

## HISTORY OF BRITISH CAMEROUN

The whole region of the Cameroons had originally been a German colony, seized in the eighteen-eighties as a 'protectorate' as part of the 'Scramble for Africa'. With typical – and sometimes brutal – thoroughness they had established an impressive infra-structure, governed from the capital of Buea in the South, later Yaoundé. Signs of their rule can be found all over the country in the massive stone-built forts and farmsteads which still remain. Following their defeat in the Great War this colony was partitioned between Britain and France, the bulk of the land mandated to France, and a rather thin strip bordering Nigeria up to Chad taken up by Britain. The French mandate was given the name of Cameroun, and the British that of North and South Cameroons.

These arbitrary decisions took little account of latent racial conflicts. There are more than two hundred and fifty distinct ethnic groups to be found in Cameroun. Indigenous groups include the Baka pygmy tribes of the Southern Forest, the Bansa based in the coastal regions, and the Bamilike from the Western Highlands. Then there are the muslim tribes from the North, the most numerous of which are the Fulani who rear their cattle and their horses in the Central Highlands. The incipient mutual mistrust among some of these groups – especially between muslim and indigenous tribes – along with the frequently insensitive administration often found in French colonies, eventually broke out in violent uprisings. In 1955 the UPC (Union of the Peoples of Cameroon), an outlawed group chiefly comprising Bamileke and Bassa tribes, launched an armed struggle for independence in French Cameroun. Out of this conflict, which cost many tens of thousand lives, resulted the Republic of Cameroun (1960). In February 1961 a plebiscite was held to determine the outcome for the British mandate, following which Northern Cameroon, predominantly muslim, voted to join Nigeria, and Southern Cameroon, with its varied indigenous population ceded with Cameroun.

Even after all the papers had been signed, violence still flared from time to time; and occasionally we would hear of 'terrorists', hi-jackings and kidnappings, especially on 'the French side'. A near neighbour had had a lot of trouble on his coffee-farm. It didn't do to drive across country at night, taking only the one car. I remember seeing a man being taken in for interrogation.

In those days South Cameroun still betrayed signs that it had been somewhat neglected under British rule. Everything looked a bit run-down: the roads in an appalling state, untarred, billowing with red dust from the exposed laterite; the office buildings also, tired, needing a lick of paint. Certainly not making any kind of colonial statement. Indicating a relaxed, *laissez-faire* attitude, sharply in contrast with the punctillious, officious manner – and indeed the beautiful roads – we encountered on 'the French side'.

Bamenda, superbly sited on its precipitous escarpment overlooking the rather scruffy town down below, could be described as a kind of hill-station, although its function had never been recreational. The German fort was still manned as a garrison, and several of the houses – including the Old Magistrate's Court in which we lived – were given over to administrators and their families.