

BAKA BEYOND

CENTRAL AFRICA'S BAKA PYGMIES, SAYS ROBERT NURDEN, ARE SUFFERING FROM 'DEVELOPMENT' AND WELL-MEANING ATTEMPTS TO HELP THEM.

BOUKOU LAURENT SITS on a log under a grass-mat awning at the centre of the compound. As chief of Kougoulou village he has pride of place: everyone else squats. He is also the only Baka pygmy in his clan to be wearing a Manchester United shirt, currently a de rigueur fashion item in Cameroon.

What he doesn't know is that the player whose name is stitched into the red cloth – McManaman – has never played for Manchester United. The shirt on his back is a reject from the sweatshops of Thailand where a seamstress had got her names and clubs muddled up, and the shirt had joined other rejected items on a shipment to Africa's poorest countries. It seems that even when these traditional hunters and gatherers are lured by Western paraphernalia, they get foisted off with second-best.

A roar comes from the single-track road and a lorry with five huge tree trunks laid out on its 50-foot trailer sweeps past, scattering children and dogs. It lifts a cloud of brown dust that eventually settles on the existing film of dirt that covers the bushes and trees on either side of the road. Boukou doesn't even look up: he sees the trucks every day, each cargo eating further into the Central African rainforest. 'It's them, the logging companies, that are ruining our life,' he says.

For southeast Cameroon's 150,000 Baka pygmies, the last 15 years have been devastating. When, in the mid-1980s, the country underwent a severe economic downturn, brought on by a slump in the price of cocoa and coffee, a cash-strapped government looked for other means of earning foreign currency. Its virtually unexploited rainforest tracts provided the answer.



One tree can fetch thousands of pounds in Europe. While the bulk of the profit poured into the coffers of government and business interests, ordinary Cameroonians gained little. And the Baka, who know the forest better than anyone else, but are at the bottom of the economic ladder, were never consulted. Now they are the losers in every conceivable way.

For centuries they have gathered fruit, nuts and honey from the forest, caught fish, and killed and eaten indigenous species such as antelope, porcupine, monkey and duiker. Theirs was a symbiotic relationship with their environment, and stocks were replenished as part of the natural cycle.

The 19th century evangelising invasion had minimal impact on the Baka. But while Western missionaries failed to make inroads, their fellow Africans, the Bantu, did. They moved in from surrounding areas, slashed and burned forests and started farming. In no way can they be described as prosperous but, compared to the Baka, they live like kings.

The Bantu operate a market economy and the Baka, despite being used to bartering rather than currency, were lured, in the hope of prosperity, to the Bantu roadside habitations. But the supposed riches never came their way. For the privilege of living in their traditional grass huts crammed in at the edge of villages, the Bantu forced them into virtual slavery. The Baka – particularly the women – had to work the land, usually without payment. And thousands still live like that today.

So when, 15 years ago, the loggers arrived, the Baka were already experiencing the downside of market forces. Since then,



it is estimated that Cameroon has lost over 90 per cent of its frontier forest, and almost all of the rest is now under threat from European (mostly French) and Asian logging companies. Just five European timber groups account for half of the production and export of Cameroon's tropical timber.

For every tree extracted, at least 20 others will be felled and left to lie on the forest floor. The logging companies use bulldozers to reach their prize, flattening virtually everything in their path. The Bantu know the forest well too, and it is largely they who direct the companies to the prized trees. But, in recent years, the Baka have been lured by cash bonuses and have taken to being tree guides. The catch is that they do not get the same financial rewards as the Bantu – often receiving as little as a tenth.

'How can my people sell themselves and the forest in this way?' says Boukou. 'The old ways have gone. And no one in my clan knows how to climb 40 metres up a tree to smoke out a bees' nest for honey any more.'

But there are severe knock-on effects, too. Logging companies need sawmills to turn trunks into planks. In 1998 the logging company Hazim bulldozed a whole Baka village – including its graveyard – near Lomié to make way for a sawmill. And now there are so many mills, and jobs dependent on them, that trees are being cut illegally just to provide employment. Even the Baka are working as sawyers, but their wages are pitiful, way below any other group's.

In addition, the noise from electric saws frightens away the fauna for miles around, emptying the forest of life. And the vegetation that springs up in the empty spaces left by bulldozers is of no use, and so the forest never recovers.

Well-meaning development projects tend to do more harm than good. In 1996, a community forestry programme tried to give local people control over their environment and the chance to negotiate concessions with logging companies directly. This has worked quite well for the Bantu because they own land. The project forgot, however, that the Baka are, for legal purposes, landless. So logging companies have ridden roughshod over Baka forests.

In order to win concessions, companies often shower gifts on villagers, but the Baka receive a minimum share compared to their Bantu counterparts. Even hand-outs, it seems, are discriminatory.

Virtually every logging company exceeds its quota and its designated area of

operation. The 'Vente de Coupe' concession system is the most devastating for the Baka. It is estimated that 90 per cent of these licences operate illegally. Here a company is given *carte blanche* to cut everything in a given area. Then the timber firms disappear, leaving the legacy of destruction for the Baka. The 'polluter pays' principle is rarely applied.

The hunting of animals by the Baka posed no threat to the sustainability of the natural species inhabiting the area. But with the influx of vast numbers of loggers, the eating of bushmeat has escalated. It is now the staple diet for thousands of itinerant workers. As Rob Barnett of Traffic, the wildlife monitoring arm of WWF, says: 'What was once subsistence use of these animals is becoming a commercial trade.'

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The demand for animals has become so great that to say it is causing wholesale slaughter is no exaggeration. 'We do not see some animals in the forest now,' said Etienne, another Kougoulou villager. 'They are disappearing fast.'

Each market has its bushmeat area where flesh mountains of animals like gorilla, civet and rat are sold. They provide sustenance for the loggers, drivers and others enjoying the opportunities that the exploitation of timber creates. But the trade in wild meat is spreading beyond the confines of the forest. For posh diners in urban centres such as Yaoundé and Douala these threatened species are a delicacy. The rarer the breed the higher the price. It is estimated that about two tonnes of bushmeat arrive in Yaoundé every day. Some Baka, seeing the money that the Bantu are earning from the bushmeat trade, are now hunting for profit, too.

As Rob Barnett points out, 'Commercial hunters are only able to access deep into the forests because of the logging roads and the timber trucks that can transport meat to urban markets.' Drivers earn good money for transporting carcasses in the back of their cabs.

Responsibility for this mess lies not only with the logging companies and misguided local desire for development, but this time squarely with the EU which funded the upgrading of the road from Abong-Mbang to Lomié. Even the African Development Bank and World Bank refused to fund the road project because of

the 'profound changes [which would be caused] to the Baka pygmies living in and around Lomié'.

Development groups such as CIAD (Centre International d'Appui au Developpement Durable) are now training the Baka in how to become farmers, in order to provide them with an alternative source of income. What they forget in their altruistic zeal is that in the rainforest the recycling of nutrients takes place above ground, and the soil quality is poor. After two years' exposure, it loses what little fertility it had. Agricultural experiments like these have, for the most part, been failures.

In another part of Cameroon, near Kribi in the southwest, groups of tourists are taken on 'ethnic' tours of pygmy villages. The Baka are primed for the visit and instructed to perform traditional tasks to the accompaniment of a farrago of flash cameras. They get paid a pittance for their troubles.

Many of these pygmies face yet more disruption from a pipeline that will stretch from Lake Chad in the north for 600 miles through rainforest to the coast. The project, planned by Exxon, Shell and Elf, will cost \$3.5bn.

Again, development agencies are playing a key role: the World Bank is likely to provide \$240m in loans and is claiming the project will alleviate poverty by creating oil revenues in Chad and Cameroon. The project anticipates an influx of 2,500 construction workers.

The destruction of the Baka's natural habitat and their subsequent economic marginalisation are not, of course, without wider consequences. Their traditional clan organisation with its democratic culture and nomadic history is disappearing in favour of a more sedentary way of life. They are being thrown into larger communal units with which they are unfamiliar. Bantu influence is creating a more structured 'pyramid' society – and chiefs like Boukou don't like it.

The changing economic situation is creating growing conflict between Baka and Bantu. The Baka are losing their forest existence but nothing is replacing it. As the richness of the forest disappears they are becoming yet another disenfranchised community: landless in a property-owning world.

Another truck sweeps by and Boukou's red shirt becomes coated in a film of brown dust. This time he can't even be bothered to brush it off.

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