The history of water politics and the politics of water history.

Introduction

This paper is divided into three parts. The first and longest part sets out the empirical base for a discussion of the history of water supply in anglophone Cameroon. This narrative is structured around a sequence of questions. Where were piped water supplies built? What technology was used? When were they built? Whom were they built by? Whom were they built for? How much did they cost? Where did the money come from to build the supplies? Which institutions operated the piped water supplies? And, where did the money come from to operate the supplies? The answers to these questions are based on archival research in Cameroon and London and interviews with engineers and civil servants in Cameroon. Inevitably there are gaps and uncertainties in the answers. The first section of the paper will be of interest to those with a particular concern for Cameroon or who those wish to compare this account with similar national stories elsewhere. A summary is provided at the end of this section for those who are more interested in skipping ahead to the discussions that follow. The second and third parts of the paper develop two different arguments which explore the political significance of water history.

The second section is built around the claim that the late colonial period was of great significance in anglophone Cameroon, in particular to the development of rural water supplies. The introduction of Community Development techniques in the 1950s
established a template for rural water projects which remains effective to the present. British colonial policy has had more influence, and perhaps a more positive influence, than is usually acknowledged. In particular looking at the history of rural water supply shows that the different colonial legacies of the British and French are more significant than ethnic differences in shaping the relative success of so-called ‘participatory, self-help, bottom-up community development’ projects in contemporary Cameroon. This matters because contemporary Cameroonian political discourse reflects three decades in which the national elite has carefully fostered competition between different ethnic groups, each of which aspire to earn the favours of the central state. Differences in regional development are often explained away using ethnic stereotypes. In this instance water history has some scope to contribute towards perturbing the existing ideological hegemony in Cameroon. Though at the same time it also risks rehearsing the tedious divide between francophone and anglophone Cameroon, which dominates much of the literature. The aim is not to stand as an apologist for the colonial administration or to argue that the British colonial legacy is ‘better’ than the French, the aim is to try to disturb the influence of ‘ethnicity’ as an explanatory tool.

The third section develops the claim that historical narratives of the construction of water supplies have become increasingly important in contemporary water politics in Cameroon. The paper describes five particular situations in which current ownership of the infrastructure is entwined with the construction of historical narratives. Local accounts of the construction histories have been deployed to justify the physical appropriation of infrastructure by local communities when faced with government’s
attempts to raise the price of water. Local ownership claims are defended as legal and morally appropriate by invoking accounts of how, when and by whom water supply infrastructure was built. However, these accounts – like all histories – are selective, partial and are sometimes knowingly inaccurate. The historical narratives are being used for a very particular purpose. In this instance this case study draws attention to the ways in which water historians need to be alert to the political work that stories can do.
The location of towns discussed in the paper
1. An empirical base, the history of producing piped water in Cameroon

Anglophone Cameroon comprises the North West and South West Provinces, which are on the county’s western border with Nigeria (Figure 1). The South West has very high rainfall (> 3000 mm/year) and the North West has marginally less, but is higher in altitude (Figure 2). In general both provinces have high relief and are well watered, enabling most rural water supplies to be provided by gravity from springs. Urban water supplies are more likely to use river sources combined with a treatment works.

Figure 1 Cameroon international boundaries, provinces and towns mentioned in the text
However, within both provinces there are particular places where the lack of a suitable drinking water supply was a limiting factor on pre-colonial settlement and on later urban growth. For example on Mount Cameroon around Buea there is a shortage of springs and in Ekondo Titi there has never been an effective year round water supply system. Nevertheless, relative to many other regions of Cameroon, and indeed much of sub-Saharan Africa, these two provinces have abundant water resources.
Despite this resource the FAO estimated in 1994 that around 55% of the rural population of Cameroon do not have access to safe, reliable piped water supplies\(^1\) a more recent consultant’s report estimates that only 21% of the rural population of the southwest province have access to piped water supplies.\(^2\). Such statistics are not particularly reliable, but they do show the ongoing challenge of providing supplies in this area. Of course they also make certain assumptions about what constitutes a safe reliable supply. Piped supplies are assumed to be improved, whilst other forms of technology are classified as unimproved. Environmental health engineers in the tropics however will however point out that a properly maintained hand-dug well or spring supply can be safer than a poorly maintained borehole or piped reticulation system. In addition such definitions of improvement also tend to erase the long history of pre-colonial water technology (such as using hollowed plantain stems as gutters for rainwater harvesting systems) and water institutions (such as establishing rules of behaviour around springs) in Cameroon. However, for the purpose of this paper, history is assumed to begin in 1902 when the German colonial state built the first piped water supplies.

At its maximum extent the German colony of Kamerun occupied an area larger than the current country of Cameroun, however, by far the most intensely colonised area was on the coast between Victoria, Buea and Douala. Above the mangroves this coastal strip was transformed into a sequence of plantations, initially developed largely through private capital.

Victoria was the administrative and commercial centre of the colonial state and the major port. There were schools in the town and a botanic garden on the banks of the river Limbe, where the Germans experimented with the introduction of new crops from their other tropical colonies. There was also a piped water supply which was constructed in 1902. It was fed from a spring source and used gravity to distribute the water around the town. A hydram was needed to lift the water up to the house of the main German official, which was situated on a rocky hill in the middle of the botanical gardens. The remnants of the hydram can still be seen, though they are now overgrown and abandoned. The quality of the water in Victoria was improved by a slow sand filter (also powered by gravity) built beside the spring. This technology, first used in Germany, uses physical and biological processes to purify water. The water system was used to supply the German colonial officers but water was also provided to the Christian missions and to the commercial quarters of town. There was a single public tap in the ‘Native’ settlement for the use of Africans.

Buea, which is inland and at a much higher altitude, was the official capital of the German colony from 1898 to 1909. The cool climate in Buea was preferred by officials to the temperatures a thousand metres lower in Victoria or Douala. However, despite being the capital, it was a smaller town than Victoria because it served a purely administrative function. It was the focus for government investment in the built

---

3 The site and building are still used as the Residence of the main administrative officer for the region, the Senior Divisional Officer of Fako.
5 According to Courade, G. (1972). *The Urban Development of Buea: an essay in social geography.* (Yaounde, Orstom), the Germans moved the capital to Douala because of fears about volcanic activity, however, Douala’s attraction as the main port and commercial centre must also have been relevant.
infrastructure with the construction of offices and homes (which were shipped out from Germany in pieces and assembled on arrival) for colonial staff. Above them all, and looking down over the pre-existing Bakweri ‘native settlement’ and the Mission station, was the German Governor’s Residence. Built in alpine style and known as the Schloss, it was first occupied by Jesko von Puttkamer, whose flamboyant self-importance it reflects. The rather more humdrum piped water supply system which supplied German colonial Buea was constructed between 1900 and 1903 and captured the large Musole stream above the town, and supplied not only the German’s domestic needs and a single tap for the local population, but also ornamental fountains in the garden of the Schloss and a ceremonial public drinking fountain decorated with a medallion showing Bismarck in bass relief. This fountain was only disconnected in the 1980s and has recently been restored (though not reconnected). Even though the mountainous setting led colonists to assume that the source was pure, the Germans constructed a slow sand filter identical to that in Victoria a little below the water intake in Buea.

---

6 There is an identical ‘Bismark Fountain’ in Togo. Kai Schmidt-Soltau pers. com.
The *Schloss* in the early 1960s, when it was the home of the Premier of West Cameroon.

The Bismarck Fountain in use in the 1960s.
Materials for the water supplies in Buea and Victoria, most of which were imported, were paid for by the German colonial state. The systems were constructed using the forced labour of Cameroonian. For example the sand, cement and cast iron pipes were head-loaded up from the port at Victoria to the building site in Buea 1100m above sea level. Both systems predate the construction of any piped water supply in Douala, which was begun in 1911. This not only reflects the relative importance of Buea and Victoria in the late 19th century but also the possibilities provided by the environment: gravity as a motive force and a source that was perceived to be safe. Neither of these attributes applied in Douala, which depended on saline, unreliable wells for water.

There are relatively few high altitude springs on Mount Cameroon, which is basalt, and the Musole spring which was captured in Buea is unusually reliable. The anthropologist Edwin Ardener, who studied the history of the Bakweri people who lived on Mount Cameroon, suggests that the original location of the village at Buea might well relate to the presence of this powerful spring. This suggestion is dismissed by the current Chief of Buea, Samuel Endeley, who, with characteristic aristocratic chutzpah, states that Buea is located where it is because that is where his ancestor decided it should be. Chief Endeley suggests, however, that the Bakweri own the spring and the provision of a tap for the ‘natives’ of Buea Town in 1903 was the condition that the Bakweri imposed on the Germans in return for granting them permission to use the water. Given the asymmetries

---

7 UK P.R.O. File No. CO 649/2 contains a translation of a German report of 1912 describing the start of work on Douala’s water supply.
8 Ardener, E. (1996) p.41
9 Interview with Chief S. Endeley, 24th February 1998
of power between the Germans and the Bakweri this claim is loaded with retrospective bravura, but it does point to a sense of Bakweri ownership of the spring, which re-emerges throughout the century.

In addition to the colonial state there are two other institutions that were overseeing the construction of water supply systems in the early part of the century: the Missions and the Plantations. Two fairly extensive gravity-fed networks were constructed before 1916 at mission stations, one (Catholic) at Bonjongo, one (Presbyterian) at Nyasoso, near Tombel. The Bonjongo mission, used another spring on Mount Cameroon\textsuperscript{10}. The Nyasoso mission was further inland and used a spring on Mount Kupé\textsuperscript{11}. As well as these two systems there were numerous small engineering works related to water supply for the plantations constructed using private capital during the German period. These included both spring supplies (a German spring-box is still in use at Mile 14, between Buea and Mutengene) and rainwater catchment tanks. Of course, these plantation supplies were constructed for productive purposes to provide for irrigation and the labour force and not out of any public health or welfare sentiment.

Following a short military campaign in 1914-915, the British army found itself responsible for the administration of most of the German colony of Kamerun. In April 1916 the British forces ceded most of this territory to France and withdrew from Douala to their own side of a new frontier which, in the South, ran along the River Mungo. The

\textsuperscript{10} The Bonjongo supply only appears in the archival record when the colonial state undertook to supply them with maintenance services in the early 1930s. At that time the engineers estimated that the system had been originally constructed around 1916. BNA Ra(1932)1

territory which now forms Anglophone Cameroon was known by the British as the Southern Cameroons and though officially a League of Nations Mandate, was in effect governed as an extension of the Eastern Provinces of the colony of Nigeria. The principal official in Cameroon (the ‘Resident’) was answerable to Lieutenant-Governors in Enugu and the Governor-General in Lagos.

It is hard to overstate the lack of British interest in developing the water infrastructure of Cameroon between 1916 and 1947. As long as the military presence continued in Victoria there was some urgency about repairs to the water system as the Navy used it to supply their ships. Petitions for money and parts were met sympathetically in Lagos and repairs were made to pipes, stopcocks, hydrams and filter beds in Victoria in 1918. However, after the war ended the trend changed. The first government engineers arrived in the early 1920’s and the Public Works Department (PWD) took over the operation of the water systems in Buea and Victoria in 1921. But it was not until 1926, ten years after assuming control that any technical staff from the Public Works Department visited Bamenda, the main settlement in the north.

The German water supplies in Victoria and Buea were used largely unaltered by the British colonial staff for many years to come. As a Nigerian Newspaper put it in 1915

---

12 BNA, Rd(1918)2
13 BNA, Ra(1921)1, BNA, Rd(1918)2
14 Buea National Archives (Hereafter BNA), File Ra(1923)1, & Ra(1922)2
“Luckily, the Cameroons itself is thoroughly up to date in this respect; the Germans have spent more on their public works than we should ever dream of doing.”

This inheritance was considered a great boon by those who lived in Buea. For example Mary Oake the wife of a teacher who wrote a memoir of Buea life in 1933, described her home as depressing on the outside and worse on the inside, but slightly redeemed by the fact that there was running water and a toilet “thanks to pre-war German sanitation.” Such supplies, however, were restricted to those living in Government Quarters. In addition from 1923 the government started to deduct a water rate from the salaries of officials who had water in their homes.

Colonial officials expressed a vague desire to extend water supplies to Africans but were only prepared to sanction schemes if Africans were willing to generate both the capital costs of construction (usually by the Native Authority taking on a loan) and also agree to pay an ongoing water rate. In addition Native Authorities were expected to pay an annual charge to the PWD for the maintenance of water supplies. In 1932 the Resident (Mr Arnett) observed that the ‘Buea water supply is a very fine one and it seems a pity, for health reasons, that it should not be made available to the native townspeople.’ However a year later his successor (Mr Carr) concluded ‘In view of the fact that the water supply of Buea ‘native’ Town cannot be described as bad and, moreover, that the District Head has now stated that the people would not be willing to pay for an improved supply I

---

15 Morning Post 21st April 1915, in UK P.R.O. File CO649/2
16 Oake, Mary (1933) “No place for a white woman: a personal experience” p14
17 To maintain the supplies in Tiko, Mapanga and Bonjongo the PWD charged the Victoria NA £15/annum in 1937. BNA Ra(1932)1
18 Resident Buea (Arnett) to D.O. Victoria, 6th January 1932. BNA Rd(1932)1
am unable to recommend that any further steps should be taken at present. No taps reached ‘Strangers Quarters’ in Buea until 1938.

In Victoria progress appeared slightly faster. By 1930 the African community of Victoria was supplied by three standpipes in ‘New Town’ which had been constructed using funds provided by the Native Authority in addition to the original German tap. However, by 1933 none of these new stand posts was functioning and the vast majority of the inhabitants were using two unprotected springs to the east of the town as their supply of water. Occasionally boreholes were drilled by the PWD and hand pumps installed for the use of Africans in settlements were the water resources were particularly bad, for example at Tiko in 1934, but both staff shortages and a lack of equipment meant that such initiatives were very limited.

The main constraints on developing water supplies were a lack of skilled engineers and a lack of capital. In 1928 plans were drawn up for a water supply in Tombel but this came to nothing. In 1935 and 1939 plans were drawn up for water supplies in Bamenda and Kumba, but no action was taken there either. In 1944 a survey of the current state of water provision was undertaken which identified Bamenda, Kembong, Kumba, Mamfe,

---

19 Resident, Buea (Carr) to Lieutenant-Governor, Enugu, February 1933. BNA Rd(1931)1
20 BNA Ra(1932)1
21 BNA Rd(1918)2
22 BNA Rd(1931)1
23 Dr T.L. Craig to D.O. Kumba, December 1928, BNA Se(1944)5
24 BNA Ra(1932)1, BNA Of(1935)5,
25 BNA Ra(1935)2, BNA Ra(1938)1
Muyuka, Tiko and Tombel as priorities, but also observed that most stream sources appeared to satisfy the wants of Africans.26

By the middle of the 40s there were signs of a change. After 1945 there was usually at least one engineer dedicated to water supplies in the PWD, and by 1955 there were two27. The first new water supplies in Cameroon since 1916 were finally built at Bamenda in 194728. This system was paid for by a direct subvention from the Colonial State as part of the Bamenda Hospital budget and was constructed under the auspices of the Native Authority Works organisation using local paid labour.

With technical staff in place there was a gradual acceleration in the construction work done in the early 1950s (Table 1). Around the same time, the policy of Community Development and Welfare was becoming established as an important strategy in rural development, which also produced an important line of funding. However, the major acceleration in investment followed in 1954 when the two provinces of Cameroon became a semi-autonomous federal territory within Nigeria and the first ‘Development Plan for the Cameroons’ was prepared.

The development plan would run from 1955-60, and would be part-funded by grants and loans from Britain. The British Secretary of State for the Colonies asked “that the plan be as realistic as possible and would only consider what was practical, giving particular priority to those basic services which made a more direct contribution to the expansion of

26 BNA Se(1944)5
27 BNA Se(1944)4
28 BNA Rb(1946)1
the territory’s economy. The British Parliament, before plunging its hands into the British taxpayers’ pocket, would have to certain that the local people were first doing their best to raise local funds for development.” In Cameroon’s case this meant that any profit from the plantations, which had been nationalised after the war and had become the Cameroon Development Corporation, would be directed towards the plan in addition to the taxes collected by the Native Authorities. From the PWD monthly returns it is possible to see that the contribution made locally was not insignificant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Work carried out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tiko</td>
<td>4 new deep wells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamenda</td>
<td>New reservoir tank and an extension of the pipeline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bambui</td>
<td>Survey, design and construction of a pipe network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mamfe</td>
<td>Construction of spring catchments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kembong</td>
<td>Construction of two deep wells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lysoka</td>
<td>Construction of rainwater catchment tank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mpundu/Moli/ Missellele</td>
<td>Construction of spring catchments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bali</td>
<td>Survey and design of a pipe network</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Construction work on water supplies, 1950-1952**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1958</strong></td>
<td>£174,745</td>
<td>£379,975</td>
<td>£273,038</td>
<td>£14,252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1959</strong></td>
<td>£304,363</td>
<td>£309,651</td>
<td>£392,544</td>
<td>£2,105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1960</strong></td>
<td>£401,479</td>
<td>£123,098</td>
<td>£288,376</td>
<td>£91,508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>880,587</td>
<td>812,724</td>
<td>953,958</td>
<td>107,865</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total P.W.D. expenditure divided by source of capital

---

29 Minutes, 29th January 1954. BNA Se(1954)2
30 BNA, Se(1944)4, Ra(1950)1
On the basis of this plan there was a surge in investment in the last years of the 1950s and most settlements of any size were bequeathed a piped water supply by the time of independance (Table). The bulk of the money requested in the Development Plan was spent on roads\textsuperscript{32}, but £50,000 was earmarked for water supplies, £29,000 for Kumba, Tombel and Wum and £21,000 for other supplies.\textsuperscript{33} In total £0.4 million of grants were made available initially in addition to Community Development and Welfare funds and the Resident requested a further £1.148 million as loans. He was, however, frank about the likelihood of repayment: “Since the Cameroons is... unable to cover its present annual expenditure in a normal year from its own revenue, it is difficult to see from where the money for paying interest and refunding such loans would be forthcoming.”\textsuperscript{34} In fact the grants made to support these investments exceeded the initial plan by a significant margin.

The vast majority of this work was carried out by the PWD engineers employing direct labour. The Victoria scheme, which replaced the original German network, is interesting, however, because it is the first where both design and construction were tendered out to the private sector. In 1958, the contract for designing the new system was awarded to a British engineering consultancy\textsuperscript{35} and, in 1960, Micheletti & Son of Lagos, were awarded the contract to carry out the building work. The system was the first to include a full treatment works with alum, slow sand filtration and chlorination. and was completed by

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31}P.W.D. Monthly Reports, BNA Ra(1956)1
\item \textsuperscript{32}Chief Engineer, Cameroons Province (Armstrong), January 1954, BNA R(1932)1
\item \textsuperscript{33}BNA Se(1944)6
\item \textsuperscript{34}Resident, Buea (Harding) to Commissioner (Gibbons) February 8\textsuperscript{th} 1954, BNA Se(1954)2
\item \textsuperscript{35}Binnie, Deacon and Gorley
\end{itemize}
March 1961 and inaugurated in 1963. The money assembled by the administration used all the unallocated CD & W funds for Cameroon, which amounted to £37,750, as well as £8,000 direct from central government, £5,000 diverted from the budget for roads and £10,000 from the Victoria NA.\textsuperscript{36} When the NA failed to produce this money Lagos reduced the burden placed on them in order to ensure that the project was completed around independence.\textsuperscript{37} After four decades of inactivity the British administration in Cameroon was anxious that when power was handed over the infrastructural legacy was not an embarrassment when compared to German investments 60 years earlier\textsuperscript{38}.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Construction</th>
<th>Initial Capital cost (£)</th>
<th>Target annual renewals contribution (£)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>c.1903</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buea</td>
<td>c.1904</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamenda (hospital)</td>
<td>1945-47</td>
<td>3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bambui</td>
<td>1954-55</td>
<td>9,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamenda (extension)</td>
<td>1955-56</td>
<td>11,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nkambe</td>
<td>1956-58</td>
<td>4,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buea (extension)</td>
<td>1956-58</td>
<td>24,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumba Town</td>
<td>1956-58</td>
<td>23,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bali</td>
<td>1957-58</td>
<td>23,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jakiri</td>
<td>1957-58</td>
<td>8,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wum</td>
<td>1957-58</td>
<td>24,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumba station</td>
<td>1958-59</td>
<td>3,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamenda (extension)</td>
<td>1958-59</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mamfe</td>
<td>1959-61</td>
<td>63,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>1960-61</td>
<td>60,750</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The date and capital costs of water supplies constructed during the German and British colonial periods.

\textsuperscript{36} BNA Rd(1958)2
\textsuperscript{37} Because of reduced receipts from timber exports the NA’s revenue was declining and in June 1959 they were in debt to around £4,100. They planned to remedy this by making women eligible for tax.
\textsuperscript{38} ‘There are still those who remember the German administration. For the British to hand over this territory after 100 years of association and nearly 50 years of direct administration without having improved one of the main amenities of the principle town in the Southern Cameroons would, to say the least, be an unfortunate legacy for the future.’ SDO Victoria (Wright) January 1959, BNA Rd(1958)2.
The inauguration of the Victoria treatment works by deputy Prime Minister A.N.Jua in 1963
From 1961 to 1972 Cameroon had a federal constitution, and water supply came under the remit of the state of West Cameroon. The investments of the late 1950’s had generally established an adequate urban water infrastructure. The systems in Tombel and Mamfe were completed using funds from the colonial period. However, within a decade the infrastructure was considered inadequate. By 1971 politicians accepted the fact that “the only lasting solution to this vexed problem of shortage of water lies in the complete reconstruction of most of these water supply schemes on modern lines with provisions to accommodate future demands.” On the one hand this was because of rapid urbanization and changing water consumption patterns, which increased demand. In Buea, for example, increasing domestic demand was growing so fast that restrictions had been placed on water use by 1963. The Victoria supply, which had been constructed in 1961, was designed for 9,000 people. By 1972 the population was around 17,000 and the system was ‘highly inadequate’. On the other hand it was because the Government of West Cameroon was starved of funds by the Federal Government in Yaounde so that there was a shortage of investments to meet the new demand. The failure of the government in Buea to substantially increase the revenue from water rates reduced their

---

39 Two major reviews were carried out just after Independence. The first report was based on a 15 day research exercise by an American engineer (Besozzi), in September 1962 on behalf of USAID. The full report has not been located. Extensive extracts are available in the minute prepared by the Director of Public Works (Ndumu) for discussion in ExCo (15th October 1962). (BNA Rd(1961)2). The second report “Portable water supplies in West Cameroon” was prepared by Mr. A.H. Holloway, the Regional Community Water Supply Officer - AID-NESA in 1963. It pays particular attention to management and fiscal affairs but also reviews technical considerations. A copy of the report can be found loose in BNA Rd(1961)3. Hearafter referred to as the Besozzi and Holloway Reports.

40 Secretary of State for Urban Development (M.N.Luma) to ExCo February 1971.

41 BNA Rd(1956)1, BNA Rd(1961)3

42 March 1972, Director of Urban Development to Secretary General Urban Development. BNA Rd(1962)5

43 P.W.D. Half-yearly report, Chapter 3, July-December 1968. BNA Open Shelves
chances of raising private capital or qualifying for aid. The result was very limited new construction during the 60s.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Date of Construction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mamfe (extension)</td>
<td>1962-63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tombel</td>
<td>1963-64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buea extension</td>
<td>1968-69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamenda extension</td>
<td>1969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banso</td>
<td>1969-72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumba (extension)</td>
<td>1972</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Construction of urban water supplies in West Cameroon completed between 1961 to 1972

In 1972 the Federal constitution was abandoned and Cameroon became a unitary state run from Yaoundé. Though this was a decade of rapid national economic growth and personal prosperity for many urban households there was little investment in water supplies. From early in the 1970s it became clear that the Yaoundé government planned to hand over water management to a parastatal corporation. This move was to be accompanied by a complete rebuilding of many of the networks using money loaned to the Cameroonian government by the World Bank on the strength of the oil reserves that had come on line during the decade. The rebuilding required extensive planning and whilst this took place the existing infrastructure was allowed to decay.

---

45 In 1972 there was an 8 million CFAF. extension to the Kumba Water Supply. Cameroon Outlook, 22nd November 1972.
46 Deputy-Manager SNEC. (Dalmais) to Prime Minister West Cameroon (Muna), May 1971, BNA Rd(1961)3
From the late 1970’s to the mid 1980’s the water infrastructure was transformed across the whole of Cameroon (Table). The target was to supply every town in Cameroon with treated water that met WHO standards. The plan for the whole of Cameroon was estimated to cost 150,000 million CAF in 1981. Between 1980 and 1987, 100,000 million was actually spent. There were 19 individual projects in the North-west and South-west Provinces (Table) and 7,000 Million CAF were spent in the North-west Province as a whole. In this period almost every existing town water supply was reconstructed or extended, and towns that had survived with minimal water supplies in the past had completely new systems built. No existing urban system was left completely untouched, though in some cases (such as Kumbo and Buea) the changes were limited.

This phase of building was marked by several innovations. First, the work was done entirely by international building contractors though the quality was regulated by government engineers. Second, chemical water treatment was introduced to all the supplies. Third, the variety of hydrams and diesel pumps used to lift water was replaced almost entirely by electric pumps, thus linking towns more tightly to the new state electricity corporation. Fourth, having been reconstructed operation and maintenance was

---

48 Cameroon shares a common currency with Chad, C.A.R., Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. Together these countries make up one of the two blocs of the Communauté Financière Africaine, which was founded in 1939. The CFA Franc (Herafter CAF.) has been tied to the French Franc at a rate of 1 F.F. = 100 CFAF since devaluation in 1994. The CFAF was introduced to West Cameroon on April 2nd 1962 when it replaced the Nigerian pound.

49 Minister of Mines and Power (Yang), Cameroon Tribune 5th August 1981.

50 Minister of Mines and Power (Kima), Cameroon Tribune 3rd March 1987

51 Cameroon Tribune 26th October 1983

52 SOGEA in Kumba, IGIP in Muyuka (Cameroon Tribune 5th December 1984), Six International in Limbe, Bali, Tombel, Banso(Cameroon Tribune 8th February 1985) and Denys in Buea (Cameroon Tribune 13th March 1985).

53 Interview with SNEC North-West Provincial Chief of Production and Distribution (Njang Enow) Bamenda 10th April 1999.
handed over by the Government to a new parastatal corporation, the Société National des Eaux du Cameroun (SNEC).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Work undertaken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kumba</td>
<td>1978/9</td>
<td>Complete reconstruction: new intake, new treatment works, new reservoirs, new distribution system, new public taps, full domestic metering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiko</td>
<td>Before 1981</td>
<td>Complete reconstruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mamfe</td>
<td>1982-83?</td>
<td>New intake and distribution system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamenda</td>
<td>1982-84</td>
<td>Virtually complete reconstruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buea</td>
<td>1984/5</td>
<td>Extension to treatment works, new distribution system and public taps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bali</td>
<td>1984-85</td>
<td>Virtually complete reconstruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limbe</td>
<td>1984-1986</td>
<td>New intake, extended distribution, new public taps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tombel</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>New treatment works, new reservoir, new distribution system and public taps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muyuka</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Complete construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumbo</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Extension to the treatment works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mbengwi</td>
<td>? 1983-1986</td>
<td>Complete construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nkambe</td>
<td>? 1983-1986</td>
<td>Complete reconstruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jakiri</td>
<td>? 1983-1986</td>
<td>Complete reconstruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mundemba</td>
<td>? 1983-1986</td>
<td>Complete construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Njinikom</td>
<td>? 1985-1988</td>
<td>Complete construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batibo</td>
<td>? 1985-1988</td>
<td>Complete construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fontem</td>
<td>? After 1988</td>
<td>Complete construction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reconstruction of urban water supplies in the 1980s.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Cost (Million CFAF Francs)</th>
<th>Source of information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mbengwi</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>Cameroon Tribune 5th August 1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nkambe</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>Cameroon Tribune 23rd May 1984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bali</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>Herald 14th February 1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limbe</td>
<td>1,300</td>
<td>Cameroon Tribune 24th April 1985</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The cost of individual projects in the 1980s reconstruction

---

54 This table has been assembled from various S.N.E.C. Financial reports and from newspapers.
Two decades of neglect under the auspices of the PWD/Ministry of Mines and Power in the 1970s meant that by the early 1980s the urban population was ready for a change. However SNEC brought other changes to urban water supply which swiftly made it unpopular. It was much more commercially oriented than the previous management and started to introduce universal domestic water metering (including public taps which were charged to local government) and regular water bills for those with water inside the home and for councils. When faced with escalating water bills, both households and councils swiftly forgot about the benefits of this reconstruction. SNEC became characterised as grasping and ineffective.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Price of Domestic water (CFAF/m³)</th>
<th>French Franc Equivalent Price/m³</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1963-70</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>0.154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>30-70.5</td>
<td>0.6-1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>72.5</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982 (January)</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>2.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982 (April)</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>4.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The national water price rises 1975-1999\(^{55}\)

Since the mid 1980s there have been very few changes to the urban water infrastructure in anglophone Cameroon. A new intake and treatment works at Limbe (formerly known as Victoria) were opened in the 1990s, and a small extension built in Kumba, but otherwise the last 15 years have seen no major construction works in this part of Cameroon. Nationally most of the effort has focussed on Bafoussam, Douala and Yaoundé. The most significant material change to urban water supplies in anglophone Cameroon has been the slowly declining importance of public tapstands and the increasing importance of metered delivery to individual homes (table). However, this trend has stagnated in the 1990s when the economic circumstances of most households have made paying for a house connection increasingly difficult. Public taps remain an important means of accessing water, and preserving them from closure has become an active political campaign.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bali</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mbengwi</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wum</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nkambe</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jakiri</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumbo</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Increasing number of water connections 1978 –1985**

In summary then the story of construction is one of three distinct episodes of intensive investment, interspersed with long periods of little activity. The earliest state-run piped water supplies were primarily for the use of colonial officials and did not benefit Africans in any meaningful way. However the government was only one of a number of institutions investing in water supply, and the Missions and plantations probably provided more water to Africans. After 1916 the government dominate the story of infrastructure investment; the state not only raised the capital for construction (mostly through grants and loans) but it generally subsidised operation and maintenance as well. Water was initially drawn from spring sources, but river sources became more common after 1980. Slow sand filters were used from the outset, but chemical treatment was generally introduced after 1980. Electricity replaced diesel and hydrams for water pumping after 1980. Private sector participation in government-owned water supplies was introduced in 1960 when design and construction was handed over to the private sector. After 1980 private sector participation was formally intensified when the infrastructure was leased to a parastatal, which was responsible for operation and maintenance. As with most Cameroonian parastatals, however, this is not really an independent commercial body but

---

56 Ernie Efingani, personal documents
a highly politicised arm of the ruling party closely connected to government. Water rates were introduced in the 1930s, but cost recovery was only really effective after 1980, when metering and regular billing became standard and cost-reflective pricing was introduced. Whilst domestic connections have become more common since the 1970s there remains a very significant proportion of urban households who cannot afford to bring water into the home and who rely on public tapstands or on their neighbours to access the network.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1900-1916</td>
<td>Initial investment by German Colonial State, Missions and Plantations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916-1955</td>
<td>Minimal investment under British rule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955-1965</td>
<td>Intensive investment in the last five years of the colonial period and first few years of independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965-1980</td>
<td>Minimal investment under the last years of the Federal and the first decade of the Unitary constitutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980-1985</td>
<td>Very intensive investment as a preparation for the handover to SNEC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985-2004</td>
<td>Limited further construction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Community Development: water, history, ethnicity

The history of constructing water supplies that has been outlined has paid attention to urban centres. However there is another quite distinct narrative that looks at rural water supply infrastructure, and which is more concerned with community development. In this section of the paper the history of community development and rural water supply is
outlined. It is argued that the colonial model of community development introduced in the 1950s set out a template in anglophone Cameroon, which produced a culture of ‘self-help’ that saw contributing labour and money towards the construction of basic infrastructure not only as a pragmatic strategy for local progress but also as a citizen’s responsibility. This normative view was subsequently exploited by the post-colonial government and international non-governmental organisations to deliver most of the region’s rural water supplies at relatively low cost and with a relatively high success rate in terms of job completion and sustainable operations. Whilst advocates of participatory development might represent this narrative as a textbook example of the worth of community management of water supplies the third section of the paper will suggest that the merits of such an approach are more ambiguous than is often implied.

This history of community development was distinctly different from francophone Cameroon where there was no tradition of community development and where it was expected that government would provide the rural water infrastructure. In other words there was a longer history of central state intervention in rural infrastructure and development. In the francophone colony it was a citizen’s right to expect the government to supply services such as water. In this region water supplies were constructed later, usually in the form of ‘turn-key’ systems paid for by the government and provided by an international contractor. These have proven to be expensive to operate and difficult to maintain and there are high levels of system failure. So much so that in recent years the European Union has spent a considerable amount of money converting these electric pump and borehole based rural networks into networks supplies by gravity from distant
springs. These different colonial legacies override the ethnic differences around which so much of contemporary Cameroonian political and development discourse is constructed, including the contemporary community development discourse.

Most communities in the anglophone North-west are classified by ethnographers as structurally similar to those in the francophone West in that they are authoritarian and have a clear hierarchical structure and leaders (fons, sultans, chiefs and secret societies) who can deliver community compliance. This is viewed as distinctly different from communities in the Southwest, which have a less centralised power structure based around lineage and a less assertive tradition of chieftaincy.\textsuperscript{57} But since 1960 community development has proven to be successful in the Southwest and Northwest, but not so much in the West. The difference is better explained by reference to colonial history than ethnic structure. The fifty year long effort to assert the importance of community development in Anglophone Cameroon has had a significant result. This case study illustrates the way in which water history can be used to disturb dominant political ideas used to explain differences.

Formal Community Development in Cameroon stems from the British Colonial Development and Welfare scheme. This was enacted in Westminster, UK in February 1940 and aimed to increase local productivity in the colonies so as to “give their peoples a good life.”\textsuperscript{58} Economic growth and social welfare were considered interdependent and

\textsuperscript{57} This despite British efforts to ‘invent’ chiefs in the Southwest.
\textsuperscript{58}Circular from Resident Buea (Murray) to all D.O.s, 21\textsuperscript{st} February 1940, Buea National Archives (BNA) File No Sa(1940)1
an interventionist future for colonial administration was seen as essential. Though sincerely advocated by a number of officials in the Colonial Office, this vision was probably accepted by the Treasury because of its propaganda value during the Second World War and, unsurprisingly, there was little money to back the scheme either during or immediately after the War.

By 1950, however, community development was gathering momentum. In 1951 the Governor in Lagos announced “It is doubtful whether any greater service can be rendered today to the people of Nigeria than that of community development.” By 1952 the total planned expenditure on Community Development and Welfare in Nigeria was over £1.8 million and £29,000 was set aside for rural water supplies in Cameroon. E.R. Chadwick, who had been a district officer (and who had also starred in the film Daybreak at Udi, a semi-dramatised account of local efforts to develop a village in Nigeria, which won the Oscar for best documentary in 1950) was appointed to the rank of Resident i/c Community Development in the Eastern Provinces of Nigeria. “Community Development Planning” said Chadwick “must be planning with the people rather than for the people.” Elsewhere he expanded on this slogan. “By community development we mean the development of communities by their own effort and industry, and not

61 Community Development Bulletin No 8, April 1951 BNA File No Se(1950)2
62 Lagos Secretariat to the Secretary Eastern Provinces, July 1948 BNA File No Se(1944)5
63 BNA Rd(1948)1
64 Chadwick (1952) Pamphlet “A short list of quotations concerning community development” (Government Press, Enugu) Copy loose in BNA File No Se(1950)2
development of communities by government... our object is to induce in the people a
desire for progress and the will to achieve it by their own efforts."65

In part this approach continued the practice of listening to local people, which had always
been part of a District Officers brief. In 1940, for example, the Resident in Buea had
declared ‘it is for the District Officers to ascertain from the people what they really want
and from the technical officers whether these wants are practicable, and if so what their
estimates are.’66 The desire to achieve development by starting with villagers had also
been a long-standing colonial aim. ‘If we could approach the people in the villages with
the set purpose of helping them in local social and material development we should be
starting at the base and should surely win the co-operation of all classes.’67 However
Chadwick formalized this process and undertook numerous tours in order to talk to local
people. He frequently drew on resources from colleagues in other colonies, importing
films of ‘planned group farming’ from Kenya, and sets of photos from Northern
Rhodesia. In particular he was a great admirer of the pamphlets of F.L. Brayne, a DO
who had worked in the Punjab in the 1910s and who had subsequently written at length
about development in India.68 Chadwick purchased and distributed many of these
pamphlets amongst both colonial officials and the educated African elite.

---

65 Community Development Bulletin No 3, BNA File No Se(1950)2
66 Resident Buea (Murray), minute, 23rd March 1940, BNA, File Ra(1938)1
67 Resident Buea (Bridges) to Commissioner (Enugu), June 1947, BNA Se(1947)4
68 Chadwick, Community Development Bulletin 13, June 1952, BNA File No Se(1950)2
Chadwick visited Cameroon in October 1950\(^69\) and held a public meeting in Buea in order to generate interest in Community Development. He set out his argument that self-help development was a necessity for villages because of the government’s weak financial situation and because it is was morally wrong to do things for people which they could do for themselves. He explained that cash would not be given “because it may not be used for the purpose intended” and offered expertise and materials as an incentive in return for voluntary labour and locally sourced materials. He sought to generate a sense of competition by suggesting that other areas were progressing whilst those around Buea were falling behind and he claimed that community development was part of an African tradition.

The minutes suggest that much of Chadwick’s meeting was given over to discussion. G.M. Endeley (a traditional leader) responded warmly to the theme that community development was ‘traditional.’ He said that “his forefathers did community labour voluntarily and without pay. They cleared the bush around the village and kept the village clean.” Chadwick agreed with him and pointed out that provision was made in the Labour Ordinance for prosecution of those who fail to participate in communal labour.\(^70\) However, Mr. Kale (who went on to be one of the first generation of political leaders in Cameroon) disagreed, he said “that the idea of community development is abstract amongst the Bakweri people ...[and] that there are no village meetings at which one can

\(^{69}\)Minutes, 21st October 1950, BNA File No Se(1950)2

\(^{70}\)Endeley’s intervention is interesting. It has to be understood in the context of British attempts to invent Chieftaincy amongst the Bakweri, who were historically an ethnic group based on a loose association of lineages. By encouraging Endeley to speak first the British officials were providing him with the deference they hoped his clan would adopt. For his part Endeley is an active agent in the process of invention since he chooses to speak on the topic of ‘tradition’ casting himself as an authority.
persuade villagers to offer voluntary services.” A schoolmaster from Bonjongo also complained that it was difficult to educate the people to do voluntary labour “the people are so much drenched in their customs and beliefs that it is very difficult to teach them.” The question of the government’s responsibilities was also repeatedly raised at the meeting. As one contributor (a Native Court scribe) put it, “since the people pay tax to the Government, the Government should undertake to improve the villages.” Mr Nyoki, (the Headmaster of Bova N.A. school) appealed for a piped water supply and said that “as Government’s policy is to improve the people they should spend money for the purpose.” Mr. Teke (a contributor from Ekona) said that the community there had already collected stones for their water supply but, having told the relevant colonial officials nothing more had happened. “Government” he said “has failed the people.” Clearly, at this stage there were high expectations of the government.

It is easy to present a naïve and overly positive account of this participatory process. Clearly Chadwick had come to preach as much as he had come to listen. He had an argument and he wanted to convince his audience of the merits of self-help development. The discussion was a performance since he was unlikely to be convinced that the government has failed the people or that it was impossible to convince Cameroonians to give their labour voluntarily. Instead he was trying to persuade the figures present that rather than waiting for Government help they would be best served by beginning to work on local infrastructure themselves. In his own words he was ‘building up ‘morale in
backward communities so as to wake those communities up to a desire for progress to be achieved largely by their own effort and industry.\footnote{Chadwick, Community Development Bulletin 2, January 1950, BNA File No Se(1950)2}

Community Development emerged in parallel with Mass Education and it is unsurprising therefore that it was particularly concerned with the \textit{minds} of Africans. Much thought was given to the psychological consequences of colonialism and particular emphasis was placed on ‘sowing the seeds’ of self-help in African consciousness. Support was given to communities, who, in the judgement of the local DO, demonstrated a willingness to work for their own development.\footnote{Rural Development Branch of the Nigerian Secretariat (Lagos) Circular, 29th January 1947, BNA File Re (1945)2 "Town Planning and Village Reconstruction"} This aim responded to an interpretation of African ‘backwardness’ which explained the lack of progress in terms of the loss of self-respect amongst Africans who had for too long been under colonial rule. This was an argument that ran alongside a debate around the dangers of ‘detribalization’ that accompanied urbanization. The DO in Mamfe expressed this view clearly: ‘It is a sad fact that the people have no idea of self-help. The rule of an alien and wealthy government has induced in them a psychology of systematic pauperisation. If they wait long enough government charity will provide. To remove that psychological trauma we shall have to select villages for experimental work in practical self-help.\footnote{SDO Mamfe (Horne) to Resident Buea, 7th July 1947, BNA File Se(1947)4}

In the first few years of the 1950’s this determination to generate a culture of self-help led to specific forms of organising construction work.\footnote{In this earliest use of the expression ‘Community Development’ in this context appears to have been at a meeting on Mass Education at Cambridge in 1947.} Communities were to organise
collections of money and materials. Once this proof of their seriousness was demonstrated, they would receive further financial and technical assistance. Manual labour for construction was to be voluntary and would be organised within the village. Communities were encouraged to build whatever they wanted (as long as it was achievable) in order to maintain morale, before subsequently building what “experts advise them to create.” Ideally the projects would then be expanded and rating systems adopted to pay for the maintenance of these social facilities. Chadwick concluded that “it is a mistake to encourage a community to build some project... that the community itself will in the long run be unable to maintain.”75 Small, quick, projects which showed people what they could achieve were more useful than projects which took longer. Preserving morale also determined the government’s financial involvement. “If the people are given too much assistance their morale will be killed. It has been proved over and over again... that too much financial assistance demoralises and pauperises people.”76 Giving villagers money ‘kills the spirit of self-help.’77

The obsession with the ‘morale of communities’ indicates that Chadwick’s interest was as closely tied to the transformation of African as to the transformation of African material existence. “It is not the model village but the model villager who is our aim... We do not accept the view that better conditions must create better citizens; we wish to see better citizens working for better conditions.”78

---

75 Chadwick, Community Development Bulletin 2, January 1950, BNA File No Se(1950)2
76 Ibid.
77 Chadwick, Community Development Bulletin 10, April 1951, BNA File No Se(1950)2
78 Chadwick (1952) Pamphlet “A short list of quotations concerning community development” (Government Press, Enugu) Copy loose in BNA File No Se(1950)2
Whilst this policy was seen as ‘new’ from the perspective of the developmental state, community development was portrayed as something very old in the African context. Custom and hierarchy were to be respected at the same time as consciousness was transformed. Unpaid work for the benefit of the community was portrayed as a traditional practice. “Voluntary labour... keeps alive the best of all African customs whereby young people can render service to the community... The age-grade system and voluntary communal labour existed, as they say ‘from the origin’ in this region and should not be allowed to die out.”

Community Development was portrayed as a lost condition of co-operation, something from an African social Eden. This was an argument which was well received, particularly by traditional authorities – who had often been those to benefit most from the age-grade system in the past.

The main obstacle to the rapid uptake of community development was local hostility to the idea of voluntary labour. First voluntary labour was seen as a government trick for reintroducing forced labour. It was asserted that having paid tax there was no obligation on an individual to work for the government again. Second, Chadwick believed that many Africans, particularly those who were educated had no respect for manual labour. Third, it was believed that work given to development projects should be paid because the government was wealthy and could afford to pay for it.

Chadwick’s response to these claims was to focus on the responsibilities of both states and of citizens. ‘National Development’ including all the major infrastructural activity

---

79 Chadwick “What is Community Development?” Extract from Eastern Outlook filed in BNA file No Se(1950)2
was the government’s responsibility. ‘Local Development’ including the maintenance of infrastructure was the responsibility of native authorities. ‘Community Development’ was the responsibility of good citizens, who improved the material conditions of their own village. A central message in community development publicity concerned the limitations of the state’s fiscal capacity. ‘The Government does not have enough money to give every village what it needs... We often think that Government has all the money in the world. But this is not so.’\(^{80}\) But his argument was not only pragmatic but also normative. “It is morally wrong to do for a person anything that he could and should do for himself. People who such things done for them become degenerate and pauperised.”\(^{81}\) Community Development, he argued, produced not only a material change in rural infrastructure but also a deepening of community life, greater honesty, and less corruption.

The influence of the Community Development propaganda on the construction of water supplies in Cameroon was not initially spectacular. The first water project undertaken through community development was near Tiko in 1950.\(^{82}\) It succeeded even without the support of the local council. However, by 1952 Chadwick was complaining that the DOs were not giving sufficient time to community development and this is why “it has not really caught on.”\(^{83}\) DOs were blamed for the lack of interest. However it is more likely that by 1955 the unprecedented levels of ‘national development’ that were prompted by

---

\(^{80}\)Anonymous pamphlet “Community Betterment in Africa” published in the early 1950’s under the authority of HMSO. BNA loose in File No Se(1950)2

\(^{81}\)Chadwick, (1951) Pamphlet “What community development means in practice in the Eastern Provinces” (Government Printer, Enugu) p7 Copy loose in BNA File No Se(1950)2

\(^{82}\)Annual Report on the Progress of the Development and Welfare Scheme, 1950, BNA file Se(1948)1

\(^{83}\)Chadwick, Community Development Bulletin 13, June 1952, BNA File No Se(1950)2
the 1955-60 Development Plan and funded by grants and the profits of the Cameroon Development Corporation’s plantations made self-help development look rather trivial.

After independence, however, the rhetoric and strategy of community development was adopted wholesale by the Government of West Cameroon, which created the Department of Co-operatives and Community Development. As the new cabinet minuted, “there is a vast reservoir of voluntary labour which can be tapped once an organisation is established for the purpose.” Capital expenditure by the central administration became conditional on acceptance that a significant proportion of labour and materials were provided by the community that would benefit from the project. ‘Failure to supply labour and materials should result in a cessation of assistance.’ Among the most popular village level projects were spring catchments (small concrete boxes built around the eye of a spring with a single tap either at the end of a very short pipeline or in the box itself) and small piped water systems connected to a number of public taps. The first extensive water system constructed using community development was built at Ekona, on the edge of the plantations, with the technical and financial assistance of the Swiss Association for Technical Assistance (S.A.T.A). The system was inaugurated in 1964 (Figure).

The enthusiasm for this approach was not, however, universal. The engineers of the Public Works Department, who were responsible for urban water supplies, argued that some schemes were beyond the competence of the local community, because for example they involved chlorination. “Though the S.A.T.A. engineer believes that the…

---

84 BNA, ExCo Memoranda 11th April 1961
85 Ibid.
86 BNA Rd(1959)5
community can undertake their own maintenance effectively we do not share this rosy view... it does not seem feasible to us that this community that found it so difficult to use wells properly will suddenly be able to maintain such a complicated water system on their own.”

Their scepticism was in part a product of self interest; community development represented a threat to the PWD’s monopoly on engineering knowledge. However, there has always been an assumption that some technologies are beyond the scope of community construction or management, the question has been about where the boundary between community management and government management should be.

The inauguration of the first Community Development water supply in Ekona, 1964

As before Community Development was used not only to construct infrastructure, but also to articulate a vision of the relationship between citizen and state. After independence there was a steady stream of petitions to the new government requesting investment in the water supply infrastructure. Community Development became the chief
strategy through which government officials could respond, usually explaining why there was little they could do. On the one hand the requests reflect the expectations of Cameroonians after independence on the other the replies perpetuated the British colonial ideas about the capabilities and responsibilities of the state (see petitions below). Nor was this attitude restricted to the state government in Buea – it was also advocated by the central government in Yaoundé. ‘The government wishes in this way to break with the passive attitude that is due to the alluring concept of a Providential State... the Minor Rural Equipment formula is capable of initiating that permanent exchange of views between the base and the summit which the formulation and execution of the [Development] Plan demands.”88 The government wanted to extend community development into the francophone zone for the same combination of political and economic reasons. Existing officers from the Department were stationed in the West and the Littoral, but their efforts had only limited impact.

“The government is the father of all, and, as a father she can never get fed up with the continual appeals of her children. We hope, therefore, that this our present appeal will in no way incur your wrath as it happens to have been made on the constraint of certain unbearable circumstances, which humanly speaking, are beyond our control. To mention a few:- there has been a continuous exodus of schoolchildren from our dear N.A. School Bova which had been set up here by your government for the benefit of this community. Apart from that, most marriages have boiled down to abrupt divorces thus bringing to a definite halt the procreation of the human race in this sector of our dear Territory. The only reason for these divorces and school leaving stems from this water problem as both the women and the school children have to travel long distances to fetch water in order to live.”

Petition from Bova/Bonakanda to the Secretary of State, Ministry of Local Government, Lands and Surveys, April 1964.89

“My dear countrymen, now that we are independent and self-governing we have to work

---

88 President Ahidjo, August 1964, circular accompanying Federal Decree 64/DF/342. BNA Re(1963)1
89 BNA Rd(1963)1
harder than before if we are to prosper. This means that we have to use our two God-given hands to the full for, as the books of God say, Heaven helps those who help themselves. In the discussions that follow shortly I would like this idea of self help to come foremost in our minds."

Response from S.D.O. Victoria to Bova/Bonakanda petition, May 1964.⁹⁰

Though community development never really took off in francophone Cameroon by 1970 it was the dominant template for rural water supply projects in the Northwest and Southwest Provinces. The Department of Community Development, in co-operation with SATA, constructed around 100 water projects throughout West Cameroon before 1970 (Table)⁹¹. These were about equally divided between the acephalous ethnic groups of the Southwest and the more hierarchical and authoritarian ethnic groups in the Northwest. In this early period little distinction was drawn between the two in terms of their capacity to construct and maintain water projects. The capital for these schemes was gathered from a variety of sources (community, government, overseas aid). The local cash contribution was seen as crucial and was usually expected to represent about 30% of capital costs. In a clear echo of Chadwick’s words CD/SATA argued that “it is not advisable for the government to sponsor a water project from start to finish. This would induce the people to relax and what is more they might not think it is their place to care for it.”⁹² It is one of the most fundamental principles of this approach that “A community which knows it will be solely responsible for its water supply will be much more careful with its drinking water than if this were being managed by the Government.”⁹³ When CD/SATA schemes were completed few regular water rates were paid, even though they were formally

⁹⁰BNA Rd(1963)1  
⁹¹Cameroon Times 15th November 1975  
⁹²S.A.T.A. engineer (Weber) March 1970, BNA Rd(1964)2  
⁹³Director of S.A.T.A. (Kreyenbuhl), Policy Propsals 1965, BNA Rd(1959)5
adopted.\textsuperscript{94} The CD workers felt that the water was something which the community deserved to enjoy for free, because they had worked for it themselves. In technical terms CD/SATA schemes were always designed to minimise operation costs, for example by not including pumps or water treatment other than sand filtration.

\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Division} & \textbf{Water points (springboxes) built} & \textbf{Water systems built} & \textbf{Water systems under construction} & \textbf{Water systems planned} \\
\hline
Fako & 0 & 3 & 1 & 1 \\
Meme & 6 & 5 & 1 & 0 \\
Manyu & 3 & 4 & 1 & 1 \\
Momo & 9 & 2 & 0 & 0 \\
Mezam & 17 & 0 & 1 & 1 \\
Mentchum & 11 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\
Bui & 7 & 1 & 2 & 2 \\
Donga & Mantung & 17 & 1 & 1 & 1 \\
\hline
\textbf{Totals} & \textbf{70} & \textbf{16} & \textbf{7} & \textbf{6} \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

\textbf{C.D./S.A.T.A. water supplies 1964-70}\textsuperscript{95}

The rate of construction slowed slightly in the 1980s. This reflected the fact that (quite logically) CD/SATA undertook the easiest projects first, but it was also a result of the expanded central government scheme for the construction of rural water supplies. Using the income from oil, the Cameroonian State was able to engage Scanwater as a contractor to build systems across the whole country. This is generally regarded as a classic development ‘white elephant’ because it used the wrong technology (boreholes, electric submersible pumps, overhead storage) and established no effective maintenance system. Furthermore it undermined CD’s efforts to encourage or cajole communities into building

\textsuperscript{94} For example in the 1966 plans for a system in Manyemem, the Swiss engineer calculated the expected rate to be 600CFA/year for operation of the system which involved a hydram. This was considered so high that it threatened the viability of the project. S.A.T.A. (Kriedler) to Perm Sec. C.D. (Ekobena). August 1966. BNA Rd(1961)3

\textsuperscript{95} S.A.T.A. annual report 1970, BNA open shelves.
their own systems. In addition around this time, the Swiss advisers supporting the CD department tended to withdraw from working in the Southwest Province, arguing that the communities in the Northwest, with their culture of strong leadership were more capable of managing community water supplies. In this regard this particular sector reflects the broader ethnicisation of politics, which became increasingly blatant and formalised in the 1980s.

After 1994 the rate of construction of CD projects declined further. This was because the national economic downturn meant that communities were finding it harder to raise their cash contribution and because the cost of imported materials rose. Instead the CD department and its external support paid more attention to the maintenance of existing systems and the establishment of cost recovery within the community owned sector. Even so, where new water supply systems are built in the Anglophone part of the country the basic strategy (community providing labour and materials and a proportion of the capital, in return for external support), technology (spring-sourced gravity flow systems wherever possible) and arguments (community labour generates a sense of ownership, heightens community cohesion and makes the most of scarce government resources) remains the same as that of the early 1950s. The colonial legacy has been adapted to new circumstances and the precise words that make up the community development discourse have been appropriated to suit new contexts, but nevertheless it is the difference between British and French colonial ideas and not ethnicity which explains why community development is well developed in some parts of Cameroon and not in others.
3. The deployment of historical narratives in contemporary water politics.

The transfer of management from the central state to SNEC, a parastatal corporation ushered in a new phase of water politics. The new management with its corporate outlook raised the unit price of water to approach full cost recovery and introduced universal metering and regular monthly bills. When families did not pay their bills SNEC had few scruples about cutting off their domestic supply. This did not matter so long as those households could still access water from public taps in the street. However, when a local government council failed to pay their bills SNEC would close down the public taps too. From the perspective of both SNEC and the government, Cameroon with its oil wealth and its aspirations to be ranked as a middle income country ought not to rely on public taps. The demand for public taps was meant to fade away as more and more households brought water into their homes. But many of the urban poor were unable to afford to bring water into their homes, particularly in the early 1990s when macro-economic reform reduced civil service salaries and raised the cost of living. When it was finally acknowledged by the government and by SNEC that communal taps on the street were likely to be a part of the urban landscape well into the future they produced a new strategy. Each individual tap was leased to an entrepreneur; they bought the water from SNEC and sold it by the bucketful to consumers from the tap. This was a strategy known as the privatisation of public taps. Through the late 1990s SNEC struggled to increase cost recovery and the urban poor struggled first to keep public taps and second to prevent their privatisation.
In at least five towns in urban Cameroon this struggle escalated into direct confrontations between SNEC and local communities over the ownership of infrastructure (table). The first, largest and most well-known of these cases is Kumbo. Here a rioting crowd drove the SNEC officials from their office using stones and catapults. After the office was emptied it was looted and razed. The protest was finally halted when the military police fired into the crowd killing four people. Overnight the army occupied the town. Though the SNEC officials remained in Kumbo and issued bills the residents refused to pay. Instead they continued to threaten the individuals and they began to physically operate
the water supply themselves. They called for community labour to clean the spring intake and engaged local plumbers to reopen the public taps that had been closed by SNEC. They created a new institution – the Kumbo Water Authority, which was modelled on the rural community development model who took over the operation of the infrastructure and who have continued to manage the network ever since.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kumbo</td>
<td>1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bali</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tombel</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutengene</td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muyuka</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1998

Muyuka Community fail in their attempt to appropriate the infrastructure from SNEC

Kumbo
In Bali a similar process took place a few years later. In this case the ongoing frustration over rises in water bills, poor service and the closure of public taps was compounded by a failure of the water system during the *Lela* dance, a key annual cultural event during which numerous visitors as well as elite Bali return to their hometown. The protest march which began peacefully ended in violence and the SNEC officials were forced to leave town the same day. In the same year the women of Tombel intensified a long running campaign against SNEC using fear of witchcraft to drive out the SNEC officials. A peaceful protest, organised by a former community development official, brought together several hundred women. At the front of the protest four old women marched naked, a move which was intended both as an insult and a curse[^96] – and which along with

various rites (urinating on the step of the SNEC office, throwing down various herbs) was sufficient to force the official engineers to flee and never return. In both Bali and Tombel community water committees were established which took over the operation the existing networks – including collecting fees, though at a lower rate than SNEC.

In Mutengene the story was reversed. This settlement had had a community operated water supply since the early 70s, but because of urban growth the town had reached a size that merited SNEC’s interest. In legal terms once a town reaches a certain population the water is meant to be operated by SNEC as the state’s representative. The transfer of ownership from community to SNEC was to be achieved through a covert process of negotiation between the corporation and the community’s representative – the chief. This is usually achieved through a large cash payment direct to the chief. However, once the community discovered what was going on they barricaded the palace and refused to allow either the chief or the SNEC representatives to leave. It was only once they had the chief’s assurance that the contract would not be assigned that the situation was diffused. The water system continues to be run be a community committee up to the present.

In Muyuka there was an attempt by opposition politicians on the local council to take control of the water supply system. They were initially successful and used their party militants to intimidate the SNEC officials and drive them out of town. However, despite SNEC’s unpopularity they didn’t really have the support of the whole community which was politically divided in its loyalties. After a few days the army were brought in, the

---

97 The Herald 14th February 1994. ‘Juju’ is a general term referring to all aspects of witchcraft.
councillors arrested and the protest crumbled. The SNEC officials returned to Muyuka and continue to run the water supply there.

From the point of view of this paper, what is particularly interesting is the way that history was deployed by the communities in Kumbo, Bali and Tombel. In each case a history of the construction of the water supply was repeatedly used to justify the protests and to assert their claim of ownership over the infrastructure. In each case the narrative that was presented (to residents, journalists, officials and visiting academics) was carefully constructed and highly partial. In some instances this was a calculated attempt to present a reason why these illegal actions were morally appropriate and as such they carefully left out particular elements which did not suit their purposes.

In Kumbo for example the narrative emphasized the role played by the Canadian government, who had donated the pipes for the original construction work in 1970. This was presented as a gift from the people of Canada to the people of Kumbo, negotiated by a particular individual called Bernard Fonlon who was born in Kumbo, but who had studied in Canada before establishing a political career back in Cameroon. The protests in the 1990s had used a photograph of Fonlon and quoted extensively from his speeches as part of their rhetoric. In addition the people of Kumbo claimed that they themselves owned the infrastructure because they had paid for it in 1970 through individual donations and they had dug the trenches in which the pipes were put as part of their usual voluntary community labour. In addition it was claimed that individuals within the community had paid for the transport of the pipes from the coast. SNEC it was argued
had illegally taken what had belonged to the community in the early 1980s by bribing the chief (known as the Fon) of ‘Nso. Prior to SNEC’s arrival it is reported that water was free and only after SNEC took over that anyone had to pay water bills. But all these accounts leave out the fact that the Canadian donation was part of a much wider set of bilateral aid deals between two nation-states, that the Yaounde government produced a significant proportion of the capital costs for construction, that the bulk of the labour though provided by locals was paid labour and that on completion the system was immediately gazetted as government property and water rates were collected by the local council as part of the poll tax. In other words the accounts foreground the community’s role in the history and ignore the government’s role. It is not an untrue account so much as a partial one that has been assembled for a particular purpose.

Similar strategies were deployed in Bali and Tombel. In Bali it was claimed that the community owned the system because the original network had been paid for using capital that had been paid as compensation to the Bali by some of their neighbours in nearby Widikum. In 1952 the people from Widikum had claimed to have been provoked by land thefts and declared war on Bali.98 The British official who ran the judicial investigation into the ensuing conflict found in favour of the Bali and ordered the Widikum people to pay cash compensation. The Fon of Bali then chose to put this money

98The land dispute between the Widikum people and the Bali people dated back to the mid 19th century. From 1947-52 the Widikum people had tried to use legal means to claim the disputed land. When these failed they resorted to war. “On March 3rd 1952 about 5,000 Widikums, armed with Dane guns, spears, cutlasses, clubs, slings and stones, led a well co-ordinated attack on the outlying settlements of Bali from all directions. The Widikums burnt down about 1,000 Bali houses, looted crops, carried animals off and destroyed whatever was considered useful to the Balis, especially bridges.” Che Mfombong (1980) p262. Two commissions of enquiry followed. In one a fine of £10,000 was imposed on the Widikum villages (£1/1/- per adult male) of which £9,000 was paid to the Balis and £1,000 to the colonial government. In the other the government forced the Balis to cede 2,000 acres of land to their enemies in return for which they received compensation of £16,390. For an account of the dispute see Che Mfombong (1980) p.257-67.
towards the cost of designing and constructing the town water supply in 1957. On this basis the Bali argued in the 1990s that the infrastructure belonged to them. 99 However, the plans for the supply had been prepared by the PWD engineers before the Bali-Widikum war ever took place suggesting that even if their was a felt need for the system it was as much a colonial plan as a local one. In addition a British official reported that the engineer in charge of the project “had hopes of obtaining some community labour on this work, But I gather the Bali people are not very public spirited and show a regrettable lack of appreciation of the services which are being given to them.” 100 It is unclear whether the money paid by the Bali people covered the complete cost of the construction materials of £23,000. 101 The colonial government certainly paid the salaries of the engineer and of the paid labourers and masons who were brought from Bamenda to work on the project. 102 What is more fundamental, however, is that in 1982 when SNEC took over the water supply in Bali the entire 1957 system was disconnected. A new intake, treatment works, reticulation system and taps were constructed. So the infrastructure that the community claimed to own in the 1990s had been paid for entirely by a loan paid for the Cameroonian government. Even so, when interviewing in Bali it was the story of the Bali-Widikum war that was repeatedly invoked.

99 Interviews with Ba Tita Gwandiku Clement, Ba Tita Fokum 1st April 1999, Fokwang Fofuleng 2nd April 1999 and the Quarter Head of Bangu 3rd April 1999. Fokwang Fofuleng, who was born in 1917 lives in the compound nearest to the water intake and some of the masons who came from Bamenda to work on the project lived in his home. The derelict hydrams are still in place.
100 Provincial Engineer (Leach), P.W.D. Monthly reports. BNA Ra(1956)1 [Not in archives index]
101 BNA Rd(1956)2
102 Interview with Fokwang Fofuleng, Bali, 2nd April 1999.
In Tombel the claim for ownership rested on the idea that the project built in 1963, had been a gift to Tombel from the then Prime Minister, John Foncha. He had been touring the country prior to the first general election in 1959. When he reached Tombel a woman had stripped off in front of him to demonstrate her dirtyness, and had complained that though they would have liked to cook food for him there was no water in town to use to boil vegetables. Foncha had promised the people of Tombel that he would personally ensure that they received the water supply that they had been waiting over three decades to see. Almost immediately after independence the work on the system began. As such it was seen as a personal gift to the Tombel people and something which therefore belonged to

103 Various versions of this story were heard in Tombel or were told to me by Tombel elites in Buea in April 1999. I am grateful to George Ngwane for introducing me to the Tombel community in Buea.
them. As at Bali, however, the infrastructure that was appropriated in 1994 was actually largely constructed in 1984 and not in 1963. However, after taking control the Tombel Community Water Committee actually disconnected the SNEC water treatment works and returned to using the treatment system that had been used in the earlier period. In both Bali and Tombel it was claimed that water was free before SNEC took over, though in both towns the systems were owned and operated by the state and water rates were paid as part of poll tax during the earlier period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of ownership</th>
<th>Process of Legitimisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>Receipts, handshake, documentation, evidence of donation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>Transaction in cash or kind. Capitalisation of manpower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>Contribution to, or initiation of, production process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Contribution of work, long habit of usage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Different aspects of ownership.\textsuperscript{104}

In each of these three cases then, histories of the construction of water supply are actively being used in contemporary struggles over water. Stories are told that emphasize a range of different processes of legitimisation and which contribute to different aspects of ownership. Regardless of any normative judgement about the outcomes of the action that has been taken by these communities it is clear that these stories are partial. But a water historian who points out the omissions is unwittingly acting as an advocate for the Cameroonian state and its grasping and ineffective parastatal water corporation by undermining the community’s claim to ownership. There are many questions to be raised about the sustainability of community water management in Kumbo, Bali, Tombel and Mutengene. But there can be little doubt that the consumers are happier to pay community water

\textsuperscript{104}Schübeler, P. (1996) “Transfer of ownership in water supply and sanitation systems” (St Gallen, S.K.A.T)
committees than SNEC. In none of these towns was there any desire to see a return to state ownership. So just as the previous section argued that water history has the scope to disturb existing political discourse in a useful way, so here it is argued that water historians need to be cautious. They need to be cautious both in the sense that the narratives that circulate are highly partial and in the sense that enriching those narratives by drawing attention to their omissions is itself a potentially political act.

Conclusions

This paper began with a (largely unreflexive) account of the construction of water supplies in Anglophone Cameroon. This argued that construction can be periodised into a sequence of short bursts of construction activity interspersed with long periods of inactivity. The motivations for those pulses of investment are very varied and need to be understood in context. For example the German investment reflected long term ambitions for a relatively important colony during a period of economic growth driven by metropolitan private capital, whereas the British investment was motivated by embarrassment and was fuelled as much by local economic growth as capital transfers from beyond Cameroon. The final pulse of investment was funded by oil-backed loans and motivated by an ideology of modernization and a pragmatic need to assert state ownership as part of a shift to effective cost-recovery by introducing a corporate parastatal to operate the networks. The second part of the paper used the example of the community development of rural water supplies to show how apparently prosaic historical topics can be used to disturb the dominant political discourse in contemporary situations. In this case by challenging the idea that the
differential effectivity of community development can be explained through ethnicity and arguing instead that the colonial legacy is more significant. In this way the paper makes a claim for the importance of collecting historical accounts. Thirdly the paper adds a note of caution by drawing attention to the way that existing narrative accounts of the construction of water supplies that are circulating in current struggles and being used in contemporary politics are often rather partial. They lack the rigour that is expected of academic accounts, though they are often more alluring as a result. This is not to say that community histories are less ‘true’ than academic water histories, just to point out that perhaps they have different uses and that this something that we should be aware of as the water history of Africa is being assembled. It raises a query about the implicit distance of the register in which the first section of the paper was produced. Is my opening account any less partial or political than the accounts that are recorded in the third section?