

# **Bakola/Bagyelli households between precariousness and struggle for survival: Lessons learned from an indigenous community in search of well-being**

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## **Abstract**

Socio-economic household surveys among indigenous peoples in general and the Bakola/Bagyelli in Cameroon in particular are infrequent. The dearth of such works testifies to the low interest of specialist of social science, especially anthropology, in this subject. This article presents the current socioeconomic status of Pygmy households in the south-coastal region of Cameroon. The Bakola/Bagyelli are now more than ever concerned about their living conditions, which are rapidly deteriorating. They have implemented survival strategies to fight poverty and precariousness, which hamper their well-being. These include slash-and-burn agriculture, the rearing of small ruminants, petty trade and the introduction of the market economy. Although invisible at the national level, these strategies aim to direct Pygmy camps towards sustainable economic development. This article's objective is to highlight the dynamics of and local strategies implemented by these populations to improve their living conditions. Through a census, data on sociodemographic characteristics, productive activities, access to resources, and family budgets of households within the camps are collected from the Bipindi, Lolodorf, and Lokoundjé subdivision. The methodology used combines several methods and techniques. The results of this study show an improvement in the living conditions of Bakola/Bagyelli households.

**Keywords:** Bakola-Bagyelli, households, survival, well-being, Cameroon



## 1. Introduction

Socioeconomic surveys of households among indigenous peoples of Cameroon remain fragmentary; much of this work is still outstanding. Currently, extrapolations made from data collected during more general studies, such as the *Food anthropology of Cameroonian populations*<sup>1</sup> programme, *Avenir des Peuples des Forêts Tropicales*<sup>2</sup> project, and population and housing censuses<sup>3</sup> or household surveys<sup>4</sup>, suffice. However, large-scale studies and large-scale programmes on Bakola/Bagyelli did not continue after the 2000s. Ngima's (1996) field work presents the most recent data on the living conditions of Bakola/Bagyelli households. The scarcity of such studies reflects the low interest of scholars of social sciences, particularly anthropology, in this region.

Ngima's (1996) study on consumption and family budgets among the Bakola/Bagyelli primarily aimed to answer three questions: How do the Bakola/Bagyelli live? What are they consuming? What use do they make of the resources they acquire by hunting, gathering, agriculture, and craft-making. Ngima reveal several characteristics of the Bakola/Bagyelli population—in particular, the social organisation and employment situation, evolution of their habitat, and their economic system.

The Bakola/Bagyelli practised semi-nomadism, and their production activities as well as their economic system were based on hunting, gathering, fishing, agriculture, and crafts. Although precarious and based on the marketing of products acquired from the forest, such as *Strophantus gratus* (*eneh/neh/iné*)<sup>5</sup>, the results of Ngima's (1996) survey already revealed the germs of a market economy. At the time, the Bakola/Bagyelli had begun the process of sedentarisation, opting between two types of camp for housing: a permanent camp to which they always returned even after a year of absence and the provisional hunting camp, which was more basic, and used only during hunting excursions. Ngima's (1996) study observed no systematic individual, family, or collective household budget. The only true forecast of an individual, of a household, was the departure for hunting or the search for starchy foods in the field or forest, or near their Bantu neighbourhoods. This study, although qualitative and descriptive, had nevertheless made it possible to highlight the (i) rudimentary nature of the Bakola/Bagyelli economic system, and (ii) level of precariousness of households within the camps. However, Ngima did not address household composition, housing characteristics, household goods and equipment, and access to capital.

The current research documents the living conditions of the Bakola/Bagyelli in light of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Food Anthropology of Cameroonian Populations* (1983–1993) studied food in the normative framework of survival in society, itself integrated in a natural, or less anthropised, environment, using a sample of rural Cameroonian populations.

<sup>2</sup> *Future of Tropical Forest Peoples* (1995–2000) explored the problems faced by tropical forest peoples in order to propose concrete recommendations. The project involved a multidisciplinary team of 30 researchers from Europe and Central Africa, the Caribbean, and the Southwest Pacific.

<sup>3</sup> Cameroon has so far conducted three general population censuses in 1976, 1986, and 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Cameroon has so far conducted four household surveys in 1996, 2001, 2007, and 2015.

<sup>5</sup> There are many common names of *Strophantus gratus*, unique to different populations and regions. It is called *eneh* in Ngoumba, *neh* in Bakola/Bagyelli, and *iné* in Ewondo.

transformations and dynamics underway within the camps. The remaining article is organised as follows: First, we discuss the methodological basis of our investigation; then, we lead a conceptual debate around the terminology 'Pygmies', and briefly describe the Bakola/Bagyelli. After reporting the main results, we further discuss the Bakola/Bagyelli *worldview*<sup>6</sup> and its relationship to the search for well-being among them.

## 2. Research area and methods

This study was based on a plurality of methods, techniques, and sources of additional information. In this section, we describe the different stages of our methodological approach. The aim is to briefly present the following points: generalities concerning the research area, methods, data processing and analysis, and interpretation of results.

### 2.1. Research area

The district of Bipindi covers an estimated area of approximately 750 km<sup>2</sup>. To its north is the Eseka district, and then the Akom II and Efoulan to the south, the Lolodorf district to the east, and the Lokoundjé district to the west. Bipindi, which is the eponymous capital, is located 78 km from Kribi. In 2005, the district of Bipindi had 14,118 persons, including 6,869 men and 7,249 women<sup>7</sup>. This population is divided between urban and rural areas. Bipindi has a low demographic density of 18.82 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. The natives (the Ngumba, Evuzok, Fang, Bulu, Bassa, and Bagyelli) and the non-natives (the Bamiléke and Bamenda) are the population groups that make up the subdivision of Bipindi.

The administrative district of Lolodorf covers an area of 1,200 km<sup>2</sup> and has 27 Bantu villages and 23 camps. The towns of Eseka and Makak lie to its north, Mvengue to the east, Bipindi to the west, and Efoulan to the south. The city of Lolodorf, which serves as the capital, is located 200 km from Yaoundé via Eseka. It is 76 km from Ebolowa and 110 km from Kribi. The district of Lolodorf has 14,326 persons, including 7,121 men and 7,205 women<sup>8</sup>. Lolodorf also has a low demographic density of 11.94 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. The sub-division comprises two main population groups: the Ngumba, Ewondo, Fang, Bulu, and Bakola, who are the natives, and then the non-natives. The Bakolas-Bagyelli live scattered in the sub-divisions of Bipindi, Lolodorf, and Lokoundjé, as shown in Figure 1.

<sup>6</sup> The worldview is a particular perception of the world, more or less conscious and coherent, which tends to give the individual a particular appreciation of what surrounds him, this appreciation can change continuously. This is what Goldmann calls "the awareness of reality". He says on this subject: "at every moment; indeed, every social group has on the different questions that arise for him and the realities he encounters, a certain consciousness of fact, real" (Goldmann quoted by Mouchtouris 1994:13).

<sup>7</sup> Demographic data from the 2005 general population.

<sup>8</sup> Demographic data from the 2005 general population.

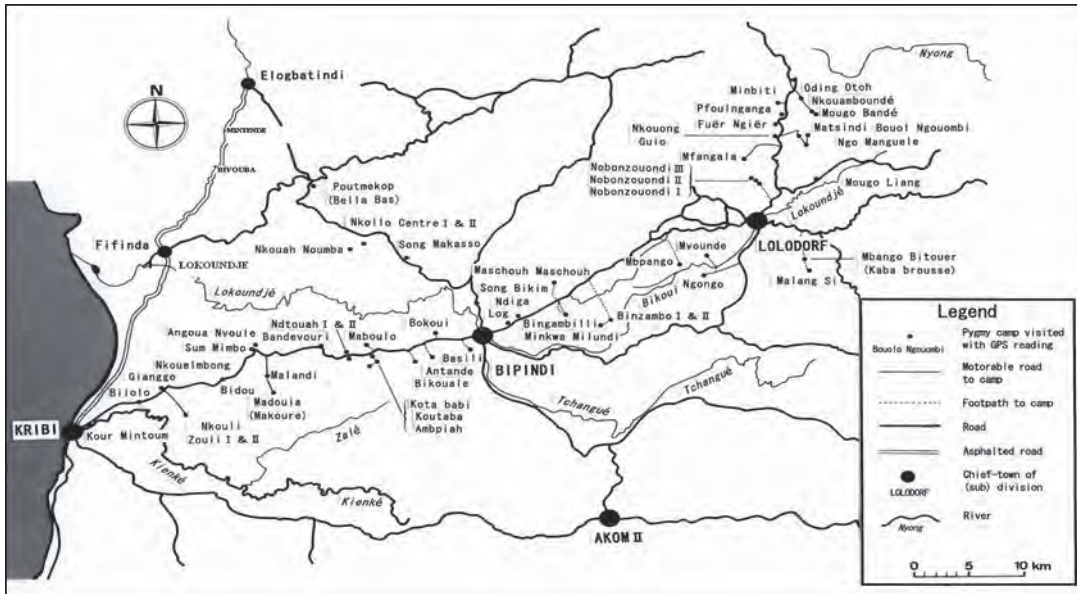


Figure 1. Area research: Districts of Bipindi, Lolodorf, and Lokoundjé showing the dispersed Bakola/Bagyelli encampments.

Source: Ngima (2001:210).

The administrative district of Lokoundjé is bordered to the north by Edea, to the south by Kribi, Campo, and Nyete; to the east by Bipindi; and to the west by the Atlantic Ocean. Its capital Fifiinda is located 35 km from Kribi. The Lokoundjé district has approximately 36,650 persons. It has a young population, and 50% of its population are women. Fifiinda has a low demographic density of 2 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>, against 13.4 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> for the Southern Region. As in most contexts, the population of the arrondissement comprises several human groups, including the indigenous populations (the Ewondo, Batanga, Mabea, Bakoko and Bassa, Fang, Ngumba, and Bagyelli) who formerly settled there and the non-natives.

## 2.2. Methods and data collection procedure

The methodology used herein combines several methods and techniques, such as conducting observations and collecting information from households in the various localities selected for the study. The observation units were permanent households<sup>9</sup> within the Bakola/Bagyelli camps. ‘Household’ is defined as a socioeconomic unit of people who share the same meals and who regularly live together, most often under the same roof, by pooling their resources.

The study took place in 24 of the 96 camps in the study area. The very advanced sedentarisation of Bakola/Bagyelli has contributed to the establishment of villages, wrongly called camps. Indeed, their

<sup>9</sup> A permanent household is a household whose members settle on the site is estimated to at least 6 months.

presence in these living spaces is almost permanent throughout the year.

The household survey covered 121 households, representing 68.4% of the estimated households in the three subdivisions. Heads of households and their spouses were the main informants. One hundred and thirty-six people were interviewed, including 79 heads of households and 57 spouses. Data collection within households took place iteratively over a period of three weeks in August 2016. Quantitative data were collected using questionnaires. The questionnaire intended for the head of household made it possible to collect data on the sociodemographic characteristics and living conditions of the households. The questionnaire addressed to women helped to collect precise information on the sociodemographic characteristics of Bakola/Bagyelli women as well as the various economic production activities and their level of participation in the functioning of groups and associations in the rural world. The household questionnaire was administered to the head of household or his representative, while the female questionnaire was administered to the spouses. Literature research, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and photography made it possible to collect qualitative data.

### **2.3. Data processing and analysis**

We processed the collected data using different techniques. The data contained in the questionnaires were double-entered on CS Pro 5.0. This phase was followed by a data cleaning on SPSS 17.0, and an export to Excel for converting the data into tabular form. Qualitative data from the focus group discussions and individual interviews were transcribed, and then codified in Atlas Ti version 6.3. A method of analysis that integrated both quantitative and qualitative components was used (Creswell 2003). This approach allowed for the concomitant analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. Descriptive statistics (univariate and bivariate) and the explanatory statistical analysis (multivariate) were used for the quantitative data. For qualitative data, discourse analysis (Landowski 1989) and ethno-perspective (Mbonji 2005) were used.

### **2.4. Results interpretation**

The interpretative framework was built around the theory of cultural dynamics (de Lauwe 1971; Solinis 1988; Mouchtouris 1994). This theory analyses the processes of emergence of new forms of social life, expression of social groups, culture-action, and elements of future innovative cultures in the transformative perspective of the implementation of a new self-development (Solinis 1988:7). Its operationalisation is based on bringing together concepts such as cultural dynamics, worldview, social aspirations, and social transformations. Within the framework of this work, the cultural dynamics are understood at two levels: first, it is an emerging creation of people who must invent their survival. On this subject, Solinis (1988:12) states that:

Cultural dynamics offers a particular analysis of the relationships between economic, technical and social transformations, and grassroots movements.

Second, cultural dynamic refers to a *bet* on human innovation—on the possibility of finding solutions to problems even when the dominant structures do not favour humans. According to Solinis (1988:12), the cultural dynamic is articulated through three transformation processes that exist in a fundamental tension against each other, that is, ‘the reproduction of social structures that favor dominant groups, opposed to creation on the part of the excluded’.

Further, ‘worldview’ is a particular perception of the world—more or less conscious and coherent—which tends to give the individual a particular appreciation of what surrounds him or her; this appreciation is able to change continually. This is what Mouchtouris (1994), in taking over Goldmann, names calls ‘awareness of reality... at every moment; in fact, any social group has a certain awareness of fact and real awareness of the various questions which arise and the realities it encounters’ (Mouchtouris 1994:13). The worldview is pure perception to which one can give a scheme of appreciation. Whether conscious or unconscious, the individual can accept the worldview, refuse it, or negotiate it. Goldmann calls this ability of the individual to choose the ‘awareness of the possible’. Further, he states that (Mouchtouris 1994:13):

It happens very often that the real consciousness of a more or less notable part of the members of a group aspires to change status or to integrate into another group, even more than individuals who constitute it are already trying in part to adopt the latter's values.

### 3. The Bakola/Bagyelli<sup>10</sup>

The Bakola/Bagyelli<sup>11</sup> occupy the westernmost position of southern Cameroon. In addition to a few settlement islets mentioned in the north of Equatorial Guinea, their presence is asserted mainly in Cameroonian territory, delimited in the west by the Atlantic coast, between the Ntem river in the South and the Nyong river in the north, and in the east, at latitude 10°60', which passes approximately over the town of Eseka. They are found in the great majority of the department of the Ocean in the districts of Lolodorf, Bipindi, Kribi I & II, Akom II, Niété, Lokoundjé, and Campo.

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<sup>10</sup> In the remainder of the text, words in italics refer to the Kola vernacular designations of certain key concepts related to habitat structure.

<sup>11</sup> The name ‘Bagyelli’ comes from Ngyeli in the singular and Ba-Gyeli in the plural. This is the name they give themselves in the South (Loung 1987) in the Kribi zone, while their brothers in the north Lolodorf area are called Ba-Kola (sg. Kola). The Mabi and the Ngumba call them Ngyelli/Bo-Gyelli, the Fang-Beti call them Nkwé/Be-Kwé, and the Mvae Nyela/Be-Yela. The /bajélé/, language of the Bagyelli, is of Bantu origin and belongs to the Maka-Njem group (A-81 according to the classification of Guthrie), that is, close to /Mbvumbo/ and /Mabi/, the respective languages of Ngumba and Mabi.



The Bakola/Bagyelli have many singularities and specificities<sup>12</sup> that help to distinguish them from other palaeo-African groups. The data from the literature and those collected in the field reveal that many changes are perceptible at the sociocultural and societal levels. The migratory history of the Ngumba suggests that the Bakola/Bagyelli have a very old relationship with the Ngumba. Their close linguistic kinship with the Kwasio (Ngumba, Mabea) suggests that their history is more or less linked to their ancestral migrations (Dounias 1987, Joiris 1992, Ngima 1993; 2001).

According to Joiris (1992:127), ‘the language of the Bakola is very close to that of the villagers Ngumba and Mabea with whom the Pygmies arrived in the region during the last migrations’. Their cohabitation with their non-Pygmy neighbours has become considerably structured and diversified over the years, accompanied by cultural and religious nations or technical contributions. These exchanges profoundly changed the culture and way of life of the Bakola/Bagyelli, and, in some places, favoured the introduction of new religiosities such as Christianity and Islam (Bitouga 2017).

Sedentarisation and the existence of sentimental and matrimonial alliances with their Bantu neighbours mean that the morphology of the Bakola/Bagyelli is abandoned in favour of their current way of life in order to describe them. Indeed, by becoming sedentary, they have been influenced by the way of life of the ‘villagers’, which has had severe cultural repercussions, in particular on habitat construction, agricultural practices, and eating habits. Despite their ‘assimilation’ into a sedentary lifestyle, the Bakola/Bagyelli, like other indigenous groups, face discrimination and marginalisation. Their relations of cohabitation with the Bantu are, in a nagging way, punctuated with various conflicts and abuses (Bitouga 2011; 2014). Their cohabitation relations with their various neighbours (e.g. the Ngumba, Bassa, Bulu, Fang, Evuzok, and Bakoko) have continued to pose problems for researchers as well. This is perceptible in the terminology used to qualify the nature of these relationships: ‘servants’, ‘slaves’, ‘vassals’, ‘clients’, ‘parasites’, or ‘symbiots’ (Robillard and Bahuchet 2012:27). Regarding the cohabitation between the Bakola/Bagyelli and their non-Pygmy neighbours, Joiris (1992:131) notes that:

Pygmy and village communities are associated in a client relationship based on relations of voluntary dependence of the Pygmies on the villagers. The friendship between two heads of families is often at the origin of this interethnic relationship.

Similarly, Ngima (2001:1) states that:

The relationships between the Bakola and the various Bantu populations mentioned above

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<sup>12</sup> It is now clear that the advanced sedentarisation of the Bakola/Bagyelli has contributed to the introduction of new forms of religiosity, including Christianity and Islam, in the camps. The presence of a chapel or a place of Christian worship within a Pygmy hamlet is no longer unprecedented. The presence of a mosque was recorded in the Angoua Mvoulè encampment in the village of Makouré II (Bipindi).

differ from one clan to another of the same ethnic group, and even from one individual to another. The frequency, quality, and quantity of gifts and counter-gifts exchanged, assistance and services provided, and even the forms of partnership itself, show a considerable variation.

Next, there are generally two types of housing within the camps: traditional housing (*mbasa*) and modern housing (*ndabo*). Although increasingly falling out of favour, *mbasa* are made from large leaves of Maranthaceae or Anthocleista. These are fixed to the vegetable framework of the habitat. A notch is made on the vein near the petiole, and the leaves are crocheted in a row. This arrangement gives the house the appearance of pangolin scales. The leaves of Maranthaceae or Anthocleista are replaced by raffia panels or palm branches. According to the Bakola/Bagyelli, the use of raffia panels is a good compromise: They are less ephemeral than the simple leaves of Maranthaceae or Anthocleista, and are available all year round. The totally vegetal structure of this type of habitat gives it a certain fragility. In the absence of nails, the structure of the building is maintained by liana ligatures, which, in the medium term, cannot oppose the collapse of the box. *Ndabo* are partly based on the Bantu construction model. The use of pisa (*nda si*) to cover the walls is widespread in camps. The vast majority of these dwellings are covered with a raffia panel roof (*ndula mbasa*). However, in some cases, the homes of some wealthy Pygmies are covered with aluminium sheets (*ndula bikwembe*).



Figure 2. Modern housing (*ndabo*) belonging to Bang Roger, Nkola of the Matsindi camp (Lolodorf).  
Source: Photographed by author at Matsindi in 2009.

The gender distribution of roles in economic production is based on the valuation of categories—male or female—with the exception of activities subject to a symbolic prohibition (Dounias 1987, Joiris 1992). This division of labour based on the valuation of social categories is also present among the Kola and the Aka (Bahuchet 1991). This gender complementarity in the division of labour observed among



the Baka is also present among the Bakola in the Campo region (Ngima 2006). Ngima (2006:67) states that:

Women perform particularly important roles in certain cultural activities, such as dancing, funeral services, and organising a great hunt for ceremonial occasions. The absence of women could be a reason for cancelling such activities.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Description of the study population**

The study population consisted of Bakola/Bagyelli heads of households or their representatives and their spouses. Regarding the subpopulation of heads of households, 79 people were interviewed, with the following breakdown by district: 21 in Bipindi (26.6%), 42 in Lolodorf (53.1%), and 16 in Lokoundjé (20.2%). The gender composition of heads of households shows that men represent 92.4% (73) and women represent 7.6% (6) of the total sample. Further, 38% (30) were between 15 and 34 years of age, 38% (30) between 35 and 64 years, and 24% (19) were 65 years and over at the time of the survey. Finally, 56.4% of the respondents had primary education, while 25.6% were out of school. On the other hand, the subpopulation of spouses/wives comprised 59 individuals, whose distribution by district was as follows: 17 in Bipindi (27%), 29 in Lolodorf (52%), and 13 in Lokoundjé (21%).

### **4.2. Household characteristics**

The average household size was 6.4 people; 92.4% (73 of 79) of households were led by men. Regarding the age of the head of household, more than three-quarters were between 15 and 64 years old (60). About 45.6% (36) of heads of households lived in marital cohabitation.

Regarding occupancy status and housing characteristics, notwithstanding their level of insecurity, 79.7% (63) of heads of households owned their own homes. Regarding the level of seniority in the occupation of houses, 50.6% (40) of heads of households declared having spent four years on average there. Those who had been there for five to nine years represented 20.3% (16) of the population, with the oldest (five years and over) representing 11% (9). These data reflect the advanced sedentarisation among the Bakola/Bagyelli.

Further, houses built with pisa/rammed earth (*nda si*) are the most common model (65.8%, 52) and 77.2% (61) of households used kerosene lamps as a light source. Almost all households used firewood for cooking (96.2%, 76). The possession of good and electronic equipment (television set, radio set, etc.) remains low. About 64 kitchens (81.7%) had agricultural tools.

It appears that households have access to drinking water from rivers (50.6%, 40), wells (16.5%, 13), unimproved water sources (13.9%, 11), boreholes (10.1%, 8), and developed sources (7.6%, 6). These

statistics are deeply worrying, given the correlation between the quality of drinking water and the state of health. If such few households have access to drinking water, their members are inevitably exposed to water-borne diseases such as cholera and typhoid.

#### **4.3. Economic situation and accessibility to household capital**

As Pierre (2003:190) notes in Lush households<sup>13</sup>, the Bakola/Bagyelli household economy is the manifestation of a ‘poverty economy’. Indeed, incomes from various economic production activities within households are lower. Most of the Bakola/Bagyelli households are struggling for their survival. This situation is accentuated by numerous constraints—in particular the weak integration of their agricultural and rural economy into the national economy, embryonic nature of the transformation of their agricultural production, fragmentation and lack of organisation of the rural economic system, inaccessibility to technical and commercial information, logistical weakness in access to agricultural inputs, lack of support for local development initiatives, and inaccessibility of Pygmy households to financial services (credit, micro-funding, etc.) that meet their needs. It is increasingly difficult for rural households to ensure their livelihood through agricultural activities alone; therefore, they have to seek other sources of income.

The strategy a household can adopt to diversify its livelihoods depends on access to several types of capital, which, in turn, makes it possible to assess the level of household development. In the context of this study, we retained three types of capital: natural, financial, and human. According to International Funds for Agriculture Development, household access to these three forms of capital can increase the (i) household access to the means of production, (ii) household access to basic services and infrastructure, and (iii) influence of households in community affairs.

To ensure their survival, the Bakola/Bagyelli households must divide their work between the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors. According to quantitative data, households have a multitude of sources of income. Hunting (39%, 31), agriculture (24.7%, 19), collecting (24.7%, 19), pharmacology (18.2%, 15), and petty trade (3.9%, 3) constitute the major sources of household income. In a minimal portion, we identify crafts as well. To ensure their food self-sufficiency, 88.7% (70) of households owned a family farm. A small proportion of households declared that they market products from their farms (12.9%, 11).

Regarding access to household capital, 87.1% (69) of households declared that they owned the land on which they carry out their agricultural activities. Further, 81% (64) of households did not have access to credit. Regarding human capital, 55.7% (44) of heads of households have a primary education level. Finally, 47.4% (37) of households had recourse to public health facilities, and 32.1% (25) went to private

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<sup>13</sup> The Lushois designate the populations of Lubumbashi, one of the provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

denominational health centres.

### 5. Vision of the world and relation to well-being among the Bakola/Bagyelli

Notwithstanding the weight of the norms and values inherited from the past, the Bakola/Bagyelli today are part of a transformative and emancipative dynamic. Through their sedentarisation, we note social transformations within the camps which reflect the cultural dynamic (Mouchtouris 1994:119) in this socio-culture. There are mutations in many areas of their lifestyle and habits. These are the transformations that are observed, particularly in terms of their occupancy status and the characteristics of their homes. The same is true of their access to various energy sources, economic situation, and access to financial capital. All these social transformations contrast the observations made by Ngima (1996). Access to *ndabo* is one of the current social aspirations of many Bakola-Bagyelli in the localities of Bipindi, Lolodorf, and Lokoundjé. The possession of such a type of housing gives its owner a privileged position among his or her own, even on the scale of the region. Owning such a property is perceived within the camp as a sign of remarkable material success. Its owner is presented as an individual who has acquired complete economic independence.

The objectification of the current transformations within the Bakola/Bagyelli households requires the analysis of their ‘worldview’ in relation to their perception of well-being and, therefore, of development. By asking the Bakola/Bagyelli about their perception of well-being, it emerges that there is a perceptible difference between those who live in a traditional hut and those who occupy a modern habitat. The reasons given are mostly that *mbasa* are uncomfortable and poorly adapted to their new sedentary lifestyle. The ephemeral character of these dwellings as well as the promiscuity that prevails there because of its narrowness have regularly appeared as the reasons that justify the desire and the increasingly growing will of the Bakola/Bagyelli to aspire to own a *ndabo*. This modern habitat is more spacious, presentable, and rewarding. With the sedentarisation of the Bakola/Bagyelli, we note the emergence of new social aspirations, which are themselves carriers of social transformations. This situation results in a re-interpretation of the environment and a new apprehension of space as well as a redefinition of oneself.

Long considered as a socio-culture where ‘private property is non-existent’, it now appears that the Bakola/Bagyelli, by becoming sedentary, have seen their detachment disappear to materiality. Indeed, we must retrace the history of colonial expansion to better understand why the Pygmies had often posed a problem for the colonisers in their conquest of domination and subjugation of the forest peoples. The latter had had trouble leaving with the Pygmies who always seemed to have nothing to lose. Today, however, we are seeing significant restructuring and reconfiguration in the Bakola/Bagyelli worldview. Their openness to the market economy and their integration into the rural and agricultural economy bear witness to their need to meet the current demands of modernity. All these actions are indicative of their

adaptability to a new way of life, which allows us to understand the different transformations observed within households.

When the Bakola/Bagyelli women are asked about the destination they give to the income they obtain from the sale of products from their various economic activities, they reply: ‘We buy products such as soap, kerosene, clothes, kitchen utensils, school supplies for our children’ (FGD, Bakola/Bagyelli women from Bikassa-Biba camp, Bidjouka). All these ‘response objects’<sup>14</sup>, which are products of Western culture, are considered by these women to be essential for their well-being—an attitude that reflects that the Bakola/Bagyelli aspire to ‘better-being’ and ‘better living’. More than in the past, Pygmies are concerned about their living conditions, which are deteriorating daily. Consequently, they are implementing survival strategies within the camps to fight poverty and precariousness, which are their daily lots.

Finally, all societies, even those most refractory to changes, whether these changes are rapid or slow, manifest a certain dynamic. Everything does not change as a whole; however, we do not observe the ‘emergence of elements of new forms of social life and innovative cultures’ (De Lauwe 1975:328) in the daily life of these societies. This is the case of Bakola/Bagyelli households, who are fighting for the improvement of their living conditions (Bitouga 2017). Consequently, a set of dynamics is mobilised with a specific objective—that of a transforming society (Bitouga 2011). This objective seems to be achieved when we analyse all the strategies developed within the camps (Fouda 1999, Nke Ndihi 2005, Soengas 2010). We do not observe a marked desire among the Bakola/Bagyelli to find solutions to their problems of poverty and precariousness despite an unfavourable context and ‘dominant structures’ (Solinis 1991) which do not always support their aspirations social.

## 6. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to report on the economic situation of Bakola/Bagyelli households in the districts of Bipindi, Lolodorf, and Lokoundjé. To provide a fairly recent and synthetic picture of household living conditions, a methodology based on a triangulation of methods and techniques was constructed. The results of this study show that the Bakola/Bagyelli households are undergoing changes, particularly in terms of living conditions—whether in terms of housing characteristics or access to different sources of energy and capital. The Bakola/Bagyelli are increasingly concerned about the improvement of their living conditions, which are deteriorating daily. This has forced them to implement survival strategies to fight poverty and precariousness. Although the actions that are undertaken at the local level are insufficient, the Bakola/Bagyelli aspire to a well-being that is contrary to what some scholars seem to regularly support. Note that the vast majority of palaeo-Africans are presented as ‘a

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<sup>14</sup> This concept borrowed from Njoh (2014:30) refers to consumer goods whose purpose is to meet human needs.

people-relic who refuses and rejects modern civilization' (Alawadi and Meyanga 2010:12)—considerations that are based on a certain exoticism and lack of knowledge of the surrounding reality. Indeed, the aspiration for better living conditions cannot be the prerogative of a few specific societies.

The Bakola/Bagyelli communities, as a full community of Cameroon, are part of the poorest segment of the population. Therefore, these forest communities cannot be excluded from the process of social and economic transformation. For Njoh (2014:29), the socioeconomic development of Pygmies appears to be a categorical imperative. In this regard he argues that we 'must get the Pygmies out of their usual living conditions, in the same way as we must get Africa out of underdevelopment'. Indigenous peoples, like any other people, aspire to well-being, a healthy life, and a fulfilling existence. Despite the differences that may remain among cultures and even societies, there is only one development. This position is defended by Nga (1998:43) who maintains that development 'is an objective fact, observable and demonstrable, and as a universal and absolute datum'. In conclusion, we can state that the current living conditions of households are better than three decades ago<sup>15</sup>, a situation that has resulted from a combination of several factors, both exogenous and endogenous.

### Acknowledgements

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<sup>15</sup> We take as reference the surveys by Ngima between 1987 and 1993 among Bakola/Bagyelli households in the districts of Campo, Bipindi, and Lolodorf as part of the *Food anthropology of the Cameroonian populations* project.

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