

DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES AMONGST THE BAKA PEOPLE OF THE EASTERN REGION OF CAMEROON: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the challenges faced by the Baka people in the midst of changes caused by development efforts in their community. The Baka people were displaced from the forest and resettled in western-like communities with the intention of curbing excessive exploitation of forest resources and to improve on their living conditions. Consequently they are currently going through a lot of cultural, social and economic challenges. This is because the displacement and resettlement scheme was seen as an activity and not a process. The resettlement on the new site was done without taking into consideration their culture and their socio-economic wellbeing. This explains why they still go back to their formal habitats for their needs. Findings from the field show that the Baka people were resettled without giving any alternative ways of generating income and without providing them with the basic social amenities like schools, hospitals and water. Besides, these people who have been used to gathering and hunting are now faced with situations in which they have to do agriculture without training or assistance. These people seem very miserable in their new habitat and are presently trapped in a vicious circle of ignorance, poverty and diseases. This paper therefore seeks to examine the development challenges faced by the Baka in their new habitat and how they are adapting to these challenges that have been imposed on them by development.

KEYWORDS: development, challenges, resettlement, displacement, culture.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Baka of the Eastern Region are one of the groups of people which make up the indigenous population of Cameroon. They are found in the forest zone and depend on the forest for their livelihood. These people who have lived in their area of birth all through their lives and have adapted to particular lifestyles are presently facing a lot of social, cultural, economic and environmental challenges. These challenges have completely altered the way of life of the Baka people. In the midst of all these difficulties, the Baka people are unable to effectively adapt to change. This is because most of the development initiatives that have influenced these changes are imposed on them and not planned with them. Development according to David Pitt (1976) should come from below; that is the people to benefit from the development should be active participants in the planning and execution of the development projects. Furthermore the "so called" development has not taken into consideration the culture of the Baka people. Writing on indigenous development Joseph K. Zerbo holds that development is not an imported concept neither an occasional concept, but that it takes its roots in the context of the culture concerned. It has to be the product of the reflection of Africans on their proper future. Africans therefore need to promote indigenous development by embarking on indigenous research while putting the wellbeing of the people to benefit as priority. According to Zerbo, African anthropologists should research on the African culture and actually bring out those aspects that can foster the development of Africa.

Some of the development initiatives carried out in the Baka area ranges from the displacement of the Baka people from the forest and resettlement on road sides, conservation of the forest, exploitation of minerals and the construction of the railway and motorable roads. It is obvious that in the Baka community, development planners have often focused on infrastructural development and neglected the human aspects. Little attention has been paid on the educational, health, livelihood and the entire wellbeing of the people. Faced with these challenges the Baka people seem to be reduced to beggars instead of contributing to their own development. According to A. Bame and M. Tchombe, in a paper presented at a workshop held in Bamenda from 28 – 31 July 1997, (see curriculum and course outline on culture and development, model 3, page 1) the general conception of development has shifted from focus on economic growth to a focus on people, their potentials and capabilities and how they can make the best use of their skills by themselves. This is not the case with the Baka as nothing has so far been done to encourage or improve on their indigenous skills. These people have excelled considerably on skills like fishing, hunting, weaving and the traditional medicines. Development here for example entails the provision of training, increase production of goods, income generating activities and marketing of their products. Besides, their traditional medicine needs to be valorised and incorporated into the biomedical system.

The goal of development according to A. Bame and Therese M. is to enlarge, improve people's choices and sharpen their skills, spirit, competences and foster their awareness of their condition in order to empower them to resolve their own problems and attain their own aspirations. Thereby improving their life circumstances by themselves, hence the concept of human capacity resources development. This implies that no human being is empty and that true development cannot be brought to a people. People may be assisted to develop, but their development rests on themselves. According to O. Sardan in his book *Anthropologie et Développement* (1995), we have to understand people's behaviour before providing their priority needs and when people's needs are provided without understanding their culture, it becomes westernised. In other words, Olivier de Sardan is saying that providing people's needs is not developing them since their priority needs are not met instead, what Africans have constructed for centuries is deconstructed through westernisation. In the western world, research action is often done before any development project is carried out, but in Africa, schools, hospitals and other projects are carried out without asking the opinion of those concerned. The national school program used by every community in Cameroon has been imposed on the Baka without taking into consideration their culture. The school program does not fit their lifestyles as the children have to go into the forest to gather food and only come back to their camps at mid day after they must have had what to eat. Besides, from our field work we discovered that the Baka people attend schools only during the rainy season where they are unable to go to the forest for hunting while during the dry seasons they stay away from school in order to carry out their activities in the forest. It is therefore not enough to create schools for the Baka but also to involve them in the planning of time schedules and designing of the school curriculum. The Baka have to know the importance of going to school and how education can benefit them. It is only by so doing that the Baka will attend the classes and not abandon the structures as the case had been in the past.

The view of Olivier de Sardan confirms that of Zerbo as mentioned above when he says "African anthropologists should start researching on African cultures which include their skills, modes of transmission, their value systems, indigenous knowledge and other aspects of the African culture". Even though, it is now possible by means of modern technology to study and record many oral traditions as they evolve, nothing can possibly replace the value of their creative transmission. To Mbonji (1988), the perspectives of the existing models of development are strange. He proposes the replacement of western type of civilization with peaceful co-existence. To him, development is not something that man brings to the society but a process that has influenced man with his cultural personality. Mbonji (1988), emphasises that African cultures should embrace development according to their socio cultural institutions. So development being a fact of all cultures becomes relative following the different worlds views. In his opinion, this can only be possible if development is viewed as something coming from inside the cultures.

The Baka people who are usually stigmatised and despised by their Bantu neighbours have been reduced to beggars and slaves who work in their homes and farms in order to generate income for themselves. This is because they have lost a grip of their own culture of gathering and hunting and are unable to meet with the demands of their daily living due to poverty. Before being displaced from the forest and resettled on road sides, the Baka depended solely on the forest for their wellbeing and had enough to eat. They were very satisfied and most members of the family could fend for themselves. Even the children were involved in gathering, hunting and fishing. Today, the Baka people living in the camps along the roads are very miserable. They continue to live as strangers in an environment which is considered theirs. Their culture of hunting and gathering of food and fruits is still part of them with agriculture seen as a new kind of activity. They are also inadequate social basic amenities like schools, health centres, potable water and electricity in the area.

2 METHODOLOGY

The study design used in this research was qualitative. Both the primary and secondary data was collected during the study. Secondary data focused on existing literature on the Baka people. Primary data was based on field work with the use of observation, individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. We also used "hanging out" as one of our research methods. This gave the researcher the opportunity to have information from the informants informally. Three focus group discussions were carried out with the community members and this was aimed at discovering what the Baka actually feel about their conditions. It was through the focus group discussions that the researchers discovered that the Baka feel abandoned by the government and maltreated by their neighbours.

The informants were made up of men and women between the ages of 15 and 45 years. Most of these people have not gone to school while the few who had gone to school ended in the 2nd and 3rd year of primary school. It was therefore difficult to obtain information from the women who could express themselves but in their native tongue. Data collection used in this work was content analyses. This method helped in the categorization of information. Some pictures were also taken in the field to show the actual field situation.

3 DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

3.1 DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES, CHANGE AND ADAPTION AMONGST THE BAKA

The Baka people of the Eastern region of Cameroon have undergone some development challenges as a result of the changes imposed on them by development planners. These challenges have created difficulties in the socio cultural, economic and environmental wellbeing of the Baka people.

3.2 SOCIO CULTURAL FACTORS

3.2.1 SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE BAKA

From our study, most of the Baka people were not legally married however they were traditionally married and had children. Though they had an extended family system with about 6 to 11 people living in the same house, their nuclear family sizes are relatively very small with the number of children ranging from 1 to 4 children per family. We discovered that there is a high infant mortality rate which is probably the reason for small family sizes. While the majority of the study population are Catholics, others are Protestants and some have never gone to church. The choice of religion is determined by the first church that was created in the area and what the church offers to them in terms of gifts on Sundays. The kinds of gifts given include; basic needs like drugs, food stuff, match, clothes and soap. In the camps visited we discovered that the Baka fear the gendarmes and police and will prefer to run away from problems through avoidance rather than complaining to the police. However when things are really bad, such as the case where a Bemou man cut a Baka with a cutlass, they have no option than to complain to the police.

According to the Baka the administrative authorities only visit them during occasions like elections. In the Akambi camp, the administrative authorities visited them when they wanted to survey an abandoned school in their camp. Generally the Baka people have no relationship with the administration and even their chiefs have little or nothing to do with them. In an interview, the chief of service of social affairs in charge of the Baka in Yokaduma said *it is of recent that the administrative authorities are paying attention to the Baka as a minority group in the country. He said they are preparing to celebrate the 7th edition of the international day of the minority populations. He added that a convention has been signed between the ministry of social affairs and the ministry of territorial administration and decentralisation that will help to foster the development of the Baka*. In his opinion, the Baka are afraid of the authorities consequently, the authorities have difficulties in ameliorating their living conditions. The administration however intends to regroup the Baka into common initiative groups and cooperatives with the aim to prepare them for a settled live. In all the camps visited, there exist no council and no one in their communities belongs to such a council. The old people are treated with a lot of love and care. They are considered to have a lot of intelligence and knowledge that can be passed on. There are no norms guiding succession in their community. This is because what they have belong to all the members of the family and not individuals. According to the Divisional Officer of Yokaduma, *the sparse settlement of Baka prevents them from benefiting from development projects like hospitals and schools*. In most of the camps visited there were no schools and hospitals.

Also, the government of Cameroon has tried to reorganize the Baka people by introducing the idea of chieftaincy to them. The purpose of this is to ease administration of the Baka people. The chieftaincy is new to the Bakas, who originally had a well structured kinship system with each family represented by the head of the family. Presently each camp has a chief who is democratically elected amongst its members to represent them as well as to settle disputes amongst them and manage the affairs of the camp. These chiefs are always elected in consultation with the administrative authorities and the chiefs of the villages to which Baka camps are attached. This is usually due to the requirement to choose a chief who possesses necessary skills to communicate, such as speaking French and not being shy.

Despite the introduction of the chieftaincy much has not change as most of these chiefs are still ignorant of their responsibilities. This is because the culture is still foreign to them. They still prefer tounanimously take decisions in consultation with some elderly men and women in the community. However, it would have been preferable for the government to maintain their family heads rather than introducing a completely new system of hierarchy. The new system does not only confuse the Baka people but it as attracts conflicts. There is a question of whether it is the new chief to be respected or the family heads. Normally in every society, people are given certain tittles because of some distinctive qualities. These qualities are usually generally accepted by the members of the community and are not limited to only communication skills as imposed by the government on the Baka people.

The changes that occur in the Baka community are not only limited to infrastructural and economic development but also include change in feeding habits and life styles. The type of food eaten by the Baka people has changed over time. The Baka people now consume food like rice, bread, sardines which were formally not part of their menu. Their lifestyles seen in their dressing styles, hairdo has greatly been influenced by their neighbouring Bantu villages.



Figure 1: New coloured hairstyles influenced by change amongst the Baka

Source: ACHU Frida

3.3 HEALTH

With the changes taking place in the society, some health centers have been constructed in the Baka community by the Government, to facilitate solution to the health problems of the Baka people. Most of these health centers lack equipments and personnel. Unfortunately most Baka people do not visit these health centers and hospitals. This is because a hospital to

them is the last resort after all other attempts have failed. They believe that their traditional herbs are more efficient than the drugs from the hospitals. The Bakas traditionally heal themselves using herbs, leaves, roots and trunks of trees. They are said to have medicine for almost everything. For example; bolouma is used for fortification, mbongo to enhance fertility, gouga for the treatment of malaria and botounga for love charms etc. If there is anything that earns the Baka people respect and dignity it is their ability to cure people with traditional herbs. This is evident with the fact that many people come from different parts of the country to get medicine from the Baka.

Despite the fact that their Bantu neighbours look on them as inferior, they still depend on their knowledge of herbs in order to cure diseases. The Baka have a good mastery of the forest and forest products. Most of their health problems are cured with the use of herbs. The herbs are used in taking care of minor illnesses and at times very complex situations such as making a woman who has stopped delivering children for a long time to produce breast milk in order to feed the child of a dead mother and making children to walk fast.

In order to valorise the indigenous knowledge on traditional medicine of the Baka people, the sector should be developed or the two forms of health systems (biomedicine and traditional medicine) could be complimentary to enable the Baka people have better solutions to their health problems.



Figure II: use of herbs as medicine

Source: NORAH AZIAMIN ASONGU

RELIGION

Traditionally, the Baka people believe in the power of the Njengi which protects them from the forest. The Baka are involved in secret societies and these societies are found specifically in the forest. Some of these societies perform rites of passage where young men are initiated into adulthood and which is the only condition that makes a man fit for marriage. The "Jengi" is a secret society in the forest which also represents the name of a supreme being. Men are initiated into this society and it is believed that it protects the men from any danger in their daily activities in the forest. At the mention of the name "Jengi" any member of that society is capable of disappearing when faced with danger or threatened by wild animals.

The new religion has brought a new doctrine with change of mentality of the Baka people. With the introduction of a new religion which is Christianity, many of the Bakas we met feel that "Jengi" is a demonic spirit in the forest that kills them and is rather out for destruction than protection. While some have completely shifted from the belief in "Jengi" others have decided to blend the believe in an almighty God and in "Jengi".

3.4 EDUCATION

In effort by the government of Cameroon to make education available to all its citizens, the Baka people were created a formal educational center known as the center for basic education. This center was created in response to the fact that there were no schools in the area and most children preferred to attend schools that are in nearby villages. However, because of the low enrolment the council of Mindourou, together with its partners has resolved to create CEBs (Centre for basic education) for children who are in class three and below. In these schools, Plan international provides school equipments,

UNICEF provides school materials, the Council provides school uniforms and the Catholic Church provides the teachers. This has not still solved the problem of under scholarisation of the Baka due to the fact that school hours conflicts with their routine activities of gathering and hunting. Some studies on the education of the Baka have suggested that special education should be organized for the Baka while taking into consideration the time and place. That is classes could take place in the afternoon after they must have returned from the forest and inside the camp to avoid distance.

According to the Senior Divisional Officer for Yokaduma, *“the Baka children do not go to school because of their lifestyle. Unlike other children who eat food before going to school, the Baka children need to fend for themselves and end up abandoning classes to go to the forest to search for what to eat. Teachers go to school and stay the whole day without seeing a single pupil”*. Also according to the Mayor’s declaration, there is a Center for basic education in some Baka camps. However, our findings on the field revealed that some of them have been abandoned. In Elanjo for example, the center for basic education is in a dilapidating state due to abandonment.



Figure III: Abandoned school at Elanjo, Mindourou

Source: ACHU FRIDA NJIEI

In spite of the formal education they receive from school, they are very attached to the traditional way of life that they learn from their parents. That is why during the dry season when there are no rains, most the children prefer to abandon school and go hunting in the forest. The curriculum system of the country does not tie with the life style of the Baka people. The Baka have their traditional way of educating their children into the trade of their parents. As such, children are taught to hunt, weave and fish amongst others by their parents.

3.5 ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

Traditionally the main economic activities of the Baka people are hunting, gathering and artisanal fishing. Men and male children are involved in hunting while women and children are involved in fishing, and all the members of the family are involved in gathering. They hunt using spears. Women also fish and weave baskets. Some go for hunting expeditions that takes them about 3 weeks to one month. This hunting expedition which takes a longer time is known as “Grande chase” and this involves the hunting of large animals like elephants. The techniques used in hunting are setting of traps and hiding in the forest to shot animals with guns. Although the main purpose of hunting is for food, in many instances, they either sell or give to the Bantu in exchange for products like cigarettes, hot drinks, drugs, salt and oil. The women reduce the gradient of the streams by diverting the water from its main course and catching the fish with baskets. The techniques used were learnt from their grandparents and most of the produce is for family consumption, though they sell the excesses to their neighbouring villages. They also practice trade by barter in their camps. It should be noted that the act of selling animals and other goods is an innovation. The Baka traditionally had trade by barter as the only means of exchange. The activities carried out by the Baka reflect their culture and are purposely to satisfy their needs and those of their families. They often migrate during the “bush mango” season and at times only return when the season is over. However, the limitation of their hunting space due to the introduction of community forests and the notion of forest conservation has forced them not only to adopt new methods of hunting but also new activities like farming.

With the changes occurring in their community and due to the fact that they have been displaced from the forest and resettled in camps, they are now involved in farming. Their involvement in farming is a means of adapting to their new

environment. Their knowledge of farming has been influenced by their neighbouring Bantu tribes whose main occupation is farming. The Baka people have not been trained on the farming techniques and skills nor provided with seedlings or introduced to alternative ways of generating income. This has resulted into hardship, low level of production and they seem to be in a confused state as they struggle to cope with life.

3.6 ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

The Baka people live in the forest and depend on forest resources for livelihood and survival. They are very attached to their forest as they mostly gather fruits that have fallen from the trees. They are very environmental friendly especially when it comes to preservation of their forest resources. Most often, they avoid cutting down trees unless it is meant for construction of houses or wood to roast their meat. The Baka people remain confined to their forests and camps because of their lifestyles. They live a hand to mouth life and do not see any reason to save for the future. As such when the men come back from hunting, the game is immediately roasted and consumed by family members. Very often, it is accompanied by singing and dancing in the moonlight. During the dry season, the head of the family, accompanied by his wife and children leave the camp to the forest. When they hunt, they roast and eat on the spot with a lot of merry making before moving to the next place in the forest. They only come back home when the rains begin. It is for this reason that the Baka remain attached to their environment and would hardly accept to go and live elsewhere. With the new resettlement scheme imposed on the Baka people by the government, they are deprived of their freedom to move to every part of the forest. Besides, the Baka people seem not to be contented with their new environment as they keep on going back to the forest for their needs.

4 CONCLUSION

From the above arguments it is clear that development should be people centred, reflect the wellbeing of people in the society, but also that it should come from the people concerned or be planned with them. Besides, development should reflect the cultural identity of the people. This implies that if Africa must develop, culture must be put at the centre of their development. African anthropologists and other social scientists should therefore embark on indigenous research as a means of promoting development in Africa.

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