



Perceptions of wildlife in the Bechati Forest area, Lebialem, South West Province, Cameroon.

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The beliefs and experiences recorded here were collected by Endeloh Denis, a native of Lebialem, Tamnjong Melanie and Edwin Ncha during July and August 2007. Denis is researching human ecology with the Vrije University, Brussels, Melanie and Edwin are CVP scholars who also teach Conservation Values in their schools and communities in Yaoundé, Cameroon. They sampled 220 households in five villages of the remote Bechati area¹, in Alou and Wabane Subdivisions of Lebialem in the South West Province of Cameroon. This remote forest area is the home of Cross River Gorillas, which are a sub-species of the Western lowland gorilla. The total number of Cross River gorillas is about three hundred individuals, found only in Western Cameroon and adjacent Nigeria. Working early in the mornings, before people went out for their daily activities and in the evenings when they retired home from work the researchers interviewed one person in each household, then invited every member of the household for a conversation and question and answer session. The goal of Denis' research, which will be published in full, in due course, is to assess the contribution of indigenous knowledge to Gorilla Protection. Our interest here is to share a set of systematically collected stories, beliefs and experiences (indigenous knowledge) that provide an insight into the Conservation Values of the Bechati peoples, and that we have also found to be invaluable tools for research on attitudes and behaviours to the natural environment, and for conservation education.

Beliefs of the villagers concerning Gorillas.

The people here believe very strongly that gorillas are human beings. They believe that gorillas are their totems. Totems protect their owners, and are not to be killed, else the totem owner dies. The totemic secret (including the ability to transform into the animal) is not bought but inborn. Children as well as adults do possess totems. From all indications children and women do not have so much information as the older males. This is justified by the fact that children and women are not careful, so their eyes are opened to use their totems only when they are big, but this was not the case in the past². This to them is the reason why gorilla family groups are now scarce in the forest. Also many older people died without "opening" (initiating) the eyes of their children so they cannot transform into gorillas. People with gorilla totems do not beat children with their hands else the children die.

Fears of the villagers.

- Wicked people (hunters) can shoot people's gorilla totems in the forest causing them to lose their lives.

¹ i. Mmouck fossimundi; ii. Bamumbu (Babong & Mbeachou); iii. Besali ; iv. Bechati ; v. Folepi.

² Meaning that nowadays younger people, if they know about totems, talk about it – consequently they are only initiated at an older age, when they become more responsible and discrete.

- There is a fear of strangers (researchers, tourists and educationist) because if these people (strangers) can come openly to know, see and talk about these “secret” animals (gorillas) which everybody in the village is afraid of, then they must be very strong . These strangers surely have that strength of their gorilla totems. Therefore when tourists and researchers are in the village those who have totems stop transforming for fear of the fact that they could be captured. This to them is the reason why researchers take long today to find gorilla nests, not to talk of gorillas.
- At the end some of them were very happy because we came preaching their gospel which is that of conservation and protecting the lives of gorillas which are fast facing extinction and also confirming human attachment to gorillas as our first cousin. When we told them this (that we know gorillas to be closely related to people) we observed a wind of change and a wave of relief on their faces.

Comments from villages about gorillas

The local name for gorilla in this area is Njimangem or Dzimangem or Njigem depending on the tongue of the individual. People made both positive and negative comments about gorillas.

Negative comments

- Some heart hardened villagers still say gorillas are animals and so should be hunted (for bush meat) as food.
- The gorilla is very powerful. It can kill people and so is not important. They should be extinct.
- Gorillas destroy crops especially plantains and bananas so they should be killed.
- Those with gorilla totems are wicked. They usually use their gorilla totems to destroy crops of their enemies. The gorillas should be killed.
- With the introduction of western religion totems are seen to be evil and should be destroyed. Those with gorilla totems are now either afraid or ashamed to carry on the practice since they want to identify with the new religion. This is another way or means by which the gorillas are no longer protected.

Positive comments

- Herbalists use gorilla totems to harvest herbs, barks of trees, and to heal the sick.
- Gorilla parts like dung, hair and bones are used for medicines.
- A gorilla is a peaceful animal. It only attacks when it is attacked.
- Gorillas attract tourist and may one day be a source of revenue to them.
- The villagers will support gorilla protection because they want the next generations to see gorillas.
- Chiefs support the law that gorillas and other primates should be protected. Villagers support their chiefs and so the law. Now killing of gorillas is a taboo.

Special observation by villagers about Gorillas

- When a gorilla sees a person, it will look at the person very well before running, and while running it defecates in order to become lighter.
- The gorilla walks or works mainly with three limbs. It respects the left hand very much. So this hand is termed by villagers as the chieftaincy hand (hand not to be shaken carelessly).
- When a gorilla shouts, leaves fall.
- If you shoot a gorilla it will enter your stomach and you will die.
- If a gorilla is killed the population of the village reduces.
- If a gorilla raids your crops then defecates on your farm, you will have a good harvest that year and in the years to come.
- Babies washed with the bones of gorillas grow up to be very strong.

Local tales and true stories about gorillas

In the past large families of gorillas could be seen very close to the villages and these gorillas were hunted for bush meat (game). Gorilla meat was not sold but distributed. What hunters wanted was not really the meat but titles. When a hunter kills a gorilla he cuts off the hands then carries the gorilla to the palace (to stop it from transforming in to a person). Beautiful songs were sung and the chief selected some villagers for a traditional dance performance (sombo). At the end the hunter was awarded the title “songwei” which permits him to wine and dine with notables and also makes him a powerful man in the eyes of the villagers. Many tales or stories were told about gorillas

My father went hunting one day. Then he met a gorilla and shot at it. The gorilla started moving towards him. He shot the second time. The gorilla did not stop moving towards him. He shot the third time but the gorilla kept coming. Finally my father used a means that I can't explain here to escape.

Story told by Raphael (Besali village)

Two years ago, I was hunting in the forest with my dog at about 3:30 p.m. The dog was ahead of me and I was following it. Suddenly I saw the dog running towards me for safety. This was a strange behaviour and the first thought was that the dog might have seen a python. I prepared my gun and machete to kill it. When I looked in front of me on a hill with thick vegetation I saw a big gorilla. At first sight I was afraid and I knew I could not shoot it because my village law does not allow me to. I was supposed to make the animal leave because where it was, was the only accessible path on that hill. I mentioned the following words in the local dialect “You are not the only one who owns the forest. We too have the right to hunt here. So go your way so I can pass”. Suddenly the gorilla went left. I waited until it was gone then I continued on the path with my dog.

Story told by a man (name not taken) in Besali

A woman persuaded my friend and I to go and kill gorillas in her farm (that come to destroy her crops). She gave us cocoyams. We took along our dogs. On arriving the farm we saw a gorilla sitting on a tall tree. We hid our dogs and prepared our guns. We moved slowly closer to the gorilla and decided to shoot at once believing that it will just fall. When we shot at the gorilla it started coming down the tree like a person. My friend shot again (the third bullet). This time the gorilla jumped down and ran away. We went and took our dogs and searched for the gorilla. We finally met the gorilla and shot two more bullets before it could die. We called the owner of the farm and butchered the gorilla. Today because of conservation we no longer kill gorillas. I have changed from a gorilla hunter to a gorilla conservationist.

Story told by Nkemonde (Mmouck Fossimundi village)

A very great hunter went to hunt, he saw a gorilla and shot. The gorilla went and hid itself in a cave. The hunter kept looking. When he saw the gorilla, it came out and fought the hunter, wounded him, he ran back to the village and called for other hunters. They all went back to the forest, saw the gorilla (since it was already weak) and killed it. Before they killed the gorilla they realised that it had harvested some herbs and was trying to cure itself. The hunter who had seen the gorilla first, later died of the wounds.

Story told by a teacher in Mmouck Fossimundi village