



WORKING PAPER SERIES

ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA

**DECENTRALIZATION VIEWED FROM INSIDE:
THE IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUNITY FORESTS
IN EAST CAMEROON**

by

Patrice Etoungou
January 2003



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Institutions and Governance Program

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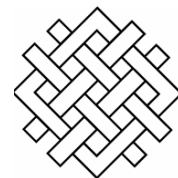
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ABSTRACT

Cameroon's 1994 Forestry Law launched a new approach to natural resource management. The 1996 Constitution introduced decentralized authorities, whose role is to enable the economic, social and cultural development of its peoples. Though the implementing texts (the regulatory laws) for this decentralization reform are still forthcoming, the new legal framework for environmental policy and the overhaul of the Constitution demonstrate the Government's will to decentralize and to improve forest resources management. At the same time, decentralized management might be inappropriate in Cameroon, as it may be too foreign a way of thinking for the forest dwellers. This study examines the community forests of East Cameroon (Upper Nyong region, Messamena and Lomié counties) to analyze factors that have not yet been fully taken into account in the current process of community forests establishment. These include exorbitant technical, financial and human costs; the ambiguous role of some international and local NGOs; the virtual, rather than substantial, Common Initiative Groups (CIGs) and Associations; and the disregard for traditional law, despite its legal primacy in African States. The interest in decentralization and forest management, also tied to the "development" of forest populations, has led to a web of misunderstandings. These findings suggest the question: are community forests the best alternative for decentralized management in East Cameroon?

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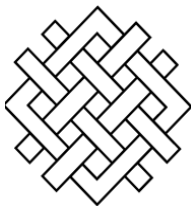
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INTRODUCTION

This work forms part of an analysis of decentralization policies and the environment in sub-Saharan Africa, conducted under the auspices of the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and World Resource Institute (WRI). The fieldwork was carried out mainly in the Upper Nyong Region, East Cameroon, as a case study of community forests. I have paid particular attention to which powers (executive, legislative, or judicial) have been devolved to which actors (NGOs, chiefs, elites, communities, cooperatives, associations, etc.), and to what extent and to whom these local authorities are accountable. My research among the *Koozimé* of Messamena and Lomié indicate, first, a certain tension between NGOs and the local populations. Second, there appear to be serious contradictions between stated political intentions and current development practices.

For example, at Kompia, a *Koozimé* village in Messamena County, the experimental marketing of community forest timber brought to light a pattern of conflicts both within the village and with outsiders. At Koungoulou, in Lomié County, rural leaders accused NGOs promoting sustainable development of treating local adults like children. At Eshiambor, also in Lomié County, a close look at the boards of directors of the Common Initiative Groups (CIGs) and Associations revealed the emptiness of some supposedly innovative structures intended to lead to change. In these and other villages, such as Kongo and Ngola, it is proving difficult to gain acceptance for the community forest concept. On the other hand, Le Bosquet, a *Baka* village on the Lomié-Messok road, seems to approve of the “community” approach to rural forestry.

This paper addresses these and many other issues, in order to provide an in-depth understanding of the current strategy for decentralization and community forests establishment in Cameroon.¹ In particular, the study examines (1) decentralization policy and the division of responsibility among and within the institutions for decentralized forest management in Cameroon and (2) accountability relations between local bodies and NGOs. Which powers have been devolved to communities, and in the management of which forests? Should farmers in leadership positions, NGOs, and local civil servants be the only ones to make decisions about the communities’ future in the context of decentralization? What is the appropriate role of support NGOs?

The findings of this study raise doubts as to whether community forests constitute the best strategy for the decentralized management of Cameroon’s forest resources. Other authors have also pointed out inappropriate aspects of their establishment (Karsenty and Marie 1995; Boulaga 1996; Egbe 1997; Diaw 1997; Ekoko 1997). Most importantly, local populations possess their own forms of political organization and logic of power (Abega 1998, 2000). This implies that these populations are capable of contributing to the discussion on decentralization, and particularly to the management of forest resources, but in their own way and at their own pace. In the first part of this work, after providing a brief background on Cameroon’s economic and political crisis, I review the legal, conceptual, financial and technical issues involved in the

¹ We drew up a six-part framework for data collection and analysis: 1) the legal framework related to the creation of community/council forests: implications and contribution to the process of decentralization; 2) the Procedures Manual for allocation of and management standards for community forests; 3) the implementation of community and council forests: observations, limits, achievements, problems encountered and their origins; 4) the legitimacy of organizations created; 5) spatial representation among forest peoples; 6) the social and technical feasibility of community forestry as an appropriate framework for decentralization.

establishment of community forests, including issues such as the cost of establishing these forests, ambiguities in the zoning plan and the thrall of the administration and its management plans. The second section examines the role of international and national NGOs and their relationship to the CIGs and local peoples. In this section we see problems such as the quasi-legalization of *dirigisme* on the part of the NGOs, the “infantilization” of whole villages (Anoukaha 1995) and the formation of illicit community forest management boards. In the third section, I set local management logic against the geometric and modernistic vision of forest management in Cameroon, demonstrating the opposition between traditional and modern forestry systems. Throughout these three sections, I refer to the case study of the community forests in the Messamena and Lomié counties of East Cameroon, where I interviewed NGO managers, administrative authorities, logging companies, and villagers from the *Koozimé* and *Baka* populations. Finally, in the concluding section, I review and summarize many of the problems in the current decentralization approach through community forests in Cameroon.

DECENTRALIZATION AND COMMUNITY FORESTS IN CAMEROON

THE 1990s CRISIS AND THE GROWING CONCERN WITH FORESTS

It is important to briefly examine Cameroon’s 1990s economic and political crisis in order to better understand the emerging concern over forest management and, in particular, the enactment of the 1994 Forestry Law.² Economic problems included the fall in world oil prices and the devaluation of the CFA franc in January 1994³. First, as long as oil was bringing enough hard currency into Cameroon to supply and support its economy, there was no major concern over the management of the country’s forest resources: that is, the “black gold” hid the “green gold.” Second, the devaluation of the CFA franc in response to falling oil prices made the country’s economy even more precarious.

The political crisis arose in relation to the initial stages of the democratization process, which took place in most African countries in the 1990s. With their newfound freedom of expression, the Cameroonian people denounced the pillage of their forests, and even prompted legislators to take action. For many observers, the crisis in Cameroon was the culmination of thirty years of autocratic power, excessive State intervention in the economy, the hi-jacking of civil society by a one-party police State, poor administrative organization, the unfair distribution of national property, nepotism, influence-peddling and the misappropriation of funds. During the race for the country’s top post in 1992, the opposition accused the ruling authorities of fraud, and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) challenged the validity of the elections. The alleged winner, the ruling president Paul Biya, was credited with 39.9 percent of the vote, against 35.9 percent for John Fru Ndi of the Social Democratic Front (SDF), the current leader of the Cameroonian opposition.

The country was in crisis and was looking for a way out. The World Bank intervened with a structural adjustment plan, followed by civil service job cuts. The World Bank particularly favored community forest management. The adoption of the new Forestry law, in fact, was one of the conditions for receiving credits under the structural adjustment plan. “Community Forests,” therefore, are not the product of any free and healthy aspiration on the part of the

² Law n° 94/01 of 20 January.

³ \$1 = CFA franc 650

Government of Cameroon, and still less of the villagers concerned. The Government had little choice.⁴

CONCEPTUALIZING DECENTRALIZATION

Decentralization is defined as an act through which the central government formally cedes powers to lower-level actors or institutions in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy (Ribot 2002). The powers devolved imply the creation of a locally autonomous decision-making sphere. It is a process that concerns artificial persons under public law—the State and local public authorities (councils, districts, regions, etc.) in the context of the legal frameworks that govern them. Under Cameroonian law, community forests do not constitute decentralized bodies, because communities cannot have an autonomous legal personality, and hence cannot take legal action autonomously under the law, manage public funds, etc. (Karsenty 1997).

Of the scientists who have studied decentralization (Mahwood 1983; Conyers 2000; Crook and Manor 1999; Agrawal and Ribot 1999), Agrawal and Ribot's "actors, powers and accountability" analysis provides the most useful framework for understanding the essential elements of any decentralization. It is particularly useful for determining the type of decentralization concerned. To constitute democratic decentralization, for example, meaningful decision-making powers should be given to local elected actors who are downwardly accountable to the electorate. In the name of decentralization, or devolution, a number of different types of actors have received powers in rural Africa. Conyers (2000: 23-6), for example, distinguishes between elected representatives, traditional authorities, appointed civil servants, local representatives of technical services or ministries, community groups, "development" committees, and non-governmental organizations.

With regard to power, Agrawal and Ribot (1999: 476) distinguish four main types: a) the power to create new rules or modify old ones; b) the power to decide how to use a resource or an opportunity; c) the power to implement, and guarantee conformity to, new and old rules; and d) the power to arbitrate in disputes which may arise in the attempt to create and ensure the conformity of rules. These four types of power correspond to three other, more familiar, categories: the legislative, the executive, and the judiciary. With regard to accountability, Oyugi (2000), Ribot (1999), Wunsch and Oluwu (1995) and Mawhood (1983) note that some African governments create institutions only accountable to central State structures, and not to the grassroots. For instance, in countries where the political parties choose all the candidates for an election—as in Cameroon—the parties are likely to be more accountable to the political leaders than to the electorate.

⁴ At the same time, the list of Cameroon's national environmental laws and decrees has grown continuously since the signing of the conventions on climate change and biodiversity in Rio de Janeiro at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992. These include: Decree No 92/069 of April 9, 1992, creating the Ministry of the Environment and Forestry; Law N°94/01 of January 20, 1994, establishing forestry, wildlife and fisheries regulations; Law N° 96/12 of August 5, 1996, establishing the framework for environmental management; Decree N°94/259/PM of May 31, 1994 creating the National Consultative Commission for the Environment and Sustainable Development; Decree N° 95/413 of June 20, 1995, establishing the procedure for the application of fisheries regulations; Decree N° 95/466 of July 20, 1995, establishing the procedure for the application of wildlife regulations; Decree N° 95/531 of August 23, 1995, establishing the procedure for the application of forestry regulations; Decree N°96/224 of October 1, 1996, establishing the reorganization of MINEF; Decree N°94/167 of August 29, 1994, ratifying the Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biodiversity.

On the other hand, “Elected representatives can claim their own legitimacy as representatives of the people, a legitimacy that they pass on to their organization if they, in turn, benefit from its legitimacy: the legitimacy of parties cannot be dissociated from that of their representatives, nor from that of their leaders” (Lagrove 1997: 224). Accountability, or having to justify to an electorate the use made of the resources available during a period of office, is a pillar of democratic decentralization. However, democratic elections are not the only accountability mechanisms—reminders, recalls, social movements and social obligations can also force accountability.

To fully understand the type of decentralization being analyzed, it is important to consider the definitions of some additional, related terminology.

Deconcentration is an organization of State structures which consists of transferring some decision-making powers to subordinate regional or local branches of the central authority, such as local or regional administrators or line ministry officials (see Ribot 2002). Deconcentration impacts the day-to-day management based on the principle of equal treatment for officials from the same entity. This principle implies that deconcentrated acts of management require an adequate staff size to allow decisions to be taken in an equitable manner at the local level.

The delegation of powers is the transfer of specific responsibilities from one authority to another. In contrast to the devolution of powers, the authority that delegates responsibilities retains overall authority for the powers delegated. It may also continue to exercise its authority concurrently with those who acquire the powers concerned (Bandet 1999).

Participation refers to the possibility for any actor to take a part in defining and managing his or her aspirations, personally or through representatives of the relevant consultative or representative bodies. Participation is also a process that should make development beneficiaries masters of their own fate, by developing their knowledge base, their capacities for negotiation, and ability to manage their own affairs. Participation also implies a transfer of powers and managerial autonomy.

The participatory approach is more than simply increasing people’s knowledge and know-how, making it difficult to put into practice. As a philosophy and model for development, it considers any external contribution as support for an internal dynamic (a desire for self-help), and suggests that development is more likely to be successful if it is based, preferentially but not exclusively, on such internal dynamics—on grassroots information, education and organization.

Community forest, under Cameroonian law, is defined as “a forest forming part of the non-permanent forest estate, which is covered by a management agreement between a village community and the Forestry Administration. The management of such a forest is the responsibility of the village community concerned, with the help or technical assistance of the Forestry Administration.”⁵ Forest products of all kinds resulting from community forests management shall belong solely to the village communities concerned.⁶ Hence all timber and non-timber resources, animal and plant species, fisheries products and special products, with the

⁵ Article 3(11) of the Decree, unofficial translation.

⁶ Section 37 (3) of the law.

exception of those banned by law, are considered to be the property of the community concerned.⁷

Neither the forestry law nor its implementing texts permit community forests to be the subject of any act of classification—they cannot become the private property of the state, the councils, or the community. Community forests are taken from the forests of the national estate⁸ and allocated to the closest neighboring community⁹ by mutual agreement. In contrast to a land ownership title, the management agreement signed by the State and a village does not confer any forest ownership rights on the latter. The community simply enjoys the use of the forest, under supervision. With State authorization, the community may log the forest by sale of standing volume, with a logging permit, or a personal felling permit.

THE LEGAL STATUS OF CAMEROON’S FORESTS

Cameroon’s Forest Zoning Plan allocates only two percent of the national estate to community forests. In these areas, communities are in competition and conflict with timber companies logging in state-authorized *ventes de coupe* (small concessions of up to 2,500 ha) (Karsenty et al. 1997). The allocated area could accommodate, in the best case, a total of 55 community forests and 14 council¹⁰ or *communal* forests in the whole country (Milol 1999: 488; Ndjebet and Vabi 2000). Currently, more than 64 percent of forests are in the permanent forestry domain as State property (Milol: *ibid.*). The permanent forest concept, which sets aside 80 percent of the land for the State, is thus becoming a point of political, administrative and technical pressure. The legal classification of Cameroon’s forests corresponds to the following table (Karsenty 1997):

Table 1. Classification of forests under Cameroonian law (Law 94/01 of 20 January 1994).

Vocation as defined in the zoning plan	PERMANENT FORESTS (classified forests)		NON-PERMANENT FOREST ESTATE	
	STATE FORESTS	COUNCIL FORESTS	COMMUNITY FORESTS	OTHER FORESTS
Administrative term	STATE FORESTS	COUNCIL FORESTS	COMMUNITY FORESTS	OTHER FORESTS
Legal status	(State’s private property)	(Council’s private property)	(Division of the national estate)	(National estate, forests belonging to private individuals)
Allocation	Production forest, protected forest, etc.	Production forest, protected forest, etc.	Co-management by villages-forestry services	Areas allocated (private property) or awaiting allocation

Statistics from the Community Forestry Unit (Ndjebet and Vabi, 2000) show 82 applications to create community forests throughout the country, for a total area of approximately 272,935 ha, as follows:

Table 2. Community Forest Applications

Province	Center	East	Littoral	N/West	West	South	S/West
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⁷ The list of protected plant and animal species are regularly updated by the Ministry of the Environment and Forests (MINEF).

⁸ Circular n° 723/LC/MINEF/DF/SDIAF of March 29, 1996, concerning the procedure for the allocation of community forests in the national estate.

⁹ Art. 27(3), D. 95-53.

¹⁰ Councils are local governments.

Area	35,470	133,642	10,000	8,204	3,320	68,574	13,725
%	10	46	5	3	2	29	5
Applications	8	44	2	8	1	17	2

Some scientists have concluded that these supposedly decentralizing and innovative strategies actually represent forms of marginalization, the exclusion of peripheral forces (local communities), and a hindrance to the sustainable management of forests (Egbe 1997; Vabi 1998; Ekoko 1998; Diaw and Oyono 1998a; Diaw and Njomkap 1998). Since the implementation of the 1994 Forestry Law regulating forestry, wildlife and fisheries, only 36 community forests have been allocated¹¹ in the whole country. In Lomié, the negotiations were led throughout by a Dutch NGO, known as Support to Sustainable Development in the Lomié region (SDDL).

THE COMMUNITY APPROACH

With the 1994 law, Cameroon seemed to be trying to end “the blood-letting of the countryside.” The legislature sought to liberalize bodies that were neither of state origin, such as those affiliated with the department of Cooperatives and Mutual Associations (COOPMUT) of the Ministry of Agriculture (MINAGRI), nor with village development committees, connected to both the former Ministry of Planning and Territorial Development (MINPAT) and the Ministry of Territorial Administration (MINAT). The text mentions modern development associations with full economic autonomy (Koffi 1993; Etoungou 1996).

Equally, the law mentions “communities,” however, without further elaboration. It was not until the time came to implement the law that it became clear that the concept of “community” does not exist in Cameroonian law. Instead, the meaning of “community” has to be accommodated under the definition of a given associative structure, which is inevitably “private.” In a legal system based on a fundamental distinction between public and private, there is no place for “community.” Hence it may be said that the “community forest” concept was imported without any consideration for existing law. Can a private association promote the development of a whole village in East Cameroon?

The law appears to be aimed at breaking with the paternalist treatment of Cameroon’s farmers, correcting certain representations of the countryside produced by a blind adherence to predetermined designs. However, does the modernist and technocratic intervention implied in the Government’s Rural Society Project correspond with what is needed for real resource management by local people? With regards to traditional spatial management and land allocation systems, the forestry administration’s proposed zoning plan, discussed below, surely infringes the basic laws of self-determination of a whole group of people. Does “self-management” not provide for the possibility of defining one’s own proposed society?

For De Sardan (1995: 62), the ideology of a village “consensus” masks the multiple divisions and antagonisms that lie behind African peasant society and the resulting organization of distinct groups within it. As “egalitarian” as they may first seem to an outside observer, “communities” are a hive of statutory contradictions (men/women, elders/youth, free men/former slaves, indigenes/newcomers) and conflicts related to the factors of production (control of labor or land, farmer/herder tensions), power disputes (related to chieftancies, cooperatives, important

¹¹ Update on community forest applications as of September 15, 2000 (Community Forestry Unit, MINEF).

members of society) or even interpersonal rivalries and mysterious jealousies involving formal or informal networks (of neighbors, family, friends, companions, *protégés*). Nevertheless, the 1994 law requires communities to form legal bodies representing all sectors of the community.¹² In the multi-headed forest societies of southeast Cameroon (Radcliffe-Brown 1950; Koch 1968; Laburthe 1981; Bahuchet 1985; Ballif 1992; Joiris 1995), this is a difficult requirement to meet.

In the villages observed, the issues involved in the distribution of political power do not often correspond to the official requirements of decentralization: the delegation of powers, free elections, and accountability. Anthropological data shows, for example, that Kompia society is based on avuncular relations, which specify the rights, duties, and privileges of each lineage, including rules for land allocation. Evidence from the villages studied demonstrates that communitarianism, which favors the organization of society into communities where individuals assimilate according to certain rules based on a single, equivalent model for all, may not be the best option. The problem with this model is exacerbated by the extremely high cost of establishing community forests.

The Cost of Community Forest Establishment

The establishment of community forests involves complex administrative and financial procedures. Application forms have to make numerous journeys between the district level (Forest Post), the regional and provincial forestry delegations, the Forestry Department, the Community Forestry Unit and the General Secretariat of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MINEF). The process involves several high level public officials in MINEF's central and external services, as well as Provincial Governors, Senior Regional Officers, County Officers, District Chiefs, Brigade Commanders, council treasurers, group leaders and village chiefs.

The Nguélémdougua Forum on community forests (Ndjebet and Vabi, 2000) found a significant variation in cost, depending whether the communities used service providers or did most of the work themselves with technical support from the Ministry of the Environment and Forests, as provided for in the regulations. Thus, the cost of compiling and filing an application can vary from \$300 to \$1,600.¹³ In addition, drafting a simple management plan varies from \$1.50 to \$6.20 per hectare¹⁴ (or \$0.40/ha when done by the community itself¹⁵), for a total cost ranging from roughly \$1,850 to \$21,500 for a 3,500 ha community forest.¹⁶ The cost of establishing a 3,500 ha community forest using local labor varies from about \$1,900 to \$3,800¹⁷; or with a service provider, from \$5,700 to \$23,000.^{18,19}

¹² Section 28, par. 1 of the Decree.

¹³ CFA 200,000 to CFA 1,050,000.

¹⁴ CFA 1000 to CFA 4000 per hectare.

¹⁵ CFA 250/ha.

¹⁶ CFA 1,200,000 to CFA 14,000,000.

¹⁷ CFA 1,250,000 to CFA 2,450,000.

¹⁸ CFA 3,700,000 to CFA 15,050,000.

¹⁹ With regard to the benefits from logging community forests, the Nguélémdougua report looks in turn at leasing the community forest to a private operator and receiving rents on the timber logged and local processing using chainsaws, portable sawmills, and mobile sawmills.

The Misadventures of the Zoning Plan

The transfer to communities of new responsibilities in a large number of areas elucidates the novelty and importance of local economic development. Local development, which was a controversial subject in the past, is now seen as consensual. The State, the administration, political parties, professional groups, local government and citizens all agree on bottom-up development, supported by information on public affairs. This return to the local level coincides with a deep transformation in a Welfare State founded on centrality and top-down control. The local administration now designates both the structures and the agents of the deconcentrated territorial administration (in the administrative constituency of the county, this refers to the county officer and technical services) and the decentralized local authorities (rural communities with financial autonomy and administered by elected representatives). An examination of the design of the zoning plan, however, tells us whether local perceptions of management are taken into account.

The zoning plan of Cameroon, drawn up with the technical support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), is based on the superposing of five basic maps, representing the water network, the road network, population distribution by village, the distribution of farmland, and slopes. A sixth map synthesizes this information, and adds a population projection for 2025. A seventh deduces the boundary of a forest-clearing front. In addition to a number of technical concerns (particularly, the reliability of population distribution based on a 1987 census, and hence the probability that cultivated land has been wrongly identified as forest), the very principle of the zoning plan is problematic:

- It traces lines and boundaries, which separate the State's private estate, sub-divided into blocks or Forest Management Units (FMUs) averaging 50,000 ha, on the one hand, from lands appropriate for agro-silvo-pastoral uses, on the other;
- Working on the basis of the water and road networks, the spatial demarcation tends to cut into village areas and reduce them to corridors between the blocks. It distinguishes a *village space*, where farming activities are allowed, from a *more remote area*, over which there are only hunting and gathering rights.

The ambiguity and limits of the new forestry code are the result of contradictions. For example, though conceived as a forestry law rather than a law on land ownership, it actually affects the allocation of land areas. Though attempting to achieve consensus with the rural population, the spatial model it establishes divides territory according to a logic based on administrative and political control rather than the spatial logic of the populations concerned.

In the area where I conducted my surveys, the zoning plan leaves little room for the local population's traditional form of organization and space management based on the rights of lineage and sub-lineage. With its technical organization of forests, the Forestry Administration imposes a single **associative and community** logic that does not always correspond with the customs of the Messamena and Lomié populations. Among these populations, each lineage has a given area they control by heritage. It is a "non specialized" land where the farmers' activities form a *continuum*. However, according to the current zoning plan, land areas should be designated by activity.

The administration's effort to innovate regarding land allocation, as prescribed by the law, has led to the creation of CIG boards.²⁰ Nevertheless, the CIG boards have no legitimacy with the local population, do not reflect any authority within the village (see Oyono 2002) and have often come to nothing, as was the case in the Kompia and Eschiambor villages. The CIGs will be discussed further below.

Conflicts over the distribution of income from community forest exploitation illustrate this rigid and poorly adapted remodeling of space. To a certain extent, it legalizes what was expressed by the chairman of the Dja Network of Associations and Local Institutions: the top down control (*dirigisme*) of environmental NGOs and the treatment of villages as "children to be molded." What possible future there can be, under these conditions, for the multi-headed forest communities and the community forests?

There are three basic problems in the process of establishing the community forests: the omnipotence and *dirigisme* of the "support" NGOs; the obsolescence and lack of legitimacy of the CIG boards; and the open conflicts between different lineages concerning the income from the timber marketed in experimental projects. Before considering each of these in the next section, we first examine a fourth problem, the constraints imposed by the management agreement.

The Thrall of the Administration and its Management Agreement

The law defines a community forest management agreement as, "a contract whereby the Forestry Administration entrusts part of the national forest estate to a community, with a view to its management, conservation and use to the benefit of that community. The management agreement is accompanied by a basic management plan that sets out the activities to be undertaken."²¹ The agreement links the community with the Forestry Administration. The Administration rules on all development plans,²² assists individuals and communities in conducting inventories, helps²³ draft and implement the Simple Management Plans (SMPs) for the forests.²⁴ The Forestry Administration is also in charge of ensuring SMP implementation and has the power to impose penalties where breaches are found to have occurred in its legal or technical management provisions. It may suspend logging permits, if provisions of the simple management plans are violated, or even withdraw them, in the case of repeated offences.²⁵

In contrast with the other categories of forest discussed earlier, community forests accord control over land without according ownership in the form of a property title. The legislature's intention was to grant forest use rights to benefit the communities concerned.²⁶ The delegate appointed by the community—the head of the CIG in the case of villages researched—assisted by local Forestry Administration officials, draws up five copies of the management plan and the

²⁰ In laws N° 90/53 of 19 December 1990 on the Freedom of Association, and N° 92/006 of August 14, 1992 on Cooperatives and Common Initiative Groups.

²¹ Article 3(16) of the Decree, unofficial translation.

²² Sect. 22, Law 94-01; art. 44 and 45, Decree n° 95-531/PM of August 23, 1995 establishing the procedure for implementing the forestry system (hereafter known as D. 95-531).

²³ Sect. 40(1), (3), L. 94-01; art. 50, D. 95-531.

²⁴ Sect. 39(1) and (3), L. 94-01.

²⁵ Sect. 65, L. 94-01.

²⁶ Sect. 37, L. 94-01; art 27, D. 95-531.

management agreement. The community retains one copy. Four copies, signed by the CIG delegate, are submitted to the regional delegate, who gives the community a dated receipt.²⁷ The law allows village communities, with the assistance of the State as guardian and administrator of the national estate, to take responsibility for the management of these forest resources, but only its vegetative cover, and without infringing on the rights related to its property-tax-base.

THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

THE SUPPORT AND GUIDING LOGIC OF INTERNATIONAL NGOS

Under Law n° 99/014 of December 22, 1999, the National Assembly of Cameroon deliberated and adopted the law governing non-governmental organizations. In the words of this law, “an NGO is a declared association or a foreign association authorized in accordance with existing legislation, and accredited by the administration with a view to participating in the implementation of missions of general interest.”²⁸ Given the technical and financial problems involved in establishing community forests, NGOs offer their services to assist local communities throughout the process. There were more than ten projects in the research area. Some NGOs are directly involved in development,²⁹ others are mainly concerned with environmental conservation,³⁰ and the remainder are involved in basic research.³¹ There are also numerous local NGOs.³² As a rule, donors tend to operate through their international NGOs; international NGOs operate by sub-contracting to local NGOs; and all concerned with the “project” spirit insist upon conformity. These organizations have no prominent representation of administrative officials but rather have been set up and are led by citizens, to support local people through training and in various other ways.

Community Forestry Program

The European Union is active through the Community Forestry Program (CFP), Rational Use of the Ecosystems of Central Africa (ECOFAC) and the Future of the Peoples of the Tropical Forests Program (FPTF). The main mission of the FPTF, as a research initiative, was to understand human activities in tropical forest ecosystems, and to propose conservation and management programs for protected area corridors to improve the management of the land and the people who live there. The FPTF works at both micro and macro levels on issues ranging from nutrition, psychology, community development networks, ethnology, history, and geography, to ethno-ecology. The program studies the effect of urban development on the environment and the participation of local populations in environmental issues. It is particularly interested in the concept of sustainable development.

I conducted surveys with the CFP on the edge of the Dja Reserve. An “annex” of the FPTF

²⁷ In the case of an application concerning an area extending over several provinces, the community provides two additional copies of the application, to be kept by the office of the Minister and the forestry department (Community Forestry Unit).

²⁸ Art. 2, unofficial translation.

²⁹ CFP, SDDL, VSO.

³⁰ ECOFAC, IUCN, Peace Corps.

³¹ Calao Project.

³² These include CIAD (International Center for Support to Sustainable Development), CED (Center for Environment and Development), AAPEC (Self-Help Association of the Peoples of East Cameroon), the OCBB (Observatory of *Baka-Bantu* Cultures), and the GECEC (the General Savings and Credit Society of East Cameroon).

conducting applied research, the CFP is funded by the European Union (DGVIII). The Program is implemented by the Forestry Unit of the Agronomy Department of the University of Gembloux, in Belgium.

CFP officials work closely with the Cameroonian Ministry of Scientific and Technical Research, the Ministry of the Environment and Forests, the University of Dschang (Forestry Department) and, to a certain extent, the Catholic University of Central Africa. Its aim is to use a scientific approach based on applied research to test the feasibility and relevance of the concept of community forestry. The aim of the program is to establish a policy for sustainable forestry management, the development of a rural population in harmony with their environment, and the development of the northern periphery of the Dja Wildlife Reserve. It is a practical test of community forestry policy. This program is conducted in collaboration with the Rational Use of Forest Ecosystems in Central Africa, and the FPTF, the World Conservation Union (IUCN- Dja), and Support to Sustainable Development in the Lomié/Dja Region (SDDL).

Support to Sustainable Development in the Lomié/Dja Region (SDDL)

The SDDL has been working in the regions of Lomié, Yokadouma and Abong-Mbang since 1983, with the aim of improving the local populations' socio-economic conditions, assisting in the management and rational exploitation of the forest and soil, and developing civic institutions and associations. The project began with nine villages in the east of the town of Lomié. It covers an area of approximately 2,500 km², with the villages of Mang and Zoulabot in the north, Kongo and Ngola in the northwest, Zoulabot II in the south, Long in the southeast, Messok in the east, Le Bosquet in the southwest and Lomié in the west. The project had a budget of five million Dutch guilders (approximately \$2.3 million³³) for its first phase (1997-2001).

LOCAL NGOS: SUB-CONTRACTORS

Almost all the "local" NGOs encountered are the result of the efforts of European Union or Netherlands Development Agency (SNV) officials. The social agendas of these "local" NGOs are established by the parent NGO, which monitors the application of the terms of reference in the field. The parent NGOs set the budget for their sub-contractors, and where they do not actually recruit the staff for the local NGO, they give a clear opinion on all strategic decisions. This leads to the multiplication of projects, each as disproportionate at the other, motivated by what is called in the Dja, "Eating your own bit of the *gombo*."³⁴ For some leaders, their NGO jobs are less about their vocation to preserve the natural heritage or help promote sustainable management than about earning an income for themselves and their families. The current staff of these NGOs offers proof of this reality. All the secretaries, accountants, deputy directors, development workers, night watchmen, and project officials are either relatives or close friends of the Director or the equivalent. Two former university students who have returned to the village refer to them as "accomplices of the Sustainable Enslavement Program." The NGOs, as well as the CIGs, thus become the tyranny of the minority.

³³ CFA franc 1.5 billion.

³⁴ In other words, getting their piece of the parent NGO's pie. "Gombo" refers to a lucrative opportunity.

NGOs forever?

In general, an NGO is defined as any organization that does not belong to the government: universities, churches, political parties, trade union organizations, religious or charitable associations, scout groups, and clubs (Lions, Rotary). There is, however, ambiguity regarding the status of some development projects and programs, which may not actually have any mandate to exist in Cameroon. What does “the general interest” actually mean? It is a terse formulation of uncertain content.

Through the works of Deléage and Chartier (1998: 26-41) on the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF), Greenpeace, and Friends of the Earth, we can see an important trend in environmental NGOs towards a logic of trade. Does a certain catechism of development and conservation projects permit open questioning of the issues at stake? What is their real purpose? For Yash Tandon (1998: 61), it is one of the two: they are either the vanguard of a new type of imperialism, or allies of the African people in their age-old fight against domination and exploitation.

It is sometimes difficult to decide which is the correct answer, particularly because of the impenetrability of foreign NGOs in Africa. Sometimes farmers are only vaguely aware of the exact reason for the NGOs’ presence in the villages, the mechanisms by which decisions are made, their relationship to government, or the complex ways in which they are held accountable. Tandon (1998: 62) argues that NGOs enjoy significant financial support from their national governments, and questions the extent to which they are still non-governmental. The same is true of European Union support. Is it not, in the end, a matter of charity money intended to appease the western conscience? The one-way evaluation of the work of African partners, as financial recipients, is not balanced by an African evaluation of the NGOs’ use of the information they obtain on African societies, which they use, notably, in their fund raising.

In this opaque field, the current decentralization process in Cameroon is encountering several brake forces. The phantom CIG boards created by NGOs to “represent” local communities, cover NGOs (local NGOs trained by foreign NGOs and set up to counter accusations of interference), and obstacles imposed by new engorged leaders who generally reside outside of their villages. Has anyone really asked the essential questions about the origin, arrival and establishment of community forestry as a viable mode of management for the Lomié/Dja region?

CIGS AND *DIRIGISTE* ASSOCIATIONS: SELF-PROCLAIMED LEADERS

Many of the farmers in positions of leadership who were met during this study had no experience as leaders, and did not always speak on behalf of their community. They had become leaders due to the 1994 law, and with the incentive and support of the NGOs. This is demonstrated by the lack of any associative culture, at least *in the modern and democratic sense as dictated by the law*. For example, the Kompia CIG’s mandate ended on July 30, 2000. The CIG members immediately called for a General Assembly to receive a synopsis from the out-going board and to organize elections for a new board. Not only did the General Assembly fail to take place because of the lack of an updated member register, but in addition, no meeting had been held in the prior seven months. In fact, the board had not produced a financial report for the previous two years.

The CIG members accuse the board of complete submission to the CFP, and of a lack of initiative and creativity. They particularly accuse it of misappropriation of funds. They have made a strong appeal to the board to stop acting as the development worker “appointed” to the village. Mr. Sagam, former mathematics teacher in Doumé, says, “It does everything the Delegate ought to: making proposals, taking decisions, and chairing meetings. Some board members are fed up, and the people don’t want any more of it.”

The decision-making process in the villages involved with the CFP is as follows: all the instructions come from the top (forestry administration officials, NGOs, elites) and flow downwards (CIGs and associations, local populations), and those who are not members of the new institutions are excluded, *de facto*, from the process. The parent NGO designs policy and strategies for the establishment of community forests, using available institutional strength as their main asset. It then gives the local NGO the responsibility of raising awareness among local communities. The sub-contracted development workers basically collaborate with the boards of the legalized CIGs. In the second stage, another form of discrimination appears in the CIG General Assemblies, only members without outstanding dues may speak. Those who are not paid up are excluded from decision-making.

Eschiambor’s Forest Management Committee

In Eschiambor, twenty non-members agreed to answer our questions. The first thing they said was that the local people are fed up with the CIG board members’ opportunism. Casimir, a former student in the Science Department of the University of Yaoundé I, said, “With regard to the representativeness of the members of the community forest management committee, we think we are dealing with *faymen*.³⁵ They are the only ones, perhaps together with the SDDL, to know what is happening behind the big show. They almost all live in Lomié. They only come here to tell us that logging companies are coming and the village should negotiate the sale of the wood from the community forest. Do you think that these people are really acting on behalf of the village?” Several local people do, however, recognize that the SDDL has accomplished something: training for the villagers in mapping, exploration, cubing, the use of compasses and GPS, and in the technical drafting, submission and follow-up of community forest applications. According to Casimir, however, the procedures for community forest establishment are still opaque because of the oversight and control rights that the SDDL wants to have over commercial logging of Eschiambor’s community forest.³⁶

The new CIG officials are not based in the village. Because of their education level, some of them are able to hold discussions with the NGO development workers and officials, but their opinions are not always that of the CIG or the association. In most of the villages studied, these leaders act in their own interests, hence the increasing number of conflicts. In Eschiambor, whether or not association members’ dues are up-to-date, the establishment of community forests has broken down the little cohesion that existed in the village.

The board chairman of the Eschiambor community forest management committee lives in Lomié Town: “Far from the quarrels and witchcraft surrounding the community forests, here I am able to meet with the various logging companies and choose the one that will be best for our

³⁵ White-collar rogues who talk so well that they are capable of selling refrigerators to the Inuits.

³⁶ The SDDL has drafted selection criteria and procedures for the choice of bidders for community forests; this is supposed to ensure that the logging company has followed the Forestry Administration rules.

community forest,” he says. The community forest debate in Eschiambor has shifted, and is now focused on the financial fall-out of the timber. In other words, the “legal” entity can exist without any legal basis, or in particular, legitimacy. While the 1994 text aimed to promote forest management by the local population, the current arrangement between the CIG/Association leadership and the village is only a pale reflection of what should exist when a forest village manages the forest: representation. If the NGOs promoting these kinds of projects do not recognize the interests and culture of the local population, can they then provide the support needed for viable community development?

Kompia’s Community Forest: Litigious and Small-scale Logging

In Kompia, even before the management agreement under discussion with the Ministry of the Environment and Forests had been signed, the CFP tested the small-scale marketing of recovered timber. The CFP made all the financial arrangements: purchasing the fuel, milling, hiring the truck, paying the driver, trading on the market in Yaoundé, and selling the wood. Kompia farmers were not able to say how much this had all cost, but the sale brought \$1,850³⁷ into the CIG’s coffers. Twenty local people who opposed the project to establish community forests were happy to give us their comments: “What is it with your white people and your community forests? The work only progresses when they want it to! It seems that all the project wants to do is tempt the village with a better future. The proof today is that the CIG board and almost all the local people consider the CFP as God.” And the questions asked by five opponents of the CFP: “Will this project last here? Is it not going to leave, just as all the others have?”

Several locals are convinced that Mr. Pelon Branchard, one of the project officials, is funding “the whole process of community forest establishment” from his own pocket. The village is a mere spectator in his “personal development.” And then there is the issue of demand: “The problem of demand is fundamental.... Whatever innovation there is, it can only be worthwhile if ownership can be and is felt by the environment into which it is introduced” (Meyer 1997: 9).

According to one hundred farmers surveyed, the attempt to establish a community forest in Kompia is crystallizing old conflicts (over land) and causing new ones, such as exacerbating hatred between lineages (*Djè Antsélé* and *Djè Zi’i*) and substituting roles in the official exercise of political power, through the permanent presence of a CFP development worker in the village. The village chief is no longer the only one with political powers (Oyono et al. 2002: 10-14), and the attributes of authority are being transferred from the chief to the head of the CIG (the development worker now plays the role of the patriarch, the chief, elite and delegate/treasurer). In addition, women are completely excluded from financial issues (it should be noted that they have rarely been included in the current process of establishing community forests). Open conflicts are to be feared.

The CIG operates without heed to General Assembly resolutions; it is only accountable to the CFP. To the CIG chairman in Kabilone, a former police inspector from Douala, the community’s opinion is of little interest to the CFP, and of even less importance to the CIG board, which sees its new situation as *manna* from heaven. With regard to the village economy, I found that the

³⁷ CFA 1,200,000.

board alone decides on the basic products purchases made with income from wood (soap, batteries, salt, tomatoes, tinned goods, diesel, cable for traps, etc.).

The people of Kompia do not all enjoy to the same degree the benefits arising from the sale of wood from “their” forest. For example, the members of the CIG board purchase a liter of diesel at CFA 250. The same liter costs CFA 275 for CIG members and CFA 300 for non-members. Some villagers ask why this discrimination exists, even if it is an internal rule, if the community forest belongs to the whole community. Management committee members see it as an incentive for non-CIG members to join. However, villagers who are not CIG members perceive it as the delegate and his team ensuring favorable treatment to the detriment of other villagers. The new “legal” bodies are not playing their proper roles, and, in fact, are building up a system of patronage. The income distribution scheme established by the involved NGO actually reinforces these divisions: five percent to the Ministry of the Environment and Forests, 20 percent to CIG funds, 25 percent to the loggers and millers, and 50 percent to the haulers (Ndjebet and Vabi 2000). The CIGs are in fact private structures.

These examples of community forests established with NGO support raise more than a few doubts as to whether the concept of community forestry is sociologically and politically appropriate for local communities in Cameroon. In the daily life of a *Koozimé* farmer, the formula of modern associations and CIGs, as representatives of communities, would not appear to be appropriate. In Lomié, the role of NGOs is equally dominant and sometimes ambiguous in the establishment of CIG and association boards, to the extent that I actually witnessed a rebellion by the *Bapilé* people in Koungoulou. In contrast, the *Baka* populations of Mouangué le Bosquet consider the community forestry concept as a godsend, because they will finally have a plot of land of their own, a refuge. These two cases will be considered more extensively in the next section, after examining the traditional management logic for the forests and fallow.

LOCAL MANAGEMENT LOGICS AND THE COMMUNITY FOREST EXPERIENCE

LOCAL MANAGEMENT LOGIC

The data from our research sites show that a traditional forest management system—associated with economic development, the “sustainable management” of natural resources and human fulfillment—already existed prior to the community forest scheme. The land tenure system has four phases representing both the management and development of the forest: the 1-to-4-year fallow (*ebour*), the 5-to-10-year/15-to-20-year fallow (*kwalkomo*), the place of the former village (*nguno*), and the “virgin forest” that has never been farmed (*ekomo*).

Ebour

Ebour is acquired according to the primacy of the first clearing of the “virgin forest” (Joiris, 1995). Among the *Koozimé* people, the system of *ebour*, or recent fallow, allows the harmonious management of the environment. They distinguish between *Ebour Latjéjtjé*--young fallow, dominated by *Chromolaena odorata*—and *Ebour Lalelele*—or old fallow, dominated by *Musanga cecropioides* (umbrella tree). The average length of a pre-forest fallow is four years (Dewatcher, 1995), and young fallow represents 37 percent of the land area farmed each year. *Ebour Lalelele* has a mean fallow of eleven years and represents 27 percent of the land area farmed each year.

Kwalkomo

In *kwalkomo*, or older secondary forest, the umbrella tree disappears and is succeeded by numerous others.³⁸ Dewatcher (1997) argues, “Slash-and-burn agriculture only affects the zones along the [Somalomo-Ndengue] road. The old interior forest is not affected by contemporary agricultural activity. It may even have a positive ecological effect, because the ecosystem that results from slash-and-burn agriculture is more varied than the homogenous forest.” If slash-and-burn agriculture is a land management technique that creates diversity, will the forestry administration’s simple management plans help to perpetuate it?

Ekomo

Ekomo is the forest that has never been farmed in *Koozimé* memory. According to the 1994 law, the person who first clears an *Ekomo* plot has usufruct rights, and ownership rights according to the *Koozimé* traditional land tenure system. The mapping of agrarian systems in Kompia by Marie Etienne demonstrates that *Ekomo*, or primary forest, represents 72 percent of the total area of “community forests.” However the area that can be termed “no man’s land” is neither infinite nor unlimited. *Ebour*, *Kwalkomo*, *Nguno*, and *Ekomo*, all lie on the border of other known villages. I found that the *Ekomo* are often in the *Nguno*, or former villages now in the forest (see Diaw and Oyono 1998b). The *Ekomo* do have owners. But with the use of modern mapping methods, based on the metric system and topography while ignoring customary practices, as is the case today, it might be said that the *Ekomo* have no owners. This flaw results from a *zoning plan drawn up without consultation or discussion*, shutting down the debate on traditional land tenure and ownership.

In contrast, given the omnipresence of the community forestry debate and the proliferation of related projects, is it still possible to conceive of the development of a village in the area *without* this burdensome notion of a community forest? To answer this, we first have to agree on what a village community is.

THE VILLAGE COMMUNITY AND THE COMMUNITY FOREST

Neither Law 94-01 nor its accompanying regulatory laws define the village community. We do not know whether it is synonymous with the “citizens living around” community forests mentioned in Article 36 of Law 94-01, or whether the definition refers to a different actor. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that there are two distinct actors. “The village community would designate an organized group of peoples forming a socio-cultural and historic entity, capable, as a whole, of maintaining relations as much with the administration as with private operators and individuals. The rights of village communities are collective rights” (Kamto 2001).

A look at the genealogy of the Kompia people helps us understand how the administration’s meddling has disrupted the social organization of this village’s population. The inhabitants of Kompia are *Bampel*. Together with numerous other families,³⁹ they make up the big *Koozimé*

³⁸ The trees that typically succeed it, according to Dewatcher (1997), are: *Fagara macrophylla*, *Uapaca sp.*, *Pentaclethra macrophylla*, *Petersian-thus macrocarpus*, *Alstonia boonei*, *Albizia sp.*, *Terminalia superba*, and *Cleistopholis patens*.

³⁹ These include the Bamdjoa, Bassiep, Bamlal, Bampom, Bakpwab, Bambo'o, Bantaba, Bapeho, Banangué, Bazoul, Bazimza, Bankoho, and others.

family. Given the extended kin relationships that exist in Messamena and Lomié counties, the way land is distributed under the current community forest strategy appears authoritarian and random.

Tama Bour: Dethroned Partners

Amongst the *Koozimé*, government is based on the *Tama Bour*, or patriarchs, of each lineage. It is these patriarchs who control and inform their kin of land boundaries with other families, tell the family's oral history, pass on their lineage's philosophy and rules of ethics through sayings, parables and proverbs, and judge and rule on disputes. Eloquence is the *Tama Bours'* indispensable tool. If they can find no grounds for immediate agreement, it is through their words—in the Biblical sense that “the Word has become flesh”—that they must appease conflict.

The following excerpt quotes the patriarch of Dimpam from the April 18, 1998 funeral of the head of the LéHe and Mpo'o *Koozimé* canton group, and referring to the arrival of the colonial administration and the Catholic and Protestant churches:

“You were a patriarch, born around 1911, died at 5:30 p.m. on March 28, 1998; a former soldier appointed High Chief on December 22, 1942, you moved the village and its people from Mpondom to Dimpam on July 14, 1941. You were a teacher at Abong-Mbang at the time. In 1956, you entered politics; you were a feared opponent, and were elected mayor of Messamena Joint Rural Council in 1962. In 1972, after a dispute with father François Teenkrode of the Catholic mission in Essiengbot, you converted to Presbyterianism. That day, you sang the Bulu canticle N° 132, *M'aye fe bo olo ya abe Zambe....* You took me to school. You brought men together and led them; you played guitar, but you couldn't dance. You knew how to manage the *Koozimé*. You had a great sense of family. You had a wonderful memory. You remembered the history of the country and the region, down to the month, day, and even the hour. You even remembered if it had rained on the day in question. On Tuesday, February 4th 1932, at 4:20 p.m., you met a German colonial administrator, Herr Gozen, near Abong-Mbang: you knew the history of the *Koozimé*, their proverbs and parables. From here to Lomié, all the *Koozimé* knew you. You were our last real chief. We lament the disappearance of the panther skin that symbolized the unity of the *Koozimé*. The *Koozimé* were powerful and strong like a panther. No one could tread on the *Koozimé*. But our panther skin has gone. We are no longer united, and we are being crushed.”

This funeral oration suggests the ontological transformation of the *Koozimé* with respect to the forest and wildlife, and the intellectual or natural qualities that confer social respect. In Kompia, for example, the current chief (Pevoh) is a former teacher, the only holder of an Elementary School Certificate of his generation. The village trader does not often attend village meetings, but it is his opinion that counts in negotiations with outsiders, and he can mobilize both the young and the not so young. But it would be a mistake to think that Pevoh or the trader can mobilize the masses only because they are able to act as intermediaries between illiterate peasants and outsiders. Nor is it in any way a recognition of family authority. In practice, when decisions need to be made on matters affecting the whole community, they are negotiated among the lineage elders. Summoned by a message taken from house to house, the elders meet at nightfall to discuss the issues on the agenda. This diffuse decision-making model leads some NGOs to think that there is no decision-making body. Others try to follow cultural models that are out of touch with local organizations, promoting a village structure that leads, such as in the case below, to omnipotence and *dirigisme*.

Koungoulou: The *Bapilé* Rebellion

In Koungoulou, local people were negotiating with the logging companies the sale of the timber from their community forest. Around the table sat the village chief, the General Secretary and the treasurer of the association, the deputy chairman of the village development committee (VDC), the SDDL, the logging company representative, a young man from the village with a B.A. in philosophy and village elders, as well as members and non-members of the association. The management officer, the mayor of Messok Rural Council, was absent.

The chairman of the community forest management committee was contentious, “We don’t know why the NGOs doubt our management capacities, they love to see us always being helped. Despite what they say,⁴⁰ they are here to dictate, to manage and to impose logging companies on the local population.” The logging company representative took the idea further, “The Koungoulou Association is the SDDL’s baby, but it knows that all babies become adults.”

Small-scale logging was conducted in Koungoulou with the help of the SDDL’s portable sawmill. Because the timber was of good quality, it brought a good price from the Douala exporters and local users. For instance, *Sapelli* was sold for \$308 per cubic meter⁴¹ in Douala, and other species at \$185⁴² on leaving the forest. Nevertheless, the newly elected chairman complained that the SDDL, instead of the village community, had conducted all the negotiations. He protested that it was an SDDL technical assistant who had reached the price and contract agreements with exporters in a language the villagers did not understand. In response, the SDDL proposed that small-scale logging be conducted by the community itself, in partnership with an accredited logging company, conditional on local milling of the logs. In other words, while the NGO was being paternalistic in the management of Koungoulou forest, other outsiders, notably the logging companies, were pushing local people to assume responsibility. The village was a battlefield between the logging companies and the NGOs.

The situation in Koungoulou is one of conflict—conflict between families, and between the SDDL and the association officials. Mr. Obougou of the SDDL considers Koungoulou to be a bad example and asked me to take it as a case study. Village elites are reasserting their leadership role. They believed it is time for the SDDL’s to stop giving its opinion on everything and controlling their affairs. What powers regarding sustainable forest management were really devolved to the community? Certainly not the power to choose its own fate, elect its own representatives, or call the committee members to account. As long as local people’s action is restricted by the law, controlled by the NGOs and supervised by a few leaders won over to the NGOs’ cause, can one truly speak of community forestry as a driving force for development and viable management?

Now we turn to the very different case of the *Baka*, the forest nomads, who finally gained a right to their own land through the community forests.

⁴⁰ Making community forest development accessible to concerned communities in the forest zone.

⁴¹ CFA 200,000.

⁴² CFA 120,000.

Le Bosquet: The Forest Refuge

Le Bosquet is a completely *Baka* village that has existed since 1972 due to the determination of a French religious community. According to Sister Madeleine, Mother Superior of the community, one of their objectives has been to introduce elementary rules of hygiene to the community, and a full-time nurse is employed to this end. The chapel of *Our Lady of the Forest* was built for the cause. According to a census conducted by the catechist, Le Bosquet currently has 900 residents representing ten families.⁴³

The consultative meeting between administrative authorities and Le Bosquet was held on February 20, 1998, and the *Baka* association of Mouangué was legalized on June 5, with the Ministry's agreement of intent signed on November 10 of the same year. Discussions with the *Baka* people suggest that the simple management plan was too complicated for them to draft without the help of the SDDL. Sister Madeleine seemed to confirm this. She said that it had taken years of work to introduce the rules of hygiene and today, she speaks of a success rate of only five to ten percent of their objectives. It was difficult to get the *Baka* to act, she said. They were happy to say "yes, we will do it," but she believes the community forest idea is still in a very early stage. She also questioned who would manage the forest given the new faculties it requires. Moreover, the *Baka* do not have the same concept of space as the 1994 legislature, being an extremely mobile population.

Simon, a former SDDL Yokadouma technician who is currently writing a book on the *Baka*, argues that the *Bantu* do not consider them to be full human beings. He is attempting to prove that existing information on the *Baka* has come from the *Bantu*, who always speak in their place. According to Simon, the *Bantu* consider the *Baka* as their alienable property, and do not hesitate to refer to "my *Baka*," or, even worse, to other *Bantu* as imbeciles by saying, "You're behaving like a *Baka* Pygmy."

Hence it is no surprise that, for the inhabitants of Le Bosquet, community forests are a godsend. The *Baka* hope to be able to replace their thatch with corrugated metal. Under one section of the simple management plan, they are planning to set up a wood-processing unit.⁴⁴ They also intend to build a meeting-house and to appraise the forest's non-timber products. In response to the question regarding whom will direct the work, they all chorus, "The SDDL." The *Baka* do not say much about their everyday life (Ballif 1992). They are all awaiting the *manna* of the community forest.

Anyone who speaks with ease about community forests inspires admiration from the illiterate. Women and elderly, in particular, are excluded from discussion, because they know nothing of the new jargon. It is thus quite clear that community forests hold the seeds of exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination. But the *Baka* do not worry about the future. "The NGO will finish what it has started in Mouangué le Bosquet. We have no doubt of this."

⁴³ These include YeDonga, YeDzembe, YeEsilo, YeMonbito, YeWala, YeMakombo, YeKolou, Yelikemba, and YeKpototo.

⁴⁴ Small-scale processing will take place with the help of Vandikhout, a mobile training center brought in by the SDDL and equipped with a double motor mill, a chainsaw for felling, and a groove-cutter for making rafters and laths. Vandikhout takes its inspiration from SWIFT (Solomon Western Islands Fair Trade) in Papua-New Guinea.

The increasingly sedentary *Baka*'s enthusiasm for community forestry is clearly related to the disdain with which they are treated by the *Bantu*, and the lack of any established location for their farming activities. Fundamentally, the *Baka* are looking for partners to support them in their enduring struggle with the *Bantu*.

Nevertheless, with the exception of the particular case of the *Baka*, and given that the *Koozimé* do not allocate space according to the metric system, it is clear that community forests do not—at least for the moment—provide a satisfactory political response to the need for resource management and conservation, or for local empowerment. The community forestry formula risks turning local classification systems upside down, without putting a viable alternative in its place.

CONCLUSIONS

DECENTRALIZATION AND THE TEST OF TIME

Unclear in everyday language, and imprecise in political language, “decentralization” is a foreign word. The English speak of self-government to refer to the idea of local government, emphasizing self-administration by local authorities. For the absolute evil of centralization, there is the radical remedy of decentralization. In Cameroon, in order to improve local people's lives, to manage the forests sustainably, to better distribute the fruits of growth, and to decentralize political life, the Government of Cameroon has opted, among other things, for the recipe of community and council forests. In a word, it is an attempt to allow local development in Cameroon.

But would there be community forests in East Cameroon without the initiative of the NGOs? And in promoting these schemes, have they really informed and trained village communities? It is one thing to help local people find their way through the political and administrative hurdles to secure a community forest, and quite another to equip them intellectually and technically to speak of the forest and how they intend to manage it. What role can community forests play in villages that are hostage to the NGOs and foresters? It could be considered pretentious always to be teaching. As one writer states, “The promises are relentlessly repeated and the experiences constantly reproduced. How can each failure be explained as an opportunity for another reprieve?” (Gilbert 1997).

While it may be true that democracy is characterized, in particular, by the principle of the separation of executive, legislative, and judicial powers, the choice of officials, the organization of free and transparent elections, accountability, and the demands for decentralization in East Cameroon do not form part of that logic. Between local development, community forestry, the forest populations' customs and traditions, land tenure systems, and the transfer of powers, decentralization has different meanings to different actors. With little regard for complaints, it is the one who appoints and decrees who keeps the “democratic” loyalties of Cameroon (Sindjoun, 1996).

In the current community forestry process, the inevitable setbacks are accentuated:

- Failure to recognize the legitimacy of traditional decision-making structures (Oyono 2002);

- Failure to comply with the subsidiarity principle⁴⁵ and its implications (Bigombé Logo, 2003);
- “Infantilization” of local people;
- Imposition of an arbitrary standard of communitarianism.

Nevertheless, there is no shortage of land ownership studies in francophone Africa (Diaw 1997). Since colonial times, land tenure relations have been studied and abundantly published.⁴⁶ Can we believe that local power is being strengthened if, through the new law, central authorities are imposing new limits and controls?

It is because of this centralist paradigm that land specialization and, later, the dichotomy between forest and farmland developed in sub-Saharan Africa (Karsenty et al. 1997; Diaw and Oyono 1998b). Bigombé (1997) notes that Cameroon’s forestry system, as structured by the 1973 and 1981 laws, is still fundamentally analogous to the provisions of the colonial decrees of May and July 1946 and March 1958. The consequence of this colonial legislation was the proclamation and forced implementation of land development policies and land and state property laws devoid of any fundamental legitimacy (Vabi et al. 2000: 5).

One should not be surprised, then, that these communities—particularly those with an oral tradition, who are generally illiterate and for whom dialogue has always been the primary means of understanding and being understood—should defer to an administration that acts in the name of texts that mean nothing to them, require complex procedures with which they are not familiar, and that is represented by public servants who, despite the color of their skin, are still foreigners.

Living without Community Forests

In the Somalomo district, no community forest, council forest, or logging project has been developed, though there are several “development” projects run by nuns. In Essiengbot and Somalomo, even though local people are aware of the new forestry legislation, there has been no rush to apply for community forests. What explains their indifference?

In Essiengbot, the nuns’ residence, which had temporarily housed the Community Forest Project, has been reclaimed by the Diocese of Doumé/Abong-Mbang, and is now inhabited by Polish nuns who were running the health center and the workshops on sewing and social and home economics. The chief and elders of Essiengbot said, “We are happy that the nuns have come back. At least with them we know we will be able to get medicine when we go to the dispensary. That wasn’t the case while they were away. Our daughters are learning to cook and to sew, they will be given first aid training, and our children are being taught well at school. At least that is something concrete.”

In Essiengbot, we have what Ela (1982) calls “European enclaves,” that is, islands of modernity at the edge of the village. The clearest examples of this are a baroque church, an imposing presbytery, a school, a dispensary, and a carpentry workshop. In the *Koozimé* context, the

⁴⁵ The 1994 law and its implementing decree employ the subsidiarity principle, according to which powers are transferred to the entity closest to the citizens that can exercise them most effectively.

⁴⁶ Some of the pioneers are Guy A. Kouassigan (1985. *Afrique: Révolution ou diversité des possibles*, Paris: l’Harmattan), Raymond Verdier (land tenure), Elias T. Olawale (1961. *La nature du droit coutumier africain*, Paris: Présence Africaine), P.F. Gonidec, René Gendarme, Victor Gasse, and Paul Bohannon (land tenure).

Catholic Church failed by preaching too many restrictions and too many clichés (monogamy, fidelity, and no sex before marriage). This is still true today. Several generations of nuns and priests have chosen to return home because, as the parish’s permanent deacon, Jules Edouang, said in 1997, “These people understand nothing of the Gospel.”

So what does an East Cameroon village look like when there is not yet a community forest? Jean Paul Zemenéa of the *Zienga Mileme* CIG summarized the situation. By the light of a storm lamp, we talked about life in the village. For Jean Paul, the Community Forest mountain was still only a molehill. “Apart from the 4-wheel-drive cars we see around, the development workers giving lessons throughout the village, tourists invited by the NGO officials, documentaries being made to show Kompia’s poverty to the world, the only difference is more problems in our daily life: having to have our wood weighed, declaring our bush meat, not working the land set aside for the community forest, getting the old men who don’t know what they’re talking about to keep quiet....” This indoctrination in the absence of cooperation, the development of tourism, and the exclusion of elders from decision-making are all proof that the community forestry formula is not the right one for decentralization in East-Cameroon. What should be done? Sow the cassava field, or submit applications to an interminable process for the right to make use of a community forest?

The All-purpose Community Forest

The current discussion on community forests gives the younger generations the impression that there is a miracle solution. To older men interviewed in the villages studied, it looked more like old wine in new bottles. They would all have died of hunger if they had waited around for the proposed training to produce the calculated results. Koum, a patriarch from Kompia, was convinced that nothing was worth more than his plate of *Kamakouma* with a good glass of *matango* or *otondol*⁴⁷, while waiting for the community forests to bring a better life. He believed that all the cocoa, coffee, logging and community forests and fields had brought nothing but new problems, without any lasting solutions. Some outsiders, promising miracles, fill their terms of reference with gloom and doom, describing dying villages—but behind this is really nothing but disdain for local customs. For Koum and many other patriarchs, “Ideologies aside, these false promises also lead to hunger, more down-and-outs, disease and death, because the forest dies.” For him, it is time for these white-collar prophets to change their strategy. Whether talking about school, healthcare for all, water systems, rural electrification, road maintenance or better public services, they should stop showering local people with ideas that have no substance.

The head of the Lomié Forestry Post stated that the Lomié case was exceptional, because the SDDL had submitted several community forest applications. Once the management agreements were signed, he had the impression that there was something like an electoral campaign, where each logging company brought food, wine and other enticements to the local populations to negotiate their logging contracts with the villages. He said, “They only seem interested in the timber; and one thing is for sure, we will be intransigent with any logging that doesn’t comply with the simple management plan.”

The Ngola’s community forest management committee delegate, who lives in Lomié, said, “It’s been a complete mess since the Lomié community forest management agreements were signed.

⁴⁷ Palm wine.

Each family tries to negotiate the marketing of the timber to their advantage, so you end up with three contracts for the same forest. Some local leaders spend nights in the Abong/Mbang inns and come back with new clothes, foodstuffs, red wine, and sometimes even whisky. There is a lot wrong with this. And the worst is that they are accountable to *absolutely* no-one.” Many retired public servants and elites see community forests as a get-rich-quick scheme. As mentioned earlier, almost all the board members live in town. For them, the community forest is just *gombo*.

WAITING FOR THE IMPLEMENTING TEXTS

While waiting for the accompanying regulatory laws on decentralization in Cameroon, investment in community forest establishment in the East has reached a dead-end. The excessive technical, financial and human costs, the misadventures of the zoning plan, the thrall of the management agreement, and top-down and technocratic technical services are all obstacles that should encourage policy makers to realign their aim. It should not be, as it is now, virtually impossible for an ordinary village to establish a community forest without the aid or support of an international NGO. While recognizing the role played by support NGOs in the process, we should not lose sight of their limitations: their treatment of local people as children, their arbitrary and standardized model of “community,” and the implications of their failure to comply with the subsidiarity principle. This research suggests that CIG and association leaders speak the official language, but do not represent their villages, or if they do, it is not in the way intended by the laws on associations and community forests.

In other words, the State must use the 1994 law to promote real decentralization. If not, the existing local management logic will always be denied and local partners excluded and “community forest” will remain an empty slogan, where local populations only hold insecure and temporary access to community forests. The tools and processes of decentralization are chronically exogenous, support and extension committees for community forest implementation are everywhere, political clientelism is ubiquitous, conflict among the State, NGOs, committees and local communities has proliferated, and the devolution of power is incomplete.

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The Decentralization, Accountability and the Environment effort aims to identify and promote policies and laws essential for effective, efficient, and equitable decentralization, including those establishing accountable representative authorities for local communities in participatory natural resource management; laws specifying the distribution of decision-making powers over nature among state authorities, civil, and private bodies; laws assuring just recourse; and laws ensuring an enabling environment for civil action. Through informed analysis, the effort aims to influence national-level policy-makers to develop environmentally sound decentralization policies and an enabling environment for civic action concerning environmental policy and its implementation. It reaches this audience directly and through the international financial and donor organizations, environmental policy research institutions, and international and local non-governmental organizations involved in environmental policy matters. This effort supports research on existing decentralization policies and on the enabling environment for civic action. To further these goals

it conducts research jointly with independent policy-focused institutions, the preliminary results of which are presented in this series.

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