

Spiritan Magazine

Volume 37
Number 1 *Winter*

Article 12

Winter 2013

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Recommended Citation

Einterz, E. (2013). VICS: The ragtag road-beaters of Cameroon. *Spiritan Magazine*, 37(1). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc/vol37/iss1/12>

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The ragtag road-beaters of Cameroon

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To drive from Kolofata to Maroua, the regional capital of the Far North, you have first to take a 20-mile-long rutted dirt road to a town called Mara. The next 47 miles between Mara and Maroua are paved, but after countless years of neglect, what used to be a road consists mostly of macadam connecting craterous, ragged-rimmed potholes. Tar has broken off in clumps along the edges of the asphalt, and the gravel shoulders have ended, so in many places if you have the misfortune to slip off the road, you slip all the way down a steep embankment.

There is a toll booth between Mara and Maroua, and it costs a dollar to pass, so a round trip costs two dollars, and given the thousands of cars that use the road every week, the Ministry of Transportation cannot be short of cash to make repairs. But the Ministry of Transportation does not do that, so local boys along the road take up the slack.

Each afternoon after school, which is to say after school for those among them who go to school, they tool up with broken buckets and bowls and scraps of sheet metal, and they gather on either side of the road and throw shovelfuls of dirt into the worst of the potholes. To level the lumps they beat the dirt down with stout sticks. From half a mile or more away you know when you are coming up to a group of road-beaters because the air all around them fills with dust and from that far off you can see the gritty cloud hugging the ground.

The boys themselves are clad in rags where clad at all, and

the dust turns them a grayish white from head to toe. When they spot your vehicle in the distance rolling towards them, they make a great show of shoveling for all they're worth, and then as you approach, they stop their labour and begin jumping up and down, waving their arms and shouting: *A hundred francs to fix your road! Please sir! We are working for you! A Tangul bottle please! Look, see! We are helping you here! A hundred francs, sir!*

Tangul is a Cameroonian brand of bottled water, and while the boys would be glad to receive a hundred francs — twenty cents — they would be just as glad if you threw them an empty plastic water bottle from your window. They will fill it with their own water and carry it to school or to the field or pasture or to the forest where they go to hunt small birds with slingshots.

If you throw nothing at all, they sigh and chalk it up to The Way of the World. They retreat, settle back down on their haunches, squint off towards the horizon, watch and wait. Another car or truck or taxi van will appear soon enough, they know, and maybe with that one — or if not that one maybe the one after that — or else the next one again ... some treasure will be theirs.

We feel a fondness for these boys, these ragtag bands of road-beaters, for, like them, we spend our days filling gaps, raising dust, doing our best with whatever we have to level the path and smooth the way. ■