

## “Our life has turned upside down! And nobody cares.”

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**Abstract:** Many hunter-gatherers today find themselves caught between the dominance of neoliberal perspectives on development and progress that focus on extractive opportunities for supplying markets with natural resources, and on conservationists' views of landscapes as wildernesses that require protection from any human activity, apart from their own. This dual occupation of hunter-gatherer land in the Congo Basin is putting huge pressure on the BaYaka Pygmies' and their neighbours' lifestyles and livelihoods. After giving their views to camera in a short film (<https://ishgr.org/hunter-gatherer-voices/>), the article examines some of the underlying assumptions about environments that legitimate the current structural and actual violence experienced by these hunter-gatherers. The article ends with a request for more accounts of the pressures facing hunter-gatherers, so we better understand them, and to assist in thinking about what we might do to support this vital part of humanity's cultural diversity.

'When the ancestors walked in the forest and they saw a tortoise on the path, they knew that path would be a good path. See a tortoise like this - you know you will eat pigs! Oh it was good, so good! Honey for everyone! Wild yams, *mea*, *ekule*, *ngange*, more than you can carry! Now its' all finished, all finished! Now there is just sadness! We have such hunger.

Fear, such fear! The boys are frightened to go in the forest. It's the eco-guards [conservation patrols]. They accuse you: "You killed an elephant, you go to prison". Fear has entered our boys, this is the root of our problem'.

*Mongemba, 55 year-old Mbendjele BaYaka man, Congo-Brazzaville.*

So Mongemba opened the film 'Voices from the Forest' (Lewis and Lewis 2013), first shown in Liverpool at CHAGS 10. A fixed camera in front of a log bench in a small riverside settlement was offered to the Mbendjele hunter-gatherers for them to tell the academics and researchers at CHAGS 10 what they valued from the past, and how they see today. Speaking directly into the

camera addressing their imagined audience with conviction and eloquence young and old, men and women, shared their views.

Next to speak was 45 year-old Maindja, a grandmother. She, like other women, expressed herself particularly forcefully:

'The ancestors' path is over! The state says our life has to change.  
"You are still eating meat!"  
We tell the children to follow the path of the ancestors. We say:  
"This gives you intelligence" but they won't listen. The children say:  
"If we are seen walking that path we are told that we are idiots".  
But now they don't know anything anymore! Who can give them the intelligence but the ancestors? Our mothers said:  
"Go dig yams, *mea, ngange, ekule*. Child, go get me honey, kill an animal."  
Who can teach them now that they are so frightened? Now they just walk aimlessly in life.  
Our life has turned upside down! And nobody cares.  
If we walk in the forest we are taken by eco-guards. This is why we don't put our bodies in the forest anymore. Now we just stay in the villages, not the forest camps. And so the wisdom of the ancestors' ways goes away.  
Listen! We don't eat meat anymore! This is what the state has done to us'.

*Since being recorded Maindja suddenly and tragically went mad after drinking some locally-distilled manioc alcohol. She has violent episodes where she is liable to attack others and has to be restrained, or flees hysterically into the forest to the great distress of her relatives. Chronic alcoholism is one of the most obvious symptoms of the dire situation in which the Mbendjele find themselves. A situation that has been forced upon them by a government more concerned to support Western conservation and industrial interests than those of forest people.*

Another woman, whose elderly father and paraplegic uncle had been severely beaten by conservation guards, passionately recounted:

'The Eco-guards come and beat you up right here! [*Repeats*] They shout at you: "bring out the meat you have". If you don't, they come in your hut and beat you there! Right here! [*Repeats*] They come and beat you up! There is no meat here anymore. We can't walk in the forest - we just sit here with hunger.  
They have ruined our world. If we try to hunt in the forest they beat us so badly. They even kill us if they see us in the forest'.

*Asimba, 35 year-old Mbendjele BaYaka woman. In 2004 her husband was severely beaten by several eco-guards for no reason other than that as a Pygmy man he must be a hunter. His case, along with four others caused international outrage after the Observatoire Congolais des Droits de l'Homme*

reported on them (OCDH 2005) and a news item was published on the IRIN humanitarian news network ([www.irinnews.org](http://www.irinnews.org)).

A young man concluded the session by setting out logically the consequences of dominant conservation ideology that demands people stop consuming wild animals. He explicitly asks us hunter-gatherer researchers and academics to take this problem seriously. For hunter-gatherers, being forced to stop eating wild meat represents an attack on their identity, culture, religion and ability to feed themselves independently. Depanda eloquently reminds us how important the hunter-gatherer lifestyle is to the BaYaka, and that their hunting is sustainable. Yet, the state, like many European and American conservationists, when judged by their actions rather than their words, appear to value animals more than people.

'We Baaka can't live only on fish!

I ask you who watch this to help us get back to our ancestors' path. You see if we lose this path it's just too terrible.

Because we Baaka are not Bilo [farmers]. Farmers are used to eating farmed food. But Baaka eat forest food.

I am asking the leaders of other countries listening to this to look at our problem.

It is not really the fault of the eco-guards as such. The law is made by the state, and it says stop hunting!

But we are hunters and we need to hunt animals to live. Since the days of the ancestors we have hunted animals. Have the elephants run out?

"No"! [from listeners]

Have the pigs run out?

"No"! [from listeners]

The animals are there - don't you see?

So you see, animals are more valuable than people! Kill a gorilla and they fly you to Brazzaville prison. If a farmer beats a Moaka [*singular of Baaka*] no-one is ever put in prison.

Thank you for listening, it gives us joy to know you hear us'.

*Depanda 25 year-old Mbendjele BaYaka man, Congo-Brazzaville.*

These are rarely heard points of view. The last time was in October 2005 when the IRIN report was published. As they attest above, from BaYaka perspectives little has changed. The IRIN report prompted much discussion within locally active conservation organizations, a begrudging acceptance of the problem, combined with belittling the victims' complaints and injuries (WCS-Congo 2005). Conservation organizations reminded critics of their official commitments to work together with locally affected people (e.g. Beltrán 2000) despite no significant examples of these being achieved in West or Central Africa.

This is not just a problem in Africa, but has dogged conservation programmes across the world particularly after they became dependent on government and

corporate funding in the 1990s. This dependence precipitated, in the view of many, the 'disturbing neglect of the indigenous peoples whose land they [conservationists] are in business to protect.' (Chapin 2004:17). Indeed, from a structural perspective, contemporary 'fortress' conservation (Brockington 2002) is the handmaiden of industrial capitalism, legitimating while ineffectually 'compensating' for the ecological destruction of market penetration into remote areas (Lewis 2008). Both often use the other to legitimate their negative impacts: in Congo government and industrialists point to the efforts made to establish conservation areas as legitimating the expansion of roads and extractive activities in biodiverse forest, while conservationists justify the imposition of protected areas and violent Eco-guards on local people with reference to damage done by industrial extractive activities and its consequences. Hunter-gatherers are caught between them.

Rather than accepting responsibility for the problems inherent in arming young men and creating conservation militias in places governed by 'the politics of the belly' (Bayart 2009), in 2005 conservationists were quick to deflect their responsibility for eco-guards' behavior and distance themselves from potential bad publicity by integrating eco-guards as local government employees, despite often continuing to pay them using conservation project funds. This has produced some perverse situations. In several cases, despite awareness that certain eco-guards were involved in massive wildlife crime<sup>1</sup> they could not be sacked by the conservation organization because they were now government employees, and their connections in government protected them.

Since local political and military elites organize the most intensive commercial poaching and trafficking networks, conscientious eco-guards are often unable to arrest perpetrators due to their political connections. In this context, Pygmies and local villagers become soft-targets for violent visitations. The beatings and other abuses experienced during these visits are a source of great anger and resentment against conservation and have established a pattern of antagonism found across the Congo Basin (Nelson & Hossack, 2003). This has been dubbed the 'People Vs Parks' debate. In its simplest form it pitches those who advocate people-free or 'fortress conservation' against those in favour of people-centred conservation (Wilshusen 2003).

While this is an important debate, it misses what seems the obvious target for conservationists seeking to end commercial poaching: Political corruption. This is at the heart of the recent escalation of intensive poaching and wildlife trafficking in Central Africa (UNODC 2016). Instead of attending to such corruption among involved government officials and their international partners organizing commercial poaching networks, European and American conservationists continue to focus their activities on targeting local inhabitants. This has profound negative impacts on the opportunities locals, especially hunter-gatherers, have to maintain their livelihoods and lifestyles.

Despite the potential spectrum of solutions available for balancing the needs of people and those of nature (McShane *et al.* 2011, Sarkar and Montoya 2011), and the formal ethical commitments made in respect of locally affected

people, the “parks vs. people” debate has resulted in entrenched ideological polarisation. As the failure of fortress conservation to protect environments like those in Central Africa becomes more apparent and wildlife crimes continue to increase, there is a reluctance to critically appraise conservation’s track record. Instead, important meetings such as last year’s intergovernmental conference on the illegal wildlife trade in Kasane, Botswana (25/03/15), are dominated by discussions promoting greater spending on military enforcement as the solution to improving wildlife conservation and the efficacy of protected areas<sup>ii</sup>. Yet evidence is mounting to suggest that local traditional and indigenous people are better custodians of forests than governments (Stevens et al 2014), and a global survey of tropical forests found that government-protected forests were cut down four times faster than community-managed ones (Porter-Bolland et al., 2012).

The response of Euro-American conservationists in Central Africa to this evidence is bewildering. Rather than side with local people with a long-term interest in these environments, generations of knowledge about and experience in these places, conservationists build close relationships with large, mostly non-local, industrial or commercial players (notably, loggers and safari hunters) whose ability to profit depends on pushing ecologically transformative, bio-diversity degrading infrastructure into remote forest. Such infrastructural projects are mostly justified in terms of economic ‘development’. Yet to who do these economic benefits accrue? Some are collected by those select locals able to get employed, and by national elites, but the lion’s share goes to the international companies exploiting local resources. The end result is that more and more is spent militarizing and intensifying poacher control activities, while poaching simply continues to increase as infrastructure improves.

As well as degrading or destroying the biodiversity of this unique ecosystem, deforestation and defaunation of African forests is subjecting many cultural traditions to extreme stress. Cultural diversity and biodiversity are interdependent, and the need to valorise both is becoming increasingly important to sustaining a healthy future environment for all. Reflecting on the challenge of conservation in such environments should turn our attention to consider the proposition that in living systems it’s not simply about preserving existing diversity, but about enhancing it for the future.

We are increasingly beginning to understand the way groups such as hunter-gatherers have enhanced their environments. In the Congo Basin harvesting practices increase the abundance of wild yam patches or *moabi* trees (*Baillonella toxisperma*), or of prey animals by trying to avoid killing pregnant females. The ‘wilderness’ model on which fortress conservation is based values a place mainly for the lack of human interference. But this is largely a misconception. Neither the forests of the Congo Basin, nor the Australian outback or the Arctic highlands can be called a *terra nullius*. These landscapes have taken their current form through human - nonhuman interactions.

Unlike conservationists seeking to preserve a 'mythical' pristine environment, as anthropologists we are well aware that maintaining cultures 'as they were' is impossible and undesirable. All groups change over time as their context is affected by multiple factors, from environmental change, to illness or contacts with other cultures. This change enables people to adapt and survive. As researchers working with hunter-gatherers our ethical role is not to dogmatically defend something we imagine existed before, but rather to seek ways to support and promote hunter-gatherers' right to determine the direction of further change and to maintain diverse ontologies and indigenous knowledge practices as they wish.

The challenge in our approach to issues as important to existence as how we manage our environmental relations, is to take on board new understandings emerging in anthropology, philosophy and science. Moore (forthcoming) discusses this in more detail. The scientific notion of environment has expanded to cover everything from the molecular to the biome. Environments are not singular, but multiple and nested. Microbiology and epigenetics are changing our understanding of what our own bodies are, revealing that the human body is not a closed system, but a set of ecologies composed of microbial and human cells, and microbial and human genes. A healthy adult has ten times as many bacterial cells as cells inherited from their parents. Dietary and political-economic factors can shape the development of human microbiomes. They reflect our daily habits, diets and cultural traditions, and our health. The human body is not a singular organism, but contains, in mutual symbiosis, complex bacterial, viral and other communities. For the human body is a series of nested environments structured by several 'more-than-human socialities' (Tsing 2013), which are themselves affected by being embedded in larger systems.

The bodies and the environments we dwell in, and will dwell in in the future, are the materialization of multi-species social relations. Plants and animals do not automatically occupy places in a landscape, their existence is the result of cross-species interactions. To become effective conservationists we must pay more attention to the cross-species socialities on which we all depend. As long as we block out everything that is 'human', we make conservation a violent, colonial, ultimately unsustainable practice, largely ineffective in its long-term objectives (Pyhälä et al 2016). We must not lose sight of how culture, economy and politics can have as significant an impact as the weather, climate change or epidemics on the environments that we all depend upon.

Taking seriously the range of nested interconnected social, political, economic and metabolic relationships on which a healthy environment depends, and the physical impossibility of maintaining constant growth on a finite planet, poses major challenges to humanity. One that is relevant to us as anthropologists is that humanity's cultural diversity, as a source of inspiration for renewal and adaptation is equivalent in importance to us, as the earth's bio-diversity is to the planet's biome. Yet currently singular models of development, education, economics and political organisation are promoted everywhere at the expense

of the diverse human experiments in co-habiting this planet that anthropologists traditionally studied.

Modern hunter-gatherers are the last representatives of the most enduring human cultural adaptations. Not in numbers, but certainly in range and diversity, these groups are key to maintaining the contemporary diversity of humanity. Rather than be placed in social evolutionary frameworks that promote hierarchical political values and the homogenization of lifestyles, education and markets, they deserve the right to determine their own futures. New knowledge practices often emerge from exchanges across cultural borders, but it must surely be a matter for hunter-gatherers themselves to decide what they chose to exchange, and on what terms, and how much use they wish to make of other systems, knowledges and practices.

UNESCO has designated BaYaka Pygmies' oral tradition as a 'Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'. Yet it depends completely on access to a healthy forest in order to find expression. Conservation organizations sometimes count hectares 'protected' as a proxy for achievement. Yet for the people, at least in Central Africa, the costs they must pay for these 'achievements' can be devastating. It certainly is for many Pygmies as Phil Agland's (2011) harrowing portrait of a small Baka community in Cameroon depicts. They have been devastated by alcoholism, violence, and the breakdown of normal parental obligations since being denied access to their ancestral forest in favour of conservationists, hunting safari companies and loggers.

In my own experience, since 1994 I have watched a society of active, well-fed hunter-gatherers walking comfortably along wide, well-used elephant paths, become poorly nourished agricultural day labourers or clandestine hunter-gatherers, sedentarised by terror (real or imagined<sup>iiii</sup>) and alcoholized to encourage debt bondage and pass the time. People are increasingly spending their time in conflict-prone super-camps, mortality has increased, outrageous violence has become normal, and when I have visited familiar campsites of the past I am struck by how over-grown the elephant paths are, and how rarely I see animals. When I ask Mbendjele about this some shrug and say the elephants have decided to go somewhere else, others respond that there are too many guns shooting off and this frightens the elephants away, and some complain about commercial poachers over-hunting.

When Depanda said 'I ask you who watch this to help us get back to our ancestors' path' he raised a challenge. It sparked Larry Barham, who convened CHAGS 10, to propose a learned society to promote research on hunter-gatherer societies and to provide a suitable platform for sharing their stories and views about their current situation. Sometimes we are the only outsiders to witness what is happening to the people who have shared so much with us. Something we can offer is to record these issues through publishing them in our journal and to reflect upon them and the patterns they reveal. It may not yet be an adequate response to the huge stresses facing contemporary hunter-gatherers but it is what we have been well-trained to do. I urge you too to share their stories here too.

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<sup>i</sup> For example, Cameroonian eco-guard Mpaé Désiré, was accused of beating Baka in 2015 and then arrested in 2016 for involvement in the illegal wildlife trade – for more see <http://www.survivalinternational.org/news/11312>

<sup>ii</sup> Eighty members of ISHGR joined indigenous organizations in signing a declaration urging world leaders to remember that ‘Tribal people should not be treated as criminals when they hunt to feed their families’ <http://www.survivalinternational.org/news/10699>.

<sup>iii</sup> It is both. See Survival International’s campaign <http://www.survivalinternational.org/conservation>.