

## MPONDO AKWA NYA BONAMBELA (1875-1914) OR HOW TO SHAPE COLONIAL AMNESIA

## MPONDO AKWA NYA BONAMBELA (1875-1914) OU COMMENT FAÇONNER L'AMNÉSIE COLONIALE

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**Abstract :** One of the features of colonial history is the little space it has given to the colonized. Narratives about the German colonial period in Cameroon (1884-1916) do not escape this weary rule of colonial history. For many decades, this space of time has been scrutinized in a multitude of studies. However, colonial subjects appear only sporadically even in the academic study of colonialism. A few names are mentioned now and then to emphasize the action of settlers. As for colonial narratives, they mostly highlight the faults of the colonized in ways that make them fit clichés. These works therefore reproduce the animated stereotypical considerations towards colonial subjects in general. Actually, the colonized appear as simple utensils in the setting of colonial narratives and in some research papers. More than a century after the Kaiserreich lost its colonies, some of those who fought against German colonialism from the very beginning are still far from spotlights. Based on the postcolonial approach, this article therefore strives to restore a positive image of Mpondo Akwa, a mostly disregarded prince from Cameroon who before and in the early 1900s, contributed effectively to the fight against German colonialism. The aim is also to show that he should be counted among the national heroes, if not regarded as a champion of the struggle for equal rights between the colonizers and colonized.

**Keywords:** Mpondo Akwa – history – Cameroon – German colonialism – collective memory

**Résumé :** L'une des caractéristiques de l'histoire coloniale est le peu d'espace qu'elle accorde aux colonisés. Les récits sur la période coloniale allemande au Cameroun (1884-1916) n'échappent pas à cette règle implacable de cette histoire. Pendant de nombreuses décennies, cette période a été scrutée dans une multitude d'études. Cependant, les sujets coloniaux n'apparaissent que sporadiquement dans les narratifs coloniaux. Il en est parfois de même pour les travaux de recherche sur colonialisme. Quelques noms sont mentionnés de temps en temps pour mieux souligner l'action des colons et des colonisateurs. Quant aux récits coloniaux, ils mettent surtout en évidence les défauts des colonisés d'une manière qui les rend conformes aux clichés. Ces œuvres reproduisent donc les considérations stéréotypées animées à l'égard des sujets coloniaux en général. En fait, ces derniers apparaissent comme de simples outils dans le cadre des récits coloniaux. Basé sur l'approche postcoloniale, cet article s'efforce donc de rétablir sa valeur réelle à Mpondo Akwa, un prince camerounais aujourd'hui oublié qui, avant et au début des années 1900, a contribué efficacement à la lutte contre le colonialisme allemand. L'objectif est aussi de montrer qu'il devrait être compté parmi les héros nationaux, sinon considéré comme un champion de la lutte pour l'égalité des droits entre colonisateur et colonisé.

**Mots-clés :** Mpondo Akwa – histoire – Cameroun – colonialisme allemand – mémoire collective

## Introduction

The role of local leading figures in Cameroon under German administration was crucial to the management of the colony. A disregard for these figures would be prejudicial to history since the “*protection*” of this territory by the *Kaiserreich* was not done without prior treaties. However, as soon as the German colonial period (1884-1914) is mentioned, three names spontaneously arise in the collective memory of Cameroonians: Duala Manga Bell, Martin Paul Samba and Charles Atangana, respectively from Duala, Ebolowa and Yaounde. In their hometowns, at least one statue or monument is erected to commemorate such figures. Except for the above-mentioned figures, almost all the other agents of the postcolonial struggle are ignored. This shortcoming in the collective memory does not spare the sovereigns who signed the series of treaties buttressing the authority of the *Reich* over this Gulf of Guinea territory. Unlike this disregard, many Cameroonians have significantly contributed to shaping the years during which their homeland was run by Germans (Heyden, 2008, p. 10). More than a century after Germany lost its colonies, most of those who opposed colonialism in Cameroon remain on the periphery of colonial memory. They are worthy of further attention though. The fact that the three figures mentioned above benefit from public recognition is not predicated upon their origin because Samba and Atangana were from modest backgrounds themselves. It is established that the anti-colonial fight led by Samba, Manga Bell and Mpondo Akwa cost them all their lives. Yet, it is surprising that the latter—probably the most important freedom fighter of that time—be so ignored. Prince Mpondo Akwa has been addressed in scholarly literature, albeit superficially and with less focus on his place in the German colonial memory (Eckert & Austin, 1997; Gomsu, 1985; Joeden-Forgey, 2004; Nagl, 2007; etc.). Compared to Prince Duala Manga Bell, his alter ego, he is almost a memory lapse. No monument has been erected to pay tribute to him. This reckless disregard for Mpondo Akwa rides on the “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over” (Said, 1978, p. 3) the colonized. Because of Mpondo Akwa’s lifelong subversiveness, and the antagonisms between the Bell and Bonambela (Akwa) clans, the coloniser first organized an essentially negative discourse on him (Foucault, 2002, p. 10). Later, they tried to erase him from any kind of remembrance. This article seeks to point out the public disregard for Mpondo Akwa despite his important anti-colonial fight against German colonizers. This alludes to highlighting his major political actions both in Germany and in Cameroon as a proof of his political genius. All this contributing to skyrocketing him to the status of a national hero.

### 1. The Prelude to a Combative Spirit

Writings by young Cameroonians in Germany used to “disturb” colonial circles in Cameroon and Germany. Still, Ludwig Paul Heinrich Mpondo Njassam Akwa is nevertheless the one who literally shook the colonial order and the German political right in general. Born in 1875 in Duala (Reed-Anderson, 2000, p.35), Mpondo Akwa was the first son of Princess Bekane Akwa (from the Bell family) and King Akwa. As a co-signatory to the Treaty of 12 July 1884, the latter happened to be one of the most influential local sovereigns of the time. In 1888, at the age of only 13, Mpondo Akwa embarked for Germany. To achieve this, his family paid a significant deposit sum of

1,000 marks for his stay in the city of Paderborn. At that time, the average German worker earned a yearly wage of about 580 marks (Aitken & Rosenhaft, 2013, p. 30). However, this amount of money would probably not have led to this end if Mpondo Akwa had not, accidentally, fulfilled another harsh condition. He may earlier have expressed his willingness “to collaborate with the Germans whatever the case, to abolish slavery and polygamy, once he has [...] succeeded his father” (Gomsu, 1985, p. 40). In other words, the settlers thought Mpondo Akwa displayed very early the servility expected for each colonized.

Yet, the pugnacity of this character appeared from his early weeks at school, in Germany. The teenager began his schooling at the newly founded *Katholische Reismann Schule* in Paderborn in 1889. He did not like it at all, but his teachers explained his usual bad mood by his “great pride” and “insufferable arrogance”. For them, the observable attitude of Mpondo Akwa was the result of his stay with the family of the Count of Westphalia in Fürstenberg (Aitken & Rosenhaft, 2013, p. 35). Right there, the teaching staff argued that Mpondo Akwa gained the false impression of his personal importance. Even his host family did not seem to take him to heart. “Mpundu complained bitterly about his period of stay with the teacher Reismann in Paderborn and asked his father to arrange for him to stay elsewhere” (Aitken & Rosenhaft, 2013, p. 34).

The teachers’ hostility towards the prince forced him to change schools. He then attended another private school in Rheindahlen. There, another teacher pointed out that his predecessors at the *Katholische Reismannschule* went a little too fast in judging Mpondo Akwa to be proud and arrogant. Moreover, as if to confirm the words of this new teacher, the development of the prince in this new environment was of the greatest. His academic grades were excellent. That is how the prince refuted the first unfounded allegations against him in Germany. Mpondo Akwa then lived in the court of Graf von Praschma<sup>1</sup> and attended a high school in Altona/Hamburg until the first grade. He was studying in business administration. In 1892, he made a trip to Kiel to volunteer at a trading establishment in accordance with his training. He was a guest of Dr Esmarck, the medical doctor of the city, and Graf von Hahn, the castle master of Prince Heinrich von Preussen.

During the years spent in Europe, the Cameroonian prince regularly counted among the distinguished guests of the families of the German upper bourgeoisie and nobility. During this first European stay “young girls fought to be invited to the table by His Royal Highness, Prince Mpondo Akwa” (Schumacher, s.d.). When he returned from Kiel to Duala in 1893, Mpondo Akwa had become a celebrity. His differing views on indigenous jurisdiction led to a great fight among his supporters in Bonaku. To put an end to the scuffles, the colonial police had to intervene to stop the fight. Mpondo Akwa began to make enemies at the top of the German colonial administration. He was one of those Cameroonians who had visited Germany and who, upon their return home, lacked the expected respect when they spoke about the metropole and its people (Schäfer, 2017, p. 187). The immediate consequence was a permanent persecution by

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Graf von Praschma, Baron von Bilkau was a racetrack owner and politician of the Centre Party of which he was a co-founder. Between 1876 and 1900, he was president of the Council of German Catholics.

the settlers. Yet, the prince was already working as an official translator-interpreter under the direct orders of Gov. von Puttkamer. Mpondo Akwa repeatedly complained about both Puttkamer himself and the way the local populations were treated by the Germans. The Governor developed a new derogatory discourse upon the prince; he did not hesitate to call him *schwarzer Lump* ("scum of a Negro") or *Halunke* ("heel"). Disgusted for good, the young heil resigned from his position after six months (*Frankfurter Zeitung* of 26 March 1906). This resignation could not have seemed insignificant to the governor. German officials thereupon amplified the discourse on the prince by making more derogatory comments about him. The evidence lies in the fact that an investigation was carried out against him in 1898. He was then accused of inciting the people of Bonakwasi to a rebellion against the colonial government (Goethe-Institut, 2017, p. FA 1). His subversive capabilities now seemed obvious to the colonial administration. As it can be seen, Mpondo Akwa's first experiences in Germany show that he is a prominent character of his time.

## 2. Second Trip, the Petition, 'Media Buzz' in Germany

Mpondo Akwa undertook another trip in 1902, but not for leisure. The prince was part of the delegation that intended to meet personally with Emperor Wilhelm II. They wanted to inform him of their total disagreement with the colonial system in place in Cameroon. In this regard, they filed a petition signed by 28 chiefs from the Akwa family. As a connoisseur of German manners, Mpondo Akwa was even appointed as deputy head of the delegation (Eckert, 1991, p. 146). A statement in a newspaper shows his crucial role in the group of representatives. Indeed, on June 11, 1902, he stated within *Hamburger Nachrichten*: "We will not allow ourselves to be deprived of that stock of black culture, black law and black idiosyncrasy that existed long before a white foot stepped our hot soil." (Nagl, 2007, p. 152). He expresses himself in the press from a subject position, quite self-confidently, a trait that will earn him more antipathies.

The emperor did not receive the Akwa delegation. Instead, Paul Dorbritz, a colonial officer, received them in the presence of the Chancellor, and the Prince of the Crown. In Duala, the 1905-petition aroused the ire of the governor. He took repressive measures as soon as he was informed of the Bonambela action against the government. Therefore, the 28 signatories were accused of high treason, incitement to disobedience to the hierarchy, attack on state organs and slanderous offense. King Dika Mpondo Akwa was sentenced to a heavy sentence of 9 years' imprisonment. Many other sentences were imposed on the other signatories of the petition. As for Mpondo Akwa who was still in Germany, he became in colonial circles the mastermind in the denunciation of the "*Puttkamereien*", Puttkamer's excesses and abuses of power. Thus, the need to closely monitor him was clearly put into words.

At first, the petition did not receive the expected attention from German authorities. When the other representatives of this Cameroonian mission left Germany without having been able to meet the emperor because of multiple blockades deliberately caused by the metropolitan political right, Mpondo Akwa stayed behind. Officially, he wanted to try his hand at business. Actually, he had to follow up the petition. At the age of 27, the prince was also well equipped to measure the scope of the petition he had just brought to the attention of the deputies of the *Reichstag*. He

could even imagine the short-term and long-term consequences on an individual level. He also feared for his life in case of an immediate return to Duala. Far from the watchful eye of his social democrat friends, the colonial machine would have crushed him immediately and unceremoniously.

He strolled in Germany for three long years, living mostly of secret donations raised by his family in Duala. The government in Cameroon had prohibited the Akwa family from sending money to Germany to support their son. On the other hand, colonial authorities had instilled Mpondo Akwa's business partners with the suspicion and fear he was not trustworthy at all. By doing so, they intended to force him to return to Duala. The prince then became aware of the increasing hostility nourished towards him with this new journey. Beyond the problems with the colonial circles, his personality and skin colour also brought him trouble.

The presence of Mpondo Akwa as a representative from a German colony in the metropole, dressing and acting according to the cultural repertoires of the white bourgeois subjects, troubled many of the prevalent and German specific assumptions and conceptions of blackness. (Skwirbli, 2017, p. 100)

In Germany, there were numerous pretexts to seriously undermine the prince's morale and persecute him. In late 1905, Mpondo Akwa appeared in two different trials. First, he was arrested in Hamburg for credit fraud and for fraudulently using the title of nobility. The same day, he was acquitted of all charges. Colonial officials in Duala had informed Mpondo Akwa's business partners in the metropole he was not a prince. He was even accused of being a mere colonial subject who was fraudulently using a title of nobility to trick Germans. The same charges were held against his own father King Dika Akwa. The racist-motivated discourse against him became more and more effective. To defend himself against his tormentors' claims that he was swindler, he hired a lawyer for all due intents and purposes.

Mpondo Akwa's first encounter with Moses Levi, his lawyer, is key to understanding the persecution the prince had to cope with in Germany. The young lawyer was waiting for a street vehicle in Hamburg when an intense argument broke out between two young men. The protagonists were a German and a young Black who had just joined. The former accused the latter of molesting him, which the accused denied vehemently. The dispute was about to escalate when the barrister stepped in front of the tough brawlers. He clearly took sides for the Black since he said in no uncertain terms: "No one molested anyone" (Joeden-Forgey, 2002, p. 3). After words of reproach to the aggressor, he turned to the victim. And then he introduced himself as a lawyer. Giving him a business card, the lawyer therefore suggested Mpondo Akwa not to hesitate to contact him if he ever found himself in further trouble of a similar nature.

After this scene, the lawyer discovered that the young man he had just helped was wanted. He was even about to be deported to Cameroon. The barrister wondered whether the reasons for this deportation were like the ruse he had just witnessed. As a result, he decided to defend the young Cameroonian at least against the false accusation that was added to the already long list of charges against him. In taking up the case of Mpondo Akwa, Levi was far from suspecting that he was directly attacking

both the colonial system as a whole and the German right in its entirety. He was not mistaken in suspecting a huge cabal orchestrated to get rid of the Cameroonian prince.

Available sources report eight complaints filed against Mpondo Akwa for fraud in 1905. Unjustly damaging his reputation in front of the German public opinion became the goal colonial officials wanted to achieve since their challenger was out of reach. Hence, on June 27, 1905, they indicted the prince before a criminal court. During the sensational trial that followed, Mpondo influenced both the court and the public. The event is reported as follows:

Mpundu Akwa's entrance on the first day of the trial made a rich impression on the press. The *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* described Mpondo as "elegantly dressed according to the newest fashion," and "very skilled in German." The *Altonaer Nachrichten* called him an "educated person [*Mensch*] with exotic, but not uncomfortable, mannerisms" (Joeden-Forgey, 2002, p. 112).

Each of Mpondo Akwa's trials filled the courtroom in Hamburg-Altona with a great number of curious onlookers. Thus, he had challenged the colonial order with its German supremacy. The lobbying campaign conducted in the *Reichstag* by Mpondo Akwa, representative of the Bonambela with the help of the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Catholic Center Catholic Center contributed to the cancellation of his deportation. The presence in the courtroom of many personalities of the German nobility close to Mpondo did not fail to add brilliance to this trial. They had come to testify for him. These included Baron Engelbert von Landsberg of Steinfurt near Münster in Westphalia, Graf Hans Praschma of Falkenberg in Silesia, and Graf Arthur Strachwitz of Grossreichenau in Lower Silesia.

The trial was controlled by political interests. Any position taken for or against Mpondo allowed the speaker to make a name for himself or herself within the various political factions that were mercilessly waging wars. Mpondo Akwa finally obtained an acquittal thanks to his lawyer. By arguing solidly, among other things, that Mpondo Akwa's deportation had been carried out without proof, the lawyer managed to undo the fabricated complaint to have his client sentenced to a heavy prison sentence (Joeden-Forgey, 2002, p. iiiiff). For conservatives and colonial lobbies who had already put the prince in their sights for a long time, this verdict was nothing but a new affront. It even increased their anger.

This perception is not lacking in foundation if one looks at even one of his letters to the Chancellor of the Empire: While the legal and illegal troubles caused by the petition to the metropolitan authorities should have calmed his enthusiasm, Mpondo Akwa adopted a legally more aggressive attitude. He wrote three more missives in 1906. The addressees were the Kaiser, the Chancellor, and another authority. He demanded that the petition, for which he was the guarantor, be processed. The local press released two of the letters.

His Excellency the Imperial Chancellor in Berlin

Altona, January 30, 1906

Your Excellency, I humbly request, that the enclosed petition be taken care of or transferred to the responsible authority to be dealt with. On June 19, 1905, a petition was sent from Cameroon regarding the Imperial Governor Mr. von Putkamer and his representative Mr. von Brauchitsch. It was made by my father, King Dika Mpondo Akwa von Bonambela,



Cameroon and numerous other indigenous leaders and was addressed to Your Excellency or perhaps the Colonial Department. According to my information, the petition documents were sent to the Imperial Government to be dealt with and they have not yet been processed. The only result of the petition was that my father and other petitioners have been sentenced to long prison sentences. In any case, the petition has not yet been taken care of. [...]

Respectfully Njassa Akwa nya Bonambela, Marktstrasse Nr 2, [signature] (Reed-Anderson, 2000, p. 34ff)

This further action thus added to his troubles. Following this request to the Chancellor, order was given to Puttkamer to free the signatories of the petition, including King Akwa who was already staying in jail since his return from Germany in 1902. This was a remarkable achievement for a young prince in the colonial context. Mpondo Akwa's letters – most of which he published in the press – made it possible to understand that he considered himself above all equal both to the colonial administrators and to any German citizen. He denounced the many injustices committed both against his father King Akwa and against the local populations by Gov. von Puttkamer and his entourage. Mpondo Akwa relied on his status as a prince to be the representative and even the advocate of the small Duala people who had no voice in the chapter. His letters also made it possible to grasp the colonial governance that was sometimes based on the principle of *divide et impera*, divide and rule. By harming the rights of the Bonambela (Akwa) while protecting those of the Bell family, von Puttkamer and his team prevented the Duala people from standing together, as Alfred Bell, another prince, already noted during his stay in Germany (Nyada, 2015, p. 37ff). This strategy seems to have worked well.

Mpondo Akwa's letters also give an idea of the vastness of the fortune the great Duala families owned at the time. It is easy to understand why one of the points of the Treaty of July 12, 1884 stipulates that the Duala would retain the monopoly of trade with the Cameroonian Hinterland. On their own, these local fortunes in many ways could arouse jealousy on the part of the colonial government.

In the aftermath of the virulent letters, Mpondo Akwa became *persona non grata* in Germany. Racist and political attacks against him became more recurrent. At the same time, the government in Cameroon had, under the aegis of von Puttkamer, issued and sent to Germany an arrest warrant against the challenger. The governor then demanded a deportation to Duala for Mpondo Akwa.

Von Puttkamer's request was not well received in the metropole. The Legation Councillor Gleim met by Mpondo Akwa and his lawyer Levi found the conviction in absentia illegitimate. Gleim also found the conviction of the prince, a resident of Altona – and therefore within his jurisdiction – by a district court to be unfounded. He continued his argument in a sarcastic tone. He asserted that von Puttkamer's logic implied that the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* journalist who had made public the so-called insults attributed to Mpondo Akwa be deported to Duala, that King Akwa and the other co-defendants be immediately deported to Germany to answer for what they were accused of (Joeden-Forgey, 2004, p. 223). Backstage, the prince and his father are

organizing another action. During a house search on October 29, 1908, the government found and seized an incomplete petition in King Akwa's palace.

Despite the lucidity of a few German citizens, Mpondo Akwa's detractors did not let go. A retired lieutenant colonel wrote, for example, in November 1906 in the newspaper *Preußische Korrespondenz*:

I personally know the famous Prince Akwa since his stay in Kiel as a petty subject who, several times, reluctantly stayed in our prisons for great banditry. Today, he is the boss of a brothel. He only gets the treatment he deserves (Liersemann, 1907, p. 5).

The retired lieutenant colonel was a staunch defender of Gov. von Puttkamer, whom he presented as one of German most hard-working colonial administrators (Liersemann, 1907, p. 5). Faced with this new attack, Mpondo Akwa did not let himself be defeated. He filed a complaint against his attacker before the German courts. An African against a German before the German court was yet another sensational event in the *Reich*. The beginning of the trial was in the favor of the plaintiff.

The Court of Council members of Hamburg decided on January 9, 1908, the lieutenant colonel had to pay a fine of 30 marks (about 15 euros). Nevertheless, the rest of the affair forced the prince to complete disillusion. The Hamburg High Court rejected the first verdict and acquitted the accused in March 1909. According to the judge, the complainant was well known to the courts because of numerous cases of theft he allegedly committed in both Cameroon and Germany. The accused, he continued, had only defended the interests of any German. The court ruling states: "Prince Akwa is a treacherous and devious person whose inferiority of the Negro character has been corrupted by a poor education received in Germany" (Eckert, 1996, p. 16). The judgement was therefore based more on skin colour and origin than on law.

Mpondo Akwa did not give up in the face of the undeniably racist argument. He attacked this judgment at the level of the Court of Appeal. There, he was put off. The prince hence understood that regardless of his supporters his efforts to lead a normal life and especially to do business in Germany were doomed to failure. He then came to the decision to return to his hometown where he still hoped to have more chance of a career in politics.

Mpondo Akwa's 1906 letters denounced the multiple abuses of the colonial power. Among other things, he accused von Brauchitsch of exploiting his position as *Regierungsrat* (senior civil servant) to provide false information about him, the son of King Akwa (Otremba, 2009, p. 250). Obviously, he tried to counter the derogatory discourse on him. Under his impetus, social democrat deputies reproached the colonists for their policy of arbitrary expropriation, the compulsory removal of premises in Duala and the brutality towards the locals. The heavy prison sentences imposed on the authors of the 1902 petition caused a great political scandal. In January 1906, i.e., a few months after Mpondo Akwa's letters to the *Kaiser* and the Chancellor, Gov. von Puttkamer was called back to Berlin to explain himself. He was relieved of his duties and never set foot in Cameroon again. The reason for the governor's dismissal was his poor governance of the colony. However, Puttkamer was also criticized for other matters such as the falsification of a passport in favour of his concubine. As stated by the "petitionists", he led a double life which was formally illegal. He thus went into retirement on May 9, 1907. Mpondo Akwa's action had been decisive in the extremely humiliating end of career for the colonial governor. As a



result, the prince could not escape all the traps set for him daily, at least not for long. As proof, lawyer Levi was unaware that his client was already in Cameroon when he noticed his disappearance in 1911.

One of Mpondo Akwa's last achievements in the metropole was a troublesome magazine. After several interviews in German newspapers, the political activist was aware of the power of the media. He collaborated to the Hamburg-based periodical *Elolombe ya Kamerun* ("Sun of Cameroon") in 1908. The bilingual (Duala-German) monthly had to contribute effectively to establishing Mpondo Akwa's popularity at the local level. The official publisher and editor was Hans Mahner-Mons. However, rumours circulated among German officials that the magazine had anti-colonial ambitions and it was sponsored by Mpondo Akwa. Actually, the prince who posed a constant worry for the authorities lived in Hamburg and was well acquainted with the editor of *Elolombe ya Kamerun*. To escape any sanctions against himself, Mahner-Mons alleged during a police investigation on January 25, 1908, that Mpondo Akwa "had offered himself as translator, but that the offer had been declined due to Akwa's bad reputation" (Schäfer, 2017, p. 189). This reply shows the extent of the damages caused to the prince's reputation. According to the editor, the monthly was rather a tool to influence the colonised in order to accept the German colonists. His real translator, he said, was a certain Wuru from Cameroon. Yet, this figure seems to appear nowhere but in Mahner-Mons' allegations. Still, the Hamburg police settled for this statement and filed a report that there was no serious reason to prohibit the magazine.

After the inaugural issue of the periodical, the official editor undertook a trip to Cameroon in January 1908. Officially, he was following his business. Given his strong bonds with Mpondo Akwa, German officials could not take his statement for granted. The chief officer of the district of Duala even went as far as to assert that Mpondo Akwa had sent Mahner-Mons to Duala "with the financial aid of 1500 Marks from Akwa donors in Cameroon, in order to represent the political interests of the Akwa people to the colonists" (Schäfer, 2017, p. 190). Mahner-Mons happened to be a smooth talker. His publication, he said, was rather a tool to influence the colonised to accept German colonialism; it aimed at contributing to the development of Cameroon as a colony. Theodor Seitz, the successor to the dismissed governor von Puttkamer, found credible the statement that the publisher was on a business trip in Cameroon. The new governor took no specific action against the "businessman", although he discovered that "Mahner-Mons supported Mpundu Akwa on a personal level by letting his Cameroonians donors *send money via telegraphic order to the address of his magazine in Hamburg*"<sup>2</sup> (Schäfer, 2017, p. 190). Instead, he promised to deal with every seditious activity in a more severe way, should he find any. The most likely scenario is that Mahner-Mons' arguments did not persuade everyone. German authorities still saw Mpondo Akwa behind the project and they prohibited the magazine after two issues. The officials were afraid they would never be able to censor "offensive" articles in the Duala language. Since the prince could no longer receive enough funds to sponsor his stay and activities in the metropole, he decided to return to Cameroon.

<sup>2</sup> My emphasis.

### 3. The Ruler of the “Great Empire”

When Mpondo Akwa arrived triumphantly in Duala in June 1911, a huge clamor spread that he was the new ruler who would wrest the country from German hands to restore British authority. Based on the prince’s multiple petitions and court cases in Germany, Gov. Seitz endlessly repeated that both Mpondo Akwa and his father posed a problem for German authorities (Schäfer, 2017, p. 189). The governor’s suspicion was not born of a spontaneous generation, neither was the aforementioned rumor. The prince knew how to make the whole colonial government waver. In fact, Mpondo Akwa announced in various correspondences to the Duala that the organization of trade and local agriculture would soon be centralized in the great Duala empire that he was about to set up. At the economic level, he planned a centralized organization of trade and agriculture in the coastal region. Politically, he did not call for the outright abolition of the colonial system. Instead, his vision was a reasonable management of the colonial regime through the progressive involvement of local representatives in the decision-making. In addition, his idea of a large Duala state based on the pre-colonial hegemony over the neighboring ethnic groups and fully independent from Europeans was totally proven.

As a colonized prince and fierce detractor to the brutal settlers, Mpondo Akwa, regardless of the pejorative discourse on him, could not escape fame. His growing popularity was not only due to his noble origins. His legal and political achievements in Germany were on everyone’s mind. To imagine the aura of this revolutionary prince, it is enough to read what the district Commissioner of Duala at the time thought of him.

For the Duala people, Mpondo Akwa was like the guide, the standard-bearer, and the liberator. His appearance inflamed Duala to such an extent that, like a powder trail, all layers of the indigenous population were intertwined with his revolutionary, political, social, and economic ideas and hopes, even if they were in part original. His name, his person, his appearance, his self-conscious manners in front of his people, fearless and skilful towards the administrative authority, even if apparently deferential, drew everyone into the movement. (Peoplesawa.com)

The colonial power sought to stop the impulses of this brazen and zealous native. Consequently, an investigation was launched against Mpondo Akwa due to a fundraising for unknown purposes and for “suspicious political attitude” (Goethe-Institut, 2017, p. FA 4). When the procedure of expropriation was decided in 1911, his father King Akwa immediately took the head of the opposition and raised the *Ngondo* (an annual water-centered festival) against this decision. The agitation caused by King Akwa’s action and the correspondence of Mpondo Akwa found in his Palace during a search earned the former an 8-month-prison sentence after being arrested on September 22, 1911. The seized mails contained violent attacks on German colonialism; they also revealed the link between Mpondo Akwa and the fall of Gov. von Puttkamer and his relations with parliamentarians in Berlin. Among these were the centrist Mathias Erzberger and the social democrat August Bebel, two of the most renowned critics of the German colonial regime.

Faced with the growing aura of Mpondo Akwa in Duala and aware of his determination and his power of nuisance, the Germans who still remembered the judicial exploits of the young prince, were panicked. Mpondo Akwa was finally arrested on September 22, 1911, alongside his father. He was first detained at the

Bonanjo police station based on false allegations made by his brother, the regent Chief Dibusi Dika. According to the latter, Mpondo Akwa had brought weapons to provoke a rebellion and probably hand over Cameroon to the British. The *Regierungsrat* von Brauchitsch also suspected the prince of being in contact with King Edward in an attempt to solicit a British takeover of Cameroon (Schäfer, 2017, p. 195). Therefore, the colonial government resolved to act accordingly by sentencing Mpondo Akwa in the summer of 1912 to a long sentence. As a result, they sent him to a colonial jail in Banyo, towards the border with neighbouring Nigeria. He was above all accused of making Germanophobic remarks.

From Banyo, the prince was deported to Ngaoundere after an ill-fated escape attempt in April 1913, he was caught and sentenced to 3 more years in prison in June of the same year. He stayed in Ngaoundere until the outbreak of World War I. For the colonial administration, this was the right opportunity to execute the bulky troublemaker. One day, while Mpondo Akwa was going to a stretcher near the prison to bathe, the order was given to his escort to shoot him. The riflemen were not slow to respond. He was eventually buried not far from the place of his execution. No news was communicated to his family, not even to his father who was then in exile.

It was only after multiple investigations and searches conducted by his family back in Duala that the colonial authority maintained the henchmen had shot Mpondo Akwa while he was trying to escape. Eventually, the extent to which his ideas became along the coast decided the colonial officials to get rid of him. The talented Mpondo Akwa was killed in 1914, but the confusion of the following years gave reasonable cause for uncertainty; in 1919 a Nigerian sailor drifted up in British Guiana and started collecting money there by claiming to be an African prince apparently said he was “Mpondo Akwa” (Derrick, 1979, p. 123) This anecdote too shows that Mpondo Akwa is far from being an ordinary figure in the history of Cameroon.

#### **4. Mpondo Akwa: a Blind Spot in National Heroism**

For decades, colonial memory has been driven away from German awareness. While colonists were rewarded for their incontestable abuses and misuses, almost no information is available about their Cameroonian counterparts or collaborators. No indication about the Kings Bell, Akwa and Deido who signed the Duala-German Treaty buttressing the authority of the *Reich* over Cameroon on July 12, 1884. Thus, Heiko Möhle rightly points out that “[t]oday, Germany is redefining its role as a global player—not only as an economic, but also as an important political and military power” (Möhle, 2005, p. 141). The colonial time in Cameroon is seemingly not part of the “right” memory (Michels, 2005, p. 6) German authorities are proud of. Quite apart from a possible colonial based pride or feelings of guilt, a presumption of innocence towards the colonial past would easily give Germany the right to a comeback in Africa. It is not surprising then that an anti-colonial activist like Mpondo Akwa could not be saved from oblivion in Germany. Yet, his home country does not give him top priority either.

Mpondo Akwa’s life is worthy of being dealt with in view of his political activism as shown above. Indeed, the beginnings of Cameroonian nationalism are very

often linked to the *Union des Populations du Cameroon* (UPC), the first Cameroonian political party with its main figures of which Ruben Um Nyobé, Félix Roland Moumié, Ossendé Afana, Ernest Ouandjié and many others were pioneering figures. However, Mpondo Akwa's political commitment and the courage he demonstrated testify to the contrary.

Prince Mpondo Akwa is one of the most important figures of the German colonial period in Cameroon who remain unknown to the public. The website of Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV), Cameroon's public broadcaster, offers an example of this memory lapse. It presents the "great figures of national history". Surprisingly, the great resistance fighter Mpondo Akwa is not part of them. The list includes fewer than ten names, including those of the two heads of state the country has known since its independence on January 1, 1960. For a country whose contemporary history is marked by many compulsive movements, it could make sense to question the criteria that led to the choice of the selected "heroes".

In Cameroon, the so-called national heroes share the public space with colonists from (British, German and French) colonial Empires involved in the history of Cameroon. Streets names in Yaounde, the capital city, may provide a good illustration of this embedding of colonial forms and nationalists (Mbembé, 2006, p. 124). Though the street naming tradition looks recent and involves mainly streets in the city centre, Cameroonian names are seen besides western names. A few examples of local figures are Charles Atangana, Essono Ela, Sultan Njoya, Duala Manga Bell, Martin-Paul Samba or Omgba Bissogo who are directly linked to the German colonial era in Cameroon. So, if many educated Cameroonians are able to talk about their national heroes, very few scholars know about Mpondo Akwa. No special event is organized to honor this historical figure. In fact, there is no official memory policy issued by the Cameroonian government. Besides, restricted information about the colonial era is taught at school. Actions to praise national figures are brought out privately. As an example, an obelisk was erected in the name of Duala Manga Bell in Duala by his relatives. It was a private initiative during the twentieth commemoration of his execution on August 8, 1936. Moreover, German authorities deliberately sorted, selected, and distorted the memory of any colonized who like Mpondo Akwa took any steps against colonialism. His case is a revealing indicator of this colonial amnesia and needs to be addressed in both politics and scholarship.

## Conclusion

All in all, the aim of this paper was to address the selective amnesia that is inherent to the general history of Cameroon. For this purpose, it is reckoned that Cameroonians were not resigned victims of German colonialism. A rereading of Mpondo Akwa's life and role as a political figure was therefore very useful to highlight his temerity and attempts to take his country away from German grasp and found an "empire". In view of the little attention he has received in his country of origin despite his political achievements, it seemed edifying to revisit his case. The fact that this prince had strong connections up to the *Reichstag*, and that he challenged the colonial order makes him a fascinating figure in the history of Cameroon. Especially when one considers that one of the consequences of his legal actions in the metropole contributed to the

removal of a governor. The setback however is his secret and extra judiciary execution by settlers in the eve of the first World War, and their attempt to erase him from the collective memory. Colonial officials developed on him a derogatory discourse which is still effective. As one of the very first colonized to skillfully use the media and the justice system to challenge colonialism, he certainly deserves to be regarded as a national hero in his home country. He deserves careful attention and tremendous credit too due to both his commitment in the fight against colonial injustices and his political agenda. Considering his young age when he began his fight against the colonial system, mindful of the results he achieved, and in view of his vision of the empire he intended to found, it is undeniable that Mpondo Akwa may deserve more attention than Duala Manga Bell, his alter ego from the Bell family. This more famous and celebrated figure really took the lead of the fight against the expropriation policy launched by the German gony after Mpondo Akwa's arrest and prison sentence in 1911.

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