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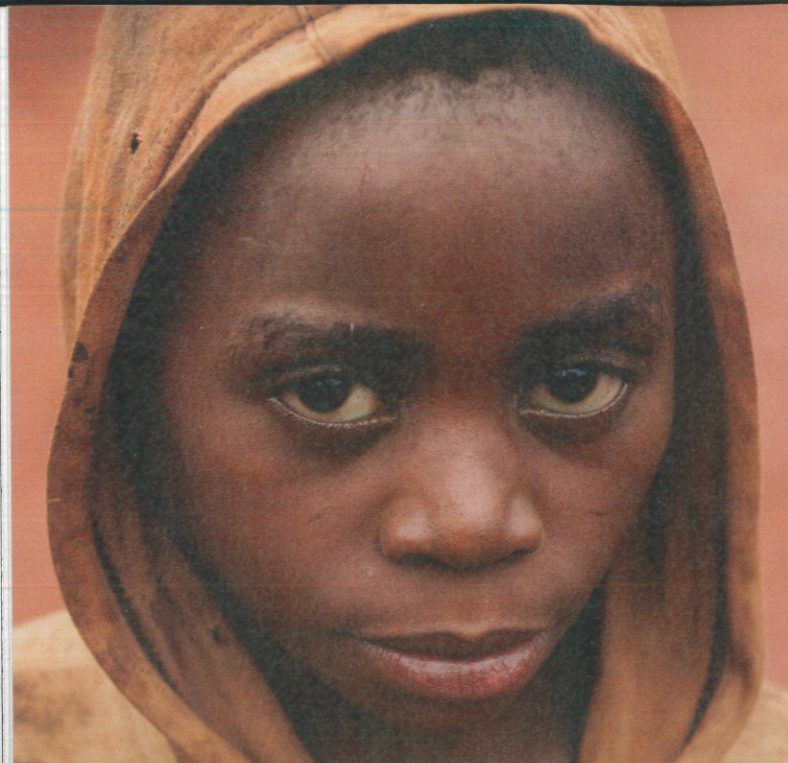
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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: a Baka boy in Missoumé, eastern Cameroon; teachers standing in a delapidated school building in Missoumé; hunting has traditionally been an important part of the Baka way of life; children walking to school near the Baka village of Mayos; Noel Olinga discusses forest subsistence near Mayos; villagers in Mbalam demonstrate how to catch a porcupine in a snare; logs cut by Pallisco in Mindourou; two boys with an antelope for sale by the NIO west of Bertoua

Edge of *THE ROAD*

For centuries the Baka indigenous people lived in the forests of eastern Cameroon. But with logging destroying their traditional home and little support from the government, many now believe that the key to their future lies in education and modernisation. **Jane Labous** reports

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARC SCHLOSSMAN

As you wend your way along the N10 through the tropical rainforests of southeastern Cameroon, it isn't uncommon to come across a dead porcupine hanging by one leg from a post beside the road, whiskers sprouting cartoonishly against the spreading sky, or perhaps the muscular coils of a python, or a civet, its tail flung out backwards. Bush meat is a staple for the Baka, the indigenous forest pygmies for whom hunting is a way of life. Nowadays, however, it's truck drivers who dine on the Baka's bush meat, stopping for a roadside snack before they rumble off through the mists to Douala carrying the giant trees over which the Baka have stood guard for centuries.

'People do whatever they want in the forest, without even consulting us,' says Noel, 50, from Mayos, eastern Cameroon, as we walk through a section of this extravagantly beautiful rainforest, which covers more than two million square kilometres of Central Africa. 'The Baka have been the guardians of the forest for years, but today we have nothing. We've been set aside, while others have benefited. It's totally unjust.'

UNSETTLED SETTLEMENT

It's difficult to find Baka who can articulately express the problems faced by this beleaguered people. Noel is an exception. In the local high school, there are just two Baka children - Noel's son and daughter - and of the estimated 75,000 Baka living in Cameroon today (the figures aren't accurate; the last count was carried out in 1975), only 2.7 per cent have completed a secondary education.

Noel's son Nilson, 18, is testament to this. 'I'm the only Baka boy at the secondary school in Djimako,' he says. 'At the beginning, it was difficult, because my classmates are used to making fun of the Baka.'

Like many of the formerly nomadic Baka groups, the Mayos community was resettled by the government years ago. Today, they live on a stretch of land near a rural road at the edge of the forest, where they have access to health services, roadside trade and a school. This resettling of the Baka, begun by the colonial government during the 1950s, has meant that the tribe is now mostly sedentary, only going out into the forest to hunt for a few months each year.

Many elders worry that the Baka way of life will die out as young people are seduced by modern attractions. Even the ancient Baka religion, based on mystical legends of forest spirits, is under siege by missionaries distributing Bibles translated into the Baka language, and wind-up audio devices loaded with biblical manifestos. 'The ancient customs tend to get lost when we live along the road,'



'Settlement means that the Baka can develop, they can send their kids to school and can even go to the hospital'

says Noel. 'We have radios, televisions and music, and we follow the media; the young people no longer want to live as before.'

MIXED BLESSINGS

But for many Baka, the new way of life has its advantages. Papa N, 68, lives in a resettlement further south, near Messoumé. 'There's nothing bad about this way of living, apart from the lack of income,' he says. 'We have access to schools and healthcare; it's much better than before.'

Helene, president of the parents' association of Messoumé secondary school, agrees. 'I see a risk of going from this place to another, whereas if you're sedentary, you can have regular school for the children,' she says. 'Settlement really means that the Baka can develop, they can send their kids to school; they can even go to the hospital.'

But in a new world where self-sufficiency is unsustainable, the Baka face numerous social barriers. They have limited knowledge of modern agricultural and monetary systems. Lack of education makes it difficult to gain employment, so they struggle to find the money to pay for food, clothing, healthcare and

schooling. Alcoholism afflicts many, a result of boredom and the availability of cheap spirits, evidenced by the empty gin and vodka sachets that litter the forest floor.

Teen pregnancy is also rife among Baka girls; those who don't fall pregnant with classmates are often seduced by local Bantu men. Joeline, 20, fell pregnant to a Bantu when she was 17 and now has a three-year-old son. When she told the man she was pregnant, he disappeared and hasn't been seen since.

Discrimination is endemic. As Samuel Diop, delegate for social affairs in Djimako, puts it, the Bantu have long considered the Baka, who were once pejoratively called pygmies, to be 'sub-humans' and 'just objects'. The Bantu use Baka adults and children as field labour in their cocoa plantations, paying a pittance, and Baka children are relentlessly teased by their Bantu peers. 'Baka are seen as the lowest class,' Nilson confirms. 'They treat Baka as though they don't have a brain or a place in society. For this to change, the attitude of the Bantu has to change - they need to understand that Baka are human beings like everyone else.'

FOREST LOSS

Meanwhile, the Baka's traditional home is being systematically turned over to loggers. Although the Baka meet all the criteria to be considered an indigenous people, as defined by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, the government of Cameroon doesn't identify them as such and thus sees no reason to allocate them user rights to the forest.

According to Global Witness, the world's second largest rainforest is losing 2,000 square kilometres every year to logging. More than 600,000 square kilometres (30 per cent) of Central African forest were under logging concessions by 2007, whereas just 12 per cent was protected, according to a study published in *Science* in that year. In Cameroon, almost half of the total 212,306 square kilometres of forest had already been allocated to logging concessions, and the country showed the highest level of forest disturbance in Central Africa.

Without forests, the Baka's identity and home is lost, explains Noel, but without education, few Baka have the voice to fight back. 'My culture is my identity; without this I can't live,' he says. 'I've



OPPOSITE: children in Baka village of Mayos, Cameroon; LEFT: a lorry park in Bertoua. The N10 highway carries a near constant flow of logging traffic the port of Douala



'Now that we're at the edge of the road, we have the opportunity to fight and to evolve our lifestyle'

told you all that the forest means to us - we are its caretakers, its guardians. The forest is our supermarket and our pharmacy, it is everything to the Bakas. When it is destroyed, it hurts us beyond imagining.

'As for fighting for our rights,' he continues. 'We really want to, but although we're trying

to find people who can stand up for us, it's difficult because our children haven't been to school. There just isn't anyone who has studied to a high level.'

LOGGER'S PARADISE

Wood from the Central African rainforest is in demand around the world. Logging routes crisscross this part of eastern Cameroon. Twenty four hours a day, trucks travel north from Gabon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic via the smoothly tarmacked N10 highway, the main artery to the port of Douala (where the dedicated 'Terminal Bois' or wood terminal is tucked away at the back).

Companies such as Pallisco, a Belgian logging concern that owns the rights to 340,000 hectares of Cameroonian forest, are adamant that their operations are not only sustainable, but also socially aware. Pallisco fells 8,000-10,000 trees a month, a number that, according to Belgian representative Isada Soumeyable, equates to about 1.2 trees per hectare. Pallisco is one of the more transparent companies operating here, boasting a department dedicated to community relations, a reforestation programme that plants around 150,000 trees a year and five Baka employees.

'I wouldn't be here if I didn't believe it was sustainable,' says Soumeyable. 'We have to explain every day to people that we're not killing elephants! If you ask people, they'll tell you we provide jobs. We aren't trying to cut everything down. If you go along this road, you'll see that people are comfortable, but if you go to other areas, there's no social project and no certification. The dynamic is different.'

No government spokesperson was available from the Cameroon Ministry of Forestry to comment on why the forest is being cut down, nor to explain the proliferation of so-called 'shadow permits', which give loose rights to almost anyone to cut down the forest. Nor could anyone explain further Cameroon's policy on indigenous peoples. And so the Baka tell, bewilderedly, of the sounds of the saws, the trucks carrying the trees, and the new rules that restrict their access to the forest.

'They are now even trying to stop us from hunting the meat we eat,' Noel says. Easier access to forest areas and local market opportunities have increased the pressure on wildlife, and the government recently instituted a ban on hunting certain species. 'But us Bakas have always known how to look after the forest and manage it properly, in balance,' Noel says. 'Hunting them is just part of the system.'

MODERNISATION THE KEY

If the problems facing the Baka are complex, so are the solutions. Since 2009, NGO Plan International has been running a project aimed at increasing levels of primary education among the Baka, as well as creating more solid livelihoods by teaching how to farm sustainably. It's also helping the Baka to campaign for their rights and to obtain birth certificates (more than 2,000 have already been distributed) to give children more legal land rights.

Francois A, Baka Rights and Dignity Project coordinator for Plan Cameroon, is working towards the introduction of lessons in the Baka language and the provision of school meals during the hunting season so that children's schooling isn't interrupted. 'They move to the forest during the hunting period, meaning the school year is stopped,' he explains. 'If a child is living in the bush for three months, it means he'll either have to repeat the year or drop out.'

'We can't just live in the middle of the forest,' adds Noel. 'Now that we're at the edge of the road, we have the opportunity to fight and to evolve our current lifestyle, and education is key. We need to modernise.'

There are success stories. Noel's 13-year-old daughter Yié is the only other Baka at the school in Djimako. 'I love school and I'm proud to go,' she says with a smile. 'When I'm older, I want to be the women's minister, so I can fight for Baka girls to be able to go to school.'

Yié and her brother walk the seven kilometres to school every day, a route that takes them across the busy road that leads down to the N10. It's scattered with shacks serving roasted porcupine to the hungry truckers, men who stare curiously at the two Baka children carrying satchels on their shoulders.

But perhaps one day, Yié and Nilson will be able to use their education to tell their story - a story of social and environmental change, of a people in flux and a forest invaded. Perhaps they will take their father's words of warning to those who matter: 'The gift of biodiversity is ours at the moment, but if we lose it, it won't be just that we lose the animals and the plants; we humans will suffer as well. We're seeing great changes at the moment; I can tell you that there are rivers here whose beds are drying up, and this has never happened before. Nowadays, we can't eat wild mangoes as we used to in the dry season, because they don't grow like they used to. These are just some of the changes happening because of the destruction of the forest.'

OPPOSITE: Baka children in school in Missoumé.
BELOW: Baka men work outside their *mongolu*, a traditional Baka dwelling, in Missoumé

