
Communication in Africa: Talking Drums and Town Criers in Pre-colonial and Colonial Bamenda Grassfields, Cameroon

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This article focuses on the historical vicissitudes of the talking drum and town criers as forms of communication in the pre-colonial and early colonial Bamenda Grassfields of the northwest region of Cameroon. It debunks simplistic and skewed views long held by European-based scholars that all in Africa was savage chaos before the advent of European colonisation of the continent. The apologists contend that pre-colonial Africans neither knew how to invent a plow nor a wheel. Through the available evidence provided in this article, those derogatory and unscientific statements are proved to be unfounded. Using interviews with people who witnessed the use of talking drums and town criers and those occupied in their use, together with the archival data, this article concludes that the Bamenda Grassfields had developed a high level of communication in the pre-colonial and early colonial period. This article is structured into the following sections: an introduction that generally outlines the key argument of the paper and its conceptual analysis; a section that outlines the various methods and sources that were used to gather the data; one that describes the geography and demographics of the study area known as the Bamenda Grassfields, showing the different indigenous groups and their relations to talking drums and town criers; a section that focuses on the talking drums and town criers in Africa; one that examines the town criers and talking drums in the Bamenda Grassfields, and findings together with recommendations for further research and conclusions.

Introduction

Eurocentric scholars for a long time held very dearly that all in Africa was savage chaos before the Europeans set foot on the continent. Apologists maintain that pre-colonial Africa neither knew how to invent a plow nor a wheel. According to historian and philosopher Georg Hegel, “Africa has remained cut off from all contacts with the rest of the world; it is the land of gold, for ever pressing in upon itself, and the land of childhood, removed from the light of self-conscious history and wrapped in the dark mantle of night.”¹ Consequently, Africa did not appear in his four cultures or civilisations and therefore was unhistorical and undeveloped.² Available evidence in Africa shows the contrary. According to African studies

scholars, Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Valentin Yves Mudimbe, it was from the 1960s onwards that there was a transformation and a metamorphosis in the practice of African history by Africans and Africanists historians. It was a period in which orthodox historical critique was adapted to merge with the analysis of oral data. The need to prove to a rather disbelieving world the cogency and rationality of the concept of African history led to studies trying to show that the oral mode of conserving information guarantees its transmission and could be just as effective as the written facts.³ Thus, from the 1970s onwards, Africanists have exhibited a lively interest and engaged in debates in social—and more recently—intellectual history. Historians are bringing closer attention to micro-histories as Valentin Yves Mudimbe posits that, “today Africans themselves read, challenge, rewrite, as a way of explicating and defining their culture history and being.”⁴ It is within this line of thought that this article positions itself.

Talking drums and town criers are, what will be referred to in this article, channels of traditional communication technology. Talking drums are large, all-wood instruments made from a single log featuring hollow chambers and long narrow openings. The drums produce resonant notes when they are struck with wooden sticks. There are often small supports under each end of the drum to suspend it from the ground and to allow it to vibrate more freely. The bigger the log from which the drum is made, the louder the sound produced and thus the farther away it can be heard. The drummer can tune his instrument to produce a lower or higher note. Drummers hit the drum edges with sticks to beat out rhythms of high and low notes. In royal palaces, these drums are sacred and stored in shrines. These drums were made of special wood. The drum is made out of the wood of “small leaf,” better known in the botanic jargon as *Piptadreniastrum africanum*. According to local experts, the talking drum was carved out of wet and dry wood or the *kei* tree. From the pre-colonial period to the 1960s, drum makers usually seasoned the wood for about two years before they used it. The first talking drum of this type was made c.1460 and was used by the *Ngamba*.⁵ Once the wood has seasoned, the carver takes two to three weeks to carve a talking drum.⁶ Drummers use two sticks to play the drum, made from the bottom portion of the raffia bamboo.

Town criers acted as a second form of pre-colonial communication. Typically muscular men with obstreperous voices, they broadcast news to villagers in the evenings. The crier beat the gong twice or thrice and delivered his message. This was done repeatedly in the village. Talking drums and town criers are still used to communicate, but not as they had been used in the pre-colonial and early colonial periods. They are not used in place of modern technology, but

rather in a ceremonial way to commemorate the past.

These media were not introduced to African societies like the modern mass media. Thus, they are still part of indigenous culture and contribute greatly to shaping communication in the society. According to Joy Chioma Nwabueze, professor and lecturer at Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Nigeria, these media can further be described as a continuous process of information dissemination, entertainment, and education used in societies that have not been seriously dislocated by Western culture or any other external influences.⁷ This suggests that traditional forms of communication were borne out of indigenous environments and have not been adulterated by external forces.



Figure 1. A typical talking drum in its shrine. The author took the photograph during the fieldwork.

Historians have not yet given sufficient attention to the communication systems of pre-colonial Africa. This paper posits that for a fuller understanding of the development of communication technologies, there is a need to appreciate what was there before the introduction of “modern communication technology.” This helps in the understanding of the development in the history of communication. According to Martin Klein, professor emeritus of history at the University of Toronto and namesake of the Martin A. Klein Prize in African History, “what defines the historian is the belief that things can be understood more fully if we understand how they came into being. Social phenomena are too important to be left to other social scientists.”⁸

The people in most parts of rural Africa still depend on traditional media because of their interpersonal nature. According to Emmanuel Akpoveta and Wilson Des, professors in the University of Uyo, Nigeria, traditional media include aspects of traditional African communication technologies, namely: folklore, music, town/village criers, village square meetings, and festivals. Based on previous research on the history of communication in colonial British Cameroons, these forms of communication showed that prior to colonial or “modern” communication technologies, African societies already had a pre-colonial communication system that had been set up by traditional rulers.⁹ These pre-colonial communication systems (talking drums and town criers) deserve historical research to appreciate pre-colonial civilisations that yet remains a *tabula rasa* in pre-colonial Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. In responding to this deficiency, this article describes the centrality of talking drums and town criers in Bamenda Grassfields before the establishment of colonial network of communication systems.

Africa is witnessing a period of rapid technological development, dubbed in some quarters as the information revolution. These new technologies—also known as information and communication technologies (ICTs)—include amongst other things electronic networks embodying complex hardware and software.¹⁰ According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, new technologies cover internet provisioning, telecommunication and information equipment and services, media and broadcasting, and commercial information providers. The new ICTs in Africa are the internet, phones, and cell phones. Despite the prevalence of these new ICTs, traditional modes of communication used in pre-colonial times persist. It is relevant to note that while complex new communication technologies exist in the society, traditional and older forms have survived and lived side by side with the new ones. Arguably, with modernity, some of the traditional forms of

communication have lost their meanings but have not completely disappeared from the communication topographies. They are now used in purely traditional settings or ceremonies.

Methodology and Sources

In writing this article, the author drew from three principal sources. The first source was the archives. In the National Archives of Cameroon in English-speaking Buea, Cameroon, the author consulted mostly assessment and intelligent reports that British anthropologists wrote at the beginning of the British colonial rule to enable the British to pacify and administer the area. In *Gold Coast Diaries: Chronicles of Political Officers in West Africa, 1900-1919*, Thora Williamson echoed the importance of archival records. She maintained that, at both local and provincial districts, reports were essential since the British generally assumed that the colonial official was the first to keep written records for the specific area. It was therefore only in the keeping of records that subsequent administrators would have a sense of the territory. Although her focus was on the Gold Coast, Williamson also said what was true of the Gold Coast was also true of the British Cameroon in which the Bamenda Grassfields was found. Records were vital for the colonial administrator at all levels—district, division and province—for effective administration.¹¹ The weaknesses suffered by the archival documents made it preponderant for the author to resort to interviews. Secondly, the author conducted interviews with people who witnessed the talking drums and town criers. The third source was secondary literature, which helped the author to understand what was going on in other parts of pre-colonial Africa. This material was also used to make comparison and see whether what was happening in Bamenda was also going on in other parts of pre-colonial Africa. The author consulted numerous secondary sources as each appeared to be coloured by the background and biases of its authors.

Locating the Bamenda Grassfields

The Bamenda Grassfields is located in the Northwest of Cameroon. It has a land surface of 6,680 sq. miles, almost the size of Belgium. Following the 2010 census its population stood at 1,828,953 people at a density of 100/km. It has more than thirty ethnic groups and languages and was administered as part of the British Southern Cameroons from the end of the First World War until 1961.¹² The term Grassfields dates back to the period of the German colonization (1884-1916). The

Grassfields are characterised by its high altitude and grassy nature. Except for the forest galleries, the area is full of beautiful grassy scenery. The indigenous population of the area immigrated from various directions and broadly speaking, these groups fall under five major headings: Tikar, Widikum, Chamba, Tiv, and Mbembe. Table 1 below shows the major groups of the region.

TABLE 1: Different Ethnic Groups of the Bamenda Grassfields

Ethnic Group	Population
Tikar	Kom, Nso, Oku, Mbiame, Wiya, Tang, War, Bum, Bafut, Mbaw, Fungom, Mmen, Bamunka, Babungo, Bamessi, Bamessing, Bambalang, Bamali, Bafani, Baba, Bangola, Big Babanki, Babanki-Tungo. Wimbum
Widikum	Esimbi, Beba-Befang, Mankon, Ngemba, Ngie, Ngwo, Mogamo, Meta, Chomba
Chamba	Bali-Nyonga, Bali-Kumbat, Bali-Gangsin, Bali-Gashu, Bali Gham
Tiv	Aghem Federation
Mbembe	Mbembe, Misaje, Mfumte

Source: Paul Nchoji Nkwi, *Traditional Diplomacy: A Study of Inter-Chiefdom Relations in the Western Grassfields, North West Province of Cameroon* (Yaounde, Cameroon: Department of Sociology, University of Yaounde, 1987), 15.

The table above shows that the Tikars have the most sub-ethnic groups, followed by the Widikum and the Chamba. It is fair to say that the least numerous are the Tiv and Mbembe. These ethnic groups collectively constitute the population of the Bamenda Grassfields. The lives of the people of this region are coloured by migration. In the pre-colonial period, they mostly migrated to Northern Nigeria where they traded in kola-nut and in return bought spices and clothes. Exceptionally, they also ventured to the Bight of Biafra where they sold livestock and bought Dane guns and palm oil. Much has been researched and written on the Bamenda Grassfields from the perspectives of anthropologists, sociologists, and to a much lesser extent, historians.¹³ In relation to new and old forms of communications, the more numerous Tikar have been associated with

more drums and town criers.¹⁴ Quite recently, the Tikars appropriated newer forms of communication from the other ethnic groups.¹⁵ Reports have ascertained that through these migrations the various groups came to know about the type of wood used for the talking drum and the different ways to make the gong that the town crier used to send out messages.¹⁶

Talking Drums and Town Criers in Africa

According to a senior re-toucher at Gloss Studios, New York City, Timothy Sexton in *African Talking Drums: More Than Just a Musical Instrument, the World's First Portable Phones*, communication instruments such as talking drums, which are often with an hourglass shape, are frequently used in African music recordings.¹⁷ They are called talking drums fundamentally because most African societies used them to communicate with each other. Talking drums can be used to approximate the spoken language, and under the most ideal of conditions, complex dialogues can take place between drummers positioned as much as twenty miles away. Usually, the conversations would only take place between drummers who were about five miles away and then pass on from drummer to drummer to the villages that were farther away.

Talking drums arose in Western African countries such as Ghana and Nigeria. The talking drum worked well to communicate highly developed thought because the actual spoken languages of these African societies had a tonal component to them in which each syllable of a particular word contains a different pitch. Amongst the Yoruba of Western Nigeria, the use of talking drums was highly developed and it was in fact, shaped and known as a *dun-dun*. The drummer holds the *dun-dun* over his arm and strikes it with a curved, hammer-like stick. On the outside of the talking drum are tightened leather cords that the drummer can squeeze to control the pitch of the drumbeat. The actual beat of the drums, as indicated, can travel for several miles across the wide-open expanses of the African plains. In *Things Fall Apart*, the celebrated African writer Chinua Achebe describes that the Ibos of Eastern Nigeria widely used the talking drums to send out messages and gather people of the society.¹⁸ Yet talking drums were used not just to send messages. They also played a role in several social rituals in African societies, such as to pay solemn tribute to tribal spirits or to honor living tribal chieftains.¹⁹

The talking drums have often symbolized the power of a traditional political leader in Africa. The specific talking drum patterns and rhythms were also closely linked with ogun, or spiritual beings associated with the traditional Yoruba

beliefs in Nigeria or Ghana. Early slave traders felt threatened by the talking drum because of the potential of talking drums to “speak” in a tongue unknown to them.²⁰ At the advent of European colonial rule, the talking drum telegraphy had developed to a level that the colonial administrators were shocked to realise that drum messages could be transmitted at the speed of a one hundred miles per hour.²¹ Researchers—primarily anthropologists, sociologists, and linguists—have documented their findings about the talking drums in Africa.²² Talking drums are known by various names in some parts of West Africa. Table 2 below lists the names that different ethnic groups in Africa applied to talking drums.

TABLE 2: Ethnic Groups and Indigenous Names of Talking Drums

Ethnic Group	Indigenous name of the talking drum
Wolof of Senegal	<i>Tama</i>
Yoruba of Nigeria and Eastern Benin	<i>Gang gan; Dun Dun</i>
Akan of Central Ghana and Cote D'Ivoire	<i>Dondo</i>
Hausa of Northern Nigeria, Niger, Northern Ghana, Benin and Cameroon	<i>Kalangu</i>
Songhai and Zarma of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger	<i>Doodo</i>

Source: John F. Carrington, *Talking Drums of Africa* (NY: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 75. The ethnic groups listed above are not all inclusive. The sample illustrates that the talking drum was the traditional telegraphy of most parts of Africa. Although the general name has been lumped up as talking drums, there is no single international drum language. When a drum is used in speech mode, it is culturally defined and depends on the linguistic and cultural boundaries of a particular society. Consequently, communication could suffer from translation problems as in vocal communication.²³

Town Criers in Pre-colonial and Colonial Africa

Historically, town councils employed town criers to make public announcements in the streets. In a broader context, in Africa these muscular men were charged to broadcast news to the villagers in the evenings.²⁴ They were

sometimes known as “gong-men,” and were typically teenage boys who carried along a noise-making instrument that they used to disseminate general information about events and the social welfare of communities. They have always constituted an important political tool for local chiefs, as their use was a low cost means of communication that reduced confusion about new information. Chiefs and/or kings had a near monopoly on this form of indigenous communication. Town criers necessarily must possess loud voices and the ability to shout at a volume audible to most of the people in the village. After a metal gong was hit twice or thrice the town crier delivered the message. This was repeated in all the corners of the village.²⁵

According to Oludayo Ebenezer Soola, Reader, Department of Communication and Language Art, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, town criers constituted communication wings of traditional rulers and traditionally took messages from royal palaces to the community.²⁶ They carried a large conical metal gong that they normally would beat with special sticks or carved bamboo rods.²⁷ They beat the gong round the village attracting the attention of people and then recited whatever information they had to pass out.²⁸ The town crier was usually an eloquent fellow who understood the community and wherever he beat his gong, heads turned and ears twitched to listen to him.²⁹ The people recognized that the message was important and urgent to warrant the dispatch of the crier. Soola further describes the town crier as a potent force in information dissemination and an authoritative voice of the traditional authority.³⁰ Most of the time, they went round the village early in the morning or early in the evenings. In doing so, the town crier took advantage of the morning’s calm or the return of people home from the day’s activities in the evening.

The town crier relayed information to his audience, the villagers, and simultaneously to the compound heads. These village leaders, in turn, delivered the message vertically to the people through family heads. The messages relayed were diverse. They ranged from those that called the people to perform duties on behalf of the community, such as carrying building materials to construct a new building to those that called the people to congregate for political or social purposes. In most Nigerian polities, these messages passed through several stages. From the source, such as the Oba, Emir, and Council of Elders whose deliberations occasioned the order, to the village square meetings. The town crier timely reminded the people of the messages and accelerated the peoples’ compliance. In the same vein, other special messages, apart from the local ones from local government, from national and state levels circulated round the village to both groups and individuals, vertically and horizontally. In his seminal path-breaking

novel, *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe gives a graphic description of town criers in pre-colonial Nigeria. Amongst other things, he said, “Okonkwo had just blown out the palm-oil lamp and stretched himself on his bamboo bed when he heard the *ogene* of the town crier piercing the still night air. *Gome, gome gome, gome*, boomed the hollow metal. Then the crier gave his message, and at the end of it beat his instrument again.”³¹

While considerable scholarly attention has been focused on African town criers, those in Cameroon have been less studied. For instance, Onuora Nwuneli attempted to explore traditional forms of communication in Africa. He opined that town criers were widely used in West, Central and East African communities, no matter the situation. He further maintained that the town crier was invariably used as the all-purpose, general information disseminator.³² They were imbued with obstreperous voices, and were charged to broadcast news to the villagers.³³ Unfortunately, pre-colonial and colonial Bamenda have not benefitted from much study of its communication.

Town Criers in Pre-colonial and Colonial Bamenda Grassfields

As outlined above, the Bamenda Grassfields is located in the Northwest of Cameroon. Town criers constituted an important political tool for the *foyns* (variously known as chiefs or kings). *Foyns* had a near monopoly on this form of indigenous communication because they often passed information from the palace to other parts of the *foyndom* or kingdom.³⁴ Generally speaking, the Tikar (see table above) have strong and well-organized political institutions. The political and administrative leader of the group is known as the *foyn*. The institution of the *foyn* is sacred. The *foyn* is the custodian of the culture of the people and it is assumed that he performs quasi-religious functions. The jurisdiction that he governs is known variously as *foyndom*, kingdom and chiefdom.³⁵

Amongst the Kom, one of the largest ethnic groups of the sub-region, a town crier was known in the local diction as *bu-ngem*, literally meaning the man who hits the gongs. Gongs were made up of metal with a hollow core. Because of the hollowness once it is struck, its sound was loud and could travel far. Amongst the Wimbun the town criers were known as *ngwentou*. The iron technology used to make the gongs has a deep history going back to the time when people settled in the region and became quite pronounced in late nineteenth century.³⁶ An anonymous informant who had witnessed a town crier describes this particular town crier in the following words:

Nyongo M+ja—(a name that would strike a bell for the older

generation of Kom people in Kom and diaspora) was a town crier in Njinikom, wag for the kids, singer for the folk, poet for the listeners. His armpit was his guitar. His chest was his drum. His stomach was home to his many characters. This is the first ventriloquist I met in the kingdom of Mountains; Sad, this talent brought him no income, but it earned him popularity. Children loved him in Njinikom. We used to follow him up and down the hills of Mungoangoa.³⁷

If *Nyongo M+ja* was a typical town crier, it meant that he was appointed by the quarter head of the village. There were also town criers who were under the tutelage of the Foyn. Royal town criers were directly under the foyn and carried information to the villages and compound heads where the town criers of the commoners took the information to the nooks and crannies of the kingdom.

Another informant, Ngong, who was a royal town crier, narrated how he was recruited and the job description of a royal town crier. He said:

I was approached for this job through my father because he had been a town crier. My grandfather too had done the job in the days of *foyn* Ngam (1912-1926). My father then decided that I should be a royal town crier. My job was to take information from the foyn and broadcast it to the nearest village. The village will then take it to the compound heads which will then finally go round. This job was done in the evenings and early hours in the morning. If there was community work like road construction, laying of wooden bridges or the meeting of the Native Court, then I will broadcast the information. This was during the days of *foyn* Nsom Ngwe'e (1956-73). I did this job till the death of foyn Jinabo II (1989) when I was sent on "retirement." It was a difficult job and no payment but I enjoyed it because I was working with the *foyn*.³⁸

The physical condition of the town crier was important. As a result, only robust, healthy men were recruited and employed for the traditional service, which ensured that they were fit enough to carry out their duties. As far as the physical nature of these people was concerned, Captain L.W.G. Malcolm said, "In physical appearance, the men are well built and in many cases are of excellent physique. It is an extraordinary thing that whenever men have been recruited they always turn out to be first-class shots. This has been remarked over and over."³⁹ According to interviews conducted in this region, town criers were people from the lowest rungs

of the society and thus constituted what was called the commoners or the subalterns.

Yet their job was crucial to the community as attested by some informants during the fieldwork. For instance, Henry was born c. 1924 and lived to see the town criers. According to him, the town criers passed any useful information in the village. Their messages passed from when there will be community work to the judgment of cases in native courts. They usually broadcasted their messages during the evenings, and especially during the dinner period. This practice ensured that the crier's message reached the people during a quiet time. Once a metal gong was beaten three times people had to pay attention to get the message. In this sub region, which was still very communal in outlook, people did things as a community, such as men constructing bridges or roads or women tilling the farms of the *foyn*. The town crier communicated appointed days for communal works. Amongst the Chomba indigenous group of the Bamenda Grassfields, the town crier was often associated with the gong and he did not only pass the message verbally but also used the gong to lay emphasis on a message.⁴⁰

The Talking Drum in Pre-colonial and Colonial Bamenda Grassfields

Like most parts of West Africa, Cameroon widely used talking drums for communication. In a like manner, communication technologies in Africa developed through the ingenuity of the people. As far as the talking drum was concerned, the Australian born literary icon Shirley Deane first touched on them in *Talking Drums: From a Village in Cameroon*, although he never devoted any chapter to the talking drum per se.⁴¹

Writing in 1924 about the talking drum of the Meta, an indigenous group of the Bamenda Grassfields, the Assistant Divisional Officer (ADO) for Bamenda Division, Charles John Albert Cregg said, "The Meta are expert in tapping out messages and it is wonderful how many names, alarms and matters of everyday life, arranged in ancient times are remembered in the talking drums."⁴² This means that apart from the talking drum merely used as a tool of communication, it was a storehouse or an archive where names as well as alarms of the everyday Meta country could be remembered. Carvers were imbued with the skills of societal history and could carve the drum in a way that once struck certain aspects of their history was broadcasted. Gregg maintains that the talking drum was used to get back his lost dog as he said: "The writer lost a dog, and the native drummer was able to find its whereabouts by means of his drumming."⁴³

Furthermore, he shows how the Meta used the talking drum on day-to-day

transactions and how the village genealogy could be remembered through the talking drum. As far as this aspect was concerned, he said:

It was never necessary to call a village head by messengers, the drum was sufficient. Anyone able to receive the messages of the Meta drums would be “au fait” with the greater part of the remembered clan history. The village is called up, then the name of the father or a well-remembered ancestor, and so on to the newly arranged name, which soon becomes familiar, through constant repetition, throughout the clan. . . . Each message has to be separately arranged, and the frequent use is remembered.⁴⁴

In a broader historical perspective, the Meta talking drums illustrate how “African worked objects signify an archival dimension with a commemorative function. They impress onto their own society silent discourse and simultaneously, a loci of memory, recite silently their own past and that of the society that made them possible.”⁴⁵

Finally, Gregg compared the talking drummer to the modern telephone operator. He said:

In effect, it is the same as when a telegraph operator becomes expert he ceases to think of dots and dashes or when recognizing the national anthem we never think of the notes of music, which go to make up the tune. . . . The members of *kwifoyn* are called by beating a tattoo on the iron gongs and when they have assembled legislation begins. After the debate a member dons masked dress and announces the order to the town, the chief by this time is back in his compound and with resignation say, “*kwifoyn* has spoken” thus clearing himself of the responsibility of an unpopular order.⁴⁶

Generally, the above quotations from Gregg show how important the talking drum was in a typical Cameroonian indigenous setting in sending out messages. It also reveals the technology involved in the making of the drum and more importantly, he draws parallels between the talking drum specialist and the telephone operator. The iron tools used to hollow the tree to create the drum suggests the existence of an iron industry in nineteenth century Bamenda Grassfields. As a matter of fact, iron smelting in most parts of Cameroon, including the Bamenda Grassfields, was a very busy industry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴⁷

Apart from the art employed in the construction of the drum, family and genealogical history played out in the language of the talking drum. In other words, the talking drum acted as an archive of family memory. The mention of the phrase “members of *kwifoyn*” needs an explanation. *Kwifoyn* is the legislative arm of the traditional government in that part of Cameroon while the chief was the executive. This model mirrors the checks and balances in the Western model of government. The talking drum was used to invite the members for a meeting. This shows the extent of advancement of some pre-colonial and colonial polities in their original settings. It also shows the creativity of Cameroonians long before the colonial era and even in the post-colonial period. In 1938, Harry Rudin, assistant professor of history at Yale, is reputed to have said,

[E]vidence of high intelligence in the native is the use of the drum woven together in Southern Cameroons for sending messages. The two tones of the drum woven together by intricate rhythm made it possible to send by night as well as by day any message that could be spoken. It was an achievement in communication far superior to that of the Whiteman before the invention of the telegraph.⁴⁸

It is likely that no one could have framed a more apt description than that made by Rudin. He also poured praises for the achievement of the Bamenda Grassfielders through the talking drum technologies. Talking drums were borne out of the necessity to communicate in pre-colonial Bamenda Grassfields. They no doubt suffered some drawbacks in that their sounds could not have transmitted information as far as the modern telegraph or today’s cell phones, but they were precursors to modern telephones. Through them, drummers disseminated messages in a relay manner to and through people. Those who first heard the message transmitted it to the people they met and so the chain continued.

In the pre-colonial period, experienced drummers trained those recruited to join them. This was because during *Ngumba* (a sacred society in the Ngemba palace made up of males who are feared and respected by all) sessions, fathers usually took their children with them, exposing them to the way the drummers played. The elders then trained those who developed an interest in playing the drum. Others developed the talent from birth.⁴⁹ The society trained as many drum players as possible so that when the need to communicate information arose, the *foyn* or chief looked for the closest drum player to relay the news.

Also, the drum had different rhythms depending on the type of message to be given. The people usually understood and interpreted the sounds of the drum. The people had names for the different sounds of the drums, which corresponded to

different ethnic groups of the region. For instance, amongst the Widikum, *Ngokoh* played when someone died, amongst the Babungo, *Ngo geu* called people to assemble in church. Likewise, in Babanki, *Ngo keben* meant dancing, amongst the Ngie, *Ngo Metabue* beat to assemble people, amongst the Ngemba, *Mbo Ngo* played if information had to be passed in the market, and amongst the Kom it was *wul-fi, ngu tum nkwifoyn*.⁵⁰

Most scholars in the likes of Eugenia Herbert, Jason R. Young, and Elizabeth Oerhke hold the view that the talking drum was a sacred instrument as well as an institution in most parts of Cameroon as well as other parts of Africa.⁵¹ These authors collectively and individually hold that rituals and rites were a means of bringing into limelight the religious experience of a group of people using the talking drums. Rituals and rites thus constituted some kind of religious expression. Rituals were a means of concretizing one's belief system and expressing one's experience between the super sensible world and the supernatural beings. In short and in simple terms, rituals were acts or forms of worship or communion and communication between one and one's objects of worship. This was the situation before colonization, but from the 1930s when colonial administration introduced landline telephones, there was a sharp decline in the use of the talking drum although it did not peter out completely.⁵² However, they continued to hold sacred places in most Cameroonian societies.

Empirical evidence gathered from the field suggests that women were forbidden from playing the talking drum because it was sacred, but most informants failed to explain why women were excluded from using such technological objects as the talking drum or from being town criers. It could however be explained that like in most parts of Africa, in Cameroon women are still seen as the weaker sex and not masculine enough to do what men can do.⁵³

Conclusion

Until the late colonial period, it was widely believed among Western historians that Africa, south of the Sahara had no "civilization" and thus no history. Others insisted that even if there were events of a historical nature, such a history was unknown and unknowable, since African societies, for the most part, were non-literate and as such left no records that historians could study. The era of decolonization, mostly during the 1940s and 1950s, and the immediate post-independence years witnessed a growing rank of Africanists who vigorously reject this eurocentric and anti-African historical epistemology that privileged civilization and written sources as the only rational bases for historical scholarship and that

denied the possibility of civilization and history to small-scale and non-literate societies dominant in Africa. With decolonization and independence came the era of nationalist and liberalist historiography, which rejected the notion of a barbaric and static Africa “without history.”

Communication has been one of the most important aspects of human civilization and thus human history. This article has taken the talking drums and town criers as indigenous forms of communication in Africa focusing on the Bamenda Grassfields of Northwest Cameroon as a case study. Using primary and secondary sources, the article has constructed the role of the indigenous people in using their environment to enhance communication long before the advent of colonial rule. The paper contends that the changing cultures of African societies notwithstanding enabled by technology to communicate, local people do not extrapolate what is modern while abandoning the old (such as the talking drums and town criers) completely. The paper has also shown how verbalized messages are communicated in local ways and how important such age-old acoustic speech devices are among the poor communities who may not afford to buy sophisticated modern gadgets for communication like the cell phone. Furthermore, interviews corroborated with colonial reports in the archives show a relationship between their migrations and town criers as well as talking drums. On a final note, the hope is that such studies based on African auditory production could be carried out elsewhere in Cameroon and Africa at large and hypothesis checked, tested, and compared to better have a fuller understanding of pre-colonial and colonial communication in Africa.

Notes

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6. National Archives Buea, Cameroon (NAB) File No. Rg. (1924), 12, C.J.A. Cregg, “An

Assessment Report on the Meta Clan of Bamenda Division,” Cameroons Province, 1924. Except otherwise stated, all the files in this article are from NAB.

7. C. Nwabueze, “The Role of Traditional Media in Rural Development: A Case Study of Ideato North L.G.A. of Imo State,” (Unpublished Project, Department of Mass Communication, U.N.N. Nsukka, 1995), 62-68.

8. Martin A. Klein, “African Social History,” *African Studies Review* 15, No. 1 (1972):18.

9. Walter Gam Nkwiani and Mirjam de Bruijn, “Human Telephone Lines: Flag post Mail Relay Runners in British Southern Cameroon (1916-1955) and the Establishment of a Modern Communications Network,” *International Review of Social History* 59, (2014):185-211.

10. V. Theissen and Dianne Looker E, “Cultural Centrality and Information and Communication Technology among Canadian Youth,” *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 33, no. 1, (2008): 313; R. Mansell and R. Silverstone, *Communication by Design: The Politics of Information and Communication Technologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 44-47.

11. Thora Williamson, “Introduction,” in Anthony Kirk-Green, ed., *Gold Coast Diaries: Chronicles of Political Officers In West Africa, 1900-1919* (London and New York: The Radcliffe Press, 2000), 3-13. The genesis of this work is quite unusual and rather suggestive. Thora Williamson, the author of record, became acquainted with a retired member of the Colonial Service, Howard Ross, who had served in the Gold Coast from 1905 to 1920. Inspired by his reminiscences, she eventually made several trips to Ghana between 1966 and 1995 (when she was over seventy), solely for the purpose of transcribing the district diaries that were moldering in the National Archives. By the time she was finished with her avocation, she had transcribed by hand all or part of ninety-seven such diaries, encompassing half a million words.

12. V.G. Fanso, *Cameroon History for Secondary Schools and Colleges* Vol. 2: Colonial and Post-Colonial Times (London: Macmillan, 1989), 15-25; Victor Julius Ngoh, *Cameroon 1884-1985: A Hundred Years of History* (Yaounde Cameroon: Navi-Group Publications, 1987), 15.

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14. Walter Gam Nkwi, “From the Elitist to the Commonality of Voice Communication: The History of the Telephone in Buea, Cameroon,” in *Mobile Phones: The New Talking Drums of Everyday Africa*, eds. Mirjam de Bruijn, Francis Nyamnjoh, and Inge Brinkman, (Mankon, Bamenda & Leiden, Netherlands: Langaa RCIG & African Studies centre, 2013), 50-69.

15. Ibid.

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17. Timothy Sexton, “An Ethnomusicological Analysis of Traditional African Drum,” accessed May 17, 2018, http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/110017/an_ethnomusicological_analysis_of_traditional.html?cat=4.

18. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958), 96.

19. Ibid.

20. See *Africa Imports*, accessed June 29, 2013, www.africaimports.com.

21. Emmanuel Davis, “The life of information, from drums to Wikipedia,” in J. Gleick ed., *The information: A history, a theory, a flood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 112.

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31. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 9.

32. Onuora Nwuneli, "Traditional Channels of Communication," *Journal of Language and Communication* 2, no. 3 (1983), 68.

33. Frank Okwu Ugboajah, "Traditional-Urban Media Model: Stocktaking for African Development," *Gazette* 18, no. 2 (1972), 77.

34. Ibid.

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37. Interview with Anonymous Informant, Njinikom-Kom, August 13, 2016.

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39. L.W.G. Malcolm, "Notes on the Cameroon Province (with Special Reference to the Bamenda Division)," *The Scottish Geographical Magazine* XXXVI (1917), 145- 153.

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43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

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49. Interview with Catherine Njumboh, Nsei traditional council hall, 10 August 2015.

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53. Interview with Patrick Kenchu, Mbesaw Quarter, Babungo, August 11, 2015, 73 years old.

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