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M. Christian Green
Muhammed Haron

17 ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTENANCE AND INDIGENOUS HUNTING PRACTICES AMONGST THE WIMBUM PEOPLE, NORTH WEST REGION, CAMEROON

Elias Kifon Bongmba¹
Tanto Richard Talla²

INTRODUCTION

The Wimbun region of Cameroon is located in the northern tip of the North West Region of Cameroon.³ The Wimbun share settlement of the Nkambe Plateau with the Mbembe Misaje, Mfunte, Mbaw and Yamba ethnic groups. The vegetation of this area is mainly Sudan Savannah with few isolated forests with stunted trees all over the region. There are also isolated patches of eucalyptus and cypress trees in the area. The Wimbun are one of the more than 200 ethnic groups in Cameroon.⁴ The Wimbun people exist in villages headed by *nkfu* (chief), a hereditary office that combines political, cultural and religious authority. The villages are organised into three clans, the Warr Clan, the Wiya Clan and the Tang Clan. The chief governs the village in collaboration with sub-chiefs, called *fai* or *tallanwe* (literally, head of an extended family) who rule over quarters. The *fais* govern the endogamous families who make up the membership of the quarters who settle in different parts of the village. They consider these settlements their ancestral land, because the land belongs to their ancestors.

The Wimbun people have a mutually dependent relationship with their environment, which they consider indispensable for their habitation, thriving and survival. Each village has a natural hunting reserve and a hunting shrine where villagers jointly hunt once a year during the dry season. Before the hunt, all the hunters meet at the shrine under the leadership of the chief priest, and the conduct of the hunt is discussed and some rituals are conducted. These rituals serve as a basis of communion with the ancestors, but more importantly with God, and other divinities of the land, which in the case of the Wimbun include *Nyu mkfu* (the God

1 Harry and Hazel Chair in Christian Theology, Professor of Religion, Rice University, Houston, USA.

2 Vice Dean, Professor of Archeology, University of Bamenda, Cameroon.

3 We have drawn additional material from an earlier study of hunting in the Wimbun area. See Tanto TR. 1998. "The Effects of Local Hunting Practices on Biodiversity Among the Wimbun of Southern Cameroon", *West African Journal of Archeology* 28(2):123-132. Most of the discussion in the first section draws from this study. See also Hawkworth EG. "Nsungli Clans, Bamenda Division". Assessment Report. File No.AC 13 National Archives Buea (NAB).

4 Nkwi PN and Warnier JP. 1982. *Elements of a History of the Western Grassfields*. Yaoundé: University of Yaoundé: Department of Sociology, 149-171.

of the farm/agriculture), *Nyuro* (the God of water) to ensure the sustainability of the environment to enable it continuously provide the needs of the community.

This chapter analyses the concept and reality of environmental sustenance in the Wimbun area of the North West Region of Cameroon, by examining challenges to the environment posed by the hunting practices of the indigenous people of the region. We argue that traditional hunting practices have led to the decline of wildlife and posed challenges for environmental management. We then argue that the government of Cameroon, through various legislation and the adoption of international protocols and hunting regulations, has acted to protect the environment, but the measures still fall short, because the state has not engaged local population in forest management. The research for this chapter is based on initial investigation and field work carried out by Tanto Richard Talla and recent studies and analysis of Cameroon legal framework on hunting and environmental protection by Elias Kifon Bongmba.

HUNTING AND HUNTING RESERVES

In an earlier study, Tanto Richard Talla traced the history, settlement of the Wimbun people from circa 1700, on their present site.⁵ They practised subsistence farming and for proteins, they hunted the wild game that was available in the region in abundance.⁶ Hunting in the region was done in the lush grass fields, forests areas, and the plains where hunters and dogs could pursue the animals.⁷ Hunting was often organised by the men of a village or a select group of individuals during the dry season. Some of the professional and expert hunters, used specially made traps to catch the animals. These hunters visited the locations where traps were placed every day to make sure that they brought home animals that were caught in the traps either for food or for sell in the market.

Hunting tools

Hunters in the region used a variety of tools, ranging from spears, arrows (though they are not good at these), nets, sticks, knives and hoes, all made locally by skilled blacksmiths who trained for a long time to produce these tools. A key part of the hunting group was a dog trained to go into the bushes and woods and follow the smell of the animals and then launch a chase. The hunters would then follow the dog looking for ways of killing the animal with the spear, or any other weapon.

5 See Mangoh JTK. 1986. *The Wimbun of the North-West Province of Cameroon: 1700 to 1961*, Honours thesis, History Department, University of Ilorin, 2.

6 Kottak CP. 1991. *Cultural Anthropology*. New York: McGraw Hill.

7 Tikar refers to the people who have settled in the Grasslands of Cameroon, the present North West and Western Regions of Cameroon. In the Wimbun fondoms (jurisdictions ruled by a *fon*), group hunting was referred to as *forh nkfu* while in the Kom Kingdom it was called *ibyem-i-kwifon*. Also see Lawrence DJ. 2000. "The Historical Significance of Ibyem-i-Kwifon in Kom 1800-1990s". Unpublished Long Essay, Department of History, University of Buea, Cameroon.

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Hunting dogs were prized not only for their ability to detect and pursue game, but their ability to detect danger and warn the hunters of the presence of predators, such as leopards lions, and hyenas.⁸ However, killing a leopard was considered an act of bravery. The person who killed a leopard was given the title of *Nformi* by the chief for such act of bravery.⁹

Hunting rites

Informants who spoke to Tanto Richard Talla stated that Wimbun traditions also demonstrate concern for the environment and prohibited hunting practices that were considered. Recklessness included excessive hunting that killed many animals or killed many young animals that were not fully grown. Informants also told Talla that large hunting reserves were governed by the *fon* (chief) of the Village who had the responsibility of regulating the hunting practices of the village. In some of the large reserves, group hunting was permitted once or twice the during the year. These major hunting outings were proceeded by rituals in which the leaders of the village prayed that they would find good game, the hunting would be safe and no one would be hurt either by an animal or by another hunter. The rituals also included the offering of sacrifices to God and the ancestors at the village shrine, which in the Wimbun area is called *ndap-ngong*, in the presence of the village chief. All hunting tools were then blessed during a ritual ceremony at this sacred place. The blessing ceremony involved killing a fowl and using the blood taken from the fowl to bless the tools that would be used during the hunt.

It is during these rituals that the chief priest introduced the designated leader of the hunt, who was a man known known for his bravery as well as hunting skills. This individual commanded the respect of the people in the village, and it was also believed that this individual had spiritual powers. The leader ensured that participants in the hunt followed all the rules established for a particular hunt, but more importantly that all members of the hunting party observe all rules. For example, hunters were prohibited from killing animals that were nursing or taking care of babies. People were encouraged not to hunt for big cats alone, but to inform the leaders, and a special strategy was developed to ensure that the big cat did not charge or maul someone to death. All dogs used in hunting were to be treated with respect and always allowed to lead the hunt, because the dogs detected the animals and launched the pursuit.¹⁰

Individual hunters who owned guns often hunted by themselves or with a small group of people. These hunters often used special tools in addition to guns, such as bows and arrows. In the Wimbun area, these individuals were highly respected,

8 Talla TR. 1998. "The Effects of Local Hunting Practices on Biodiversity Among the Wimbun of Southern Cameroons", *West African Journal of Archeology* 28(2):123-132.

9 The Nformi is the chief officer of the Nfuh Society, which according to the traditions of the Grassfields of Cameroon, was responsible for waging war in time of conflicts.

10 Interview with Abraham Gwei by TR Talla, Tala village, Cameroon, 12 November 2018. Gwei, now deceased, was the chief priest of the *ndap-ngong* shrine in Tala village..

because they were skilled hunters, who sometimes killed cats or larger animals by themselves. It was also the case that these skilled hunters would go in small teams and coordinated their search for the animals or waited at strategic points, as the dogs went into the bushes and drove the animals to a position where the hunters would kill the animal. Hunters often carried protective gear and some wore clothing that would enable them disguise themselves and not be seen easily by the animals.¹¹

Hunters also used traps, which could be made of iron, or nets to catch the animals. Sometimes traps were placed in the evenings and the hunters would go early in the morning to see if they have caught any animals. If it was suspected that there was a leopard in the trap, two hunters would go inspect the trap to be sure that the leopard did not charge if only one person was out inspecting the traps that were placed the previous night. Trapping was an important hunting practice and technique because particular animals would be targeted and killed.¹² Individual hunters often took care of the animals they killed during their own hunt. However, communal hunting activities always ended with the hunters taking the chest of the animal, called *ngung* in Limbum, to give as a tribute to the chief of the village. The skin of a leopard and lion, the horn of a buffalo and the chest of a porcupine were royal property and were given to the chief.¹³

THE COLONIAL FOREST PROJECT AND POSTCOLONIAL HUNTING LAWS

During the research for the earlier study, Tanto Richard Talla reported that hunting practices went through significant changes during the colonial period; a development which shocked locals who had hunted in the Wimbun area from the time they settled at their present location. First, colonial masters imposed rules restricting what they considered excessive hunting. These regulations were aimed at protecting the forest reserves. In the case of Cameroon, Germany, the colonial master, took control of most of the lands for large agro-industrial plantations and for the growing of cash crops, such as tea and coffee. While these developments did not reach the Wimbun area early in the colonial process, it affected most the regions of the South West Region of Cameroon, and large sections of agricultural land were reserved for commercial activities, which in some cases diverted the land from the cultivation of food and further restricted locals from hunting for wild life.¹⁴

11 Interview with AN Ngange by TR Talla, Sehn village, Cameroon, 20 July 2018. Ngange is the present chief of the Wimbun village of Sehn.

12 Talla, "The Effects of Local Hunting Practices on Biodiversity".

13 Interview with Charles Kamanda by TR Talla, Tala village, Cameroon, 2 June 2018. He is the Fon of Tala village. He sits on the skin of a leopard which was caught during one of the group hunts in his village long before he was born.

14 This is what most of the coastal communities like the Duala and Bakweri experienced under the Germans and later under the British. For more details, see Ngoh VJ. 2002. *History of Cameroon since 1800*. Limbe: Pressprint.

In response to the frustrations their action caused amongst the local people, successive colonial governments created hunting reserves for the locals and also taught them how to plant the region with trees such as eucalyptus, neem, and cypress.¹⁵ This prevented the local people from exploitation of natural resources in what were once community forests. Most of them intentionally resorted to illegal activities that were also destructive to the wildlife and the ecosystem of the colonial protected forest reserves. The government in postcolonial era began an extensive education programme to educate the people about the agro-industrial projects.

Villagers began to see their freedoms to hunt curtailed. Land tenure systems which were governed by the village through their family networks began changing. Land that was not occupied was designated state land and, more importantly, natural resources and minerals belonged to the state. A land tenure system was introduced, and the members of the different villages saw their rights to hunt for game curtailed. Large parcels of land which the government took over were now managed by the state. Following the attainment of independence by Cameroon in 1960/61, the postcolonial government, with relatively fewer means, continued with most of these colonial policies on the management of lands. Lands, mainly unoccupied, remained under direct state control, and the state placed them under the supervision of different ministries or state institutions. They included the Rural Development Secretariat, the Department of Tourism, the Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries and Animal Husbandry, and presently, the Ministry of Environment and Forestry. The forests were now managed by local Cameroon forest guards who were trained to protect the forests and the environment. However, there was a rather gradual shift away from the dictatorial mindset, towards a lukewarm desire to incorporate local communities in the sustainable management of the environmental resources of their areas.

THE FORESTRY, WILDLIFE AND FISHERIES LAWS OF CAMEROON

The government of Cameroon took a significant step in 1974 by promulgating Law No 74-1 of 6 July 1974, which established regulations governing land tenure, and seemed to have summarised issues concerning the ownership of land and its resources. However, it was a continuation of colonial policies and was intrinsically contradictory in nature and practice.¹⁶ On the one hand, the law guaranteed the right of local communities to own and manage land, but at the same time, it maintained that all land in the country was state land. Another challenge was the fact that the law required that land ownership by individuals and communities could only be legalised if they obtained a land certificate through a cumbersome process from

15 This was the case in the Wimbun quarters of Mbiyeh-Tala and Binju-Nkambe where forest reserves of Eucalyptus trees were created.

16 See Kofele-Kale N. 2007. "Asserting Permanent sovereignty over Ancestral lands: The Bakweri Land Litigations against Cameroon", *Annual Survey of International Comparative Law* 13(1):103-156.

the administrative authorities. The law, therefore, gave the government the legal right to take over community land anytime and anywhere for any reason, thereby depriving the indigenous hunters of their precious forests and wildlife. In both the colonial and postcolonial era, laws governing eminent domain were not established, except provisions of the Land Law of 1974, which stated that all unused and or occupied land belonged to the state.

Things changed significantly later and affected hunting practices with developments in land control and conservation that involved state response to the challenges posed by economic challenges in Cameroon. During the negotiations that would establish the Structural Adjustment Programme in Africa by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the management of forests and wildlife resources were taken over by the state in 1994. This made it difficult because the World Bank demanded that as part of the Structural Adjustment Programme, the government was to cede management of some of the land resources to private individuals. In response to this aspect of the conditions of the SAP, the government enacted Law No 94-01 of 20 January 1994, which laid down a legal code to govern forests, wildlife and fisheries in Cameroon. A presidential decree which ordered the application of Law No 95-466-PM of 20 July 1995, stipulated the modalities for the implementation of this Law. The law stressed the idea of participatory management of wildlife and fair access to the benefits accruing from the exploitation of wildlife according to regulations governing land tenure and state lands.¹⁷ In line with this, some parts of Cameroon's forests were designated for community hunting with locally created councils to manage such hunting zones, as determined by the law. The law also created buffer zones in some forests, where no hunting was allowed. The local hunters did not understand the full dimension of these buffers.

Indigenous response to the 1994 forest, wildlife and fisheries law

Although a cross-section of Cameroonians thought that the law attempted to promote and regulate participatory management of the forest and its wildlife, some of the guidelines outlined in the articles of the law were problematic and remained a bone of serious contention between the local hunters, who were not part of the government-created forest management team known as forest guards. The local populace saw themselves in the law, but as consumers with limited options, because the measures the government had put in place to protect wildlife products ignored their indigenous knowledge on forest management.¹⁸

One of the issues that angered the local people and hunters was the fact that none of the government trained forest guards were indigenous the area. The forest guard were regarded as professionals, but since many of them hailed from different parts

17 Egbe SE. 2001. "The Law, Communities and Wildlife Management in Cameroon", Rural Development Forestry, Network Paper 25e.

18 Nguiffo S and Talla M. 2010. "Cameroon's Wildlife Legislation: Local Customs Versus Legal Conception", *Unasylva* 61(236):2010.

of the country, they did not always know the landscape they were assigned to protect. Some of them did not have the cultural or religious meanings that were attached to these lands by the locals. Samson Samba, a local Wimbun hunter who performed hunting rituals maintains that if some of the local people had been recruited as guards because of their indigenous talents in forest management, this could have psychologically instilled a sense of belonging in them. The situation became even more troubling when the forest guards, under the guise of upholding the law, prevented unemployed indigenous people not only from hunting wildlife but also from making use of other forests products, such as herbs, wood and ritual sites for their subsistence, as they had done before.¹⁹

The professionalisation of forest management was intended to preserve the forest reserves in many parts of Cameroon. However, this move by the state created far more problems, because locals could no longer hunt as they did in the past. The locals also lost income because they were no longer allowed to exploit some of the forests which were now designated national treasures and off limits to hunting by the locals. Yet this did not stop the demand for wildlife products, such as bush meat, by the urban population,²⁰ who could not carry out hunting activities to sustain their lives as they did in the past.

State action effectively curtailed a participatory approach to local forest and wildlife management. The Presidential Decree of 1995 did not make provisions for ameliorating the challenges that locals would face when the state took control of all lands that were vacant and restricted hunting, which was not only a cultural practice but a source of income. The government did not work with locals to do the management of the community forest, because the 1995 Presidential Decree on the application was not inclusive enough in providing a legislative framework to support local involvement in wildlife management.²¹ This, therefore, resulted in intensive, illicit and indiscriminate hunting by the locals to meet their needs. The results of these acts were a substantial adverse ecological effect not only on local wildlife, but also on the overall structure and composition of local ecosystems of the region.²²

Provisions of the 1994 law on forests, wildlife and fisheries

Although some clauses of the 1994 Law seem to be in line with some of the indigenous regulations on hunting, they were deliberately vague as was the case

19 Interview with Samson Samba by Tanto Richard Talla, 2 August 2018. Samba is a former ritual leader and priest of the Wimbun village of Taku.

20 Bowen-Jones E and Pendry S. 1999. "The Threat to Primates and other Mammals from the Bushmeat Trade in Africa, and How this Threat could be Diminished", *Oryx* 33(3):233-246 [https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-3008.1999.00066.x].

21 Egbe, "The Law, Communities and Wildlife Management in Cameroon".

22 Effiom EO, Nuñez-Iturri G, Smith HG, Ottosson U and Olsson O. 2013. "Bushmeat Hunting Changes Regeneration of African Rainforests", *Proceedings of the Royal Society B, Biological Sciences* 280(1759):1-8 [https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2013.0246].

with the 1974 Land Law, giving the government the upper hand to scheme its interpretation at any time to the disadvantage of the poor, uneducated local hunters. Section 21, Part III of the 1994 Law, classified forests, according to their natural contents, into permanent and nonpermanent forests. This was challenging, because the line between the two is very thin, and it allows the government to maneuver its control even into the nonpermanent forests supposed to be controlled by the local community at any time in the future, depending on the natural resources that might be discovered there. This prompted local hunters to recklessly harvest any natural resource they thought might attract the attention of the government, even when it violated local preservation norms.

Section 80 of the 1994 Law says that “except where authorized by the service in charge of wildlife”, which excludes the indigenous people, “hunting with drugs, poisoned bait, tranquiliser guns or explosives; at night, especially with search lamps, headlamps or in general with any lighting equipment whether designed for synergetic purposes or not shall be forbidden.” It also prohibits hunting with unconventional devices such as fire, dane guns, poisoned instruments like spears, and modern nets. Except for the prohibition of the use of fire, this is very much in line with the Wimbun traditional laws governing hunting, especially on the village or community reserves. But the clause “except where authorized by the service in charge of wildlife” makes it ambiguous. The implication was that the officer-in-charge could, based on his judgement and interpretation of the law, authorise the use of such weapons, even if it was illegal on protected community reserves in his area of control. The confusion generated by this did not help the environmental preservation efforts of the government and the local people.

Equally, Section 106 of the 1994 law also reinforces Section 80 by adding that ammunition which is part of the standard weapons of the armed forces and police officers, such as firearms capable of firing more than one cartridge with one press on the trigger, projectiles containing explosives, trench clubs and chemical products were not to be used in hunting. The wealthy hunters who owned weapons were not generally indigenous hunters. Many of these wealthy hunters tend to care less about the preservation of the local environment, even when the law requires them to do so in the course of hunting. The local hunters were therefore left to watch in despair, as their once cherished forest, home to their shrines, herbs, gods, have been taken over by the state and strangers who have ignored local preservation practices. The impact of this on the efforts to sustainably preserve Cameroon’s natural resources and ecosystems within a framework of an integrated management scheme envisaged by Section 1 of the general provisions of the 1994 Law has been damaging over the years.

Section 81 of the 1994 Law stipulated that any hunting method, whether traditional or not, which endangered the conservation of certain wildlife species, such as elephants, lions and tigers, might be forbidden or regulated by the service in charge of wildlife. This was supported by Section 98, which stated that the keeping of and trafficking in live protected animals, their hides and skins or trophies, within

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the national territory, required possession of a certificate of origin issued by the administration in charge of wildlife. Those who violated this provision were to be fined according or brought to court.

All of this went against the norms and beliefs of the indigenous Wimbun society, where in the past and well before the extinction of many of the large animals, the killing of lions, leopards and buffalos earned the hunter a title for being brave from the *fon*, an occasion that was celebrated in the society. Some of the Wimbun *fons* were named after these animals, which they considered to be totems and whose horns they used as drinking cups and skins as seat covers of the royal stools.²³ These animal parts represent symbols of authority. The law generally failed to protect the many traditional and local environmental practices and did not satisfactorily recognise the contribution of local customs to sustainable wildlife resource management,²⁴ for example, in Mount Binka, the hunters used to hunt leopard (*mba*) for its skin and buffalo (*nyar*) for its horns. As a consequence, local hunters were eager to track and kill such animals, not only for the prestige it bestowed on their society and themselves, but even more because they were angered by the realisation that the government was not actually out to conserve the environment, but to protect such animals for rich foreign hunters who paid so much money to do so as a hobby.

Section 86 of the 1994 Law authorises traditional hunting of wildlife throughout the national territory, except in state-protected forests or the property of third parties. This means that the law allowed hunting in all other forests. However, this seems to be inhibited by Section 81, which designates certain wildlife species to be conserved wherever they are found. This means that if some of the animals mentioned in Section 81 are found in unprotected or open forests, then they are protected. Although Section 87 stated the conditions under which one could hunt animals and wildlife on protected reserves, local hunters saw this as a limitation on their God-given rights to enjoy the natural resources of their ecosystem. The tension here lies in the fact that some of the areas that have now been designated protected forests were formally community forests that belonged to local villages. The local hunters, who lost control of the forest and its wildlife, were therefore angered and left with no option than to illegally hunt, including protected species, whether in the protected or unprotected areas of the forests. They did so with no remorse, because they believed such resources naturally belonged to them, and the government had no right to regulate its usage. This was the case in the protected Mbibi forest of Tala village, where local hunters continuously and illegally invaded the forest with no concern for its protection search of mainly protected wildlife animals and wild plant species.²⁵

23 Interview with Charles Kamanda by TR Talla, Tala village, Cameroon, 2 June 2018. Kamanda is Fon of Tala village who sits on the skin of a leopard which is considered a totem of the royal house.

24 Nguiffo and Talla, "Cameroon's Wildlife Legislation".

25 Interview with Charles Kamanda.

All categories of professional hunters, whether local or foreign, according to Section 93 of the 1994 Law, were required to have a hunting licence or permit obtained from government officials after the payment of a fee.²⁶ The taxation of hunting activities has become one of the sources of income for the state. Some of the local hunters, however, feel that this should apply only to non-indigenous hunters, who care less about sustainable preservation of the forest than the hunt for anything that promotes their subsistence. These taxes are really beyond the means of the poor local hunters, and their inability to pay and the lack of comprehension of the complicated procedure for payment excludes them from the legal hunting of large mammals, which they use to do before.

Local effects of the 1994 law on forests, wildlife and fisheries

These aspects of the 1994 law have had a very disastrous effect on the morale of local communities, who are legally banned from hunting certain species in the forests they claim is theirs, as they helplessly watch government services assisting wealthy foreign hunters to hunt the species prohibited to them. The consequence has been illegal hunting with no sense of sustainability or preservation of the forest and its wildlife. Section 105 of the law further requires that 30% of the fees collected should be put into a special fund for the development and conservation of wildlife, but this has hardly been the case, mostly because the forest guards, who lack resources and receive poor pay, have no regard for the law. The outcome has been reckless destruction of the environment and its available wildlife with no course to regeneration, as was the case under the local law of Wimbumland. Interestingly, this destruction has occurred under the watchful eyes of the state appointed forest guards, many of whom are not locals and do not care about the preservation of the environment in the Wimbum area.

It should be understood that the law stipulates that, hunting permits and licences shall be non-transferable, but this has been difficult for the state to ensure. This is because the few trained forest guards responsible for such insurance are not well paid and not adequately provided with the necessary resources they need. Consequently, at times, when encouraged by especially some rich hunters, they ignore the implementation of this aspect of the law. The consequence is that some of those who possess the permit are not good hunters. They end up hunting indiscriminately, thereby destroying the wildlife and the ecosystem

Section 90 of the 1994 Law reinforces the fact that hunting permits and licences should be issued only to persons who have complied with the regulations concerning the possession of firearms. Since there is no clear and effective verifiable system in place to know those who have complied with the regulations, the government continues to issue licences to unqualified hunters, even those who even possess weapons banned by Sections 80 and 106 of the Law. This has led to the wanton destruction

26 The different categories of hunters and users of the forests and their products include those who do safari, sports or trophy hunting and those who use the forest for scientific research of the biodiversity.

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of the wildlife and the forest ecosystem by hunters who are not qualified by law to be given licences to hunt. The disappearance of some wildlife, such as monkeys, which were protected by the indigenous code, on Mount Ndukong of Tala has been ascribed to the use by some licensed foreign hunters of firearms capable of firing more than one cartridge with one press and the noise that this produces. However, we must also insist that by levying a financial penalty on those caught with live animals, the law, to an extent, supports the indigenous practice that local hunters should not take captive baby animals and their mothers to allow for regeneration. This has not often been respected due to lack of human and material resources to enforce it. A glaring example is the Mount Binka forest, where most of the protected wildlife, particularly monkeys, has been exterminated by local poachers because of the lack of forest guards to manage the forest effectively.

We must state that a critical examination of the laws that govern hunting practices does not imply that we reject all attempts at regulating hunting and controlling the rampant exploitation of the forest reserves in Cameroon. As researchers from the region, we recognise that deforestation is a major environmental catastrophe. There is evidence even in the Wimbun area that lack of responsible management and control of forestry researches has resulted in the depletion of forests. One clear example of where these practices depleted the forest and wildlife is in the village of Ntumbaw in the Wimbun area. The evidence that there was a large forest reserve in the town remains in the names of the different quarters (settlements) of the town.²⁷ Several forests surrounded the palace of Ntumbaw itself and the names of the quarters were linked to a forest. The area of the village that lies northeast as one approaches the village is still called *Tukopmba*, which means “at the entrance head of the forest that has leopards”, indicating that there was a forest there that had leopards. Elias Bongmba’s quarter, where his family resides in the village, is called *Mbukop*, which means “below the forest”. There are two quarters to the west of the palace. One is called *Shukop*, which literally means “the mouth”, or the entrance of the forest. The other quarter is called *Njitarkop*, which means “within or in the middle of the forest”. These names indicate that there were several forests within a small area. Also, as one descends towards the quarter of Mbaka that lies on the river Miren, which is the boundary between Njirong and Ntumbaw villages, there was a large parcel of land that was called *ngongmba*, which means “the land of leopards”. This area was the official hunting ground of the chief. Villagers went down there every year for the chief’s annual hunt. We must stress that the hunting that was practised at this protected parcel of land was carried out once a year, even though the slash-and-burn practice had largely depleted the wildlife and forests.

Therefore, in the case of the Nkambe Plateau, we see a reason for regulations, but the state has not taken any action to regenerate the forest in the area. The loss of the forests in the region has severe religious consequences for indigenous religions.

27 See Bongmba EK. 2014. “Where Did the Forest Go?” Unpublished paper presented at the Biennial Conference of the African Association for the Study of Religion at the University of Cape Town, 30 July to 3 August 2014.

In the Wimbun area, forests were also considered sacred groves and had shrines where indigenous religious rituals were practised. For example, one of the holiest shrines in Ntumbaw was located in the forest, on the way to the palace. However, we must emphasise that the laws, for the most part, have served as a restriction mechanism for people in the Wimbun area and other regions of Cameroon.

RETHINKING FOREST AND LAWS GOVERNING WILDLIFE

The traditional methods of both group and individual hunting and the conservation of wildlife described thus far generally aimed at sustaining the subsistence needs of the local people without doing any serious damage to the environment which housed the wildlife upon which they depended.²⁸ This is rightly so, because group hunting is one of those rare occasions that brings together all members of Wimbun villages and their leaders once a year during the dry season. Over the years, all measures, against all the odds, have been taken by most village heads and their subjects to maintain this practice to ensure the continued existence of hunting reserves. Traditional regulations governing the life, exploitation and management of such reserves, as earlier indicated, are well communicated to the people during such events.

The prohibition of indiscriminate hunting in reserve has over the years made it possible for the growth and existence of a variety of wildlife and the rest of the biodiversity on which the Wimbun depend for food and habitat. The biodiversity of the community forest is left to recover during the long rainy season, when no hunting takes place on the reserve. Selective hunting also allows for the conservation and sustenance of animals in the reserve. Nursing animals and babies are not to be killed if detected. It is an abomination to kill them consciously; hence, reproduction over the years is ensured, thereby avoiding extinction of the various species.

It is the case, however, that not all aspects of group hunting have been favourable to the maintenance of biodiversity in the Wimbunland. Bush burning during the hunt rendered some parts of the reserves permanently bare of any vegetation, thus exposing the soils in reserve to erosion and leaching. The particularly bitter huckleberry called *mfoh*, which grew in the wild and was used as a purgative for stomach problems, is today extinct. Another plant locally referred to as *hahwurr*, which was used as an antibiotic to stop blood bleeding from a wound, is also gradually disappearing. It is widely believed the use of fire on the reserve killed all these plants, including their seeds. Burning also destroys a lot of insects, weak or sick animals, and their natural habitat, forcing some of them to migrate from the reserve for good.

According to Ngah Tamfu, a resident of Tabenken village,²⁹ because some of the tall trees have withered over the years, monkeys, tiger, leopards and antelopes which existed in the forest of Mount Binka in Wimbunland are today extinct. With

28 Nguiffo and Talla, "Cameroon's Wildlife Legislation".

29 Interview with Ngah Tamfu by TR Talla, Tabenken village, Cameroon, 2 June 2018. Tamfu

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the destruction of the vegetation by bush fires, floods and droughts have become constant menaces to the area. Presently, the region also experiences a decrease in rainfall, though this is minimal. This has also contributed to the warming of the area, occasioned logically by the rise in atmospheric carbon. Generally, many local Wimbun people argue that their land is today hotter than it used to be. All these have negatively affected the level of agricultural productivity in the area, as the soils gradually lose their fertility and climatic patterns changed, forcing them to invade some of these reserves, as is the case with Mount Ndukong.

It should be noted that the community and traditional hunters often respect the above traditional legal system or regulations governing the existence, exploitation and management of the community forests, because they mostly fear the penalties to be inflicted by the spirits and the gods of the land on those who failed to respect them. On the other hand, they considered the legal penalties instituted by the government on defaulters of environmental protection laws as something which could be easily handled. Hence, the current government regulations of forestry and wildlife, which ignore the contributions of the local populace have necessitated not only the gradual eradication of wildlife, but also the weakening of long-established and effective sustainable traditional methods of wildlife management particularly in Wimbunland and all of rural Cameroon as a whole.³⁰

The law itself was not well comprehended by the local people, who were attached to their forest and its wildlife for survival. They were not part of the drafting team, nor were they even consulted in making the laws. It should be noted that those who drafted the 1994 Law and the 1995 Decree of Application were motivated by the demands of an external force, namely, the World Bank in line with the Structural Adjustment Programme, which the country was undertaking in the 1990s. Although the World Bank, on the face of it, might have wanted a participatory scheme in the management of Cameroon's natural resources, its habitual exploitative and capitalist tendencies in dealings with the developing world, practically made it impossible for this to be achieved. This is because the motives of the bank were not to satisfy the concerns of the local people, whose livelihood depended on the wildlife in the forests of Cameroon, but to make sure Cameroon embarked on projects that could enable her to pay the loans. It became difficult for the government to satisfy the rights of the local people and hunters and at the same time meet up with the Structural Adjustment Programme of the World Bank, which amongst other requirements encouraged logging of its forests by foreign companies to satisfy foreign demands.

This explains why the law prohibited and sometimes tolerated some of the activities that have also been harmful to the environment. The law also gave the general impression that the local community had the free hand to manage its forests and wildlife resources in line with its customs and traditions. But this has

is from Tabenken village. His grandfather was given a red feather for killing a buffalo on Mount Binka.

30 Nguiffo and Talla, "Cameroon's Wildlife Legislation".

not been the case in practice. Management and exploitation of both protected and unprotected forests must be done according to Section 7 of the general provision of the 1994 Law, subject mainly to regulations governing land tenure in Cameroon in the contradictory 1974 Land Laws and the 1995 Decree of Application, whose interpretation depended on the varied interests of those concerned.

This, therefore, means the management of both protected and unprotected forests and its wildlife is effectively done by government officials, who do not have any obligation to incorporate the uneducated local hunters, who in their dependence on the environment have over the years garnered excellent management skills and knowledge of their ecosystem. The management tree now positions the local hunters as passive participants, who helplessly watch their forests and its wildlife controlled by people who are not even of the area. They manage the forests not for the interest of the local people, but for the interest of the state and sometimes, locals think, to the advantage of the corporate exploiters of forest resources like timber. The absence of locals, who should rightly be considered stakeholders in the land management, has forced them into illegal hunting with no concerns about environmental protection, thus destroying what they had protected before.

Generally, from the look of things, the 1994 Law seeks to preserve Cameroon's forests and wildlife to satisfy foreign and not local needs. It bans many hunting practices which the local hunters depended on to sustain their families, without providing any practical alternatives for how they might survive under such circumstances. This has, therefore, bolstered the bullish nature of local hunters in Wimbumland and elsewhere in the country to continuously and grossly violate the 1994 Law, with negative consequences for the ecosystem in order to sustain their families and despite the penalties.

The practical implementation of this law has not been possible, because the government is deficient in a trained workforce to enforce it. Also, the few available forest guards are not very well equipped with the material resources, such as guns, vehicles and night vision equipment, to enable them to patrol in the night and prevent illegal hunting. The low wages they get from the state has made them tepid in the exercise of their duty and vulnerable to corruption, as they intentionally turn a blind eye to violations of the law by those who can buy their way through. The negative consequences of this in the push by the government to better manage and conserve its forests and wildlife has been so devastating.

In addition to the loopholes in the implementation of the law, factors, such as population growth, have required the construction of more settlements and the opening up of more farms to sustain the growing families. Enforcement of the laws has forced the local population, who so much cherished the protection of their environment, to encroach upon local forest reserves and even sacred sites to find food to meet their needs. In the course of doing this, the ecosystem has suffered tremendous damage. Such damage has been reported, for example, at Mount Ndukong, near the Palace of Tala village, and at Binka village near Mount Binka, which before were homes to monkeys and antelopes, whose population has

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been reduced by farms and logging for construction. Such encroachments on land reserved by the community for group hunting has destroyed the natural ecosystems and also been the death of group hunting in most Wimbun villages and Bamenda grassland as a whole.

It is essential in countries, such as Cameroon, that the legislation that governs access to and use of forestry products, as well as hunting, not only be regulated, but involve a cross-section of the political community, the state and private partnerships. We are not calling for privatisation of forest management, which could also lead to excessive exploitation and expedite the depletion of forests and their resources. We are calling for strategic partnerships between the state and non-governmental organisations, because we think that such collaboration would strengthen present efforts to revitalise and sustain the ecosystem. This was a recommendation of the Africa Forestry and Wildlife Commission, which met in Dakar, Senegal, in 2018. Working in private partnerships could enable states like Cameroon to have more access to new technologies, investment, and management styles to undercut government bureaucracy.³¹

The Commission also urged member countries to enhance their implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGT). The Commission noted that since the local communities are affected the most by the legal changes which reduce access to food, religious sites and in some cases ancestral shrines, states must take local needs into consideration and craft legislation that assures reasonably regulated access to forest and wildlife resources.³²

CONCLUSION

Local hunting practices, which were carried out in a sustainable manner, have disappeared in the Wimbun area of the North West Region of Cameroon. Cameroon government regulations and conservations of forests through legislation and presidential decrees have excluded local participation and not succeeded in stemming some of the environmental degradation that is taking place in the region. This calls for a critical dialogue and collaboration between the government and residents of the Wimbun area to develop a plan to regenerate and sustain a rich biodiversity that can provide sustenance to the people of the region while averting an environmental catastrophe.

31 United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). 2018. Africa Forestry and Wildlife Commission, Twenty First Session, Dakar, Senegal, 19-23 June, 7 [hereinafter Africa Forestry and Wildlife Commission]. Online at: <http://www.fao.org/forestry/afwc/31908/en/>. See also Committee on World Food Security, High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition. 2017. "Extract from the Report Sustainable Forestry for food Security and Nutrition". Online at: <http://www.fao.org/cfs/cfs-hlpe/reports/report-11-elaboration-process/en/>

32 Africa Forestry and Wildlife Commission, 5.