



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Located slightly north of the equator, Cameroon (183,568 square miles, or 475,440 square kilometers) is slightly smaller than Spain and not much larger than the U.S. state of 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, daytime heat during the dry season 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 AD, bringing

Islam with them and encountering Hausa already there.

Cameroon's colonial name comes from the *cameros* (prawns) 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. Between 1884 and 1916, Germany united the south and north into a colony. Germany'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 the 1992 elections. He won the presidential poll that year and was reelected to seven-year terms in 1997 and 2004, though these elections were marred by opposition party boycotts and allegations of fraud. In 2008, an amendment to the constitution allowed Biya to run for and win another term in

2011. Although opposition groups called 2011 election results fraudulent, Biya maintains a firm hold on power. His party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (RDPC), dominates the National Assembly.

In 2006, Cameroon and Nigeria agreed to end their decades-old border dispute over the Bakassi Peninsula in the Gulf of Guinea. In compliance with a ruling by the International Court of Justice, Nigeria pulled the last of its troops from the peninsula and formally handed the region over to Cameroon in 2008. Cameroon's victory in the dispute gives it access to potentially huge oil deposits believed to exist in the region.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Cameroon's population of 19.7 million is growing by 2.1 percent annually. Douala, the center of commerce and industry, is home to almost 2 million residents. The capital, Yaoundé, hosts more than 1.6 million.

Cameroon is often known as “Africa's crossroads” and “Africa in miniature” because of its many ethnic groups. The largest groups are the Bamileke (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; 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. School is taught in either French or English; the non-dominant language is taught as a subject. Rural children enter school knowing neither of these languages, while urban children know at least one of them.

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), Douala, and in the anglophone provinces and neighboring areas.

Religion

About 40 percent of the population is Christian, with about twice as many Catholics as Protestants. About 20 percent is Muslim (mostly Sunni). Another 40 percent follows indigenous beliefs.

Many people consult witchdoctors for healing and relief from evil spirits. It is also widely believed that black magic can be used to attract wealth and success. Fortune-tellers (called *ngambe men* and *ngambe women*) are popular, and witchcraft (*muyongo*) is feared. Christians and Muslims often respect and practice some indigenous beliefs, especially in connection with death rites, traditional medicine, and family relationships. The merging of religions does not create contradictions for believers; they adopt the elements they feel enhance their faith's overall value.

General Attitudes

Complicated leadership patterns center on those with title and rank, either inherited or earned through education or wealth. Nepotism is common, and many jobs are given to family members rather than the person most qualified for the job. 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. Some groups believe that a wealthy person who fails to share his wealth can be cursed by a jealous family member.

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. The practice is accepted because the host family assumes it will someday benefit from the same network. Guests can be asked to leave only in rare cases. 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 gradually disrupting this system, but it remains important.

Personal Appearance

Cameroonians consider a clean, well-groomed appearance and fashionable dress marks of good character. All but the very poor have formal clothing for special occasions. In recent years, secondhand clothing imported from Europe has brought more options and reduced the cost of clothes. 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, shells, feathers, porcupine quills, ivory, and certain fabric designs often indicate particular royal or social status. Otherwise, these men wear modest Western clothing, particularly in urban areas. Some tribes practice ritual scarring, making distinctive cuts on the face.

Women enjoy clothing with embellishments such as lace,

embroidery, appliqué, or designer branding. The most common attire is a colorful *pagne* (a wraparound dress; *rapa* in Pidgin) around the 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. In public, Muslim women and some Christian women cover their heads with headscarves, which fall loosely over the sides of the head and down the back. Headscarves are often chosen to match the wearer's outfit and may be made from a variety of fabrics, such as silk or lace. Muslim women may also wear large amounts of jewelry and decorate 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 their feet clean, and women nearly always paint their nails. Women often prefer sandals, while men prefer closed-toe shoes. Children usually wear Western-style clothing. In rural areas and poor communities, toddlers often wear only a pair of shorts most of time.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Men take handshakes seriously and use them to greet friends or even coworkers they see every day. When joining a group, men often shake hands with each individual. In francophone areas, a brief handshake is preferred. 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. Family or close friends may also brush alternate cheeks while they "kiss the air." 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, while a woman might 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 greeting *Oo la ndi?* (Will you still sleep?) is used in the morning; the answer is *Oo sat ni?* (Have you arisen?).

The importance of one's place in society is reflected in the tendency to address others of seniority by title instead of name. First names are only used with close friends and people younger or close to the same age and status. In fact, it is considered rude to address someone of higher status or age by name. Usually older people and people in authority are

referred to by last name preceded by *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, or *Madame*. Even younger siblings use titles for older siblings, often adding "brother" or "sister" before the first name. Peers might use nicknames that reflect a person's role in a group. Professionals and officials are always called by their formal titles. For example, the director of a company is often referred to as *Monsieur le Directeur* (Mr. Director). Older men and women are often addressed using the name of one of their children, usually the eldest. For example, the father and mother of Njoh would be called *Papa Njoh* and *Mani Njoh*, respectively.

Familial titles are common regardless of whether or not people are related. Older people may be called *ma* or *pa*, followed by the first name. A person might also refer to someone of their parents' age as *auntie* or *uncle* followed by the first name.

Gestures

Cameroonians use the right hand for greeting, eating, and passing objects. 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 upwards quickly and audibly taking in breath means "yes," and shrugging and shaking the head side to side means "no." Cameroonians make clicking sounds with the tongue to indicate agreement or astonishment. People often display pleasure by dancing spontaneously. 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 with the palm facing upward is a request that something be shared. A hand extended and cupped upward indicates that someone is stingy. Public displays of affection are not acceptable, but peers of the same gender may hold hands or arms while talking.

Visiting

Cameroonians enjoy visiting family and friends, 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 during the visit; 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. Business matters are not discussed during social visits.

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 visitors without a close relationship to the hosts because the food may be interpreted as questioning the hosts' means or

hospitality; these 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. 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. Formal meals are often blessed. Food is not taken for granted and not wasted. 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 to assure the person that the contents are pure; the host leaves the cap loose, and the guest pours. A guest must taste offered food; smelling it first is an insult. Satiated guests eat at least a small portion and must explain that 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 the money on the table after eating.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Families in Cameroon are generally large, consisting of a husband, one or more wives, and children. As men marry, each builds a home within or near his family's compound. Most men choose to build outside the family compound, sometimes moving into the compound after their parents pass away. Children are considered a sign of wealth. Rural families have as many as 10 children; urban families are typically smaller.

In Cameroon, while the nuclear family is important in maintaining the family structure, the distinction between nuclear and extended family is less pronounced than in many Western cultures. The extended family acts as an important social safety net in times of need. Family members help one another and can expect help in return when needed. Younger family members are expected to show respect and deference to older family members. When dividing up food, land, and other resources, the older family members pick first. Cousins may be as close as siblings (and may even be referred to as siblings) but birth order and degree of relatedness are not forgotten. Oftentimes, a person moves in with extended family in another area for financial reasons, to attend school, or to assist the family.

In more traditional families and rural areas, men are responsible for providing for the family economically. Women are expected to bear children, keep a clean house,

cook well, and raise respectful children. In polygamous families, wives take turns cooking for the entire family. The husband typically spends the night with the wife who cooked for him. Men raise cash crops, hunt, or work for wages. Women may contribute by growing food for the family and selling any surplus. Men are expected to provide what their wives cannot produce on the farm. While women are primarily responsible for caring for children, a growing number of urban men help with childcare. Fathers play a more prominent role in their children's lives as they grow older. They especially provide input on their sons' careers, marriages, and property decisions. In more Westernized circles, gender roles are less rigidly defined and men generally have one wife. In these families, it is more likely for both husband and wife to work outside the home, share responsibilities for children, and make decisions together.

While definition of gender roles is not as rigid as it once was, many families still strive to maintain the appearance of these roles. Today, a growing number of women work outside the home to help support the family, but the man is still referred to as the main wage earner. While many couples make decisions together, their discussions generally take place in private and the man maintains the appearance of sole leadership.

Women often run small businesses, such as market stalls, tailoring shops, food stalls, and babysitting services. A growing number of women participate in adult literacy programs, vocational training, and higher education. Urban women are more likely to be educated and to be formally employed than their rural counterparts. In recent years, more women have held important posts in business and government. Despite changes in the roles of women in Cameroonian society, they remain marginalized in many aspects of society, particularly in rural areas. For example, by both traditional custom and Cameroonian law, women are unable to own land, and fewer girls than boys are enrolled in school.

The elderly are treated with respect in society and within the family. They live in the family compound, where they are cared for by their children and grandchildren. The elderly are considered a source of wisdom and experience. Elders play an important role in many traditional ceremonies, such as the ceremony during which a dowry is paid. Today, many young people place less emphasis on the authority of older family members, which sometimes leads to conflicts within families. Cameroonians remember, express gratitude to, and seek support from their ancestors by drinking in their honor after pouring some of their drink on the ground. This action symbolizes sharing the drink with the ancestors who have died.

Young children are cared for by their mothers until weaned. At that point, older sisters or female members of the extended family help raise the child. In urban areas, families may have live-in nannies to assist with the children. Children may also be raised by extended family members to provide additional household help or farm labor or if their parents migrate in search of employment. Children take on household responsibilities around age five. As they grow, they are given more difficult chores. Children are often responsible for

household chores, like fetching water, washing dishes, and gathering firewood.

Housing

In northern rural areas, most families live in a *sarre* (compound), a cluster of small buildings surrounded by a mud-brick wall, with a communal courtyard in the middle. Each building serves as a bedroom and may be either circular or square. In the south, it is more common for the compound to contain one larger, main house and a few smaller buildings to house grown sons, extended relatives, and wives in polygamous families. The courtyard serves as a play area for children, a venue for ceremonies, a place to relax in the evening, and a garden.

The buildings may be made from a combination of mud bricks, wooden planks, thatch, and natural materials. Wealthier families may stucco and whitewash their homes and the walls of their compounds. The wealthiest build their homes from concrete, often using funds sent by a child working abroad or in an urban area. Roofs may be conical and made of thatched straw and branches. These roofs are built on the ground and then lifted onto the buildings. A growing number of roofs are made from corrugated metal.

In cities, homes can be structures within a compound (similar to those in rural areas, but usually made of cement) or apartments in multi-storey buildings. The style and amenities in urban homes vary greatly depending on the families' income, education, and taste. Urban neighborhoods are often a patchwork of modern structures and traditional buildings. Throughout the country, the wealthy build their homes from modern materials, often in the style of homes in the United States or Europe.

Electricity is more widely available in cities and is quickly spreading to rural areas, though it is often unaffordable. In rural areas without electricity, a wealthy family's home may be powered entirely by generators. Most urban residents have indoor plumbing. Nearly all rural homes rely on natural water sources (usually streams) or communal taps and usually have a pit latrine located about 30 feet (9 meters) from the houses. Cooking is usually done outside on an open fire built between three stones, on top of which the cooking pot is set.

In polygamous households, each wife has a room or building within the family compound, which she shares with her daughters and young sons. Each wife may also have her own kitchen. The husband and older boys have their own room.

Homes are usually sparsely furnished. Two to three children may share a bed. Mattresses may be locally made and are usually stuffed with grass. Most people decorate their walls with family pictures. Christians may decorate with crucifixes and religious art.

Rural homes are generally built on ancestral land that has been in the owner's family for generations. When building a home on such land, people generally rely on family members to help with the construction. In urban areas, the land must usually be purchased, so home ownership is beyond the reach of many. Mortgages are available to people with reliable incomes, which many people lack. Instead, many people purchase homes using *tontines* or *djangis* (informal loans

given by savings societies, groups of people who pool money annually, with one member of the group receiving a loan each month).

Dating and Marriage

Marriages in Cameroon may be arranged by the couple's families or by the couple. In more traditional families and in rural areas, marriages are usually arranged. The potential groom's parents generally initiate negotiations with a young woman's family after careful research. When deciding on a potential daughter-in-law, parents take into account the woman's family's reputation and social standing. The younger generation, particularly in urban areas, more often select their own spouses. Couples may meet at school, at church, at social activities (such as parties or traditional events), or at the market. When dating, people may go to restaurants, bars, clubs, and movie theatres. Before becoming engaged, a couple seeks their families' approval. If they approve, representatives from both families direct the couple to seal their engagement by sharing a glass of wine and a kola nut. If the families disapprove, the couple usually breaks their engagement rather than facing their families' disapproval. In fact, in order to register their marriage with the government, a couple must confirm that they have received their family's approval. More determined couples may go forward with the marriage and lie to register their marriage, but they may be disowned by their families. Many couples choose to avoid marriage and payment of the dowry by simply moving in together. A recent trend among educated Cameroonians is the exchange of engagement rings. Women marry on average by age 20, men by 27. The average age is younger in rural areas and older in cities.

Whether arranged or not, marriages may involve months or years of negotiations over the dowry payment, which is often paid over time and is therefore considered a long-term financial commitment between the two families. The groom's family provides cash and goods to specific members of the bride's family who were involved in her upbringing. Parents, grandparents, uncles, and aunts may all be included in the dowry. The amount can be as high as the equivalent of several thousand U.S. dollars and is set according to the family's status, ethnic group, and level of literacy and to the perceived value of the bride. The dowry may also contain goods such as salt, livestock, palm oil, clothing, and processed food.

In devout Christian families and traditional Fulani and Bamileke families, pregnancy outside of marriage brings shame to the family. The unwed mother is seen as promiscuous and will find it difficult to marry later. For this reason, the couple is often pressured to marry before the child is born. Among other groups, attitudes toward sexual relationships are more relaxed. Pregnancy before marriage is accepted and may be seen as a good indication of a woman's fertility and ability to bear more children in the future. A woman's parents often raise the child as their own if the mother is not ready for the responsibility.

Couples might have one or more weddings (civil, traditional, or religious), depending on their social and financial situation. A traditional wedding is usually held first and may or may not be followed some years later by a civil or

religious ceremony. Additional weddings are delayed most often by the high dowry a groom must pay and by the need to save up for wedding festivities. In order to be considered legal, a civil wedding must be held. However, most Cameroonians see little value in legal marriage, so not all marriages include a civil ceremony. For a traditional wedding, the groom's family takes the bride from her home to the groom's family compound for a party with singing, dancing, and food.

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. Many women are raised to place more emphasis on the children than on their marriage. Love is more often expressed through actions than through words or public displays of affection. For example, a man may show love to his wife by being faithful, providing for the family financially, splitting the wood for cooking, or responding to the needs of the children. A woman may express affection for her husband by cooking his favorite meal, helping him with farm chores, or warming water for his bath.

Civil law allows a man to have as many as four wives, but some ethnic groups allow for many more (especially among royalty). Polygamy is less common in urban areas than in rural areas. Throughout the country, polygamy is decreasing due to the high cost of living and the expense of paying a dowry to each wife's family. Infidelity is common, and men may have many girlfriends in addition to one or more wives. Divorce is rare and considerable stigma is associated with divorcées.

Life Cycle

Traditional rites associated with life events vary according to religious and tribal customs. These practices are more emphasized in rural settings and by people who follow traditional religions and are less common among urban, educated, and Christian families.

Among most ethnic groups, pregnancy is associated with various traditions, some of which involve not only the expectant mother but the father as well. Pregnant women do not openly acknowledge their pregnancy until it is visible, out of fear that the child will be harmed by witchcraft and black magic. Couples expecting a child are especially strict about moral behavior. For example, they avoid quarreling with one another during the pregnancy. They also avoid attending funerals, because the spirits of the dead are believed to bewitch unborn children. Couples may also consult a clairvoyant to determine the gender of the baby and to protect the child from malevolent spirits. Among Bantu ethnic groups, pregnant women and their partners avoid eating specific foods, such as tubers, bananas, cassava leaves, and the meat of certain animals. These foods are believed to contain undesirable qualities (such as ugliness or roughness of the skin) that may be transferred to the child. Future parents are encouraged to eat sticky foods (such as okra, mango soup, and a thick spicy soup called *nkwi*), which are believed to facilitate delivery.

Rituals and ceremonies after birth traditionally included the burial of the placenta and the umbilical cord, which were

believed to connect the baby to the land of his patrilineal ancestors. People living away from their home village may dry the umbilical cord and then mail it to the man's parents to bury. In many families, the grandmother ties a leather pouch filled with herbs and tree bark around the baby's waist. The baby will wear this pouch, which is intended to ward off sickness and death, throughout his or her childhood. In recent years, fewer families observe these traditions. In some regions, women who give birth to twins are highly revered and twins are believed to have special powers.

Traditions associated with the naming of a child vary widely across ethnicities and religions. Most Cameroonians are given at least one name that is tied to their ethnic roots, traditional leadership, or family heritage. They may also be given a more Westernized first name. Muslims usually give their children names related to Islam. In predominantly Muslim areas, babies are forbidden from leaving their mother's room for one week after birth. When the week is up, a naming ceremony takes place, starting at dawn and lasting the entire day. The father announces the name and brings the child into the open. Guests bring gifts for the baby and mother and stay to eat and talk.

People are considered adults when they marry and move into their own home. It is not uncommon for children to live with their parents well into their thirties, until they find stable employment or marry and establish a home of their own. Unmarried adult children are expected to contribute to household needs in much the same way as other adults in the household, but they are traditionally considered children as long as they live with their parents. Rite-of-passage ceremonies were more widely practiced in the past than they are today. The most honored ritual associated with the transition from childhood to adulthood is the *So*, practiced among the Beti, during which young men camp in the jungle for about a year. During this time, they perform military exercises, learn traditional dances, undertake physical challenges, and participate in large-scale hunting trips to test their courage. When they return, they are considered men.

When a Muslim dies, the body is buried quickly in the family compound. Mourning takes place for three days and three nights, during which time people come to pay their respects to the family. Among most other groups, a death is immediately followed by a mourning period of 7 to 10 days. During this time, mourners visit the family compound to express their condolences. This mourning period is often marked by loud crying and all-night vigils. Extended family and friends bring food for those who come to pay their respects and mourn with the family. After the mourning period, the deceased is buried, usually within the family compound.

Later, the family holds a *cry die*, a funeral ceremony that celebrates the life of the loved one and often involves music, dancing, and food. A *cry die* can be held any time after the death; it is not uncommon for it to take place as long as 10 or 20 years after the death. The ceremony is often delayed for financial reasons or to wait for a close family member to return from abroad. Families may hold many ceremonies for a single person, depending on how many times they can afford to organize one. They may also hold a single ceremony for

many deceased relatives. Ceremonies are generally open to anyone who knew the deceased, no matter how casually.

Most ethnic groups have rituals associated with the death of a spouse. Women are expected to perform more elaborate rituals than men. When a woman's husband dies, she may shave her head, be isolated for a period varying from a week to a year, refrain from shaking hands, or be smeared with palm oil. After the death of a wife, the husband may perform rituals such as shaving his beard and head, remaining indoors until the burial, sleeping on a mat, or wearing a mourning color (often black) for as long as a year.

Diet

Staple foods vary by region but include corn, millet, cassava, groundnuts (peanuts), potatoes, plantains, yams, and rice. *Fufu*, a common dish, is a stiff paste made by stirring flour (corn, millet, cassava, or rice) into water and boiling. *Garri* is grated cassava that is dried over a fire until light and flaky. Meat is a luxury for villagers. Northern Cameroonians 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. Snacks and street foods include raw sugarcane, boiled eggs, roasted corn, 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

Soccer is the most popular sport. People in urban areas may play on soccer fields, but in rural areas people often play in any open space available, such as farmland, schoolyards, or vacant lots. Goals may be fashioned out of sticks, rocks, or other available materials. Inter-village soccer tournaments are organized during the months when school is out (June, July, and August). Handball, volleyball, and basketball are also popular. People throughout the country participate in outdoor activities, which vary according to the landscape. People who live near bodies of water enjoy swimming. In mountainous areas, many people go on hikes. A marathon is run up and down Mount Cameroon each year.

Traditional board games played with seeds or pebbles are common. One of the most popular is *songo*, in which players try to capture their opponent's pieces. *Songo* is played throughout West Africa, and players come to Cameroon each year for the *Songo* World Championship.

Savings societies sponsor monthly feasts that provide recreation for adults. Christians participate in activities at their church, such as choirs and religious education classes. In their free time, women may join traditional dance groups, visit friends and relatives, or play cards. Men enjoy playing games (such as *songo*, chess, cards, and Monopoly), dancing, socializing in bars, and playing and watching soccer. Young people socialize, dance at discotheques, and listen to music.

Movies, videos, arcades, and television are popular in cities. People especially enjoy television shows from the United States, Mexico, and Brazil. In rural areas, people pay a

small admission fee to watch videos at a local "video-club" consisting of a television and DVD player in an outdoor courtyard. Live music, dances, radios, and portable cassette players are popular throughout the country. Few Cameroonians take vacations. Urban workers and students use any vacation time to return to their home villages.

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. Music varies from one ethnic group to another, and one style of music may be adapted by different groups. For example, the Njang style of music is common in many parts of the country and varies slightly from group to group. Among the Nso it is called Njang of Nso, while among the Kom it is Njang of Kom.

Visual art also varies according to ethnic group. Many styles are linked to royalty, as works of art were traditionally commissioned mainly to decorate royal palaces. Statues and relief carvings portray scenes from local oral literature. Ritual masks are still produced, with styles varying by region.

Holidays

National holidays include New Year's Day, Youth Day (11 Feb.), Labor Day (1 May), and National Day (20 May). Some religious holidays have national recognition, including Easter, Assumption (15 Aug.), Christmas, and the Muslim holidays *Fête du Ramadan* (Ramadan feast) and *Tabaski* (also called *Fête de Mouton* and *Eid al-Adha*).

Youth Day celebrates the importance of young people in nation-building and commemorates the 1961 referendum that led to the formation of modern-day Cameroon. The holiday is commemorated with official parades and speeches. Young people may also celebrate by going to movies, discotheques, concerts, and restaurants. International Women's Day (8 Mar.) is not an official holiday but has become an important public event in recent years. Many employers give women the day off. Women wear special fabrics made especially for the holiday, and women's groups organize parades.

National Day marks the 1972 union of the French and British zones. It is celebrated with parades and a speech by the president. In the evening, people may attend parties at nightclubs and bars, go to the movies, attend concerts, or watch fireworks.

Christmas is widely celebrated by both Christians and non-Christians. People celebrate with special meals, often including rice, beef, and fish. Family members exchange gifts, often new clothing and shoes. Christians attend church services on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

For Muslims, the most important holidays are *Fête du Ramadan*, at the end of the holy month of fasting, and *Tabaski*, held 40 days later in honor of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. Celebrations for each day share many similarities. Women decorate their hands and feet with henna on the eve of each holiday. The day begins with morning prayers at the mosque and in public squares. On *Tabaski*, the *imam* (religious leader) slaughters a ram directly after the

prayers. Each household also slaughters an animal for the celebratory feasts. At the *Fête du Ramadan*, children get new clothing and sweets. An important part of both holidays is *satika*, the act of sharing with strangers and the needy. People gather at mosques to give and receive food and drinks.

In addition to national and religious holidays, there are many regional and tribal celebrations. Most celebrations include modern and traditional music and handicraft exhibitions. These events bring together people of similar backgrounds and are important times for relatives and friends to reunite and catch up. The Ngondo festival is put on each year, in early December, by the Sawa people of Douala and includes other groups that share common ancestry. Festivities include canoeing contests, fashion shows, and the election of Miss Ngondo. The celebration culminates with a message from the ancestors collected from the Wouri River by a person considered to have supernatural powers. The message usually relates to the well-being of the community, including warnings about threats and problems affecting social harmony. The Nyem Nyem Festival is celebrated in January in the Adamaoua region. Celebrations commemorate the Nyem Nyem people's ancestors' resistance against German colonization. The Medumba celebration assembles all Medumba speakers to celebrate the language and the cultural values it carries. Every other December, the Bamoun in western Cameroon hold the Nguong celebration, which promotes the group's cultural diversity and history.

SOCIETY

Government

The president (currently Paul Biya) is head of state and appoints a prime minister (currently Philemon Yang) 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. Many rural people prefer to consult a village chief rather than take matters to a local government official.

Economy

Economic prosperity depends largely on oil, coffee, and cocoa prices. Because oil reserves may run out in the future, Cameroon is working to diversify its economy. Agriculture employs a majority of the labor force in growing and processing food. Even people with professional employment usually grow and sell small amounts of crops. Cash crops include coffee, cocoa, cotton, rubber, and timber. Major crops specific to 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 corruption and poor management. Cameroon uses the currency common to francophone African countries, the *CFA franc* (XAF).

Transportation and Communications

Cameroonians travel by foot, bicycle, or motorcycle taxi. Paved roads connect major cities, but many areas are isolated. Unpaved roads are often impassable in the rainy season. Vans or sedans provide local public transportation. Taxis are available in cities. In an effort to reduce the number of traffic accidents, a 2011 law prohibited taxis and buses from driving at night. The domestic airline connects some major cities.

Telephones are concentrated in large urban areas, but as electricity spreads to rural areas, a growing number of people own phones. Cell phones greatly outnumber landlines in Cameroon. While purchasing a cell phone is affordable for most, calls remain relatively expensive, so call times are carefully monitored. 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," in French-speaking areas), or *one-battery radio* (in English-speaking areas), in which gossip and information are informally passed from one person to another. In most areas, this system is a method of engaging in gossip and political debate. However, in areas without electricity, it is an important means of gaining information and news. Few Cameroonians use the internet, and connection speeds are relatively slow. Those who use the internet usually do so at internet cafés or workplaces; few people can afford personal computers and internet connections.

Education

Schools are divided between the French and British models. The two models differ in terms of curriculum, grading systems, and standardized exams. Although they also differ in how many years of schooling each level consists of, children stay in school for the same amount of time overall.

Primary school begins at age six and lasts six years. Primary school is free and technically compulsory, though not all students are enrolled. Secondary school begins at age 12 or 13 and is divided into various levels. Secondary schools charge a nominal enrollment fee but do not charge tuition. Students may pursue either technical course work (such as auto mechanics, plumbing, computer science, or accounting) or a more general course of study (usually in preparation for higher education). Students complete secondary school at age 17 or 18 and must pass standardized exams to graduate. Most students attend private schools, where the quality of education is usually higher. Though these schools charge tuition, they are affordable for the average family.

About 86 percent of boys and 82 percent of girls attend primary school. In secondary school, attendance drops to 45 percent of boys and 42 percent of girls. School enrollment is higher in the south than the north and higher in urban areas than rural. Factors affecting enrollment include school fees, failure to pass the required exams, a shortage of classroom space, and parental choice. Many families place little value on formal education, partially due to the high unemployment rate among Cameroon's university graduates. Some families, particularly in the north, prefer to teach their sons a skill, such as livestock herding, rather than send them to formal schooling. Efforts to improve the quality of education,

increase school attendance, and raise literacy rates have met with some success in recent years.

Teaching styles rely heavily on memorization. Students generally copy information from the chalkboard while teachers lecture. Critical thinking, class participation, and technology are rarely incorporated. While officially banned, corporal punishment is sometimes employed in schools, particularly in rural areas. Muslim children memorize passages from the *Qur'an* at evening *Qur'anic* schools.

Higher education is provided by eight public universities and about forty private institutions (including universities and vocational institutes, such as teaching colleges). Informal education and apprenticeships provide vital vocational skills. For example, in urban areas, many people receive vocational training to learn skills such as shoe mending, shop keeping, street vending, car washing, masonry, stonework, and taxi driving. Admission to vocational schools is competitive, as these programs generally lead directly to a job. University admission is less competitive, as graduates often struggle to find employment related to their field of study.

Health

Although government-sponsored health care is generally inexpensive, the quality and availability are low. Cameroon's hospitals, while able to provide emergency services, often cannot provide basic (especially long-term) care. Patients' families must supply food, medicine, and some care. Corruption in the system allows some nurses and doctors to demand bribes in exchange for care. Villages often have local clinics staffed by nurses. Private hospitals are available and provide a higher level of care but are unaffordable to the average Cameroonian. High-quality non-profit and internationally funded clinics operate in some areas. Many people, particularly in rural areas, turn to traditional healers instead of or in addition to modern medicine. Although government vaccination campaigns have targeted polio and measles, Cameroonians face a range of diseases, including malaria, cholera, and AIDS. Treatment for AIDS and tuberculosis is free.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of Cameroon, temporarily located at 1700 Wisconsin Ave NW, Washington, DC 20007 (permanent address, 2349 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008); phone (202) 265-8790; web site www.cameroonembassyusa.org.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	19,711,291 (rank=58)
Area, sq. mi.	183,568 (rank=54)
Area, sq. km.	475,440

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	150 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	134 of 155 countries
Adult literacy rate	77% (male); 60% (female)
Infant mortality rate	61 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	54 (male); 55 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2011 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

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