

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE WRITINGS OF
J. G. MULLEN, AN AFRICAN CLERK, IN THE
GOLD COAST LEADER, 1916–19

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Six months after the allied victory over Germany in the Cameroons, the first instalment of a remarkable memoir was printed in the *Gold Coast Leader*.¹ 'My experience in Cameroons during the war' marked a literary turning point for the *Leader*. Situated in amongst the political writings and opinions of the African intelligentsia, who controlled the Ghanaian press at the time, the memoir is an exceptionally early example of writing by a self-declared 'Coast clerk'. Moreover, until October 1916, when the first instalment of the memoir appeared, the *Gold Coast Leader* had not featured any works of African autobiography, let alone works by members of the geographically mobile group of clerks, government employees and traders whose role as mediators and translators between cultures helped to mould the relationship between colonizer and colonized in the early twentieth century (Lawrance *et al.* 2006: 4; see also Austen and Derrick 1999). As the introductory comments that follow will suggest, however, a large number of questions surround the identity, social position, career and self-representations of J. G. Mullen, the author of the memoir and its prequel, 'My sojourn in the Cameroons during the peaceful days: half hour's talk with Billy' (1919).

Wide literary and political networks were made possible by the printing press in the colonial world in the early twentieth century: through newspapers in particular, West Africa's literate elites connected with one another across many thousands of miles. An illuminating example of these networks may be found in a column of the *Gold Coast Leader* revealingly entitled 'Gleanings from other papers'. On 28 March 1914, this column contained reprints of items taken from the *Colonial Office Journal* as well as from *Public Opinion*, *African World*, and

STEPHANIE NEWELL has published widely on West African print cultures, including *Literary Culture in Colonial Ghana* (2002) and *The Forger's Tale* (2006). This article forms part of a larger project on creative writing in the African-owned, English language newspapers of British West Africa, 1880–1939.

¹The *Gold Coast Leader* was established in June 1902 and edited by prominent members of the African intelligentsia. According to its own editorials and columns, J. P. H. Brown was the proprietor, manager and regular editor until his death in 1919. Rev. Fynn Egyir-Asaam is also named as one of the early proprietors of the *Leader* (see 'Scrutineer: our fallen chief', 25 October 1913: 5–6). While the prominent Ghanaian newspaper historian K. A. B. Jones-Quartey suggests that the *Leader* was founded by J. P. H. Brown, with Dr Savage of Nigeria as first editor (1975: 96), there is no mention of Dr Savage in the newspaper's own published accounts of its genesis. Indeed, the editorial in the issue of 18 October–8 November 1919 names another man, Mr Robert Midley, as a co-founder of the *Leader* (p. 3).

The African Mail (*Gold Coast Leader* p. 6). In the process of cutting and pasting these items from other journals, the scissors-wielding editor reveals the international range of newspapers to pass through his office. His selection of material also reveals how he scrutinized each publication for items of relevance to his *own* constituency of readers. Across the colonial territory known as 'British West Africa', each African-owned newspaper formed a similarly local knot in the network of newspapers surrounding it, asserting its own specificity while absorbing the debates and opinions that flowed in from other printing presses.

Compared with the West African newspapers of the 1940s and 1950s, Ghanaian newspapers from the early twentieth century appear fragmented and elitist, reflecting the political concerns of their highly educated editors and proprietors. They are often dominated by editorial campaigns for parochial measures such as municipal sanitation or fresh water supplies in particular towns. As the innovative research of Audrey Gadzekpo (2001) demonstrates, however, partly as a result of this distinctive format West African newspapers in the early twentieth century are a source of many surprising discoveries for present-day researchers into African print cultures. For example, a single issue of the *Gold Coast Leader* from the 1910s contains lengthy reprints of colonial ordinances alongside reports from Reuters, 'local' news of the comings and goings of personalities in elite African circles, protracted serializations of works on West African history, letters from readers who wish to debate moral issues such as the merits of polygyny, advertisements from British clothing companies, editorials urging readers to protest against particular colonial ordinances, poetry, short stories, and items gleaned from the British and African press. Gadzekpo's work on women writers in the newspapers of the 1920s and 1930s highlights the possibilities presented by this intensely polygeneric format of Gold Coast newspapers for writers and readers at the time (2001; 2006).

At least sixteen locally owned presses sprang into existence in the Gold Coast between the 1880s and the early 1920s, but regular production was blighted by the difficulty of securing printing materials, which had to be imported from Europe. Moreover, financial success was often prevented by the limited numbers of local readers willing to become regular subscribers. This lack of paying readers is the most common complaint of editors at the time. Wartime conditions exacerbated many of these economic and infrastructural problems after 1914.

West African newspapermen faced a host of contradictions in their coverage of the Great War. In the African-owned newspapers of colonial Ghana, the conditions faced by African soldiers on the ground were rarely discussed, and the issue of conscription was ignored. Yet British West African soldiers and carriers were often reluctant recruits who had been forcibly enlisted by chiefs with heavy mobilization quotas to meet (see Killingray 1987; Strachan 2004). While British propaganda emphasized their patriotism and loyalty to

empire, desertion rates were high among conscripts; additionally, the scaling-down of a visible colonial presence in many parts of West Africa in order to provide manpower for the war sparked local disturbances and power struggles that were anything but patriotic (Killingray 1983; Saul and Royer 2001; Strachan 2004).

Allied African troops were poorly equipped and undernourished, and sickness claimed the lives of more men than military engagement (Strachan 2004). They faced terrain that made trench warfare impossible, and casualty figures were high: by the successful conclusion of the Cameroons campaign between February and April 1916, for example, 4,600 battle casualties had been recorded, and 35,000 men had been admitted to hospital suffering tropical diseases (Gorges 1916: 262). In spite of these victims of war, the fact that mass carnage on the European scale was out of the question in West Africa caused many European commentators to liken the region's role to that of a 'side-show', with campaigns and casualties on the Western Front determining the course of events in the main 'theatre' of war (Gorges 1916: 17; Stockwell 1988: 42).

No details of these conditions are reported in the press. Rather, what one finds is the assertion of a vigorous pro-imperial identity: 'From the seat of British Administration/Flows the water of Freedom and Liberty,' opens one such vocalization, a poem entitled 'Preference of British Rule' by the pseudonymous 'Headockey of Togoland', published in the *Gold Coast Leader* after Togoland was taken by the Allies in the swift campaign of 1914 (30 January 1915: 7). 'That's why we prefer Thee O Britannia/Under thy flag there's much contentment', the patriotic poem continues, 'At thy left there's freedom and liberty/At thy right true [sic] and justice to all/Ever our supplication to God will be/To remain always with Great Britain' (*ibid.*).

If one privileges European imperial manoeuvres over 'local' interpretations of the Great War, one runs the risk of rendering vital areas of the past unintelligible and of being forced to dismiss swathes of African-authored material from the archives, including Headockey of Togoland's blatantly jingoistic poem. As Frederick Cooper points out in *Colonialism in Question*, however, 'ways of thinking' in the past should not be filtered through the normative categories of later historical periods. For Cooper, this warning applies with especial force to the category of anti-colonial nationalism, for, he writes, '[w]e tend to weave all forms of opposition to what colonialism did into a narrative of growing nationalist sentiment and nationalist organization', with the consequence that 'we lose sight of the quest of people in the past to develop connections or ways of thinking that mattered to them but not to us' (2005: 18).

With Cooper's warning in view, we can examine the ways in which the Great War enabled prominent political leaders like J. E. Casely Hayford and J. P. H. Brown, editor and manager-proprietor of the *Gold Coast Leader* respectively, to use their printing presses to reinforce and refine the links, forged by members of the Gold Coast elite in

the previous two decades, between Africans' imperial, regional and pan-African identities. In the years before the outbreak of war, these newspapermen expressed unhesitating loyalty to the British Crown. In adjective-laden prose, they declared, '[t]he Gold Coast native is highly sensible of and deeply grateful for the great and various benefits, moral, social, religious and political which contact with the whiteman [sic] has brought to him' (*GCL*, 8 July 1911: 3). This unsigned editorial was probably written by Casely Hayford, remembered today as a great nationalist leader in colonial Ghana: 'No primitive nation ever rose or came to anything without contact with a higher superior power or nation,' the editorial continued, offering a perspective that was repeated many times in subsequent years (*ibid.*).

This model of imperial subjectivity is anachronistic by contemporary standards, especially if West African 'nationalism' is defined by default as *anti-colonial* nationalism. Members of the Gold Coast intelligentsia insisted that the British Empire had a moral responsibility and a political obligation to nurture their emergent 'nations'. Such beliefs need not be regarded as an example of the mental colonization of the intelligentsia, nor as a manifestation of the tragically split, alienated identity of elite West Africans in this period.² Rather, each time they use the discourse of imperial loyalty in their newspapers, Casely Hayford and his colleagues make the same vital move: they hold the British administration to account for the misrule and exploitation of African nations, and make use of print to insist that the imperial power should take responsibility for political reforms and the enfranchisement of its subjects.

As the war progressed, the powerful editors of African-owned newspapers and other members of the Gold Coast intelligentsia swore increasingly fervent loyalty to the British Empire as imperial citizens. Newspapermen in the Gold Coast, alongside chiefs and members of political organizations such as the Aborigines Rights Protection Society (ARPS) in Cape Coast, established charitable 'war funds' to assist the British war effort. Prominent men made conspicuous contributions towards these, raising a total of over £80,000 for the purchase of aeroplanes and other supplies to help the Allies between 1915 and 1917 (Lucas 1924: 35). Recording each generous contribution for all to see, the *Gold Coast Leader* and its rival, the *Gold Coast Nation*, published detailed lists of donors, donations and official responses.³

These donations can be regarded as acts of political self-assertion taking place *within* the framework of imperial identities and colonial networks of power. In their role as benevolent gentlemen, the Gold

² Several recent histories of elite literature and culture in colonial Ghana dwell on the 'Faustian predicament' of an Afro-Western intelligentsia caught in an inescapably dualistic identity (see Korang 2004; Gocking 1999).

³ In total, eleven aeroplanes were purchased using subscriptions from Gold Coast donors. By 1918, however, accusations of embezzlement were rife, when the editors at the *Gold Coast Leader* insinuated that the Hon. E. J. P. Brown of the ARPS had pilfered funds, and called for the publication of the ARPS War Fund accounts (5–12 October 1918: 3–4).

Coast intelligentsia made use of their newspapers to exercise public patronage over their supposed imperial masters. They reversed the conventional ‘charity-for-Africa’ model, and showed a philanthropic impulse to assist (darkest) England in her darkest hour. In so doing, they demonstrated their equality in wealth, morality and status. Each donor simultaneously displayed his economic power, his ‘national’ leadership potential and his rightful place as a citizen of the imperial world.⁴

In conjunction with these charitable donations to the war effort, as early as May 1915 the call went out, in harmony with India, ‘for a larger and fuller political life and the right to enjoy in the particular country of their birth the full benefits and privileges of British citizenship’ (*GCL*, 24 April 1915: 4). ‘The Gold Coast Press . . . has shown a wise restraint in their criticism of local affairs,’ ran one editorial in the *Gold Coast Leader*, probably written by Casely Hayford:

[But] our interest and concern in the great war in Europe should not blind us to the realities of our political life in West Africa . . . the question of the recognition of our rights to better, more responsible and more lucrative appointments in the Government Service of our country is as acute now as it ever was (*GCL*, 21 November 1914: 3).

The intelligentsia’s demands for civil and constitutional rights were therefore woven into the very fabric of their wartime imperial relationships, and their wartime relationships were, literally, ‘bound up’ in the press. The Gold Coast newspapers, and the wider print cultures they generated, were inextricable from the African elite’s sense of political subjectivity: print was vital to their entire process of self-definition (see Jenkins 1985a).

In spite of the wartime difficulties in procuring paper and printing materials, throughout West Africa the African-owned newspapers offered a perfect forum, not only for an exchange of views between professional, highly-educated elites, but also for the literary outpourings of an emergent, geographically mobile class of educated African clerks, traders, government employees, teachers and catechists. Particularly in the inter-war period, the African newspapers provided this literate sub-elite with one of their most pivotal access points to print.⁵ As a result, West African newspapers in the first three decades of the twentieth century contain a vital source of information—in the

⁴These charitable donations from Cape Coast townsmen should be put in the context of the decline and gradual impoverishment of the town between the turn of the century and the outbreak of the Great War. In 1901, the town’s population was 28,948, whereas by 1911 the population of the now ‘dishevelled’ town was just 11,269 (Casely-Hayford 1992: 212). The elite men’s donations can be seen, at least in part, as a bid to maintain the traditional status and importance of Cape Coast. Prominent West Africans contributed to war funds in other British West African colonies: in Nigeria, for example, war funds of £149,000 were raised for the British war effort (Macmillan 1920: 41).

⁵As discussed below, however, this ‘sub-elite’ was not a homogeneous group and Mullen’s position within it requires further clarification (see Casely-Hayford 1992).

most productive, creative, subjective sense of ‘information’ – about the attitudes, values and aspirations of this group of men. Receptive and discursive, the newspapers were an excellent environment for newly educated individuals to see their opinions printed in black and white.

Newly educated Africans were often regarded as alienated and discontented, or ‘detrribalized’, by the colonial establishment. In his account of the Great War in West Africa, for example, Brigadier General Gorges said of local clerks, ‘The[ir] conversation and writings . . . savour of the quaint and entertaining phraseology of the Indian Babu’ (1916: 49). Members of the African elite also tended to regard these men with suspicion. In the 1910s and 1920s, the most negative representations of this literate sub-elite usually arose within the context of debates about culture and African identity: an example can be found in Kobina Sekyi’s play, *The Blinkards* (1915), which satirises ‘semi-educated’ Africans and echoes the colonial government’s concerns about their apparent mimicry of European culture. This was a group of men positioned ambiguously between the highly educated, professional African elites and the colonial administration: often derided by their social ‘superiors’, they were nevertheless vital to the functioning of colonial bureaucracies and commercial enterprises (see Lawrance *et al.* 2006).

In the figure of John G. Mullen, it is tempting to see one of the first sparkles of a loosely configured social group which, by the 1930s and 1940s, was characterized by its vociferous obsession with writing and the power of print. Mullen’s social status, name and identity are more problematic than this interpretation suggests, however; it is necessary to exercise caution in situating him as a pioneer ‘clerk’ and member of the Cape Coast ‘sub-elite’. To date, it has been impossible to find concrete information about J. G. Mullen and his family in Cape Coast. No Mullens are mentioned in the numerous histories of Cape Coast, either in their own right or as members-by-marriage of prominent local families (Priestley 1969; Gocking 1999; Casely-Hayford 1992; Jenkins 1985b; Wrangham 1999). Historians and genealogists of Cape Coast, including Roger Gocking and Mansah Prah, have not encountered the name Mullen during their research into Cape Coast.⁶ Mullen’s Irish name suggests that he may have had European ancestors, or at least a connection to the Roman Catholic Mission, but his name does not appear in histories of the Roman Catholic Church in Ghana. Indeed, in an environment where newspaper editors frequently promised to protect contributors’ identities from disclosure, there is every possibility that ‘Mullen’ was the pseudonym adopted by a writer cautious not to jeopardize his future as a West African produce trader for European firms.⁷

⁶ Personal communication.

⁷ An intriguing alternative to these conjectures is provided by the historian Tom McCaskie, who suggests that the ‘G’ in J. G. Mullen’s name may stand for ‘Grant’, thus positioning Mullen within the sprawling ‘Grant’ family headed by the Cape Coast merchant and pioneer rubber trader, Francis Chapman Grant (see Gocking 1999). Grant died in 1894, leaving

An additional significant ambiguity surrounding Mullen's 'clerkly' identity is that the quality and confidence of his writing, and the range of his vocabulary, surely exceed the educational reach of a typical, low-ranking African clerk with a basic Standard VII education.⁸ His ability to construct vivid cliff-hangers, and his creation of lively dialogue in comic-book German and pidgin Hausa, alert us to the arrival of a striking new voice on the Ghanaian literary stage. It appears to be the voice of a well-educated man whose writing style shows a great deal of familiarity with imperial literary genres ranging from the popular adventure stories of H. Rider Haggard and George Henty through to explorers' and traders' writings about African 'savagery' and 'cannibalism'.⁹

Mullen's prose style suggests a level of education which bears more in common with men in the upper echelons of Cape Coast society such as Casely Hayford and Kobina Sekyi than with the newly literate sub-elite who did not write extensively for the press until the inter-war years.¹⁰ Above all, Mullen's command of an English 'literary' language demonstrates the elasticity of the label 'clerk' in the early twentieth century, for it applies to a broad spectrum of individuals drawn from a range of non-elite and elite backgrounds. If Mullen was one of the first clerks to work within and alongside the expanding, elite-owned newspapers of West Africa to produce his own body of texts and to publicly define his aspirations, then the 'clerkly' identity he proudly asserts serves to problematize the assumption that African clerks formed a homogeneous social group in the early twentieth century. As Gocking points out, there was 'considerable differentiation within the ranks of the "better classes" based both on economic as well as educational standing' (1999: 58): in such an environment, African clerks could be first-generation literates or members of established elite families.

'My experience in Cameroons during the war' was serialized between 14 October 1916 and 8 December 1917. Instalments were irregular

numerous children, all of whom had been educated in England, as befitting the offspring of an elite merchant. Further research is required to explore the possibility of Mullen's connection to Grant's family.

⁸ See Gocking (1999: 57–61) for a discussion of the different categories of clerk and 'scholar' in the Gold Coast at the end of the nineteenth century; for clerks in Cameroon, see Ralph Austen (2006).

⁹ An example of this literature is Captain Charles Gilson's wartime novel, *Across the Cameroons: a story of war and adventure* (1916). As with so many of Gilson's novels for boys, *Across the Cameroons* borrows heavily from the plot of Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) in its quest to find lost treasure in the heart of Africa. The novel shows some familiarity with the military campaign in Cameroon and with the type of warfare the terrain necessitated, but in spite of dire warnings about the 'bloodthirsty', 'wild and lawless tribe[s]' in Cameroon (Gilson 1916: 20), it is markedly lacking in African characters, bloodthirsty or otherwise. The main plot of the novel focuses on two English boys of different social classes, Henry Urquhart and Jim Brand, who chase the former's roguish German cousin through war-torn Cameroon in an effort to prevent him unlocking a cave with an ancient 'Sunstone' and stealing the treasure.

¹⁰ There is of course a possibility that the editor of the *Gold Coast Leader* corrected the grammar and spelling errors in the manuscript, but it is unlikely that he rewrote the entire text in the distinctive voice of Mullen.

and, as with so many West African newspaper serializations in the early twentieth century, the text is incomplete, ceasing when the press suspended production as a result of wartime paper shortages. When the *Leader* recommenced production a fortnight later, Mullen's work had disappeared in favour of news items on the subject of the war and reports on the forthcoming West African Conference which led, in 1920, to the formation of the National Congress of British West Africa.

In the memoir, Mullen describes how, at the outbreak of the war, he found himself stranded on a remote British trading station at Mbua (or Bua, just south of present-day Batouri) in the German Cameroons. The remainder of the memoir narrates his many adventures as he escapes on foot with some of the company 'yard boys' on a long and dangerous journey through 'cannibal' Maka territory to the German prisoner-of-war camp at Ajoshohe. The text stops abruptly on 8 December 1917 with an instalment set in Ajoshohe towards the end of the Cameroons Campaign, where a sadistic German officer named Herr Jellowwick tortures and abuses French officers in revenge for Allied victories in the war (1 December 1917: 5).¹¹

In the memoir, Mullen frequently and proudly asserts his identity as a 'native clerk' from Cape Coast. All of his friends in the text are African migrant traders, or clerks and accountants to private companies, and they greet him by the Akan name 'Kwesi' (as well as 'Johnny' and 'Jim'). Mullen's description of these anglicized clerks working for European trading companies in Cameroon offers an important layer of information about African trade and migration in West and Central Africa, for his narrative contains details of the attitudes and opinions of African clerks working for commercial firms in the private sector (see also Arhin 1979). In this, the memoir adds material to recent studies of the employment of African clerks by European colonial governments (see, for example, Lawrance *et al.* 2006; Austen and Derrick 1999).

In the face of the literary 'thickness' of Mullen's work, however, and our uncertainties about his identity, it may seem rash to extrapolate too much about the author and his career on a European trading station from his own representations, or to position him as a representative of a particular social group. What kind of 'source' are his memoirs for social historians?

With caution, it is possible to glean some basic information about Mullen, his peer group and commerce in the pre-war period from his autobiographical writings, particularly from the second memoir he produced in 1919. 'My sojourn in the Cameroons during the peaceful days: half hour's talk with Billy' appeared a year after the last instalment of 'My experience in Cameroons during the war'. It is in fact a prequel to the first memoir. Fragmented and unfinished, it appeared between January and April 1919 at a time when the *Leader* was struggling

¹¹ Further research is required into this camp, which can be found on the British War Office map of 1915 half-way between Abong Mbang and Yaoundé, north-east of Akonolinga (see Figure 1). The German commander's name was probably spelt Jelowik, Jelovich, or Jellovich, rather than the unlikely Jellowwick.

to continue production in the face of crippling post-war shortages of printing materials.

According to this prequel, Mullen worked for Obuasi Mines in the Gold Coast as a junior clerk in the Time Office. While working in the office one day, he overhears two senior colleagues discussing an advertisement from the German trading company Krause and Fehrman seeking clerks to work in the interior of the Cameroons. Interestingly, this advertisement appeared in the *Gold Coast Leader*, the very newspaper which carried Mullen's later memoirs.¹² Unwilling to leave the Gold Coast in search of wealth, Mullen's colleagues say, 'A penny at home is worth more than a thousand abroad. You may go, and if you do I guarantee you will become richer than ever you were' (25 January 1919: 4). The junior clerk eagerly leaves the Gold Coast for the German Cameroons to work as a produce trader for many happy, lucrative years until the outbreak of war brings a premature end to his utopia.

From the memoirs, it is difficult to establish the year in which Mullen departed for the German colony. While the scene in the Time Office is said to occur 'eight years ago', that is, in 1911, 'My experience in Cameroons during the war' describes incidents that take place when Mullen is in the Cameroons as a clerk in 'February 1903' (28 October 1916: 5). Given its subject matter, 'My experience in Cameroons' could not have been written before 1914, but it is possible that the second short memoir was composed before the outbreak of war and revised to take account of the conflict.

Taken together, the two memoirs indicate that from 1903 onwards Mullen travelled to and from the German Cameroons on a regular basis to work for different European trading companies, rising steadily through the ranks of 'native' employees as he gained experience until he gained control of his own station and staff at Mbua before the outbreak of war. The second memoir is striking for its representation of pre-war Cameroon as a utopia for African traders: as Mullen says to his interlocutor at the start of the prequel, 'I may as well tell you that despite my misfortunes there, I still yearn for the good and peaceful days in that country which I even now consider little less than an earthly paradise' (25 January 1919: 4).

This representation of the pre-war colony as a 'paradise' is not unusual: several historians have commented on African expressions of regret at the end of German rule (LeVine 1964: 37; Austen and Derrick 1999; Rudin 1938). Nevertheless, it is dramatically at odds with accounts of German imperial policy and traders' atrocities against Africans, particularly on Cameroonian plantations in the immediate pre-war period (see Geschiere 1997: 30–3; Rudin 1938). While there has been some debate about the extent of German violence compared to the violence of other European powers in the region,¹³ it is clear

¹² For details of German companies trading in Cameroon, see Rudin 1938.

¹³ For example, Ralph Austen and Jonathan Derrick (1999: 93) refer to the 'myth of extreme colonial oppression' by Germany; similarly, Victor T. LeVine (1964: 37) insists that

that German imperial policy tolerated, if it did not actively endorse, the widespread abuse and neglect of African labourers, particularly on the privately owned plantations (see Clarence-Smith 1993).

Before the outbreak of war, Cameroon was thus a 'hell' for some of its indigenous inhabitants, particularly the Maka people in the rubber-rich south-east region (Geschiere 1997: 33). As Geschiere notes in his detailed study of Maka history, this imperial violence provides a 'historical basis' for the Maka people's own reputation for violence against strangers. The Maka fiercely resisted the Germans, who first attempted to subdue them in 1905 but did not finally succeed in the conquest of Maka territories until 1910 (*ibid.*: 29). On occasion, this resistance manifested itself through anthropophagy, such as the murder and ritual consumption of a young German rubber trader which caused a scandal in Germany and led to the final devastating defeat of the Maka in 1910 (*ibid.*: 30).

A striking feature of Mullen's wartime memoir is its failure, or refusal, to discuss either the Great War or German colonialism prior to the outbreak of war, except for its immediate negative effects on the life of the narrator. This is one man's 'great escape story': a story of survival and fear, and of violence against the individual. In each action-packed section, the hero-narrator describes how he flees from terrifying encounters with bloodthirsty cannibals or cowers under the blows of German soldiers at military checkpoints. From the outset, he asserts his status as a British passport-holding clerk who finds himself caught up in a war in which he is neither equipped to defend himself nor politically invested.

In asserting this British identity, Mullen shares the sense of 'imperial citizenship' voiced by elite editors in the Gold Coast newspapers, but he exhibits none of the desire to intervene in colonial rule on behalf of Africans that one finds in their political commentaries. Rather, his chief concern is to escape with his life: this concern is central to the adventure story he produces for his Cape Coast readership in 1916. As John Parker points out, the injustices of colonial rule in Cameroon are of less importance to our narrator than his efforts to escape from a volatile and dangerous situation in which a critique of German imperial policy would invite further trouble.¹⁴ So great are the levels of physical danger and abuse experienced by Mullen throughout the text that violence, rather than the war, becomes the central motif.

At times, Mullen's relish for plot, action, the exotic and the production of a page-turner seem to override the rules of autobiography.

'the German colonial administration was not as black as it was often painted' and praises the 'intelligent, often enlightened administration' of the Germans. Writing as the war raged in Europe and East Africa, Albert F. Calvert (1917) also shows grudging admiration for the German colonial infrastructure and the well-trained, ordered African troops (xi). On the other hand, the missionary, T. Vincent Tymms (1915: 5, 16), insists on the cultural specificity of Teutonic violence in Africa, a view that was reinforced by anti-German propaganda as well as official government reports such as the Bryce Report of 1915 in which the Allies accused German soldiers of human rights abuses and atrocities (see Buitenhuis 1987: 27).

¹⁴Personal communication.

Large parts of the text seem to be dominated by popular and imperial fictional templates rather than by the conventions of life-writing. This is particularly obvious in the narrator's repeated fantasies of becoming a foodstuff for Cameroonian cannibals. He is obsessed with the Maka people's capacity for cannibalistic consumption, referring to it on numerous occasions throughout the memoir. In one symptomatic aside included in the extract, for example, he recalls the comments of some cannibals as they eye his 'corpulent' travelling companion: "Look dis be fine meat, plenty salt live for him skin. Ah mien Gott! de white man he no gree we chop dem people" (28 October 1916: 5). 'So longingly did they eye him', Mullen continues, 'that their mouths actually watered with the saliva of expectancy' (*ibid.*).

In his study of the Maka people of south-east Cameroon, Peter Geschiere points out that even today, '[a]ncient practices of anthropophagy are invariably referred to whenever the Maka are mentioned, apparently in order to signal their ferocity', and European visitors to Maka territories are teasingly informed that 'the Maka eat whites' (1997: 27). Maka people themselves often refer humorously to these practices (*ibid.*: 28–9). Clearly, Mullen's colonial image of Maka cannibalism had some basis in ritual practices of anthropophagy, but the strength with which his fantasy of cannibalism is mapped onto Maka cultures betrays other preoccupations.¹⁵ The Maka territories through which Mullen passes were rumoured to be rich in rubber, a precious commodity sought by traders for the expanding automobile industry in Europe (Geschiere 1997). In conjunction with this, the expansion of the African produce trade was widely regarded by the European colonial powers and European traders as a key feature of the spread of 'civilization' in Africa. The fact that the Maka fiercely resisted colonial intrusions must therefore have compounded their image as '*die Primitivsten aller Primitiven* (the most primitive of all the primitives)' (*ibid.*: 28).

Operating on a European trading station in south-eastern Cameroon at precisely this time of colonial 'pacification', Mullen conveys the violence of German rule—and the violence of the expanding trade frontier of which he was a part—*through* his images of Maka people's cannibalistic consumption. In their rejection of the possibility of European trade, the Maka are seen—by Mullen and his European employers—to be capable only of the illegitimate consumption of human flesh rather than the legitimate commerce brought to their produce-rich region by European traders (*ibid.*: 30–3). His discourse is an example of Gananath Obeyesekere's argument that colonial violence must be understood in order to understand indigenous anthropophagy (2005: 259).

If memoirs should follow the rules of realism and verisimilitude and aim to give readers confidence in the veracity of a particular individual's

¹⁵ Gananath Obeyesekere (2005: 2) usefully distinguishes between 'cannibalism' (the projection of otherness onto the 'native') and 'anthropophagy' (the actual ritual practice of eating human flesh).

life, then Mullen's narrative flouts autobiographical conventions in numerous respects. How much of this narrative can (and should) we believe? Dramatic incidents follow one another in quick succession in each instalment. In one scene, for example, Mullen is captured and incarcerated in a Maka chief's hut. The narrator sits gloomily in heavy chains, awaiting his consumption by the local community. 'To die alone, unsoothed, unnoticed, with no kind hands about me, was indeed hard to bear,' he reflects, revelling in a high 'literary' vocabulary of abandonment (4 November 1916: 5). In spite of his melancholy, however, the next morning he relishes a breakfast of 'fried worms and roasted rats,' simultaneously savouring the meal and regurgitating a colonial stereotype of tribal African cuisine (*ibid.*). Next in this implausible scene, the familiar literary figure of the virtuous woman makes an entrance in the form of the cannibal chief's youngest wife: she is the sole female to appear in the memoirs. 'You must run away with me,' the beautiful woman tells him, secretly handing him a metal file to cut through his chains (*ibid.*). The chief discovers his wife in the prisoner's hut, and, with 'wild eyes', beats the narrator until the girl persuades him to stop (*ibid.*). Later that night, she escapes with Mullen, but is tragically killed by their pursuers.

These characters lack plausibility and motivation: it is difficult to understand why the chief, renowned for his murderous jealousy, would stop beating Mullen having discovered his favourite wife in the prisoner's hut; or why the young woman would wish to assist the prisoner. How did the girl obtain a metal file in such a remote settlement, and how did Mullen cut through his chains in such a short time? If one works within the logic of the memoir, it is also necessary to ask why the young woman should wish to liberate an individual who has been described as tender, salty meat by his captors. 'This girl, offspring of the most callous and blood-thirsty race, had deigned to offer me help,' Mullen muses, perhaps trying to deflect readers' disbelief by emphasizing his own amazement at the humanity of the savage woman (*ibid.*).

In a text dominated by the themes of physical violence, incarceration and escape, the young wife seems to function as a narrative device designed to facilitate the narrator's bid for freedom. Mullen needs her in order to escape from the 'cannibal' scene he set up. From George Henty to Rider Haggard, figures such as the chief and his wife have appeared in a similar manner. Mullen's textual exaggerations and acts of generic rule-breaking thus reveal a great deal about his literary and cultural affiliations to the British Empire as a loyal subject who wishes to establish the greatest possible distance between himself as an African and the local communities he encounters in the forests. As we have seen, he achieves this through recourse to established colonial stereotypes of cannibalism and 'primitive' otherness.

Nevertheless, in spite of its fantasies and fictions, the details of Mullen's journey are both believable and verifiable. The detailed information he provides in each instalment – about the trading stations,

the distances covered, the places visited *en route*, and the time taken to move between locations—is accurate and realistic, and his journey can readily be tracked on the British wartime map of Cameroon (1915) (see Figure 1).

‘My experience in Cameroons during the war’ and its prequel are rare public instances of West African autobiography, albeit riddled with imperial fictions. Private and semi-private examples of ‘writing the self’ have been found in the journals of West African teachers, catechists and clerks in the colonial period (see Barber 2006). Missionary archives often contain autobiographical and/or dictated accounts of conversion experiences or of tragedies such as famine or battles. Meanwhile, members of the West African intelligentsia regularly composed biographies of ‘great men’, offering exemplary lives for the edification of readers. Fictional first-personal narratives were also common in the early twentieth century, including the immensely popular confessions of a Lagosian prostitute called Segilola in I. B. Thomas’s serialized epistolary narrative, written in Yoruba and published as a first-person confession in the vernacular press in the 1920s (Barber 2005). Few non-fictional autobiographies were produced by West African writers before the 1920s.¹⁶ Mullen’s work stands out from the articles and editorials surrounding it in the *Gold Coast Leader* as an early instance of writing by an African clerk. His voice is unique and puzzling, however, and the memoirs invite us to ask about the role and the place of the ‘eccentric’ in the historiography of imperial West Africa.

How representative is Mullen’s work of the experiences and perceptions of migrant African clerks and traders in the early twentieth century? If we regard Mullen as the advance guard of an emergent social class, he might be expected to borrow politely from other cultural forms and to experiment tentatively with a range of different voices. Our narrator certainly plays with literary genres, but his experiment in autobiography is anything but polite or hesitant. Moreover, the first-person narrator of this memoir does not present himself as an ‘obscure aspirant to elite status’ in the manner of the tentative, non-elite writers who typify his class in later decades (Barber 2006: 1). Mullen presents readers with a narrator who is reflective to the point of self-absorption, unashamedly violent in his encounters with Africans, and constantly engaged in an effort to restore his autonomy in a hostile environment. Literate and self-confident, he is a comfortable clerk who revels in the English language and savours his ability to produce a ‘literary’ turn of phrase.

Mullen has left us with a lengthy but unfinished and untrustworthy account of one man’s experience of wartime West Africa. Besides

¹⁶John Parker notes that the Gold Coast’s first newspaperman, Charles Bannerman (1828–72), serialized his autobiography, ‘Recollections of an Old Sinner’ in 1859 (personal communication). For a discussion of two early twentieth-century autobiographies by West African clerks, see Austen (2006).

its originality as a work of literature, his work furnishes present-day scholars with insights into two areas of history for which details have been sparse to date: first, Africans' subjective experiences of the First World War in West Africa;¹⁷ second, the attitudes and experiences of Anglophone African clerks working for European firms in the private sector of the economy.¹⁸ Workers came to Cameroon 'from all European colonies on the West Coast between Cape Verde and the mouth of the Congo' (Rudin 1938: 319). Mullen's two memoirs help us to understand how these African migrant clerks and traders lived and operated within the German imperial regime in Cameroon, participating actively in the local economy and also contributing imaginatively to the construction of ideas about local people's cultures and languages.

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FIGURE 1 British War Office map of the German Cameroons, 1915 (British Library maps, 'Cameroons: West African District Council Maps, 1915', GSCS, 2793)

¹⁷ Joe Lunn is one of the few scholars to have undertaken a comprehensive oral history of the First World War, focusing on the recollections of African veterans and witnesses from French Senegal in interviews conducted in the early 1980s (Lunn 1987). See also Elizabeth Wrangham's D.Phil thesis, 'The Gold Coast and the First World War', which draws on official records of workers' and farmers' demands alongside clerks' and traders' petitions in the colonial archives (Wrangham 1999).

¹⁸ Benjamin Lawrance *et al.*, *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks* (2006) focuses on the African clerks working for colonial governments and largely ignores the African employees of commercial firms.

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ABSTRACT

J. G. Mullen was a Gold Coast clerk who published his memoirs, in instalments, in the *Gold Coast Leader* from 1916 to 1919. In this unusual narrative, he describes his adventures in Cameroon before and during the First World War. His account combines real-life geographical and social details with flamboyant tropes probably derived from imperial popular literature. Mullen's biography and even identity have so far been otherwise untraceable. His text offers glimpses, always enigmatic, of the experience and outlook of a member of the new clerkly class of colonial West Africa. This contribution presents an edited extract from Mullen's text together with a contextualizing and interpretative essay. The full Mullen text is available in the online version of this issue of *Africa*.

RÉSUMÉ

J. G. Mullen, employé de bureau de la Gold Coast, a publié ses mémoires, en feuilletons, dans le *Gold Coast Leader* entre 1916 et 1919. Dans ce récit inhabituel, il décrit ses aventures au Cameroun avant et après la première guerre mondiale. Il y rapporte des détails géographiques et sociaux du réel assortis d'envolées lyriques probablement inspirées de la littérature populaire impériale. La biographie, mais aussi l'identité même de Mullen, restent jusqu'à présent introuvables. Ses écrits nous laissent entrevoir, de façon toujours énigmatique, l'expérience et la perspective d'un membre de la nouvelle classe d'employés de bureau de l'Afrique de l'Ouest coloniale. Cet article présente un extrait adapté du texte de Mullen, accompagné d'un essai de contextualisation et d'interprétation. Le texte complet de Mullen est disponible dans la version électronique en ligne de ce numéro d'*Africa*.