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► AFRICA

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. Located slightly north of the equator, Cameroon (183,567 square miles, or 475,440 square kilometers) is not much larger than California. The north, from Lake Chad to Garoua, is dominated by a dry plain where Sahara winds and hot temperatures are standard from October to May. Cooler winds and rain between June and September allow for farming and grazing. A plateau of 2,000 to 4,000 feet (600–1,200 meters) covers much of central, southern, and eastern Cameroon. Here, dry-season daily heat is relieved at night and by occasional showers. Rains from May to October bring abundant water to the plateau's cities and farms. In wetter grasslands above 4,000 feet (1,200 meters), the November to April dry season is cooler; rains are heavy for several weeks after midyear. Rich volcanic soils provide for agriculture in this area. Mount Cameroon (Mount Po) is an active volcano. The narrow Atlantic coastal lowland is hot and humid all year. Douala's average high is 90°F (32°C). The lowlands support large areas of rubber, banana, cocoa, oil palms, and timber. Logging is depleting forests in the south and east.

History. Bantu tribes inhabited Cameroon's highlands more than 1,500 years ago and began spreading south into Pygmy lands as they cleared forests for new farms. Fulani migrated to the north from western Africa in the 13th century A.D., bringing Islam with them and encountering Hausa already there.

Cameroon's colonial name comes from the prawns (*cameros* in Portuguese) that 15th-century explorers found in the Wouri River. During the colonial era, southern Cameroon supplied the Atlantic slave and commodity trades, while northern peoples participated in the Muslim culture and economy of the Fulani and Hausa south of the Sahara. Germany united the south and north into a colony between 1884 and 1916. Ger-

many's defeat in World War I led to Cameroon's partitioning between France and Britain. The French tightly ruled the east from the capital, Yaoundé. The smaller British area to the west was ruled more loosely from Nigeria.

Anticolonialism grew after 1945, and independence was achieved in French Cameroon in 1960. In 1961, voters in the southern portion of British Cameroon chose to join in a federation with the new republic; those in the north chose to unite with Nigeria. Cameroon's former French and British areas kept separate educational, legal, civil service, and legislative structures until a 1972 referendum adopted a national, one-party system along French lines.

Ahmadou Ahidjo, a northern Muslim, was president from 1960 until his resignation in 1982. The presidency was then filled by his prime minister, Paul Biya, a southern Christian. After resisting a 1984 rebellion designed to reinstate Ahidjo, Biya dismantled the opposition. He submitted to public pressure and allowed the introduction of multiparty politics in 1992, but subsequent elections have been marred by boycotts and allegations of fraud. Biya maintains a firm hold on power, and his party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (RDPC), dominates the National Assembly.

THE PEOPLE

Population. Cameroon's population of 15.7 million is growing at 2.02 percent annually. More than half the people live in rural areas, but cities are growing rapidly. Douala, the center of commerce and industry, is home to more than two million residents. The capital, Yaoundé, hosts more than one million.

Cameroon is often known as "Africa's crossroads" because of its many ethnic groups. The largest groups are the Bamileke

Cameroon

(in the west), Fulani (north), and Beti (south). The Beti are also known as the Pahouin. No single group comprises more than 20 percent of the population, and most comprise less than 1 percent. Cameroon's more than two hundred ethnic groups have widely different backgrounds—from Fulani kingdoms to small bands of Pygmies that live and hunt in southern forests. More typical are the farming and trading central and western peoples (half the population) with independent chiefdoms and rich cultural traditions. On the whole, the ethnic groups respect and tolerate each other; disputes are generally localized.

Language. Cameroon has some 240 languages; nearly 100 have written forms. Cameroonians commonly speak several local languages. French and English are the nation's official languages, and most urban residents can speak and read one of them. University graduates often speak both to some degree. Rural people generally are not fluent in either. French is used primarily in the eight francophone provinces colonized by France. English is common in the two anglophone provinces once governed by Britain.

No local language is used widely enough to have official status. Some languages have regional dominance, such as Fulfulde in the north, Ewondo near the capital, and Douala on the coast. Pidgin English, an ever-evolving tongue with roots in English and other European languages, emerged during colonization to facilitate trade and communication between ethnic groups who could not communicate otherwise. Today it continues to perform this function in Yaoundé (alongside French), as well as in the anglophone provinces and neighboring areas.

Religion. More than half the population is Christian, with about twice as many Catholics as Protestants. About one-fourth is Muslim (mostly Sunni). Most of the rest follow indigenous beliefs. Christians and Muslims often respect and continue to practice some local beliefs. The merging of religions does not create contradictions for believers; they adopt the elements they feel enhance their faith's overall value. Indigenous beliefs are especially evident in death rites, traditional medicine, and family relationships. Fortune-tellers (*ngambe*) are popular and witchcraft (*muyongo*) is still feared.

General Attitudes. Complicated leadership patterns basically center on those with title and rank, either inherited or earned through education or wealth. Leaders often maintain a support base by providing favors to family members, villagers, and those of the same ethnic group or social class. Cameroon is a group-oriented society; everyone has a place in the group and each group has a clear leader. Individualism is not encouraged. When one person benefits from something (such as a high wage), the group expects a share.

Family and friendship ties are strong and obligations run deep. For example, even distant relatives or "junior" siblings (a half sibling or someone from the village) can expect a family to house and feed them, regardless of the hardship it might cause. Guests cannot be asked to leave except in rare cases. The practice is accepted because the host family assumes it will someday benefit from the same network. Deep, complex bonds also exist between fellow students or local residents of the same sex and age. These bonds mean that service, respect, and cooperation usually come before personal interest. Social change is disrupting this system, but it remains important.

Personal Appearance. Cameroonians consider a clean, well-groomed appearance and fashionable dress the marks of good character. All but the very poor have formal clothing for special occasions. Muslim men in the north usually wear the *boubou*, an embroidered flowing robe. In western grasslands,

men wear vibrant multicolored robes and matching headwear for ceremonies; beads, certain designs, shells, feathers, porcupine quills, and ivory often indicate particular royal or social status. These men otherwise wear modest Western clothing, especially in urban areas.

Women wear a colorful *pagne* (a wraparound dress; *rapa* in Pidgin) around their waist with a matching blouse. A woman might wear more than one *pagne*, either as a head covering or as an overskirt to cover work clothes while in public. Muslim women cover their heads outside of home, often wear a lot of jewelry, and color their hands and feet with patterns using henna (a plant dye). More intricate designs are drawn on their legs and arms for special occasions, such as weddings. Women might apply rich oils to their skin for a glossy appearance. People strive to keep feet clean; men prefer shoes to sandals.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings. Men take handshakes seriously and use them to greet friends or even coworkers they see every day. In francophone areas, a brief handshake is preferred. Family or close friends may also brush alternate cheeks while they "kiss the air." In anglophone provinces, a slightly firmer handshake is most common. If one's hand is dirty, one offers the wrist. Hugs are reserved for family and close friends. Close male friends, as well as young people of the same age and gender, snap the middle finger and thumb while pulling the hands away from a handshake. Most Cameroonians recognize seniority (defined by gender, age, or prestige) by bowing the head or touching the right arm with the left hand during a handshake. To show special respect, a man might bow from the waist (women curtsy); in the north, women may kneel. One avoids eye contact with respected individuals but does not turn one's back to them. People do not touch or approach traditional royalty until they are told how to act.

Formal greetings include *Good morning* (*Bonjour* in francophone areas) and *Good afternoon* (*Bonsoir*). Local phrases vary widely but are followed by inquiries about family welfare. A person responds to the informal greeting of *Ha na?* (Pidgin for "How are you?") with *Normal* (Fine) or *Fine* (Great). In Fulfulde, people ask *Jam na?* (How are you?) and respond *Jam* (fine). In Mungaka (spoken near the city of Bamenda), the morning question is *Oo la ndi?* (Will you still sleep?) and the answer is *Oo sat ni?* (Have you arisen?).

Since one's place in society is more important than one's name, Cameroonians address others of seniority by title. Even younger siblings use titles for older siblings. Peers might use nicknames that reflect a person's role in a group. Professionals and officials are always called by their formal titles.

Gestures. Cameroonians use the right hand for passing an object, greeting, or eating. A person who uses the left accidentally or out of necessity apologizes. One points with head gestures or by puckering the lips. Legs may be crossed at the ankles but not the knees and not in front of those with higher authority. In some areas, women do not cross their legs in front of men. For all, it is important to keep the soles of the feet from pointing at others. A quick head nod indicates agreement. Nodding up quickly and audibly taking in breath means "yes" and shrugging means "no." Cameroonians make clicking sounds with the tongue to indicate agreement or astonishment. People often display pleasure by dancing. Grief may be shown by placing the hand on one's opposite shoulder and bowing the head, or by resting hands on top of the head (one hand on top of the other). People beckon by waving all fingers with the

palm down. A hand extended and cupped upward is a request that something be shared. Public displays of affection are not acceptable, but peers of the same gender may hold hands or arms while talking.

Visiting. Cameroonians enjoy visiting, especially on Fridays after mosque or Sundays after church. Social visits are casual and relaxed, except in more conservative homes where rank and gender distinctions are important. In such homes, women and children rarely appear; if they do, they are not introduced. Unannounced visits are common, although strangers are expected to arrange visits in advance. One greets each individual at a small gathering and offers a general greeting to larger groups. Hosts need not stay the entire time with guests, who are content to sit long periods without conversation.

Hosts offer guests something to eat and drink, even if they have to send a child out to buy something. Visitors who drop by during a meal are asked to join in. Invited friends might bring food or drink as a gift. Food is not acceptable from others because it may be interpreted as questioning the host's means or hospitality, but visitors can present other gifts. Guests offer gifts for children through the parents. Good hosts will accompany their guests a distance from the home or send a companion along if it is after dark. One removes street shoes before entering a Muslim home. Business matters are not discussed during social visits. Northern Muslims show deference to a chief by removing their shoes about 100 yards away before visiting. Foreigners and government officials, considered on the same level as chiefs, do not remove their shoes.

Eating. Cameroonians eat the main meal in the evening. Food is not taken for granted, so formal meals are often blessed, and elders are served first. Rural women eat by the cooking fire with younger children, not with the men or older boys; women also serve the meal.

Diners wash their hands in a common bowl before and after eating. Most people eat with the right hand and Muslims do so from communal bowls. Bottles are opened in the drinker's view; the host leaves the cap loose and the guest pours. A guest must taste offered food; smelling it first is an insult. Satiated guests at least eat a small portion and then say they have eaten recently. In many areas, not being hungry is considered being sick, so guests generally are expected to eat plenty. Cameroonians would rather share a meal and eat less than eat alone. On entering small restaurants, diners wish others *Bon appétit* (Good appetite). They leave money on the table after eating.

LIFESTYLE

Family. Rural families often have as many as 10 children. Urban families are smaller. Young children are cared for by their mothers until weaned. At that point, older female siblings and relatives share in raising them. Fathers become more involved with their sons regarding career choices, marriage, and property issues. Often, a child is raised by rural grandparents, especially if the parents work in the city. By age 10, children are farming, herding, or doing domestic work. Cousins may be as close as siblings but birth order and degree of relatedness are not forgotten. The elderly receive basic needs and affection within the family compound. Cameroonians remember ancestors by drinking in their honor after pouring some of their drink on the ground.

Men raise cash crops and may hunt or work for wages; women farm food crops. Men are expected to provide for their families what their wives cannot produce on the farm. Women are expected to be fertile, keep a clean house, cook well, and

raise respectful children. A woman can be sent back to her family by an unsatisfied husband. Urban women are more likely to get an education and enter the job market.

Dating and Marriage. Marriage is a highly regarded status to which nearly all Cameroonians aspire, but it is often viewed more as a social contract than an affectionate relationship. Arranged marriages may involve months or years of negotiations that create obligations after marriage for relatives on both sides, but couples can also meet on their own. Women marry on average by age 20, men by 27, though the average is younger in rural areas and older in cities.

Couples might engage in one or more weddings (traditional, civil, and religious), depending on their social situation. A civil union may come first, followed some years later by religious and/or traditional ceremonies. These are delayed most often by the high bride-price a groom must pay his bride's family for raising her; he can pay in cash or in kind (cattle, food).

Men may have many girlfriends in addition to one or more wives. Civil law allows as many as four wives, but some ethnic groups allow for many more (especially among royalty). Urban men are less likely to have multiple wives. Women are raised to be mothers more than wives. Their extended family will help provide for their children if they are not married.

Diet. Staple foods vary by region but include corn, millet, cassava, groundnuts (peanuts), yams, rice, potatoes, and plantains. *Fufu*, a common dish, is a stiff paste made by boiling flour (corn, millet, cassava, or rice). *Garri* is grated cassava that is dried over a fire until light and flaky. Meat is a luxury for villagers. Northern people sometimes eat beef, lamb, goat, and chicken. *Bush meat* (snake, monkey, porcupine, etc.) is a delicacy in the south. Sauces made from fish, meat, or vegetables are often cooked in palm, cottonseed, or peanut oil and seasoned with hot peppers. An urban breakfast might include tea or coffee, fruit, and bread. Rural breakfasts consist mostly of leftovers from the previous evening. Energy snacks and street foods include raw sugarcane, boiled eggs, roasted corn, fresh fruit, and nuts. Beer is popular on social occasions, but water is the main drink in the home. Muslims usually prefer tea to coffee.

Recreation. Team sports and individual athletics are sponsored by companies and urban social clubs. Soccer is the most popular sport. Inter-village soccer tournaments are organized during the months when school is out (June, July, August). Men and women in schools and cities play team handball, volleyball, and basketball. A marathon traditionally is run up and down Mount Cameroon (13,450 feet, or 4,100 meters) each year. Traditional board games played with seeds or pebbles are popular. Savings societies sponsor monthly feasts that provide recreation for many adults. Urban workers and students use any vacation time to return to their native villages. Movies, videos, and television are popular in cities. In rural areas, people pay a small admission fee to watch videos at a local "video-club" consisting of a television and VCR in an outdoor courtyard. Live music, dances, radios, and portable cassette players are popular throughout the country.

The Arts. Modern Cameroonian music is a fusion of world influences and indigenous styles such as *makossa* and *bikutsi*. Many Cameroonian musicians have gained international popularity. Traditional musical instruments include drums and lutes made from hollowed gourds and wood. Statues and relief carvings portray scenes from local oral literature. Ritual masks are still produced, with styles varying by region. Cameroon hosts several cultural and arts organizations.

Cameroon

Holidays. Cameroon's national holidays include New Year's Day, Youth Day (11 Feb.), Labor Day (1 May), and Unification Day (20 May). Unification Day marks the 1972 union of the French and British zones. Some religious holidays have national recognition, including Easter, Assumption (15 Aug.), and Christmas. For Muslims, the most important holidays include *Fête du Ramadan* (Ramadan feast) at the end of the holy month of fasting, and the *Fête de Mouton* (lamb feast) held 40 days later in honor of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. At the *Fête du Ramadan*, children get new clothing and sweets. Many villages also have annual festivals or dances.

Commerce. The cash economy dominates in urban areas, but bartering and payment-in-kind still exist in rural areas. Most retailing is done curbside, from market stands, in small shops, or out of converted cargo containers. Douala and Yaoundé have the largest department stores. Multinational banks dominate trade and finance, but credit unions handle local savings and investments. People often form or join *tontines* (*njangis* in anglophone provinces)—savings societies with as many as 20 members (men and/or women). Members pool their capital, provide loans to each other, and sponsor social activities. Doing business is considered a delicate matter, and taking one's time is essential. Stores are usually open from 7:30 or 8 a.m. to 4 or 5 p.m. In francophone areas, businesses close for lunch at noon or 12:30 and reopen at 2:00 p.m. Street vendors do business late into the evening. Urban stores commonly close on Saturday afternoon and Sunday, except in the north.

SOCIETY

Government. Cameroon is a unitary republic. The president (currently Paul Biya) is chief of state and appoints a prime minister (currently Peter Mafany Musonge) as head of government. Several parties are represented in the 180-seat National Assembly; members are elected to five-year terms. The voting age is 20. Local courts for domestic and land law are maintained by hereditary kings in the north and west and appointed chiefs elsewhere. These rulers enjoy strong loyalty among many ethnic groups and are consulted about national politics. Each of the nation's 10 provinces is led by a governor, and each province is divided into several divisions and sub-divisions led by prefects and mayors. Many rural people prefer to consult a village chief rather than take matters to a government official.

Economy. Economic prosperity depends largely on oil, coffee, and cocoa prices. Because oil reserves may run out in the future, Cameroon is trying to diversify its economy. Agriculture employs a majority of the labor force in either growing or processing food. Cash crops include coffee, cocoa, cotton, rubber, and timber. Major crops specific to the Cameroon's north include corn and onions; in the south, manioc and pineapples are key products. The south has a better-developed infrastructure than the north and has greater access to products and services. Economic growth has been inhibited by poor management and corruption. Cameroon uses the currency common to francophone African countries, the *CFA franc* (XAF).

Transportation and Communications. Paved roads connect major cities, but many areas are isolated. Unpaved roads are often impassable in the rainy season. Vans or sedans provide

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	142 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women	114 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$1,680
Adult literacy rate	80 percent (male); 65 (female)
Infant mortality rate	70 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	47 (male); 49 (female)

local public transportation. Taxis are available in cities. Many people travel by foot, bicycle, or motorcycle taxi. The domestic airline connects five cities. Telephones are concentrated in large urban areas. Mail service is unreliable, but "hand mail" passes via taxi drivers to shops where mail can be retrieved. Families can announce funerals and celebrations on the radio. Even more effective is *radio trottoir* (pavement radio), a system of verbal relays that passes news and information with great speed.

Education. The education system remains divided between French and English models, though it is governed by one government ministry. Rural children enter school knowing neither French nor English, while urban children know at least one of them. Primary school enrollment is higher in the south than the north. More boys than girls actually finish school. Secondary school enrollment is low due to fees, exam failures, space shortages, and parental choice. Muslim children memorize *Qur'an* (Koran) passages at evening *Qur'anic* schools. There is a full university in Yaoundé and smaller universities in four other cities. Informal education and apprenticeships provide vital vocational skills.

Health. Cameroon lacks an adequate healthcare system. Hospitals, while able to provide emergency services, often cannot provide basic (especially long-term) care. Patients' families must supply food, medicine, and some care. Still, a rural health program has helped decrease the infant mortality rate and increase life expectancy. Villages often have local clinics staffed by nurses. Although government vaccination campaigns have targeted polio and measles, Cameroonians face a full range of diseases, including malaria, cholera, and AIDS.

AT A GLANCE

Events and Trends.

- In January 2004, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan met with Cameroon's President Biya and Nigeria's President Olusegun Obasanjo to help resolve the two nations' border dispute. Nigeria has refused to accept a section of a 2002 ruling by the International Court of Justice that granted the oil-rich Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon.
- Legislative elections in 2002 saw President Biya's RDPC win 133 of 180 seats in the National Assembly, significantly increasing the RDPC majority. The main opposition party, the Social Democratic Front, won 21 seats. It claimed that vote-rigging had been widespread.

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