

Studying under the gun

A York student visits Cameroon and watches the country explode

by Heather Green

Looking back, I cannot explain what compelled me, a Canadian born, 'Westernized' student, to do everything within my means to arrange a year of study in Cameroon. It wasn't the 'roots thing,' although being of African descent, it seems not only natural but vital that I'd want know the historical truths of my distant homeland and its peoples. All I know was that in the summer of 1990 I was ready to go, as long as someone would accept me.

I was introduced to the capital city of Yaoundé via its tiny yet disorganized airport, on the last flight to come in. My luggage had been lost and I suddenly realized I had no idea what the professor who was meeting me looked like, and worse still he must be looking for some white woman — since 'Canadian' is associated internationally with 'white.' As the crowd thinned out, we discovered each other by a process of elimination, and here began, for me, that all-important process invaluable to any foreigner anywhere — familiarization.

Adjusting not only to being in Cameroon, but to being 15,000 km away from friends and family, time seemed to stand still. The first week felt literally like six months. The world around me seemed like a dream, with me on the outside looking in and unable to participate.

As an individual of mixed race, considered 'black' by Canadian standards, I had to adjust to the labels of 'la Métisse' or 'la Blanche' as many Cameroonians saw me. I virtually had to rethink my identity and the role I played with respect to my Cameroonian peers, as a Westerner with all my individualistic, time-guided behaviour, but also as an 'African-Canadian' who could appreciate many Cameroonian cultural and social values.

I remember going to the markets with mixed feelings — I was wary of the men and their up-front flattery and irritating sexual comments, yet I reveled in the spirit of belonging when some of them would call out 'ma soeur' ... 'mamié, viens ici,' and from the older women: 'ma fille.' It seems that once I experienced this sense of community, this

feeling of being everyone's sister, I no longer noticed the absence of material conveniences like hot running water, bank machines or telephones.

But at a national university these 'conveniences' are necessary to compete and be compatible with academia elsewhere. In Africa, the lack of comparable education and information facilities is an ever-present reality. For example, a typical day at the university residence begins at sunrise (that's 6 am), an appropriate hour to see whether the water supply has been cut off — *again* — and whether you saved enough the night before at least to brush your teeth. Outside the human 'traffic' begins as high school students, market women, taxis and the military police all use the uncordoned university compound as their public route to work or school.

As you pass in front of the basketball courts on your way to class, you see the men in khaki, dozing slovenly on their rifles, 'valiantly' protecting us students' from each other. I find it curious that I got used to these gendarmes living permanently only twenty yards from my room — armed to the teeth, often illiterate and probably so young or inexperienced that the slightest excitement might cause them to panic and shoot some innocent bystander.

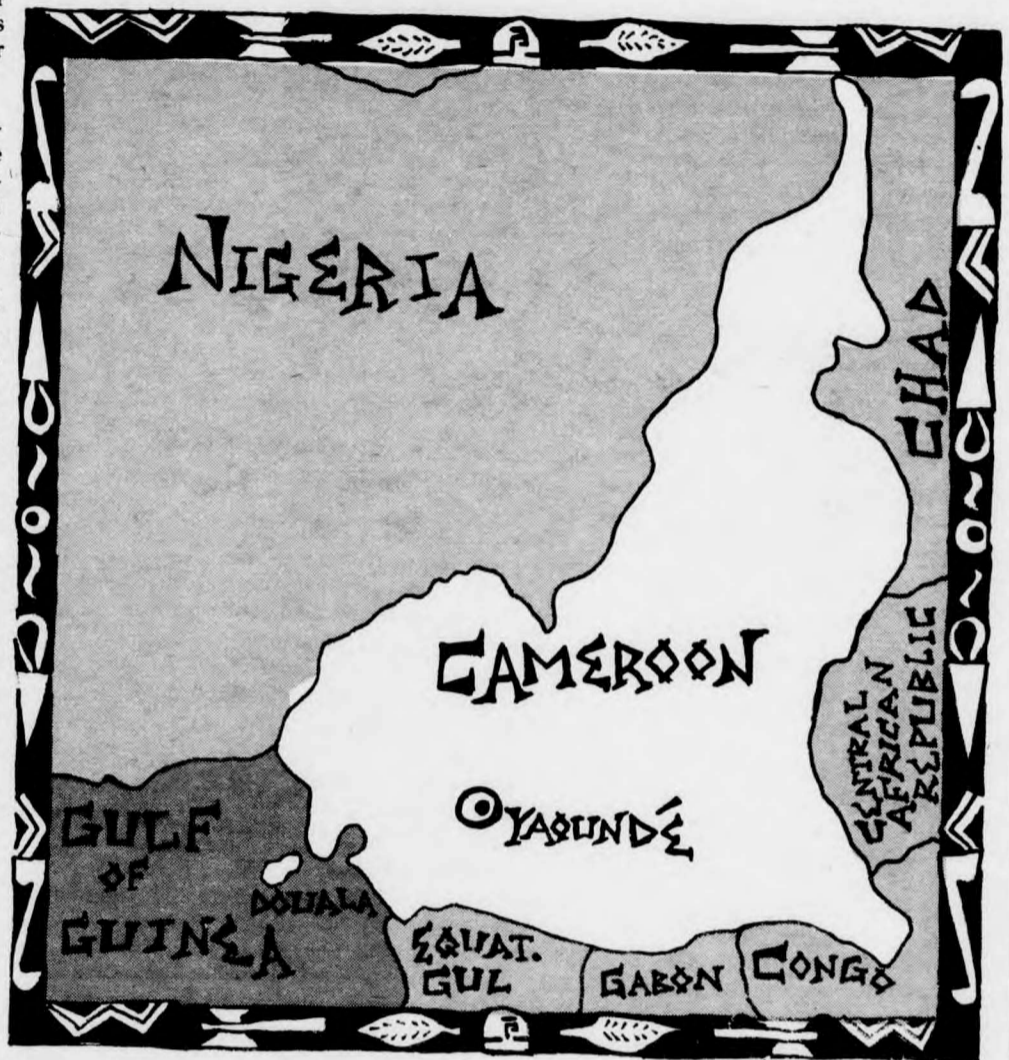
At the University of Yaoundé, like universities in many Third World countries, lack of infrastructure and its maintenance was the main reason that 40,000 students were struggling to eke out an education at an institution built for 6,000. Not only were seats scarce, but many undergraduates experienced lectures from outside classroom windows, or strained to hear a professor as she lectured from atop her desk, surrounded by a sea of faces.

Talk of book lists and bibliographies was a running joke since the library's collection was essentially inaccessible and the bookstore was beyond the students' means. What's more, if the professor did have time off from his other job that day, and came to class, it was a treat if he actually taught something current, and not some outdated, racist theory, as I saw at least one Cameroonian professor continue to embrace.

Fortunately there were others, like the professors of my African literature and sociology courses, who were consistent both in academic and human terms. Despite the politicized bureaucracy of the university administration, the tightly monitored and censored curriculum and the ever-present government and police spies among the students and faculty, a few professors were not afraid to point out and criticize social realities. But unlike in Canada, overcoming the silence around daily realities in Africa basically means not being afraid to die.

To me this drastic contrast in our daily realities was best demonstrated by the events of May 6, 1991. That morning I had been enticed out of bed as usual, by plenty of music coming from rooms throughout the residence. The Bikutsi, Makossa and Soukous musical genres which originate from this region were interspersed with the cheerful propaganda (reminiscent of Bush and his 'kinder, gentler nation') of the president's daily radio message: "I ask of Cameroonians to prove their courage: democracy is not easy, but Cameroonians are a strong and patriotic people. I put my trust in them to ensure that democracy works as it should." (Translation of President Paul Biya's daily quote from 6 May 1991.)

But there was no school that day. The students of the University of Yaoundé had been on strike for just over a month, and were continuing to boycott classes until the government met their demands — for a list of all



graphic • Rose-Ann Bailey

those students killed and missing since the first strike on April 2, for the release of those hundreds still detained, for the removal of the army and police who blockaded the campus, for decent and dignified learning conditions,

for amnesty to all Cameroonians imprisoned or in exile for political reasons, and ultimately for a National Conference, an open forum through which the people would rewrite their country's constitution.

Instead, on that Monday in May, the Cameroonian 'authorities' responded with what was their most brutal tactic to date. At nightfall, when a crowd of thousands of students held a meeting in one of the student ghettos which were virtually in my backyard, I saw

a file of about 100 soldiers pass my residence, guns loaded, in perfect silence. They descended toward the meeting to ambush the unarmed students, throwing tear gas and opening fire, causing panic and sending them blindly into other groups of armed civilians and soldiers on all sides. Beatings, rape, imprisonment and death were the obvious results.

The next morning the exodus began. This had been the last straw. The students had packed all that they could carry and were leaving in droves, some with mattresses, others with stoves and bottles of propane gas, still more with bookshelves and suitcases balanced on their heads. Within a few days the population of Yaoundé had decreased by over 30,000 as students returned to their villages vowing to "see you after the National Conference."

The University of Yaoundé 1991-92 academic year had been late in starting last October due to an ongoing nationwide general strike which began in June '91, itself a direct consequence of student action. The functioning of banks, stores, public transportation and even government offices was continually interrupted for almost five months, despite the president's agreement to 'conditional elec-

tions' which finally took place on March 1 of this year.

Cameroon's domestic economy has become stagnant and living conditions have worsened as a result of chronic unemployment, food rationing and still more illegal detentions, torture and disappearances. Meanwhile the government is once again playing up the national soccer team's hopes for the next World Cup, promoting a sense of national pride while attempting to minimize the gravity of public dissatisfaction.

The French government has significant control behind the scenes over the repressive imposition of this superficial 'stability.' Working for a profitable and exploitative exchange with Cameroon — one which is maintained only at the cost of the lives of Africans — both the French and Israeli military have shared their 'expertise' in training Cameroonian 'forces of order,' secret police and collaborators, on how to quell a powerful student movement.

This I witnessed firsthand last April as I watched a military helicopter carry out low-level flights and other terrorist manoeuvres above the campus and residences. Wondering about the white man who was clearly visible dropping tear gas and small explosives around our heads, I was informed that he was just one of several Israeli soldiers (among other non-Africans) sent to demonstrate to Cameroonians such 'skills.'

One year later, as a result of just such programs of 'North-South' cooperation, the students' solidarity and organization have been broken, the student leaders have fled the country and those who remain have had to endure the blatant intimidation of attending classes among the spies and gendarmes.

These are some of the daily realities of just one African country, thought by many to have been the most stable since the independences gained in the 1960s. Not surprisingly, most of this goes on unnoticed by the Canadian media, the public and those of other countries.

Yet studying in a place like Cameroon is infinitely more informative, eye-opening and educational than relying on the traditional means of information, or undertaking the usual stint in Europe or the US. Not only did I experience an African society beyond all the stereotyped and biased representations that are offered in the West, but most significantly, I gained a revealing perspective on our own acquiescence to the Western foreign politics of intervention and domination.

A YEAR OF STUDENT STRUGGLE

June 1990 • Civil protests call for multi-party democracy and legalization of the anglophone-based Social Democratic Front. Forces fire on peaceful demonstrators, killing six. The government reports no deaths.

At the University of Yaoundé, students march in support and armed forces permanently occupy the office.

December 1990 • President Biya legalizes opposition parties.

April 1991 • Over 1000 students hold a march which ends in clashes with security forces. Students and reporters are arrested.

Tension escalates with a taxi drivers' strike in Devala and the 'assassination' of a student known to be a government informer.

Demonstrations, riots and clashes with armed security forces spread from major cities to smaller provincial towns.

May 1991 • The army ambushes a student meeting, resulting in over 20 deaths. Government papers report "zero deaths" the next day.

June 1991 • "Operation ghost towns" begins a summer of nationwide stay-at-home strikes, non-cooperation and civil disobedience.