

Abstract

Translating the Forest: Tourism, Trophy Hunting, and Transformation of Resource Use in Central African Republic (CAR)

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This dissertation develops an “anthropology of encounter” by examining forest conservation and ecotourism in the wildlife-rich Dzanga Sangha Dense Forest Reserve in southwestern CAR. Using textual, ethnographic and historical approaches that demonstrate the breadth of cultural anthropological analysis, it describes a cultural politics of conservation that is increasingly dominated by highly specialized forms of tourism. In the Sangha River basin those forms of tourism are taking root within the context of a century-old rivalry between French and German interests; today, largely French-controlled logging and trophy hunting operations are pitted against largely German- and American-controlled alternative economies of ecotourism and non-timber forest product trade in the Reserve area. Both economies, in cultural and historical terms, are characterized by tensions between the value of trophies, and that of translation; between relations of abstraction and of mimetic seduction. Africans manipulate these tensions, maintaining a lucrative but likely unsustainable situation of rival resource use regimes.

The dissertation is two volumes, and contains a great deal of background investigation that frames the central arguments. Beginning with past circumstances of contact, I trace the economic prehistory and colonial history of the region, illustrating the central roles of BaAka "Pygmies" in the multiple economic systems at play. The ethnohistory of the little-known "Sangha Sangha" ethnic group illustrates their social and economic marginality to tourism, conservation and logging activities, but also their centrality to transborder river-based exchange in the region. I focus on the

Sangha-Sangha and BaAka to reveal the workings of their relations to one another in their relative autonomy within historically repressive concession-based forest management regimes. I also examine broader village-level politics, to link local and regional dynamics with national and international relations of concession-based forest use that are currently in a crucial phase of reconfiguration. My treatment illustrates the strength of colonial legacies of French and German rivalry, but also the strength of local power relations, centered in fluid family, clan, and regional ethnic identities, and the big men who have shaped them.

These hierarchies of status, whether Western, African, or some creative mixture of the two, break down in forest clearings during today's tourism encounters, suggesting specific possibilities for less asymmetrical social relations of resource use. Yet, detailed study of revenues from tourism and trophy hunting in the town of Bayanga show that they flow primarily to powerful men within local politics, or to more recent arrivals who successfully establish small enterprises. Long-term residents are relatively under-remunerated, despite tourism's purported role as economic compensation for their constrained access to the forest.

The second volume draws back from the details of forest clearings, to re-consider the broader region and the concerns of CAR's state elite in relation to international conceptions of the African rainforest. We see that the safari-hunting legacy deeply shapes resource use policy and politics in CAR, though relations of social status among elite groups. A closer look at members of the political elite in CAR uses interviews and close readings of popular texts and reports about the region to depict their concepts of the forest as both cultural and natural patrimony. Readings of international press and non-fiction writing about the region's most famous conservationist suggest the powerful connections between symbolic capital--drawn largely from colonial tropes of the "great white hunter/explorer"--and actual capital flows that determine territorial control. Through

this final example of encounter, the career of a prominent conservationist in the region, the conclusion links the history and future of these forests.