



# CAMEROON



**Area:** 183,569 square miles

**Population:** 27.2M (2023 est.)

**Capital:** Yaoundé

**Ethnic Groups:** 250 ethnic groups, among them Cameroon Highlanders, 31%; Equatorial Bantu, 19%; Kirdi, 11%; Fulani, 10%; Northwest Bantu, 8%; Eastern Nigritic, 7%

**Languages:** 230 languages that comprise 24 major African language groups; French and English (both official)

**Religions:** Christian, 68.5%; Muslim, 19.5%; traditional beliefs, 4.3%

**Life Expectancy:** 60.32 years

**Literacy:** 78.23%

**Economy:** Agriculture: coffee, cocoa, cotton, rubber, bananas, livestock, timber; Industry: petroleum production and refining, food processing, textiles; Exports: crude oil, petroleum products, lumber, cocoa, aluminum, coffee

**Economic Inequality:** 0.48 (average)

**Gender Inequality Index:** 0.560 (ranking 141/162)

“If you understand the beginning well, the end will not trouble you.” – Cameroon Proverb

## Earliest History on the Move

The beginnings of human settlement in the region known as Cameroon date to more than 50,000 years ago. A key crossroads of Africa, the region became an early center of food production in West Africa. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE, proto-Bantu-speaking farmers, began to move deeper into Central Africa, carrying seed crops, yams, palm oil, pottery, goats, and stone axes. Their descendants spread to Eastern Africa and Southern Africa, creating the elements of cultural and linguistic unity within sub-Saharan Africa across the following centuries.

Socially and politically stratified early kingdoms thrived in Cameroon’s grasslands territory replete with rich resources. The region was a center for the royal patronage of large-scale iron-smelting, pottery-making, brass-casting, and textile industries. Commerce brought Arab and Islamic influences into northern Cameroon in the 10th century C.E. These influences were broadened and strengthened by the invasion by the Massa people in the 16th century and the subsequent rise of the Kotoko kingdom as well as by the immigration of the Fulani people into the region. By the 1480s, Portuguese explorers had sailed into the estuaries of present-day Cameroon (spelled Cameroun in French and Kamerun in German) and named the major river after the Portuguese word for prawns (camarões), which the British later Anglicized to Cameroon.

For the next three centuries Cameroon was a major source of enslaved Africans in the Atlantic World. The Portuguese dominated the slave trade at first, but were superseded over time by Dutch, British, French, and finally American merchants. Following the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in the early 1800s, the export trade expanded to alternative commodities such as ivory, rubber, and palm oil, an industry once controlled by women. The presence of Christian missionaries attracted the attention of Islamists, who fought for self-sufficiency through a jihad supported by the teachings of the radical mystic Usman dan Fodio.

During the European “Scramble for Africa” in the late 19th century, the Germans beat the British to a claim of the Cameroons by seizing the region as a territory of Bismarck, who would become the convenor of the Berlin Conference in 1897. In July 1884, Cameroon was formally declared a German protectorate. Duala resistance to German rule was expanded across ethnic lines to include Bafut, Kpe, Bulu, and others. The Germans’ brutal weaponry and divide-and-rule tactics quelled most of the uprisings, although parts of the interior remained outside of effective German control until after 1910. In 1914, the German colonial government executed two of the most prominent resistance leaders, Chief Rudolph Douala Manga Bell and Martin-Paul Samba, but the struggle continued.

Following Germany’s defeat in World War I (1914-1918), the divided Cameroon was awarded France and Britain, giving the French a mandate over 80 percent of the territory and the British a mandate over 20 percent (the

area adjacent to Nigeria). Linguistic and economic differences soon developed between the French and British mandates, which were among the known African targets of Hitler. They were renegotiated as Trusteeship Territories after World War II (1939-1945). Britain invested little in Cameroon, making it a marginal province of the British colony of Nigeria. France, on the other hand, considered Cameroon one of its model colonies and invested money and resources in education, health care, and the infrastructure. Economic investment in both territories was encouraged in the fertile south rather than the remote and arid north. Both French and English persisted as official languages.

### **After Independence**

Decolonization left the new nation state in disarray that made a post-Independence fraught with uncertainties and divisiveness. French Cameroon gained independence from France in 1960 and formerly British Southern Cameroon became independent by a vote organized by the United Nations General Assembly the following year, when they joined to create a united nation state. Divisions remained and two leaders dominated the decades that followed independence. President Ahmadou Ahidjo ruled from 1960 until 1982, followed by Paul Biya, who has maintained control ever since. Accusations of corruption and authoritarianism, as well as conflicts over Boko Haram (2014-2018), separatist wars, and political refugees from Central Africa have contributed to instability.

Another source of uncertainty is the environmental region bounded by the ancient Lake Chad, at the junction of the state boundaries of Chad, Nigeria, Niger, and Cameroon. A freshwater lake, Mega-Chad once encompassed a catchment area of more than a 25,000 square kilometers. Its desertification affects more than 17 million people and portends an ecological catastrophe for the region.

### **Global Connections**

Cameroon's global connections reach to the Pacific Northwest, where members of the Kom royal family have maintained close friendships with the descendants of Gilbert and Mildred Schneider, who were missionaries in the Mambilla region. Their son, Cameroon-born photographer Evan Schneider, has presented the family's collection of more than 7,000 photographs and 12,000 slides, together with early reels of historically important documentary films to the Smithsonian Museum of African Art. Gilbert Lo-oh Mbeng (named after Evan's father), who is the grandson of a Fon (traditional dignitary) in the kingdom of Kom, has visited Seattle and Portland. Gifts and commissioned objects from the 1930s to 1961, form the basis of the Paul and Clara Gebauer Collection of Cameroon Art at the Portland Art Museum and are included among the holdings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Oregonians, the Gebauers were missionaries in Cameroon, where they became patrons of local carvers and other artisans, helping to ensure their artistic and economic survival, as well as the arrival of a significant collection of Cameroonian art in Portland.

After early beginnings and a brief hiatus (2007-2017), the Cameroonian film industry resumed in popularity. The semi-autobiographical film *Chocolat* (1985) by French director Claire Denis had explored the processes of historical memory and power but modern Cameroonian filmmakers have looked to more imaginative settings, including the make-believe African nation state of Njuana that is at the heart of the action thriller *L'Axe Lourd* (The Highway) directed by Dr. Nkeng Stephens, a *tour de force* in the music video industry. In the words of Stephens, "Let's tell the African story the African way."

Many early Cameroonian writers rejected the path of assimilation that French colonizers in particular had offered. Likewise, prominent Cameroonian historians, like Martin Njeuma, saw a broader path and helped found the World History Association. Not only did Cameroonian author Imbolo Mbue (b.1981) "tell the story the African way," she placed that story in a global context. Her New York Times bestseller *Behold the Dreamers* (2017) described the entangled lives of an immigrant Cameroonian chauffeur in New York City and a wealthy white executive at Lehman Brothers during the financial crisis of 2008, while *How Beautiful We Were* (2022) is her recent novel about the collision of people living in a small (fictional) village in Africa and the forces unleashed by an American oil company. As the proverb reminds us, "If you understand the beginning well, the end will not trouble you."

--Written by Candice Goucher, January 2024

### **Suggested Readings**

Imbolo Mbue, *Behold the Dreamers* (New York: Random House, 2017).

Imbolo Mbue, *How Beautiful We Were* (New York: Random House, 2022).

Martin Njeuma, ed. *Introduction to the History of Cameroon: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 1990).