

**From ‘Community through exclusion’ to ‘Marginalized and fragmented community’:
The Aka forest foragers society in the Republic of the
Congo (ROC) ***

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In this paper, I would like to update on the marginalization of the Aka society; a forager ethnic group who live in the tropical rain forest zone of the Republic of the Congo (ROC) in Africa.

Figure1 shows the location of ROC and tropical rain forest zone. The green belt shown in this map of ROC indicates the tropical rain forest zone. The arrow shows the region inhabited by the Aka.

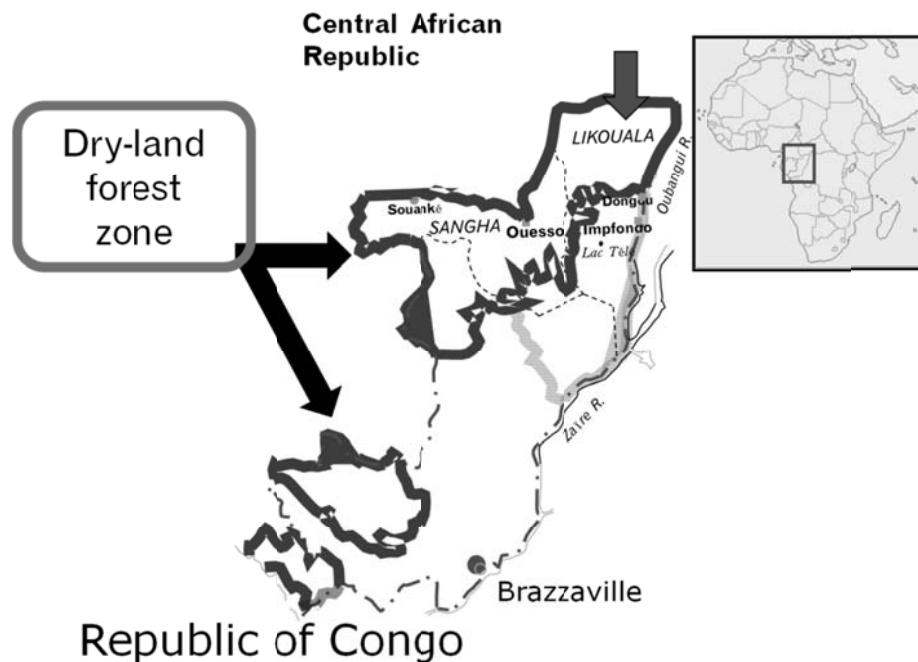


Figure 1. Location of ROC and tropical rain forest zone

Figure 2 shows a typical village of the slash-and-burn horticulturalists.



Figure 2. horticulturalist village

The Aka set up small camps distributed about 8-km radius in the periphery of the horticulturalists.



Figure 3. Aka camp

We have seen the inter-ethnic relationship between the Aka and the horticulturalists or farmers up to the 1990s(Figure 4); that is before external influences, such as deforestation, strongly affected these inhabitants in the tropical rain forest.

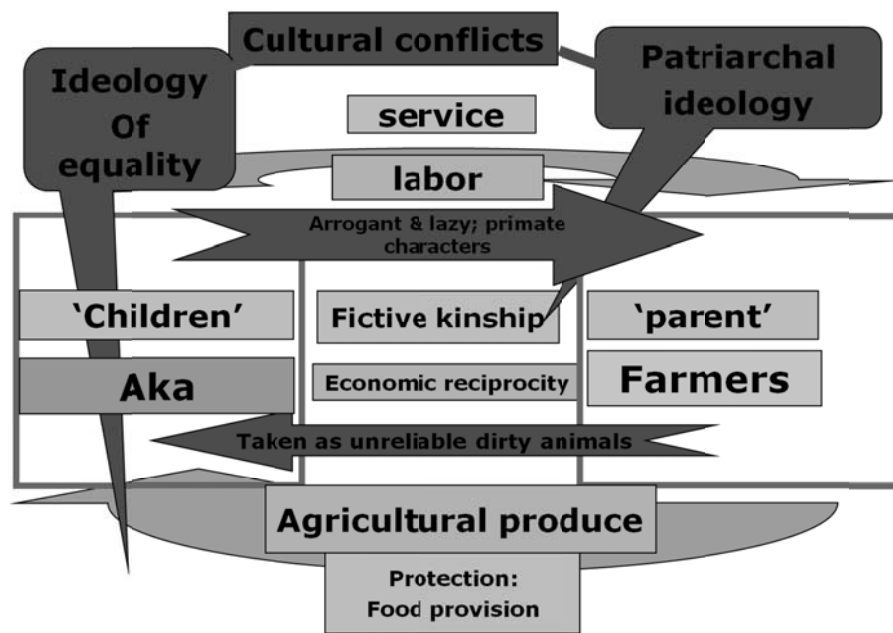


Figure 4. Ambivalent relationship between Aka and farmers

In other words, as children - the Aka - were working for their parents - or the farmers - and in exchange, the farmer parents provide food for the Aka children, based on a patriarchal relationship to actualize economic reciprocity. It is this ambivalent relationship of cultural exclusion and economic interdependence that maintained the Aka-farmer regional community up to the 1990s.

For the Aka, the relationship with the farmers was not limited to the economic aspect; the farmer parents provided political barrier to safeguard the Aka children by accommodating demands and neutralizing violence against the Aka by remote farmer communities and police. Furthermore, for the fluid-like small-group life activity of the Aka, their membership was established as an ethnic identity for itself through relationships with the farmers based on ethnic identity *per se* (itself).

Community through exclusion up to the 1990s has established and integrated via cultural exclusion. However, after suffering economic difficulties through crumbling crude-oil prices and civil wars, the ROC government allocated the tropical forest zones and forest exploitation units, and sold to foreign timber industry as timber concessions.

Figure 5 shows a timber-designated section of the region inhabited by the Aka. The whole section was in fact completely sold to the foreign lumbering companies by 2003.

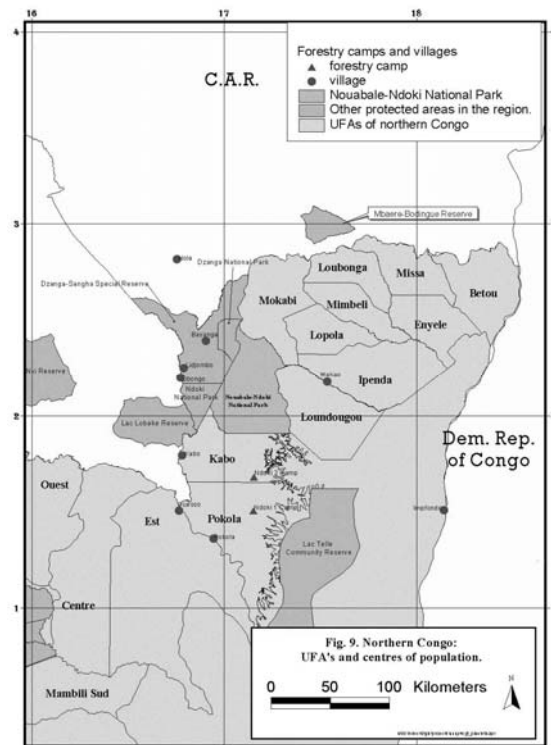


Figure 5. Timber-designated section in north-eastern Congo

Figure 6 shows the changes of logging in the ROC with time. Timber production was rapidly increased after the year 1999.

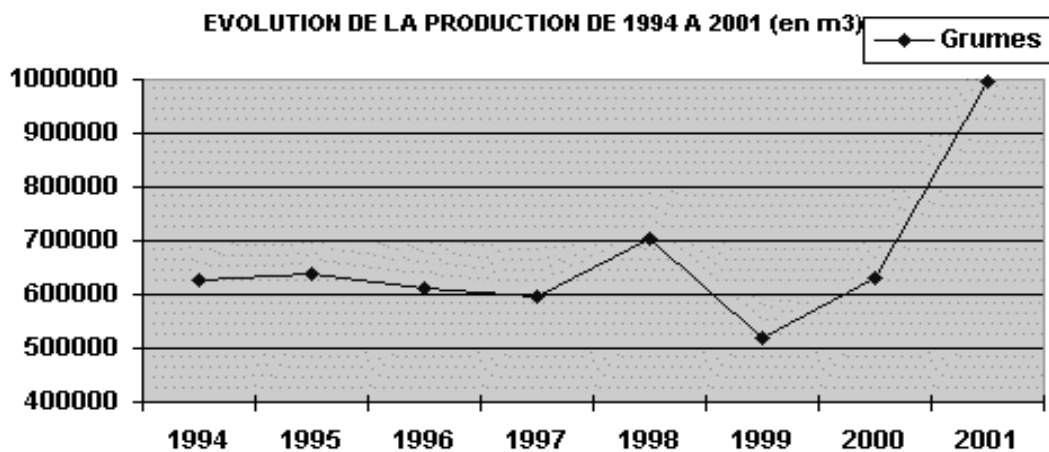


Figure 6. Timber production of ROC(1994-2001)
(Africonsei, <http://www.ifrance.com/africonseil/CONGOECO.htm>)

Interestingly, while the rapid surge of commercial logging in the regions inhabited by the Aka in tandem with higher forest protection activity in the

1990s, an NGO related with nature conservation bought timber-designated sectors over from lumbering companies and eventually established the Nouabale Ndoki National Park in 1993.

Under the background influence of nature conservation concept and political pressures from the European and United States, the trilateral relationships of the timber industry, nature-conservation NGO and the ROC government were maintained and closely coordinated. Both the timber industry and the ROC government could not ignore the strong climate of public opinion on nature conservation prevalent in Europe and the US. In fact, they appeal to the conservation-orientated forces with respect to the nature-conservation concept by cooperating in the establishment of the national park.

As a matter of fact, the nature-conservation NGO requires the cooperation of the lumbering companies to maintain the National Park well. Thus, the trilateral cooperative system was established with the NGO, lumbering companies and ROC government working hand in hand. However, this trilateral cooperative system almost ignored the will and rights of the Aka living in the area, especially in aspects associated with understanding the ‘undeveloped’ nature and education related with respect for nature conservation among the Aka .

Figure 7 shows symbolic of the close relationships between the lumbering company and nature-conservation NGO; the lumbering company allocated a section of its parking lots for the NGO office in the ROC capital, Brazzaville.



Figure 7. Nature-conservation NGO office

Now, let’s look at the social transformations in the Aka community through commercial deforestation. Through the influx of lumberjacks, deforestation bases developed into townships with a higher population. Many of the farmers then moved to these towns in search of opportunistic hard cash. As a result, the Aka-framer relationship, which is established on local community through

exclusion, began to erode and crumble.

Figure 8 shows the difference in community distribution of the Aka between 1996 and 2004. According to our survey in 2004, Aka in the regions under commercial deforestation moved to settlements along the logging road or villages under the administration of the Management Office of the National Park when the livelihood-sustaining social bond between the Aka and the forest or the farmers was terminated. Moreover, the Aka either worked as small-scale farmers or worked the National Park and timber industry as hired temporary labor, thus losing their own identity in the process of changing their settlement and routine work.

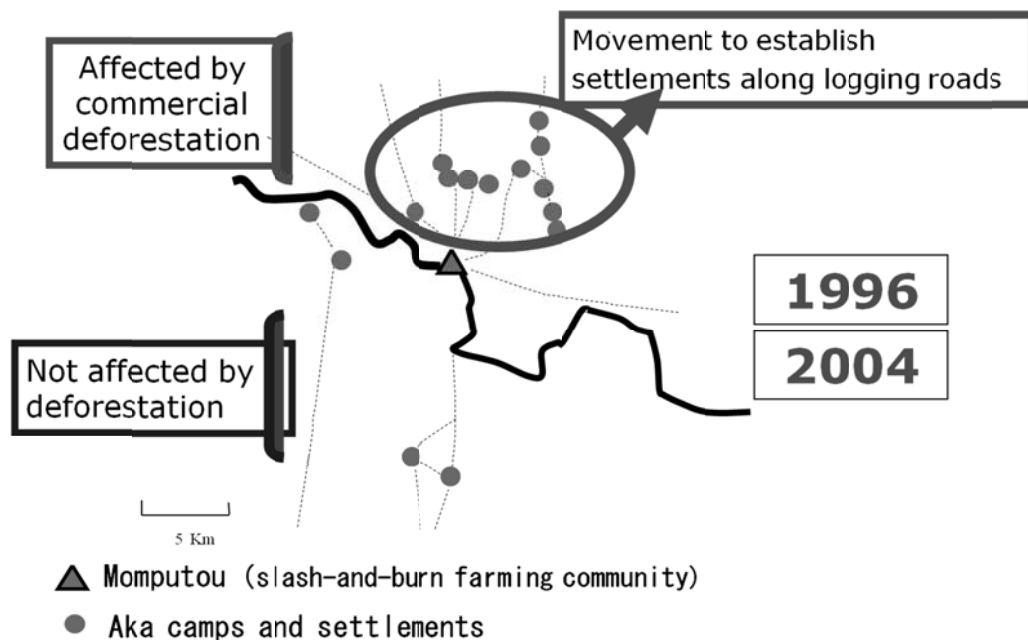


Figure 8. Transformation of Aka camps and settlements (1996vs2004)

Figure 9 shows Aka who work as a lumberjack in the timber industry as a temporary labourer. They take along their children and stay in lumberjacks' camps.



Figure 9. Having being hired as temporary labor, Aka worked as lumberjacks

As for the non-deforestation areas, many Aka lost the fictive kinship that binds them and the farmers when the latter moved to the towns.

As a result, a majority of the Aka moved in search of horticultural work with remote farmers' villages, and began to stay around the villages longer than before. In the process of these changes, the Aka became more dependent on the farmers on the whole.

Furthermore, aggressive conflicts and violent clashes between the Aka and farmers or foreign lumberjacks, which were unheard of before, began to emerge more frequently. In most cases, the outcomes seemed to work disadvantageous to the Aka, who were without political cohesiveness and strongly dependent on the farmers.

From the above, it is clear that the Aka society is marginalized by the trilateral relationships of the ROC government, commercial timber industry and nature-conservation NGO.

Current foraging societies in other regions of the world are selected as the representatives of on-site indigenous peoples, where attempts to emphasize on their rights and reinvention of cultures are on the rise. However, in the case of the Aka, they stand to become the absolute minority, where their ethnic identity is fast eroding and who have no chances of voicing their rights at all.