# Reconstituting the role of indigenous structures in protected forest management in Cameroon

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A B S T R A C T

This article illustrates how institutional transitional processes influence the intended sustainability outcomes in protected forest management in Cameroon, using the case of the Tofala Hill Wildlife Sanctuary. The study revealed that the major setback in attaining sustainable forest management does not necessarily lie in the conflicting interests of actors, but also in the social processes that guided the negotiation of these conflicting interests. Processes initiated by bureaucratic institutions did not adequately appreciate the efforts of the existing indigenous structures. The differences in the modelling of social change by the agents of change had negative impacts on governance outcomes and disrupted collaborative actions. This study argues that indigenous structures should not just be regarded as mediators in the processes of forest management. Their actions are influenced by powerful actors (elites). They are thus embedded in complex configurations that can retard sustainable forest management processes. There is a need to carefully explore and understand the various contexts in which these complex configurations influence forest management in order to foster sustainable collaborative management.

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## 1. Introduction

Natural resource management issues in developing countries are increasingly mimicking western models, while the contribution of indigenous cultures and institutions are often overlooked (Awono et al., 2014; Fairhead and Leach, 1995). Before colonization took firm roots in Africa, the indigenous rulers occupied a unique position in the management of natural resources. They were accepted by their subjects as the religious, political, judicial and the spiritual embodiment of their communities and therefore took responsibility in the management of community resources (Appiah-Opoku, 1999). Today, the right of indigenous rulers in the management of community resources have been compromised (Yufanyi Movuh, 2012). Commonly, indigenous resource management structures are unrecognised and this may lead to management deficits in terms of the organisation of collective action needed for effective outcomes (Awono et al., 2014; Cleaver, 2002). Recently, it has been recognised that collaborative planning is an effective approach to natural resource management, particularly in situations where there are multiple actors with conflicting interests (Raitio, 2012; Wodschow et al., 2016). This is linked to the notion that reconciling conflicting interests will improve collaboration actions (Tieguhong et al., 2015).

Notwithstanding, it is also noted that reconciling conflicting interests in natural resource management is a hard choice (Nkemnyi et al., 2013).

Institutional and policy factors are more important than any other types of underlying causes to effectively combat degradation and deforestation in the long-term (Somorin et al., 2014; Tegegne et al., 2016). Interventions aimed at changes in environmentally-related incentives, knowledge and institutions, decision making and behaviour impact forest governance (Agrawal et al., 2008; Chhatre and Agrawal, 2008). However, despite the emergence of different forest governance regimes, less is known about the effectiveness and efficiency in term of forest conservation and local development (De Koning, 2011).

Failure in forest governance in Cameroon has been attributed to institutional challenges, including inadequate collaborations, inequity and lack of social justice among other causes (Alemagi, 2011; Epule et al., 2013; Mbatu, 2015). Failure to achieve the intended policy objectives has long been explained by the social characteristics of the context in which policy is implemented (De Koning, 2011). It is important to understand the extent to which different actors participating in policy implementation are actually institutionalised (Meagher et al., 2014). This is because most often, formalised (bureaucratic) structures reflect a consensual model of society, suggesting that the new arrangements work for everyone, instead of a conflictual model questioning for whom these practices work and why and who pay the price for them.

The participation of local institutions in forest governance offers an improved context for local decision making on environmental problems and access to resources (Forsyth et al., 1998; Leach et al., 1997; Sanginga

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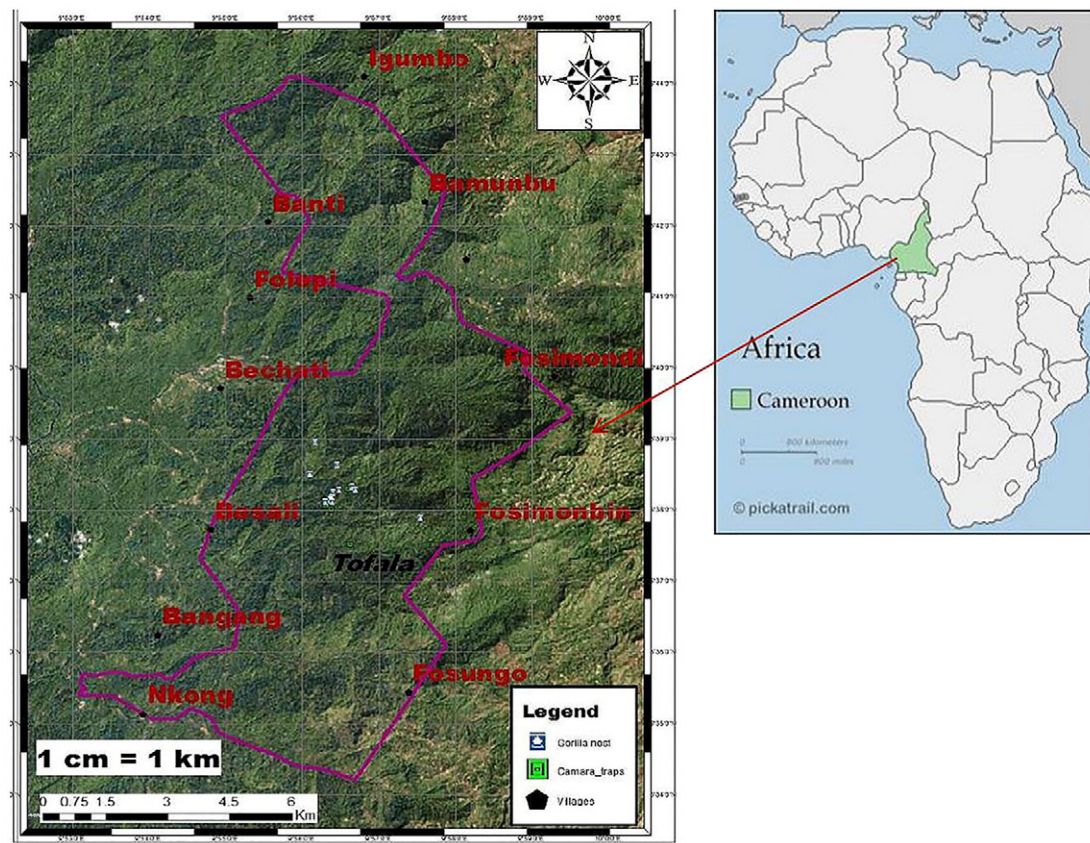
**Fig. 1.** Location of the study area
Source: *ERuDeF 2014 and Pickatrail.com*

et al., 2010). A corrective analysis of the roles of local community members (expressed through norms, beliefs, local regulations and practices) indicates the impact of new forest management institutions (De Koning, 2011). The analysis of shifts in roles enables the understanding of how new knowledge is introduced into socio-cultural life and how networks and local knowledge influence the functioning of an increasingly complex governance system (Cleaver, 2001, 2002).

The theory of institutional bricolage helps us understand how interests and roles influence forest governance. Institutional bricolage refers to the construction and borrowing of disparate institutional elements in order to create frameworks for practices and decision making (Cleaver, 2002). It also emphasises the active roles of actors; iterating that actors are not just linked to appropriate ways of doing and being, but also to believe or traditions. Thus, understanding institutional involvement in forest management is an essential precursor to finding solutions to the challenges involved.

This study examined the roles of traditional structures in forest management in the Tofala Hill Wildlife Sanctuary (THWS); how the roles of traditional structures in forest governance have changed as a result of the introduction of bureaucratic structures and the shift that has occurred in forest management leadership and how it has affected land use.

## 2. Approach and methods

### 2.1. Study area

This study was conducted in the THWS located in the South West Region of Cameroon. THWS is located specifically between 5°370–5°420 latitude and 9°530–9°580 longitude (Fig. 1). There are ten main local communities (Fossimondi, M'mockmbin, Bamumbu, Folepi, Bechati, Banti, Igumbo, Besali, Bangang and Nkong). These ten local communities are spread across two sub-divisions (Wabane and Alou)

in the study area. Each community is governed by traditional structures, which has a paramount chief at the head. The THWS was selected as the study location because it was in the process of transferring management roles from indigenous to bureaucratic structures[1] ('protected area management teams'). Processes that led to the transfer and transformation of roles could be documented as they progressed.

THWS can be considered as a biodiversity hotspot of global significance due to the presence and diversity of important large mammals, birds and plants species (Nkemnyi et al., 2012). It is also home to the most threatened of the African apes, the Cross River gorilla (Dunn et al., 2014). Despite the rich biodiversity of the THWS, poaching, habitat loss and fragmentation are major challenges. Additionally, more than 80% of the local inhabitants depend on the forest for their livelihoods (Nkemnyi et al., 2013; Nkemnyi et al., 2011). The competition between forest resources for local livelihoods and wildlife conservation is currently a challenge in the area as diverse conflicting interests need to be reconciled.

### 2.2. Theoretical framework

This research has followed the theory of institutional bricolage as developed by Cleaver (2002). The theory of institutional bricolage emphasises the active roles of the actors (Fig. 2). It theorises actors as conscious and unconscious social agents who are deeply embedded in social life, but still able to analyse and react to a diverse set of situations that confront them. Actors' agency is then influenced by their authority, legitimacy and identity. The 'institutional bricolage' approach helps explain the interactions between actors and structures with a focus on the dynamics of institutional arrangements surrounding forest management.

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[1] Bureaucratic structures referred to organised structures with a high degree of formality in the way it operates.