

LOOKING THROUGH A GLASS OF BEER: ALCOHOL IN THE CULTURAL SPACES OF COLONIAL DOUALA, 1910-1945*

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The pivotal role played by alcohol in the European colonization of Africa has been addressed by many scholars.¹ The trade in alcohol, local consumption, and European attempts at regulating both have served historians as a lens for examining the dynamics of colonial rule throughout the continent. Studies have shown that most colonial regimes in Africa made some considerable effort to control the local population's access to alcohol, as well as their consumption. The failure of European administrations to block the diffusion and use of alcohol within African societies, despite these efforts, has been identified as evidence of colonial weakness and African agency in shaping local processes during the colonial era.

In recent years, the study of alcohol consumption in colonial Africa has attracted scholars exploring local responses to colonial rule. The history of alcohol is interpreted against a larger backdrop of colonial oppression and the African struggle against this oppression. As Charles Ambler and Jonathan Crush wrote,

ubiquitous daily struggles over alcohol production and consumption, and occasional violent conflicts between brewers and police, were surface manifestations of a deep rejection of state interference and control in the arena of drink. Illegal drinking places became sites for what James Scott describes as the "hidden transcript" of the dominated: a discourse of opposition that encompassed not only the web of alcohol legislation, but the shared experi-

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¹ For example, see Charles Ambler and Jonathan Crush, eds., *Liquor and Labor in Southern Africa* (Athens, Ohio, 1992); Emmanuel Akyeampong, *Drink, Power, and Cultural Change: A Social History of Alcohol in Ghana, c. 1800 to Recent Times* (Portsmouth, N.H., 1996); Michael O. West, "Liquor and Libido: 'Joint Drinking' and the Politics of Sexual Control in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1920s to 1950s," *Journal of Social History* 30 (1997), 645-67; Simon Heap, "'We Think Prohibition Is a Farce': Drinking in the Alcohol-Prohibited Zone of Colonial Northern Nigeria," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 31 (1998), 23-52; Ann Mager, "The First Decade of 'European Beer' in Apartheid South Africa: The State, the Brewers and the Drinking Public, 1962-72," *Journal of African History* 40, 3 (1999), 367-88.

ence of racial oppression and economic exploitation that bound drinkers together.²

In their history of liquor and labor in Southern African, Crush and Ambler examine the role of alcohol in local societies primarily within the context of an ongoing dialogue between Africans and their European oppressors. Alcohol was seen as a tool used by both colonizers and Africans in their attempts to seize power. As they wrote, "drinking must be conceived not simply as a weapon of domination but also as a relatively autonomous form of cultural expression—and thus a potent form of resistance."³ Thus the consumption of alcohol is seen by Ambler and Crush as a form of resistance to colonial rule, and their collection of essays concerning the history of alcohol in Southern African seeks to map this "terrain of resistance."⁴

Emmanuel Akyeampong takes a similar approach in interpreting the "uses and meanings of alcohol" in Ghana as "a metaphor for power."⁵ Akyeampong argues that alcohol, along with blood and water, "lubricated social relations" throughout the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial history of Ghana and that by studying the role of alcohol in this history, we can learn about the "culture of power" in the region.⁶ In colonial Ghana, both the British administration and local chiefs attempted to control access to alcohol and its consumption as a way of securing control over the entire social order. For the local population, struggles against these controls were connected to broader popular protests against local and colonial hierarchies of power. The link between popular struggles related to alcohol and mass political protest was most prominent in the nationalist movement of the 1940s and 1950s, in which the elimination of colonial control over alcohol became a central issue in the movement for independence. Akyeampong argued that alcohol remained an important "symbol of protest" for the Ghanaian masses even after independence, and even those who used alcohol as an escape did so in response to frustrations linked to the political arena.

In colonial Cameroon, similarly to both Ghana and Southern Africa, efforts to control the distribution and consumption of alcohol within the territory were clearly linked to larger efforts of the German and French regimes to shape social, economic and political processes in the colony. From the colonial perspective, access to alcohol did represent power, and as will be seen below, European officials went to great efforts to differentiate the local culture of drinking from that of Europeans as part of racial ideologies and cultural policies at the foundation of colonial domina-

² Charles Ambler and Jonathan Crush, "Alcohol in Southern African Labor History," in Ambler and Crush, eds., *Liquor and Labour*, 3–4.

³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵ Akyeampong, *Drink, Power, and Cultural Change*, xv.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xvi.

tion. Thus, in Cameroon during the interwar years, and particularly in Douala, the colonial struggle to limit the production, sale, and consumption of alcohol among Africans underscored the fundamental struggle carried out by the administration to secure and maintain power.⁷

But the history of alcohol distribution and consumption in colonial Douala did not follow the same trajectory in all areas of the city during this period. The cultural and political significance of alcohol was not uniform throughout urban space and the presence of alcohol in each quarter of the city did not reveal an identical metaphor of power struggle between the colonial power and the local population. Rather, the history of alcohol in Douala was deeply linked to the distinct construction and evolution of various cultural, economic, and political spaces in the city, and the differences in the construction of and control over these spaces was revealed in the multiple histories of drinking in the city. Colonial officials and the European population shared their administrative, commercial, and residential spaces with the local Douala elite in the quarters of Joss and Akwa, and it was in these quarters where the colonial administration made its most stringent efforts to protect European society from African intrusion. Thus, as we will see, efforts to control access to alcohol and the culture of drinking were most exacting in these quarters.

By contrast, the immigrant quarter of New Bell was imagined and handled by both German and French colonial regimes as an "African space," allowing the quarter limited cultural autonomy from the colonial power.⁸ The desire of the administration to maintain some distance from this African space also found expression in colonial efforts to monitor and control the culture of leisure in the quarter, and thus the consumption of alcohol—the main method of distraction in the quarter—was treated far differently in New Bell than Douala quarters by the colonial power. From the perspective of immigrants, alcohol occupied a central position in the social, cultural, and economic spheres of the quarter, and colonial policy inevitably played a role in determining the impact of alcohol in all these areas. The history of drinking in the New Bell quarter reveals that residents capitalized on its colonial designation as an African space and established pockets of autonomy from colonial rule.

Without denying the influence of power struggles on the production of alcohol and the culture of drinking in the Strangers' Quarter, the history of alcohol in New Bell was not solely the product of dialogue or conflict between the stranger population and either colonial or local hierarchies of power. The use of alcohol in New Bell was ultimately neither a response to colonialism nor a tool of resistance to it. Rather

⁷ Susan Diduk, "European Alcohol, History, and the State in Cameroon," *African Studies Review* 36, 1 (1993), 12–13.

⁸ See Lynn Schler, "The Strangers of New Bell: Immigration, Community, and Public Space in Colonial Douala, Cameroon, 1914–1960" (Ph.D. thesis, Stanford University, 2001).

than conceptualizing drink in New Bell as an expression of power or an instrument of political or cultural struggle, it would be more accurate to view the history of alcohol there as reflecting a community life that was generally transitory, spontaneous, and creative, and as such, uncaptured by the colonial regime. The emphasis here is on moving away from viewing African cultures as locked in an inescapable dialogue with colonial powers and from interpreting all expressions of local culture as some form of resistance or response to colonialism. For the strangers of New Bell, sharing a drink at the end of the day was not necessarily an expression of power or a conscious political gesture. Drinking was an expression of popular culture rooted in the Strangers' Quarter, and the realignment of economic and social relations following the growth of a vibrant local industry of alcohol production made its most significant impact on the internal workings and construction of the immigrant community.

Alcohol and Colonialism in Cameroon

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of alcohol in the history of colonial Cameroon. Indeed, the introduction of alcohol into the precolonial territory by European traders helped pave the way to formal colonial rule. As historian Susan Diduk wrote, "spirits, above all other trade goods, helped secure Germany's annexation of Cameroon, its control over indigenous labor, and access to the country's interior."⁹ After becoming a staple of international trade in Cameroon, the demand for European alcohol grew. So valued was imported liquor that it soon became a form of currency in the territory. After formal colonial rule was established by the Germans in 1884, alcohol was widely used as salary for African employees, and it thus facilitated the recruitment of African labor.

The sale of alcohol to local populations by European traders was met with opposition by colonial administrations and missionaries throughout Africa. These forces of opposition began lobbying for prohibition on either moral or political grounds. While missionaries feared the decline in local morality brought on by excessive drinking, colonial governments wanted to secure control over the sale of alcohol as a means monitoring and controlling local economic and social processes. In Cameroon, the German administration began a program of limited prohibition in 1910, rather than completely outlawing the trade. Arguing that an outright ban would only foster an active illegal trade with neighboring colonies, Governor Seitz hoped to severely reduce the scope of the trade by limiting it to the southern coastal region.¹⁰

After the Germans were ousted from Cameroon by Allied Forces during World War I, the start of the French Mandate in 1916 brought on new pressures to control the local trade of alcohol. As historian Lynn Pan has documented, the terms of the

⁹ Diduk, "European Alcohol," 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

Mandate established by the League of Nations stipulated that strong control should be exercised over the sale of liquor to Africans and required annual reports documenting this control.¹¹ But the presence of a large community of French businessmen and colonial officials prevented the total prohibition of alcohol in Cameroon. Faced with pressures from the Permanent Mandates Commission, missionaries, and international public opinion on the one hand, and the needs of the local expatriate community on the other, the French attempted to implement an alcohol policy that would both ensure an ample supply of liquor in the colony and block African access to it.

The first French commissioner in Cameroon, General Aymerich, lost no time attempting to prevent Africans from consuming alcoholic beverages. Three months after taking control of the city, Aymerich reminded the general public of laws concerning Africans and alcohol:

in taking over the administration in Cameroon, the Commissioner has reminded the public that decrees issued by the Allied authorities would be vigorously enforced, and particularly the decree of June 1, 1915 banning the deliverance of alcohol to the indigenous population. [Certain components] of this decree seemed to have been overlooked, as well as the penalties associated with them.¹²

As reinforcement to the legislation issued by the interim regime, the early French administration issued another decree on November 22, 1916, outlawing the consumption of all alcoholic beverages, wine, and beer by the indigenous population.¹³ On December 20 of the same year, another law was issued banning the sale of alcohol to Africans, as well as the employment of Africans as intermediaries in the sale of alcoholic beverages.¹⁴

The colonial agenda embedded in this legislation was propelled by both economic and political factors. First and foremost, precautions had to be taken to protect the supply of labor that the French believed was vulnerable to alcohol abuse. The administration ordered European employers to pay their African employees in food rather than cash to prevent workers from buying alcohol.¹⁵ But, while policy makers feared that the consumption of alcohol threatened the availability and reliability of the work force, there was also a guise of protecting African morality

¹¹ Lynn Pan, *Alcohol in Colonial Africa* (Uppsala, 1975), 52–54, cited in Diduk, "European Alcohol."

¹² Archives Nationales du Cameroun–Fonds Français (hereafter ANC–FF) Unclassified, Douala 1916–1925, Note of General Aymerich, August 23, 1916.

¹³ ANC–FF Unclassified, Douala 1916–1925, list of early decrees, 1916–1922.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Rapport Annuel du Gouvernement Français sur Administration sous Mandat des Territoires du Cameroun*, 1924, 12.

within these policies. In an attempt to satisfy the Mandates Commission, the administration presented prohibition as their moral responsibility to their corruptible African subjects. As the French wrote in the 1924 report to the League of Nations, "it would be highly desirable for the indigenous people of Cameroon to substitute the pleasure of alcohol consumption with purer joys."¹⁶ In their yearly reports, the French outlined specific measures taken to block the access of Africans to alcohol.

The racist underpinnings to these policies expressed a belief that Africans could not control their alcohol intake, and this could lead to social ruin. One administrator in Douala warned that without control, Africans would drink themselves to death. As he wrote, "this is a national vice that has led to the ruin of the family, of society, and of the indigenous economy. Do you want to resolve the Duala problem? Let alcohol flow freely for a few years, and this entire race will disappear forever."¹⁷ As long as Africans lacked the moral strength to use alcohol in a civilized manner, it was the administration's duty to impose controls. As the same administrator wrote, "I applaud all measures taken, be they draconian, by the High Commissioner against the use of alcohol among Africans. In this matter, it is better to be safe than sorry."

Despite rhetoric to the League of Nations, the initial phase of zealous control over local consumption ultimately gave way to a more relaxed approach. On September 12, 1919, a decree was passed authorizing Africans to purchase beverages containing no more than 14 percent alcohol content.¹⁸ This decree was in turn modified in 1929, increasing the permissible content level to 20 percent.¹⁹ There was certainly reason to prevent the excessive use of alcohol among Africans, but there were also incentives for avoiding a complete ban. The modifications allowing for beverages of 14 later 20 percent alcohol content were designed to maintain the guise of prohibition while enabling the French to reap the tremendous profits from the sale of beer and wine to their African subjects. Thus, while the Mandates Commission of the League of Nations imposed a policy of prohibition upon the administration in Cameroon, the colonial economic agenda propelled the French to look for loopholes in implementation.

In distinguishing between distilled hard liquor and fermented beer and wine, the French claimed that they were protecting Africans from the most virulent of substances. Distilled liquors, such as rum and gin, were extremely inexpensive and thus accessible to large sectors of the population. A similar situation was noted by Akyeampong: "in the late nineteenth century Gold Coast, where rum and gin were often sold cheaper than water, young men had the opportunity to indulge them-

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁷ ANC-FF 2AC 8092, Wouri, Rapport Annuel 1941.

¹⁸ *Journal Officiel du Cameroun*, September 12, 1919.

¹⁹ Diduk, "European Alcohol," 12.

selves."²⁰ The diffusion of these inexpensive and potent beverages would lead to widespread alcoholism within the local population because Africans could simply not handle them.

Beer and wine, on the other hand, did not pose the same dangers. The French administration claimed that a total repression of alcohol within indigenous society would only lead to an active illegal trade.²¹ The administration therefore authorized the sale of imported beer and wine because it was believed Africans would be less prone to abuse them. Of course, the French would profit from this policy, through both import duties and licensing fees. The administration hoped that the diffusion of European beer and wine would encourage Africans to abandon locally brewed palm and maize wine for imported beverages. An alcohol content of 14 percent was authorized because this was the minimum level of alcohol needed to enable the transport of wine from Europe without spoiling.²²

From the colonial perspective, the widespread consumption of locally produced alcoholic beverages threatened French economic interests but did not pose any threat on social or cultural grounds. As explained in the 1923 report to the League of Nations,

is it convenient to attach an excessive importance to infrequent scenes of drunkenness caused by wine made of maize, a substance indispensable as a source of nutrition? We think not. Regrettable from a moral standpoint, the manifestation of drunkenness only exerts a limited influence because it is not often repeated. Infinitely more dangerous can be the regular consumption, even without drunkenness, of distilled drinks, whose low prices can enable their spread among the native population. The best way to prevent this danger seems to be the authorization of some beverages, beer and wine, in order to compete against the indigenous brews. One can already see in centers where contact with Europeans is constant a gradual increase in the native clientele which drinks these imported beverages.²³

The excessive production of palm wine was insignificant as a social phenomenon, but it did pose a challenge to colonial economic interests because of the threat posed to valuable trees. As the French claimed in their annual report from 1921, "the principal inconvenience with regard to the production of palm wine is not alcoholism, but the decay of palm trees as a result of their excessive punctures. These trees have

²⁰ Akyeampong, *Drink, Power, and Cultural Change*, 54.

²¹ *Rapport Annuel du Gouvernement Français*, 1921, 11.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Rapport Annuel du Gouvernement Français*, 1923, 14.

become precious because of their oleaginous value, and it is therefore opportune to impose a few sanctions towards stopping abuses."²⁴

Alcohol and Urban Space

For the French, concern over the moral decay of local society was expressed for the benefit of the Mandate commission, while the true colonial agenda regarding the indigenous consumption of alcohol was primarily driven by economic interests. But there were also cultural and racial components to the French desire to regulate the alcohol intake of the indigenous population. While the French were willing to sacrifice local morality for economic gains, there was an ongoing attempt at preserving the public spaces designated for colonial interests in Douala. The consumption of alcohol within African society posed a potential threat to European public spaces in the city, imagined as insulated both spatially and culturally from the local population. This was not unique to Cameroon, as Ambler and Crush wrote with regard to Southern Africa, "official efforts to impose and enforce liquor regulations aimed not only to subordinate African drinking to the temporal rhythms of industrial employment but to contribute to a definition of urban space...."²⁵ The goal of the German and French administration in establishing an insulated European center in Douala emulating the cultural norms of a western bourgeois society was maintained by an ongoing separation of urban space along cultural and racial lines. Alcohol demarcated those spaces reserved for whites from those relegated to Africans.

For the European population, alcohol was synonymous with leisure, pleasure, and civilization. Africans, on the other hand, lacked restraint and sophistication, and could not help but abuse alcohol. This abuse represented a profanity of a foundational element of Western culture as practiced in colonial spaces. The offense felt by Europeans by this African intrusion into white cultural spaces could be seen in the following observation made by the French administration: "unfortunately, conversion to Christianity does not always have the effect of blocking an individual's desire to drink alcoholic beverages. On the contrary, a number of new converts have expressed to Europeans an amazing observation that, 'now that we are Christians, we can drink the same alcohol as whites.'"²⁶

In Douala, efforts to protect alcohol for the white population were most pronounced in those quarters where Western culture came into closest contact with Africans, namely Akwa and Joss. In these quarters, prohibition policies were intricately linked to larger questions of public space and culture, and ultimately reinforced racial boundaries in the city. This could be seen in the administration's rejection of a liquor license for Clement Cizey's Cinema d'Akwa. In 1927, the French

²⁴ Ibid., 1921, 11.

²⁵ Ambler and Crush, *Liquor and Labor*, 22.

²⁶ *Rapport Annuel du Gouvernement Français*, 1924, 14.

administration revoked Cizey's liquor license, claiming that too many Africans frequented the cinema, and there was no way to guarantee that they would not be served alcohol.²⁷ Cizey responded with a protest petition signed by 80 European residents of Akwa and Bell, claiming that the lack of proper lighting and communications made it difficult to move far at night, and it was therefore necessary to maintain the liquor license for the cinema in Akwa because it was easily accessible to the resident European population.²⁸ The license was not renewed for the Cinema, and as a result, Cizey petitioned the administration two months later for a liquor license for a new private bar he planned to open exclusively for Europeans. As he wrote, "this club, without having the character of a private circle, will permit me to only accept clients at my convenience, and to reject those who might cause a scandal, such as sailors. I believe that you will find favor with this plan, as it responds to the objections of granting a liquor license to a mixed establishment."²⁹ The chief of the Douala *circonscription* lent his support to Cizey's new plan when he wrote the commissioner that

since the closure of the establishments owned by Najbi Elmir and Doubouille, the European population have been forced to frequent mixed establishments to drink wine and beer, or to go to the Bell Plateau if they want to have liquor. Here in Douala, the cafe is a very popular meeting place for the local population. Mr. Cizey, when managing the Tabourel Bar-Dancing, was never the cause of any significant complaints, which are inevitable in his profession, and I believe that his request should be authorized.³⁰

The controversy over the Cizey liquor license demonstrates the active role played by the colonial administration in constructing urban space and culture in Douala. In attempting to establish and preserve a specific social order in the city, there was a need to structure the culture of leisure and entertainment. According to a decree of 1924, all establishments selling alcoholic beverages were to open no earlier than 7 A.M., and to close no later than 11 P.M. on weeknights, midnight on Sundays and holidays. Any bars or cafes found repeatedly disturbing the "public tranquility" or enabling the practice of prostitution faced steep penalties or closure.³¹

The administration also encouraged Europeans to socialize separately from Africans in order to protect Western culture from local influence. In order to ensure

²⁷ ANC–FF APA 11680/C, Alcool, Infractions, 1924–36, Letter to Clement Cizey, February 10, 1927.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Petition and Letter from Cizey, January 28, 1927.

²⁹ ANC–FF Unclassified, Douala, 1925–1928, Cizey to the Commissioner of the Republic, March 7, 1927.

³⁰ ANC–FF Unclassified, Douala, 1925–1928, Chief of the Circonscription of Douala to the Commissioner of the Republic, April 23, 1927.

³¹ *Journal Officiel du Cameroun*, November 23, 1924.

that the racial division of leisure space was maintained, the police sent African undercover agents to European bars. When the agents were served alcoholic beverages, the owners of the establishments were immediately arrested and slapped with steep fines. In 1925, for example, Joseph Bockler of Akwa paid a fine of 2,000 francs for selling an African a glass of rum costing one franc.³²

Mixed bars threatened the colonial vision of public space in Douala. The reluctance of the administration to grant liquor licenses to these mixed establishments was at times infuriating for European proprietors. This could be seen in an effort made by a Mr. R. Durand to obtain a license to sell alcohol at his dance hall. In a 1936 letter, Durand explained that his dance hall was divided into two floors, with the ground floor reserved for Africans and the top floor for Europeans; alcohol would only be sold to Europeans on the second floor. Dancing and the playing of music would only take place on the first floor. Durand realized the administration's objection to mixed bars, and he wrote, "from a moral point of view, it is better to separate the two populations from each other, but this will not prevent the European clientele from enjoying the local spectacle from the balcony on the second floor."³³ The request was rejected, and Durand later wrote, "I would like to forget all the hassles to which I have been subjected over the last six years of my stay but have not had the courage to do anything about. Nonetheless, I remain convinced that the worst enemy of a colonial official and merchant is not the anopheles mosquito or the tsetse fly, but most often some chief administrator of a region."³⁴

In attempting to keep Africans out of bars and dance halls reserved for European use, it was necessary to provide them with their own leisure establishments for off-work hours. At the same time, bars and dance halls designated for indigenous use required constant regulation to prevent them from encroaching on European-occupied public spaces. The potential for African bars to disturb European residents was felt primarily in Douala quarters. As we will see below, the nightlife of New Bell created few inconveniences for the community of expatriates. In Akwa, on the other hand, these bars challenged the efforts of colonial officials to preserve a civilized environment for their European citizens. Thus African bars and dance halls in Akwa were closely monitored, and their proprietors forced to comply with strict rules concerning noise levels, hours of operation, and even interior design.³⁵ This could be seen in the authorization for an African dance hall in Akwa, given to a Mr. Diaye in 1935; after all the European residents of the quarter gave their approval, and the

³² ANC–FF APA 11680/C, Alcool, Infractions, 1924–36, April 26, 1925.

³³ ANC–FF APA 11697, Débits de boissons, licences, M. Durand à M. le Délégué du Commissaire de la République à Douala, November 18, 1936.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, M. Durand à M. le Délégué du Commissaire de la République à Douala, January 30, 1937.

³⁵ *Rapport Annuel du Gouvernement Français*, 1924, 12.

building was inspected to verify its layout and cleanliness. Officials limited the number of instruments to three brass instruments, one drum, and three string instruments. In addition, the dance hall was only to be open on weekends, and the police were to ensure that those leaving the bar would not make too much noise.³⁶

Official surveillance over establishments serving an African clientele could become obsessive. For example, complaints by a neighbor of the famous Fisher Dancing in Akwa led to a close surveillance of the dance hall in 1932. The following intelligence report made by an officer of the court was prepared in order to assess the level of disturbance:

At 9:10 P.M. ... one could distinctly hear the brass band playing a dance, and the same music could be heard until 9:17, when the jazz band began playing. At 9:24 and 9:30 the brass band played and at 9:40, the jazz band played with a singer using a microphone.... at 10:08, the brass band came on again, as they did at 10:25 and at 10:35, at 10:45 the jazz band played again with a singer and microphone accompanied by castanets, a bass drum, and cymbals. At 10:58 the brass band played a Maringa non-stop, and from 11:25 on it played alternatively "This is for my Papa," and a Maringa until 11:37. At the end of the dance, one could hear shouts of "You-ou..."³⁷

This report demonstrates the high level of surveillance to which African bars in Akwa could be subjected. It is important to note, however, that not all of the indigenous population suffered from this colonial intrusion into their leisure world. It was primarily the Duala who had both the financial resources and the cultural inclination to frequent African bars and dance halls in Akwa during the interwar years. For immigrants employed as manual laborers, beverages in these bars were prohibitively expensive. Mr. Durand acknowledged, for example, that African customers alone could not sustain his bar, and mixed establishments enabled some Africans to benefit from the resources of the European clientele.³⁸ As one New Bell resident claimed, "beer and wine were for white people."³⁹

Middle-class Duala had both the money and the cultural penchant to enjoy imported wines and beer decades before other populations of Cameroon. Imported alcohol was indeed a luxury item in colonial Douala, even for the European administration. This could be seen in a complaint made by the judiciary services concerning the confiscation and destruction of alcohol seized by the police from Africans. As the court officer wrote, "one wonders if it is not more in keeping with the

³⁶ ANC-FF APA 11697, Débits de boissons, licenses, February 28, 1935.

³⁷ ANC-FF APA 11680/B, Alcool, Police des débits, Affaires diverses 1927-1944, Procès-Verbal de Constat, September 10, 1932.

³⁸ ANC-FF APA 11697, Débits de boissons, licences, M. Durand à M. le Délégué du Commissaire de la République à Douala, November 18, 1936

³⁹ Interview with Marie Ngobo, New Bell, Douala, December 1998.

general interest of the population for the authorities to find an alternative to this ... brutal destruction of such riches, which are only prohibited for the indigenous population."⁴⁰ Unlike other local groups, the Duala had the economic resources to adopt the Western bourgeois practice of enjoying a bottle of European table wine with lunch or dinner on a regular basis.⁴¹ The widespread consumption of imported wines among the Duala became a symbol of their privileged status in the eyes of the immigrant population. As one informant claimed, "the Duala disliked some tribes more than others. They would only give imported wine and liquor to those they got along with."⁴² Few other members of the indigenous population could afford these luxury items.

The Westernized Duala were the first group in Cameroon to enthusiastically embrace European trends in leisure and cultural activities such as music and dance. Their exposure to colonial culture was expressed in their quick mastery of European instruments and musical style. Enthusiasm for this music could be seen in the great success of the Duala as pioneers in Western-influenced music in Cameroon and their ongoing recognition as singers and musicians today. Groups of Duala requested permission to study music with Europeans in the city in the late 1920s.⁴³ Duala musicians began recording albums in Lagos to be duplicated in England and sent back to Cameroon for sale in the 1930s.⁴⁴ Traces of Duala influence can still be seen when popular music is sung in the Duala language by all ethnic groups in Cameroon.

The cultural proximity between the Duala and Europeans made the sharing of leisure space a natural consequence for the Duala elite. Since they were inclined to see themselves as set apart and above other groups of Africans in the city, it was not surprising that the Duala in Akwa enthusiastically frequented the mixed establishments and Western-style dance halls reserved for Africans. For the immigrant population, participation in the nightlife of Duala quarters was both impossible in economic terms, and undesirable from cultural and social perspectives. In New Bell, an alternative world of leisure and entertainment developed to suit the needs of the strangers' community. Far removed from colonial surveillance and inspection, the off-hours world of New Bell reflected local perspectives on public space and community life outside the tight control of the colonial regime.

⁴⁰ ANC–FF APA 11680/C, *Alcool, Infractions, 1924–36*, Chef de service judiciaire à Monsieur le Commissaire de la République, April 19, 1927.

⁴¹ Institut des Sciences Humaines, Yaounde (hereafter ISH) Wouri File, *Réponse de l'enquête no. 1C sur l'alimentation des indigènes par le Chef Supérieur Lobe Bell, 1938*, *Réponse de l'enquête no. 1C sur l'alimentation des indigènes par Moukouri Jacques Kuoh, 1938*.

⁴² Interview with Zepherin Benjamin Ngoko, New Bell, Douala, December 1998.

⁴³ ANC–FF Unclassified, Douala, 1925–1928, Letter from "Un groupe d'Indigènes soussignés," June 15, 1928.

⁴⁴ ANC–FF APA 11368/A, *Censure: Films, disques, et enregistrements 1935–45*.

Alcohol and Leisure in New Bell

The stark contrast between drinking establishments in New Bell and Douala quarters serves as a metaphor for much of the difference in their experience of colonial rule during the interwar era. The culture of leisure time and entertainment in the New Bell Strangers' Quarter did not evolve in the image of Western bourgeois society or under its control. Indeed, the immigrant community lacked the financial resources to enjoy European wine on a regular basis or to frequent dance halls with ten-piece brass bands, where musicians earned in one month the near equivalent of a yearly salary for the average laborer.⁴⁵ For the community of strangers, colonial policy and economic circumstances allowed for a night life of a far more sparing nature. But unlike in Douala quarters, off-hours entertainment escaped colonial control and generated revenues that remained inside New Bell. Thus, the culture of entertainment and leisure thriving in the quarter during off-work hours was an expression of community life essentially unhindered by colonial regulations, and helped to circulate resources among residents of the quarter rather than into the hands of European proprietors or the administration. The nightlife of New Bell was significant not only as an expression of a unique and vibrant social life, but also as a vital contributor to the economic sustenance and viability of the community.

Established by the German administration in 1914, New Bell was designated to house the thousands of immigrants from both Cameroon and the entire West African coast who came to Douala throughout the colonial period, seeking employment, adventure, and refuge. Many of these newcomers found work within the colonial economy as dockworkers, porters, manual laborers, and civil servants, but most earned their livelihood in New Bell's "unofficial" economy. Both German and French administrations allowed the quarter to evolve autonomously as long as this did not hinder the implementation of economic or social policies. The space of New Bell thus evolved into a physical articulation of diffused power and the colonial regime maintained a distance from the inner workings of the quarter.

Before World War II, there were no European-style bars or dance halls in New Bell,⁴⁶ but not because the immigrant community did not drink or dance. On the contrary, nearly all informants responded to questions concerning leisure time activities with, "we drank."⁴⁷ Indeed, alcohol played a paramount role in the culture of entertainment in New Bell. Informants recalled that drinking was, in fact, the only

⁴⁵ ANC-FF DOM 167, Contrats de Travail 1936-45; Jacques Guilbot, "Les Conditions de Vie des Indigènes de Douala, *Etude Camerounaise* 27-28, September-December, 1949, 179-239.

⁴⁶ Interviews with Marie Ngobo, New Bell, Douala, March 1999; Sebastien Nzekou, New Bell, Douala, March 1999.

⁴⁷ Between December 1998 and March 1999 over 50 interviews were conducted with New Bell residents who had lived in the quarter during the period under examination.

diversion available for workers during off-work hours in the quarter.⁴⁸ The consumption of alcohol in New Bell was so universal that drinking ultimately became synonymous with community in the quarter, and informants would signify an individual's membership in the community by their sharing a drink with others. This could be seen in one informant's description of the police: "when they were not working, they would come and have a drink like everyone else."⁴⁹

Although drinking was widespread in New Bell, the production, sale, and purchase of unlicensed alcohol were all illegal activities. Colonial regulations and sporadic attempts to enforce them affected the culture of drinking and the spaces within which drinking took place in the Strangers Quarter. Beginning in 1921, the sale of alcohol required a license.⁵⁰ The fabrication of alcohol by the indigenous population was outlawed by a decree of July 17, 1922.⁵¹ As seen above, these measures taken by the colonial regime were intended to maintain control over the diffusion of alcohol within local society, and to allow the administration to earn revenues from its trade. Residents of New Bell were aware of colonial motives, and as one informant recalled, "palm wine was only made illegal when the whites wanted to us sell their own beers."⁵²

Colonial control undoubtedly influenced the type of alcohol consumed in New Bell. The need for a license to sell alcohol was far more difficult to circumvent for imported beverages than for those beverages locally produced and sold on a small scale within the confines of the quarter. As a result, the sale of locally produced palm and maize wine was far more widespread in New Bell than that of imported beer and wine. Because licensing laws made locally produced alcohol both cheaper and more accessible, colonial policies served to encourage a vibrant New Bell-based industry of alcohol production, rather than actually limiting the access of the local population to alcohol, or encouraging the sale of imported beer and wine. The French were frustrated by failure of the local population to purchase imported alcohol. By 1935, the administration complained that the steady decline over time of the sale of imported beverages was the result of increasing production of local palm and maize wines.⁵³

In the early Mandate years, as seen above, the French had been relatively apathetic about the production and consumption of locally produced alcoholic

⁴⁸ Interviews with New Bell residents Marie Claire Mbita, December 1998; Gertude Mbe, December 1998; Barthelemy Tchopé Tassi, December 1998.

⁴⁹ Interview with Augustine Biloa, New Bell, Douala, March 1999.

⁵⁰ *Rapport Annuel du Gouvernement Français*, 1921, 11.

⁵¹ *Journal Officiel du Cameroun*, July 17, 1922.

⁵² Interview with Joachim Onana, New Bell, March 1999.

⁵³ ANC–FF APA 11699, *Alcool, Vins, Principes: 1925–1939*, Le Président de la section commerciale à le Gouverneur des Colonies Commissaire de la République, November 21, 1935.

beverages. They reported to the League of Nations in 1921 that the production of local wines exposed indigenous people to the punishment of the *indigénat* in theory, but that in practice, only the severe abuse of these beverages was prosecuted. The report claimed that when consumed in normal quantities, these beverages were "less dangerous."⁵⁴ This relaxed attitude toward the economic and social significance of locally produced drinks was in stark contrast to the "Durban system" instituted by the British in South Africa in 1909, according to which the sale and consumption of locally produced *utshwala* was only permitted in municipal beerhalls, allowing the colonial government tight regulation and monopoly over this important local industry.⁵⁵

But as the increasing sale of palm and maize wine encroached upon the sale of imported beer and wine in Cameroon, the French revised their nonchalant view of the African beverages. The threat to European economic interests inspired a growing opposition toward locally produced alcohol. In the 1930s, the administration increasingly described palm and maize wine as dangerous narcotics. As the president of the Commerce Department wrote in 1935,

following intelligence information I was able to obtain, it is clear that the decrease in the sale of [imported] beverages is the result of the increase in the clandestine fabrication of *mimbo* (palm wine), maize beer, or other drugs more or less dangerous, which the indigenous people consume in great quantities in the region of Douala, to great detriment to their health. I ask you, Mr. Governor, to intervene in order to stop the production and sale of these beverages with which the indigenes are poisoning themselves.⁵⁶

This language of paternalist morality was continually employed to disguise moves aimed at protecting European economic interests involved in the sale of alcohol to Africans.

In its campaign against locally produced beverages, the administration also claimed that palm wine was frequently laced with marijuana, increasing its potency and potential to harm the local population.⁵⁷ Once the local beverages were categorized as dangerous, Commissioner Répique wrote in 1936, "without ignoring the fact that the radical suppression of intemperance among certain tribes would be practically impossible, the administration would be lax in its duties if it did not try to prevent it in the greatest measure, or if it did not actively intervene."⁵⁸ The chief of

⁵⁴ *Rapport Annuel du Gouvernement Français*, 1921, 11.

⁵⁵ Paul La Hausse, *Brewers, Beerhalls and Boycotts: A History of Liquor in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1988).

⁵⁶ ANC-FF APA 11699, *Alcool, Vins, Principes: 1925-1939*, Le Président de la section commerciale au Gouverneur des Colonies Commissaire de la République, November 21, 1935.

⁵⁷ ANC-FF APA 10005/A, Annual Report, Yabassi Circonscription, 1929.

⁵⁸ ANC-FF APA 11910, *Circulaires*, Depart 1929-1936, Circulaire No. 63, June 17, 1936.

police in 1939 recommended that the most effective method to protect the indigenous population from the combination of palm wine and marijuana was to increase the number of licenses given to residents of New Bell in order to improve surveillance.⁵⁹ Efforts were focused on the unlicensed production and sale of alcohol in the quarter but, as will be seen, these met with little success.

In reaffirming their faith in the potential for policy to change drinking habits in New Bell, these colonial administrators grossly underestimated the extent to which cultural, social, and economic factors rooted in New Bell served to shape the culture of drinking. Within the community of New Bell, African drinking habits and preferences were guided only in small part by colonial laws. The culture of leisure and entertainment was ultimately grounded in the space of New Bell and remained insulated from excessive colonial influence. The residents of the Strangers' Quarter relied on their experiences both as ex-villagers and as newly arrived immigrants to the particular space of New Bell in contributing and participating in a public culture heavily based on the consumption of alcohol.

For many immigrants, the easy access to alcohol was linked to its cheapness, and this was a significant difference between urban and rural life. While maize wine was more expensive than palm wine, both were cheap enough to be affordable to the general immigrant population on a regular basis in Douala.⁶⁰ This was in stark contrast to life in the village, where access to palm wine was severely limited for the vast majority. As Susan Diduk noted, "daily alcohol consumption [in rural areas] was a privilege available only to very high-ranking older men."⁶¹ While palm wine was a relatively rare commodity and status symbol in the village, its widespread availability and accessibility in Douala made it a marker of the freedoms and opportunities gained by moving to the city.

In the city, access to alcohol was not controlled by a few powerful Big Men, as in the rural areas. On the contrary, it was women—primarily married women—who produced palm and maize wine in New Bell. Women earned and controlled the revenues from this industry, and thus democratized alcohol consumption for the urban population. On a social and cultural level, women also played an important role in constructing community life through their control over the access and sale of alcohol to the immigrant population.

⁵⁹ ANC–FF APA 11680/B, *Alcool, Police des debits, Affaires diverses 1927–1944*, Le Délégué du Haut Commissaire de la République à Monsieur le Haut Commissaire de la République, August 16, 1939.

⁶⁰ Interviews with New Bell residents Jean Assama, December 1998; Anasthasie Ongono, March 1999; Thérèse Monthe, March 1999.

⁶¹ Diduk, "European Alcohol," 6.

In terms of generating income, married women had few options beyond the sale of alcohol.⁶² Obtaining a license to sell crops or other goods in the market was costly and difficult, and most women preferred to avoid colonial control by establishing their own businesses, which were often far more profitable than petty commerce based in markets.⁶³ Married women who made wine worked individually, each having her own area where production took place. In periods of stricter controls and closer police surveillance, women set up private breweries in the bush beyond their living quarters. The production process took several days, during which palm or maize kernels were washed, dried, and fermented.⁶⁴

Throughout the production and sale of wine, women were constantly aware of the illegality of their activities. The presence of police was always a factor in shaping this process, and particularly in periods of stricter controls and campaigns of mass arrests. Thus women attempted to work discreetly and to maintain some level of concealment for their enterprises. Once the wine was ready, women brought it into their homes, where they often kept doors and windows closed to avoid police scrutiny. Benches and tables were set up for customers. One informant claimed that those who came did so quietly, without knocking, because even those who drank were in danger of arrest. Customers knew of these places by word of mouth, and "there was no need for publicity."⁶⁵ Wine was sold primarily in the evenings and on weekends, when most of the population of New Bell was not working, but it was possible to buy locally produced wine at any hour of the day. Women interviewed claimed that Sunday was their busiest day, and the time of greatest profit.

Despite efforts to maintain a low profile, the existence of illegal bars in New Bell was no secret to either the police or the colonial administration. Some informants even claimed that the wives of policemen were also involved in the sale of alcohol. While police always posed a threat to the alcohol industry, there were periods of particularly zealous control. These usually followed changes in legislation, but the individual personalities of French police commanders also influenced the level of police intervention in the production and sale of alcohol in the quarter. Informants recalled that Chief Commissioner Dubois was particularly fervent in his efforts to put an end to the production and consumption of palm and maize wine in New Bell.⁶⁶ Dubois, who served in the 1920s, was the same commissioner reprimanded

⁶² Interview with Anasthasie Ongono, New Bell, Douala, March 1999.

⁶³ Interview with Augustine Biloa, New Bell, Douala, March 1999.

⁶⁴ Interview with Marie Ngobo, New Bell, Douala, March 1999.

⁶⁵ Interview with Anasthasie Ongono, New Bell, Douala, March 1999.

⁶⁶ Interviews with Augustine Biloa, New Bell, Douala, March 1999; Anasthasie Ongono, New Bell, Douala, March 1999.

manded by the administration for destroying confiscated alcohol.⁶⁷ Under Dubois, bars were raided frequently and women arrested, fined, and sent to jail regularly for possessing and selling locally produced wines.⁶⁸ According to one informant, Dubois developed an impressive network of informants who helped him in these efforts.⁶⁹ But as one resident of New Bell recalled, "these same people who would tell on us were the same people who lived with us, the same ones who would come to drink."⁷⁰

Women continued to produce and sell alcohol, even under periods of intense surveillance such as that under Commissioner Dubois. Although serving as a ever-present nuisance, the arrests and fines did not constitute any real obstacle to the women. Those found guilty could be imprisoned for up to two weeks, but once released, they quickly resumed activity. The colonial administration also preferred to fine perpetrators, and women could simply pay their fine and return to work. Although the administration assumed that fines would serve as a deterrent, informants recalled that fines were actually quite low. As one informant claimed, "we paid fines that were nothing compared to the profits we made. After arrest, we would begin again, knowing that we would be arrested again.... We paid between 300 and 600 francs each arrest, and a cup of wine would cost 10 francs at first, later 40 francs."⁷¹

The tremendous gap between colonial perceptions of local processes, and particularly women's role within them, and the reality of New Bell is reflected in the low level of the fines. Had the administration been aware of the kinds of profits women were making, it is highly unlikely that fines would have remained so low. Women's activities remained largely unknown or misunderstood by colonial officials, and these gaps in knowledge established a pathway to opportunities exploited by women in New Bell. It was apparently inconceivable for colonial officials that African women could earn more than their husbands. But in fact, women did earn far more from the sale of wine than their husbands did through employment in the colonial economy. One informant explained that she made more than four times her husband's salary by selling wine, and it was through her earnings that they were able to build a house from durable materials.⁷² In underestimating the earnings of women in local industries, the colonial administration actually fostered women's earning potential through the imposition of trivial fines.

⁶⁷ ANC-FF APA 11680/C, *Alcool, Infractions, 1924-36*, Chef de service judiciaire à Commissaire de la République, April 19, 1927.

⁶⁸ Interview with Thérèse Monthe, New Bell, Douala, March 1999.

⁶⁹ Interview with Mbody Konrad, Bassa, Douala, December 1998.

⁷⁰ Interview with Anasthasie Ongono, New Bell, Douala, March 1999.

⁷¹ Interview with Augustine Biloa, New Bell, Douala, March 1999.

⁷² Interview with Anasthasie Ongono, New Bell, Douala, March 1999.

In exploiting such opportunities, women made an immense contribution in the construction of public space and culture in New Bell. For most of the colonial period, bars in the quarter were situated inside women's homes, and this blurred the distinction between private and public spheres. Living rooms became sites of large gatherings where urban popular culture was invented and shaped. In these bars, ethnicity did not determine or limit participation in communal life.⁷³ Members of all tribes congregated together, using pidgin as the common language. Customers would mostly sit and tell stories while drinking, but there was also some gambling in bars. Women recalled many fights between clients; as one informant claimed, "there cannot be drinking without fights. I even saw this in France...."⁷⁴ Bars established by married women thus served as the primary meeting place for the vastly diverse community of immigrants and served as the common ground for forging a communal identity.

The study of alcohol consumption in New Bell is thus essential for understanding the nature of popular culture in the Strangers' Quarter. Bars were the most significant sites of public gathering and cultural exchange in the quarter throughout the colonial period. Through this study of alcohol, the nature of popular culture within the immigrant community emerges as separate and defiant of both local and colonial hierarchies of power. For many historians seeking to recover the experiences of non-elite cultures from the past, this image of empowered and defiant ordinary people is ardently pursued. The cultural histories of groups and communities often excluded from political history, such as the immigrant population of New Bell, often seek to uncover a role of influence and power in shaping historical processes. As Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson wrote, "the study of popular culture in history has had a range of uses and benefits for historians as well as a diversity of analytical tools.... one should never again think that ordinary people have been unimportant to political history; they have been visibly engaged in the cultural realm in shaping and resisting the exercise of power."⁷⁵

Without denying the immense significance of popular culture on political processes, we must be avoid imposing a political consciousness on all expressions of popular culture, even when the exercise of popular culture does have far-reaching political consequences. The ongoing use of alcohol in New Bell despite colonial efforts to stop it could be interpreted as an anticolonial immigrant initiative. But while easy access to alcohol reflected a breakdown in local hierarchies of power in rural areas, and a direct contradiction to colonial policies restricting the African

⁷³ Akyeamong noted a similar trend in the Gold Coast: "Drinking circles in towns came to transcend barriers of ethnicity and age.... industrial labor cut across ethnicity and homogenized the socioeconomic circumstances of wage laborers." *Drink, Power, and Cultural Change*, 60.

⁷⁴ Interview with Anasthasie Ongono, New Bell, Douala, March 1999.

⁷⁵ Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, eds., "Introduction," *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies* (Berkeley, 1991), 18.

consumption of alcohol, the culture of alcohol consumption in New Bell should not be overly characterized as an immigrant attempt to express or exploit new-found power. Without ignoring the intersections of power configuring the alcohol industry in the Strangers' Quarter, the off-work hours of local residents were not always exploited to resist hierarchies of power situated both within and above New Bell. The strangers of New Bell gathered to share a drink because it was the only outlet for entertainment in the quarter. Bars served an important purpose within the community by providing individuals with an opportunity to socialize after a long day of work, and ultimately, the alcohol industry was a significant indicator of internal economic and social processes within the quarter.

The history of alcohol consumption in the Strangers' Quarter cannot be seen merely as a response to colonial rule, or as a symbol of African agency in the face of foreign oppression. New Bell residents were not conscious of colonial power in all aspects of decision making, and the cultural and social life of the quarter was not constructed in constant dialogue with the European center of the city. For most, drinking was an important expression of community life that was present-based and practical, and not orchestrated by sentiments of anticolonialism, nationalism, or class consciousness. Thus, while power struggles played a role in constructing the culture of alcohol in the Strangers' Quarter of Douala, this is not the only lens through which to view it.

