North –South Cooperation: American Educators On Study Trip
Experience African Realities

Some thirteen current and future educators from the Kentucky Appalachian Region recently undertook a field trip to Cameroon often described as Africa in miniature. The wide ranging experiences enjoyed by members of the delegation led to the near unanimous conclusion that the field trip was a most memorable one worth retaking, and recommending for their fellow Americans and others around the world. In the words of a female participant “if there are Seven Wonders of the World, I think Cameroon, Africa, should be the eighth. Cameroon in the heart of Africa remains a puzzle, an eldorado, a land of numerous awe inspiring photo opportunities, but a rich garden in decay where tourist potentials abound.” Continuing, she praised the Almighty for what she termed a “completely safe and fascinating round trip” despite the difficult nature of some roads and hitherto stories and cautions on possible health and travel risks to the “African jungle” like pick pockets, and other real and imagined unforeseens.

Exchanges with the rich pygmies of the South, a daring trip to the Campo Ma’an National Park and Rain Forest using an engine boat to sail some ten nautical miles deep into the Atlantic Ocean, hiking on part of the Buea Mountain, and the Mami Water falls, some 15 miles from the town of Dschang are just some of the experiences which may remain indelible in the minds of the American Scholars.

The delegation was led by Dr Charles Jones a Professor of Educational Psychology, and his colleague Dr Fidelis Achenjang, both of Union College, a four year private Liberal Arts Institution affiliated with the United Methodist Church and located in Barboursville, Kentucky, USA. The intensive five week programme running through June/July 2007 was funded by Union College and a Fulbright-Hays Curriculum Development Group Project Abroad (GPA) grant.

Left: Team leaders, Drs. Jones & Achenjang take a close look at the lava flow in Bakingili, Limbe, 2 July. 
Right: Premier conference seminar led by Dr Mrs Ngwi Focio on The Cameroon Educational System & Resource Needs held in Dschang on 25 June 2007.
Talking to Pan African Visions (PAV), Project Director Prof Fidelis Achenjang disclosed that the underlying goal of the intensive field experience was to help educators enrich their teaching by exposing them to a different socio–economic climate, and culture. The participants went on, met with various educators in Cameroon, public policy experts, administrators and government officials, traditional rulers, artists, and religious leaders to enhance their social studies, ecology, geography, and history curricula. The trip which ran from June 17-July 22 coincided with the campaigns and twin Local Government and Parliamentary elections and gave members of the team greater insight into political activities in Cameroon. In an exclusive interview for Pan African Visions (PAV) conducted by Ajong Mbapndah L, Prof Achenjang formerly of the University of Dschang, Cameroon, sheds more light on the memorable trip.

Pan African Visions (PAV): Prof you were recently in Cameroon with a group of educators from South Eastern Kentucky, what was the purpose of the trip?

Prof Achenjang: A joint effort by Prof. Charles Jones, instructional designer and colleague in Educational Psychology, and my humble self, resulted in the award of a Fulbright-Hays Group Project Abroad grant to Union College. Given my long service and connections in Cameroon, we thus recruited current and future educators from southeastern Kentucky for the intensive field trip to Cameroon. Briefly, our goals are to promote cross-cultural understandings through shared experiences, enhance international perspectives to impact curriculum development and influence teaching about cultural diversity in the Appalachian region.

PAV: What motivated the choice of Cameroon and on what basis were the educators selected?

Prof Achenjang: Cameroon was chosen on the basis of my collegial relationship with various faculty and administrators in Cameroon universities, as well as my knowledge and connections with some of the country’s public policy experts, professionals, political & government leaders, artists, church and traditional leaders. Additionally, Cameroon, as a nation of ethnic and plural diversity known as Africa in miniature and situated in the heart of Africa has a lot to offer given its bilingualism, the triple heritage of Anglophone Cameroon and its relative political stability. Participants were selected by a diverse committee of five on the basis of an application comprising a motivated letter of intent, a current resume, and letters of support from the candidate’s establishment following public service announcements via radio, email and newspapers. The selection was highly competitive and obviously we were interested in a mix of participants, call it diversity; and specially teachers with minimal prior experience abroad whose careers reflected a strong international commitment and a willingness to utilize African studies in their classes.

Educators, Kevin Rossman & Regina Lang enjoy riding a motorcycle taxi called OKADA to appreciate the risks involved or just for the fun of it; 21 June

Photo with the Elogbatindi pygmies near their traditional huts (hidden in deep jungle) cane framed with a mix of giant forest leaves (July 8)

It is easy to forget that Mr. Travis Carmack was part of the team; after all he spent most time recording the events on camera, video and audio.
PAV: Serving as Project Director for the group, what were some of the difficulties you came across to ensure the trip was successful?

Prof Achenjang: The field trip, unfortunately, coincided with Cameroon’s twin election period and so many of the government officials and administrators from basic and secondary education did not respect their prior appointment with the team. Also some of the University faculty that were supposed to meet with our team for a seminar or discussion on Cameroon literary works were absent because supposedly they were in Buea working on the Cameroon General Certificate of Education examinations. These were very discouraging aspects of the trip in addition to the fact that some of the infrastructure was dilapidated and in ruins. Of course some stretches of roads were mind boggling. In any case, the selfless contribution of friends coordinating the trip in Cameroon and the driver as well as the hospitality of the people we met generally insured a successful trip. We are very grateful for their services.

PAV: What were some of the major highlights of the trip and what will you say fascinated the delegation most about Cameroon?

Prof Achenjang: The highlights of the trip included our meeting with Christian Cardinal Tumi of the Douala Archdiocese, and Chief Njalla Quan, Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) General Manager on very short notice. Both gentlemen were very gracious and knowledgeable. We also met with the opposition leader Ni John Fru Ndi of the Social Democratic Front (SDF) and other political figures. The quality and hospitality of the country coordination and lecturers was exemplary and participants generally approached situations with a learner mindset. Of course the diversity of Cameroon as seen through the whirlwind field trip was remarkable and very enlightening. We remain indebted to anyone who crossed path with us in Cameroon.

US Educators pose with Chairman Fru Ndi, following a memorable visit to his Ntarikon palace on 24 June. In the spirit of African hospitality, the team was offered a bowl of choice locally grown fresh mangoes (see photo), from the SDF leader’s farm.

PAV: Could the trip lead to the dawn of some deeper North-South cooperation in terms of education or just a one time event that is now history?

Prof Achenjang: Good question. Yes we have already proposed that some 3-5 Cameroon teachers come to Southeastern KY in a teacher exchange program for 3-4 weeks to study the Appalachian region and the education system as well as do some sightseeing. We also recall presenting a memo suggesting a faculty-student exchange and outreach program with the University of Dschang that could eventually lead to twinning of the two sister cities, Dschang and Barbourville. We await the response from Dschang in this regard.

We are also working on a website or an on-line resource center to facilitate the continuing dialogue and the establishment of real time interchanges between our numerous Cameroon contacts and Kentucky educators, students and the public at large. On a more practical level, we thank participants who connected in real life with some families in Cameroon as they continue to sow and harvest seeds of diversity.
**PAV: Judging from the experiences that you and the members of the delegation had, will you recommend more of such trips to other Educators?**

**Prof Achenjang:** We are ready and prepared to recommend as well as facilitate such trips at any time. The trip was highly successful, challenging, and filled with a rich learning experience. Participants are meeting to begin a Cameroon Interest Group or “Friends of Cameroon”, before October month end to help facilitate any new ventures and opportunities. We will always remember this opportunity.

**PAV: Prof. Achenjang, any last word?**

**Prof Achenjang.** Yes, Laurean, thank you sincerely for engaging me on this important lesson 201, Out of Africa. I can only speak for my humble self and hope you find time to get some other members of the team to share their views on any lessons learned and or opportunities missed in their Cameroon experience. I know that through more of these, the North-South cooperation as you put it will be strengthened thus loosening any disconnect between and among us and bringing fresh solutions to our pluralistic world. Finally, I know that most of the participants can now act as change agents and facilitators in Southeastern Kentucky, enhancing diversity and global awareness in the region and beyond through education and more. Once more thank you sincerely for this opportunity. It has been my pleasure.

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**Left:** US Educators in conference with 1965 class SOBAN Njomo Kevin, Chief of Station, Radio FM Mount Cameroon Buea CRTV following a guided tour of the station, 5 July

**Right:** US Educators menu/meal plan included a variety of home cooked local dishes which they enjoyed. Following most meals many Educators benefited from a choice of a dozen or more different ice cold drinks & bottled water to drown the food

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Prof Charles Jones, Fulbright Project Instructional Designer, Pam Halstead, a Special Education Teacher, and Regina Lang, a Performance Artist and Expressive Therapist were part of the Team of U S Scholars that traveled to Cameroon and shared their experiences with Ajong Mbapndah L, for Pan African Visions.

**Pan African Visions (PAV):** What made you interested in joining the trip to Cameroon and how useful has the experience been to you?

**Prof Charles Jones:** We were fortunate to receive a Fulbright-Hays grant from the U.S. Department of Education. These grants allow American Educators to visit Developing Nations and exchange ideas with colleagues in other areas of the world. We chose Cameroon in part because Dr. Fidelis Achenjang, a chemistry professor at Union College; the grant receiving institution, (Union College is an institution of higher education in the State of Kentucky, USA) is a native of Cameroon and has many contacts there. Our group included two university professors and ten Kentucky teachers or teachers in training at university.

**Pam Halstead:** I have always wanted to travel to another country. I felt that the trip would help my
teaching career by giving me first hand experiences that I could share with my students and other educators in my area. The trip has been very useful; I have presented slide shows to students in my school, displayed artifacts, and have shared my experiences with others. The children that I have shared these experiences and pictures with have been very excited to learn about Cameroon.

**Regina Lang:** I have always had a global perspective and I continue to be interested in learning more about how cultures are different and how they are the same. I currently work with an increasing number of African youth within and outside of the school system, who are immigrants to the United States. The trip to Cameroon has afforded me the opportunity to get a glimpse of the world for their perspective. I hope that insights gained in Cameroon will assist me to work with these youth more effectively.

**PAV:** Was the image of Africa and Africans that you had prior to the trip any match for the reality you actually saw and lived?

**Prof C. Jones:** Ten of our team members had never visited Africa before this grant project. All of our first time African visitors had unexpected experiences. Most images and stories of Africa in the highly industrialized nations concern poverty, political upheaval and diseases such as AIDS, Ebola or Malaria. The true diversity of African society and culture is an enlightening experience to most first time visitors, including the members of our own team. Seeing first hand the growing economic activity in Africa and meeting Cameroonian educators and professionals provided our team members with a much more complete understanding of Africa in general and Cameroon specifically.

**Pam Halstead:** Not really, I didn’t understand the differences between the cultures, or the slow paced lifestyle that Cameroonians live. The lifestyle in America is very fast paced, we don’t have time to enjoy our children and families like the people do in Cameroon. The people that I met while in Africa were very nice and giving. I felt like I was an honored guest in almost every place that we went.

**Regina Lang:** Many images of Africa were starkly familiar and comforting, while others gave me cause for great concern. My concern continues to be the disparities in resources and income in comparison to those in western society. This reality has caused me to contemplate the global impact of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade and how we might begin to unravel the negative effects of those occurrences.

**PAV:** What impressions of Cameroon and Africa did you come back with and will you recommend similar trips for others or undertake the trip a second time if given the opportunity?

**Prof C. Jones:** We were very impressed by the friendliness and devote religious character of the people of Cameroon. The geographic and ecological diversity of the nation was also quite fascinating. We would be happy to return to Cameroon and we would recommend such an excursion to other educators from any industrialized nation; we believe that all would benefit from an exchange with our African Colleagues.

**Pam Halstead:** My impression of Cameroon is that the people are hard working and caring people. They seem to have very close knit family ties, while, we have lost some of our ties with our families. The families in Cameroon that we met were very supportive of each other and seemed to take the time to help one another. Yes, I would recommend educators to make a trip to Cameroon. I might consider taking a second trip to Cameroon in the future.
Regina Lang: I was born approximately 7 miles from where Alex Haley, the author of “Roots,” was born. I have visited his boyhood home on many occasions. It was there, where I first began to make connections about shared culture between Africans and African Americans. As I traveled around Cameroon, I saw remnants of culture that we continue to share. These culture-based images and ways of being are often devalued by western society but I believe that they should be celebrated and built upon. The trip to Cameroon has furthered my belief that peoples all around the world desire the same basic things. i.e. food, shelter and the pursuit of happiness.

I return with many different images of Africa. One can choose to gravitate towards any of one of those images, based on ingrained perspectives, disseminated by the western media or one can begin to see new possibilities. Some of these possibilities include: collectivism, a different pace, song, and rhythm and a synergy with nature.

For anyone, a trip to Africa is the beginning of education, but openness to new realities is the beginning of positive change.

Above. Prof. Jones welcomes Paul Tezanou, President of the African Blind Association who arrives to greet US Educators at the Teclaire Palace Hotel, Dschang, 21 June
Left: US Educators prepare to leave the US for their whirlwind field trip in Cameroon: Regina Lang in African blue gown & Pam Halstead, in sleeveless flowered dress, front row, 17 June, Lexington, KY

PAV: Of the people you met, the events you lived and the things you saw, what was your most fascinating experience?

Prof C. Jones: The most fascinating person we met in Cameroon was Cardinal Tumi in Douala, Cameroon. He informed us of the role of the Catholic Church in Cameroonian society and the church’s charitable works in social development. Our visits to Campo Ma’an National Park & Rain Forest Reserve along with our hiking experience on small Mount Cameroon were certainly unforgettable experiences in the African bush.

Pam Halstead: The most fascinating experiences that I had were when we visited the schools for the blind. It helped me to recognize the differences between the schools in America and Cameroon. There is a real need for resources to help students with special needs in Cameroon. The children at the schools appeared to work hard, and they still had a great outlook on life, even though they faced hardships every day.

Regina Lang: I especially enjoyed my visit to the village in Fontem Cameroon. My brief stay in the village afforded me the opportunity to connect with the people on a very personal level, while at the same time, observing the culture, daily lives and discussing our shared dreams, hopes and concerns.

PAV: Is the event now history or do you see in the trip prospects for closer ties and cooperation between Educators from the USA and Cameroon?
**Prof C. Jones:** We are still in contact with many colleagues whom we met in Cameroon. Professor Linus T. Asong, the Cameroonian Author, has expressed an interest in visiting Kentucky and conducting some workshops in our area. We are currently working on such a visit for Professor Asong. We are also exploring an exchange program between faculty members from American and Cameroonian institutions of higher education. Our team is creating a website on the Union College server regarding the grant which should be online before the end of October 2007. We hope that our website will provide a medium of continuing dialogue and information regarding Cameroon and our grant experience.

**Pam Halstead:** No, I don’t see the trip as history; I hope to be able to keep in touch with educators and friends that I have made in Cameroon. My husband and I, still E-Mail some people that we met while in Cameroon. We met a lot of great people while on our trip that can be used as great resources in our schools.

**Regina Lang:** No definitely not, I hope to continue build relationships with educators and others in Cameroon and the U.S. in an effort to build bridges to greater understanding and exchange of resources. On a personal level, I continue to correspond via email with college students and others that I met along the way.

**Photo Digests, Thumbnails & Tiles of Some More Lessons Out of Cameroon, Africa by the US Fulbright Educators**

US Educators, make tortuous progress walking unsteadily down the slippery & precarious laterite track whose surface had been churned by some vehicles following a serious downpour of rain with their bus following, **22 June**

US Educators enjoy the opportunity & experience of walking up the thickly foliage slope of Buea Mountain despite the disappointment that they did not catch any glimpse of wildlife, **3 July**

US Educators & guides in prayer & traditional communion at Chief Palace, Bonjongo shortly before confronting the lush vegetation of Buea Mountain, **3 July**

Parting is such sweet sorrow. US Educators pose for an AU REVOIR photo with guide, Laura Morfaw & the Dschang Teclaire Palace Hotel staff, shortly before departing from Dschang, Cameroon, **21 July 2007**
Welcome & meeting with local administration, in Prefecture, Dschang, 20 June

Meeting with His Eminence Christian Cardinal Tumi, Douala, 6 July

Education conference-seminar with teacher trainers, led by Mr. Ajong, Principal GTTC Fontem, 28 June

Meeting with Chief Njalla Quan, CDC General manager, Limbe, 4 July

Visit to crater lake Monoun with geologist, Dr. Tanyileke, leading participants, 26 June

US Educators waiting for a meal to be served in (African) time and or style

Participants found time to relax over some ice cold drinks & a mix of “loud” African makossa & dombolo

US Educators & the Chief of Station, Radio FM Mount Cameroon, Buea, July 5