

Power and participation in a Cameroonian village

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*To tackle the theme of change, one must start
by an understanding of the society as it was,
as it is and as it could become*

(Olivier de Sardan, 1996)

This paper explores the difficulties that confront the formation and continued functioning of community-based groups in villages in the tropical forest region of South Cameroon and examines the use of participatory tools to assist in obtaining small, clearly defined objectives¹. Centralised, top down approaches to conservation and development are widely perceived as having failed to achieve their objectives, with local participation being increasingly accepted as one of the few ways forward for organisations working in the field, (Chambers, 1983 ; Sach, 1992 ; Burkey, 1993 ; Rondinelli, 1993 ; Dudley, 1993 ; Timberlake, 1985). This approach typically requires members of a community to establish a group or groups to represent the village and thus facilitate the participatory process. People in this region find it enormously difficult to work together, largely due to lack of experience and mutual mistrust and suspicion. The paper argues that concern needs to be given to understanding the historical and cultural context of a community in order to anticipate problems that may arise when creating or working with groups. Issues such as power relations and attitudes to change and modernity are of key importance.

The research that this article is based on was undertaken in Mekas, a bulu² village located in the western sector of the Dja Reserve. The Reserve, created in 1950, occupies some 530,000 hectares of tropical forest in South Cameroon. Since 1992 the Reserve has been jointly managed by *ECOFAC (Conservation et Utilisation Rationnelle des Écosystèmes*

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² Belong to the ethnic group basaa-beti (beti-fang).

Forestiers en Afrique Centrale)³ and *MINEF (Ministere de l'Environnement et des Forests)*. It is one of an increasing number of projects attempting to combine conservation with sustainable development. The project, now in its second phase, is in the process of developing a management plan for the Reserve. In it, it states how it intends to work in "tight collaboration" with the population in order to draw up usage zones within the Reserve. This will include the elaboration of regulations on sustainable use of natural resources, which will be the basis for a "process of development" (*Plan d'Amenagement de la Reserve de Faune du Dja, 1998*). In order to do this ECOFAC will need to work with groups representing the local population. As highlighted in this paper, this will be a highly sensitive and delicate operation, not least because of the role played by members of the elite⁴ in this region. In addition, it will be necessary for the project to be actively involved in the development and/or adaptation of these groups in order to ensure that they are as representative of the population as possible and able to fulfil the role required of them.

The paper uses case studies of two groups, one village-based and the other representing the villages in the western sector of the Reserve (*Canton Bulu du Dja*). The first is a women's association called *Les Amies*, created with the aim of social, cultural and economic development in the village of Mekas. It went through a series of stages starting with initial enthusiasm and action. This was followed by a number of events that led to the breakdown of trust between members and resulted in disillusionment and slow disintegration of the group. Using the participatory process, an attempt was made by the author to encourage and facilitate the revival of the group to recreate *Les Amies* in a new and functioning form. The approach succeeded but not without creating conflict and rupture within the community. The second group is ASSODEDJA (*Association pour le Developpement du Canton Bulu Dja*), created by members of the elite originating from the region. Its focus was on attracting external sources of funding for the development of the region. Previous collaborative development projects had taken place with French development funds and ECOFAC. ASSODEDJA suffered a similar but more profound fate than *Les Amies*, caused by conflict between villages, failure of the collaborative projects, and tension between members of the elite.

The paper tells the story of the two groups, the problems they faced in achieving their objectives and how and why they failed. It then describes how the participatory process was used to facilitate empowerment of those members of the group who previously had little say in the decision-making process. Finally it discusses the influence of the pre-colonial, colonial and the post colonial systems in the region. Each of these systems has had significant impact on the structure and attitudes of the community particularly in relation to perceptions of power and development.

³ A project funded by by DGVIII (Development) of the European Commission.

⁴ A member of the elite is someone who has received a good education, possibly in Europe. They often work in the city but have considerable political influence in village affairs.

“Les Amies”. A history

Les Amies was started at the end of 1992 by a woman married to one of the men in the village. She had lived in Douala for 17 years with her previous husband and it was there that she was a member of an association linked to her husband's ethnic group. She thus brought the idea to Mekas and wanted to start a similar association in the village. In the beginning *Les Amies* had the following activities ;

- *Groupe de travail* - A group of women farming together in both individually and communally owned fields.

- *Caisse annuelle* - A “bank” where savings are placed, normally over a yearly period. When the bank is “broken” at the end of the year members take what they have saved plus any interest paid through loans.

- *Tontine/cotisation* - This circulating loan system is similar to those that exist in my parts of Central and West Africa (Van den Brinck, 1997). For *les Amies* it was a small group of four or five women who were involved.

- *Caisse de secours* - Intended as a form of security in case of illness or death of a member or her family. Payment into the *caisse de secours* was meant to be obligatory but in reality contributions were rare.

In 1994 *Les Amies* was dynamic and motivated. The local *Chef du Poste Agricole* encouraged them to formalise their association and obtain external funding. They decided to open a bank account in order to obtain credit for a development micro-project. To obtain credit they needed to have a bank account containing a minimum of 50 000 CFA (500 FF). Through contributions from each member they managed to raise 40 000 CFA. In order to make it up to the 50 000 CFA required, a decision was made by the *Fondatrice* to sell two sacks of peanuts that *les Amies* had harvested from their communal field. At this point a series of problems arose. The treasurer of the *Caisse Annuelle* fled the village with the group's savings. Rumours started to spread that the *Fondatrice* was going to sell the sacks of peanuts and take the money for herself. According to the *Fondatrice*, this annoyed her to such an extent that she confirmed their fears and kept the money from the peanuts. The group presented the problem to the village chief who said he was unable to judge the case because the *Fondatrice* was the wife of one of his sons. Similarly the treasurer, who was the daughter of one of the notables of the village was left untouched. The said notable was either unable or unwilling to take responsibility for the recovery of the money. This highlights the hierarchical system of the village and the lack of justice that exists within the system. A third problem that arose was when the men from the village borrowed 30 000 CFA and never repaid the loan. After these experiences *Les Amies* no longer wanted to deal with large sums of money or make

loans as they no longer had confidence amongst themselves or in others relating to money. The group continued to meet but with far lower expectations, using the meetings as a social gathering to eat, drink and gossip.

“ASSODEDJA”. A history

The idea of ASSODEDJA was conceived in 1985 by the villagers of Nkolombembe, the second largest village after Mekas in the western sector of the Reserve. Their proposition was to create a large tontine for all the Canton and at the end of each meeting have food, drink and dancing for all the participants. This reflects the local peoples preference for the social rather than economic benefits linked with people coming together as a group. The idea of the tontine was taken and transformed by members of the elite living outside the village. It resulted in the creation of an association aimed at the “opening up and development of the canton” and “assisting the inhabitants in organising themselves with the goal of unity and solidarity” (Joiris, 1995). The association was made up of representatives from the villages in the canton, the chief of the canton, the village chiefs and members of the elite living in towns and cities.

The activities of ASSODEDJA were closely linked with the contacts and influence of the members of the elite involved. They highlighted the plight of the population to external organisations and NGOs in order to obtain financial and other support. Two major projects were launched. The first a well and shop financed by French development aid and the second the improvement of the quality of the road, in collaboration with ECOFAC.

The French development aid financed the construction of a well and shop and would have provided one million CFA of merchandise for the shop on its completion. The shop and well were donated for the whole canton but were to be constructed at Mekas. The work for the shop and well was given to the *Volontaire du Progres*. All the material was provided, except for the sand which the population said they would supply. The workers arrived, construction began and the men started to dig for sand. During this time the president of ASSODEDJA held a closed meeting with the women in order to tell them that they would be in charge of managing the shop. The men wanted to participate in the meeting but were excluded. In response to this decision the men refused to continue digging for sand, arguing that if the shop was only for the women then they could dig for sand themselves. In addition, the men forbid the women from providing free food and lodgings for the construction workers. This is when the project started to break down. The work was delayed due to lack of sand and the construction workers were unhappy. Eventually, after several contract extensions, the workers were recalled and the shop left uncompleted. The well, on the other hand, was finished. However, the population had been asked to contribute

50 000 CFA to use in case the pump broke. The men refused to make the payment, saying that the women would claim the pump for themselves, just as they had done with the shop. Later the pump broke and remained unrepaired.

The collaborative project between ASSODEDJA and ECOFAC was aimed at improving the state of the track which traverses the western sector of the Reserve from North to South. ECOFAC, through ASSODEDJA, proposed to provide machetes, files, food and payment for each man working on clearing the track. In return they requested that the villages situated along the length of this road give a contribution, amounting to 50 000 CFA in order to demonstrate their partnership with ECOFAC. The collection of this money was organised by ASSODEDJA but the contributions came nowhere near the amount requested. In order not to lose the opportunity of work and payment offered to them, the men of Mekas borrowed money from *Les Amies*. The Mekas men gave their contribution to ASSODEDJA but insisted that as they had provided the money only they should be given the employment. This created tensions within ASSODEDJA as it had a strong representation in Nkolombembe, the other major village in the Reserve. The Mekas men say that they never received payment for the work they did on the road because the president of ASSODEDJA used the money for other purposes. It is for this reason that they were unable to repay their loan to *Les Amies*.

In 1994, following these collaborative projects with ECOFAC and French development aid, the activities of ASSODEDJA came to a halt. Internal tensions between members of the elite and inter-village tensions, particularly between Nkolombembe and Mekas, led to the departure of the general secretary and the splitting of the Canton. The general secretary started his own association, GIDER (*Groupement d'intérêt pour le Développement Rural*) which ran from his own village to the southern section of the reserve, the northern sector of the canton remained associated with ASSODEDJA and Mekas and Meka'a (just north of Mekas) claimed "neutrality".

The participation process

Les amies

First contact and attendance at meetings

I first started attending and recording meetings with *Les Amies* at the end of September 1997. It was during this time that I became aware of the tensions between the women in the village. Each meeting returned to the same problems; non-attendance of members but with no action being taken; the *Caisse de Secours* not functioning as it should; problems of repayment of loans; gossip and disagreements between women both

during and outside the meeting ; the statute not being followed ; and lack of leadership from the president and other members of the office. At each meeting these problems were discussed and re-discussed without conclusion or resolution. It was at this point that the president asked one of the men of the village to help them to reassess their statute. After he discussed the idea with me we decided to ask the president if we could first interview some of the existing and past members of the group in order to understand the situation better, which she agreed to.

The process of problem solving

Interviews with a selection of five women were held, all of whom were or had been members of *Les Amies*. Questions were asked about why they had joined and what they saw as the problems which blocked the development of the group as well as how they thought these problems could be resolved. The problems as perceived by these women can be divided into three broad and overlapping themes ;

- disagreement/conflict (*teke enwoane*) and hatred (*sin/sian*) between the women
- the poor state of the statute which was undefined and rarely followed
- lack of comprehension among certain women about what an Association is and does.

When asked why they had joined *Les Amies* most of them emphasised the need for the women of the village to get on with one another and be together. They joined because they were women of Mekas and this desire to be united was paramount to them ; “Even if there is no progress in our meetings we need to come together often, we must get together”. Another woman described her reason for joining in the following way ; “All the women of the village should know each other, that is the first goal, but the real goal is that if they get on and do things together the village can function well - that is the real goal”.

It seems that unity was both the central goal for *Les Amies* among the women and its greatest problem. That is, despite a fundamental desire for the women to come together regularly and get on with one another, there was always misunderstanding and disagreement between them leading to “*la haine*” (hatred). Resolving this hatred was seen as an impossible task and yet fundamental to solving the problems of *Les Amies*. When asked how the tontine could be made to work one woman responded ; “You think you can get rid of the disagreements ? How ? The hatred, how ? It’s like the church, each day they say you must love one another but as soon as you return to your house you start hating, it’s like that, you enter your own home, you don’t go into your neighbours house”. How and why this hatred exists was seen as difficult to explain but by some it was described as being linked to a tension created by inequality between women. One

woman had spoken to some of the older women in the village about the current problems for *Les Amies*. They told her that before, when they were young, it wasn't like now but rather the women were "hand in hand, everyone was equal". The question of equality, or lack of it, appears to be key. When asked to explain where the hatred came from it was often linked to "jealousy" (*zok*) caused by the difference between women who had come from living in town - who were often better educated - and those who had been brought up and stayed in the village ; "Perhaps you are born here in a little village and after that you leave to get married, always close by, how can you evolve ? Syriack and I, we have come from Sangmelima, that means that those who are not from here understand something more. But for those from here, it's difficult to convince them, they only want to create jealousy, nothing but that". The problem of this "village mentality" was highlighted by several women. One woman when asked why she felt that the group didn't function as it should replied by saying "*because we are in the village*". She went on to explain that in towns groups are well organised and members get on with one another. The support provided in urban-based groups is not just financial but emotional ; "in town if you are in an association, when you have a bereavement, they rent a car, they buy food, they themselves go to your village, they themselves prepare the food, you see, that's to say you're in mourning but you don't feel like you're in mourning". By contrast in the village ; "there is no feeling, people don't come to help and support you and it is the conflict (*teke enwoane*) between women that plays a large part in this".

There were other reasons also given for conflict between women including family feuds and tensions between young and old. The family feuds have sometimes lasted for generations. Women find themselves married into a family with a history of conflict with other families which they are expected to continue. The women cited the conflict between older and younger women, saying that the needs of the younger women were different from those of the older, that they had their own ideas and yet found it difficult to speak out in meetings ; "When we are in a meeting and my mother-in-law has already made the decision not to do such or such a thing, me at my low level, I'm not able to do anything, even if I don't agree with her". This imbalance of power between young and old is highlighted by the fact that the positions of office were held by the older women. It was felt by all the women that the statute needed to be clearly defined and most importantly, applied.

Development of a Statute

It was decided to focus on something tangible that could be done for *Les Amies*, that is, help them to develop their statute in the hope that if this was adhered to the disagreements and inequalities between women would be reduced. Two meetings were held with food and palm wine provided at

the end of each meeting. The meetings took place during a two week period with a group of 6-8 women. An outline of issues relating to the statute had been written based on the individual interviews that had taken place and these ideas were discussed, changed, added to or thrown out. Each meeting lasted about two hours and each point of the statute discussed and rules developed. The meetings were lively and enjoyable and most of the women took an active role in the discussions. The statute was completed, roles of the members of office defined and elections for the new office decided. The second meeting ended on a light note with women joking about the campaigns they were going to run before the elections.

Dispute and Disorder

The next meeting of *Les Amies* was held at the house of the president. The process of how the statute had been developed was explained and then presented for discussion. The meeting ran fairly smoothly and there was little dissent regarding the rules developed. At the end the president, who had said very little, spoke out. She said that the statute stated nothing new, that all the rules made had already been discussed before and nothing had changed. She asked the rest of the group what they thought the white woman was doing to help. As far as she could see the white woman was doing nothing for them. The meeting broke up and everyone left but not before another meeting was arranged for the following Sunday. It was evident that despite the president's reluctance the other women were looking for change. Later I found out that before the meeting the president had heard rumours that the new statute had been written and already sent off to be formally legalised. In addition she had heard that one of the newly married women in the group was boasting about how she had already been made president.

The Elections

The following meeting began with the president making a speech. She said that their association was not about development but about guarding tradition. That the group was unlike other associations because its members were not "intellectuals" (*beyem mam* - or those who know much, *beyem* also means sorcerer, perhaps implying there is good reason to be suspicious of intellectuals). She continued that she had been "given" the village by her parents-in-law, that she had lived for years in the village and had an age of experience. She argued that some other motive must lie behind the white woman's desire to develop the statute. That this was why the young, newly-married woman wanted to become president, in order to benefit from whatever was going to come with the new statute. Finally she stated that she was not going to give up the presidency and that the rest of the office would also remain. There was a long silence and I began to resign myself to the fact that the participatory approach must attempt to

work within existing social structures of the village, even if these are based on inequality and autocratic rule. Then another older woman from the village spoke “Being president is not an inheritance. You say your parents-in-law left you the village. They didn’t leave you the village with the meeting (*ekon*). The question of changing the office goes back more than a year and this cannot be blamed on Mengue (the young woman in question). Even if you no longer remain president, if you really love your village you will continue to be with us”. And with that the group swiftly moved on to voting in the new office with the old president obliged to accept her new role as one of the advisers making up the “*Conseil de Bureau*”.

Later *Les Amies* split into two groups. The original *Les Amies* was made up of the older women and the new group, “*L’Avenir des Femmes Rurales de Mekas*”, consisted of the younger women.

ASSODEDJA

Attempted rejuvenation

On 26 January 1998 the previous General Secretary of ASSODEDJA and present president of GIDER called a meeting at Mekas to discuss “the solidarity of the Canton Bulu Dja”. He described ASSODEDJA as having had a crisis of confidence but that it should be re-launched. Despite questions asking the reason why, he would only say that the division of the canton had meant opportunities had and would continue to be lost. The undeclared but rumoured motive was that UNESCO⁵ was coming to visit the Reserve and that there would be benefits to a local population that showed itself to be united and well-organised.

The second meeting was held about two weeks later at the village of Nkolombembe, the idea being that a decision on the future of ASSODEDJA would be made. When the president of GIDER did not arrive, a closed meeting was held between certain members of the elite and village chiefs, and the decision made for the existing office to remain until their mandate expired in August 1998. When the president of GIDER finally arrived the meeting began but the acting president of ASSODEDJA announced the decision made earlier and refused to alter it. The tension mounted but no further decision was made except that the chief of the canton - who described the members of the elite as intellectuals in the process of playing with the population - called a third meeting at his village three weeks later. At this third meeting there was a boycott from the Northern sector of the Canton. Discussions circled around the conflict between the villages of Mekas and Nkolombembe and criticism of members of the elite - or intellectuals - who were described as being egocentric and concerned only with their own self-interest. However, no decision was made due to the absence of half the Canton.

⁵ The United Nations Organisation for Education, Science and Culture

The initial reason for the re-launching of ASSODEDJA, that of the arrival of UNESCO, had been put to one side when it became evident that the Association could not begin to be re-launched whilst there were continued tensions between the villages and members of the elite. However, it was announced at this final meeting that UNESCO had financed a seminar entitled “Participatory Management and Sustainable Development” and that part of their agenda would be a visit to the Western sector of the Dja Reserve. The population was asked to prepare a programme for this visit

An alternative to ASSODEDJA

With the agreement of one of the leading village elders it was decided that Mekas would develop a presentation for UNESCO based on discussions held with a group of elders, men and women. Discussions were held around the themes of participatory management, sustainable development and conservation. Separate meetings of between one and two hours were held with each group of between five and six people. A synthesis of these ideas was then compiled as a presentation to be made to UNESCO by one of the youth of the village. However, on the day of the UNESCO visit, the presentation to be made by the villagers was not included on the programme. It was replaced by a presentation made *in the name* of the local population by the president of GIDER. The “ordinary” villagers were disappointed but accepted the decision as part of the hierarchical village system. A system that was not just, but one that they were used to. On their departure UNESCO was presented with a written copy of the villagers own presentation.

Reflections

Using the participatory approach with *Les Amies* enabled the younger women to find a voice. They were in a weaker position due to the dominance of the village tradition of power being linked with age and experience. The president of *Les Amies* was insisting on maintaining her position of power entirely based on her given right to do so due to her age and experience. Through the participatory process, realising that they were united in their desire for change, the other women were given the confidence to override the existing power base. The situation for ASSODEDJA was that of the educated elite who, as a minority, were attempting to use their position of power and influence to control the Association, with the aim of providing an image of unity with which to present UNESCO. For this reason the participatory action took a step away from ASSODEDJA, with the aim of facilitating the immediate need

of the local population. That is, organising themselves to make a presentation to an organisation that had the potential to directly or indirectly effect their future. However, the approach partly failed due to the overwhelming power of one member of the elite. He was able to replace their presentation with his own, but described himself as representing the local population. However, he was not able to stop them from handing a written copy of the presentation to UNESCO.

It could be argued that for *Les Amies* the intervention using the participatory approach to unite a group in order to structure and plan a clearly defined goal was successful. Longer term use of this approach would inevitably be more complex and problematic. It was already clear from the work with *Les Amies* the direction that this might take, with the “facilitator” being seen as having hidden motives related to personal gain. This reveals how the role of the facilitator is highly delicate, whether an insider or an outsider, he/she will be perceived with suspicion and mistrust. Transparency, continual explanation of actions and sharing information and knowledge are fundamental requirements.

For ASSODEDJA it is evident that attempting to work with a group,

- a) representing such a large and diverse number of people,
- b) made up of such explosive power relations, and
- c) that has only outward looking objectives (that is, existing only as a means of searching external development support), is something to be avoided.

Despite the many problems and crises with which *Les Amies* was faced, the potential for participation with this group is far greater. It was a pre-existing group with a genuine desire to function and with internally focused objectives. The problem was that because of this they were extremely wary of introducing elements into their group which would disrupt their delicate position of unity. However, this means that they were also more aware of what they did and did not want. This was expressed in the discussions held with the women for the UNESCO presentation. The women stated clearly that at this stage in its life the group did not want material support relating to development. This was because they felt that they did not have the knowledge or experience to manage their own project and realised that the entry of such a project would create conflict and disruption. Their preferred approach was what they referred to as intellectual support and training, which would be aimed at increasing their knowledge and understanding. Areas of interest included agricultural techniques, household management (including the local fabrication of household items such as soap) and preparation for a micro-project, through project management training.

The clearly stated needs of *Les Amies* shows a rare understanding and sensitivity to what would and would not benefit the group. This insight

had only been gained through a painful learning process involving error and failure. Projects desiring to work in participation with such groups should be obliged to take an equally sensitive approach and be prepared to take time to fully understand how and why the groups function in the way they do. The project should then work alongside the group on an ongoing basis providing support and maintaining lines of communication and transparency at the group level.

Further analysis

The aim of relating these case studies was first to demonstrate the very real difficulties faced by these two community groups in their formation and function. Secondly I wanted to show how the participatory process was used in order for them to go some way to achieve small but clearly defined objectives. This section of the paper attempts to understand the origin of these difficulties. It looks at pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial influence on bulu attitudes and behaviour relating to relations between villages and groups.

The two central features of both *Les Amies* and ASSODEDJA were the need for unity in order for them to function correctly and the objective of development. For both groups the desire for unity repeatedly failed, resulting in the failure of their community-based development initiatives.

The problems faced by each group have different emphases but can never the less be related to the following themes common to both ;

- A power imbalance within the group linked with inequality and lack of democratic procedures.
- Tensions between “intellectuals” (associated with education, the city, modernity and members of the elite) and, for want of a better term “simple villagers” (linked with traditional village life and values).
- Outside influence, such as external projects.

These three themes can be united by an overriding concept of “*le petit et le grand*”⁶ referred to by Bekaert (1996) in his article on the system of patronage in ex-Zaire which he described as being incompatible with current ideas of development involving participation and partnership. In South Cameroon the concept of *le petit et le grand* is clearly recognised by the village population. For them the relationship between *le grand* and *le petit* was traditionally based on age and experience over youth and innocence. Thus the elders would always be seen as *les grands* and therefore superior to the young people of the village, *les petits*. Now the concept has become more complex. The definition of *le grand* of today is based on a whole series of criteria such as education, money and links with

⁶This concept is also referred to by Chambers (1997) but in terms of “uppers” and “lowers”.

or knowledge of modernity. What *le grand* ultimately represents today is someone who is capable of creating change, combined with an openness to abusing the powers he/she holds. *Le petit's* attitude towards *le grand* is highly ambivalent. He/she sees the opportunities that *le grand* is offering but feels that ultimately it is *le grand* who will benefit more than, or even at the expense of, *le petit*.

The notion of *le grand* et *le petit* and its effects.

The historical context

A description of the history of the *Canton du Dja* by Bidjang (1991) suggests how far back the conflict between villages might go. As warring tribes, the Bulu fought with one another until the arrival of *Awusô*, a pact of non-aggression between the various tribes. (See also Alexandre and Binet, 1958). The agreement of the pact was that physical war would be banished but verbal insults permitted, whatever the social rank of the individual giving or receiving these insults. This transformed the “armed war” into an “oral war” and it was in this way that unity between the Bulu was achieved. Ironically, this system of “oral war”, aimed at stabilising bulu relations in the past, now rather adds to tensions and instability between friends, family and villages. It is an example of what seems characteristic of bulu behaviour and identity, where aggravation is preferred over reconciliation and confrontation over diplomacy. Another interesting point which identifies the possible source of tension between villages is by looking at the the bulu word for development. The word is *meyae*, meaning growth, particularly in height - significant in its notion of being able to look down on others. In addition, when the Bulu talk about development they say *meyae nlam*, that is, growth of the village. Combine this conception with the vision of evolution and development that came with colonialism and it can be seen how the conflict between villages was catalyzed. When the French arrived in the region they designated the village of Mekas as an administrative centre and it was here that the school and hospital were built. Inhabitants from other villages, including the other large village in the Canton, Nkolembembe, had to come to Mekas for their education and medical treatment. The bulu society is often described as acephale (Joiris, 1995). Traditionally, it had little structured hierarchy or concentration of power. The Bulu in Mekas took advantage of their newly acquired position of power to demonstrate their superiority over the more “primitive” villages and prove their true bulu identity as *beti* (noble) and *mebun* (meaning both confident and overconfident or insolent)⁷. This was a source of conflict between villages, but particularly between the previously equal villages of Nkolembembe and Mekas. It is

⁷ As defined by Bidjang (1991).

this same conflict which continues today, with the fight for power over material benefits which will signify one village as more “advanced” or “developed” than the other. If the objective of an organisation such as ASSODEDJA is the development of the Canton it will have to continually contend with a notion of development which is linked with superiority of the village. Development for them is development of the village not the development of the canton, a major restraint when you are a group aimed at uniting the canton for mutual development goals.

The political context

There is a strong sentiment of inferiority that exists amongst those Bulu who feel they have not had a good education, have not lived in the town or city or have not travelled or experienced “*la vie*”. This was particularly evident in the discourse between the women of *Les Amies*. They felt threatened by the worldly, educated women who came from the towns and who were able to express themselves in French. They felt that these women were playing “*le grand*”. They were arrogant and boastful and looked down on the simple village women. A woman trying to do something for the evolution or improvement of the village was more likely to be seen as someone motivated by self-interest and wanting only to prove themselves better than others. Great efforts were made to belittle or humiliate these women who stepped out of line, and if this means disrupting or damaging the functioning of the group then this was the price paid. However, at the same time these women realised they were alone in the village. Unlike the men, they did not originate from Mekas but arrived as strangers through marriage. Because of this vulnerability there was a desire to create kinship or unity through their common status as wives. However, the constant expression of distrust and suspicion meant that this unity was continually breaking down. The inverse of this inferiority felt by the “uneducated” towards the “educated” is that of age and experience over youth. In this case it was the older women who were *les grands* and the young or newly married who were *les petits*. In *Les Amies* it was the older women who controlled the discourse. The power given with their age meant that they maintained their position despite a majority dissent. It was the participatory process, through group discussions, that gave the other women the confidence to dislodge their president and produce a more democratic balance of power for their association.

The suspicion that the villagers have of the *elite* and others in a relative position of power is understandable. The experience of *Les Amies* demonstrated that these positions of power were abused, with the *Fondatrice* and treasurer both taking communally-owned property for themselves. In the case of ASSODEDJA it was evident to the local population that they were being manipulated by members of the elite. These *elite* were in search of the power and prestige linked with an international organisation such as

UNESCO and the real or imagined material benefits it would bring.

Members of the elite argue that they are representing the interests of the local population. However, in the case of ASSODEDJA the local population openly stated that it was the ego-centrism of the *elite* which caused conflict and split the Canton.

The fear of someone abusing their position of power is enormously damaging for the success of group initiatives and the process of development. This is revealed in the case of ASSODEDJA and the project for the construction of the shop, where the men, quite intentionally, caused the projects failure. The president of ASSODEDJA wanted the women of the village to run the shop because it was felt that they would be better at managing the money. However, by doing so he excluded a whole section of the population who traditionally hold power in the community. When I asked one of the villagers why he felt the men had been prepared to destroy the projects success he gave two reasons. Firstly jealousy, and second the fact that the men felt that the president had specifically chosen to work with the women because it would be more easy for him to cheat them. This suspicion of the real interests of power and authority can also be seen in the work with *Les Amies* when the president asked what was “behind” the white woman’s desire to re-write the statute. Her belief was that there was some material benefit which would arrive with the new statute and would be illegally shared between the white woman and the new president.

This fear of power and authority hiding its real intentions and being concerned only with serving its own interests can be linked with the past (colonial) and current (independent) political system in Cameroon. Here positions of power and authority are abused at all levels and serving personal interest is seen as normal behaviour (Chabal and Daloz, 1999). However, to believe that this is purely a symptom of African political history places limits on what is a common symptom of an imbalance in power relations⁸.

Conclusion

This paper explores the difficulties that confront the development and proper functioning of community based groups in Southern Cameroon. It uses case studies of two Associations in the Dja Reserve, a protected area

⁸ The similarity of perceptions between Russian peasants vis-à-vis land lords described by Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina* and those of Cameroonian farmers towards ‘intellectuals’ is an example of how the context within which this problematic is placed can be widened ‘*Another stumbling block was the peasants invincible mistrust of the possibility of a landlord having any other aim than that of robbing them as much as possible. They were firmly convinced that his real aim (whatever he might say) would always be hidden in what he did not tell them*’. (Tolstoy, 1877).

The similarity of perceptions between Russian peasants vis-à-vis land lords described by Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina* and those of Cameroonian farmers towards ‘intellectuals’ is an example of how the context within which this problematic is placed can be widened.

co-managed by the Cameroon government (MINEF) and a European funded project, ECOFAC. It tells the story of the two groups and attempts to analyse the problems they had. It examines the use of participatory tools used to achieve clearly specified objectives ; development of the Associations statute in one case and preparation of a presentation in the second.

The stated intention of ECOFAC for the management of the Reserve is that it should be undertaken in collaboration with the local population. The aim is to develop a management plan with the local population, using representatives in the form of pre-existing or specially formed groups. It is likely that ECOFAC will be confronted with a number of problems when trying to develop or work with these groups. The article strongly recommends that a good understanding of the historical and cultural situation of a community is required in order to anticipate and deal sensitively with problems that will arise. Of key importance is an understanding of power relations and attitudes to change and modernity. The influence of the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial systems on perceptions of power and development should not be underestimated. The concept of *le grand et le petit* is used to portray how traditional perceptions have been adapted and incorporated into modern world views. It is a useful concept to understand the conflicts that arose within the two groups discussed. A major issue is power imbalance, revealing a system of inequality and injustice that has significant impact on attitudes and behaviour. The article supports Baekaert's argument that the concept of *le petit et le grand* makes it very difficult to develop a sense of participation and partnership, based on equality and trust, amongst the local population. This makes it extremely difficult for ICDPs (Integrated Conservation and Development Projects) to fulfil their objectives of integrating the local community in the decision making process for developing management plans. First, in terms of finding representative groups to work with and second in terms of their own relationship with the local community. Referring back to Olivier de Sardan's quote at the beginning of the paper, managing change in a society involves gaining an understanding of its past and present. This understanding takes time and energy, both of which are rarely invested by conservation and development projects, despite some having worked in a region for many years.

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Résumé

Pouvoir et participation dans un village camerounais.

Les projets "top-down" centralisés n'atteignent que rarement leurs objectifs. Pour les organisations sur le terrain, la participation locale est l'un des rares moyens à leur disposition pour progresser. Or, le processus de la participation n'est absolument pas simple. Les organisations doivent travailler avec des représentants de la communauté locale. Dans la zone forestière du Sud Cameroun, les communautés villageoises sont

cependant confrontées à de grandes difficultés lors de la constitution d'association ainsi que pendant tout le travail. Les populations de cette région ont du mal à travailler au sein d'une équipe, par défiance mutuelle. D'autres éléments perturbateurs de la cohésion du groupe sont des questions de pouvoir, leur abus et les sentiments à l'égard du changement et de la modernité. Tous ces facteurs peuvent avoir une influence considérable sur les relations entre l'organisation et le comité avec lequel elle essaie de travailler. La compréhension du contexte historique et culturel de la communauté mérite une attention particulière pour permettre d'anticiper les problèmes qui pourraient surgir à la constitution des groupes ou lors du travail avec eux. L'étude de deux associations dans le secteur occidental de la Réserve du Dja permet d'éclairer ces problèmes. Leur histoire, les problèmes qu'elles ont rencontrés dans la réalisation de leurs projets et comment elles ont échoué, sont analysés. Comment le processus participatif a conféré des pouvoirs aux membres du groupe qui, avant, n'intervenaient pas dans les prises de décisions est également décrit. Enfin, l'influence, dans la région, des systèmes pré-coloniaux, coloniaux et post-coloniaux sont abordés en mettant l'accent sur leur répercussion sur la structure et les comportements de la communauté, spécialement en matière de perception du pouvoir et de développement.

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