

## Wage Bondage in the Cameroon Development Corporation: The Sleazy Exploitation of Female Labour at Tole, 1954 - 2002

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### ABSTRACT

Since the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) took over tea production at Tole in 1954, women have played a vital role in the process of cultivation by surrendering their labour at different levels of cultivation. In spite of the momentous contribution in the production process, there were signs that their role was undermined judging from the “tea spoon” wages they received. The aim of this paper therefore, is to investigate the involvement of female labour; the level of their input and the rewards that accrued to them in the plantation labour process. The study investigates labour inputs and remunerations with the intention of finding out the level of commensurateness between them. To accomplish the said objectives, this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach. Both qualitative and quantitative instruments of research are applied in order to be able to assess the input-dividends ratio of the women in the period under study. From the findings made, it is evident that the women of Tole sacrificed a lot in the production process but what they ripped in the form of wages and non-monetary benefits or concessions were insignificant.

**Keywords:** wage slavery, estate, exploitation, female labour, Tole.

### INTRODUCTION

In 1928, the German planters introduced tea in Cameroon and subsequently, established an experimental tea farm of 66 acres at Tole. The farm gradually functioned until the Second World War which broke out in 1939, diverted the attention of the British who managed it. Meanwhile, at the end of the war the British authorities decided to revamp and indigenize most of the former German plantations in the Southern Cameroons for meaningful development to follow. In 1947 therefore, the Commonwealth Development Corporation (later Cameroon Development Corporation – CDC) was created to fulfil this mission and the plantations were assigned to this agro-industrial consortium. The CDC steadily became interested in tea business and therefore took over and refurbished the tea estate at Tole in 1954. By 1958 the CDC authorities guided by the supposed docility of women and the need to have a stable labour force, decided to engage women on its plantations as permanent workers. The Tole Tea Estate was to set the pace for such an adventure with a predominantly female labour force. Taking women for granted, their labour became a subject of exploitation as the nature of their remunerations proved that they

were trapped in the underpinnings of modern slavery.

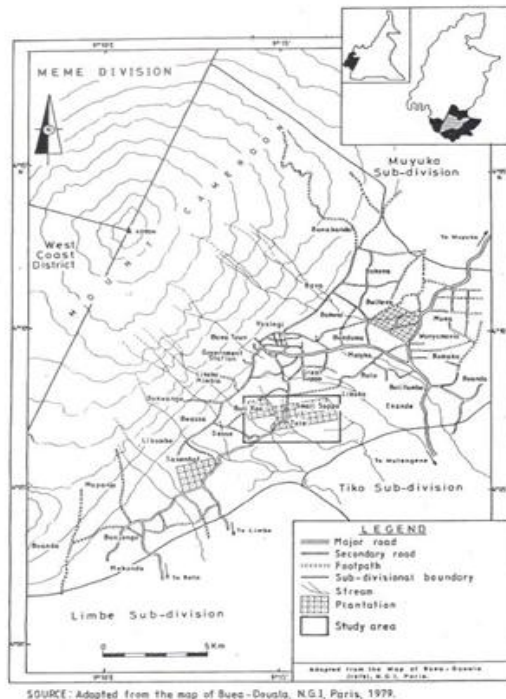
### LOCATION

The Tole Tea Estate (now Cameroon Tea Estate Tole since 2002 when it was privatized) is located some five kilometers from Buea Town (Bederman, 1967:317). Tole is situated in Buea in Fako Sub-Division, South West Region of Cameroon. is bound by Small Soppo in the North, Sasse in the South, Bokwoango in the Western flank and a waste land which extends to Bolifamba is on the East (see map 1).

With the creation of the CDC, most of the former German plantations were handed over to this new body. The CDC actually got involved in tea management only in 1954 when it took over the tea plantation at Tole. After 1954 the CDC was eager to expand cultivation because there were prospects for an increase in the demand for tea in the world market (Shamsher et. al., 1977:61). The expansion project went on gradually and by 2002 about 452 hectares had been cultivated. The expansion in cultivation was quite challenging because of the unavailability of enough man power. The major problem that confronted the German planters and subsequently the CDC in Cameroon was the

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recruitment and maintenance of a permanent labour force.



**MAP1.** *The Location of Tole Tea Estate in Buea Sub-Division*

### LABOUR INCOMMUNICADO

The major problem that confronted the German planters and subsequently the CDC in Cameroon was the recruitment and maintenance of a permanent labour force. Mark DeLancey (1972:100) argues that the labour problems that confronted the colonialists could not be solved within the plantation areas for two principal reasons. First, the areas where the plantations were located were sparsely populated. Second, the Bakweri, the indigenes on whose lands most of the plantations were located were not inclined to work as labourers in plantations. Their negative attitude towards plantation work could be explained by the vexatious expropriation of their ancestral lands by the plantation owners. Arguments raised by other authors who are interested in plantation studies also indicate that the lack of interest on the part of the Bakweri to engage plantation labour was because of their early involvement in the Colonial Maritime trade and the cultivation of cash crops such as banana. Their early involvement in these income generating activities made them independent operators and punctured the desire to cede their labour to the plantation operators as casual or permanent labourers. Bederman (1967:320, 1968:9) asserts that by 1966 there were only 50

Bakweri indigenes working in Tole as opposed to 100 Nigerians in a labour force of 790 where women comprised 435 (55.5 percent female and 44.9 percent male). A critical analysis of these statistics shows that the Bakweri constituted only 6.3 percent and foreigners (Nigerians mostly) comprised 12.7 percent of the total work force of Tole. The remaining 81 percent came from the Grassfields.

Given the difficulty of obtaining labour around the plantation localities, the CDC continued with the German policy of recruiting labour from the Grassfields of Cameroon and Nigeria. Yet, this strategy did not solve the problem of an unstable labour force. The labour force continued to be notoriously unstable right up to the early years of independence. A tenable explanation for the shortage of labour was the fact that many of the workers were not willing to make a career out of the minimal opportunity offered by plantation work. Thus, many of the plantation workers remained migrants as they worked for short periods and left after raising enough money to help them establish back in their homelands.<sup>1</sup> Even though the main reason for the subsequent engagement of female labour in the plantations was to stabilize the labour force, other factors also accounted for the preference for female labour in the CDC plantations and the Tole Tea Estate in particular.

### THE PREFERENCE FOR FEMALE LABOUR AT TOLE

It was in a bid to overcome the problem of labour instability in the Tole Tea Estate and other plantations that the CDC officially embarked on the recruitment of women on permanent basis as from 1958. The ambition of this policy was geared towards two major goals. Firstly, it was seen as a solution to the shortage of male labour in some arduous but vital tasks like the tapping of rubber and plucking of tea (Warmington, 1960:100). The second objective was to redress the problem of labour fluctuation permanently. It was hoped that male workers would be encouraged to stay longer on the plantations if their wives were also given the opportunity to make a steady income as plantation workers.

In another dimension, the CDC preference for female labour was based on the assumption that by nature, women were passive and subservient.

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Florence Aba, 71 years, former plucker, Buiyuku Village, Buea, 18 July 2013.

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Women were falsely assumed to be more docile and complacent than men in the plantation system. The implication of this comforting assumption for management was that they would exploit the services of women. Again, it was presumed that wage employment was a more significant event in the lives of women than that of men. After all, were women not excluded from the colonial capitalist scheme of things when only men were engaged in plantation wage labour? Furthermore, it was articulated that wage employment gave women a degree of freedom from patriarchal control. This was because it empowered them financially (Konings, 1998:156). Hence, given the opportunity, many women, especially from the Grassfields, flocked to Tole for tea plucking.

Apart from the aforementioned, some external factors influenced management's decision to recruit women on the tea plantation at Tole. Expatriate managers of the CDC, based on their experience on some tea and coconut plantations in Asia, had the conviction that women were best suited for certain jobs such as tea plucking and harvesting. Rightly or wrongly, women were considered as expert pluckers because of their nibble fingers. That is, women could easily harvest tea leaves as they did with vegetables. Consequently, tea plucking in many parts of the world came to be identified as women's work. Based on the Asian experience, the CDC management argued that tea plucking in Cameroon was an occupation for women. As such, the Tole Tea Estate witnessed a high influx of female labour to the extent that women comprised 63 percent of the labour force in 1988 (Konings, 1998:153). The rationality of such expatriate beliefs could however, be questioned when looking at the nature of the labour force in other tea plantations in Cameroon. This is because unlike the Tole Tea Estate, the Ndu and Djuttisa Tea Estates had a predominant male labour force over the years. This therefore, provokes another interesting debate or discourse on gender responsibility in terms of who is best suited for what piece of work in the plantation labour process.

### JOB DEPICTION OF FEMALE WORKERS

From its inception, the labour force of Tole Tea Estate was predominantly female in character. As earlier seen in this paper, in 1966 for example, there were 435 women in a labour force of 790 and these women were involved at different levels of production (Bederman,

1967:320, 1968:9). An analysis of the 1966 statistics shows that women represented about 55.1 percent of the labour force. In 1978, the total labour force of the estate stood at 1.106 and out of this number, there were 800 women representing 72.3 percent while the men numbered 306 representing only 27.2 percent of the labour force. By the end of 2000 women still dominated in the field. Out of 587 field workers, 427 were women constituting about 72.5 percent of the total labour force while men comprised only 27.5 percent (Akara, 2006:50). Looking at the job description of these female workers it should be recalled that besides plucking, which was the main activity on the field, women were equally involved in other areas of field work such as weeding and fertilizing. This was common especially during the "slack periods" (December to April).

The women were mostly involved in the plucking of tea leaves for processing. The leaves were manually harvested and the quality that was required was the flush or immature leaves (two leaves and a bud) for high quality production. The women used baskets hanging on their backs (see plate 1). Before weighing, the tea leaves were inspected by the checkers to ensure that only the required quality was taken to the factory. After weighing and recording, the leaves were placed in gigantic bags and transported to the factory for processing. A few of the female workers were involved as checkers and overseers who controlled "gangs" (work groups) in the estate.



**Plate1.** A Cross Section of Women Plucking Tea at Tole

**Source:** Photo Album of Christopher Niba, Photographer, Buiyuku, 4 January 2013.

The lowest positions in this stratum of field supervisors were opened to women at an early stage. Over the years, a few women were appointed as overseers and senior overseers. The appointment of women as supervisory duties, however, was limited only to the female dominated sections of the estate. This was especially in the plucking section. From the

foregoing, it can be said that for a long time, women occupied lower positions in management. They were mostly concentrated in the plucking section (Akara, 2006:53-54).

Generally, higher positions such as Field Assistant and Manager remained male dominated. It can be concluded that the women who escaped from patriarchal domination in the local communities came face to face with it on the estate. This was the status quo until the 1990s. After this period of male domination, the female workers are gradually making their way to the top contrary to speculations by authors like Konings that women would never hold top ranking positions in the estate. By 2002, as we discovered in the field, Joyce Donji had risen to Senior Field Assistant while Hana Wole had attained the rank of Estate Manager.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, apart from playing a dominant role as pluckers, few of the female workers were able to forge their way to supervisory positions at the Tole Tea Estate.

### **THE INPUTS OF THE WOMEN AT TOLE**

It is important to look at female labour input at the Tole Tea Estate because it is only after this that we can be able to paint a clear picture of the politics of labour remunerations especially concerning female labour. In the Tole Tea Estate, the working day started at 5:00 am when the time keeper turned on the “engine”, a gigantic electrically driven alarm based in the factory which could be heard all over the estate and its environs. The workers were expected to assemble for muster at 5.30am in order to be assigned their daily tasks. From the 1970s, the time was set at 5.30am and the field workers were expected to be at their various sections at 6.00 am and work started at 6.30 am.<sup>3</sup>

During the peak seasons (April-July and October-December) when there were much tea leaves, these women were expected to put in eleven hours of work daily. This means that they started work at 6.30 am each day and ended at 5.30 pm, which was considered “over time”. The daily task of the female workers during the peak periods was up to 26kg of tea. During the “slack” periods, that is, when there was less tea leaves in the field (December-April), the women worked for eight hours a day, 6.30 am to 2.30

pm and their daily task was set at 14kg (Konings, 1993:76).

In 1987, the daily task of the workers was increased. For example during the “peak” periods, it increased from 26kg to 32kg. The argument that was put forward to justify this increase in task was that the corporation wanted to cope with the challenges of the economic crisis that hit the country as from the 1980s (Konings, 1993:76). The aim was to increase production both qualitatively and quantitatively in order to compete favourably in the world market. After analyzing the labour inputs of the female workers, it is important to mention that this could be likened to wage slavery as described by Karl Marx. The female labourers were subjected to long and exhaustive working hours. In spite of the sacrifices made by the female labourers, the remuneration to labour remained disgusting.

### **REWARDS TO LABOUR AS EVIDENCE OF WAGE BONDAGE**

In 1980, the United Nations reported that women, who constituted 60 percent of the World’s population, utilized two thirds of the total working hours in the world. It further stated that in spite of this, they received only one-tenth of the world’s income.<sup>4</sup> From this revelation, it could be argued that women in different sectors of labour, including plantation labour, earned meagre wages that were not commensurate to their sacrifices in the production process. Karl Marx had decried this situation in 1848 when he came up with the *Communists Manifesto*. In the work, Marx pointed out that the very survival of the capitalist system was predicted on the exploitation of labour and not the super intelligence of the capitalist. He went further to state that the capitalists maximized profits because labour was not granted benefits commensurate to their input (Possony, 1954:27). This situation was witnessed in the Tole Tea Estate where the female workers were exploited both mentally and physically through long and exhaustive work hours that were inadequately compensated for.

Before 1970, the women on the Tole Tea Estate earned lower wages than their male counterparts

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Pauline Abid, 70 years, former tea plucker and overseer, Wonganga Village, Buea, 20 July 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Idem.

<sup>4</sup> UNO, Report of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, 1980.

that were on the same task.<sup>5</sup> The reason for this inequality was that management simply wanted to emulate the system of unequal pay between men and women practiced in many Asian plantations. This was typical of the patriarchal relations that existed in the estate on gender lines. No convincing justification was given to this gender disparity in terms of labour input, daily task and durations of work. Even though the CDC management argued that the female workers needed less time to complete their daily task while their male counterparts needed a much longer time to do so, this was not institutionalized. The only argument that could have been tenable was that the male workers performed more difficult tasks like pruning and road maintenance, but this argument is still lopsided because the natural phenomenon of men being stronger than women must still be applied in instances like this.

Thus, the contention held by management that the men performed more difficult tasks was considered fallacious by the women. For example, some of the women who worked on the estate for many years argued that tea plucking was a tedious and exacting exercise. Worse still, the long hours of work were compounded by increase in tasks from 18kg to 26kg in 1980 and from 26kg to 32kg in 1987 during the “peak” seasons of plucking.<sup>6</sup> Given the argument as to who contributed more in the labour process, Reddock and Jain (1998) have concluded that the attempt by plantation operators to distinguish between “light” and “heavy” work was merely an attempt to devalue women’s role in the production process. Following the arguments that were raised and the payment mechanisms that were put in place, it can be said that the CDC management got the labour of two female workers and paid for only one and a half. The gender disparity in the rewards to labour can be seen from the statistics contained in table I.

<sup>5</sup> Personnel Circular No.5, Rates of Pay-Daily Rated Employees effective from 1 October 1963, Bota C.D.C Personnel’s Division 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Archives of the Delegation of Labour, Buea, MTPS/SWP/Bu.95/S.I, Vol. IX, Complaints from the CDC, Minutes of Mass Meetings with Workers of the Estates/Services of the Cameroon Development Corporation in Connection with the Economic Crisis, August – October 1987, pp. 2-3.

**Table I.** Rates of pay of daily employment on the CDC estates, 1<sup>st</sup> October 1963

Category of worker	Daily wages (FCFA)
Male workers	135
Female workers	118
<b>Artisans</b>	
Class 111	320
Class 11	450
Class 1	615
<b>Assistant overseers</b>	
Male	198
Female	171
<b>Headman</b>	
Male	156
Female	130
<b>Time Keepers</b>	173
<b>Checkers</b>	145

**Source:** Personnel Circular No.5, Rates of Pay-Daily Rated Employees effective from 1 October 1963, Bota, CDC Personnel Division, 1963.

Looking at table I, there are indications that by 1963, women earned lower wages than their male counterparts in the CDC. In Tole, a majority of the female workers worked in the field and were classified under general labour. This was because most of them had not gone beyond the First School Leaving Certificate or acquired any professional training. The female field workers were placed on 118 FCFA a day and it was clear that Sundays were not counted on their pay roll. Thus, in a month, the female field workers were on wages ranging from 3,068 to 3,186 depending on whether the month was thirty or thirty-one days. This was high level exploitation based on capitalist tendencies. Marx in his arguments in relation to labour posits that out of the eight on eight (8/8) labour input in the factory system, only one on eight (1/8) is handed back to labour in the form of wage slavery and seven on eight (7/8) is withheld back by the capitalists’ machinery in the form of profits (as cited by Possony, 1954:xxi). This was exactly the situation that prevailed at Tole because female labour was subjected to long and tedious working conditions with very little remunerations. Part of their benefits was stripped off from them, reinvested in the expansion of the estate (without any meaningful change in their situation) and profit maximization. What was very glaring was the disparity that existed between male and female labour in terms of wages. There were times that the women had to agitate through strike actions calling for an improvement in both working conditions and a

harmonization/increase in wages as was the case in 1963. These differences existed until 1968 when the government of the Federal Republic of Cameroon took steps to harmonize workers' wages in the country. On 15 July 1968 Decree No. 68\DF\272 announced the harmonisation of wages in the Federal Labour Code. It defined the minimum wages for agricultural and non-agricultural workers in Cameroon. Though three wage zones were established, the CDC signed a bilateral agreement with the CDC Workers Union to maintain a uniform wage structure for all its workers without gender bias. They were to be similar to zone 11 of the primary sector.<sup>7</sup>

In 1969, the National Joint Bargaining Board for Collective Agreement and wages was given the task to draw up a standard classification of occupations and to fix minimum wage rates for each zone. In 1970, it was published with twelve categories and the following year, the minimum wage rate for each was established. The tea pluckers in Cameroon were classified under category I and later category II (see table II).

**Table II:** Monthly Salaries for the Primary Sector, Zone 11 on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1985 in FCFA

Category	Grade					
	A	B	C	D	E	F
I	24,069	24,369	24,681	24,984	25,289	25,594
II	25,526	25,911	26,668	27,199	27,741	28,278
III	27,659	29,380	30,476	31,832	33,182	34,538
IV	32,781	37,617	42,465	47,245	52,160	57,002
V	54,025	58,760	63,489	69,534	72,947	77,664
VI	74,973	79,533	84,099	88,660	93,229	97,792
VII	80,822	86,207	91,602	96,987	102,371	107,767
VIII	107,767	119,899	132,005	144,127	156,225	168,171
IX	159,483	170,956	182,457	193,935	205,414	215,909
X	178,454	193,145	207,847	222,538	237,240	251,931
XI	251,931	264,520	277,124	289,723	302,317	314,917
XII	314,917	327,516	340,110	352,698	365,303	377,902

Source: Konings (1995:42).

Following the harmonization of the wage structure, the tea pluckers earned between FCFA 25,526 and FCFA 28,278 monthly. Each

<sup>7</sup> CDC Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ending 1968.

category had six 'echelons' and wage disparities were based on merit and seniority rather than on sex. Besides cash, some of the workers earned bonuses in kind. The introduction of bonuses was efforts geared at trying to motivate the workers and to reduce the exploitation gap. Solving the problem of exploitation was still far-fetched. Some of the women were given blankets, flasks and other accessories, which could still not compensate for the high level of exploitation. The female workers because of their level of education did not easily notice this exploitation. As a result, some of the women felt satisfied with their earnings. For example, the story was told of a woman who referred to "Pay Day" as "Christmas Day." She went around singing *all na happy* and this earned her the nickname "Mami Happy."<sup>8</sup> It was however, regrettable that this kind of euphoria existed amidst high level of exploitation. It should be borne in mind that this kind of ecstatic atmosphere existed only on "Pay Day" as the workers returned to their poverty stricken lives a few days later.

The financial situation of the women became precarious following the economic crisis that hit Cameroon as from the mid 1980s. As part of management's strategy to counter the crisis, workers' wages were reduced. For example, unlike in 1986 when no hospital maintenance fees were paid, workers were now obliged to pay FCFA 1,680 per month as from 1991. Furthermore, workers were obliged to save FCFA 3,955 from their wages. Apart from the health care saving scheme, many other deductions were made from the workers' pay (see table III). Some of these deductions were to help in the running of the affairs of the CDC and to support its recovery plan until its financial situation improved.<sup>9</sup> This brought inconveniences and further inflicted pain on the workers particularly those who had an alternative means of saving their money like in *Njangi* houses which bore interests on them.

**Table III:** Monthly Wages of Tea Pluckers at Tole in 1986 and 1991 (FCFA) FCFA

	1986	1991
Category	2E	2E

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Anabel Mbah, 72 years, former tea plucker, Buiyuku Village, Buea, 18 July 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Archives of the Delegation of Labour, Buea, MTPS/SWP/Bu.95/S.I, Vol. IX, Complaints from the CDC. Minutes of Mass Meetings, p.2.

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Hourly Wage Rate	114.01	114.01
Hours Worked	192	189
Normal Wage	21,890	21,548
Public Holiday	1,824	917
Overtime (150%)	-	1,757
Bonus\Allowance(plucking bonus)	2,800	2,040
Seniority Bonus	3,589	3,583
Gross Taxable Wages	30,979	29,990
Pension Fund	919	839
Compulsory Savings	-	3,955
TPS PAYE TAX	762	714
Surtax	257	250
Council Tax	88	164
Land Bank Tax	1,615	799
Car\Motor\Bicycle Allowance	210	215
Contributions for Palm Oil	2,800	-
Hospital Maintenance Fees	-	1,680
Credit Union	7,085	8,400
Total Deductions	13,749	19,749
Net Pay	17,230	10,241

**Source:** *Konings (1995:43).*

Referring to the statistics on table III, it is clear that the introduction of so many saving schemes imposed strain on the workers whose wages were low. Following the economic crisis, there was a reduction in the wages and salaries of the workers to the extent that it became difficult for them to meet up with their day-to-day pre-occupations. Imposing various savings schemes on the workers only worsened the situation because their incomes were further reduced. The management could have advanced arguments that the workers were saving for the future but it was not logical because how could workers be forced to save when they were not even sure of a single square meal let alone talk of being able to address their family needs. From the foregoing, it can be argued that the compulsory saving schemes that were introduced at the peak of economic slow-down was not intended at guaranteeing the workers' interests but was rather aimed at introducing safety valves for a company that was under the weight of the economic crisis.

Looking at the harmonization scheme, it was difficult to achieve total harmonization because in spite of all efforts, wide variations still existed among the workers' wages. The main reason for this was the 'overtime' and pro-rata payment system on the estate. A worker was rewarded for each kg of tea leaves plucked above the daily task. The worker was paid an additional FCFA 15 per kg if she plucked between 26kg and 35kg. The bonus was increased to FCFA 25 if she plucked between

35kg and 45kg (Konings, 1993:76). In spite of all extra payments, the wages were still generally low. For example between 1975 and 1976, Virginia DeLancey conducted a survey among 175 married female workers on the Tole Tea Estate. The essence was to find out how they spent their wages. Her study revealed that the 175 women earned a total of FCFA 1,709,267 (6,837 dollars) as wages per month. That is, each of them earned an average of FCFA 9,767 (39 dollars) per month (DeLancey, 1978:11). This was indicative of the low wages that were earned by these women.

DeLancey (1978:11) further maintains that most of these women got additional subsidies to their income from the family allowance they received from the Cameroon National Social Insurance Fund (CNPS), petty trading, and the sale of excess produce from *chop farms*. Combining their exhaustive plantation duties and these extra income earning activities was quite an uphill task. While appreciating De Lancey's findings, it could be argued with caution that her generalization on the family allowance scheme was a miscalculation. She failed to come to terms with the fact that the allowance varied from one female labourer to the other depending on the number of children they had and who were under 21 years of age.

Another contention here is that in Cameroon, the family allowance is not paid monthly but quarterly. There were even times that the CNPS failed to meet up with this obligation. For instance, on 20 January 1991 the CDC workers wrote to the labour authorities complaining that they had not been paid five quarters of family allowance dues. Following the survey among 120 former CDC field workers by the author in 2006, the income variations were clear. For example, 45 percent of the women earned between FCFA 10,000 FCFA 19,999 while only 5 percent earned between FCFA 40,000 and FCFA 49,999 (see table IV). This revelation was an indication that the women were exploited. It was difficult for them sponsor their children in schools or to take care of their basic needs with such meagre amounts. The situation of female labour in the Tole estate reflected a typical capitalist enterprise where the plight of labour is considered least in terms of the operation of the factory system.

**Table IV:** *The Level of Income Earned by Former CDC Workers in Tole*

Level of	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%

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Income in CFA						
Less than 10,000	1	1.7	3	5	4	3.3
10,000-19,999	27	45	27	45	54	45
20,000-29,999	16	26.7	17	28.3	33	27.5
30,000-39,000	12	20	10	16.7	22	18.3
40,000-49,999	4	6.7	3	5	7	5.8
50,000 & Above	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	60	100.1	60	100	120	99.9

**Source:** Akara (2006:76).

From table IV it is clear that the wages of a majority of the female workers fell between FCFA 10,000 and FCFA 19,999. The female workers who found within this range constitute 45 percent while those who earned between FCFA 20,000 and FCFA 29,999 constituted just 16.7 percent. These strikingly low-income levels for a majority of the female workers made life difficult for them. This explains why the women had to go into other activities out of their regular plantation duties. Some engaged farming after plantation work. For example, some of them had to leave the plantation at 4:00 pm to their individual farms but with very little time to put in there. It was even very difficult for these women to perform these income-subsidizing activities because of the exhaustiveness of the plantation system. Management claimed that other non-monetary concessions were granted to these workers to improve on their living standards. However, these non-monetary concessions still did not solve the problem of poor working and living conditions in the estate.

### NON-MONETARY CONCESSIONS TO THE WOMEN AT TOLE

Though management acknowledged that the workers' wages were extremely low, it however argued that the women enjoyed some non-monetary benefits. These included free housing, free health care and crèche facilities. This part of the study is dedicated to a critical analysis of this claim.

#### Housing

The workers were provided free accommodation in three camps, Tole Old Camp, Tole New

Camp and Saxenhof Camp. Unfortunately, the free accommodation that was offered to CDC labourers in general could not compensate for the extremely low levels of income because the nature of the rooms left much to be desired. The first complaint that was raised by the workers was that the rooms were very small (about 4 by 3 meters) and they were sub-standard structures that were poorly maintained. For example, many of the houses had leaking roofs (Ardenner and Ardenner, 1960:92). All the houses of the Tole Old Camp for example, were semi permanent structures and the planks of some were in a state of dilapidation. Still talking about housing in the camps, congestion became a serious problem. Between 1999 and 2000, there were 760 rooms in the estate hosting a total of 1334 workers.<sup>10</sup>

Congestion in the camps increased crime wave there and moral decadence was highly noticeable. For example in some of the camps, it was commonplace to find a couple sleeping and/or making love in the same room where their kids slept (Adener and Adener, 1960:92). The children copied very fast from their parents and the result was early pregnancies among many young girls. The high rate of congestion in the camps also contributed to serious insanitary conditions in the camps. For instance, between 1999 and 2000, there were only 24 toilets and showers for close to 2000 persons living in the estate.<sup>11</sup> This means that there was an average of 83.3 persons per toilet/shower.

The unhygienic condition of these facilities can hardly be overemphasized. The toilets became a breeding ground for mosquitoes and other harmful insects, which became vectors for the transmission of diseases such as malaria. It was due to the aforementioned situation that some workers were forced to rent houses in neighbouring villages like Buiyuku and Small Soppo. Those living outside the camps were entitled to a housing allowance as stipulated by section 66(2) of the Labour Code of 14 August 1992. By this section of the Labour Code, employers were called upon to provide housing facilities for their employees and in the absence of these; the latter were to benefit from housing allowances. Unfortunately, those who rented

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Joyce Donji, 44 years, Senior Field Assistant, Cameroon Tea Estate, Tole, 4 January 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Idem.



houses outside the plantation did so at their own expense.

### **Crèche**

The CDC authorities provided a free day care nursery for the young children of the workers. This was on grounds that the wages of the women were too low for them to engage the services of baby-sitters. It was for this purpose that a crèche, a semi permanent building with a playing hall of 6.6m by 10m, was established on a site about 150m from the Tole Tea Factory. The playroom had balls, cots, wooden toys and first aid equipment. The kids were taken there early in the morning and withdrawn from there at 3.30 pm. The parents provided their food which the crèche attendants administered. Unfortunately the crèche had only two attendants who were expected to take care of at least 40 children each day. Many of the women were disappointed with the fact that they had to force their kids out of the bed before 6.00am in order to prepare them for the crèche before going to work. Furthermore, the situation was worse during “overtime” periods. They had to make adequate arrangements for the kids to be taken home at 3.30 pm when the crèche closed for the day while the women were still in the field (Akara, 2006:79-80).

At this point in time, it can be argued that the crèche was established as a means to reduce the burden of the workers but it instead increased their difficulties because they now needed more time to prepare their kids for the crèche and of course time to pick them up at closing time. Added to this was the fact that the women had to prepare food for their kids every day and deposit with the attendants before going to the field which made the process very cumbersome. In spite of the efforts made by these women, there were complaints that the children were not properly fed at the crèche. Given this situation, the notion of a day care facility as a remedy to poor wages was destroyed. Many of the women lost confidence in the day centre and decide to seek alternative measures for their kids. For instance, some of them brought relatives from their villages of origin to take care of their kids on the understanding that they would later sponsor them to study a trade like hairdressing or tailoring. Bringing in an extra force as a baby sitter only increased the burden of these women who were on very meagre incomes.

### **Healthcare**

The plantation management considered that good health was a condition *sine qua non* for the enhancement of qualitative and quantitative production among the workers in the estate. The Tole Tea Estate had an Aid Post and a Clinic. There was free consultation for workers and their children and some basic drugs were made available to them. A medical doctor from the CDC Cottage Hospital, Tiko made routine tours to the Clinic at Tole at least once a week to see the sick. An ambulance service was made available to transport serious cases to the Cottage Hospital, Tiko.

The medical staffs were often inadequate, less qualified and inexperienced. Between 1977 and 1978 for example, there were only six clinical staff for a labour force of 1106, and between 1999 and 2000, the number stood at 11 for a labour force of over 1,334 (excluding their dependents). In addition, basic drugs were also short in supply and worse still, no modern laboratory existed. Pregnant women for instance, were examined by the use of the ‘cold test.’<sup>12</sup> Nurses even refused to attend to emergency calls after working hours except they were paid for “overtime.” This added to the woes of the workers. As already mentioned, the deduction of FCFA 1,680 from the monthly wages of the workers as “Hospital Maintenance Fee” (see table III) strained their finances. Amidst such a disappointment and lack of confidence in the health unit, many were forced to consult in non-CDC health establishments like the Buea General Hospital and the Mount Mary Maternity. This, of course, was done at their expense as it entailed extra expenditure.

### **CONCLUSION**

From the foregone discussion, it could be seen that the female workers at Tole worked very hard but surprisingly, their efforts never yielded meaningful dividends. This was true judging from the “tea spoon” wages that they earned. While management was honest to admit that wages were low, it however, attempted to exonerate itself from all the teething troubles the women suffered in connection with their low-wages. The attempted justification was that a number of non-cash benefits were accorded them. It was therefore certain that management

<sup>12</sup> Handsome Elem Onya, “Health Services for Plantation Workers on Tole Tea Estate.” Long Essay, PAID-WA, Buea, 1981/82, p.13.

considered the “free” accommodation and medical care as part of the remuneration of the women. After a careful assessment of these non-cash benefits, it was realized that these partly increased the burden of the female workers rather than being a solution to their woes in the plantation system. The women were forced at times to agitate and brought pressure to bear on management to improve their lot. Unequivocally the female workers deserved more than what was offered them. This created a kind of atmosphere where labour was exploited and degraded. Despite the cash and non-cash benefits put together, wage slavery was still very visible at Tole Tea Estate. Workers especially women were exhausted in order for the CDC to maximize its profit in the tea venture. Wages remained low and the institution of the so-called fringe benefits was like “running but standing still.”

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## Wage Bondage in the Cameroon Development Corporation: The Sleazy Exploitation of Female Labour at Tole, 1954 - 2002

### Interviews

Name	Age	Profession	Place	Date
Anabel Mbah	72	Tea plucker, 1971- 2001	Byuiyuku Village, Buea	18 July 2013
Florence Aba	71	Tea plucker, 1972-2002	Buiyuku Village, Buea	18 July 2013
Joyce Donji	44	Senior Field Assistant, 1995-2002	Cameroon Tea Estate, Tole, Buea	4 January 2013
Pauline Abid	70	Tea plucker and later overseer, 1967-2002	Wonganga Village, Buea	20 July 2013

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