

Carly Goodman  
February 26, 2016  
carlygoodman@gmail.com

Research Report: *Bushfalling* to No Man's Land: The U.S. Diversity Visa Lottery in Cameroon

The office was on the second floor of a building, up a metal spiral staircase, on a dusty street in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, a country in Central Africa. A banner decorated with a bright American flag hung outside, and proclaimed, in English, "American DV Lottery," and, in French, "play and win here with the professionals."<sup>1</sup> A man with a laptop at the front of the shop, exposed to the noise and air of the street, assisted a line of people who had come to enter the green card lottery, a program run by the U.S. government as part of its legal immigration policy. As people applied and paid a fee, they received a print-out with their confirmation number on it, and the man on the laptop also saved a copy to his PC. The man in charge, Bengha Innocent, had grown up in the English-speaking Northwest Region of Cameroon, but had come to bilingual, but majority francophone, Yaoundé in 2004 to attend university.

Innocent had known about the lottery for as long as he could remember. Early in high school, he said, "I just heard that there's this contest which is like a game, that when you play, if you win, you will probably have a visa to go to America, and you live in America like an American."<sup>2</sup> Although his main profession was working as a teacher of information management and communications, each autumn he set up shop to assist Cameroonians in entering the lottery. "So many people are interested in leaving the country. They believe that out there is better than here," he said. "Most of them come here and tell me they've gone to the embassy time and again... so they believe this is the only way for them to go." He added that his clients trusted him to improve their chances to win the lottery. "There are people who come, they look at me, and they tell me I am a magician. Because when they want to play, I say, oh you are going to win. And it just happens!"

In October and November 2015, I conducted a research trip to Cameroon with the support of a generous grant from the History Project/Institute for New Economic Thinking. During the month I spent in the country, I conducted research at the National Archives of Cameroon in Yaoundé, at the university library of the Université de Yaoundé 1, and at the university library at the University of Buea. In these collections, I focused on finding evidence of past lotteries in newspapers. I also conducted 45 short oral history interviews with cyber café operators in larger cities throughout the country, in both English and French. I was also able to observe the DV lottery in operation for the first time. During my stay, I visited Yaoundé, Douala, Kribi, Bamenda, Buea, and Limbe. I am so grateful to The History Project and the Institute for New Economic Thinking for supporting this research trip. My experience in Cameroon is something I will never forget. My dissertation is much richer for the inclusion of the voices of Cameroon's cyber café operators.

---

<sup>1</sup> Photograph by author, October 29, 2015, Yaoundé, Cameroon. (Author's possession.) "Gates Solution Center: American DV Lottery 2015 2017. Jouez et gagner ici avec les professionnels."

<sup>2</sup> Bengha Innocent, interview with author, October 29, 2015, Yaoundé, Cameroon. (All transcripts in author's possession.)

My dissertation argues that the DV lottery has reshaped global migration, making possible for the first time significant voluntary immigration from sub-Saharan Africa to the United States, and serving U.S. public diplomacy in the region by sustaining the American Dream in Africa. My research focuses both on the legislation of the immigration policy, and its implementation in Africa. In particular my research focuses on the roles played by private visa services entrepreneurs in Africa who seized the program as an economic opportunity in a time of relative privation as African states adopted structural adjustment programs, limited state services, and devalued currencies. These agents played a key role amplifying the lottery, transforming it from an abstract dream to a concrete possibility, and promoting positive impressions of the United States.



Cameroon's government promotes the country as "Africa in miniature" due to its geographic and demographic diversity.<sup>3</sup> Positioned just at the curve separating west from central Africa, Cameroon borders Nigeria, stretches north towards Chad, east toward the Central African Republic, and south to Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and the Republic of Congo. The country boasts the highest mountain in western Africa, dense forests, lovely beaches, and Sahelian savannah in the north. Most of its territory was once a German colony, which was divided after World War I between France and Great Britain as mandates, and later trustees. When the country gained independence in 1960 and 1961, it became a federal republic that was officially bilingual with French and English both official languages in addition to hundreds of local languages. Since independence, Cameroon has had two presidents, Ahmadou Ahidjo until 1982, and Paul Biya ever since. In contrast to some neighboring countries, including Nigeria and Ghana, Cameroon has no direct, nonstop flights to North America, and very few historic ties to the United States of America. In 1990, only around 3000 Cameroonians resided as immigrants in the United States. Today the number is over 33,000, an eleven-fold increase in just over twenty years.<sup>4</sup>

Easily half of the new arrivals – 15,000 people – came through the U.S. Diversity Visa (DV) lottery.<sup>5</sup> Each year, beginning in 1994, the United States has held an open, cost-free lottery, inviting millions of applicants around the world to submit their names for a chance at a green card, the document that gives a person lawful permanent resident status in the United States. The lottery has been especially popular in Africa, from which few immigrants hailed prior to 1990. In 1989, for example, only 187 Cameroonians received immigrant visas to the United States.<sup>6</sup> In the 2013 Diversity Visa program, the United States received

---

<sup>3</sup> Cameroon's population was estimated to be 12 million in 1990, and 22.25 million today. Data from World Bank, visualized by Google's Public Data project, accessed at: [https://www.google.com/publicdata/explore?ds=d5bncppjof8f9\\_ctype=l&strail=false&bcs=d&nselm=h&met\\_y=sp\\_pop\\_totl&scale\\_y=lin&ind\\_y=false&rdim=region&idim=country:CMR&ifdim=region&hl=en&dl=en&ind=false](https://www.google.com/publicdata/explore?ds=d5bncppjof8f9_ctype=l&strail=false&bcs=d&nselm=h&met_y=sp_pop_totl&scale_y=lin&ind_y=false&rdim=region&idim=country:CMR&ifdim=region&hl=en&dl=en&ind=false)

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Takougang, *Cameroonian Immigrants in the United States: Between the Homeland and the Diaspora* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Eulalia Amabo Nchang, "15,000 Cameroonians in US on DV Lottery Tickets – Consul: Interview with Vice Consul Connor O'Steen," *Cameroon Post*, October 12, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Immigration Statistics: Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 1996, Table 3, Immigrants Admitted by Region and Country of birth, 1986-1996. <http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/yearbook/statyearbk96.zip>

224,509 qualified entries from Cameroon, selected 3,858 lottery winners, and issued 1,619 Cameroonians diversity visas.<sup>7</sup> Because immigrants who enter the United States with a diversity visa can bring their immediate families, and later petition for other relatives to join them, over time the visa lottery introduces new, sustained chains of migration from underrepresented countries. The lottery has dramatically transformed Cameroonian emigration to the United States, both increasing the number of Cameroonian immigrants, and drawing broadly from both anglophone and francophone communities; previously the majority of immigrants were English speakers.

My research contextualizes the operation of the visa lottery, and considers both domestic Cameroonian and international dynamics surrounding emigration from Cameroon to the United States. In contrast to other sub-Saharan African nations, Cameroon enjoyed relative political and economic stability through into the 1980s, with the state using oil revenues to fund health, education, infrastructure, and a large number of public-owned enterprises. When Cameroon adopted structural adjustment programs in the late 1980s, reducing state programs and devaluing the currency, standards of living and income plummeted. Economic hardship within Cameroon and an international wave of pro-democracy movements after the collapse of the Soviet Union exacerbated political problems in Cameroon, particularly the linguistic divide between French and English-speaking Cameroonians - what came to be known as the “anglophone problem.”<sup>8</sup>

The new economic landscape, along with coincident political fractures, created new pressure on Cameroonians to depart the country in search of better opportunities abroad. A newly widespread Cameroonian desire for mobility was bolstered by forces of globalization that exposed Cameroonians to images of life abroad while reinforcing a sense of stasis and decline within Cameroon. Moreover, Cameroonians faced the reality and rhetoric of increasingly restrictive immigration policies in Europe, which had previously been a preferred destination for Africans seeking greener pastures. In this context, the DV lottery - and the United States - provided an alternative that eventually attracted many applicants from both English and French-speaking communities in Cameroon.

At first, it was anglophones who seized the lottery most enthusiastically. Anglophones were more likely to go to America for linguistic reasons and to want to depart Cameroon permanently due to their sense of marginalization in Cameroon. As economic and political pressures mounted in the 1990s, English-speakers in Cameroon, who felt these pressures most acutely, increasingly sought to go abroad, and to do so permanently. This phenomenon became so widely discussed that Cameroonians created a new expression to describe going abroad to the West. The expressions “bushfalling,” “to fall bush,” and “bushfaller” all draw on Pidgin words. “Bush” is a word for farm that indicates

---

<sup>7</sup> Immigration Statistics: “Diversity Visa Program, DV 2007-2013: Number of Entries Received During Each Online Registration Period by Country of Chargeability,” accessed at [http://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/DV\\_Applicant\\_Entrants\\_by\\_Country\\_2007-2013.pdf](http://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/DV_Applicant_Entrants_by_Country_2007-2013.pdf); “DV 2013 - Selected Entrants” accessed at <http://travel.state.gov/content/visas/english/immigrate/diversity-visa/dv2013-slected-entrants.html>; “Table VII Immigrant Number Use for Visa Issuances and Adjustments of Status in the Diversity Immigrant Category Fiscal Years 2004-2013,” accessed at <http://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/Statistics/AnnualReports/FY2013AnnualReport/FY13AnnualReport-TableVII.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Piet Konings and Francis B. Nyamnjoh, “The Anglophone Problem in Cameroon,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 35 no. 2 (1997): 207-229.

food and bounty. The word “fall” means to “jump onto” or “rush into” something. Traditionally, to “fall bush” meant jumping into or rushing to a farm to do the necessary work of harvesting, sowing seeds, and providing labor at key times for the farm. “One never returns from the bush with empty hands,” the anthropologist Michaela Pelican has explains.<sup>9</sup> In the 1990s, Cameroonians began using the expression to mean traveling to an industrialized country to do labor and reap material rewards for it; the term is associated with adventure-seeking. The scholar Maybritt Jill Alpes wrote, “A person who has traveled to bush has to hustle, which means that he or she will accept any kind of work to be able to make money.”<sup>10</sup> In the words of an aspiring emigrant, “falling bush – it means that you are going to the white man’s world.”<sup>11</sup> The verb “rapidly shoved its way into our sonorous lingua franca in the 1990s, when the phenomenon of Cameroonians emigrating to the West attained new proportions,” a *Cameroon Post* magazine article explained.<sup>12</sup>

Anglophones and francophones had long assessed their places in Cameroon differently, given the centrality of the French language and strong diplomatic and business ties with France, and the sense of marginalization felt by many English speakers. Different political circumstances within Cameroon also shaped attitudes about international migration in the early 1990s. The anthropologist Michaela Pelican has refined a picture of aspiring African emigrants that is too often homogenous, drawing attention to Africa’s diversity, and the non-uniform experiences and options for African emigrants. Anglophone Cameroonians, reacting to particularly difficult circumstances at home, used positive, adventure-seeking language to describe going abroad and seeking fortune: bushfalling. The language francophones used to describe emigration showed more ambiguity. With higher expectations about their place in Cameroon, in the attitudes of francophone Cameroonians, Pelican explains, “migration is seen in a more critical light.”<sup>13</sup> Instead of bushfalling, francophone terminology for international migration tended to borrow from militaristic language. Francophones used terms like “*aller au front*” and “*aller se battre*” to describe traveling abroad, meaning “to go to the front,” and “to go into battle.”<sup>14</sup> These words associated going abroad with hardship and struggle, rather than material opportunity.

Divergent attitudes about emigration resulted not only from different experiences of bilingualism in Cameroon, but from different migration destinations. In the 1990s, previous avenues to France, as well as to other European countries, were closing. Since the 1970s, France had tightened its borders and ended labor migration programs, and in 1993, France’s interior minister Charles Pasqua endorsed the idea of “zero immigration” and enacted legislation that toughened requirements, limited visas, and expanded border enforcement.<sup>15</sup> Approval rates for asylum applications plummeted. A destination once

---

<sup>9</sup> Michaela Pelican, “International Migration: Virtue or Vice? Perspectives from Cameroon,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39, no. 2 (2013): 242.

<sup>10</sup> Maybritt Jill Alpes, “Bushfalling at All Cost: The Economy of Migratory Knowledge in Anglophone Cameroon African Diaspora,” *African Diaspora* 5 (2012): 95.

<sup>11</sup> Innocent, interview.

<sup>12</sup> Clovis Atatah, “A propos de bushfalling,” *Post News Magazine*, September 2006, accessed at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20070326142333/http://www.postnewsmagazine.com/pages/editor03.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Pelican, 241.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Kimberly Hamilton, Patrick Simon, Clara Veniard, “The Challenge of French Diversity,” *Migration Policy Institute*, November 1, 2004, accessed at: <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/challenge-french-diversity>;

associated with making dreams come true had become so difficult, it was likened in the francophone Cameroonian press to a hell in which immigrants were subject to detention and homelessness.<sup>16</sup> By the end of the decade, a Cameroonian newspaper estimated that 90 percent of Cameroonians in France were considered illegal.<sup>17</sup> Due to the presence of European and international NGOs in Yaoundé, the city's residents had access to images and policies about migration promulgated by European governments that framed African immigration as a problem, as illegal, and as something European governments could not sustain.<sup>18</sup> As a result, francophones tended to speak about going abroad in negative or ambivalent terms.



The United States Diversity Visa (DV) lottery was different. In contrast to contemporary migration policies in France, across Europe, and in the United States, the DV lottery created a new instrument that encouraged immigration. While Cameroonians seeking temporary visas to the United States tended to be refused at the Consular section of the embassy, those selected in the Diversity Visa lottery encountered a much warmer reception and much better odds.<sup>19</sup> The DV lottery would become the most important channel Cameroonians used to come to the United States.<sup>20</sup> In the first year alone, the United States selected 908 winners from Cameroon, and ultimately issued 312 diversity visas to Cameroonians.<sup>21</sup>

The earliest participants in the lottery hailed from the anglophone regions, where people were more likely to have contacts in the United States, and where people spoke enough English to understand the program's procedures. The United States initially focused its outreach on English-speaking audiences.<sup>22</sup> But francophones also played, and in increasing numbers over the years.<sup>23</sup> As Joseph Takougang argues, the lottery "has

---

Christine O'Connell, "Plight of France's *Sans-Papiers* Gives a Face to Struggle over Immigration Reform," *Human Rights Brief*, 1996, accessed at <http://www1.american.edu/ted/hpages/human/pasqua41.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Blaise, "L'enfer parisien des immigrés," *La Nouvelle Expression*, May 30 – June 2, 1995. University of Buea Archives.

<sup>17</sup> Takougang, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Pelican.

<sup>19</sup> Cameroonian Frances Nkam guessed that the U.S. Embassy "has about a 1 percent visa-granting rate. For every 1,000 people who actually apply for a visa, you'll be lucky if 10 people from that number get a visa. That is almost impossible." Ali Watkins, "U.S. immigration overhaul may wall off pathways from Africa, Caribbean," *McClatchy Washington Bureau*, July 5, 2013, accessed at <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/politics-government/congress/article24750739.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Takougang, 29.

<sup>21</sup> About twice as many DV lottery winners are selected each year than can receive the visa, because some of the people selected will either not qualify for the visa, or will choose not to follow through on applying. Office of the Spokesman, U.S. Department of State, "Final DV-1 Information from State Department," October 19, 1994. Office of Policy and Planning, Annual Report: Legal Immigration, Fiscal Year 1997.

<sup>22</sup> Edmund F. Scherr, USIA Diplomatic Correspondent, "United States Notifying Winners of New Visa Lottery Program \*Safeguards system eliminates fraudulent application," *Cameroon Post*, Weekly Edition, December 6-13, 1994, Author's collection; Edmund F. Scherr, USIA Diplomatic Correspondent, "US Announces second lottery for 55,000 immigrant visas, applications due in February for random selection," *The Herald*, December 12-14, 1994, Author's collection.

<sup>23</sup> "Anglophones jouent plus longues que les francophones." Kanna Landry, interview with author, October 28, 2015, Yaoundé, Cameroon (French).

singularly accounted for the tremendous increase in the number of French-speaking Cameroonians in the United States.”<sup>24</sup>

In contrast to the language francophones used to describe traveling to Europe, a context in which African migrants were criminalized as illegal, and victimized, francophones discussed the DV lottery and emigration to the United States in more positive terms. A francophone African website posted about the program in 2001 as the lottery of the American Dream, that made it possible to live and work “in the country of Uncle Sam totally legally.”<sup>25</sup> That the DV lottery offered an explicitly legal path to the United States dampened the sense, among francophone Cameroonians, that traveling abroad was like going into battle. One French speaker, Serges Ngueffang, in a 2005 article explained why the visa lottery was so appealing: “One has a better chance with it. The Europeans already closed their doors. With this card, we are not illegal.”<sup>26</sup> Instead of framing emigration as ‘going to the front’ in a military metaphor, the *Cameroon Tribune* used the verb *se bousculer* which means “to rush” or “to scramble,” language often used in anglophone African writing to describe going abroad.<sup>27</sup> The opportunity to go legally to the United States rather than clandestinely to Europe, however small the odds of winning the lottery, made the United States a more attractive destination.<sup>28</sup> An anglophone Cameroonian affirmed this comparison: “People have told me, from all indications, from all information, they told me going to America is like, they are free there, when they go up to Europe, they chase them there, there is a lot of police chasing them away, because in America, if you get your legs in America, it is a free zone.”<sup>29</sup>

The United States’ shift, in 2003, to an online system further broadened participation opportunities, particularly for francophones. In 2000, perhaps 20,000 of Cameroon’s 16.5 million people had access to the Internet, but that number grew quickly, to 370,000 in 2006, to 725,000 in 2009, and over one million (out of 20 million Cameroonians total) in 2012.<sup>30</sup> As access to the internet spread, enterprising Cameroonians opened small cyber cafés. Managers at these cafés realized that the annual visa lottery was an excellent way to draw in business, since home access to the internet was exceedingly rare in Cameroon. A spokesperson for the U.S. embassy, Bouba Monglo, told a French-language news outlet that the shift to an online system had resulted in more French-

---

<sup>24</sup> Takougang, 29.

<sup>25</sup> “La loterie du rêve américain” “au pays de l’oncle Sam, en toute légalité.” “La loterie du reve americain” afrik.com, July 18, 2001, accessed at <http://www.afrik.com/article3061.html>.

<sup>26</sup> “On a plus de chance ainsi. Les Européens nous ferment déjà leurs portes. Avec cette carte, nous ne sommes pas dans l’illégalité.” Dorine Ekwè, “Le Boom de la loterie Américaine au Cameroun,” *Mutations*, November 2, 2005, accessed at <http://www.bonaberi.com/article.php?aid=1390>.

<sup>27</sup> “Les Camerounais se bousculent déjà pour cette nouvelle édition et des business sont nés en marge.” Feliciet Bahane N., “Plus de 1.400 Camerounais gagnent l’Amérique à la loterie,” *Cameroon Tribune*, October 27, 2010, <http://fr.allafrica.com/stories/201010280326.html>. See for example, Austin Avwode, “Mad Rush to America,” *The Week*, March 11, 1996, <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/198929055?accountid=14270>.

<sup>28</sup> A woman who helped her husband run a visa shop discussed how important it was to be able to go in “le manier legal” – the legal manner. “Mireille,” interview with author, October 30, 2015, Yaoundé, Cameroon (French).

<sup>29</sup> Nkongho Walters Mbu, interview with author, October 29, 2015, Yaoundé, Cameroon.

<sup>30</sup> “Cameron Internet Usage and Population Statistics,” *World Bank & International Telecommunications Union*, accessed at Internet World Stats, <http://internetworldstats.com/af/cm.htm>.

speaking applicants for the lottery program. “Before two years ago [2003], it was more the people in the English-speaking part of the country who applied. In addition, it was more difficult to manage because it had to be done by mail. The advent of the Internet has facilitated the discovery of this medium by francophone Cameroonians.”<sup>31</sup>

Bringing the visa lottery to life as an instrument of migration in Cameroon was an emerging cohort of African private visa services entrepreneurs, including travel agents, photographers, and a variety of others seeking personal profit, who became important enactors of the program.<sup>32</sup> Facing a shrinking public sector, falling wages, and high unemployment in Africa - consequences of structural adjustment - one method of survival in Cameroon was creating small enterprises, in this case serving Africans’ emigration aspirations by selling visa services.<sup>33</sup> As the anthropologist Charles Piot argues, the moment of extreme privation in Africa after the Cold War was also productive in the Foucaultian sense, “spawning a new round of extraordinarily inventive bricolage.”<sup>34</sup> Small businesses offered visa lottery-related services, taking visa photographs, filling out government forms, and acquiring necessary paperwork and certifications for their clients. The DV lottery, with its low threshold for entry, offered a perfect opportunity for these visa entrepreneurs. Motivated by profit, visa services agents not only earned income during the lottery registration period. They also served as transmitters of the U.S. policy, bringing it to audiences not reached by official U.S. announcements.<sup>35</sup> Through their businesses, posters, advertisements, and later, access to the internet in cyber cafés, they helped spread a kind of “lotto fever” through the cities of sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>36</sup>

Like other promising young people, one man came from anglophone Northwest Region to the capital to pursue his studies at the Université de Yaoundé II. He took a job at Cyber City, a cyber café, where his work was “making the world a global village.” During the visa lottery, he assisted both anglophone and francophone clients to enter the visa lottery. “Most often it’s the English-speaking people who do it. The francophones, once they have an idea about it, they also give it a try,” he told me.<sup>37</sup> Another visa agent, told me, “The irony about it is that the French, too, are interested. America is an English country, but the French, everybody wants to go. The French, too, they are playing even more. It is somehow

---

<sup>31</sup> “Avant ces deux dernières années, c’était davantage les gens de la zone anglophone du pays qui postulaient. En plus, c’était plus difficile à gérer parce qu’il fallait le faire par la poste. L’avènement de l’Internet a facilité la découverte de ce moyen par les camerounais francophones.” Ekwè, “Le Boom de la lotterie Américaine au Cameroun.”

<sup>32</sup> The 1990s saw an uptick in a global commercial migration industry, which emerged to manage migration flows in an era of recent globalization. Visa lottery-related entrepreneurs were part of this larger trend. See Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen and Ninna Nyberg Sorensen eds., *The Migration Industry and the Commercialization of International Migration* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>33</sup> Charles Piot, *Nostalgia for the Future: West Africa after the Cold War* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010); James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>34</sup> Piot, 3.

<sup>35</sup> And engaging in “Atlantic African” economic practices that have long characterized African economic activity. Jane Guyer, *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> Melissa Block, “Immigration Lottery Draws Millions of Applications,” *NPR*, June 10, 1994, accessed at <https://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P1-27998063.html>; James Butty, “U.S. to Hold Visa Lottery,” *West Africa*, June 19, 1994; and “Lottery Fever in Freetown,” *West Africa*, March 2, 1997.

<sup>37</sup> Allomonwing Joseph Ngochi, interview with author, November 4, 2015, Yaoundé, Cameroon.

funny – people who don't even understand English, too, they play.”<sup>38</sup> Many of the capital's internet cafés where the visa lottery is most famously advertised are in an anglophone neighborhood, where visa agents long experienced with the DV lottery - often anglophones themselves - advertise their services to both English- and French-speakers residing in Yaoundé.<sup>39</sup>

The online DV lottery was good for the internet business – perhaps better for the café owners than for lottery applicants. Many people did not understand how to access the Internet or how to enter the lottery. As one Internet café operator in Yaoundé explained, “We help them take pictures and complete the online registration form. And they pay us 1,000 CFA to enter,” Mr. Bodo explained. While entering the lottery was officially free, café operators could profit from customers without Internet access.<sup>40</sup> This business crossed the language divide, as cyber café operators seized the program as a business opportunity, and promoted it in both French and English. As one blogger described Yaoundé during the lottery, “banners and billboards are prominently displayed, directing passers-by to a nearby Internet café where they would, or could, by a stroke of luck, automatically become American citizens without ‘spending much.’”<sup>41</sup> One woman working at a cyber café with her husband told me, “Anglophones comme francophones – les gens se intéressent.”<sup>42</sup> The entrepreneurial activity around the green card lottery “instil[ls] in one the fantasy of one day becoming Uncle Sam's countryman”, a blogger argued.<sup>43</sup>

Due to the efforts of private visa services agents, each year the month-long registration period inspired enthusiastic participation of both anglophone and francophone Cameroonians. When I arrived in October 2015 to observe that year's DV lottery in action, I found banners and signs, flyers and postcards, proclaiming the lottery open. A poster of Barack Obama holding a green card appeared on one poster. A banner showed Barack Obama with an amendment to his famous catchphrase: Yes You Can Win.<sup>44</sup> Another banner featured a portrait of the Obama family. Some internet café operators provided legitimate services for reasonable fees, while others cheated their customers, provided false information, and perpetuated fraud. The U.S. government tried to intervene against unscrupulous visa services providers, publishing a warning against fraud in French-language newspapers targeting French-speaking lottery applicants, an audience it had not paid much attention to at first. “Please note,” the U.S. Embassy in Yaoundé stated in a

---

<sup>38</sup> Menkan Kari, interview with author, October 30, 2015, Yaoundé, Cameroon.

<sup>39</sup> Yerima Kini Nsom, “Carrefour Obili: Savouring the Citadel of Anglophone Euphoria,” *Cameroon Post Online*, September 10, 2010, <http://www.cameroonpostline.com/carrefour-obili-savouring-the-citadel-of-anglophone-euphoria/>.

<sup>40</sup> “En effet, dans nombre de cybercafé à Yaoundé, des affiches invitent au jeu. Jules Bodo, gérant d'un "cyber" au lieu dit carrefour Mvan explique que cette loterie est un bon moyen pour d'arrondir les fins de mois. Selon lui, "il y a beaucoup de candidats mais tous ne comprennent pas comment ça marche. On les aide à faire des photos et à remplir la fiche d'inscription en ligne. Et il paye 1.000 F pour l'opération", affirme-t-il. Pourtant, la soumission d'une demande d'inscription est gratuite. Mais comme beaucoup de postulants ont du mal avec Internet, les gérants se font de beurre...” Bahane N., “Plus de 1.400 Camerounais gagnent l'amerique a la loterie.”

<sup>41</sup> Mirabel Azamgeh Tandafor, “US Lottery fever grips Yaoundé as the rush increases,” *L'Effort Camerounais*, December 11, 2005, [http://www.leffortcamerounais.com/2005/12/us\\_lottery\\_feve.html](http://www.leffortcamerounais.com/2005/12/us_lottery_feve.html).

<sup>42</sup> “Mireille,” interview.

<sup>43</sup> Tandafor, “US Lottery fever grips Yaoundé.”

<sup>44</sup> Photograph by author, October 30, 2015, Yaoundé, Cameroon.



French-language message in 2012, “that there is no fee for participating in the Diversity Visa program.”<sup>45</sup> The U.S. consular section in Yaoundé became concerned about fraud in DV lottery cases, warning in a confidential cable about “rampant corruption and fraud” associated with its immigration screening.<sup>46</sup>

Yet, despite the existence of fraud and opportunism, and despite the long odds of winning, the lottery remained one of the few avenues for legal immigration of Cameroonians to the United States. A cable from the U.S. Embassy in Yaoundé recounted, the DV Lottery “remains an alluring opportunity that embodies much of what draws Cameroonians to immigrate to the U.S.” Even after participating in a long, heated discussion in 2007 about DV-related fraud and the difficulty Cameroonians face in getting a tourist visa to the United States, a young, foreign-educated Cameroonian journalist in 2007 told the Embassy “that perhaps this year she too would play the DV lottery.”<sup>47</sup> At the same time that the lottery reinforced positive imagery of the United States in French and English-speaking Cameroonians, it facilitated a growing stream of lucky, hopeful Cameroonians to the United States.

---

<sup>45</sup> “Veuillez noter qu'il n'y a aucun frais à payer pour participer au Programme de Visa Diversité.” Georges Ndenga, “La loterie americaine accessible a tous,” *Africa Info – Cameroun*, October 14, 2012, <http://fr.allafrica.com/stories/201210130672.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Cable, Cameroon Yaoundé, To Secretary of State, “Cameroon Scensetter for General Ward’s February 21-22, 2008 Visit,” February 20, 2008, accessed at Canonical ID: 08YAOUNDÉ164\_a. Confidential. Wikileaks: [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08YAOUNDÉ164\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08YAOUNDÉ164_a.html).

<sup>47</sup> Cable, Cameroon Yaoundé to Secretary of State, “Which Visa Lottery? Consular Outreach in Cameroon,” November 2, 2007, accessed at Canonical ID: 07YAOUNDÉ1304\_a, Unclassified. Wikileaks: [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07YAOUNDÉ1304\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07YAOUNDÉ1304_a.html).