The Rev. Joseph Jackson Fuller, Jamaican Transnational Missionary, and the Recalcitrant Baptist Pastors of Cameroon

Born in Spanish Town, Jamaica in 1825 to slave parents, young Joseph Jackson Fuller witnessed a solemn ceremony where the burial of iron shackles symbolised total emancipation in 1838. A few years later he embarked with his father on a Baptist mission to the ‘benighted heathen’ of Fernando Po in the Bight of Biafra. By the time of his ordination in 1859 he had joined a mission to neighbouring Cameroon.1 Two years after his Jamaican wife died of fever he married the white daughter of an English missionary. On tours of Britain and Jamaica in the 1860s Fuller gained a reputation as a mighty orator. Meanwhile, the local evangelists he enrolled in his mission had begun to make significant progress in the conversion of their people. As he entered his seventh decade Germany claimed Cameroon for its nascent African empire and Fuller’s mission plunged into crisis. An agreement negotiated over his head transferred his congregations to the Basel Missionary Society and the headquarters of Baptist mission operations moved to the Congo. Although non-denominational in its constitution, the Basel society was doctrinally closer to Lutheran and Calvinist practice than Baptist traditions. In particular, they conducted baptism by sprinkling rather than the total immersion that gave Baptism its name. Fuller’s people revolted against this spiritual fruit of the Scramble for Africa and proclaimed themselves the Free Native Baptists (an appellation first used in Fuller’s native Jamaica). The evangelists’ revolt illuminates the tangled web of competing authorities – individual, denominational, indigenous, national and racial – that in extreme situations could be brought to bear on a single mission and how sympathies of resistance might be established between people of colour across national boundaries. Of the many different questions of authority raised in this chapter the most salient is how a rising tide of racial thinking in the late nineteenth century bore on the work of indigenous evangelists in colonial situations. The story of how Fuller responded to these events can be found in the various texts and the letters he wrote.

1 The country now known as Republic of Cameroon was formerly called the Cameroons in English, Cameroun in French and Kamerun in German. Except in quotations the present-day usage of Cameroon is employed in this chapter.
In a technical sense Fuller cannot be termed an indigenous evangelist. However, the prevailing colonial discourse about ‘Natives’ included him and those like him who ‘returned’ to Africa. When tensions arose between colonial authorities and subject peoples these missionaries were often caught in the crossfire and made to see they would never be regarded as quite so reliable as their white fellows. They also seem to have been able to sympathize with their fellow blacks in ways that white missionaries did less frequently. Fuller’s case shows how this worked. He left an account of his life and work, ‘Autobiography of the Rev. J.J. Fuller of Cameroons, West Africa’ (74 typewritten pages), as well as numerous letters and notes. The autobiography was never published but survives in the archives of the Baptist Mission. In the typewritten version Fuller claims the journal he kept in Cameroon was destroyed by white ants. The surviving manuscript was completed after his return to England in 1888 – not long after the mission was handed over to the Basel Evangelical Mission. It covers his early work on Fernando Po, and his time at the trading post of Victoria on the Southwest tip of Cameroon, up to time the territory was transferred to the Germans. Fuller’s surviving papers also contain a series of handwritten ‘recollections’ which are sub-titled ‘from the beginning to 1887’ they only run up to 1876. Unfortunately neither source covers the German takeover and the struggle this initiated between Fuller, his Baptist converts and the newly arrived Basel Missionaries – certainly the most fraught period of his life. Fuller played a crucial role in these conflicts which we can piece together from surviving letters.

Briefly, the letters show that the Baptist Mission Board agreed to hand over their lands and converts to the Lutherans of the Basel Mission (henceforth called Baslers). In 1887 Thomas Baynes, the Secretary of the Board, asks Fuller to see if the chiefs will acknowledge that the Society has ‘rights to the lands they occupy under our purchase from King William.’ This refers to the agreement with the local rulers that the mission had negotiated when they were forced by

---


3 These recollections would seem to be the main source for the typed ‘autobiography,’ though there are sections here not reproduced in the typed version and the page numbering seems to be erratic, making a detailed comparison of the two sources difficult. The pagination of the recollections might lead one to conjecture that a second volume of recollections may have once existed but if so it has not survived.