The hidden voices of conservation: gossip, rumors, and local power in Yangambi (DRC)

By Albert Wawina Matongo
PhD candidate
Université de Neuchâtel

Executive Summary

This progress report presents preliminary findings of my project, which examines rumours as indicators of local tensions, perceptions, and power dynamics linked to the implementation of hybrid projects[1] in the Yangambi Biosphere Reserve (DRC), led by Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), UNESCO and Ghent University. The findings draw on a total of ten months of fieldwork—seven months in 2023 and a further three months between July and September 2025. This second phase of fieldwork was made possible through funding from the Rufford Foundation. Employing an ethnographic methodology, the research combined participant observation, formal and informal interviews, and a reflexive field diary, conducted across three villages and the town of Yangambi.

The analysis is structured around three main axes: 1. The emergence and circulation of rumours in the context of institutional information deficits and historical mistrust; 2. Rumours as instruments of symbolic power, mobilised both by subaltern populations and certain local elites or community leaders ; 3. Their direct influence on the reputation, legitimacy, and effectiveness of conservation initiatives, through alternative narratives that generate doubt, invoke colonial memory, and reframe technological presence as covert extraction.

These rumours, far from being mere "social noise", operate as discursive forms of resistance, as political languages, and as tools of community regulation. Their circulation has tangible consequences on project operations (equipment damage, team withdrawal, security interventions) and prompts a critical reflection on the strategies through which institutional legitimacy is constructed and contested.

From a logistical perspective, CHF6,857 have been spent to cover the costs of the national trip, the living in Kisangani and the three fieldwork missions. A partial financial report and supporting documentation have been submitted to the Secretariat of the Institute of Ethnology at the University of Neuchâtel. A remaining balance is requested to complete the final phase of fieldwork and to organise participatory workshops.

The next steps (October–December 2025) will focus on engaging more directly with opinion leaders and women, finalising the thematic analysis and relational mapping of gossip dynamics, preparing participatory workshops, and producing an interim report tailored to both local communities and partner organisations.

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[1] I refer to as "hybrid projects" all initiatives implemented in Yangambi that aim to reconcile conservation with local development. These interventions pursue initiatives that seek co-benefits related to climate, conservation, and development. According to the IPCC (2014, p. 14), co-benefits are defined as "the positive effects that a policy or measure aimed at one objective might have on other objectives, irrespective of the net effect on overall social welfare."

1. Project Background

This interim report forms part of my doctoral research, which investigates the social and political effects—anticipated, unintended, or ambiguous—of hybrid projects in the Yangambi Biosphere Reserve, Democratic Republic of the Congo. My inquiry centers on how these projects, often designed and implemented by international scientific and environmental institutions, are received, contested, and reinterpreted in local contexts shaped by colonial histories, entrenched power asymmetries, and divergent epistemologies.

At the core of this research lies a phenomenon frequently dismissed as peripheral or unreliable: rumours. Rather than treating them as distortions or noise, I approach rumours as socially meaningful discursive forms that offer insight into how local populations navigate uncertainty, asymmetry, and marginalization. In Yangambi, these narratives occupy the edges of official discourse but are central to how people make sense of—and respond to—external conservation or development agendas. Projects spearheaded by CIFOR, Ghent University, or UNESCO are not encountered passively. But they are recontextualized through suspicion, critique, and speculation, giving rise to rich counter-narratives articulated through rumour.

By examining rumours as politically charged practices, this research positions them as analytical tools that expose hidden voices, dynamics of contestation and negotiation. Rumours do not only signal resistance; they also reveal tactical forms of engagement, appropriation, and reinterpretation, in which local actors assert their agency. This challenges the idea that misinformation stems from ignorance. Instead, rumours emerge as vernacular critiques—rooted in lived experience, historical memory, and a broader struggle over knowledge, legitimacy, and voice.

The findings presented here draw on then months of ethnographic fieldwork—seven months in 2023 and three months between July and September 2025, the latter supported by the Rufford Foundation. This temporal layering allowed me to trace the evolution of rumours, identify continuities and shifts in perception, and document ongoing tensions around the legitimacy of scientific and conservation infrastructures.

This second phase of fieldwork focused on three dimensions: first, the mechanisms through with rumours emerge and circulate in contexts of uncertainty and institutional opacity; second, what these rumours disclose about intra-community dynamics and power relations between locals and development agents; and third, how they shape the perceived credibility and effectiveness of conservation initiatives. These questions were pursued through participant observation, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, and reflexive journaling across three villages and the town of Yangambi.

Methodologically, I grounded this research in an ethnographic tradition that values immersive engagement and reflexivity. The informal and often sensitive nature of rumour required adaptive strategies and sustained trust-building. I paid particular attention to the reception of technoscientific devices—such as the flux tower, camera traps, and the mega transect—which, while intended to produce objective environmental data, often became focal points of suspicion. These devices were not just tools of measurement; they became symbols of distant authority, economic exclusion, and epistemic control.

In documenting the narratives surrounding them, my goal is neither to confirm nor refute the content of rumours, but to treat them seriously as expressions of symbolic struggle (Holmes,2022; Scott, 1985). This struggle is not only about truth and falsehood, but about who gets to speak, who is heard, and on what terms. In the long shadow of dispossession and structural inequality, rumours become more than stories—they are instruments of meaning-making, resistance, and negotiation in a contested conservation landscape.

2. Methodological Approach

My approach is grounded in an ethnographic tradition that seeks to understand, from the field, the social and political dynamics underpinning conservation projects. It is based on a reflexive stance, firmly rooted in field experience, and draws upon a combination of qualitative techniques adapted to the sensitive and informal nature of the phenomenon under investigation. During this second phase of research—focused on rumours surrounding devices in Yangambi— participant observation and informal conservations formed the cornerstone of my methodological strategy. These tools enabled me to grasp the ordinary and often implicit forms through which narratives circulate, as well as their embedded social and political functions.

Between July and September 2025, I conducted a total of 22 interviews across three peripheral villages and the town of Yangambi: 8 formal interviews, including 6 with farmers and 2 with project staff; and 12 informal interviews, of which 8 were with farmers and 4 with agents. The average duration of these formal interviews was approximately 45 minutes. I also conducted a focus group in each village to gather general perceptions of the conservation and development projects, including the research infrastructures installed within the reserve. These methods allowed me to explore local perceptions of conservation and development initiatives (particularly technoscientific devices), identify the most widespread rumours, and examine their role in reshaping relations between local populations and conservation institutions.

In parallel, I carried out extended participant observation in one village—strategically selected for its centrality in the circulation of information, and the presence of conservation and development activities—as well as in the urban centre of Yangambi. This sustained immersion enabled me to closely follow the contexts in which rumours emerge and spread, such as markets, informal gatherings, and everyday social interactions. It also granted me privileged access to local speech practices, ambient atmospheres, and the tangible effects these narratives have on behaviours, attitudes, and interpersonal dynamics. Informal discussions — often emerging on the margins of banal activities or shared waiting moments — were systematically recorded. These exchanges played a crucial role in surfacing latent tensions that formal interview settings often fail to capture. They significantly deepened my understanding of the relational logics underpinning local discourses.

I also kept a daily field journal, in which I recorded observations, personal impressions, interactional contexts, methodological adjustments, and the evolving nature of my position within each research site. This journal proved instrumental in maintaining a rigorous reflexive posture and in tracking the social and political density of rumours, beyond their mere discursive content.

This methodology — inductive and deeply grounded — enabled me to approach rumours as full-fledged social facts: carriers of critique, memory, and resistance, rather than dismissible background "noise". It also allowed me to better understand how devices presented as purely scientific may, in local contexts, become platforms for powerful counter-discourses that reveal enduring asymmetries and contest external authority.

3. Preliminary Findings

As part of the FORETS project, the Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and Ghent University have deployed a series of scientific instruments at the heart of the Yangambi Biosphere Reserve. These devices — the flux tower, camera traps, and the mega transect — are intended to generate critical environmental data for understanding the functioning of tropical forests, monitoring biodiversity, and supporting conservation and climate mitigation policies.

The flux tower, a 55-metre-high steel structure, measures greenhouse gas exchanges between the forest and the atmosphere, providing key data on carbon sequestration. The mega transect spans several kilometres across the reserve to generate multi-resource inventories (fauna, flora, fungi), while camera traps record wildlife movements, enabling ongoing species monitoring. Together, these tools embody a technoscientific logic of environmental surveillance, grounded in advanced technologies and standardized protocols.

However, in the region, these instruments are not perceived as neutral. They have become objects of suspicion, anxiety, and at times, outright rejection. Over the course of ten months of ethnographic fieldwork, it has become clear that although these devices are underpinned by scientific rationale, they also generate persistent and multi-layered rumours. These popular narratives reflect deeper tensions, namely institutional opacity, colonial memory, power asymmetries, and local resistance to what is perceived as imposed conservation.

The following section presents a selective preliminary result of the analysis of some rumours collected in the villages and town of Yangambi. Their analysis illustrates how technoscientific initiatives can, in a local context, become the site of a collective counter-narrative, oscillating between mistrust, symbolic reappropriation, and political critique.

3. 1. The Emergence and Circulation of Rumours: From Informational Voids to the Social Circulation of Doubt

Rumours emerge in a context marked by informational uncertainty and institutional communication gaps. Their origin cannot be attributed to a single process but stems from plural logics, shaped by the positions, expectations, and interests of various local actors.

On one hand, some local elites and community leaders, often serving as intermediaries or collaborators of the implementing organizations, fully understand the scientific purpose of the flux tower, camera traps, or mega transect. However, when their personal or political expectations are unmet, they may deliberately circulate alternative narratives aimed at challenging or discrediting hybrid projects. In doing so, these stories become tools of symbolic resistance, reinscribing local voices within a register of autonomy and dissent.

On the other hand, a large segment of the population reconstructs the meaning of these devices based on a lack of information or a profound distrust of institutional discourse. As one development agent explained, *"In the absence of information, people feel free to speculate [à l'absence d'information, les gens se permettent de supputer]"* (T015, September 2025). Another put it more bluntly: *"Nature abhors a vacuum — people don't tolerate emptiness; they create content, information to fill the void"* (F01, August 2025). This cognitive and communicational void is thus filled by collective narratives rooted in historical traumas of domination and colonial exploitation, which feed a generalised suspicion toward any external (technological) presence.

These narratives — often laced with suspicions of clandestine extraction or resource plundering — reveal the friction between local and scientific knowledge systems:

"Since the time of the Belgians, [white people] were taking red mercury from our forest and forbidding us from entering... and now they've put up this antenna to steal our oxygen." (LiH014, August 2023).

"The climate problem isn't us... before they came and put that antenna in the middle of the forest, there were no violent winds or frequent crop losses like now." (LiH08, August 2023).

"The people from the European Union installed the tower to take our oxygen and carbon and send it to the white people's countries... and we're the ones left suffering here." (YaHF013, May 2023)

"When they send the oxygen to Europe, they also send wind back to destroy our homes." (YbiH18, September 2023)

The spread of these rumours follows a dual trajectory: *horizontally* through word-of-mouth at markets, wakes, agricultural labor, and village gatherings; and *vertically* as they are transmitted to urban centres via political intermediaries, opinion leaders, or social media networks. As Allport and Postman (1947) have argued, rumours operate as cognitive substitutes in contexts of ambiguity. So, the more absent, inaccessible, or unconvincing the official information, the more powerful, legitimate, and socially cohesive the rumour becomes.

3. 2. Power Dynamics: Rumour as a Weapon of the Weak and a Tool for Symbolic Rebalancing

The rumours circulating in Yangambi surrounding scientific installations reveal entangled power relations between local actors, development institutions, and rural populations. These rumours operate as discursive forms of resistance and as symbolic spaces through which power is reappropriated.

Following the analytical framework of James C. Scott (1985, 1990), these rumours resemble "weapons of the weak" — everyday strategies of resistance deployed by subaltern groups in contexts where open confrontation with authority is either impossible or carries high risk. Rumour, in this context, functions as a *"hidden transcript"* which is a parallel discourse embedded in doubt, suspicion, and irony, through which local communities bypass, challenge, and ridicule institutional authority. When a resident states, *"The people from the European*

Union installed the tower to take our oxygen and carbon and send it to the white people's countries... and we are the ones left suffering," this is not merely a naïve belief but an implicit critique of unequal regimes of knowledge and power between the scientific North and the forested South.

Local elites play an ambivalent role in this dynamic. Some, fully aware of the scientific purposes of these devices, deliberately circulate alternative narratives when they feel excluded from the material or symbolic benefits of the projects. In doing so, these rumours become political weapons of contestation, allowing them to reaffirm their influence over collective discourse and rebalance symbolic hierarchies vis-à-vis development agents. Other leaders, by contrast, contribute to the dissemination of such narratives due to genuine distrust or lack of information — revealing the fragility of institutional communication channels.

As I observed in the field:

"Some project participants adopt an ambivalent stance. When their interests — whether financial or symbolic, such as having a say in recruitment — are fulfilled, they express a discourse aligned with development actors. However, when their expectations are unmet, they shift their position. They then circulate critical, even hostile narratives, which contradict the institutional discourse and contribute to discrediting the organisations involved." (Note de terrain, communication personnelle, 24 septembre 2025)

In this sense, rumour is not a social pathology, but a political symptom (Holmes, 2022; Duffy, 2002). It constitutes one of the "tactics of the weak" through which the dominated subvert the strategies of the powerful (de Certeau, 1980). It also embodies what Foucault (1978) describes as a form of counter-conduct — a discreet refusal to be governed, here by technoscientific rationality and the language of expertise.

The narratives emerging in Yangambi reactivate colonial memories of dispossession and exploitation, confirming Taussig's (1987) insight that popular imaginaries express both the memory of power and the fear of renewed loss. When a farmer states, *"Since the time of the Belgians, [white people] were taking red mercury from our forest... and now they've installed this antenna to take our oxygen,"* (LiH014, August 2023), rumour serves as a form of critical remembrance, a way to link colonial pasts with present-day inequalities.

Finally, rumour becomes a vector for the social organisation of meaning, circulating horizontally (markets, funerary vigils, neighbourhood networks, village gatherings) and vertically (opinion leaders, social media, urban spheres). As Kapferer (1990) suggests, it is both a mechanism of community cohesion and a collective language of suspicion. In this regard, Allport and Postman (1947) rightly argued that the more absent or untrustworthy official information becomes, the more legitimate and powerful rumour becomes. In Yangambi, rumour is not a mere distraction or "noise", but a means of reconfiguring discursive power — a tool through which local populations reclaim speech and redefine their relationship to truth and legitimacy.

3.3. Influence on Reputation, Legitimacy, and Effectiveness of Conservation and development Initiatives

The rumours surrounding scientific devices, and hybrid projects in Yangambi exert a profound influence on the public reputation, perceived legitimacy, and operational effectiveness of these initiatives. They cannot be reduced to mere "communication failures," as most development practitioners tend to do; rather, they are fully-fledged social and political acts, capable of reshaping how projects are understood, reframing their objectives, and at times disrupting their implementation.

From an institutional standpoint, such rumours undermine the credibility of development actors. Staff from CIFOR, Ghent University,UNESCO and partner organizations are increasingly viewed not as knowledge mediators, but as new embodiments of opaque, external power, perpetuating technocratic forms of control rooted in colonial histories. The recurring narrative — *"The flux tower is stealing our oxygen and sending it to Europe"* — exemplifies this symbolic reversal of legitimacy: the scientific apparatus, intended to produce objective data for the common good, becomes in the local imaginary the emblem of disguised extraction. This narrative inversion signals a crisis of trust in institutional discourse — a moment where science loses its presumed neutrality and becomes suspect, tainted by hidden interests.

As James C. Scott (1990) has argued, subaltern discourse often takes the form of "*hidden transcripts*" — counter-narratives in which moral and political judgements about the powerful are embedded in indirect speech. In Yangambi, rumours function precisely as counter-publicity to the official rhetoric of conservation and research. They erode the moral and scientific authority of projects, while simultaneously reinforcing communal solidarity through a shared narrative of suspicion. In this way, rumour weakens institutional legitimacy but strengthens the social legitimacy of local voices.

Rumours thus carry a paradoxical double function. First, they delegitimise conservation efforts by spreading alternative interpretations — clandestine mining, oxygen theft, surveillance of hunters — that generate distrust and hinder cooperation. Second, they reinforce internal community legitimacy by creating a discursive space of autonomy, in which local speech reclaims the authority to determine what is true or false. This process echoes Foucault's (1978) notion of counter-conduct, which is, in our case, a refusal to be governed by the "truth" of expertise. By challenging the scientific monopoly on forest knowledge, rumour reasserts the forest as not only an ecological space, but a political one.

In terms of practical outcomes, these narratives have tangible effects: delays in field operations, temporary withdrawal of research teams, destruction or theft of equipment (e.g., cameras), local distrust of researchers, and even interventions by security services. As one CIFOR agent reported, a rumour claiming *"the researchers are exploiting minerals"* led to the involvement of the National Intelligence Agency, suspending fieldwork. In such cases, rumour becomes performative — it does not simply describe reality, it transforms it (Kapferer, 1990).

Still, to treat rumour purely as an obstacle would be reductive. As Max Gluckman (1963) suggested, gossip and scandal are also mechanisms of social regulation. They reveal tensions, but also stage them, providing a way to reaffirm the moral boundaries of the group. In

Yangambi, rumour reflects a collective need to make visible asymmetries of power and to reintroduce negotiation into a process perceived as unilateral. Thus, the influence of rumour is ambivalent: negative, in that it undermines institutional credibility, slows operations, and fuels mistrust; positive, in that it compels institutional actors to acknowledge the political and communicational dimensions of their presence, and to rethink the terms of their legitimacy.

Therefore, rumour serves as a test of legitimacy — revealing that legitimacy is not decreed by science or expertise, but constructed through symbolic exchange, mutual recognition, and shared speech. In other words, rumour reminds us that no conservation or development intervention is ever solely ecological or technical — it is always at its core, social, historical, and political.

7. Challenges Encountered

Several constraints emerged during this first phase of fieldwork:

- *Transport challenges*:

Access to Yangambi and surrounding villages remains difficult. Given the uncertainty of securing a place aboard the CIFOR boat, I had to rely on motorised road transport for the Kisangani–Yangambi route. On site, the lack of adapted motorised transport required the daily rental of motorcycles, which increased logistical costs and created a dependency on local drivers.

- *Reluctance among project staff*:

Some staff working for NGOs or conservation institutions were cautious or reluctant to speak openly, especially regarding the rumours circulating about their activities. This limited the depth of certain data and led me to prioritise alternative data collection methods, such as participant observation and informal conversations.

- *Rising cost of living*:

Compared to my initial projections, the costs of food, accommodation, and services rose significantly in Kisangani and Yangambi. This required an adjustment in budget allocations, including the reduction of previously planned margins in other areas of expenditure.

These constraints did not compromise the achievement of my primary research objectives, but they do justify a revised logistical and financial plan for the next stage of fieldwork.

8. Forthcoming Steps (Planned)

The second phase of the project, scheduled for October to December 2025, will focus on the following activities:

- Further pursue and deepen the investigation, with increased attention to opinion leaders and women, to capture generational and gendered differences in perception.
- Complete the thematic and relational mapping analysis of rumour dynamics, highlighting the key channels through which these narratives circulate.
- Prepare and conduct the participatory workshops planned for August–September 2025, designed to bring together local leaders, farmers, and development agents to share preliminary findings and co-develop practical recommendations.
- Produce an in-depth interim report and develop a dissemination plan adapted to local communities as well as conservation and development organisations.

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