

## SOCIAL, DEMOGRAPHIC AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF EQUATORIAL GUINEA

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**ABSTRACT:** In Equatorial Guinea, the total population was 350000 in 1991. The population pyramid presents a broad base (due to the large proportion of children: 43% of the total population is under the age of 15 years) that tapers off to a narrow vertex (due to the low life expectancy: only 6.4% of the population is over 80). The estimated life expectancy in 1996 was 45 years in males and 51 years in females. The mean population density is 10 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>, though the distribution is by no means homogeneous. The highest population density corresponds to the province of Kie-Ntem, with 17 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>; however, the island territories present the highest densities of the whole country, with 60 and 120 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> on North Bioko and Annobón, respectively. The two main urban centers are the capital, Malabo, on the island of Bioko, with an estimated population of 58000 (60% of the total population on Bioko), and Bata, on the continent (population: approx. 45000). Seventy percent of the population of Equatorial Guinea lives in rural areas. Social indicators include: annual population growth rate (1991): 2.4%; global fertility rate (1988): 5.64 offspring per female; gross birth rate (1989): 4.3%; gross mortality rate (1989): 1.9%; gross infant mortality rate (1989): 21.4%; illiteracy rate: 45%, of which over half are women; 23% of the population has completed primary schooling, 0.5% secondary education, and 0.2% university studies; of the latter, a full 88% are males; just under half of the population (48%) is employed, though only 38% are women. In economical terms, Equatorial Guinea possesses a free market economy, in which the private sector predominates. Expansion is hampered, however, by the precarious condition of the infrastructure, among other factors. The economy is basically fundamented upon two sectors: the exploitation of forest resources and agriculture, which involves 80% of the active population. Equatorial Guinea is included among the least developed countries, with severe deficiencies in terms of basic needs in nutrition, health, education and housing. The Fang are the predominant ethnic group in Equatorial Guinea, representing 82% of the global population. They are in turn divided into the Ntumu Fang to the North of the Uolo river, and the Okak Fang to the South. Four main ethnic groups collectively known as «Playeros» (or «Beach Peoples») inhabit Río Muni, the coast and the islands of Corisco and the Elobey group: the Ndowe (representing 3.7% of the population), the Bissio (1.4%) (previously known by the Spaniards as Bujebas), the Basseke, and the Balengue. The Bubi are second most numerous ethnic group, and are native to the island of Bioko. This group represents only 9% of the population. According to the 1983 census, of the total of 57740 inhabitants on Bioko, the Bubis accounted for 42%, while the remaining population was mainly Fang. The Fernandinos on Bioko island and the Annobón on Bioko and Annobón islands are minority groups. All these ethnic groups are of Bantu linguistic origin. Most of the population is Christian; however, religious beliefs are a syncretism combining monotheist Christian faith and traditional animist beliefs. The cult of ancestors is common in traditional belief among the different ethnic groups, as is communication with the supernatural world and with the spirits. Luck or ill fortune is always due to the intervention of spirits. These spirits are equally capable of protecting or causing bad luck, illnesses and death. Disease is seen as the confluence of physical and spiritual evil. Poor health is often attributed to a lack of adequate attention or homage to ancestors; it represents punishment by the ancestors for having transgressed certain norms or rules.

**KEY WORDS:** Equatorial Guinea, demography, social indicators, economic characteristics, ethnic groups, the Fang, the «Playeros» or Beach Peoples, the Bubis, the Annobon, religious beliefs, disease conception.

### GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Republic of Equatorial Guinea covers an area of 28050 km<sup>2</sup> divided into two regions: a) continental, comprising 80% of the population and consisting of Río Muni (28000 km<sup>2</sup>) located between Cameroon and Gabon, the islands of Corisco (15 km<sup>2</sup>) and the Elobay group (2,5 km<sup>2</sup>); b) insular, comprising the islands of Bioko (2017 km<sup>2</sup>) and Annobón (17 km<sup>2</sup>). Administratively, the country is divided into four provinces on the continent (Littoral, Center-South, Kie-Ntem, and Wele-Nzas), and three in the insular territory (Annobón, North Bioko and South Bioko). The climate is equatorial, with a constant annual temperature of about 25° C, relative humidity in excess of 80%, and high annual rainfall figures. The continental orography comprises a littoral zone separated from the flat-lying interior by the Niefang mountain chain (maximum height 1250 m). The island of Bioko lies only 32 km off the coast and presents a

much more abrupt topography, due to its volcanic origin, with two mountain massifs: Basilé Peak to the North (3012 m) and Biao Peak to the South (2009 m), along with the Great Caldera of Luba (2261 m).

The official language is Spanish. The native languages are Bubi on Bioko, Tadambo on Annobón, and Fang, Ndowe, Balengue and Blasio in Río Muni. Pidgin English is also widely spoken.

The total population according to 1991 statistics was 350000 (UNDP, 1991), with a sex and age distribution in line with the demographic composition of other developing countries, i.e., the population pyramid presents a broad base (due to the large proportion of children: 43% of the total population is under the age of 15 years) that tapers off to a narrow vertex (due to the low life expectancy: only 6.4% of the population is over 80). The estimated life expectancy in 1996 was 45 years in males and 51 years in females. The mean population density is 10 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>, though the distribution is by no me-

ans homogeneous. In effect, a large area of Río Muni is practically uninhabited, with less than 5 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> in districts such as Evinayong, Acurenam, and Nsoe, and 10 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> in Ebebyin, Micomeseng, and Mongomo. The highest population density corresponds to the province of Kie-Ntem, with 17 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. However, the island territories present the highest densities of the whole country, with 60 and 120 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> on North Bioko and Annobón, respectively. The meridional half of Bioko is practically uninhabited. The two main urban centers are the capital, Malabo, on the island of Bioko, with an estimated population of 58000 (60% of the total population on Bioko), and Bata, on the continent (population: approx. 45000) (UNDP, 1991). Seventy percent of the population of Equatorial Guinea lives in rural areas, though the distribution by regions is here again irregular: 60% of the population is urban on the islands, compared with a 75% rural population on the continent.

Other social indicators include:

- Annual population growth rate (1991): 2,4% (i.e., relatively low compared to the mean rate of up to 3% on the African continent, and high with respect to the overall world rate of 1,7%).
- Global fertility rate (estimated for 1988): 5,64 offspring per female.
- Gross birth rate (1989): 4,3%.
- Gross mortality rate (1989): 1,9%.
- Gross infant mortality rate (1989): 21,4%.
- Illiteracy rate: 45%, of which over half are women.
- Educational level: 23% of the population has completed primary schooling, 0,5% secondary education, and 0,2% university studies; of the latter, a full 88% are males.
- Employment: just under half of the population (48%) is employed, though only 38% are women.

In economical terms, Equatorial Guinea possesses a free market economy, in which the private sector predominates. Expansion is hampered, however, by the precarious condition of the infrastructure, among other factors. The economy is basically fundamented upon two sectors: the exploitation of forest resources and agriculture, which involves 80% of the active population (subsistence or commercial). As in other tropical nations, the diet is based on products such as yucca, malanga, yams, bananas, rice and a great variety of fruits. The consumption of animal protein is largely based on game and, to a lesser extent, on fish. The main export products are timber on the continent, and cocoa on the island of Bioko. This latter crop was established in the last century. Production figures in 1989 corresponded to a total of 44440 hectares of cocoa. However, there has been a constant decline in production due to diminishing market prices and the sociopolitical situation in the country. Thus, as few as 5000 hectares were dedicated to cocoa production in 1993 (PEREZ DEL VAL, 1996).

Following a dramatic period of dictatorship (1968-1979), the present political system retains the country in

a state of economical stagnation, with an ongoing degradation of the institutions and social structures. The political regime since the coup d'état in 1979 that ended the Macías dictatorship constitutes a «democracy» headed by President Obiang Nguema, who has been governing the country since 1979. A process of political aperture towards pluripartidism commenced in 1992, though the political parties in the opposition continue to have no effective political weight.

The foreign debt of the country in 1990 represented 132,9% of the Gross Domestic Product (UNCED, 1991), and per capita income in 1988 was 350 US dollars. Despite its wealth in natural resources, Equatorial Guinea is presently in a difficult economical position. Since 1988, timber production has become the main economical activity in the country, followed in terms of revenue by petroleum. As a result of these activities, deforestation is increasing at a high rate. The annual deforestation rate has been estimated as 30 km<sup>2</sup> (FAO, 1988).

Equatorial Guinea is included among the least developed countries, with severe deficiencies in terms of basic needs in nutrition, health, education and housing. The UNDP (1991) defines «human development» as the process by which the opportunities of the individual are enhanced. However, the concept of human development is much more complex, and its statistical appraisal based on the Gross National Product is not realistic. An alternative approach has been proposed to determine the Human Development Index (HDI) by combining national income, longevity, educational level and quality of life. Accordingly, Equatorial Guinea ranks in position 137 among the 160 countries evaluated for 1990, i.e., the country belongs to the low human development group. In contrast, a Gross National Product-based rating would place Equatorial Guinea higher up on the list with respect to other developing countries than when using the above mentioned HDI. These differences in indicators reflect the difficulties involved in converting economical growth to improvements in the quality of life of the inhabitants, for the well being of the population is more dependent upon the way in which income is used than on mere income as such.

## ETHNIC GROUPS

The Fang are the predominant ethnic group in Equatorial Guinea, representing 82% of the global population. They are in turn divided into the Ntumu Fang to the North of the Uolo river, and the Okak Fang to the South. Four main ethnic groups collectively known as «Playeros» (or «Beach Peoples») inhabit Río Muni, the coast and the islands of Corisco and the Elobey group: the Ndowe (representing 3,7% of the population), the Bissio (1,4%) (previously known by the Spaniards as Bujebas), the Basseke, and the Balengue. The Bubi are second most numerous ethnic group, and are native to the island of Bioko. This group represents only 9% of the popula-

tion however. According to the 1983 census (MECP, 1983), of the total of 57740 inhabitants on Bioko, the Bubi accounted for 42%, while the remaining population was mainly Fang. A minority group, the Fernandinos, is also found on the island, these individuals being the descendants of slaves freed by the English in the XIX century and originally from Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon. This minority group also comprises the Afro-Americans that Spain exiled to the island in the past. Over time, this minority gained considerable influence as a privileged social class with an important influence on the political and economical life of the island up to independence in 1969. Finally, the Annobón, who account for 4% of the total census of Equatorial Guinea, are found on the island of Bioko and on Annobón, where a total of 2000 inhabitants are concentrated in a single village, San Antonio de Palé. All these ethnic groups are of Bantu linguistic origin. In this sense, the part of Africa regarded as Bantu is divided into two regions: Congolese (inhabitants of the equatorial zones of Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, the Congo, Angola and the ex-Zaire) and Sudanese Bantus. A large proportion of the population is found outside of Equatorial Guinea; indeed, about 100000 live in Cameroon, Gabon, Nigeria and in Spain.

### The Fang

The basic economy of these people is represented by migratory subsistence agriculture. The fundamental sociopolitical unit of the Fang ethnic group is the clan. In effect, the Fang are organized as exogamous patrilineal clans known as «ayóng». These clans are in turn segmented into lineages [«nd-o-bot» (NZE, 1985) or «ayombot» (PANYELLA & SABATER, 1957)], which are characterized polygynic families (one male with several wives). Inter-clan alliance in the form of polygynic marriages is established via the «nsoa», or «wealth of the bride», whereby the male acquires full rights over the woman and her descendants. The institution of «nsoa», together with the practice of polygynia makes access to marriage difficult for many young people. Negotiation of the amount corresponding to each «nsoa» is in turn dependent upon the prestige of the lineage, which of course implies a policy of interests and strategic alliances to reinforce the more powerful lineages. Clan exogamy also encompasses the maternal clan.

The oldest individual of each clan is also its ruling head. According to Fang traditional law, succession when a man dies corresponds in first place to the closest male blood relative, i.e., the son. Inheritance, as in the case of succession, likewise corresponds to the male line. The son inherits his father's property and wives (including his own mother) and offspring: male siblings, their wives and single sisters. However, sexual intercourse can only be maintained with those women incorporated to the clan by affinity, i.e., through marriage alliances (the co-spouses of the father and the wives of

the male siblings). The offspring of a woman not acquired legally (i.e., for whom «nsoa» was not paid) belong to the lineage of the father of the woman in question. In the past, heritable goods included the skulls of the salient clan ancestors. Women were only able to transmit their female offspring by order of age, along with a few items or properties of personal use such as domestic appliances, tools, clothing, etc. (ESTEVA FABREGAT, 1984).

### The «Playeros» or Beach Peoples

The «Playeros» or Beach Peoples (Ndowe, Bissio, Basseke and Balengue) arrived on the coast around the XIV century (IYANGA, 1992). These are sedentary peoples whose activity centers on fishing and subsistence agriculture. They present a number of internal subdivisions, but are closely linked and related since their arrival in the littoral regions. The Ndowe are divided into two large linguistic groups: those who speak Benga, which comprises the Benga, Bakupu, Batanga, Banoko, Balimba and Duala, and those who speak Kombe, which in turn comprises the Kombe, Asonga, Iyasa and Bomundi.

Sociopolitical organization is acephalic; each clan has a chief, who is in turn advised by the council of chiefs of the different lineages. The family or «dyanga» is the political and economical unit. Structurization is patrilineal and exogamous. Inheritance and succession to chief status is likewise paternal in line and in order of age among males. As most of these patrilineal societies, the Beach Peoples are polygynic; however, as pointed out by IYANGA (1992), monogamous marriage has existed for over 150 years, clearly influenced by evangelization. As in the case of the Fang, «ebonda» or «wealth of the bride» also exists among the Beach Peoples, whereby marriage alliances are established when the family of the groom pays material tribute to the family of the bride in return for ceding one of the clan's females. In turn, the clan of the groom acquires the rights over both the woman and her descendants, which come to belong to the clan.

These peoples have multiple initiation and transition rites, such as «esube» (or circumcision at birth) in addition to others that are celebrated upon reaching puberty. The main purpose of these rites is to introduce the individual to the community and to adult status, while reinforcing the feeling of belonging to the group. These initiation ceremonies demand courage, discipline, resistance and the overcoming of pain. Secret societies are also widespread, and membership is a matter of family tradition, social status, etc. Only those individuals who form part of these societies are regarded as being able to perceive events in the metaphysical world. The belief in a universal force may be manifested in different ways, as an expression of their beliefs regarding plants, animals, the sun, moon, sea or fire.

### The Bubi

According to MARTIN DEL MOLINO (1989), the first people to reach the island of Bioko did so approximately

two thousand years ago. When Bioko was discovered by the Portuguese explorer Fernando do Poo in 1472, the inhabitants were farmers who lived under stone-age conditions. Iron and its uses was a novelty to them. The origin of the Bubi is uncertain, and it is not possible to precisely establish when they arrived on the island. However, it seems clear that different migrations took place from the mainland, following displacement by other Bantu peoples advancing towards the coast.

Bubi social organization is centered on two filial groups: matrician («Carichobo» in the dialect of the North, and «Rijoc» or «Mnoé» in the South) and patrician (or «Loká»). Both configure a dual filiation parental system where the descendants inherit both clans. All those who belong to one same clan are regarded as descendants of a common female ancestor in the case of the matricial group, and of a common male ancestor in the case of the patricial group (FERNANDEZ-MORENO, 1993a). These clans are exogamous and segmented into nameless lineages. The patrician group is in turn divided into subpatrician groups of different social ranking that reflect the existence in the past of a highly structured internal social hierarchy. Both the matricial and patricial groups are headed by the individual of oldest age. Likewise, in the matricial group, the woman of greatest authority shares the condition of chief with her male counterpart. Traditional Bubi society was not politically acephalic as in other peoples described above. We have references that, at least during the second half of the last century, these people were under rule by a monarch in the South of the island, though dispersion and isolation between the meridional and septentrional population nuclei was considerable, in view of the abrupt topography of the island. This in turn favoured a measure of autonomy. Ruler succession was patrilineal, and by order of age among males. In contrast, inheritance was traditionally matrilineal. Thus, in order to maintain property within the matricial group, males did not leave their inheritance to their offspring, as these pertained to the matricial group of the mother; rather, property was transmitted to the offspring of a female sibling.

Polygyny also existed in the past, though restricted to the upper classes. As in the case of other ethnic groups, such marriages also established «vooio», or «wealth of the bride», literally meaning the establishment of bride value. The main item involved in such transactions was «lokó», small stringed conch beads that reflected wealth and were used as currency and for ornamental purposes. Postmarital residency was patrilocal. At present, matrilineal families are quite frequent, with three generations being grouped within the same residential unit: the mother, her unmarried offspring, and one or more married daughters with their offspring. Some villages to the South of the island celebrate alliance rituals that reproduce a number of the elements of their traditional marriage systems. According to these alliances, the woman is awarded a spirit as spouse; the latter serves as legal pater of her descendants, i.e., the spirit confers legiti-

macy in place of the biological father; the offspring that the woman may have with the biological father acquire the patricial condition of this ancestor-spirit (FERNANDEZ-MORENO, 1993b).

### The Annobón

Very little information is available on Annobón culture and society. Even the date of discovery of the island is obscure, though 1472 seems to be the likely year. At the time of its discovery, the island of Annobón was uninhabited. Colonization was by freed slaves originating from what is now Namibia, Angola and Sao Tomé; these ex-slaves worked in timber cutting and in the intensive cultivation of cotton and sugar cane (CUNHAMATOS, 1835). The Annobón (descendants of these freed slaves) have developed a language (Fandambo) that combines Portuguese (the language of the first European colonizers) and their own native languages. They have also developed a culture of their own, attributable to the peculiar population of the island (with heterogeneous groups) and to the isolation and abandonment to which they were subjected in the past.

The population of the island of Annobón has barely increased since its early days. When the first missionaries arrived in 1885, there were a total of 1150 inhabitants (COL, 1899; BARRENA, 1985). This figure rose to 1200 in 1912 (RAMOS, 1912), while the 1924 census in turn reflected the presence of 1400 inhabitants. The 1950 census indicated 1403 inhabitants. At present, the population is estimated at no more than 2000. Polygyny is observed among the Annobón; however, this practice is presently rather restricted, due to the current economical difficulties of the island. As to the sociopolitical organization of these people, ZAMORA (1962) reports that in the past there were three casts, among which certain families stood out in hierarchical terms. These families even had slaves of their own. The maximum authority was elected in these families. The election took place in a so-called «viyil», i.e., the place where the council of elders and the most important people of the village met to establish major decisions. Such activities continue to this day.

### RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND THE CONCEPTION OF DISEASE

According to the 1983 population census, 88% of the population of Equatorial Guinea is Catholic, 4.8% observe traditional religious beliefs, 0.5% are Muslims, and 0.2% practice other religions (MECP, 1983). Most of the population is Christian; however, religious beliefs are a syncretism combining monotheist Christian faith and traditional animist beliefs.

The cult of ancestors is common in traditional belief among the different ethnic groups of Equatorial Guinea, as is communication with the supernatural world and

with the spirits. Luck or ill fortune is always due to the intervention of spirits; it is never a matter of chance. These spirits are equally capable of protecting or causing bad luck, illnesses and death. Thus, everything may be accounted for in the supernatural realm.

As in the case of all African peoples, different mechanisms exist for the designation of guilt and for confronting ill fortune. These attitudes in turn have a significant impact upon health care practice. Disease is seen as the confluence of physical and spiritual evil. Poor health is often attributed to a lack of adequate attention or homage to ancestors; it represents punishment by the ancestors for having transgressed certain norms or rules. Alternatively, disease represents a state of vulnerability to, or lack of protection against, evil spirits or witches who through mediation by other people cause illness. This situation often gives rise to accusations of witchcraft. Disease is confirmed by the healers or traditional priests, or as a result of accusations made by witches or shamans. In order to «expel» the disease, multiple concoctions or traditional remedies are prescribed, along with talismans that must be worn, offerings, and orations. Likewise, food is regarded both as a source of disease and as a means to heal or purge. Within this context, shamans, priests and witches (both male and female) who are able to reveal the cause of illness and indicate healing treatment are influential and respected individuals of marked social prestige. Likewise, repeat failure or a lack of credibility may lead to rejection by the community.

Thus, since the origin of disease is not to be found in the organism (for disease is merely a manifestation of something else) healing is more than a matter of simply curing the body. In order to regain health, two remedies are required: spiritual, to effectively combat the supernatural origin of the evil, and medicinal, to resolve the physical manifestations. Perceived bodily condition is therefore closely linked to beliefs and cultural values.

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