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African Immersion: American College Students in Cameroon

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ONE

Introduction

Setting the Context

It was a perfect evening on July 4, 2013, in Kumba, Cameroon. With temperatures in the low seventies and a light breeze, the atmosphere was right for a celebration. *Société Nationale d'Electricité* (AES-Sonel), the company which supplied electricity to the country showed no signs of turning off the lights.¹ At about 6:30 P.M. University of Dayton students and members of host families and friends began to trickle into the B & B Restaurant. It was there, at that location, that they celebrated America's 237th Independence Day. Within an hour all the students arrived. A glance at tables in the restaurant showed a wide combination of local food: chicken-chips, *ndole* and plantains, Cameroonian-style fried rice, *garri* and *okra soup*, *fufu* and *eru*, and more. Drinks included a variation of domestic and foreign brew with labels such as 33 *Export*, *Mutzig*, *Sazengbra*, *Pampamorse*, Coca-Cola, *Grenadine*, and *Supermont*. Background music added to the ambiance. It was a combination of *makossa*, and music from the Now Collection of Best Dancing Music, Lady Pounce, *Maître Gims*, Petit Pays, K-Tino, Flavor, and P-Square. It was a festive moment. Taking advantage of B & B's wireless internet evening customers texted, posted on blogs, Facebooked, e-mailed, engaged in small talk, and mostly hung out with each other and Cameroonian friends.

About two hours into the evening coordinator James Nkwetta Odine announced it was time to sing the national anthems. The group stood up, members cleared their throats, and it began. First they sang the US Anthem, and later the Cameroon National Anthem in English, and the French version by those who knew it. The event was solemn, joyful, and exciting. It was a good time to be a part of the immersion experience. The lyrics of both anthems and other defining documents from those nations

were built around noble causes: freedom, equality, peace, courage, justice, and human understanding. The US Declaration of Independence stated: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."² The Star-Spangled Banner addressed similar themes: "O say, can you see, by the dawn's early light, what so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming? . . . O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?"³ The Cameroon Anthem paid tribute to the ancestors and affirmed the nation as a land of hope: "O Cameroon, Thou Cradle of our Fathers, Holy Shrine where in our midst they now repose, their tears and blood and sweat thy soil did water, on thy hill and valleys once thy tillage rose. . . . Land of Promise, land of Glory! Thou, of life and joy, our only store."⁴ The ideals of those anthems attested to the supreme nature of humanity, and were befitting for the occasion.

It was a remarkable moment. Occasionally keys and notes were off but all present were gripped by the excitement of the evening. The event affirmed the universal nature of humanity. It was cross-cultural experience at its best. People from different continents and different cultures cementing the bonds of humanity—they spoke with different accents, interpreted things differently, at times laughed at different jokes, but kept their "eyes on the prize." Immersion was about identifying those bonds which united rather than divided us. It was about learning from each other, complementing each other, praying with each other, and celebrating with each other. It was about experiencing a new culture. It was a realization that whether people lived in America or Cameroon they inhabit the same space, the same earth surface, shared the same basic human needs, advocated same human rights, and strived to be happy irrespective of how it was defined.

Over time, cultural immersion was defined differently by different groups, institutions, and agencies. Alice Boateng and Abigail Mercy Thompson articulated that "international experience is noted to contribute to a greater ethnic sensitivity and awareness in multicultural practice."⁵ "The main target of immersion," stated the Danish Institute for Study abroad, "is exchange of values that leads to a sense of intercultural understanding and competencies that will give your future a competitive edge. Immersion starts with engagement, without you taking action, you will not immerse. So get out there and meet others, try new things, and make your semester abroad unique."⁶ Gowher Rizvi and Peter S. Horn asserted that "training of students as international citizens" demanded "continuous and integrated experience of international issues and culture." To achieve cultural immersion students had to be integrated with the local community. "International immersion programs," they added "are important."⁷ Joshua S. Mckeown agreed cultural immersion was a prerequisite for successful study abroad programs. Sheila J. Curran

argued that "cultural competency" was essential especially for Millennial students many of who went through life "over programmed and over-protected." Study abroad "disrupted" the world they knew, and thereby prepared them for more future opportunities. Cultural immersion, she concluded, was a crucial skill in the "global work world."⁸ Study abroad, Kevin W. Dean and Michael B. Jendzurski argued, "broadened global perspective gleaned from interpersonal engagement with cultural others in an interpersonal setting." Jennifer E. Coffman articulated similar conclusions stating study abroad "programs undoubtedly contribute greatly to comparative understanding of what it means to exist within a global context-breath of view." Many other studies came to a similar conclusion.⁹ In fact, the question as to whether or not study abroad is beneficial has been settled. However, questions remained about the nature and implication of the benefits of study abroad.

Within the last fifteen years study abroad gained additional momentum on college campuses. Study abroad, the Forum on Education Abroad stated, was "education that occurs outside participants' home country," and "*results in progress towards an academic degree* [italics are mine]." Study abroad is essential especially in today's rapidly changing global environment, wrote Elizabeth Shannon. "American students for whom a semester or year of study abroad is possible," she continued, "have a very special opportunity for intellectual and cultural growth. We should insist that they take it, for it will be one of the wisest decisions of their lives."¹⁰ The literature on study abroad is filled with positive outcomes including an ability to learn about oneself, encounter the world, and develop a sense of the global community. Study abroad as John K. Hudzik argued became "a growth industry." Rick Reeves added: "Study abroad is a necessity, not luxury." Study abroad provided students with an opportunity to "explore a different culture," and travel to other parts of the world.

The National Association of Foreign Students Advisors (NAFSA), originally created in 1948 to coordinate advising of foreign students in the US broadened its mission decades later to advising and coordination of all study abroad students including Americans involved in international study and exchange programs. In May 1990, NAFSA added to its name the Association for International Education to reflect its new direction. Simultaneously, the Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Program initially proposed by late Senator Paul Simon of Illinois asked the US government to assist study abroad initiatives on college campuses. Members of the Commission argued that global training of college students was a prerequisite of America's continuous leadership in a competitive world. In short, global education was no longer an option but a necessity.¹¹

As policy makers emphasized international education, so was there a rise in the number of participants in study abroad. During the 2007–2008

Academic Year roughly 262,000 Americans studied abroad, which represented an increase of almost 130 percent over the previous decade. Of that number white females made up roughly 65 percent of the participants. Minority participation was consistently low. Though African Americans made up roughly 12 percent of the US population, a 2010 study showed that African Americans made up 4.7 percent of students who participated in overall US study abroad programs in 2009. The same study showed white participation at 84 percent, and Hispanic Americans at 6 percent. Study abroad was and remains an overwhelmingly white enterprise. Study abroad participants came mostly from the humanities and social science disciplines. In fact, professional schools were consistently underrepresented in the study abroad population.¹²

Studies have shown additional advantages of study abroad. In "The Effect of Study Abroad on College Completion in a State University System," Isaiah O'Rear, Richard L. Sutton, and Donald L. Rubin persuasively argued that study abroad enhanced students' ability to graduate on time. According to the study, graduation rates of those who did study abroad rose by 7.5 percent as compared to those who didn't. The study, they concluded confirmed that study abroad was not an "academic luxury," but a tool which contributed to "college students' personal growth."¹³

Despite benefits, study abroad had many problems. Student participants generally attempted to duplicate their American lifestyle in countries they visited, and resisted genuine involvement in the local culture. Also, students elected to do study abroad because it was less rigorous academically, and as a result was an opportunity for them to relax and still earn academic credit. "How much meaningful academic and cultural learning can take place in a four-week period as students surf and snorkel their way in groups along Australia's Gold Coast, listening to their American professor lecture on a bus, and stopping to pet kangaroos at their wildlife refuge," stated a critic.¹⁴ Elizabeth Brewer and Kiran Cunningham argued that students "saw a study abroad semester as a way to take a semester off, but still get credit, and thus never really meant to learn very much."¹⁵ Sheila Curran's conclusion was apt:

The world needs graduates with a global focus, cross-cultural understanding, and linguistic fluency. Studying abroad is a perfect venue for acquiring and enhancing these skills as well as many others. But building such skills requires intensity of purpose and seriousness of engagement. Frequently, students are seeking the social and physical safety of international programs where they can maintain US habits and lifestyles abroad. And all too often, institutional expectations for student learning—inside and outside the classroom—are low.¹⁶

In 2000, the African Studies Association devoted, *African Issues to "Study Abroad in Africa."* In that journal articles were published on sev-

eral aspects of study abroad ranging from recruitment, preparation, academic program, challenges, benefits, and impact. Utilizing case studies from programs in South Africa, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and other nations in the region the articles pointed to the strengths and limitations of study abroad. In doing studying abroad American institutions typically worked directly with universities rather than the local population. Even in cases where students lived with local host families, formal arrangements were with local universities. In "Study Abroad in Africa: A Survey," Mark Pires, Oumatie Marajh and John Metzler provided an overview of study abroad programs in Africa. Since the mid-1990s, more American students had done study abroad in Africa mostly in the English speaking countries of South Africa, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Tanzania, indicating that language plays a significant role in the selection of study abroad sites in the continent. Though the overall number of US study abroad participants increased dramatically within the last fifteen years, the number of those heading to Africa either held steady or in some cases declined. Those who went to Africa were never above two percent of the total US study abroad population.¹⁷

Despite scholarly contributions of articles in *African Issues* and other places, many questions remained about study abroad. Additionally, it has been over ten years since *African Issues* focused on study abroad, and much has happened since then. There was September 11, 2001, which resulted in tightened security. To some the strict security measures made parents more relaxed to allow their children to travel overseas. However, others saw a very fluid global condition, and as a result preferred their children to either stay in the US or go to traditional sites in Europe. Another effect on study abroad was the US economic recession which began in 2006. The recession led to budget cuts at many American universities, and as a result funds for study abroad programs in Africa declined. Increasing focus on China, where several American universities currently have branches of their campus contributed to dwindling attention on Africa. All those factors and more need to be taken into consideration in attempts to understand the motives, relevance, and impact of study abroad programs in Africa. Earlier studies contained little about American perceptions of Africa before the trip, and how those views changed after the trip. Existing literature contains little about students' interaction with African communities, and results of such contacts. Several other questions remained unanswered. What was the overall role of race in the attempt to understand study abroad in Africa? How did Africans perceive these young Americans who lived in their homes, paraded their streets, dated their youths, attended their churches, participated in their traditional celebrations, and hung out in their bars? What was the impact of such interaction? The present study attempts to answer those questions and more. Based on primary sources including extensive interviews in Cameroon, response to questionnaires, personal journals,

and a variety of secondary sources, this study is a historical analysis of the University of Dayton Cameroon immersion Program as a case study of study abroad. The study is contextualized within broader issues of American and African history.

Begun almost twenty years ago, the University of Dayton Cameroon Immersion program introduced students in a more deliberate and consistent manner to life in African culture. During the one month stay in Cameroon students lived with host families, and were placed at different sites for service and educational purposes. Unlike typical study abroad programs, this program was designed to ensure maximum interaction between American students and local people in Cameroon. Arrangements were made directly with the local community and a local university did not serve as an intermediary. The Cameroon program is therefore an appropriate case study of cultural immersion programs. While other immersion programs at the University of Dayton predated the Cameroon program, the Cameroon experience was unique for several reasons. It was the most consistent and enduring in Africa, regularly attracted students, and received continuous University funding. The program was nonstop annually for almost twenty years.

An equally important aspect of the immersion program was the service component. While early participants of the Cameroon Immersion Program focused on service learning, the program later evolved into more of an educational experience. Service learning is defined as "*community service that is linked to an individual's academic experience through related course materials or through reflection activities [italics are mine]*."¹⁸ Immersion participants elected to do service for various reasons. While some saw it as a way to "give back," others were fulfilling an integral part of the University of Dayton mission. Still, others were moved by a sense of idealism. Whatever the rationale, students' notions of service were challenged in Cameroon. Immersion participants went to serve yet in Cameroon they were served. They went to teach, yet they were taught. They went to help Africans learn how to develop, and live well; yet the African experience taught them how to relax, find their passion, and develop a sense of proportionality. Those were important aspects of the immersion program.

The Cameroon program was a uniquely cross-cultural experience in which participants lived with locals, engaged in activities with locals, and did service at agencies to promote local initiatives. The program addressed many of the criticisms of study abroad programs. Participants went through orientation, participated in reflections sessions, and had a series of follow-up meetings to assist in readjustment problems. Those issues, experts wrote, strengthened study abroad.¹⁹ The current study is therefore a case study of cultural immersion programs, pointing to the strengths and limitations of cross cultural interaction.

Given Cameroon program's unique characteristics, resilience and longevity, there is sufficient data and rationale to undertake an analysis of the experience. What is the meaning of the program? How was it different from typical study abroad programs? In what ways can it contribute to shaping future study abroad programs? What was its impact on participants' overall education? This study attempts to provide answers to those questions and more. It examines through a historical lens the meaning of the Cameroon immersion experience. The study is different from others in several ways. It is the first historical study of its kind on the topic. It addresses in a more consistent manner the relevance and transformative nature of a cultural immersion program in Africa. It argues that Africa is important in the considerations of study abroad sites. In doing so it delves into issues of race, class, power, and struggle for gender equality. It contextualizes students' experiences within a broad scope of African and American history. It is therefore, in part, a study of modern African political, economic, and social systems. Cameroon was ideally suitable for an African immersion program for several reasons.

With a population of 20 million, Cameroon's population belongs to over 200 ethnic groups speaking over 230 languages. Its triple colonial heritage makes it unique, and the nation displayed many of Africa's political, economic, social, and religious complexities. Appropriately, the nation has been called different things: "Africa in miniature," "Africa's crossroads," "Africa in one triangle," "mecca of Africa's football," and "Africa in microcosm."²⁰ By focusing on Cameroon, the current study serves as a window to understand American college students' immersion experiences in the rest of Africa.

While there were similarities between the University of Dayton Cameroon Immersion Program and study abroad programs on other American college campuses, the immersion program was unique in several ways. It began as a requirement for a degree program but evolved into largely an experience not accompanied by academic credit. As a result it gave immersion participants more opportunities to interact and engage the local culture and community. Additionally, unlike other study abroad sites which students were already familiar with many immersion participants had neither heard of Cameroon nor had much knowledge beyond an elementary level of the place. Their first real introduction to Cameroon came after they decided to do the immersion trip. Of the top twenty-five study abroad countries that US students went to in 2009, South Africa was the only sub-Saharan nation on the list.²¹ Even though study abroad has taken place in several sub-Saharan nations for many years, many of those programs had been sporadic, short-lived, and ignored by the scholarly literature.

There was an additional reason for this study. Postimmersion reports indicated that participants' gains were similar to those of Returned Peace Corps volunteers (RPCVs) who served in Africa. RPCVs who served in

Africa described their experience as “great,” stating they experienced “lots of personal growth,” “acquired good public skills and confidence,” “gained managerial experience,” “learned a lot about [themselves],” and “gained independence and confidence.” Immersion reports documented similar outcomes. During the one month stay in Cameroon participants were empowered and gained a new perspective on life’s deeper meaning. They learned about themselves, “matured,” and developed a new awareness of themselves and the world around them. They gained an appreciation for what they had, vowed to stop taking things for granted, and became more constructive critics of their country.²² This study attempts to examine how and why immersion participants who spent one month in Cameroon came away with identical outcomes as RPCVs who spent two years in that country. The Cameroon experience changed both immersion participants and RPCVs in ways they never imagined. This study attempts to examine how and why that happened. No previous study has attempted such a comparative analysis. In doing so the study expands our understanding of how to develop and implement cultural immersion programs in developing nations.

The book has ten chapters and three appendices. Chapter 1, “Introduction: Setting the Context,” defines and contextualizes immersion within study abroad literature. It addresses how and why study is different from existing ones, and why it is important. Chapter 2, “Antecedents of Cameroon Immersion,” examines immersion programs which preceded the Cameroon experience, pointing to their impact and relevance. Among earlier programs, the chapter emphasizes immersion programs in the nation of Sierra Leone. Immersion is contextualized within both African and American history. Chapter 3, “Paul Biya’s Cameroon: Overview, Debacles, and Attractions,” is an overview of Cameroon’s historical experience, and explains why that nation was ideal for an African immersion experience. The chapter begins with an analysis of the labor strike of February 2008 which almost derailed that year’s immersion program. The study argues that in order for immersion to succeed students must have knowledge of local history and customs. The chapter contains sections on Cameroonian culture including community values, food, gender issues, and the nation’s attractions. The chapter addresses many of the nation’s challenges and prospects. Portions of the chapter have appeared in the journals *Africa Today* and *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines*.²³ Chapter 4, “Recruitment, In-Country Preparation, and Orientation,” examines the application process to participate in immersion, and orientation of students to deal with realities in Africa. It gets into students’ perceptions of Africa before the trip. It critically examines selection and orientation showing how both changed and adjusted to new realities. The chapter contains a detailed description and analysis of in-country preparation including efforts involved in selection of host families and placement sites. It delves into issues of in-country logistics, challenges, and re-

sponses to them. Chapter 5, "Cameroon! Here We Come," focuses on immersion participants' service at placement sites in Cameroon. It begins with arrival at the Douala International Airport, pointing to participants' immediate impressions of their new environment and struggles to adjust. The chapter addresses areas of strengths and weaknesses. Placement sites are discussed, explaining why selected and with particular emphasis on struggles faced by both immersion participants and Cameroonians in their efforts to collaborate at work. In the end there were frustrations, lessons, and an awareness of difference. Students were placed at both government and private agencies including nongovernmental organizations. The chapter offers vivid description of those sites and a glimpse into difficulties faced by developing nations in an effort to advance beyond their current stage of development. Chapter 6, "Living in Cameroon," is a thoughtful analysis of immersion students' life in Cameroon. Like the previous chapter, "Living in Cameroon," begins in Douala and follows students all over Cameroon. It is an event-packed month filled with surprises, frustrations, triumphs, and excitement. Each day was educational. Each day was an experience. Each event was new and seemed to surpass the previous one. The chapter follows students to host parents' homes, to sites visited, and to bars and night clubs, and much more. It examines their likes and dislikes, and how they changed over time. It delves into their activities away from more structured programs of the experience. In the end, those were moments which tested their abilities to deal with issues such as diversity, wealth, class, poverty, and more. They engaged in a critical examination of self. Every effort is made to let them speak in the story. Chapter 7, "Confronting Race, Elitism, Privilege, and Faith in Cameroon," focuses on how students responded to their Caucasian identity, and their interaction with African Americans in Cameroon. What emerged was a disturbing reality of how America's racial past has continued to influence the present. Chapter 8, "Cameroonians Evaluate Immersion" examines perceptions Cameroonians held of their guests and how they changed over time. It was characterized by excitement, disappointment, disbelief, challenges, and hopes. It was an educational experience for the hosts. Myths and stereotypes were imploded. Chapter 9, "Making a Difference," delves into projects and programs developed as a result of the immersion experience such as the Barombi Water Project, Anne Gabonay Municipal Library, and the Cameroon Football Development Program. Chapter 10 "Conclusion," is a summation of the meaning of immersion to a student's overall education. It is a synthesis of what went right and wrong, and contains some recommendations. Appendix A lists names of students who did the University of Dayton Immersion experience from the beginning in 1982–2000. Appendix B contains the names of those who did the Cameroon immersion experience from 1995. Appendix C is a copy of the questionnaire sent out to each immersion participant. Questionnaires were sent to fifty former participants, and

responses were received from twenty-seven of them. Several photographs of immersion participants in Cameroon are included.

NOTES

1. American Electricity Supply (AES) Sonel contract in Cameroon was apparently terminated in 2013. It was believed it sold 100 percent of its interests to Actis, a British equity firm. AES-Sonel arrived in Cameroon in 2001, and never succeeded to satisfy consumers. See Piet Konings, *The Politics of Neoliberal Reforms in Africa: State and Civil Society in Cameroon* (Mankon, Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa Research and Publishing Common Initiative Group, 2011), p. 91; also see "Breaking: AES—Sonel quitting Cameroon," *The Cameroon Daily Journal* Douala, May 29, 2013. <http://www.cameroonjournal.com/aes%20sonel%20.html> (Accessed 23 September, 2013).

2. Vincent Wilson, Jr. ed. *The Book of Great American Documents* (Brookeville, MD: American History Research Associates, 1982), p. 15.

3. The lyrics are on several websites. Here is one of them: <http://www.lyricsondemand.com/miscellaneouslyrics/nationalanthemslrics/usanationalanthemlyrics.html> (Accessed 20 September, 2013).

4. Tazifor Tajoche *Civics Education for Secondary Schools, Book 2* (Buea, Cameroon: Education Book Centre 2003) p. 14.

5. Alice Boateng and Abigail Mercy Thompson, "Study Abroad Ghana: An International Experiential Learning," *Journal of Social Work Education*, Vol. 49 (2013), p. 701.

6. "Cultural Immersion at DIS," <http://www.disabroad.org/studyabroad/culture/> (Accessed 18 February, 2014).

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19. Curran, pp. 49-52;

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