

## Section I: Dynamics of the Past Discussion and Comments

### DISCUSSANTS

Alain Froment  
ERMES Laboratory (IRD)  
University of Orléans

Tamara Giles-Vernick  
University of Virginia

Barry Hewlett  
Washington State University

David Wilkie  
Associate in Forest Research and Development

Robert Harms (Moderator)  
Yale University

NOTE: At the close of the first session of the conference, David Wilkie delivered a presentation on the role of infrastructure and trade in economic development and resource conservation in the Congo basin at present. He focused specifically on roads as a proxy for trade, but also as a paradox for the conservation and development communities. Roads, he noted, enable rapid development of national trade but also entail damage to regional resource bases and rural lifestyles. (His ideas will be presented in a forthcoming paper in the journal *Conservation Biology*). Discussing the phenomenon of roads enabled us to pull the historical points made by the authors into a conversation about the present and future challenges faced by the Sangha River region, and the Congo basin, more broadly. That conversation is fully transcribed below.

**Barry Hewlett, Washington State University:** In terms of roads increasing the quality of life: I think we need to ask: “For whom?” Research demonstrates that increasing roads correlate with poorer nutrition and declining quality of life for forest foragers. Greater market economy equals greater inequality that emerges, at least for certain people, while others may profit. Also, what are our measures of quality of life? Rural development programs have very western biases about their criteria: sort of healthy, wealthy and wise. We need to call this bias into question and entertain other conceptions of the things that mean “quality of life.” How do we understand diversity within and between populations? We do have good descriptions of different populations, but in terms of actually explaining diversity theoretically, the literature is fairly poor.

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**Alain Froment, Laboratoire ERMES, France:** An historical approach to these problems is of immeasurable value. There is, unfortunately, a large gap between the archeological evidence of other eras and the

colonial history presented here. “Paleo” approaches teach us a great deal about the dynamics of these ecosystems, their expansion and recession over time, and the influences of anthropic pressures within and around them. True, archeologists haven’t quite figured out whether it was indeed Bantus who brought metallurgy to these forests, or whether Oubanguian peoples didn’t also expand at around the same era described by Raymond Lanfranchi. The histories and contemporary dynamics of inter-group relations are, of course, delicate matters.

Let me note in passing a certain reluctance among us here today to use the word “pygmy.” Here I speak as a biologist. I don’t mind calling them hunter-gatherers. But other peoples hunt and gather as well. And, of course they may abandon this particular subsistence strategy. What, then, would we call them? As biology would have it, they are small people, and so a certain distinction — indeed, discrimination — would probably persist. In other words, we are distinguishing among groups by their mode of life, but other, even more profound differences exist, and persist.

Let me also suggest roads, then and now, as disease vectors. Sleeping sickness, for instance, spread where there were roads. Colonization was both the cause of and the solution to sickness. Current trade and development are no different (AIDS, chicken pox), and the process of “hunter-gatherer” sedentarization will be extremely important for their future fate. When they are gathered along roads, they become incredibly easy targets for insect-vector borne diseases, such as malaria and arboviruses. One last, paradoxical effect: we have good data indicating that as road condition declines, nutrition improves among forest dwellers.

**Tamara Giles-Vernick, University of Virginia:** I’d like to pose an alternative question. How do we understand what “the history” of this region is? Many facts about this region are hotly contested, and influence the way people use the forest/river/cultural landscapes. I call them environmental-historical cosmologies. Deforestation is not a self-evident practice, but has all sorts of historical and cultural precedents. For instance, in Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch’s talk we see the end of rubber as a respite. Yet, in my work with central Africans, they see rubber as one of a series of forest commodities that were once in vogue and that provided access to goods and other things. Now they seem to be looking for a replacement commodity through which to obtain such access. I don’t mean to frame forest use in exclusively economic terms. I would encourage us to think about roads not just as avenues of exploitative trade and development, but as positive connections to broader networks of power, social relations, and such.

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These different versions of history do influence each other. WWF's version of the history of Bayanga, as I perceived it in my field research, characterized migrants as a source of environmental destruction. That version of the past has manifested itself in efforts to discourage migration in the present, and to render certain forest uses as "illegitimate." Mpiemu, many of whom have moved into the Bayanga area over the years, thus think of themselves as dead people, as people separated or cut off from their history. These interactions are playing themselves out in ways that belie any master narrative, and have rather to do with interactions. It is thus important that we realize that our terms are or may be negotiated. Terms like "indigenous" have underpinnings involving imposed distinctions between those who "belonged" in a place and those who didn't (or shouldn't), and should be examined even as they are used.

#### QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, AND RESPONSES

**Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, University of Paris VII, France:** As far as the gap between prehistory and colonial history goes: indeed, there is a great deal that we simply don't yet know. Very few historians have worked on these regions, and few currently do. In the upper-Sangha basin what we know is that there is and has historically and prehistorically been enormous fluidity as far as population movements are concerned. But there is a sort of "rupture" with the colonial era, a period of widespread illness, disappearances and flight, conscripted labor. The area is known as the region of rivers; as a result there were, on the eve of the colonial era, many different peoples, many different languages, many different commercial trades. Then, suddenly, with the advent of formal colonialism, the region appears unnaturally empty. Half of the region's residents died between about 1890 and 1920 (due to sleeping sickness and Spanish flu). We see, today, populations that each have their respective memories of the ravages of state power (either conquerors from outside the region in the 1800s or, later, the western colonial administration). People are thus opposed to centralized authority, not because they want to remain as they were, but because they want to protect their heritage. Conservationists who seek, and who may think they have found a "dialogue" with local populations must consider such historical facts. Dialogue, after all, implies equal interlocuters, yet history dictates inequality in this region. It's complicated.

**Anna Roosevelt, University of Illinois Field Museum of Natural History.** Such similarity to colonial history of the Amazon where I have worked to date! As Lanfranchi explained, much is not known about the archeology of this region. There are recent excavations

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such as Julio Mercader's project in the Ituri. These give us a bit more information about the prehistoric quality of life of pygmoid peoples. Often the skeletons don't allow taxonomic identification, but we do see particular pathology suggested, or other evidence of health problems. From a health perspective, historically the state and centralization of hierarchy have been implicated in dropping status or lowered quality of health and life, in both Africa and Amazonia.

**Catherine Coquery-Vidrovich, University of Paris VII, France:** As an historian, I must note here that whatever development process we discuss, it always implies deforestation. Monasteries in France destroyed forests, but are understood as a great moment of progress. The reintroduction of a few wolves in the Alps now makes farmers furious. In the U.S. the entire west was cleared. That, too, is a central paradox, such as the one David Wilkie raised about roads in central Africa in his presentation. How not to make of Africa a simple restitution of the lost paradise, waiting for travelers from the western world? Perhaps a certain destruction of that ecological "patrimony" is inevitable for "progress."

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**William Ascher, Duke University:** Paradox implies mystery or lack of understanding; David Wilkie has traced the "paradox" of roads furthering national development but damaging the health and economies of forest dwellers. Perhaps we should think rather in terms of "tradeoff." A tradeoff means that pursuing one objective means damaging the other. In terms of road building, we need to think about how different actors will make choices and decisions. This decision may be a matter of consensus and political decision-making, so there will need to be a process. The way you've posed the question of a balanced "paradox" has sort of made it impossible to answer.

**Alec Leonardt, Princeton University:** Actually there isn't much state penetration in the areas we're discussing. It is really up to the logging companies. The state may have whatever policy it wants, but it will be unfortunately irrelevant. And what of self-determination? What of human rights? If we leave those questions out, then is it really a question of people like us, who don't live in these regions, making decisions about the future of the pygmies? Southeastern Cameroon has virtually no rural to urban exodus. Around large settlements we see displacement of rural inhabitants, who buy up agricultural land, pushing locals out along road axes to clear forest again.

**David Wilkie, Associates for Forest Research and Development:** A recent article in *Environmental Conservation* looked at rate of deforestation and per capita income. The results produce a Kuznets curve. The asymptote of the curve is at thirty five hundred dollars per capita per

year, then it begins to flatten. Deforestation increases as long as people's wealth increases up to that figure, and then begins to level off.

**Vincente Ferrer, World Bank:** About IUCN imperatives for conservation in the Congo River basin: you may always say that the companies are getting concessions and not clearly controlling them, but we cannot assault the government. The states can control these companies if they want to. To my knowledge all the countries in the Congo basin already have conservation areas. I think actually that NGOs and others could go further in supporting these African states as they attempt conservation. Should these countries, at their cost, be developing their own conservation areas to monitor the vast tracts of forests in their entirety? O.K., but will the international community offer them assistance in that? If so, how?

ALAIN FROMENT holds doctoral degrees in medicine (M.D. 1978) and biological anthropology (Ph.D. 1983), as well as graduate degrees in tropical medicine, nutrition, and research direction. He currently serves as Research Director for IRD (Institut Français de Recherche pour le Développement), where his regional specialties are Senegal and Cameroon and his topical specialty is nutritional anthropology.

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Alain Froment, LaboratoireERMES/IRD, 5 Rue du Carbone, Technoparc, 45072 Orléans Cedex 2, France. Tel: 011 33 2 38 49 95 26. E-mail: [afroment@orleans.orstom.fr](mailto:afroment@orleans.orstom.fr)

TAMARA GILES-VERNICK teaches history at the University of Virginia. After service as a Peace Corps volunteer in CAR, she completed her Ph.D. in history at Johns Hopkins University, studying the Mpiemu of southwestern Central African Republic.

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Tamara Giles-Vernick (academic year 1998-1999) Yale University, Sangha River Network/Program in Agrarian Studies, 89 Trumbull Street, New Haven, CT 06511. Fax: 203. 432. 5036. E-mail: [tg2y@virginia.edu](mailto:tg2y@virginia.edu)

BARRY HEWLETT is Professor of Anthropology at Washington State University. He specializes in cultural and medical anthropology of central Africa, particularly the Pygmies of Central African Republic (Lobaye region).

Selected bibliography:

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Barry Hewlett, Department of Anthropology, Washington University, Pullman, WA 99164.

E-mail: hewlett@mail.wsu.edu

DAVID WILKIE holds a Ph.D. in conservation biology, and is currently the president of Associates in Forest Research and Development as well as an adjunct associate professor at Boston College. He has over fifteen years of research experience concerning socio-economic aspects of household level natural resource use in central and west Africa, and in central America.

Selected bibliography:

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David Wilkie, Associates for Forest Research and Development, 18 Clark Lane, Waltham, MA 012154-1823.

Tel: 781. 894. 9605. E-mail: dwilkie@msn.com

ROBERT HARMS is Professor of History at Yale University. His research concerns the ecological and social history of central and western Africa, as well as the dynamics of the west African slave trade.

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Robert Harms, Yale University, Department of History, 320 York Street, New Haven, CT 06520 Tel: 203. 432. 0559.

E-mail: robert.harms@yale.edu