

## **Nepal and the Politics of Madhes**

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Prior to the Cameroon Field School (CFS) I was expecting two things in particular from the excursion: to get first hand information about the politics and society in Cameroon and to enrich my horizon and outlook in various ways. I believe both objectives were met to some extent.

After a short meeting on 2009 August 29, the CFS officially took off next morning as Dr. Godefron Ngima Mawoung began his short lecture on the conditions of Pygmies in Cameroon (see Appendix A). On September 6, after observing Musee De Bandjoun as our group was returning from Bandjoun, a town in West Province, eight days long CFS was coming to its end. During those days, plus my week long additional stay in Cameroon the points listed below were of particular note to me:

1. The international airport in Doula does not exactly welcome with open arms. With its bit slow and bit disorganized arrival lobby queuing for immigration, having ones yellow card fever checked certificate, and struggling to be near luggage carousel are about half-show hurdles amidst numerous little side-deals and negotiations on who knows what carry on by individuals and small group of men, all man in fact, in the arrival area. It does not take a newcomer to Cameroon to realize why Transparency International rated Cameroon as “the most corrupt country” in the world twice in last 15 years. One can also quickly grasp that all these side deals at the airport are just a reflection of a country where official administrative structure are little more than shells or legal artifice but it is survival strategies and realities that trump the rules.
2. Yaounde, the capital, no doubt is far more hospitable than the economic capital, Doula, but it does not welcome you with open arms either. Despite photographer friend next to you and wonderful scenic beauty around your prime enemy in and around downtown or suburb of the city is your appearance and camera. No pictures please! Taking pictures of persons without permission is understandably ridiculous but clicks of camera to capture anything around are prohibited. Sorry!! Of course, if you are ready to cut some sort of deal pictures are welcome as is everything else.

3. In contrast, as you move to country-side or even small towns one of the good medium to reach people, of course only after exchanging friendly gestures and smiles, is camera. Hospitality in those areas is a constant reminder that the Cameroon you are in is not Doula where outsiders are merely prey of all sorts and not Yaounde where they are victims to cut deals.
4. Oh music and dance! Be it in the centre, east or west Cameroon it is part of everyday life. Whether you want to welcome guests or express joy; be it to shake ones' belly after eating or to attract tourists by displaying culture music and dance are always there in numerous improvised forms. But its importance is far deeper to create moments of egalitarian space in Cameroonian society at large that is deeply hierarchical and patriarchal.
5. If you do not want to believe its hierarchical-patriarchal complex, for historical evidences meet chronicle of the Kings at the Museum of the Palace in Bamoun, including the one in eighteenth century who had 681 wives, and, for present accounts visit Chieftains or Sultans, mostly in the western Cameroon, to see how they are treated like the kings. Even trying to know rich business-men is insightful, including the one in Bandjoun who has 82 wives. Having four/fives wives is still common if man thinks he can manage.
6. Religion in Bamoun has something to reveal as well. Of course one can find Mosques and Churches often close to each other in most part of Cameroon. Also, Muslims, Christians and Animists are easily found across the country, otherwise Christians are densely populated in the western and southern provinces and Muslims almost in every province. It is believed traditional indigenous religious practices are common in rural area throughout the country and rare in cities. But Bamoun is unique for its Muslim-Christian assimilation that has produced complex religion of its own out of mingles.
7. Given its rich mineral base and agricultural land agro-products are backbones of its *relatively good economy*. But Cameroon has experienced *no industrialization* what so ever. Few handfuls of elites are enjoying the economic surplus and large population is migrating particularly to Europe in search of livelihoods.
8. The relatively stable politics in Cameroon is not the result of successful channelling of citizen's rights or expansion of democratic polity, rather it was an outcome of exclusive historical advantage elites exercised over the populace as to set a political course of their choice. The twenty-two years long, almost dictatorial regime of President Ahmadou Ahidjo was succeeded by authoritarian presidential rule of Paul Biya in 1982. He continues to hold the office after twenty-eight years. The long one-party rule of RDPC/CPDM (Rassemblement Democratique du Peuple Camerounail) was believed of coming to an end in 1992 as Cameroon experienced its first democratic election. But re-election of Paul Biya was clear message to its people that the regime is presided in police state and he is ready to silence dissent through tyrannical means. It so happened throughout 1990s as the country experienced series of killings, rigorous censorship, and political exile. However, to the outside world Cameroon is stable and relatively peaceful country, an image that is deeply flawed.

Situating Africa's present quandary in *Citizen and Subject* Mahmood Mamdani argues due to colonial legacy it revolve around two clear tendencies: modernist (that champions rights) and communitarian (in defence of culture) (Mamdani 1997: 3). The idea of "sustainable development" in Cameroon is also subject to same predicament. The conditions of the Pygmies are among one of the best cases to assert this argument (see Appendix A). Also its internal and external politics is not only summons to democracy but is subject to elite's collaboration inside and outside the country. In Nepal, however, we see a double move, both in development and politics where modernist and communitarian, democrat and authoritarian is critiqued and affirmed. Its different trajectory is, perhaps, the legacy of quasi-but-non-colonial legacy it has lived with.

After the CFS my remaining days back in India was focused more on identifying underlying causes of almost non-existence of social movements and sense of civility in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in particular, bordering regions with Nepal. To examine Indian perspectives on border dynamics was also centre to my concerns. Contemporary understandings and interpretations were graspable and insightful to realize other than security concerns both Indian government and public intellectuals, except few, are least bothered about people living in either side of the border. Also they have fairly little knowledge about the complex dynamics and situations in the regions. My stay in India was helpful to realize that few months of archival work in Nehru Library and Museum, Delhi, and state and regional archive in Patna and Darbhanga to comprehend historical causes is crucial.

As stated before, the region I am studying shares open border with India to its south. Since Madhesis have family and cultural ties with people in India, there is deep rooted empathy on Indian side to support Madhesis' political aspirations. My few weeks of stay in Bihar – bordering regions to Nepal – and Delhi revealed this fact more forcefully. It was also fruitful in understanding local and regional dynamics from a perspective that will help me to comprehend intertwining dynamics on both side of the border and explain change and continuity in Nepal in relatively largely frame. The stay in Delhi was insightful to understand how those local issues are perceived and interpreted in relation to national interest and programs.

The main themes of my study are Nepali citizenship and nationalism and its political interplay. I will examine the post-1950 political process to add light to these issues by examining underlying causes of the Madhes/Madhesis contention. In doing so, I will examine the construct of "Nepali nationalism" and its political consequences. By historically examining such constructions and deeper intertwining with "national identity" and "Nepali citizenship," my study will also explain why 'Nepaliness' was dominated by the *pahadi* (hill-people) imagination and how the structure and practice of the "citizenship certificate" helped to produce a materially and politically poor class of Madhesis. As cultural uniqueness is embedded to this imagining the use of symbolic languages and images to convey meanings have resulted in a set of values and beliefs, and the allocation of power and resources at the expense of political and economic rights. Problematic of cultural practices and ideological propaganda on who is, and is not, "a Nepali" is therefore core to unpack the politics of Madhes and understand Nepali nationalism and citizenship.

The CFS and few weeks of stay in India was a good insight to better understand how external image and domestic dynamics differ vastly.

## **Appendix A**

### **Conditions of Pygmies in Cameroon** by *Dr. Godefron Ngima Mawoung*

In 1983, nine members team headed by French Professor initiated a research study on Pygmies in Cameroon. The study was the first of its kind with the objectives to know the way of life of Pygmies, their relationship with neighbours and environment; and their engagement with sustainable and social development in Cameroon. Over the years, the research was divided into the four main activities: a) general census of Pygmies; carried during 1983-2007, b) basic training to Pygmies leaders; c) conscious attempts to realize Pygmies their vulnerable status; and d) socialization in relation to education, health and sanitation, and modes of agriculture. Though research on Pygmies had yielded significant success in bringing their situations into national and international limelight and also in improving their living conditions there is still a long way to go before Pygmies live a dignified and quality life.

Pygmies are basically considered hunter gatherers still living in forest who have different way of life than local Bantuk people. Based on their language they are categorised into three main groups: Baka, Bakola/Bagyelli, and Medzan. Geographically Bakas are resided in east, Bakola/Bagyellis in central and south, and Medzan in central Cameroon. Beyond the way of life, even in terms of population, they are considered to be minorities as they together make 44,000 – Baka (39, 000), Bakola/Bagyellis (5000), and Medzan (1,000) – almost 0.44 per cent of the country's total population. Bantuk people, who dwell in towns, did not considered Pygmies to be “real people” or “human beings.” It was only after 1983 when intellectuals, activists, and I/NGOs started championing Pygmies cause they were gradually treated as human beings.

The study on Pygmies began with a holistic approach covering all aspects of cultural, psychological, economic, and political. Analytical, systemic, and iterative tools were used to synthesize research findings. Despite the fact that Pygmies still suffer from poor education, poor health services, and is deprived of basic facilities there has been substantial improvements in their living conditions in last two decades. They also live in increasingly deteriorating environmental conditions and lack means to combat with devastative circumstances and governments policies that are unfavourable to them. Unfortunately, few significant organizations that had helped to uplift Pygmies situations ceased to continue their activities as they lack resources – the major one was the missionary in the south province supporting Bakola group. As forests are rapidly being destroyed and devastated Pygmies are facing new challenges to deal with it and so are activists, NGOs, and government institutions.

There are no doubts that the rate of Pygmies living in houses, going to schools, improvements in their health and sanitation, their interactions with towns and cities, access to French language, etc., have increased to a significant level. However, their condition is bleak as there is no National Policy for their betterment. On such a backdrop, it is difficult from Pygmies to maintain pace with country's growth and sustain their developmental process. Academics are also were aware of a scenario that despites growing academic and public knowledge on Pygmies it is not yet set and challenges in days ahead are far more though for all, and more so to Pygmies.

## Pictures



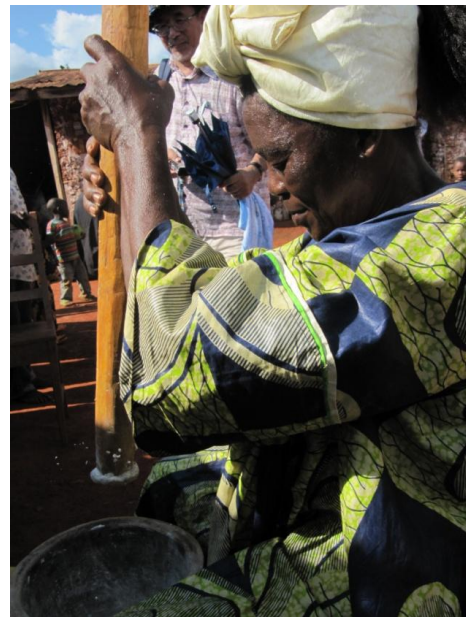
[Women selling fish at roadway town, Ayos, Cameroon]



[Workers waiting for food at narrow and busy street near Jame Masjid, New Delhi]



[Baka Pygmies playing instrument to welcome the Field School team, East Cameroon]



[Woman at D'andom village demonstrating Casaba processing to the Field School team]



[People stooping over to Sultana in front of the Bamoum Palace, Cameroon]