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Africa's Indigenous Peoples: 'First Peoples' or Marginalized Minorities'?

TITLE:

**FOREST PEOPLE OR VILLAGE PEOPLE. WHOSE
VOICE WILL BE HEARD?**

ABSTRACT:

With reference to the current situation of the Mbendjele Yaka in northern Congo (Brazzaville) this paper summarises some of the problems facing them as outside interest in their forest increases. Issues relating to traditional and modern land ownership, international forest exploitation by both commercial loggers and wildlife protectionists, and representation are raised in the Mbendjele context. Mbendjele conceptualisations of themselves as 'forest people', as opposed to 'village people', are considered from the point of view of the contemporary indigenous peoples and minority rights movements. This offers an interesting analysis that highlights some of the challenges to be overcome in coming years. In effect, 'forest people' are currently marginalized from these processes by the 'village people' character of international procedural forms and structures within which they are expected to represent themselves.

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FOREST PEOPLE OR VILLAGE PEOPLE. WHOSE VOICE WILL BE HEARD?

Introduction

This paper concerns the Mbendjele Yaka (or Aka Pygmies), living in northern Congo (Brazzaville). The Mbendjele identify themselves as belonging to a larger grouping of Yaka people, or '*bisi ndima*' – literally: forest people. Mbendjele say that forest people have always lived in the forest, they share common ancestors and certain myths, a distinctive forest-orientated lifestyle and social organisation, and a 'Yaka' aesthetic in speech, singing, performance style, ritual life and corporal appearance. Other Yaka groups live in forest neighbouring Mbendjele forest. These groups are called the Ngombe (Baka Pygmies), the Mikaya, Luma, Ngabo (Aka Pygmies) and the Tua by the Mbendjele. The Yaka make a clear distinction between forest people and village people (*bisi mboka*). The Mbendjele refer to village people living in their forest generically as 'Bilo' – this groups together over 40 different Bantu and Oubangian language speaking ethnic groups¹.

The argument

In this paper I present the current situation of the Mbendjele Yaka in northern Congo (Brazzaville). As international interest in their forest increases the Mbendjele are steadily losing rights and resources to outsiders. The paper examines how Mbendjele perceive of their present situation and how they define themselves in relation to others. I will expand on the significance of the term 'forest people' from the Mbendjele's perspective, and explain its opposition to 'village people', as well as emphasise the relevance of this distinction to the current development of the minority rights and indigenous peoples' movements in Central Africa².

In North and South America, Australia and New Zealand indigenous people have defined themselves in opposition to politically dominant European colonial settlers and their descendants. The oppositions between colonised and colonisers, often expressed in terms of skin colour as black against white, have often been used to determine and justify a group's indigenous status. Since modern African states have become independent of their colonial rulers the significance of the opposition between black and white as indigenous and non-indigenous peoples has diminished. Today however, as the contemporary indigenous rights movement develops in Africa other more 'traditional' oppositions are being emphasised in determining the indigenous status of the groups concerned. In Central Africa the opposition between colonised and coloniser is equivalent to the enduring opposition between forest people and village people that is elaborated in this paper.

This paper only indirectly deals with the technicalities of defining Africa's Indigenous Peoples from outsiders' perspectives, whether as marginalized minorities or first peoples. Indeed, Africa's Indigenous Peoples are both 'first people' and 'marginalized minorities'. Given the current and widespread alienation of forest peoples' rights in Central Africa I hope that in different forums they will be able to use whichever international instruments offer them most advantage. However, to 'use' these international instruments requires such specialised experience and 'Northern' style knowledge that the vast majority of Central African hunter-gatherers are not even aware of their existence, let alone of how they might use them. Despite the good intentions of those promoting international discussion, awareness

¹ I would like to thank James Woodburn, Justin Kenrick and Dorothy Jackson for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

² Kenrick (2000) has pointed out similar issues relating to the absence of a political space for forest people. Here I expand and elaborate on some of the points he made.

and respect for indigenous and minority rights, contemporary practices and procedures effectively exclude many of those most in need of support.

The Mbendjele in northern Congo (Brazzaville)

The vast majority of Mbendjele often spend more than half the year hunting and gathering in forest camps and some part of the year near or in agriculturalists' villages trading, labouring and performing services in return for manufactured goods, food, alcohol or money. However, the situation varies greatly from place to place. Mbendjele near the Central African Republic are evangelised and relatively sedentary, those living near logging towns may spend long periods working outside the forest, others further south spend most of the year in the forest with some groups not coming out to villages for years at a time. The same group or family may spend a year in a logging town followed by the next few years mostly in the forest, or vice versa. Annual variation in movements is very common, but the number of places visited is limited. Thus over several years people will move between well known 'resource centres' within their traditional territories, and sometimes beyond these areas. Such 'resource centres' may be salt licks popular with large game, areas rich in wild yams, seasonal caterpillars, fruit trees, rich fishing sites, abandoned palm-nut plantations, farmers' villages, logging towns, or prospecting camps. Mbendjele travel light and their movements are as likely to be opportunistic as planned in advance.

Each group of Mbendjele associates itself with a particular area of forest delineated by rivers, marshes and Lac Telle. As part of my research I mapped these traditional territories and found that the forest in the Sangha-Oubangui triangle between 1° and 3° 30' north of the equator, and 16° and 17° 30' east of Greenwich is recognised as being the territory of particular clans of Mbendjele. In most cases Mbendjele territories are also claimed by local Bilo groups, some Bilo even claim exclusive rights and dispute the notion that Mbendjele have any rights whatsoever. Territories were delineated during the colonial period to discourage inter ethnic warfare and to define the area of forest from which villagers were obliged to collect products like copal resin, rubber and duiker skins with which to pay their taxes.

Despite newcomers claims to the contrary, the Mbendjele consider all the forest to be theirs. Their rights to go where they wish and use whatever they like in the forest are a birth-right that they consider inalienable. Komba (God) created the forest for Yaka people to share, and encouraged them to live in a certain way that includes a system of forest management and certain key social values. Forest people highly value the importance of sharing. Thus the Mbendjele and other forest people have been willing to share their forest with others, and in practice rarely deny anyone access to the forest. They call the area in which they were born, where they do most of their hunting and collecting "*ndima aηgosu*" (our forest). This is a collective claim, not an individual one. In Yaka tradition, notions of exclusive individual ownership are only applied to ritual and mystic knowledge (intellectual property). Certain personal possessions like a woman's basket, pots, clothing and machete and a man's bag, weapons, tools and clothing are considered to be owned by individuals, but unlike ritual and mystic knowledge, they are shared. Although the owner has priority of use over others they will find it very difficult to refuse any member of their extended family or affines who demands the item. Mbendjele relationships are based on the principle of sharing physical items. No one should claim exclusive ownership of the physical world. The notion that an individual, apart from Komba (God), could own land, rivers or forest and as an owner exclude them, evokes suspicion, incomprehension and mockery.

When the country became a one party state following the principles of 'scientific socialism' in the late 1970s party activists replaced traditional chiefs, and traditional territories became state lands unless they had permanent buildings on them or were in active exploitation as farms. This definition of land ownership remains in place today and effectively discriminates against Mbendjele land-use and claims over land, since the majority of their lands will appear

unoccupied at any given time³. The official alienation of Mbendjele rights over forest was compounded during the late eighties and early 1990's when the forest was divided into large concessions called UFA's (Unitie Forestieres d'Amenagement) in order to attract investment from foreign companies willing to exploit forest resources. As Colchester (1994) points out, this system resembles the colonial concessionaire system, both in the scale of the areas involved and in the total disenfranchisement of local people's rights over their land and resources.

Since this was done, outside interest in the forest has increased greatly. Today all the UFAs have been attributed to multinational logging companies, except for the UFA of Nouabale-Ndoki that was given to the Wildlife Conservation Society and is now the Nouabale-Ndoki National Park. Before the outbreak of civil war in June 1997, the IUCN were preparing to occupy the Lac Telle region and create a protected area. Like the logging companies they replace, the wildlife protectionists impose their presence on local people without meaningful consultations. Only Bilo communities are approached for their agreement and also occasionally to receive compensation.

This increased activity in the forest has led to large urban developments around the activities of logging companies, the intensive development of road networks throughout the forest, and the opening up of previously inaccessible areas to commercial exploitation, mostly by professional hunters supplying urban centres with bush meat. The impact of these various uses of the forest by outsiders is that local people – both Mbendjele and villagers – see their resource base diminishing and increasing numbers of strangers coming into their lands. Despite increasing concern about this, it is extremely difficult for them to resist the determination of central government and the forest exploiters to achieve profit.

The problem of discrimination against Mbendjele

The Mbendjele and their way of life are stigmatised and discriminated against by local people. This is endorsed and reinforced by official attitudes to Pygmy peoples that tend to regard their hunting and gathering way of life as primitive and shameful to the national heritage, yet celebrate their extensive knowledge of plants for healing and magic, and their incomparable skills as singers and dancers. This contradictory perception effectively devalues the very process by which Mbendjele maintain the celebrated and special knowledge derived from a forest lifestyle. On the rare occasions that governments have taken an interest in Pygmy people it has been to enforce sedentarisation programmes and assimilationist policies.

Since the enforced 'villagisation' programme of the 1970's most Mbendjele will claim allegiance to particular villages regardless of whether or not they have a hut there. Two permanent Mbendjele villages were established around 1955 though most are more recent. The population and the number of long-term structures vary greatly over time as well as between places. Despite sometimes building substantial mud and thatch houses at some of these sites, they are inhabited very variably. It is not unusual to find villages almost deserted and overgrown with tall grass. Despite the long duration of some of these villages none have officially recognised village committees, as do all Bilo villages. With no recognition of Mbendjele villages, outsiders coming into their areas – such as foresters, official government missions, medical or electoral campaign staff – will go directly to consult with the Bilo village and ignore the Mbendjele. When these visits are offering benefits to the population, these are easily monopolised by the Bilo.

There is tacit acceptance and support by local authorities of the discrimination and denial of basic rights of the Mbendjele by their villager neighbours. Like the lack of official recognition

³ For a more detailed account of the relations between land law and hunter-gatherers land rights in Central Africa see Barume with Jackson 2000.

for their communities, individual Mbendjele only exceptionally possess identity cards or other signs of official recognition. This lack of official recognition and representation at the local and regional level reflects the perception common among non-Pygmy groups that the Mbendjele are the property of villager masters (*konja*) and do not qualify as full citizens or people worthy of independence. The villagers' traditional structures that justify and encourage this situation are not questioned or criticised by the regional authorities; rather they are supported since many officials come from local villages. This is most apparent in relation to access to justice. Mbendjele can only file formal complaints against villagers if another villager represents them. Thus many Mbendjele have nowhere to seek redress when villagers wrong them. Another example is education. Despite most villagers being literate in French and Lingala, no Mbendjele can speak French and none are literate.

James Woodburn (1997) shows that ethnic distinctions based on economic practice are indigenous and enduring, and that these distinctions form the basis for serious discrimination against hunter-gatherers. This is certainly the case in the Congo. The widespread similarities across sub-Saharan Africa in the types of discrimination practised by agriculturalists and pastoralists against hunter-gatherers are striking. Woodburn characterises these as negative stereotypes, denial of rights and segregation.

The situation of the Mbendjele fits this analysis well. Many Bilo consider the Mbendjele to be chimpanzee-like, backward, impoverished, lazy, gluttonous, disgusting, dirty, stupid, childish, and uninterested in change. Mbendjele may not eat or drink together with Bilo, have sexual relations or marry, or sleep in the same houses, and as briefly mentioned above many villagers deny that Mbendjele have any basic human rights, frequently describing them as their 'slaves'. The Mbendjele oppose these derogatory characterisations of themselves by village people, and reject the fictional kinship links that underpin the villagers' claims to authority over them.

Due to the political and discriminatory nature of village people's attitudes and behaviour towards the Mbendjele and other Yaka people, it is unacceptable to most Yaka that they be represented by them, except in the potentially dangerous village world. The Mbendjele experience of the village world has been one of frequent violence. Slave-raiding and warfare characterised inter-villager relations in the pre-colonial period, then came the brutal colonial regime of pacification and forced labour, punctuated by the world war when Germans killed French soldiers stationed in Mbendjele forest. Recent history has continued this trend with a long period in a repressive one-party state followed by intermittent civil war in the 1990's.

For Mbendjele, local and national government, and state administrative structures are village people structures that are simply extensions of the village world. Since most Mbendjele experience the village world as one of huge potential violence, whether from villagers, soldiers, militias or local authorities they consider it safer to leave the Bilo to deal with the world outside the forest. Bilo use this to their advantage and manipulate the fact that without identity cards or officially recognised communities, Yaka people are effectively denied any independent representation.

The Mbendjele point of view

The Mbendjele, like other Yaka groups, see a clear distinction between the autochthonous and permanent forest people (*bisi ndima*) and the transitory later arrivals to the forest - 'village people' (*bisi mboka*). A large body of stories called *gano* elaborate on this difference. *Gano* stories are typically told in the evenings to children. Recounting them makes the forest generous and food plentiful. They are punctuated by songs with simple, rather mesmerising rhythms that help captivate even the youngest. They express moral and social values, entertain and inform. They explain the origin of each animal's particular habits and character, and why they lost their rights to share Yaka sociality. Stories about Bilo explain that the Bilo

are really another type of gorilla, and emphasise that Komba (God) disapproves of their behaviour and moral comportment. Bilo are more than ordinary gorillas because they hunt and kill Yaka. Stories about Bilo all focus on the most appalling (to Yaka) human nightmares; being hunted and eaten, being raped, tortured or murdered. Village people are portrayed as the archetypal 'other', so fundamentally opposed to human values that they are really animals that resemble people.

The Mbendjele often talk about their relations with Bilo using hunting vocabulary to describe their scams, transactions and encounters. Indeed Bilo are more often called 'gorillas' than by the usual ethnonyms. Mbendjele endlessly make jokes about the gorilla-like behaviour of Bilo. Their clumsiness and arrogance, their love of bullying Mbendjele, or the way they charge around, becoming excessively violent without reason. Often Mbendjele would point out forest foods to me saying with mirth, Bilo and gorillas eat this. As one man explained, gorillas charge up making terrifying noises, just because you accidentally trod on a twig while walking in forest they occupy. The Bilo do the same with the Yaka, shouting a lot, becoming violent and dangerous for nothing, maybe because you walked across their farm. Both Bilo and gorillas make lots of negative noise (*motoko*) and become aggressive and violent about claims to own areas of forest. In both cases, Mbendjele oppose them.

When Bilo claim they own areas of forest or rivers or Mbendjele, it is viewed like the noise gorillas make – it is meaningless, self-deluding nonsense. From the Mbendjele point of view Komba (God) created the forest for Yaka people to share with his creatures. Therefore, when Bilo claim to own areas of forest or Mbendjele people, it is clearly nonsense. In contrast to the permanence of their own occupation of the forest, Mbendjele see village people as transitory occupants who will eventually leave. If they get too unpleasant or the claims they make are too much, Mbendjele simply leave them for a while and depart into the forest.

The Mbendjele distinguish 'village people' values, practices and places from their own in relation to the forest. Mbendjele often state that everything they need is in the forest. They pride themselves on being 'gourmets', because the foods most valued by Bilo, honey and fatty meat, form the basis of their diet. Mbendjele take pride in only eating the best, most succulent forest foods. That Bilo are trapped into eating farm food all the time, that they don't share food, and that they voraciously eat any forest food no matter how bitter, provokes Mbendjele mockery, pity and laughter. Mbendjele men mock the Bilo men's ineptitude in the forest. They are proud of their superior skills in hunting, tracking and orientation. They boast about their ability to walk without using paths, of being able to just circle around without getting lost.

The Mbendjele say that the Bilo don't like the forest. In general the Bilo agree⁴: they see the forest as a dangerous, dark, unforgiving place inhabited by bad spirits and wild animals, it is the opposite of the village and farms, which Bilo see as safe places, where all real human-beings should live. The Mbendjele, on the other hand, see the forest as the best place for humans to be. It is safe, peaceful, cool and clean whereas the village is dangerous, noisy, hot and dirty (*mbindo*). Domestic meat is taboo for the Mbendjele. They see it as dirty meat (*nyama ua mbindo*). What disgusts them about domestic animals is the way they consume human waste: old clothes, discarded food, paper, vomit and excrement. This concentration of human waste in villages makes them *mbindo*. The concentration of graves at villages adds to the dirt and danger because of the ancestral spirits (*b.edio*) of the Bilo.

The developed oral tradition, the entrenched cultural stereotypes, and peoples' accounts of the past all attest to the enduring and elaborate nature of the opposition between village people

⁴ A respectable Bilo man is expected to have some forest competence. Being a good hunter is seen as an accomplishment. These skills are valued and respected by other Bilo precisely because of the negative representation of the forest as a dangerous and difficult place.

and forest people. This oppositional distinction is widespread among the people of Central Africa and has been commented on by ethnographers of the region, most notably in the Ituri forest of the Democratic Republic of Congo by Colin Turnbull (1966) for the forest people, and more recently by Grinker (1994) for the village people. Even when forest people no longer have access to forest these oppositions do not break down, and can even become more entrenched as has happened to the Twa Pygmies of the Great Lakes Region (Lewis 2000).

Versions of this cultural distinction between certain hunter-gatherer people and their neighbours have been observed in other parts of Africa and the world. Woodburn's (1982) generalised characterisation of these differences in terms of 'immediate-return' and 'delayed-return' societies has many similarities to local Central African conceptualisations of the differences between forest and village people. Other anthropologists have developed theories based on these indigenous distinctions. For example, Lee's concept of 'communal foraging relations of production' (1981), or Ingold's argument that hunter-gatherer sociality is such 'a radically alternative mode of relatedness' (1990:130) that the term 'society' is inappropriate. Bird-David, basing her theorising more directly in local models argues in a similar vein to the Mbendjele that 'there is a strong case for distinguishing between gatherer-hunters and their neighbours ... The differences between them relates to their distinct views of the environment that they share' (1990:194-5). She characterises the gatherer-hunters view of their ecological relations in terms of a 'giving environment' (1990:190). This also applies to the Mbendjele.

From the Mbendjele point of view the forest has always been, and will eternally be there for them. It was created for Yaka people. Mbendjele have an unswerving faith that the forest will always be able to provide them with what they need. In order to maintain this state of abundance the Mbendjele have a complex ritual life in which, among other things, forest spirits are enlisted to support and assist the Mbendjele in satisfying their needs. From their point of view, bad hunting and gathering are related to the activities of malicious spirits rather than to inadequacies in human skill or the environment's ability to provide. People recognise each other's skills but it is impolite to refer to them, rather hunting success is talked about in terms of personal and mystical relationships⁵. This is related to the Mbendjele's egalitarian ethic, in which individual ability is downplayed, and perceived of as a consequence of their conduct in relationships with other people and mystical agents.

The idioms Mbendjele use for discussing the efficacy of food gathering activities may seem odd but they are practical. If taken as a body of practices it could be argued that they form a system of forest management. For instance, in areas of forest where hunting is consistently unsuccessful, Mbendjele hunters will place leaf cones stuffed with earth (*misongo*) on all paths leading into that area of forest. This warns other Mbendjele that the forest is populated by voracious spirits or has been cursed, and that they should not attempt to find food but turn back or simply pass through. Despite apparently non-scientific reasoning the effect of this allows degraded areas of forest to be left in order that their resources increase to sustainable levels again. However Mbendjele idioms for understanding the forest and its resources have not yet adapted to the rapid change brought about by the increasingly intensive exploitation of forest resources by outsiders. The sophisticated balances their traditional lifestyle has with the forest are being dramatically shaken by the immense power of modern technology to transform and degrade the environment, and the Mbendjele are only just becoming aware of it.

As previously mentioned, the Mbendjele have been willing to share their forest with outsiders because of their strong ethic of sharing, but whether they will be willing to share in future remains to be seen. Mbendjele are very clear that the forest is theirs, that they have priority in it and that their relationship with it is uniquely committed and binding. They see themselves

⁵ The general idiom for discussing success and failure in the food quest or procreation is a term called 'ekila'. This is a complex polysemic word that I devote a chapter of my thesis to discussing.

as controlling outsiders' access because they are the guardians of the forest and its secrets. However, in recent times loggers using sophisticated and powerful technology have been able to bypass the Mbendjele to get into the forest.

Those communities that have experienced loggers coming and going feel cheated – the huge machines and extensive infrastructure of towns, roads and slipways impress the Mbendjele but also raise their suspicions. How could so much power be used without huge profits? Working for the loggers is seen as a means to share in these profits. But when they seek work they find that the vast majority of salaried jobs are being given to villagers, leaving them only casual employment and low-paid piece-work. In the search for work they frequently experience discrimination in favour of others and if they get work are often verbally abused or falsely accused by their work mates. Employers complain that they are unreliable.

The difficulties they have getting employment, the discrimination they suffer, and the ease they see villagers getting jobs make many feel that they are the victims of a conspiracy between Bilo and powerful white people (*mindele*) to rob the forest of its resources without sharing with the Mbendjele. In many respects these Mbendjele are right. They express this by saying the '*Bilo bateka ndima na mindele*' (Bilo are selling the forest to the whites).

Despite the Mbendjele being tolerant and sharing their forest with outsiders they are outraged that no one is in the least bit concerned to respect their rights and also to share with them. Mbendjele strongly resent this lack of respect for universal sharing, but feel that no one cares or ever listens to them. Most Mbendjele simply adapt, by hunting in different areas, or by seeking employment with the loggers and the communities that spring up around their activities, or by working with commercial hunters and so on.

Partly due to their belief in an eternal and abundant forest, and partly because most can still avoid over-exploited areas the Mbendjele don't realise to what extent the forest is deteriorating. As many avoid degraded areas and go elsewhere, others, often living near urban centres begin to see their options for gaining food become increasingly limited. Many become more or less sedentarised and rely on trading, salaried employment, day labour or piece-work to sustain their families. Manuel Thuret (1999) describes one such community living opposite the town of Ouessou. In effect, the Mbendjele in these communities are adopting many 'village people' practices because their forest is no longer sufficiently abundant to support long periods away from villages.

The steady degradation of Mbendjele forest by commercial activities, and its occupation by increasing numbers of animal protectionists may in the not too distant future have a devastating impact on the Mbendjele's ability to hunt and gather effectively in their traditional areas. As their options for gaining a livelihood reduce they will be obliged to adopt more and more of the lifestyle and practices of village people.

Most Mbendjele remain unconvinced that anyone is interested in their opinion on recent occurrences in their forest. They perceive of themselves as powerless to oppose the will of the state, multinational companies or local officials. This dominating world – the village world – intimidates the Mbendjele due its ability to unleash excessive violence against people. The recent intermittent civil war of the 1990's continues to reinforce traditional Mbendjele stereotypes of village people and village places.

Contemporary procedural forms and structures

Although in national law the Mbendjele are supposed to be equal to other Congolese citizens in practice this is not the case. The discrimination they are subjected to by village people, their lack of official recognition or northern style education, their attachment to an

‘immediate-return’ economy and lifestyle within the forest, their mobility, egalitarianism and small social groups all contribute to make effective representation or protest difficult.

These difficulties begin at the local level and extend outwards to national and international levels. The problems are similar at every level due to the basic assumptions about people that these various institutional structures make. These assumptions are clearly biased to what Mbendjele would call ‘village people’. Place is a clear indicator of this; meetings and other forums where Mbendjele might, in theory at least, be able to present their concerns are often based indoors in urban or village environments, and with a heavy bias to written forms of communication. Effective representation at these levels demands a northern style education – the ability to read, write, to know basic maths, to have a sense of geography and current affairs, to understand hierarchic structures of authority, the dress codes and etiquette of formal meetings, public presentation styles and many other skills that are particular to institutional structures. The lack of northern style education has practical implications for very ordinary procedures like obtaining travel documents, travelling by aeroplane, preparing speeches, communicating with officials and other participants in international languages, or operating standard office equipment like telephones, fax machines, computers, email, and so on that are only rarely taken into account⁶.

A brief examination of the minority rights or indigenous rights movement in Africa reveals that despite the stated aims of these movements to support people like the Mbendjele, the main international forums expressly intended for them to voice their concerns effectively discriminate against forest people. Even in Rwanda, and more recently DRC, where indigenous Pygmy organisations have been participating in international indigenous rights meetings since 1994, the processes and activities involved are so elaborated and abstract that only the most educated are confident enough to participate. In effect the expectations of the international forums tend to exclude the more ‘forest’ minded representatives in favour of the more ‘village’ minded ones.

This is not intended as a criticism of the individuals and organisations representing and supporting indigenous and minority communities in Central Africa. Indeed since many hunter-gatherer communities are now *former* hunter-gatherers, it is important that they establish forums within which to express their concerns. Their ground-breaking work, notably in pushing indigenous rights onto national and international agendas, is undertaken in very difficult circumstances and they have achieved a lot in a short space of time⁷.

The critically important skill of those who are participating is that they can present their concerns and engage in dialogue in styles and forms readily comprehensible to outsiders with little knowledge of the situation. This skill is in demand at the international level since it simplifies already complicated administrative procedures (like international communication, co-ordination, formal presentations, seminar-type meetings etc.) and facilitates achieving results that will be recognisable to funding bodies. The individuals representing indigenous and minority communities at the international level are inevitably literate, urban based and apart from one or two rare exceptions all are former hunter-gatherers. From the Mbendjele perspective most of these people are more like ‘village people’ than ‘forest people’ and the discourse they engage in will be biased to ‘village’ concerns.

My intention here is to criticise the international structures and the expectations they hold of representatives of indigenous communities. There is no ‘political space’, to use Justin

⁶ This may be due to the majority of indigenous or minority rights organisations being biased more towards advocacy than capacity building. By not becoming sufficiently involved in ‘grass roots’ issues organisations have failed to recognise the inherent discrimination of contemporary procedures and practices.

⁷ See Jackson 1999, Kenrick 2000 for further details.

Kenrick's (2000:2) term, for those indigenous communities, like the Mbendjele and many other Pygmy groups who are truly forest people, ignorant of formal education, national and international power structures and their relations, and intimidated by urban environments, formality, bureaucratic procedures and modern technology. If this issue remains unaddressed the remaining groups of forest people will only be aware they can represent themselves, and that there are others facing similar situations, when it is too late and they have lost their forest world to loggers and animal protectionists. The indigenous rights movement will only reach forest people when their distinctive 'indigenous' qualities are being superseded by village people qualities. The minority rights movement will only reach these minorities when their distinctive identity has been compromised sufficiently for them to participate in the majority discourse. This is a Catch-22 situation for forest people. Only when their distinctive identity has been dramatically transformed will they be able to participate in these discourses.

Conclusion

An ideal of these human rights movements is to establish a dialogue between equals. Yet the platform we offer for this dialogue is biased by being structured and conducted in ways suitable for village but not forest people. Unless we give this issue serious attention both the indigenous peoples' and the minority rights movements in Central Africa risk failing to secure the effective participation of a significant proportion of those people they most seek to support and defend.

Creating a space for forest people is not at all self-evident. The 'village world' is global and seemingly unstoppable. Forest people experience intense discrimination in their own countries and their forests have been transformed by global capitalism into a series of faunal and floral assets to be distributed among white and black 'village people'. Forest people are deeply resentful about the lack of respect for their rights by village people, but without outside support they are unlikely to be heard before it is too late. Supporting forest people's efforts to be heard will require thinking creatively together of different ways in which this might be achieved.

I suspect this will be a long-term process that will involve working closely with specific communities to establish relationships based on trust, genuine consultation and participation, and to assist individuals with the necessary skills to build up networks with other hunter-gatherer communities. In this way appropriate activities could be developed that work on capacity building in the community, on facilitating networking visits to other forest peoples' communities, developing education programmes, and so on. Alliances that share expertise could be formed, between NGOs with specific skills to offer forest people, and the forest people with their unique and special forms of social and political organisation. This could provide the opportunity to develop structures and procedures that are appropriate to forest peoples' expectations and experience. They should take into account forest peoples' preference for specialists rather than leaders, for group deliberation and decision-making, or their sense of time, place and work. This may well entail improving and increasing translator support services, considering alternative venues to urban areas, exploring the possibilities offered by new technologies such as portable communication equipment, video and on-line conferencing, and alternative energy sources like solar panels, and so on.

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