

## *Section I: Dynamics of the Past*

### Section Overview

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Many writers have described the Sangha River region and the broader Congo River basin as a kind of paradise outside of human control, terrifying yet pristine. Such descriptions characterize not only the timeless classics and national canons of Western and African literature (Conrad {1910} 1983; Gide 1948; Goyemide 1984; Labou Tansi 1979), but also typify many contemporary publicity and press accounts (Chadwick 1995; Linden 1992; Thibeaud 1995). Researchers have, on the contrary, contemplated humans' roles in the creation and maintenance of the area's forests over time (De Wachter 1997; Fay 1996; Gally 1996; Roizman 1995). These opposing notions of the forest as paradise or, alternatively, as a product of prehistoric and present human activity, have been instrumental in the claims of competing organizations to the forests as worthy of either their "protection" or "exploitation." One evening during field research in the Central African Republic in 1997, I was summoned from my house in the village of Bayanga for cocktails on the terrace of the local logging company's villa. I found myself overlooking the Sangha River at sunset, being addressed point blank by the company's new owner. "You're an anthropologist. Did all humans really originate in Africa? And if so, what do you think our responsibilities to people here now should be?"

Never would I have so directly connected debates about human origins with those about current conditions of employment and economic production in equatorial Africa. But this businessman seemed acutely conscious of the complex interactions in a region where many people still live primarily through hunting and gathering, while also interacting with modern structures, sensibilities, and technologies. He seemed, sincerely, to wonder whether such interactions might destroy these African forest dwellers' socioeconomic foundations, as has so often seemed the case when capitalist practices encounter "Other" modes of life. Indeed, his questions also raise concerns about whether the destruction of such foundations, in one of the last stretches of forest on the planet where they can still be said to truly flourish, might be tantamount to the destruction of some social foundation common to humanity. His query is a heavy burden to bear for an entrepreneur in the tropical timber industry, principally preoccupied with an immediate need for labor and local cooperation.

Or perhaps his brusque connection between prehistory and contemporary political economy was designed as playful questioning: could specialized anthropological knowledge be applied with pertinence to today's pressing moral and management dilemmas? Certainly his connection of knowledge and responsibility highlights the layered nature of many contemporary African forest communities, where workers from other regions or from more formally educated sectors of African society co-exist with both expatriate managers and with more long-term residents who are heavily dependent upon and knowledgeable about forest resources. More importantly, our conversation highlights the common challenges that can connect such a range of "locals" with researchers, conservationists, government officials, and business people involved in the use and management of the Sangha region's forest resources.

How then, to summarize relevant knowledge about the region for the varied purposes that so diverse a crowd may espouse? Jan Vansina has made impressive, if somewhat sweeping, arguments in recent years about a dominant equatorial African political tradition brought by Bantu colonizers of these forests around 500 BC, and brought to an end by the arrival of European colonization in the late 1800s (Vansina 1990). Indeed, it may have been Bantu farmers who first assimilated and transformed the traditions of previous forest dwellers. Or perhaps hunting and gathering forest denizens have always depended upon agriculture in one form or another. But several scholars, marshalling still scarce linguistic, ethnographic, and archeological data, have argued against such a vision of dominance by or dependence upon farming peoples, forcing reconsiderations of such historical and prehistorical hypotheses (Bahuchet 1991a; Eggert 1992; Hardin 1994; Vansina 1995).

It may be comforting for contemporary expatriates, concerned about their impact on forest dwellers, to conceive of the first pioneers in the region as having been Africans themselves, who paved the way for and later ceded their position of dominance to Europeans. Yet, as both scholars and the logging company executive cited above have suggested, multiple cultural and economic traditions in fact exist side by side in present day equatorial Africa, negotiating their relationships to one another without wholly dominating each other. Some even suggest, in response to a somewhat imperialistic and now outdated view of Bantu expansion, that social pluralism—including, today, hunting and gathering, farming and industrial lifestyles—characterizes this part of the world, and may even be actively maintained by its longest-term residents (see Discussion and Comments, Section I, this volume).

These scholarly debates do not constitute a comprehensive picture of the past in the Congo River basin, but they do reveal the regionally specific nature of these forests as evolving natural and social systems. Bailey (1989) has advanced the hypothesis, based on research in the eastern Congo basin area, that hunting and gathering in Africa's equatorial forests could never have been a viable subsistence strategy without the contribution of nearby farmers. But in the western Congo basin, abundant wild yam species make autonomy from agriculture possible for hunter-gatherers (Bahuchet, McKey, and Garine 1992). It is also in this western region that we find the widest divergence between languages spoken by "pygmies" and their "villager" neighbors (Bahuchet 1984; Wilkie 1993).<sup>1</sup>

It thus seems appropriate, in struggling with the enormous questions evoked above, to further focus our analytical gaze in regional terms. Whether such knowledge will reveal the Sangha basin as a mere historical exception worthy of further investigation for its own sake, or as a fundamental challenge to dominant modes of equatorial African historiography, remains to be seen. As a starting point, the first section of this volume presents selected aspects of the area's prehistory, pre-colonial, and colonial history considering the relevance of the past for analysis of contemporary relations of resource use. It asks:

- How has the view of the Sangha River region as an untouched, pristine environment contributed to the policies and approaches of conservation organizations?
- What historical accounts concern the people of this region as they have altered and/or been influenced by the natural environment?
- What are major trends in the environmental history and prehistory of the region?
- How can such an historical context be effectively incorporated in conservation policy formulation and implementation?

Each perspective or set of answers offered is slightly different from the others; some are even somewhat mutually contradictory. On the whole, invested as most of this volume's authors are in equatorial African social systems where riches have long been measured in knowledge and in people, rather than merely in money or in formal titles to land or rank (Guyer 1995), most would agree that these papers are an extravagant display of wealth.

Yale faculty specializing in the diachronic study of forest use frame the section by discussing forest studies elsewhere, and the issues that connect our Africa-based efforts to considerations of humans and forests more generally. Professor Robert Gordon of

<sup>1</sup> The terms "pygmy" and "villager" are widely recognized as being ethnographically inadequate; I use them here to simplify our analysis of social relations, on a regional scale, between groups who share a wide variety of foraging, farming, fishing, and wage labor activities in varying proportions within their respective systems of subsistence and social identity.



Fishing on the Sangha River. (Illustration: Bernardin Nabana)

Yale's Department of Geology and Geophysics, reminds us that debates about hunting and gathering versus other forms of forest use, such as industrial metal smelting, are unique neither to tropical forests nor to the present, but are deeply rooted in the histories of temperate regions as well. The workings of political power, the accumulation of wealth, the force of scientific knowledge and of popular opinion in determining which modes of use are either ascendant and/or under attack as being unsustainable, may be similar across forest sites as different as Connecticut and the Congo River basin. Takeshi Inomata, an archeologist in Yale's Anthropology Department who works in Guatemalan forests, writes in this section to remind us of archeology's relevance for forest protection efforts, particularly as regards the status and roles of "indigenous" peoples versus more recent arrivals, or visitors.

Raymond Lanfranchi has taken to heart the need for a broader social and environmental context for archeological data, in relation to ongoing research needs, and to the work in other places and disciplines. In this section he and his students have contributed

specific data to debates about the timing and impact of iron-working peoples' arrival in the forests of the Sangha region in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. His findings lend further subtlety to models for the dispersion of metallurgy, probably by Bantu-speakers, into these forests during the period 500 BC to 500 AD. He notes, however, that many questions remain unanswered regarding the impact of such technologies on the forest itself, and require further research on human settlements in this area.

The climatological and human contexts within which our work has meaning are, indeed, complex. The forest has never really disappeared from equatorial Africa, but has shrunk and expanded over time. Starting about 70,000 years ago, we see a retreat of the forest, with a slight expansion between 3000 and 4000 BP. Iron seems to have appeared rather suddenly in the Sangha River region, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century before our era (500 BCE). But what were the circumstances of its appearance? What were the impacts of iron-making on the forest? Much basic work remains to be done before sophisticated understanding begins to emerge.

This work may inform different ideas about human habitation and transformations of tropical forests over time, thereby contributing to the knowledge base from which future policies may be made and further research may be conducted. Dr. Lanfranchi has long worked in Africa, founding and running centers for the study of African history and prehistory by Africans themselves. His paper, presented on behalf of his two Central African students and co-authors, thus testifies not only to the research accomplished and remaining, but to the manner in which western researchers may help foster further research capacity within the countries where they work by providing training and publication opportunities for their national collaborators.

For this particular volume, his paper provides a backdrop against which papers about the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries may be understood.

Of course, from the "turn of the millenium" to the "turn of the century" is entirely too large an intellectual leap, according to dis-cussant Alain Froment. Froment is a medical doctor and anthropologist who is concerned with the evolution of forest peoples in terms of both their cultural and their biological uniqueness, and their fate given the social changes and epidemiological challenges they currently face. But, as colonial historian Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch responds, the gap between the two eras discussed here reflects real gaps in historical knowledge. Even so, she argues, one fundamental assertion holds from prehistoric to historic times: the forests of the Sangha region have defied "colonization" by any one material or political culture. Rather, they have harbored, and continue to harbor, a stunning variety of subsistence strategies, social

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contracts, and exchange relations. She reminds us that the conditions for that continued diversity are, today, fragile.

The article by her colleague, anthropologist Elizabeth Copet-Rougier, considers economic networks from northern African (more specifically Fulbé) trading and slave-raiding states that extended down into the Sangha River area by the mid-1800s. Dr. Copet-Rougier, prevented from attending the conference by the onset of a grave illness, nevertheless contributed to this section an exquisite ethnographic and historical account of the Sangha region. Her paper here is one of the last to appear before her death, and promises further directions for her work which make her loss all the more tragic. It describes the Sangha River as the point where African and European trade systems met in the colonial period. This encounter, she argues, was mediated by the region's longer-term residents through their systems of intermarriage for commercial and political alliance. These systems have changed, yet remained intact, despite the pressures of changing regional trade.

Dr. Coquery-Vidrovitch's paper completes the portrait of mixed accommodation and resistance to outside initiatives on the part of local populations. She uses the crucible of the concession company system to illustrate particularly spontaneous local modes of resistance to the violence of the rubber trade. She even suggests the relevance of these Sangha-region resistance strategies, which were quite distinct from the organized rebellions of other African colonial territories, to any attempt to impose extractive (or protective) measures in the present.

Discussant Tamara Giles-Vernick furthers Dr. Coquery-Vidrovitch's central argument through examples from her own social-historical research in the Dzanga-Sangha Reserve of southwestern Central African Republic. She notes that not only mechanisms of resistance, but also modes of attempted control may have clear connections to the colonial past. Non-governmental organizations and government agencies currently administering protected areas in the Sangha basin use the term "migration," for instance, as a category for comprehending and controlling Africans' movements in this trinational zone (Mogba and Freudemberger, this volume). Consciously or not, contemporary organizations thus betray connections to their predecessors in the colonial governments, and should not be surprised to find their words on such topics met mostly with suspicion and mistrust from the residents of the region. Awareness of how certain terms are laden with historically embedded negative connotations, she suggests, might help avoid such miscommunication.

Finally, David Wilkie provoked hot debate at the conference with his brief presentation about roads, those paradoxical emblems

of both economic development and environmental degradation since the colonial era. His intervention does not appear as a paper here, but rather appears as an article in the journal *Conservation Biology*. Wilkie admitted that roads are major axes for the arrival of new ideas and technologies. But they are also, he argued, the arteries through which the lifeblood of the forest (fauna, timber, and other resources) flows to nourish economic systems far beyond the forest limits, to the demonstrable detriment of forest residents. How might governments, regional power brokers, and local communities be advised to consider this paradox in their planning for the future? Having posed the question, he almost mischievously left the group of conference participants to grope toward answers in a discussion session (transcribed and presented at the close of this section). Accomplished equatorial Africanist Robert Harms of Yale's History Department moderated the discussion.

As anthropologist and panel discussant Barry Hewlett notes, we must all work harder to be "transdisciplinary" rather than "interdisciplinary," that is, to conceive and carry out projects together across our separate disciplines, rather than merely presenting one another with our research results. It is only through such innovative investigations of data that phrases from this discussion, such as "quality of life," can acquire clear meanings for the populations of this region, where external interventions seem to be intensifying at present. To be sure, much remains to describe and to debate. But as the businessman on the banks of the Sangha River reminded me so radically through his pointed questions, our efforts at better understanding and management are increasingly collective, and must be historically and pre-historically informed.

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