

## Cameroon Muslims

Islam arrived in Cameroon which is located on the west coast of Africa in the 1600s. Muslims account for about 25-30% of the total population. Christianity accounts for about 30% of the country's population, where almost one of every three people follows an indigenous African religion. The country is divided into two large religious spheres with the northern regions being predominantly populated by Muslims and the southern and western regions by Christians and Animists.

The Islamization of the region began in the 17th century with the settlement of the nomadic Muslim Fulani people in the northern parts of what is now Cameroon. In addition to the Fulani, who engaged in trade, proselytizing dervishes affiliated with the Qadiri and the Tijani orders arrived in the area in large numbers and this culminated in the creation of a populous Muslim community here. Because of this historical background, Islam is more common among the Fulani, Peuhl, and Bamun tribes in the north and the west.

In the early periods following the arrival of Islam in the region, Muslims were politically active and founded local sultanates. Political structures like the Kanem State and the Bornu Sultanate ruled North Cameroon for decades in the 19th century. These sultanates existed until colonizers began to occupy the region. The northern regions of Cameroon were taken under the control of the Adamawa Emirate, which was subject to the Sokoto Caliphate founded in Northern Nigeria in 1804. Having occupied Cameroon in 1884, the Germans violently oppressed the Muslims who had been in positions of power and diminished their political power in order to consolidate German authority.

After testing the water to see if the Muslims would act in accordance with their colonial interests, like all colonial powers, the Germans understood that the Muslim minority would not collaborate and so they resorted to restricting the sphere of Muslim activity in the region. Missionaries brought from Europe in the same period journeyed across the country and started their efforts to Christianize the population. While the Muslims took armed resistance at military level, at civil level they continued their struggle by refusing to send their children to colonial schools in what can be considered an instance of civil disobedience.

Following the British-German agreement of 1893, the Hausa and the Fulani people had split down the middle, with some ending up in Northern Nigeria, and others in Northern Cameroon. Opposing this division, the Muslims had to fight against both the British and the Germans. This ethnic and religious solidarity is the primary reason why, even today, the effects of the Muslim-Christian conflict in Nigeria are felt strongly in Cameroon.

The German presence in Cameroon did not last long. During the First World War in 1916, the French and the British invaded and shared Cameroon out between them. In accordance with their agreement, more than three-quarters of the country came under French control. Like the Germans, the French tried to keep the Muslims under control through severe and sometimes softer measures. They tolerated the further strengthening of groups who did not jeopardize their colonial interests. So much so that certain cultural associations, students associations and Sufi movements were active under French supervision.

Thanks to the increase in urbanization, communication and transport links under colonial rule, a period started in Africa when civilians and merchants could travel with ease. This change resulted in further and faster interaction between the Bantu peoples and also an increase in Islamic proselytizing efforts and the number of Muslims.

French Cameroon gained independence in 1960 and, together with the British-controlled areas which joined them in 1961, formed a single state, the independent Republic of Cameroon. A portion of British Cameroon was given to Nigeria, which had also been invaded by Britain, again to ensure that the Muslims remained a minority on both sides.

The adoption of a rigid secular and unitary policy by the state after its independence caused both the religious and ethnic alienation of the Muslims which comprised various ethnicities. In 1963, the state gave the Muslims permission to establish their first official association (the *Islamic Cultural Association of Cameroon*). Remaining virtually the only representative of Muslims for many years, this organization lost

its monopoly when a more democratic political milieu began to be established in 1992.

Due to limited financial funds from the state, the Muslim minority obtained funds from abroad, especially from Libya and the Gulf countries, and established its own schools, hospitals and NGOs. Muslim students who were sent abroad not only strengthened the relations between societies, they also had a positive effect on the position of Muslims within the country by increasing the number of educated people there.

When students who had gone to Arab countries started coming back during these years, this increased both awareness of Islam in the country and brought political demands and social visibility onto the agenda. Considered by the state to be a threat, this new generation of Muslim intellectuals are dealt with cautiously by the traditional Islamic scholars. This has led the new generation of Muslim intellectuals and scholars to develop a movement close to Salafism at a civil level by establishing new educational institutions.

Relations between the state and Muslims have always experienced their ups and downs, with the two parties going from being collaborators one minute to enemies the next. "Mutual suspicion" can be the best description of the current state of affairs between the state and Muslims. While the state does not trust Muslims, the Muslim minority feels similarly toward the state.

Today, there are mosques and madrasahs in all large urban centers of Cameroon. Despite continuing at full force, missionary activities have not managed to dissuade Muslims from going to the madrasahs. While trying on the one hand to raise religious awareness among Muslims, Islamic educational institutions also function as places where non-Muslims can get acquainted with Islam. Thanks to these efforts, the number of Muslims in the country is increasing by the day.

Having important and significant funds, missionaries can establish schools that provide education at primary school, high school, and university levels. Even Central Africa's top Catholic university is located in Cameroon. While public schools account for 40% of all primary schools in the region, Catholic and Protestant missionary schools account for 30%, and Islamic schools for a very small portion.

The existing tensions between Muslims and Christians in the neighboring countries of Nigeria and the Central African Republic have the potential to affect Cameroon. The influence of Boko Haram in those regions of Nigeria which border Cameroon may cause future developments that affect the Muslim minority in a negative way. Again, the tension between Christian militants and Muslims in Central Africa has the potential to cause security issues along the Cameroon border.

But, the most significant issue facing the Muslim minority of Cameroon today is the conflict within the minority itself. The recent civil conflict in the Bamoun region has caused damages which will be hard to repair. Home to over 280 indigenous languages and over 500 ethnicities, Cameroon is, in a sense, the mirror of Africa. Its complex social composition has divided the Muslim minority into ethnic groups. In addition to ethnic conflicts, there are bitter conflicts between Salafi and Sufi branches in the country. Meanwhile, there are also the various ideological organizations formed by new university graduate intellectuals.

The *High Islamic Council in Cameroon* acts as an intermediary between the Muslim minority and the state. As the highest religious authority within the Muslim community, the council also acts as the office of the mufti. Cameroon's Ministry of the Interior tries to keep the Muslim minority under check through these institutions.

In the northern regions populated predominantly by Muslims, issues other than serious ones such as murder or land disputes, are dealt with by traditional scholars acting as qadis (Islamic judges). Issues relating to family law, such as inheritance, divorce, and marriage, are also regulated by local scholars. Even in cases which are resolved through court cases without consulting the qadis, if there is a petition to that end, the courts take the complaints of the qadis into consideration.

Experiencing poverty despite all its riches, Cameroon is a country of impossibilities. Even though the territory is favorable for agriculture and there are large meadows suitable for animal husbandry, both are still carried out under primitive conditions in Cameroon. Just as their riches were taken away from them by

colonial powers for many years, the people are also bereft of educational and technological opportunities.

The only reason why the majority of Cameroon lives in poverty is that all areas of production are occupied by European farmers, businessmen and merchants, especially the French. It has become the lot of indigenous Africans to tend small plots of land, raise a small number of animals, or provide services in areas monopolized by Europeans.

Under this economic disparity, Muslims who constitute the majority of rural dwellers experience the most oppression. Except for some small or medium scale enterprises, all large-scale businesses in Cameroon belong either directly to Westerners or to local Christian businessmen.

Surface area: 475,440 km<sup>2</sup>

Population: 23,130,708

Muslim population: 25-30%

Capital: Yaounde

Official language: English, French