

# HISTORICAL LAND USE AND VEGETATION CHANGES IN THE TROPICAL RAIN FOREST OF SOUTHEASTERN CAMEROON

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This study was undertaken to clarify how the subsistence activities of shifting cultivators in the tropical rain forest of southeastern Cameroon have been influencing the dynamics of forest vegetation, with special reference to the historical changes in forest use by the local peoples. The livelihoods of Bakwele farmers (Bantu-speaking people) and their historical background are described and analyzed. While the forest area along the Dja River on the Cameroon–Congo border has generally been regarded as primary forest vegetation, extensive surveys in the area have revealed more than 20 old village sites scattered throughout the forest. The ancestors of Bakwele once lived there, shifting their settlements and field sites from time to time. As a result, this area now comprises a mosaic of various vegetation types, mature forest (generally regarded as “primary forest” consisting of evergreen and semi-deciduous forest), secondary forest, and swamp vegetation, some of which have been under human influence for centuries. The people clearly recognize these differences, and use these environments accordingly, depending on their purposes of use.

The vegetation survey showed that the species composition of the “primary forest” is clearly different from that of the secondary forest, the latter being dominated by pioneer species of *Musanga cecropioides* (CECROPIACEAE), particularly in the younger stage. Some researchers have speculated that semi-deciduous forests in Cameroon, which have generally been regarded as “primary forests,” may have been established through human disturbances. If we accept this view, in order to understand the development of such forests consisting of deciduous, shade-intolerant tree species such as *Triplochiton scleroxylon* (STERCULIACEAE), *Terminalia superba* (COMBRETACEAE), and *Entandrophragma cylindricum* (MELIACEAE), it is necessary to consider not only short term (10–15 years) cyclic forest use by the current form of shifting cultivation, but also the impacts of shifting settlement patterns that take place over a much longer time span.

**Keywords:** Human impacts, Shifting cultivation, Tropical rain forest, Vegetation changes