

Recent migration of hunter-gathers and Bantu-speaking farmers along the Ikoy Valley (Gabon): Implications for conservation and development in the area.

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Roadmap of the presentation

- Ph.D. research on the long term consequences of the departure of logging companies from remote rural concessions.
- Grey literature on study site was either wrong or misleading.
- History of study site from academic sources.
- Impact of this history on the organisations that work in the area today.

Roadmap of the presentation

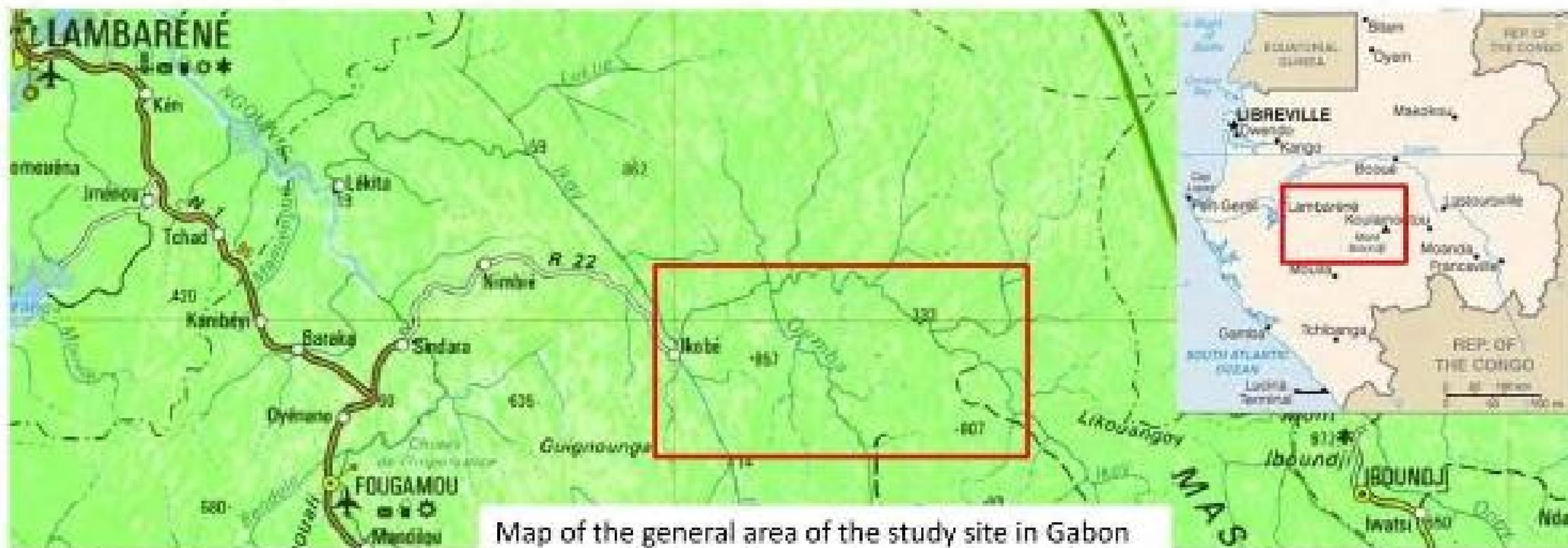
In 2008 I began researching the long-term consequences of the departure of logging companies from concessions in a remote rural area of Gabon, specifically the consequences for both the people and the natural environment that surrounds them.

At the start of this research I discovered that what was known from the grey literature of the people, the history, the environment and past exploitation of the study site was either wrong or misleading. In fact, the area has had a complicated history of in-and out-migrations of various peoples and companies dating back to at least the mid 1800's. This history has had a major impact on the people, the environment and the companies that are located in the area today.

This talk begins with the history of the study site from various academic literatures, archival literatures and oral histories and then goes on to explain what impact this history has had on the organisations that work in the area today.

Background to study site

- Middle reaches of the Ikoy River.
- Accessible by a logging road built in the 1960s.
- Road is severely degraded.
- Since 2009 no transport services, except during the dry season.



Map of the general area of the study site in Gabon (based on Institut Géographique National, 1994)

Background to the study site

The site chosen for this Ph.D. study is the middle reaches of the Ikoy River, in Gabon's Massif du Chaillu. It was chosen as it is one of the most remote areas in Gabon. Access to the area is via a single logging road that was built in the 1960s. Today this road is in various stages of degradation depending on when different sections were abandoned. In 2006 loggers had abandoned the entire area, but in 2010 a Chinese logging company started operations in the area.

At the start of the study three bush taxis irregularly served the area. But, by 2009, stretches of the road were so degraded that all the vehicles had broken down, and their drivers had abandoned the route.

The only regular vehicles that use the road today are ones belonging to the Gabonese administration, logging companies, or environmental NGO. Most of these vehicles are not officially allowed to carry villagers.

The area that I focused on in this study is the last section of the road beyond Ikobey. Until the arrival of the Chinese logging company vehicles using this part of the road were scarcer than the ones going between Sindara and Ikobey. The exception being during the dry season when private vehicles venture into the area, rented by urban people searching for traditional medicinal cures.

People found this study site area - Villages

- The area of focus is the road beyond Ikobey.
- Along the road there are fifteen villages.
- Six Mitsogo (Bantu speaking people) villages.
- Eight Babongo (Hunter-gathers) villages.
- One Mitsogo village has the last of the Akele in the area.



The People in the area of the study site

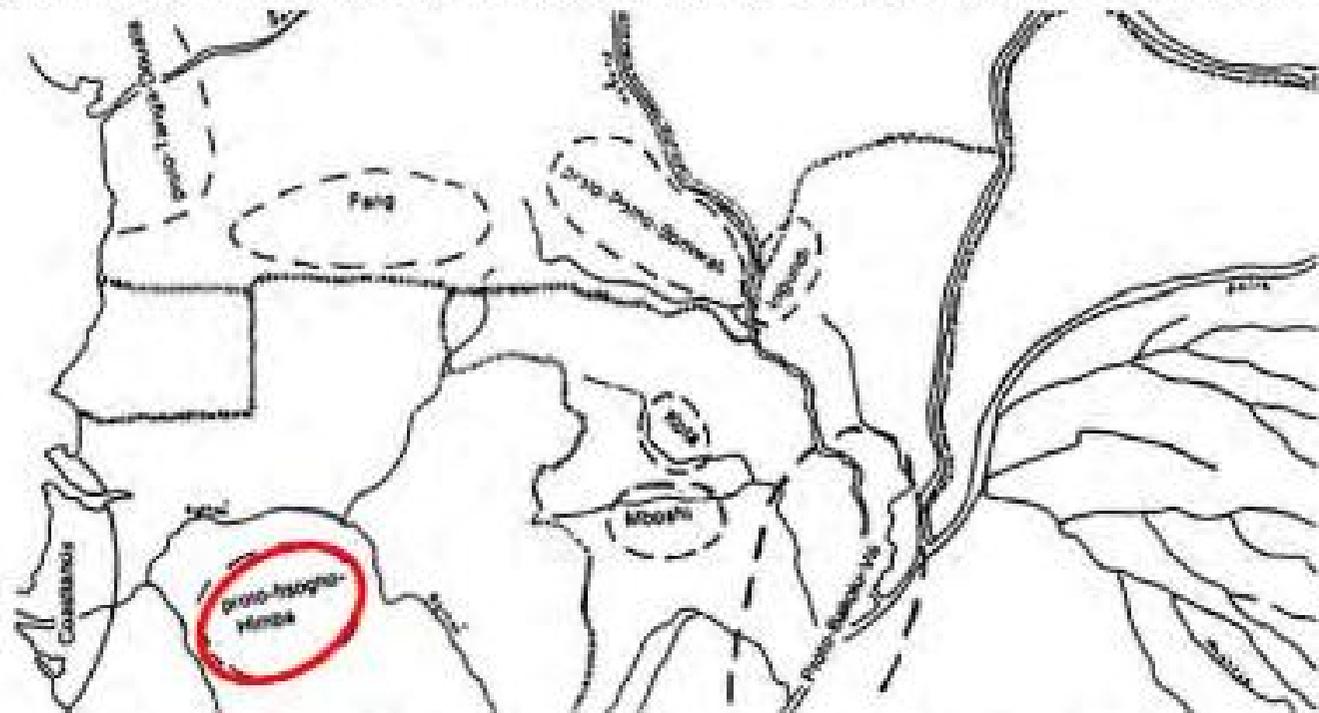
Fifteen villages are found along the final section of road beyond Ikobey. These villages are principally inhabited by two populations, the Mitsogo, a Bantu speaking people and the Babongo, a hunter-gather group. In addition to these populations there are the remains of a third population, the Akele, also a Bantu speaking people, but of this group there are only three elders that remain.

The two principal population groups, especially the Babongo, are considered by the Gabonese, conservation and development NGOs (prior to 2008), historians (Barnes, 1992, p.8), consultants (Kramkimel et al., 2005) and linguists as some of the first peoples in Gabon.

People found this study site area – Consensus

- It is generally accepted that :
 - The Mitsogo and especially the Babongo populations are some of the oldest populations in Gabon.
 - Both have been living in the Du Chaillu Massif for a considerable amount of time.

- Klieman (1997) has dated that the proto-Itsogho-Himba language common to both populations has been spoken in the Massif since 4,000 B.P.



Location of proto-Itsogho-Himba Language, 4,000 B.P. (Map from Klieman, 1997, p.32)

The consensus being that both the Mitsogo and Babongo have been living in the Du Chaillu Massif for a considerable amount of time. According to Klieman, the languages spoken by today's Mitsogo and Babongo have a common root in protoltsogho-Himba, that has been spoken in the Du Chaillu Massif since 4,000 B.P. (Klieman, 1997).

People found this study site area – Assumption

- From this consensus I had assumed that the inhabitants of this part of the Du Chaillu Massif had been living in the area for a considerable amount of time.



- Oral histories attained from the people quickly showed that this assumption was incorrect.
- All the people in the area say that they had started migrating there in the 1960s, with the last people coming in 2000.

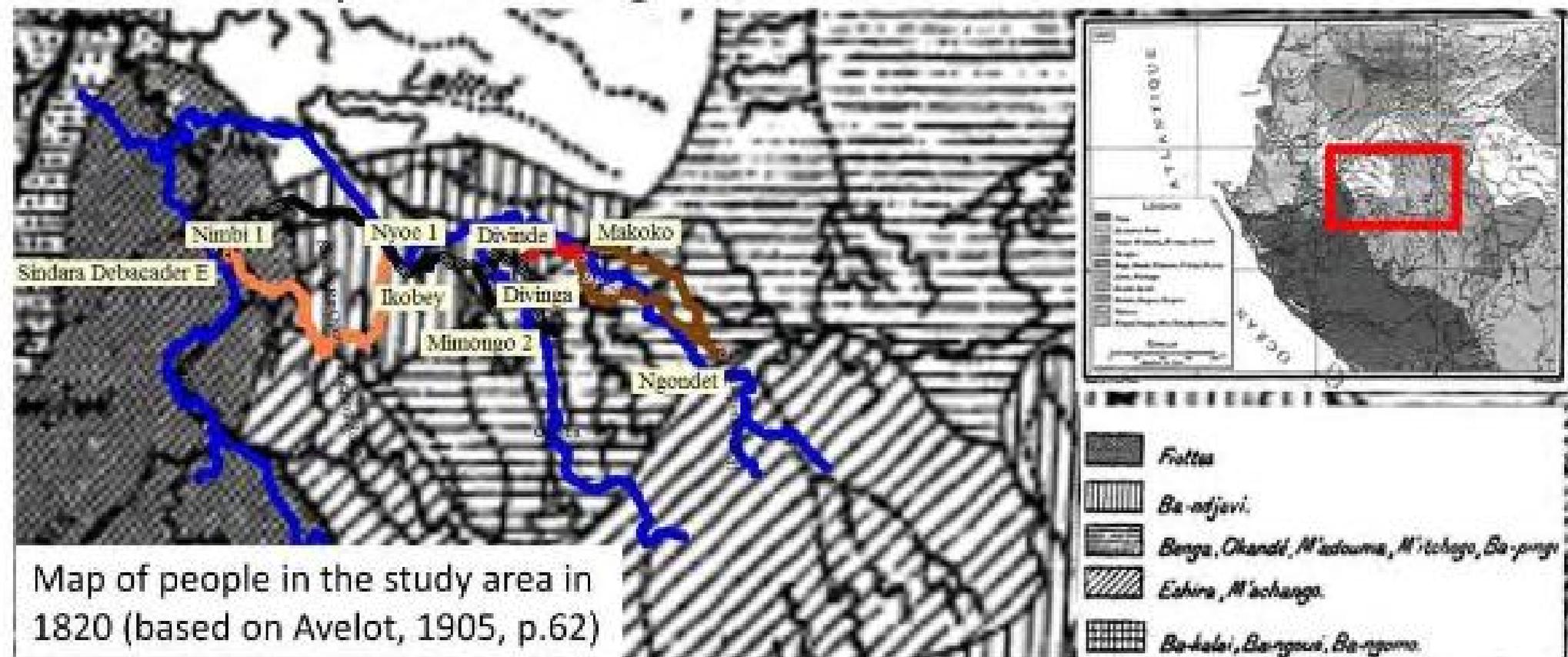
Based on this consensus, it is generally accepted that the people at the end of this particular road in the Du Chaillu Massif have been living in the area for a considerable amount of time (Ruizperez et al., 2005, p.9; Mebia, 2009).

Yet the oral histories from the Mitsogo, Babongo and the remaining Akele, of this area, all tell of how they are recent arrivals, migrating into the area between the mid 1960s and 2000, and that the area was uninhabited when they first came.

Due to the contradictions between the oral histories and the consensus from the literature I became interested in the recent history of this area. This presentation is a preliminary summary of this investigation.

The Akele advance – Ngounie River

- The Fang migration displaced others, including the Akele who had a similar lifestyle as the Fang.



- In 1870s the Akele in turn displaced the Villi and Eshira from the Samba Falls on the Ngounie River.

The Akele Advance

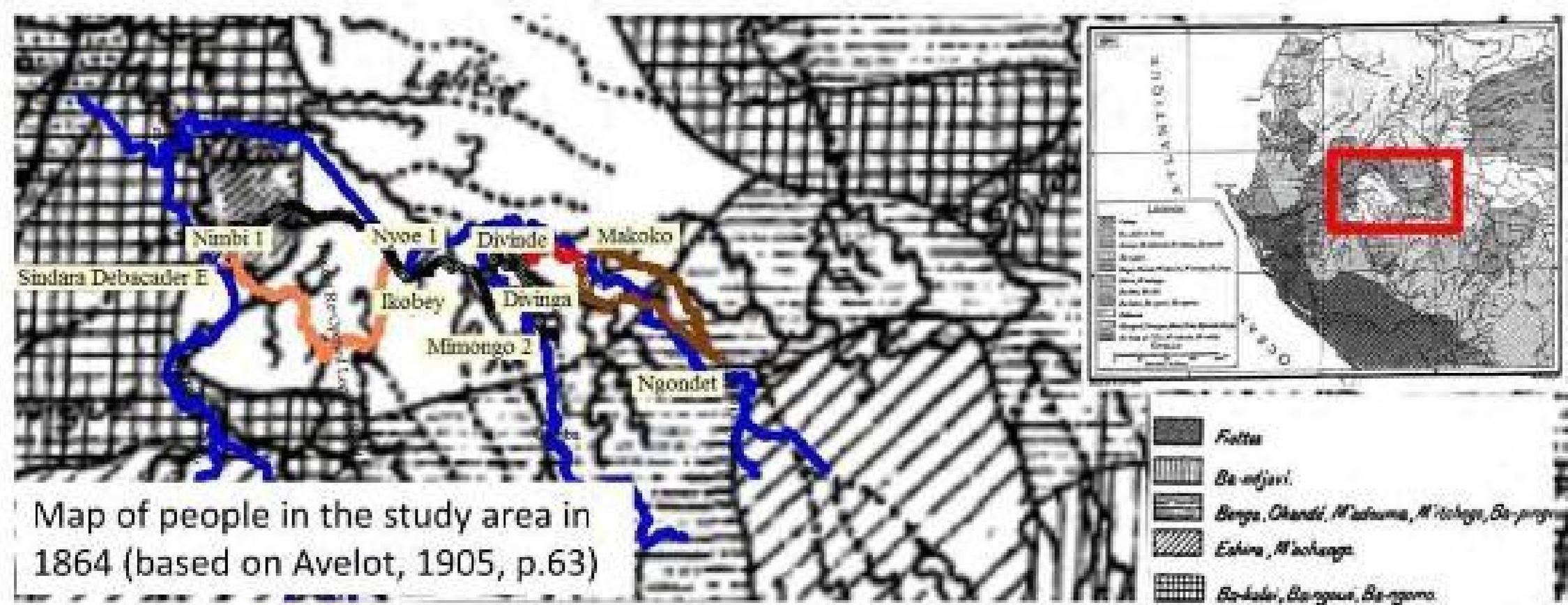
To understand why it was possible for these people to migrate into the study area in the 1960s we have to go back to the 1840s when the Fang were migrating from Southern Cameroon to Northern Gabon (Cinnamon, 1998). This migration triggered a series of events that led to the displacement of people throughout Northern and Central Gabon (Avelot, 1905; Gray, 2002).

One of the populations displaced southwards by the Fang were the Akele (Van der Veen, 1991), a group of people who, like the Fang, were traders, enslavers and warriors. The Akele themselves displaced others, including the people living on the Ngounie River.

In the 1870s, at Samba Falls, the Akele took over an important part of the riverine trade from the Villi and Eshira (Gray & Ngolet, 1999). At this point on the Ngounie River, the falls forcing riverine trade onto paths (Chamberlin, 1977; Gray, 2002).

The Akele advance – Ngounie River

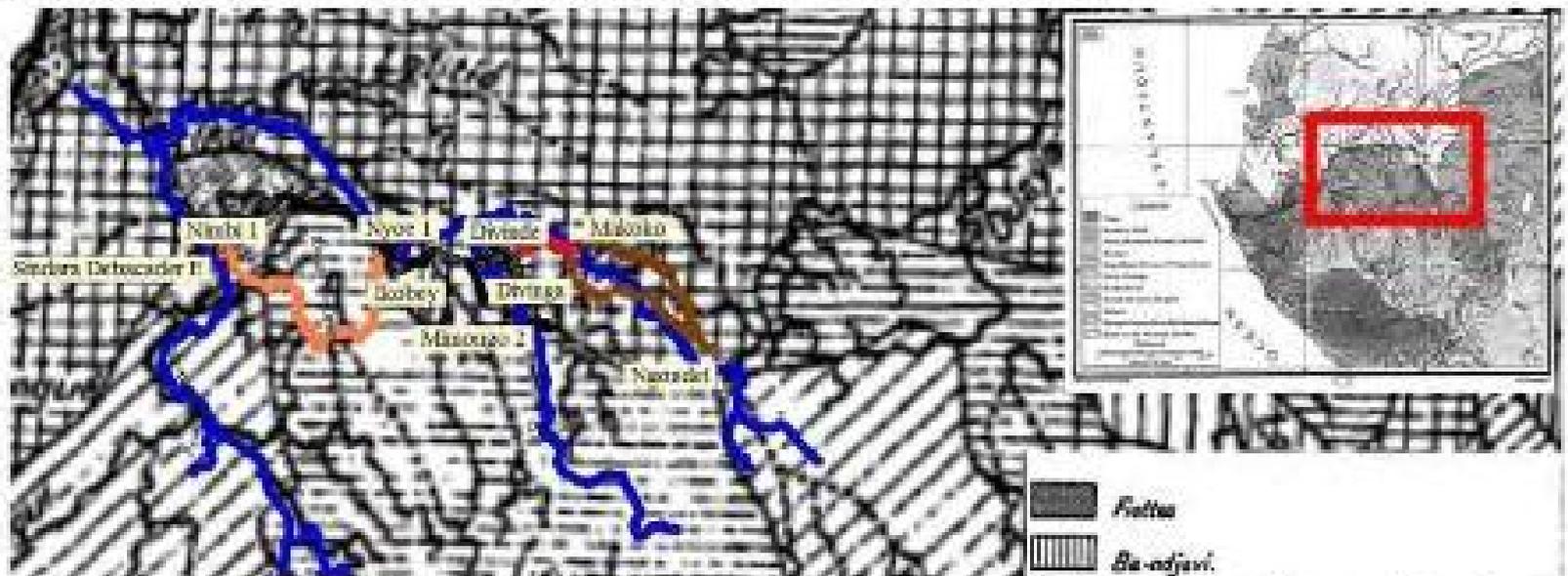
- By controlling the Samba Falls, the Akele were able to monopolise the trade of products coming from the Ikoy River including, slaves, ivory and wax.



By controlling the area of Sindara, the Akele were able to monopolise the trade of forest resources that came down the Ikoy River, which at the time consisted of slaves, ivory and bee wax (Chamberlin, 1977; Gray, 2002).

The Akele advance – Ikoy River

- Inhabitants of the Ikoy Valley were exposed to the Akele advance.
- In 1890s the Akele had expelled the Mitsogo and presumably the Babongo out of the area.
- The Mitsogo and Babongo fled towards the villages of Waka to the west and Eteke, Massima and Mimongo to the south.
- By the end of the 1890s the Mitsogo were able to stop the Akele advance.



Map of people in the study area in 1884 (based on Avelot, 1905, p.64)

It also meant that the inhabitants of the Ikoy valley described by early explorers like Du Chaillu (1867a; 1867b) and shown on early maps by Avelot (1905), Nassu (1914) and Neuville (1884), were now exposed to the Akele advance. Presumably the Babongo were also exposed, but there are no references of their presence in the area at the time.

In the 1890s the Akele had forced out the Mitsogo and other inhabitants of the Ikoy area (Gray, 2002, pp.57-58; Gray, 2005, p.235) and presumably the Babongo. These people fled to the east and southeast. Only a concentrated effort by the Mitsogo in the late 1890s stopped the Akele (Gray, 2002, pp.57-58; Gray, 2005, p.235).

The Akele retreat – commercial conflict

- Trade became the downfall of the Akele.
- It brought conflict with the French commercial interests of the time.
- The SHO gained commercial rights to exploit the Ikoy River area.
- In the early 1900s a SHO agent went up the Ikoy River to search for natural resources, he found Akele villages along the river.



Itinerary of E. Quéru, agent of the S.H.O., 1907-1909 (based on Coquery-Vidrovich 2001)

The Akele retreat – Commercial conflict

Trade became the downfall of the Akele, for it led to direct competition with the French, who in the 1900s were reinforcing their commercial effort in Gabon by expelling the major foreign traders of the time, namely the British and Germans (Barnes, 1992; Chamberlin, 1977; Coquery-Vidrovitch, 2001; Patterson, 1975; Pourtier, 1989).

In 1899 the Afrique Equatoriale Française (AEF) had been legally divided into commercial concessions (Cuvillier-Fleury, 1904, p.94), one of which was given to the Société commerciale, industrielle et agricole du Haut Ogooué (SHO). The SHO was given a large concession that included Sindara and the Ikoy valley.

In 1900s the first commercial agent for the SHO went up the Ikoy River (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 2001, pp.380-381; Gray, 2005) to make an inventory of the commercial natural resources of the area, he found Akele villages throughout the area. He set up factories in the area and organised the transport of rubber, ivory, raphia (Barnes, 1992, p.25; Coquery-Vidrovitch, 2001, pp.381-383) and latter palm nuts via a network of caravan routes that criss-crossed the whole area.

The Akele retreat – Commercial conflict, Famine and disease

- The SHO set up a factory on the Ikoy River, created a network of caravan routes and organised the collection of rubber, ivory and latter palm nuts.
- The period between 1910 and 1920 brought turbulence and chaos.
- There were labour shortages as labour was needed to build infrastructure and work for the logging industry.
- Able body people left the Ikoy valley, in some cases forcefully.

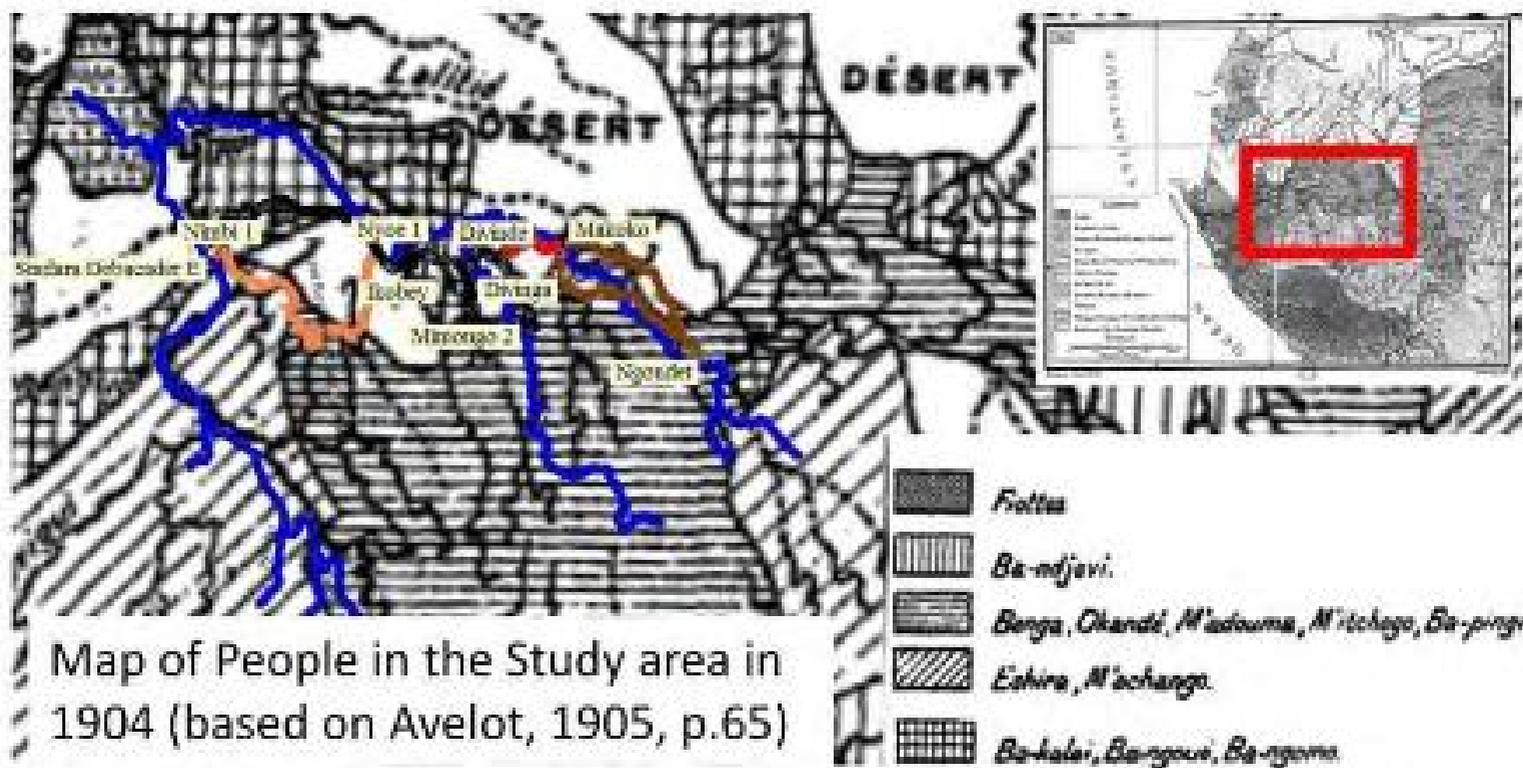
The Akele retreat –Famine and disease

Not only had the Akele lost their trade monopoly to the French but, like in the rest of Gabon, the Akele of the Ikoy area were being affected by the turbulence and chaos that was occurring throughout the country between 1910 and 1920s.

In the first decade of the 20th century there was a shortage of labour in Gabon, which resulted in able-bodied villagers in places such as the Ikoy valley leaving their villages, in some cases forcefully (Gray, 2002; Gray & Ngolet, 1999; Rich, 2007; Rich, 2005). Labour was needed to build infrastructure (Chamberlin, 1977; Gray, 2002; Rich, 2007) and for the logging industry (Christy et al., 2003; Nguimbi et al., 2006).

The Akele retreat – Famine and disease

- The displacement of the able bodied workforce left villages empty of people to work in the plantations.
- Resulting in famine and outbreaks of disease.
- By 1930's the Ikoy area became a "Dead Zone" with the Akele either dying or fleeing.
- The Ikoy valley laid empty for thirty years.



The displacement of able-bodied adults meant that villages no longer had the power to create and look after plantations (Gray, 2002, pp.151-153). The end result was famine and disease that had a major impact on the Gabonese population, including the destruction of entire villages (Gray, 2002; Headrick, 1994; Rich, 2007).

By the 1930s the area of Ikoy had become a “dead zone” (Gray, 2002, p.160), empty of people, with the Akele either dying or fleeing. For thirty years the area laid empty as people feared that it was cursed (Gray, 2002).

Regroupment and migration back to the Ikoy River

- The thirty year period came to an end in the 1960's
- Regroupment was being carried out on the caravan route that ran between Eteke and Mimongo, via Massima.
- The Mitsogo, Akele, and Babongo found today in the middle Ikoy valley refused regroupment.
- They used the old SHO / Akele caravan routes to enter the headwaters of the Ikoy and Oumba Rivers.
- The Mitsogo who had lived around Mimongo followed the Oumba River down.
- Latter other Mitsogo, Akele and Babongo also from around Mimongo followed the Ikoy River down.



Map of Oumba and Ikoy Rivers (based on Institut Geographique National, 1994)

***Régroupement* and migration back to the Ikoy River**

This thirty-year period came to an end with Gabon's Independence from the French in 1960. South of the headwaters of the Oumba and Ikoy Rivers there was a caravan route along which the Gabonese administration continued the previous policy of *régroupement*, but, like previous efforts of *régroupement*, not everyone accepted it.

Today's population of Mitsogo, Babongo and Akele found in the middle reaches of the Ikoy River, tell of how they fled *régroupement*, by leaving the caravan routes and entered the forest. For the most part these people used the now abandoned Akele and SHO caravan routes to enter the headwaters of the Ikoy and Oumba Rivers, where they created a number of villages.

Migration and foresters – The encounter

- In the 1960s the SHO had transformed into a forestry company that local people called Madre, this latter became La SONG.
- Madre started exploiting the forests around Sindara in the early 1960s.
- By the late 1960s, Madre had entered the “Dead Zone” and created the town of Ikobey.
- The foresters met up with the Mitsogo, Akele and Babongo at Ikobey.
- Before this encounter at Ikobey, the people had migrated on the old caravan routes. After this encounter they migrated on the logging roads.

The Migration and foresters –the encounter

By the 1960s the French concessions had been or were being disbanded. Part of the SHO concession was bought by one of the former SHO employees, Mr Madre (Simon, 1953, p.26). The forestry company MADRE exploited the forest around Sindara and Waka. At the end of the 1960s, MADRE was entering the “dead zone” that had been created thirty years earlier. This company created the modern-day town of Ikobey, where they set up their base, and created all the present-day roads. MADRE later became La SONG, who exploited the forest throughout the area, including the area beyond Ikobey.

While the foresters were coming up from Sindara, the Mitsogo, Akele and Babongo were migrating towards Ikobey from the southeast. They migrated along two routes. A first group of Mitsogo followed the Oumba River downstream and then, later, a second Mitsogo group, the Akele and Babongo followed the Ikoy River downstream. The migration of people into the middle reaches of the Ikoy River was brought to a close in 2000 when a group of Babongo originating from around Mount Ibondji also followed the Ikoy River downstream.

The use of the caravan routes by the migrants came to an end when the people encountered the foresters at Ikobey. People then started to use the logging roads to migrate towards Sindara as well as back up the Ikoy, moving at the same time that the foresters did. From the 1960s to 1990s MADRE and La SONG had been able to exploit all the accessible forests, stopping short of a steep escarpment in the east. The encounter between the people and the foresters was not the first time that they had met. People from all three populations, including the Babongo, had previously been using the old caravan routes to travel from Eteke, Ibondji, Massima and Mimongo to Sindara in search of jobs with the forestry companies that were there at the time.

Migration and foresters – Development

- Madre and La SONG developed the area of Ikoy by building roads, schools and dispensaries.
- They also hired local people and held weekly markets.
- This development initiative by the foresters further attracted the Mitsogo, Akele and Babongo.
- Development came to an end when La SONG left.

Migration and foresters -Development

MADRE and La SONG both had a development policy that significantly advanced development of the area including the building of roads and bridges that lasted longer than their exploitation of the area. They also helped build schools, dispensaries, as well as hiring local people and the holding of weekly markets in which local food products were brought from the surrounding villages to be sold to the employees. These efforts by the foresters further encouraged the migration of the Mitsogo, Babongo and Akele towards them (Knight, 2006).

When MADRE and La SONG left, the development of the area came to an abrupt end.

Migration and loggers

- After 1990s national and international logging companies exploited the area, but never for long periods of time.
- Between 2000 to 2006 Malaysian loggers operated in the area.
- Since 2010 Chinese loggers have started operating in the area.



Between 1990 and 2000 smaller national logging companies and other European logging companies exploited the forest, but they principally kept to the roads, never going as far as the original foresters and only exploited for a couple of years. The first of the Asian logging companies started to exploit the forest between 2000 and 2006 and later in 2010 a Chinese logging company started operations.

Migration and loggers

- The recent loggers did not create new roads.
- Instead they relied on the road system that Madre and La SONG had put in place.
- As they have not maintained roads, access has become difficult with roads degrading and bridges collapsing.
- As the roads disintegration so villages are propelled to the next usable section of road towards Ikobey and Sindara.



Development and loggers

- After the first foresters, none of the loggers have had a development policy.
- Many of the schools and dispensaries that the first foresters had built have disappeared.
- These loggers have been bringing everything from outside the area including:-
 - Food
 - Workers



Logging companies that came after the original foresters have done little to maintain the road. The schools, dispensaries and markets have also all disappeared. People in the area consider MADRE and La SONG as some of the best foresters that have worked in the area.

The end of development has meant that the infrastructure that was put in place is today collapsing. This has resulted in the continuing migrations of the Mitsogo and the Babongo toward Ikobey, propelled to move when bridges along the old logging roads collapse.

Not only have the recent loggers stopped development in the area, but they also bring everything that they need from outside the area. This includes the food that they consume and the workers that they employ. The exception being local forest guides who are employed in the prospection's teams for a short period.

Development and loggers

- This lack of development policy by the loggers has resulted in a difference in skill sets between age groups. Whereby :
 - The elders, including some Babongo, have been had long-term employment in jobs related to logging such as drivers, electricians, mechanics, chainsaw operators etc. And their children had access to schooling
 - The youth have only had short term employment in menial jobs such as being guides, and cutting transects. The schooling of their children depends on the distance between the village and the nearest state school



Impact of events

- Conservation and development organisations justify their work with the Babongo in the area by using labels such as “indigenous people” and “autochthons”. They claim that they these people are the first inhabitants of the area and that they need protecting from loggers.
- In fact the presence of people, loggers and conservationists in the area are due to events that occurred at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century.



As the first forestry companies invested more in development than today's logging companies there can be seen a difference in skill sets, with some elders including, to a lesser degree, the Babongo, having had experience at a number of different long-term jobs. The young, on the other hand, are only hired for menial jobs that are of short duration.

The impact of these events Conservation and development organisations are using the label of “indigenous peoples” and “autochthons” as the basis for their work with the Babongo living in the area of the study site, some have even suggested that they are the first people to live in the area and that they and the biodiverse environment that surrounds them needs protecting (WCS, 2007, p.246), especially from loggers and other industries. My preliminary research has shown that this is far from true.

Impact of events

- Commercial exploitation of the natural resources in the area dates back to the 19th century.
- Over time different people have been competing for access to these resources, including conservation and logging organisations .
- By only understanding the current environmental and social-economic situation, conservationists have misinterpreted what they see in the area.
- Resulting in conservationists thinking that the area is in a “pristine” state.

The impact of these events

The people who live in the area of the study site today, including the Babongo have migrated into the area in the last 40 years and that the presence of the people, loggers and conservationists in the area is due to earlier events that occurred at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century . Based on the labels that the conservation and development organisations use, they should be working with all the populations found in the area, rather than just one set of people.

The commercial exploitation of natural resources of the area dates back to before the last decade of the 1800s. During this time people have competed for access to the resources of the area including conservation and logging organisations. As conservationists have only taken into account the ecology and population of the area as found today, there is a lack of understanding of the history, human ecology and environment of the area. This has resulted in a misunderstanding of the area by conservationists and so policies that they put forward, such as wanting to protect the area due to its “pristine” state.

Impact of events - On logging and conservation

- The thirty year “dead zone” period allowed the environment to recuperate.
- The forest recuperated, resulting in a high density of Okoume stands, a secondary forest species.
- As Okoume has a high commercial value, it attracted the attention of foresters and then loggers.
- The thirty year period also allowed animal populations to recuperate, resulting in increased populations of endangered species such as gorillas, chimpanzees and elephants.
- These endangered animal populations attracted conservationists who in 2002 set up the Waka National Park.



The impact of these events –On logging and conservation

During the thirty-year period when the area was empty, the environment has had time in which to recover. This has resulted in populations of endangered species such as elephants, gorillas and chimpanzees having time to recover from the past exploitation that started in the mid-1800s. It also resulted in old plantations returning to a forest with a high density of Okoume stands, which are sign of past environmental disturbance.

Due to these events, the area became very attractive to loggers who were attracted to the Okoume stands that have a high commercial value. At the same time, in 2002 conservationists became attracted to the area due to large populations of endangered species found in today in the area, they helped in the creation of the Waka National Park.

Impact of logging events on development

- The Mitsogo, Akele and Babongo who came in the 1960s benefited from the foresters of the time.
- When forester left and loggers came in, development ended and with it:
 - Roads started to degrade.
 - Access to schools and education became difficult.
 - The training of people through employment ended.



The Impact of logging events on Development

The Mitsogo and Akele greatly benefited from the first forestry companies. With the end of the development programs, the infrastructure in the area has degraded and more importantly there is a generation of youth who have had little training and for whom employment is scarce.

Impact of logging events on development

- The Babongo have been more effected by this, as the did not benefit as much as the others from the first foresters.
- Other commercial activities, such as agriculture and bushmeat sales, are not viable due to the difficulty of access to the area.
- Development in the area will only continue if the loggers of today take, as their role models, the first foresters of the area.
- *“Foresters recognize that forestry is concerned not with trees, but with how trees can serve people”* this is how Foresters defined themselves in the 1971 World Forestry Congress.



This is worst for the Babongo since they did not benefit as greatly as the others from the early opportunities that MADRE and La SONG offered. Other commercial activities, such as the sale of bushmeat or agricultural products are not feasible due to the difficulty in finding transport out of the area to commercial markets.

Development of the area will only continue if today's logging company's take, as their role model, the first forestry companies that worked in the area. Today's logging companies cannot be called foresters as "*Foresters recognize that forestry is concerned not with trees, but with how trees can serve people*" (from the Seventh World Forestry Congress Declaration, paragraph 13 Vernell (ed.), 1971; Westoby, 1987, p.323), this is how foresters defined themselves in the 1971 World Forestry Congress.

Impact of conservation events on development

- Local people hoped that Waka National Park would help development.
- This has not occurred and is unlikely to occur in the near future.
- In fact, if the area became cut off, any conservation effort to help development in the area may hinder conservation of the area.
- Without development, it is likely that the Mitsogo and Babongo will continue their migration to Sindara.

Local people had hoped that the citing of a National Park base in the area would mean that development would restart. But this has not occurred and is unlikely to in the near future. In fact, any development initiative by conservationist may be counterproductive, as the area may soon become cut off from the rest of Gabon if there is no intervention by either the State or loggers. If the area becomes cut off, then it would encourage both the Mitsogo and Babongo to continue their migration towards Sindara and so away from the area around the park.

Conservationists will soon have to make a decision whether to maintaining their presence in the area. If they decide to stay, then they will have to bring in heavy equipment to maintain both their own road and the main road. If they decide to leave the area, then the area may once again become a “dead zone” as is already occurring in the headwaters of the Ikoy and Oumba Rivers.

Thanks to the villagers in the Ikobey area.

Thanks to my research assistants.

Thanks to my advisors.

Thanks to my funders Rufford, UCL and ZSL.



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