

## **Spanish voices in Africa**

‘Se habla español’ in Africa

When one thinks of Spanish-speaking countries, automatically countries in Latin America like Venezuela and Colombia come to mind. However, did you know that there is a country in Africa whose citizens also speak Spanish? This country is Equatorial Guinea and since 1844, Spanish has been its official language. In 2000, French was also named an official language.

Situated in Western Africa, the Republic of Equatorial Guinea is comprised of a mainland territory called Río Muni, the islands of Bioko and Annobón and several other smaller islands. As its name suggests, it is located close to the Equator and the Gulf of Guinea, and is bordered to the North by Cameroon and to the East and South by Gabon. Therefore, it has a tropical, humid climate with a rainy season and a dry season like in Trinidad and Tobago. With a population of a little over half a million, it is the smallest populated country in continental Africa and the smallest member of the United Nations from continental Africa. The capital city is Malabo, which was formerly called Santa Isabel.

But how did this little country become the only country in mainland Africa with Spanish as an official language? It is believed that Equatorial Guinea was originally inhabited by the Pygmies, of whom there are only small isolated groups left in Northern Río Muni. Then, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, migrations of Bantu tribes like the Playeros, or coastal tribes, and the Fang occurred.

The first human inhabitants on the island of Bioko were the Bubi, who emigrated from Cameroon and Río Muni. Nevertheless, the Portuguese explorer Fernão do Pó is given credit for discovering the island in 1472 when he was in search of a route to India. He originally called it ‘Formosa’ meaning ‘beautiful’ but it was renamed after him and later renamed to Bioko.

The Portuguese also colonized the island of Annobón, introducing its inhabitants, who were native to Angola, via the island of São Tomé. They maintained control until the Treaty of El Pardo in 1778, which gave Spain the islands in exchange for territory in the American continent. The British set up a base on the island of Bioko to combat the slave trade in 1827 but the Spanish reclaimed it in 1844.

Meanwhile, Río Muni became a Spanish protectorate in 1885 and a colony in 1900. In 1900, the Treaty of Paris resolved conflicting claims by France and Spain to

the territory as it gave the French the right to “pre-emptively seize all territories if Spain decided to abandon its possessions in Río Muni” (Wikipedia). The Spanish later united Río Muni, Bioko and Annobón between 1926 and 1959 to form Spanish Guinea. During the colonial period, the country’s education and health services were greatly developed.

After one hundred and ninety (190) years of Spanish rule, Equatorial Guinea finally gained independence on October 12, 1968. Today, its head of state is President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasago, who has ruled the country since seizing power via a coup in 1979. Like Trinidad and Tobago, the country also has a head of government, Prime Minister Ricardo Mangue Obama Nfubea.

As a result of its history, the majority of the population is of Bantu origin, with the largest tribe being the Fang. This tribe makes up more than eighty-five (85%) of the population, followed by the Bubi, Mdowe, Annobon and Bujeba tribes. The majority of the population is also said to be of Christian faith, with Roman Catholicism being the main religion practised. However, pagan practices can also be found throughout the country. More than sixty-five percent (65%) of the population speaks Spanish and the rest speaks French or the tribal languages of Fang and Bubi.

The culture of Equatorial Guinea is varied, as on the mainland it is heavily based on ancient rituals and songs, while on Bioko, the Spanish customs and traditions from colonial times are strongly evident. The *abira*, a ceremony that is said to help cleanse the community of evil, is one of the countries most famous celebrations. A popular dance is the *balélé*, which is performed throughout the year along the coast and at Christmas time on the island of Bioko.

With the discovery and exploitation of large offshore oil and natural gas reserves in 1995, the country experienced rapid economic growth and is now the third largest producer of oil in Sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, oil exports contribute to more than ninety percent (90%) of the country’s total export earnings. Other important industries include forestry, farming and fishing, and prior to gaining independence, cocoa production contributed substantially to the country’s revenue. Nevertheless, the agricultural industry has been neglected for years by the government, which now has plans to reinvest some oil revenue into this waning industry. The country has other natural resources like titanium, iron ore and uranium that have not yet been developed, and its official currency is the CFA franc.

However, although Equatorial Guinea now has the second highest per capita income in the world according to the World Fact Book of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), little has been done to improve the living conditions of its people, the majority of whom live in poverty.

Its major trading partners include the United States of America, China and Spain. On January 08, 2007, Prime Minister Patrick Manning met with the Foreign Affairs Minister of Equatorial Guinea in Trinidad and both governments signed a Memorandum of Understanding, paving the way for future developments of natural gas projects between the two countries.

So, now you know a little bit about the country that will co-host the African Nations Cup for football with Gabon in 2012. Hopefully the next time someone asks you to name a Spanish-speaking country in Africa, you will be able to correctly identify the only one there is, Equatorial Guinea!

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**For more information about the Spanish As the First Foreign Language (SAFFL) initiative, please contact the Secretariat for the Implementation of Spanish (A Division of the Ministry of Trade and Industry) Riverside Plaza, Besson Street, Port of Spain. You can contact the Secretariat at 623-2931-4 or [spanishsecretariat@gmail.com](mailto:spanishsecretariat@gmail.com).**