

WOMEN'S WORLD DAY OF PRAYER

(INTERNATIONAL AND INTERDENOMINATIONAL)



5th March 2010



10:30am at St. John Bosco



'LET EVERYTHING THAT HAS BREATH PRAISE GOD'
CAMEROON

Setting the scene

With its striking variety of landscapes, Cameroon is potentially a tourist's paradise. One can travel through the green Equatorial South to the warm bright savannah and the steppes in the North which merge into the swamps along Lake Chad. Travelling to the Western Highlands one reaches the coast with its beaches of fine green and yellow sands. On Kribi Beach, in the far South, there are the wide Lobe Falls that, uniquely, fall straight into the ocean.

A major feature of Cameroon is the Adamawa Massif, an extensive plateau of West-Central Africa in North-Central Cameroon and Eastern Nigeria and is a major watershed for Cameroon. Here one will find Mount Cameroon which is one of Africa's largest volcanoes. It is 4,040m high (13,255 ft) and rises spectacularly from the tropical rainforest floor to its bare summit which is cold, windy and occasionally brushed with snow. It erupts frequently!

Population density is highest in the large urban centres, in the Western Highlands, and the North-Eastern plain. In contrast, the Adamawa Plateau, the South-Eastern Bénoué depression and most of the South Cameroon Plateau are sparsely populated.

Cameroon's many ethnic groups and languages number more than 240 with English and French being the official languages. This makes Cameroon one of Africa's most culturally diverse countries. The ethnic groups can be divided into broad cultural and linguistic groups corresponding to particular geographic regions.

Cameroon is also well-known for its styles of music, particularly makossa and bikutsi. These styles were recorded in the early '70s and reached Europe for use in nightclubs and for dancing.

The Republic of Cameroon is, indeed, 'Africa in miniature'. Except for its Atlantic coastline on the Gulf of Guinea, it is bordered by some of the larger countries of West and Central Africa.

The country experiences a variety of climates ranging from a Sahelian hot and dry climate in the North to humid equatorial in the South and a temperate cool climate in the Western Highlands. Temperatures range from 15°C in the West to 43°C in the extreme North. Dry and wet seasons differ in length in different areas: the Saharan area has a dry season of 7 to 8 months, while the Equatorial region has 7 to 8 months of rain.

The People

In 2006 the population was estimated at 17,340,702. Life expectancy is only 51 years, while the infant mortality rate stands at 64 per 1000. Over 60% of Cameroonians are younger than 25.

The more widely known of the indigenous groups are the Baka people, historically called Pygmies (a name no longer considered respectful) and among the oldest of the inhabitants of the land. These communal hunter-gatherers follow a nomadic lifestyle within the South-Eastern rain forests and continue to use the most primitive methods

of hunting and fishing. The women gather wild fruits and nuts and practise beekeeping while tending the children.

Unaccustomed to the cash-based economy, they barter forest-game for produce and manufactured goods by setting up camp along roadsides.

Non-Baka peoples, however, seek out the Baka's traditional herbal medicines and treatments especially for their children who are the most vulnerable to diseases that are potentially fatal.

They worship a forest spirit known as Jengi whom they perceive as both a parental figure and guardian. Each successful hunt is followed by a dance of thanksgiving known as the Luma, which is accompanied by drumming and polyphonic singing.

Today, the greatest threat to the Baka's way of life comes from multi-national logging interests. As the forests disappear, the animals and plants upon which they rely vanish as well.

The History

Around 1000 BC the Bantu people settled in South West Cameroon with other indigenous people settling on the high plateau and in the Lake Chad basin during those early times. The mid 15th Century saw the beginnings of colonisation, with the Portuguese navigator, Fernando Po, arriving in the Gulf of Guinea. He was so impressed by the density of the prawns found in the river that he called it the River of Prawns (Rio Cameroes) but by the 16th Century this name had evolved to Cameroon. The slave trade was introduced in 1450.

In January 1841 Joseph Merrick and Alfred Saker - Christian ministers of the Baptist Missionary Society - arrived from Jamaica. The following years saw an increase in Christianity and Islam in various areas of Cameroon, in addition to the numerous existing indigenous beliefs.

By the later years of that century a treaty was signed with the German Government and German sovereignty unilaterally declared on the west coast of Africa. In 1916 France and Britain invaded the German protectorate of Cameroon and in 1919 the country was placed under the protection of the League of Nations – with 4/5 of the country given to France and 1/5 of the country given to Britain.

In 1945 Cameroon became the Territory of the Trusteeship of the United Nations and by 20th May 1972 full independence was achieved. February 4th 1984 saw the birth of the Republic of Cameroon.

The Government

The country, with its ten provinces, is led by an elected president and administered by various political and municipal bodies. Each province has a Governor and is further split into divisions and districts with its own officials. The government consists of a multi-party system. In 1990 a series of political upheavals led to legislation for more rights and liberties. Presidential elections were held in October 1992 and the National

Assembly was re-formed in 1996. Yaoundé is the country's administrative and political capital and Douala is the economic capital.

In 1970 Madame Delphine Tsanga became the first female minister and headed the Ministry of Social Affairs. She served for 14 years, thereby marking a path other women have since followed. Today various walks of life are available to women such as the police, army, magistrates, journalists, doctors, archivists, teachers and administrative lawyers.

The Education System

Education is obligatory from 6 to 11 years but few go on to secondary level where tuition fees are prohibitive. Fewer girls than boys enrol in primary school. Early marriage, unwanted pregnancies and domestic chores are some of the socio-cultural prejudices contributing to lower education attendance for girls. Illness, the daily journey to fetch water and the absence of hygienic facilities in most schools keep older children – particularly girls – out of class and uneducated, perpetuating the cycle of ignorance and poverty.

A number of problems plague the education system in general. They include a high drop-out rate, rural/urban disparities in school attendance, a lack of primary school teachers and a limited access to formal and vocational education for children with disabilities. The three northernmost provinces lag far behind the rest of Cameroon in school attendance. In these areas, half of all girls are not in school.

General and technical education is carried out by the government. There are six state-owned and, since 1998, five privately owned universities. The first university was founded in Yaoundé in 1962.

The Economy

The economy is based largely on agriculture and an estimated 70% of the population are farmers. Exported products are coffee, cocoa, cotton, tobacco, timber, rubber, banana, and palm produce. Cameroon is also rich in natural resources and receives revenue from forestry, minerals and petroleum, which led to economic growth between 1977 and 1985.

Fourteen countries of Central and West Africa, including Cameroon, have a common currency, the Franc CFA, and thus can co-operate financially. Devaluation in 1988 caused a serious economic crisis. Cameroon embarked upon a readjustment policy under the auspices of the International Monetary Fund. Revaluation of the CFA in January 1994 re-established the export trade. Cameroon also benefited from the Heavily Indebted Poor Country initiative (HIPC Funds), which led to debt reduction.

Women are involved in small businesses, farming and common initiative groups. All these activities contribute towards the growth of the local economy. Many women work as bayam-sallams (or buyam-sellams). They are market women who buy foodstuff in rural areas and sell it in the cities. The term was coined in the 1980s when the role of female food sellers became increasingly important in the economy. In the 1990s its usage was adopted by leading politicians and statesmen who use it in the absence of a more appropriate French equivalent.

Health Issues

The government is in charge of healthcare under the auspices of the Ministry of Health. There are health units, provincial hospitals and two reference hospitals (one in Yaoundé the other in Douala). Epidemics and endemic health problems like malaria, tuberculosis and HIV and AIDS constitute the principal causes of mortality and morbidity.

The urban/rural divide shows some of the largest disparities in basic sanitation, with less than half the rural population having access to safe drinking water. These factors, along with poor hygiene, contribute to the deaths of about a third of the children who die each year.

According to the Ministry of Health and UNICEF, malaria, HIV and AIDS and malnutrition account for 77% of all diseases affecting children. Over 40% of all deaths among children under the age of five are due to malaria, yet less than 1% of children sleep under insecticide-treated nets.

Vaccination for children between birth and 5 years and for pregnant women is freely carried out in the national vaccination programme. People infected with HIV and AIDS are also entitled to anti-retroviral drugs free of charge in all approved health centres over the Cameroon National Territory.

The Religion

There are three main religious groups in Cameroon: Christianity 60%, Islam 20% and indigenous beliefs 20%.

The Christian women form 60% of church membership and they shine in religious activities. There are fellowship groups, where they carry out seminars and workshops to fight against poverty. They teach others small-scale projects like soap production, preparation of smoked fish, fruit preservation, production of natural juice and tie-dyeing fabric.

They support their sisters who are ordained ministers or are theologians awaiting ordination.

The Women

Cameroon signed the United Nations Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in 1983. The constitution promotes equality between men and women and the civil law provides equal rights in the areas of inheritance, credit and employment. However, traditional rights often discriminate against women.

Only the male head of a household has land rights. Socially the place of women is still influenced by patriarchal tendencies. At all levels giant steps towards assuring women's rights were accomplished by efforts women have made and are still making. The women are involved in the struggle for peace, justice and integrity.

They assist HIV and AIDS and leprosy patients and put all their talents and resources at the disposal of their children, who are at the centre of their lives. Thus women continue to make a difference in the economy, politics and religious activities.

The Children

The children love to play with water; ride bicycles; use bamboo, wire and wood in their crafts; play their home-made instruments; play football and other sports; enjoy computer games and watch television.

Some children have very difficult lives. Many are faced with forced labour, trafficking and poverty-related survival measures as well as lack of access to education. Cameroon has child labour laws but faces the problem of enforcing them. The Ministries of Social Affairs, Labour and Social Insurance are responsible for enforcing the child labour law through site inspections of “registered” businesses.

The law sets the minimum age for employment or apprenticeship at 14 years. Children are prohibited from working at night and those under 18 are prohibited from moving heavy weights, performing dangerous and unhealthy tasks and working in confined areas. Violations of child labour provisions are punishable by fines and imprisonment. The law prohibits slavery, child trafficking, servitude and procuring prostitutes, including sharing the profits from another person’s prostitution.

According to the Ministry of Social Affairs, children from large rural families are “loaned” for labour in exchange for monetary compensation in urban areas where they serve as domestic servants and sometimes as prostitutes. The nature of child labour varies from load-bearing in the markets and car parks, to street vending, car washing, domestic service and child care.

Cameroon has been identified domestically and internationally as a source, transit and destination country for trafficking of children for the purposes of forced labour and commercial sexual exploitation. Some are sent to USA and Europe. Trafficked children work in cocoa, tea, banana and rubber plantations, in spare parts shops and in bars and restaurants. The children’s unfamiliarity with the language makes it easier for employers to assert control.

And in conclusion

This is a beautiful and fascinating country. Like other countries it is emerging from its traditional background into the modern age with all its complexities. The people are moving forward with courage and determination without losing any of their distinctive characteristics.