

A royal visit

by John Phillips

The event that I want to tell you about is a true story which happened in 1990. At that time I was in Yaoundé, the capital city of Cameroon, teaching on a training course. Incidentally, I wasn't teaching English then, but Pidgin English, but that's quite another story.



Now, the course had come to an end and the trainees were about to travel to different countries in Africa. Two of them were going to work in Zaïre and needed to buy some spare parts for motorcycles to take with them. So I took them into town to show them where the motorcycle shops were.

Since we were going to be travelling around the muddy backstreets of Yaoundé we, didn't put on our best clothes and shoes. I was wearing a very scruffy pair of training shoes, worn and stained by the rough, red earth of Cameroon.

As we were looking for the motorcycle parts we noticed that everywhere the shopkeepers were closing up their shops in a rush. When we asked them what was happening, they told us "The Prince is coming, the Prince is coming."

Well, we really had to hurry, but we managed to buy the motorcycle parts we needed, and we quickly got into a taxi and headed for home. But gradually the traffic got slower and slower until eventually we couldn't go any further. Lots of police in ceremonial uniforms were lining the road and ordering cars to stop.

It so happened that the place where we stopped was only a few hundred yards from the airport, so we decided to go and see what was happening. To our surprise we found that the police even allowed us to go onto the apron where the planes usually stand. We joined a large crowd of people who were lining a long red carpet which led across the apron to the VIP lounge.

As we were waiting, large groups of men, women and children in colourful costumes danced African dances to the sound of loud drumming.

We'd been standing for a long time in the midday sun, when finally we saw a large military transport plane coming in to land. It drew up and taxied towards the terminal. The military band began to play and the drums began to beat even louder. The important guests got off the plane and at first we couldn't see who they were. But when they got closer we realised that they were none other than their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales—Prince Charles and Princess Diana—surrounded by a group of bodyguards, photographers and officials.

There was a lot of welcoming and handshaking, but finally they started getting closer. But just where the carpet turned to the left towards the VIP lounge, near where we were standing, the royal couple, seeing some white faces, left the red carpet and came over to shake our hands. "Hello," said the Prince, "are you the British contingent?" I answered for our group that some of us were British, others American and I explained the kind of the language work we were doing. The Prince showed that he was well informed and mentioned that he had heard that Cameroon had over 200 languages.

While we were talking, the press photographers were busily taking pictures. And the next day, on the front page of the national newspaper, *the Cameroon Tribune*, this was the picture which appeared:



But the story doesn't quite end there. Seven years later, when the Princess of Wales died in a car accident in Paris, the *Cameroon Tribune* recalled the visit of the royal couple—and they printed the same picture on the front page.

And I don't know whether you think so too, but I think that while I was talking to Prince Charles, the Princess was taking a good look at my scruffy old training shoes.