

**People with Disabilities in the Tropical Forests of South-eastern Cameroon:
Practices and Social Context**

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Currently, some researchers working in the field of human development are advocating for research and intervention with regard to disabilities and development. It is crucial to clarify the actual conditions of people with disabilities (PWDs) in developing countries (Asia and Africa, etc.) based on field research. However, the mass media have popularized the image of the “hidden disabled person” living in developing countries; such people are presumed to be hidden from the outside world, separated from their communities, and cared for by a limited number of women, especially their mothers. Ingstad [1991], who conducted field work in Uganda, noted that such images of PWDs are underscored by the mass media and treated as if official facts by canonical international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labor Organization (ILO). She went on to criticize this phenomenon as “the myth of the hidden disabled person”. Thus, the stereotypical image of PWDs living in developing countries, including African countries, has been established without clarifying the actual state of such PWDs.

In this presentation, I will clarify how PWDs, especially those with physical handicaps, living in the tropical forests of Southeast Cameroon secure caregivers and livelihoods within their complex ethnic groups. I will seek to modify the conventional image of PWDs (the image of the hidden disabled person) by focusing on the interactions between PWDs and other individuals in their communities. Field research for this presentation was conducted over a period of nine months in the villages of the Boumba and Ngoko Division, in the East Province of Cameroon.

While perspectives on disability have been changing from an individual (medical) model to a social model, the means by which PWDs subsist within the social milieus of non-Western countries should be clarified in order to promote the empowerment of PWDs within the contexts of their actual situations.

Key Words: disability study, anthropology, Africa, physical handicap, field study