

CAMEROON'S TYCOON

Cameroon Studies

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Volume 1

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Cameroon Coast, 1500–1970* – Edwin Ardener. Edited and with
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Volume 2

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Volume 3

*Cameroon's Tycoon. Max Esser's Expedition and its
Consequences* – Edited by E.M. Chilver and Ute Röschenthaler

CAMEROON'S TYCOON

Max Esser's Expedition and its Consequences

Edited by E.M. Chilver and Ute Röschenthaler



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Max Esser in his late middle age: a Studio portrait, reproduced by kind permission of the Prinzessin Ratibor. This portrait was used with others in Wilhelm Kemner's pamphlet, *Was wir verloren haben*, 1922.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- ABM – Archives of the Basel Mission Basel
ANY – Archives nationales Yaounde
BAB – Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde
DKB – Deutsches Kolonialblatt
DKZ – Deutsche Kolonialzeitung
GNK – Gesellschaft Nordwest Kamerun
GSK – Gesellschaft Süd-Kamerun
JASO – Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford
KLPG – Kameruner Land- und Plantagensgesellschaft
MDS – Mitteilungen aus den deutschen Schutzgebieten
WAPV – Westafrikanische Pflanzungsgesellschaft Victoria

PREFACE BY THE EDITORS

In March 1898 the *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung*, the organ of the German Colonial Society, informed its readers of the publication of a new book in the following terms:

‘In the Spring of 1896 Dr. Esser set off, in the company of two other gentlemen, Dr. Zintgraff and Herr Victor Hoesch, to investigate whether, and which, particular enterprises would have a prospect of profitable success in our colonies and to indulge in a bit of hunting on their way. The enthusiasm of the late Dr. Zintgraff had clearly provided the motive power for the expedition; Zintgraff had worked tirelessly for many years to develop the Protectorate and lived to see his efforts crowned with success. The travellers visited Principe, Sao Thomé and Cameroon, and our readers will certainly be struck by Dr. Esser’s lively report on Cameroon and everyday life in Bali . . . The travellers went on to Loanda, explored the little-known southern hinterland of the Portuguese colony and returned along the right bank of the Cunene river to Mossamedes via Tiger and Alexander Bays. Their explorations have since been picked up, from another point of view, and completed by Professor Dr. Wohltmann and have inspired new plantation enterprises along the right lines. The book is written in a sprightly style and is handsomely produced.’

A century has now passed since the publication of Max Esser’s *An der Westküste Afrikas* which he sub-titled *Wirtschaftliche und Jagd-Streifzüge* and which might be translated as ‘Business and Hunting Forays’. His book describes the early stages of an important development in Cameroon’s economic history, that of plantation enterprise on a grand scale and the labour migration it gave rise to. In the scramble for Africa a new imperial Germany had quite recently acquired a large land-mass with a barely explored hinterland sandwiched between areas under French and British

influence. Neither the men in the governing institutions of the Second *Reich* nor its thriving business community had yet developed very clear ideas about what was to be done with it and which were its most promising fields of investment. It was a good moment for reassessment of the economic opportunities it offered by an independent entrepreneur with good connections.

In 1896 Max Esser went to Cameroon for the first time. A young merchant banker, with a taste for adventure and hunting, he re-explored the prospects for a large-scale plantation industry around Mt. Cameroon: its people had been finally subdued in 1894. He then travelled the 'Bali Road' to persuade the *Mfon*, the ruler of Bali-Nyonga, to send labourers down to the coast. This was the first of several extended visits to Cameroon.

Esser's book is clearly intended to arouse more enthusiasm in its readers for Germany's acquisition; past and present colonial aspirations and an imperial destiny are described with fervour. It can also be counted among the earlier sources for the historical ethnography of the hinterland of the coast of the present South-West Province and the edge of the Western grassfields, coming as it does between Eugen Zintgraff's *Nord-Kamerun* of 1895 and Franz Hutter's *Nord-Hinterland* of 1902.

Apart from first-hand exploration and campaign accounts by Esser's contemporaries, published in official and learned journals, there are memoirs, a large array of specialist, especially geographical, literature and unofficial nostalgic accounts by colonists. After the Second World War the Colonial past was again re-examined, both from an ethnographic viewpoint and from a more critical, often Marxist or neo-Marxist one, in particular as the wealth of the reassembled colonial archives began to be appreciated. At present the roots, or rather, rhizomes, to borrow J-F. Bayart's metaphor, of the post-colonial, multi-ethnic state are again attracting the political economists as capitalism is re-invented and African scholars become increasingly involved in the interpretation of the past in the present.

But we shall not be attempting an analysis of past writings, still less of the amply-documented contests of the historians, but return the reader to the beginnings of an important development in the person of one of its pioneers, whose appearance on the Cameroon scene coincided with metropolitan situations conducive to speculative overseas investment, given a bit of luck and the right connections. We give Esser's account of it and of some of the consequences as they appeared to contemporary observers in the fifteen years following the inception of his grand plantation plan.

There were longer-term consequences. One was the creation of a modernised agro-industrial sector in isolation from Nigeria on the one hand, and relatively remote from the later centre of political power and patronage in Yaounde on the other. The social and demographic effects of labour migration can be followed in E.W. Ardener's publications (some conveniently collected in Volume 1 of this series). For another we could point to the cost and difficulty of maintaining what can still be viewed as the 'Road to Bali', an old problem casting a backward shadow, crossing, as it does, corrugated forest country to climb a steep escarpment, at least for as long as the 'Bali lands' remained a major source of labour and other easier routes were not developed.

EDITORIAL NOTE

This book is divided into three parts, and Appendices. Part I is an essay by Ute Röschenhaler in which Max Esser's family connections and life history are explored, to the extent it has been possible to recover them.

In Part II we have presented a literal translation of that part of Esser's book which deals with his expedition to Bali-Nyonga, his agreement with its ruler to supply labour to his projected plantation company and his return journey.

Parts of his other chapters are summarized. Summarized parts have been indicated by square brackets. Why did we not translate this 225-page work entire? The summarized parts are often not of direct interest to Cameroon Studies, including his studies of the Portuguese islands of Príncipe and Sao Thomé and his travels in Angola on behalf of his backers. Some of them, too, consist of repetitive descriptions and reflexions which, in our opinion, added little or no information.

The Notes refer to Esser's sources of information, contemporary accounts and opinions, later assessments, some biographical details of other actors and later ethnographic references and identifications.

Part III consists of five short annotated translated texts – contemporary documents from archival or old published sources dealing with the crucial question of labour supply from the hinterland, starting with the state of the 'Bali Road' in the last days of Zintgraff's expedition and ending with the situation as seen by the Station Commander of the Bamenda Military Station in 1913. The 'opening up' of the hinterland also opened a Pandora's box of questions, including those of competition between incompatible German interests. The rendering of toponyms and ethnonyms in earlier reports presents quite a few puzzles, not only because of different

realizations by contemporary interpreters but because of misreadings of hand-written reports and the likelihood of occasional typographical errors. Our own identifications are shown in square brackets.

Finally we have two Appendices. The first deals with the 'Esser Affair' touched on in Röschenhaler's essay and some of its reverberations. The second deals with the trophies Esser brought back from his travels and presented to the Linden Museum, Stuttgart, then in process of formation. Some quite intriguing issues arise. Our Select Bibliography includes a few of the bibliographical works we have found helpful.

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Eben of Manyemen; Chief Enaw Benson Ebai of Talangaye; Chief Andreas Akame of Babensi I; Chief A. Fobia IV traditional ruler of Nguti, and his wife.

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PART I

The Setting, Public and Private

CHAPTER 1

Max Esser: His Life and Labours

Ute Röschenhaler

The answer to the question ‘What do we know about Max Esser’ is all too little. His book, published in a fine illustrated edition by his brother-in-law Albert Ahn, provides few clues to his life and background. His comparisons between the costumes he devises to please the ruler of Bali with those of the Cologne carnival might identify him as a Rhinelander. From his book, we can also pick up the fact that he had learned musketry drill during his military service.

We know of Esser’s leading role in the establishment of large-scale cocoa and other plantations on the coastal mountain range of Cameroon from colonial memoirs, for example, those of Jesco von Puttkamer (1912), Theodor Seitz (1927/29) and Wilhelm Kemner (1922, 1937/41), from the federal German archives and from company reports. Kemner, Esser’s successor as managing director of the main plantation enterprise he created, the *Westafrikanische Pflanzungsgesellschaft* ‘Victoria’ (WAPV), describes him as a bold, far-sighted and energetic man, and explicitly acknowledges his venturesomeness as an investor. The Cameroonian economist Dr Simon Epale (1985), looking back to the forerunners of the Cameroon Development Corporation, refers to his able direction.

Max Esser was almost certainly the most noteworthy capitalist who appeared in person on the Cameroon scene during the German period. Historians of colonialism see Esser in quite another light, as a man whose activity could not fail to enserf or impoverish the peoples of the mountain by occupying so much of their land, and whose search for a cheaper local work force inevitably gave rise