



Immigration and
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Cameroon: Situation of women regarding the customs of chiefdoms; whether the wife of a village chief recently inducted against his will would be forced to join her husband at the village, share her husband with the multiple spouses imposed by the chiefdom and initiated into the secret society; consequences of refusing these practices; significance of the title of Defo and whether one can be a Defo but not be a chief, only a high-ranking member (*notable*); information on the village of Baham (2005 - March 2006)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

An article in the *Journal of African History* indicates that the village of Baham is located in Bamileke territory (2005). The Web site Cameroon: Culture and Tourism (Le Cameroun culturel et touristique) stresses the [translation] "absolute and sacred nature" of the process of designating a chief in Bamileke villages, a process that [translation] "is not the same throughout West [province]" (n.d.a.).

An associate professor of anthropology at Carleton College in Minnesota who has done "extensive field research concerning the Bamileke since 1983" indicated that the Bamileke have a "custom of 'capturing' a new chief" (13 Mar. 2006).

The Web site Cameroon: Culture and Tourism indicates that, among the Ngemba in Bamileke territory, the high-ranking members (*notables*) of secret societies handle the succession process: it is their responsibility to [translation] "capture" one of the heirs of a deceased chief, who will become the new chief (n.d.a.). The new chief is brought to the [translation] "La' Kam (a place where the chief is hidden for nine weeks, invested and initiated into the mysteries of the kingdom)" (ibid.). According to an article in the *Cameroon Tribune*, in the village of Komako, this [translation] "initiation period" lasts seven to nine weeks, during which time [translation] "one of the wives made available [to the new chief] conceives his offspring" (14 Oct. 2004).

As an example, after being captured in January 2004 in Bamileke territory, the future chief of Bandjoun lived in the [translation] "[La' Kam], the place of initiation into the traditional secrets," for nearly 12 weeks (*Cameroon Tribune* 16 Apr. 2004; see also ibid. 22 Dec. 2003).

Forced presence in the village

Regarding the capture of the future chief and the treatment of his wife, the

Associate Professor of anthropology at Carleton College said:

A Bamileke chief's wife can be forced to live in the village with him. This would be expected of her, to live in the royal compound along with all of the other chief's wives. If the wife was married to the chief before he was "captured" as chief, and had children with him before he became chief, in some cases she is not allowed to live with him, but must live in a house in the village adjacent to the royal compound. ... There appears to be some variation in this practice (13 Mar. 2006)

No information on this type of practice among other ethnic groups in Cameroon could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Sharing a husband with other wives

The Associate Professor of anthropology at Carleton College added that a chief must accept his new wives because this practice is part of the process of enhancing diplomatic ties with other chiefs (13 Mar. 2006). "Any previous wives are not asked their consent, and are expected to share their husband with the new wives" (Associate Professor 13 Mar. 2006).

Initiation into the secret society

According to the Associate Professor of anthropology at Carleton College, there are many secret societies. The chief's wives have four specific roles and cannot decline them or the ritual responsibilities of those roles (13 Mar. 2006). The only way a wife could refuse would be to divorce her husband, but "it is quite possible that this would not be allowed in many chiefdoms" and would cause her to be "socially ostracized" (Associate Professor 13 Mar. 2006).

Consequences for a wife of refusing to participate in the practices

A wife who refuses to accept the practices associated with her husband's accession to the chiefdom would be seen to have initiated "spiritual sanctions," such as illness, death and poor crops (ibid.). A wife may also be held prisoner by her husband's family until she relents (ibid.).

Significance of the title of Defo

The Carleton College Associate Professor said that "Fo" means "chief" in the language of Bafoussam and the surrounding chiefdoms in the northwest part of the West Province (13 Mar. 2006). According to an article published on the Web site Cameroon: Culture and Tourism, the Defo is one of the chief's [translation] "servants," his [translation] "head of internal matters" (*chef de service intérieur*) (n.d.b.). The Web site Bamileke.com describes [translation] "the ruling body" of the Bamileke village of Bayangam and states that a [translation] "Dziefo" is one of five individuals that rules with the chief (n.d.).

No other information could be found about the title of Defo among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

Associate Professor in Anthropology and Sociology at Carleton College in Minnesota. 13 March 2006. Correspondence sent to the Research Directorate.

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<<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayFulltext?type=6&fid=313000&jid=&volumeId=&issueId=01&aid=290526>> [Accessed 4 Apr. 2006]

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV), United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) Francophone and Lusophone West Africa Regional Office, and a professor of anthropology at the University of Helsinki were unable to provide the information requested within the time constraints for this Response to Information Request.

We were unable to reach a professor of anthropology from the Université Yaoundé 1.

Internet sites, including: Embassy of France in Cameroun, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Cameroon-Info.net, Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV), *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2004*, ECOI.net, Factiva, Freedom House, *International Religious Freedom Report 2005*, *Jeune Afrique/L'Intelligent*, *Le Messenger*, *Le Quotidien Mutations*, Université 1 Yaoundé.

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