

# EXPLORING INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP:

A cultural awareness workshop to inspire a new generation of Baka leaders



This publication is the report of a leadership building initiative organised by Association Okani and Forest Peoples Programme in November 2020 which saw the participation of 20 indigenous Baka women and men living in and around the Ngoyla forest block in South-East Cameroon. The leadership building initiative was held at Okani's newly created Indigenous Peoples Centre for Leadership and Sustainability situated at Ntam - Ngoyla subdivision in the East Region of Cameroon. There were two trainings, organised in series which comprised 20 participants from 11 Baka communities. Although the publication reports the proceedings from this particular leadership building exercise, the authors hope it will also serve as a useful guide for leadership building activities for forest indigenous communities supported by other development actors.

## AUTHORS

Nsioh Macnight Ngwese  
Catherine Clarke  
Samuel Nnah Ndobe

**Front cover image credit:** Samuel Nnah Ndobe



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## BACKGROUND TO THE LEADERSHIP BUILDING INITIATIVE

### CONTEXT

The Ngoyla-Mintom forest block and southern Dja Biosphere Reserve periphery, in south-east Cameroon, is rapidly becoming the next frontier of natural resource exploitation within the country. The increased exploitation of natural resources in the area is occurring in a context in which the property and access rights of local communities living within the zone are precarious, with very limited protection in national laws. As a result, there is a serious risk of a form of natural resource exploitation in this area that threatens the survival of indigenous peoples and impoverishes local communities, is environmentally unsustainable and does not contribute to broader economic development within Cameroon.

Indigenous Baka communities with intrinsic spiritual relations to the forest are especially vulnerable to these risks. Being disproportionately dependent on the forest (which is considered under national laws to be “unoccupied” land available for allocation), their lands, livelihoods and culture are the most affected by projects for natural resource exploitation (or protection).

The empowerment of indigenous organisations and communities to participate in natural resource management is critical for transparency and accountability in contexts such as Cameroon, where many natural resource exploitation activities take place in remote forest areas, where oversight is difficult. Strengthened and informed community voices provide an alternative source of information that can expose wrongdoing by the private sector, agents of the administration or illegal actors, as well as triangulating information from other sources.

Indigenous voices can also provide alternative or complementary views on sustainable use of complex socio-ecological systems and their dynamics in the context of biological and cultural diversity.

In this way, empowered, engaged, and informed communities are critical to ensuring the legality, sustainability, and equity of natural resource management processes, to guard against corruption, and to ensure the respect for and protection of human rights. Moreover, actions by local communities, men, and women, to hold those in power to account and push for industry compliance are most likely to be effective when taken by local communities directly - because they have legitimate, direct, and permanent interests, and are a form of change-seeking constituency.

Strong indigenous leadership is also an indispensable building block for indigenous peoples to exercise their right to self-determination, safeguard their cultural practices and articulate collective visions for the sustainable development of their communities.

## THE KETA PROJECT

Keta – the Baka word for “dream” – began in April 2019 and runs until March 2022. Its overall objective is to strengthen the active participation of forest-based indigenous peoples (both organisations and communities) in sustainable natural resource management, to enhance the promotion, protection, and defence of indigenous peoples’ human rights.

Key components of the Keta project include organisational capacity building support for Gbabandi (the national platform of forest indigenous peoples in Cameroon); a tailor-made training programme for indigenous leaders; training on key natural resource management issues; and support for an Indigenous Women’s Network.

## SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

Association Okani and Forest Peoples Programme (FPP) have observed that the gradual assimilation of forest indigenous communities into the “modernised” cultures of their Bantu neighbours and the outside world at large, coupled with restricted access to the forest, is impacting Baka traditional knowledge, livelihood activities and wellbeing. For the Baka indigenous peoples, three different ways of being can be identified today:

- There are those who are in voluntary isolation, living in the forest for months, who come out for a short time and then go back
- There are others who are living in more of a dualistic way – they go back and forth between the forest and the roadside settlements.
- Then there are those who live predominantly in roadside villages and peri-urban centres.

In all three groups, however, indigenous Baka peoples suffer severe systemic and social discrimination and live considerably and visibly below the poverty line.

As the Baka teach their children in the forest, in a learning-by-doing approach, there are limited opportunities to enact and impart their knowledge, with impacts on the next generation already visible, e.g. reduced cultural practices, less knowledge of medicinal plants and hunting techniques, and other livelihood activities. As such, Baka boys and girls find themselves in a particularly challenging situation, disconnected from their traditions, yet not accepted by the development around them.

Forests are shrinking as deforestation and forest degradation heighten, with the remaining intact forest, the former abode of the Baka people, frequently only found within legally protected areas. The Baka say that *bélé masaka*, “the forest is crying”, as it loses ever more of its heartlands. So too the unique traditional hunting techniques are being lost over time. The preparation of local charms to annihilate large and threatening animals is only mastered by a few elders (*kobos*) and the fabrication and use of traditional musical instruments is fast becoming a thing of the past. In the forest, practices like *maka*<sup>1</sup>, *moulongo*<sup>2</sup> and *yeyi*<sup>3</sup>, that served to school younger children in Baka ways, are fast disappearing. All of these changes have contributed to the loss of self-esteem and cultural identity experienced by many Baka people today.

Mastery of the forest and traditional practices are unique amongst the Baka people and traditionally a source of pride. Recognising their mastery of the forest and their traditional practices can contribute to increasing self-esteem and rekindling a strong identity as indigenous forest peoples.



A GROUP OF YOUNG MEN PREPARING AN EXPOSÉ. PHOTO BY NSIOH MACNIGHT

- 1 Refers to hunting large game (*grand chasse*) by men.
- 2 Refers to hunting expeditions by the whole family (men, women, and children) or by groups of families and which can last for several weeks or months.
- 3 Traditional songs often sang by women during hunting expeditions to attract specific animals.

## FORMS OF INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP

*“A leader is someone who pulls others towards development, someone who carries the problems of the community, fearless, ready to die for his people and serves as a bridge between his community and the outside world.”*

Minsolo Emmanuel, Baka man from Abing village

*“A leader is like a stream; it runs day and night and never sleeps.”*

Cathy, Baka woman from Djoum

There is no word for “leadership” in the Baka language, however, there are several words which can describe “a leader”, some of which have been identified by Baka community members Okani and FPP have worked with in the region as:

- *wabe ngoma* (can also describe a spokesperson);
- *bie mbeli* (a guide); and
- *wele moussoumbou*.

However, there seems to be general agreement (among Baka communities), that a leader in Baka is best described by the term ***wele moussoumbou***. For the Baka, anyone can be a *wele moussoumbou*, no matter of their age or sex. To be a *wele moussoumbou* however, you must be initiated into specific traditional societies.

Traditional *wele moussoumbou* have the task of bringing people together for a common purpose, commanding confidence in the community and listening to other’s views, for the benefit of the whole community – leadership qualities clearly valued by Baka communities.

The role of elders and cultural guides (*kobos, ngangas, etc*) is as important as ever in Baka culture, however, a knowledge gap is emerging as younger generations have not had such ready access or exposure to the forest, a site of cultural enactment and transmission.

## THE TRADITIONAL CHIEF AND INDIGENOUS REPRESENTATION

Other forms of indigenous leadership, linked with external representation (as opposed to internal social organisation), have emerged among Cameroon's forest indigenous communities in more recent times and are also interesting to consider here.

Even though Baka social structure (non-hierarchical in nature) does not traditionally have a "chief", there is a growing tendency among Baka communities to designate a traditional "chief". This shift mirrors the administrative structuring of the state, however, only about six "3rd degree traditional chiefs" (in the villages of Loussou, Assoumindele, Payo, Nomedjoh, Moungue le Bousque and Assok) of forest indigenous communities are officially recognised.

The increasing desire of Baka communities to have their traditional "chiefs" recognised officially by the State can be understood in part as a response to the systemic disadvantage faced by forest indigenous communities in relation to the governance of their own affairs in Cameroon due to their exclusion from administrative recognition as separate communities.

Forest indigenous communities are generally considered to form "part" of a Bantu village with a Bantu chief. In these cases, one indigenous representative (e.g., the Baka "chief" designated by the Baka) is generally invited to form part of the Bantu chief's council of advisors ("notables"), along with a representative from each Bantu "family" within the village. This situation is highly problematic for forest indigenous peoples as they are subject to the authority of a different ethnic group, and often one at the hands of which it has long-time suffered discrimination and marginalisation; they have distinct concerns, particularly in relation to activities that will affect forest lands, on which they rely much more heavily than Bantu communities; and they are not considered to be "independent" communities entitled to their own lands, to their own (separate) consultation and free, prior and informed consent, and to govern and develop their own communities in accordance with their own culture and vision for socio-economic development (self-determination). They are also by definition always in the minority in the discussions among notables in this situation.

The traditional chief is an institution which is genuinely traditional in some parts of the country, and one which was imposed by colonialism in others. The traditional chief is an official of the State, from whom he receives a financial allocation, as well as maintaining a traditional authority role (including in relation to land allocation and resolution of disputes) within the community.

Under modern administrative arrangements, the role of chief has significant importance: he is the legal representative of the community, the decision-making authority for the community vis-à-vis its relationship with the authorities, and e.g., the formal recipient of notifications from the administration (some of which have legal consequences). Even where it is not clearly stated that the chief has authority, there is a general acceptance (both in villages and within the administration) that a village may not engage with the authorities except by or with the agreement of its chief.

When mitigating measures are made for communities, they are generally made based on Bantu communities' traditions – for example, excising bands of land near to the road, where Bantu communities usually engage in agriculture, or providing support for income-generating activities that are suitable for Bantu but not indigenous communities (such as livestock or pisciculture).

If external representatives (companies, State, NGOs) do enter communities to consult with the Baka (or include them in Bantu consultations), Baka women are often excluded from the process, or lack the confidence to actively participate. As the forest use and cultural sphere of the Baka woman is distinct (both from the Baka man and the Bantu woman), it is vital that their perspectives and practices are heard and respected.



## WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

This training was conducted in line with the Keta project's objective of empowering a new generation of Baka women and men leaders, in a culturally appropriate manner. It is built on the idea that projecting spirituality brings to the forefront the question of identity and self-determination. A cultural revival will help the Baka to reclaim their identity, be proud of it, and take steps towards their self-determination. The aim of the workshop was to facilitate the development of a new core of dynamic Baka leaders from the Djoum-Mintom-Ngoyla forest zone, who will ensure leadership through cultural revival within communities and promote culturally appropriate approaches to influence decision-making processes that concern them.

Specifically, the workshop aimed to:

- Facilitate a Baka self-assessment as individuals and as a community to dispel low self-esteem and build identity. Create a space for the Baka to analyse how Baka perceive themselves, how they think others perceive them, and their understanding of the reasons behind the difference.
- Facilitate deep analyses of recurrent Baka problems, through mapping of their ancestral lands and territories and assessing their relationships with local institutions and other resource use actors.
- Develop action plans to guide leaders and the leadership process.



## METHODOLOGY

The methodology focused on building leadership by reviving cultural awareness among participants, to develop self-esteem and a strong sense of identity amongst the Baka indigenous peoples. Knowing that the Baka, as indigenous peoples, are distinct, even though they may not necessarily feel pride about being distinctive, we wished to approach leadership by seeking to explore how the Baka can rekindle and express that feeling of uniqueness or pride in cultural identity.

The resulting methodology is based on what we termed “Self, Problem and Solution”. In this approach participants were invited to explore and develop leadership qualities for action from the perspective of personal analysis and reflection as individuals, collectively as a community, and then by exploring problems related others peoples’ behaviour towards them and the management of the forest, before seeking solutions based on their cultural context and the inherent problems. Reviving culture here is a form of support, aligning the workshop to the spiritual bases of the Baka cosmology.

The methodology was developed by indigenous members and colleagues of Association Okani (a Baka led Cameroonian organisation founded in 2006), with the specialist support of Samuel Nnah Ndobe, an independent consultant and instructor whose work has focused on sustainable development and indigenous peoples, and Forest Peoples Programme. The workshop structure and content was conceived by the principal facilitator, Samuel Nnah Ndobe, drawing upon his work with indigenous communities across the world, blending different methodologies of participatory community consultations. The associate workshop facilitators included Macnight Nsioh, Project Officer at FPP, as well as Venant Messe, Andre Ndomba and Luc Moutoni from Association Okani (the former two of whom are themselves Baka).

The key to this methodology was allowing free-flowing discussion between participants related to key themes with minimal interruption from facilitators.

The following approaches and techniques were used during the workshop:

- Role play: dancing, singing and forest spirit incantations
- Learning through *likano* (exploring traditional stories and myths relating to leadership)
- Drawing/illustrations
- Guest speakers (e.g. *kobos*, indigenous leaders)
- Field visits
- Meditation
- Participatory mapping

The aim was to facilitate Baka participants to rediscover their identity, their self-confidence, and their self-esteem; to recognise what makes indigenous peoples such as the Baka different from others and to be proud of that difference. This can only happen by enhancing their deep connection and spiritual relationship with the forest.

The rationale for this methodology is that reviving cultural belonging and embracing Baka identity will build self-confidence amongst participants and be shared with other members of the participants' communities, and thus inspire a new form of leadership geared towards respecting the culture of forest peoples and honouring forest spirits.

The workshop was residential and lasted for five days – this enabled participants' immersion in the subject, without distraction, and gave time for relationships of trust to develop.

## LOCATION

The workshop was designed and the location selected to create a familiar and safe space for participants. Sessions took place outside, in the forest, with participants hosted at Okani's new built-for-purpose *Indigenous Peoples Centre for Leadership and Sustainability*. As this was the inaugural meeting of the Centre, on the first day of the workshop there was an opening ceremony to call on the ancestors to bless the centre and its activities. Every morning, Elders led traditional prayers or recounted *likano* or traditional stories, which centred the cultural dimension of the workshop and reinforced the transmission of cultural knowledge.

## LANGUAGE

We made sure language was not a barrier and participants could speak freely in Baka. Any sessions in French were simultaneously translated into Baka. Two Elders/Spiritual practitioners who are still connected to traditional practices attended the entire workshop and held the process spiritually, assuring connections with the ancestors and spirits of the forest.

## PARTICIPANTS

Participants were selected by Baka communities around the Ngoyla Wildlife Reserve and the Dja Biosphere Reserve and comprised a cross-generational group of men and women, including some Elders and some individuals already taking on leadership roles in their communities.

The aim was to create multipliers of leadership – not to focus on people who want to dominate or who are overly focussed on status, but people who were ready to go back to their communities and facilitate conversations and create greater awareness. Efforts were also made to identify new, younger leaders who are available and interested.

A total of 20 Baka women and men took part in the two workshops (10 people per workshop) from Assok, Akom, Bemba 1, Nkolemboula, Zoulabot and Lele in the Mintom sub-division of the South Region and from five villages in the Ngoyla, sub-division of the East Region, including Ndimako, Assoumindele, Lelen, Mballam II and Mabam.

The feedback from participants on this methodology was very positive. Participants expressed satisfaction with the cultural focus and content of the workshop, which they found refreshing, and with the facilitated discussions amongst participants, as these were in accord with key aspects of their culture and they could easily identify with these approaches.



PHOTO BY LUC MOUTONI

## DISCUSSIONS AND WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES

This leadership training was designed to conform with the acephalous nature of the Baka culture, in which there are traditionally no hierarchies but knowledge holders and cultural guides. Leadership within Baka communities is shared... the *nganga* are the go-to guys when it comes to knowledge on traditional medicine; the *kobos* are usually older people believed to have “wisdom” and are often consulted on various issues within communities, including responsibilities for sharing. The training focussed on participants’ self-esteem, and sought to support the emergence of leaders who will render leadership contagious according to their abilities, their environment, etc. Discussions were focussed on Baka identity, way of life and their intra- and extra-community relationships.

### MORNING MEDITATIONS

Each day began with a morning meditation in the forest. The morning meditations permitted participants to start each day with a moment with their ancestors, to relate to nature and the spirits of the forest. In this exercise, participants spent time in nearby forests, meditating, and afterwards participants had a chance to share their forest experiences with the rest of the group. Below is feedback from some participants after meditation.

*When I was in the forest, I had a revelation, I heard a voice talking to me. This voice insisted on the necessity for us to safeguard our culture, especially our language. Today, it is difficult to hear a Baka speak without mixing it up with the local Bantu language. This is not helpful to us.*

Mondenga Bicken Marc, Ndimako village.

*The spirits inspired me to two things: that my place is in the forest and my identity is Baka. Because I have been dating mostly Bantu men, I used to be like a bat, half mammal half bird - the Bantu could not accept me fully because of who I am. I feel secure in the forest with my people. I am very grateful that this training permits us to express ourselves freely, and in Baka. It gives us self-confidence.*

Laurentine, Zoulabot village

*When we used to live in the forest, we were fine and never had health problems. Health problems started when they forced us to leave the forest and establish settlements along the main roads. When I was in the forest this morning, a voice said to me “stop eating palm oil and all these other oils you buy from the market, stop eating peanuts...these things are not for the Baka people. We have ‘kani’ in the forest which you can use in place of peanuts and the ‘moabi’ oil is a far better oil source.” We have our natural salt in the forest and do not need the kitchen salt we get from the market. All these things are bringing strange health problems to our people. “Go back and give this message to your friends.”*

Djima Denise, Meyos village

The essence of the daily meditations was to permit participants to reconnect with forest spirits. Younger participants often came back with questions for the *kobos* on different things they had seen or experienced in the forest. Some participants came back from the forest with medicinal plants which they presented to the whole group, explaining when and how to use them, and often these discussions led to broader conversations on traditional medicinal knowledge. The facilitator often allowed these conversations to go on for an hour or two, without any interpretations into French so as not to disrupt the dynamics of the conversation.

DURING TRAINING SESSION. PHOTO BY NSIOH MACNIGHT





PARADE DURING MORNING INVOCATION. PHOTO BY SAMUEL NNAH NDOBE

## DAY 1: WHO AM I? EXPLORING SELF-IDENTITY

*We are here to promote Baka identity and culture and to praise the gods for this opportunity to bring us together to promote our way of life. We will dance to our gods, bless this centre, and invoke “ejengi” to come be with us all through this week. For the 5 days that we will be together, we will talk about ourselves, who we are, what our identity is, and why we are different from others.*

Samuel Nnah Ndobe, workshop facilitator

### INVOCATION:

To kickstart activities, a cultural invocation was led by the *kobo* of the group. The invocation comprised of a procession of participants to the meeting ground followed by traditional songs and dances, inviting forest spirits to be part of all activities that were to be carried out during that week at the training centre. These were followed by prayers to *Komba* and other forest-dwelling spirits.

### SELF-INTRODUCTION:

The first session of the workshop was dedicated to participant introductions, where each person was invited to talk about themselves, their lineage, clan (*Ye*) and their family background. The day served as an icebreaker, allowing participants to become accustomed to each other and to the event organisers. It was also an opportunity for participants to go deep into different Baka specificities (e.g. different *Ye*) and explore why villages with different *Ye* communities differ from those with just a single *Ye*.

*Ye*'s are the largest family units, each time Baka people meet the first element of introduction is your *Ye* of origin – for example, a man and woman from the same *Ye* should not marry. In ancient times hunting expeditions and other forest activities by men and women were carried out in groups belonging to the same *Ye*. This has led to roadside villages dominated by people from the same *Ye*. Most of the participants at the workshop originated from the following *Ye*'s: *Ye Ndoum*, *Ye Makombo*, *Ye Kpotolo*.

## DAY 2: WHO ARE WE? EXPLORING COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

The objective of the day was to enable participants to freely explore elements of discrimination that they face on daily basis. Although national laws and policies do not generally favour Cameroon's forest indigenous peoples' full enjoyment of their rights, one of the most severe sources of discrimination that they face come from their interactions with their Bantu neighbours.

Forest indigenous peoples in Cameroon have lived in settlements side-by-side Bantu communities for several decades, but their relationship has never had an equal standing – with the Bantu being dominant, often facilitated by national laws that do not consider the specificities of indigenous communities. There is no doubt that the discrimination indigenous peoples face from their neighbours has impacted their self-esteem and zeal to get out of their comfort zone and demand what is rightfully theirs.

One way of regaining self-confidence is for communities to discuss this unequal relationship they have with Bantu communities, including talking about the inhumane treatments they often endure and most importantly talking about how best to overcome such challenges. As part of these important discussions, Day 2 had three main talking points: who we are, why are we different, and what do others think of us. Below are some quotes from participants.

### WHO ARE WE?

*We are Baka, and a Baka must self-identify as one. We have strong attachments to the forest, without which we are incomplete. Wherever we find ourselves, whatever we do in life, we must always seek to come back to the forest.*

Pierre, Mballam 2 village

*We are forest peoples. A Baka can be recognised from his morphology, the sharpened teeth, and marks on our faces.*

Jean-Claude

### WHY ARE WE DIFFERENT?

*We are different because we are more attached to the forest. We do not see riches in the forest, we see life. Everything we use and need is found in the forest. The songs we sing are all related to the forest, our cries awaken forest spirits, and each song is adapted to the activities we carryout in the forest.*

Mama Alice, Ntam village

## WHAT DO OTHERS THINK OF US?

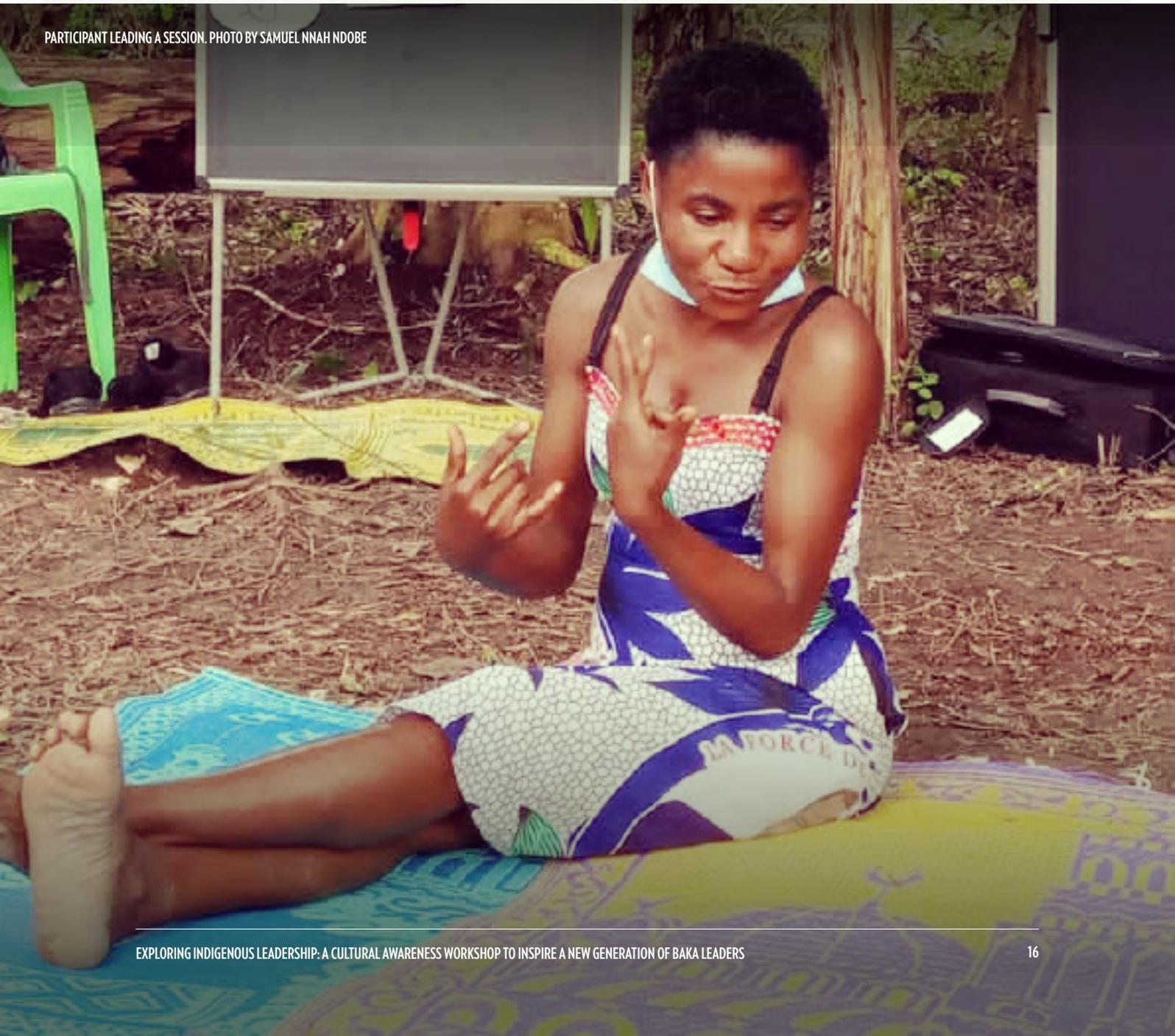
*They compare us to monkeys. When I first left my village, some people wanted to know if I had a tail. My ex-boyfriend who is Ewondo used to refer to me as an extra-terrestrial person.*

Laurentine, Assok village

*They consider us slaves. They call us animals and tell us to return to the forest if we dare stand up to them. I believe humiliating Bakas gives Bantus a lot of pleasure.*

Florence, Akom village

PARTICIPANT LEADING A SESSION. PHOTO BY SAMUEL NNAH NDOBE



## DAY 3: OUR CULTURE: STRONG FOR NOW?

The third day saw continuation of discussions from the previous day, specifically focussed on what participants thought about their culture and “being Baka.” Participants were divided into groups (usually men, women, and youth groups of 2-3 people) to reflect on the following 3 issues and share thoughts with the entire group.

- Are the Baka losing their identity and culture?
- Talk about a time you were proud to be Baka.
- Talk about a time you were not proud to be Baka.

The purpose of these discussions was to boost self-confidence of participants through sharing some life experiences about discriminations faced because of being Baka, but on the flip side of it, to consider some of the positive aspects of their cultural identity. Participants discussed these issues in their groups but also presented highlights of their group discussions in a plenary session at the end of the day. The following are some points that were raised in the plenary.

### ON THEIR IDENTITY AND CULTURE

*The Baka culture is resisting, it is still strong despite all the threats. Most traditional rights like ‘ejengi,’ ‘ekosse,’ etc. still exist, although not in every community like in the past. Our traditional songs and dances still exist in their original forms and we do these regularly. The intensity may be weaker in some communities, but we practice these regularly. The ‘hita’ is a traditional instrument used for music just like a guitar. The knowledge of its construction and usage still exists in some communities.*

*Our language cannot disappear even though it is being highly influenced by neighbouring Bantu languages. Our knowledge of the forest is also very good and not threatened by anything now.*

*Traditional hunting tools have become rare, there are very few people who can still fabricate and use these tools. We could even say these practices may be extinct soon because those with such knowledge are very old people who do not hunt again and younger people are unwilling to learn such ways because of the modern firearms people use for hunting. The same goes for traditional musical instruments. Very few people still hold this knowledge and if care is not taken, it will disappear.*

*Our attitudes can also compromise our identity and culture. We have the tendency of exposing our secrets to foreigners for money and as such put our culture in danger. Now, we try to initiate foreigners into the ‘ejengi’ tradition. In one village, a woman paid money to be initiated into a cult where even Baka women are not permitted to be part of. All for money. If we continue like this, we will not last the test of time.*

## ON PROUD BAKA MOMENTS / SOURCES OF PRIDE

*Our attitude in the forest is a source of pride. Our knowledge keeps us apart from other when we are in the forest with our Bantu neighbours. People always want to know how we do certain things or names of trees or animals. We also learn very quick from Bantu neighbours and from each other. Our knowledge of the forest is sought after by many people. When camping in the forest, we do not need pots, tents, buckets, or plates. The forest is our home and everything we need is available in the forest. this difference between us and the Bantu is a source of pride.*

*The fact that Baka speak more than one language makes us proud. Every Baka learns the neighbouring Bantu language in addition to our Baka language. This is a survival strategy, but it also shows that we are intelligent people. This ability makes us proud to be Baka.*

## ON MOMENTS TO FORGET QUICKLY

*Our relationship with our Bantu neighbours can be described as modern slavery. Most often, things happen that we want do not want to remember. For instance, when you work for a Bantu man, you are often paid with sachets of whiskey, or some bananas or cassava (manioc).*

DANCING DURING MORNING INVOCATION. PHOTO BY NSIOH MACNIGHT



## DAY 4: OUR TERRITORIES: EXPLORING CONNECTIONS TO LANDS AND THREATS TO FORESTS

The objective of Day 4 was to encourage participants to talk about their lands and threats to the forest. Participants developed participatory maps to assist in these discussions. The sessions were facilitated by Samuel Nnah, who made room for discussion on how people interact with the forest and how conservation and forest exploitation affect Baka daily use of the forest.

The composition of participants in both trainings was such that each set of participants came from the same area of the Djoum-Mintom-Ngoyla zone (the area covered by the Keta project). Participants for training one came from Ngoyla sub-division, and their communities all have the Ngoyla Wildlife Reserve and its environs as their traditional forest use areas. Participants of the second training were from the Mintom area - the forest around the proposed Mintom cement mine site and the northern portion of the Ngoyla Wildlife Reserve is commonly used by the Baka communities in that area. This geographical grouping made it easier for participants to develop a common map relatable to all and to ensure that everyone could participate in the discussions comfortably.

PARTICIPANT DRAWING PARTICIPATORY RESOURCE MAPS. PHOTO BY NSIOH MACNIGHT



After the maps were developed, participants had discussions on the specific threats they face in the forest, the nature of the threats, the perpetrators, and how it has affected the lives of Baka communities. The main threats identified in these forests are from the Ngoyla Wildlife Reserve restrictions and interactions with eco-guards, the Mintom cement works, agricultural expansion by individual Bantu farmers, poaching, and illegal logging.

These discussions on forest usage and analysis of the threats were facilitated by Samuel Nnah. Participants discussed the necessity for Baka communities to be united against these common threats to defend their rights, the importance of having community discussions when such threats arise, the role leaders are supposed to play in such instances and, most importantly, what role cultural identity and attachment to the forest plays in decision-making instances, in both intra and extra community decision-making circles.

## COMMUNITY RESTITUTION

At the end of the mapping exercise, participants went on a field visit to Assoumindele (a Baka village 15km from Ntam) where a big meeting was organised to enable them to share what they had learnt during the week and present their maps to community members. These meetings were facilitated by the training participants, and everything was done in the Baka language. It was an occasion for participants to share with other Baka communities (and have an opportunity to practice sharing with communities) the importance of owning their identity, to discuss the roles leaders should take vis-à-vis natural resource management and how preserving their forest is the only way of preserving their identity and ensuring a better future for Baka communities.

PARTICIPANT LEADING A SESSION. PHOTO BY SAMUEL NNAH NDOBE





PARTICIPANT MAKING A COMMITMENT ON LAST DAY OF TRAINING. PHOTO BY NSIOH MACNIGHT

## DAY 5: OUR COMMITMENTS

The last day of the training was a recap of the entire week. Participants discussed what they had learnt from the training and how they believe it would help boost their self-esteem. Participants also made commitments for the future and how they plan to advance the knowledge they have gained from the training.

Following the first four days of the workshop, participants felt confident they could inspire leadership within their communities.

*When I go back to the village, I hope to inspire others with this courage I have acquired this week. The courage to speak out on issues facing us. I am asking the gods to help me mobilize my fellow villagers so we can talk about our forest, our customs and how losing this culture will mean losing our livelihood and thus our lives.*

Laurentine, Zoulabot village

*This week has taken us back to our roots. I will encourage my mates to not ignore our culture. Our self-esteem depends on our links to our traditions. I implore 'Komba' to give us the strength necessary to confront these threats to our forest.*

Alino, Akom village

*It was a beautiful and insightful experience. Thank you for accommodating me. When I was coming, I had a different perception but now I see the reality is different. The spirituality of the training is very refreshing. I had this "donor thinking" when I was coming but that can really be one-sided. I commit to going back to Yaounde and discuss this training with my colleagues and maybe I may be able to change their mindsets too.*

Jurgen Stolzlechner, EU Delegation in Yaounde (invited to attend last day of training).



GROUP PHOTO BY SAMUEL NNAH NDOBE

## CONCLUSIONS

Indigenous peoples' leadership and the imposed traditional chief are not synonymous. Imposing other forms of leadership within indigenous communities actively suppresses traditional indigenous leadership institutions. Rulers installed by non-indigenous authorities within indigenous communities cannot legitimately lead communities in core matters concerning their wellbeing. By stepping outside of the accustomed "modern" leadership models to embrace their traditions and culture in leading their communities, indigenous peoples can gain more opportunities to seek and exercise control of their traditional lands and the resources in them. The first step in achieving self-determination is self-acceptance: a step towards developing self-esteem. Self-esteem helps indigenous peoples to fight societal injustices within their communities but also goes a long way to raise awareness of indigenous struggles within and beyond local communities.



## RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON PARTICIPANTS' EVALUATION OF THE TRAINING

At the end of the workshop on Day 5, participants formulated recommendations based on their appreciation of the activities over the course of the week. Most of the recommendations were for a wider adoption of the methodology of the workshop and an encouragement for indigenous communities to hold on to their traditions and customs. Below are the most pertinent recommendations from the workshop participants.

- The Baka are generally very confident when engaging in activities compatible with their culture and way of life. Developing methodologies for consultations that take them back to their traditions or engaging with Baka communities in a culturally suitable manner is the best way to ensure proper understanding and creating a meaningful space for dialogue. This approach may therefore also be relevant for creating an open and equitable space for an effective free, prior, and informed consent process.
- Indigenous peoples and Baka uniqueness, their culture and way of life is their strength and holds the key to their survival amidst the scramble for resource exploitation on indigenous lands. Indigenous communities must hold on to what makes them different, and it is important for NGOs and other development partners working with indigenous peoples to recognise and promote indigenous culture and traditions.
- Developing the self-esteem of indigenous peoples is key to building indigenous communities that can withstand pressures from different land use projects introduced on their lands and that have the potential to heighten poverty and contribute to loss of traditional and ecological knowledge.

## SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ORGANISING AN INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP WORKSHOP

- Locate the training as close to the participants' home environment as possible (e.g. in the forest)
- Collaborate with indigenous elders, knowledge holders, and traditional leaders to develop the workshop content and structure
- Make use of traditional folk tales which explore the theme of leadership and root discussions in traditional values (e.g. non-hierarchical societies)
- Encourage participants to develop ground rules at the start of the workshop (e.g. giving everybody the space to speak, no drinking of alcohol, etc)
- Forget PowerPoint presentations and note-taking, focus on storytelling, role play and movement
- Engage with the forest and give traditional spiritual practices a central space by collaborating with elders
- Find a facilitator who is experienced working with the indigenous peoples in question
- Use the language the participants feel most comfortable in as the key workshop language, making use of experienced interpreters (e.g. indigenous languages)
- Combine younger and older participants – potential leaders, those currently involved in indigenous peoples' organisations/movement, and those recognised as leaders or elders by their communities
- Ensure participation from an equal number of men and women at the offset and be conscious of and actively encourage participation from all participants throughout the workshop

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## WORKSHOP STRUCTURE

### DAY 0

Arrival of participants  
Shared evening meal

### DAY 1: WHO AM I? EXPLORING SELF-IDENTITY

Morning meditation  
Spiritual invocation  
Self-introduction

### DAY 2: WHO ARE WE? EXPLORING COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Morning meditation  
Who are we?  
Why are we different?  
How do we experience others?

### DAY 3: OUR CULTURE: STRONG FOR NOW?

Morning meditation  
Are the Baka losing their identity and culture?  
What makes me proud to be Baka?  
When was I not proud to be Baka?

### DAY 4: OUR TERRITORIES: EXPLORING CONNECTIONS TO LAND AND THREATS TO FOREST

Morning meditation  
Participatory mapping  
Facilitated discussion and restitution

### DAY 5: OUR COMMITMENTS

Morning meditation  
Personal commitments

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Forest Peoples Programme (FPP)  
1c Fosseway Business Centre, Stratford Road, Moreton-in-Marsh,  
GL56 9NQ, UK  
Tel 00 44 1608 652 893  
info@forestpeoples.org  
www.forestpeoples.org

Stichting Forest Peoples Programme  
Oldend 15, 9465 TJ Anderen,  
The Netherlands

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