

WHEN THE LONG-MARGINALIZED BEDZANG INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY RECLAIM THEIR CULTURAL IDENTITY:

A story of resistance, pride, and collective rebirth from the forests of Cameroon



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In the forests of Ngambé-Tikar, in Cameroon's Centre Region, a small indigenous people called the Bedzang are doing something the world rarely gets to witness: they are taking back what was taken from them. Not by force, not by protest, but by dancing again around the fire, by teaching their daughters which plants help a woman give birth, by rebuilding instruments that had vanished from their culture, by saying out loud the name of their language, "Azang" and refusing to let it be the last generation to do so. This is the story of a community that chose resistance, pride and life.

1. Who are the Bedzang ?

The Bedzang are a forest-dwelling indigenous people, historically nomadic, whose territory covers the arrondissement of Ngambé-Tikar in the Mbam et Kim division of Cameroon's Centre Region. A community of slightly greater than one thousand people, they are among the smallest and least-known indigenous groups in Central Africa and the Congo Basin in general and among the most overlooked.

For generations, the Bedzang lived in deep symbiosis with the forest. They hunted with handcrafted tools. They gathered plants whose names and properties they had memorized across centuries. They built their homes from bamboo and palm leaves, weaving the mats that covered the rooftops using techniques passed down through families. Their evenings gathered children around a fire, where elders told stories, posed riddles, sang songs, and danced, transmitting in those moments everything that made a Bedzang person who they were: their values, their history, their relationship with the forest, their identity.

That identity was encoded in their language, "Azang", a language unlike any other in the region, carrying within its words and rhythms an entire way of seeing the world. It was encoded in their polyphonic songs, in their traditional dances performed with ceremonial masks, in their midwives' knowledge of birth plants, in the secret herbs a hunter shares with his dogs before entering the forest. It was a complete civilization, self-sufficient and deeply rooted.

And then, slowly, it began to disappear.





2. What was lost and why

Marginalization and assimilation does not always announce themselves loudly. For the Bedzang, it came in layers. The pressure of neighboring Bantu communities, who gradually absorbed their labor and their living space. The forced sedentarization that severed their relationship with the forest. An administrative invisibility that kept them out of every representative structure for indigenous peoples at the national level. The quiet, persistent message, repeated in a thousand daily ways: that their culture was inferior, that their language was an obstacle, that their practices belonged to a past that modernity had rightly left behind.

Generation after generation, the Bedzang began to adopt the culture of those around them, letting their own slip away. Children grew up speaking “Tikar” rather than their own dialect, “Azang”. Young men hunted with modern rifles rather than traditional traps. Young women no longer learned the birth plants from their mothers. The ceremonial dances were danced less and less. The masks gathered dust. The instruments fell silent.

By the time ECODEV began working alongside the Bedzang communities in 2018, the extent of what had been lost was both staggering and heartbreaking. In 2026, a field survey across the seven Bedzang hamlets revealed that only one woman: the First Princess of the hamlet of Mansoh, still retained partial knowledge of the Azang language. One woman, in an entire community. Many cultural objects, among which traditional “frottoir” (bathing sponge), the traditional pipe, and some musical instruments called, had disappeared entirely from daily life. No one was making them anymore. Many community members had forgotten they had ever existed.

The Forest Dependent Community, Bedzang did not decide to abandon their culture. They were pushed away from it, gradually and relentlessly, by forces larger than themselves. And somewhere, in the hands and minds of those who still remembered, that is the traditional midwives, the healers, the hunters, the elders, the knowledge was still there, waiting.





3. The reclaiming begins

In March 2026, ECODEV launched a project with a deceptively simple premise: go to the communities, listen, and ask what do you want to do? What do you want to preserve? What do you want to transmit?

From the first mission, the communities' response was unambiguous. They knew exactly what had been lost. They knew exactly what needed to happen. They did not need to be told. They needed space, support, and the recognition that what they knew had value.

What followed over the next six months is worth highlighting. The communities decided and then do, with the supports and encouragements of ECODEV. The women of Ngoumé, Koueng, and Mbondé decided they would teach their daughters the traditional dances. They confected their ceremonial masks, gathered around the fire after dark, and showed the young girls the steps, the songs, the gestures that their own mothers had shown them. The women of Mansoh, Gah, and Nyanka'a decided they would transmit traditional birth knowledge: the plants, the preparations, the care that surrounds a Bedzang child's entry into the world. The men decided they would take the young boys into the forest and show them the hunter's herbs, the dogs' preparation, the forest reading that makes a hunt successful and they decided, as is their right, that this knowledge would not be documented. It is a community secret. It was transmitted, invisibly, from man to boy, as it always had been.

"Vive la chasse et la cueillette."

Ngué Bosco, Bedzang community member, Ngoumé village, at the inauguration of the community's transmission house, 2026

When Ngué Bosco said those words: "Long live hunting and gathering", at the end of a day when his community had built, with their own hands, a traditional house for cultural transmission, he was not expressing nostalgia. He was making a declaration. A declaration that the Bedzang way of life is not dead. That it is worth living and fighting for.

And then came the moment that no one had planned, no project document had anticipated, no logframe had predicted.

At the ASBER[1] restructuring workshop held in June 2026, participants identified many objects that had completely vanished from Bedzang culture: canaries, traditional hooks, traditional mats, their dialect, the traditional frottoir, the traditional pipe, some musical instrument, among many others. The room went quiet when they were named. They had been so forgotten that their absence had not even been mourned.

[1] Association des Bedzang Réunis (ASBER), a community based organization created for the Bedzang and by the Bedzang.



Weeks later, a mother from Ngoumé revived some. She did not only bring to life what was long abandoned, she taught her children how to make them.

She had not forgotten. She had simply stopped, because the world around her had stopped valuing what she knew. The moment the community named the loss, the moment it was spoken aloud in a legitimate communal space, she remembered and acted.

This is what cultural reclaiming looks like. Not a museum. Not a documentary. A mother, her children, and objects that are revived again.





4. Recognition and what comes next

In March 2026, something happened that no one in the Bedzang communities had ever expected. Cameroon's Minister of Arts and Culture, Mr. BIDOUNG MKPATT, wrote a formal letter to ECODEV. His ministry, he explained, was conducting a national mission to collect the free and informed consent of Pygmy indigenous communities in the Mbam et Kim department as part of a process to register Bedzang polyphonic songs on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. He needed ECODEV's support to mobilize the communities and ensure the mission's success.

A community that had been invisible to its own national institutions and absent from every representative structure, unheard in every policy space, was now being approached by a government minister because their songs were considered worthy of humanity's highest cultural recognition.

This did not happen because of a lobbying campaign. It happened because the Bedzang communities began to be seen: through the publications, the field reports, the advocacy articles, the social media presence built through this project. Visibility created recognition. Recognition created opportunity.

But the most important thing about the Minister's letter is not what it says about the Bedzang's songs. It is what it says about the Bedzang themselves: that they exist, that their culture has value, that the world is paying attention.

For a people who had spent decades being told, through action and inaction: that they did not matter, that their culture was an obstacle rather than an asset, that their language was dying and perhaps should, this letter is not just administrative correspondence. It is a moment of profound, long-overdue recognition.

And it is only the beginning.

The transmission circles established in all seven hamlets continue to meet. The women keep teaching the dances, the birth plants, the songs. The elders keep telling the stories. A generation of Bedzang young people is growing up knowing, for the first time in decades, that who they are is worth knowing.

What is needed now is what was needed from the beginning: partners who understand that cultural revitalization is not a charity project. It is a rights issue. It is an issue of justice. It is a question of whether a community will be allowed to exist on their own terms, in their own language, with their own knowledge intact.

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