

The Upper-Sangha in the Time of the Concession Companies

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ABSTRACT

Despite the difficulty of access, the Sangha River valley was not entirely *terra incognita* at the turn of the 20th century. By that time there was active trade between the upper and lower Sangha, which explains why this region was one of the areas in central Africa most contested by the concessionary companies. This paper traces the historical circumstance that favored the emergence of the concessionary system, as well as its legacy of violence in the Sangha region. Local responses to this violence are presented as having a unique yet effective “effervescent” character, based on the area’s decentralized political traditions. In response to such local resistance to changing market demands for rubber, and to the increasing outcry from European human rights activists, the concessionary system did eventually alter its practices. Above all, it is important to remember this fact: the forest lining the banks of the Sangha River is not virgin forest; rather, it is a forest inhabited by people long traumatized by the impact of European colonization.

Extending from the Atlantic north of Bangui, the vast, dense forest of the Sangha region made travel and exploration difficult. Rivers served as a means of penetration, but were often blocked by dead wood and swampy forests. Despite the difficulty of access, however, the Sangha River valley was not *terra incognita* to European traders and explorers. By the end of the 19th century there were two paltry stations on the river between Brazzaville and Bangui: Bonga, at the mouth of the Sangha, was maintained by one customs agent and two soldiers; and Liranga, at the confluence with the Oubangui, was maintained by one civil servant and eleven militia. Travel up river involved a major expedition on the *Foumoum Tango*, a 45 ton river boat, 35 meters long, six meters wide, with an eleven-paddle rear wheel and a lower deck for blacks. At the slightest lowering of the water, it would beach on the sandbanks and have to be unloaded and pulled off with ropes. Whenever the load was too heavy, more powerful steamers of the *État indépendant du Congo* were brought in, “grabbing all the trade from our interior by having merchandise coming from the Sangha, from Alima, from Lobaye, etc. unloaded at their station, all the ivory and rubber passing by under the noses of our station masters” (Cointet 1899-1900).

This competition between riverboats demonstrates that, by the turn of the century at least, there was active European trade between the upper- and lower-Sangha, which explains why this region was one of central Africa’s areas most contested by concessionary companies. Moreover, Brazza had concentrated his exploration efforts on the upper-Sangha, in the Gbaya, Mpiemu, Yanghéré and Hausa areas. The proximity of Cameroon and the appetite of the Germans concerned the French administration. Between 1911 and 1914,

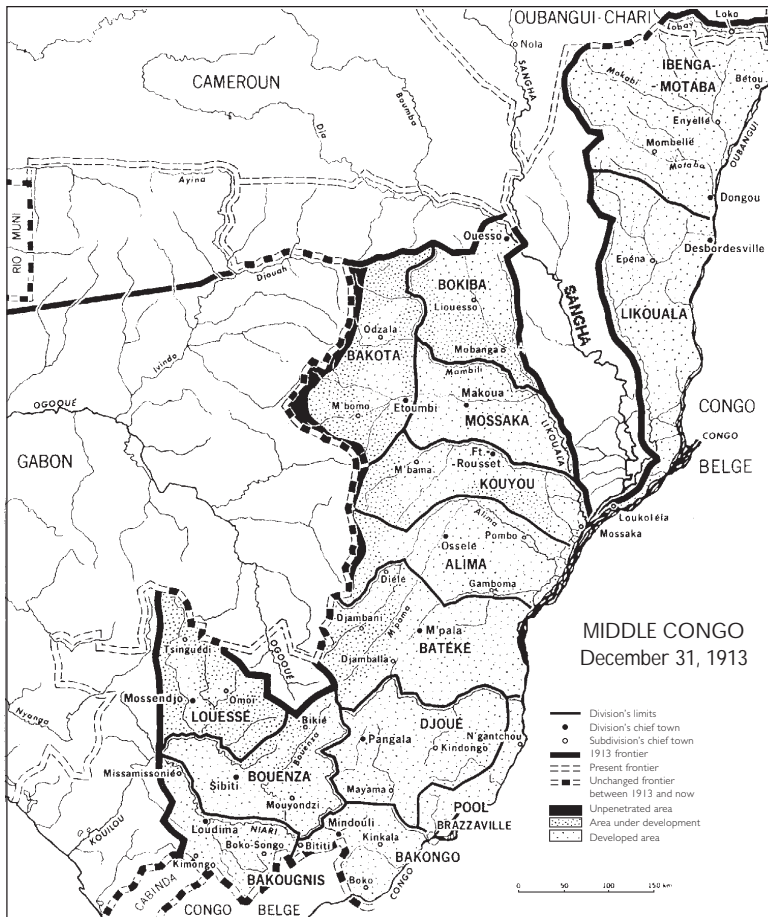


Figure 1 The Sangha River region at the time of the French and German accords of 1911.

during the brief period of the famous “duck’s bill” (a series of accords which gave up part of the Congo’s territory in exchange for a free hand in Morocco), France granted Germany access to the Sangha River, giving over almost all of the Sangha valley (see Figure 1). However, the economic activity of the Ouesso enclave, the only point of access to the river, was more jealously protected.

Far from being a region untouched by colonization, the Sangha River valley was contested from the end of the 19th century by at least twelve concessionary companies with the most diverse names: *Société de l’Afrique française*, *Compagnie de la Sangha*, *Compagnie des Produits de la Sangha-Lipa-Ouesso*, *Compagnie franco-congolaise de la Sangha*, *Sociétés de l’Ekelà-Sangha*, *de la haute Sangha*, *de la Kadeï-Sangha*, *Compagnie française du Congo*, *Société commerciale et agricole de la Mambéré-Sangha*, *Compagnie française du Congo et des colonies africaines*, and so on (see Figure 2). The smallest of these companies’ concessions measured 5,300 km,² the largest, that of the Tréchet brothers, the *Compagnie Français du Haut Congo*, measured 32,000 km.²

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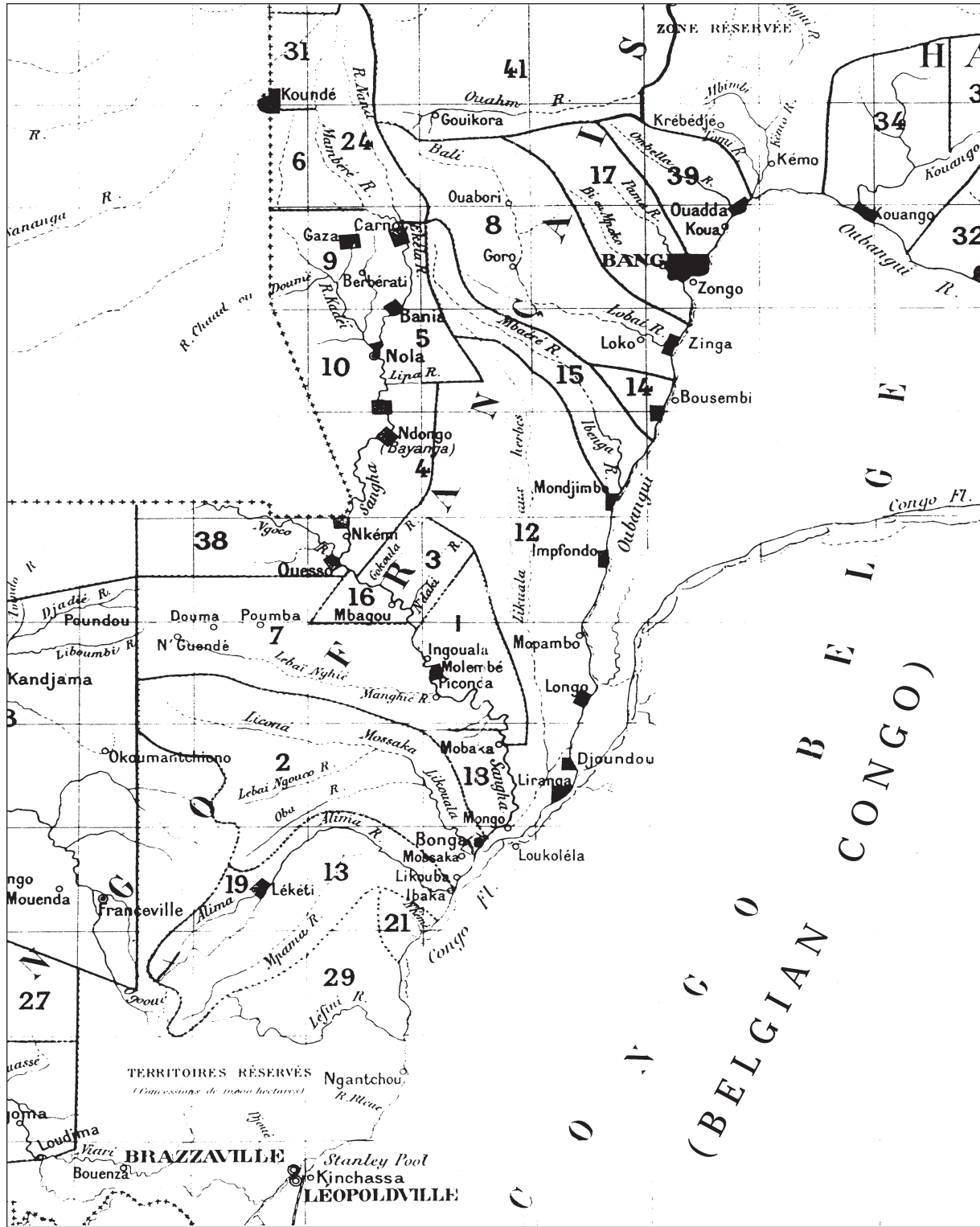


Figure 2 Map of the concessionary companies in the Middle Congo Region (from *The Colonial Dispatch*, 1899).

THE CONCESSIONARY SYSTEM

What was the nature of these concessionary companies? These economic relics of the colonial era grew out of a compromise at the end of the 19th century between the state and private industry, in which each sought to exploit the territory at the least expense. The colonial state was quite willing to listen to Brazza, and to “make the country valuable” as it was explained at the time, on the condition that the private companies invest at least the minimum amount of capital not accorded administratively by the vote of the French parliament (Brunschwig 1961). As for the colonial firms, their vision was primarily one of exploitation, which consisted of securing a commercial monopoly on goods that could be hunted or harvested, mostly rubber and ivory. The “natives” would deliver the goods at the lowest possible price, as there was little money in circulation until World War I, and producers were paid for their services through the exchange of overvalued western manufactured goods.

Thus the forty or so concessionary contracts that were signed in 1899-1900 for periods of thirty years granted the companies full usufruct of the conceded lands, including the rights to agricultural, forest, and industrial exploitation, but reserved mining rights in the hope of granting them at a later date. The clause on international freedom of trade required by the famous Berlin accord, on what was known as the Congo basin, was obviated by referring to a monopoly not of commerce but of “the exploitation of the products of the land.”

In exchange for its prerogatives, the concessionary company paid the colony an annual fixed sum, which was augmented by a percentage related to area and profits. Unlike chartered companies that had the right to organize their own police force, a concessionary company did not in principle have any sovereign rights. It was required to help with the establishment of customs posts and with the eventual construction of telegraph lines, to maintain a fixed number of steamships on its part of the river system, and to plant at least 150 feet of rubber plants per ton exported. In return, any land made valuable through its action would become the freehold property of the company upon the expiration of the contract. In the case of the Sangha region, this clause did not constitute an idle promise, as the colonial state soon sought to disengage itself from the system it had put in place, through negotiating the retrocession of the monopoly.

True, relative to other colonial territories at the turn of the century, the region was still hardly known by westerners, a fact from which some companies even profited. True, too, the *Compagnie de la Mambéré-Sangha*, the most northern company along the Sangha, disappeared almost immediately due to a cartographic error which meant that it existed only on paper. But the *Compagnie de la Ngoko-*

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Sangha, which extended from the Sangha River the length of the Cameroonian border, fought hard against the competing *Süd-Kamerun* company, arguing that the expansion of the latter was at its expense. In the early years, the administrators of the *Ngoko-Sangha* had in fact established a number of factories a few days up-river from Sembé, the limit of navigation on the Koudou, at Ouessou, at Ngali on the Ngoko, and at Ngoila. In 1907, the company employed about twenty agents, assisted by local merchants, and produced some rubber. Its chief occupation, however, was the sale of arms and ammunition: between 1900 and 1907, more than 10,000 guns, 200,000 cartridges, and 60 tons of gunpowder had been exchanged for rubber. Although it did not altogether cease production, the company's business stagnated until World War I, and its claims led to a scandal in 1911 (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972: 315-330).

THE TRÉCHOT CASE—A MODEL COMPANY

We will not belabor here the lamentable history of these companies, whose investments were ridiculously limited in comparison with the infrastructural needs of the area (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972). It should be remarked, however, that the region at the mouth of the Sangha River was held by one of the few functioning companies that had been set up in this manner: the *Compagnie Française du Haut-Congo* (CFHC). The five Tréchet brothers who set up the company were knowledgeable about the problems of the region, having previously worked as agents for the local trading house, Daumas. They arrived in the Congo in 1888, and set up their own concern in 1892 with "almost nothing." The only Frenchmen to have reached the middle Congo or "land of rivers" up to that time, they started out as merchants and hunters before progressively widening their commercial sphere. Always eager to encourage private initiative, Brazza invited them to follow him into the upper-Sangha. Through Brazza's recommendation to investors, the Tréchet brothers secured capital in Paris for their venture in the Sangha region.

When the Tréchet brothers applied for their concession, they knew what they were doing. Their company's two steamships exploited the river from warehouses in Brazzaville and Loango, and from trading posts that were progressively established along the rivers, most notably at Bonga, at the mouth of the Sangha (1896). They were in charge of five trading posts headed by twelve Europeans, and they had just criss-crossed the region concluding treaties with local chiefs. They knew the real value of a commercial area easily penetrable by means of a remarkable river system. "Energetic and working themselves as hard as they worked others, the Tréchet

brothers imposed themselves through their herculean strength and their character” (Sautter 1966: 290).

Nor were the further reaches of the Sangha devoid of commercial concerns. Three of these concerns oversaw the interests of a former company that was well established in the region, the *Nieuwe Afrikanshe Handels Vennootschap* or *Compagnie Hollandaise*. This company had adapted to circumstances and naturalized itself by creating two concessionary companies on the upper-Sangha, the *Compagnie Commerciale de Colonisation du Congo Français* or CCCC (known as the 4CF) and the *Compagnie de l’Ouham-Nana*. Like the Tréchet brothers’ company, both of these were set up as family businesses and were headed in Africa by a strongman, Anton Greschoff, whom the Bakongo named *Foumou Ntangou*, the sun-king.

Rather like the Tréchet brothers, Greschoff was a pioneer in the Congo, reaching points in the interior to do business with Tippu-Tib and being the first to sell to the Batéké the scarlet blankets they liked so much. He continued to head the concessionary companies he had helped to set up in the upper Sangha until 1905. Thus he was also an obvious mediator between the populations of the north of the forest and those of the Congo River basin.

THE VIOLENT LEGACY OF COLONIAL COMPANIES

It would be inaccurate to refer to the human population of the Sangha region as “primitives” who knew nothing of Western commerce. Present in the area since the end of the 19th century, it is impossible that trading should not have left some traces. Colonial influences must have been particularly pronounced in the Sangha region, because the area was very remote. Indeed, until a late date the colonial administration established no commercial or political outpost in the Sangha region. Thus the forests along the Sangha River were entirely under the control of European business agents and their African traders and boatmen. With no administrative or judiciary controls in place, abuses were legion. The first of these injustices was uncovered in the course of Brazza’s third mission, which took place in 1905 following the “Congo scandals,” which rocked the Belgian colonial administration and had repercussions in French colonies as well.

Brazza had required that he himself choose the members of this investigative mission. The mission’s evaluation of commercial practices in central Africa was so condemning that the government decided against publishing the report, which was “conceived in absolute sincerity, but also with implacable severity.”¹ The mission had gathered reports in the highlands about a certain number of brutalities that were committed by concession agents against

¹ Note to the Minister of Colonies, March 23, 1906; Foreign section of the National Archives, General reports series, Gabon-Congo, XIX-4 (b).

Africans. In the territory of the *Société de la Sangha Équatoriale*, one of them named Treuil was sentenced to three years in jail; another, Pujet, fared better (*L'Humanité*, 24 October 1905).

The most serious abuses took place between the upper-Sangha and the upper-Oubangui due to collusion there between certain administrators and private agents. This was the case on the territories of the *Ouham-Nana* and the *Compagnie de la Lobaye*, where about fifty women and children who had been taken hostage to compel the men to harvest rubber died in a few weeks; survivors fared only a bit better (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972: 174-75). Brazza concluded that the kidnapping of women was widespread in the region. Kidnapping appeared to be the usual means of repression, of recruiting porters, and of bringing in taxes in kind on concessionary territory. It was also quite customary to send armed guards to "make rubber," with instructions to throw the chief and the women into chains if the inhabitants were not inclined to cooperate, or to send others equipped with *assegai* and arrows with orders to threaten non-cooperative "natives." Not far from there, in the Mpoko concession to the rear of Bangui, a new inquiry in 1906-07 concluded that 750 people had been murdered, and that another 750 were likely to have been murdered (*ibid*: 177-184). It is certain that all of the peoples of the region, having been terrorized, were aware of the excessive abuses of concessionary company agents.

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LOCAL RESISTANCE

But from the beginning, there were numerous reprisals against the Europeans. In 1902 in the lower-Sangha, the agents of the *Compagnie des Produits de la Sangha* were attacked at their trading post at Ndoki (on the right river bank above Ouesso). The agent of the *Compagnie de la Sangha Ndoki* suffered the same fate at Ikelemba (left bank, a little further down), as did another on the opposite side, at Pembé (*Société de l'Afrique Française*), and yet another at Mboko (*Compagnie Franco-congolaise*). The insurgents took advantage of the situation to make off with guns and cartridges (30 guns and 2,000 cartridges at Ikelemba, as many guns and 3,000 cartridges at Pembe, 40 guns at Ndoki) (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972: 198). In the following years, there were a number of similar occurrences. They were followed by violent repression. In these areas in which the local population had long avoided encroachment on "European" territory, resistance movements of an order that was sometimes considerable followed the first explosions of anger: the Ngounié and the middle-Sangha resisted until 1905, Lobaye from 1902 to 1908, upper Ngounié from 1903 to 1909. In 1908, an agent of the *Ngoko-Sangha* company fell into an ambush and his body was

cut into pieces. All lines of communication were severed, and the lack of stability spread as far east as the basin of the Koudou and the Sembé rivers, tributaries of the Ngoko. The insurrection was not put down until the following year. In the lower-Sangha, sporadic outbursts of trouble were constant (*ibid*: 199-200).

This type of revolt ended with the progressive reduction of the abuses that had sparked them. Certain troubles, however, were particularly persistent. The case of the Nola trading post on the upper-Sangha north of the Kadei-Mambéré tributary is exemplary for the continuous disturbances that lasted, under the same chiefs, from the closing years of the 19th century until almost 1930. More than just a response to the brutality of a handful of Europeans, the resistance reflected the profound unease of a region subjected to more and more stringent pressures. The precarious equilibrium that had been established in the 19th century between Gbaya farmers and their slave-raiding neighbors to the north, the Fulbé shepherds of Adamawa, was eroded in the north by the arrival of Rabah, a rival (Hallam 1977), and in the south by the arrival of the Europeans. Within this context, the beginnings of colonization completed the disruption of structures that were already weakened by growing instability. Unable to resist, the inhabitants finally sought refuge in the 1920s in messianic movements. Although it is not always easy to pinpoint the causes of uprisings, they were undeniably a response to the destruction of traditional values.

Europeans' knowledge of the area beyond Nola was sketchy. The only known trading posts were Bania, on the Mambéré, and Berberati, a little further to the north, which were founded by Brazza. Gaza, too, was a known post, located on a tributary of the Kadei that Mizon had crossed for the first time in 1892 on his return from exploring part of Benoue, after visiting the Fulbé towns of Adamoua, the nearest of which was Koundé. Situated at the border of the forest and the plains forest, this northern area appeared more accessible. For Europeans coming from the Congo, the climate was more salubrious due to an altitude of over 500 meters. Moreover, Brazza was immediately impressed by the relative density of the population, by the abundance of food, and by the degree of complementary commercial interaction between the farmers and the herders.

The population of the upper-Sangha proper was made up of Gbaya who cultivated corn, bananas, and manioc. The villages, made up of groups of ten to twenty clay enclosures with thatched roofs, dotted the trails continuously. Many of the hamlets followed the same chief. These chiefs in turn paid allegiance to a clan chief, who was in charge of one or more warrior chiefs (*kaigama*), as well as an interpreter-steward (*dogali*) who was responsible for relations with the Fulbé and the Bornouans.

Thus the supposed isolation of these peoples is far from the truth. On the contrary, remarkable organization, instituted along kinship lines, allowed travelers to traverse the area with a remarkable degree of safety (though conflicts erupted, as trade transformed these kinship lines — see Copet-Rougier, this volume). By the same token, this solidarity allowed a clan chief to unite them against the danger at an early date: in 1891, chief Bafio managed to array the entire Bayanda tribe against Fourneau, the first European explorer on the upper-Sangha. The struggle continued for several years, and Bafio did not submit until 1894, following severe repression campaigns conducted by Goujon, the administrator of Nola, who was little concerned with the inhumanity of his methods.

Although subjected to Fulbé slave raids in the north that had led to an increasing instability in the latter part of century, the Gbaya could no longer take refuge to the south. There they were blocked by the French and the Germans, who had established the eastern border of Cameroon through the protocol of 1894. The administrator of Nola was away from Brazzaville for over a month, and took it upon himself to intervene. With the help of fifty or so Senegalese militiamen, he could raise between 200 and 6,000 men, depending on the needs of the moment. He distributed guns, powder, flints, and chopped up bars of metal for them to use as bullets, and set off to round up and enslave all of the Gbaya chiefs suspected of furnishing a contingent to the Fulbé. The campaign lasted from March to September, 1896; the country was laid waste in flames and blood. Furthermore, he occupied the market town of Koundé, with its significant population of Hausa traders, to crush the resistance of the *lamido* (Fulbé religious and political leader) of Ngaoundéré, who had decided to defend it. He then forcibly transferred them, along with their stock of ivory, to Carnot on the Mambéré River (a tributary of the Sangha), 200 kilometers away, hoping to develop a new trading pattern to the south, along the Sangha to the Congo.

The state of affairs worsened with the arrival of the 4CF concessionary company: the Gbaya were left in the hands of company agents. For want of personnel, the administration entrusted Senegalese militiamen with guarding the Bania and Nola trading posts and abandoned Koundé. Once again there were disturbances, this time directed against the 4CF company. Chief Baboua, who was widely respected in the region, was unhappy that his sons Semba and Yerina had been accused of enslaving a dozen villagers with a view to trading them for a pair of oxen and had been imprisoned. The Europeans at the trading post informed him that “the whole country belongs to the ‘Landais’ (the Dutch), who bought it and own everything in it . . . down to the hair on the natives’ heads.”

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Summoned by the new head of the post at Souka, Baboua refused to comply. The administrator rashly decided to mount an attack in difficult country with which he was unfamiliar. He set off at the head of a dozen infantrymen, backed up by the warriors of allied chiefs. However, “in spite of unimaginable fatigue caused by the terrible state of the trails, in crossing two hundred creeks through country with extremely furrowed gulleys,” the company encountered only deserted villages. Hidden in the bush and armed with short, light arrows and small spears, the Gbaya laid ambushes.

Nevertheless, Baboua had to surrender in the end, and was forced to march past eighty of the country’s chiefs during the celebrations for the July 14th French national holiday in Koundé: “This made a tremendous impression” (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972: 201-212). In spite of this public humiliation, the disturbances did not cease. In 1907, a 4CF agent was assassinated. The following year, the Koundé post was transferred to Baboua to ensure closer contact with “a people subjugated on the surface only, and ready at any moment to throw off the yoke.” Indeed, the movement only gained strength after World War I: the upper-Sangha took part in the huge uprising that enveloped the whole Gbaya region, from the Chari to eastern Cameroon and to the edge of the Congo, between 1928 and 1930 (Nzabakomada-Yakoma 1986).

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CHANGES IN THE CONCESSION SYSTEM

The uprisings were not a coincidence, as there was no reduction in the excesses of the companies, despite the reforms that had been undertaken. Wanting to abolish the concessionary system that was paralyzing rational development of the country, but bound by contractual obligations, the French government came up with a solution that only reinforced the monopoly of the local companies. In exchange for giving up some of their privileges, the companies of the middle Congo, including all of those situated on the banks of the Sangha, were regrouped in 1911 into one huge concessionary, the *Compagnie Forestière Sangha-Oubangui*, encompassing 11 million hectares (see Figure 3). Louis-Ferdinand Céline, who worked for this company on the Cameroonian side, would use it as the model for his evocatively named *Compagnie Pordurière* which translates as something akin to *The Filth Company* (Céline 1932). Despite negotiations that later reduced the claim of the company to five million hectares, the arrangement officially guaranteed the company a monopoly on rubber until 1935, even though rubber was the region’s only export crop, and the markets had been undermined by a price crash, resulting from the global competition from Malaysian plantations.

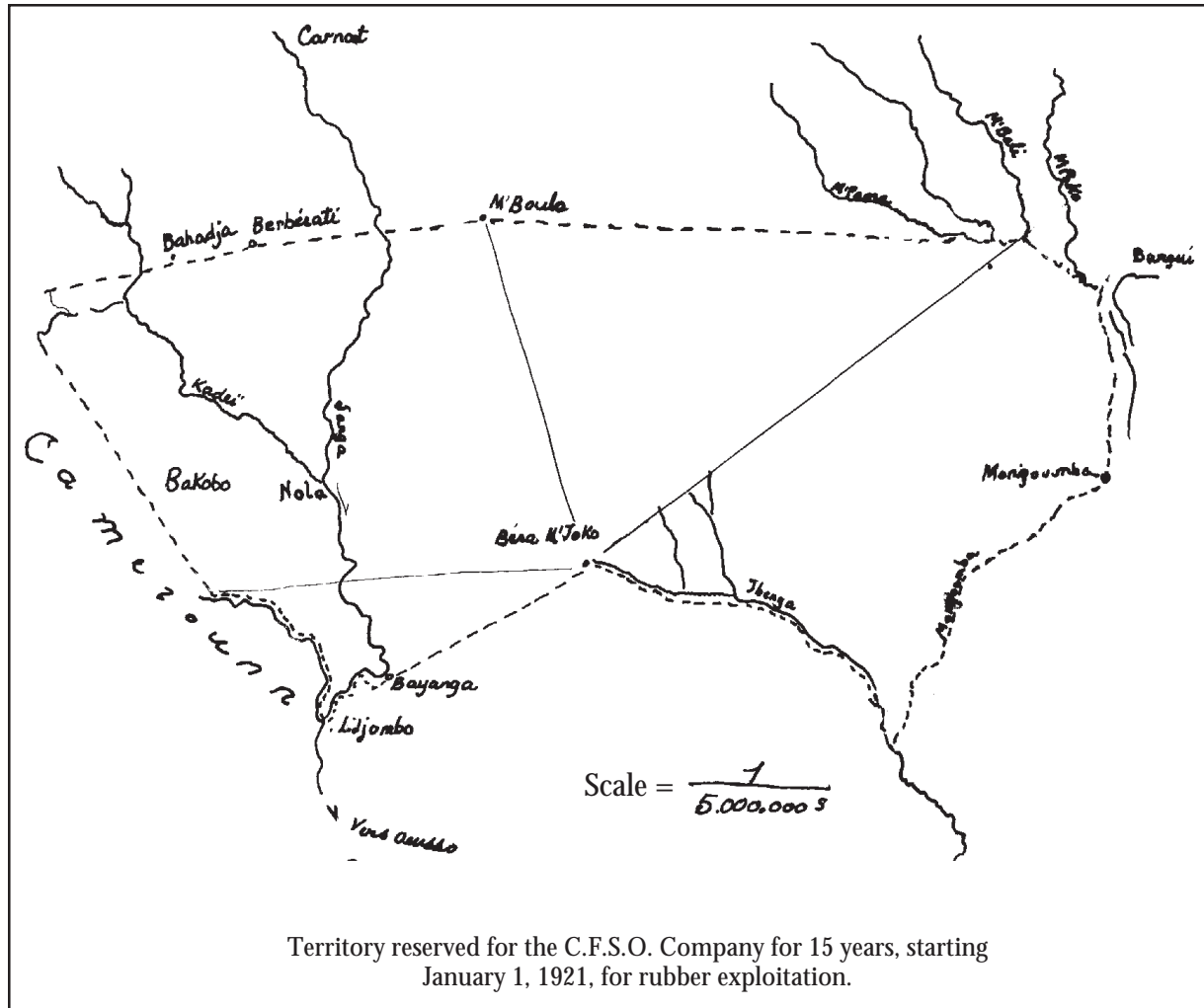


Figure 3 Map of the Sangha-Oubangui Forestry Company (reprinted with permission from Kretsinger and Zana, 1995, *Quelques Souvenirs de Bayanga*, RCA: GTZ, WWF-US).

This arrangement meant that until 1935, Africans across the Sangha region could hope for no more than a pittance in wages. They would continue to be subject to the brutal trading practices that were in effect, as became obvious with the publication in 1927 of the great writer André Gide's *Voyage au Congo*. Gide was struck above all by the misery and apathy of the inhabitants, "so fearful and so terrorized that they pretended not to understand anything. . . so as not to have to answer us . . . One cannot imagine more miserable human livestock" (Gide 1948: 159, 175, 186). This testimony echoes that of the Brazza mission twenty years earlier:

The myth of the negro who lives in the bush, subsists on roots for any length of time, and is oblivious to prolonged

fatigue and starvation, has been perpetuated for too long. While they are almost unbelievably hardy, they suffer and eventually die from hunger and fatigue like any other people would.²

Only after World War II did the situation begin to change. In spite of a spurt of activity during the war, when rubber was considered a strategic product, rubber gathering was abandoned once and for all as being unprofitable. The local populations could breathe a little easier. Oil palm plantations were encouraged as a replacement crop, especially around Ouesso, meeting with considerable success until 1965. Working conditions were apparently more reasonable. There was also an effort to unite the region by building a road, so that sturdy all-terrain vehicles could reach Ouesso, at least during the short, drier season. During this same period, the introduction of heavy equipment made the exploitation of wood a possibility, although this was a risky venture because of the length and the poor quality of communications lines.

CONCLUSION

Thus the upper-Sangha was not virgin territory when contemporary conservationists began to set up camp for the inventory and monitoring of the area's rich wildlife resources. It has not been protected from the world by its "impenetrable" forests. On the contrary, from an early date the region was very much the object of western interests, because its forest products could be exploited by European companies with little effort. But above all, the region was interesting to colonial as well as postcolonial organizations because the river provided access from Cameroon, as well as from the Central African Republic and Chad, to the northern savanna upstream. The local populations thus found themselves in the path of a colonial route to the riches of the central African back-country. Because of European access and penetration, local communities were severely affected by systematically violent practices that were in part clandestine, and were often covered up by a small but particularly pernicious group of Europeans. The remoteness of the area and its distance from African and European observers allowed this fearful system to remain in place until a late date. It is impossible that the memory of these events, which spanned almost two generations, should not have left profound traces, traces that are still largely ignored by social science research and by the work of contemporary conservationists.

² Captain Mathieu to Brazza, Mobaye, August 2, 1905 (Gide in the Brazza collection, CAOM, 1905-10).

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