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AN EXTRACT FROM 'MY EXPERIENCE IN CAMEROONS DURING THE WAR'[1]

J. G. Mullen, with annotations by *Stephanie Newell*

I. *THE GOLD COAST LEADER*, 14 OCTOBER 1916, p. 6

It was on the night of the 11th August 1914, when news of a great war in Europe reached us at Mbua[2] (a town in the South Cameroons, about nine weeks or more from Duala,[3] (or Kribbi) and that preparations were being made between the allied forces of the British and French for a war with the Germans in the Cameroons. Being a native of Cape Coast and a British subject employed in an English factory,[4] it occurred to me that I would fare badly at the hands of either the German soldiers or the natives should this news be authentic. The inevitable trend of events was evident if war really broke out, the natives being mostly cannibals, would attack all aliens, irrespective of race or colour and eat their flesh before any assistance from the German Government could be obtained. My agent was stationed at Njassi,[5] four days from Mbua, and until I heard from him, my sole duty was to remain at my place. There was hardly any signs of agitation noticeable in Mbua between the 12th and 14th August, but on the 15th the natives could be seen running hither and thither, with spears in their hands, removing their belongings to the bush, mysteriously disappearing and returning in a similar manner, with a seeming stern resolve to finally eradicate all foreigners. These wild ignorant people had long waited for this with wariness, and nothing could afford them a better chance than such an event. In a short time the whole country was thrown into a state of commotion so that by the 18th instant no woman or child could be

[1] A full text of the writings of J. G. Mullen in the *Gold Coast Leader* is available in the on-line version of this issue of *Africa*. The full text includes 'My sojourn in the Cameroons during the peaceful days: half hour's talk with Billy' (1919), the 'prequel' referred to in my introduction. The original grammar, spelling and layout have been preserved throughout the full text and this extract; *sic* has not been used. Many of the spelling errors would have been introduced after the submission of the manuscript: they are consistent with the efforts of a typesetter to decipher handwriting.

[2] Mbua (or Bua) is south of Baturi and east of present day Doumé.

[3] Douala.

[4] Merchants and produce traders in West Africa from the eighteenth century onwards called their stations 'factories'. A report from Kwitta (Keta), on the Gold Coast–Togo border, published in the *British Journal of Nursing* in 1903, described factories thus: 'We have several factories, as they are called – in fact, they are trading stations; the natives bring in rubber, palm oil, ivory, skins, &c., and receive in exchange either money or cheap cotton goods, beads, or other "trade" goods. You would be surprised at the weights they can carry; everything is carried on the head (except the babies), from a single box of matches to a load weighing from 60 to 80 lb. The women are the chief carriers, and it is amazing to see them, with a great load on their heads and a baby slung on their backs, stepping along as though it were nothing' (*The British Journal of Nursing*, 19 December 1903: 514).

[5] Present-day Ndjassi. This station was situated just outside the boundary of the 'South Cameroons Company's concession' area.

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seen in the town of Mbua except the men who appear and disappear concocting dangerous schemes, with surprising secrecy. Besides myself in Mbua there were the following clerks: two Kwitta[6] clerks with 26 yard boys, five Cameroon native clerks with 30 yard boys and two Gabon clerks with 6 yard boys. I had ten yard boys. All these people were concerned with the safety of their stores and preparing some means of defence, should the natives attack us. On the 20th August I received a note from my boss intimating that he had been arrested by the German authorities, and his stores commandeered and, that sooner or later, a similar treatment would be meted out to me, so I closed up my accounts, and gave up myself to contemplation of the future. The natives in the meantime, were blackmailing and marauding traders in the outlying villages, but hesitated to take any other important steps. The reason assigned to this, apparently was they were waiting till the German forces had passed to meet the French troops, who were proceeding from Molando Nola[7] etc. News reached us of the doings of the natives at Ndelele,[8] Bisom, Deligoni[9] etc, and it made the heart quail to see thousands of loads of goods, stores, etc and several traders passing down to Dume[10] station to seek refuge. One by one my boys deserted me, until by the 23rd August only three remained with me, ultimately even these three boys would not remain in the yard, and I was left alone with the arduous task of looking after the factory which contained goods to the amount of over £2000. Grim despair stared me in the face, and I lost my equilibrium for want of sleep. During the day, I took snatches of sleep, and at nights I kept watch and took precaution to safe guard myself against an attack from the natives. Several petty stores in Mbua were plundered by the natives; on the 26th August the German troops passed. An appeal for protection was made by all the traders to the German officers, but they were told to take care of themselves. The natives fled to the bush on the arrival of the German troops, and the German officers incensed at this action, ordered their houses to be burnt down, and their cattle seized. Next day the troops proceeded on their way. Nothing of importance happened to break the tension that ensued between the 26th and 28th but on the 30th on a dark and chilly night, I was awakened from a reverie by a slight noise at the back of the store. Being prepared for any emergency of the kind I took a large cudgel and cautiously walked to the back of the house whence the sound proceeded. As I anticipated, a man was strenuously working to force an entrance into the store. Near him lay a battle axe and other dangerous implements, and at the sight of me, he rose and taking a

[6] Kwitta (Keta) is a coastal Ghanaian town near the border with Togo, famous as a centre of commerce: its government offices, post office, court house and prison were housed in the Danish-built fort. Interestingly, nearly all of the clerks Mullen mentions in the memoir are West African migrants. The stories of these migrant clerks add an important layer of information to the social history of migrant networks, which tends to focus on elites.

[7] Possibly Nola in present day Central African Republic.

[8] Ndélélé is near the border with present-day Central African Republic.

[9] Probably Daligéné.

[10] Doumé.

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heavy stone flung it at me. It hit me forcibly on the knee, and inflicted a most excruciating pain, suppressing a groan I sprang at him, and dealt him a heavy blow with my cudgel. He staggered back but closed up with me again. I threw away the cudgel and in a moment we were engaged in a deadly contest. Nothing could be more horrible than the deadly means with which he sought to overcome me. He was a heavy man but by no means a good fighter. He hit out viciously, desperately but aimlessly, while I concentrated every effort to bring him to the ground. We swayed together, to and fro, locked in a tight embrace, but with an ability, which I afterwards failed to conceive, I wrenched myself from him and dealt him a blow right above the abdomen. With a loud yell he turned and fled. Pursuit was useless, so gathering up his tools, I took them to the house and repaired the damage which he had done to my store. Since then I was wont to be more vigilant than ever. Friends far and near, urged upon me to escape, giving as their reasons, that I was a British subject and working for an English firm. At first, I seriously considered their advice, but on maturer consideration, I deemed it imprudent to go away and leave the store unguarded. So I determined to stay through thick and thin. I may here cite one remarkable letter which I received in connection with this matter. It ran thus:- 'Don't be a silly ass and say your sense of duty forces you to stay and protect your store. You know how unreasonable the Germans are, and what would be your fate, should you fall into their hands. Your only chance lies in escaping, and I believe the greatest crime one can commit against nature is to be obstinate and refuse a chance in the face of a disaster. You are committing that offence now, and your guardian angel may be looking down upon you with pity and contempt for your act of folly. For goodness sake go, and may luck attend you.' To this and other subsequent letters I briefly replied thanking the writers for their advice and stating that I considered it injudicious to act upon them. One by one all the traders removed from Mbua, so that by the end of August only three important stores remained, including mine. About the 11th September, I received another note from my boss intimating that he was being sent down to Ajoa,[11] as a prisoner of war, by the Germans, and that I should follow at once. I dare not go, without the sanction of the German Government and I wrote to say so. On the 22nd September, however, a German official with three soldiers arrived to commandeer my store. This official first asked for the key of the safe which I handed to him. When I called his attention to the goods in the store, he said the best thing he could think of was to set fire to the goods, and put me inside to burn with them. 'Dem be shit cargo, and I no get no time for count dem!' he said, and then with a vehemence which alarmed me, this great German cursed me, the English, and everything connected with the English, and emphasised his words by kicking the breakable

[11] Ajos (or Ayos), east of Yaoundé, also referred to as Ajoshohe by Mullen in later instalments. On the British War Office map of 1915, a telegraph route runs directly through Ajoshohe from the main administrative port of Duala (Douala), terminating at Njassi Post and Telegraph Office in the east (see Introduction, Figure 1).

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articles in the store. This caused me to giggle, but unfortunately he looked up and saw me in this act, and after that he administered heavy blows and kicks to me, he ordered the soldiers to bind me up, and keep me in custody. I soon found myself in the hands of these unscrupulous soldiers, whose cruelty was proverbial throughout South Cameroons. All day they goaded me to pain and anger. They were indeed painfully jocular; they tickled me, pelted at me with stones, ordered me to lick the dirty soles of their boots, and to do all sorts of un-nameable things. The officer stood by in calm indifference to my sufferings; my mute anger grew till I felt I must choke; an innocent person kept in captivity for the populace to stare at, might feel as I felt. These torments continued all day and the least reluctance on my part to comply with their requests was rewarded with whips and kicks. In addition to this, the cord with which I was bound gnawed into my flesh and inflicted a pain beyond description. I cried aloud in my agony for forbearance and the louder I cried out the more the soldiers jeered at me. Gradually I lost consciousness, and then all became still blackness. When I recovered consciousness, the German officer was bending over me, and I was unbound. My hands were very much swollen; this officer, after a short reproof full of venomous invectives handed me a passport to Ajoa, and ordered me to provision myself for the journey, I made up two loads and that very night I left Mbua with my boys.[12] Great was my thankfulness to God for my wonderful deliverance from a torturing death, and from the hands of these wicked people, and as I repeated the 'magnificat' the only song of thankfulness that I could think of at the moment I said my last farewell to Mbua.

II. *THE GOLD COAST LEADER*, 16 OCTOBER 1916, p. 5

That night I camped nine miles from Mbua, and, at the first streak of dawn, headed for Jnassi,[13] four days distant. During the journey missiles would be hurled at us by hidden foes lying in ambush, but the unfailing hand of Providence shielded us. I travelled about 22 miles that day, and then camped underneath a great spreading tree for the night. On that night, about 11 pm, my boys having fallen asleep, I lay on my bed of grass, deep in retrospection – Life at that moment seemed so uncertain, so transitory. Five short months back, all had been well with me. Trade was good, and brisk, and lots of profit to be had. In blissful contentment, I had begun to think that life was all too short for some of those sweet peaceful times that come to every individual at certain periods in his life – It seemed to me, then, that nature had meant to repay me a thousandfold for those *little* mistakes I had made, and just as I was beginning to realize the meaning of happiness, war,

[12] There is a discontinuity here with the earlier instalment in which Mullen states that '[o]ne by one my boys deserted me, until by the 23rd August only three remained with me, ultimately even these three boys would not remain in the yard, and I was left alone' (14 October 1916: 6).

[13] Jnassi should be Njassi (that is, Ndjassi).

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with its train of disaster, affliction and pain, had suddenly intervened, wrecking my plans, and to knock me about like a weather-cock.

Thus I was ruminating over the perturbing circumstances of my fate, when I beheld three torches at a distance of about ten yards from our camping area. I crawled to my boys and gave them the alarm. I discerned two stalwart men carrying spears; their faces were expressive of murder, and they crept towards us slowly and silently. Suddenly, and before we could offer any resistance, they swerved to the right and planted their spears almost simultaneously into one of my boys with deadly result, and then disappeared into a thicket close by. The boy expired within a few minutes. The suddenness with which these natives accomplished this deed, dazed and stupified me. It was a dark night, and would be blinded folly to act otherwise than remain on the *uqi vive*. The ground being soft, with some cutlasses, we contrived a grave in which we buried the poor dead boy. My mind was set up in getting to Njassi as quickly as possible, so I left behind the load of the dead boy, which belonged to me and contained some provisions. On the 26th inst., I arrived at Njassi, and there I met several Coast clerks with whom I was acquainted. They gave me a cordial reception and sympathised with me for all the mishaps that had befallen me. I noticed that they were all enjoying very lucrative positions, as all the Germans, excepting three, had enlisted at Dume. An air of tranquillity pervaded the whole township of Njassi; the natives seemed good-natured enough and all was calm and peace. I gleaned that the natives of Njassi had formed no plot to massacre and loot the Traders, but it was said that the natives of the outlying villages were plotting and scheming, though it could not be determined what it was all about. No one, however, cared to be misled by the attitude of the natives of Njassi towards the Clerks and Traders, for it was known that as soon as the conglomeration broke out, they would join the others, so notoriously fickle they were. I walked through the streets of Njassi with a keen sense of satisfaction, and truth to tell, never before in the Cameroons, had I felt so disposed to all my surroundings. The cordial reception given me by my friends, the pervading air of quietude and peace that hovered around the town, exhiliarated me beyond words, and momentarily obliterated from my memory, the incidents of the last few days past. I spent two nights in Njassi, and on the following day, I left with the good wishes of my friends. On reaching the brink of Njassi stream, I turned and gazed at the town with a yearning heart. I had known that town for a year, and actually resided there on duty for three months, and, at this parting, fully recollecting the pleasurable moments I had had there, I could not help shouting 'Njassi with all thy faults, I like thee. Farewell.'

Three days from Njassi brought me to Dume, a large station situated on a hill, with walls which stood grim and forbidding. I arrived there on a Monday, and the crowd of people waiting to show their passports to a German Official, was thick and dense. I made several efforts to get through, but all was in vain. It can only be compared to a packed mass of humanity, which surged and swayed with the impatience of waiting. People were jostling and cuffing each other, gesticulating and shrieking

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in sharp piercing tones, in their mad and fruitless attempts to make way with their passports. No way in any given direction was possible and the more haste one made, the less he progressed. I followed closely at the heels of one tall man, a Kaka native, who, with majestic tread, and the strength of a giant, made way for himself by pushing the people right and left with an air of quiet unconcern. I kept close behind him, and indeed made good progress with him, but suddenly, my course was impeded by a Jaunde[14] man, who sharply slapped me in the face, and said, 'You be English shwine, *du sow.*'[15] I was momentarily blinded, and he took the advantage to deal me several blows. When I recovered from the shock, however, I caught hold of him, heedless of the consequence, so mad with fury I was, and smarting under the sting of the blow, I hit him right above the abdomen. With a cry of pain, he fell down, with his hands to his chest – what became of him afterwards, I do not know, for at that very time, I heard a familiar voice shout, 'Hello, Johnny, come with me this way, we will find egress to the fight of one of the chance openings. Mind yourself.' I looked up and saw a Gaboon[16] man, an old friend of mine, and following him, we landed in front of the Dume Fortress. As we were entering the Fortress, I heard the clanging of the chains of prisoners who were marching past another doorway. Some of them looked more like skeletons than living beings. Close by, there were also about a dozen of them standing near a cask, whilst one of them was stretched on it, and the *caskingo* (whip) laid on him hard and without mercy. The others were all waiting their turn to receive 25 lashes, with calm indifference. With my experience of life in the South Cameroons, I can say, that most of these people thus condemned, were the victims of injustice and falsehood. Some fraudulent German Agents, wishing to fill their pockets, had falsified some of these most unfortunate victims' stock accounts, and ruthlessly sent them to prison for what they had done. I say this with certainty and those who have been to the South Cameroons, would doubtlessly bear me out. And the soldiers' constant application of brutal treatment to these unfortunate prisoners, had rescued them from beings with morals, ideas, sensations, and feelings to mere pieces of flotsam on the stream of life which might be driven this way or that, with the current. Peace and mercy had been so often denied them, and they had by degrees become unhinged, and reckless, caring for nothing so long as life lasted. In the Cameroons, prisoners are more

[14] Yaoundé.

[15] *Shwine* is a misspelling of 'schwein', meaning pig or more contemptuously 'swine'; *du sow* means 'you hog', or 'you filthy beast'; it could also be translated as 'you scum' in this instance. Bertrand Harry kindly provided the German translations for this edition. Throughout the memoir, Mullen writes a simplistic parody of German; his language is very similar in style to the anti-German cartoons and stories produced by Britain as part of the propaganda war against Germany (see Buitenhuis 1987; Messinger 1992). For a detailed account of imperial language policy in German Togo, see Lawrance (2000). Mullen's comic-book German can be interpreted as a jibe at the colonial administration's failed effort to impose German as the lingua franca of the country: the language of trade and commerce, English, was impossible to displace (Rudin 1938).

[16] Gabon.

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or less solely under the control of the soldiers, who are invariably of very wicked temperaments. They treated the prisoners with a sternness that bordered on mania, and once at Baturi Station,[17] two days from Mbua, whilst on stock-taking, I saw a soldier order a prisoner to eat excrement, and the prisoner quietly complied. Had he refused, he would have been shot down, without hesitation, on the spot, and the soldier would only have to cut the prisoner's head, go with it to the Ober-Lieutenant in Charge of the Station, and in exoneration say this:- 'Massa! Good soldier done come! One shwine want run away, I shoot him. Him head be this,' and the great German would say, 'Ach! Meiner lieber You be good – Jah vek'[18] and thus the matter would end. Life was of little or no value in the Cameroons, and a soldier is indeed a bad soldier who does not occasionally kill a native, prisoner or otherwise.

III. *THE GOLD COAST LEADER,* 28 OCTOBER 1916, p. 5

I pushed my way as best as I could through the German Official inspecting passports, not without some trepidation though, for, as a British subject, I expected no more from the Germans, than contempt and reproaches and possibly 25 lashes. When I at length approached this Official with my passport, he cast a very severe and scatching glance at me, and asked – 'Nigger, was ist du, und was machst sie hier jetst?' ('Nigger, what are you, and what doest thou here now?')

'Massa, I be Cape Coast man,' I blurted out.

'Cape Coast, Cape Coast,' he said, 'You zink I be fool? You member I no sabe you long time palaver? I say vat for country you be? Na you talk quick ich habe keine seit.'[19] Uncertain how to reply, I stood pinned to the ground racking my brain for a fitting answer. The word Cape Coast somehow seemed to rouse his ire and indignation, and I felt at a loss what to say next.

'Donner, wetter Himmel Gott, how much for town, du sow, mench shwine,'[20] the German roared, evidently annoyed at my delay in replying, and thereat he whacked me on the head with a cane which he jerked somewhere from his Office. I writhed in agony. It then occurred to me that the Germans in Cameroons were more conversant with the

[17] Present-day Batouri, near the border with the Central African Republic.

[18] A pidgin English rendering of *Ach! Meiner lieber* is 'you be good'. *Jah* is a misspelling of ja, or yes, and *vek* could be a misspelling of weg, or away. The translation of *Jah vek* may be 'yes, take it away' or a more colloquial 'yes, now go away.'

[19] Literally, 'You think I'm a fool? Remember I don't have a long time for chatting. I have no time/I am in a hurry.'

[20] Spelt correctly, *Donnerwetter* has two meanings: 'Gracious me!' or 'My word!', when it is a response to an unexpected development or a realisation about something; or 'Damn it!' when it is an angry response to a situation. The latter is the most likely in the situation Mullen describes. *Himmel* means 'Heavens above.' *Du sow* or *Du Sau* is, again, 'you sow' or 'you scum', and *mench shwine* or *Mensch Schwein* means 'human swine'. The sentence thus translates as: 'Damn it! Heavens above! Good God! How long do I have to wait to hear what town you're from, you scum, you human swine!' Wartime caricatures of Germans frequently have them exclaiming in a patronising way, *Himmel!* (see, for example, Gilson 1916: 15).

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names of Accra and Sekondi out of the whole Gold Coast (towns at which the German-South Coast Express steamers called) and ports like Cape Coast or Saltpond etc., were utterly beyond their ken.

'Massa, I be Accra true born,' I hazarded, avoiding in the meantime, the incisive cane, with which this great German aimed at my head.

'Jah you be dem English schwine what make plenty big moff,'[21] he said, and initialling the passport, he hurled it at me. As I stooped to pick it up, again came the cane on my back with such stunning aggressiveness, that I groaned like a bull. He then called a soldier to chase me out of the port, and for more than half a mile, this soldier chased me, hurling at me stones, pieces of wood, and even some raw cassada which he snatched from farmers. When all attempts to reach me proved futile, the soldier with menacing gestures, turned and went away. I had reason to be thankful that I had a pair of good legs to carry me far from these wicked people. I hurried away from Dume until I overtook my boys who had preceded me on the Abongmbang[22] Station Road. It took two days from Dume to Abongmbang. Feeling thankful for having surmounted the persecutions of the Germans at Dume, I nevertheless began to entertain the dread of incurring some perils on the journey from Dume to Abongmbang up to Ajoshobe,[23] my destination, for my course, nine miles from Dume, lay through the country of the incorrigible 'Makias,'[24] a people who never scruple to eat the flesh of a man stricken with leprosy. These people cherish such insatiate fondness for human flesh that the Germans' stern measures and punitive expeditions have availed very little to wean them from their uncanny ways. With them, Cannibalism is hereditary, and nothing short of death, could prevent them from killing and devouring human beings. Now and again, people were reported as missing between Dume and Abongmbang or Acoulinga,[25] and none knew whence they went or what became of them afterwards. At times, however, actual reports of these inhuman deeds reach the German Government, and then fighting ensues. When it is over, there comes a lull and nothing happens for some time, six months at the longest. The Makias exhume and devour their own dead a few days after the corpse is buried, so deep-rooted is the habit of eating human flesh. They make no exception also to the Cameroon natives, but they infinitely prefer the flesh of foreigners, which they assert, contain 'much salt and plenty fat.' This reminds me of an incident which took place whilst I was travelling to the South Cameroons *via* Jaunte[26] and Bertua[27] in February 1903, with a Clerk

[21] A rough translation of this sentence is: 'Yes, you are the English swine who makes a big stink,' or 'Yes, you are the English swine who makes plenty of big mistakes.'

[22] Present-day Abong Mbang.

[23] Ajoshobe (present-day Ayos) is also spelt Ajoshohe in the memoir.

[24] Throughout the memoir, Mullen refers to the Maka people of south-eastern Cameroon as the 'Makia' and 'Makias'. The Maka region is marked on the British War Office map of 1915, running north-east of Abong Mbang (see Introduction, Figure 1).

[25] Present-day Akolinga.

[26] Yaoundé.

[27] Present-day Bertoua.

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from Togoland. We happened to pass through a Makia Country and the natives, on seeing my companion, who was a rather corpulent man, pointed at him and said, 'Look dis be fine meat, plenty salt live for him skin. Ah mien Gott! de white man he no gree we chop dem people,' and so longingly did they eye him, that their mouths actually watered with the saliva of expectancy.

As it will be observed, I was in no very placid state of mind when I thought of the journey that lay before me, for I knew not what fate awaited me. My boys seemed to be absorbed in melancholy reflection and they expressed their premonition, now and again, in broken sentences to each other. The only access to our destination was through the Makia Country, and there was nought to do but take the risk.

Evidently, the Makias between Dume and Abongmbang were not so voracious as those between Abongmbang and Ajoshohe, for although they accorded my greetings with scowls and imprecations, they made no attempt to assault or molest me. In two days, I reached Abongmbang station and having had my passport initialled (though not without a kick on the backside and a 'Gott straffe Englander')[28] I hastened on my journey four days of which now remained to bring me to my destination – Ajoshohe.

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[28] 'May God punish the English.' *Gott strafe England!* and *Wir haben nur einen Hass – England!* were common jingoistic chants in Germany. The latter is a quotation from Ernst Lissauer's 'Hymn of Hate': 'Hate by water and hate by land;/Hate by heart and hate of the hand;/We love as one and hate as one;/We have but one enemy alone – England!' (Welch 2000: 59).

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