

## 1 Introduction

Stories told by environmental campaigners, policy-makers and some scientists about deforestation and savannisation have long and widely been accepted as truths. However, they have had to be reconsidered in the light of new insights gained from a combination of analyses in climate and vegetation history, ecology, social/environmental anthropology and history. These new perspectives on forest ecology have turned former 'truths' into 'environmental narratives' or 'myths', while emphasising how these myths have legitimised certain behaviour and ideas.

After sketching the setting within which policy debates on sustainable management of tropical rainforests take place, this article explores the implications of such new perspectives for sustainable forest management. If some current forests have not always been forest, and if they have always been shaped by a variety of factors including human exploitation, then their loss or 'degradation' is problematic mainly for those applying a relatively narrow time-scale. If assumptions of equilibrium and climax vegetation are indeed false, then ecological sustainability in forest management is no longer a 'natural given'. If one embraces the idea of combinations of contingent factors shaping dynamic equilibria in the context of tropical rainforests; if one accepts that there is hardly any 'primary' rainforest, but rather patches of various stages of 'secondary' growth, then to *which* (combination) of stages should a forest manager return if he or she intends to manage a forest 'sustainably'? It implies that sustainable forest management involves choosing one dynamic equilibrium over others.

Questions also arise over who should make such choices. The social dimensions of sustainability in forest management are usually associated with respecting local tenure arrangements, and with some form of local community involvement or co-management. This article argues that to be meaningful, local involvement in tropical forest management should start as early as the strategic planning phases, when the major choices are made regarding the types, restrictions and location of forest exploitation. In West African settings, however, major dilemmas arise in whom to co-operate with in organising co-management, given

# New Perspectives on Forest Dynamics and the Myth of 'Communities':

## *Reconsidering Co-management of Tropical Rainforests in Cameroon*

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that 'community' is frequently a myth obscuring complex social differences, dynamics and local power relations. The second part of this article explores these dynamics and their implications for co-management in a particular case around forest resource tenure in Cameroon.

## **2 Blueprints for management of tropical rainforests**

The threat of irreparable loss of tropical rainforests has mobilised numerous countries and non-governmental organisations for their 'sustainable management'. A variety of influences, from structural adjustment programmes stressing the importance of sustainable environmental management, to environmentalist campaigns depicting the earth as one system, have turned tropical rainforests into a matter of global concern. This explains (and legitimates) the current involvement of global institutions in forest management: organisations of states, international financial institutions, trans-national companies, and international environmental and development organisations (Hajer 1997: 14; Milton 1996: 179–180). Such institutions take individual and sovereign states as the main agencies regulating human activities, and grant them a central role in implementing and enforcing the set of mechanisms for environmental management. Nevertheless, alliances of these international organisations, together with their national counterparts, put pressure on southern countries to manage their surviving tropical rainforests sustainably.

Ideas, people, money and resources circulate within this apparatus of international institutions. Some authors argue that this apparatus organises the production of forms of knowledge and types of power, linking them through strategies and programmes (Ferguson 1990; Escobar 1998) – although not without contestation. The environment debate can thus be considered as an arena in which the meanings of such key concepts as sustainability and development are contested, along with accounts of environmental change. Some actors are more influential in such struggles than others, depending on their financial positions and their capacities to influence public and political agendas.

This apparatus nevertheless influences the content of forest policy and projects in southern, indebted, countries. Civil servants in capital cities usually write such policy texts, often in co-operation with foreign consultants. Usually, these writers lack detailed knowledge of local situations (or have difficulties in integrating their knowledge into such texts). Time and other organisational constraints do not allow them to acquire such knowledge, so that problems that occur in quite dissimilar contexts are simplified and formulated in identical terms. Important decisions on planning for development and environmental management thus come to be based on narratives and 'cultural policy paradigms' (Hoben 1995; Ferguson 1990: 258). Such a narrative '...tells us how things were in an earlier time when people lived in harmony with nature, how human agency has altered that harmony, and of the calamities that will plague people and nature if dramatic action is not taken soon' (Hoben 1995: 3). Not only do such paradigms describe the problem, they also prescribe its solution, leading to blueprints for action. By putting their resources into action, by spending the money they have been charged with spending, by 'moving money', development agencies and bureaucrats also justify their own existence (Tendler in Ferguson 1990: 70).

## **3 New perspectives on forest ecology: major political implications**

Policies and projects regarding sustainable forest management are usually built on conventional ideas about forest ecosystems, which rely heavily on notions of equilibrium, climax vegetation and system regulation. Estimates of carrying capacities and maximum sustained yield levels are based on models founded on assumptions of predictable and linear growth patterns in stable environments (but see Leach *et al.* 1997: 12). In contrast, so-called 'new ecologists' focus on dynamics. Central themes are 'spatial and temporal variability, dynamic, non-equilibrium processes and histories of disturbance events' (Leach *et al.* 1997: 13–14). Recognising the significance of contingency and path-dependency; current landscapes are seen as coincidental results-for-the-moment of a series of human interventions and ecological changes (Leach 1999: 5).

Policy is about reducing the difference between a dreaded – or current – situation and a desired

situation, a difference that is felt to be problematic. In conventional ideas on sustainable forest management, the desired situation mirrors conceptions of what the forest is generally thought to have been like in the past. Yet new perspectives on forest ecology relate the image of that past to a particular historical period and thereby shed a different light on the current situation. Ichikawa's historical ecological research in the Ituri forest in the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, has substantiated that centuries of local forest exploitation changed the light conditions in the forest, redistributed seeds, and concentrated organic material and minerals near places of residence. In secondary forests, more fruit-trees occur and run-wild crops attract game. Current 'pristine' Equatorial African rainforests have thus been shown to be the historical product of long-term human habitation and exploitation (Ichikawa 1999).

Such ideas imply that ecological sustainability in forest management is no longer a 'natural given', but involves choosing one dynamic equilibrium over others. In forest management, this type of choice – if made – usually takes place in the phase of strategic planning. Strategic planning consists of decision-making on types of land use, land use objectives, desired future forest and management activities (Bos 1994: 45–7). It involves decision-making on such major issues as the relative importance of timber exploitation *vis-à-vis* other forms of forest use. This is a crucial phase, as it provides the outlines for subsequent phases of decision-making (Vellema and Maas 1999: 4). Such choices will affect local people whose livelihoods largely depend on forest resources. If one seriously wishes to involve local populations in decision-making on management of tropical rainforest in a meaningful way, therefore, co-management should start as early as the strategic planning phase.

Yet questions arise as to who is to make this choice of one dynamic equilibrium over others, and who should be involved in strategic planning. These issues become even more important in the light of the unequal power positions of the various actors involved, and in view of historical evidence of the social unrest and violence resulting from forest classifications. Whom to co-operate with in organising co-management? The Cameroonian case,

which I now go on to explore, will illustrate that there is no straightforward answer to this question.

#### **4 Cameroon: Unequal power relations affecting co-management**

Tropical rainforests are the subject of diverse, and often contradictory, interests. Hunting/gathering, agricultural and agro-industrial activities, biodiversity conservation and commercial logging all take place in these areas. In order to accommodate such a multitude of interests, forest managers usually turn to zoning. Zoning is often considered a purely technical matter, yet it directly affects local people whose livelihoods largely depend on forest resources. Zoning easily becomes a tool in the hands of a powerful stakeholder, or coalition of stakeholders.

In the Equatorial African context, forests and timber carry immense commercial value. Decision-making is, therefore, still highly centralised, with the State and logging companies amongst the most important and powerful actors. Forests are valuable not only because of the profits derived from the timber itself, but also because a whole apparatus exists that profits from distributing the right to exploitation of this timber. Timber rights are strategically important resources, instruments in achieving and maintaining power. Consequently, the political elite cannot be considered as neutral in decision-making on forest management.

In southern Cameroon, a draft zoning plan was developed without the involvement of local populations. Nor could local people exert any formal influence on its practical consequences, such as the arrival of a logging company in the forests connected to their village. Meetings between logging companies and village chiefs and notables would be confined to establishing the 'gifts' to be provided prior to exploiting the neighbouring forest. Such 'negotiations' with local people do not take place on an equal footing, not least because the latter lack knowledge of timber prices on the world market. Furthermore, local populations have no formal means to withdraw their permission or to apply any other sanction should the logging company fail to live up to the promises made (van den Berg and Biesbrouck 2000: 26–7).

A co-management setting entails discussions and negotiations between the various stakeholders. Yet stakeholders are highly differentiated in their interests, political and economic power, and capacities to voice and defend their views. They are not all equally equipped to participate in a co-management process, so the mere act of putting the various stakeholders around a table will not necessarily result in a form of consensus acceptable to all.

Even amongst local people, there are important imbalances of power, and these influence people's respective dealings with other stakeholders in co-management settings. Different local groups are affected differently by logging activities and other measures influencing resource availability, and each cannot be expected to defend the concerns of those with contradictory interests. Furthermore, urban elites and certain rural people are more likely than others to profit from the presence of external actors, or to form alliances with them. For example Bantu men, and particularly the elite, are in a better position than women or Bagyeli to make use of opportunities to influence – or even appropriate – the collective compensation given to villages (van den Berg and Biesbrouck 2000: 29).

## 5 Communities: a myth?

Working with 'communities' has become a cultural policy paradigm alongside, and linked to, attempts at sustainable forest management. This is apparent in international discussions of the social dimensions of forest sustainability, particularly in the principles, criteria and indicators developed by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), International Tropical Timber Organisation (ITTO), and Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) among other organisations. While their lists vary, several themes recur. First, customary principles of forest tenure and management should be recognised and respected. Second, as local livelihoods often depend on forest resources, it is considered appropriate to involve local communities in the definition and implementation of forest management plans. This social dimension of sustainability thus more or less presupposes a form of co-management. Third, in the process of decision-making on forest management, vulnerable stakeholders such as

indigenous peoples should be granted special attention over others. Finally, distribution of the economic benefits of commercial timber production among all stakeholders should be fair (see also Parren *et al.* 2001).

In Cameroon, international pressure led to recent legal and institutional changes regarding forest management (Ekoko 2000). Partly as a result, current Cameroonian policy offers some (limited) possibilities for local people to participate in decision-making. At the introduction of the 1994 Cameroon forest law, both government officials and representatives of international agencies emphasised publicly that there would be a considerable increase in the potential role of 'rural communities' in forest management. In practice, some of these legal possibilities remained merely rhetoric; others turned out to be prone to abuse or even enhanced illegal exploitation (Djeumo 1998; Essama-Nssah and Gockowski 2000; Karsenty 1999: 154–55; Milol and Pierre 2000: 16–18, 29, 37).

Cameroonian forest law is especially ambiguous with respect to the definition of 'community'. The related application decree simply uses synonyms such as '*communauté*' and '*communautés riveraines*'. The section of the forest law on community forests uses the notion of '*communautés villageoises*', which formally refers to rural populations having created an acknowledged legal entity (Nkwinkwa 2001: 158). The most obvious format for such a legal entity is a GIC (*Groupe d'Initiative Commune*), yet in Cameroon, even a group of just three people can form a GIC. Early experiences with community forests revealed the problems of such a construction, particularly for the distribution of benefits from commercial logging in community forests. The absence of a clear definition of 'community' enabled the urban elite to devise creative, and lucrative, interpretations of the opportunities provided by the forest law (Djeumo 1998). In an attempt to circumvent this, the Community Forestry Unit of the relevant government ministry stressed 'maximum consultation' of all sections of the 'community' (Brown 1999: 26). Yet the concept of *communauté villageoise* itself remained obscure. By the end of 1999, the Cameroonian Minister of Environment and Forests asked his higher civil servants to reflect on the question of who belongs to a *communauté*

*villageoise*. The solution they arrived at designated membership as the entire population of a village or several neighbouring villages (Nkwinkwa, pers. comm. 2001). This solution seems surprising, given that many of these civil servants, born in or with kin living in such villages, have experienced that they are anything but coherent and homogeneous social units (see also, e.g. Van den Berg and Biesbrouck 2000: 32–5).

This ambiguity with respect to ‘community’ is by no means exclusive to Cameroon. All those planning participatory forms of forest management must construct local representation in order to be able to proceed (Ribot 1999: 23). For practical reasons they prefer a small number of units, and a few people per unit to serve as representatives during negotiations. The appeal of the term ‘community’ lies in the combination of its seeming concreteness and its mental connection with a bounded homogeneous group, whose members show solidarity among themselves and shared interests in a certain area (Leach *et al.* 1997: 7). On the basis of these assumptions, the obvious next step is to create a group or committee to represent ‘community’ interests. ‘If they don’t have a community we’ll make them form one, and then we’ll order them to participate...’, the director of a participatory forest regeneration project in South-west Cameroon said (Sharpe 1999: 39). This group or committee can then be engaged in consensus building and agreement with outside agencies in establishing forest management plans (Leach 1999: 2).

Social scientific literature has been paying attention to social differences and their implications for some time. More recently, debate has focused explicitly on the gap that exists between the assumptions underlying such concepts as ‘community’ and local realities.<sup>2</sup> Villages are not as clearly bounded, static and homogeneous as the notion of ‘community’ implies. Leach *et al.* (1997) and Burnham (2000: 20) suggest a parallel between the uncritical use of notions such as ‘community’ and mythic discourse, myths being commonly accepted stories expressing basic cultural understandings. In development discourse, terms like ‘community’ can conveniently obscure the internal differences that exist amongst such groups of people. Burnham follows Ferguson in arguing that, in some cases, their role is to conceal fundamental areas of social and political

contradiction. In the context of rainforest conservation, he says, many descriptions of so-called customary law are examples of such myths, tending to ‘freeze history’ and ‘create socially unrealistic fictions’ (Burnham 2000: 8–12).

Inspired by these authors, and given the ambiguity regarding the concept of ‘community’ in southern Cameroon, the article now turns to the tenure of forest resources by Bagyeli hunter-gatherers, analysed in its historical, social and politico-economic context. What can we learn with regard to ‘community’ by analysing such local tenure and its dynamics?

## 6 ‘Community’ in Bagyeli tenure of forest resources

In the Bipindi-Akom II region of southern Cameroon, Bagyeli ‘pygmies’ are a minority. Bantu speaking farmers live in villages that stretch along the passable roads, whereas Bagyeli usually live in settlements some distance away. Symbolic kinship relations, intricate economic links and administrative connections relate Bagyeli and Bantu. Leadership and representation are problematic throughout the region. In Bantu villages, development is greatly enhanced by mediation of the elite, whether current or retired civil servants who have returned to or maintain links with their village of birth. Bagyeli hardly ever become civil servants (let alone influential ones), so it is impossible to speak of a Bagyeli elite in this sense. Yet the first generation of Bagyeli to have received formal education plays a similar role<sup>3</sup>. Bagyeli are looked down upon and their power position *vis-à-vis* these Bantu farmers and administrative authorities is rather weak.

Despite many changes in the lives of Bagyeli hunter-gatherers, livelihoods still depend heavily on non-timber forest products (NTFPs). Bagyeli derive most of their food and earnings from uncultivated forest products, supplemented by agriculture and labouring for Bantu farmers. Some Bagyeli are professional traditional healers, the more famous earning a substantial income (Biesbrouck, in prep.). For Bantu farmers, uncultivated products are a welcome supplement to cultivated food and income from sales of cacao and food crops (van Dijk 2000).

Customary tenure arrangements have evolved to regulate the exploitation of these forest resources; arrangements integrated into daily life, without the need for distinct formal institutions. Two different, and partially overlapping, social entities play a role in the distribution of Bagyeli collective rights of access to natural resources.<sup>4</sup> Every person is identified as belonging to a residential unit (a base-camp), as well as being a member of particular sections of father's and mother's patri-clan (a House). Furthermore, 'good relations' are essential to access natural resources in the high forest (Biesbrouck 1999: 11–24).

Despite their interrelations, Bagyeli 'pygmies' and Bantu farmers cannot be considered as an homogeneous group. Furthermore, due to Bagyeli mobility, social units of tenure are not congruent with the geographical boundaries of the surrounding forest. An analysis of the dynamics of Bagyeli forest resource tenure suggests a number of further messages on the concept of 'community' (Biesbrouck 2001). These will be useful in future attempts to involve Bagyeli in 'sustainable' management of their forests, but may also carry broader relevance.

### 6.1 Changes in 'community' size over time

First, the size of such social units changes over time, largely in response to changing perceptions of resource value. Currently, in the context of hunting, Bagyeli consider forest space as subdivided into areas related to base-camps, even if these all belong to the same Bantu village, and inhabitants of other base-camps should respect these boundaries. Yet this has not always been the case. About a generation ago, unrelated Bagyeli from other base-camps associated with the same village could access hunting resources freely. While those from camps associated with other Bantu villages were expected to announce and explain their hunting activities, and could in principle be denied access, in practice this rarely occurred. First, bush-meat was abundant and not commercialised. Second, outsiders (especially if they settled) could be turned into (classificatory) relatives through broad interpretations of the kinship idiom, and eventually even incorporated into the House. In other words, in the course of a

generation, Bagyeli have limited the group of people having access to valuable forest resources to those living in the same base-camp or their relatives and affines (Biesbrouck 1999: 57–74).

### 6.2 Bagyeli-villagers interrelations, and (inter)national influences

The reason for this reduction in size of Bagyeli right-holding group illustrates a second key message regarding 'community': Bagyeli tenure is interrelated to that of villagers, and the whole is influenced by events at the (inter)national level. Considering this in a historical context provides an interesting parallel with current plans for zoning the area.

Bagyeli tenure can be understood only in relation to villagers' exploitation and management of the same forest area and resources. Bagyeli share with villagers membership of the clans and villages distributing collective rights to resources; access to the same forest space and resources, and important parts of the normative framework underlying rights (including classifications of space and notions of connection between social entities and resources; Biesbrouck 1999: 42–6).

Until the 1950s, villages shared their forests through kinship and other alliances. Bagyeli pygmies could hunt in forests related to neighbouring villages, while Bantu villagers appreciated the bush-meat and healing capacities, which they sometimes provided. However, in the 1950s, Bantu became more protective of village forest boundaries, ceasing to make such alliances; from then on 'every village had its own affairs' (Biesbrouck 1999: 63).

This was largely due to villagers attributing new values to land. In particular, the colonial government put much effort into enhancing the productivity and profitability of cacao cultivation for export (Rietsch 1992: 277–8). Newly created administrative structures, such as the *communes rurales* (1952) and *bureaux de village* (1954), were to strengthen the control of the central authorities over rural populations, and particularly over cash crop producers (Biesbrouck 1999: 261–62). Farmers had their own reasons for cultivating cacao, which had become an important means to

fulfil tax obligations in a context of rising cacao prices. It was also an important way to mark and consolidate land tenure in the context of growing scarcity of land near the roads. Cacao thus became a strategic tool in the struggle for agricultural space, and the defence of village forest boundaries is at least partly explained by fear of losing control over the forest for cacao.

That restrictions at that particular time extended to the Bagyeli hunter-gatherers, even though they hardly farmed cacao, reflects interaction with broader factors, especially the unrest among farmers caused by government classification of forests in the late 1940s and early 1950.<sup>5</sup> The colonial authorities in Cameroon classified vast forest areas to facilitate the issue of exploitation permits to logging companies. Commercial timber exploitation was considered a 'rational' way to manage forests, with silvicultural operations held to enrich them. The forested areas were perceived as enormous, impenetrable and with negligible human populations, enabling them to be defined as 'vacant lands without masters' in line with earlier ideas around German crown lands (see Fisiy 1992). By 1948, French logging companies in the Kribi region had been granted 25-year concessions covering at least 714,000 hectares, and were nearly ready to start exploitation. They needed guarantees that the *coupes* would continue to provide timber, and, therefore, that these areas would absolutely not be converted to agriculture. The forest service considered classification of forests into the domain of the state as a normal procedure to achieve this.

In April 1953, the chief of the forest service instructed the heads of all forest inspections to protect the state forest domain against encroachments from farmers; to oppose farmers' demands for recognition of rights to lands in 'classified' forests, and to 'carefully watch' claims made by farmers in yet-unclassified forests. The latter would, it was argued, lead these 'homogeneous massifs' to become as leaky as sieves, endangering their conservation and management for timber.<sup>6</sup> In the same period, other natural resources, such as game, were also subjected to state regulations.

Farmers in the area feared that forest classification would mean losing their rights over them. They

wanted to preserve the possibility of creating new forest fields, perceiving the forest as advancing towards their villages, threatening to choke them if not pushed back. They employed several strategies to secure their land rights. One, using cacao plantations as *marqueurs de terre*, served also to convince the colonial authorities that the terrain was already used (*mise en valeur*), not 'vacant without master' and thus available for classification. Another strategy was to file requests for the official recognition of the individual (or collective) appropriation of lands. The more eloquent and influential men overtly showed their anger, fiercely expressing their dissatisfaction in official meetings and letters. For example, in 1948 when the classification committee studied the situation of the Kienké Nord forest, the authorities were received by hundreds of farmers who overtly questioned their legitimacy; the atmosphere was particularly unpleasant (Biesbrouck 1999: 66–71). Among these farmers, the administrative attempts at forest classification led to an increasing preoccupation with questions of ownership.

It was in this context that farmers denied Bagyeli access to forests, arguing that near farmers' fields, Bagyeli would only be tempted to steal agricultural crops. Unequal power relations left Bagyeli little means to oppose these restrictions. Due to their mobility and dependence on forest resources, they felt the effects of reduced areas for hunting and gathering on their daily lives. Membership of a residential unit and House/patrilineage, and increasingly, good personal relationships with right-holders, became more important as a means of access to uncultivated forest resources. After some time Bagyeli themselves took up farmers' ideas and applied them to unrelated Bagyeli belonging to other base-camps connected to the same village.

## 7 Conclusion

This article links new perspectives on forest dynamics to insights gained from political ecology (and studies of science/policy processes) – focusing on the apparatus involved in forest management – and to social scientific discussions on the concept of 'community'. Within this apparatus, certain concepts serve as vehicles for the circulation of myths, and 'community' is one of them. This

concept, and the underlying myth, are part of 'blueprints for action', of 'cultural policy paradigms' for forest management.

New perspectives on forest dynamics imply that ecological sustainability in forest management is no longer a natural 'given': sustainable management involves choosing one dynamic equilibrium over others. Such new perspectives have major political consequences for co-management: if one wishes to involve local populations in decision-making in a serious and meaningful way, then co-management should start as early as the strategic planning phase. This brought up the question of who should be involved in strategic planning; an important issue in

view of the immense commercial value of timber combined with the differences among stakeholders in interests, political and economical power, and capacities to voice and defend their views.

The environmental anthropological research on local tenure of forest resources in southern Cameroon summarised in this article joins a wider effort to disclose the myths underlying the concept of 'community'. Instead of simply replacing this notion with another, this article emphasises that 'communities' in local tenure may be rather more complex than some policy makers continue to assume, and dynamic, not least in response to state and international attempts at forest management.

## Notes

- \* Those readers who wish to share their views on the article with the author are encouraged to do so. She can be contacted by Email at karen.biesbrouck@planet.nl
1. Co-management can be defined as '... working partnerships between the key stakeholders in the management of a given forest' (Carter in Brown, 1999: 1). It is about joint problem definitions, negotiation and coming to agreements. Several divisions of tasks are conceivable, varying from situations in which local populations have almost exclusive decision-making power, to situations in which professional foresters hold most of such power – with local people acting as informants and/or labourers.

2. See for example, Brown (1999: 4, 24); van Est & Persoon (in press); Hilyard, Hegde, Wolvekamp & Reddy (1998: 34–35), and Mandondo (2000).
3. Most members of this Bagyeli 'elite' are now members of the board of a Bagyeli association, CODEBABIK (Comité de Développement des Bagyeli des Arrondissements de Bipindi Kribi) (Ngoun 2000).
4. For further details, see Biesbrouck (1999).
5. This section is based on letters and reports from the National Archives at Yaoundé.
6. This fear was grounded, as the example of Ivory Coast was to show (Parren 1994).

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