

# EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE FIELD GUIDE

Cameroon



# About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.



The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 introduces “Culture General,” the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment.

Part 2 presents “Culture Specific” Cameroon, focusing on unique cultural features of Cameroonian society and is designed to complement other pre-deployment training. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location.



and Language Center (AFCLC) website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) or contact AFCLC’s Region Team at [AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil](mailto:AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil).

**Disclaimer:** All text is the property of the AFCLC and may not be modified by a change in title, content, or labeling. It may be reproduced in its current format with the expressed permission of the AFCLC. All photography is provided as a courtesy of the US government, Wikimedia, and other sources as indicated.

[Please scroll over images to view captions.](#)

# PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

## What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.



Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual

symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic, representing the importance Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

## Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and

economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

### **Cultural Domains**

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize these behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains – which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems among others (see chart on next page) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the ways different cultures define family or kinship, a deployed military member can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

### **Social Behaviors Across Cultures**

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.



Conversely, industrialized nations have more sophisticated market economies, producing foodstuffs for

universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

## Worldview

One of our basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different according to our cultural standard.



As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Consequently, we assume

that individuals falling into the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

# 12 Domains of Culture



This collective perspective forms our worldview – how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for our actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

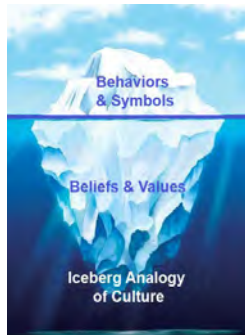
### Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true – regardless of whether there is physical evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central facet of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have help shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.

### Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the



deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

As you travel throughout the African Continent, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common among most African countries. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

## CULTURAL DOMAINS

### 1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable or which occurred prior to written language.



Africa has a history that spans the entire existence of humankind. In ancient times prior to the emergence of written languages, history and



wisdom were preserved across generations and ethnic boundaries through oral folk legends or myths. Most early human evolution began as hunting and gathering cultures in East and South Africa, with countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa renowned for their early human sites. In the last several millennia, the development of agriculture and pastoralism (animal herding) replaced hunting and gathering lifestyles.

Ancient civilizations evolved in all corners of Africa, inspired in part by peoples from the Middle East bringing trade, beliefs, customs, language, and on occasion, colonization. Far from being isolated empires, the African civilizations were intimately connected by commerce and marriage throughout various regions of the continent, and when confronted by outsiders, managed to adapt to their influences. Eventually, Arab traders introduced Islam to Africa and also instituted the Trans-Saharan African slave trade that lasted from the 7th to 19th Centuries.

The “golden age” of European exploration, which lasted from the 18th to mid-20th century, prompted the wholesale exploitation of Africans resources – first human assets through slavery, followed by natural resources such as minerals, precious gems and metals, and wildlife, thereby diminishing most of what was traditional and African.

The introduction of the European Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade altered the slave trade through both the sheer number of Africans enslaved and through the cementing of a racist ideology of Black inferiority to legitimize the institution of slavery. Slavery decimated the African continent for over 400 years through the forced relocation of an estimated 25 to 30 million Africans worldwide. This figure does not include those Africans who died aboard ships or during capture. While abolition of the slave trade dissolved the institution of slavery, it





did not end the European presence on the African continent nor did it drastically alter their attitudes towards Africans.

Starting in the mid-19th century, European colonialism served to redefine African ethnic relations on a large scale; however, as African societies began to resist colonial rule and seek their independence, widespread ethnic conflict and genocide occurred. Sustained westernization and globalization continue to shape the continent through poverty, disease, and social reform. A history still to be recorded, Africa's future identity faces many challenges in critical areas such as environmental change, ethnic strife, women's health and security, and education.

## 2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community.

Traditional African political organizations in the form of bands, tribes, and chiefdoms have existed for several millennia and continue



to influence contemporary African governments. Uncommon in modern society, bands are limited to hunting and gathering economies, such as the !Kung of the southern African Kalahari Desert and foragers of central African forests.

Tribes are still represented today across the African political landscape, although the use of the word "tribe" is sometimes misinterpreted due to its western notion of "primitiveness" and oftentimes substituted with the term "ethnic group." Lacking centralized authority, tribes are organized around segmented descent groups or in some cases age groups.

Everyday governance is discharged through councils of respected elders and sanctioned through ritual and other means. East African pastoralist groups such as the Maasai,

along with some West African tribes and the Berbers in North Africa, represent this type of organization.

Chiefdoms or kingdoms are ruled by kings or queens from a royal clan and generally incorporate millions of subjects. Kingdoms such as the Zulu or Swazi in southern Africa developed through conquest, while others like Ghana's Ashante developed through an association of related traditional states. However, colonialism eventually diluted the power and

reach of these empires, whose leaders were often retained as indirect rulers or figureheads.

Today, all three of these political organizations still exist, although in the confines of modern African nation-states created by

colonial powers who had little regard or understanding of African cultures. This juxtaposition of modernity with tradition has caused severe conflict throughout the continent.

Challenged to construct their respective "national" identities, regional leaders attempt to do so by diluting the traditionally cohesive power of ancestry. These national ruling elites, who derive their power from wealth and commerce rather than tribal affiliation, feel threatened by loyalty to these traditional organizations, labeling their rule as "tribalism."

This "class versus descent" scrimmage for power has resulted in conflicts across the continent and a dramatic divergence of interests. As a means to overcome these and other issues on the continent, a 55-nation federation, the African Union (AU), was formed in 2002. AU's charter is to promote "greater unity and solidarity between African countries and peoples" by building partnerships in all segments of "civil society."

### 3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer



individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society. Prior to the arrival of Islam and Christianity, the African continent consisted of orally transmitted indigenous religious practices. As in many societies, African indigenous beliefs influenced diet, subsistence patterns, family structures, marriage practices, and healing and burial processes. In essence, Africans constructed their worldview through their indigenous religions.



Today, the African continent is primarily either Muslim or Christian. Other faiths such as Judaism and Hinduism exist as pockets in different regions of the continent, primarily in urban areas. The historical trajectories of Islamic and

Christian expansion in Africa offer intriguing commonalities in how Africans across the continent initially reacted to the introduction of each of those religions. For example, it is common throughout the continent to find a blending of many elements of indigenous religious practices with local Islam and Christianity.

Consequently, many African native religions share similarities with religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in their understanding of God as the creator and ruler of all life, although He is considered untouchable by humans.

However, unlike Christianity and Islam, many African indigenous religions believe that God is not directly involved in people's lives. To them there is a spirit world populated with former good and bad human beings. The good spirits intercede with God on behalf of their living families to whom they then relay God's will through dreams and acquired



possessions. The bad spirits work to bring misfortune through sickness, death, or natural disasters to those who behave inappropriately.

Many indigenous African religions revere "nature" spirits living in the sky, water, and forests. These impersonal spirits help protect people from harm and provide them with life's essential ingredients such as water, sun, and wildlife. This belief system is commonly referred to as animism.

Just as spirits mediate relations between God and humans, religious specialists act as mediators between spirits and humans to provide protection from harm.

#### 4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called "fictive kin"). The traditional African family with respect to marriage, family structure, and descent is a much different arrangement than is found in most American families.

Likewise, there are several components of the traditional African family that are common to all African cultures.



First, perhaps the most difficult feature to reconcile to Americans is that of polygyny – the practice of a husband having more than one wife. A benefit of this arrangement is that it promotes societal alliances through marriage, procreation, and family wealth through female labor.

Second, due to polygyny, the family in most African cultures has historically consisted of an expanded set of kin or relatives that extends well beyond the American notion of a nuclear family. This arrangement created a family environment where children considered all siblings as "brothers and sisters" and all of the wives/mothers as "mother."

Third, the extended African family traces descent through either the male or female side of the family, a practice which differs considerably from the American family. Patrilineal descent (through the male side of the family) is the more common approach and usually features polygyny. The matrilineal (through the female bloodline) marriage pattern is more uncommon and almost always features monogamy – it is rare to encounter a wife having more than one husband.

Lastly, it is common for two or more blood lines (lineages) to share a common ancestor and collectively form a clan, which is the largest social unit. Clans do not have formal leaders or organizational structures. Membership is transferred from father to child and cuts across ethnic and social boundaries.

The dramatic social changes in Africa during and after colonialism in the last 4 decades have obviously affected the traditional family, and variations on these 3 features can be found across the continent.

## 5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles. Gender roles in Africa follow no single model nor is there a generalized concept of sex and common standard of sexual behavior.

Prehistorically, gender role differentiation in Africa's hunting and gathering cultures was based on a division of labor featuring different, yet complementary, sets of responsibilities for males and females, adults and children. Females gathered

over half the caloric needs from natural vegetation, while also reproducing and raising offspring. Males were primarily hunters but also assisted with gathering.

These gender patterns continued as agricultural practices advanced.



Females shared in farming while continuing to provide for the family's subsistence, and males produced the cash crops. Pastoralists like the Maasai of Kenya traditionally have featured males involved in cattle-raising and females in food production.

The 19th-century European colonial period introduced a cash economy into Africa, with female labor used to produce the cash crops. By inserting male authority over females, colonial administrators disrupted the distinct yet complementary male/female relationship that had been traditionally African.

More recently, western influence across the continent has dramatically altered the traditional gender roles. Educational and professional opportunities for females, along with increased family migrations to urban areas, have radically altered traditional male and female gender roles.

Likewise, the number of single parents and even child- or other relative-led families has increased with the predominance of HIV/AIDS-related deaths and warfare, further altering traditional gender responsibilities. Additionally, ethnic conflicts involving abuse of women are prevalent in many unstable countries, and while the rubric of traditional African gender generally remains, the forces of change are gradually ripping it away.

## 6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is



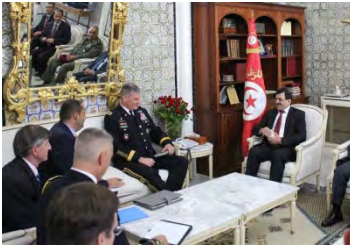
defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally. America is predominantly a monolingual society, where traditionally, fluency in a second language has been considered a luxury rather than a necessity. Conversely, national survival for many societies in Africa required them throughout their existence to

adopt multilingual practices, if for no other reason than to preserve their native heritage.

You may find it challenging to comprehend the scope of Africa's linguistic diversity. There are over 2,000 African languages (many spoken-only) from 6 major language families, and perhaps 100 of these languages are used to communicate among the more dominant ethnic groups such as Berber, Swahili, Yoruba, and others.

Official languages of African nation-states are few, yet the linguistic diversity expressed across the continent (Nigeria has 250 languages) has prompted an awareness of the value of Africa's linguistic traditions. While most areas of the continent speak the adopted language of their colonial past – such as French and Portuguese in West Africa, French and Arabic in Morocco, and English in Kenya and South Africa – the majority of people also speak one or more traditional “indigenous” languages of their and other ethnic groups. As African independence spread throughout the continent, ethnic groups continued to depend on their indigenous identifiers, such as language, to celebrate their “release” from colonial rule and to

preserve a sense of indigenous identity.



While communication styles tend to vary by ethnic or social groups, Africans generally are friendly and outgoing people although they tend to communicate with reserve to avoid

confrontation. As in most kin-based societies, Africans believe that saving face or protecting one's honor and dignity are of utmost importance; therefore, they avoid public criticism and controversial topics at all costs – even to the extent of withholding their honest opinion or modifying the truth.

Africans admire and even expect extended greetings and small talk, and to attempt to rush or avoid social graces is considered disrespectful. Similarly, Africans avoid direct eye contact when communicating with new acquaintances and people of status,



particularly elders. They also are fond of non-verbal gestures, and it is common throughout African societies for members of the same gender to hold hands or touch while conversing.

## 7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.



The contemporary African educational system hardly resembles the traditional pre-colonial structure, whereby community elders were primarily responsible for preparing youth for adulthood. Their instruction included fundamentals of ethnic ritual and ceremony, along with customary protocol for their distinctive gender roles. A rite-of-passage commemorating their successful journey from childhood to adulthood served as a form of graduation.

European colonialism brought a more structured, formal educational system that catered to a small group of African elite who demonstrated potential to administer expanding colonial territories. Following independence, many African nations adopted the European system because they believed it would prepare them to be more competitive in intra-continental and global marketplaces, thereby enhancing their quality of life.

However, progress in developing and maintaining reliable educational institutions has been slow for a variety of reasons. Since most Africans live in rural environments, they continue to rely heavily on child labor for family survival, resulting in decreased school enrollments or early withdrawals. Likewise, widespread HIV/AIDS epidemics, ethnic conflict, teacher and resource deficits, and inaccessibility to remote rural areas also

hamper progress. According to 2023 statistics, about 100 million African children and youth were out of school, of which 35 million were of primary school age.

## 8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In low-context western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. Conversely, most African cultures are traditionally high-context societies, whereby people center their activities on socializing and establishing close associations, having little regard for the passage-of-time.

Only after establishing trust and honor will your typical African counterpart agreeably proceed with business. In his worldview, time is a precious commodity used to establish relationships



and form alliances. Any attempt to accelerate the tempo at the expense of social pleasantries will likely result in deadlock.

To an African, close physical proximity between individuals encourages cooperative trust, and for centuries they have viewed human linkage

as a core element to survival. This closeness is best represented in a traditional African village where strong kinship connections are evidenced by a display of close interpersonal relations among family members.

While conventional African concepts of time and space remain intact, throughout the continent western influence and globalization have stepped up the pace of African living, mostly in urban areas. Consequently, rural-to-urban migrations have reshaped traditional social and subsistence patterns.

## 9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Prior to 19th-century European colonization of Africa,

recreation served a vital subsistence role, whereby adolescents and adults alike participated in intellectually stimulating leisurely activities that concurrently served to develop essential hunting and pastoral skills.

Games of chance and skill were important to early childhood development, providing social outlets within and outside their community. Featuring wrestling, jumping and running; traditional African sport was steeped in religious ritual.



Along with colonialism came the introduction to Africa of western sports such as soccer, cricket, rugby and track and field. This emphasis on western sport continued to thrive with African independence and globalization, as seen in sporting events such as the Olympics and the World Cup.

Leaders such as Nelson Mandela skillfully employed sport to promote a unified South African nation. Importing the predominantly “white” game of rugby, Mandela used it to fuse a racially divided country following his election in 1992. This event is the theme of the motion picture “Invictus,” exemplifying how sport can serve to create national identities and overcome ethnic division. His efforts have inspired many other African nations to follow suit.



Likewise, East African countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia have produced the world’s dominant male and female distance runners, and South Africa, Cameroon and Nigeria emerged as strong contenders in the 2010 World Cup. African nations are now competing in leagues such as the International Basketball Association (FIBA) World Championships, and there is also a growing number of African

basketball players on US college campuses and in the National Basketball Association (NBA).

## 10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

Despite having only 18% of the global population, Africa is a victim of many of the world's debilitating health disorders. According to the World Health Organization, 68% of the global HIV/AIDS cases and 95% of malarial diseases occur in Africa.



These and other medical conditions are attributed primarily to viral infection and widespread poverty caused by extreme climatic conditions and civil unrest, coupled with inadequate preventative measures. While extensive drought generates widespread famine, civil disturbances generate millions of displaced persons. Likewise, with only 65% of the Sub-Saharan African population having access to basic drinking water, water-borne bacterial diseases such as cholera and schistosomiasis are common.



Many people in Africa lack access to western medicine, and as a result depend on traditional health practices to combat disease. In addition, some traditional beliefs run counter to western medical practice and perhaps discourage individuals from utilizing those services even when they are available. This

problem is further intensified by lack of federal regulatory healthcare management.

While modern healthcare procedures are more common in urban areas, many rural people rely on traditional practitioners who use a variety of plants and herbs to treat patients. Similarly, many families have their own secret remedies. While in some cases traditional medicine proves effective with fewer side effects than modern drugs, traditional practices do not adequately treat many of the more serious conditions.

On a positive note, western influence has stimulated some progress in combating Africa's health crisis. More resources are devoted to achieving basic human security by assessing disease symptoms early and with scientific accuracy.

## 11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. Traditionally having an agrarian-based economy, Africa today remains predominantly agricultural, featuring less industrialization than most other parts of the world. Post-colonial adversities such as civil war, disease, poverty, and unstable dictatorships posed unusual hardship on several young African nations; however, Africa currently stands at the cross-roads of economic development with many nations becoming some of fastest growing regions in the world.



Colonialism institutionalized the exploitation of Africa's mineral resources, resulting in today's oil industry dominating the economic market in several coastal regions. A surge in global oil prices; a growing African middle class; and reduction in civil wars, foreign aid, and inflation collectively promise a more positive outlook for the future.

Countries such as Botswana, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and South Africa are economically the wealthiest on the continent, with regions such as East Africa showing signs of economic stability. Despite the economic upswing, much of sub-Saharan

Africa's future economic prosperity is held hostage by devastating diseases such as AIDS, particularly in areas of southern Africa, and the growing effects of climate change and man-made environmental degradation throughout the subcontinent.

## 12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. Africa lags far behind most of the world in manufacturing capacity and output. Even the more economically-developed nations such as South Africa are competitively weak when compared to non-African industrialized nations. During the 1970s and 1980s, Africa experienced some growth in raw exports although this increase did little to boost long-term manufacturing capacity.

Today, Africa is experiencing an actual decline in manufacturing capacity due primarily to a lull in the global economy, along with other indigenous issues such as environmental stress, poor physical and organizational infrastructure, and a shortage of skilled personnel. Likewise, African manufacturing capacity is no match against global powers such as China and significant Southeast Asian markets.



International aid from both governmental and non-governmental organizations has helped African nations establish preliminary economic footholds. For example, many of them have dedicated industrial developmental zones to attract foreign investment and increase export-related manufacturing capacity, although Africa is far removed from having a significant role in the global marketplace in the foreseeable future.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize African society at large, we will now focus on specific features of Cameroonian society.

# PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

## 1. HISTORY AND MYTH

### Overview

Cameroon is often referred to as “Africa in miniature” for the diversity of its people and landscapes. Various African empires, multiple European colonizers, several religions, and over 250 indigenous ethnic groups shaped Cameroon’s history. Relative stability, limited political freedoms, and modest development have been the hallmarks of independent Cameroon.

### Early History and Migrations

Although archeological evidence is scarce, people have lived in the area comprising Cameroon since about 8000 BC. Short statured hunter-gatherer groups like the Baka (often referred to as Pygmies) were among Cameroon’s earliest inhabitants whose descendants still live in the southern forests (see p13 of *Political and Social Relations*).

Hanno, an explorer from Carthage in modern-day Tunisia, reached Cameroon around 500 BC. His arrival facilitated the founding of trade networks for slaves and goods between northern Cameroon and North African civilizations. Between 200 BC and 500 AD, Bantu-speaking people likely from eastern Nigeria and western Cameroon migrated to southern and eastern Cameroon, displacing many Pygmy hunter-gatherer groups. The Bantu speakers used iron tools, hunted, fished, and cultivated yams and bananas on subsistence farms.



### Regional Empires

From the 9th to 19th centuries, various regional empires and ethnic groups occupied parts of Cameroon. Although none of these empires ever controlled the entirety of the territory, they all contributed to modern Cameroon’s culture, customs, and ethnic composition.



## Cameroonian Flood Myths

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values which often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity. Two Cameroonian myths tell about a great flood and the people who would populate the earth in its aftermath.

A Pygmy flood myth recounts that a curious chameleon cut open a tree trunk to identify a strange noise coming from inside. Soon after, water gushed forth from the tree and covered the world. The first human couple emerged from the water and became ancestors to everyone on the earth.

Another Cameroonian myth alleges that a girl's kindness to a goat allowed her to stay alive in a great flood. In this story, the girl shared some of her flour with the goat which then warned her about the coming flood. Thanks to this tip and, in some versions, a lizard's guidance, the girl and her brother survived the catastrophe. When the siblings were looking for suitable mates, the goat reappeared and told them to marry one another since they alone had lived. To symbolize that they were related, the goat instructed them to place a clay pot with a broken bottom on the roof of their home. In some parts of Cameroon, the tradition of the broken bottom pot on the roof persists when a couple is related to one another to help ensure that no bad fortune befalls them (see p4 of *Family and Kinship*).

**Sao Empire:** The Sao people established a kingdom in northern Cameroon in the 5th-century AD, which thrived between the 9th and 14th centuries. Archeological excavations have revealed Sao coins, jewelry, and bronze and terra cotta



figurines. By the 14th century, the Kanem Kingdom (see below) conquered the Sao, reducing the once large kingdom to a shadow of its former size and influence.

**Kanem-Bornu Empire:** Founded on the northeast shore of Lake Chad (in present-day Chad) in the 9th-century AD, the Kanem Empire became an Islamic state at the end of the 11th century and extended into Cameroon in the 13th century (see p3-4 of *Religion and*

*Spirituality*). Although internal political divisions, economic hardships, and conflicts weakened the Kanem Empire in the late 14th century, it regrouped at Bornu in Nigeria to form the Kanem-Bornu Empire. From the 14th to 19th centuries, this empire included a portion of northern Cameroon. The Kanem-Bornu people traded slaves, ivory, and animal hides for salt, horses, and manufactured goods from North Africa. It declined gradually and lost control over its Cameroonian holdings around 1870.

**Fulani Migrations:** Between the 13th and 15th centuries, Islamic pastoral nomads known as the Fulani (see p12-13 of *Political and Social Relations* and p3 of *Religion and Spirituality*) migrated to northern Cameroon from Nigeria and began to change Cameroon's religious and cultural landscape. Between the 16th and early 19th centuries, the Fulani gained control over large swaths of the North, displacing the area's non-Muslim inhabitants (known as "Kirdis" meaning infidels—see p12 of *Political and Social Relations*). These refugees became susceptible to capture by Muslim slavers involved in northern Africa's slave trade network.

## European Discovery and Activities

**First Contact:** Portuguese explorers reached Cameroon in 1472. While navigating the Wouri River, Fernando Po and his expedition noticed the abundance of giant shrimp in the river and consequently called it the *Rio dos Camarões* (River of Shrimps), the origins of the name Cameroon.

**Competition and Commodities:** By the early 16th century, the Portuguese had constructed sugar plantations, expanded the slave trade, and established close ties with local chiefs in the coastal towns of Douala, Limbe, and Bonaberi without having to establish direct colonial control. Other Europeans followed, resulting in the Portuguese, Dutch, British, French, Spanish, and Germans competing for commercial dominance along the coast. They exchanged cloth, metals, weapons, and manufactured goods with the Cameroonians for palm oil, ivory, gold, and slaves. By the end of the slave trading era in the mid-19th century, French, German, and British trading companies had become the foremost European actors in Cameroon.

**Slave Trade:** Between the 16th and early 19th centuries, local African middlemen and Europeans captured millions of Africans and sold them as slaves in North and South America. By the mid-16th century, slaves had become the region's most important export commodity. Although the Dutch, Spanish, British, Germans, and French were involved in the slave trade, the Portuguese were the leading suppliers of African slaves to the New World.



Various coastal groups, including the Douala people, managed Cameroon's slave trade, selling slaves captured from inland areas to the Europeans. A separate slave trade under Fulani control existed in northern Cameroon where slaves were transported north throughout the Islamic world.

In 1807, Britain made the slave trade illegal, enforcing its ban beyond its shores with naval patrols. With several other European countries followed suit, Britain established a base off Cameroon's coast to stem slave shipping in 1827. Although Britain signed agreements with Cameroonian chiefs to end the overseas slave trade in the 1840s, the slave trade continued until Cameroonian middlemen found trade in other goods sufficiently profitable. Consequently, domestic slavery within Cameroon continued for many years beyond the British ban.

## German Colonization

**German Rule:** Prior to the introduction of Malaria suppressants in the 1870s, relatively few Europeans ventured into Cameroon's interior. Moreover, several coastal chiefs were fearful that contacts between the Europeans and interior groups would diminish the chiefs' favored status. As interactions emerged, the chiefs promoted the establishment of a British protectorate. Britain delayed its decision, allowing the Germans to establish a colony in 1884. For the first time, Cameroon's myriad of ethnic groups, chiefdoms, and other entities came under a single governing body that encompassed the entirety of present-day Cameroon. Calling their colony Kamerun, the Germans began formal administration from the inland settlement of Yaoundé, the modern capital, in 1888.

German colonizers were not interested in "civilizing" Cameroonians or acculturating them to German lifestyles.



Instead, the Germans sought to extract raw materials to profit their domestic industries, oftentimes with little regard for Cameroonians' welfare. In addition, the Germans introduced compulsory taxation and forced labor to enable the construction of harbors, roads, bridges, and railroads. Overworked and mistreated, many Cameroonians died working on these infrastructure projects or on

privately-owned German cocoa, banana, rubber, and palm oil plantations.

**Resistance:** In an effort to stake claims in the interior ahead of other Europeans, the first German colonial governor established a number of administrative outposts. Conflict soon emerged between German colonizers and inland groups who resisted German interference in their lands and affairs.

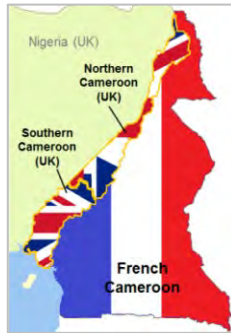
German colonial rule also ran afoul of the coastal chiefs, including the leader of the Douala people who had earlier requested a British protectorate. While Germany's colonial treaty gave Douala elites a privileged status, preserving their

property rights and exempting them from certain taxes, the Germans wanted to force them off their lands in the early 1900s. Led by German-educated Rudolf Douala Manga Bell, the Douala resisted—first with legal protests and then by rallying other Douala clans. The Germans ultimately hanged Bell in 1914 for treason.

**Germany's Exit:** Germany's colonial rule ended 32 years after it began when French and British troops overran Cameroon in February 1916 during World War I. When Germany surrendered in 1918, it lost Cameroon and all of its other overseas territories. Germany's colonial legacy included a relatively good infrastructure, some developed urban centers along the coast, and a Cameroonian urban elite whose status hinged more on money and education than on traditional values (see p13-14 of *Political and Social Relations*).

### French and British Colonization

After World War I, Britain and France divided Cameroon so that France received about 80% of the territory while Britain gained the other 20%, divided into northern and southern sectors. These 2 European powers had distinct approaches to administering their colonies. Governing from neighboring Nigeria, the British ruled Cameroon indirectly through local rulers, while the French, ruling from Yaoundé, sought to assimilate and transform French



Cameroonians into French people through direct rule. These administrative and cultural contrasts still reverberate in Cameroon's modern history.

**British Cameroon:** Although the British governed Cameroon and Nigeria together, Britain devoted the bulk of its attention and resources to Nigeria, leaving British Cameroon neglected and underdeveloped. British colonizers outlawed forced labor in their territories, allowing for indirect rule through local chiefdoms which left some native governance structures intact.

Under Britain's inattentive leadership, the economy of British Cameroon stagnated until 1924 when some of the former German plantation owners returned to repurchase their holdings. By 1925, Germans outnumbered the British 3 to 1, and by 1937, Germany received almost 80% of British Cameroon's exports to Britain's 7%. At the start of World War II in 1939, Britain seized German property and continued to delegate authority to local chiefdoms through the 1950s.

**French Cameroon:** With the lion's share of Cameroon's territory under its control, France focused on profiting financially by increasing the production of cocoa, timber, and coffee and industrializing oil and aluminum production. The



French governed with the cooperation of Cameroonian elites and, like their German predecessors, used forced labor to undertake construction projects, a practice that continued until 1952. France's often abusive labor practices helped to galvanize trade unions and other groups to lobby for greater rights

and eventually challenge French colonization.

### **Cameroonian Nationalism**

Provoked by France's harsh leadership and high taxes, many Francophone (French-speaking) Cameroonians began pushing for greater political self-determination and development in the 1940s and 1950s. Although France granted Cameroonians some representation within its colonial administration, Cameroonian nationalists deemed France's political overtures insufficient. Numerous political groups formed to increase Cameroonian representation and counter colonial dominance in both French and British Cameroon.

**The UPC and Armed Resistance:** One of the most vocal, anti-French political groups, the Union of Cameroonian Peoples (UPC), sought unification with British Cameroon and full independence from France. The French banned the UPC in 1955 after the group supported riots that turned violent. The suppressed UPC then split along ethnic lines with its leaders

from Bamiléké and Douala fleeing to British Cameroon while Bassa factions remained in French Cameroon. Both groups began an armed resistance that continued even after independence. In response, the French fought the UPC rebels, while the British banned the UPC in 1957 and deported its leaders.

**Independence from France:** Meanwhile, in 1956, several non-violent groups united to prepare Cameroon economically, socially, and politically for independence. To hasten liberation, French-educated Fulani Muslim Ahmadou Ahidjo formed a new coalition in 1958 that had the confidence of influential groups from the South as well as his native North. France allowed French Cameroon autonomy on all matters of self-government except foreign affairs in January 1959 and granted full independence on January 1, 1960.



### **British Cameroon's Referendum:**

Throughout the 1950s, British Cameroonians were divided about joining French Cameroon or Anglophone (English-speaking) Nigeria. In 1961, British Cameroonians voted in a UN-sponsored referendum to determine their fate. The primarily Christian Southern British Cameroonians opted to join Cameroon as 2 Anglophone regions. By contrast, predominantly Muslim Northern British Cameroon voted to merge with Nigeria (see map on p6 above). Thus, the colonies' Muslim population was split between Nigeria and Cameroon.

### **Independent Cameroon**

**Ahidjo's Presidency:** Elected on an ambitious platform that promised to promote capitalism, maintain ties with France, and build a nation free from ethnic conflict; Ahidjo became Cameroon's first President in 1960. The new country faced numerous challenges, including the UPC's simmering rebellion, a diverse ethnic and religious landscape, Francophone and Anglophone cleavages (see p5 of *Political and Social Relations*), little experience as a political unit, a weak and undiversified economy, and uneven regional development.



Although the UPC and Ahidjo shared goals of independence and unification, UPC fighters considered Ahidjo too close to the French to govern legitimately. Thus, the rebels continued their fight after independence as the National Liberation Army of Cameroon until French-backed Cameroonian troops defeated them in 1970. The UPC's struggle from 1955 to 1970 left at least 10,000 dead in French Cameroon.

As the conflict deescalated, Ahidjo used his authoritative political savvy to swiftly consolidate his power and in 1966 outlawed all political parties but his own. Although he jailed thousands of political opponents and suppressed the media, Ahidjo worked to spur economic development by upgrading infrastructure, investing in agriculture and industrialization, and expanding education (see p3 of *Learning and Knowledge*). The discovery and export of petroleum in the 1970s provided a boon to Cameroon's economy (see p2 of *Economics and Resources*). Ahidjo's affinity for smart alliances, regional and ethnic favoritism, and political suppression allowed him to hold on to power for over 20 years.



### The Struggle for Unity

When Southern British Cameroon joined independent Cameroon, forming the United Republic of Cameroon in 1961, the former British and French territories largely preserved their distinct legislative, legal, educational, and civil service structures. While Francophone Cameroon benefitted from French and

German colonial improvements, Anglophone Cameroonians inherited inadequate infrastructure, a weak economy, and no industrialization. The new country's Francophone leaders did little to lift the English-speaking regions out of poverty.

In June 1972, President Ahidjo orchestrated a constitutional change empowering the central government in Yaoundé at the expense of local administrations. This move strongly favored

the larger and more prosperous Francophone regions in matters of law, language, economy, and culture. This unification bred resentment among many Anglophone Cameroonians that continues to simmer today (see p4-6 of *Political and Social Relations*).

### Biya's Presidency

In 1982 Ahidjo abruptly resigned, presumably for health reasons, and his Prime Minister, Paul Biya, a French-speaking southern Christian from the Beti ethnic group, assumed the Presidency. Although no longer in office, Ahidjo expected to continue to control the government through his role as leader of the Cameroon National Union (UNC) party. In 1984, presidential palace guards still loyal to Ahidjo mounted an unsuccessful coup attempt against President Biya. The coup left hundreds dead and led to Ahidjo's subsequent exile.



In an effort to consolidate and reinforce his power base, Biya replaced the UNC with the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) as the only party in what he intended to be a single party state and ruthlessly repressed political opponents. Discontent simmered, while government troops suppressed large pro-democracy protests in 1990. Although Biya bowed to domestic and international pressure, allowing the emergence of multiple political parties that same year, public appeals for greater political representation continued to mount. Some Anglophone leaders decried their neglect by and subordination to Francophone leaders, forming a secessionist movement, the Southern Cameroon National Council (SCNC), to campaign for the independence of English-speaking Cameroonians.

Still in office today, Biya has ensured that his CPDM party maintains its hold on power through vote tampering, intimidation, party co-optation, and removal of presidential term limits (see p3-6 of *Political and Social Relations*). Biya is one of Africa's oldest and longest-ruling leaders.

## 2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

### Official Name

Republic of Cameroon  
*Republique du Cameroun*  
(French)

### Political Borders

Nigeria: 1,050 mi  
Chad: 680 mi  
Central African Republic (CAR):  
495 mi  
Republic of the Congo: 325 mi  
Gabon: 185 mi  
Equatorial Guinea: 117 mi  
Coastline: 250 mi



### Capital

Yaoundé

### Demographics

Cameroon's population was 30.97 million people as of 2024 with an annual growth rate of 2.71%. The country's average population density is close to 170 people per sq mi, although some northern areas are sparsely populated. As of 2023, 59.3% of Cameroonians resided in urban areas, where the population growth rate was 3.43%. In 2023, over 4.06 million people lived in the coastal city of Douala, the commercial center, while 4.51 million people lived in Yaoundé, the capital and largest city.



### Flag

The Cameroonian flag consists of three equal vertical bands of green (hoist side), red (center) with a yellow star, and yellow (right). Green stands for prosperity and Cameroon's lush southern greenery. The central

red panel and yellow star together represent sovereignty and North-South unity. Yellow symbolizes wealth, the sun, and the North's sandy soil.

## Geography

Slightly larger than California, Cameroon has an area of 183,568 sq mi. Situated in western sub-Saharan Africa, Cameroon is bordered by Nigeria to the west; Chad to the northeast; the CAR to the east; Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and the Republic of the Congo to the south; and the Atlantic Ocean to the southwest.

Cameroon contains all of Africa's major geographic features in a single country. The West and Northwest have verdant volcanic mountains, hills, and plateaus. Semi-arid northern plains transition into a sparse savannah plateau in central Cameroon. There are tropical rain forests in the South and East, grasslands in the high plateau of the West, and mangrove forests and beaches in the Southwest along the coast. Roughly 13.1% of Cameroon's land is arable, while 3.3% of the land is devoted to permanent crop cultivation.



Cameroon's mountain ranges are concentrated along its Nigerian border, which includes the Bakossi Mountains in the Southwest, the Alantika Mountains in the North, and the Mandara Mountains in the Extreme North. Cameroon's highest point is Fako, the taller of volcanic Mount Cameroon's 2 peaks. With an elevation of 13,435 ft, Fako is the tallest point in sub-Saharan West Africa. Cameroon's lowest point is its Atlantic Coast, which is sea level.

## Climate

Cameroon's climate varies considerably with its terrain, ranging from hot and dry in the North near the Sahara to the second wettest area in the world in Debuncha in southwestern Cameroon.

The South experiences 3 seasons: a dry season from November to February, a light rainy season from March to May, and a rainy season from June to October. Warm and humid all year-round, the South's average temperatures are between 80°F and 90°F during the day and fall to the 60s°F at night. The hotter North receives less precipitation during its rainy season from June

through September. Average daytime high temperatures in the North range from the mid-70s°F to 107°F; March, April, and May are the hottest months. Nighttime temperatures are usually between 50°F and 75°F.

### **Natural Hazards**

As one of the most active volcanoes in western Africa, Mt. Cameroon is a deadly threat. Over 1,700 people died in 1986 when the volcano erupted and released poisonous gases. Waterborne diseases are also a widespread threat to human health (see *Sustenance and Health*, p4).

### **Government**

The Republic of Cameroon is a multiparty presidential republic divided administratively into 10 regions—8 Francophone and 2 Anglophone (see p6-7 of *History and Myth* & p1-3 of *Language and Communication*).

### **Executive Branch**

Elected by popular vote to a 7-year term, the President serves as head of state and commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces. Current President Paul Biya, who has been in power since November 1982, amended the constitution in 2008 to remove presidential term limits. This action permitted his reelection again in October 2011 and again in 2018. The President appoints the Prime Minister, 30% of senators, and various other civilian and military officials. He exerts power over all branches of government and has the formal power to convene and dissolve the legislature.



President Biya appointed the current Prime Minister, Joseph Dion Ngute in January 2019. The Prime Minister, in theory, acts as head of government, although he wields little power. Having the option to dismiss the Prime Minister at will, the President vacated the Prime Minister's position twice from 1972 to 1975 and again from 1984 to 1991.

## Legislative Branch

Like the Prime Minister, the legislature has limited power to do more than pass laws that the President supports. While the 1996 Constitution called for a 2-chamber legislature composed of a Senate and National Assembly, only the National Assembly existed until the first Senate elections occurred in April 2013. The 100-member Senate serves as the upper house of Parliament, consisting of 70 elected and 30 presidentially appointed members who serve 5-year terms. The elected officials are chosen by local council electors from the country's 10 regions. All senate members belong to the President's Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM).

Cameroonian voters directly elect the 180 National Assembly representatives to 5-year terms, although the President can lengthen or shorten these terms at will. Since the 2007 elections, the President's CPDM party has held a commanding majority in the National Assembly with 152 of 180 seats.

## Judicial Branch

Political corruption, inefficiencies, political pressures, and a patchwork of legal frameworks characterize Cameroon's judicial system. The 8 Francophone regions follow the French civil code, while British common law is the legal foundation for Cameroon's 2 Anglophone regions. Traditional legal customs and courts (customary law) also inform judicial matters in both the Anglophone and Francophone regions, particularly those governing family, inheritance, and property (see *Sex and Gender*). Although its multiple legal



systems typically remain separate, Cameroon unified some aspects of the penal code in 2005. The Supreme Court is the highest court in the country, although its rulings are not necessarily binding. Bribes and political influence often determine judicial outcomes.



### Traditional Government Structures

A number of hereditary kingdoms and chiefdoms still exist predominantly in the Northwest, having partial sovereignty over their territories. Kings and chiefs, often called **fons**, serve as the leaders, judges, and spiritual mediators for their communities whose judgments are binding within their jurisdictions.

### Political Climate

By dominating the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, President Biya has assured his desired political outcomes for over 30 years. Even in his 80's, with a term extending until 2025, Biya has not indicated that he is grooming a successor. Consequently, a void in leadership continuity could have a destabilizing political effect in the event of his sudden incapacitation or death.

Although a number of opposition parties have participated in elections since the introduction of a multi-party system in early 1990s (see p7-10 of *History and Myth*), the CPDM under various names has controlled the country at the local and national levels since 1960. Discouraged by election fraud, voters turn out in low numbers. Political opponents to the President's CPDM risk arrest, exile, or death.

Cameroon's religious and regional groups compete for political influence, particularly those from the predominantly Christian South and Muslim North (see p3-4 & 6-7 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Some people believe that the transfer of power from the former Muslim northerner President Ahidjo to Christian southerner President Biya was intended to set a precedent for the North and South to alternate having presidential representation. Since the 1984 coup attempt, the North's power has waned. Similarly, Anglophone Cameroonians desiring greater regional autonomy or even independence tend to blame Francophone political dominance for failing to inadequately represent them (see p6-8 of *History and Myth*).

While hundreds of ethnic groups (see "Ethnic Groups" below) compete for influence, officials often favor their own groups

when awarding contracts, jobs, and projects. President Biya, a member of the Beti ethnic group, has lavished his political gains on other Beti while accumulating millions himself. Transparency International's 2023 corruption index ranked Cameroon 140 out of 180 countries.

## Defense

The Cameroon Armed Forces (*Forces Armées Camerounaises* or FAC) are a competent midsize force. Encompassing the Army, Air Force, and Navy, the FAC is responsible for protecting the country from internal and external threats. Although a reform program began in 2001, budget constraints and passive leadership have left these efforts unfinished.

Much of the FAC's equipment is outdated. Cameroon receives most of its new military equipment, training, and advisory support from France, although the US, Spain, Romania, Israel, China, and South Africa have supplied equipment and/or expertise as well. Cameroon formed an 800-member peacekeeping battalion in 2008 after receiving US training through the Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance program.

Cameroon's military expenses were \$540 million in 2024, less than 1.01% of its GDP. Prior to 2019, Cameroonian defense expenditures had



consistently hovered between 1.3% and 1.6% of GDP since 2002. As of 2024, active armed forces personnel numbered around 38,000, less than a mere 0.1% of the labor force. Military service is voluntary and requires high school graduation and a 4-year service commitment. Over 3% of Cameroon's military personnel are HIV positive, which detracts from force readiness (see p4 of *Sustenance and Health*).

To help consolidate his power base, Biya has favored his Beti ethnicity in military promotions. Generally, the FAC does not adequately reflect Cameroon's diversity: only a small percentage of generals were from Anglophone regions.



**Air Force:** The Air Force's chief mission is to support ground forces with airlift; however, its aging fleet limits its ability to mount credible air defense or strike capabilities. As of 2024, the Air Force had around 6 combat capable and training aircraft, 2 intelligence aircraft, 14 transporters, 16 helicopters, and 1,000 personnel. The Air Force's 3 main aerial bases are in Yaoundé, Douala, and Garoua.

**Army:** Established in 1959, the Army is the oldest and largest Cameroonian service with roughly 33,500 personnel. Its mission is to protect the country from external threats and help maintain internal security. Since the 1990s, Cameroon has been preparing its Army forces to engage in what it perceives as its greatest threat—an oil dispute with Nigeria over ownership of the Bakassi Peninsula's swamplands (see “Bakassi Dispute with Nigeria” below). Created in 2001 to combat crime, the Special Rapid Intervention Brigade is a tactical Army unit that answers directly to the President. It is known for violently containing protests.

**Navy (MNR):** Cameroon's approximately 1,500 Navy personnel are charged with protecting Cameroon's coast, territorial waters, internal waterways, and maritime interests. Since the 2000s, the

Navy's budget has modestly increased to enable some modernization. The Navy's fleet strength is 20 and consists of roughly 15 patrol and coastal combatants, 5 landing craft, and 1 auxiliary. Lacking an adequate



number of sea-worthy vessels, the Navy has difficulty confronting piracy, illegal fishing, illicit trafficking, natural disaster evacuations, and other challenges at sea.

**Internal Security Forces:** Cameroon's French-style paramilitary force consists of 9,000 gendarmes responsible for internal rural security. Similarly, the civilian police provide security in urban areas, while a joint FAC unit serves as the Presidential Guard. Cameroon also has a Fire Fighter Corps.

## Cameroon Air Force Rank Insignia



Army  
General



Corps  
General



Division  
General



Brigadier  
General



Colonel



Lieutenant  
Colonel



Commander



Captain



Lieutenant



Second  
Lieutenant



Warrant  
Officer  
Class I



Warrant  
Officer  
Class II



Flight  
Sergeant



Sergeant



Corporal



Lance  
Corporal



Leading  
Aircraftman

## Security

### **Bakassi Dispute with Nigeria:**

Relations between Cameroon and Nigeria became tense after a dispute over ownership of the oil-rich Bakassi Peninsula. In 2002, the International Court of Justice decided in favor of Cameroon, leading to Nigeria removing its troops following bilateral talks in 2006. Despite Nigerian compliance, Bakassi remains a problem as the peninsula's chiefly Nigerian residents tend to be resistant under Cameroon's control. Skirmishes periodically prompt calls for Nigerian intervention and could cause cross-border violence.



**Terrorism:** Boko Haram is a Nigeria-based terrorist group seeking to spread Islamic law and eliminate Western influence. Having cells in northern Cameroon, Boko Haram threatened the country with suicide bombings in 2013, shortly after killing a Cameroonian mayor and kidnapping French tourists. Since 2009, Boko Haram has destroyed entire villages, killed over 40,000 people, and displaced over 3.01 million others across the Lake Chad region.

**Domestic Insecurity:** Foreign nationals visiting urban areas are advised to be particularly vigilant of street crimes, such as theft, sexual assault, and carjacking. In addition, Cameroonians sometimes publicly protest government actions, often leading to bloody clashes with security forces. Dozens of people died in several cities in 2008 while protesting the rising costs of basic necessities and President Biya's elimination of presidential term limits (see p10 of *History and Myth*).

**Regional Instability and Transnational Crime:** Cameroon is the temporary home of approximately 475,357 refugees fleeing conflicts in the CAR, Nigeria, and elsewhere. The violence and lawlessness they have fled often spill over Cameroon's porous

borders, making travel near border areas dangerous. Cameroon is also a country of origin, destination, and transit for human trafficking. Although the country passed an anti-trafficking law in 2011, rampant corruption, poverty, and lack of job opportunities allow criminals to continue illicit human trafficking and smuggling activities. Pirates also operate in and near Cameroon's coastal waters.

### Foreign Relations

Cameroon's foreign policy is moderate in its approach and modest in its influence, as seen in its inclination to resolve transnational disputes through multilateral forums rather than direct intervention. Similarly, Cameroon is a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, a bloc of developing countries favoring Third World solidarity and cooperation. While Cameroon's colonial ties have facilitated its participation in both the Francophonie International Organization and the British Commonwealth, it favors the French currency along with fellow Francophone African countries (see p3 of *Economics and Resources*). Cameroon's first President actively sought friendly relations with neighboring countries, although President Biya has focused less on his foreign policy role—a stance which limits an already unassertive foreign policy.

### Cameroon-US Relations:



US-Cameroon relations are amicable yet distant, hampered somewhat by Cameroon's denial of domestic political freedoms. Notwithstanding, the US executes a substantial engagement strategy in Cameroon. Its focus is on trade, economic

development, regional security, healthcare, democratization, environmental protection, and military cooperation. US military engagement is designed to strengthen their bilateral partnership by improving Cameroonian capacity through joint-force exercises and medical/dental exchanges. High-ranking US military personnel infrequently visit Cameroon—the US AFRICOM Commander visited in 2008, followed by the US President in 2009.

## Ethnic Groups

Cameroon has over 250 ethnic groups with no single group comprising more than 22% of the population. The largest individual ethnic groups are the Bamiléké in the West (a Highlander group), the Fulani in the North, and the Beti in the South (a Bantu group). Each Cameroonian ethnic group has its unique lifestyle, cultural norms, and group titles. Although most ethnic groups tolerate one another, localized disputes, discrimination, and ethnic nepotism are prevalent. Ethnic fissures appear to have become more pronounced under President Biya.



### Highlanders

Highland groups, prominently the Bamiléké and Bamoun, live in the West and Northwest and account for about 32% of Cameroon's population. Highlanders, also known as Grassfielders, speak Sudanic languages and traditionally earned a living through farming or raising livestock. Most rural Bamiléké are agriculturalists, while urban dwellers are entrepreneurs holding about 70% of professional jobs. Even though some Bamiléké speak English and others French (see p1 of *Languages and Communication*), the Bamiléké culture serves as a unifying feature.

The Bamoun ethnic group is an 18th-century combination of some Bamiléké and another Highland group, the Tikar. One of the Bamoun Kingdom's most notable leaders was Sultan Ibrahim Njoya. In the early 20th century, he created a written script for his ethnic language and a comprehensive religious doctrine that adapted Islamic rituals to Bamoun traditional beliefs (see p5 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Today, many Bamoun live in the western city of Famboun where the current Bamoun sultan resides.

## Bantus

Meaning “people” or “humans,” the word Bantu represents ethnic groups throughout Africa who speak Bantu languages and historically followed sedentary farming lifestyles. In Cameroon, the Equatorial and Northwestern Bantu groups together comprise about 27% of the population.

One Cameroonian Bantu group, the Douala, traditionally has held a predominant socio-political role due to its strategic location along the coast. The Douala's early and frequent exposure to various European groups allowed it to trade, accumulate wealth, and attain higher levels of Western education than other groups (see p4 of *History and Myth*).

Another Bantu group, the Beti, traditionally lived in the southern rainforests and has risen to prominence in the military, civil service, and other official capacities thanks to the support of fellow Beti, President Paul Biya.

## Kirdi

At 11% of the population, the term Kirdi encompasses around 25 historically non-Muslim northern ethnic groups which the dominant, Muslim Fulani labeled as “infidels.” Although having since embraced Islam, most Kirdi groups whether Muslim or non-Muslim have retained their cultures rather than accept Fulani traditions. Despite their differences, all Kirdi groups share a common history of having had to flee, fight, or otherwise evade Fulani persecution and cultural dominance for centuries (see p3



of *History and Myth*). This long history of antagonism has resulted in Kirdi resentment toward the Fulani.

## Fulani

Accounting for 10% of the population, the primarily Muslim Fulani people have dominated

northern Cameroon for centuries and are a driving force behind the predominance of Islam in the region (see p3-4 of *History and Myth* and p3-4 *Religion and Spirituality*).

Having assimilated many groups into their culture, the Fulani continue to exert some power over other non-Muslim groups like the Kirdi. At various times, the Fulani have required tribute from, exploited, or enslaved these non-Muslims (see p3 of *History and Myth*). Cameroon's first President, Ahmadou Ahidjo, was the son of a Fulani chief and a woman of Kirdi slave descent.

### Eastern Nigritic

The Eastern Nigritic ethnic category is comprised of many smaller groups that historically lived in Eastern Cameroon on the shores of the Logone River. Together, these groups comprise 7% of Cameroon's population. They mainly speak languages from the Niger-Congo linguistic family.

### Other Groups

Short stature groups such as the Baka, commonly referred to as Pygmies, reside deep within the southern forests. Although they

are likely the oldest group in Cameroon (see p1 of *History and Myth*), the Baka are often disadvantaged and marginalized, perhaps lacking identity documentation because of their remotely displaced location. The Bantu, in



particular, exploit groups like the Baka for cheap labor, mock them, and encroach on their lands. The Baka and other African groups constitute a combined total of 13% of Cameroon's population, while non-Africans comprise less than 1% of the population.

### Social Relations

Ethnic, religious, linguistic, social, and political differences enable Cameroonians to express a variety of beliefs and behaviors and serve as discriminators for determining social status. For example, advancement through education is a social imperative for the more affluent, urban-dwelling. Conversely, the Douala living along the coast acquire social status through wisdom inherent in old age. Similarly, local communities often

convey elevated social status to nobles, village elders, and traditionally prominent families.

Some Cameroonian ethnic groups are somewhat classless, depending on the consensus of village elders to reach political and social decisions. Still others, such as the northern Fulani, have a rigid hierarchy with clearly defined roles for leaders, nobles, common people, and non-Fulani servants.

The urban political and military elite—now mostly members of President Biya’s Beti ethnic group—are at the top of Cameroon’s national hierarchy. Consequently, the privileged often enjoy luxurious lifestyles that insulate them from the hardships of the less fortunate who struggle to acquire healthcare, education, and personal security. For example, many wealthy Cameroonians employ 24-hour private security guards to protect their homes in urban areas, while the less wealthy must contend with robberies and other petty crimes.

Cameroonians tend to emphasize the importance of groups—extended family, ethnic or religious affiliations, and even same-age classmates—over individuals. Personal relationships and networks are crucial to maintaining social status, as group members share in each other’s success, regardless of whether they have earned it (see p1 of *Family and Kinship*). Thus, well-



paid Cameroonians distribute their wealth and are expected to help other group members succeed through preferential hiring. This “group first” mentality helps explain the existence of widespread nepotism and ethnic favoritism in Cameroon. By helping

one’s own group get ahead, successful members get a return on their investment and benefit from their group’s social and professional connections.



## 3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

### Overview

According to 2022 estimates, 66% of Cameroonians identified as Christian, 31% as Muslim, 1% as traditional religious practitioners, and 2% as “none” or “other”. Other estimates determine that Muslims account for 19% of the total population, while Christians traditional practitioners, and others account for 70%, 3%, and 8% respectively.



Cameroon's varied religious landscape can be traced to its cultural diversity and unique historical trajectory. Simultaneous to foreign missionaries introducing Christianity to Cameroon's coastal peoples in the 19th century, Islamic holy warriors from present-day Niger and Nigeria were spreading Islam among Cameroon's northern inhabitants.

### Traditional Beliefs

Traditional religious beliefs and practices predate the introduction of both Christianity and Islam to Cameroon. Many Cameroonian groups practiced animism, the belief that the spirit of life or consciousness resides in all objects, both animate and inanimate. According to animism, all natural objects—both plants and animals—are sacred, a conviction that establishes a close connection between animists and their environment. The Baka, for example, traditionally believed in a forest spirit that was simultaneously mother, father, and guardian to the group.

Many ethnic groups in Cameroon also recognized a supreme being, a creator god who was good, merciful, and unknowable. For example, the Nso Highlanders worshipped a supreme being, **Nyuy**, at a community-wide annual ritual that involved travel to sacred sites and the sacrifice of a ram.

Many Cameroonian groups also believed that the spirits of their ancestors participated in daily life by guiding or obstructing human behavior. To influence or understand the spirits'

intentions, the various ethnic groups held special ceremonies or performed certain rites. Members of the Fang, a Bantu ethnic group in the South, carved **bieri** boxes as containers for their ancestors' remains, which they consulted before hunting or making war. Some Bamiléké Highlanders retained the skulls of their dead ancestors as a way of honoring them.



Other groups supported secret societies whose members maintained law and order and educated the next generation in religious beliefs. Each ethnic group traditionally held ceremonies to mark birth and death, celebrate initiation, promote healing, and dispel evil spirits—many still do. Food and palm wine were often offered to the ancestors during the ceremonies, which also included making music, drumming, singing, and dancing. Many Cameroonian groups carved elaborate masks that were worn during funeral or other rituals.

## Islam

### Origins of Islam

Islam dates to the 6th century AD, when Muhammad, whom Muslims consider God's final Prophet, was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Muslims believe the Archangel Gabriel visited Muhammad over a 23-year period revealing to him the Qur'an, or "Holy Book."

**Muslim Sects:** Islam is divided into 2 sects: Sunni and Shi'a. Sunni Muslims are distinguished by their belief that the leader (**caliph**) of the Muslim community (**ummah**) should be elected. Most of Cameroon's Muslims are Sunni Muslims. Conversely, Shi'a Muslims believe the **caliph** should be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.

### Shared Perspectives

Many Islamic tenets parallel those of Judaism and Christianity. In fact, Muslims consider Christians and Jews "people of the Book," referring to biblical scriptures, because they also share their monotheistic belief in one God.

**Scriptures:** Much of the content of the Qur'an is similar to teachings and stories found in the Christian Bible's Old and New Testaments. Muslims view Islam as the completion of previous revelations to Jewish and Christian prophets.



### Concept of Jihad

The concept of *jihad*, or inner striving, is a fundamental element within Islam. Traditionally, it is the principled and moral pursuit

of God's command to lead a virtuous life. It should not be confused with violence and notions of "holy war" that often are associated with the term. Most Muslims strongly oppose terrorism and consider it contrary to Islamic beliefs.

### Ramadan

Ramadan is a month-long time for inner reflection, self-control, and focus on God. During this time, Muslims who are physically able are required to fast from dawn to sunset. Many Muslims believe that denying their hunger helps them to learn self-control, appreciate the difficulties of the poor, and gain spiritual renewal. Ramadan is the 9th month of the Islamic calendar and is anchored in 3 holy days, *Lailat al-Qadr*, *Eid al-Adha*, and *Eid al-Fitr* (see p3 of *Time and Space*).

### Introduction of Islam in Cameroon

Islam penetrated northern Cameroon in a series of waves. Although Arab traders brought Islam to the region as early as the 10th century, Islam's initial impact was minimal. In contrast, a 19th century holy war resulted in permanent change to Cameroon's religious landscape.

**Fulani Migrations:** Nomadic Fulani groups migrated to northern Cameroon from Nigeria beginning in the 13th century, bringing their Islamic faith with them. As the Fulani gained control of more land, some groups they encountered converted to Islam although many others retreated from the newcomers. By the end of the 18th century, the Fulani and their converts were scattered throughout the northern region.

**Usman dan Fodio's Holy Warriors:** In early 19th century, Usman dan Fodio, an Islamic scholar in Nigeria who objected to the prevailing interpretation of Islam, began a holy war to cleanse and purify the faith. In Cameroon his warriors were intent on converting the "pagans" who upheld their indigenous beliefs by force if necessary. They converted or displaced many groups—the Fulani in particular who were eager to the cause. Following these events, the Islamic Fulani became the dominant group in Cameroon's North.

## Christianity

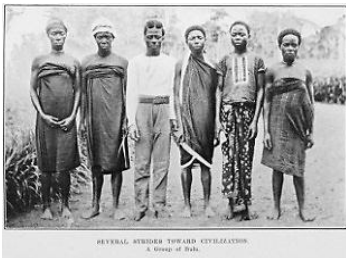
### Introduction of Christianity in Cameroon

Although Roman Catholicism arrived with the Portuguese in the 15th century (see p3-4 of *History and Myth*), there were no organized missionary efforts until the 19th century. Many missionaries, both Protestant and Catholic, were inspired by humanitarian concerns and concentrated predominantly in the South. Accordingly, they built missions that provided for the spiritual, medical, and educational needs of the converts.

Nevertheless, many of the same missionaries saw indigenous cultures as degraded and uncivilized and believed it was their Christian duty to share Western civilization with the Cameroonians. Dismissive of indigenous practices and beliefs, most missionaries encouraged their converts to adopt Western-style gender roles, family structures, housing, clothing, and agricultural practices. In addition, many missionaries collaborated with colonial administrators in the development and execution of colonial policies, thus making religion an instrument of politics.

English Baptist missionaries arrived in Cameroon in 1845, followed by American

Presbyterians and Jamaican Baptists. Later arrivals included missionaries from the German Basel Mission Society, the



German Catholic Pallotin Fathers, Norwegian Lutheran Church, and French Catholic Holy Fathers.

### Local Responses to the New Religions

Cameroonians responded to the new religions in various ways. Some converted quickly to Christianity to take advantage of the access to education and economic opportunities that missionaries could provide. In the North, some Cameroonians converted to Islam, while others retreated to isolated, mountainous areas where they maintained their traditional beliefs (see p11-13 of *Political and Social Relations*). Other Cameroonians accepted some aspects of the new religions while combining them with their traditional beliefs.

**Bamoun:** Impressed with the military dominance of the Fulani in the late 19th century, King Njoya of the Bamoun Kingdom (see p11 of *Political and Social Relations*) arranged for **marabouts**, religious teachers, to instruct him in Islam and build a mosque

for his followers. Sensing a political change with the Germans' construction of a military garrison in the early 20th century, Njoya welcomed German Protestant missionaries and allowed them to open a school. Njoya then developed a writing system to transcribe hymns and Bible verses into the indigenous language and replaced the mosque with a church.



After the Germans' departure (see p5-6 of *History and Myth*), Njoya introduced his own religion. Struck by the similarities in Christianity and Islam, Njoya developed a comprehensive religious doctrine based on Islamic rituals but adapted to Bamoun traditional beliefs. Although Njoya later abandoned this effort and returned to Islam, all 3 traditions – Christian, Islamic, and indigenous – still influence the Bamoun worldview.

**Fang:** Feeling the pressures of colonial society in the early 20th century, some Fang combined aspects of ancient ancestor rites and initiation ceremonies with certain Catholic beliefs to found the **Bwiti** movement. Also known as *Eglise de Banzie* or the Church of the Initiates, **Bwiti** has 2 to 3 million followers in Africa today. The central ritual of the church is a multiple-day initiation

that all members must undergo in order to achieve “one-heartedness” or a sense of community with God, ancestors, and other church members. **Bwiti** rituals include a mix of playing instruments, dancing, singing, and consuming **iboga**, a root that causes hallucinations when ingested.

### Religion Today

Religious ceremonies are popular social occasions for Cameroonians. Although Muslims, Christians, and traditional religion practitioners are found in every region, Christians are concentrated primarily in the South and West. Generally, the 2 Anglophone regions are largely Protestant, while the 8 Francophone regions are largely Catholic (see p6-8 of *History and Myth* and p1-3 of *Language and Communication*). Predominantly Muslim groups include the Fulani in the North and the Bamoun in the West.

### Christianity

While the well-established Catholic Church and mainstream Protestant denominations such as the Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Baptists, dominate; other types of Christian churches have emerged in Cameroon in the last decades. African elements, such as music and dance, generally infuse worship services often held in indigenous languages (see p1 of *Language and Communication*).



**Independent African Churches:** Independent African churches (IAC) take several different forms, although each usually traces its founding to a charismatic leader who broke away from a mainstream Protestant mission church. IACs typically incorporate some traditional African religious beliefs and practices in their services.

**Charismatic Holy Ghost Churches:** Also known as Pentecostal churches, charismatic churches are distinguished by their informal services during which worshippers engage in ecstatic singing, clapping, and dancing, pray loudly, and speak in tongues. Members interpret the Bible literally and believe in

prophecies, miracles through prayer, and faith healing. They are discouraged from consuming alcohol, smoking cigarettes, and gambling. Pentecostals do not typically incorporate traditional beliefs and practices in their services since they view them as evil and incompatible with their Christian faith.



## Islam

Although Muslims are concentrated in the northern part of the country, especially the Northwest Province, there are also significant Muslim populations in large cities, including

Douala and Yaoundé. Each Fulani Muslim community, called a *lamidat*, is led by the *lamido*, the “commander of believers”. Although there is little religious-based violence in the country, Muslims in the North sometimes discriminate against the non-Muslim Kirdi (see *Political and Social Relations*, p12).

## Traditional Beliefs

For many Cameroonians, whether Christian or Muslim, a traditional worldview continues to infuse daily life. Many inhabitants still uphold the belief that spirits or supernatural powers reside in many objects, while ancestral and nature spirits influence their daily lives. Traditional rituals are especially important in burial and marriage ceremonies (see p4-5 of *Family and Kinship*), health and wellness (see p3 of *Sustenance and Health*), and negotiating family relationships.

If misfortune or illness befalls a Cameroonian or his community, he may consult a *ngambe* or fortune-teller to identify which spirit is causing the misfortune and to suggest potential cures. Some Cameroonians may blame bad luck, sickness, death, and accidents on an unhappy ancestor spirit, while others consider misfortune a result of deliberate and malevolent witchcraft (*muyongo*). Cameroonians may take measures to protect themselves from witchcraft such as purchasing “insurance” from a “witch-doctor” or hiring a “witch-hunter” to identify the witch and

perform an exorcism. Although the practice of witchcraft is a crime, prosecution is arbitrary and inconsistent due to a typical lack of evidence and proof.

### Religion and the Law

The constitution and other laws protect religious freedom. All religious groups must register with Cameroon's Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization and receive approval from the President before they can legally operate. Generally, the government has been slow in recent years to approve new applicants and categorically refuses to register any traditional religious groups.

Religious organizations may publish and broadcast both Christian and Islamic religious services on state-sponsored television and radio broadcasts without restriction. The government observes both Christian and Islamic holy days as national holidays (see p3 of *Time and Space*).

### Religion and Politics

Although he tried to include representatives of many ethnic groups in his government, Cameroon's first President—Ahmadou Ahidjo, a northern Muslim—allowed Muslims to



monopolize the most important ministries and the security services (see *History and Myth*, p8-9). As a result, southern Christians were disadvantaged politically. When present President Paul Biya, a southern Christian, took office in 1982, Muslims argued that the government implemented policies that marginalized the North's Muslim population.

Recently, some Christian and Islamic organizations have become active in social movements, vocally condemning corruption and the government's insensitivity to the needs of the poor. Christian churches have also had a significant impact on other societal issues, remaining important providers of healthcare (see p3-4 of *Sustenance and Health*) and protesting the traditional practice of female genital mutilation (see p4 of *Sex and Gender*).



## 4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

### Overview

Cameroonian families tend to be large and provide an essential social safety net. Individuals are expected to care for less fortunate relatives, respect their elders, and subordinate their own desires to those of their families.



### Family Structure

Most Cameroonian households are multigenerational and patriarchal. Rural family members typically live together in extended-family compounds that house a man, his wife or wives (see “Polygyny” below), his parents, unmarried children, and other relatives. In patriarchal societies, the male head-of-household makes key family decisions in consultation with elders and other male relatives (see p1 of *Sex and Gender*).

Urban and more Westernized Cameroonians are more likely to live in single nuclear family units (parents and their children) segregated from their rural extended families. Nevertheless, these nuclear families usually retain close ties with their distant relatives. Similarly, a Cameroonian may reside with a wealthy uncle or childless relative in times of financial need or to pursue an educational or employment opportunity. Cameroonians tend to have a flexible definition of “relative,” which may also refer to close, non-blood-related friends.



**Polygyny:** Legal in Cameroon, polygyny is the practice of a man having multiple wives simultaneously. Cameroonian Muslims and followers of traditional religions are often polygynous, while most Christian men have only one wife (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Over 22% of Cameroonian women are in polygynous marriages.

In rural areas, polygyny is a source for acquiring labor to tend more land (see p2 of *Economics and Resources*). By contrast, in urban areas, polygyny serves as a means of demonstrating wealth and high social status (see p13-14 of *Political and Social Relations*). Some families prefer that their daughters become the second wife of a wealthy man rather than the only wife of a man with lower status. Polygyny is less common among the younger generation, Cameroonians with higher education, and urbanites.

**Children:** Cameroonians generally cherish children, viewing them as signs of good fortune, vitality, and wealth. Consequently, couples are encouraged to have many offspring.



Parents typically begin preparing their children for adult roles and responsibilities early, teaching them to assist in household chores around age 5. Boys also learn specific skills from their fathers and other male relatives and may accompany them to work. This training is considered

important, as sons are expected to earn wages to support their parents in their old age. By contrast, female relatives teach the girls to cook, clean, and, in rural areas, raise crops that benefit the entire household. In addition, girls often care for their younger siblings and cousins.

### Residence

Cameroonian residences vary depending on location, family composition, and family financial status. In rural areas, families traditionally live in **sarres**, compounds of single-room mud or straw structures that cluster around a common courtyard where meals are prepared. In a polygynous family, each wife lives with her daughters and younger sons in a separate accommodation, while older sons have their own rooms elsewhere in the compound. In both rural and urban areas, many Cameroonians construct homes of concrete bricks and iron or aluminum roofs. Some wealthier urban Cameroonians construct brightly painted, multi-room homes built behind high walls and featuring upholstered furniture and decorative gardens. Many urban dwellers live in apartment complexes.

## Rites of Passage

Cameroonians observe rites-of-passage ceremonies to mark the various stages of life. Rituals may vary considerably based on the respective ethnic and religious heritage.

**Birth and Naming:** The arrival of a healthy newborn prompts celebratory visits from family and friends, often after a time of seclusion for the mother and child. Twins are especially esteemed among some Cameroonian groups. A popular custom among some Grassfielder groups (see p11 of *Political and Social Relations*) is to bury a baby's umbilical cord within the family compound as a means of ensuring the child's health and connection to its ancestors.

Names are important in Cameroonian culture and often hold familial and religious significance—parents may name their children after relatives or sacred individuals. Children born to Muslim families are



named at a celebration held 7 days after birth, while Catholic and some other Christian newborns are christened (given their official name) and baptized at a church ceremony.

**Circumcision:** Customary among Christians, Muslims, and traditional religious practitioners alike (see *Religion and Spirituality*), male circumcision is administered to about 91% of Cameroonian boys. While some groups conduct the circumcision immediately after birth, others wait until about age 15 to commemorate the boy's transition into adulthood. While popular in some African cultures, female circumcision is relatively rare in Cameroon (see p4 of *Sex and Gender*).

**Coming-of-Age:** Besides male circumcision, other special traditional rituals and ceremonies are used to acknowledge a boy's passage into adulthood. For instance, the southern Beti people traditionally required boys of age 15 or 16 to live in the forest unchaperoned for a year, where they had to achieve deeds of strength and courage. A young man's success would then be celebrated with drinking, dancing, and the

acknowledgment that he was ready to marry, which most Cameroonian groups consider the final step to adulthood.

### Dating

Dating is a more common practice in urban than in rural areas, although most young couples, regardless of location, have the opportunity to get to know one another before marrying. As in Western society, young adults usually meet prospective partners at school, work, church, parties, or traditional social gatherings (see p2-3 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

To avoid an expensive brideprice (see below), some couples are known to live and sometimes have children together without, or in advance of, marrying. Although devout Christian and Muslim families tend to consider out-of-wedlock births shameful, other

Cameroonians, in particular the Betis, view pregnancy before marriage as a positive sign that the potential bride is fertile.

### Marriage

On average, Cameroonian women marry by age 20 and men by 28. While the legal marriage age is 18 for

males and 15 for females, rural couples tend to marry at a younger age than urban. In 2018, 30% of girls were married before they turned 18. This number varied according to the region and reached a staggering 60% in the northern part of the country. As a consequence, early marriage usually disrupts a young bride's education (see p5 of *Learning and Knowledge*).

**Spouse Selection:** Because marriage binds not just a couple but also their families, Cameroonian parents and other relatives have considerable input into a Cameroonian's spouse selection. Even if they do not directly select the marriage partner, family members at least ensure the future spouse's financial, moral, religious, and social suitability. Families generally prefer that their young relatives marry within the same ethnic group, although marriage outside one's group is becoming more common, especially in urban areas.



**Brideprice:** After a man has identified a potential wife, he and his family arrange to visit her family to ask for her hand in marriage. If the families collectively agree with the match, the families negotiate a brideprice—a gift which the groom’s family offers to the bride’s as compensation for the loss of her labor. Grooms may pay the equivalent of thousands of dollars to the bride’s family in addition to gifts of meat, salt, livestock, palm oil, and clothes. Once the brideprice is set, the families select a wedding date.

**Weddings:** Varying by region and ethnic group, weddings are generally joyous events often lasting several days and hosted by the groom and his family. While Christian weddings typically occur in a church, Muslim couples traditionally sign an Islamic marriage contract in the presence of close family and friends. Brides often wear Western-style wedding dresses or brightly patterned traditional *pagnes* matching those of the other women in their wedding party (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*).



After the official ceremony, the couple gathers with family and friends to celebrate the occasion with entertainment that often includes musicians, dancers, and comedians.

## Death

Commemoration of death typically involves both a mourning period and celebration of the deceased’s life. Following Islamic traditions, Muslims typically bury their dead within 24 hours. Traditionalists follow unique burial rituals intended to ease the deceased’s transition to the spirit world and honor ancestral spirits (see *Religion and Spirituality*, p1-2 & 7-8). Most non-Muslim groups observe a 7-10 day period of mourning during which community members offer condolences and food to the family. Rituals such as the Grassfielder’s (see *Political and Social Relations*, p11) *cry-die* involve day-long celebrations that include dancing, eating, and wailing. Some Cameroonians bury their loved ones within family compounds rather than cemeteries.

## 5. SEX AND GENDER

### Overview

Although Cameroon's constitution guarantees gender equality, ethnic, religious, and cultural traditions tend to perpetuate female subordination in practice. Traditional female gender roles remain the norm, yet today, women constitute more than half of Cameroon's workforce and hold key societal positions.



### Gender Roles

In rural areas, men and women traditionally perform distinctive tasks. Women produce about 80% of the country's subsistence crops, maintain households, and care for

children. Meanwhile, men are responsible for providing financially for their families by performing wage labor and raising cash crops.

In urban areas, many Cameroonian women work outside of the home in addition to performing household work. In 2023, 67% of women participated in the labor force, primarily in administrative and clerical positions. Cameroonian women are entitled to government-paid maternity leave benefits, while fathers typically receive a shorter period of paid paternity leave.



Women tend to be victims of contradictory laws. Although the constitution grants citizens a "right and obligation to work," it also allows men to overrule their wives' decision to work outside the home.

Similarly, Cameroonian law does not bar sexual harassment or hiring discrimination based on family status. In some situations, women have been obliged to offer sexual favors for promotions or raises, and despite laws mandating pay equity, they still tend to earn less than men.

## Gender and Politics

In proportion to their share of the country's population, women are underrepresented in Cameroonian politics, holding just 31%



of seats in Parliament and 6 of 35 Cabinet posts. In order to increase female representation, the government passed a law in April 2012 that required each political party to have at least one woman on its list of candidates for the

newly created Senate (see p4 of *Political and Social Relations*). In the 2023 Senate elections, 27% of senators were women, and, in the 2020 National Assembly elections, 35% of representatives were women.

Both Cameroon's Ministry of Women's Empowerment and a variety of non-governmental organizations work to protect the legal rights of Cameroonian women and boost their political representation—especially at the national level. At the local level, women tend to have less influence than men due to entrenched traditional norms.

## Gender and Education

Although primary education is compulsory in Cameroon (see p3-4 of *Learning and Knowledge*), only 91 girls were enrolled in primary school for every 100 enrolled boys as of 2019. Some parents choose to send only their male children to school in order to better prepare them to compete favorably in the workforce. Consequently, the males will be financially able to care for their parents in old age (see p2 of *Family and Kinship*). Although male and female enrollment rates are comparable at the secondary level, many girls drop out after puberty because of early marriage, unwanted sexual attention from male teachers and students, and pregnancy.

## Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Although rape and other forms of GBV are illegal, GBV is widespread likely because few cases are prosecuted. Spousal abuse is not considered cause for divorce and even considered a sign of affection in some areas. Some men believe that

payment of a brideprice entitles them to treat wives as their property or as they see fit.

In a 2022 report, over 50% of partnered women faced domestic violence, while 33% faced emotional and 20% faced sexual violence. In total, 65% of women were confronted with GBV. Although the minimum punishment is 5 years imprisonment, convicted rapists typically receive lesser punishments—less than 10% are even convicted. This low rate is endorsed in some cases by victims' families, who elect to forfeit prosecution to instead arrange a marriage between the victim and the assailant for the sake of family honor.

### Gender Equality and the Law

Although Cameroon's constitution states that women and men are equal before the law, other legal provisions undercut this assertion and relegate women to a lower social status. For example, the constitution states that a man chooses where the family makes its home and also permits him to restrict his wife's employment at his discretion. Laws and norms not in the constitution also limit the status of women. For example, women face a higher burden of proof when trying to obtain a divorce on grounds of infidelity. A man only has to verify that his wife had a single adulterous affair, yet a woman has to show that her husband is a habitual adulterer. The government is considering reforms that would rectify these and other forms of gender inequality in national laws. Nevertheless, any such reforms would not affect local customary laws, which are often biased against women (see p4 of *Political and Social Relations*).

**Breast Ironing:** Women in some parts of Cameroon practice “breast ironing,” a painful and traumatic form of GBV in which hot objects are used to reshape the chests of or limit the breast development of adolescent female relatives. The intent behind breast ironing is to make girls less attractive to males who



through their appeal might inflict other forms of GBV. About 25% of Cameroonian females have undergone breast ironing, 53% in some regions.

**Female Genital Mutilation (FGM):** About 1% of women in Cameroon have undergone FGM, a procedure whereby the female sex organ is altered with the intent of reducing sexual pleasure and promoting virginity. FGM is most common among poorly educated Muslims in the Far North region.

### Sex and Procreation

Cameroonians have traditionally prized fertility, considering it a reflection of their health and moral and physical strength. Some groups welcome pregnancy before marriage as a favorable sign of a bride's ability to bear children (see p2 of *Family and Kinship*). Due in part to these traditional values, the birthrate in Cameroon remains relatively high at 4.4 children-per-woman. This rate is on par with the sub-Saharan African average.



The government considers the fertility level to be too high and has invested in programs to educate the public on the benefits of contraception. As of 2018, around 19% of Cameroonian women used contraception, most of whom were educated city dwellers with jobs outside the home. Catholics, Muslims, rural dwellers, and women in polygynous marriages are less likely use contraception. Abortion is prohibited except in cases of rape or grave health risks to the mother.

### Homosexuality

Homosexuality is illegal in Cameroon, where offenders face fines up to \$400 and prison terms up to 5 years. As of 2024, consensual homosexual behavior is prosecuted more aggressively in Cameroon than in nearly any other country. Alleged homosexuals are sometimes convicted and serve jail time on mere suspicion of homosexual conduct. Discrimination, harassment, and violence against homosexuals and their advocates are common.

## 6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

### Overview

Cameroon is linguistically diverse with over 200 indigenous languages, about half written. Some Cameroonians speak multiple indigenous languages, none of which is spoken as a first language by a majority of the population. During Cameroon's colonial period, French and English became dominant and eventually the official national languages. Few Cameroonians



speak both French and English nor a common native tongue, resulting in a linguistic divide that only amplifies the country's historical, regional, and religious contrasts (see p5 of *Political and Social Relations* and p1 of *Religion*

*and Spirituality*). This linguistic division has been alleviated with the development of informal and simplified pidgin languages that enable speakers of different languages to communicate.

### Indigenous Languages

Indigenous languages generally are not taught in public schools (see *Learning and Knowledge*, p3), while knowledge of indigenous languages is declining primarily in urban areas. A 2019 study conducted by UNESCO found that 28% of respondents use a Cameroonian indigenous language as a mother tongue while 36% use both indigenous and foreign languages. Cameroon's native languages belong to 3 primary language families and are generally mutually unintelligible across the various ethnicities.

**Niger–Congo:** Cameroon is home to 169 Niger–Congo languages, which include various Bantu languages specific to particular ethnic groups (see p12 of *Political and Social Relations*). Within the Bantu subgrouping, over a million people in the South and around Yaoundé speak Ewondo, the language of the Beti ethnic group, while about 200,000 Douala along the coast speak their native Douala dialect. The Fulani's Fulfulde

language is widely spoken in the North as both a first and second language.

**Afro-Asiatic:** Most speakers of Cameroon's 55 Afro-Asiatic languages live in the Muslim North near Chad. One of the most widely spoken languages from this group is Cameroon's unique version of Arabic, Shua Arabic, which has over 75,000 speakers. Hausa and Wandala are 2 other widely used Afro-Asiatic languages, each spoken by over 23,000 Cameroonians.

**Nilo-Saharan:** Kanuri and Ngambai are the 2 Nilo-Saharan languages spoken in Cameroon. Many non-Kanuris in the area speak Kanuri as a second language. Generally, most Kanuri speakers are Muslim.

### French

According to multiple studies, over 80% of Cameroonians spoke French with some proficiency as of 2019. French is widely used in government, the military, commerce, and education throughout the country (see p3 of *Learning and Knowledge*). Occupants of the 8 French-controlled regions, under colonial rule until 1960 (see 6-7 of *History and Myth*), typically learn French from a young age.

Although both French and English are official languages in Cameroon, French is favored in many domains. For example, all official documents are issued throughout the country in both French and English, although the French version usually appears first and more prominently than the often poorly translated English version. In addition, the constitution states that the French version shall prevail if a conflict of interpretation arises between the 2 versions.

Cameroon's 2 Presidents since independence have been French speakers (see p8-10 of *History and Myth*), while the majority of inhabitants in the 2 largest cities — Yaoundé and Douala — primarily speak French.



## English

About 28% of Cameroonians speaks some English, which was introduced primarily in the former British-controlled Northwest and Southwest regions (see p6-7 of *History and Myth*). English is typically learned early and in conjunction with an indigenous language.



As an official language, English is used in government and education primarily in the 2 Anglophone regions (see p2-4 of *Learning and Knowledge*). Many

Francophone Cameroonians express an interest in learning English, not necessarily to communicate with their Anglophone compatriots, but because it is considered a financially advantageous skill that could help link Cameroon to the global economy.

## Pidgin and Creole Languages

Pidgins and creoles typically develop in environments where several languages are spoken. As basic informal intermediary languages, both languages use simple grammar and vocabulary borrowed from one or more languages. They tend to evolve quickly, vary by region, and are sometimes criticized for corrupting standard languages. To most people in linguistically diverse Cameroon, they are indispensable.

Like indigenous languages, pidgin and creoles are not taught in public schools, although students often use them to communicate outside the classroom. While there are written forms that are increasingly used in musical and literary compositions (see p3-4 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*), spelling in these variants is not standardized, making comprehension of such written materials difficult.

**Camfranglais and Kamtok:** A mixture of French, English, and indigenous languages, **Camfranglais** is a relatively new but widely spoken pidgin that enables Francophone and Anglophone Cameroonians to communicate. **Kamtok** (derived

from “Cameroon Talk”), is basically English infused with vocabulary and grammatical forms from several indigenous languages. It has been used as a lingua franca since the 1880s among 10% of the population and as second language by some 40-50%. While based on English, US English speakers typically have difficulty understanding **Kamtok**.

### Communication Overview

Communicating competently with Cameroonians requires not just the ability to speak English, French, Fulfulde, Ewondo, or another indigenous language but also the ability to interact effectively using those languages. This notion of competence includes paralanguage (speech, volume, rate, and intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, and gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these elements of communication help ensure that Cameroonians will interpret statements as the speaker intends.

### Communication Style

Cameroonians are generally passionate and animated when conversing. Because they typically prefer indirect communication, Cameroonians can become uncomfortable admitting they do not know something or offering their frank assessment. Consequently, open-ended rather than specific “yes or no” questions facilitate more responsive answers. If a discussion becomes controversial, Cameroonians tend to use humor to dispel tensions. Consequently, wit, laughter, and teasing are important in Cameroonian conversations. Foreign nationals who can accept teasing gracefully earn respect and friendship.

### Greetings

Cameroonian greetings are warm, convey respect, and set a friendly conversational tone. Neglecting to greet people—whether strangers or acquaintances—is considered extremely impolite. When meeting for the first time,



most Cameroonians make eye contact and shake hands while maintaining a distance of 3 to 4 feet (see p1-2 of *Time and Space*). At subsequent encounters, Cameroonians may snap their fingers after a handshake to indicate trust and friendship. In the Francophone regions, non-Muslim Cameroonian men and women commonly kiss once on each cheek and then snap their fingers when greeting family, friends, or close acquaintances.



Muslim Cameroonians generally avoid physical contact with unrelated members of the opposite sex. Upon meeting a member of the opposite sex, foreign nationals should wait for the Cameroonian to extend his or her hand. If the person does not offer a

hand, it is appropriate to nod and extend verbal greetings.

Greeting rituals have many variants. In particular, chiefs and elders are greeted with bowing and clapping. Because these greeting customs vary widely, foreign nationals should ask their hosts about social protocols for a local leader or rural noble.

### Forms of Address

When meeting in professional and formal contexts for the first time, Cameroonians usually use a French or English title, such as Professor, Parliamentarian, or Chemist, and last name. Work colleagues typically address each other by their first names. French-speakers usually address their peers with the informal French “you” (*tu*), using the more formal “you” (*vous*) along with the appropriate title when addressing elders, superiors, and officials.

In less formal contexts, Cameroonians may address strangers and acquaintances with titles of respect according to their age and social status. For example, Cameroonians might refer to a male acquaintance as “father” or “brother” to indicate respect and closeness (see p1 of *Family and Kinship*). Muslim Cameroonians who have completed a pilgrimage to Mecca are addressed as **Alhaji** (male) or **Alhaja** (female).

## Conversational Topics

Cameroonians typically begin conversations with inquiries about health, family, and other general topics before discussing serious matters. Topics like Cameroonian soccer (see p2 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*), family, hometown or region of origin, music, and cuisine are acceptable when conversing with people of either sex and can help to establish rapport.

Cameroonians tend to avoid contentious topics that could cause disagreement. Topics such as religion, gender roles and equality, ethnic differences, corruption, and politics are usually considered unsuitable for polite conversation, especially with new acquaintances. Urban Cameroonians may be hesitant to share their political opinions for fear of government reprisal.

## Gestures and Sounds

Cameroonians often use hand gestures to emphasize or replace speech, although less likely when speaking to foreigners or people outside their ethnic group. Waving one's index finger back and forth means "no," while nodding upwards and audibly taking a breath indicates "yes." To hail a taxi or beckon someone, Cameroonians place their palms down and motion their fingers toward the palm. Banging a fist thumb-down into the other palm indicates "very much" and "a lot" and is not an angry gesture. Placing both hands on the head indicates disappointment.

Cameroonians may also use certain sounds in the place of words or gestures. For example, hissing is used to get someone's attention and is not considered impolite. Clicking the tongue twice can express agreement or surprise.

## Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) and click on "Resources" for access to language training and other resources.



## Useful Translations

English	French
Yes	Oui
No	Non
Please	S'il vous plaît
Thank you	Merci
You are welcome	De rien/pas de quoi
Hello	Bonjour
Goodbye	Au revoir
Excuse me/sorry	Désolé/je m'excuse
Do you speak English?	Parlez-vous anglais?
I do not speak French	Je ne parle pas français
I understand	Je comprends
I do not understand	Je ne comprends pas
How are you?	Comment allez-vous?
I am fine, thank you. How are you?	Bien, merci, et vous?
I am fine	Bien
What is your name?	Comment vous appelez vous?
My name is ____	Je m'appelle ____
I am pleased to meet you	Heureux de faire votre connaissance/ enchanté
Help	Au secours
Call the police	Appelez la police
Thank you for your help	Merci pour votre aide
Where are the bathrooms?	Où sont les toilettes?
Straight ahead	Tout droit
Right	À droite
Left	À gauche



## 7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

### Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 78.23%
- Male: 83.4%
- Female: 73.1% (2020 estimate)

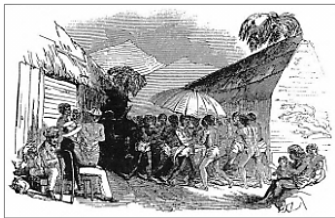
### Traditional Education

In Cameroon and throughout Africa, traditional education involved the transmission of values, skills, religious beliefs, historical knowledge, and a sense of community to younger generations. Traditional methods typically varied by ethnic group, although most groups used an informal, experience-based teaching style. In traditional Cameroonian society, all family members shared a responsibility to convey knowledge and skills through stories, lessons, examples, and coming-of-age rituals (see p3 of *Family and Kinship*).

### Introduction of Formal Education

Supported by the Baptist Missionary Society of London, Jamaican Reverend Joseph Merrick led a group of missionaries

in 1844 to construct Cameroon's first school in the town of Bimbia among the Isubu ethnic group. In the following 40 years, additional English Baptist and American Presbyterian had limited success in pursuit of their education goals. In total



they educated fewer than 500 students, building only a handful of schools before they had to abandon them when the Germans established a colony in 1884 (see p5-6 of *History and Myth*).

### Education during German Colonization

The German colonizers focused their educational goal in Cameroon on the creation of a productive labor force that would economically benefit Germany. While the Germans did not view the abandoned schools as essential to this plan, they did allow German missionaries to continue operating them on a small

scale. Eventually, the Germans permitted non-German missionaries to return and enlarge the country's educational offerings, particularly since these missionaries could provide a basic education at little cost to Germany.

In support of the Germans' initiative to produce obedient workers with basic skills, the missionaries' curriculum in the first 2 decades of German rule centered on reading, writing, arithmetic, Christian doctrine, and agricultural education. Although in 1907 they mandated instruction in German culture and language, unlike the French to follow (see below), the Germans were uninterested in inculcating German identity. By 1913, the colony had 624 missionary schools with over 40,000 students and 4 government schools with fewer than 850 students.



### **Education during British and French Colonization**

When they moved into Cameroon following Germany's expulsion after World War I (see p6 of *History and Myth*), the British and French relied on the existing missionary education system to implement their educational goals. But just as the British and French had different plans for their colonies, they had different goals for their educational systems (see p6-7 of *History and Myth*).

To acquire the workers needed for agricultural production, the British initially focused on providing Cameroonians with a skills-based education much like the Germans before them. Toward this end, they opened government schools and standardized curricula across government and missionary schools. In contrast to the Germans, the French approached their Cameroon colony with the goal of expanding its economic potential and assimilating its residents into French culture and society. In addition, the French wanted to ensure that Cameroonian loyalties were directed to the state rather than the church. Although they continued to allow some missionaries to operate schools, the French strictly controlled all school curricula,

striving to provide alternative state-run, free and compulsory educational programs that emphasized French culture and language.

Financially strapped after World War II, the British encouraged both Cameroonian interests and foreign missionaries to expand educational opportunities while maintaining control of curricula. The British concentrated on preparing Cameroonians for impending independence. By contrast, the French expanded education at the primary, secondary, and vocational levels, reinforced their control of missionary schools, and continued to emphasize French culture and language.

### Education after Independence

Although the British and French colonial educational systems remained largely in place after independence, newly independent, united, and bilingual Cameroon faced another challenge: how to unite a diverse population. Consequently, the government sought to use education to unite the country by standardizing Cameroon's educational system across the Anglophone and Francophone regions. Despite these efforts, disparities persisted as an entrenched preference for French emerged to place a number of Anglophone students at an educational disadvantage—a situation which continues today (see p2 of *Language and Communication*).

### Modern Education System

Education is compulsory for all Cameroonians between the ages of 6 and 14. Although most government schools instruct in either French or English, there is growing demand for bilingual French/English instruction, as well as instruction in indigenous languages (see p1-3 of *Language and Communication*). Schools are open 5 days-a-week and are in session for 35 weeks from September to June.



qualified teachers, Cameroon has one of the more advanced primary education systems in Africa. While primary school

**Primary:** Although schools typically suffer from a lack of

enrollment rate is at 96%, as of 2022, only about 69% of enrolled children completed primary school. In both the English and French systems, primary school starts at age 6, extending for 6 years. In the English system, school runs for 7 hours daily, usually from 7:30am to 2:30pm. Upon completing 6 years, a student in the English system receives the First School Leaving Certificate. In the French system, students attend 1 to 2 separate 5 hour shifts, the first from 7am to 1pm and the second from 1:30pm to 6:30pm. Upon completion of 6 years, a French student receives the *Certificat d'Etudes Primaires*.

**Secondary:** While primary education is free, secondary schools charge tuition, causing a substantial hardship for many families. This situation also contributes to lower secondary school attendance rates. As of 2022, only about 53% of eligible children were enrolled in secondary school. Both the English and French secondary systems consist of 7 years divided into 2 cycles, lower and upper secondary. Programs of study in both systems include literature, history, geography, economics, music, foreign language, sciences, mathematics, physical education, and nutrition. With the completion of secondary school, English system students receive the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level, while the French system students receive the *Baccalauréat* degree.

**Tertiary:** Unlike primary and secondary institutions, Cameroon's 8 public universities and several private tertiary institutes are mostly bilingual, although some use only English or French. Even at bilingual universities, French is more commonly used than English, as most universities are located in the Francophone regions.

In 2018, about 14% of Cameroonians who had completed secondary school were enrolled in state-run, privately-run, or technical universities.



Institutions may issue French degrees— *License*, *Maîtrise*, *Diplôme d'études Approfondies*—and *Doctorat*, or English

degrees—Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctorate. Out of the 6 medical schools in Cameroon, only the University of Yaoundé provides specialized training of approximately 90 doctors per year, including surgery, which limits the country's ability to address its doctor shortages (see *Sustenance and Health*).

## Other Education Issues

**Rural Education:** Cameroon's rural areas suffer from a serious lack of qualified teachers, proper school equipment, and supplies. Consequently, rates of primary school completion in rural areas are very low—illiteracy rates can reach 90%.

The rural, predominantly Muslim areas in the North face a similar situation. The students who do complete primary school are mostly male, as local residents do not see the usefulness of educating girls who will grow up to be wives and mothers. As an alternative to public schools, some Muslim children attend a Qur'anic school, which educates students in Muslim beliefs and history and whose curriculum is not typically regulated like that of a public school.

**Vocational Education:** The Cameroonian government has responded recently to widespread unemployment among general education university graduates by providing increased funding to technical and vocational institutions. Young Cameroonians are increasingly choosing technical and vocational education in the hope that it is a more secure path to long-term employment and even self-employment.



**Refugee Education:** Cameroon hosts roughly 475,357 refugees from the Central African Republic (CAR), Nigeria, and Chad who

reside primarily in urban areas (see p9-10 of *Political and Social Relations*). Most refugees have difficulty finding employment and live in very poor conditions. In response, the Cameroonian government passed a 2005 law granting refugee children access to financial support for tuition and supplies, permitting them to attend primary and secondary school.

## 8. TIME AND SPACE

### Overview

Cameroon, as is much of Africa, is largely a high-context society which means it considers strict time management and punctuality as less important than interpersonal relations (see *Time and Space*, Part 1—Culture General). While specific customs related to time and personal space can vary by ethnic identity and context, most Cameroonians are aware of variations and considerate when interacting with people from different backgrounds.

### Time and Work

Cameroon's work week extends from Monday through Friday. Most government offices and banks are open from 7:30am until 3:30pm. Markets and shops usually open and close later than offices, while restaurant hours vary widely. A 1-2 hour meal break typically occurs between noon and 3pm. Cameroon is in the West Africa Time Zone (WAT), which is an hour ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 6 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). The country does not participate in daylight saving time.



### Punctuality

While time management and punctuality are not high priorities for most Cameroonians, some urban business professionals value efficiency and deadlines. Foreign nationals are expected to arrive on time for business appointments even though these typically start late. Meetings typically include social time in order to foster personal relationships. In strictly social settings, it is customary to arrive late.

### Personal Space

In Cameroon the appropriate personal space varies depending on gender, setting, and ethnic and religious background. While

the standard conversational distance between individuals is about an arm's length, when Cameroonians meet for the first time, they usually maintain a greater personal distance and refrain from conversational touching (see p4-5 of *Language and Communication*). Close friends, relatives, and co-workers may repeatedly touch one another during conversations, even in a professional environment. Most Muslims avoid any physical contact with unrelated members of the opposite sex (see p5 of *Language and Communication*).

### Public Space

Cameroonians may occupy and manage public space in a manner that is unfamiliar to Americans. For example, Cameroonians do not typically form orderly lines, but rather, stand in clusters and jostle to receive attention and service. Although most Cameroonians maintain clean personal spaces, many public areas are littered and unsanitary, which increases Cameroonians' risk for disease (see p4 of *Sustenance and Health*).



### Conveying Respect

Cameroonian men who share the same social status (see p13-14 of *Political and Social Relations*) typically maintain direct eye contact during conversations. By contrast, men of lower social status may avert their gaze during conversations with their elders and superiors. Women tend to avoid direct eye contact during interactions, even with other women.

As a sign of respect for their elders upon meeting, men may lower their heads or bow from the waist. Similarly, many Cameroonian women curtsy to show respect, although women in the North typically kneel. Cameroonians may not speak candidly in the presence of people having a higher social status, allowing the elite to dominate the conversation. Cameroonians consider it rude for a person to turn his back or cross his legs in the presence of a superior or elder. If such behaviors cannot be avoided, it is proper for the individual to apologize to the elder in advance.

## Left Hand Taboos

As is common throughout Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, Cameroonians typically use the left hand for personal hygiene and consider it unclean. It is therefore customary to use the right or both hands when eating, gesturing, accepting items, or greeting people. Cameroonians may view it offensive to use only the left hand in social engagements.

## Photographs

Foreign nationals are advised to request permission before photographing Cameroonians. Taking pictures of public infrastructure, such as military establishments and airports, or of uniformed military personnel is prohibited.

### Holidays

#### National Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- February 11: Youth Day
- May 1: Labor Day
- May 20: National Day
- August 15: Assumption Day
- December 25: Christmas Day

#### Religious Holidays

Religious holidays occur on variable dates. Christian holidays are set according to the church calendar; Muslim holidays follow the Islamic lunar calendar. Religious holidays include:

- **Good Friday:** Celebration of the passion and suffering of Jesus Christ
- **Easter Sunday:** Celebration of Jesus Christ's resurrection
- **Ascension Day:** The Thursday that falls 40 days after Easter Sunday
- **Djoulde Soumae:** Celebrates the end of Ramadan (Eid al-Fitr)
- **Tabaski:** Feast of Sacrifice (Eid al-Adha)



## 9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

### Overview

Cameroonians' dress, recreation, music, and arts are shaped by a dynamic blend of over 250 ethnic groups' traditions, the influences of 3 different European colonizers, and the recent effects of modernization and globalization.

### Dress

Traditional Cameroonian apparel is more commonly worn in rural areas and varies based on regional climate and local customs. In business settings, Cameroonians tend to dress in modest, well-pressed Western-style business attire. The younger generations and some urban dwellers typically wear more casual Western styles sometimes combined with traditional elements for a unique Cameroonian style.

**Men:** Urban Cameroonian men favor Western clothing such as suits, button-down shirts, and pants or a mix of Western dress with African elements. In the rural North, men typically wear the traditional **boubou**, a 4-piece outfit consisting of an undershirt, flowing outer shirts, loose-fitting pants, and a matching hat. In other rural regions, men prefer a 2-piece outfit known as the **quatre pouches**. Consisting of loose-fitting pants and a shirt with square front pockets, the outfit is often accompanied by a matching hat. Among many rural Grassfielder groups (see p11 of *Political and Social Relations*), men wear colorful overcoats and carry a staff and large handbag.



**Women:** Like their male counterparts, many urban women wear a mix of Western and traditional styles. For example, women may fashion Western-style dresses, suits, and other articles of clothing from a traditional **pagne**, a large piece of colorfully patterned fabric. The **pagne** can also be used in more traditional African styles, such as a body-wrap or long



dress, as a protective head covering, or as a baby carrier. Women often wear a free-flowing, loose dress with wide sleeves called the ***kabba*** when casually meeting with friends, shopping, or performing chores at home. Many Muslim women wear a ***hijab***

(Islamic headscarf) with modest ***pagne*** garments.

## Recreation

Cameroonians typically spend their leisure time with their families or friends. Popular pastimes include visiting, playing or watching sports, or participating in community events. Men often socialize over beer or palm wine at bars or ***buvettes*** (simple drink stalls—see *Sustenance and Health*). Women typically socialize at home or at the market.

**Sports:** Football (soccer) is Cameroon's most popular sport. Inter-village tournaments draw many participants as do impromptu matches. Because of their history of success in international competitions, the men's national team, ***Les Lions Indomptables*** (the Indomitable Lions), is a particular source of pride. Qualifying for the World Cup 8 times and advancing as far as the quarter-finals, the team has made more World Cup appearances than any other African team. Cameroon is also a 5-time winner of the Africa Cup of Nations.

Other sports enjoy regional popularity. While wrestling and tug-of-war are widespread in the Northwest and Southwest, horse-racing is particularly popular in the North among Fulani groups (see p12-13 of *Political and Social Relations*). Canoe racing is a common sport along the coast, while handball, volleyball, and basketball are played at urban recreation centers.

**Games:** Many Cameroonians enjoy ***songo***, a traditional game similar to ***mancala***, which involves strategically moving seeds or pebbles around a board having multiple holes or "pits" with the goal of capturing the other player's seeds.

During the rainy season, some Cameroonian families play a memory game called **kweti** that hinges on children's abilities to quickly name their relatives. Many Cameroonians also enjoy socializing while playing card games such as **Générala** (similar to Yahtzee), **Huit Américain** (a version of *Crazy Eights*), and **Cochon Graté** (a form of *Donkey*).

## Music

Enjoying many distinct musical varieties, Cameroonians typically commemorate special occasions and celebrations with traditional music (see p3 & 5 of *Family and Kinship*). While they vary by ethnic group, traditional musical performances often involve clapping, stomping, and/or the use of instruments, such as drums, flutes, horns, bells, xylophones, and stringed instruments.

Founded in the 1930s and still popular in Cameroonian nightclubs today, **makossa** dance music combines elements of jazz, funk, Latin, and popular African dance music with traditional Cameroonian music. **Bikutsi**, the traditional music of the Beti people (see p12 of *Political and Social Relations*), forms the basis of a modern genre of Cameroonian dance music characterized by pounding rhythms.

## Dance

Cameroonians regard dance as a major cultural feature and a key part of community gatherings, holidays, and major life events (see p3 & 5 of *Family and Kinship*). There are over 200 traditional dances in Cameroon, each unique to a particular region and ethnic group. During most traditional dances, men and women perform separately.

In the West and Northwest, dancers wear elaborate masks to perform the **lali** and the **tso** war dances. The Tupuri men of the Northeast perform the **gurna** dance, which involves the use of long sticks to celebrate manhood and the grain harvest. The **gurna's** song identifies societal problems and potential avenues of resolution.



## Folklore and Literature

Cameroon's traditional literature is primarily folklore that was passed through the generations in stories, myths, poetry, proverbs, and riddles (see p2 of *History and Myth*). Since independence, few writers have produced works in their indigenous languages, choosing instead French or English (see p2-3 of *Language and Communication*). Due to an entrenched Cameroonian preference for Francophone writers—such as Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono, and Patrice Nganang—Anglophone authors receive less attention and publishing support than their Francophone counterparts. Consequently, Cameroon's Anglophone authors have struggled to distinguish their work from that of more prominent Anglophone writers from other African countries.

## Theater

Traditional Cameroonian theatrical performances have served varied purposes, from religious ritual to entertainment. For example, the *mvet* is a community-focused traditional form of entertainment where a single performer plays multiple characters by combining spoken performance with dance, music, and mime.

Western-style theater developed slowly during the colonial period when dramatists like Njoh Dibongue and Kingue Kwedi began to produce plays in German and French. Since independence, a national theater company, local troupes, and theaters have been established with governmental support.



## Arts and Crafts

Cameroonian handicrafts are as diverse as the ethnic groups that produce them (see p11-13 of *Political and Social Relations*). In the Western Highlands, bronze, brass, and wood sculptures are popular art forms. With an abundance of high quality clay in the region, Tikar artists near the western city of Bamenda produce ceramics and masks. Bamoun artisans create high-quality beadwork using shells and colorful glass beads. In the North, the Fulani people decorate cloth and leather products with brass details.

## 10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

### Sustenance Overview

Cameroonian cuisine combines a variety of indigenous ethnic specialties with French and other African culinary traditions. Foods vary by region where climate and location dictate crop, meat, and fish availability.

### Dining Customs

Cameroonian families typically consume their 3 daily meals together, although in some ethnic groups, men eat first followed by women and then children. While the lunch break can last up to 2 hours (see p1 of *Time and Space*), the evening meal typically is the largest. Guests typically sample each dish their hosts offer to honor their hospitality.

### Typical Meals

In urban households, breakfast usually consists of tea or coffee with fruit, porridge, bread, eggs, or boiled cassava. Rural breakfasts are typically the leftovers from yesterday's dinner. For lunch and dinner, both urban and rural Cameroonians typically eat **fufu** or another starch (see below) alongside a vegetable-based soup or stew.



**Starches:** Bland starches—rice, millet, couscous, boiled cassava (tuberous root), and **fufu**—are staples of most Cameroonians' diet and are typically eaten at least twice a day. To make **fufu**, Cameroonians soak and then

boil starchy root vegetables, such as cassavas, yams, or plantains, before pounding them into a paste. Cameroonians traditionally scoop the **fufu** into a ball and then dip it into the accompanying stew or sauce.

**Meats and Proteins:** Since poultry, lamb, goat, and beef are expensive, many Cameroonians consider meat a delicacy and consume it only on special occasions. Seafood such as mackerel, sole, and shrimp, and beans or black-eyed peas are

more common sources of protein. Popular meat main courses include **brochettes** (goat, beef, or chicken kebabs) and **ndolé**, a dish made of meat, shrimp, pork rind, a spinach-like bitter leaf, and peanut butter. Many Cameroonians hunt and consume wild animals such as porcupines, monkeys, and snakes, collectively referred to as **bush meat**.

**Fruits and Snacks:** Cameroonians enjoy a variety of fruits for desserts or snacks, including grapefruit, green oranges, pineapples, bananas, papayas, and sugarcane. Popular snacks at urban food stands include peanuts, corn on the cob, and donuts known as **pof pof** in English and **beignet** in French.

### Beverages

Instant coffee, tea, water, and soft drinks are common beverages throughout Cameroon. Water is the main drink in the home. Although many Muslim Cameroonians



avoid alcohol for religious reasons, most Cameroonians, especially men, enjoy beer and wine at home or at a **buvette** (drink stand or small bar). Many Cameroonians make their own beer from corn or millet. Palm wine, known as **fitchuk**, is a highly alcoholic drink popular in the South and West and often featured in wedding negotiations and traditional village ceremonies (see p3-5 of *Family and Kinship*).

### Religious and Special Food Customs

Food plays an important role on many occasions (see p3-5 of *Family and Kinship*). Christmas and other holidays, community celebrations, and special events such as births are marked with feasts that often include the consumption of sheep, goat, or chicken. During the Islamic month of **Ramadan** (see p3 of *Religion and Spirituality*), Muslims break their daily dawn-to-dusk fast with a large evening meal that often includes a rich soup. During the Islamic celebration of **Tabaski** (*Eid al-Adha*), Muslims ritually slaughter sheep and share the meat with family and friends.

## Health Overview

Despite government healthcare spending at 0.48% of GDP (2021 est.) and recent modest improvements in healthcare infrastructure, Cameroon lacks the ability to provide preventative, emergency, and long-term care for its people. In 2024, the life expectancy at birth was 64 years, which is consistent with Africa's average but far below the US life expectancy of 81 years. Although trained medical personnel or midwives reportedly attended almost 69% of births in 2018, Cameroon has one of the world's highest maternal mortality rate—roughly 438 out of 100,000 births resulted in the mother's death. As of 2021, there were just 12 physicians per 100,000 people, well below the World Health Organization's recommendation of 23 physicians per 100,000 people.

## Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine comprises the knowledge, skills, and remedies derived from the beliefs, theories, and experiences of indigenous populations. Because traditional medicine is more affordable and accessible than modern medicine, Cameroonians routinely consult traditional healers about a variety of ailments. Many Cameroonians view sickness as a result of bad fortune, witchcraft, or punishment from God (see p1-2 & 7-8 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Consequently, traditional healers often incorporate a spiritual component in their treatments.



## Modern Healthcare System

The Cameroonian healthcare system suffers from a lack of funding, dilapidated facilities often without electricity, and a severe shortage of medical professionals (see p5 of *Learning and Knowledge*).

For many rural villagers, medical facilities are several days' journey on poor roads, making modern medical treatment inaccessible. Modern medicine is also too expensive for many Cameroonians to afford: patients usually pay for medical treatment upfront in cash and provide necessary medical supplies at their own expense.

While Cameroon's best-equipped hospitals are located in or near major cities, district and rural clinics often lack the resources and expertise to treat serious ailments. Similarly, urban pharmacies typically stock a wide variety of medicines, while rural pharmacies often lack the most basic medicines.

## Infectious Diseases

**Malaria:** Malaria is a leading cause of illness and death in both rural and urban areas. In 2022, malaria accounted for 12% of deaths among children under 5 years. With help from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and donors, Cameroon is making strides to prevent and treat malaria.

**HIV/AIDS:** As of 2022, an estimated 726,000 Cameroonians or 2.6% of the population were infected with HIV/AIDS, which is the 17th highest rate in the world. With wide-ranging societal consequences, HIV/AIDS disproportionately affects Cameroonian women, who were infected at more than twice the rate of men as of 2022.

**Cholera:** Cholera is an often deadly intestinal infection contracted by consuming contaminated food or water. Cameroon experienced a serious cholera epidemic in 1971. Periodic outbreaks affect thousands of households each year and can kill as many as 10% of those who get the disease.

### Water

Although Cameroon has an abundance of water, the government struggles to provide clean drinking water and sanitation to the population. As of 2022, 82% of urban dwellers but only 52% of rural residents had access to clean drinking water. Cameroonians who can afford to do so drink bottled water. In 2022, just 58% of urban and 22% of rural people had access to sanitation. While this lack of clean water and sanitation contributes to Cameroon's high rates of communicable disease, it has received little governmental attention or investment. As such, water and sanitation access rates have remained the same since the early 1990s.



## 11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

### Overview

Despite oil reserves and favorable agricultural conditions, Cameroon remains underdeveloped by global standards, suffering from low per capita income and significant wealth disparities. Rampant corruption and mismanagement create an unfavorable business climate that stunts economic growth.

### Services

The services sector contributed 52% of Cameroon's GDP in 2023 and constitutes the largest economic sector, it employs 42% of Cameroon's workforce. It benefits from the economic activity created around large-scale energy projects. The services sector is booming, driven by the sectors of telecommunications, air traffic and transport.

**Tourism:** Cameroon's notable cultural and geographic diversity offers potential for a major tourist industry (see p2 of *Political and Social Relations*). Despite attractions like Kribi's beaches and Mount Cameroon, tourism is a relatively minor and slow-growing enterprise. In 2022, travel and tourism contributed 7.6% to the GDP, a decrease from 10.4% of GDP in 2019—the country's poor infrastructure, border insecurity, and limited tourist amenities hinder any prospects of tourism becoming a major source of national income anytime soon. In 2022, this sector provided 295 million jobs which accounted for 9% of total employment.



### Industry

The industrial sector is the next largest component of Cameroon's economy, accounting for 25% of GDP in 2023 and about 15% of

the labor force. The largest subsector is manufacturing (13% of GDP), followed by mining, quarrying, and construction.

A significant portion of Cameroon's manufacturing is devoted to food processing, particularly the preparation of cash crops like cocoa and coffee for export and the production of beverages for

domestic consumption. Similarly, processed wood and other construction materials are in high demand as a result of an upsurge in government infrastructure projects. Although there is no industrial mining in Cameroon, small-scale subsistence miners extract the country's cobalt, gold, iron ore, and nickel.

**Oil:** Holding less than 1% of the world's oil reserves, Cameroon produces oil on a much smaller scale than neighboring Nigeria and Chad even though crude oil accounts for nearly 39% of exports. Managed by the state-owned National Hydrocarbons Corporation, oil production peaked during the 1980s' oil boom and then settled at an average output of 61,000 barrels-per-day in 2022. In 2013, the International Court of Justice supported Cameroon's claim of ownership of the oil-rich Bakassi peninsula. Several US and international companies are working to develop the Cameroonian oil industry. China is also increasingly involved in exploring and developing new oil fields through joint ventures and investment.

### Agriculture

Although agriculture accounted for just 17% of GDP in 2023, 42% of the labor force worked in this sector, either producing cash crops or working subsistence farms. Agricultural outputs encompassed the largest part of GDP from the 1970s through the early 2000s, accounting for roughly 43% of GDP in 2001. However, as oil profits increased, agriculture's share of GDP declined. Today, the most important export crops are cocoa beans, coffee, cotton, and bananas. As Cameroon's highest earning agricultural export, cocoa accounted for 7% of exports in 2022.

The majority of farmers in Cameroon are small-holders who use traditional methods such as handheld tools and animal power to work their land. Because so many farms are non-mechanized, agricultural production is relatively low and inefficient. The most important crops for domestic consumption include starches such as plantains, cassava, corn, peanuts, and millet (see p1 of *Sustenance and Health*). Northern livestock



farmers usually raise cattle, sheep, and goats, while poultry farming is more typical in the southern and central regions.

**Forestry:** Since roughly 43% of Cameroon is covered in forests, lumber is one of its most lucrative exports, comprising between 10% and 20% of export earnings annually. Between 2001 and 2015, Cameroon harvested over 777,000 Ha of its forests for firewood and timber export. Although this deforestation rate is lower than that of neighboring countries such as Nigeria, which lost 36% of its forests over 20 years, Cameroon's lumber industry does not follow sustainable practices that would ensure continued viability and biodiversity.

### Money and Banking

The currency of Cameroon is the Central African CFA franc which is subdivided into 100 **centimes**. The CFA franc is issued in 5 banks notes (500, 1000, 2000, 5000, 10,000 francs) and 8 coins (1, 2, 5, 10, 25, 50, 100, 500 francs). Due partially to inflation that averaged 2.4% between 2009 and 2012, no **centime** coinage is currently in use. CFA francs are pegged to the Euro at a rate of €1 = 655.96 CFA and are backed by the French treasury. In 2023, the exchange rate averaged 607 CFA to \$1.



Regulated by the Bank of Central African States in Yaoundé, the CFA franc serves as the official currency of African Financial Community

members. Besides Cameroon, members include the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, the Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon. Travelers may transport CFA francs between Central African Financial Community countries without restriction.

### Foreign Trade

Foreign trade in Cameroon lacks diversity in both partners and products. In 2022, exports totaled \$6.95 billion. Crude oil, petroleum products, cocoa, sawn wood, and gold were the main exports, accounting for roughly 81% of exports. Many of Cameroon's exports go to the Netherlands (19%), France (15%), India (14%), Spain (10%), and China (8%). Cameroon imports

refined petroleum, wheat, rice, medications, and frozen fish primarily from China (39%), France (8%), India (6%), Belgium (4%), and the UAE (4%). In 2022, Cameroon's imports totaled \$8.19 billion. Over the past decade, China has increased its market share in Cameroon, selling electronic appliances, footwear, and clothing. As the country's need for food and refined hydrocarbon products has increased over the past 5 years, Cameroon's trade deficit is estimated to be 2.7% of its GDP in 2022.

### Foreign Aid

Foreign aid and direct investment are important sources of capital flow into Cameroon. Foreign aid accounts for between 5% and 10% of Cameroon's annual budget. In 2021, Cameroon received net of \$1.126 billion of development assistance and foreign aid. The largest multilateral donors were International Monetary Fund, International Development Association, and European Union institutions, while France, Germany, and the US were the largest single-country donors.

In 2022, the US provided \$183.9 million to aid Cameroon. This aid funded projects to further the bilateral partnership; address democracy, good governance, and economic development issues; and fund health and disease prevention programs. In comparison to other African countries, Cameroon has incurred relatively low external debt. For example, Cameroon's total 2022 external debt of \$9.6 billion was about 25% that of neighboring Nigeria.

### Corruption

Bribery, extortion, and money laundering affect all aspects of business in Cameroon. Although these activities are illegal and punishable by prison sentences, fines, or seizure of assets, corruption is a widely accepted practice. Corruption convictions are rare and are typically pursued only against those who have lost political favor (see p4 of *Political and Social Relations*). In 2023, Transparency International ranked Cameroon 140 out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index.



## 12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

### Overview

Since the early 2000s, the Cameroonian government and its foreign donors have funded projects to improve the country's physical and communications infrastructure. Despite these efforts, transportation and communication systems remain relatively slow, inefficient, and overburdened.

### Transportation

Since most Cameroonians do not own cars, they typically walk, ride bicycles or motorbikes, or use public transportation for local travel. Buses, taxis, and so-called bush taxis (often overcrowded minibuses or large 4WD vehicles with bench seating) are the most common modes of transport between cities. Bush taxis are typically used for longer intercity trips on Cameroon's dirt roads. Where roads are paved in and between larger cities, buses or cars are the preferred modes of transportation. Both buses and bush taxis depart when full rather than on a fixed schedule.



**Roadways:** Cameroon has 75,736 miles of roadways, of which about 7% are paved. There are 3 types of roads in Cameroon: paved Trunk A link regions and major cities, Trunk B are intraregional, and Trunk C connect smaller towns and villages to Trunk A and B roads. Many Trunk C roads become nearly impassable in the rainy season due to flooding and potholes, while most Trunk A and B roads can be used year-round.

Poor roads, substandard vehicles, unskilled drivers, and a lack of signage and signals make motor vehicle travel in Cameroon dangerous. Motorists often ignore speed limits and traffic signals and rarely pay attention to their surroundings when changing or crossing lanes. In addition, many bodies of water lack bridges, requiring travelers to be prepared to improvise as needed.

Security on roadways is also a problem. Armed robberies occur frequently in areas bordering Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR) (see p9-10 of *Political and Social Relations*). In addition, soldiers and police often set up impromptu check points where they attempt to coerce bribes.

**Railways:** As of 2021, Cameroon had about 549 miles of railways. Consisting of a single main line, the Trans-Cameroon railway serves the cities of Douala, Kumba, Yaoundé, and Ngaoundéré. Although it struggles to meet demand, CAMRAIL, the national rail service provider, delivers adequate, though sometimes unreliable service. Overcrowding is particularly problematic in second-class compartments, as a ticket does not guarantee a seat. Rather than adhering to a set schedule, CAMRAIL trains typically depart when trains are full.

**Airways:** Cameroon has 34 airports, of which 11 have paved runways. The 4 major airports are Nsimalen International and Yaoundé International, both located in Yaoundé; Douala International, serving the southwestern coast; and Garoua International Airport in the North. Camair-Co (Cameroon Airlines Corporation) replaced Cameroon Airlines as the national airline in 2011 and serves various cities in the domestic and African markets, such as Lagos, Nigeria and Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, as well as Paris, France. Several international airlines, including Air France, Turkish Airways, and South African Airways, connect Cameroon to other international destinations.



**Ports and Waterways:** Of Cameroon's multiple ports, the Port of Douala serves as the chief port for Cameroon's land-locked neighbors, the CAR and Chad. Other important Cameroonian ports include the northern Port of Garoua on the Benue River and Limboh on the western

coast. Ferries and boats offer transportation across rivers such as the Ntem and Sanaga and between Cameroon and neighboring countries like Nigeria.

## Energy

Cameroon's energy infrastructure is poor and antiquated. In 2022, hydropower generated 62% of electricity followed by fossil fuels which accounted for 38%. Although it possesses the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest hydroelectric potential in Africa, Cameroon presently utilizes only half of that capacity. In 2022, 71% of Cameroon's population had access to electricity, although that percentage is disproportionately distributed between urban (94%) and rural (25%) dwellers. Brownouts and blackouts frequently disrupt electricity service, especially during the dry season (see p2-3 of *Political and Social Relations*).

## Media

Since independence, the government has controlled Cameroon's media, owning several media outlets outright and controlling other privately-held outlets through threats of criminal punishment and torture. Journalists continue to be prosecuted under the criminal code's laws against defamation, persuading journalists to self-censor or face stiff penalties. The 2023 Press Freedom Index released by



Reporters Without Borders said Cameroonian authorities have imposed a climate of fear and self-censorship on media practitioners. The index showed that Cameroon had made a significant decline from 118<sup>th</sup> in 2022 to 138<sup>th</sup> in 2023. That notwithstanding, journalists face huge hurdles some of which led to exorbitant fines and in some cases jail terms.

**TV and Radio:** Official state control over television ended in 2007, which allowed several private TV channels to emerge. Nevertheless, the state broadcaster, Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV), remains the largest provider of radio and TV. Broadcasting in both French and English, CRTV has a 24-hour TV channel and 1 national, 10 regional (AM), and 4 local (FM) radio stations. Many private radio stations broadcast regionally.

**Print Media:** The government's *Cameroon Tribune* newspaper, printed in both French and English versions, has limited credibility due to its close association with the regime. Over 50 privately-owned, regional newspapers are in circulation, including the popular French-language papers *Le Message*, *La Nouvelle Expression*, and *La Mutation* and the English-language *Cameroon Post*. Since 1990 professional journalists must carry a press card issued by the Prime Minister's office. Because it only grants journalists in good standing with the regime this credential, the government ensures written media coverage is favorable to its policies.

### Telecommunications

While telecommunication services remain prohibitively expensive for many Cameroonians, cell phone subscriptions now outnumber landlines by a margin of 27 to 1. Cellular use continues to grow as new providers compete for market share.

Multiple telecommunication providers serve Cameroon, including Camtel, the largest local provider, and international carriers like Orange and Ringo. Since 2005, the government and Camtel have greatly improved the telecommunications infrastructure with funding and support from Chinese telecommunication companies and banks, such as Huawei Technologies and Eximbank.

**Internet:** Mobile Internet service through cell phones is currently limited, although it has great potential as a less expensive way to access the Internet. For now, Cameroonians mainly access

the Internet in cyber cafes where service is often slow and erratic. With the introduction of foreign internet service providers, the cost of home and mobile Internet services has declined, while quality has improved, increasing home service access for



Cameroon's upper class. Nevertheless, home Internet service remains unaffordable for most Cameroonians. In 2021, only 46% of Cameroonians were Internet users.





For more information on  
the Air Force Culture and Language Center visit:  
[airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC](http://airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC)

For more information on  
United States Air Forces Europe & Africa visit:  
<http://www.usafe.af.mil>



## CULTURE GUIDE

Access all of the AFCLC's expeditionary culture field  
guides in our mobile app!

