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The governance of nature as development and the erasure of the Pygmies of Cameroon

Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta

Abstract

The Pygmies are among the remaining ‘savages’ in West and Central Africa. This paper demonstrates how the governance of nature through sedentarization, the creation of national parks as a mechanism of forestry conservation and the failure to endorse standard environmental safeguards in the creation of the Tchad-Cameroon pipeline project have led to the devastation of the livelihood of the indigenous pygmies. Simultaneously, by categorizing the Pygmies as a ‘primitive other’ despite the very dynamism of the concept of culture, the state of Cameroon has excluded them from the benefits of postmodernist development. I demonstrate that projects aimed modernizing them, and achieving sustainability have instead accentuated their exclusion because of their presumed cultural isolation, led to their deep entrenchment in poverty and resulted in complete erasure. Development has thus, become a process of erasure in which the livelihood of the Pygmies has been balkanized and their cultural existence and identity, negated.

Key words: environmental governance, environmental conservation, conservation refugees, politics of exclusion, Pygmies, nature and culture, identity, development

Introduction

The Central African rainforest is home to several groups of hunter-gatherers generally called “Pygmies”, who have adopted a nomadic lifestyle (Turnbull, 1961, Biesbrouck, 1999). They are facing serious threats from attempts by governments, national and international non-governmental organizations and missionary groups to ‘modernize’ them. Although these diverse networks of development actors often have conflicting aims and interests, they converge on the modernist development paradigm that they use. This paternalistic approach is guided by claims to have a better knowledge of the development problems of indigenous groups like the Pygmies and more suitable solutions than those of these indigenous peoples themselves. Development in this context can be equated to “the sublimation of traditional culture into a global way of thinking” (Wesner,

1998:51). The result has instead been the exclusion, disarticulation and impoverishment of these indigenous Pygmies. They are suffering from the consequences of national policies and land tenure laws that do not take their cultural specificities into account. Hitchcock and Holm (1993) note that “external domination of hunter-gatherer groups is increasingly structured by the bureaucratic state rather than the market”. The state establishes settlement schemes, social services, land tenure laws, and political representation policies- all of which influences the lives of hunter-gatherers. While the market continues to dramatically influence the lives of hunter-gatherers, (“Pygmies”), especially international logging interests, [petroleum exploitation] and local demands for bush meat, the role of the bureaucratic state is rapidly increasing(cf Hewlett 2000:380).

This paper examines how government policies meant to govern nature-the creation of national parks, the re-location of the Pygmies in the name of sedentarization and the failure to endorse and implement standard environmental safeguards during the construction of the Tchad-Cameroon pipeline project have negatively affected the livelihood of the Pygmies. Simultaneously, by categorizing the Pygmies as a cultural “other”-because of their isolation, projects to modernize them have instead led to disarticulation, crushing poverty and marginalization because these projects silence them and are underpinned by assumptions that they are “primitive and backward”, and need just a good dose of modernity to come out of the bush into mainstream Cameroonian society. Ironically, attempts to bring the Pygmies out of the bush have instead ostracized them from the benefits of development.

Method and Conceptual framework

The data reported here was elicited through ethnographic research with development stakeholders and the local Baka population over different periods of fieldwork beginning in the late 1990s. The first, on the ethnomedical causes of infertility in the East Province of Cameroon, lasted between June 15, to August, 30th, 1997. The second, lasted between May to August, 1999 and involved the collection of baseline socio-economic data as a prelude to the World Bank sponsored Chad-Cameroon pipeline project. The third and last, an evaluation of the implementation of primary health care in the East Province of Cameroon under the auspices of the Social Policy Research Network for West and Central Africa, took place between May and July, 2003. This is complemented by participant observation and a literature review providing baseline data on the

lives of the Baka Pygmies, the management plan of the Dja Wildlife Reserve and the Chad-Cameroon pipeline project.

The conceptual lens adopted for this study is the *Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction (IRR) Model*. It identifies eight major impoverishment risks inherent in the displacement or resettlement process: “the risks of landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalization, increased morbidity/mortality, food insecurity, loss of access to common property resources, and social disarticulation” (Coelho and Stein, (1980), Cernea and Schmidt-Soltau, 2000:1-2, Chatty and Colchester 2002, World Bank, 2002). To achieve people-centered development, we need to mitigate these risks- achieve “double sustainability” and avoid the phenomenon of conservation refugees and profound conflict through development as poverty alleviation strategy. As noted by McNeely (1995:23) ‘policies which ignore the presence of people within national parks are doomed to failure’. As I will demonstrate below, the indigenous Pygmies are exempted from this internationally recognized standard.

Background

The colonial time neologism of ‘Pygmy’, although derogatory, is a collective identity for several linguistically diverse ethnic groups characterized by their small stature. The ‘pygmies’ are hunter-gatherer societies living in the equatorial rainforests across Central Africa. They live in small-sized, traditional semi-spherical, leaf-and-twigs huts. In Cameroon, they are made up of three main ethnic groups. The first, the Baka, traditionally semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers, numbering more than 40,000 and occupying 75,000km are found in the southeast. The second group, the Bakola (also called Bagyeli), constitute a population of approximately 3,700 people, occupying 12,000km in the central coastal region. Lastly, the third group, the Bedzang, with a population of less than a thousand people, are inhabitants of the area north-west of Mbam, in the Ngambé-Tikar region. The three pygmy groups represent about 0.4 % of the total population of Cameroon (Tchoumbe 2005:64, Logo 2001:104).

They maintain a symbiotic relationship with the rainforest: it is their ancestral home, the source of their existential security, livelihood and their spiritual centre. Abéga (1998: 25) notes that the identity of the Baka is closely tied to the existence of the forest, of which they consider themselves

an integral part. They are reputed for their knowledge of traditional medicines, fetishes, and the making of charms. Patients sometimes travel from far away to obtain the benefits of Pygmy healers, who are paid between 2 to 6 USD (Rasek and Schmidt, 1997). African tropical forest foragers have four main characteristics: (1) they spend at least four months of the year in the tropical forest hunting and gathering, (2) they have a strong identity with and preference for forest life, (3) they maintain multi-stranded socio-economic relations with neighbouring farming populations; (4) they practice important ritual activities associated with elephant hunting (Hewlett 1996:215). Their habitat is under threat today from the advent of modernity in Africa's rainforests- the environmental degradation caused by the overexploitation of natural resources and global warming. In addition to this, political discrimination, domination from their 'master' Bantu neighbours with whom they maintain economic and social relations, persecution and appalling poverty, are daily currencies. Genocidal armed conflicts have also taken an unprecedented toll on the Pygmy population in the Central African rainforests. As a matter of fact, intensive commercial hunting, the opening of roads into the forests to facilitate logging activities, and systematic deforestation have devastated the rich ecosystem of the tropical rainforest, thereby endangering the cultural identity of the Pygmies. The transformation of their traditional lifestyle has led to changes in their principal means of survival. Pygmy groups have been classified into four on the basis of their main means of survival: traditional hunter-gatherers- 6 per cent of the population, hunter-gatherer-farmers, 38 per cent, farmer-hunter-gatherers 35 per cent and farmers-hunters 21 per cent (Loung, 1992, Logo, 2004, Tchoumba, 2005). Most, however, largely depend on hunting (of antelopes, wild pigs and monkeys, fishing and the gathering of honey, berries, fruits and other plants). They are gradually settling down. Some members of the community now work as day labourers and servants on farms that belong to their Bantu neighbours at poverty-level salaries, or practice small-scale, informal mining activities. The area occupied by the Pygmies in Cameroon is the site of biodiversity projects such as the Dja Biodiversity Reserve, Lake Lobéké National Park, Boumba Beck National Park, Dzanga-Ndoki National Park and the Chad-Cameroon pipeline project passes through their territory. These development projects alongside sedentarization, have negatively affected the Pygmies in various ways, leading to the erasure of their socio-economic and political livelihoods.

The pains and contradictions of paternalistic development

Sedentarization as modernization

In the early 1960s, the French colonial administration began establishing road side camps for the Baka Pygmies around Bantu villages as part of efforts to move them onto permanent settlements along major and secondary roads so as to improve health conditions and to make them part of the mainstream economy by encouraging them to produce cash crops. In 1968, Catholic missionaries started the East Cameroon Pygmy Project to get Baka to move to large sedentary villages where they could be provided with health, education, agricultural, and evangelical services. In 1975, the Government of Cameroon established the Ministry of Social Affairs with the aim of improving upon the living conditions of marginal groups. At the time, the Baka were the only identified marginal group in the country. The Ministry established the policy blueprints of the Baka sedentarization programme and bankrolled Cameroonian anthropologists to conduct preliminary studies of Baka and Bakola foragers under the auspices of the Pygmy Research Unit of the Institute of Human Sciences. Field agents in towns with a large population of pygmies were also supported. As noted by Hewlett (2000), despite encouragement from government agents, they have contributed little to the sedentarization of the Baka. They have not been forced to sedentarize and have moved to the road side on their own. The real aim of the sedentarization policy was tax collection and the control of the local people. Through this policy of civilization and development for the ‘backward’ peoples, the Pygmies were obliged to adopt a sedentary lifestyle and to participate in the modern state system (Kenrick, 2005, Knight, 2003).

The Pygmy socio-economic integration programme failed to take into account their interests and aspirations- of understanding their perceptions of poverty and aspirations for development and has therefore remained an unrealized pipeline dream. Modern state systems such as formal education, elections, and local administration, infiltrated the sedentarized Pygmy societies. However, the modern systems are not accommodating the lifestyle of Pygmies, and they are finding it difficult to adapt to the modern system due to the lack of a rigid social system within their society. Consequently, neighbouring farmers who have adapted to the modern system are lording it over the Pygmies (Ichikawa, 2001:27-28, Lewis, 2005). It has been reported that some groups of Bagyeli Pygmies in Southwestern Cameroon who sedentarized in the 1960s, were forced to return to the forest camps in the face of social conflicts with Bantu farmers (Biesbrouck, 1999). This scenario resonates with McNeely’s (1995:23) observation that ‘policies which ignore the presence

of people within national parks are doomed to failure'. Similarly, Cernea points out that 'eviction from traditional lands has been typically disastrous to those affected' (2000:27), because of broken cultural livelihoods. This is *a system of risks*: people are affected by direct land-access restrictions (physically or economically leading to pauperization and socio-economic erasure) and the populations who own/use the land where the displaced people relocate (the '*hosts*') are always in conflict with them. Focus was on their assimilation or their conversion to the dominant lifestyle, even when their cultures and lifestyles differ significantly from those of the dominant society and their survival depends on the recognition of their rights and access to their traditional land and natural resources (see Report on indigenous peoples/communities by the expert working group of the African Commission on Human and People's Rights and ILO Convention No. 169). As victims of prejudices that portray them as "primitive, backward or uncivilized", "less advanced", and "less developed"- they are always sidelined and exploited in political, social and cultural life as well as in the development process. Their preference for the forest over the 'sedentary' village life actually constitutes a security-driven retreat, since the forest is their protector from the effects of outside influences and, above all, the conflicts that they generate. The forest is the socio-cultural niche for their survival, and despite deforestation, the forest retains the ability to keep them nourished. In a nutshell, "it appears to be where their culture blossoms, a place for rites, such as the Baka's *Djengui* ceremony. The Pygmies have maintained a harmonious relationship with their environment, and have adapted to nature's forces, rather than trying to change them.'"(Nguiffo, 2001:1999).

The exclusion of the Pygmies from development by both the state and civil society actors who erroneously think that they know the needs of the Pygmies than these indigenous peoples, has left them at the margins of postmodern development. Despite the lack of reliable data and indicators, because of difficulties to accurately estimate the income levels of Pygmy populations, some anecdotal evidence exists: their contracts remain precarious and their earnings are always insufficient when compared to the magnitude of their needs. The average income of the Pygmy is less than one-third of the income of the other Cameroonians that live in the same region (Tchoumba, 2005:15-16). They further lack basic social services, and even when these services exist, they are inaccessible and un-adapted to their needs and they suffer from social prejudices. In the Djoum Sub Division for instance, the problem of access to education arises less in terms of the

availability of educational infrastructure than in terms of adaptation of the education system to the lifestyles of the target population that this education is aimed at. There is a brazen lack of effective guarantees or special applicable measures aimed at granting access to secondary education for indigenous children either in law or in practice. At the moment, no indigenous children are enrolled at university. There are several hurdles to the achievement of the right to education for indigenous children. First and foremost, a birth certificate is a prerequisite for enrolment in the public school system. The cost of the administrative procedures involved, coupled with the distances between public service centres and indigenous villages is an issue. Furthermore, there is the unavailability of school textbooks in their languages, and the school calendar is incompatible with hunting seasons and the transmission of traditional knowledge systems through practice. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the state does not recognize the “ORA” (*“observer, réfléchir et agir”* (“observe, reflect and act”) teaching method that simultaneously blends theory and practice, used by Baka communities in the Abong Mbang area and Bagyeli communities in the Bipindi region. ORA as a system of informal education preserves the traditional cultural values and aims to enable indigenous children to express themselves in French while taking account of their culture and specific characteristics. Apart from official non-recognition, the informal education centres that promote and use this method of instruction, receive no financial or technical assistance from the state (CED, 2010:10-13, Venant, 2009). They also face discrimination and bullying from both teachers and other pupils at school who look down on them. Similarly, the availability of health care infrastructure does not guarantee access to the Pygmies. They are often, victims of numerous prejudices. Traditional medicine remains the predominant means of treatment among the Pygmies. They have an established reputation in this domain, and many Cameroonians visit them in search of both healing and power.

The Pygmies further suffer from a litany of poverty-induced illnesses such as scabies, malnutrition, parasitic infections, and diarrhea among others. A survey conducted by Louis et al. (1993) among the Bulu and Baka showed that one in four children suffered from diarrhea during the preceding week and one in three had had the same infection a month earlier. There was also a record level of infections from faeces disposal and a high prevalence of persons with a previous history of measles, particularly among the Pygmies who had been victims of an epidemic before the survey. The difference in the number of persons affected between the two communities was explained by

the fact that both groups hardly intermingle and that the Pygmies are not vaccinated. The infant mortality rate among these peoples is estimated at 9.1% from 0-12 months, and 18.2% from 0-5 years. Life expectancy is estimated at 23 years for the Baka, compared to a national average of 52.4 years (Ndoumbe et al, 1993, Louis, 1993, Tchoumba, 2005:17). This implies that the Baka have half the life expectancy for other Cameroonians, and that they are at the verge of extinction from preventable diseases. Sexually transmissible diseases including AIDS have not spared the Pygmies. In 1993, a survey showed that only 0.7% were HIV positive, while in 2003, a screening campaign in the same region of Yokaduma revealed that the rate of HIV infection had risen to 4%, although lower than the national average (Tchoumba, 2005). This is justified by the gradual opening of the Pygmies' habitat to "modernity" and the superstitious believe that having sex with a Pygmy provides therapy against HIV/AIDS. This situation is compounded by lack of concerted measures to provide medical care to diagnosed HIV patients. And the cost of treatment with anti-retroviral drugs is certainly not within the reach of the Pygmies who lack the financial meansⁱ.

The Baka use the expression *mandate* to capture the state of their destitution-literally meaning that they have nothing: "*no food, no game in the forest, no clothes, no pots, no salt, no money*, etc. The socio-cultural context of poverty among the Pygmies has to do with the nature of local economies, and their way of life in particular. In the Bipindi-Kribi region, pauperization is **reflected by other indicators such as the residential pattern, and the problem associated with these transformations including the lack of land due to land conflicts, lack of fishing and agricultural tools, malnutrition, food insufficiency, and lack of financial means** and sources of income, among others. This is *a system of risks*: since the people are affected by direct land-access restrictions- physically or economically leading to pauperization and socio-economic erasure (Cernea, 2000). The Bagyeli living in this area have a more settled life- they are more sedentary and agriculture is becoming their main economic activity, unfortunately, they are constantly involved in land conflicts with the Bantus who are customarily, the owners of the land located by the roadside. These indicators of poverty resonate with that of the Baka who live along major roads such as in Abong Mbang or Djoum.

Under sedentarization associated with agriculture, poverty is also characterized by the relations of stewardship between the Pygmies and their Bantu "masters". The former constitute a cheap labour force subject to all forms of degrading hard labour:

“The Bantus elect who works on the farm and who does the hunting. We have realized that when the Bantus want to solicit our services, they leave their homes very early in the morning and come to force us out. They do not even give us time to go to bush to excrete or to eat. When you refuse, problems start and they bear a grudge against you.....”.

“Bantus sometimes seize our game because they know that we do not have national identity cards and we cannot complain to the authorities. The trade by barter we undertake with them keep us in a perpetual state of dependence”.(Jean, Interview of May, 1999).

Under these conditions of vassalage, poverty affects women more than men. The former now bear responsibility for all the household chores, and do extra work because of the primordial role they play in agriculture. This has led to an imbalance in male-female roles, relationships and a higher dependence of the latter on the former. Women are designated among the Pygmies as poor when they do not have a husband to fell trees and clear farms, and a poor man as an individual who does not have a wife to produce the food necessary for the upkeep of the family. In addition to what has been stated above, Pygmy populations in areas such as Djoum, Akom II, Lomié and Yokadouma, who maintain a symbiotic relationship with the forest, also laid emphasize on their relationship with the forest and their non-participation in decision-making processes relating to the management of forest and resources. It follows that the Baka and Bagyeli peoples of this area are poor because they now lack usage and access rights to the forest and its resources, because of the creation of protected areas on their ancestral lands without due consultation, and they are sidelined from the benefits of forest exploitation and conservation. In the Loebéké National Park for instance, the Baka peoples reported that food insufficiency and limited access to health care are additional indicators of poverty.

“When our parents were living there (in the national park), they had everything, even if someone took seriously ill, they took something to treat him from the forest. Today, the law prohibits us from getting there....”(Mpaele, May, 2003).

If you do not collect fruits, you cannot have soap, if you do not go fishing, you cannot eat salt, if you do not cultivate cassava and plantains to sell you cannot buy clothes. I am dirty and without clothes because I do not do anything. I have already been forbidden from entering the forest. They (conservation organizations) have chosen to exclude us from the place where there is a lot of meat, a lot of wild yamsⁱⁱ.

The Baka attribute their poverty to the “disturbances caused in the forest by all these strangers who have invaded it”- mainly, forest exploiters, conservation organizations and safaris- thereby preventing them from gaining access. They point out that *“there currently exist too many laws which prohibit just anything.....the forest no longer has anything and they no longer want to see us there whereas we are not the ones who have destroyed the forest.(Mbile, 28-year-old, male).”*

The foregoing demonstrates that there are some similarities and parallels between the poverty indicators at the national level and those of indigenous and tribal peoples, notably with regards to material and financial needs. Under-scholarization was further singled out as a cause of poverty by both the Baka and Bagyeli: *“we are poor because our children do not go to school”*. They actually feel exploited and dominated because they are uneducated. The same is true with their precarious standard of living: poor housing, food insecurity, limited access to health care, portable water. At the same time, national poverty indicators do not take cognizance of the socio-cultural aspects of poverty, issues concerning the basic human rights of the people, environmental degradation, or intercommunity relations which are essential components in the definition of an effective poverty alleviation strategy among these peoples. This suggests, as noted by Tchoumba (2005:43-44) that *“national poverty indicators, in the absence of reliable data, do not give a complete picture of the specific situation of indigenous peoples and can therefore be said to be ineffective for use in drawing-up poverty alleviation strategies for this segment of the national society”*

In the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, as concessions for logging and mining tremendously increased, the exploitation of natural resources by multinational companies, conservation projects spearheaded by foreign NGOs and their local allies, Pygmy domination by farmers reached a crescendo (Matsurura, 2009, Kenrick, 2005, Knight, 2003). This asymmetrical relationship, as I have demonstrated above, has become widespread in the process of Pygmy sedentarization and interaction with modern structures. It has been reported that a conservation outfit and a logging consortium engineered a conflict between farmers and the Baka in Southeastern Cameroon. The farmers received ten times more money as compensation from the logging company than the Pygmies. Even the composition of a committee for the management of natural resources included only farmers (Harriot, 2008).

One Forest and Two Dreams

A national park must remain a primordial wilderness to be effective. No men, not even native ones, should live inside its borders. (Bernard Grzmiek, Wild Life Campaigner, East Africa).

The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) imposed by the World Bank and the recommendations of the Rio Earth Summit impassioned and emboldened the government of Cameroon to create protected areas. Accordingly, 30% of national land was classified as protected areas. This instead served to reinforce threats hanging over forest people. Although local people's participation in conservation projects is being sought, it has not been achieved. As eloquently stated by Ndameu (2001:197) both indigenous people and conservation projects are at variance with each other: the projects consider that the resident populations take too much game from protected areas, sometimes for commercial gains, and contribute to access by poachers, while indigenous people feel they are being excluded from humanity in the name of preserving important pockets of biodiversity for present and future generations. The chasm between development and conservation- between traditional and modern knowledge systems, between the world view of conservation projects and that of indigenous populations- is blatant and seems irresolvable in the short term, given the gulf of understanding that separates them. We therefore find ourselves in the dilemma of one forest and two dreams: conservation organizations are concerned about preserving species, while the modes of living of indigenous populations are inextricably intertwined to the forest.

The creation of the Dja Wildlife and Hunting Reserve on 26 June 1950 by decree No.319 of the French High Commissioner for Cameroon led to the resettlement of the Baka in Bulu villages. It was subsequently converted by the Cameroon branch of UNESCO's Man and Biosphere programme in 1981 and extended into a UNESCO World Heritage Site Scheme in 1987. This migration which occurred under the aegis of the State's National Sedentarization Policy made them "conservation refugees". It led to the loss of their cultural identity and multiple deprivations since they were never consulted. "*We only came to realize that we longer had the same right of access to the forest as our ancestors*". Coelho and Stein, (1980) note that "*When technological change comes too fast and too soon for a society, it makes stable adaptations difficult if not impossible*

to achieve without severe pain, emotional stress, and conflict". This situation is accentuated in the case of the Pygmies by the legal pseudo-argument that fails to consider traditional land titles as land ownership and the negation of claims for a proper resettlement. Bantu Chiefs were instrumental in the relocation of the Baka because of vested interests in having the Baka near their village- free labour, and permanent access to the Baka's knowledge of medicinal plants and at hunting- all for a pittance. They were initially settled at Ma'an, the site of the Miatta Bantu plantations before moving to Miatta village. They spent a season there, during which time; the Bantu helped them with their agricultural activities. Their migratory trajectory underscores the instrumental role of the Bantu in the State's sedentarization policy. The Baka have now become a hybrid community- their lives carries on well in both the "village world and in the forest world" where they continue to spend several months a year. This identity crisis is most accentuated among those born along the dirt road. Having seized to be truly of the forest, neither are they completely of the village since they are regarded as "strangers" in their own country by their Bantu compatriots.

Even more pressing is their lack of political voice as shown by the non-recognition, and/or non-respect of their cultural identity in the clientelist political system of Cameroon. Expressions such as "Bushmen", "under-developed", "backward", "primitive" and even worse terms are often used to refer to these peoples. These negative stereotypes and discrimination are additional to the dispossession of their ancestral lands and natural resources by large-scale forest exploiters, agro-industrial companies and forest conservation organizations. This leads to their impoverishment and threatens their survival, culture, and human security as a people. In fact, Pygmies are excluded from participating in the benefits of forest exploitation and biodiversity conservation of the areas situated in their ancestral territories. Although forestry law in Cameroon provide for a mechanism of sharing the benefits of large-scale forest exploitation between the State, decentralized local authorities and local communities, in reality, most local communities scarcely have access to these benefits because of nepotism, bureaucracy and corruption. Even when they do, the Pygmies are systematically denied their share. They almost never participate in committees in charge of managing these resources and scarcely receive any benefits. The same holds for fallouts of game hunting in the so-called protected areas.

They are 'symbolic citizens'. Few of them have birth certificates and/or identity cards, essential documents for them to obtain citizenship and enjoy the wide range of rights associated

with it. Tchoumba (2005:17) notes that during the presidential elections of October 11, 2003, many Bantu elites from the region inhabited by the Pygmies subsidized an operation to issue national identity cards for them, but this has not facilitated access to citizenship for a great number of individuals. At the moment, no Pygmy village has legal status, although the Pygmy communities found around major roads have been in this area since the 1960s, during which concerted efforts were made to encourage them to sedentarize. Pygmies, then, settled on lands offered them by the Bantus by virtue of the customary relations between the two groups. These Bantus consider the Pygmies as their “property” and treat them as such. The Pygmy communities settled at the outskirts of Bantu villages and their camps are considered as appendices or parts of those villages. Some Bantus even maintain that the camps are transitional, even though the settlement of these Pygmies dates back several decades. They are referred to only by proxy-one talks of Pygmy camp of this or that village, rather than the Pygmy village. As a result, there are many land disputes between both ethnic groups.

The official dispossession of the Pygmies through the non-recognition of their villages has a series of attendant political, economic and social implications. Politically, they are represented by the villages to which they are associated. When administrative authorities go visiting, the Pygmies have to go and meet them in the officially recognized villages. In the economic sphere, they are excluded from the benefits of forest taxes and forest resource exploitation due to the non-recognition of their rights as inhabitants living near the forest being exploited. Socially, the people live in a precarious and permanent situation for fear of imminent expulsion from the villages as one camp leader confirmed:

When we came to this village, the village head gave us the land we occupy today. We could farm any where without being worried. But since he died, his son who has become the head, causes us a lot of problems. He prevents us from farming and building other houses on land that is ours. He constantly tells us to go back to the forest, a place the law prohibits. (Nkoumto, June, 1999).

Without disparaging this perception, the Bantu perception of land conflict is slightly different, as one Bantu village head confirmed:

The Pygmies are my property, they are under my responsibility and control. My parents adopted them and I do not understand why we should keep bickering with them over our land. My brother suggested to them that they should go back to the bush since he wanted to farm on the land occupied by the Pygmies. They refused to go under the pretext that their ancestor's bones were buried here. We understand them, so there is no problem between us. (Ndzana, July, 1999).

Our ancestors were hunters who lived from the forest. Our fathers told us to live in this forest and to use what we needed. When we see the forest, we think 'That is our forest'. But now, we are told by the government that it is not our forest. But we are hunters and we need the forest for our lives.(....).Around 15 years ago, we were first told that Dja is a reserve. We were staying in one of our camps in the forest when the white man came to tell us that the forest is protected and that we can no longer live there. They told us to stop hunting and go to live in a Bantu village outside the forest(.....)

We had no choice, because they told us that they will beat and kill us if they find us in the forest. They still treat us badly. We have no land, no food, nothing. We have to work on the farms of the Bantus or use the small plot the Catholic mission has given us. Some young men still go to the forest and look for food [meat and plants] but this is very dangerous. If the game-guards catch them, they will take everything and beat them and ask the family to pay money. And these are even the lucky ones. They have killed many Baka from our area.' Interview August 2003 with a Baka family head (male, 55 years old, Mintom Subdivision, Cameroon. Translation Schmidt-Soltau (Cernea and Schmidt-Solteau, 2000:16)

Summarily, the Pygmies are victims of the non-respect of their fundamental rights, in particular, the right of access to land and natural resources. Their lifestyles are not recognized, and therefore not respected. On the contrary, they are considered by dominant groups as “backward, underdeveloped, retrograde or primitive”. They lack access to social services: absence of infrastructure, inaccessibility to appropriate health services and educational infrastructure. They are excluded from genuine participation in their own development, and the denial of their rights to live according to the norms and tenets of their own culture, accentuates the Pygmy's

marginalization and impoverishment. Development efforts targeting them are rather intended to convert them to dominant models without taking into account their cultural specificities and needs, particularly through Cameroon's exclusive land tenure law.

Legally dispossessed land owners

Cameroon's land tenure law excludes the Pygmies as it stipulates that all land that is not held under private land title belongs to the State. This law is at variance with customary rules, which define the principle of land acquisition, usage and transfer between all the different forest peoples. The overlap between modern and customary law is detrimental to the Pygmies, who are transformed into 'virtual owners' of land through their use of it., but whose rights are not recognized and guaranteed under modern law. In fact, Cameroonian law and jurisprudence favour modern law over customary rules. After independence, the Supreme Court of Cameroon (SCA) in *Affaire Bessala Awona Versus Bidzogo Genevieve* correspondence (COR) No.445, of 3 April, 1962 declared: *'In every case relating to custom, where legislated, the law takes precedence over custom.* In addition to this, by mitigating the principle that stipulates that the option of jurisdiction carries the option of legislation, jurisprudence allows: *"....In the absence of customary provisions governing problems submitted to them, the (Customary) courts must make reference to the written law. And as a supplementary precaution, the judge is empowered to disregard the custom when it runs counter to social order and to accepted standards of behaviour, or when the solution to which its application leads is not as good as that proposed by written law*(SCA, *Affaire Menamae versus Eyene J.* COr. A of 4 January, 1966 Penant, April-May-June, 1967).

The Pygmies find themselves in a precarious legal situation because none of them holds recognized customary land rights in the permanent forests that are home to their former villages, and since their quasi-sedentarization, they are simply 'squatters' on Bantu territory alongside the tracks. They enjoy no rights to the land, and while their traditional rights to their former lands are ignored under forest law- which severely limits their rights of access and usage for resident populations of permanent forests. In the case of the Baka of Miatta, their old village, Mabé, is now in the middle of the reserve. The restrictions resulting from the new status of this territory implies

that they are no longer able to perform all their traditional activities there without violating the law. At the same time, recognition of land rights is the prerogative of the State, and not that of the project. The State has overall authority and sovereignty over its laws and whose legislation on this subject has not taken into consideration the specific situation of indigenous people. This violates the World Bank standard that ‘those who do not have formal legal title to land but have a customary right/entitlement to such land or assets, including those who have no recognizable legal right or claim to land that they are occupying, are entitled to receive at least resettlement assistance’.(World Bank 2002:6).

The current chasm between modern law and Baka customary rules relating to the use of space constitutes a fundamental obstacle to the Baka’s involvement and participation in community forestry- the areas where they might claim traditional rights over the land and the forest are all located within permanent forests, where, by law, community forests might not be created. The non-permanent forestry estates that lies on either side of the roads, comes under Bantu customary land ownership. The Pygmies living there have no customary rights and can, therefore, not develop their own community forest activities.

The Pygmies, like other indigenous peoples are victims of the shortcomings of the colonial and postcolonial land tenure legislation- particularly the introduction of the concept of private property engendered by colonialism. In the actual sense, land belonged to members of a given community. In the dual political system and dispensation put in place first by colonialism and now being appropriated by the postcolonial state, lineage and family heads own family land while the Chief is *de facto* owner of all the land in the village. At the supreme level is the state which claims ownership over all parcels of land. Following Mamdani (1991:139- 146) there is no contradiction in the notion of communal ownership of land, as corporate and individual land rights co-exist explaining why the colonial notion of “private property” was a unilineal reductionism of community rights based on the universal European concept of legal tenure. In line with Mamdani (1991), Colson observes that “they assumed that the full range of land rights covered by the principle of proprietary ownership must exist in Africa as in Europe” (Colson 1971:196-97). This shows how the transplantation of theoretical concepts from elsewhere often fails to capture local level reality. Stated otherwise, rights in the European sense had to be exclusionary with no possibility for multiple and overlapping

ownership. The second problem with this Eurocentric reductionism was the conflation of ritual offices with proprietary rights over land whereas they were only concerned with ritual activities and not with the allocation of land. Thirdly, community was conflated with tribe. 'Strangers' were seen as having no traditional access to land whereas in most of pre-colonial Africa, strangers were considered as members of the kinship network and welcomed as wives, clients, 'blood brothers', settlers or disciples thus enhancing the prestige and labour force of a household, kin group or community (Mamdani, 1991: 139-146).

The colonial notion of land tenure revolved around the above stated three conflations: community as proprietor of land, community leaders as wielders and executors of that proprietorship right and tribal affinity as defining access to community land. Following this logic, all owners of land had to be identified and protected against exploitation by being denied the right to freely dispose of their interests and land became a sole community ownership, what Colson,(1971) calls 'customary but untraditional'. Despite evolution over time, the colonial and postcolonial land tenure system in Cameroon share certain similarities and parallels. Colonial land tenure ascribed undue importance to agriculture in the determination of rights, marginalized and thereby, downplayed other local forms of land and resource use. Two other critical aspects of the peoples of Cameroon were also undermined. First, were the intangible rights associated with the cultural use of the land and its resources, which are often, of a sacred nature. Second, the rights over the natural resources, which represent a significant part of the local communities' activities on the land. The local production system of the Pygmies places high premium on hunting, gathering and collecting which literally, have no role in agriculture, and can lead to the conclusion that the land is unused (Nguiffo et al, 2009:5-10). Furthermore, there is the need to document land ownership through its development as evidence of effective occupation before due registration. Occupation is supposed to be through the construction of houses, and outhouses, sheds or other buildings- or by exploiting it, through the growing of crops, plantations, or animal rearing and grazing. This requirement further alienates the Pygmies because they live a nomadic lifestyle and their means of production is based on hunting and gathering, which are not in tandem with the development requirements of the legislation in force. Contrary to this, the World Bank in its resettlement policy framework calls for the recognition of 'customary land rights and 'ensures that the displaced persons are:

(1.)informed about their options and rights pertaining to resettlement,

- (2). consulted on, offered alternatives, among, and provided with technically and economically feasible, resettlement alternatives, and
- (3). provided with prompt and effective compensation at full replacement cost for losses of assets [attributable] directly to the project'.(World Bank 2002:3).

Chad-Cameroon Pipeline Project: broken livelihood

The US \$ 4.2 billion Chad-Cameroon Petroleum Development and Pipeline Project, the largest World Bank Group investment in Africa, and the first ExxonMobil project in the region, extends through land-locked Chad and Cameroon to the Atlantic coast. Effective work began on this 1, 070 km pipeline project, constructed to transport crude oil from fields in southeastern Chad to Kribi on the Atlantic coast of Cameroon in October, 2000 and the first oil started flowing in July 2003. The project took off against the backdrop of several controversies. Civil society actors in both Chad and Cameroon and their international allies protested against the Consortium for negotiating to place the project beyond the reach of national laws in both countries, thereby insulating the oil companies from liability in the event of disaster. They further called on the World Bank, the 'moral guarantor' of the project to focus on governance, the rule of law and citizen participation in decision-making, necessary requisites of sustainable development, since it is an already established fact that 'having good institutions in place before oil wealth arrives is likely to generate much better results than trying to create those institutions as or after oil wealth arrives.'(Pegg, 2009:319, see also, Smith, 2007:198). Some organisations also challenged the view that poverty reduction can come from promoting development with corrupt, military governments and multinational oil companies. They rightly predicted that the project will lead to profits for the elites at the expense of the poor and their environment. This is because even the Bank's weakening safeguard policies are premised on mitigating damage rather than on avoiding harm, which 'subverts any acceptable notion of ecological planning'(quoted in McCully, 1996:57). They also raised alarm bells about the social and environmental impacts, its viability and ability to meet the goal of poverty reduction. They wanted a moratorium so as to permit the Bank to address these concerns: finalize studies, review laws, draft and implement new laws so as to have a regulatory framework for the activities of the oil companies, and more importantly, to allow time for true public consultation before the approval and subsequent takeoff of the project . Despite some modifications in the original project proposal, the Bank fast-tracked the project at the expense of the capacity-building initiatives

designed to ensure that Chad actually used its forthcoming oil revenues for poverty alleviation. In the face of a wide range of domestic and political crises, Chad engaged in a series of squabbles with both the Bank and members of the oil consortium that culminated in the formal termination of the Bank's engagement in this project in September 2008 (see Pegg, 2009). Its abject failure, following Benjamin Smith is due to the incorporation of oil revenue windfalls 'into pre-established institutions and patterns of decision making' with the ultimate outcome being that 'the windfall revenues merely magnified existing patterns. In this light, the Bank largely overestimated its ability to change these existing institutional patterns and failed to appreciate the extent to which petrodollars would amplify many of Chad's pre-existing problems such as corruption and political instability. (Smith, 2007:122).

The project has come and gone, leaving behind broken livelihoods and bitter feelings among members of rural communities- including the Pygmies with little or no improvement in the lives of these peoples, but complete erasure. As poignantly pointed out by Keenan petrodollars have contributed minimally to the welfare of developing countries {and indigenous communities), it instead leads to the 'paradox of plenty', or 'the resource curse' (Keenan 2005:1). Although the avowed aim of the project was to alleviate poverty in both Chad and Cameroon, the rural masses and communities neither benefited from employment nor from compensation for the destruction of their crops and property because they lacked enough knowledge and skills to get more.

As Ragan (1966) notes, development is often interpreted to incorporate the idea of moving towards a new social era, implying greater social equality and prosperity for all citizens, despite the dark spots of the development experience. Scott (1998) has argued that state-initiated development initiatives in much of the Third World have often orchestrated human and environmental disasters owing to the convergence of four elements. First, states engage in the administrative ordering of nature and society, failing to take account of local level reality (despising local knowledge) for the purposes of planning, and in the process, effacing or radically altering that ground-reality. Second, states have adopted a high modernist ideology, staking their faith in the legitimacy of scientific and technical progress, as embodied in certain types of planning such as oil drilling and the creation of national parks. Third, states have often engaged in authoritarian and coercive practices to ensure that such high modernist plans come to fruition. Fourth, there has often been a weakly developed

civil society, lacking the capacity to vigorously resist such planning (Scott, 1998:3-5). In the case of the pipeline project, I will argue that all these elements were present. This has resulted in development as erasure, which I will demonstrate in the next section.

Development as Erasure

In line with Scott's analysis, official Cameroonian discourses of development have tended to associate a (Westernized) culture of progress and modernity, 'a vision of conquest' (Visvanathan 1985), 'the colonisation of development by 'authorities' (Escobar, 1984, 1995) while simultaneously, devaluing 'non-Western', traditional and indigenous systems of knowledge which have been devalued and portrayed as 'irrational'. This is the case with development projects such as the Chad-Cameroon pipeline project which traverses approximately 880 km of Cameroon's fragile ecological zones, home to several indigenous peoples. The Pygmy's livelihoods and culture- (their local traditional knowledge) that is so intertwined with the local ecology- are also subject to the same threat of erasure that continues to cast its shadow over the environment now that the pipeline is finally behind their homes. Using the logic of erasure, it was argued that any environmental and social impacts would necessarily be less than the purported benefits of the project. Furthermore, 'to rationalise the 'transformation' of culture and livelihood, particular developments must be redolent with promise for prospective customers and beneficiaries' (Routledge 2003:246). In the context of the pipeline project, promises concerning the alleviation of poverty and the provision of sustainable development permeated official discourses of development.

If anything, the quality of life of the Bakola is likely to be improved by the attention that they will receive under the project. (Serge Micailof, World Bank Country Director for Central Africa).

One hundred and fifty families were singled out for resettlement- a calculation based on the mathematics of erasure. **Many village lands were expropriated, crops and plants destroyed and water sources polluted.** The compensation plan, including both individual and communal compensations, was very limited in scope, and inadequate to restore or improve on broken livelihoods. In the Kribi region where the pipeline reaches the coast, the Bantus, traditionally sedentary farmers, cohabit with the Bakola/Bagyeli Pygmies, semi-nomads. Whereas, the Bantus

hold customary rights over the land, the Pygmies have no such rights, and were therefore sidelined in the compensation plan despite the existence of an Indigenous People's Programme, meant to improve their lot. The general compensation process also turned out to be discriminatory towards them. Thus, some Pygmies whose livelihoods had been destroyed did not receive individual compensation. Others were simply pushed over their lands by the neighbouring Bantus who then appropriated the compensation due to the Bagyeli Pygmies for themselves. This is the case with Mr. Ekouang, living in the Kour Mintoum settlement. Similarly, in the Loundabele settlement, Mr. Mintouong Gaston complained of the payment of compensations that he was due to a Bantu woman of Kouambo village. Neighbouring village Chiefs confirmed that crops belonged to Mr. Mintouong. Mr. Mangama Pierre summed up the grievances of the Pygmies thus:

I think that the project does not concern us, because they have made recruitment in all Bantu villages, but not in Bagyeli, as if we were sub humans. The pipeline has a negative impact on our lives. The route crosses a zone in which we practice agriculture and hunting. And when construction work started, our crops and our medicinal plants were destroyed, without compensation. Game has equally disappeared.(Nguiffo, 2002:5).

This implies the loss of women's agency, because they earn respect and power from the capacity they are reported to have in controlling the men's hunting activities through typically female rites. The reduction in hunting therefore leads to the waning of this gendered ritual power, thereby destabilizing the egalitarian nature of this society. As a matter of fact, the economics of displacement and resettlement for these indigenous peoples only meant the erasure of their prosperity, especially as the Pygmies have no land rights. The creation of the Campo Ma'an park to mitigate environmental harm resulting from the pipeline has unfortunately also resulted in the further displacement of the Bagyeli. Park staff reportedly torched several Bagyeli villages located in the park so as to dissuade them from hunting there. Commercial logging and the poaching of Gorilla by commercial poachers from Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, remains a serious problem.(The Canadian Great Ape Alliance, 2004).

Despite the payment of compensation to replace agricultural land, most of the funds did not go into agricultural production or reinvestment to make provision for the future. In fact, the affected

communities have been left alone to face the long term impacts: funds had no impact in terms of generating new livelihoods for villagers, at the same time, prices increased due to shortage of labour and agricultural goods in the market, an upsurge in rural-urban exodus and conflicts between locals and migrants attracted by the new found wealth also accentuated. Even the communal compensation plan which had as objective to compensate communities with social development projects was both very limited and imposed. Communities, who were supposed to identify projects for themselves through consultations, were instead constrained to choose from a restrictive list of options proposed by the Consortium. Driven by the ethos of cost-minimization, at the expense of time-intensive social and environmental components such as capacity building, the Consortium fast-tracked its operations and its death was foretold, even at conception.

One Bagyeli community reported that a traditional burial site was disrupted by pipeline construction. As a forest people, the link between the nature and society is central to the religious belief of the Pygmies. The conjunction of the natural, spiritual and social worlds is discernible in the collective performance of important rituals such as *Djengui*. The people feel a particular attachment to the forest landscape and forest products are imbued in the cultural practices of the people. Their language, sense of community, the memories of their ancestors evoked by particular settings, are intertwined with the place of their inhabitancy, what Parajuli (1996) calls 'ecological ethnicity'. Regarding the mystical nature of the forest, Abega (1998) notes that in Baka mythology, the god Koumba is 'the creator of all the things'- all elements of Baka cosmology are a creation of the god Komba, including the forest and the Baka themselves due to the fact that:

The forest is the foster mother: she puts her fauna and flora at the disposal of men. These possessions are transformed before being invested in food, architecture, pharmacopoeia or economic activities. This model permits permanent regeneration, being based upon respect for the rhythms of nature. The Baka respects this rhythm by adapting himself into this environment without altering it, and by associating the relationship to the environment to an entire system of representation. (Abega, 1998:120)

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the trappings of evolutionism as reflected in the categorization of the Pygmies as a 'primitive other' has frustrated humanistic attempts to 'modernize' them. These development initiatives have instead backfired because of the influence of dominant perceptions, calling for the need to dispense with the language of primitivity as the first step towards engaging the Pygmies in meaningful, self-reflexive and participatory and sustainable development. The Cameroonian state and NGOs as development actors are instead 'speaking for' (political representation) and 'speaking about' or 'representing' the subaltern Pygmies in the sense of producing a portrait of these indigenous peoples. The proclivity of dominant discourses and institutions are instead marginalizing, disempowering and erasing the Pygmies in the name of development (see Spivak, 1998, Kapoor, 2004). Hewlett (2000:385) notes that Cameroonian government officials were proud of helping the Baka, rather than leaving them to die out, despite official perceptions that they are at a low stage of evolution, have few redeeming traits and low social value. This resonates with Ndagala's (1988) concept of "doomed versus free views" of the Hadza: government (doomed, meaning a primitive stage of evolution that would either die out or needed the help of civilized philanthropists to survive), versus anthropologists' views ("free"- meaning harmonious hunters, gleeful gatherers), calling for greater collaboration between government officials and anthropologists. This 'misrepresentation' of the Pygmies, I argue, borders on the misconception that their culture is unchanging and that local knowledge is 'irrational' and the Pygmies are 'empty vessels'- calling just for a good dose of modernity to bring them out of the bush, into human society. This is despite the fact that Pygmies have a dynamic lifestyle that is adapted to ever-changing environmental conditions. Simultaneously, both rational scientific and local knowledge are not antithetical to each other. They can be harnessed, usefully suggesting that listening to the Pygmies and taking their concerns into account, be it through the sedentarization policy, conservation or the pipeline project so as to avoid broken livelihoods, instead of representing the Pygmies, could turn them from 'primitive' to modern 'savages'. In other words, if they are regarded as dialogic partners and empowered, they will become their own change agents through participatory and sustainable development, and not through a parochial development model that tends to erase them. Given the plethora of injustices from which they suffer, the first step towards effective development is to enfranchise them so that they can enjoy basic human rights such as land rights and they will be able to make the best out of the modern state system.

Notes

ⁱ Apart from the Chad-Cameroon pipeline corridors where the Baka and the Bakola benefit from a specific anti-AIDS programme, it is uncertain if Pygmies in other regions of Cameroon enjoy such attention, despite their specific vulnerabilities.

ⁱⁱ See the film produced by FPP entitled Indigenous Peoples and Protected Areas: From principles to practice.
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