
Cameroon: Does isolation still protect forest communities?

Indigenous Baka number 30-40,000 and live in the southern and southeastern areas of Cameroon. They are associated with, among other local communities the Bagando Bakwele, Knonbemebe, Vonvo, Zime and Dabjui farmers. About 4,000 Bagyeli and Bakola live in the southwest, and are associated with Bulu, Ngoumba, Fang and Bassa. Most Baka, Bagyeli and Bakola still rely on hunting and gathering to secure their livelihoods, and even though some also cultivate annual crops, often on the lands of these Bantu patrons, the majority still rely on the forests. Many local communities recognise them as “people of the forest,” who their ancestors found when they arrived.

Baka, Bagyeli and Bakola in general retain many aspects of their forest-based culture, including non-hierarchical social structures coupled with community recognition for individuals’ special skills, relatively small communities, an aversion to social conflict, proximate planning horizons and, to those from “outside”, an opportunistic circumspection. For almost all Baka, Bagyeli and Bakola, their forest is their ancestral home, their reliable grocery, the root of their existence, and their customary right, and forests throughout Cameroon’s southern forest zone are dotted with their favoured hunting and gathering grounds and their hidden sacred places. Their primarily hunting and gathering lifestyle combined with subsistence trade is associated with high physical mobility, which means that they can be difficult to locate at certain times of year, and their places of work and home are rarely accurately recorded - most are literally off the map.

Cameroon’s indigenous forest communities’ geographical and social isolation has enabled many of them to retain their forest-based culture since pre-colonial times, while the world around the forest has undergone radical changes. The same applies to indigenous hunter-gatherer communities who have established permanent villages for cultivation outside forests, since the vast majority of them are also completely marginalised from civic and government structures in Cameroon. This socio-political marginalisation reflects the gross discrimination that Baka, Bagyeli and Bakola face when they leave the security of their forest and communities, where they are powerful and relatively secure, for the amenities of the roadside or neighbouring local villages, where they may be mocked, cheated, and unfairly treated by government and civic authorities. This unsavoury treatment means that many Baka, Bagyeli and Bakola prefer to stay in the security of their forest community and to remain uninvolved in the “affairs of the village.”

Indigenous forest peoples’ isolation also means that most of them still have almost no access to modern health care, or formal education, and most are unable to speak and read French, the official language that dominates the forest zone in Cameroon. Until recent moves by the Cameroon government and NGOs to enable formal registration few of these people had their own identity cards, and almost all were absent from official census data and electoral lists. Thus they have been unable to stand up to powerful outsiders who sought to abuse their rights and the forest remains an important refuge.

Despite a long history of trickery and persecution by people entering the forests to extract resources such as rubber, wildlife, timber, minerals, and data on the flora and fauna, Baka, Bagyeli and Bakola in general are very open to outside influences. Their traditional forest coping mechanisms, however,

are proving unable to protect them from the increased demands on forests in which they have lived for aeons. Since the introduction in 1994 of Cameroon's new forest law there have been significant investments by donors in Cameroon's protected areas network to support older parks and to establish new conservation "planning regions". This has been extensively documented in WRM Bulletins (see WRM Bulletins N° 67 and 73). Campo Ma'an, Boumba-Bek and Lobéké National Parks were all established by the Cameroon government with donor support since 1995 and all overlap the traditional lands of Baka, Bagyeli or Bakola.

The fact that these communities were "off the map" when the parks were established has led to a situation where their forest rights, and hence their right to isolation are denied through the application of non-discretionary rules to protect endangered flora and fauna. Many of these new rules undermine indigenous peoples' hunting and gathering lifestyles, even though their rights to resources and to "traditional sustainable use" of them are protected by national and international legal provisions, and international agency guidelines. Current plans by Conservation and donors (see detailed TRIDOM article at <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Cameroon/still.html>) threaten to widen this pressure to cover huge "landscapes" covering much of the Congo Basin, and this will place further burdens on communities no longer able to isolate themselves.

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