintenance and consolidation of its power. It was only later that it was prepared to speed up the programme of privatisation. In addition to persistent pressure from international donors, the regime realised that privatisation itself did not necessarily foreclose rent-seeking opportunities for the parasitic bureaucratic and political elite. Indeed, some members benefited from it. For politicians responsible for the privatisation process, privatisation measures have frequently been an opportunity for corrupt practices. Divestiture has not been a transparent process and, in return for the payment of substantial kickbacks, public enterprises have been sold at prices far below their true value amid reports of embezzlement of the proceeds. Moreover, privatisation has not excluded members of the bureaucratic and political elite from occupying top positions in former state-owned enterprises. Some have been re-appointed and others have been newly recruited (Konings 2007).

The problems of privatisation in Africa are seen by some as also being due to the fierce opposition of civil-society organisations (cf. Olukoshi 1998; Beckman & Sachikonye 2001; Konings 2003a, 2003b, 2009b). Although World Bank studies have recommended the involvement of civil society in neo-liberal economic reforms, arguing that their participation in policy making would ensure ownership, credibility and sustainability of the reform process (World Bank 1992, 1995; Rakner 2001), there is ample evidence that civil-society organisations tend to be excluded from the decision-making process because of their expected resistance to the allegedly harmful effects of externally imposed privatisation schemes on their members. Academics, students and ethno-regional movements have vehemently denounced the sale of national and regional patrimony to western multinationals and nationals closely connected with African regimes (Tangri 1999; Konings 2003b, 2007). They and various indigenous business groups have criticised the prominent role of foreign companies in the privatisation process as a 'recolonisation of Africa'. Consumer groups have often protested against the poor and/or expensive services delivered by newly

privatised enterprises. Undoubtedly, the most public, persistent and organised opposition to privatisation in Africa has come from the labour movement. Trade unions have, on occasion, succeeded in blocking or slowing down the privatisation of specific enterprises or influencing negotiations for a privatisation agreement. At other times and in response to external pressures, governments have simply brushed union opposition aside, leaving a legacy of anger and political tension (Beckman & Sachikonye 2001; Konings 2006).

Remarkably, hardly any detailed studies have been published on the responses of African workers to privatisation in West-Central Africa.¹ This is all the more surprising because privatisations of large, strategic public enterprises in Cameroon and other African countries have often been followed by militant protests by workers against massive lay-offs and deteriorating conditions of service.

This chapter discusses how the privatisation of the CDC's tea estates generated not only persistent regional protest but also protracted strikes by estate workers. I focus on workers in the two privatised tea estates in Anglophone Cameroon, namely the Tole Tea Estate and the Ndu Tea Estate.

The chapter is divided into two parts. The first provides evidence that the announced privatisation of the CDC tea estates in October 2002 was fiercely opposed by Anglophone and other ethno-regional organisations, in particular the Bakweri Land Claims Committee (BLCC), all the more so because it turned out to be engineered by a few well-connected members of the regional elite who were conniving with the Cameroonian state. The second part describes the growing militancy of Tole and Ndu workers following a dramatic deterioration in their conditions of service in the aftermath of the privatisation of their estates.

The privatisation of the CDC tea estates

Attempts to privatise the CDC have been vehemently opposed by Anglophone and South West associations as well as by other regional civil-society organisations.² The most important was the Fako Agricultural Workers Union (FAWU), which is responsible for the representation and defence of CDC workers in Fako Division. Its president, Cornelius Vewessee, is one of the most prominent union leaders in Cameroon, having played a significant part in achieving a

large measure of union autonomy in 1992 (see Chapter 5). He insisted that the CDC could not be privatised without consulting the FAWU, arguing that CDC workers had made personal sacrifices during the economic crisis to assist the corporation's recovery. Moreover, he said the union would resist any mass lay-offs and/or deterioration in workers' conditions of service as a result of privatisation. And finally, the Anglophone press severely criticised the announced privatisation: it has long defended the Anglophone cause and informed the Anglophone population of the issues at stake.

The united Anglophone front was able to prevent the implementation of the corporation's privatisation for some time. However to the consternation of Anglophones in general and the Bakweri in particular, it was announced in October 2002 that the CDC tea estates had been sold to a South African consortium, Brobon Finex PTY Ltd. Brobon Finex would run the tea sector, including the Tole Tea Estate in the Bakweri area, under the name of Cameroon Tea Estates (CTE).

The privatisation agreement between the Cameroonian government and Brobon Finex was on the following terms. The Cameroonian government was to hand over 65% of its shares to Brobon Finex which, in turn, would sell 5% of its shares to its personnel. Brobon Finex was to expand tea production area from about 1,500 to 3,000 ha in fifteen years and invest about FCFA 8 billion over the following ten years. It would also reimburse the FCFA 1.1 billion owed by the CDC tea estates. In addition, it agreed not to lay off any workers, improve existing health, education and accommodation facilities, and continue buying produce from local contract farmers. Finally, and conforming to the government's privatisation policy of agro-industrial enterprises, land would be excluded from the transaction.

At the signing of the agreement on 18 October 2002, the Executive Chairman of Brobon Finex, Derrick Garvie, declared that his company would demonstrate within a few years that the government's act of confidence had not been misplaced and that no effort or expense would be spared in developing Cameroon's tea sector. He guaranteed the jobs of the existing labour force, adding that more workers would be recruited as a result of plans for expansion.³

The BLCC expressed its bewilderment at the sale of the CDC tea estates without any consultation or compensation of the landowners in spite of previous deliberations between the committee and the government. The Anglophone secessionist movement, the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), claimed that the Francophone-dominated state had no *locus standi* to privatise, sell or transfer CDC tea estates located within the territorial boundaries of Anglophone Cameroon to South Africans or any other person (Konings 2003b). In March 2000, the unions had warned the government that the 1992 Labour Code provided that workers would be consulted in the event of privatisation as to whether they would prefer to be paid off before negotiating new contracts with the new employer.⁴

The privatisation of the CDC tea estates soon became a national scandal when it emerged that a handful of politically well-connected elites were going to benefit at the expense of the public treasury and the native landowners. From his comments, it became clear that this privatisation was masterminded by John Niba Ngu, a former CDC general manager and minister of agriculture, who is known to be a close friend of President Biya. He used both his technical knowledge and his many connections within the regime's highest levels to design the privatisation of the CDC tea estates. While experts had estimated the value of the three tea estates at between FCFA 5 billion and FCFA 10 billion, Ngu managed to bring the price down to FCFA 1.5 billion. Less than three months later, the CTE sold stocks worth FCFA 4.6 billion. In return for his excellent services, the Board of Brobon Finex appointed Ngu as general manager on a monthly salary and benefits amounting to FCFA 4 million. According to Ngu, they allocated him 5% of the CTE's share capital, although this was later contested by the Board of Brobon Finex.

There were also growing doubts about Brobon Finex's takeover when it became clear that the real owner of the CTE was Alhadji Baba Ahmadou Danpullo, an extremely wealthy Mbororo from the North West Province of Anglophone Cameroon who was apparently using Brobon Finex as a front. He is a well-known cattle rancher and businessman in Cameroon with an international network stretching as far as South Africa and also a member of the central

committee of the ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM). Interestingly, Danpullo had previously been involved in another privatisation scandal in Cameroon, namely an attempt to sell the *Société de Développement du Coton* (SODECOTON), a huge parastatal in Northern Cameroon, which was on the same privatisation list as the CDC in 1994. Danpullo was among the small group of politically well-connected elite, most of them originating from Northern Cameroon, who managed to buy the company at a giveaway price. The deal was eventually cancelled by the government following a popular outcry and the intervention of external donors, in particular France and the World Bank (Takougang & Krieger 1998: 169-80). Apparently, Danpullo had put John Niba Ngu, who was looking for a South African financier for his privatisation scheme for the CDC tea estates, in contact with Brobon Finex. Although he was not a signatory to the convention between the Cameroonian government and Brobon Finex, he paid the money for the takeover of the CDC tea estates to the public treasurer, and has since been engaged in other financial transactions on behalf of the CTE.

Investigations by the BLCC in South Africa found that Brobon Finex existed in name only and had no office premises. Its chairman, Derrick Garvie, was indeed known in South African business circles but not in connection with Brobon Finex. This raised suspicions that Brobon Finex was merely a straw company. Some of my informants alleged that Danpullo made use of the Brobon Finex construction because it improved his chance of acquiring the tea estates, being well aware that the government would be inclined to sell large, strategic state enterprises to foreign companies. It enabled him to whitewash part of his ill-gotten capital. After initially being designated by the Brobon Finex Board as a major shareholder, he gradually started to act as chairman of the CTE Board, as the South African Brobon Finex board members became less visible in Cameroon.

In January 2003, the BLCC threatened to sue Brobon Finex in South Africa for trespassing on Bakweri property without the prior consent of its owners. In addition, it called upon the government to revoke the controversial privatisation of the CDC tea estates and to open meaningful discussions with the BLCC with a view to achieving an equitable resolution of the Bakweri land problem.⁵ Amid growing evidence of financial malpractice, President Biya

instructed the prime minister and the security forces to investigate the matter. The outcome of these investigations has never been made public but it is widely believed that Danpullo had been using his political network to help settle the matter and been engaged in bribing investigators. Moreover, it would appear that President Biya himself has serious allegations to answer about personally authorising the transfer of the CDC tea estates to his friends.

What is more relevant to our discussion here is that the controversial privatisation scheme was going to have nefarious consequences for the Tole and Ndu Tea estate workers whose living and working conditions had already been badly affected by the economic recession prior to privatisation. This gave rise to an unprecedented degree of labour militancy on both estates.

Growing labour militancy on the Tole Tea Estate

Neither the government nor the CDC's management had felt it necessary to inform the Tole Tea Estate workers of the planned privatisation of their estate so they only came to learn of it through the media. Being aware that privatisations in Cameroon had usually led to retrenchments and a deterioration in workers' conditions of service, they were worried about their future despite assurances given by the new owners on the signing of the privatisation agreement that the existing labour force and their conditions of service would be maintained. Shortly after the estate's privatisation on 18 October 2002, one of the women pluckers expressed the workers' widespread anxieties as follows:

I am not sure whether we are going to enjoy similar conditions as under the CDC. I am rather afraid that we are going to suffer when the new owners have installed themselves. Nobody appears to be willing to enlighten us on the effects of privatisation and our new status. One simply asks us to wait.⁶

The workers were even more alarmed when the 'real' owner of the CTE, Alhadji Baba Ahmadou Danpullo, decided in November 2002 to transfer 23 managerial staff from his business enterprises in Douala to his new company, probably because he thought they would

be more loyal than former CDC staff members. His decision created serious problems on the estate. First, these newly appointed managers were Francophones who all had difficulty communicating with the Anglophone estate managers and workers. And given the deepening Anglophone-Francophone divide in the country (Konings & Nyamnjoh 2003), it was hardly surprising that their appointment was generally seen on the estate as a highly provocative attempt to establish Francophone domination of a former Anglophone enterprise. As one of these Francophone managers put it:

The Francophones are looked upon here as invaders. The Anglophones have not digested the fact that the tea sector of the CDC has come under the control of French-speaking Cameroonians. One has therefore the impression that they will do everything to chase us from the company.⁷

Second, although lacking any experience in tea production, these newly appointed managers rapidly usurped the functions of the former CDC managerial staff and lorded over them and the workers. This behaviour fuelled existing tensions and feelings of solidarity and militancy among the workers. Without the first CTE general manager's knowledge, these Francophone managers engaged in dubious financial transactions that resulted in a lack of funds to improve estate facilities and workers' conditions of service. Their lack of experience and frequent clashes with Anglophone managers and workers soon led to a serious drop in tea production.

From 29 December 2002 to 4 January 2003, the estate workers staged a first strike against the new CTE management.⁸ They asserted that their conditions of service had declined following privatisation. Their social-security contributions had not been transferred to the National Social Security Fund since 1996, medical care was not being provided, ambulances and factory tractors had broken down, septic tanks were not being emptied, and wages for November 2002 had not yet been paid to all the field workers. Many workers also protested at the sudden dismissal on 4 January 2003 of the CTE's general manager, John Niba Ngu, and his replacement by his Francophone deputy general manager, Mahamat Alamine Mey. While the Board of Brobon Finex insisted that Ngu had been fired because

of his unilateral decision to dismiss all the newly hired, inexperienced and unpopular Francophone managers, the workers claimed that he had been fired because of his plans to improve their conditions of service. At a meeting with some of the Brobon Finex board members on the same day, their Staff Representatives were told not to meddle in the sacking of their former general manager and to ensure workers returned to work, while the CTE management looked into all their problems. The board members ordered the immediate payment of any salary arrears and made the following promises: the CTE would increase workers' salaries by April 2003, raise their conditions of service to the standards prevailing on the tea estates in Kenya and elsewhere, and provide them with toilet and medical facilities as well as protective clothing and boots. A few days later, the new CTE general manager, Mahamat Alamine Mey, signed a protocol agreement with the President of the FAWU, Cornelius Vewessee, reassuring workers that all their acquired rights would be honoured.

On 17 June 2003, estate workers staged another strike in protest at what they termed 'poor working conditions and humanitarian neglect'.⁹ They felt particularly aggrieved by the abrupt cancellation of certain allowances and bonuses they had been enjoying under the CDC and the regular lack of medical facilities on the estate. Although an amount of FCFA 650 was deducted from their monthly wages for medical care, they were forced to go to the CDC hospitals where they were charged the same as other non-CDC personnel. Apparently representing the feelings of most estate workers, a 52-year-old widowed tea plucker lamented the fact that:

The abolition of several allowances has drastically reduced my income. My monthly wage has dropped from FCFA 40,000 to FCFA 22,000. I am not even sure if I will get this little amount. They are always finding pretexts to cut my present wage. One speaks of taxes to be paid, absenteeism, indiscipline and so on. At present, I am torn between resigning and revolt. I would like to leave but I wonder how I could raise my children if I did so.¹⁰

Despite growing discontent among the workers, the chairman of Brobon Finex, Derrick Garvie, still presented an optimistic picture of the company's future during the celebrations to mark the first anniversary of the CTE on 18 October 2003. He again stressed that one of the principal managerial objectives was 'to make CTE a clear example of the success story of privatisations'.¹¹

Soon after these celebrations, the CTE management implemented a controversial reorganisation in December 2003. Staff Representatives pointed out how a number of the proposed measures went against the 1992 deregulated Labour Code, and they attributed the absence of any state intervention in the matter to the close links between top government officials and Alhadji Baba Ahmadou Danpullo. The reorganisation started with a 50% slash in workers' salaries and the withdrawal of any remaining allowances. When workers reacted to this dramatic decline in their income by resorting to protracted strike action on 8 January 2004, management used this illegal strike as a pretext for implementing two further measures. It immediately dismissed 268 workers without paying their severance pay, and started recruiting new workers from outside Anglophone Cameroon. Among those dismissed were a number of Staff Representatives. The CTE's management simply refused to seek authorisation for their dismissal from the Ministry of Labour as required in the Labour Code. It then changed almost the entire labour force – with the exception of 90 workers – from being permanent workers into casual and temporary workers. These measures were accompanied by the introduction of a labour regime that became more and more despotic (Burawoy 1985), the banning of trade unionism on the estate and the bypassing of Staff Representatives.

Furious about these measures, workers continued to strike until 5 February 2004 when the Minister of Labour, Prof. Robert Nkili, decided to intervene. Immediately after his mediation and the settlement of the dispute, it became evident that management was unwilling to respect his instructions about refraining from 'wrongful terminations of contracts and unacceptable wages and terms of employment'. It started introducing new reorganisation measures that led to a further deterioration in workers' conditions of service. It also notified tea pluckers that their daily task would be increased

to 32 kg in the slack season and 45 kg in the peak season. The workers then decided to stay away from work on 10 February. And in retaliation, management announced an additional cut in wages.

Given these developments, the living and working conditions on the estate became so deplorable that workers started complaining that 'the takeover of the tea estate by Brobon Finex had re-introduced slavery in this part of the country'.¹² While CTE management was celebrating the company's second anniversary on 23 October 2004, workers circulated tracts in which they called for the return of John Niba Ngu as general manager to save the company from total collapse. They deplored their loss of benefits and the social amenities they had enjoyed under the CDC, the fall in the quality of their tea, and the abandonment of certain sections of the plantation which, they said, had fallen into disuse.¹³

During the course of 2005, workers became increasingly desperate. They regularly appealed to the government to return the estate to the CDC, stressing that Alhadji Baba Ahmadou Danpullo was focusing his attention and capital on his newly constructed 4,000-hectare tea estate in Ndawara in the North West Province which, he boasted, was making use of the latest technology (see Chapter 2). Irrespective of its 35% stake in the CTE, the government remained silent, apparently unconcerned about the decrease in tea production and workers' declining conditions of service. Feeling abandoned by the government, workers gradually lost faith in any future improvement in their predicament under CTE management. Significantly, while many appeared to no longer be interested in keeping their jobs at any costs, they did not want to resign before all they were owed had been paid out since this would enable them to repay their debts and invest in a new future.¹⁴ Their growing realisation of a common interest in fighting for their accrued rights became a source of solidarity. This was clearly manifest in 2006 when a protracted strike – probably the longest in Cameroon's labour history – paralysed all the estate's activities for almost an entire year.

On 18 January 2006, the workers held a short strike as a warning. They had been informed that the Minister of Labour would be coming on a working visit to Buea and the next day they intercepted him and informed him that the sale of their estate to Brobon Finex

had not been a good move. They had been exposed to untold hardships following privatisation, and were unable even to send their children to school. The minister replied that he had refrained from any earlier intervention on their behalf because he had expected their problems to be solved at the company level. He asked them to go back to work while he tried to solve their problems by meeting Prime Minister Ephraim Inoni with a view to reconsidering the privatisation of the CDC tea estates.¹⁵

Nothing more was heard of the minister after he left Buea and on 26 February 2006 workers announced that they had no other choice than to go on strike due to 'the inhuman working conditions we are subjected to by the CTE management'. They stressed that they would not resume work until they had been paid the following benefits:

severance payment from CDC to date; accrued leave allowances from 2003 to 2006; good separation bonuses, [their] own 5 per cent shares in the CTE as spelt out in the privatisation agreement; [their] social insurance dues; [their] credit union contributions which were never transferred by the CTE to the credit union; and balances owed to retrenched workers since January 2004.¹⁶

By the start of this strike, a new spokesman for the workers, Blasius Mosoke, had emerged who acted in close cooperation with existing Staff Representatives. He was not a worker but a manager, being one of the estate's field assistants. He told me that two major factors were responsible for his siding with the workers during the strike. First, like the workers, he felt he had been badly treated by the newly recruited Francophone managers after privatisation. His relationship with the CTE's management had become particularly strained after he refused to provide the names of the workers involved in the first strike in 2006. Just like them, he had considered resigning after receiving his severance pay. Second, he felt obliged to fight not only for himself but also for the workers because he thought that the core of the estate's labour force was predominantly made up of poorly educated women who were incapable of representing their own interests effectively.¹⁷

At a crisis meeting in Limbe on 29 March that was attended by representatives of the regional administration, management and workers, the newly appointed French general manager of the CTE, Jean-Pierre Croze, disclosed that he intended to close the estate for three months during the ongoing strike to replace the machines in the tea factory at a cost of approximately FCFA 3.5 billion. He then offered the workers FCFA 14.9 million that, he said, represented part of their accrued benefits. Staff representatives rejected his offer, however, saying that the workers would prefer the immediate payment of all their benefits.¹⁸

Not long after this meeting, on 8 April, the strikers started blockading the Tole to Sasse road. This had the intended consequence of forestalling the reopening of some local elitist colleges after the Easter holidays. The workers' argument was simple: if they prevented students from going to school, their parents, who belonged to the cream of the Cameroonian elite, would be likely to bring pressure to bear on the government to meet their demands.¹⁹ Indeed, on 12 April, the Minister of Labour organised another crisis meeting in Buea but in spite of heated discussions, he failed to persuade workers' representatives to accept the CTE management's initial offer of FCFA 14.9 million (with the remainder of their accrued benefits being paid progressively). However in the end, he reached a compromise with both parties agreeing that all the accrued benefits would be paid out three months later. In the meantime, each party would calculate the total amount and then compare their findings with the payment coming in July.²⁰

After this agreement, three significant events occurred. First, there was an attempt by CTE owners to continue selling tea stocks during the strike and in the night of 25 April, soldiers tried to remove bags of processed tea from the estate's factory. It soon transpired that Alhadji Baba Ahmadou Danpullo had hired these soldiers to transport the tea to one of his lorries that was parked in Buea. Defying warning shots, incensed workers attacked the soldiers and damaged their truck and, in revenge, soldiers tried to arrest Blasius Mosoke, the estate's field assistant and the workers' spokesman. Workers responded by warning the military that they would not take it lying down if anything happened to Mosoke.²¹

Second, there was an attempt by the Bakweri elite to buy the estate. Claiming that it was extremely worried about the ongoing crisis in one of the region's most important enterprises, the management of the Bakweri transport and shipping company Fakoship announced on 14 July its intention to take over the Tole Tea Estate. However, this offer was immediately dismissed by the chairman of Brobon Finex, Derrick Garvie, who said that 'as the owner of the estate, his company had the sole right to let it go fallow, dismiss workers, dismantle machines, close it down and sell it without the government or anybody else interfering in its affairs'.²² Alhadji Baba Ahmadou Danpullo strongly condemned the offer as being another expression of Bakweri opposition to his company. He repeatedly declared that the crisis on the estate was not due to managerial lapses but to the political machinations of the Bakweri elite who continued to incite workers against the management with the aim of undermining the company and serving their own interests.²³

Third, the most dramatic event was the workers' decision to besiege the CDC's Head Office in Bota-Limbe. They had been frustrated by the government's failure to respect the agreement reached at the crisis meeting on 12 April and while they had made their own calculations of their accrued benefits, the three-month deadline had passed without any government response. On 26 July, between 500 and 800 men, women and children from the Tole Tea Estate occupied the CDC's Head Office, demanding FCFA 2.3 billion in accrued benefits. The FAWU's president aptly described the symbolic meaning of their occupation:

The protesters presently camped at the CDC Head Office have not behaved violently because they have come back to where they were, to express that the marriage to which they were given, had not been successful because the new husband seems to have another wife in Ndawara [referring to Danpullo's newly created tea estate in that locality] and is not taking care of them. So they have come back to their father. CDC is their father.²⁴

Although the provincial governor and the CDC's general manager ordered them to leave, the workers resolved to stay until a definitive solution to their problems had been found. Only the personal

intervention of President Biya persuaded the workers to call off their protest action on 4 August, and Prime Minister Ephraim Inoni was asked to mediate. He set up an *ad-hoc* committee composed of government, management and workers' representatives that was presided over by the Minister of Labour in order to calculate the amount owed to the strikers and ensure its prompt payment.

The committee started work on 7 August. According to its own calculations, it did not accept the workers' 'exorbitant' demands of FCFA 2.3 billion and proposed the meagre sum of FCFA 169 million. After recalculation, it agreed to a figure of FCFA 308 million, which the workers still considered far below their expectations. Payment was to take place in the subsequent two weeks but was again postponed. It was only after mounting labour unrest that the regional administration announced it would make payments on 30 August.

However when the workers gathered outside the offices of the Provincial Delegation of Labour in Buea to receive their payments, they were informed that nothing would happen without an accurate list. In response, the workers went on the rampage in Buea, erecting road blocks on the main road to Kumba and Douala and tearing down billboards along the roadside. Clashes between workers and the police led to 30 workers being taken to hospital and a passer-by reportedly being hit by a stray bullet.

A few days later, on 2 September, the regional authorities summoned the workers to collect their payments. Since the authorities proved unwilling to publish a list of beneficiaries and the amount each of them would receive, the workers refused to turn up. There were two reasons why they finally collected the money they were owed on 11 September. First, their leaders had been continuously exposed to death threats by the administration, leaving them with no choice but to comply. Second, the workers' united front had been broken after workers at the Tole Credit Union secretly collected some FCFA 2.2 million.²⁵ Most of the workers were embittered because they had been hoodwinked into accepting miserly sums and they declared that they were no longer prepared to work on the estate.

A month later, all the workers who had been paid off had – either voluntarily or forcibly – left the Tole Tea Estate.²⁶ Some returned to their villages of origin, while others moved to

neighbouring villages to try to eke out a new existence. Those who still wanted to work on the estate were told by CTE management that they had to apply for new contracts. On 1 October, youths hired by the management on a contract basis started pruning the overgrown tea bushes. Tea picking was expected to restart in the course of 2007.

Growing labour militancy on the Ndu Tea Estate

Given the CTE takeover of all the former CDC tea estates in October 2002, it is not surprising that the Ndu Tea Estate workers faced similar problems to the Tole Tea Estate workers after the controversial privatisation. These included a drastic deterioration in their living and working conditions, massive lay-offs, frequent violations of the Labour Code, the replacement of competent Anglophone managers with inexperienced Francophones and, above all, constant delays in the payment of the financial benefits that the former and present owners, the CDC and the CTE respectively, owed the workers, such as severance pay, termination benefits, compensation for sums (for social insurance and credit union dues) deducted from workers' wages for over the years without interest and the workers' 5% share in the company as stipulated in the privatisation agreement.

Ndu Tea Estate workers used similar tactics to Tole Tea Estate workers to protest against growing exploitation and subordination in the labour process. Faced with the banning of trade unionism on the estate, they began to resort to informal, collective actions. And when they realised that the CTE management was not going to keep its promise of improving their living and working conditions after privatisation, some workers decided to stop working on the estate.

In 2004 the Ndu workers showed their profound dissatisfaction with the estate's privatisation. In February, they began a sit-in. In response, CTE management sanctioned them in a similar way as the Tole workers: and almost the entire Ndu labour force was transformed from having permanent labour status into contract labour. In presidential elections on 11 October, Ndu workers refused to support the incumbent president, Paul Biya, holding him jointly responsible for the estate's privatisation and its nefarious effects on

the workers' living and working conditions. This is evident from a two-page memorandum that was signed by the local elite and the chief of Ndu:

The negative influence on voters for the CPDM in Ndu Subdivision, among others, was the privatisation of the CDC and the irregular lay-off of hundreds of workers of the Ndu Tea Estate by the CTE.²⁷

In March 2005, Ndu workers threatened to go on strike again to back their grievances. In a petition to the CTE management, they lamented the fact that they had been reduced to contract workers under extremely rigid conditions on the grounds that they had absconded from work during the previous strike. They also decried the punitive transfer of some Staff Representatives and the allegedly intentional miscalculations on their pay. They claimed that the management still owed them wages and leave allowances. Curiously, instead of addressing their grievances, management threatened to sanction them for their refusal to use the proper channels for seeking redress.²⁸

Inspired by the protracted strike on the Tole Tea Estate in the same year, Ndu workers embarked upon a four-month strike on 28 August 2006, demanding the immediate payment of their financial dues. They stressed that they had waited long enough, having sent numerous petitions to the CTE management and the administration of the Donga-Mantung Division, and announced that they were now prepared to fight to the bitter end, even if it cost them their lives. They cut down hundreds of eucalyptus trees from the CTE fuel plantation and blocked the Grassfields ring road, bringing traffic between Bamenda and Nkambe, the capital of Donga-Mantung Division, to a standstill. They had been informed by reliable sources that the CTE management was planning to bring in workers from the Ndawara Tea Estate in the North West Province in an effort to break their strike and ignore their legitimate demands. Fearing that the situation might degenerate into violence, the divisional administration ordered two trucks of armed soldiers from the Nkambe barracks who used force in a number of clashes that resulted in the hospitalisation of more than 30 workers.²⁹

Faced with a deteriorating situation, the Senior District Officer (SDO) for Donga-Mantung Division, Godlive Mboke Ntua, and the District Officer (DO) for the Ndu Subdivision, John Mkong Yosimbom, convened a crisis meeting on 1 September. Their attempts to bring the workers to reason failed as the latter had lost all confidence in the divisional administration and CTE management. They then successfully approached Emmanuel Ngafeeson, the Secretary of State at the Ministry of Justice in charge of the Penitentiary, who was a prominent member of the local elite and popular among the masses, being fondly known as the 'man-at-the-grassroots'.

The following day, Ngafeeson went from Yaoundé to Tatum, a village close to Ndu where he was welcomed by the strikers. He then accompanied them to the CTE Ndu office, a distance of more than five kilometres, where he subsequently addressed them in their local languages, appealing to them to calculate all that was owed to them and to send a delegation to Yaoundé on 4 September to negotiate with the government and the CTE management.³⁰

During the meeting on 4 September, the Minister of Labour, Prof. Robert Nkili, tried to solve the problems on the Ndu Tea Estate by setting up a tripartite committee to calculate workers' benefits and define the financial responsibilities of the CTE management and the government. The committee later proposed an amount of about FCFA 181 million.³¹ The workers immediately rejected the offer as being way below their expectations. They pointed out that the Tole Tea Estate beneficiaries, who were far fewer in number than they themselves, had been offered a much higher sum. They also vehemently disapproved of the fact that only 565 of the 863 permanent and contract workers were on the list for payment. When the Governor for the North West Province, Koumpa Issa, delivered the money to Ndu on 5 October, he met stiff resistance from the workers who simply refused to accept their benefits.³²

The divisional administration then called on the Provincial Delegate of Labour for the North West Province, Simon Ade Fru, to mediate in the matter. After a lengthy exchange with the strikers on 11 October, they were advised to collect the money being offered. If any of them disagreed with the calculation of his/her personal benefits, s/he could file a complaint in the law courts.³³

Soon afterwards, one of the principal workers' spokesmen, Francis Kolle, went to Yaoundé where he handed over a memorandum to the Minister of Labour listing what the workers thought was owed to them. A workers' committee had calculated this to be a sum of over FCFA 2.9 billion.³⁴

In the meantime, it was discovered that seven men and one woman had betrayed the workers' cause by secretly collecting their dues at the Ndu Subdivisional treasury. On 17 October, striking workers visited the homes of these blacklegs with mock coffins and crosses, performed burial rites on their door steps and inscribed 'may your soul rest in peace' on their doors. They later set fire to the coffins that contained magic objects, and the workers were requested to swear an oath over the ashes while vowing not to collect their money. As a result of this action, the divisional administration stated that the strike's ringleaders were to face trial on charges of life-threatening behaviour. Subsequently, it intensified its tactics of intimidation, bringing pressure to bear on them to stop the strike and accept the amount of financial benefit they had previously rejected. Their refusal to submit was perceived as an act of stubbornness, and the administration regularly threatened to call in troops to crush the strike.³⁵

On 23 November, 16 workers' representatives, who had been acting as spokesmen for their colleagues, resigned after the DO for Ndu Subdivision, John Mkong Yorisombom, banned meetings between them and the CTE management. Apparently, the DO's banning order came in the wake of a meeting between workers' representatives and CTE management that almost degenerated into a bloody confrontation.³⁶ A few weeks later, four of them were arrested and tortured.³⁷

Relations between the strikers and the divisional administration became more strained when the workers decided to intensify their strike action until they were paid what they thought rightly belonged to them. On 28 November, a protest march was organised by the striking workers, their families and dependents. This was followed by heavy beehives being brought in to reinforce the road blockade between Bamenda and Nkambe in an attempt to forestall the anticipated arrival of some 1,000 workers from the Ndwara and Djuttitsa tea estates.³⁸

The next day, the SDO for Donga-Mantung Division, Godlive Mboke Ntua, issued an ultimatum to the strikers. It was broadcast several times on Donga-Mantung Community Radio and branded the workers as a group of recalcitrant fellows who had refused to be brought to reason and were still confronting the divisional administration. He urged them to collect their dues before re-engaging in further negotiations with the CTE management. He stressed that it was ridiculous to claim, as the workers had previously done, an amount of around FCFA 3 billion while the CTE had only paid FCFA 1.5 billion to purchase the three tea estates.³⁹

The strikers, however, turned a deaf ear to the SDO's ultimatum. While continuing to man their road blockade, they marched in the night of 29 November to the houses of the CTE estate manager, Falalou Mohammed, and the Ndu Workers' Club president, Joseph Koni, taking both hostage and forcing them to take part in their nocturnal demonstrations.

Violent clashes took place between the strikers and the forces of law and order on 1 and 2 December. The troops first attempted to protect some eight saw operators who had been charged with cutting up the eucalyptus trees that had been used by the strikers to block the ring road. They subsequently attempted to escort truckloads of workers from Ndawara and Djuttitsa that were on the way to the Ndu Tea Estate. Two workers were killed and several others were injured during these confrontations.⁴⁰

Following these dramatic developments, the Minister of Labour felt once again obliged to intervene to resolve the deepening crisis on the estate. He organised another tripartite meeting in Yaoundé on 6 December. After a long and heated debate, it was agreed that workers would accept that their financial dues had been calculated in conformity with the labour laws and regulations in force. Any amounts that were being contested by the workers were to be re-examined by the SDO for the Donga-Mantung Division, a representative of the Ministry of Labour and the CTE management. Since not all the personal financial benefits owed had been wrongly calculated, workers should begin receiving their dues individually. Although the usual punishment for illegal strike actions as stipulated in the Labour Code was the dismissal of the participant(s), the CTE management agreed to keep on all the workers for the sake of peace.

The Minister of Labour then requested that all workers resume work immediately, promising that all outstanding grievances would be handled within a year.⁴¹ While the workers' representatives voiced dissatisfaction with the outcome of the meeting, they eventually felt compelled to agree to it due to the state's persistent intimidating tactics, arbitrary arrests, torture and killings. Payment of the financial dues started on 29 December.⁴²

It took some time before work resumed on the Ndu Tea Estate since those workers, who had expressed their willingness to continue working for the CTE had to wait to sign permanent contracts. However many strikers refused to resume work because of the maltreatment they had suffered at the hands of the CTE management. Others feared going back because of the desecration inflicted on the estate by the strikers in the form of sorcery and witchcraft.

In January 2007, the Ndu elite held their first meeting after the crisis on the Ndu Tea Estate. They stressed that bringing in workers from other areas was tantamount to provoking local workers and held that the chiefs' right of cleansing and purifying the land could only be effectively carried out in the presence of the workers who had desecrated the estate. In addition, they called on the administrative authorities to release the financial data on the workers' payments to facilitate reconciliation and to set up an *ad-hoc* committee to review any contested financial data. They successfully persuaded the divisional administration and the CTE management to release detainees and withdraw the 'imported' workers from the estate. However, the divisional administration ignored their request to remove the forces of law and order from the estate in order to 'facilitate dialogue and enable the workers to resume work'.⁴³

Conclusion

This study of the privatisation of the CDC estates in Anglophone Cameroon illustrates how externally imposed privatisation schemes have often been opposed by African governments, civil-society organisations and workers alike. Cameroonian government officials have regularly attempted to postpone and manipulate the

implementation of schemes that challenge the stabilising and uniting patronage systems in the weak nation state, undermine their limited popular legitimacy and provoke ethno-regional and workers' protests. Although heavy dependence on western donors for continued financial assistance eventually forced them to comply, they attempted to sell state corporations, like the CDC, to foreign companies and nationals closely allied with the regime at giveaway prices in return for considerable kickbacks.

Having been excluded from the decision-making process, civil-society organisations in Anglophone Cameroon strongly contested attempts to privatise the CDC. Ethno-regional organisations feared losing control of their ancestral lands and regional economic heritage, whilst trade unions feared retrenchments and a deterioration in workers' conditions of service.

There is ample evidence that the most militant opposition to the privatisation of the CDC estates came from the workers. Chapter 3 explained the main reasons for their remarkable solidarity and militancy in spite of their internal divisions. It would be wrong to conclude that the 'Tole and Ndu workers' militant actions against the privatisation of the CDC derived from their opposition to privatisation *per se*. Their leaders told me that workers would support privatisation if it was expected to improve the company's efficiency and workers' conditions of service. They stressed that workers had become vehemently opposed to the privatisation of the CDC for the following reasons:

- They disapproved of the CDC's privatisation because the CDC continued to have the reputation of being one of the few relatively well-managed parastatals. This helps explain their frequent demands during the disastrous privatisation exercise for a return to the mother company.
- They strongly condemned the secretive and corrupt nature of the CDC privatisation as well as the blatant absence of any consultation of workers and trade unions in the process.
- Above all, they quickly discovered that the new owners' promise to safeguard and even improve workers' rights and benefits was not going to be respected. Confronted with unbearable living and working conditions after privatisation, they gradually lost

interest in keeping their jobs at any cost and resumed informal collective actions. Determined to receive all their accrued benefits before resigning, they engaged in protracted strike actions that paralysed all the estate's activities.

In sharp contrast to popular resistance to neo-liberal reforms in some African countries (cf. Zeilig 2002), Tole and Ndu workers received little support from civil-society organisations in the region that claimed to be equally opposed to the privatisation of the CDC, in particular the trade unions and various Anglophone associations. Management banned trade unionism from the estates and the Anglophone associations seemed to be first and foremost preoccupied with their own specific grievances. Given these circumstances, the militant actions of the Tole and Ndu workers were bound to remain local expressions of anger and outrage.

There was only one notable example in Cameroon of a broader coalition of popular forces against privatisation practices. This occurred after the takeover of *La Société Nationale d'Electricité* (Sonel) in 2001 by the American multinational AES-Sirocco, which dismally failed to keep its promise of guaranteeing an uninterrupted supply of electricity. Various parts of the country suffered from electricity rationing and regular power cuts, which resulted in a reduction in economic output and hardship for consumers. This, together with excessive increases in the price of electricity and massive lay-offs, led to strikes and boycotts by workers and numerous demonstrations and court cases by consumers. Although workers and consumers eventually failed to achieve the departure of the Americans, they were able to gain important concessions from the privatised company, including the recruitment of new workers, better conditions of service, increased investments in regular power supplies and the replacement of American top managers by Cameroonians (Konings 2007).

Notes

1. There are more detailed studies on workers' responses to privatisation in the southern part of Africa. See Larmer (2005, 2007), Pitcher 2002) and Zeilig (2002).

2. For a detailed discussion of regional civil-society opposition to the privatisation of the CDC, see Konings (2011a and b).
3. See *The Herald*, 20 October 2002.
4. See *The Post*, 8 August 2006.
5. For all the BLCC actions described in this study, see the BLCC website: <http://www.bakwerilands.org>. See also *The Herald*, 8 and 22 January 2003.
6. Interview with a woman picker on the Tole Tea Estate, 21 November 2002.
7. Interview with a Francophone CTE manager at the Tole Tea Estate, 13 December 2002.
8. Interview with Mathias Anyacheck, Staff Representative at the Tole Tea Estate, 29 November 2003. For press reports on this strike, see *The Herald*, 6 January 2003 and *Le Messenger*, 9 January 2003.
9. Interview with Staff Representatives at the Tole Tea Estate, 29 October 2003. For a report of this strike, see *The Herald*, 18 June 2003.
10. Interview with a tea picker at the Tole Tea Estate, 29 October 2003.
11. See *The Post*, 20 October 2003.
12. *The Post*, 13 September 2004.
13. *The Post*, 25 October 2004; *The Herald*, 1 November 2004.
14. *The Post*, 13 September 2005.
15. *The Post*, 25 January 2006.
16. *The Post*, 17 March 2007.
17. Interview with Blasius Mosoke at the Tole Tea Estate, 15 March 2006. See also *The Post*, 25 September 2006.
18. *Le Messenger*, 30 March 2006; and *Cameroon Tribune*, 12 April 2006.
19. *The Post*, 29 April 2006 and 16 August 2006; and *Cameroon Tribune*, 12 April 2006.
20. *The Post*, 19 April 2006.
21. *The Post*, 1 May 2006.
22. *The Post*, 8 August 2006.

23. *The Post*, 8 August and 12 September 2006.
24. *The Post*, 8 August 2006.
25. *The Post*, 15 September 2006.
26. *The Post*, 20 October 2006.
27. *Herald Today*, 7 November 2004.
28. *The Herald*, 9-10 March 2005, p. 3.
29. *The Post*, 30 September 2006.
30. *Ibid.*, and *Le Messenger*, 5 September 2006.
31. *Le Messenger*, 9 October 2006; and *The Post*, 12 October 2006.
32. *The Post*, 12 October 2006.
33. *The Post*, 19 October 2006.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *The Post*, 3 November 2006.
36. *The Post*, 26 November 2006.
37. *The Post*, 17 December 2006.
38. *The Post*, 30 November 2006.
39. *The Post*, 3 December 2006.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *The Post*, 16 December 2006 and 6 January 2007; and *La Nouvelle Expression*, 8 December 2006.
42. *The Post*, 6 January 2007.
43. *The Post*, 13 January 2007.

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