

From: 2000 Hunters +
Gatherers in the Modern
World, P.P. S. Schweitzer,
M. Biebele & R. Hitchcock,
eds. NY: Berghahn

Chapter 21

CENTRAL AFRICAN GOVERNMENT'S AND
INTERNATIONAL NGOs' PERCEPTIONS
OF BAKA PYGMY DEVELOPMENT

Barry S. Hewlett

In a recent paper, Hitchcock and Holm (1993) state that "external domination of hunter-gatherer societies is increasingly structured by the bureaucratic state rather than the market." The state establishes settlement schemes, social services, land-tenure policies, and political representation policies, all of which influence the lives of hunter-gatherers. While the market continues to dramatically impact African forest foragers ("pygmies"), especially international logging interests and local demands for game meat, the role of the bureaucratic state is rapidly increasing. This chapter examines perceptions of Baka foragers by government and nongovernment officials (of international NGOs and PVOs) who have responsibilities for establishing and implementing state policies and programs for the Baka.

The essay focuses on the Cameroonian government's project to sedentarize and socially and economically integrate the Baka into Cameroonian society. Most of the Cameroonian government officials who were interviewed are responsible for establishing and coordinating the sedentarization program, while the international NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) and PVOs (private voluntary organizations) are the primary agents responsible for implementing the Baka program. The aim of this chapter is to describe the nature and intensity of government and NGOs' perceptions of Baka with the hope of promoting greater understanding and respect for the different perspectives, which may in turn

contribute to better services for Baka foragers. The essay is written with the assumption that how a particular problem is viewed, conceived, and defined patterns and limits the ways it can be solved. For instance, de Waal (1989) indicates that Europeans have a Malthusian view of famine, which emphasizes lack of available food. Consequently, Europeans' response to famine is usually to send food, when in fact many other factors may be contributing to the crisis (crowding at refugee camps, lack of medicines, lack of seasonal employment, etc.).

While several similarities exist between the government's and NGOs' views of tropical forest foragers, the differences are dramatic and often lead to conflicts in development programs. The nature of the conflicting views is illustrated in the following remarks from the annual report of an American NGO working with government officials in the Central African Republic to manage a tropical forest reserve, a project that is impacting the lives of Aka forest foragers. The author of the report indicates that "the success or failure of the conservation effort depends on the supportive attitude and active participation of the local population—and this includes all government functionaries assigned to work [on the project]. In-roads are being made with the local population. But, unfortunately, the same can not be said concerning the Central African government representatives. They have all been hostile, uncooperative, corrupt, greedy, jealous, and often-times vindictive. Local authorities continually hassle the [NGO] personnel with everything from unsubstantiated rumors to weekly summons to idiotic investigations into the 'lack of moral character' of the whites in the project sending letters full of outright lies to authorities in Nola and Bangui."

While NGO officials often have difficulty with government officials, the latter often question the motivations and interests of international NGOs working on state development projects. For instance, a Cameroonian official who establishes Baka policies has published a report that questions the motivations of French, American, and Dutch volunteers who have worked on development projects for the Baka in Cameroon. He entitles a section of his manuscript "Volunteers for Progress: Humanitarianism or Search for the Exotic." He suggests that many international volunteers may be serving because they cannot find work in their home country, or are searching for adventure and touristic curiosities or to conduct research for personal academic gain. He suggests that missionaries also have ulterior motives for working with Baka—to learn traditional Baka medicines in order to develop new Western drugs and to facilitate the exporting of ivory, cacao, and coffee.

The most illustrative example of these contrasting perceptions comes from the film made by Phil Agland on the Baka. In the U.S. it was a National Geographic Special entitled "Baka: People of the Forest," while

in Britain it was a two-hour documentary shown on the BBC. This rather romantic portrayal of the Baka shows them collecting honey and highlights the important role of women in their society and the active role that fathers play in child-care. This film received excellent reviews in the U.S. and Europe and is often shown in U.S. universities to demonstrate the life of pygmies or foragers. However, the film was not shown on Cameroonian television because the government thought it gave a negative and primitive view of the country. Cameroonian television has broadcast several news stories about how the government, missionaries, and NGOs are assisting in the social development of the Baka by training them in farming techniques and providing formal education.

Such contrasting views are not limited to state projects for the Baka. The aforementioned Hitchcock and Holm article on the San is full of examples of conflicts between Tswana government officials and international NGO consultants, anthropologists, and officials. Ndagala presented a paper at the London CHAGS 4 meeting in which he described “doomed” versus “free” views of the Hadza, which were essentially government (“doomed,” meaning a primitive stage of evolution that would either die out or needed the help of civilized peoples to survive) versus anthropologists’ views (“free,” meaning harmonious hunters, gleeful gatherers) of the Hadza (Ndagala 1988). He called for greater communication between government officials and anthropologists.

This essay is similar to Ndagala’s in that it articulates contrasting views of those who are working toward the “development” of a hunting and gathering group, but is different in that it tries to point out some similarities as well as differences, and tries to explain why differences exist and why the different groups feel so intensely about their particular views.

Background

The Baka live in the tropical forests of southern Cameroon, northern Congo, and Gabon; are Oubanguian speakers; utilize spears and traps as their most important hunting technique; are relatively highly assimilated into village culture since they have small farms; and spend three to four months per year in the forest. The Baka population is estimated to be around forty thousand.

The Cameroonian sedentarization program for the Baka goes back to the early 1960s. The government wanted Baka foragers as well as farmers in the forested area to move onto permanent settlements along major and secondary roads in order to improve health conditions and increase the population’s potential as a work force for cash crops. In 1968, Catholic missionaries started the East Cameroon Pygmy Project to get Baka to

move to large sedentary villages, away from other villagers, where missionaries could provide health, education, agricultural, and evangelical services. In 1975, the Government of Cameroon (GOC) established the Ministry of Social Affairs, which was responsible for improving the living conditions of marginal groups. The Baka were the only marginal group identified and targeted for intervention (eventually the Bakola foragers of southwestern Cameroon were included). The Ministry established the policies and directions of the Baka sedentarization program and provided some financial support. Most of the government’s money was utilized by Cameroonian anthropologists in the early 1980s to conduct preliminary studies of Bakola and Baka foragers (the Pygmy Research Unit of the Institute of Human Sciences was established to conduct the research) and to support field agents in towns with high concentrations of Baka. Some excellent research resulted from the government-sponsored studies (Loung and Godefroy 1986), and demonstrates the Cameroonian government’s concern about the impact of their interventions for Baka. The Dutch NGO is starting to conduct research before intervention programs for Baka are implemented.

While the GOC has established the sedentarization program (also called social-economic integration program), the Baka have not been forced to sedentarize. The GOC agents encourage this when possible, but they have not actively tried to move Baka to the road, and in fact have done little to contribute to Baka sedentarization. For the most part, Baka have moved to the road on their own.

The GOC established the Baka sedentarization program, but the implementation of the program has been left primarily up to international NGOs (such as the Dutch Cooperation [SNV] and the French Association of Volunteers for Progress) and PVOs (Catholic missionaries). The French and Dutch groups became involved through contacts with French and Dutch Catholic missionaries. The Dutch volunteers officially began their technical assistance to the sedentarization program in 1979, and their involvement and participation has gradually increased over the years. Currently, SNV has six technical assistants who provide agricultural extension and health education services to the Baka. SNV does not feel it has been very successful and is trying to reorganize its efforts to make the Baka program more community based and bottom-up rather than the reverse. The French volunteers work directly with the Catholic missionaries to provide health services to Baka. They currently provide two nurses and one community development agent to work with Baka.

The Catholic missionaries have had the greatest impact as they have contributed the longest, most intensive, and most consistent program to large sedentary Baka communities that they have established. Their interventions include: health education (clothing, housing, hygiene), literacy

training, agricultural education, leadership training to facilitate discussion of village issues, and evangelizing. As previously mentioned, the French volunteers work directly with missionaries in the Baka villages that they have established, while the Dutch work with Baka in different areas.

Thus, there are three groups involved with the Baka sedentarization program: the GOC, the SNV (Dutch Assistance), and Catholic missionaries with the assistance of French volunteers. GOC coordination of the Baka program is minimal, and each unit evaluates, sets priorities, and acts rather autonomously.

Methods

Government and international NGO staff that were responsible for the Baka sedentarization program were interviewed as part of a study of African tropical forest foragers being conducted by The World Bank (the result of that work is Bailey et al. 1992). Individuals from the Ministries of Social Affairs, Plan, Agriculture, and Higher Education and Scientific Research, Catholic missionaries, and SNV staff working with the Baka were interviewed. I was unable to meet with any of the French volunteers. Project reports (e.g., annual reports and project evaluations) and published papers of the various governmental and nongovernmental agencies were also examined.

There are two important limitations to this study: (1) it focuses only on those directly involved with implementation of the sedentarization program—it does not include the public's views of the Baka; and, (2) it does not discuss Baka views of the development process.

Finally, a cautionary note: the study discusses a generalized dichotomy. An inherent problem to this sort of discussion, it is that no particular individual clearly falls into one or the other perspective. There is a continuum of perspectives, and there are, of course, government officials who have perceptions similar to those of NGO officials and vice versa. But overall, the distinctive perceptions described provide a better understanding of some of the difficulties of government and international agencies working together on projects aimed at hunters and gatherers.

Underlying Differences in Perceptions

While talking to individuals responsible for Baka sedentarization, it became clear that the government officials' underlying perceptions about the nature of Baka and why they should help Baka were quite different from those of the NGO staff and missionaries.

Cameroonian government officials consistently mentioned the "evolution" of the Baka. Baka, while a nice people, were at an earlier and primitive stage of cultural evolution and needed assistance to move into the modern world. Ndagala calls this the "doomed" perspective of government officials—governments can either let these groups slowly die out or can help move them into the modern world. Cameroonian government officials were very proud of the fact that they were doing something to assist the Baka rather than just letting them slowly die out as was happening in some other central African countries. Some of the government officials' comments included the following:

1. The Baka are culturally evolving and moving *up*, and are currently in a difficult stage of evolution and therefore need government intervention.... Learning agriculture is the most important part of the sedentarization program, and other things will follow (e.g., better diet, health, money to attend school, money for taxes, identity card, etc.).
2. Their frequent residential mobility is an early stage of cultural evolution.
3. Sedentarization is a movement that is going on and is irreversible.
4. The Baka are evolving from a primitive to a modern stage where one *produces* and contributes to a national economy.

In the eyes of the Cameroon government officials, the Baka were at a low stage of evolution, had few redeeming characteristics, and had low social value. While there was a consistent theme of evolution and movement toward civilization, there was, of course, considerable variation in government officials' perceptions. The higher one went in the ministries, the more generalized and negative the comments about Baka. A secretary general, for instance, indicated that one sign of Baka's lower stage of evolution was their lowered mental capabilities. None of the junior-level government officials suggested this. Baka were noted as having extraordinary supernatural abilities and knowledge (e.g., their shamans are noted as especially good), but again these characteristics were perceived as an earlier stage of evolution.

The international NGO staff, missionaries, and consultant anthropologists, on the other hand, valued many aspects of Baka life. The Baka were at a higher rather than at a lower level of existence. Hunting-gathering Baka life was valued because it was close to nature, relatively egalitarian (special reports by SNV looked at the important role of women), and peaceful. The Baka had exceptional knowledge of the forest, were exceptionally good parents, and had emotionally and socially satisfying lives. The Baka needed to be protected from the assertive and exploitative

farmers as well as from the national government. They did not believe that social-economic integration was necessarily advantageous to the Baka. Baka autonomy from the villagers was their primary concern. There was a general mistrust of the motives of the government integration program—they thought the government wanted them to sedentarize and integrate simply to control them more easily and so they could pay taxes. NGO staff and missionaries were interested in teaching Baka to farm and become sedentary so they could not be exploited by the villagers and government officials.

The Impact of Underlying Perceptions on Identifying the Problems

Government, NGO, and missionary reports and evaluations gave similar reasons for targeting the Baka for special services and intervention: exploitation by Bantu farmers, poor health and nutrition, lack of education, and lack of integration into the national social-economic system. There was also general agreement as to why things were particularly bad for the Baka: deforestation and population increases have caused a depletion of forest game animals and wild plant foods, and have resulted in the increased exploitation of peoples with fewer resources. While similarities existed in the reports and interviews, there were differences in the emphasis or intensity given to a particular problem and the way in which a problem was articulated. The differences in intensity and articulation of problems reflect the underlying differences in perception described above.

1. *Baka are exploited by Bantu.* This was the primary problem and driving force for NGOs' and missionaries' activities, while it was a secondary or tertiary point for government officials. Missionaries were especially strong on this point and used it to explain why it was important to have Baka settlements some distance from those of farmers.
2. *Baka are not part of the national social-economic system.* This was the greatest concern for government officials. It is seen in the current name of the government's Baka program—it is no longer called the Baka sedentarization program; it is now called social and economic integration of the Baka. Government officials frequently mentioned that Baka did not contribute to the national economy with cash crops nor did they pay taxes. NGOs and missionaries, on the other hand, emphasized the point that Baka do not use community services, such as primary health care and public schools, and are not

part of political decision-making. NGOs and missionaries want Baka to participate in the national social-economic system, but for different reasons: they do not want the Baka to be exploited and want them to have self-determination.

3. *Baka have poor health and nutrition.* Government officials emphasized the lack of food, reporting that Baka frequently had to steal from farmers, that they lived only on salt, and that malnutrition was common. Government officials tended to view Baka life as nasty and brutish. NGOs and missionaries, on the other hand, emphasized the poor sanitary conditions: Baka did not wear shoes; use latrines; or wash themselves, their children, or their eating utensils.
4. *Baka lack formal education.* Government officials, NGOs, and missionaries agreed that Baka needed formal education, but NGOs and missionaries emphasized the importance of formal education to understanding and utilizing the political and economic system so that the Baka might be more independent, while government officials emphasized the importance of learning how to read and write so that the Baka could get jobs, start to contribute to the national economy, and participate in the mainstream community.

The Impact of Underlying Perceptions on Solving the Problems

There are also similarities in the actions that the government, NGOs, and missionaries list to remedy the above-mentioned problems: develop agricultural abilities of Baka, identify and establish Baka leaders to represent them at community meetings, decrease child mortality and morbidity, and educate Baka children. But as described above, the underlying differences in perceptions influence how the solution is articulated and why these particular actions are important and necessary.

Developing the Baka's capabilities for agriculture is a central solution for both NGOs and the government, but for different reasons. Missionaries and NGOs emphasize the point that farming is the best way that the Baka can become financially and dietarily independent from Bantu, while the government is interested in how increased agricultural activity will help to integrate Baka socially and economically into Cameroonian society. If Baka have farms—cash crops, in particular—they can pay for the cost of formal schooling, medications, and taxes. It is worth noting that neither the government nor the NGOs or missionaries feel that hunting and gathering and nomadism are viable options.

The establishment of hierarchy (i.e., community leaders) and formally educating Baka are also desired goals of the government and NGOs, but

again the emphases and articulation of these solutions are somewhat different. The government emphasizes integration into mainstream Cameroonian society, while the NGOs and missionaries emphasize independence from the exploitative Bantu.

Government documents seldom indicate an interest in maintaining or sustaining Baka culture. Missionaries' and NGOs' documents, on the other hand, list the importance of incorporating and maintaining Baka language, rituals, and traditional medicines.

It does seem somewhat ironic that with the adoption of agriculture, hierarchy, and formal education, few elements of Baka culture—e.g., egalitarian social relations, interactive styles, conflict resolution, sharing—would be left. What is maintained is what is perceived as culture (language, ritual, and medicines). Generally, both government officials and NGOs want the Baka to be more like them: sedentary, responsive to hierarchy, healthy, wealthy, and wise.

Resolving Conflicts

In many ways the government's and NGOs' agenda for Baka look very similar, but there are significant differences in their perceptions of Baka that can and do lead to conflicts. Understanding and resolving these conflicts can be difficult, but I think the recent work of Ross (1991) provides an insightful framework for analyzing ethnocentric and intergroup conflict. He identifies three different sources of conflict, which lead to three different proposals for effective conflict management. The three sources of intergroup conflict are intercultural miscommunication, psychocultural interpretation, and competition for scarce resources.

Intercultural miscommunication refers to conflict that arises or persists because different groups do not understand each other's styles of communication, belief systems, and behaviors. This study and Ndagala's have focused on this aspect of conflict between groups working with hunters and gatherers. In order to resolve this dimension of conflict, it is necessary to do what Ndagala advocated in his paper—create greater cooperation and communication between state officials and anthropologists. The parties involved (in this case, central African government officials and NGOs) need to meet regularly and articulate their philosophies and actions to each other.

The second source of conflict that needs to be considered is competition for scarce resources. How does an intervention program influence availability of jobs, land, access to medicines, education, etc.? It is necessary to understand and explore the nature of resources that are at stake with the Baka program. Resources are in very short supply in central

Africa at this time: government officials have not been paid for many months or years, Western medicines are hard to come by, formal education is more expensive than before and available to fewer people, and access to land is increasingly difficult. Central African farmers often do not want programs for Baka (or other forest forager populations) because it gives them greater access to land, medical supplies, education, and training. Government officials have to be responsive to the interests of the farmers as well as those of the Baka.

The third source of conflict, called psychocultural interpretation, draws attention to the mediating effects of shared and culturally reinforced mental representations of the world. It attempts to understand the *emotional intensity* and *ambiguity* of conflict by examining socialization patterns. This aspect of conflict is the least understood. It suggests that there are not only differences in behaviors and views, but that people have intense feelings about what they do. The intensity of these feelings may be ambiguous and difficult to articulate. These emotions develop as one grows up and learns particular social styles. Many government officials who are making policy decisions and implementing programs for Baka grew up in villages where formal education was difficult to come by, and infant and child mortality were high. Their parents or grandparents possibly lived a life in which illiteracy, high infant mortality, and inequality (e.g., forced labor by Europeans) were common. Government officials intimately know what village life is like, and many government officials have spent their adult life moving away from this lifestyle. While they often have positive memories of village life, they do not want to return to village conditions. European missionaries or international NGO staff, on the other hand, have little firsthand experience of what village life entails. NGOs and missionaries working on development projects for Baka grew up under much different conditions and are generally not living under village conditions while they are in central Africa. They certainly did not personally experience the negative consequences of village life, for example, high child mortality.

A better understanding of the various sources of conflict between government officials, NGOs, and missionaries on policies and programs for Baka or other forest forager populations can enhance the delivery of services to these populations. Whether or not these programs are appropriate is completely another issue, but there is a clear pattern of African governments and international NGOs working together more rather than less frequently to serve hunters and gatherers and other indigenous peoples. Therefore, the sorts of conflicts they encounter and the measures taken to resolve them might be useful and applicable to other parts of the world.

Conclusion

Seldom do anthropologists working with an international NGO on a development project for hunters and gatherers give much attention to views of government officials. Anthropologists have been trained to pay attention to the world-view, interests, and desires of the indigenous peoples. The government often becomes the villain because it has tremendous power and authority over indigenous peoples. In working and talking with Cameroonian government officials, I have come to better understand and respect their views (although I do not always agree with them). Cameroonian government officials work hard and are serious, highly motivated, well educated, and articulate. They feel strongly about their views, are trying to do what they can with the limited resources they have, and are trying to deal with missionaries and NGOs that they do not trust very much. This essay argues for greater understanding, communication, and empathy for the views and actions of government officials. Government officials are playing an increasingly important role in decisions about hunters and gatherers, yet anthropologists and international NGOs involved with development programs for indigenous peoples generally dismiss the abilities and qualifications of government officials. This neglect of the government role ironically often leads to more conflicts and fewer services for Baka.

References

- Bailey, R. C., S. Bahuchet, and B. S. Hewlett. 1992. "Development in the Central African Rainforest: Concern for Forest Peoples." In *Conservation of West and Central African Rainforests*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.
- de Waal, A. 1989. *Famine That Kills: Darfur, Sudan, 1984–1985*. New York: Clarendon Press.
- Hitchcock, R. K., and J. D. Holm. 1993. "Bureaucratic Domination of Hunter-Gatherer Societies: A Study of the San of Botswana." *Development and Change* 24: 305–38.
- Loung, J.-F., and N. M. Godefroy. 1986. *Rapport d'activités pour l'exercice 1985/1986*. Yaoundé, Cameroun: Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche Scientifique.
- Ndagala, D. K. 1988. "Free or Doomed? Images of the Hadzabe Hunters and Gatherers of Tanzania." In *Hunters and Gatherers I: History Evolution and Social Change*. T. Ingold, D. Riches, and J. Woodburn, eds. Oxford: Berg.
- Ross, M. H. 1991. "Managing Ethnocentric Conflict: Competing Theories and Alternative Steps Towards Peace." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association.