

Indigenous World 2020: Gabon

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There seem to be particular difficulties in conducting a census of Gabon's population and figures therefore vary depending on the source. The latest figures from the 2010 census give a total of 1,480,000 inhabitants, more than 600,000 of whom live in the capital and its surrounding area.

The average population density is 4.6 inhabitants/km² for a land area of 257,667 km². If we take into account the population density in the capital (1,800 inhabitants/km²), however, the rest of the country remains inhabited at only a density of around 1 inhabitant/km².

The population comprises some 50 ethnic groups of different cultures and languages, the main ones being the Fang (32%), Mpongwè (15%), Mbédé (14%), Punu (12%), Baréké or Batéké, Bakota and Obamba.

Throughout Gabon, there are also hunter/gatherer communities (often called Pygmies) comprising numerous ethnic groups (Baka, Babongo, Bakoya, Baghame, Barimba, Akoula, Akwoa, etc.) with different languages, cultures and geographical locations. The

Pygmy communities live both in the towns and in the forest. Their livelihoods and their cultures are inextricably linked to the forest, which covers 85% of Gabon. According to official data stated during a conference in Libreville on 27 April 2017, there are now some 16,162 Pygmies living across the national territory.¹ The Baka live in Woleu-Ntem, particularly in the seven villages of Minvoul, and they number between 373 and 683 individuals. Other Baka have also been noted in Makokou, and upstream of Ivindo. They number some 866 individuals.

There are also Bakoya living in Ivindo, in Djouah (north) and Loué (east) districts of Zadié department (Mékambo). They number some 1,618 individuals across Ogooué-Ivindo. The greatest concentration of Pygmies is found among the Babongo of Lopé (Ogooué-Lolo), estimated at 708 individuals, but also the Bakouyi (Mulundu) and Babongo of Koulamoutou, Pana and Iboundji, numbering some 2,325. To these statistics must be added the Babongo or Akoula of Haut-Ogooué (4,075 individuals).

The NGO Brainforest organised a national workshop on 19 January 2019 with the support of WWF Gabon and the “Gabon, Ma Terre, Mon Droit” (Gabon, My Land, My Right) Platform. This platform is an initiative of 20 Gabonese NGOs and resource people focusing on different issues such as land tenure, land grabbing and community rights promotion. The objective of the workshop was to examine an advocacy document aimed at ensuring that local communities’ and Indigenous Peoples’ rights were considered in the draft Water and Forests Code. This workshop enabled civil society organisations involved in the forestry law review process to strengthen the analytical document that will be used to support their advocacy. The draft bill of law was adopted by the Council of Ministers on 26 February 2019.

Development of agrofuel plantations

DAs in many African countries, oil palm and rubber plantations are springing up at an alarming rate in Gabon. In 2012, the government announced its ambition to make Gabon the number one palm oil producer in Africa. The President of the Republic’s “Emerging Gabon Strategic Plan” anticipates an increased number of oil palm and rubber plantations aimed at developing the export agriculture sector.

The government also wants to encourage both company and “community” plantations, established by the people. The Plan notes two companies that will be involved in developing these oil palm and rubber plantations: OLAM and SIAT Gabon.³

The government has allocated 300,000 hectares (3,000 km²) to the Singaporean company OLAM for the purpose of establishing monocrop plantations. OLAM International has a presence in 64 countries, and first became established in Gabon in 1999. Its activity in the country initially focused on logging but, in 2009, it began to move into the production of both palm oil, through OLAM Palm Gabon, and rubber, through OLAM Rubber Gabon, in association with the Gabonese state. This latter holds a 30% share in the palm oil production company and a 20% share in the rubber production company. These plantations are to be established in three regions: Mouila, Kango and, particularly, Bitam/ Minvoul where OLAM states that it has signed an agreement to establish the largest rubber plantation in the country, covering 28,000 hectares, and to build a processing plant at Bitam and Minvoul.⁴

In November 2018, the World Rainforest Movement (WRM) issued a warning regarding the consequences of such vast industrial oil palm plantations in terms of their effect on the availability and quality of water for the communities living in the vicinity of the plantations. WRM and Sauvons les forêts (Save the Forests) have embarked on a campaign to denounce the OLAM group's land grabs, which have taken place without the free, prior and informed consent of the communities affected.⁵

Notes and references

1. Stéphane Billé, "La population pygmée du Gabon est estimée à près de 16.000 âmes". Le Nouveau Gabon, 13 May 2017. Archived on 20 October 2018: <https://web.archive.org/web/20181020000329/http://lenouveaugabon.com/social/1305-11906-la-population-pygmee-du-gabon-est-estimee-a-pres-de16-000-ames>
2. "Qui sont les peuples autochtones au Gabon?" Groupe International de Travail pour les Peuples Autochtones (GITPA) Accessed: 13 February 2020: <http://gitpa.org/Peuple%20GITPA%20500/GITPA%20500-9WEBDOCGABONQSPA.htm>
3. "Débats autour des plantations d'agro carburants" Groupe International de Travail pour les Peuples Autochtones (GITPA) Accessed: 13 February 2020: <http://gitpa.org/Peuple%20GITPA%20500/GITPA%20500-9WEBDOCGABONAGROCARBURANTS.htm>

4. Ibid.
5. “Gabon: Les plantations industrielles de palmiers à huile d’OLAM privent la communauté de Sanga de l’accès à une eau potable”. World Rainforest Movement, 21 November 2018: <https://wrm.org.uy/fr/les-articles-du-bulletin-wrm/section1/gabon-les-plantations-industrielles-de-palmiers-a-huile-dolam-privent-la-communaute-de-sanga-de-lacces-a-une-eau-potable/>