

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

SHIRLEY ARDENER (ed), *Swedish Ventures in Cameroon 1883-1923: Trade and Travel, People and Politics. The Memoir of Knut Knutson with Supporting Material*. Cameroon Studies, Volume 4, 2002 (pages, v+288p.)

In this volume, Shirley Ardener shares the edited memoir of Knut Knutson, a Swedish adventurer who travelled to Cameroon from 1882-1896. Ardener's interest in Knutson's memoir stems from a desire to represent an early first hand account of the people of the Cameroon Mountain from a Swedish point of view. The book is divided into four chapters: 1) an introduction to Knutson and an explanation of Ardener's involvement with his memoir; 2) Knutson's memoir; 3) additional material from his travels; and 4) documentation on alternative perspectives of travels to the Cameroon during the same period.

The introduction provides biographical information on Knutson and George Waldau, his travelling and business partner. It also details Ardener's journey in the publication of this work. Having previously known of Knutson's presence in the Cameroon, it was only during her visit to the Cameroon in 1997 that Ardener became fully involved with this project. She was asked by a local chief to help with the publishing of this memoir, since the locals had great difficulty in obtaining funding. Other than slight changes in the paragraphing and punctuation, the memoir is shown in its original form. Rather than offering a critique of it, the aim for Ardener is to provide primary material in a way which "makes the reader feel contemporary to those events" (p.xiv). For Ardener, primary sources, "enable the personalities and predispositions of the players in historical events, which to some extent determine their course, to be given weight when interpreting 'the facts'"(p.xiv).

Knutson was inspired by early European travellers to Africa. His memoir, presented in the second chapter of the book, outlines how he came to travel to the Cameroon and his experiences while there. Unable to join other expedition initiatives at the time, his brother-in-law put him in touch with George Waldau who was already planning an expedition to the Cameroon and who was looking for a partner. A business partnership was therefore established between the two men. A large part of the memoir describes the two men's arrival in Cameroon, their hunting practices, the vegetation, and the various types of species they encountered and hunted. A turning point during their stay was the discovery of a rubber plant, which they cultivated and traded for land and other goods. Their various travels to the interior of Cameroon were often in search of more opportunities for discovery.

Knutson's writings also detail local religious practices, customs and discuss the slave trade and the presence of missionaries. In 1884-1885, the German invasion in Cameroon forced Knutson and Waldau to relinquish their land with the understanding that they would still be able to work on it. Knutson makes great note of the fact that he felt that the Germans were not being honest in their dealings. The land soon became Crownland and Knutson questioned the character of the German officials as well as the German government.

In the third chapter, Ardener shares the actual contracts made between Knutson and Waldau and representatives of the various villages. Ardener's commentaries in this section mainly consist of explaining the origins, effects and processes involved in implementing these contracts. These documents provide details of the transactions that occurred between different actors. This chapter describes Knutson's legal battles with the Germans and his difficulties in being recognized as the owner of his land. After years of battle, Knutson sold his land rights to Waldau who eventually collaborated with the Germans and continued to manage plantations estates even after the British forces appeared during the First World War. The fourth chapter titled "Alternative Perspectives" briefly considers the experiences of other travellers to the Cameroon which provides a comparative analysis which supports and sometimes contradicts Knutson and Waldau's accounts.

Although reading Knutson's memoir proved interesting, this book does not critically address the colonial script of these travels. Can these ever be considered neutral benevolent acts? Also, the book does not question the possible patriarchal lens from which Knutson might have been writing this memoir. Women are rarely mentioned in any significant manner and when they are, they are said to occupy a subordinate position. Readers should critically question, where such writing is coming from, what is being produced and also who has the ability to produce such accounts of history. This book will possibly be of interest to those familiar with the region, to historians of this area, and to those interested in deconstructing colonial narratives.

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