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'FIRST THE FOREST': CONSERVATION, 'COMMUNITY' AND 'PARTICIPATION' IN SOUTH-WEST CAMEROON

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References to community participation and participatory appraisal have become near-mandatory in development and environment policies and project planning. In line with this 'new' valuation of people, notions of community and forms of local organisation have been reconceptualised as 'social capital' through which development agencies may engage in capacity-building to achieve social and environmental objectives. But whilst these concepts have considerable attractiveness for Western audiences, their reality and appropriateness on the ground are open to some question. This article therefore aims to explore the relevance of concepts of community, participation and social capital to the analysis of local development processes, and in particular to the efforts by environmental agencies and NGOs involved in 'saving the rain forest'.

Cameroon contains one of the major surviving blocs of tropical rain forest in the world and is the site of numerous efforts at rain-forest conservation by Western aid agencies and NGOs. Biodiversity conservation and the expansion of timber exports are both conditions of the World Bank's programme for Cameroon (despite being contradictory). Cameroon's South West Province alone is the site of three major bilaterally funded conservation projects, as well as an ITTO forest regeneration programme and two projects supported by Birdlife International, the RSPB and (most recently) the WWF. Several of these projects have a high public profile, nationally and internationally. Together all of them may control more functioning infrastructure, vehicles and staff than any of the provincial Delegations for health, agriculture or other government services. In terms of their local profile, conservation projects and their activities are highly visible. Reports and rumours of their activities (such as demarcating reserve boundaries; confiscating bush meat, non-timber forest products (NTFP), guns and chain saws; and exporting rare medicinal plants) circulate throughout rural and urban society.

At present these external agencies' stereotypes of the problem of rain-forest biodiversity destruction focus on alternative 'villains': timber companies, peasant hunters and shifting cultivators. Until very recently (1996) timber companies were considered the least of these threats in South West Province. Accordingly the projects have focused on hunters and cultivators. Conservation projects have suggested various draconian plans for resettlement and armed patrols to control local use of forest. More recently, however, faced with local hostility and the total ineffectiveness of coercive measures, attempts to reverse the supposedly negative activities of local forest users have focused on the concept of 'community participation' in conservation. In many cases, projects seek to achieve their objectives through techniques such as PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) or RRA (Rapid Rural Appraisal) and PFM (Participatory Forest Management) (Watts 1994; Brocklesby, cited in Brocklesby and Ambrose-Oji, 1997). One issue

addressed by this article is that, despite (or perhaps because of) the use of these 'participatory' techniques, the conservation community has only hazy and general notions of what the scenarios of sustainable management and community participation may entail, or indeed of what Cameroonians themselves consider to be the important processes surrounding the forest future.

Conservation is explicitly addressed to the long-term future, though the activities of projects themselves are mostly narrowly instrumental (carrying out inventories, defining boundaries, setting up beekeeping courses) and planned over short-term tranches governed by the project cycle of donor agencies. In this respect, conservation projects offer one of the more extreme versions of the tension between vision, action and understanding which is contained in all 'sustainable development' programmes. But the environ-mental future envisaged in rain-forest conservation is only one of many possible futures towards which various groups in Cameroonian society direct their practical activities. With their long-term aims, one would have imagined that conservation organisations would have taken steps to engage in such debates, but research in south-west Cameroon shows that projects discovered these local debates only belatedly and incompletely, often through activities which were bound to stir up local opposition.[1] In the climate of mistrust that now exists between projects and local people, it is difficult to conceive of any durable programme of rain-forest conservation. This makes understanding the relationship between the forest future and social futures, as conceived by local people, all the more urgent.

Much conservation thinking on 'participatory management' is based upon the notion of forest as a resource in the custody of local communities. Such a generalisation is severely tested in South West Province. Misguided attempts to put such participation into effect have led to much of the mistrust of projects which now exists. But mistrust and contestation are not limited to relations between projects and populations. As will be discussed below, the region is characterised by high ethnic diversity and extensive rural–rural migration. Accordingly, almost all settlements are ethnically mixed and contain settler strangers with varying degrees of commitment to local 'community'. Witchcraft is generally believed to be widespread, often reflecting and creating tensions between the categories of 'elders' and 'youth' or villagers and 'elites'.[2] Overall, this complex socio-political context promotes highly disputed conceptions and aspirations concerning the future shape of society. As will be shown, many of these are focused around economic, social and personal development, processes in which forest conversion has played, and continues to play, a major part. Accordingly, understanding local attitudes to the forest allows an *entrée* into this complex political world.

This article aims to document some of the major themes in local debate around forest. The first section presents a preliminary outline of recently collected data on contemporary local views of forest futures, combined with data gained in informal group discussions on 'what should be done?'. I then argue that these local views concerning the forest are not self-explanatory; rather they are reflexive upon the history of the region. The opinions, attitudes and values which appear in the debates have been developed in

relation to experience of living in the forest but have also been formed by the historical political economy to which this part of Cameroon has been subjected. I then present an outline of the practices toward forest which characterise forest villages in the mid-1990s, sketching how debates on forest and land resources have become a focus for contests surrounding the legitimacy of various groups and institutions which exploit or control them. This suggests how attitudes and practices toward forest are closely linked with perceptions, constructions and aspirations regarding future society. In the final section I outline the problems with current conservationists' attempts to understand local attitudes, and identify some political and economic preconditions for an effective dialogue between conservationists and local people.

'FIRST THE FOREST . . .' (VICO, 1744)

Vico posits that civilisation was achieved through the conversion of forest to humanised space. His quasi-historical account rather neatly parallels the mythic and the economic dimensions of the relationship between forest and conceptions of development that are prevalent in contemporary South West Province.

Entry into the forest, either as the first settler or more mundanely as a farmer clearing a new plot, is still seen as entering a world of dangers, much as it was among cognate cultures in eastern Nigeria early this century (Talbot, 1912). Whilst none of the south-west Cameroon cultures have such well developed myths of 'first entry' as those of the Beti, Eton and Ewondo of central Cameroon (Alexandre and Binet, 1958: 16; Guyer, 1984) most village histories begin with the meeting up of village ancestors and the clearing of a space for settlement. Masquerades, such as *male*, represent forest powers (cf. Ardener, 1996), whilst creatures such as the tree hyrax are singled out as particularly evil. Forest, and the liminal space of farm bush, are dangerous to particularly vulnerable humans—often women, in the view of men—whilst acts which are otherwise merely amoral become immoral when committed in the forest. (Illicit sex in the forest is a far more heinous matter than in the village, for example.) Thus whilst life in the village is not itself very safe—owing to witchcraft—the forest itself is the locus of potential powers.

Local people, however, do not deal with the forest solely at this mythic level. The forest is also the source of much more mundane resources: timber, non-timber forest products, tools, bush meat, medicines (cf. Jeanrenaud, 1991; Thomas *et al.*, 1989; Infield 1988). Moreover the forest has a history: village territories are well known, areas of forest are recognised as belonging to particular families through previous farming, paths and river crossings have memories of events attached to them—often 'inexplicable' deaths, or unexpected meetings. (In the past, at least, travellers left tokens at crossroads, to mark their passage and to show their direction in case they became lost in the forest: Talbot, 1912.) But the forest is also valued as potential farmland and it is through this conversion of forest to farm that community is constructed.

Forest is the source of human well-being. The fracturing of the relationship between society and the forest is an ever-present threat. Historically, such a fracture took place for many forest societies of south-western Cameroon in the early stages of German conquest and colonial rule, when masks and effigies were destroyed and villages were forced to regroup on more accessible paths. For many of the current population, also, the mythic aspects of the forest are irrelevant or little known, thanks to Western education or because the people concerned are from the 'grassfields' farther north and have their own views of forest society. In spite of this, though, the ambivalent powers of the forest remain a feature of contemporary views towards it.

Besides the use of forest by villagers, forest conversion through timber concessions and plantations and forest colonisation by stranger farmers have been a major basis of economic development in south-west Cameroon. Periods of intense timber extraction have accompanied every political change. Local views on current conservation initiatives are deeply affected by this historical experience. In addition, though, the small-scale village polities of the forest zone have recurrently responded to the need for forest colonisation by loaning or selling land to settlers. As a result, far from being a 'chorus of harmony', community politics revolve around contested views of past history and schismatic visions of the environmental future. These visions are themselves intertwined with views on the future of Cameroonian society: issues of communal security and economic development.

As in Vico's account, then, forest conversion remains the key process for the origin of civilisation and the major means of achieving 'development'. As we shall see, the power of local conceptions of development conflicts sharply with the 'new' discourse of rain-forest conservation, promoted in Cameroon by international NGOs, donor agencies and the World Bank.

<center>ATTITUDES TO THE FOREST AND THE FUTURE[3]</center>

To get at some of the conceptions and attitudes to forest the research collected many forms of data in a range of institutional settings. From these interview data, collected between 1992 and 1995, various themes arise.

'Forest' is itself a contested category: many individuals and groups did not distinguish 'forest' from 'bush', whilst others distinguished bush as areas which were developed (i.e. by conversion to farms or farm fallow). In English and in Pidgin the term 'forest' was often associated with Forest Reserve—i.e. land controlled by the Forestry Department. Other informants (even in rural areas) said they had visited zoos or the botanical gardens in Limbe as their sole experience of forest. Paradoxically informants from remote settlements (what outsiders would think of as villages deep in the forest) were least likely to differentiate or use the category 'forest' in conversation. 'Forest' and 'bush' as discrete categories are more marked in the built-up villages and towns along the Kumba corridor (see Fig. 1) than around Korup National Park, where the term 'forest' is little used except in contexts controlled by the Korup Project (Ruth Malleson, personal communication). Probably forest and farm are far less discontinuous in areas of low settlement, such as Ndian Division, where the Korup National
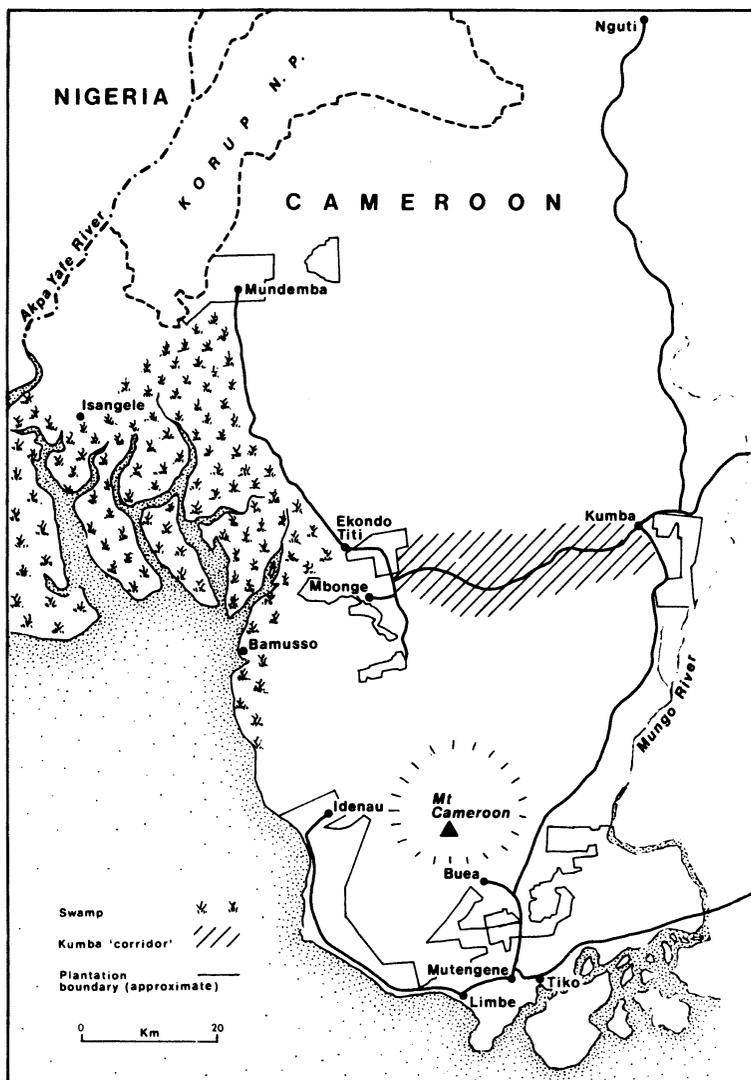
FIG. 1   South-west Cameroon: plantations, the Kumba 'corridor' and biodiversity reserves

Park is situated, than in areas where land has been widely sold and converted into farm plots. There is also an element of distance in the recognition of 'forest' as a category. Areas termed 'forest' lie far from settlements, often at the end of farm access roads (which were often first built as logging roads by timber companies in the first instance). In Pidgin, or in English, 'forest' is a category used mostly by people who are farthest from it, or by those who are least likely to have day-to-day experience of it. In contrast, villagers living in

areas with large tracts of uncultivated or fallowed 'wild' land tend to distinguish 'bush' (relatively recent fallow) and 'black bush' (very old fallow or never cultivated land).[4]

The problematic meaning or definition of 'forest' is mirrored by responses to conservation slogans. Slogans such as 'Korup—Africa's oldest rain forest' (Korup project), which were taken from the literature of the conservation projects operating in the region, were administered as conversation openers for debate. Whilst many interviewees denied having heard of 'conservation', those who had seen posters or heard radio and television programmes on the issue said that such slogans meant 'nothing'. The slogan 'Save the rain forest' was particularly singled out as 'whiteman's talk'. This is more than a matter of education, as environmentalists believe; those who know most about conservation projects are often the most hostile. Interviews around Mundemba, headquarters of the Korup National Park, were particularly critical. In the case of the Mundemba interviews there is much critical comment about conservation activities, evidently intended to get back to the project. (Anyone asking about 'the forest' is assumed to be working for the Korup Project.) Two questions explored the issue of who owns 'the forest':

> Forest is government property and they should tell people how to use it. Is that right?
> A hia say fores na government property and them get for tell people how them go use am. I correct so?

> Forest belongs to the people who live there and they should use it as they wish. Do you agree?
> Some people them say fores na property for fores people so them fit use am as them like. U gree so?

Both questions generated great dispute and highly polarised group opinions. Since the questions were intentionally ambiguous, discussion focused on issues of ownership, as well as ranging over issues of political legitimacy (of village authorities or of the Cameroon government itself) and of the effectiveness of these agencies in controlling forest use. Groups of 'indigenes' versus 'strangers' had markedly different responses to the question of ownership. 'Sons of the soil' (i.e. people who were members by descent of the village in which they were interviewed) emphasised the right of the villagers to control their forest. 'Strangers', on the other hand, were about equally divided between those who believed forest was government property and those who argued that it belonged to the village. But in many of the interviews a key issue was that 'our parents' had destroyed the forest—by cutting it for farms, or (amongst 'sons of the soil') by selling it as farm plots to strangers. Hostility on the part of 'youth' towards elders, especially village heads, is especially marked in the agriculturally developed ribbon settlements of the Kumba corridor (PAID, 1973–85). 'Our elders'' greed evidently called into question the political legitimacy of their councils and their continuing control of resources. Among themselves, young 'indigenes' were far more critical of the elders than were young 'strangers'. In mixed groups, however, indigenes and strangers muted their criticisms (except in two or three cases where the debate deteriorated into a fight).

Criticism of forest 'stewardship' by the 'village community' is a major theme in local politics.

Similar polarisation surrounded the statement that forest was government property. To some extent, acceptance of control by the 'government' is almost certainly an artefact of the methods used; questions about forest are overwhelmingly considered 'official', and even the term 'forest' has connotations of state-controlled land. Given that until recently the security services in Cameroon were ubiquitous, it is likely that people did not always express their real views. Nonetheless, views about the government's stewardship of the forest did contain some interesting (and internally consistent) surprises. Criticism of government stewardship focused on the corruption of the Forestry Department and the control of the state by 'the French', which reflects the 'anglophone question' in national politics. (The category of 'the French' can refer just as well to francophone Cameroonian elites as to actual French expatriates and companies, which are relatively poorly represented in contemporary south-west Cameroon.) Anti-francophone feelings were expressed relatively rarely in the interviews but are widespread in less focused discussions around forest resources. As further instances of the failed stewardship of the state, interviewees cited the lack of control of the extraction of medicinal plants by a multinational company. However, views on the ownership of forest by the state were not simply critical. Many groups cited the use of forest resources for development as an important aspect of government legitimacy; criticism of the government in power was based on its failure to use the forest 'properly'.

Two further questions investigated attitudes to the preservation of forest, and the important issue of who should pay for forest resources and forest management.

> Forest has many useful things in it, we should keep them for our children and our children's children.
> *Fores get plenty fine fine thing them: you think say we go fit leavam for we pikin them and them own pikin them?*

> If the Europeans like our animals and plants should they pay, or should we pay, to look after them?
> *If whiteman dem like we bif and plants dem for we fores, you think say make na dem pay or make na we pay for lookot am?*

As with the previous statements, responses to these questions were highly polarised. Against our expectation, a minority of interviews concluded that whites should pay for the things they want. In far more cases this alternative was rejected as a continuation of past exploitation. Past experience of the timber companies or the plantations or Plantecam (a multinational company dealing in medicinal plants) was cited as evidence that payment for forest resources has often been to the disadvantage of local people or the country as a whole.

A far larger proportion of the discussions concluded that control of forest, and the management of forest, should be carried out by Cameroonians. Often 'the government' is cited, alternatively 'we' (meaning 'the young' or 'we poor people'), rarely the community or the village. Many groups expressed

concern that if 'they' pay (i.e. the 'whites') it will 'give them too much
control'. One group expressed this as over-subordination (like colonial rule);
another thought it would be too 'French' (and was also critical of
government services and of the Forestry Department). Another view was
ironical: 'Of course they will pay us. If they can see we have done well we
should get a tap on the back.' This issue of local pride and control of
activities and budgets is crucial to the management of proposed 'community
forests'. Support for state control of forest resources is, perhaps, surprising in
view of the critical stance towards the government. To some extent it is
consistent with the criticism of government legitimacy mentioned above. It
may also reflect class positions and the complex relations between our
informants and state organisations such as the police or army. Young people
see the army and police as among the few job opportunities available to
school leavers. In day-to-day experience the police and the army are a part of
the ambivalent mass of young people involved in the 'informal economy'.
(These include the 'unemployed', termed 'applicants' in Cameroonian
English, labourers and hand-cart transporters ('push-push'), 'motor boys'
working at taxi ranks, apprentices and thieves. Often it is this group which
organises the vigilantes who are responsible for communal security in many
small towns or *quartiers* of the cities.) In a pilot series of more formal,
questionnaire-based interviews we included questions on young people's
career aspirations: the police and the army came out as the most frequent
choice of career among young men (trader or nurse were the most frequent
among young women). Taken together with participant observation data,
these attitudes and aspirations suggest quite strongly nationalist and
authoritarian ideas about control of the forest.

   The statement on keeping forest resources for our children and their
children contrasted our informants' ideals with their objective despair at the
circumstances of themselves and the country. The statement elicited a rich
seam of comment on 'the elders'' greed in not leaving things for their juniors
to use to earn money, as well as much commonsense discussion of 'the
economic crisis' and how 'We have to use everything if we are to eat. How
can we keep anything for our children?' Again the 'whiteman' was cited as
part of the cause of people's troubles. 'The whites took everything. There is
nothing left for us.' The World Bank has managed to penetrate local political
discussion, if not the entrepreneurial activities of the political and
bureaucratic elite! Concern with the stewardship of resources is thus
entwined with local understandings of national and international politics.

   Together these responses suggest that local understandings of the causes
and effects of 'environmental change' are considerably more sophisticated
than conservationists are giving people credit for. They suggest also that
inserting conservation into local discourse is a deeply political process.

   One final statement is worth mentioning here for the insight it gives into
the gulf between local conceptions of the forest and its portrayal in the
conservation movement. Our informant groups were asked to discuss the
statement:

   People who live in the forest have a better life than other people.
   People wey dem di stay for fores area dem, di enjoy pass other people dem?

Apart from referring to the availability of bush meat, of forest fruits or farmland, virtually no one agreed with this statement. Many cited the fact that people do not live in the forest: even the smallest village is not 'forest' any more. Informants pointed out also that the only people who live in the forest are likely to be robbers.[5] Others, mainly in small rural towns, compared conditions they lived in as 'bush' and argued they would be much better-off in town. Forest or bush is evidently somewhere to escape from, rather than the pristine Eden of the conservation literature.

CONTEMPORARY CONSERVATION INITIATIVES AND HISTORICAL/POLITICAL REALITIES

The interviews and debates about the forest provide a rich set of insights into contemporary political debate in Cameroon, as well as into young people's experience and knowledge of village and regional history. To appreciate the sophistication of the debates it is necessary to put them in their broader context. Three issues in particular run through the debates: relations between ethnic categories of 'indigenes' and 'strangers'; concern about the power and legitimacy of the state; historical experience of the activities of expatriate companies (and development experts) broadly categorised as 'the whites'.

'Indigenes' and 'strangers'. Culturally and linguistically south-west Cameroon is very diverse. The relatively low population density and small size of indigenous forest societies made them dependent on relatively large numbers of slaves (recruited through trade in forest products and European goods) in the pre-colonial period. The division between freeborn and slaves is nowadays less emphatic but continues to offer an 'armature' for inter-group relations. More recently, forest villages have depended upon recruiting 'strangers' as workers in various forms of indentured or sharecropping labour arrangements.

Large-scale immigration of plantation workers (mainly from the Bamenda Highlands and eastern Nigeria) to the plantations in the early colonial period tended to be short-term. But increasing numbers of workers have since become permanent settlers in the forest zone. Such settlers are also classed as 'strangers' by local villagers.

Throughout the colonial period, and even today, control of land and political representation was heavily skewed towards the indigenous population. In the colonial period the British set up 'Native Authorities' based upon tribal groups, excluding 'strangers' from any political role. Land was vested in these Native Authorities and, at least in theory, could be neither rented nor sold. Under colonial rule, forest was the subject of silent contests between immigrants and indigenes, or between different indigenous factions. Thus the statement that 'our fathers sold all the forest' refers to actual historical processes and also to more general conflicts between youth and elders concerning the environmental past, the political present and the future life envisaged by respondents. The British, for example, did not even recognise the existence of strangers (except as transient migrant workers) until the late 1930s. Even as late as 1958, urban and rural councils excluded 'non-natives' from voting. The pattern of exclusion persists in village

councils or in access to elected office to this day as a cleavage in party political allegiance as between 'strangers' and 'sons of the soil'.

The establishment of plantation camps, together with the political organisation of Indirect Rule, provided a model for the development of multi-ethnic settlements which are characteristic of most of forested south-west Cameroon. Mono-ethnic settlements are very much the exception rather than the rule. However, given the small scale of pre-colonial polities, combined with the political dispensation of indirect rule and post-colonial politics, multi-ethnic settlements have considerable problems in establishing and maintaining social order.

Concern with the power and legitimacy of the state. Much recent work has emphasised the rhizomatic nature of the Cameroonian state (Bayart, 1993), with its concomitants, the hidden penetration of state power to the most local level, via patronage, and the close relationship between bureaucratic or political office and personal or local accumulation ('straddling'). By implication, Bayart is arguing that this image of political and economic life as the 'politics of the belly' is pervasive through Cameroonian society. The views from the forest documented here raise some questions about the pervasiveness of this political culture. Firstly, most people experience the state in terms of the services it should or might (theoretically) provide. Like most African countries, Cameroon has a rich panoply of Ministries, delegations and government officials, all of whom (in theory) have responsibilities for development going down to the most local level. Given the poor performance of most of these services, many people view the state as failing in its responsibilities, failing to be 'present', in the development process. As a matter of historical fact the state has been all but absent in terms of infrastructure construction in much of rural South West Province. Much infrastructure (roads, clinics, village halls, football pitches) has been built by timber companies (and repaired or maintained by 'village development' or 'youth' groups), and forest exploitation is closely associated with local perceptions of 'development'. The decline in state services over the last few years of structural adjustment is no more than a continuation of past processes. At present, forestry services supported by outside funds are one of the few functioning government departments—but only where conservation projects are active.

Particularly over the last few years, the multi-ethnic settlements of forested south-west Cameroon have also suffered from considerable social and political insecurity. Whilst it is, in part, the result of new multi-party elections and the decline of the effectiveness of the state's surveillance systems, social insecurity is also a structural feature of forest society. 'Community' is a deeply problematic concept, given the structural characteristics of forest settlements. Later I suggest that the community is, in a sense, 'absent'. Contests around forest and the future are also contests around the construction and shape of 'community', of society itself.

The 'whites'. Whilst local people see a clear link between forest exploitation and development by the government, they also perceive links between forest exploitation and national and international political economy. From the first establishment of formal colonial rule, by the Germans in the late nineteenth century, the people of south-west Cameroon suffered land

alienation for plantation concessions, as well as the 'boom' extraction of wild rubber through forced labour. More recently expatriate companies have continued to extract medicinal plants (*Prunus, Yomimbe*) from the forest, whilst even conservation projects such as Korup have been accused, by the Cameroonian press, of illicitly exporting plants for drug extraction. (See the well publicised *Ancistrocladus* 'scandal', *Nouvelle Expression* 240, 17 March 1995; see also *New Scientist*, 16 January 1993.)

Extraction of timber from the forest of South West Province has taken place since the early colonial period. During the colonial period most timber concessions were given to expatriate logging companies. More recently concessions have been worked with foreign capital but are often formally granted to Cameroonian 'front men' for such companies. Forestry concessions and the bribes associated with them have been crucial to the paying-off of politicians and local elites. Timber exploitation has intensified during every political conjuncture in Cameroon—at independence, during the creation of the federal state, at unification and, at present, in response to externally imposed conditionalities for multi-party elections and 'good governance'. Given present-day World Bank conditionalities, including decentralisation and multi-party elections, timber has become, once again, a key resource in political co-option. (Oil revenues are, reportedly, controlled by the presidential office and/or multinational companies: Jua, 1993.)

Given all these experiences, local attitudes to expatriate projects (whether they aim at exploitation or conservation of the forest) are inevitably ambivalent. On the one hand, local people are deeply aware of the fact that much of the development of the region has been achieved either through the direct intervention of external ('whiteman') agencies—the Commonwealth Development Corporation, for example—or indirectly through the royalty payments and forestry dues paid to government or village councils by timber companies. On the other hand, local people are also aware of a strong and continuing thread of opposition and resistance to external agents, ranging from highly articulate legal protests (for example, the Bakweri Land Rights petition of 1946) to local protests against the creation of Forest Reserves (the Abana 'riot' of 1932) to general distrust of foreign businessmen (or ethnobotanical researchers). These ambiguities are expressed in the responses to our questions, but they are also embedded in attitudes to local and national politics, and attitudes towards politicians and self-styled 'elites'. Repeatedly, local political leaders have been compromised by aiding timber companies (in return for substantial bribes) or betraying local communities' land rights by selling off timber and land. In the interviews these attitudes were expressed by young people as a general distrust of 'our elders', as well as of government and the 'whites'. In this sense the highly visible activities of conservation projects such as the Mount Cameroon Project or Korup National Park are as likely to confirm suspicions as to allay them.

CONTESTED REALITIES: CONSERVATION PROJECTS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF 'COMMUNITY'

Conservation organisations and environmental management projects are relatively new entrants into the nexus of state activities and local socio-

political contests around forest. When the Korup National Park and the
biodiversity reserves around Mount Cameroon were first proposed[6] (in 1983
and 1985 respectively), conservation and donor organisations approached the
issue of demarcating conservation areas in ways which were both
authoritarian and naive. Unaware of the lengthy history of land alienation
and exploitation or of the tensions between strangers and 'natives', or
between youth and elders, NGOs such as the World Wide Fund for Nature
(WWF, UK), the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB, UK) and
Wildlife Conservation International (USA) strove to establish and police the
boundaries of biodiversity reserves. Similarly, government organisations
such as the ODA (UK) and scientific centres such as the Royal Botanic
Gardens at Kew sought to establish reserves, whilst at the same time others,
such as the Missouri Botanical Gardens, conducted botanical inventories in
the forest and collected specimens for pharmacological assay, unaware that
their activities were seen as a continuation of past practices in the extraction
of wild rubber, timber or medicine (S. A. Laird, A. B. Cunningham and E.
Lisinge, personal communication).

In their early phases such conservation efforts almost totally disregarded
local interests. For example, the WWF was successful in pressing the
government to reclassify the former Korup Forest Reserve as a National
Park, apparently unconcerned (or indeed welcoming the fact) that national
park status would demand the resettlement of six forest villages. Since the
establishment of the national park, relations between the project and these
villages have been characterised by a mixture of bad faith, failed promises
and obscure management of resettlement funds. Similarly, the boundaries of
reserves on Mount Cameroon were simply drawn on maps according to the
supposed degree of environmental degradation and biodiversity value.
Luckily the ODA project later recognised local claims to farmland and began
a process of boundary negotiation with villages bordering the proposed
reserve (Watts, 1994). Even so, KNP and LBGRCP have both been
extraordinarily naive in their dealings with local politicians and organisa-
tions such as the Cameroon Development Corporation, a major plantation
company holding leasehold title to enormous areas of land.[7] As a result, their
conservation activities continue to be viewed with suspicion, as has been
shown in the 'conversations about forest'.

Over the last few years, partly perhaps in response to local suspicion, but
more likely in response to concern in their 'home' countries and changing
development fads, rain-forest projects in Cameroon have been seeking to
promote 'participatory' approaches to wildlife conservation and 'community
management' of forest resources as a means to achieve sustainable resource
use and biodiversity preservation. The justifications for this new approach
are highly varied; state control of forest has proved ineffective, incompetent
or corrupt, whilst vesting the ownership of forest in the indigenous
community might prove both more equitable and more effective, at least in
principle (Watts, 1994).

This search for an 'indigenous community' may be misplaced in south-
west Cameroon. Settlements in the forest are not, as it were, remnants of
some 'traditional' past but the focus of all the historical and politico-
economic processes that have affected the region: migration, forest

exploitation, the exploitation of people, primitive accumulation by external agencies and institutions. As we have seen, local debates around forest are full of cogent discussions of the issues raised by external intervention in local affairs. But these debates do not exist merely as discourse. They also reflect, and are reflected in, the everyday life of forest villages: the 'communities' on which conservation and forestry projects build their attempts to develop sustainable use of forest.

All the ethnographic and historical data that have been reviewed in this article suggest that, for the people of south-west Cameroon, social integration and coherence are a fragile outcome of the work of converting the forest rather than a normal condition of life. But such a community does not simply persist once it has developed; as we have seen in this article, it is structured by the wider political economy. The inhabitants of contemporary forest settlements have highly differentiated relations with the wider world. These patterns of relations in turn promote differentiation in wealth and status within settlements. Such differentiation in turn allows complex cross-cutting alliances amongst settlement members and between settlements, as well as the emergence of patron–client networks stretching up to the city or even across international borders (Gabon, Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea). All these patterns are emerging in a multi-ethnic context where members of ethnic groups range from mobile migrant labourers with relatively little commitment to constructing 'community' to long-settled households which own land and houses.

The different interests, ethnic backgrounds and form of access to resources of groups of 'indigenes' and 'strangers' are reflected in the diversity of views about forest resource management and the future of the forest. Immigrant settlers are likely to view the future of the forest in terms of their 'home' environment: people from the grassfields cite the success of wood lots and argue that the forest can safely be converted to farms and eucalyptus groves. One settler had taken this experimental approach further by renting a plot of orchard bush high on Mount Cameroon to replicate the farming system of the Bamenda grassfields on land that locals consider 'useless' for agriculture. 'Bayangi' from Manyu Division[8] envisage leaving large trees as shade for cocoa groves and attempt to purchase and farm contiguous plots in solid blocs mirroring the clan territories of their settlements of origin. 'Ngolo'[9] seem historically to have spawned 'daughter settlements' linked by kinship and clanship with the home village and perceive forest conversion as establishing a widening network of settlement links corresponding to an extension of 'Ngolo' territory. (This commonly expressed stereotype may be one root of inter-ethnic tensions.) Thus, whilst all settlers share a common view of forest conversion, they do not agree on the environment to come. In practice, given the admixture of households and quarters on the ground, these contesting views on the environmental future are unlikely to be expressed in practice. But they are fertile ground for ethnic stereotyping and tensions over plans for adjacent farms.

Occupation, age and employment history cut across these 'ethnic' world views in interesting ways. Small-scale timber extractors, for example, are quite conscious of the diminishing timber resource and of their own role in forest clearing. But their prescriptions for the future explicitly contrast with

the tendency of land 'owners' to follow the extraction of mature trees by cutting down smaller shade trees instead of allowing them to grow to saleable size. This reflects their relation to resources: artisan timber contractors purchase individual trees from owners, sawing each tree *in situ*, and are often residents and themselves land-owners in the settlements where they operate. In contrast, those from whom they purchase trees see the cutting down of larger trees as a stage in the valorisation of land for sale. Partially cleared land is attractive to smaller-scale settler farmers. Thus the form and end results of the process of forest clearing are contested.

Much of this smaller-scale settlement is being carried out by retirees from the plantations, ex-drivers and lower-level civil servants. Some immigrants are 'native' returnees as well as stranger settlers and may coalesce around resource-rich entrepreneurs. Others depend upon the partial clearing of land by artisan timber contractors and the purchase of relatively small plots from 'native owners'. Their 'vision' of the future social/ecological system is as an 'outgrower' system—basically small-scale producers of food crops for sale either through formal co-operatives or through marketeers' networks. Such farmers are aware of the environmental implications of a large number of fundamentally similar small-scale farms—i.e. that secondary forest/bush fallow is likely to disappear. But they point out that, given the size of their land holdings, no other pattern is possible. Most often, prescriptions for perpetuating the forest focus on inequalities in access to land. Given the cost of buying land from 'natives', the latter are perceived as having too much and being unable to use it all, and as becoming venal and rich through land sales. Since 'natives' form the core of the village councils and courts, and settlers are the most frequent litigants, there are tensions between them which often flare into outright conflict. Theft of produce and tools expresses these conflicts. (In the election period of 1993 such tensions led to sporadic arson and assaults on village heads, whilst wealthy farmers and council members associate the increasing incidence of armed robbery with incitement by their poorer neighbours.)

Party allegiances affect views of forest resources: the opposition Social Democratic Front has repeatedly called for a blockade of timber trucks leaving South West Province for Douala, arguing that logs for export represent the theft of anglophone Cameroon resources by the francophone state and 'the French'. But perhaps the most important emerging cleavage is in the patterns and organisation of forest colonisation by small-scale stranger farmers or by larger-scale capitalist farmers, who have in some ways competing models of status and power and of their own impact upon the environment. To the emerging capitalist farmer the farm is an adjunct to urban-based operations, including food marketing. Marked class differences are developing which will surely result in variant views of the environmental future. A number of large-scale farmers expressed the view to me that 'forest conservation' does not conflict with their interests, since their farms are modern and permanent whereas the 'peasants' practise primitive shifting techniques. This vision articulates well with conservation organisations' policies, especially if large farmers can successfully represent themselves or their village agents as 'the community'.

These varied views of the future of the forest do indeed issue in patterns of resource management, even though the patterns are rather inchoate at present. Variant patterns of local environmental knowledge have implications for forest resource use. In this area of high immigrant settlement, many settlers have a fundamentally urban background, as well as a relatively high level of formal education. Their knowledge of the forest environment is limited, though, again, it varies with age and the length of their farming career. Indigenous knowledge of plants, animals and ecological processes—what one might call 'natural history'—is also stratified by gender and ethnic category. For many settlers (and 'natives') the conversion of forest to farmland implies rather standardised 'packages'—hence the popularity of cocoa farming, where the technique is well known, or of relatively simple intercropping patterns. But the loss of indigenous knowledge is not inevitable. Medium to large-scale capitalist farmers are often reproducing the labour organisation, cultivation practices, social control techniques and 'environmental management' of the plantations. These variations in knowledge and practice have important consequences for the future management of the remaining areas of farm bush and the ability of farmers to control or reverse environmental deterioration (cf. Amanor, 1994). Yet, like the other social variations, they are also linked with pervasive cleavages within and between local ethnic and class-based groups.

Some final insights into local responses to conservation through the 'indigenous community' are provided in remarks from each side of the 'community'/conservation project boundary. As one Cameroonian official of a participatory management project said, 'If they don't have a community we'll make them form one, and then we'll order them to participate . . .' (director, South Bakundu forest regeneration project). Another view comes from an itinerant electronics repairer, a young man of good education who had been exposed to the educational efforts of both the Korup project and the ODA Limbe project. In his view, conservation concealed some secret interest:

> You whites are very wise. You know that there is something valuable in these forests and you try to persuade the villagers to preserve it. But you won't tell us what it is. All this talk of saving the forest is to conceal that thing from us.

His views were widely shared by the audience of young men and women who had gathered to listen to his tape-recorder that night.

CONTESTED FOREST FUTURES: CONSERVATION OF WHAT, FOR WHOM, AND HOW?

The contradictions between current conservation initiatives and the existing political economy are well recognised in local people's attitudes and practice and are informed by their historical knowledge. Yet, as I have shown, conservation projects and organisations have generally proved unable, or unwilling, to articulate with local and regional concerns. In part this reflects the methods they have used to gain information on local concerns: survey questionnaires or 'PRA' techniques, which demand to be complemented with long-term ethnographic field research (cf. Sharpe, 1983). 'Participatory'

methods were used at first with near-total disregard for the historical background of forest use in the region. In most cases, also, projects have sought to disregard or obscure the conflicts around forest which come out so clearly in the interview data presented here. Thus this article emphasises the importance of reflexivity and political and historical knowledge in interpreting even open-ended, conversational, data on such a sensitive topic.

There are many voices on the future of the forest. Contrary to the stereotypes held in some conservation and governmental circles, popular knowledge concerning forest resources is extensive even in urban settings. But such knowledge and attitudes exist as part of sophisticated discourses and critiques of the existing 'world'. The key to the success of forest conservation initiatives will be the extent to which they realistically attach themselves to these developmental aspirations. Given this diversity, the notion of some single indigenous community 'voice' in participatory management is naive.

What is missing from the current conservation agenda, I suggest, is local cultural knowledge of how civilisation has been achieved. Our informant groups' responses to the slogans produced by conservation projects (often for Western audiences) show just how difficult it is for conservationists to engage with the cultural logic of modern West African societies' views on forest. Pre-Romantic European theories of the place of forest in the creation of civilisation, such as Vico's, may be a corrective to contemporary conservation stereotypes of pristine untouched wildwood, 'indigenous people' and human stewardship of 'Nature'. Influenced by European experience of forest colonisation, Vico wrote a mythopoeic theory which linked forest clearance and the development of reason through the origins of knowledge from myth—a process which he related to the cosmological break that occurred when men cleared the trees and looked up, for the first time, at the sky. In a mythic idiom, Vico populated his forests only with a race of Cyclops—the one-eyed who, in their moments of animal contentment, gazed dully at the trees. Only with the coming of people, with their villages and civilisation and, later, academies could this one-eyed vision be cleared. Vico's imagined history is pragmatic as well as mythic, however. Clearing the forest made clearsightedness possible but it also provided the resources through which society might progress and develop: 'First the forest, then the village, then the city, then the Academy' (Vico, [1984] 1744: 78). In contemporary Cameroon, contested discourses around forest are more complex but no less polysemic than Vico's myth; the forest has many meanings as well as many uses.

As this article has tried to show, 'the forest' is quite central to local contestations around 'development' and the future. As in Vico's myth, 'community' is seen as an outcome of the successful management of the forest rather than a given of rural society. Indeed, civilised society is the result of the enormous social and environmental energy that enables forest settlements and social identities to form. For many forest settlements 'community' is a daily construct, achieved by overcoming cleavages of class, ethnicity, political allegiance and gender. Nor is 'community' secure: forest villagers are faced with problems of creating and maintaining a degree of social and personal security among a population which is mobile and

culturally diverse, using social institutions which are labile or barely legitimate. Village members themselves are proud of their ability to create 'social capital' and reluctantly invest considerable amounts of time in doing so. The exploitation of forest resources (timber, forest products, wildlife) attracts population yet at the same time provides the resources through which some order can be established within it. South West Province forest frontier settlements are but one end of the continuum that includes, at the other, settled agricultural societies, ethnic identities, cities or Vico's 'Academy'.

In this article I have been able only to begin documenting local forest management strategies, and the extensive discourses concerned with environmental and societal change. As we have seen, these discourses are crucially concerned with 'the state', with relations between indigenous and immigrant populations, and with comprehending the ecological and social consequences of forest conversion. At the local level, the response to conservation initiatives will depend upon the power perceived to be behind forestry laws and policies, the distribution of power and wealth within village organisations and the presence of alternative forest users—whether these be stranger farmers, small-scale timber contractors or large companies. Political responses to forest conservation or exploitation, including continuing investment in 'social capital' or the construction of 'community', are likely to depend only on the extent to which parties within the local political arena perceive advantage in such a strategy. Changes in external agencies' policies, in national law or in the local effectiveness of state functionaries are likely to result in unforeseen consequences for community construction, unless they are grounded in secure social knowledge.

Contrary to received wisdom, defining the 'community' is far from simple. Outside organisations, including the national government, tend to define the community for purposes of forest resource management as the indigenous people of the area. But to do so in South West Province is to privilege a sector of the population who share the common world view of 'development through forest valorisation' of immigrants and state function-aries. It is as likely that vesting the management of the forest in the 'indigenous community' will increase the processes of farm clearance rather than checking it. It could also increase the power of self-styled 'community leaders', increase inter-ethnic and class cleavages whilst not tackling the more fundamental issues of social order that both indigenes and strangers desire.

What, then, of community management, which is seen by external agencies as an apparently cheap, apparently voluntaristic, method of achieving 'conservation'? Surely it begs the questions of conservation of what? For whom? Even the category of 'forest' is far from clear-cut. Who defines what it is? Who defines where it is? Rather than the nature/culture division central to many current conceptualisations of conservation, our research in Cameroon reflects the fact that forest is power. In the past this was the power of forest societies, of men over women (Ardener, 1975) or of firms and concessions over people. Currently the conservation organisations are in the ascendant, attempting hegemony by co-opting elements of the 'community' and by economic and political pressure on the state.

The implications of the article can be divided between the practical and the theoretical. Practical issues are that current weakly theorised notions of the place of community participation in forest conservation and management need to be considerably modified in relation to grounded regional realities. This in turn implies that rain-forest conservation requires two conditions which neither government nor external agencies seem likely to support: communal security in which contested 'histories' and 'visions' can continue to be contained by informal structures of dispute control and arbitration; and economic development which facilitates the inclusion of disaffected 'youth'. In south-west Cameroon at least, but probably more widely, it is a nonsense that the saving of forest is heard as preserving rural slums by the people who live there.

In theoretical terms, however, the article raises some rather more critical issues. Community and local organisation are currently being treated as 'social capital' through which development organisations may achieve their aims. In this article, in contrast, I have shown how community is an almost daily construction and how forest resources are mobilised to that end. If the concept of social capital has any utility for analysis, it needs to be applied to far more grounded practices than is currently the case. In the Cameroon context, the mere ability to maintain arenas in which people can speak to each other, negotiate or sustain long-term relations beyond single strategic dispute control are quite crucial to the continued ordering of society.

NOTES

[1] Notwithstanding the fact that I made my own field notes available to development workers on the ground (see Watts, 1994) and acted as an adviser to one of the projects (Mount Cameroon Project workshop, 1994).

[2] 'Youth', 'elders' and 'elites' are all political categories, denoting those who are excluded from power, those who hold power in village councils and educated, often urban based, power brokers respectively.

[3] The data on which this article is based were gained between 1992 and 1996, in a number of ways and in a variety of institutional settings, ranging from informal participant observation through village court hearings to newspapers, meetings with conservationists and villagers, interviews with officials and participation in forestry project policy and planning meetings. At a late stage of the research the key issues emerging from the multiple research arenas were distilled into a series of paired controversial statements and administered to groups of young men and women to elicit 'conversations about conservation' similar to those collected in Sierra Leone by Richards (1996). Whilst the results of this semi-informal survey have not been analysed in detail, the questions themselves provide a useful framework to present contests around forest.

The interview checklist on which this account is based consisted of two sections, the first offering controversial statements about forest and who should control it, whilst the second section explored the respondents' experience of 'forest'—including whether they came from a forest area, whether forest and bush were the same thing, whether they had visited a forest,

what things they used from the forest, and whether they knew of, or belonged to, any group that controlled forest use. Interviews were carried out by myself, by Cameroonian sociology students, supervised by Dr Francis Nyamnjoh, by Ruth Malleson and a number of school leavers from Mundemba, and by a journalist and a village chief. In some cases interviews were taped, though the sound quality is not good, owing to the noise of group discussion. More often notes were taken in the standard ethnographic way, and written up afterwards.

[4] Similar discriminations are used in local Oroko languages (Malleson, personal communication), which also distinguish land types in terms of ecological assemblages, ease of cultivation and soil type/water retention characteristics.

[5] Some of the groups were presented with questions taken from Richards's 1994–95 interviews in Sierra Leone. 'Rebels live in forests. We should cut them down.' This question proved rather contentious in Cameroon and was dropped from many interviews. Those who did respond focused on bandits rather than rebels, though some few respondents, especially Bakossi and Bamileke, referred to the rebellion of the UPC *maquisards* of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

[6] The first proposals for a forest reserve on Mount Cameroon were made in 1926, but were resisted and eventually ruled out by the colonial Forestry Department. The irony is that this proposal to make Mount Cameroon a biodiversity reserve was reintroduced, by the Royal Botanic Garden, Kew, and the ODA, as a largely 'British' project. (See National Archives, Buea, Qh/a 1926/1, 'Cameroons Mountain Forest Reserve'; National Archives, Buea, Qh/a 1933/2, 'Cameroons Mountain Forest Reserve.')

[7] The exact extent of CDC leasehold lands is a carefully kept commercial secret. Estimating the areas which have been cleared and planted with rubber, oil palm, bananas or teak is relatively straightforward. These crops cover most of the cultivable land area of Fako Division. But uncultivated land areas in the other divisions of the province are unknown. The forthcoming privatisation may lead to the size and exact location of the holdings being revealed.

[8] 'Bayangi' usually denotes Kenyang speakers but is sometimes applied to Ejagham and other groups such as Obang, all of which inhabit Manyu division.

[9] 'Ngolo' usually denotes Ngolo, from the area of the Rumpi hills. In certain contexts, however, it may be used to categorise other speakers of the Oroko languages.

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ABSTRACT

Western concern with 'conserving' or 'managing' the rain forests of Africa has led to
the setting up of a number of conservation projects. In such projects the
'participation' of the 'community' in forest conservation has become the new
orthodoxy. However, proposals about local people's participation presume that
defining the future of the forest is a straight contest between the alternatives of
conservation or forest clearing. Such proposals also presume that the existence of
communities is non-problematic. In contrast, this article documents that there is
already considerable local debate about forest use and conservation, much of it
among those excluded from the formal arena of politics and policy-making. Concern
with 'the environment' includes concern about the perpetuation of society, and
represents a clear continuation of West African village cosmologies focused on the
societalisation of space. At the same time, conservation aims of 'keeping the forest
as it is' have few resonances, since forest people see society itself as an artful, but
often problematic, construction in which the conversion of the forest plays a central
part. In conclusion, the article suggests that the key to environmental management

must be for external agencies to articulate with the interests and values of those who hold a legitimate stake in African forest resources.

RÉSUMÉ

Les préoccupations occidentales en matière de conservation ou de gestion des forêts tropicales africaines ont conduit à la formation de nombreux programmes de protection de l'environnement. La participation des communautés en matière de conservation forestière est devenue la norme dans ces programmes. Cependant, les propositions de participation des populations locales sous-entendent que la détermination de l'avenir de la forêt se résume purement et simplement à un conflit entre les différentes formes de conservation et la déforestation. De telles propositions sous-entendent également que la présence de ces communautés ne pose pas de problèmes. Par contraste, cet article montre qu'un débat important s'est déjà instauré au sein de ces communautés concernant l'utilisation des forêts et leur conservation, principalement parmi les exclus de l'arène politique officielle et des prises de décision. Les préoccupations en matière d'environnement incluent une inquiétude sur la perpétuation de la société et représentent un prolongement clair des cosmologies des villages d'Afrique occidentale concentrées sur la sociétalisation de l'espace. Dans le même temps, l'objectif de conservation consistant à préserver la forêt en l'état éveille peu de résonances, les populations forestières considérant la société comme une construction ingénieuse, mais souvent problématique, dans laquelle la conservation des forêts joue un rôle central. Cet article suggère en conclusion que la clé d'une bonne gestion de l'environnement doit résider dans la prise en compte par les organismes extérieurs des intérêts et des valeurs de ceux qui ont des intérêts légitimes dans les ressources forestières africaines.