

AMBIGUOUS SPACES: THE STRUGGLE OVER  
AFRICAN IDENTITIES AND URBAN  
COMMUNITIES IN COLONIAL DOUALA, 1914–45\*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the relationship between experiences and the physical and discursive constructions of space in colonial urban settings. African immigrants and the colonial regime imagined Douala's immigrant quarter, New Bell, as an African space but the actual meaning of this classification was highly fluid over time. Colonial ineffectiveness in approaching New Bell was evidenced by half-hearted and flawed surveillance efforts including the failed use of identity cards, informants and pass laws. Residents maintained a sense of autonomy within the space of New Bell, and remained largely ignorant or apathetic toward colonial law within the quarter, ultimately enabling the community to thrive.

**KEY WORDS:** Cameroon, colonial, migration, urban, crime.

THE important links between experiences and the physical and discursive constructions of space require more attention, particularly in urban-based histories. While the concept of space has become a historiographic and theoretical catch phrase, the metaphoric use of space has been a more appealing subject of inquiry than have actual physical spaces in Africa.<sup>1</sup> The focus on specific groups and individual Africans living in cities without considering the physical spaces in which they lived, and how the evolution of these spaces infringed upon or enabled their decision-making, ignores an essential aspect of city living, particularly in the era of colonial modernist urban planning.

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<sup>1</sup> An example is Anne McClintock's description of the colonial conquest: 'Since indigenous peoples are not supposed to be spatially there – for lands are "empty" – they are symbolically displaced onto what I call *anachronistic space*' (emphasis in the original): Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York, 1995), 30. Some important exceptions are John and Jean Comaroff's examination of missionary efforts to reorder the spatial organization of villages and homesteads as a precursor to installing nuclear households in Tswana society, and Anne Kelk Mager's recent exploration of the construction of gender in the specific space of the Ciskei. Neither study examines the uniquely complex and textured landscapes of urban spaces, or the relationship between city spaces and history. John L. and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (2 vols.) (Chicago, 1997); Anne Kelk Mager, *Gender and the Making of a South African Bantustan: A Social History of the Ciskei, 1945–1959* (Portsmouth NH, 1999).



Map 1. Douala, 1957. *Source:* adapted from map in René Gouellain, *Douala : ville et histoire* (Paris, 1975), 384.

But spaces are not fixed, and the mapping of places as they are made and remade provides us with important insights into relationships of power operating in bounded locations and changing over time. David Harvey argues that the description of identities and entities as they operate in particular spaces enables us to prioritize process and flux over fixity and continuity.<sup>2</sup> Harvey claims that individuals and groups constantly invest spaces and identities with value and what he terms ‘permanences’, which ultimately organize and direct social life. Thus, rather than describing the value and meaning of space as fixed, the historian’s task is to uncover the *process*

<sup>2</sup> David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Oxford, 1996), 7–8.

through which certain spaces take on value, and to understand that this process is actually a 'pivot for diverse forms of socio-ecological action'.<sup>3</sup>

This article will examine how Africans and the colonial administration made and remade the space of New Bell, Douala's immigrant quarter, from its creation in 1914 until the end of World War II. African immigrants and the colonial regime imagined New Bell as an African space, and the physical and discursive constructions of New Bell reflected this categorization. However, the actual meaning of this classification was deeply contested and highly fluid. Archival material from the period reveals changes in colonial perceptions of New Bell over time, but provides little insight into the evolution of local perceptions regarding the quarter. Oral interviews conducted in Cameroon from December 1998 to March 1999 with residents who lived in New Bell during the interwar period offer perspectives missing from colonial records. As will be seen below, the ambiguity of local and colonial designations of 'African space' enabled both African residents and French officials to reinvent New Bell and its community to meet evolving needs.

In designating New Bell an African space, the French were initially unenthusiastic about approaching, mapping or controlling the quarter, and the absence of necessary resources during the interwar years also played a hand in determining the colonial relationship to New Bell. But as the unmonitored flow of people, goods and information in and out of the quarter posed incessant challenges to colonial agenda, the French were forced to reinvent their approach, with the goal of bounding New Bell into a discernible, manageable entity. Yet the persistent perception of the quarter as an African space led to hesitation in the administration's efforts to reconstruct New Bell into an image of compliance. Thus, throughout the period prior to the end of World War II, when the French administration suffered from acute shortages in resources throughout Cameroon, the colonial ability and desire to control New Bell were incomplete, resulting in an uneven establishment of rule. Thus, the history of failed French policy in New Bell confirms the significance of specific spaces and places in configuring colonialism and the experiences of Africans living under colonial rule.

#### BEGINNINGS: THE COLONIAL CONSTRUCTION OF NEW BELL

Douala provides a window into the history of colonialism in Cameroon. The colonial presence was perhaps more conspicuous in the port city than anywhere else in the territory because throughout the periods of both German (1884–1914) and French (1916–60) rule, Douala was the economic capital and an important administrative center. Douala was also the scene of a dramatic struggle led by the indigenous population of the city, the Duala people, against colonial urbanization policies. Living alongside the Duala was the immigrant community of New Bell. This community grew steadily and constituted a significant force in the city, probably equaling the Duala in number by the 1920s, and definitively outnumbering the indigenous population by the end of World War II. Despite the gradual economic, political and numeric marginalization of the Duala elite in the city, the history of the anti-colonial activity of the Duala has dominated studies of the city

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 11.

in the era prior to World War II, making the 'history' of Douala equivalent to that of the Duala elite throughout the colonial period.<sup>4</sup> An examination of the creation and growth of the community of immigrants living in New Bell can begin to correct this historiographic imbalance.<sup>5</sup>

The Strangers Quarter of New Bell was created by the German colonial administration in 1914 as part of an extensive urbanization plan for Douala.<sup>6</sup> The cornerstone of this plan was the goal of reserving the city center for Europeans by relocating the local Duala and the growing population of African strangers to the outskirts.<sup>7</sup> New African neighborhoods were to be established a few kilometers inland from the coast, separated from the European quarters by a one kilometer-wide Free Zone. Duala protests against the plan stalled its implementation, and the outbreak of World War I prevented its completion. In early 1914, the Germans succeeded in relocating the stranger population into New Bell, before being ousted from Douala in September by Allied forces.<sup>8</sup> The French administration, established in 1916, adopted the German policy.

It is extremely difficult to assess the exact size or socio-economic profile of the stranger population of Douala throughout the colonial period, particularly in the interwar era. As will be seen below, this is because many strangers evaded the administration's control. In light of the lack of official records from this era, we can only rely on trace information found in colonial

<sup>4</sup> New Bell has received significant attention in the historiography of Cameroon only for the post-World War II era, when incidents of political unrest and nationalist organizing were noted among the working class and the unemployed of the quarter. See, e.g., Richard Joseph, *Radical Nationalism in Cameroun: Social Origins of the UPC Rebellion* (Oxford, 1977).

<sup>5</sup> The very construction of a research agenda centered around New Bell signified an important intervention in the historiography of Douala, but access to this history required the use of methodology not previously employed within this field. The archival sources used in this study came primarily from two locations, Archives Nationales du Cameroun (Yaounde) and Archives Nationales, Section d'Outre Mer (Aix-en-Provence). Together, these archives provide substantial material on the history of New Bell, but must be read 'against the grain', to uncover information about the everyday lives and experiences of past residents of the quarter. In addition to colonial documents, a considerable portion of sources emerged in the collection of more than fifty oral histories in New Bell, from December 1998 to March 1999. This was the most comprehensive attempt made to date by an historian at collecting oral histories among residents of the quarter.

<sup>6</sup> The German plan for the expropriation of Duala and immigrant populations from land in the city center has been dealt with extensively in numerous studies. See Ralph Austen and Jonathan Derrick, *Middlemen of the Cameroons Rivers: The Duala and their Hinterland, c. 1600–c. 1960* (Cambridge, 1999); Andreas Eckert, *Grundbesitz, Landkonflikte und kolonialer Wandel: Douala 1880 bis 1960* (Stuttgart, 1999); Jonathan Derrick, 'Douala under the French Mandate, 1916 to 1936' (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1979); René Gouellain, *Douala: ville et histoire* (Paris, 1975); Victor LeVine, *The Cameroons: From Mandate to Independence* (Berkeley, 1964); Harry S. Rudin, *Germans in the Cameroons 1884–1914* (New Haven, 1968).

<sup>7</sup> Similar strategies have been noted by historians of several colonial cities. See David M. Anderson and Richard Rathbone, *Africa's Urban Past* (Portsmouth NH, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> The Duala refused to live in New Bell, adhering to their pre-colonial settlement pattern based on villages. Cultural norms defined New Bell as *kotto* land with no access to waterways, and therefore fit only for slaves. See Ralph Austen, 'Slavery and the slave trade on the Atlantic Coast: the Duala of the Littoral', *Paideuma*, 41 (1995), 127–52.

documents from this period, combined with the more abundant records pertaining to the community in the postwar period, to paint a partial picture of the community of strangers before the war.

It is evident, however, that immigrants began arriving in Douala in large numbers during the German period and constituted a clear majority of the African population by 1930, if not earlier. Immigrants originated from the interior of Cameroon, as well as from other West and Central African colonies. They had manifold economic, political and social objectives. During the German period, they came mostly from Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Dahomey and Togo. Hausa traders and artisans from Cameroon and beyond also began arriving in significant numbers, using Douala as their base for long-distance caravan commerce.<sup>9</sup> With the French Mandate, African government clerks and merchants came from Senegal and Guinea. Immigrants from within Cameroon represented over 200 ethnic groups, with large concentrations of Beti, Bassa, Bamileke and Hausa. Most came voluntarily, as employees of large commerce houses or the colonial administration, but others were brought to the city as prisoners, soldiers or forced laborers.<sup>10</sup> Many found work within the colonial economy as dockworkers, porters, manual laborers and junior civil servants, but most earned their livelihood in New Bell's 'unofficial' economy as artisans, petty merchants, prostitutes and alcohol brewers. Despite the general shortage of accurate statistics, various sources reveal that the vast majority of the stranger population were not employed in the colonial economy. For example, the colonial annual report on Douala for 1929 cited approximately 6,000 immigrants employed in colonial enterprises, while a report from a campaign against sleeping sickness that same year estimated the stranger population as exceeding 20,000.<sup>11</sup> As the population of New Bell grew, so too did an independent local economy with New Bell-based employment opportunities.

The colonial administration's inability to secure this labor force for its own purposes was a source of great frustration and disdain, as illustrated by the following excerpt from the 1929 report:

The need for manpower is practically limitless. All those willing can find work, unemployment is unknown. Certain professions, serving an indigenous clientele, have grown beyond normal proportions for a city like Douala, indicating an evolution of superfluous needs: photographers, tailors, jewelers, shoe-makers, bakers, hatters, transport workers, and various retailers such as grocers, haberdashers, hosiery shops, and hardware stores.<sup>12</sup>

The inability to mobilize this workforce was directly linked to the vision of New Bell in the colonial conceptual and physical mapping of space in Douala.

From its very creation, the German administration imagined New Bell as a purely African space—a home to the native Other, contained and designated for the natural, pre-modern lifestyle of Africans.<sup>13</sup> Within the

<sup>9</sup> Archives Nationales du Cameroun-Fonds Français (hereafter ANC-FF) VT 38/17, Population Exodus, 1917–25. <sup>10</sup> ANC-FF VT 38/17, Population Exodus, 1917–25.

<sup>11</sup> Gouellain, *Douala*, 220; Derrick, 'Douala under the French Mandate', 356.

<sup>12</sup> ANC-FF APA 10005/A, Annual Report, Circonscription of Douala, 1929.

<sup>13</sup> As Dr. Kuhn wrote, 'They can dance at night, scream and play the drums, and cook to their hearts' desire all those dishes they love over there, and they will not have to

quarter Africans exercised limited autonomy, and the design of New Bell by German planners aimed to guarantee the vital role its residents were to play as the primary labor source for the urban colonial economy. Thus, make-shift housing was provided and a minimal infrastructure of roads was built, facilitating the flow of workers to colonial enterprises. A native prison was also built in New Bell, to replace one located near to European quarters, thus maintaining a distance between Europeans and an African criminal element, and serving as a concrete disciplinary reminder to the African population.<sup>14</sup> African criminality was assumed in this spatial configuration. Perhaps most reflective of the colonial agenda regarding New Bell was the establishment of the leper colony in the quarter, staffed by one native nurse.<sup>15</sup>

The French adoption of the German vision of New Bell as an African space engendered their initially nonchalant attitude toward the quarter. Within certain limits, New Bell could develop outside colonial scrutiny. French policy sanctioned this status when in 1925 the formal borders of the city were established, excluding New Bell from Douala proper. Governor Marchand offered the following rationale: 'We would certainly encounter difficulties if this quarter were included in Douala, forcing us to undertake urbanization projects there, particularly the building of roads'.<sup>16</sup> The Picanon Inspection Report of 1926 echoed this sentiment, proclaiming, 'The administration has no need for New Bell, located far enough away from the European quarter as to pose no threat to its growth'.<sup>17</sup> Once New Bell was removed from the Douala municipality, a detailed, mapped awareness of that space became superfluous. Although New Bell was described as densely populated in 1920, and the most populated African quarter by 1930, no map of the quarter was drawn until 1950 and no census taken until 1956.<sup>18</sup>

The strangers of New Bell established their presence in a spirit of temporality, haphazardly creating living quarters and neighborhoods to meet immediate needs using limited resources. Unlike in Duala and in European quarters, land in New Bell was never privately owned. In the early colonial period, with land readily available, residents simply claimed plots and built huts. As new communities grew, and hierarchies of power sprang up, colonial appointed chiefs would claim control over specific tracts of unclaimed land, requiring newcomers to obtain permission to build. But the native chiefs' control was incomplete at best, particularly in the interwar years, when the first chiefs were drawn from those immigrants who demonstrated strong loyalty to the regime.<sup>19</sup> The stranger population reluctantly recognized the

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constantly struggle to maintain their customary lifestyle'. Archives Nationales, Section d'Outre Mer, Aix-en-Provence (hereafter ANSOM) FM/SG/TGO31/288, the Humboldt Report, 1919-20.

<sup>14</sup> ANSOM FM/AGEFOM929/2920, Exposé historique de l'expropriation de Douala, 13 Mar. 1914.

<sup>15</sup> ANC-FF NF 891, Santé Divers, 1922-9, Projet de réorganisation des services sanitaires de Douala, 11 July 1921.

<sup>16</sup> ANC-FF DOM 510, Lotissements et aménagements des centres urbains 1925-46, 6 June 1925. <sup>17</sup> ANSOM FM/AGEFOM929/2922, Picanon Inspection, 20 Dec. 1926.

<sup>18</sup> ANSOM FM/AGEFOM929/2921, Terrains expropriés par les Allemands, 13 Feb. 1920; Unclassified, Douala 1925-8, Chef de la Circonscription de Doula à M. le Commissaire de la République, 5 Mar. 1925.

<sup>19</sup> ANC-FF 2AC 8092, Wouri Annual Report, 1941.

power of local chiefs as colonial representatives, but did not regard them as legitimate leaders.<sup>20</sup> Most informants claimed that immigrants had little trouble securing plots, which were never sold but simply claimed by immigrants or granted by the chiefs.<sup>21</sup> As newcomers took land wherever available, neighborhoods in New Bell were ethnically mixed, with residents claiming, 'we all lived together'.<sup>22</sup> Land became increasingly scarce as the population grew, but even in 1956, about half the 61,890 residents of the quarter lived in houses they had constructed themselves.<sup>23</sup>

Residents of the quarter today live with this legacy. Houses, haphazardly built, are crowded together. The few paved roads are mottled with potholes several feet wide and many inches deep. Most houses are set back from these roads, and reachable only via narrow footpaths. Open sewage, rats and mosquitoes abound. Many live without running water or electricity. Thus, from the colonial period until the present, residents of New Bell continue to experience the history of a space disenfranchised from the narratives of modernity and progress evident in the city center.

But it was not only New Bell's marginality in the colonial consciousness that contributed to the lack of control over the quarter at the start of the Mandate. The acute shortage of manpower and other resources, which in the early years of the Mandate represented the greatest obstacle to establishing effective rule in Cameroon generally, forestalled the establishment of any real control over the space of New Bell specifically. To cut expenditure, the chief administrator of Douala reduced the police force from 200 to 100 officers in 1918.<sup>24</sup> In light of official estimates putting Douala's population at approximately 20,000 at this time, with the number of New Bell residents greatly underestimated, this reduction of the police force appears highly risky for a colonial regime seeking to maintain control.<sup>25</sup>

There is evidence, in fact, that the German departure created a temporary power vacuum in Douala. During and immediately after the war, Africans quickly capitalized on opportunities presented by lax control, and in Douala as elsewhere, German properties and goods were pillaged.<sup>26</sup> The French turned a blind eye, partly because they had no great concern for the German loss of property. But more significant was a fear that mass arrests of commerce house employees involved would aggravate the wartime shortage

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Jeanne Koloko, New Bell, Douala, Mar. 1999; interview with Yondi Dieudonné, New Bell, Douala, Dec. 1998.

<sup>21</sup> For example, interviews with New Bell residents El Hadj Souleiman Mouri, Dec. 1998, Eyobo Essawe Isac, Dec. 1998, and Anasthasie Ongono, Mar. 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Interviews with New Bell residents Jean Assama, Pie Nguidjol, Anasthasie Ongono and Joachim Onana, New Bell, Douala, Dec. 1998 and Mar. 1999.

<sup>23</sup> Population statistics available in Gouellain, *Douala*, 292. Statistics on housing available in R. Dizian and A. Cambon, *Etude sur la population du quartier New-Bell à Douala* (Yaounde, 1956).

<sup>24</sup> ANC-FF Unclassified, Douala 1917-25, L'Administrateur des Colonies Ch. Mathieu, Chef de la Circonscription de Douala, à M. le Commissaire de la République, 20 Dec. 1918.

<sup>25</sup> Austen and Derrick, *Middlemen of the Cameroons Rivers*, 142; Gouellain, *Douala*, 157.

<sup>26</sup> ANC-FF APA 10934/A, Divers 1919-26, 28 Feb. 1917; ANC-FF Unclassified, Douala 1917-25, L'Administrateur de Douala à M. le Commissaire de la République, 21 Jan. 1917.

of African clerks and laborers. The administration encouraged local officials to relax punishments, suggesting fines rather than imprisonment.<sup>27</sup> The looting reveals the tenuousness of early French rule in Douala, and an implicit acknowledgment within the regime of its limited capacity for maintaining control.

#### COLONIAL ATTEMPTS AT CONTROL

While a severe lack of resources dictated a snail's pace in the expansion of effective control, the French never lost sight of their goal of establishing a profitable environment for colonial enterprises in Cameroon. During their first decade of rule, the French tried continually to establish authority and launch effective policy. Private enterprises expanded, the volume of exports such as cocoa, rubber and timber climbed and the growth of the economy has led some to describe the 1920s as a period of prosperity.<sup>28</sup> The Depression halted this process as export prices plunged. But following the Depression, the French intensified their economic exploitation of Cameroon. The 1930s witnessed considerable growth of European concessions, and increasing administrative intervention to protect and foster colonial interests by ensuring a supply of labor.<sup>29</sup> As the production of exports increased, so too did activity at the port of Douala. Despite the Depression, the city experienced significant growth during the 1920s and the later 1930s, and continually adapted to meet the expanding needs of its colonial administration and European population.

These efforts were dependent upon the availability of an African labor force in the city, and this force was located in New Bell. It was therefore impractical to maintain a laissez-faire policy toward the quarter, and in 1920 the administration began taking steps to secure this supply of labor. The French regime attempted to institute strict controls over the movement and settlement of the New Bell population, leaving immigrants with no alternative but to work for European interests.<sup>30</sup> Those who did not comply were classified as delinquents. The definition and punishment of crime thus broadened along with the colonial agenda, and increasing numbers of New Bell residents fell under the criminal category. Administrators from Douala bemoaned the pervasive criminal activity among the African stranger population, with the most troublesome infractions being the local disregard for new regulations regarding movement and settlement.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> ANC-FF Unclassified, Douala 1917-25, L'Administrateur de Douala à M. le Commissaire de la République, 17 Apr. 1916.

<sup>28</sup> Odile Chatap, 'Le travail salarié au Cameroun sous mandat Français, 1922-1939' (Mémoire de maîtrise, University of Yaounde, 1976); F. Etoga Eily, *Sur les chemins du développement : essai d'histoire des faits économiques du Cameroun* (Yaounde, 1971).

<sup>29</sup> J. A. Mbembe, 'Bureaucratie et forces marchandes dans le Cameroun de l'entre-deux-guerres (1920-1938)' (seminar paper, African Studies Centre, University of Leiden, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> ANC-FF APA 11873, Douala Annual Report, 1920.

<sup>31</sup> ANC-FF APA 11873, Douala Annual Report, 1920. The annual report of 1929 reveals that 778 cases of vagabondage were prosecuted in 1928, while 75 cases of theft were prosecuted in the same year. See ANC-FF APA 10005/A, Annual Report, Circonscription of Douala, 1929.

Despite efforts, the French administration was never able to secure a hold on large sectors of the population. Africans crossing over the city's fluid borders were dubbed 'the floating population'.<sup>32</sup> Uncounted and unregistered, the floating population of Douala materialized most conspicuously in the statistics of the legal system. In the courthouses and prisons this ephemeral mass was most successfully brought under colonial scrutiny, and as a result, criminality became synonymous with the floating population. As one official wrote, 'All of these vagabonds steal, quarrel, get arrested, go to prison, and then start over again'.<sup>33</sup> As home to this population, New Bell earned a reputation for sheltering a purely corrupt element.<sup>34</sup> One delegate sent in 1925 to Douala reported that the unemployed vagrants of New Bell were all thieves suffering from venereal diseases.<sup>35</sup> Another health inspector described the native quarter of Douala: 'one can find all the physical and moral residue of the black race. It is a place where syphilis and theft reign'.<sup>36</sup> According to the French, New Bell was home to 'all the dregs of the interior populations'.<sup>37</sup>

Colonial frustration was exacerbated by ongoing shortages in manpower and equipment. During the first two years of French rule, only one French official, Sergeant Buoy, presided over the entire police force, none of whom spoke French or had any kind of military training.<sup>38</sup> Following his departure in 1918, reinforcements were slow in coming, and in 1926 the chief of the circonscription of Douala charged that the security of the city's inhabitants was jeopardized by the lack of French personnel. The police commissioner at the time was the only colonial official overseeing law enforcement in the city, and he was 'completely overwhelmed'.<sup>39</sup> The first significant step toward reorganization and expansion was made by Governor Marchand in 1930, with the establishment of the Special Service Police

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, ANC-FF APA 11280/A, Police Douala 1928-9, 7 May 1930; ANC-FF Unclassified, Douala 1925-8, 14 Feb. 1928. The classification of all those not employed by colonial interests as the 'floating population' was not unique to French officials in Cameroon. As Frederick Cooper wrote in his study on labor in colonial Africa, 'British officials in London shared with their French equivalents a sociology of Africa that divided its population into peasants and educated elites and treated everyone else as a residual - "detribalized Africans" or a "floating population"'. Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996), 169.

<sup>33</sup> ANC-FF APA 11873, Douala Circonscription Annual Report, 1920.

<sup>34</sup> ANC-FF APA 11873, Douala Annual Report, 1920.

<sup>35</sup> ANC-FF APA 11875/A, Correspondances diverses, Douala 1918-26, Le Délégué du Commissaire de la République à Monsieur le Commissaire de la République, 5 Mar. 1925.

<sup>36</sup> ANSOM 1/AFFPOL/3139, Mission d'inspection Picanon 1926-7, Inspection Générale du Service de Santé, 8 Mar. 1920.

<sup>37</sup> ANC-FF APA 10184/A, Cameroun Politique, Psychose collective du banditisme, 8 Aug. 1948; ANC-FF APA 11873, Douala Annual Report, 1920.

<sup>38</sup> ANC-FF Unclassified, Douala 1917-25, L'Administrateur Adjoint des Colonies Dimpault, Chef de la Circonscription de Douala, à Monsieur le Gouverneur des Colonies, Commissaire de la République, 2 Feb. 1918.

<sup>39</sup> ANC-FF Unclassified, Douala 1925-8, Chef de la Circonscription de Douala à Monsieur le Commissaire de la République, 7 July 1926.

and Security Forces for Douala, responsible for controlling the floating population, the workforce and traffic in arms, alcohol and narcotics.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to manpower, the police force lacked basic equipment. Appealing for bicycles in 1919, Chief Mathieu wrote,

The distances one must cross in Douala are too great to demand of tired personnel without providing some means of transportation that would render this difficult Cameroonian climate more tolerable. It is probable that these bicycles do not exist, or would be difficult to find, but I suggest that one could obtain them with the help of the Department of Colonies, whose wartime stocks are not completely depleted. I would be very happy if you would provide this necessary means of transportation to the circonscription.<sup>41</sup>

This demand was rejected, but Mathieu argued three months later,

In light of your decision to reclaim the cart being used by the police commissioner until now, it is essential that this official, who is often needed at a moment's notice, be provided with some means of transportation. I ask you to reconsider the decision you made when I last asked you to purchase a bicycle for the police commissioner.<sup>42</sup>

The request was finally granted, but one bicycle could hardly satisfy the needs of the entire police force.

Far more grave was the need for water transportation. Without a boat, it was impossible to combat crime on the rivers and at the port, including illegal immigration and smuggling. After repeated requests during the first decade of French rule, a boat was provided in 1928, but its engine did not work and it was considered unsafe for passengers.<sup>43</sup> Crime continued unabated on the waterways, and as one official wrote,

The sole remedy for this unfortunate state of affairs is to provide the police with a boat which is light, quick, easily maneuvered and equipped with a motor. The expense would not be very high, and would be recuperated with the repression of these frauds.<sup>44</sup>

An effective boat was finally provided in 1930.<sup>45</sup>

But the above efforts were not sufficient to secure control over the African stranger population or the urban spaces they occupied. The ineffectiveness

<sup>40</sup> ANC-FF APA 10910/E, Contrôle Politique 1930-6, 22 July 1930; *Journal Officiel du Cameroun*, 31 Mar. 1934; ANC-FF APA 11280/A, Police, Douala 1928-9, Le Commissaire Central de Police à M. l'Administrateur des Colonies Chef de la Circonscription Douala, 14 Oct. 1930.

<sup>41</sup> ANC-FF Unclassified, Douala 1917-25, L'Administrateur des Colonies Mathieu, Chef de la Circonscription de Douala, à Monsieur le Gouverneur des Colonies, Commissaire de la République, 8 Jan. 1919.

<sup>42</sup> ANC-FF Unclassified, Douala 1917-25, L'Administrateur des Colonies Mathieu, Chef de la Circonscription de Douala, à Monsieur le Gouverneur des Colonies, Commissaire de la République, 3 Apr. 1919.

<sup>43</sup> ANC-FF APA 11280, Police, Douala 1928-9, Le Chef de Circonscription Douala à Monsieur le Commissaire de la République, 8 Apr. 1930.

<sup>44</sup> ANC-FF APA 11280, Police, Douala 1928-9, Le Chef de Circonscription Douala à Monsieur le Commissaire de la République, 8 Apr. 1930.

<sup>45</sup> ANC-FF APA 10227, Propagande Allemande, Le Commissaire de la République Française dans les Territoires du Cameroun à M. le Ministre des Colonies, 5 Mar. 1933; *Journal Officiel du Cameroun*, 31 Mar. 1934.

of the colonial administration in charting and controlling the inner workings of New Bell was largely due to the physical and discursive distances separating the space of the immigrant quarter from colonial knowing. In colonial consciousness, New Bell remained an African space whose interior architecture was, by and large, a mystery.

#### SURVEILLING AND IDENTIFYING THE FLOATING POPULATION

When it was no longer possible to ignore New Bell, the French administration struggled to discern the essence of the community. The regime strove, in the words of James Scott, to improve the 'legibility' of New Bell's immigrants as a prerequisite to securing control.<sup>46</sup>

French officials expressed concern over internal information networks circulating in New Bell. Luise White claims that colonial officials referred to all information that they had not engendered, shaped or controlled as rumor. Rumor, according to White, 'is a category that simultaneously reveals popular conceptions about the actions and ideas of those in authority and declares the weaknesses of official channels of information and education'.<sup>47</sup> Administrative and police reports from Douala often referred to rumors circulating in the Strangers Quarter as a catalyst for dissent and social and political unrest.<sup>48</sup> Officials feared the 'unsophisticated but lively public opinion not based upon reason, as in Europe, but on passion'.<sup>49</sup>

The administration's only access to local information was through African informers. Consequently, a large network of freelance agents was established, with some earning handsome salaries comparable to those of high-level African employees in commerce houses and the administration.<sup>50</sup> As providing information became profitable, even members of the indigenous elite, such as Chief Paraiso of New Bell, and the Duala businessman Sam Mandessi Bell, participated.<sup>51</sup> Colonial archives abound with reports furnished by these agents, often consisting of reconstructed overheard conversations.<sup>52</sup> Information reported was political, or focused on criminal activity or social unrest, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

Douala, January 10, 1946, Report of Agent #21: Information received on 15/1/46 at 12:30 ... I took part in a conversation in which someone declared ... The

<sup>46</sup> James Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, 1998).

<sup>47</sup> Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumors and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley, 2000), 210.

<sup>48</sup> ANC-FF APA 11201/N, Commissariat spécial de Douala, 1929-32, 3 July 1931; ANC-FF APA 10197/F, Sûreté - Atteinte au crédit de la nation - Echange de billets, 6 Oct. 1936; ANC-FF APA 10184/A, Cameroun Politique, Psychose collective du banditisme, 8 Aug. 1948; APA 11200/A, Rapport de Police, Douala, Sûreté, 4 Sept. 1939.

<sup>49</sup> ANC-FF APA 10184/A, Cameroun Politique, Psychose collective du banditisme.

<sup>50</sup> ANC-FF DOM 167, Contrats de Travail 1936-45; ANC-FF APA 11223/B, Sûreté 1931-41; Chatap, 'Le travail salarié'.

<sup>51</sup> ANC-FF APA 11223/B, Sûreté divers 1931-41.

<sup>52</sup> For example, see ANC-FF APA 11200/A, Rapport de Police, Douala, Sûreté; ANC-FF APA 10208/C, Douala Sûreté 1946, Rapports des Agents; ANC-FF APA 10209/3, Agitation Douala 1945-6.

French administration has struggled to turn the entire feminine population of Cameroon into prostitutes. This is the reason that it has grouped together a band of women with Mr. Puig and called this a Girls School. Since the founding of this school, there is no need for these girls other than prostitution for Europeans, and therefore, each one of the girls who has conceived has miscarried.

Douala, April 27, 1946, Report of Agent #12: On 26/4/46, during surveillance of the Yaounde quarter, I overheard a conversation between certain *ecrivains* and auxiliary monitors who were complaining that the administration had neglected to give them a raise. The administration had also refused to pay them allowances for their housing or their wives. They questioned whether their wives did not need to eat just as the wives of other officials employed by the administration. They are drafting a letter to the High Commissioner on this subject.<sup>53</sup>

Conversations such as these allowed the administration some insight into local activity, and partial access to African spaces.

But freelance informers were not always dependable, and as one police commissioner complained in 1933, 'I am only able to obtain information which is partial, broken, and of limited value'.<sup>54</sup> Nor did the French sense of security improve. In a 1939 report an official complained that, 'despite having taken all the necessary precautions, it is difficult to stop the circulation of false information'.<sup>55</sup>

#### IMPLANTING AFRICAN IDENTITIES

The unchecked fluidity of the immigrant population frustrated the colonial inclination to fix and classify African populations as part of their ruling strategy. The population of New Bell was indiscernible as long as it remained a mass of vagabonds, prostitutes and smugglers. In order to bound New Bell into a known entity, a standard was needed for identifying and organizing its population.

Governor Fourneau suggested the use of identity cards in Douala in 1917, and a decree requiring identity cards for the African population was issued in 1923, but neither was actually applied.<sup>56</sup> In 1927, Governor Marchand devised that identity cards be issued to the indigenous population, and would include information concerning employment, payment of taxes, work permits and health. Distribution began among those employed by Douala commerce houses and the administration, as well as those working as licensed artisans or petty merchants. This enabled the administration 'to discern without difficulty those indigenous who were really employed from those who lived as parasites'.<sup>57</sup>

Identity cards would render the space of New Bell more legible, and help create African subjects recognizable to European bosses and police. Elusive

<sup>53</sup> ANC-FF APA 10208/C, Sûreté Douala Rapports 1946.

<sup>54</sup> ANC-FF APA 11280, Police, Douala 1928-9, Le Commissaire Spécial, Chargé de l'Immigration, à Monsieur le Délégué du Commissaire de la République, n.d.

<sup>55</sup> ANC-FF APA 11200/A, Rapport de Police, Douala, Sûreté, 4 Sept. 1939.

<sup>56</sup> ANC-FF APA 11326/B, Carnet d'identité des indigènes, Le Chef de la Circonscription de Douala à M. le Commissaire de la République, 18 Sept. 1928.

<sup>57</sup> ANC-FF APA 11326/B, Carnet d'identité des indigènes, Circular #32, 3 Aug. 1927.

strangers could now be followed, detained and held accountable for their presence in the city. In the modernist tradition of social control, each African subject residing in New Bell was to have verifiable proof of a name, a place of employment and evidence of having complied with laws regarding taxes, commerce and hygiene. But the card had to reflect a subject's physical attributes in order to verify that the individual holding a particular card was the actual subject identified by it, and it was here where the Europeans met with great difficulty.

Marchand endeavored to establish a connection between card and individual through photographs and fingerprints. Douala's police commissioner suggested that a copy of each photograph be delivered to the police, and a file opened on each individual, as this would be 'of the greatest utility in researching and arresting criminals'.<sup>58</sup> But the use of photographs was only possible with a sufficient supply of cameras and photographers. The governor surveyed each circonscription but found only three photographers in the territory outside Douala.<sup>59</sup> The chief of the circonscription of Doume offered an alternative solution: 'More or less all of the indigenous people have tattoos, scars, deformities or amputations of their fingers or toes, particular marks, or coloring, etc., which would allow for the establishment of a close description'.<sup>60</sup> Marchand thus instructed officials to note any distinguishing physical traits on an individual's card.<sup>61</sup>

But problems immediately emerged concerning fingerprints because colonial administrators had no idea how to extract a legible print, nor were they capable of reading a clear print.<sup>62</sup> Marchand sent out another circular in 1928, suggesting the fingerprint be substituted by finger tracing, a method he claimed was widely used in French West Africa and Indochina. The circular, shown below, described the method by which officials were to trace the left index finger of each African's hand on the back of the identity booklet. Detailed instructions were included on how to position the finger, trace it and how to illustrate knuckles, nails and lines (Figure 1).<sup>63</sup>

<sup>58</sup> ANC-FF APA 11326/B, Carnet d'identité des indigènes, Le Commissaire Central au Chef de la Circonscription de Douala, 13 Sept. 1928.

<sup>59</sup> According to responses to the governor's survey, there were no photographers in Ebolowa, Yabassi, Ndiki, Dschang, Bafoussam, Bafia, Akonolinga, Yoko and Doume, and only one photographer each in Yaounde, Mbanga and Nkongsamba. ANC-FF APA 11326/B, Carnet d'identité des indigènes, Responses to Circular #32, 3 Aug. 1927.

<sup>60</sup> ANC-FF APA 11326/B, Carnet d'identité des indigènes, Le Chef de la Circonscription de Doume à M. le Commissaire de la République, 17 Sept. 1927.

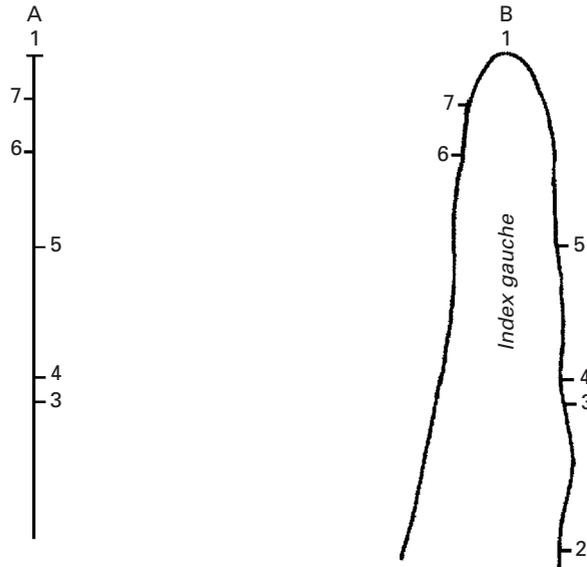
<sup>61</sup> By the time Marchand had issued specific orders concerning the purpose and use of the identity card, it was evident that a simple card alone would not provide enough space for all the information recorded on them. Hence the identity card became the identity booklet, with pages to record employment history, personal status, travel visas, bride-wealth and tax payments, vaccination records and medical history. ANC-FF APA 11326/B, Carnet d'identité des indigènes, Circulaire à toutes les Circonscriptions et Chefs de Services et de Bureaux, Chemins de Fer & Travaux Publics, Port, P.T.T. Douane, Domaine, Finances, Ateliers, 7 (?) July 1928.

<sup>62</sup> ANC-FF APA 11119, Régime des laissez-passer, 1934-45, Le Chef de la Région du Wouri à M. le Gouverneur du Cameroun Français, 20 Oct. 1941.

<sup>63</sup> ANC-FF APA 11326/B, Carnet d'identité des indigènes, Circular #66, 4 Oct. 1928.

Fig. 1. System of identification based on markings taken of the left index finger.

1. Fingertip.
  2. First line at the base of the finger (palm side-up).
  3. and 4. Lines located at the level of the knuckle.
  5. Line located at the level of the upper finger (palm side-up).
  6. and 7. Upper and lower edges of the nail.
- A. A vertical line showing the levels of each marking.  
 B. The drawing of an index finger, for demonstrative purposes only.



The details of these efforts are significant in revealing the dynamics of the colonial gaze as it was cast upon its African subjects. Propelled by a desire to control, and invigorated by patronizing and racist attitudes cloaked in the fundamentals of science, colonial officials struggled to bring the African population into focus. The failure to do so contributed to their ongoing inability to establish an uncontested rule. Africans simply did not make themselves available to the ruling bodies issuing the booklets, which frustrated officials, as can be seen in the following excerpt from a letter sent by Governor Repiquet in 1934 to the chiefs of circonscriptions:

My attention has been called to the difficulties facing the authorities of Douala ... and the impossibility they face in trying to verify the identity of indigènes in an effort to control their fiscal situation. I believe some progress can be made in this area with a stricter application of the decree ... I ask you to remind the local populations that those who leave their regions of origin, and particularly those using a water route on their way to Douala, would greatly benefit from the possession of an identity booklet which is in perfect order and indicates their fiscal situation.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>64</sup> ANC-FF APA 11326/B, Carnet d'identité des indigènes, Circular #42, 20 July 1934.

It is evident that more police, better intelligence, surveillance and identification did not enable the colonial administration to control and construct the community of strangers in New Bell. The failure of colonial policy in New Bell can be found in a close examination of the stranger population and their own visions of their community.

#### LOCAL VISIONS OF NEW BELL

The African population of New Bell was partially responsible for the failure of the colonial state in maintaining control over the quarter, as residents were quick to seize opportunities created by the administration's indecision and impotence. The ambiguities of New Bell's positioning within the colonial consciousness had dramatic implications for the construction of place and community in the Strangers Quarter. The existence of the space of New Bell was, in fact, a vital prerequisite to the viability of this population. The quarter gave shelter to entire communities submerged in the shadow of colonialism, and was ultimately shaped by a stranger population growing and thriving outside colonial law. Thus, the bounding of New Bell as an African space situated beyond the boundaries of the colonial city was not merely the product of colonial imagination. The portrayal of New Bell in colonial sources as an African space provides only one side of the story, but oral interviews with residents of New Bell during the interwar era confirm that the immigrant population also envisioned the quarter as separate and removed from the city center occupied by colonizers and Douala. Discursive conceptualizations of the Strangers Quarter formulated by the immigrants themselves were critical to the subsequent construction of spaces, communities and hierarchies of power within the quarter. Over and over again, oral informants referred to colonial New Bell as 'the bush' – signifying a purely African space, deeply local, unowned, distant, uncolonized and outside the control of any dominant power.<sup>65</sup>

While reminiscent of something recognizable, the association of New Bell with the bush was an entirely new construction, merely invoking elements of the familiar as a foundation upon which to build a community strikingly dislocated from any prior frame of spatial reference. By describing New Bell as the bush, residents could ground and interpret urban patterns of settlement as an extension of an intelligible, familiar locality. But rather than accept this description of the bush as representative of an existing type of local space, it is essential to problematize this discursive construction. Gupta and Ferguson have argued that a 'nostalgia for origins' plaguing diasporic, migrant and refugee communities has inspired these displaced communities to imagine their new surroundings as extensions of a distant, familiar world left behind.<sup>66</sup> The imagined homeland serving as the blueprint for the reconstructed community is invoked as 'the original, the centered,

<sup>65</sup> For example, interviews with New Bell residents Joachim Onana, Mar. 1999, El Haj Hamidou Paraiso, Mar. 1999, Samuel Kapendia, Dec. 1998, Marie Claire Mbita, Dec. 1998.

<sup>66</sup> Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (eds.), *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology* (Durham, 1997).

the natural, the authentic'.<sup>67</sup> While residents of New Bell explained their surroundings as the bush, this description was a local innovation, and an important step in the process of place-making among immigrants, enabling them to apply a familiar foundation to an unknown world. In thus labeling New Bell, residents signified the quarter as an uncolonized space, characterized by tempered anarchy, and marginalized within the European field of vision. Once New Bell was bounded as the bush, the description became a permanence empowering subsequent immigrant reiterations of this space as African, natural and uncontrolled. For example, when asked how residents negotiated potential conflicts over land, or who controlled the living arrangements or the infrastructure, many informants explained the lack of control by simply claiming, 'New Bell was the bush'.<sup>68</sup> This statement explained the abundance of space, the absence of private ownership and the lack of any dominant authority controlling land holding.

The landscape of New Bell resonated with diffused authority and short-term planning. Construction conformed to boundaries set by the natural landscape of creeks and rivers. Oblivious to modernist rules concerning the separation of public and private spaces, structures in New Bell served multiple purposes of housing and industry, as petty commerce and the production of goods such as alcohol took place within living quarters.<sup>69</sup> Extended families, lodgers and long-term guests all shared cramped quarters. Animal grazing and agriculture, outlawed within European and Duala quarters by the Hygiene Service, continued in New Bell throughout the colonial period.<sup>70</sup> There was no running water or sewage system, posing serious health risks. When the administration contemplated plans to rectify the situation, an official of the Hygiene Service proclaimed, 'The order of housing in New Bell is simply impossible, construction has been undertaken with no sense, how would you like to send an hygiene officer there?'<sup>71</sup>

Thus, the police were the only representatives of the colonial regime to visit New Bell with any frequency.<sup>72</sup> The regime hoped to control the quarter by expanding categories of criminality. Residents of New Bell were not always informed of new or existing laws, and it was primarily through confrontations with police that they differentiated between illegal and legal activity.<sup>73</sup> Particularly in areas of police laxity, the strangers of New Bell

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

<sup>68</sup> For example, interviews with Samuel Kapendia, New Bell, Douala, Dec. 1998, and El Haj Hamidou Paraiso, New Bell, Douala, Mar. 1999.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Marie Ngobo, New Bell, Douala, Mar. 1999; interview with Augustine Biloa, New Bell, Douala, Mar. 1999.

<sup>70</sup> *Journal Officiel du Cameroun*, 6 Sept. 1921; ANC-FF APA 11201/D, Police Douala 1930-3, Entretien des habitations, 25 Feb. 1933.

<sup>71</sup> ANC-FF, Wouri Region, Municipal Commission, 12 Jan. 1952, quoted in Gouellain, *Douala*, 309.

<sup>72</sup> ANC-FF APA 11875, Correspondances diverses Douala 1918-26, Le Délégué du Commissaire de la République à Monsieur le Commissaire de la République, 5 Mar. 1925.

<sup>73</sup> Women in New Bell were particularly isolated from colonial networks of knowledge. As a result, many living in the quarter throughout the colonial period had no knowledge of landmark events within the European community, such as World War II. Some female informants claimed to know nothing about laws concerning the *laissez-passer*, or they claimed they did not need a *laissez-passer* during the colonial period

circumvented colonial law with their own standards, sometimes without any awareness of having done so. The 1928 chief of the circonscription thus complained,

the Duala are perfectly aware of rules concerning manners, and they make a real effort to show respect to the authorities. But the floating population of petty merchants, artisans and laborers are generally crude. These people do not salute, perhaps not recognizing the person who passes by them in a car. Often, they are distracted, or completely lacking in any education whatsoever.

He recommended that indigenous chiefs of the quarter organize mass meetings to remind the population of their obligations, and when necessary, impose sanctions against offenders.<sup>74</sup> Thus, the regime realized that violations committed by the local population were the result of imperfect communication between African and colonial populations of the city.

#### CONTINUITIES: VAGABONDAGE

Within a climate of compromised police power and imperfect communication, the stranger population attempted to carry on many aspects of pre-colonial life despite colonial restrictions. In fact, much of the activity deemed illegal by the administration was simply an immigrant attempt at extending pre-colonial autonomy into a colonial space. People and goods flowing in and out of New Bell were often an extension of pre-colonial social, cultural and economic practices despite their recognized displacement in the colonial city. Thus, even when members of the stranger community were fully aware of prohibitions on certain activities and practices, they nonetheless disregarded these restrictions.

This dynamic can be seen in the history of vagabondage in New Bell, which exposes colonial impotence in confining African bodies to designated spaces, as well as local reconfigurations of space in avoidance of the colonial reality. From the outset of French rule in Cameroon, official reports bemoaned the unchecked movement of Africans in and out of Douala. According to law, Africans were prohibited from traveling between circonscriptions without a *laissez-passer*. Granted by the heads of circonscriptions, this pass authorized movement for purposes of employment. All those without the *laissez-passer* were designated 'vagabonds', but the requirement of the *laissez-passer* did little to curtail illegal movement. This was partly due to the nature of the pass and its distribution.

Until 1941, there was no uniformity of information, format or validation of the passes between regions. A local African bureaucrat designed the *laissez-passer*, which was then signed by a local European official. Often, the pass did not specify a single identity, and multiple persons could be listed on one pass. Thus, the pass could note the name of an individual, 'accompanied by two women' or 'accompanied by four boys'. These were obviously useless

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because they were women. Interviews with Lydie Zang, Ekombitié village, Sangmelima province, Mar. 1999; Jacqueline Angono Ebe, Mendong village, Sangmelima province, Mar. 1999; Jacqueline Kemayou, New Bell, Douala, Mar. 1999; Pauline Ngono, Nkil Zok village, Sangmelima province, Mar. 1999.

<sup>74</sup> ANC-FF Unclassified, Douala 1917-25, Le Chef de la Cironscription de Douala à M. le Commissaire de la République, 14 Feb. 1928.

as deterrents to illegal immigration.<sup>75</sup> In some regions, African clerks signed the passes. This became a lucrative business, but it robbed the *laissez-passer* of any law enforcement potential and Africans exploited opportunities to circumvent the law.<sup>76</sup>

The administration embraced punishment as the most effective deterrent to illegal movement among the African population. Until 1924, the punishment for vagabondage was 15 days in prison followed by expulsion from Douala back to regions of origin. But this punishment seemed insufficient to Marchand, and he increased the sentence for vagabondage to correspond to that employed throughout French West Africa, namely, imprisonment for up to six months followed by expulsion (*interdiction de séjour*) for five to ten years.<sup>77</sup> This severe punishment made vagabondage equivalent to theft, and perpetrators of both crimes received sentences of six months in prison.<sup>78</sup>

The increased severity of the punishment did not put an end to vagabondage, primarily because proportionately few Africans were arrested and forced to serve this sentence. Looking at police records and population estimates, in 1928 there were 773 individuals prosecuted for vagabondage in Douala, while in 1929 this number fell to 492.<sup>79</sup> According to estimates from the period, the population of New Bell surpassed 20,000 at this time.<sup>80</sup> Official reports suggested that no more 6,000 immigrants were officially employed during this year.<sup>81</sup> Thus, it is clear that the vast majority of New Bell's vagabonds easily escaped punishment, and the increase in severity remained largely theoretical.

Oral informants confirmed these archival findings. Most informants interviewed claimed that the *laissez-passer* was never an obstacle to immigration to Douala. Residents of New Bell, including former police officers, recalled that little was done to convict the masses residing in the quarter without the pass.<sup>82</sup> One informant claimed that individuals who wanted to remain in the city without the *laissez-passer* simply stayed in New Bell, and did not venture out to other quarters where law enforcement was more active.<sup>83</sup> The laxity of the police force in dealing with vagabondage in New Bell led some immigrants to believe that they did not need the pass.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>75</sup> The lack of uniformity opened the way for falsification, and counterfeiting of the passes was not uncommon. Archival records and oral histories show that Africans exploited their personal connections to indigenous employees of the administration in order to obtain official stationery for counterfeiting purposes. Interview with Pie Nguidjol, New Bell, Douala, Dec. 1998; ANC-FF APA 10282, Personnel indigène 1929-40.

<sup>76</sup> ANC-FF APA 11119, Régime des laissez-passer, 1934-45, Le Chef de la Région du Wouri à M. le Gouverneur du Cameroun Français, 20 Oct. 1941.

<sup>77</sup> ANC-FF APA 11367/A, Le Ministère des colonies au Président de la République Française au Cameroun, 6 May 1924.

<sup>78</sup> ANC-FF APA 10407, Interdiction de séjour 1930-2.

<sup>79</sup> ANC-FF APA 10005/A, Douala Annual Report, 1920.

<sup>80</sup> Derrick, *Douala under the French Mandate*, 356. <sup>81</sup> Gouellain, *Douala*, 220.

<sup>82</sup> Interviews with Samuel Kapendia, New Bell, Dec. 1998; Marie Ngobo, New Bell, Douala, Mar. 1999; Zéphirin Benjamin Ngoko, New Bell, Douala, Dec. 1998; Dagobert Fampou, Joss, Douala, Mar. 1999; Lydia Zang, Ekombitié village, Sangmelima Province, Mar. 1999.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Yondi Dieudonné, New Bell, Douala, Dec. 1998.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Jacqueline Kemayou, New Bell, Douala, Mar. 1999.

But even for those aware of the law, there was simply no recognition of vagabondage as a crime.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, police records of those prosecuted for illegal immigration reveal a dissonance between colonial and local definitions of criminality. The colonial regime met with tremendous difficulties in combating the problem simply because few residents in New Bell would define their presence in the quarter as vagabondage. Those prosecuted explained that they had simply come to the city to visit a brother or uncle, or for private employment purposes. When asked to present a *laissez-passer*, tax receipt or identification card, they simply explained, 'I don't have them'.<sup>86</sup> This continued exercise of autonomy, accompanied by a nonchalant attitude, provides some insight into local perceptions of colonial power in New Bell.

#### SMUGGLING

Throughout the Mandate era, unauthorized trade in New Bell troubled the French regime. Illegal trade was facilitated by the massive volume of goods imported and exported at the port and the inability to survey sufficiently the myriad of waterways leading in and out of the city. The acquisition of a single motorboat did little to improve police and customs officials' effectiveness on the vast river network.<sup>87</sup> The space of New Bell itself was also vital to the illicit trade, with the immigrant quarter serving as the center of Douala's black market. Traffic was conducted in a wide variety of imported goods and local foodstuffs, with one informant claiming that agricultural products sold in New Bell were easily brought into the city by women traders without the *laissez-passer* or trade licenses.<sup>88</sup>

What was illicit in the eyes of officials was often merely the extension of pre-colonial trade networks and economic relationships into a colonial space. This was particularly apparent among the Hausa traders. Traveling along pre-colonial caravan routes, the Hausa incorporated new products of the colonial era into pre-existing markets. They were particularly active in the black markets in currencies, exploiting ethnic ties crossing over colonial borders and capitalizing on fluctuations in both French and British currencies.<sup>89</sup> The Hausa also made great efforts to maintain their autonomy in trade, despite the imposition of regulations regarding licensing, tariffs and immigration. Unlicensed Hausa butchers in New Bell, for example, were prosecuted for selling meat rejected by colonial inspectors.<sup>90</sup> The Hausa also maintained a lively arms traffic along caravan routes.<sup>91</sup>

Like the Hausa, Bamileke petty traders known as market boys exploited pre-colonial social and economic networks in conducting business in New

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Samuel Kapendia, New Bell, Douala, Dec. 1998.

<sup>86</sup> ANC-FF APA 10751, Justice: Indigènes, Affaires diverses, 1930-4, 7 Mar. 1930.

<sup>87</sup> ANC-FF APA 10227, Propagande allemande, Le Commissaire de la République Française dans les Territoires du Cameroun à M. le Ministre des Colonies, 5 Mar. 1933.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Jacqueline Kemayou, New Bell, Douala, Mar. 1999.

<sup>89</sup> ANC-FF APA 10934/A, Divers 1919-26, 9 Sept. 1925 and 17 Nov. 1925.

<sup>90</sup> ANC-FF Unclassified Douala - 1916-25, Ducq Ernest, Commissaire Central de Police au Gouverneur, 31 May 1919; ANC-FF APA 10278/J, Santé divers 1930-45, Procès verbal #46, 21 Sept. 1939.

<sup>91</sup> ANC-FF Unclassified Douala - 1916-25, Le Sergent Chef de Poste, 1 Jan. 1917.

Bell. This is apparent in the history of the well-documented Bamileke credit associations and popular banks known as *tchua*, which enabled members of the same village groups or age sets to obtain capital for investment. Bamileke market boys built up merchandise bases by borrowing money from *tchua*, and these village-based 'banks' permitted the success of many young men seeking capital for urban business ventures. Thus, the roots of the well-known *dynamisme bamiléké*, making a great impression on the entire immigrant population, can be located in pre-colonial kinship ties finding expression in both the formal and black markets of New Bell.<sup>92</sup>

But while a portion of the illicit trade in Douala sprouted out of pre-colonial, ethnic-based economic alliances, the main base of the trade was characterized by multiethnic participation in traffic centered around the port. While each ethnic group exploited their particular cultural practices and norms, it was the cooperation between groups and their specializations that enabled widespread traffic in Douala throughout the colonial era.<sup>93</sup>

Traffic conducted at the port was primarily nocturnal. In years preceding the acquisition of the motorboat there was no water surveillance, but even afterwards police had great difficulties patrolling at night when visibility was limited.<sup>94</sup> Captains generally came ashore in the evening, enabling local traders to board ships and conduct business with crewmen. Familiarity with crewmen and guards was essential, as one informant claimed, 'only those with good relations with others could participate in the trade'.<sup>95</sup> It was generally Douala traders who boarded ships. Capitalizing on relations nurtured over decades as trade monopolists, the Douala developed longstanding ties with crewmen who returned to port year after year. The Douala were also prime candidates for this work because they had canoes with which to approach ships at night.<sup>96</sup>

The Douala, commonly referred to as wholesalers, would bring goods purchased aboard ships to the shore for an active nightly trade with Bamileke, Hausa, Togolese and Dahomean retailers. Immigrant 'retailers' were also referred to by their pidgin name, *Bayam-Sellem* (Buy them-Sell them) because they took goods purchased from the Douala and resold them in markets in New Bell.<sup>97</sup> The use of pidgin names and terminology such as 'wholesalers' and 'retailers' allowed participants to shroud themselves in a self-constructed legitimacy distanced from colonial law.

Traffickers thrived in a marketplace created independently from European interests, and at the expense of colonial enterprises. Large commerce houses such as John Holt and Woermann suffered continual losses to this

<sup>92</sup> Jean-Louis Dongmo, *Le dynamisme bamiléké* (Yaoundé, 1981); G. Gosselin, *Le crédit mutuel en pays bamiléké* (Geneva, 1970).

<sup>93</sup> This type of cooperation among ethnic groups in Cameroon has also been described in Andreas Eckert, 'African rural entrepreneurs and labour in the Cameroon Littoral', *Journal of African History*, 40 (1999), 109–26.

<sup>94</sup> Interviews with Douala residents Valère Epée, Bali, Dec. 1998; Léopold Moumé Etia, Deido, Dec. 1998; Joachim Onana, New Bell, Mar. 1999. Information on smuggling can also be found in ANC-FF APA 11280 Police, Douala 1928–9.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Aladji Tanko Assan, New Bell, Douala, Dec. 1998.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Valère Epée, Bali, Douala, Dec. 1998.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Valère Epée, Bali, Douala, Dec. 1998.

traffic, and the colonial administration was nonetheless unable to stop what they defined as damaging, criminal behavior.<sup>98</sup> But for New Bell residents, traffic was an important component of the community's sustenance. New Bell residents working in the illicit trade were highly prosperous, and the entire quarter enjoyed easy access to products not available elsewhere.<sup>99</sup> Aware of this situation, but unable to prevent it, the frustration of European powers in the city can be seen in the following excerpt from the local colonial press:

It is estimated that in Douala, there are presently between eight and ten thousand market-boys – equal to the number of salaried workers – who work in the black market without a patent. All that is impossible to find in the official market (in certain large commerce houses in particular, everything is always out of stock), can be found in the hands of the market boys, be it a bicycle part, fabric, lampshade, or a hundred other articles. This merchandise is always unloaded at the port, but one can not find it for sale anywhere ... except by the market boys, and at double or even triple the official price ... One is surprised that they do not fall into the hands of the law. This trade is all methodically organized, and enjoys complete impunity.<sup>100</sup>

#### POSTWAR CHANGES AND CONTINUITIES

Prior to World War II, the colonial regime lacked the resources and full motivation to curb Africans' expressions of autonomy in the Strangers Quarter. In the postwar decade, the tenuous nature of colonial rule was replaced by substantial efforts at development, accompanied by considerable increases in resources and investment. The administration embarked upon development projects using funds made available through *Fonds pour l'Investissement en Développement Economique et Social* (FIDES), established in 1946.<sup>101</sup> In Cameroon between 1947 and 1952, the main focus of FIDES investment was a massive modernization project for the port of Douala, for which a sizable workforce was needed.<sup>102</sup> But the administration soon realized how the gulf of knowledge and communication separating it from the labor force would sabotage the undertaking of any large public works requiring considerable manpower. Moreover, in the years prior to independence, New Bell was identified as a hotbed of anti-colonial organizing, and efforts to maintain calm in the quarter were preceded by efforts to understand the community living there. Thus, in 1946, Jacques Guilbot was commissioned to do an in-depth study of labor in New Bell, the 'Petite étude sur la main-d'œuvre à Douala', which was, according to Frederick Cooper, one of the earliest of its kind conducted in French Africa.<sup>103</sup> In addition,

<sup>98</sup> ANC-FF APA 11280, Police, Douala 1928–9.

<sup>99</sup> ANC-FF APA 11875/B, Divers correspondence Douala 1918–26, letters to John Holt, 1917.

<sup>100</sup> *L'Eveil du Cameroun*, 8 Aug. 1948.

<sup>101</sup> Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 176.

<sup>102</sup> Gouellain, *Douala*, 276; Martin-René Atangana, *Capitalisme et nationalisme au Cameroun: au lendemain de la seconde guerre mondiale 1946–1950* (Paris, 1998), 236.

<sup>103</sup> Jacques Guilbot, *Petite étude sur la main-d'œuvre à Douala* (IFAN, Centre au Cameroun, 1948); Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 371.

a census was conducted in New Bell in 1955.<sup>104</sup> It included detailed maps of each neighborhood, the first ever drawn of the quarter.

Despite constituting an important first step, the administration ultimately decided that more was needed for the population of New Bell than an improvement in colonial knowledge of the quarter. Without a minimum standard of living conditions, the community of strangers could not sustain itself, and the potential labor force would leave the city in search of better options elsewhere. Thus, for the first time, the French began plans for urban renewal in New Bell, including renovation of the quarter's infrastructure. A network of roads and sewers were desperately needed, as was running water.<sup>105</sup> But the decision to modernize New Bell began with an attempt to clarify the legal status of property there, and this gave an opportunity to the Duala who saw themselves as the historical and legal owners of land in the immigrant quarter. Once the French raised the question of land ownership in New Bell, the Duala ('as stubborn as ever', claimed one official) demanded official recognition for their proprietary claims.<sup>106</sup> The French preferred to avoid a solution to this conflict by working around the problem. The Duala signed an agreement in 1954 authorizing limited public works, but a complete and effective renovation and modernization of New Bell's infrastructure was never undertaken.<sup>107</sup> Thus, the colonial administration perpetuated the ambiguity of New Bell's status, and residents of the quarter have continued to live in the shadow of this legacy.

Only a handful of colonial officers realized that no improvement in surveillance or knowledge could ensure the availability of African labor. These officials understood that the local decision to avoid incorporation into the colonial workforce was based on the complete depravity of employment standards. As one official in 1947 explained, Africans

have complaints about the work regime, housing, food, salaries, brutality of overseers, disregard of employers ... In one word, all the causes of worker discontent, past and present, can explain the difficulties faced by [European] planters, merchants and industrial enterprises.<sup>108</sup>

With little incentive to work for the colonial power, immigrants in New Bell imagined alternative modes of existence. Despite colonial efforts, the nature of New Bell as a physically and discursively constructed African space separated and distanced from colonial rule enabled Africans to seize opportunities. The strangers of New Bell thus instilled their own meaning into their presence in Douala. Ultimately, the rejection of colonial boundaries became the foundation of community in New Bell, and the key to its viability.

<sup>104</sup> Census results can be found in the following ANC files entitled, 'Quartiers Douala, Population recensement du Quartier', 2AC 9239 Congo, 2AC 9241 Congo – Banyangu, 2AC 9245 Babylone, 2AC 9246 Mbam Ewondo-Bamileke, 2AC 9244 Ndjong Mebi, 2AC 9242 Nyongmondo, 2AC 9240 Senegalaise, 2AC 9243 T.S.F.

<sup>105</sup> Gouellain, *Douala*, 308–9.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* 310.

<sup>107</sup> ANC-FF 1AC 8639, New Bell Urbanisme 1954, Rapport sur travaux d'urbanisme de New-Bell, Douala, 19 Nov. 1954.

<sup>108</sup> ANC-FF APA 11655/B, Travail et main d'œuvre – 1944–7, Governor Delavignette au Chef de Nyong et Sanaga, 27 Jan. 1947.