

## RELOCATED TO THE ROADSIDE: PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS ON THE FOREST PEOPLES OF GABON

Judy KNIGHT

*Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, The University of Oxford*

**ABSTRACT** The Forest Peoples of Gabon (commonly referred to as the Pygmies) have, until recently, attracted little attention in the academic forum. It seems it is widely assumed that these groups are largely assimilated into dominant neighbouring ethnic groups and have consequently adopted new cultural practices and lost many of their own (Anderson, 1983). Recent research has revealed a range of socio-economic situations including forest-based semi-nomadic communities who combine hunting and gathering with shifting cultivation. However, the majority of Gabon's Forest Peoples have moved to the roadside, and where the last forest-based groups remain, relocation is inevitable or in process. Integrating ideas of history both exogenous and local, the aim of this paper is to consider the reasons why the Forest Peoples of Gabon have been relocated to the roadside in both academic and real terms. Based on recent fieldwork it provides preliminary observations on: the present distribution, settlement patterns and subsistence strategies of the Forest Peoples of Gabon; the processes by which they have been (and continue to be) relocated; and the effects of their various efforts to accept or reject inclusion.

Key Words: Pygmies, Gabon, Relocation, Assimilation, Conservation

### INTRODUCTION

'Les groupes pygmées du Gabon sont particulièrement mal connus et la littérature à leur endroit assez rare, en dépit du fait que ce furent les tout premiers Pygmées découverts par les Européens, au XIX siècle' (Bahuchet, 1993b: 76).

'Exclusionary practice has led to only a partial understanding of Africa's Pygmies. We are left with a myth of the 'Forest People' and no adequate way to explain those Pygmies that do not correspond to the myth' (Frankland, 2001:1).

Gabon is situated on the West Coast of Central Africa and is bordered by Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Congo. Portuguese traders first noted the area in 1472 and due to the profile formed by the Estuary, called it the 'Gabao' (hooded cloak). Colonised by the French from 1839 and a territory of French Equatorial Africa in 1910, its current borders were settled in 1947. Gabon is, by African standards, a small country-surface area of 267,670 km<sup>2</sup> (Pourtier, 1989) – with a small population density – approximately 3.8/km<sup>2</sup> (Lahm, 2002) – yet one of the richest, due to its abundance of natural resources, which include oil, magnesium, uranium, gold and timber. A tropical climate predominates, with a continuous rainy season (sometimes divided into two seasons depending on the region) interrupted briefly for a few months of dry season – usually falling between June and September. With between 60% and 80% of its land surface forested, Gabon includes approximately one tenth of the world's second most extensive region of tropical forest, the

Congo Basin; and only 1% of the land is cultivated (Ecofac, 2002 – personal communication). To the East of the country, forest gives way to savannah producing the stunning ‘postcard’ landscapes to be found in the Lopé reserve and Batéké plains of Haut Ogooué. Forest Peoples are found today in every one of Gabon’s provinces.



Men returning from the hunt.  
Babongo-Nzebi, Mtai Mtzingui 1998

Somewhat ironically, although the Forest Peoples of Gabon were the first ‘Pygmy’ groups to be discovered and written about by Europeans, they have been largely neglected as a subject of study ever since. Gabonese Forest Peoples were often omitted completely from academic descriptions of Central African Pygmy peoples or else mentioned in passing if they were located on the country’s borders and formed part of larger more extensively studied groups in Cameroon or Congo (e.g. Baka, Bakola). The reason for this seems, in part, due to recent historical factors in the post-independence era. Foreign scholars report that prior to the 1980’s, anthropological and ethnographical research was not encouraged in Gabon (notable exceptions to this included studies carried out by the University Omar Bongo and ORSTOM). However, this explanation does not account for the dearth of literature on Gabonese Forest Peoples since this time. Frankland (2001) sees as exclusionary the past anthropologi-

cal practice of propagating the myth of the authentic ‘forest people,’ and its counterpart, the anti-myth of extinction. To assess the extent to which this process is responsible for the academic marginalisation of Gabonese Forest Peoples would require a more detailed examination of the field than is possible here, but it is worth noting that the little information filtering through to foreign academics has consisted principally of over-generalisations in which these groups are characterised as largely assimilated with their neighbours.

Having worked among various Central African hunter-gatherer peoples over the last ten years, my motivation for pursuing doctoral research on the Babongo of Gabon itself emerged from curiosity concerning the dearth of information available. Within that context, the core aim of this article is to present preliminary observations on the current state of knowledge concerning Gabonese Forest Peoples and to identify contemporary trends and processes affecting their lives.

During 1997 and 1998 I travelled around the country and carried out a preliminary survey of the locations and socio-economic situations of the various Forest Peoples as the foundation work for future doctoral research. Returning to the field in December 2001, I was able to visit further groups and began carrying out a cultural mapping project with the Babongo of the Ikobé region of Central Gabon. My work in this locality consists of a mapping project involving the collection of physical maps and cultural information including genealogies and stories relating to place and migration. Information presented here is drawn from data gathered during these two visits.

Gabon’s recent history has created levels of material prosperity and access to amenities that seem, on the surface, to place its Forest Peoples worlds apart from other ‘Pygmy’

peoples in Central Africa. However, these conditions mask some of the common underlying problems faced by many Forest Peoples throughout Equatorial Africa when they are trying to make sense of their changing lives and circumstances. The majority of Gabon's Forest Peoples have moved to the roadside, and where the last forest-based groups remain, relocation is inevitable or in process. This article seeks to explore the nature of the relocation process and its implications for the future.

## TERMINOLOGY

'Forest Peoples' also referred to as 'Pygmies' are known by various names in different parts of the country; thus, nomenclature can be confusing. The majority of groups still live next to their long-standing neighbours (often referred to as 'traditional') thus names for the Forest Peoples can differ only in so much as they are equivalent labels given to them by different ethnic groups. For example, 'Barimba,' being the Punu word for Forest Peoples in general, is used in the southern regions of Gabon where there are high densities of Bapunu. There are often overlaps and multiple names for the same group, and these names likewise differ from what the Forest Peoples call themselves.

In the centre of the nation's capital, Libreville, is a plaque listing all the 76 ethnic groups of Gabon. Ethnologists distinguish 47 ethnic sub-groups grouped into nine ethnic groups and eleven language groups (Pourtier, 1989). The Forest Peoples are listed under the overall title of 'Pygmées.'

'Pygmée' is the French label appropriated by the Gabonese to describe any of the Forest Peoples, known variously as Babongo, Baka, Barimba, Bagama, Bakoya, Akoa and so on (see Raponda Walker, 1960, Mayers, 1987, Bahuchet, 1993b for listings of local terms). The label 'Pygmée' sets these people apart as the first inhabitants of the land – traditionally nomadic hunter-gathers, whose lifestyle and culture is forest-based. In certain discourses, the term is also used to describe any forest-dwelling people who are specialist hunters. It is often said that 'Batéké (or Mitsogho) and the Pygmies are the same' because of their longstanding exchange relationships, kinship links, and in particular their traditional forest-hunting way of life.

As is so common throughout Central Africa, the term also carries with it the double identity of the Pygmies as 'nothing' (numerous derogatory connotations, lower status) and 'everything' (healers and fetishers that know the secrets of nature). They themselves use the word with outsiders as a form of self-description, interchangeably with such local terms as 'Babongo,' again in contexts that emphasise their dual identity as 'small and



Gathering Firewood: Babongo-Tsogho, Boundji, Etéké Forest 1997



Women demonstrate building Itudi (round hut). The more common form of hut-style can be seen in the background. Babongo-Sango, Diyanga, Mount Ibounji, 1998.

powerless' and 'omnipotent fetishers,' and, like other Gabonese, go on to elucidate its meaning in relation to the term 'Bantu.'

As the Forest Peoples' societies appear to be predominantly patrilineal and patrilocal, offspring of a mixed marriage shed their identity if their father is not Babongo. Occasionally, where the individual is small in stature, he will nevertheless be recognised as a 'Pygmy,' illustrating just one of the many ways in which Forest Peoples have appropriated external definitions to describe themselves. The Forest Peoples do not approve of the term's derogatory connotations, nor the fact that it is printed on their birth certificates. 'Forest Peoples' has been chosen as the preferred term with the recent emergence of indigenous rights awareness and representation.

All over Gabon, Forest Peoples are famous for their songs and dances; and performing troops sometimes come to the capital. Today they practice a wide variety of rites traditionally associated with their neighbours, but they also have rites that are specific to them. At Mtai Mtsingui, the Babongo-Nzebi distinguish themselves as the 'Autochtons' (First Inhabitants) by carrying out circumcision in the traditional way (associated with nature and the land) as opposed to going to hospital (associated with subsequent new-comers). Local songs, such as those recorded by Pierre Sallée attribute the origins of the widely practised rite of 'Bwiti' to the Pygmies (Sallée, 1977; 1984).

## STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

'There was the first Pygmy boy Nzambe and his wife, Dibenga. There were three types of people: the Pygmies, whites and the blacks. At first the Pygmies had all the resources, but the whites and other blacks stole them when the Pygmies went to collect honey. The Pygmies were left sad and empty because their brothers had taken everything. They stayed in the forest while the whites and blacks went to town. That's why they're o.k' (Old Woman, Babongo, Ibounji, 1997).

'The wild pig started to construct a shelter. A Pygmy woman was pregnant. While she was asleep her husband made a house like the wild pig's because it was quick, but it was not so strong. This was the first house, or Itudi (round hut)' (Old Woman, Babongo, Ibounji, 1997).



Basket Making: Babongo-Tsogho, Mugoko, Etéké Forest 1997

Archaeologists working in Gabon believe that hunter-gatherers were living in the area at least 400,000 years ago; and between 60,000 BP - 40,000 BP were known to inhabit a range of environments including tropical rainforest and savannah. By 12000 BP the wide occurrence of tool industries attest that the area was occupied consistently by small groups of hunter-gatherers. By 4500 BP evidence suggests hunter-gatherers coexisting alongside more sedentary ceramic-using villagers and a steady increase in population size through to the Iron Age, beginning 2500 BP (Oslisley – personal communication; Cliste, 1999). This data provides important parallels regarding the linguistically derived hypothesis for the development of proto-Bantu speech communities in the area from c. 4000 BCE (Klieman, 1997). While there is, as yet, no conclusive archaeological evidence that these early hunter-gatherers were the direct ancestors of present day Forest Peoples (Klieman, 1997); myths and legends from the region claim that the Pygmies were the descendants of the first inhabitants of the forests, who subsequent settlers encountered during their migrations (Gollnhofer & Sillans, 1997; Merlot, 1990; Deschamps, 1962; Bahuchet, 1993a).

Ethnolinguists and anthropologists make a broad distinction between the northern Baka groups and the other Forest Peoples of Gabon (Bahuchet, 1992; Joiris, 1997; Mayers, 1987; Hombert, 1985; Puech, 1985; Deschamps, 1962; personal fieldwork, 1998). The northern groups form part of the large group of Baka, West of the Congo Basin found in Southwest Cameroon, Southwest CAR, and Northeast of Congo Brazzaville (Bahuchet, 1992; Joiris, 1997; Mvé Mebia, 2001). These groups migrated to Gabon from Southern Cameroon in recent history and have a Ubangian-based language. The Bakola or Bakoya (Northeast Gabon) who are related to neighbouring Forest Peoples over the Congo border; Babongo (Central and Southern Gabon), Barimba and Bagama (Southwest Gabon) appear to have had longer standing relationships with the immediate region and have Bantu-based languages. These groups say that as well as speaking the languages of their traditional neighbours, they have their own exclusive languages (or dialects). In reality, the situation is very complex. The various histories of migration and displacement of the Forest



Peoples in the area, their range of relationships with other ethnic groups, as well as factors such as shifting patterns of trade and regional power structures; has resulted in an extremely fascinating and complex socio-linguistic situation (Bahuchet, 1993a; Klieman, 1997; Rossel, 1999). Based on the Guthrie classification of Bantu languages the following language groups have been identified amongst Forest Peoples in Gabon: Bakola: B.22b (Rossel, 1999); Babongo-Tsogho: B.31 (Klieman, 1997; Van Der Veen, 1991; Raponda Walker, 1937), Babongo-Nzebi: B.52 (Klieman, 1997); Barimba and Bagama: B.43, B.44 (Klieman, 1997).

The majority of historical references to the various Gabonese Pygmy groups come from the early explorers, traders, colonial officials, and the late nineteenth and early twentieth century missionaries Du Chaillu (1863), Fleuriot (1880), Crampel (1890), Mgr le Roy (1897), Trilles (1932), Anderson (1983), Briault (1945), Raponda Walker (1960) Cabrol (1962) and Fairley (Hunting Pygmy Hunters, no date). Although Forest Peoples in the region are alluded to as early as the seventeenth century (Battell, 1906: HSP2:6. p.56), Du Chaillu (1863) is generally recognised as the first to document Pygmy groups in Gabon, and thus his writing is used as a historical baseline. Albeit brief and in passing, Du Chaillu's comments provide some interesting information on the Babongo (he uses the term 'Obongo') living around the Mbigou region, in the basins of the Ogooué and Ngounié rivers. He outlines their settlement patterns, mode of subsistence and relationship with their neighbours. He describes their villages as consisting of temporary round huts "mal construits et dispersées au hasard," averaging around 12 in number and located deep in the forest. He also notes that he saw examples of such villages abandoned alluding to the Babongo's nomadic lifestyle. The Babongo were hunter-gatherers, procuring forest products such as vegetables, roots, nuts and wild fruits, and ingeniously trapping wild animals such as leopards, wild pigs and antelope. Observing that they did not practice agriculture themselves, du Chaillu reports they exchanged forest products for bananas, materials and tools (Du Chaillu, 1863: 256-290).

Du Chaillu was told by Ashango informants that the Babongo lived in a state of dependence on other groups such as the Ashango and Nzebi. The Babongo could be clearly distinguished from the latter in terms of physical appearance and lifestyle, as these groups did not intermarry. Although the Babongo were essentially nomadic, they would restrict their movements to the territory of their neighbours and hence were named after them, e.g. the Obongo-Ashango. Consequently, their language was a mix of their own and that of their neighbours.



Preparing Manioc Batons, Babongo-Nzebi, Mtai Mtzingui, 1998



Babongo-Akélé Quartier in roadside regroupement, Manamana, Lastoursville 1998

Although Du Chaillu travelled extensively in Gabon, his descriptions of Pygmy groups are confined to a fairly limited area, and hence give us little information on the wider distribution of Pygmy groups in Gabon at the time. Shortly after his voyages, descriptions of Forest Peoples began to emerge from various parts of the country. These included the writings of Marche (1877) on the Babongo around Ndjolé, along the Ogooué river; Fleuriot (1880) on the Babinga of Mékambo; Crampel (1890) on the Bayagas (Baka) West of Minvoul; Mgr le Roy (1897) and Trilles (1932) on various Forest Peoples living in the vicinity of the missions of Gabon, in particular Akoa around the Estuary; and Anderson (1983) writing later about the research he carried out in 1931, 1934 and 1949 on the Babongo-Rimba in the Central and Eastern regions of Southern Gabon extending over the border into Congo.

As a missionary, Anderson's primary aim was evangelisation and the documentation of spiritual aspects of Babongo-Rimba Culture. Additionally, he worked on developing an inventory of location, settlement type, mode of subsistence, and material culture (Santesson, 1939). During his three trips he was able to document approximately 45 Babongo-Rimba villages, many of which were on the Congo-Gabon border. In 1949 he focused primarily on Central and Southern Gabon. Groups visited included those living in the vicinity of the Kunyi, Nzebi, Punu, Téké and Yaka, with whom they maintained hierarchical exchange relationships that he described as 'master-slave.'

Consistent with the few descriptions made of Forest Peoples in and around Gabon since Du Chaillu's expeditions, Anderson describes the Babongo-Rimba as essentially semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers, reliant on long standing exchange relationships with their farming neighbours. The majority of Babongo he interviewed were based in villages located in the forest, sometimes so distant from the road that he was unable to make a personal visit (his measurements are based on approximate numbers of water courses crossed). Settlements described accorded with Du Chaillu's earlier depiction of temporary camp-type arrangements with round domed huts and open shelters. Village size varied from three to eight huts, with populations ranging from a single nuclear family to 21 inhabitants. Likewise, Anderson mentions several abandoned villages as evidence of mobility. Where



Babongo-Téké roadside settlement, Kebaga.  
Traditional Téké-style architecture, Haut Ogooué, 1998

Babongo owned chickens they had received them as payment for working in neighbouring Batéké fields. Occasionally, Babongo villages had adopted agriculture, but rarely to a sufficient extent to satisfy their needs. Other Babongo villages were located by the road at varying distances (as much as ten kilometres) from the neighbouring chief's village. A few consisted of rectangular huts built in the style of their neighbours although village layout was less orderly. In the case of the Babongo based in roadside settlements, Anderson notes that they also had temporary camps at other sites away from the road, where they would go and hunt in the dry season.

The fact that Anderson carried out short visits over a prolonged period of time, meant that his documentation provides some historical perspective. By 1949, he reports a general increase in Babongo roadside settlements. This was due to the large-scale movement of many Babongo villages so that they would be immediately adjacent to their traditional neighbours, who themselves often relocated beside a newly built road. With these developments came a growth in the number of huts in a Babongo village, more permanent housing following the architecture of their neighbours and a reduction in the number of traditional round huts. He reports the growing importance of agriculture for all the villages that he revisited, some of which had become self-sufficient. Likewise, he observed the adoption of crafts and clothing traditionally associated with their neighbours, such as basket and raffia cloth-making, and the reduction in old practices such as tattooing and teeth chiselling. Where previously Anderson recognised Babongo-Rimba on the basis of physical characteristics (height, skin colour, facial characteristics), many had now become indistinguishable from their neighbours.

During his last trip in 1949, Anderson noted his visit to the missionary, Donald Fairley at Bongolo, who accompanied him to visit the Barimba (Anderson, 1983:26). Fairley worked closely with the Forest Peoples around his mission and documented the lives of the Babongo-Nzebi in some detail during his service there between the years 1935-1969 (Hunting Pygmy Hunters - no date). He witnessed their communal net hunting using dogs and 'bush-beaters' and ingenious method of hunting elephant where only the most skilful hunters would creep under the living creature and spear it through its belly (Thompson,



2003 – personal communication). Fairley described the Babongo-Nzebi as living in semi-permanent villages for several months of the year, where their women planted gardens of bananas, plantain, manioc and other staple vegetables. For the rest of the year they were essentially nomadic moving from camp to camp in the forest. Fairley also provided some insights into the Babongo's relationship with their Banzebi neighbours, in particular how the latter took the Babongo as 'slaves.' He notes that in the years that he was at the mission, the problem of 'slavery' was ameliorated and Babongo communities became highly mixed with other local ethnic groups; and thus became less physically distinguishable from their Banzebi neighbours.

Since Anderson (and Fairley's) study, little has been done to locate and document Gabon's various Forest Peoples. Notable exceptions to this include Raponda Walker's entry 'A la recherche des Pygmées Gabonais' in 'Notes d'Histoire du Gabon' (1960) where he describes personal encounters with Forest Peoples and cites existing references to situate groups geographically; and Deschamps' (1962) brief summary of names and locations of the various Forest Peoples based on information compiled from the national archives.

Both authors present data on the Forest Peoples that supports Anderson's observations on processes of relocation and intensification of relationships with neighbouring communities. Raponda Walker (1960) notes that between 1905 and 1933, when he lived in Sindara, he visited Pygmy camps along the river Waka and communities living next to the Mitsogo at Matendé 'dans les huttes de feuilles, ensuite au village même de Mobai, dans des cases ordinaires' (Raponda Walker, 1960: 235). In 1933, he witnessed 'un village de Pygmées évolués...don't les cas étaient en tout pareilles à celles de villages voisins habités par les Mitsogo, les Simba et les Masango' (Raponda Walker, 1960: 235). In 1960, drawing on the observations of Le Roy (1897) and Briault (1945) he presents information on the Akoa of l'Estuaire, noting that communities once found at Point Denis had all but disappeared, having relocated inland, or merged with neighbouring groups: 'le dernier pur Okowa, comme on disait, fut un nommé Kouba, danseur et acrobate réputé, qui est mort il y a quelques années' (Raponda Walker, 1960: 234). Deschamps (1962: 133-136) describes communities living in 'huttes rondes de feuillage (familles déplacement)' in the areas of Mimongo and Minvoul (after P. Morel, 1961), and mixed Babongo communities at Lastoursville living in permanent roadside villages, which they seasonally abandon to live in semi-permanent camps in the forest. In Mekambo (after Cabrol, 1962), he describes 12 Bakola villages 'Près de Mékambo fortement métissés...Villages groupés du type gabonais courant; cultures vivrières' (Deschamps, 1962: 134).

Recently, studies including demographic information on Pygmy communities have taken place in the Lopé National Park (Angoué, 1999; Angoué & Binot, 1999), in the Minkébé area by WWF staff (ongoing) and Sally Lahm (2002); Bahuchet and Joiris 1994 (Joiris, 1997) amongst the Baka in the North; Klieman (1997) in the central, southern regions; and Rossel (1999) in the North-East border region. The Department of Anthropology (Laboratoire Universitaire de la Tradition Orale) and its students, have produced some preliminary studies (see in particular Mayers, 1987) and in 2002 (in association with the Centre Culturelle Française) held a conference on the Pygmies, the primary aim of which was to address the problem of the dearth of information and to appeal for sponsorship to compile an archival resource and ongoing database on the Forest Peoples of Gabon.

## GEOGRAPHY AND PRESENT DISTRIBUTION

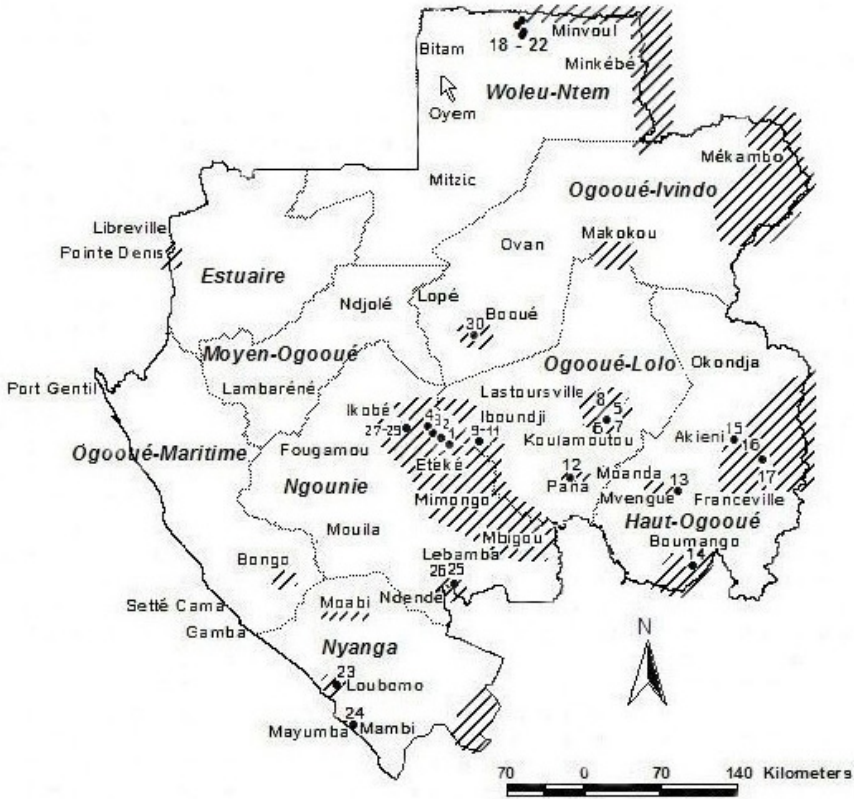
The following observations are based on the survey I carried out in 1997/8 and later extended in 2002. The aim of the survey was to produce a preliminary map of the present locations and socio-economic situations of the Forest Peoples of Gabon and to re-examine the areas of change noted by Anderson (1983) in the light of this new information. Data on location of Forest Peoples was amassed through archival sources and interviews with key informants. Where possible, regions pinpointed were visited and a sample of villages surveyed. These included villages found in a variety of contexts such as, the two major habitat types of Gabon (dense tropical rainforest and forest-savannah mosaic), forest and roadside settlements, and some interviewing of individuals in urban settings. A range of methods were used, including the use of GPS and basic archaeological survey mapping techniques, photography, informal and formal interviews, participatory techniques, simple observation and, where possible, the collection of life histories, stories and songs (see Fig. 1 and Table 1).

The survey was based on 26 (now 30) villages and camps, (approximately 1295 people). According to the most recent national census (1993), the Pygmies represent 1% of a population of 1,200,000. Thus the sample represented approximately 10% of the total Pygmy population. However, the accuracy of the national census figures are questionable. As is so common with marginalized, nomadic groups, the Forest Peoples often lack birth certificates and identity cards and may get excluded from censuses due to the inaccessibility of their villages and camps. This has led to a reliance on approximation rather than accurate figures. In addition, the national population figures are now considered out-dated and a new national census is in process (2003). Studies carried out on a provincial basis, suggest a lower overall figure for the estimated total number of Forest Peoples in the country (personal fieldwork, 1997/8).

### I. Population Distribution

Forest Peoples are found in all of Gabon's nine provinces, with relatively high population densities in Ngounié, Ogooué Lolo, Haut Ogooué, Ogooué Ivindo and Woleu Ntem; and lowest figures in Ogooué Maritime, Moyen Ogooué and Estuaire (where there tends to be dispersed mixed families in mostly urban settings). Villages are found in a variety of contexts including Savannah and rainforest although concentrations are highest in roadside locations.

Forest Peoples claim different regional origins. The Northern Baka groups, with permanent villages around Minvoul, said they had come down from Cameroon relatively recently in the 1960's. According to Rossel (1999), movement of Baka from Northern Congo into Cameroon and Gabon has taken place for at least a century and a high degree of movement still occurs between borders. Thus many of the Baka based in semi-permanent settlements around Minkébé may have had longer associations with the region. Forest peoples based in the South around Mayumba and Lebamba claimed their ancestors originated from the Congo several centuries ago. In the Massif du Chaillu, Haut Ogooué, Lastoursville and Bongolo, some Babongo groups claimed to be the first inhabitants of the area known today as Gabon.



**Fig. 1.** Demographic Map of the Forest Peoples in Gabon. Judy Knight 1997/1998/2002. Numbers represent location of sites visited. Shading notes the approximate range of Forest Peoples’ habitation zone.

II. Settlement Patterns (and Mobility)

Always close to the forest, most of the Forest Peoples have a base village along the road, where older members stay permanently and other members of the community spend most of their time especially during the rainy season. These vary from a group of semi-permanent huts, to permanent settlements, depending on the area, the proportion of time spent in the village versus the forest, and the manner in which the village was established. The majority of roadside villages visited were formed as part of an official ‘regroupement’ set up by the government, whereby often previously separate ethnic groups were made to form villages alongside each other in an ordered grid layout. Forest Peoples are invariably found in regroupements that include their traditional neighbours. Their roadside villages can rarely be considered in isolation as they form part of a wider complex of villages encompassing forest camps and roadside locations.

**Table 1.** Distribution of Forest Peoples in Gabon 1998-2002. Extent of Personal Knowledge of Forest Peoples in Gabon, according to accounts in situ and personal contact made during 1997/8 (2002) Fieldtrip.

Province	Environment	Forest People [Neighbouring Ethnic Groups]	Location: Core Areas	Known Villages [Population]
Estuaire	Coastal, semi-evergreen lowland tropical forest	<i>Akoa</i> [Myéné-Mpongwé]	Point Denis	No specific Akoya villages. Mixed Akoya / Myéné communities, identifiable by name (Angouie 2002-personal communication). [Numbers not known]
	Urban	[Myéné-Mpongwe & Benga; & Fang; Various Gabonese, African & occidental]	Libreville	Urban-mixed marriages and migrant labourers A few educated individuals with jobs e.g. journalist, nurse, Clerical
Woleu-Ntem	Semi-deciduous, marshy forest.	<i>Baka</i> , [Fang]	Minvoul area. Frequent movement of Baka between Southern Cameroon & Congo	Esseng (Mféfé-nlame), Elarmintang, Zangaville, Bitounga, Oveng Alène, Mimbang, Nkôgh akôme, Doumassi [323 Baka, 10376 Fang (National Census 1993); 364 Baka (Mve Mebia, WWF 2001)]. Roadside and Forest villages
		<i>Baka</i> [Fang, Bakota]	Minkébé area, into Ogooué Ivindo	Exact population figures of Baka in trans-boundary region is much higher, & subject to variability. Jôiris and Bahuchet (1994) estimate as many as 3000. WWF estimate 500-700 resident in Gabon. Predominantly Semi-permanent settlements.
		<i>Baka</i> [Principally Bakwele]	Minkébé Gold camps Base of Nouna River, and mid-Ivindo River.	Baka Landing Site' (name given by Lahm 2002); established 1996 at old camp of SOGEMI. Baka fled Mayibeth II during second major Ebola outbreak [approx. 17]. Community recently relocated to Ete village in Haut Ivindo [approx. 50].
		<i>Baka</i> [Principally Bakota, various Gabonese and West Africans]		Ngutu: mixed camp-a few Baka from 'Baka Landing Site' permanently resident. Source: Lahm (2002, 2003-personal communication).
Ogooué-Ivindo	Semi-deciduous lowland tropical forest	<i>Bakola, (or Bakoya)</i> [Boungom, Bakota, Mahongoué, Bakwélé]	Mekambo between Mazingo & Ekata.	Dept Zadié: Canton Djouah: Etakangaye, Imbong-Mangombe, Mawa, Mbiolola, Ngando, Tembe, Itoumbi, Canton Mbengoué: Maheka. Canton Loué: Coco, Mbéza, Maboula-Ekata. [Adults: 851 (Odambo 1998) ; Population: 970 (Cabrol 1961)] Roadside villages.
		<i>Bakola</i> [Bakota, Bekwélé]	Belinga	1 village reported (Mayers 1987). Bakola now moved (Lahm 2003-personal communication).
		<i>Baka</i> [Bekwélé]	Ivindo River, North of Makoukou	Doumabango (Mekob), [approx. 25-30] Source: Mve Mebia WWF 2002.
		<i>Baka, Bakola</i> [Bekwélé, Fang, Bakota]	Makoukou	Baka-Quartier Zoatab [approx. 20], Quartier Bienvenue [approx 15] Quartier Essick [approx. 20], Village Alarmintang [approx. 15] Village Tsenkele [approx. 10]. Source: Mve Mebia WWF 2002 Bakola-A few individuals based in Makoukou town for paid work.
	Forest-savannah mosaic	<i>Babongo</i> [Simba, Masango]	East of Booué, bordering Lopé	Misangalani [approx. 28]. Roadside Village. Hombert (1985) mentions Okouga village in the same vicinity.

The largest Forest Peoples' settlements are to be found in the area around Franceville (Haut Ogooué). Here there are highly sedentary groups of Babongo-Téké with ordered villages located next to the road but separate from neighbouring Batéké groups. The largest of these is Kebaga, which in 1998, was made up of two quartiers; Kasielli I, consisting of 58 huts and approximately 129 people and Kasielli II, with 78 houses and an approximate population of 174 people. By 2002 these two quartiers had fused and the village had expanded considerably with electricity and satellite connections (personal fieldwork, 2002). House types included an assortment of permanent structures ranging from huts with corrugated iron or aluminium roofs to the traditional Batéké style wicker houses, as well as government-funded public buildings, such as schools and dispensaries. When

(Table 1 continued)

Province	Environment	Forest People [Neighbouring Ethnic Groups]	Location: Core Areas	Known Villages [Population]
Haut Ogooué	Forest-savannah mosaic	<i>Babongo</i> [Téké, Obamba]	Akieni area Road L112	Kebaga and Ekalla II [approx. 500]. Roadside Villages.
		<i>Babongo</i> [Obamba]	Okondja Otala	[Numbers not Known]
		<i>Babongo</i> [Bawumbu]	Mvengué area Road to Moanda Road R16	Bingia I and Bingia II [approx. 200]. Roadside villages, located near the railway.
		<i>Babongo</i> [Bawumbu, Bakaningi, Mixed ethnic groups working at SIAB]	Boumongo Area Road R 17	Mouyabi-Babongo quartier & mixed Babongo/Bawumbu villages. [approx. 150] Population variable due to frequent movement between Congo & Gabon. Villages extend into Congo e.g. Bandoye & Bambama. Roadside villages
Ogooué Lolo	Semi-evergreen lowland tropical rainforest	<i>Babongo, Bakouyi</i> [Akélé, Banzebi]	Lastoursville Road N3	Quartiers in roadside regroupments: Manamana, Tsati, Lipaka I and Lipaka II. Forest Village: Ndingui. [approx. 250]
		<i>Babongo</i> [Banzebi]	Pana area Road R18	Lehegni (mixed regroupement: Babongo & Banzebi), Mugombafaha, Maranda II (Mixed regroupement: Babongo Banzebi), Roadside villages. [approx. 150]
		<i>Babongo</i> [Masango]	Koulamoutou to Mimongo (path)  Mt. Ibounji	After Mayers (1987). [Numbers not known]  Moukougama: Babongo-Tsogho , Diyanga: Babongo-Sango. [approx.85] Forest-edge Villages
Moyen-Ogooué	Semi-evergreen lowland tropical rainforest	<i>Babongo</i> [Mitsogho]	Ikoy area East of Lopé	Some Babongo reported to have hunting camps [numbers not known]
	Urban	Various groups [Fang, Myéné-Galoa]	Lambarene  Ndjolé & Lake Tsimbe.	Urban-mixed marriages and migrant labourers  Mayers (1987) notes one individual at Lake Tsimbe and possibly some individuals at Ndjolé (Numbers not known).

these populations visit the forest, it is usually on a daily basis or as a kind of recreational activity.

In other areas, e.g. Minvoul and Mayumba, roadside villages are seasonally occupied and populations are highly mobile, making frequent visits between forest and roadside locations and staying in the forest for the dry season. At Loubomo (Mayumba area), there is a small Bagama quartier (5 huts, approximately 15-20 individuals), on the end of a Balumbu and Bapunu regroupement (consisting of 45 huts and a total population of 197 individuals). The Bagama huts in this region are more typical examples of Forest Peoples' quartiers, which form part of larger roadside regroupements. The majority of Bagama huts are small, and rectangular with mud and wicker foundations; with leaf thatch, bark or where affordable corrugated iron as roofing. Forest Peoples' quartiers tend to stand in contrast to the rest of the village as they are usually smaller and seem relatively 'poor' in terms of quality of housing and material possessions. In forest camps, shelters tend towards less permanent structures and include a variety of shaped wicker frames interwoven with leaves and bark. The classic 'round hut' though fewer in number, can be found variously around the country (personal fieldwork, 1997/8).

Only in a minority of cases are communities based in the forest permanently. Around the Massif du Chaillu, in particular the area between Sindara, Etéké and Mount Ibounji



(Table 1 continued)

Province	Environment	Forest People [Neighbouring Ethnic Groups]	Location: Core Areas	Known Villages [Population]
Ngounié	Primary & secondary, riverine & mountainous tropical rainforest	<i>Babongo</i> [Mitsogho, Masango, & Simba]	Eteké (Central forested area spanning Ikobé, S. Lopé, Mimongo, Mt Ibounji & Mbigou )	Mixed Babongo, Simba, Masango, Mitsogo villages between Massima & Dondomobe. Forest Villages include Ikondja, Mutada, Ibounji I & II, Kumi, Ngontet, Ndamba, Masika, Mandji. [Estimate approx. 2000 Babongo in & around central forested area] Forest & roadside villages.
		<i>Babongo</i> [Mitsogho]	Ikobé	Tranquil, Evouta I and II, Mimongo, Mutombi, Nyoye I Osimba, Tcibanga, Diga, Divinde, Iwanga. [approx. 300] Roadside villages-Babongo and mixed Mitsogho.
		<i>Babongo</i> [Mitsogho]	Mouila area-20km from Mouila before Michel Marine.	Ngando: mixed Babongo/Mitsogho village [approx. 12]. Roadside village. Source: kenmoe, UNESCO 2003
	Semi-evergreen lowland tropical rainforest.	<i>Babongo</i> [Masango & Mitsogho]	Mimongo area (Dibanda 20km east of Mimongo)	5 villages, [Numbers not known].
		<i>Babongo</i> [Banzebi & Masango]	Mbigou area Lebamba, Mbigou & Malinga Road: R.20	Kambamongo, Malu, Bolapesso. [Numbers not known] Roadside villages (after Mayers 1987).
		<i>Babongo</i> [Banzebi]	Lebamba area	Matare Mtsingui, Binambi, Nzingui [At least 100] Roadside villages.
<i>Barimba</i> [Bapunu & Banzebi]	Ndendé area	Irafia. Mayers (1987) notes village between Tchibanga & Ndende: Dinguilala.[Numbers not known]. Roadside villages.		
Ogooué-Maritime	Coastal, Semi-evergreen lowland, tropical rainforest	<i>Barimba</i> [Baloumbu, Bavarama, Bapunu & Eshira]	Bongo village area Southern area, bordering Nyanga	Locals report villages present. Ukai village. Speculative. Some sources note a presence at Lagune Fernan-vaz (Mayers 1987 & Trilles 1935). Speculative.
Nyanga	Coastal, Semi-evergreen lowland, tropical rainforest	<i>Bagama</i> [Baloumbu, Bapunu & Bavili]	Mayumba area Mambi	Nganzi [approx 13], communities reported in Doumanga, Moulengui Binza area. [Numbers not known].
		<i>Bagama</i> [Baloumbu & Bapunu]	Loubomo and Panga	Bagama quarters in Loubomo & Panga. [At least 100]. Roadside & forest settlements.
		<i>Barimba</i> [Bapunu]	Moabi area Doussala.	Numbers not known. Roadside & forest settlements.

there are several forest-based villages and camps. Villages tend to consist of between 15-20 huts, with approximately 70 people whereas the average camp size is 6-8 huts with up to 20 people at any one time. While little is known regarding traditional residency patterns and land tenure, residential composition appears to vary considerably as there is a high degree of mobility between villages and camps. Villages are largely clan-based: there is frequent intermarriage; and groups often break away to establish new villages on the basis of clan disputes. Recently, groups have tended to choose locations nearer to the road to set up villages and logging developments have opened up the area to road building and large-scale commercial bushmeat exploitation.

### III. Subsistence Strategies

Hunting is an important part of the lives and subsistence of the various Forest Peoples and in this domain, they are renowned as specialists. Hunting is primarily a male activity.



Babongo-Téké roadside settlement, Kebaga, State funded buildings, Haut Ogooué, 2002

Groups have different hunting techniques: in Lastoursville and Lebamba, for example, Babongo groups carry out communal net hunting (both sexes), whereas in Etéké they do not. Amongst the northern and southern groups, they described the great elephant hunt; while in the central area around the Massif du Chaillu, some groups claimed to have a taboo against eating elephant (possibly a clan taboo rather than representative of the whole community). In Lastoursville, some of the older members continue to use traditional bows and poisoned arrows, but in the majority of instances these have been superseded by guns, often loaned out, with bullets, by neighbouring ethnic groups to specialist Babongo hunting partners in exchange for a high quota of bushmeat. Trapping devices are ubiquitous and used by both men and boys to catch a variety of small to medium sized mammals. Fishing and crab-catching are also common.

All the groups visited in 1997/8, regardless of context, had adopted agriculture to some degree. The most southern groups are reported to have only recently adopted agriculture. At Loubomo and Panga, agriculture was rare but had started in the last 5 years due to an increase in mixed marriages. The Bagama groups at Mambi, who are still primarily hunters and gatherers living in temporary camps, have recently taken up farming themselves, as forest resources in the area have been seriously depleted through prolonged logging. In the Massif du Chaillu, Babongo groups combine hunting and gathering with shifting cultivation. The area is typified by a complex of semi-permanent villages and camps for hunting and tending to existing or new plantations. Adjacent deserted villages frequently testify to patterns of movement relating to crop management. In most areas gathering of foodstuff continues to provide an important part of the diet and is primarily carried out by women and children. The exception being the more sedentary groups which rely on salaried work where agricultural and shop products have tended to supersede the gathering of foodstuff. Forest groups continue to exchange meat for agricultural goods with their neighbours, and provide labour on their plantations. The extent of this varies depending on the degree of self-sufficiency achieved as today most Forest Peoples have their own plantations.

Babongo have also been affected by wider urban migratory trends. Paid work in rural areas tends to be seasonal or temporary, such as labouring for logging companies, sieving gold, working as guards or road builders. Some men are employed as low rank military.

In a few areas especially around Franceville, certain companies have employed Babongo alongside people from other ethnic groups with comparable positions and salaries. In urban settings the majority of Babongo tend to work as builders, guards and cleaners, although a few individuals have attained professional positions such as journalists and doctors.

## RELOCATION PROCESSES

Preliminary results of archival research and fieldwork through oral histories brought out the following categories of relocation.

### I. Traditional Migration

‘Men are like fish, they move’ (Man, 70, Bagama, Loubomo, 1998).

The earliest accounts of the Forest Peoples emphasise their nomadic, migratory nature. Mobility is central to self-identity and history. This is evident on examination of the map of Gabon, which is alive with history and movement through its trails of named places. When Forest Peoples move to another site, they often retain the name of their original village, which was commonly named after a founding ancestor, or clans that divided, or a feature of the original landscape. Thus Gabon is full of multiple village sites of the same name. The most common reasons cited for moving include the death of a village founder, clan disputes and recently to be nearer the road (personal fieldwork, 1998).

Another factor commonly assumed to influence the migration patterns of the Forest Peoples is that they have willingly followed their traditional neighbours, who themselves were highly mobile. Deschamps (1962), in his analysis of Gabonese oral traditions, distinguishes various levels of involvement of the other Gabonese groups with Pygmies during the major migrations and peopling of the country, and traditional war; often leading to intermarriage, or displacement and Babongo seeking refuge in the forest. However, several of the nineteenth and twentieth century sources describe Forest Peoples’ movements as being limited to the vicinity of their long-standing neighbours. This was supposedly due to their relationships, which have been described variously as ‘symbiotic,’ ‘dependent,’ ‘servile.’ (Du Chaillu, 1863; Briault, 1945; Anderson 1983).

Klieman (1999) questions a number of assumptions commonly made by scholars regarding the relationships between hunter-gatherers and their neighbours in a historical context. In her seminal study of Bantu expansion into equatorial rainforest regions (3000 B.C. to A.D. 1880), Klieman (1997) examines patterns of initial contact with hunter-gathering communities using methods of comparative historical linguistics supplemented by archaeological, ethnological and archival data. Using case studies from the Western Equatorial region, she argues that evidence from modern hunter-gatherer groups in Central Africa, indicates that the subordinate social status of these communities in contemporary society, may have had its origins in recent history and is therefore not an accurate indicator of the situation in the past. Klieman (1997) suggests that previously, all hunter-gatherer

communities of the forested regions, like the agriculturalist communities of the same area, had long histories as independent but not isolated economic units. Thus rather than their movements being 'restricted' by their relationships with their neighbours, they retained a degree of autonomy that allowed them to choose to move away from previously established relationships and profit from changing economic circumstances. This is reflected in patterns of linguistic divergence evident in their present day languages. Where modern day hunter-gatherers continue to exist as distinct cultural units, with their own Bantu dialects or languages, it is because at some point in the past their ancestors chose not to assimilate into the communities from whom they originally adopted Bantu languages.

Klieman proposes that initial relationships between Bantu immigrants and autochthonous populations (she terms 'Batwa') were based on parity, even a certain degree of prestige towards the latter due to what she terms the 'new-comers' model, i.e. the vital role of autochthonous populations as ritual guardians of the land. This encouraged linguistic and cultural merger and the development of ongoing socio-economic relations. As Bantu moved into a fully agricultural lifestyle (with the introduction of bananas and iron 1500-500 B.C.E.), regional and local economic specialisations appeared alongside increasingly more centralised politico-economic structures and long distance trade networks. Consequently, the ancestors of modern-day Forest Peoples began to lessen contact with the Bantu communities with which they shared language and began to develop their own economic niche as procurers of forest products for entry into regional systems of trade (Klieman, 1997).

With the rise of territorial chiefs (500-1000 C.E.) the religious importance of autochthonous populations became usurped. In Central Gabon Forest Peoples were able to maintain their independence; whereas in the southern areas groups became absorbed as clients on the periphery of centralised systems. Despite this, all these groups were able to retain a strong degree of autonomy due to their position as forest specialists and the high trading demand for forest produce, well into the Atlantic Age (1500-1900 A.D.). It was only during the height of the latter era that hunter-gatherers began to lose a degree of their autonomy and status. With the growing demand for ivory, agriculturalists began to oust Forest Peoples as elephant hunters; and raided their communities, forcing them to enter into exploitative relationships of clientage and slavery in order to survive (Klieman, 1999).

Klieman's work is of further interest to the present discussion as it implies that the original forest specialist communities were formed from groups that once had close ties to agricultural communities and relied upon cultivated crops as part of their subsistence; not communities that had been isolated in the forest for thousands of years. In addition, she suggests that in the past, hunter-gatherer communities, such as the Babongo-Tsogho, may have lived more sedentary lives and only chose to take up a nomadic lifestyle, based on procurement and delivery of forest products, to carve out an economic niche to participate in long-distance trade routes that began to develop between 500-1000 A.D. Her interpretation also provides a possible explanation for the dualistic nature of how Forest Peoples are perceived in modern day Gabonese society: simultaneously honoured as the autochthonous population, alongside extreme social disdain.

## II. Slavery

'The Babongo were slaves for the whites, slaves were mostly Pygmy and other ethnicities too. Other blacks would give Babongo into the slave trade' (Old Man, Babongo, Haut Ogooué, 1998).

'Le groupe Okandé a fourni, avec les pygmées, le plus fort contingent de captifs pour les négriers de la Côte d'Europe et d'Amérique. Ces captifs étaient pris surtout lors les razzias effectuées par les turbulents et belliqueux Bakélé, qui eux-mêmes, fuyaient devant les Fan' (Gollnhofer & Sillans, 1997:22).

The slave trade in Equatorial Africa commenced with the Portuguese around 1580 and slave trading reached its peak in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. Legislation to end the Atlantic slave trade began in the early nineteenth century and on April 27 1848 a decree was signed to end slavery in the French colonies (Juris-Classeur de la France D'outre-Mer 1. 1957). A year later, French officers patrolling the Gabonese coast caught a ship and dispatched its human cargo at Fort d'Aumale where Libreville was established and named after freed slaves. Raponda Walker (1960: 235) recounted: 'vers 1880, j'ai connu personnellement à la Mission Sainte-Marie deux jeunes Pygmées, anciens esclaves libérés.' Although slavery was not as severe in Gabon as in some other West African coastal areas, slaving had a profound affect on the fabric of local societies, and displaced numerous communities including the Forest Peoples (Klieman, 1999; Poutier, 1989; Metequé N'nah, 1981; Raponda Walker, 1960). As Colchester (1994) notes,

'The key feature to appreciate is that the European slavers themselves never went far inland...and were almost never actually engaged in the business of raiding slaves...slaving was carried out by Africans and implied the transformation of old types of bondage and servile working conditions into pure slavery as well as the massive intensification of raiding and war' (Colchester, 1994: 9).

The Atlantic trade tapped into, and was developed upon, pre-existing trade routes and commercial spheres (Klieman, 1999). Yet, over time, slavery and commerce transformed the relationship between society and space. Certain groups became empowered by their position in relation to the slave trade circuit. Slaves were captured and sold on, passing through a hierarchy of ethnic groups, until they arrived at the coast where they were 'stored' and sold into the European slave trade. These practices intensified during periods of major migration and displacement and continued within society well after the European slave trade ended (Gollnhofer & Sillans, 1997; Merlot, 1990). Thus, nearly a century later, on July 8, 1931 legislation was passed to prevent slavery and slavery-type relationships taking place within the interior of the countries of Equatorial Africa (Juris-Classeur de la France D'outre-Mer 1. 1957; Christy, 2002 – personal communication).

It appears that the slave trade exploited relationships between the Forest Peoples and their neighbours, transforming them into what Anderson described as 'master-slave.' Hunter-gatherers are known to have played a role as primary producers supplying forest products for the Atlantic trade system and consequently, they fell victim to the same historical processes as other peoples in the region (Klieman, 1999).



'As trade systems shifted from a focus on kingdoms to the new coastal entrepôts, economic and social hierarchies developed from the coast inland. Middlemen traders vied for top positions in this commerce, pushing primary producers to the bottom of the social and economic structure. Such peoples eventually became objects of the trade itself as the slave trade penetrated the entire region' (Klieman, 1999: 102).

According to the literature, these established patterns of 'slaving' behaviour carried on up until recent history (Raponda Walker, 1960; Gollnhofer & Sillans, 1997). Reports from local administrators, missionaries and Forest Peoples frequently refer to Babongo villages as being raided in various parts of the country (Trilles, 1932; Anderson, 1983; Thomson, 1998; personal fieldwork, 1997). As recently as the 1950's, Donald Fairley reported that for decades Pygmy women had been regularly taken as slave wives by the men of the big tribes either by coercion, fear, witchcraft or outright capture (Thompson, 1998). Trilles (1932) met some of the children of such unions, noting the difficulties they had in accepting their background. This process is known as 'emancipation' or 'shedding skin' in Babongo local dialect. Babongo informants reported that, in the past, especially during times of stress e.g. when neighbouring communities lost members due to illness (e.g. food-poisoning, small pox), or their women experienced infertility (through syphilis originally brought to the shores by European sailors and rife in the logging camps); Babongo women would be captured, and taken as wives and forbidden to mention or express their Babongo identity, even to their children. These children would grow up, often stigmatised without knowing why, or else ashamed of their mother's identity and family (personal fieldwork, 2002).

In the 1950's, Fairley noted that the Pygmy tribes had gradually declined to less than 3,000 people in the southern part of Gabon, and he estimated that in the fifty-mile area surrounding his mission at Bongolo, there were less than 700, with only one woman for every four men. With the support of the local government, Fairley was personally involved in freeing numerous female 'slaves.' Once freed, the Babongo women returned to their villages with their children. As the mixed children intermarried with the Babongo, the latter's community became less distinct (Thompson, 1998).

Forest Peoples generally reported the cessation of raiding behaviour with the coming of independence and the resultant changes in local economic structures and ethnic demography.

'Babongo were the first inhabitants of the world and of black Africa. All the blacks are Bantu, everyone in Africa is like a Bantu. Before, Babongo used to be slaves to the Banzebi. This changed with independence. In the 1960's we were able to leave the suffering behind. Before the whites came, some Babongo ran into the forest; with independence they became free, so were encouraged to come back on the road' (Old Man, Babongo, Lebamba 1998).

Yet, even as recently as 1998, in Mayumba, the southern region of Gabon, hierarchical and cruel behaviour towards some of the local Bagama by their neighbours, could be observed, and rumours of their being treated as mere commodities (personal fieldwork, 1998).



Forest Settlement, Baka, Oveng Alene, Minvoul 1998

### III. Famines: 'Faits de Contact'

'We left the forest because life was difficult, there was illness and hunger. It was before independence. A local administrator working for the colonial government came to incite the Pygmies to leave the forest and come to live in the village by the road. This was for road construction and to pay taxes. Pygmies were known for their orientation skills and for finding rubber. Also the Bantu would not have liked the Pygmies to be exempt from work so everyone was included' (Old man, Babongo, Haut Ogooué, 2002).

Some Forest Peoples referred to famines that had driven their ancestors from the forest to the road in search of food. Du Chaillu (1863) and early colonialists noted the occurrence of 'demi-famines' due to seasonal variations in nutritional availability. However, these are contrasted with the general famine that broke out to a greater or lesser degree in all of the regions of Gabon, between the years of c.1916-1925 killing thousands of people. Poutier (1989: 1.217) notes that historical context is key to understanding the origins of the famines: 'elle est moins liée au système de production qu'à l'ensemble des 'faits de contact' dont la colonisation devait amplifier les effets jusqu'au tragique.' As contact intensified, food shortages began to occur more frequently. Areas most affected were those where commerce, in particular the slave trade, turned efforts away from agricultural activities and caused insufficient crop production.

While climatic factors acted as the catalyst, the later famines of the twentieth century are best understood within the context of the tightening of colonial administrative power. The idea of fixing communities to place was one that had pre-occupied the colonial administrators since their arrival in the mid-nineteenth century and came to typify colonial policy in Central Africa where population densities were low, widely dispersed and highly mobile. The aim was clear: political subjugation and re-orientation of production towards the needs of the Colonial state. From the end of the nineteenth century, large parts of the interior of the country became depopulated due to the demand placed on local men to work for concessionary companies logging Okoumé by the coast. However, the intensification of forced labour imposed during the First World War resulted in further depletion of the male workforce from the plantations to work as gun-men, porters and labourers. This led to wide scale underproduction, and consequently famine. These processes had far

reaching consequences including the breakdown of customary food exchange networks. According to Babongo oral histories, relations between agriculturalists and Forest Peoples worsened under the pressures of colonial demands for forest products.

In response to the famines, the 1920's witnessed a new wave of regroupement (resettlement) policies, particularly in the northern regions, focusing on the development of agriculture, religious conversion and improving sanitary conditions. Rural communities voluntarily gravitated to the road to escape starvation. It was during this period that the first reports of Forest Peoples experimenting with cultivating their own crops began to appear (Raponda Walker, 1960; Anderson, 1983).

#### IV. Resettlement Programs

'They came from Congo, they passed by the river 'Libagui' and the villages Mbungu-Baduma, Koto, Moanda, towards Budinga. Then they met the whites who brought them out of the forest. The whites got hungry at midday but when the Babongo were hungry at another time, the whites said that it wasn't yet midday, so the Babongo got angry. They abandoned the whites and went to the forest. There they found fruits e.g. roots and wild foods. When the whites called them back they didn't want to come because of nature and all the food in the forest. Now with independence they left the forest and live with the Bantu' (Old Man, Babongo, Lipaka I, 1998).

Archaeological evidence reveals there to have been numerous dispersed settlements in the Lopé area as recently as the 1920's; by 1947 traces of active settlements had mostly disappeared (White, 2002 – personal correspondence). Pourtier (1989) shows how, from 1940 to 1970, the distribution of populations varied, becoming highly concentrated, and localised to roadside and river areas. Recent demographic studies on the Forest Peoples also show settlements to have concentrated in roadside areas (personal fieldwork, 1997-2002). Table 2 and Table 3 compare demographic information from the 1997/98/2002 survey with data extracted from Anderson's accounts of 1935-49. The exact villages noted by Anderson often could not be found during the 1997/98/2002 survey, as they no longer exist and their descendants have moved on to new villages and communities. In addition, many of the villages described by Anderson were on the Congo-Gabon border and today fall on the Congo side. However, these groups are related to the Gabonese Babongo, and even at present, there is frequent intermarriage and movement between the areas. The comparison therefore serves to illustrate the general trends in population size, settlement types and location over time.

Anderson's records show types of Babongo-Rimba settlements and demography in the late colonial period. His data demonstrate changes over time between 1931-49, which are much clearer when they are compared with the figures from the 1997/98/2002 survey. One sees an increase in settlement size over time, with largest population densities in the Haut Ogooué region. There is a corresponding increase in the number of roadside settlements and larger, more permanent villages rather than the predominance of camps and hamlets which characterised mobility.

Consistent with Anderson's accounts, the majority of Forest Peoples claimed that they had moved during the period shortly before independence. According to one of Anderson's informants, it was the French administration that had ordered the Babongo to build

**Table 2.** Data on settlement size and distribution over time based on Anderson 1931-49 (Anderson, 1983) (cf. Table 3). The areas Anderson visited in Gabon included Babongo-Rimba villages around Haut Ogooué, Ngounié and Nyanga.

Site No.	Date	Village Name	Country	Location	Style	No. of huts	Settl. Type	Population
1	1931	Banzieye	Congo/Gabon border	Forest	Traditional	12	camp	7 families
2	1935	Ikwele	Congo/Gabon border	Forest	Traditional	7	camp	18
3	1935	Loyo	Congo/Gabon border	Forest	Traditional	6	camp	16
4	1935	?	Congo/Gabon border	Road	Teke	?	camp	6
5	1935	Isyeri	Congo/Gabon border	Road	Traditional	3	camp	8
6	1935	?	Congo/Gabon border	Road	Traditional	?	camp	deserted
7	1935	?	Congo/Gabon border	Road	teke	?	camp	6
8	1935	Sala Mbamba	Congo/Gabon border	Road	Traditional	9	village	?
9	1935	Malima II	Congo/Gabon border	Road	Traditional	hovel in ruin	village	10
10	1935	Matwene	Congo/Gabon border	Road	?	2	village	?
11	1935	?	Congo/Gabon border	Road	Traditional	3	village	?
12	1935	Iyoyo	Congo/Gabon border	Road	Kuta	3	village	?
13	1935	Bambama	Congo/Gabon border	Road	Teke	?	village	6
14	1935	Bangolo	Congo/Gabon border	Forest	Traditional	?	camp	5
15	1935	Makaya	Congo/Gabon border	Forest	Traditional	12	village	18
16	1935	?	Congo/Gabon border	Forest	Traditional	3	camp	12
17	1935	Mungoma	Congo/Gabon border	Road	Teke	3	village	9
18	1935	Bouyali	Congo/Gabon border	Forest	Traditional	?	camp	4
19	1935	?	Congo/Gabon border	Forest	?	?	village	21
20	1935	?	Congo/Gabon border	Forest	Traditional	5	camp	10
21	1935	?	Congo/Gabon border	Forest	Traditional	?	camp	7
22	1935	Banzieme	Congo/Gabon border	Road	Traditional	8	village	?
23	1935	Mouyali	Congo/Gabon border	Forest	Teke	?	village	16
24	1935	Kingolo	Congo/Gabon border	Road	Mixed	4	camp	9
25	1935	?	Congo/Gabon border	Forest	Traditional	?	hamlet	?
26	1935	Nzabi-Taba	Congo/Gabon border	Road	?	?	hamlet	5
27	1935	Makie	Congo/Gabon border	Road	Teke	6	village	13
28	1935	?	Congo/Gabon border	Road	?	?		15
29	1935	Kuta	Congo/Gabon border	Road	Teke	4	village	16
30	1935	Kingani	Congo/Gabon border	Road	Teke	8	village	13
31	1935	Mahinda	Congo/Gabon border	Road	Kunyi	9	village	29
32	1949	Bambamba	Congo/Gabon border	Road	Teke	many	village	?
33	1949	Bango	Congo/Gabon border	Road	Kunyi	21	village	?
34	1949	Misasa	Congo/Gabon border	Road	Teke	11	village	?
35	1949	Kwamba	Maymba	Forest	Punu	7	village	5/6 families
36	1949	Mulaku	Maymba	Forest	Traditional	6	camp	?

rectangular huts and to move next to the automobile track, as part of their wider regrouping policy. Sometimes this policy was intended to provide labour for the actual construction of roads, to hunt meat to feed the workers, or else to aid the collection of taxes (Anderson, 1983). The earliest reports of Forest Peoples being regrouped appear to come from the Bakola in the North-East of the country. These communities were settled by the road between 1930-1940 and today are predominantly sedentary, living in 11 villages located in the Mékambo region on the roads between Mazingo and Ekata. These were followed shortly by numerous Forest Peoples around the country e.g. Bagama in Loubomo said that their families had been ordered to move by colonial officials when the first road was built between Tchibanga and Mayumba (c. 1940). Their subsequent relocation patterns have followed those of major road building in the area (personal fieldwork, 1998).

Official 'Regroupement' policies took place at various times, but in effect the process was continuous throughout the high and late colonial period and into independence. 'Regroupement' literally meant the bringing together of previously dispersed communities to form larger settlements, strategically placed next to transport routes and administrative posts and later amenities such as schools and dispensaries. Couched in a discourse of 'civilising and protecting the indigenous populations,' these policies were powerful instruments of territorial control. They went hand in hand with the dividing and sub-dividing of

**Table 3.** Data on settlement size and distribution based on personal research 1997/8 (2002)

Site No.	Date	Village	Region	GPS	Location	Settl.	Forest Peoples	No. of Huts	Population
1	1997	Mutada	Eteke	01°15.47 S, 011°35.15 E	Forest	Village	Babongo	21	77
2	1997	Mogoko	Eteke	01°11.63 S, 011°31.20 E	Forest	Camp	Babongo	8	26
3	1997	Veda	Eteke	01°09.06 S, 011°27.15 E	Forest	Camp	Babongo	6	34
4	1997	Boundji	Eteke	01°06.23 S, 011°24.82 E	Forest	Village	Babongo	15	74
5	1998	Manamana	Lastoursville	01°02.90 S, 012°52.93 E	Road	Village	Babongo	8	35
6	1998	Tsati	Lastoursville	01°01.92 S, 012°51.75 E	Road	Village	Babongo	4	19
7	1998	Lipaka II	Lastoursville	01°01.42 S, 012°50.16 E	Road	Village	Babongo	12	58
8	1998	Lipaka I	Lastoursville	00°58.41 S, 012°49.02 E	Road	Village	Babongo	7	10
9	1998	Mukingami	Mt. Iboundji	01°12.26 S, 011°47.68 E	Forest	Village	Babongo	11	46
10	1998	Diyanga	Mt. Iboundji	01°13.97 S, 011°50.00 E	Forest	Village	Babongo	12	39
11	1998	Bikuru	Mt. Iboundji	Reading not Possible	Forest	Camp	Babongo	3	deserted
12	1998	Mayela, Buyabe	Pana	01°30.90 S, 012°34.63 E	Road	Village	Babongo	8	29
13	1998	Bingia II	Haut Ogooué	01°37.74 S, 013°27.21 E	Road	Village	Babongo	28	79
14	1998	Mouyabi	Haut Ogooué	02°14.45 S, 013°34.62 E	Road	Village	Babongo	21	71
15	1998	Kasielli I, Kebaga	Haut Ogooué	01°12.77 S, 013°53.78 E	Road	Village	Babongo	58	129
16	1998	Kasielli II, Kebaga	Haut Ogooué	01°12.93 S, 013°54.18 E	Road	Village	Babongo	78	174
17	1998	Ekalla II	Haut Ogooué	01°22.12 S, 014°08.16 E	Road	Village	Babongo	34	66
18	1998	Mféfé-nlame	Mirvoul	02°09.77 N, 012°08.34 E	Road	Village	Baka	10	47
19	1998	Nkuta	Mirvoul	02°11.56 N, 012°11.11 E	Forest	Camp	Baka	7	38
20	1998	Akom	Mirvoul	02°06.42 N, 012°11.30 E	Road	Village	Baka	11	40
21	1998	Doumas	Mirvoul	02°06.43 N, 012°11.37 E	Road	Village	Baka	6	27
22	1998	Oveng Alene	Mirvoul	02°04.70 N, 012°11.23 E	Forest	Village	Baka	12	37
23	1998	Loubomo	Mayumba	03°12.00 S, 010°40.00 E	Road	Village	Bagama	7	15
24	1998	Nganzi	Mambi	03°32.11 S, 010°48.17 E	Forest	Camp	Bagama	5	13
25	1998	Matare Mtsingui	Bongolo	02°21.35 S, 011°38.28 E	Road	Village	Babongo	15	54
26	1998	Iyawa	Bongolo	02°22.39 S, 011°37.04 E	Forest	Camp	Babongo	3	15
27	2002	Tranquil	Ikobé	01°02.34 S, 011°03.73 E	Road	Village	Babongo	7	27
28	2002	Mimongo	Ikobé	01°08.07 S, 011°12.73 E	Road	Village	Babongo	10	25
29	2002	Mutombi	Ikobé	01°07.91 S, 011°12.72 E	Road	Village	Babongo	12	10
30	2002	Misangalani	Lopé/Booué	00°22.09 S, 011°47.18 E	Road	Village	Babongo	26	28

the country for administrative and exploitative purposes (forced labour and tax) and laid down the foundations of the modern state system (Pourtier, 1989: 102-105).

Areas were affected differently depending on the aims of the policy (political, economical, sanitary, moral, sociological), whether implementation was repeated in one area, and the methods of instigation. It appears that Anderson's studies of Forest Peoples were made at a crucial time in these developments. From 1931, regroupement took on a new impulse as efforts were focused on road building and developing means of communication. PCA (postes de controle administrative) were created in 1934 to enable the administration to tighten control: to absorb villages far from the centres and to concentrate existing regroupements further to form towns. As Pourtier (1989: 2.50) describes: 'sans doute des petits poisons échappent-ils toujours au filet, mais les établissements humains de quelque importance ne pouvaient plus se soustraire à un controle que la delimitation des subdivisions en 1936 perfectiona'. Subsequent waves of regroupements followed throughout the country, notably in 1947 which 'peut etre considerer comme la charte de regroupement moderne' (Pourtier, 1989: 2.50-55).

Regroupement policies were not specifically targeted at Forest Peoples but geared towards rural communities at large. However, it is hard to find a forest community that was not affected. Forest-based groups refer to the period as 'l'évolution' when they were made to build houses in the manner of their neighbours and to adopt surnames (personal fieldwork, 1997). For many Forest Peoples the process of moving to the roadside was gradual; while remaining in the forest, they moved vicinities to be next to their traditional neighbours who moved with the building of roads and, later with the development of towns and cities. Elsewhere, communities were subjected to more brutal methods of forced sedentarisation and faced imprisonment and burning of villages if they did not comply (Pourtier,



1989). Forest Peoples were made to set up villages as *quartiers* in an official roadside regroupement but they would continue to have camps in the forest. Local communities often resisted, such as the famous example of the Mitsogho at Ikobé in 1968. In the Massif du Chaillu, an area with a high density of Forest Peoples, many villages remained unreached well into the 1970's (Pourtier, 1989: 1.110-121).

In 1997, several groups reported that they had been told to move in the period around independence in 1960 (Babongo at Lastoursville, Mimongo, Mbigou, Ndendé); while others clearly moved in the post-independence era, in the 1970's, (Babongo at Lebamba) and as late as the 1980's (Babongo at Pana, and the Baka at Minvoul). For at least a decade after independence, the Gabonese government continued the policy of 'regroupement and modernisation du villages' throughout the country (Léon Mba, 1962; 1963; Bongo & Tomo, 1967). Methods of instigation were often harsh and local officials were under severe pressure from the government to achieve the double objective of transferring villages to the roadside and reducing the number of centres by concentrating groups further. Local communities were told that they had to come together to have access to modern amenities such as schools and dispensaries, essential requisites for 'l'évolution' and the 'amélioration de son niveau de vie' (Pourtier, 1989:2.110). Although official regroupement policies are long since over, the tendency of local administrators to encourage Forest Peoples to move to the road perseveres. In Mount Ibounji, for example, the Mayor in 1997, was encouraging the Babongo to move from their forest location to the town, with the stated objective of increasing contact with populations that had previously been inaccessible in the forest, and improving their standard of living, by integrating them into the state system (personal fieldwork, 1998).

## V. Political Factors (Peace).

'Our families had moved to the road and were not hurt, so they came and encouraged us to move. We too were curious to see the elephant with the fire inside its belly [the motor car]'

(Old Man, Babongo, Lastoursville 2002).

After a three-year period of internal self-government, the Republic of Gabon moved peacefully into independence (in 1960), but retained both commercial and political relations with France. The following year Leon Mba became Gabon's first president and after his death, in 1967, he was succeeded by El Hadj Omar Bongo (formerly called Albert Bernard Bongo), who has been in power ever since. In 1968, Gabon was declared a one-party state and, despite a move towards pluralism in 1990, President Bongo has continued to engineer re-election. While his authoritative stance and wealth have been the foci of criticism, his reign has created a stability that has also benefited the country.

Whereas in other areas of Central Africa war has played a large factor in displacing populations in recent history, Gabon has been mercifully spared. This has also contributed to the willingness of many forest-based groups to gravitate towards the road and to stay there. As family members have settled into a roadside way of life, they have encouraged subsequent generations and relations to do the same, and the process has taken on its own momentum.

'Leaders' of Pygmy communities helped to install others by the road, some were in town already who were at school and had different values' (Man, 30, Bawumbu, Haut Ogooué).



Forest Settlement, Mukingami, Babongo-Tsogho, Mount Iboundji, 1998

Some Forest Peoples reported that, in 1990, they were ordered to move from the forest to the road in order to contribute to the electorate. They described how Bantu candidates running for elections often call upon Pygmies for their vote and use previous master-servant relationships as a means to gain their support (personal fieldwork, 2002).

The vulnerability of 'Pygmy' groups in situations of stress and war, is illustrated by the human rights violations and abuse experienced by other forest groups in Central Africa, such as the Twa of the Great Lakes Region and the Efe and Mbuti of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Just a few miles from Gabon over the Congo border, several reports from neighbouring Babongo-Téké groups in Bambama and Zanaga regions indicated that, during the war in 1997, Babongo fled to the forest and were reluctant to leave, especially due to their traditional ties with the Batéké (they were being targeted as scapegoats and enemy fetishers). Gabon's low population density, as well as relative prosperity, attracts numerous migrant labourers from neighbouring countries. These include other Forest Peoples from over the Congo borders who seek refuge with their relations in Gabon during times of conflict.

## VI. Economic Factors (The "Gabonese Miracle")

'No other country in Africa, perhaps the world, has gone through such a dramatic transformation in the twentieth century from basic traditional housing in the rainforests to mini skyscrapers' (Newton, 1994: 365).

Soon after independence, Gabon struck oil and huge amounts of money began to change hands and flavour the urban culture with quick returns and excessive financial ventures. Urban migration began to empty out rural areas so that today approximately half the population of Gabon is concentrated in its capital city, Libreville.

During the mid 1970's and 1980's, at the height of the oil boom, a great deal of money was pumped into public events and building projects, the most famous perhaps being, the Transgabonese Railway, linking Libreville with Franceville. While aimed at facilitating mineral and timber transport, Franceville itself benefited from the resources and connections. Some of the small Babongo villages suddenly found themselves next to the railway

tracks where they were able to enter into a monetary economy and sell their products (notably bushmeat) to passers-by. Babongo have clearly benefited from the presidential interest in developing the area and it comes as no surprise that the largest, most sedentary areas are to be found there.

The construction of the Transgabonese Railway was largely funded by older established logging companies in exchange for concessions in the areas it crossed. Thus logging of Okoumé began to rapidly extend into the interior in the latter part of the 1970's when the railway came into use (Wilkes, 2002; Louis 2003 – personal communication). These developments provided an increase in employment opportunities for the local population, including Forest Peoples, in various types of construction work, road building and logging.

## VII. Environmental Factors

'Dans toute la partie exploitable de la forêt du Gabon, il devient de plus en plus rare de rencontrer des villages en pleine forêt. La maladie du sommeil, l'alcoolisme, les maladies vénériennes ont fait disparaître une grande partie de la population et la reste décimé, s'est rapproché petit à petit des points d'ou il était facile d'aller aux factoreries européennes' (M.C. Quillard, 1918, after Pourtier, 1989: 2.174).

'The foresters are planning a road further into the forest. We are happy because it will mean that our village will not be so far from the road and things that we need' (Man, 60, Babongo, Étéké, 1997).

There is little data on the subject, but it is clear that deforestation has played a major role in displacing Forest Peoples from their traditional areas both in colonial times and recent history. This is particularly evident in coastal areas, such as Mambi in the Mayumba forest (Southwest Gabon), where Bagama reported a long history of logging and displacement (personal fieldwork, 1998). There was a sizeable community of Akoa in L'Estuaire at the time of French occupation (referred to in Myéné oral tradition) in Point Denis and around Santa Clara. From the end of the nineteenth century communities were described as living more towards Igombiné (Mgr Le Roy, 1897; Trilles, 1932; Briault, 1945) and some along the Rèmbooè (Raponda Walker, 1960). Merlot (1990: 13-14) notes that communities became more sedentary and mixed with their Mpongwé neighbours, and by 1944 'il y a plus trace de Pygmées aussi près des côtes.' Locals report that the last of these communities fled when logging and tourist development came to the area.

While deforestation has taken place since the end of the nineteenth century, the general absence of economic development and infrastructure in the interior of the country protected a significant part of the forest from large-scale exploitation during the colonial period and beyond. Logging was generally selective focusing primarily on the exploitation of Okoumé. However, with the devaluation of the CFA in 1994, and the effects of the Asian Financial crisis in 1998-9, logging activities began to increase considerably both in species diversity and area (Lahm, 2002). According to World Resources Institute (WRI), in 2000, 75% of Gabon's forest cover had been handed over as concessions (Global Forest Watch, 2000); the latest concessions map published in 2002 showed these areas to have expanded to include even the 'untouched' zones of forested country.



Forest camp, Veda, Babongo-Tsogho, Etéké Forest 1997

In theory, within most areas of Gabon clear felling is not practised. Logging is generally selective, involving 1-2 trees per hectare (WCS and Ecofac, 2002 – personal communication). However, management plans are poorly monitored especially where areas are sold as temporary short-term concessions (Permis Temporaires d'Exploitation). In the majority of the country, companies holding concessions are investing efforts in developing Gabon's infrastructure, most notably roads and railways. Thus, large stretches of previously inaccessible forest have been opened up to the commercial bushmeat exploitation to satisfy the demands of the urban sector.

The recent decision of President Bongo, encouraged by the World Conservation Society (WCS), to turn 10 percent of the country's land into National Parks marks a positive step forward. Previous attempts at national park formation had been unsuccessful in the sense that they were paper-parks 'sans être dotés d'une administration et sans gestion appropriée' (HEBDO No 463, 2002). Prior to independence, protected areas (later known as 'aires d'exploitation rationnelle de faune') began to be established with the aim of controlling game hunting. These consisted of two adjoining areas: 'Réserves totales de Faune' where hunting was forbidden and 'Réserve partielles de Faune' where sports hunting was organised through permits and guides. From the 1980's more comprehensive environmental conservation laws began to take form but implementation continued to be the major problem. The forestry law of 1982 proscribed the establishment of new logging and mining concessions within protected areas and two years later reserves began to be policed. This only provided limited protection, as many of the old concessions continued and laws were not always adhered to (Christy, 2003 – personal communication). Reports indicated that by 2001, resource extraction (including large-scale commercial logging) was underway in most of the existing reserves (Nasi, 2001).

There is little information pertaining to the impact earlier conservation developments had on local populations. By 1946, when the creation of the first National Park, Okanda (now Lopé), was in process; much of the interior had already become largely depopulated. Correspondence between the respective governors in Libreville and Brazzaville at the time, indicated that the area was favoured as it was largely unoccupied: 'elle est située sur le fleuve Ogoouée, à 40 kms en aval de Boué, dans une zone entièrement dépeuplée, hormis deux villages de pagayeurs, établis sur le bord de fleuve. Sa superficie est égale

à 4,800 km environ' (Pré, 1946). Elsewhere, notably around the Gamba Complex, conservation and mineral exploitation developments contributed to the dispersal of Barimba populations previously based in the area (personal fieldwork, 1998).

Regulations on local activities in the 'domaines de chasse' varied depending on the area. In 1956, at Omboué (Iguela), all traditional activities were authorised except those involving the use of firearms. Elsewhere, at Ndendé, local hunting was entirely banned and at Tchibanga, hunting with a gun was authorised with permits, if the hunter had owned the gun prior to the establishment of the reserve (J.O.A.E.F., 1956; Arrête 1/3/1956). In the course of these earlier attempts at creating national parks and reserves, during the colonial period and beyond, official documents were circulated for local communities to sign, stating that they respected and approved of the conservation developments (Christy, 2003 – personal communication).

Since the 1990's there has been an increase in externally funded research and management programs. International conservation organisations have been working hard to put into effect existing laws and future protective measures (Ecofac, WWF, WCS, 2002 – personal communication). On August 30, 2002; thirteen national parks were created all around the country. Eight of these are entirely new; the rest consist of previous protected areas some of which have been extended in area. The establishment of national parks marks a new level of commitment by the Government to long-term conservation efforts with the added incentive of preserving the country's natural heritage in order to develop tourism. According to the law, national parks have a continuous status (in contrast to the previous 'reserves') and more rigorous conservation measures are being introduced (Christy, 2003 – personal communication). Logging and mineral exploitation is forbidden within national parks and companies affected have already been offered compensation and told to move (Rimbunan Hijau, 2003 – personal communication). Commercial bushmeat exploitation is being monitored around the country, and anti-poaching operations are underway in several logging concessions (Aveling, 2002 – personal communication). These developments are taking place alongside wider Central African conservation initiatives involving COMIFAC, in particular the Tranfrontier PDF-B project of which Minkébé (WWF) is a component.

The extent to which these developments will affect Forest Peoples' lives is hard to determine at this stage. The Government has no specific policies towards indigenous people. During the 1980's, Gabon became party to much of the general international human rights legislation, such as the African Charter on Human Rights (ACHPR). However, it has not endorsed legislation that specifically protects the interests of Indigenous and Tribal peoples, such as the ILO Convention 169; or minority groups, such as the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (DRM). The reason for this seems, quite simply, that until recent conservation developments indigenous peoples' rights have not been seen to be an issue. State policies have equated development with sedentarisation of indigenous peoples and integration into the state system. Likewise, non-governmental organisations (NGO's) have only just begun to provide alternative means of support. According to Nasi (2001) due to being classified among middle-income countries, Gabon has not attracted international NGO's outside of the environmental sector (including those concerned with the indigenous rights movement); in contrast to those countries overwhelmed with more serious or urgent sociological problems. The NGO movement is recent in Gabon, most having been established

after 1990. National NGO's are numerous, and while some have shown an interest in the Forest Peoples, they usually lack the means to carry through any significant projects (few have permanent staff and offices). International bodies such as UNESCO and the EU have started to direct their support towards local NGO's and academic institutions focusing on the cultural promotion of Forest Peoples (primarily through the collection of ethnographic and ethnomusicological data). Other projects, for instance those concerned with communication, education and healthcare are at the planning stage (UNESCO, 2003 – personal communication).

There is also the problem of what terminology to use to protect and promote the rights of these groups. The term 'indigenous' is politically sensitive and considered demeaning in some contexts due to its previous usage as administrative classificatory terminology by the colonial state. The concept is, at best, deemed unhelpful as it is generalised out to mean 'originaires du Gabon' (native inhabitants). While 'Pygmées' in Gabon are widely acknowledged as the first inhabitants of the region, this does not confer on them any specific recognition or status within the state system. The problem is highlighted by the expression used by some local academics: 'Nous sommes tous les Pygmées' ie, descended from the original inhabitants of Africa. Using the alternative title, 'Forest Peoples' also presents complications. This designation is based on a specialist mode of subsistence (nomadic hunter-gathering), which is becoming increasingly diversified. Although Pygmy communities are renowned for their more profound knowledge of the forest, today most groups combine hunting and gathering with agriculture and continue to maintain close relationships with their neighbours. The question is then posed as to why Pygmies should have separate rights to forest populations as a whole?

With regard to security of land tenure and feasibility of potential land claims; the first challenge encountered is the dearth of data on Forest Peoples' traditional systems of land occupancy and resource utilisation. In Gabon, access to the forest is not prohibited but land is owned by the state. Gabon's lack of land pressure and the comparatively slow rate and impact of deforestation, has meant that defending Forest Peoples' rights to territories and resources has, thus far, not been a major concern. Formal permission for establishing villages and plantations is not required in the countryside and land-use rights are recognised both between villages and by the state. Legislation recognises a 'Zone d' exploitation forestière villageoise' whereby logging is forbidden on a band of 5 km around an occupied village or roads (HEBDO: Décret no.1205/PR/mefpe du 30 aout 1993). However, the area exploited for hunting and gathering invariably extends much further than this. Camps and 'deserted villages' may be seasonally occupied and thus appear unoccupied at any given moment. As land rights are based on fixed association with place, the high levels of mobility characteristic of the lifestyles of Forest Peoples, and Gabonese rural communities in general would make many potential land claims difficult to implement (Christy, 2003 – personal communication).

In 1981, Government legislation prohibited all hunting activities in the country but shortly after, the ban was lifted except for hunting elephant and buffalo, which remains illegal (Christy, 2002 – personal communication). Local hunting is not illegal in logging concessions. Problems occur when Forest Peoples' skills and knowledge are exploited by middlemen in the commercial bush-meat trade, in particular large-scale elephant poaching. In such instances, Forest Peoples become prime targets for protective measures. WWF Minkébé Project recently repatriated local Baka elephant hunters to their home



Parks are created for both conservation and economic purposes: 'La creation des parcs nationaux répond, non seulement, à un souci de conservation...mais aussi...de developper un secteur économique de plus en plus important a l'échelle mondiale, celui du tourisme de nature' (HEBDO No 463, 2002). Thus conservationists have already begun to use Forest Peoples as trackers in the parks (Lopé, Minkébé) and are working on ways to involve them in future developments in eco-tourism (Blom, 2002 – personal communication).

As the majority of parks are so recently established it will take time before paper plans can be realized. In most of these areas, forest communities are based by the road and in the case of the Babongo around Waka, they are rapidly relocating to the road as a result of recent road building and logging activities. When interviewed in 1997, Forest-dwelling Babongo in the area welcomed the plans for road building as it meant they would not have to walk 3 days to the nearest road to exchange forest products for modern amenities (soap, tobacco, salt, bullets). They appeared to be completely unaware of the consequences this would have on their lives and the environment. While the logging trends may be to some extent reversible, the processes ensuring that the last Forest Peoples move towards the roadside seem firmly in place.

## ASSIMILATION PROCESSES

Relocation whether it is forced or willing, involves the intensification of relationships with neighbours due to proximity and increased contact with the monetary economy and state system. With its ethnic diversity and regional historical differences, it is clear that the Forest Peoples experiences of assimilation are not the same throughout the country. In this section I consider some of the effects of the relocation process drawing on testimonies gathered predominantly from the Forest Peoples themselves.

Long-standing relationships between Batéké and the Babongo have had a favourable effect on the latter's recent development; and having a Téké president in power has no doubt assisted. These aspects have generally had a positive affect on how Forest Peoples have been viewed in the Haut Ogooué area, and in recent years, Gabon generally.

'It was really the present president who had mixed us together and made it so that we were no different, giving us modern amenities to assimilate. Before, intermarriage was forbidden but today it exists. Here there are no Pygmies in the forest anymore, they just visit as a kind of holiday. There is a high degree of education and wage labour in the area' (Old Man, Babongo, Kebaga, 2002).

In the same region, there is a local governor who is Babongo; and a high proportion of Babongo have access to official documentation and the means to vote. There is also an example of very effective assimilation regarding working conditions and a successful land claim. In the 1980's, the French company SIAB was built unknowingly on the site of the previous Pygmy village *Mupata*, meaning 'money,' alluding to their moving there during colonial times to pay taxes. At first, the French employed other ethnic groups and not the Pygmies, so the latter protested. The administrative staff (who were locals) promptly employed them to work alongside Bawumbu and Batéké, with a comparable salary and shared accommodation. Rumour had it that the Babongo employees were somewhat favoured, as the local management felt that, as fetishers the Babongo would protect their interests. A local Muwumbu went on to explain the situation further,



‘Téké and Pygmies are the same, genetically no different. They have the same language, do the same activities: hunt with nets and dogs, fish, smoke meat and share rituals together. For example, the Téké have a ceremony for Twins. The newborn babies are confined to the house for 2 months. On the day when they are allowed out, the twins’ parents call the Pygmies to do the ceremony. The Pygmy gives a kiss to the mother of the twins to give chance-like a key to life.’ (Man, 30, Bawumbu, Haut Ogooué 2002).

Throughout Gabon there are examples of covert aid given to individual Forest People due to traditional links with neighbours (that often extend to kinship) in exchange for power gained through fetishes or healing services. Aid tends to take the form of education (sending a child to school) or employment (e.g. as body guards). The fact that such processes are concealed is testimony to the fact that the Pygmies continue to be seen as an inferior sub-group, connections with which can bring shame.

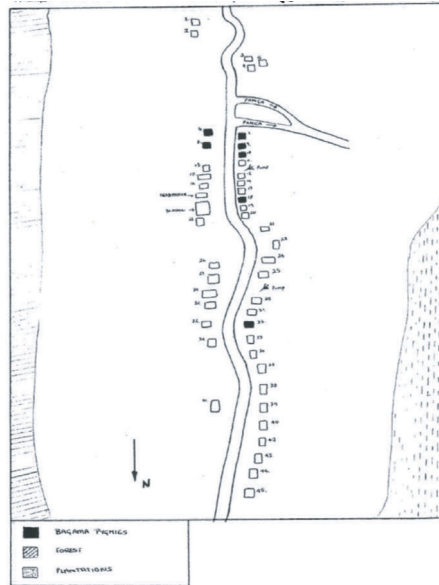
‘They say we smell bad. Get a white person as white as light, four days in the forest and they smell the same...and anyway if we smell so bad, why do the Bantu come and take our wives...we have a church in our village now and we (Baka and Fang) worship fine together’ (Man, 40, Baka Representative from Minvoul, Pygmy Conference, Libreville 2002).

In some areas, presence of the church has provided a new space from which to reassess previous relationships. Missionaries working in the Minvoul area reported that when they set up a communal church in a Baka village, several Fang elders refused to attend as it was on Pygmy land. When interviewed Baka reported that they had moved to Gabon in Leon Mba’s reign to escape the abuse they experienced from the Fang in Cameroon. While relations here were much better, they were still difficult. Some Baka reported that they flee the Fang because the latter consider them not human but animal and that’s why they don’t want to go to school. Others said that Fang men marry Baka women but treat them like slaves, and often reject them (personal fieldwork, 1998). As well as the relatively recent time-span of cohabitation, this area is predominantly populated by a single ethnic group. Missionaries believed that rather than an issue of discrimination, the Fang were characteristically exclusive treating any outsiders (not just Baka) with initial suspicion. With time the congregation grew although the Baka tended to submit to the Fang in matters of leadership (Christian Missionary Alliance, 1998; 2002 – personal communication).

In contrast, in areas with a rich history of ethnic diversity and movement, such as Sindara, (historically a nodal point for trade and transport), reports of discrimination are more rare. Ethnic boundaries between Babongo and neighbouring Mitsogho in Ikobé are less well defined and there is a long history of shared migration, linguistic merger and inter-marriage (personal fieldwork, 1997, 2002; Angoué 2002 – personal communication).

‘People living here are Babongo and Mitsogho, well, Babongo as we live far in the forest. They are more mixed at Ikondja because they are near the road. They speak a mixture of Simba, Mitsogho, Babongo and Masango...we have no problem with Simba, Mitsogho and Masango, we don’t work as their slaves.’ (Man, 40, Etéké forest, 1997).

Financial independence has influenced social interactions and choice. At Masingalani, situated on the edge of the Lopé National park, the Babongo community originally followed their traditional neighbours (Simba and Masango) to the road. However, as relationships were tense, and the Babongo gained financial independence through working for logging companies and growing all their own foodstuffs, they moved away from their neighbours and set up their own village separately.



**Fig. 3.** Sketch from field notes on Loubomo, (Nyanga) showing the typical layout of a roadside village. This highly ordered layout is typical of 'regroupement' formed villages. Other villages that have grown up more gradually tend to be more dispersed and irregular. The Bagama are found on the Southern end of the village, except for a few mixed Bagama households (indicated here by shaded huts more towards the centre). Total population of village in 1998: 197. Bagama: 10%, Balumbu: 20%, Bapunu: 70%.

Urban migration trends have contributed to breaking down old authority structures and exclusionary practices.

'Before I wouldn't get on the back of a pick-up truck if a Pygmy was there, but that has all changed with evolution' (Man, 45, Téké, Haut Ogooué, 1998).

There is clearly an increase in intermarriage between Pygmies and their neighbours. In most areas there is still a bias towards Babongo women marrying out rather than men. In the few cases where men marry out, it is often those select few who have achieved respected jobs and salary.

However, for the most part, the artificial juxtaposition of distinct ethnic communities, which characterised regroupement policies, has created tensions. 'Regroupements' such as Mananmana (Lastoursville) and Loubomo represent standard examples of Forest Peoples' roadside settlements.

The marginalisation of the Forest Peoples is neatly mirrored in the typical roadside village layout (see Fig. 3). At Loubomo, as in so many other roadside villages, the Pygmy quartier is located at the very end of the village, before which the electricity supply comes to an abrupt end. In such situations it is not unusual to hear stories of discrimination and lack of access to resources such as healthcare, education and official documentation.

'If we are ill we just suffer or die. We have our traditional medicines but they are no longer effective as the ancestors are angry with us for leaving the forest' (Old Man, Babongo, Manamana, 2002).

In addition, adaptation from a forest way of life can be frustrating, especially when subjects are exposed to material goods that are largely inaccessible.

'We need money, nice shelters, employment for our kids, guns for hunting, cars. But most of all money that is rightfully ours from the exploitation of our forest' (Man, 40, Babongo, Manamana, 2002).

Often around the time of the elections Forest Peoples are promised facilities such as electricity or school buildings. In 1998, for instance, the Pygmy quartier at Manamana was without any electricity, whereas in 2002, street lamps had been installed right through the whole village. When amenities (such as generators, or schools) require financial or state support for maintenance they often go unused. Where economic discrepancies have resulted between different communities of Forest Peoples, this has sometimes been a source of local tension (Man, 30, Bawumbu, Haut Ogooué 2002).

Entering into a monetary economy has led to generational rifts and conflicts between value systems. In Lastoursville, the young Babongo have come to represent Selfishness, from the point of view of the elders, as they no longer share their meat from hunting amongst the clan, but sell it for money. This tension also plays out in attitudes towards the past, where the old are nostalgic but the young exhibit a kind of shame towards their identity.

'Why do you talk about the past? Babongo and Batéké, we are the same.... We eat the same food as the Bantu, we have the same fingers, fingernails, hair so why do you think we are different? In what way are we different?...When you come here you take pictures of us with bare feet and you expose us in newspapers, saying these are Pygmies, they have no shoes and they eat raw food' (Woman, 20, Babongo, Kebaga, 2002).

Offspring of mixed marriages often find themselves in a frustrating situation concerning their part-Pygmy identity. While striving to be proud of their heritage they are confronted with trying to make sense of the marginalisation and stigmatisation towards Pygmies. At Lebamba, intermarriage between Babongo and Banzebi has increased dramatically over the last fifty years. Amongst the Babongo, this is mainly characterised by female exogamy. The younger mixed generation tend to be more sedentary, interacting more closely with the Banzebi community. As the Banzebi are matrilineal, offspring of a mixed marriage are viewed as Pygmies and face negative stereotypes and discrimination. At Lastoursville the Babongo and Bakélé are patriarchal and patrilocal. Because of their father's ethnicity, many offspring of mixed marriages have access to resources, such as a basic education that give them a clearer understanding of the state system and aspirations for the urban way of life. At the same time however, they may still be impeded by poverty and discrimination themselves. In such instances, some individuals choose to cut off from their mother's family completely. In a recent national conference on the Pygmies of Gabon, Forest Peoples from various regions of Gabon were encouraged to attend. Four young men, of mixed Akélé-Babongo parentage attended as representatives of Lastoursville. On visiting their villages, it transpired that this had caused resentment amongst the Babongo community. While intermarriage is commonplace in the region, it was felt that, as the

youths had Akélé fathers, they were technically not Babongo. It was clear that the older Babongo had not really understood the purpose of the conference until it was too late, and felt they had not been adequately represented.

In most roadside villages, the traditional forest-based life associated increasingly with their ancestors is no longer regarded as an option, but the alternatives lead to frustration and fatalism, as a result of the perceived ambivalence of the state towards their current situation.

‘Things are really not okay but we accept the situation. The only thing is that the Bantu continue to consider us as inferior. They take our forest but they say it is not belonging to us but to them. But as we are inferior what can we do? Oh well, that’s just the way it is’ (Old Man, Babongo, Lastoursville 2002).

‘I am already old and very ill. If my family don’t do something for me I may die. We no longer live in the forest, okay but we don’t have any assistance. If we die no one will come and ask us what happened because they do nothing to help us’ (Old Man, Babongo, Lastoursville 2002).

## REPRESENTATION

‘The hub of the problem of Pygmies of Gabon is political discrimination. People don’t talk about the Pygmies and as far as trying to encourage positive discrimination, this is not really possible as in Gabon we are encouraged to talk about unity as a nation, rather than particular ethnicities’ (Odambo 2002 – personal communication).

MINAPYGA (Minorités Autochtones Pygmées du Gabon) the first indigenous Forest Peoples’ organisation in Gabon, was recognised by the Ministry of Interior as an official NGO in 1997. It’s founder, Leonard Odambo, an educated Bakoya from the Mekambo region, currently works as a journalist in Libreville, where he lives with his family (his wife is Fang). Odambo is a rare example of a Bakoya who has reached university level education through a combination of his determination, academic achievement and good fortune. He attributes his successful education to the support of two locally influential Bakota, one of which was his teacher at primary school.

Inspired by the international indigenous rights movement, in particular the formation of other indigenous Pygmy groups around Central Africa, MINAPYGA’s goal is to raise national and international awareness of the precarious situation of Pygmies of Gabon and to establish lasting development programs. While advocating that Forest Peoples should have the choice of continuing their traditional forest-based way of life; the primary aim of the organisation is to promote the Pygmy culture and facilitate integration, so that they are no longer considered a class apart, and have access to citizen status and identity cards.

‘The Pygmies don’t know their proper situation in relation to the state and what their rights are because they are marginalized. They don’t know the state system because they aren’t educated, so they don’t get the benefits of being a citizen. They are stuck between two worlds: crippled by a way of thinking that disempowers them and no longer suits their way of life. They need a new world vision to be able to find their place in contemporary society. Integration is at the heart of the social fight. It starts with the issue of the citizenship of Pygmies’ (Odambo 2002 – personal communication).

Longer-term project plans focus on improving access to basic resources including, land, education, health and the cultural promotion of Pygmy culture through the documentation of their languages and creating a network of cultural centres around the country. MINAPYGA has organised dance troops to perform in the capital and has been one of the main driving forces in arranging a national conference on the Pygmies of Gabon. The organisation is also concerned with more pressing short-term projects such as ensuring adequate nutrition for Pygmy communities in the Mékambo region that have been exposed to the Ebola virus or else prohibited from hunting due to meat contamination (Odambo 2002 – personal correspondence).

At present, MINAPYGA consists of 12 board members, and the Bakoya people of Mekambo, Odambo's home area. Odambo hopes to expand the organisation to create grassroots representation for the numerous Pygmy peoples throughout Gabon. He has already travelled widely around the country to establish regional contacts and through the support of UNESCO has attended conferences elsewhere in Africa. The organisation is young and faces challenges, in particular financial and lack of state and public support. The interpretation of this is ambivalence to the Pygmy cause.

'The Pygmies are marginalized so they stay like it. It's a kind of vicious circle. The Pygmies were ordered to integrate so they could have access to health care and nourishment. The Pygmies don't know what they want anymore. The state made them leave the forest so they can't go back to the old ancestral ways. The real problems are those of marginalisation, lack of communication, education and adapting to a new way of life' (Odambo 2001 – personal communication).

An article recently published in the National Gabonese Newspaper, 'L'Union'; announced the formation of an indigenous Baka organisation 'Edzengui' (genie of the forest). The organisation was originally founded in 2002 by Mme Hélène Nzé Andou, a Baka from Minvoul, and has just achieved NGO status through the Ministry of Interior. Edzengui is apolitical and sees itself as a forum to address the needs of the Baka and facilitate communication between themselves and the wider community. The primary aim of the organisation is 'la promotion de l'identité culturelle des Pygmées Baka de Minvoul.' Areas of interest include Traditional Medicine, Arts and Crafts, and Dance and Ceremony. In addition, the application of Baka ecological knowledge to help protect the environment in the North-East of Gabon and to generate alternative means of livelihood e.g. through



Forest camp, Nganzi, Bagama, Mambi, Mayumba Forest, 1998

eco-tourism or working as research assistants around Minkébé National Park (L'Union 8/8/ 2003).

Whilst maintaining its status as an indigenous organisation, the founders believe that due to the multi-disciplinary programme envisaged, external assistance is crucial to ensure success. Therefore, under article 6 of the organisation's statutes, 'elle est placée sous la tutelle conjointe des ministères de la Cultures et des Arts, de l'Economie forestière, chargé de l'Environnement et de la Protection de la nature, de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche scientifique et de celui du Tourisme.' The founder is also counting on the support of national and international development agencies. Sponsorship has already been received from WWF in the form of T-shirts for the organisation's official inauguration ceremony on August 17, the day of the country's Independence celebrations (L'Union 8/8/ 2003).

## FINAL REMARKS

In this paper I have drawn attention to the neglect of anthropological studies on the Forest Peoples of Gabon and presented some of my preliminary research findings. As the majority of Forest Peoples are presently based by the roadside, my work has concerned charting the process of mobility and how it has unfolded in recent history. Relocation has been a constant throughout the known history of the Forest Peoples of Gabon however; the twentieth century witnessed the movement of the majority of the Forest Peoples to the roadside. This was primarily due to resettlement programs and a post-independence government that equated development with sedentarisation and integration into the state system.

For those communities that remain in the forest today, it is only a matter of time. Processes of relocation are firmly in place. The country's economy is becoming increasingly reliant on logging and large stretches of forest are opening up to road building and commercial bush-meat exploitation. As the Forest Peoples become enmeshed in these processes the lure of the road and its amenities is intensified. In addition, family members already settled into a roadside way of life are encouraging forest-based groups to do the same.

Being based by the roadside does not mean surrendering a forest way of life. Access to the forest is not prohibited and the majority of Forest Peoples continue to frequent hunting camps and rely upon the forest for their subsistence. Nevertheless, increased sedentarisation, exposure to a monetary economy, intensification of relationships with other ethnic groups, have effected profound changes to the Forest Peoples' relationship to society and space and brought the issue of their assimilation to the fore.

With its ethnic diversity and regional historical differences Gabon serves as an interesting area for comparative studies of the assimilation process. The Forest Peoples' experiences of integration are dependent on numerous factors including those pertaining to their relationship with neighbouring ethnic groups. These may include the particular nature of an ethnic group (whether they are inclusive of outsiders, hierarchical, have a history of aggressive behaviour towards neighbouring groups); the duration of the relationship with the neighbours and the degree and nature of kinship links (matrilineal or patrilineal). A

history of ethnic diversity in a particular area sometimes means that many groups live together alongside Forest Peoples in a more socially fluid inclusive environment.

The majority of Forest Peoples located by the roadside are experiencing some of the now familiar problems of 'Pygmy' peoples throughout Central Africa, including discrimination and difficulties in accessing basic resources. However, reports of major human rights abuses or violence are conspicuously rare. In fact, Gabon has some of the largest, most affluent Forest Peoples settlements found in Central Africa. The higher status and levels of integration achieved by the Babongo of Haut Ogooué is doubtless due to having a president in power, who as a Téké has had a history of long-standing relationships with Forest Peoples. This has had a positive affect on how Forest Peoples have been viewed in recent years throughout Gabon.

However, it is essential to question the extent to which factors aiding the assimilation process are sustainable. Many of the recent relatively positive examples of integration experienced by the Forest Peoples have been linked to the current president and the affluence and stability of the country. Once Gabon enters into a new phase of history, how will the Forest Peoples be affected? Many of the latter are beginning to voice their resentment as they are maladapted to the state system and have no clearly defined place in contemporary Gabonese society that allows integration with equality and dignity. I refer in particular to the double identity of the Pygmies as 'all' or 'nothing,' which is so commonly found amongst 'autochton' populations throughout the world. While identity cards may bring parity on paper, more is needed to combat the psychology of marginalisation imposed upon and internalised by Forest Peoples, through the continuation of negative stereotypes and a history of discrimination. Accordingly, efforts are now turning towards the 'conservation and promotion' of Forest Peoples' Culture. In particular, their specialist knowledge of the forest and their essential role as the first inhabitants of the land.

Land, history and identity are at present crucial issues for the Forest Peoples of Gabon. It is with this in mind that I am focusing my research on a detailed ethnographic study of one location, involving the physical mapping of present-day and past settlements and land usage, and using well-established anthropological methods to record information on genealogies and interethnic relations. Knowledge of history is vital to an understanding of the present and the future. Eventually, I hope to be able to present the information I collect to the Babongo People in an accessible form.

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Author's Name and Address: Judy Vashti KNIGHT, *Linacre College, St. Cross Rd, Oxford OX1 3 JA, UK. E-mail: judy.knight@linacre.oxford.ac.uk*

## Important Corrections

1. "World Conservation Society" should read "Wildlife Conservation Society" see especially page 107, line 9, word 10 & page 118, section Acknowledgements, line 39, word 9.

2. Page 118-please replace the following name for the electronic publication. Section Acknowledgements-line 37, name 3 change "Kim Mclean Fiander" to "Claudine Angoue".

3. P109, Line 16, word 10, correct 'les' to "des". 'nous sommes tous des Pygmees'

4. The following directional indicators should not be capitalised.

-p82, line 2, word 3: 'to the east of the country'.

-p85, line 18, word 11 "west of the Congo Basin...."

line 19, word 6, "northeast of Congo..."

line 20, word 13 "southern Cameroon"

line 23, word 2 and 4: "central and southern Gabon"

-p87, line 6, word 14, "west of Minvoul"

line 10, words 5, 7 & 10, "central and eastern regions of southern Gabon"

line 17, words 2 & 4: "central and southern Gabon"