WHAT’S THE NATURE OF THEIR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE? (CONTINUED)

During special occasions such as the visit of an honored guest, wedding ceremony or funeral rites, chicken, goat, sheep, or cattle meat is served to guests. Special drinks such as palm wine and millet beer, and of late, bottled carbonated drinks, beer, and wine are served at these occasions. As part of inauguration festivities, a newly installed chief ceremoniously serves his subjects a handful of beans mixed with palm oil to symbolize the chief’s ability to ensure food and fertility in his realm.

Beti and Ewondo women are mainly responsible for feeding their families. They grow staple food crops, while men provide meat, palm oil and salt. Men also grow cash crops and herd the livestock. In general, men have higher social status than women. They have more rights with regard to marriage, divorce and land tenure within most village systems of social organization as well as more access to government bureaucracy and the courts. However, women have resort to informal power within households, enforced through their control of subsistence activities and their role as conduits to female ancestors.

As part of daily etiquette, praise names are used during greetings in many parts of Cameroon. At meetings, people greet each other with warm handshakes. The gracious serving of food is an important symbol of hospitality. Respect is accorded to elders. Special protocol is observed when speaking and seating during an audience with the chief indicating a hierarchical social organization.

WHY STUDY BETI AND EWONDO?

The Beti-Pahuin are well known for their oral literature which includes poetry, stories, legends, proverbs, chants and riddles. Since the colonial period, written literature has had a strong history among the Ewondo who have contributed most of the classics to modern African literature. In addition, the Beti speaking people are renowned for their pottery, textiles and sculptures that are often used as household objects. They are also noted for their royal displays which reflected in elaborately beaded calabashes and exquisite sculptures. The Bamoun are known for lost-wax bronze sculptures. In order to fully appreciate the unique literature, artworks and royal displays, it is necessary to study Beti language and culture.

BETI & EWONDO

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WHO ARE THE BETI AND EWONDO PEOPLE?

The Beti-Pahuin, in particular, are a group of related peoples who inhabit the rain forests of Cameroon extending into the Congo Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Sao Tome and Principe. Although they can be viewed as separate individual groups, they share a common history and culture. Their languages belong to the Bantu category of the Niger-Congo language cluster, being mutually intelligible and often regarded as dialects of the same language. Due to a long shared history, there has been a great deal of intermarriage between the Beti-Pahuin and other ethnic groups to the point that distinguishing the different peoples can often prove difficult. For this reason, the Beti-Pahuin are made up of individual ethnic groups consisting of the Ewondo, Bane, Fang, Mbida-Mbue, Mvog-Nyenge and Eton.

The Ewondo or Yaounde (also sometimes known as Yaunde) are mainly centred in the capital city, Yaounde, which was named after them. Ewondo, a dialect of the Beti language group, is the most widely spoken dialect in Cameroon. It has over half a million speakers and serves as the lingua franca of the capital city. The Beti, and their subgroup, the Ewondo people’s exact origins are not clear. They are thought to have migrated from the Azande area of Sudan but recent studies indicate that they originated in the rain forests not far from their current territory.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THEIR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE?

Cameroon is a vastly multilingual country comprised of 247 indigenous languages, one lingua franca, pidgin English, and two official languages, English and French. Beti and Ewondo are among the local languages used for wider communication. The other widely used languages are Fulfulde (or Fulani), Basaa, Duala, Hausa, Wandala, Kanuri and Arab Choa. However, these indigenous languages have not been officially recognized. At the time of independence from France and Britain in October 1961, the country remained divided into French-speaking Cameroon and English-speaking Cameroon. This official bilingualism was instituted in the whole federal republic as a ‘neutral’ option in order to avoid language conflict and also financial and material costs. The result was that indigenous languages were kept in the background as preference was given to the languages of the former colonial masters. The indigenous languages are mainly limited to oral usage especially in rural and family circles.

In cultural terms, the Beti and Ewondo are organized in terms of patrilineal kinships. Several families belonging to a common lineage live together in a village, and in turn, several villages form a clan. The clans are ruled by a chief who doubles up as the religious authority. Although colonial influence diluted the power of Beti chieftainship, and in some instances the office of the chief has disappeared, most of the decision making at village and clan level is still done by traditional consensus. By 1939, most of the Beti and Ewondo people were converted to Christianity and Islam. However, local animist beliefs still persist. After independence, there was an increased resurgence of traditional practices. Today, the Beti and Ewondo may go for church service on Sundays, and then continue to practice animist religion during the week. The country’s national anthem begins with the words, ‘Oh, Cameroon, cradle of our ancestors’, which reflects the importance of ancestral kinship and the desire to forge an imagined community in the midst of wide ethnic diversity. Among the Beti, ancestors are still remembered in oral literature, buried in elaborate tombs in the family courtyard, and venerated with offerings of libation, food and shelter. Muslim converts on the other hand, believe in an afterlife of material rewards for those who obey the laws of Allah.