

# Cameroon

## January 2017

There is a lizard with a yellow head and a red tail that comes with the house. He marches along the top of the wall weaving between the spires of broken glass bottles. Normally he has an imperious look but will do a ceremonial bowing on occasion.

Here he is with his girlfriend.

We have been to the market to buy vegetables. While we were bargaining for some tomatoes another seller came alongside and nudged us with her basket. Inside were hundreds of yellow, very large fat grubs with dark brown heads crawling over one another? Our immediate reaction was to draw back. They are



actually quite nutritious and are weevil larvae found in the rotting trunks of palm trees (*chinis*).

At our school the principal walked into the office where we were sitting and dropped a thick electrical hose on her desk. She had been threatening the ‘premier’ students who had not done their homework. This is not an idle threat. The students will be beaten with a knotted rope (*la chicotte*) if they are to be disciplined.

So, there is a kind of cultural mine field to navigate and weave through – much like the lizard.

There has not been any water for four days, but this morning after a couple of coughs the spigots were once again gushing.

On our way to school we pass a huge mansion which is fairly new and completely empty. Our driver says that it was owned by a minister of government. He fell foul of the country’s president, and the president accused him of corruption. The driver says that everyone in the government is corrupt so that this is an accusation which is easily proven. He is now serving 2 years in prison.



At the college there are 350 students and about 30 teachers. On the morning of our first day there was a general assembly on the playground. All of the students were dressed in blue shirts and grey pants. The boys and girls have the same outfits, but some of the older girls have dresses. The principal talked for quite a long time while some of us staff stood next to her. She then introduced Karin and me. I asked if I am supposed



to speak and she nodded. I said, 'Bonjour tout le monde. Je parle seulement un peu Francais, mais j'ai compris ce que madame a dit –on ne doit pas dormir et c'est tres important de travaler beaucoup. J'espere que nous parlerons entre nous plus tard. Merci.' This was probably the worst speech ever given in French, and therefore the reaction was quite unexpected with cheers and applause.

Our driver is often late. One day after waiting half an hour, we finally heard the car. We rushed out still hoping to get to school on time. We jumped into the car. I turned to the driver thinking I would complain, but it was a new face. 'I asked him if he was the new driver?' 'No.' That didn't make any sense. 'Are you going to drive us to the school?' 'No.' 'Oh. Sorry. This is a mistake. Goodbye.' He had just been turning around in our driveway.

The teachers only teach about three hours each day. There are seven classes with about 50-60 students in a class. There is a constant undercurrent of murmuring while teaching is taking place. Some students are sleeping with there heads on their arms. The worst class is the *Premier*. This is the next highest class before reaching the *Terminal*. Only the brightest students move on to the Terminal where the classes only have 10 to 15 students. Those that fail the '*probatoï*' exam get left behind. So the Premier class becomes a dustbin for the hopeless and lazy.

Karin and I taught the 6<sup>ieme</sup> which is the first class. We did some role play where two students walked toward one another and bumped shoulders. Then one would say 'I'm sorry. My fault.' and the other responded with 'That's OK'. This was very popular and it was done over and over.

Then we asked them to tell us what their parents did. One of the girls told us that her mother was a singer. We asked her if she could sing us a song. She began singing, then the others around her joined in and soon the whole class was singing and clapping.

We have since arranged a schedule for teaching all the class levels. We try lots of techniques – anagrams, role play, writing sentences that need correction, interviewing the students, playing grocery shopping. Some things work and others don't. Today we took on the scary and hopeless *Premier* class. I told them that they must think of themselves as spies to the US. If they say something like 'I am student.' instead of 'I am a student' then they will be arrested. So pay attention. And they did. I kept writing sentences with errors and they tried to find the mistakes. It worked. It also helps that Karin is sitting among the students and making comments and encouraging them to answer.





The other way we help is by correcting exams before they are given to the students. A typical exam will have 15 or 20 mistakes. Most of the mistakes are because the teachers are French speakers and a French formulation has been used. Did any of you know that English has 6 continuous tenses and the French have only one (imparfait). The French don't like continuous. Why is that? It's a mystery.

An egret and a cormorant sharing a puddle.

We decided to take a beach holiday for a few days. The director of our school was going to a funeral in the same area so we all went together. On the road I tried out different sentences with Beatrice. Finally with her we pieced together the following: 'Elle m'aime et telle une douceur, remplit le vide de mon coeur.' Not long after we were stopped along the road by a bunch of guys in fluorescent jackets. They told us that since we were not wearing seat belts we would be fined about 40 dollars each. No douceur there. Our patron said that that was way over what was reasonable. In the end she gave them a few bucks. It turned out later that it was a shakedown -wearing seat belts is not compulsory and they are not allowed to ask for money. They are criminals. There is a list of the most corrupt countries on the internet and Cameroon is among the worst.

We took some walks along the beach and came across the end of someone's dream – a pleasure boat washed up on the beach. All of the fastenings had been removed by the locals as these are quite valuable.



After some very peaceful days and good food by the sea we started home. Our pickup began having trouble almost immediately. The first to go were the lights. The driver hotwired some of the fuses and the lights came on – though only the brights. Then at about 9 pm a metal tube which is needed for the hydraulics of the clutch got a hole. The driver borrowed a wrench and my pen knife and unscrewed the tube, cut off the part with a hole and then started banging it with the wrench on

the asphalt until it looked like the original (kind of). He then said the only English I'd heard him say: 'Mission accomplished'. All of this took about 2 hours with a lot of suggestions from passersby. One guy with a whistle warned passing trucks of our breakdown. Another was the flashlight holder. The amazing thing was that this was done in the dark with a flashlight and whatever tools were at hand. I have decided that with will

power you can accomplish anything.  
ANYTHING!

I think it is always nice to bring up medical breakthroughs in the newsletter. The latest is if you have a cough that is keeping you awake at night. Take about 50 cc of Famous Grouse whisky and sip it very slowly. The little bugs will be killed and you will sleep nicely. I hope all of you are taking notes.



As evening settles over Yaoundé, the houses with their corrugated iron roofing take on a rosy hue. With our French friend, Beatrice, we sit on our second floor veranda and feel a light breeze which is cooling the city that has baked in the sun all day. In front of us on the top of a hill is a *boulangerie* which is outlined in pink flashing lights. Next to this is the English church which has atop its steeple a pink flashing cross mounted on a neon green base.

So far so good.

Love

B+K

## February

In the centre of Yaoundé there is a string of ancient mango trees. Looking up into the high branches we see what appear to be very heavy fruit. Only some of the fruit loosens occasionally, flies around a bit and reattaches. Using the camera we zoom in and there we find thousands of fruit bats.

It is like seeing a tree full of little winged Gollums. They are called *chauve souris* (bald mice). At some point they all take flight and the sky is full of their darting forms.



The camera is handy for all kinds of things. We discovered that it has GPS. So we can check our coordinates for the school and our house then we can put these into Google Earth on the PC to find the distance and best way to get to work. This becomes more impressive given the fact that there are no street signs or numbers. If, for example, you were to take a taxi, you can't tell the driver where you are going. Yet there are hundreds of (shared) taxis. It's a mystery how they manage.



This all reminds me of the language we are trying to teach. Every rule is full of exceptions - no street signs or numbers here either. Take pronunciation - if you take dough, through, bought, trough, tough 'ough' is pronounced 5 different ways. If I were to write a grammar book for English the title would be '*English - The trashcan of broken rules*'. Here is another – the verb 'to be' cannot be used in the continuous form. You cannot say, for example, 'I am being hungry'. I told this to Karin and she said, 'What about: He is being a jerk.' *So you see, nothing is sacred.*

We were sitting at breakfast in the morning when we noticed what appeared to be a small leaf moving across the table. Again using the camera and with full zoom on the macro setting, we could see that it was a tiny little animal which had made a flat cocoon out of the red dust. It had some legs on the front of its body which it used to drag its little house around. This may seem a bit creepy, but, hey, we are all trying to make do with whatever works.



This week was 'bilingual week' where all Francophones were to speak English. On the last day of the week there were no classes, but instead the kids performed. They did a fashion show of the latest models, they gave the news in French and English, one of the girls performed a near perfect version of 'Raise Me Up' to great acclaim, there were general knowledge competitions between the classes and several groups did dance numbers. We faculty sat at tables and were plied with refreshments (including beer!).

It was all entertaining. The dancing was very well performed but left us feeling a little uncomfortable when it got too suggestive. After all, the dancers were often underage. I kept waiting for the vice police to show up. We have seen the same in Malawi where it also seemed completely acceptable.



The only low point in 'Bilingual Day' were the speeches by the faculty. There is an unfortunate tradition to hold long, droning speeches. The students sink lower and lower and cover their heads in an attempt to shut out the monotony. At our table, we tried to look interested, but had to succumb to *ennui*'s greater force.

Some of you may not be aware that the African Football Cup of 2017 is being played as we speak. BUT THAT'S NOT ALL! Our very own Cameroon beat Ghana in the semi-finals which means that they will be playing in the finals! Their rival is Egypt who beat tiny Burkina Faso to reach the finals. Life in Cameroon is at a standstill until this match is decided. Everything else is on hold. Even breathing.

We have a very old TV set which we have placed in the driveway with plastic chairs around. Beatrice, Karin and I will watch the game with potato chips and wine. Beatrice joined us, but, being the only sane one, will probably read her book throughout the match. Actually you don't need a TV set to follow the results because every time there is a score the entire city of Yaoundé erupts with cheers or groans. I say '*erupt*' advisedly because when 2 million people simultaneously make noise, it is volcanic.

In the weekends we try to get out to see the sights or have a nice meal. Today we had lunch at a very pleasant restaurant surrounded by plants. The plants attract birds and we managed this picture of an African paradise flycatcher with its long tail.

I tell my students that there is a reason for getting an education. Without it you may have to make do with a job like those guys who stand in the middle of the street selling plastic fans or bicycle inner tubes. Or if you are a little luckier you can sell fresh water in plastic containers. The next step up from that would be a driver of one of those little yellow taxis that belch black smoke or in the market selling palm weevil larva. So guys, for gawds sake, stop saying 'I am student' or 'I have 15 years old'.

All the same you do have to appreciate some of the entrepreneurs. Haute couture and selling sunglasses. How cool is that!







The football finals have been played and the Cameroon Lions won! A big step for Cameroon - a small step for the rest of the world. The celebrations went on and on into the night. There was a lot banging on pots with wooden spoons – this apparently is a symbol for how the Egyptians were cooked in the Cameroonian pot.



Our favourite bakery supports the “Indomitable Lions”

Corporal punishment is alive and well in Cameroon. Beatrice was having a lesson together with another teacher yesterday. He had arrived late and was angry. Beatrice gasped when for no apparent reason he slapped first one student across the face and then another. She was in shock. One of the girls leaned over to her and asked sympathetically, ‘Don’t they beat the students in France?’ In a shaky voice Beatrice whispered back, ‘No, never.’ Another punishment is to have the students who have not done their homework kneel in the gravel.

I find often that our conversation in Cameroon gets relegated to polite phrases that really don't impart any information, interest or humour. There is a technical breakthrough that may help in these situations. The Indian Chakra Pump. So how does the pump work? It looks like an ordinary bicycle hand pump but with mantras printed on the side. You place the hose in one side of your mouth and on the other side you put a kazoo. You may need help pumping. The fantastic result is that it keeps the level of nonsense being said to a minimum. It is 100% guaranteed.

In our class for the 11 year olds we taught them this song:

*The poor old slave has gone to rest  
We know that he is free oh free free  
His bones they lie disturb them not  
Way down in Tennessee oh see see*  
It is a funny song where you keep changing the syllables  
The pe-oor old slee-ave..  
The polly poor old slolly slave ...  
The piggety poor old sliggety slave...

It seemed a bit too reminiscent of old romantic slave days in the South, so we switched out the word ‘slave’ with ‘knave’. It has a waltz rhythm and in the end we all sang and waltzed around.



We considered starting our own language school here in Yaoundé, but someone beat us to it.



Here are some more portraits and sketches.



Affectionately from Cameroon,  
B and K

## March

I am forever impressed with the physical prowess of Cameroonians. Where are all the weak spindly ones – like me? There is, of course, a rougher life to contend with which requires hard work with a lot of lifting and carrying. I especially notice their posture: Both men and women carry loads on their heads and walk very straight and tall. There may be a secondary cause for their good physique: life is rough and infant mortality is high (5.2 %). As a result you will eventually get a genetically superior population with a superb physical stature.

However, longevity in Cameroon is only 57 years. If you remove infant mortality from the equation the remaining population of strong individuals live to a rather low 63 years. Disease, poor nutrition, unsanitary conditions, air pollution... not to mention that red dust which you constantly breathe – all of it takes its toll. The strong bodies are not strong enough to contend with the harsh physical conditions.

You might wonder if this early mortality might be due to natural environmental causes alone. I don't think so. I would regard Australia as roughly similar in terms of a dry, dusty, hot climate. Yet Australian longevity is very similar to the Norwegian – men 80.5 years and women 84.6. Compared to the Cameroonian 57 years, the Aussies live 45% longer.

The difference seems to be largely due to social and cultural causes. This is a touchy issue and will usually start a debate as to whose at fault for today's African culture – with a good deal of shouting and finger pointing. None of which is very fruitful. Whatever the primal cause, one is left with very stable, brutal and

corrupt governments in sub-saharan Africa. If you ask any person on the street – a taxi driver or a lady selling bananas – they will very openly tell you that the politicians of their country are corrupt. (On the world corruption scale Norway ranks as #6 and Cameroon at #145 with Somalia at the bottom with 176). Our students are critical of this and have not lost their idealism.



Driving through Yaoundé the bats were suddenly all in flight and the air was filled with thousands. Our little Gollums were flying chaotically in all directions and the air must have been filled with a cacophony of echolocation.



Bats have a very high metabolism and will eat their own weight in insects in a single night – 1200 insects/hour. That keeps the bothersome insects at bay for the rest of us. Bats are our friends. Creepy friends are better than no friends. Another interesting fact is that their body temperature varies and when active can be between 40 and 44 °C (unlike most mammals it



is not constant). Bats carry disease but very seldom suffer from them. It is suggested that their high metabolism and body temperature is the reason.

We took a break from school, smog and dust and spent some days on the Atlantic coast. There were lots of birds - eagles, vultures and sea birds of many varieties. Here is one that we found rather fascinating.



Grey Heron with its amazing neck. This is not a graphic manipulation!

We found a guide to show us around the nearby forest. There is always something strange that will pop up like this curious plant to the right. The red is actually a fruit. The Pygmys were living in the same forest we were walking in. We have been offered to visit them. We weren't comfortable with that. Going to see people simply because they are short seemed a bit demeaning so we declined. (I am descendent from the Ozark hillbillies, but I am not going to play my washboard for you! Beg away. Nyet!)



We did see one pygmy! He is working in the hotel reception. He is rather well dressed and speaks French. No loin cloth or blow gun. Pygmys aren't what they used to be. The tourists are though.



On the beach we saw some interesting markings in the sand (on left). We think they were the heel marks of a tourist being dragged away by the pygmy's to be put into the pot. Could be a disappointment. White meat is rather bland. Needs a lot of salt.

We have been trying to take pictures of the large birds in the area. They are constantly flying overhead, but are nearly impossible to capture with a camera. Karin finally saw one coming from far off and we had plenty of time to focus. Still the picture was pretty rough. It is a *Palm Nut Vulture*.



Here are just a few bird pictures we've taken whenever the subject happened to be near. They are kind of like cute cat pictures for ornithologists. We have moved to a place with lots of flowers and bushes. We sit on the veranda with the camera close by and watch our favourite TV show – which is these little fellows.



Paradise Flycatcher Female



Paradise Flycatcher Male





WhiteThroatedWattle Eye



Snowy Crowned Robin Chat - Singing



Speckled Mouse Bird with two babies



Woodland Kingfisher –after fishing



Bronze Munia like to cuddle

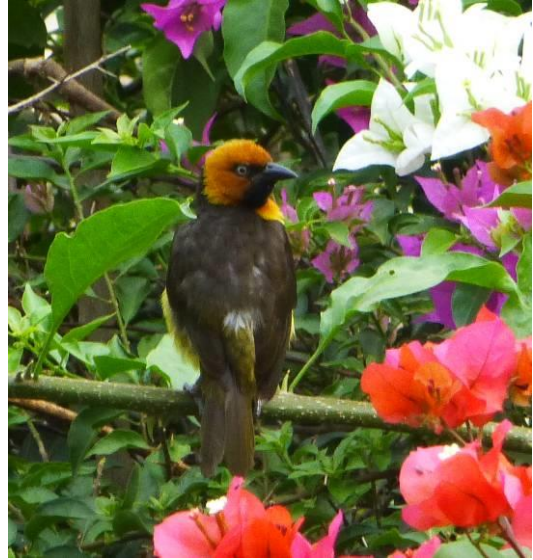


Spectacled Weaver Bird





Pied Hornbill



Black Winged Red Bishop



Bulbul with Lizard



Blue Flycatcher



Olive Sunbird



Splendid Sunbird



## Street scenes from Yaoundé



**Blind Drummers**



**Encore Rêver**



**Fashion**





## Making an honest living

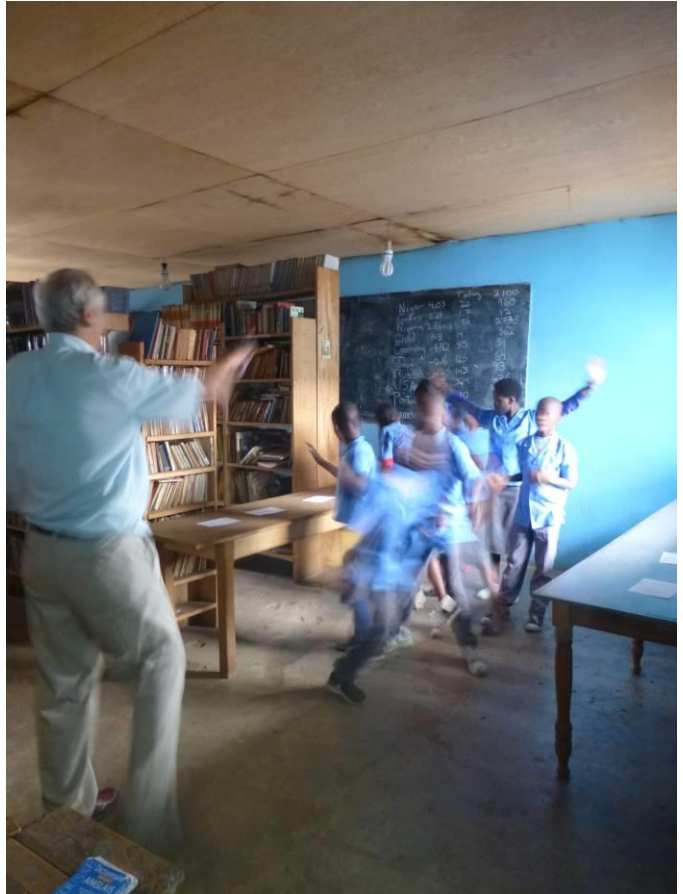




## School



Learning part for Old Woman in Jack and the Beanstalk – “Would you like to buy some Magic Beans young man?”



Find the right word in English



Yaoundé School Bus



Magic Tricks – “You see this coin....”

Soon we will be heading home.

Bye from Cameroon,

B and K

## Synopsis

After 3 months in Cameroon, we find the experience a mix of things. It is not easy for people to get by here. A lot of time is spent sitting around and selling bananas which is a kind of metaphor for work life here generally. I keep wondering – can you really make a living that way. We think people talk in an aggressive way. It is just the way they speak. Probably life has never been easy in Cameroon. There is a bit of the feeling that nothing has changed much. Maybe in the old days you herded goats waving a stick and shouting - today you do it while shouting into your mobile phone.

We have loved teaching, though that too can be tough. In the beginning we tried teaching classes with too many kids who were talking, sleeping and uninterested. The way the Cameroonian teachers would succeed was with physical beating of both boys and girls. I have watched a teacher walk into class flexing a length of rubber hose like a Gestapo. In the last month we changed to having small classes with 8 kids who actually wanted to be there. We gradually learned how to have activities that fit the different age groups. We started all classes with having them find words in a matrix of letters (boggle). With the older ones we had discussions (what to do about corruption, what is your personality, etc) and with the younger ones more action prone activities. For example to learn the verbs associated with movement we would blindfold a student who had to draw a circle around a figure on the blackboard. The other students would lead him/her by shouting directions (stop, forward, backward, up, down, climb over the chair, etc.). When we told them we were leaving the 6<sup>th</sup> grade ran forward and gave us hugs. It felt very ‘je te kiffe’ – I dig you.

One of our pleasures in Cameroon has been the birds. They are much more than lizards with feathers. We watch them all the time and have learned a lot about their habits and personalities. The cheeky blue flycatchers, the arrogant pipit, the slow doves ... Take the waxbills: They can't soar like eagles. They have tiny little wings so in order to stay aloft they have to flap frantically or they would drop like a rock. That means when they land they do it at full speed. So ... they have to stick out their legs in front, grab on and hope the momentum doesn't rip them off the perch. Another thing – birds seem to accept other birds with the same colours – I have seen a sparrow, a bulbul and a speckled mouse bird all on the same twig looking comfortable. They all have the same colours. However, if a grey mourning dove lands the speckled mouse bird will start screaming holy hell at him. Speaking of bulbuls – they will instantly attack the pretty little sunbirds. The bully bulbuls. Strangely ‘bulbul’ means ‘nightingale’ in Turkish. So in the night the bully bulbuls will sing sweet melodies. A complex personality. Good to know. Now you can say like Marlon Brando: “You may be a one-eyed jack around here, but I've seen the other side of your face.”