

CONTEMPORARY TRANSFORMATIONS  
OF BAMVELE AND BADJIA  
AGRICULTURE IN CENTRAL  
SOUTH CAMEROON

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## II. SEVERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SOCIETY OBSERVED :

### A. The system of production in agriculture :

#### 1. The ecosystem of the region

There is a transition from the primary evergreen forest, south of the area, to large savana along the Sanaga river in the north. A third landscape is the swampy areas along Sanaga river's tributaries running south to north. These swampy flat places are particularly appropriate for rice cultivation.

With an annual rainfall of 1,500 mm, and inspite of important interannual variations, the year can be divided into four seasons :

August-December : main rainy season.

January-March : main dry season.

April-June : small rainy season.

July : short dry season.

Because fog is frequent in the morning during the dry season, the moisture is high all the year ( never less than 70 %). The temperature registers only a few variations around an annual average of 24° C.

Typical reddish lateritic soils are common in the area, the texture is clayey and frequently gravels are found along the profile.

#### 2; .Population, origin and history

The main ethnic groups in the area are the Bamvele and the Badjia, two small groups belonging to the Beti, the main ethnic group in Central-South Cameroon.

These groups crossed the Sanaga river between 1850 - 1900 fleeing from the north which was invaded by the Muslim Fulbe. Until the end of the nineteenth century (arrival of the German coloniser), many tribal wars took place in the region before a final delimitation of the villages' territories.



After the 1st World War, during the French colonisation, two important events occurred which determined the actual human settlement organization :

a) The building of the road between the northern and the southern part of the country : the coloniser obliged the villagers to move and live along this road in order to build and maintain it (1930 and after).

b) At the same time (since 1915) there occurred the introduction of cocoa production. Since cocoa is a perennial crop, the people settled near their plantation which put an end to their previous migration.

Following from these two facts, the present human settlement is characterized by villages located along the main national number One road and very vast and spacious areas without any population.

### 3. The traditional farming system

Having arrived from the savanas of northern Cameroon, these ethnic groups introduced their traditional farming system in the part of their new territory characterized by the same type of landscape. Some principal elements of this shifting cultivation system are :

- Fire (the people put fire to the savana in March-April in conjunction with hunting activities, and again in July after clearing the land) and simple tools (hoe, planting pin) are the principal means of production.

- No ploughing is conducted.

- The maintenance of the soil's capacity of production is assured by alternating a crop rotation of several years with a long fallow.

### B. The agricultural structure

1. The basic economical and political unit in the "Ndzall" society :



In the landscape, a village appears to be a serie of several groups of houses located on one side of the road only.

The people who live in these units belong to the same clan (related for many generations, same genealogy). Splits and scissions from this clan had originated smaller groups called "nda bot" (literally : "the men's house").

Inside a "nda bot", the oldest active man has the authority ; he is the arbitrator of the conflicts which occur inside the "nda bot", takes decisions concerning the conclusion of weddings with other clans and manages the territory which is attached to the group (usually a savana and its name).

The people who belong to a "nda bot" live in one or several groups of houses along the road. A "nda bot", a group of persons, and its settlement constitute the "Ndzall" and a "Ndzall" with its territory is the basic economical and political unit in the traditional society.

Economically, it is a self-sufficient unit (agriculture, rural crafts, ...) but the "Ndzall" is dependent on others units for its reproduction (wedding-rings).

Now, it is difficult to identify these units because since several decades ago, the system has lost its coherence, particularly when the coloniser has settled the population along the main road. So even now, many people are living far from the traditional territory attached to their "Ndzall", but their fields are still on this piece of land and they must walk hours every day to reach them. Since several years, there is a new movement from the main road to the traditional territory where some people are building a new house or, more frequently a shelter ; but this is still marginal.

In spite of these difficulties, a knowledge of this situation is fundamental to the understanding of the society in which conflicting situations between units are very common.



## 2. Authority and decision - making regarding agriculture in the "Ndzall".

Traditionally, the authority belongs to the oldest active man of the unit who can decide about the sexual distribution of the work in agriculture (briefly, men are hunters and defend the group while women manage the crop rotation of plants for home consumption in savana) and the management of the territory for agricultural production (so any individual strategy is impossible in the unit). To maintain his authority in case of conflicts, he uses economic means such as the attribution of pieces of land for agricultural production or traditional forms of co-operation, but also ideological ones.

In short, the organization of this traditional society is like the "domestic community" which has been described by different authors.

We recall briefly here its essential characteristics :

- An agriculture, which is able to provide the group with the means of subsistence, it needs for its maintenance and reproduction, is the main social activity.
- There is a "patrimonial" relation to land which is considered as a collective mean of labour.
- Human energy is the only mechanical energy available in the system.
- Agricultural production tools are individual, in a few number and of a little value.
- The community self subsistence is based on a "cultural distribution of the tasks" inside the basic economical cells of the society.

As we have identified the traditional functioning of each social unit, it is possible to study the transformation of Bamvele-Badjia' system production during the colonial period and since the independance.



## II. RECENT EVOLUTION OF THE FARMING SYSTEM :

### A. The self-sufficient economy of the traditional domestic community

#### 1. Hunting and fishing activities :

Individual or collective, hunting is an important activity for men. Traps, bows, and spears are common. The main hunting period is the end of the dry season where, during bush-fires, important collective hunts are organized. From insects to buffaloes, a wide range of animals provides the villagers with meat and protein throughout the year. However since the introduction of guns, signs of overexploitation are evident.

Fishing is a collective activity mainly conducted by the women during the dry season coinciding with the lack of work in the fields at that time. With simple methods, in small rivers and during a short period of the year, fish catches provide only a marginal part of the protein consumed by the people.

For several decades, with the introduction of nets, men have been involved in fishing the Sanaga river. But a large, and of course the best part of the catches are directed to the market in urban areas.

#### 2. Domestic animals :

In spite of a great number of animals in each village (chicken, pigs, goats, sheep) we cannot describe a local economy of animal husbandry as the sociological function of these animals is the main aspect to take into account. Their number is an outward sign of richness for the owner who uses them as gifts for visitors or during ritual ceremonies.

#### 3. Natural food gathering :

Beside a wide range of wild fruits and vegetables, oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) and raphia palm (*Raphia vinifera*) are the principal species exploited and the twice daily harvest of the sap from these



two palms is the main job for a large number of villagers who sell it both as a fresh "palm wine" or after processing it, mixed with cassava and maize, into a local alcohol called "arki".

4. Traditional agriculture in Savana : a crop rotation of plants for home consumption.

Briefly, the crop rotation applied is as follow :

First year : first season : -bush fire at the end of the dry season coinciding with collective hunts (March-April).

second season: -allocation of the land by the head of each unit.

-clearing by the women and, sometimes, men.

-second fire to burn *Imperata cylindrica* pulled up and gathered together into several heaps (July).

-preparation and broadcasting of peanuts with hoes by the women and, sometimes, men and children (August-September).

-weeding by hoe in November collectively by women.

-harvest in December-January : only the pots are transported home. The other parts of the plant remain and cover the soil during the following dry season.

Second year : first season: March-April.

- pocket drilling of different kinds of local cucumber for seed production or rural crafts.

- 2 or 3 weeks later : pocket drilling of maize between cucumber plants.

- May-June : weeding of this plant combination and propagation by cutting of cassava in unused places.



-July : the maize is harvested : cobs are put into a storehouse built previously in the field.

-October : the harvest of cucumbers is followed by an extended process of transformation : rottennessing, shelling and skinning to get the seeds which are decorticated. The almonds obtained are pounded into a paste which is mixed with meat and cooked in banana leaves.

second season :

-In October, broadcast sowing of sesame and brief preparation of land by hoe. No maintenance is conducted until the harvest in January or February. At that time, the roots are cut and sheaves of stems dried on bamboo in the field. Two weeks later the threshing occurs and only the seeds are carried to the village.

-During this season, the women plant cassava's cutting continuously.

Third year and after :

-Different kinds of cassava, the basic food of people who consume both leaves and roots, remain alone in the field. This plant occupies the land since the early stages of clearing (fences, delimitation of each field...).

-Cassava is harvested, according to family needs, during two or three years and after this it becomes too ligneous for human consumption. So at that time, the field lies fallow for five to fifteen years. The duration depends on the family size, the soil's fertility and the distance from villages ( Large savanas, with suitable soils for agriculture, do not take part in crop rotations because they are located too far from villages.)



This typical crop rotation is adapted to the soil's fertility and it can be modified as follows:

In case of low soil fertility: Typical crop rotation :		In case of high soil fertility :
peanuts	peanuts	peanuts
maize-cucumber	maize-cucumber	maize-cucumber
cassava	sesame	one season without any crop
fallow	cassava	maize-cucumber
	fallow	sesame
		cassava
		fallow

If this crop rotation is the main element of the traditional farming system, there are still other kinds of fields :

- In March, the women clear a piece of land near the house and grow on it many kitchen crops (sauce plants, tomatoes, okra...) as well as fruits (papaya, banana, mango, citrus, pineapple...) and cassava. After a first production cycle, only cassava and fruits remain on the land. The cassava having been harvested, the same range of plants as during the first year is grown again. As these small plots are well fertilized (manure, kitchen wastes, ashes ...) usually a continuous agricultural production is permitted.
- In the forest now, a man can clear the land in March and April and grow maize on it for 2 or 3 years until bananas, installed in combination since the first year, enter production. But this is a rather recent practice.
- In the village itself, when a house is demolished, old men put fire to the wood and nats made of palm leaves and grow tobacco on that place for village consumption.



### 5. The conditions of reproduction of this system :

It is possible to summarize these conditions as follows :

- The cycle : long fallow, land clearing, fire, crop rotation, fallow ... concentrate at the soil's surface the nutrients which are necessary for each crop.

- With two crops a year, this farming system uses the possibilities offered by the climate and minimizes the erosion hazard.

- The system removes from the field, a minimum of products and soil restitution are important.

So, these different techniques have preserved for decades the cultivated areas' capacity of production.

But, on the other hand, this traditional agriculture also offers several weak points :

- Based mainly on Cassava production, the system provides limited surplus and important storage is impossible. As a consequence, other economic activities, particularly during the dry season, are necessary in order to prevent any food shortage and to balance the diet.

- This system is very sensitive to the climatological variations in a region of transition, as we have seen above, and in which important interannual variations affect the amount of annual rainfall and, as a consequence the yield of each crop.

- This fallow system cannot support a high density of population but at the same time it needs continuously the most important part of the labour force available in the community for agricultural production and to transform the different products into goods.

- Lastly, we have seen that association and cooperation forms are not developed among the farmers, the organization of the society into small units indicates a lack of group cohesion and weakness of superior authority. Thus, this atomic structure has allowed the penetration of commercial agriculture without changing the family production framework.



B. - Stages of commercial agriculture's penetration and its development.

1.-Beginning of the colonial economy :

Since the beginning of the century, different attempts have been made in order to build links between this agriculture and the urban areas market as a number of experiments failed, because of their lack of adaptation to the local ecology or the society structure (Oil palm, rubber, swampy rice productions were tried), the cocoa industry was finally chosen as the commercial agriculture base.

2.-Cocoa : several characteristics of this production had permitted an articulation with the traditional farming system :

- Cocoa is grown in the part of the territory which is under forest, so there is no competition for land between this new production and the traditional crop rotation in savana.

- The introduction of this plant in the family production framework was the main element in the transformation of the men's traditional activities from hunting and defence to farming and agricultural production for the market and, as a consequence, the development of the local economy monetarization.

However, relations between the cocoa industry and the traditional farming system are conflicting on three points :

- The utilization of the labour available in each economic unit.
- As conflicts between elders and youngers become deeper, little by little, family production was substituted by individuals.
- The management of the territory : as cocoa is a perennial crop, the land attribution to each farmer took a definitive character contradicting the traditional management of the Ndzall's territory.



### 3.- Coffee :

Just before Independence, coffee production had been introduced according to the same logic as with cocoa. This was a second stage in the growth of commercial exchanges between the local people and other parts of the country.

### 4.- The birth of commercial garden marketing for local consumption and its consequences :

This process occurs recently and it is possible to identify four reasons for which this third link with the market appeared :

- The growth of several urban centres in the region and, particularly Yaounde, the capital.
- The possibility of selling goods directly along the main road national number one to the trucks which are going both to Southern or Northern Cameroon.
- The recent sugar agro-industry plant in the area which had opened a new market for local goods.
- As cocoa and coffee provide money mostly to the male villagers, women use the new process to increase their revenue as they are facing increasing currency needs.

The evident consequence at the village level is a breaking of the traditional equilibrium between production and consumption at the family level. At the same time, as living conditions are getting worse, a large part of the young people prefer to move out of the village and try to find a job in urban areas. As a consequence, the growth rate of unproductive people in each village does not permit the normal reproduction of the traditional farming system which is hit by the lack of labour available.



As a great part of the cash income is used in "sociological investments" (festivals, ceremonies, travel ...), the new earnings cannot solve the degradation of living conditions.

### C.- The actual phase of contact with Agro - Industry

#### 1. Sugar Agro-Industry plant :

For a decade, in the West part of the area, several thousand hectares are under sugar cane plantations. Two factories drain hundreds of young people from neighbouring villages who are expected to profit by regular cash income and save money for their future wedding and, at the same time, their economic independence.

#### 2. Relation between the agro-industry and local people.

Besides this role of an attractive place for young people, the agro-industry is also a new market for goods products in the region.

### III. The consequences of transformation observed :

#### A. Evolution of the traditional means of production :

##### 1. Land :

If the introduction of cocoa and coffee industries had not competed with the traditional farming system, this is not the case with the agro-industry plant which chooses the best savanas in the West part of the region.

##### 2. Labour :

Because of an important rural exodus, we have already



analysed a labour scarcity hits the reproduction of the traditional crop rotation in savanas.

B. The evolution of the process observed :

All the transformations we have described implicate obviously a trend towards the disappearance of the "domestic community" economy and society. In spite of signs of resistance, the process should go ahead as new agro-industrial projects for the eastern parts of the area are under discussion.

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