

Mbororo claims to regional citizenship and minority status (northwest Cameroon)

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Abstract

As outlined in the panel abstract, discourses on autochthony, citizenship and exclusion are popular in Cameroon. In my presentation I will consider the case of the Mbororo (agro-pastoral Fulbe) in northwest Cameroon (also called the Cameroon Grassfields) and their recent claims to regional citizenship and minority status.

The Mbororo entered the Cameroon Grassfields in the early 20th century. Benefiting from favourable ecological conditions, many Mbororo prospered over time and settled permanently in their grazing area. Conversely, the Grassfielders who constitute the local majority tend to perceive the Mbororo as strangers and migrants, while considering themselves their hosts and landlords. The Mbororo have long entertained patron-client and host-guest relations with their Grassfields neighbours, which facilitated their integration into the local community and their (indirect) political representation. In the context of Cameroon's political liberalisation and the constitutional changes of the 1990s, the Mbororo have changed their strategies, aiming at direct representation to the state and its resources. In 1992 MBOSCUA, the Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association, was founded and gradually developed into a nationally influential ethnic elite association.

In my presentation I will examine the discourses employed by MBOSCUA and Mbororo individuals whereby they endorse their collective and individual claims to access to natural and state resources. While claiming to be an indigenous population group – i.e. arguing that they have no other home – they also portray themselves as an endangered minority whose cultural and economic rights have to be protected. Moreover, many Mbororo of the younger generations are not only concerned with political-economic interests, but have gradually developed emotional bonds with their home areas.

1. Introduction

As Peter Geschiere (2005) has argued, over the past ten to fifteen years discourses on autochthony and belonging have become an overriding theme in the politics of many African and lately also European countries. In a public lecture a few weeks ago, Jean and John Comaroff showed that in South Africa discourses of autochthony have been applied to people as well as animals and plants.¹ The flip-side of this preoccupation with belonging is the attempted exclusion of ‘the other’, the stranger, the allochthone. However, ‘autochthone’ and ‘allochthone’ are rather fuzzy notions that can be applied to different units or groups whose relationship may be constantly redefined.

Geschiere, as well as Bayart, Konings, Nyamnjoh and Socpa have pointed at the ambivalent outcomes of autochthony discourses in Cameroon.² As Geschiere (2004, 2005) argues, the new emphasis on indigeneity and minority rights, which has been promoted by the Cameroonian government as well as by international development and global rights organisations, is geared towards surpassing national citizenship. This development he considers precarious, as in many African countries the idea of formal equality of all citizens in the face of the law is still little institutionalised (Geschiere 2005: 13).

While I largely share Geschiere’s concerns with the demise of national citizenship, I will adopt in this paper the perspective of a minority group that clearly benefited from the new opportunities ensuing from Cameroon’s democratisation and from changes in the international development establishment. My focus will be on the Mbororo (agro-pastoral Fulbe) in northwest Cameroon who, in the view of many Cameroonians, is a prime example of a stranger population. As members of the Fulbe ethnic group, the Mbororo are thought to have emerged from somewhere in West Africa. They are seen as culturally and religiously different from their Grassfields neighbours. Furthermore, having settled in the Grassfields only in the 20th century, they are considered latecomers. And finally, as cattle pastoralists they are seen as nomads, i.e. people constantly on the move and with no permanent home. Yet despite their reputation as strangers and migrants, the Mbororo have been able to challenge

¹ Comaroff, Jean and John. 2007. *Nations with/out borders: neoliberalism and the problem of belonging in Africa, and beyond*. Public lecture in the interdisciplinary lecture series ‘Border Crossings. Grenzverschiebungen und Grenzüberschreitungen in einer globalisierten Welt’, 21/06/2007, University of Zürich, Switzerland.

² Bayart, Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 2001, Geschiere 2004, 2005, Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 2000, Konings & Nyamnjoh 2000, Socpa 2002.

local autochthony discourses. By claiming regional citizenship and minority status to the Cameroonian state, they have attained the same legal entitlement to political representation and natural and government resources as their Grassfields neighbours. However, as I will argue below, the Mbororo's newly-found self-esteem and improved legal status may also have negative consequences, particularly with regard to interethnic relations. Furthermore, the identification of the Mbororo as an 'indigenous people' – i.e. as a pastoral group whose cultural identity and (presumed) nomadic way of life has to be protected – tends to be problematic. The Mbororo in the Cameroon Grassfields are mostly agro-pastoralists, and no one wants to return to a nomadic life which, in any case, only few have ever experienced. These and other aspects make the Mbororo's quest for regional and national citizenship a particularly interesting case that sheds a somewhat different but complementary light on autochthony discourses in Cameroon.

The arguments in this paper are based on fourteen months of fieldwork conducted between 2000 and 2002 on the subject of interethnic relations and identity politics in northwest Cameroon. Information on further developments since my departure in 2002 has been obtained through regular communication with Cameroonian acquaintances and friends as well as through internet research.³ Related and more comprehensive analyses can be found in my PhD thesis (Pelican 2006) and in a comparative essay co-authored with Andreas Dafinger (2002, 2006) on herder-farmer relations in Burkina Faso and northwest Cameroon.⁴

2. The Mbororo in the Cameroon Grassfields

In the following I will introduce the Mbororo and their neighbours in the Cameroon Grassfields. Subsequently, I will give an overview of their socio-political and economic trajectories during the colonial and post-colonial period, thus providing the historical background to the Mbororo's changing strategies of the 1990s.

³ I would like to thank Aliou Sali, Musa Ndamba, Nuhu Salihu Jafaru, Ramatu Nuhu, Ramatu Sali and Sarli Sardou Nana for sharing with me their perspectives on recent developments concerning the Mbororo and MBOSCUA in Cameroon.

⁴ My thanks go to the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Halle/Saale, Germany for generously supporting my PhD research.

2.1. *The Mbororo and their neighbours*

The Mbororo constitute a minority in the Western Grassfields, accounting for 5 to 10% of the region's total population (Boutrais 1984: 230, 1995/96: 548). The majority are Grassfielders who belong to linguistically distinct communities but share common features of economic and socio-political organisation. They are largely subsistence farmers and are organised in centralised chiefdoms and confederations. Furthermore, they entertain strong economic, political and religious bonds with their settlement area, and consider themselves 'natives' and 'guardians of the land'. A third population group are Hausa, a term locally used to denote the heterogeneous group of Muslim village dwellers. They include both descendants of early Hausa traders, sedentary Fulbe from Nigeria and Northern Cameroon, and local Grassfields converts. They are a tiny minority and are represented in only a few urban and rural centres. Mbororo and Hausa constitute also a religious minority vis-à-vis the local Grassfields population who are predominantly Christians and adherents of African local religions.

The Mbororo community in the research area is internally diversified, comprising members of two sub-groups, namely Jaafun and Aku. Originally, both groups dwelled in the Kano area. In the course of the 19th century they adopted diverging migration trajectories and developed distinct sub-ethnic identities (Boutrais 1995/96: 15-210, Dognin 1981). The Jaafun started entering the Western Grassfields in the early 20th century. They came from northern Cameroon, mainly the Adamaoua Plateau, and established themselves on the Bamenda Highlands. The Aku followed later, from the 1940s onwards. They entered the Grassfields coming from Nigeria, mainly the Jos Plateau, and settled on the lowland pastures on the northern fringes of the Bamenda Highlands.⁵

2.2. *Mbororo socio-political and economic trajectories (1910s-1980s)*

The first Mbororo to enter the Western Grassfields were members of the Jaafun community of Lompta in the Adamaoua. They established themselves in the vicinity of Bamenda, the regional capital, in the late 1910s. Their settlement was named Sabga after its initiator Ardo Sabga, and later became the headquarters of the Mbororo

⁵ Other Fulbe sub-ethnic categories, such as Wodaabe or sedentary Town Fulbe (*Huya*) are largely absent from the Western Grassfields. As indicated above, Town Fulbe here are subsumed under the ethnic category of Hausa; being numerically few, they are socially, economically and spatially integrated into Hausa communities.

community in northwest Cameroon. During the subsequent decades, many more Mbororo were attracted to the Western Grassfields, as the Bamenda Highlands became renowned for their favourable ecological conditions, offering fertile pastures and numerous salt springs.

The colonial administration supported the influx of Mbororo pastoralists as a means of diversifying the regional economy and augmenting its tax income.⁶ Concurrently, local Grassfields chiefs welcomed the pastoralists' establishment on their chiefdom's territory, as long as they paid tributes and acknowledged their hosts' territorial and political primacy. Even though population densities were relatively low and farming and pasture lands abundant, crop damage was a recurrent problem, as the Mbororo's practice of extensive grazing and seasonal transhumance collided with the Grassfielders' system of shifting cultivation. In consequence, Grassfields farmers looked on the pastoralists' settlement with reservation, and occasionally responded with public protest and violence (Boutrais 1995/96: 734, Dafinger & Pelican 2006, Harshbarger 1995). The British colonial administration was faced with the predicament of implementing its policy of indirect rule and, at the same time, protecting the Mbororo against the hostility of Grassfields farmers and exactions by local chiefs. This dilemma resulted in frequently changing policies regarding the pastoral sector and the management of farmer-herder relations (Njeuma & Awasom 1988).

Despite difficulties with the local farming population, many Mbororo benefited from the favourable ecological environment of the Bamenda Highlands and prospered over time. By the mid-1940s, many had settled permanently in their rainy season camp, with only part of the family undertaking a seasonal transhumance. This trend towards sedentarisation was further endorsed by the administrative imposition of 'grazing rules' that restricted pastoral mobility (Boutrais 1995/96: 115-118). At the same time, the Mbororo in the Western Grassfields developed a conscious political identity. As they saw their pastoral interests inadequately represented by local Grassfields chiefs, they appealed for direct representation to the colonial administration. However, the British headquarters in Nigeria denied them the status of a politically independent minority and classified them as 'strangers' rather than

⁶ Cameroon has a triple colonial legacy. Initially administered by the Germans, it was split in 1919 and placed under the mandate of the French and British colonial powers. The Western Grassfields were part of the British mandate area.

'natives' (Boutrais 1995/96: 112-115). In response, Mbororo leaders formed a 'Fulani Council' that, although its existence was never officially acknowledged, effectively acted as an intermediary between the Mbororo population and the British administration. Furthermore, the British granted the Muslim community limited juridical autonomy (Awason 1984: 226-241, 269-303, 2003). Yet it was only after Cameroon's independence and in the context of constitutional changes in 1972 that the Mbororo were given Cameroonian citizenship.

The adoption of a more sedentary lifestyle impacted also on the pastoralists' economic strategies. In order to safeguard their pastoral resources, many Mbororo started to combine their herding activities with limited subsistence agriculture. While Jaafun relied primarily on employing local farmers to cultivate their fields, Aku tended to perform most tasks themselves. Economic diversification was also encouraged by the British colonial administration, and subsequently the Cameroonian state, both as a means of augmenting rural production and as a way of improving farmer-herder relations. The assumption was that comprehensive knowledge of both economic systems would promote mutual understanding. Yet, although many Mbororo and some Grassfielders were both cattle rearers and farmers, the notion of distinct ethnic-occupational categories remained vivid and farmer-herder conflicts continued to be perceived in ethnic terms (Pelican 2006).

Changes in Mbororo mobility and economy affected also the socio-cultural sphere. With growing wealth, many Mbororo aimed at improving their living conditions by investing in consumer goods and Islamic education. Mbororo youths gradually adopted practices and consumption patterns of their Grassfields peers, such as frequenting local bars, attending Grassfielders' rituals and festivities, or dating Grassfields partners. Mbororo elders considered such practices incompatible with their Mbororo and Muslim identity (Boutrais 1995/96: 967-970, Frantz 1986). As they worried about their youngsters' acculturation to a non-Muslim environment, they emphasised an Islamic lifestyle and encouraged Islamic education while refuting western or Christian schooling. Only at a later stage, Mbororo individuals became aware of the practical advantages of western education and started sending some of their children to school. By the late 1980s just a few Mbororo had undergone secondary or university education. Yet as we will see below, they were extremely instrumental in exploring new political strategies.

Eventually, in the second half of the 20th century, the Mbororo began to face socio-economic difficulties as a result of increasing population density and competition over natural resources (Boutrais 1995/96: 679-712). Many families experienced gradual impoverishment. While their family sizes continuously increased, the rate of herd growth stagnated due to the effects of overgrazing. In addition, farmer-herder conflicts became exacerbated, both as a result of farmers' expansion into grazing zones and the Mbororo's negligence in the adequate control of their cattle herds. Many Mbororo spent considerable wealth on administrative and judicial procedures that benefited state agents rather than producing lasting solutions. Furthermore, as a legacy of the colonial period, the Mbororo lacked formal institutions of political representation, and largely relied on patron-client relationships with local Grassfielders in defending their economic and political interests. This arrangement, however, proved ineffective in facing influential entrepreneurs who began to institute private and state ranches on Mbororo grazing land.⁷ In addition, due to their relative wealth and lack of formal education, Mbororo had become prime targets of state agents' venality.

As a result, the Mbororo in the Western Grassfields experienced themselves as a politically marginalised and economically exploited minority. The British colonial administration had classified them as 'strangers' and had denied them autonomous political representation. Local Grassfielders' attempts to integrate them into their socio-political community constituted a constant source of dependency and exploitation. Under Ahidjo's regime, they qualified as Cameroonian citizens, but were subsumed under the category of 'northerners' on account of their Muslim identity and Fulbe ethnicity. Consequently, Mbororo who were born and grew up in the Grassfields still counted as 'strangers' to the area, with limited rights to the region's natural and state resources. It was only with Cameroon's democratisation in the 1990s that the Mbororo eventually obtained the opportunity to engage in the political arena and to express their interests and grievances directly to the state.

⁷ One such influential entrepreneur is Alhaji Baba Danpullo of Ndawara Ranch whose infringements on Mbororo grazing land have caused considerable grievances and conflict over the past twenty years (Davis 1995, Hickey 2002, <http://www.newint.org/issue277/endpiece.htm>, last visited 04.07.07)

3. Mbororo responses to new political and legal avenues (1990s)

By the mid/late 1980s, Cameroon (like many African countries) faced a serious economic crisis. As part of the structural adjustment programme, proposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the Cameroonian state was obliged to embark on a process of economic and political liberalisation. Concurrently, the demand for democracy and human rights was taken up by large parts of the Cameroonian population, particularly in northwest Cameroon, the heart of the political opposition. In 1990, the current regime under President Paul Biya introduced a multi-party system, and subsequently endorsed the formation of ethnic and regional elite associations as vehicles of political representation to the state and its resources (Geschiere & Gugler 1998). It is in this context that a growing preoccupation with ‘autochthony’ and ‘belonging’ emerged, which was promoted by the Biya regime to weaken the opposition (Geschiere 2005, Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 2000).

As a consequence, a variety of established and novel political avenues opened up and was soon explored by many regional and ethnic groups, including the Mbororo. Most effective among them was the formation of ethnic elite associations to act as representatives to the state and to international development agencies. Thus in 1992 educated Mbororo individuals founded MBOSCUA, the Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association. While alternative associations were created in the same period, MBOSCUA advanced to the most vocal and effective organ of Mbororo self-representation. Its activities will be described in more detail below.

In addition, other paths of political lobbying have been explored, often with the support of MBOSCUA members. Analogous to their Grassfields counterparts, Mbororo leaders formed a chiefs’ association, entitled the North West Lamidos Forum (Awasom 2003). Although this body did not function for long, the demand for a Mbororo leaders’ forum continues to exist.⁸ Another strategy of endorsing Mbororo interests vis-à-vis the state is via the co-optation of high-ranking officials. In 2002 the Mbororo counted two members of parliament as ambassadors of their cause, namely Peter Abety, Minister for Special Duties, and Manu Jaji Gidado, Attaché at the

⁸ In 2004, for example, MBOSCUA organised a one-week workshop for Mbororo leaders of the North West Province to discuss their contemporary socio-political and administrative role within Mbororo society and in relation to the state. The participants agreed on the need for regular workshops and for a joint forum to pursue their communities’ welfare.

Presidency (Hickey 2004)⁹. Similar to their Grassfields neighbours' practice of awarding traditional titles to their elite members, the two were given the titles of messenger and chief's representative. In the meantime, Abety has been discharged from office but continues to support Mbororo interests in his position as University lecturer in Yaoundé. In addition, new sympathisers have been won among current officials.

3.1. MBOSCUDA activities in northwest Cameroon

For the purpose of this paper, I am particularly concerned with MBOSCUDA and its interaction with the Cameroonian state and international development agencies.

MBOSCUDA is a national, membership-based organisation with approximately 30,000 members and branches in nearly all provinces.¹⁰ It represents Mbororo, i.e. (agro-)pastoral Fulbe, while distancing itself from sedentary Town Fulbe. The latter's interests are considered substantially different and they are thought to have separate possibilities of political representation. MBOSCUDA runs a number of regional programmes, aimed at the revitalisation of Mbororo cultural practices, the improvement of Mbororo women's socio-economic situation, the promotion of Mbororo children's education, the strengthening of civil awareness, and the improvement of pastoral conditions. The organisation's most active branch is in the North West Province. Here transformations in Mbororo self-perception and political strategies are more pronounced than in other parts of the country.

In the initial phase, MBOSCUDA members were preoccupied with convincing the Mbororo of the advantages of joint action and collective political representation. As a result of their pastoral heritage, Mbororo were used to pursuing their interests via individual strategies, such as patron-client relationships. Their solidarity networks focused on the kin or lineage group. Moreover, interaction between Jaafun and Aku was limited. MBOSCUDA activists, however, encouraged both sub-groups to see themselves as one and pursue collective strategies.¹¹ By the second half of the 1990s,

⁹ The Herald (Cameroon), 29/01/2002: Abety schemes with Mbororos but faces Danpulo's anger.

¹⁰ MBOSCUDA press release, Bamenda, 16/03/2005: MBOSCUDA granted Consultative Status by the United Nations.

¹¹ In this context, the phrase "don't make *pulaaku*" or in Fulfulde "*taa waDDa pulaaku*" became a popular slogan among MBOSCUDA sympathisers (Davis 1995). In their view, *pulaaku* or the way of behaving like a *pullo* (sing. of Fulbe) was an outdated strategy and no longer compatible with the requirements of their current economic and political situation. They thus called on individuals to

MBOSCUDA was widely established among Mbororo in the Western Grassfields. In order to realise their community development projects, the association sought the collaboration of the German Development Service (DED) and Village AiD, a UK funding-partner agency.¹² In consequence, MBOSCUDA's programme orientation shifted from redefining Mbororo identity to redefining Mbororo political and legal status, thus adopting current trends in international development policies and global rights discourses (Duni et al. 2005, Hickey 2002, 2007).

3.2. Redefining Mbororo regional and national citizenship

MBOSCUDA significantly contributed to promoting civil awareness among Mbororo, and also succeeded in redefining Mbororo political and legal status vis-à-vis the state. I will now focus on these two achievements and illustrate the ways in which Mbororo individuals justify their claims to regional/local citizenship and national minority status.

In 2000 new computerised identity cards were issued and MBOSCUDA encouraged Mbororo citizens to register. While in the previous system, Mbororo were generally registered as being born in northern Cameroon, the new identity cards indicated their actual birthplace. Mbororo hence qualified as regional citizens with claims and rights to natural resources and political representation in their home area. Concurrently, the association also encouraged Mbororo individuals to stand as candidates in municipal elections and to actively participate in community development projects.

Many Mbororo in the Grassfields acquired the new identity cards and expressed their satisfaction with being recognised as local citizens. As they argued, they have been living in their current settlement area for several decades. Their children have grown up with Grassfields children, have learnt their neighbours'

transcend socio-cultural barriers and to express disagreement openly. In a comparative essay on pastoral Fulbe in Burkina Faso and northwest Cameroon, Dafinger & Pelican (2002, 2006) phrase this dichotomy of strategies in Hirschman's (1970) terminology of 'exit' and 'voice'. Both pastoral Fulbe in Burkina Faso and Mbororo elders in the Grassfields tend to adopt an 'exit' strategy, that is to escape conflict situations by moving away. Mbororo youths in the Grassfields, on the other hand, plead for 'voice', for taking an offensive course.

¹² The collaboration with Village AiD included the establishment of the partnership programme Ballotiral which operated projects on female literacy and legal counselling in the Donga-Mantung Division. Many of the activities concerning the promotion of civil awareness among Mbororo (outlined below) were carried out by Ballotiral. http://www.villageaid.org/Cameroon/cameroon_overview.htm (last visited 04.07.07)

language, have adopted a number of Grassfields customs, and don't know any other home. Furthermore, they have integrated themselves into local Grassfields communities, participating in communal activities and supporting the local Grassfields chief. They thus see themselves as able members of Grassfields chiefdoms, and claim rights and belonging in the same way as their Grassfields neighbours. Furthermore, some influential Mbororo communities, such as the one in Sabga, have developed an exceptional preoccupation with their group history as a way of endorsing their claims to power and land (Pelican 2006: 164-188). While Mbororo are known for their lack of collective historical consciousness (Boutrais 1995/96: 43, 65), the Sabga community has produced a written codification of its history that is structured similarly to the historical accounts of Grassfields chiefdoms.

Above all, Mbororo are concerned with their entitlement to grazing land, as the competition over land has increased due to growing population density (both in humans and animals). While a few long-established and influential individuals have acquired land titles, the majority rely on the good-will of local administrators and Grassfields chiefs. To counter this situation, MBOSCUDA has organised workshops to alert Mbororo, Grassfielders and administrators to the rights of Mbororo citizens (Pelican 2006: 233-241). Furthermore, the organisation has offered legal advice in land disputes. However, it has become clear that there is no generally applicable and easy solution to farmer-herder conflicts and land disputes.

MBOSCUDA has also been instrumental in redefining Mbororo national citizenship. Alongside collaborating with international development agencies, it associated with transnational human and minority rights organisations, including Amnesty International, Survival International, Minority Rights Group International (MRG), and the World Intellectual Property Organisation.¹³ This international backing proved helpful in defying human rights abuses.¹⁴

¹³ http://www.web.amnesty.org./library/Index/ENGAfri170052002?open&of=ENG_CM (last visited 04.07.07)

http://www.survival-international.org/mbororo_0301.htm (last visited 01.02.05)

http://www.minorityrights.org/news_detail.asp?ID=257 (last visited 01.02.05)

http://www.wipo.int/edocs/mdocs/tk/en/wipo_grtkf_ic_7/wipo_grtkf_ic_7_2_add.pdf (last visited 01.02.05)

¹⁴ For example, in 2002 four Mbororo individuals from Sabga were arrested and condemned by a military tribunal for participation in a collective riot against the influential entrepreneur Alhaji Baba Danpullo. The case was brought to international attention and eventually, in spring 2004, the four convicts were released and a gendarmerie officer was charged for human rights abuse.

Furthermore, in line with the United Nations' proclamation of the decade of 'indigenous peoples' (1995-2004), MBOSCUDA portrayed the Mbororo as an 'indigenous minority' whose cultural survival had to be protected. MBOSCUDA officials were enrolled to participate in government programmes for the development of indigenous minorities and autochthonous peoples.¹⁵ In consequence, in December 2004 it was publicly announced that the Cameroonian government recognised the Mbororo alongside the 'Pygmies'¹⁶ as 'indigenous minorities'.¹⁷ Moreover, MBOSCUDA representatives have acted as resource persons to the Working Committees of the United Nations and the International Labour Organisation concerned with Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (MBOSCUDA press release, Bamenda, 16/03/2005, Tchoumba 2006).

In analysing these recent developments two questions emerge: What does it mean if the Mbororo are classified as an 'indigenous people' alongside the ethnic groups of Baka, Bakola, Bagyeli and Bedzang who are considered 'Pygmies'? And which practical implications do these developments have for the Mbororo and MBOSCUDA?

As Hodgson (2000) and Kuper (2003) pointed out the term 'indigenous peoples' is decidedly a political notion that may refer to different things in different locations. While in North, Central and South America indigenous activism has a long history and the status of 'first peoples' is generally uncontested, the situation in Africa is different. Here it is much more problematic and controversial to define which groups may count as 'indigenous', as there are long and on-going histories of migration, assimilation and conquest. This difficulty is also reflected in current working definitions of 'indigenous peoples' as applied by the International Labour Organisation and the United Nations, which emphasise self-identification as a fundamental criterion (Hodgson 2000).

http://www.afrol.com/News2002/cam009_bororo_arrest.htm (last visited 21.01.05)

http://www.afrol.com/News2003/cam001_bororo_terror.htm (last visited 21.01.05)

<http://www.afrol.com/articles/12973> (last visited 21.01.05)

<http://www.icicemac.com/nouvelle/index.php3?nid=1067> (19.01.04)

¹⁵ <http://www.ilo.org/public/french/region/afpro/yaounde/mdtyaounde/download/indisc03.pdf> (last visited 10/02/05)

¹⁶ The term Pygmies here refers to the ethnic groups Baka, Bakola, Bagyeli and Bedzang in southern Cameroon (see Tchoumba 2006).

¹⁷ Cameroon Tribune (Yaoundé), 14/12/2004, by Emmanuel Kendemeh: Mbororo people learn human rights.

Many African states have been opposed to the concept of ‘indigenous peoples’ and their entitlement to land and resources, arguing that all Africans are ‘indigenous’ and should have equal access to natural resources (Lutz 2007). Cameroon is one of the few African countries that has adopted the very notion of ‘indigenous peoples’ in its National Constitution, though without providing clear definitions. In his recent report for the International Labour Organisation on “indigenous and tribal peoples and poverty reduction strategies in Cameroon” Tchoumba (2006) summarises the situation as follows:

In Cameroon, as elsewhere in Africa, the concept of indigenous peoples is somewhat controversial. No community in Cameroon is legally recognized as an indigenous people, although the National Constitution provides for the protection of minorities and the rights of the indigenous peoples. However, based on the principle of self-identification, our work will focus on the so-called “Pygmies” and Mbororo who identify themselves in Cameroon as indigenous peoples. These two ethnic groups share a common attachment to their cultures, lifestyles and their marginalisation in political life and the development process. Their cultures and lifestyles differ significantly from those of the dominant society and their survival depends on the recognition of their rights and access to their traditional land and natural resources. They suffer from discrimination insofar as they are considered as being “less developed” and “less advanced” than the other more dominant groups of the society. These groups have been identified by the working group of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights as indigenous communities in Africa and the principle of respect for the lifestyle, customs, cultures and institutions as well as the self-identification of the indigenous and tribal peoples is recognised by ILO Convention No. 169 as fundamental for these peoples. (Tchoumba, 2006: 6-7)

Tchoumba gives a long list of criteria that classify the Mbororo and the ‘Pygmies’ as ‘indigenous peoples’. It strikes me, however, that the two groups fall into the category of pastoralists and hunter-gatherers respectively. Here we may consider Kuper’s (2003: 389-390) argument that the United Nations has tended to give precedence to hunters and nomadic herders, viewing them as representatives of the original human populations of the world. This renders the case of the Mbororo somewhat ambiguous. The Grassfields Mbororo are not nomadic herders but largely sedentary agro-pastoralists. Ironically, their assumed nomadic lifestyle may be less ‘endangered’ by national policies than by their desire for a settled and more comfortable life.

Another issue is the alignment of Mbororo and ‘Pygmies’; i.e. the question of belonging also emerges with regard to ‘indigenous peoples’. The Fulbe (including the Mbororo) are renowned as a proud and exclusive people who tend to look down on

other ethnic groups (e.g. Burnham 1972). This may apply to the Mbororo in the Grassfields to a lesser degree than to Fulbe in northern Cameroon. Nonetheless it was foreseeable that their ethnic pride may overshadow their collaboration with the ‘Pygmies’. Accordingly, a proposal for a joint project benefiting both Mbororo and ‘Pygmies’ in Cameroon was rejected by some MBOSCUDA officials – a development also related to increasing divisions within the organisation.

This leads us to the second question concerning the practical implications of the Mbororo’s official recognition as an ‘indigenous people’. So far, there has been no impact of this political status-change on the lives of ordinary Mbororo in the Grassfields. Maybe, if the above-mentioned project had been instituted, it would have made a change. However, for educated Mbororo and MBOSCUDA representatives there has been considerable opportunity for advanced training and international travel. For example, over the past four years MBOSCUDA’s current provincial programme coordinator attended six international workshops in the United States, Britain, Tanzania and Nigeria, as well as three skill enhancement trainings in southern Cameroon. His wife is presently in Geneva for a three-months Indigenous Fellowship Programme organised by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.¹⁸

Against the background of these emerging new opportunities, it is not surprising that there are indications of increasing rivalries and ruptures within MBOSCUDA. Furthermore, criticism has also been raised by Mbororo leaders who submitted a petition to European institutions, accusing Mbororo intellectuals of misappropriating international aid.¹⁹

4. Administrators’ and neighbours’ perspectives on Mbororo claims to citizenship

The question emerges, how local administrators and neighbouring groups have responded to the Mbororo’s recent political strategies and their status-change. As concerns their further recognition as an ‘indigenous minority’ I have, as yet, no substantial information. Regarding the assessment of MBOSCUDA and its activities, Grassfielders and Hausa as well as state agents have expressed their approval rather than contempt.

¹⁸ <http://www.ohchr.org/english/issues/indigenous/fellowship.htm> (last visited 04.07.07)

¹⁹ The Post (Yaoundé), 03/05/2005, by Kini Nsom: NW Ardos petition British High Commissioner.

Most Grassfields groups have their own ethnic elite association and consider it normal that the Mbororo organise themselves collectively. Furthermore, many of MBOSCUDA's projects are met with sympathy, as their objectives of promoting children's education, women's socio-economic status and individual human rights are shared by local Grassfielders. However, regarding access and property rights in natural resources, Grassfields communities are opposed to Mbororo claims, and insist on their self-proclaimed status as 'first-comers' and 'guardians of the land'. Since MBOSCUDA has limited its involvement in land disputes, no official objections have been raised against them.

Similarly, the Hausa assess MBOSCUDA's activities in a positive light. Due to the small size and ethnic heterogeneity of the Hausa community in Cameroon, no Hausa ethnic elite association has emerged. Some Hausa individuals have expressed the idea of joining MBOSCUDA, as they see their two groups united by shared religion, cultural similarities and minority status. However, the Mbororo have been reluctant to integrate Hausa in their political activities, and MBOSCUDA's ethnically exclusive approach has been met with incomprehension by their Hausa neighbours.

Government officials in the Western Grassfields are generally aware of MBOSCUDA and its community development projects, particularly in those areas with a strong Mbororo presence. While some approve of the organisation's efforts to counter their colleagues' venality, others are critical. On the overall, government officials have taken a neutral or positive stance to the Mbororo's new political and civil self-consciousness.

MBOSCUDA officials are aware of the potentially disruptive impact that the Mbororo's new self-consciousness may have on their interethnic relations. Occasionally, they aim at integrating both Mbororo and members of neighbouring communities into their projects, in order to promote communication and collaboration on the local level. However, the long-term effects of the Mbororo's novel political strategies on the local power balance and on interethnic relations are still to be observed.

5. Conclusion: potential effects on interethnic relations

As the above elaborations have shown, the national political transformations of the 1990s and the changes in international development policies have largely benefited the Mbororo. By successfully claiming regional citizenship and minority status to the Cameroonian state, they have been able to challenge local autochthony discourses. Yet at the same time, they have entered new discourses of belonging – though on a smaller scale – concerning who counts as ‘indigenous peoples’, who should be represented by MBOSCUDA, and who is entitled to ensuing travel and training opportunities.

Another domain affected by the Mbororo’s bolstered self-confidence and their recognition as regional citizens is their relationship with neighbouring population groups. As Mbororo and Grassfielders are now attributed equal status by the Cameroonian government, the regional power balance has changed. And while former inequalities have been resolved, a potential for new tensions has emerged. There is an observable tendency among Mbororo in the Grassfields to secure access to natural and state resources via legal claims, as an alternative or in addition to cultivating good relations with their Grassfields neighbours. Concurrently, Mbororo have been assisted and encouraged by MBOSCUDA to defy the exploitative practices of state agents. Consequently, integration into the overarching regional community is increasingly negotiated on the level of the state rather than the local or regional community itself.²⁰

At this point it is too early to provide a general assessment of the long-term effects of the Mbororo’s current political and legal strategies on interethnic and interpersonal relations. Yet, we may suggest tentatively, that rather than facilitating social relations, international and state recognition of citizenship, land, and minority rights may tend to discourage integration on the local level and to promote the polarisation and politicisation of interethnic relations.

²⁰ This argument has been explored in more detail in the comparative essay on herder-farmer relations (Dafinger & Pelican 2002, 2006). Further case studies supporting this analysis can be found in Pelican (2006: 394-424).

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