

BANTU AND BAKOLA/BAGYELLI OF SOUTHWESTERN CAMEROON: A PERMANENT CONFLICTUAL COHABITATION

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ABSTRACT For several centuries, the Bantu and the Bakola/Bagyelli have lived, shared forests and land, and maintained social relationships in southwestern Cameroon. This fraternal cohabitation can be described as a ‘necessary evil’ for both ethnic groups. This article begins by describing the historical relationship between the Bantu and the Bakola/Bagyelli. Next, it analyzes the context of the conflict between them, focusing specifically on three points: (1) differences in value judgments, (2) differences in livelihood, and (3) problems related to ownership of forests and land. Finally, it presents possible solutions.

Key Words: Bakola/Bagyelli; Bantu; Cohabitation; Conflict; Necessary evil; Southwestern Cameroon.

INTRODUCTION

The Bakola/Bagyelli (Pygmies; singular Nkola/Ngyelli) and the Bantu have coexisted for several centuries in the forested regions of southern Cameroon. They have what could be called an ‘ambivalent’ relationship: not exactly peaceful and not openly conflictual. They live as neighbors, participating in some shared activities and visiting, trading, and working with each other. Some have intermarried.

Previous research has explored features of Pygmy-Bantu relations, focusing on Pygmy groups, including the Mbuti, the Aka, or the Baka. However, few reports have focused on the Bakola/Bagyelli. This article describes the historical relationship between the Bakola/Bagyelli and the Bantu, analyzes the context of the conflict, and presents possible solutions.

The Bakola/Bagyelli and the Bantu live in the southwestern region of Cameroon. In Cameroon, Pygmies are often classified into three groups: the Bakola/Bagyelli, the Baka,⁽¹⁾ and the Medzang.⁽²⁾ The population of the Bakola/Bagyelli is approximately 5,000 (Ocean, Mvila, and Nyong and Kelle departments: Fig. 1). The Bakola speak the Kola language and live in the northern part of the region, from Lolodorf to Bipindi (Fig. 2). The Bagyelli speak the Ngyelli language and live in the central and southern parts of the region, between Bipindi and Campo, close to the Atlantic Coast in Kribi, Akom II, and Campo divisions. These languages are extremely similar; both are classified as Bantu A-80 (Loung, 1987). The Bantu sometimes use pejorative words to describe their Bakola/Bagyelli neighbors.

Currently, the Bakola/Bagyelli engage in hunting, gathering, fishing, and agriculture, similar to their Bantu neighbors. However, the yields are very different.

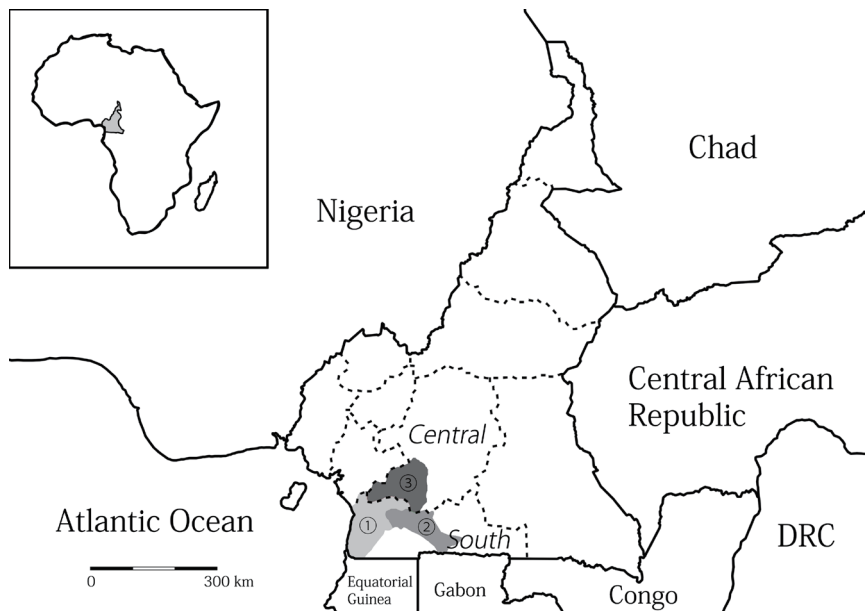


Fig. 1. Cameroon and three departments (1: Océan, 2: Mvila, 3: Nyong & Kelle)

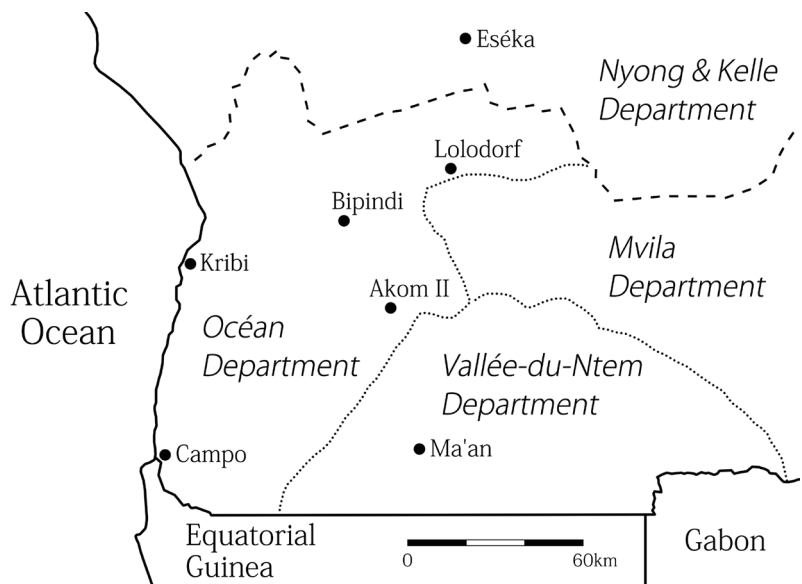


Fig. 2. Océan department and surrounding area

For example, the agricultural fields of the Bakola/Bagyelli tend to be quite small and poorly maintained. Destruction of forested areas and fauna by multiple stakeholders (state, local populations, industrial foresters, etc.) is making it difficult for the Bakola/Bagyelli to hunt and gather, making their life in the forest uncertain and forcing them to rely increasingly on agriculture.

The neighboring Bantu include the Ngoumba, Fang, Bassa, Evouzok, Mabea, Boulou, and Mvae. They are predominantly forest-dwellers who depend on agriculture, cattle husbandry, petty trading, hunting, and harvesting for subsistence. Community hunting and gathering activities take place in the same forest.

For this analysis, field data were collected in Lolodorf, Bipindi, Kribi, Eseka, Campo, Akom II, Elog Batindi, Evuzok, and Ma'an. In the Lolodorf-Bipindi localities, the following Bakola/Bagyelli communities were visited: Mashuer-Mashuer, Bidjouka, Binzambo, Lambi, Elog-Ndiga, Bipindi Centre, Mbango, Ngoyang, Nkouambpoer II, Ngovayang, and Lolodorf Centre. Many Pygmy camps and associations were visited in the Akom II, Campo, Elog Batindi, Ma'an Evuzok and Eseka areas. Individual interviews were conducted with members and leaders of FONDAF, ADEPADEL, ASBAK, ARC-EN-CIEL, indigenous Pygmy leaders, Bantu neighbors, and administrative and municipal authorities of the studied areas, etc.

Two types of data were collected: notes from interviews and observations about the cultural, social, and economic development of each town. This report summarizes the main themes from the individual interviews and group discussions with local administrative authorities, indigenous leaders, and Bakola/Bagyelli community members.

Secondary data, such as traditional, legal, and regulatory instruments relating to social conflicts, were analyzed for Bantu villages and Bakola/Bagyelli camps in the three departments of Ocean, Nyong and Kelle, and Mvila.

HISTORY OF BANTU AND BAKOLA/BAGYELLI RELATIONS

I. Pre-Independence to 1980

The Bantu and the Bakola/Bagyelli have had a relationship for several centuries. This relationship was initially friendly and fraternal, but it deteriorated into animosity, hostility, discrimination, and inhumane treatment. Exclusion became the norm, and longstanding discrimination by the dominant Bantu led to practices involving persistent forced labor of the Bakola/Bagyelli, which could be considered slavery. The Bakola/Bagyelli had no other options and remained vulnerable (Bouka Owoko & N'zobo, 2011).

Before Cameroon's independence on 1st January 1960, the Bakola/Bagyelli lived with the Bantu, their neighbors and 'enemy-friends.' Their lifestyle was based on an imbalanced relationship: the Bakola/Bagyelli worked hard on plantations and cash crop farms owned by the Bantu. They did not receive a wage

for their work, but received something equivalent to assistance. This might have been a small plate of starchy food, such as plantain fingers, cassava, or cocoyam, or bowls of corn flour, to provide one or two days of meals for a family of five or six.

In those days, the problem of land ownership was relatively negligible, because the Bakola/Bagyelli were more nomadic than the Bantu. Problems arose when the Bakola/Bagyelli were repeatedly accused of stealing from Bantu farms and traps. They came to be considered lazy and dishonest, and were subjected to severe beatings and forced labor on Bantu farms, without any intervention from village heads. Bantu villagers were considered to be the masters, landlords, or proprietors who could penalize 'their Pygmies.' Curiously, the Bakola/Bagyelli never left their masters, and took on the role of servants. Thus, the Bakola/Bagyelli and the Bantu became what appears to be a *necessary evil* to one another.

These relations have been fostered by similar clan systems. The heads and nobles of Bantu villages would meet with the chiefs of the same Bakola/Bagyelli clan in the forest. They established strong relationships, exchanging manufactured goods, agricultural produce, hunting products, etc. There was mutual assistance between chiefs, frequent inter-clan visits, and, finally, inter-ethnic marriages (Kimura, 2014). Note, however, that these marriages were organized only one way: a Bantu man can marry a Nkola/Ngyelli woman, but never the reverse (Loung & Ngima, 1985).

In some ways, the Bakola/Bagyelli and Bantus mutually sustained this relationship. The Bantu believed that they were superior to the Bakola/Bagyelli. They could marry their daughters to 'their Pygmies'. They helped the Pygmies in times of misfortune and spoke on their behalf in judicial village matters: the Bakola/Bagyelli were generally always considered at fault in legal matters, and Bantu nobles would repay their debts. On the other hand, the Bakola/Bagyelli would watch over their Bantu cousin-friends and 'masters'. They would protect them using supernatural powers, take them for traditional treatments, give them extraordinary powers, and regularly provide them with 'bush meat' and other faunal products harvested or gathered in the forest (Ngima, 1993).

Relations were aggravated after independence, following the memorable call of the First President of the Republic of Cameroon, Ahmadou Ahidjo, in the early 1960s. He required all Pygmies to relocate to the edge of the forest, rather than in the heart of the forest. He also required them to settle like the Bantu, go to school, practice agriculture, attend health centers, etc. —basically, to live as ordinary 'civilized' Cameroonians—. In so doing, he ended the extreme domination and inhumane treatment of the Bantu (or 'Grand Noirs') toward the Bakola/Bagyelli (Bahuchet, 1985).

II. After the 1980 Economic Crisis

During and after the 1980 economic crisis, the passing of the older generations led to new social values, including modern schools, medicine, applied agri-

culture, etc. However, aid from the government, NGOs, the international community, and multilateral cooperative bodies was drastically reduced. The Bakola/Bagyelli realized that they had been abandoned, with no financial assistance. They gradually began to change their social behavior, and began speaking up at village educational institutions, in meetings, seminars, and workshops. They spoke to anyone who would listen, with the expectation of reactions from the Bantu (Koppert et al., 1997).

In 1996, the Head of State, Paul Biya, stated that “Cameroon Pygmies are Cameroon citizens wholly and not a part” (Biya, Preamble of the Constitution of January, 1996). This statement helped pave the way toward the liberation of the Pygmies.

The Bakola/Bagyelli have progressed drastically. Some have commented that “We are no longer the Pygmies like our forefathers, but we are like the Bantu”, “Our children go to school and to hospital”, “We speak French, eat rice, bread, from conserved tins, dance in the same bars, drink the same beer, etc.”, “We publicly love Bantu girls with our money”, “We enter the same cars and planes” (Abega, 1998).

The new approach taken by the Cameroonian government, as well as national and international partners, encouraged human rights and liberty for the Bakola/Bagyelli. They were provided with camps built from durable materials and free modern health facilities, while their neighbors were ignored. The Bakola/Bagyelli became the ‘children’ or ‘prodigies’ or ‘favorites’ of sponsors who work directly with Pygmies. According to the United Nations Development Programme, “the Pygmies are considered people like every other group, it is not good to destroy their forest, their environment, and their ecosystem. They have right to live, health, education and environment for their existence and development...” (PNUD, 2014: 68–69). International human rights and the Cameroon constitution stress the need to maintain equality for all and the removal of discrimination, but with regard to their neighbors, the Bakola/Bagyelli continue to be duped, overexploited, and repressed.

PAST AND CURRENT CONFLICT

The discord between the Bantu and the Bakola/Bagyelli can be classified into three main categories: (1) value judgments or prejudices against the Bakola/Bagyelli, such as being lazy, inferior, animalistic, dishonest, etc.; (2) different livelihoods, i.e., the Bakola/Bagyelli were formerly nomadic; and (3) problems related to the privatization of land and forests.

I. Value Judgments

The Bakola/Bagyelli are currently considered inferior humans by the Bantu people. The Bantus consider themselves to be the “absolute masters”. In Bantu villages, expressions such as “my Pygmies”, “my workers”, “my wealth to

bequeath to my progeny”, etc. are frequently used. The Bantu consider the Bakola/Bagyelli to be an inveterate lazy group of people, who can barely farm enough to feed their families comfortably. Some Bantu have commented that although the Bakola/Bagyelli have travelled by air to Europe, the USA, as is common nowadays, assisted by Non Governmental Organizations and certain development partners, they will never be equal to the Bantus (Ngima, 2001). Thus, the Bakola/Bagyelli continue to be marginalized and discriminated against, to live in hardship and isolation, and to be stigmatized by the Bantu.

Bantu have the privileged duty of acting as interlocutor for Bakola/Bagyelli at customary courts and the court of First Instance, stretching to the state, NGOs, international donors, and partners (Ngima, 1993). This allows the Bantu to take advantage in criminal matters.

On the other hand, the Bakola/Bagyelli behave like independent people. They do what they want, go where they want, and choose their friends and partners. They send their children to school and to hospital, and they can negotiate directly with NGOs, state representatives, and national or international donors. Generally, they consider themselves equal to Bantu and want to do everything they can. However, this is not actually the case in daily life.

II. Differences in Livelihood

According to oral tradition, the Bakola/Bagyelli lived in the forest first and guided the Bantu through the forest to its edge, where they settled. They bartered with the Bantu for starchy food like cassava, cocoyam, plantain, and yams, as well as alcohol or objects made from iron or silver.

The Bantu consider the Bakola/Bagyelli to be nomadic, arguing that they own neither the land nor the forest. Therefore, the Bakola/Bagyelli have no right to the land they occupied in Bantu villages, nor the right to exploit the forest of the Bantu ancestors. Additionally, they consider them ineligible for benefits from any sponsor, such as the state, NGOs, and other international financial institutions.

Because of their nomadic life, the Bakola/Bagyelli do not regularly bathe, wash their clothes, brush their teeth, sweep their leaf huts, or clear the bush around their settlement. Bakola/Bagyelli students are often sent out of classes by teachers and classmates because of their body odor or dirty clothes. This type of civil segregation has not led to any reaction from administrative, political, or traditional authorities.⁽³⁾

Various changes in different Pygmy settlements have led to the delocalization of settlements, changes in masters, or complete separation between masters and their previous slaves (Loung & Ngima, 1985).

III. Problems in the Ownership of Forest and Land

The sedentarization of the Bakola/Bagyelli has led to massive destruction of forests to create new fields for cocoa, banana, rubber, and palm plantations. This

has weakened the position of the Bakola/Bagyelli in their recent cohabitation with the Bantu in the villages.

Originally, forests and land were an inalienable source of sustenance for both the Bantu and the Bakola/Bagyelli. Now, they are sources of conflict and result in recurring land and forest litigations, criminal tribunals, sorcery, separation of groups, as well as killing with guns, swords, and machetes (Loung, 1987).

1. Meaning of forest and land for the Bantu

Traditionally, forest and land represent an inalienable source of wealth to the Bantu 'Grands Noirs' (Ngoumba, Bassa, Fang Boulou, Mabéa, Ewondo, etc.). This vital wealth is passed from one generation to the other by the ancestors. Generally, their Bakola/Bagyelli neighbors are farmers who live in the forest and on the land. The Bantu consider 'villagers' without a land portion or a part of the forest to be unemployed city dwellers; they are considered useless members of society because they are unable to marry or feed and raise children.

2. Meaning of forest and land for the Bakola/Bagyelli

Pygmies generally do not engage in sufficient agricultural activity to sustain themselves, so they hunt for most of their meat. They consider the forest to be a natural environment for their animals, birds, fish, flora, and other living forces, to be bequeathed intact to future generations. The forest is also a Pygmy pharmacopeia, yielding rich natural medicinal resources.

The Bakola/Bagyelli see land and forest as more than an economic source. They believe the forest and land are the habitat of their ancestors and protect their spirits. Their history and traditions are built on the forest, where all their ancestors lived. Without the forest, a Nkola/Ngyelli would not grow into manhood. The forest is also a source of identity. The Bakola/Bagyelli bury the umbilical cords of all family members in the forest. The pantheon of their gods (the *min Kuta*) and all the spirits live in the sacred forest, where all the rituals and sacrifices are always performed for hunting, healing, or treatment sessions.

Bakola/Bagyelli patriarchs frequently say, "No forest, the Nkola/Ngyelli cannot survive, he 'dies'." Therefore, prohibiting the Bakola/Bagyelli from accessing the forest is an unavoidable source of problems and conflict between the two brother-enemies.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

I. Settling Disputes about Value Judgments

Accusations of the Bakola/Bagyelli being lazy and untruthful, even in jest, generally end in a quarrel and cross-insults and fights. These disputes involve younger people and would not necessitate the intervention of the head of the family. Soon after, the friends are generally together again, perhaps sitting on

the same palm tree trunk in the forest, eating or drinking together, sharing cigarettes, or supporting the same team in a village football field. This kind of brawling between young Bakola/Bagyelli and young Bantu illustrates the remnants of the long-standing conflict between the two groups, who are destined to cohabit and inevitably come to terms.

When accused Bantu recognize their crimes and ask for mercy, they can pay their Nkola/Ngyelli employee in old worn-out clothing. All dirty linens are washed in public. Obviously, the greatest losers in this system of friendly arrangements, or in the event of intervention by a chief, are the Bakola/Bagyelli.

II. Reconciling Differences in Livelihood

The Bakola/Bagyelli were originally nomads, so they have been considered dirty, untidy, and highly uneducated. However, the Bakola/Bagyelli currently establish and maintain good working relations with their Bantu 'cousins'. They may be part of the same clan, speak the same language, eat the same food, and sometimes even share a home; family plays a vital role. For example, the Ngoumba and the Mabéa share a clan identity with the Bakola/Bagyelli (Bahuchet, 1972).⁽⁴⁾ Solutions to the recurring problems are now possible. Many Bakola/Bagyelli have settled down and engage in agriculture, have built personal houses, send their children to modern schools, go to health centers when sick, and actively participate in the socio-political life of their village communities.

III. Cooperative Management of Land and Forest

To deprive Bantu or Bakola/Bagyelli of the forest or land is to annihilate their existence, effectively exterminating their culture.

Before the 1990s, Bakola/Bagyelli could not rightfully make a claim against the Bantu and demand compensation. However, since a 1994 decree on public liberty and expression in Cameroon, and intervention by NGOs in defense of the rights of vulnerable people, the Bantu rarely engage in unlawful actions against the Bakola/Bagyelli. For example, from 1980 until now, I have personally assisted in four serious incidents involving the Bakola/Bagyelli: The murder of two Bakola/Bagyelli, trafficking of human organs in the forest, and theft of cocoa and foodstuffs (Ngima, 2001).

CONCLUSION: PERMANENT CONFLICTUAL COHABITATION; A NECESSARY EVIL?

The Bakola/Bagyelli have maintained cordial economic, social, and political ties with neighboring Bantu, state, local, national, and international NGOs, decentralized governments, missions, forest exploiters, etc. These relationships were often based on misconceptions and servant-master roles. The Bakola/Bagyelli had no other choice but to partner with the Bantu. However, building relation-

ships with the outside world is increasingly possible. Rapid progress in technology and communication has led to considerable changes in personal habits, education, knowledge, and, consequently, social behavior. Within this context, what is the role of indigenous people?

The Cameroon Constitution stipulates that “all persons shall equal rights and obligations”. Therefore, Bakola/Bagyelli are full Cameroonian citizens who must enjoy citizenship rights at the same level as any other social group, and can equally exercise civic responsibility as members of the social and political community. The decentralization process (Ngima, 2015) initiated in Cameroon requires contributions from a cross-section of Cameroonian society, especially the Bakola/Bagyelli, who are relatively few in number and poorly represented.

With regard to land ownership and recognition of the rights of the Bakola/Bagyelli, investment in more productive activities could gradually increase their purchasing power. Therefore, it is important to help them manage their affairs and considerably improve their living conditions to help them manage the land and forest they occupy in an efficient way.

The Bantu and the Bakola/Bagyelli are indigenous populations who have been sharing the same lands and forests for several centuries. They share common problems and have learned to manage their differences for several generations without separating. Cohabitation within the entire country, and even worldwide, requires effective local solutions. The cohabitation of the Bantu and the Bakola/Bagyelli has been interpreted as a *necessary evil* for both peoples, who help each other in times of need. Despite challenges and fears, they share a similar culture.

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NOTES

- (1) The Baka live in south and southeast Cameroon and are the most populous Pygmy group. INADES-Formation estimated its population at about 50,000 individuals (2002).
- (2) The third group, Medzang, includes about 1,000 individuals and occupies the savanna of Ngambe Tikar and the edges of the forest in Mbam and Kim Divisions of the Centre Region. They were originally Baka who migrated toward the south (Abega, 1998), and are commonly referred to by the neighbouring Bantu population as the ‘Pygmies of Ngambe Tikar.’
- (3) This situation has also been reported among the Baka in southeast Cameroon (Hattori, 2014).
- (4) Research involving the Bakola/Bagyelli and the Bantu of the Ocean, Nyong and Kelle, and Mvila departments has revealed that a majority of the great Kwassio clans

(Ngoumba and Mabéa or Mbvoumbo and Mabi) are also found among the Bakola/Bagyelli. Most Bakola/Bagyelli aged 20 years or older can speak and understand Kwassio, even before travelling south in all three divisions. (The Bakola/Bagyelli travel through the Lolodorf-Kribi road axis, occupied mainly by the Kwassio.)

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