
Cameroon: When women mobilise to protect the moabi

Southern Cameroon is red and green. Green like the forest of the Congo basin that breathes and has a heartbeat and that offers its inhabitants the biotic resources necessary to subsist; and red like the dusty roads where trucks run, transporting the bodies of forest giants that will be turned into furniture, flooring, doors, etc. Along Cameroon's open veins flows its vital element to the port of Douala, where the vampire from the North comes to quench its thirst...

Voices of women reach us from the forest. In Southeast Cameroon women are organizing to improve their living conditions and to preserve a mythical tree, the moabi (*Baillonella toxisperma*). This forest giant from the basin of the Congo River is being industrially exploited at a pace that is hard to determine but that is affecting local peoples and in particular, women.

For the peoples of Southern Cameroon, the moabi is of considerable importance. Traditionally the "Sacred Tree," dead ancestors were placed sitting at the foot of the tree or in a hole in its trunk; thus the moabi incarnated the power of the dead person. As the "Pharmaceutical Tree" its bark, its leaves and roots served to make over fifty traditional drugs used among other things for menstrual pains, vaginal infections and after childbirth. As the "Nutritional Tree" its edible fruits reduce women's work when it bears fruit, the seeds produce a good quality oil that is under the control of women from the time of gathering to the time to take it to market, representing one of the main sources of income in the areas where it grows.

Industrial exploitation of the forest started in Cameroon at the beginning of the twentieth century, during German colonization in the coastal region, to spread later to the whole country at the pace the railway was built. And, although some industrialists cannot find an explanation to the dwindling of maobis, it may be seen that the distribution of these species is inversely proportional to the historic presence of forest exploitation. In fact, maobi trading is lucrative as it is a very good quality timber for carpentry and fetches a high price on the international market. It is really a luxury product that finds its place in yachts or estates, as decks, windows, panelling, etc. Maobi parquet was used to cover the floors of the Paris Champs Elysées Theatre.

In Cameroon, the international timber trade is exclusively in the hands of foreign companies, mainly French, Italian, Lebanese and more recently, Chinese. However, the moabi market continues to be very "Franco-French": according to official statistics, between 2000 and 2005, 45 percent of the volume of moabi was produced by French companies and 71 % of the production was sold in France (24% in Belgium). It is thus obvious that the moabi trade is in perfect coincidence with the trade ties with the old metropolis.

Since the eighties, many villages are in dispute with the forest exploitation companies surrounding the Dja reserve, a region that is rich in moabis. The villagers have sent numerous letters to the relevant authorities, claiming their right to use the forest and asking for moabis to be protected. They have taken various measures, such as organizing meetings with the industrialist, marking the moabis to point out their right to use them and blocking the entry of heavy machinery until the army intervened... but none of these measures really achieved its objective. At Bedoumo, the army violently

repressed a strike aimed at blocking the entry of the logging companies. The villagers were obliged to pick up the cinders of the fires they had light along the road to warm them from the cold night air with their bare hands, they were beaten and tortured and as a result some pregnant women had miscarriages. Confrontations of this type mobilize the entire community, although in general it is the men who appear at the forefront, as supposedly they are the ones who have contact, both oral and written, with the authorities.

However, the two conflicts specifically related with the moabi tree that made the villagers physically confront the companies were either promoted by women or led by women. In Bapilé, the Italian company FIPCAM opened up a road (during a feast day when the villagers had gone to a neighbouring village) through the space reserved for the community forest and destroyed a cemetery. The following day, on hearing the noise made by the lumberjacks and discovering that various moabis in flower had been felled, five village women went to the forest to try to convince the workers to give up their logging, with no success. The following days, the whole community mobilized to block the road and the machinery, struggles and strikes went on for a month, and finally they achieved the protection of some of the remaining trees and recognition of the damage caused (300 moabis had been felled). Although compensation has not yet been paid.

In the village of Ziang-Ognoul, Pallisco, a French industrialist opened up a road in the space reserved for the community forest. When the villagers heard the noise, Mrs Koko Sol marched to the forest with various villagers, mainly women, and threatened to set fire to the machinery if the loggers did not stop their work. As a result, the loggers were expelled and a large number of moabis were preserved; unfortunately eleven had already been felled.

In some cases conflicts arise between men and women in the villages. In the first place because the men work in the logging companies and are responsible for making inventories of timber species. In the second, because some of them sell moabis from their land to clandestine sawmills. A woman from Ebimimbang affirmed that “the men are guilty because they are in contact with the industrialists and are well aware that the moabi is very important to the women.”

The scarcity of moabis causes particular prejudice to women who must find other options for food; receive less income and do without medicinal ingredients or medicines for the specific treatment of female genital diseases. This situation is added to the masculine domination that they must endure in their societies.

Faced with this situation, Mrs Rufine Adjowa decided to establish an NGO known as CADEFÉ. Its objective is to improve the living conditions of women by protecting the moabi. The idea is to gather village women in small groups or even cooperatives to develop the sale of moabi oil. The peasant women can thus obtain substantial income that enables them to pay their children’s schooling and medical attention or to purchase the oil and soap they need without having to ask their husbands for money.

Because of their exclusion, all these women make up a social group able to promote changes in relations of power and to propose effective solutions for sustainable and equitable management of forest ecosystems.

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