

Forest people and conservation initiatives: the cultural context of rain forest conservation in West Africa

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In an influential account of rain forest, the botanist P. W. Richards has suggested that Africa is the 'odd man out' in terms of human impact on rain forest ecology (Richards, P. W., 1996). In this view, the rain forests of tropical America and Asia are pristine or primary forest, whereas those of Africa (and especially West Africa) show clear signs of human disturbance and management. Ecological differences are paralleled by differences in the relationships between forest people and the environment in Asia, America and Africa. In Asia and tropical America, forest societies are commonly perceived as 'indigenous people', racially or culturally distinct from the encroaching wider modern society. Following on from this, the anthropologist's role in conservation has been primarily one of advocate for indigenous rights, and of documenting cultures which are, like the forest, under threat. Thus in Amazonia, anthropologists have long been engaged in ethnobotanical inventory work, in establishing first contacts with tribal peoples, and in documenting their plight to the outside (western) world of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international agencies. (For a useful review of anthropology and the conservation of biodiversity, see Orlove and Brush, 1996.)

More recently, however, the pristine condition of the forest, the demographic history of its population, and the role of anthropologists in mediating relations between forest people and the outside world have all come under some challenge. Thus the population density of much of Amazonia appears to have been far higher before the conquest, whilst anthropologists have begun to point out the existence of distinctive 'creolized' cultures in Amazonia: cultures such as Caboclo society (Nugent, 1993) which are not indigenous but have considerable historical depth. Recently, anthropologists

and others (e.g. Colchester, 1993) have turned their view from the analysis of the communities or tribes of indigenous people to the interplay of institutions (government and private companies) and social movements (such as environmental NGOs, as well as land-rights movements, etc.) and how these impact upon the forest and its people (Burnham *et al.*, 1995; Sharpe, 1996). Using the insights from this new perspective, Africa is perhaps not so much the odd man out, but rather one regionally specific 'socio-ecology' amongst many. Perhaps the perspective adopted in this chapter will serve as a bridge or middle ground between often excessive over-generalizations and extrapolations from global processes to particular countries or regions (wildly variable estimates of deforestation that are characteristic of much environmental planning may be compared with the equally obsessive concentration on the local by many anthropologists and green campaigners). One aim of the chapter is to suggest that anthropology has sufficient comparative data to generate the same kinds of regional generalizations as, for example, forestry (see Guyer and Lambin, 1994). Relations between people and forest in West Africa and Asia are as different from each other as are the multi-species forest of Africa from the dipterocarp forest of South-East Asia. A further aim is to argue that, in the rush to establish conservation in West and Central Africa, the cultural uniqueness of forest-society relations in the region was lost. What is needed for effective conservation is a recognition of West African forest peoples' world views, and a realization of how these cosmologies have incorporated an understanding of the modern world.

Conservationists are relatively new entrants in the 'fantastic invasion' of the West African rain forests by Europeans (Marnham, 1980; Colchester, 1993). Large areas of West and Central Africa were nominated as national parks and protected areas in the 1980s (see Figure 4.1). Unlike the savanna game parks of East Africa, conservation projects in the rain forest have relatively little historical experience either of managing the environment or of dealing with local people. Nowhere in forested West Africa is there a National Park that is more than 15 years old. Thus it was perhaps inevitable that when rain forest conservation became an internationally prominent issue, spurred on by the perceived urgency of the task of preserving biodiversity, conservation organizations acted without paying sufficient attention to local West African society.

In large part, conservation organizations brought to West Africa a series of myths about forest peoples and the forest environment which are drawn from other places in the world, or from other times, rather than the reality experienced by West African forest peoples themselves. Such views are the stock-in-trade of both conservation campaigns and the western media. Perhaps the key theme in these outsiders' stereotypes is the idea of 'indigenous people' as custodians living in harmony with the rain forest: a theme deriving from Amazonian and South-East Asian experience. A second major theme is that rain forest is pristine and natural, a survival of a world