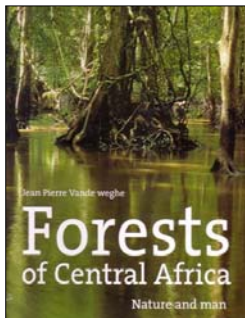


The forest and the city: possibilities of the impossible

By *Stephane Dondeyne*¹

As a land-use professional, with a keen interest in Central Africa, I am always eager to learning more on the ecologic geography of the region. Land-use, naturally implies the agency of people, hence my equal interest in social and cultural aspects. Here, I like to present and comment on two recent books, which largely satisfied my interests in these fields. The first one deals with the forests of Central Africa (Vande Weghe, 2004), the second with Kinshasa (De Boeck and Plissart, 2004), which is the largest city in the area.

The forest



Forests of Central Africa covers the forests of Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, western Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and São Tomé and Príncipe. It focuses on the dense humid forests, the lowland forests and the mountain forests, but also touches on the many open habitats associated to the forest belts. Over 10,000 plant species occur here, of which more than 40% are endemic to the region. Fauna is exceptionally varied with 263 mammal species, including 43 primates, and 708 bird species. Among the unique fauna of the forests of Central Africa are spectacular and large mammals such as forest elephant, gorillas and chimpanzees, bongo and okapi.

The book provides in a logic sequence, a comprehensive overview of the ecologic characteristics of the region: the mineral world, climate, ecological gradients, vegetation, fauna, followed by the interaction of man and nature, and ends with a discussion on the conservation challenges ahead. It is illustrated with clear maps and superb photographs, but the interesting text makes it more than a nice looking coffeetable book. The author made a commendable attempt to cover all possible subjects, inevitably taking the risk that specialists will feel that their particular subject has not been given the treatment it deserves.

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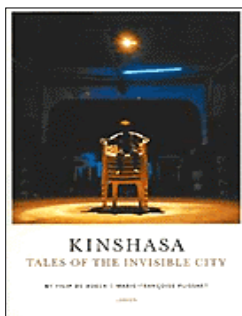
[The Land 7: 234-238 \(2003\)](#)

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Personally, as a soil scientist, I regret that the chapter on *the mineral world*, which largely draws on literature on geology and geomorphology, is scanty on soil properties and does not present anything on soil geography. Soil properties do get some attention in the chapter on *the Life in the Forest* where the stereotypic story of the poor, acidic tropical soil is presented, classified either as *Oxisol* or *Ultisols*. A reference to the FAO-UNESCO soil map of the world², would have allowed making links between soils and vegetation formations: *Gleysols* for example, are the dominant soils over 220,000 km² of the region according to the Soil Map of the World and can be linked to the “Congolian swamp forests”. This type of caveat, I guess, could be attributed to the author’s bias, but I am afraid it also reflects the soil science community being less successful at communicating information on the matter to a wider audience.

The chapter on *Man and the Forest* presents socio-historic and demographic information encompassing the peopling of the area, the pre-colonial history, a section on the Atlantic slave trade, and the current socio-political situation. It so provides a base for the subsequent presentation of the conservation efforts and discussion of the challenges ahead. Whereas the forests of Central Africa have not undergone massive conversion yet, the growing demographic pressure leads to increased hunting and exploitation for timber. Proposed strategies for conservation include monitoring the state of the forest, valuing the area for carbon sequestration (referring to the Kyoto protocol), ensuring that local communities do not over-hunt, a plea for the sustainable harvesting of timber, and even considering artificial plantation despite the poor results this approach had in the past. Finally, potentials and problems of tourism for nature protection are discussed.

The city



In *Kinshasa* anthropologist Filip De Boeck and photographer Marie-Françoise Plissart, provide a portrayal not only of the physical and visible urban reality, but also of a second, invisible city as it exists in mind and imagination, as a mirroring reality lurking underneath the surface of the visible world.

This book is very original in both scope and structure. Kinshasa is presented as a “a vast mirror hall” with reflections of “a city of memory, a city of desire, a hidden city, a trading city, a city of the dead, a city of signs, a city of words, an oneiric city, a city of utopia”. It does this by alternating sections presenting historic facts and life stories with reflective sections. In this way an original account is given of the multi-crisis the city goes through, and I believe, which is characteristic for the development process the region is going through. These crises are set in a tension field between “traditional” and “modernity”, “rural” and “urban”, “the forest” and “the city”. Where many of the situations are very recognisable to those familiar with other parts of Africa, they are

² The FAO Soil Map of the World, using the 1988 Revised Legend, is available from the FAO on a CD-ROM.

exacerbated by the size of Kinshasa, and the extreme forms of poverty next to the wealth some got hold of.

The most poignant accounts are the stories of street children getting accused of witchcraft. The phenomenon of witch-children is presented as a crisis of the cultural imaginary and linked to the growing presence of death. The imaginary, as a flexible organised field of social practice, has become disorganised and has lost its capacity for creating continuity and producing sociality. Due to the austere living conditions, kin based solidarity structures are under such a pressure that a profound restructuring of the notions of motherhood, authority and the field of kinship itself is taking place. Hence, the tension field between tradition and modernity are being defined, and sometimes resolved, by witchcraft: “new situations demanding new magic”.

In the last chapter, a reflection on the city’s future starts from images of sunken boats, boats as icons of the “greatest reserves of the imagination”. It is shown how, against the grain of city authorities, people use and organise space in the process of which new forms of sociality are created. An example is how the presence of a lamppost leads to the occurrence of bars, a cyber café, a telephone shop, and a bus and taxi station. To a much greater extent however, the remaking of social coherence is shaped through processes of an immaterial, invisible, relational nature. The body forms a tool in creating private and public spheres through clothing, hairdressing and bodybuilding. In this context the stage, the bar, the body, the street, the funeral, and even the church, become *heterotopias*. Heterotopias are “enacted utopias”, i.e. places where it is possible to live and imagine contradicting categories at the same time. Unlike utopias, heterotopias do not generate hope but offer a glimpse of the possibility of overcoming fragmentedness, the contradictions and the ruptures that have scarred the face of the city.

Possibilities of the impossible

In the epilogue of *Forests of Central Africa*, Jean Pierre Vande Weghe, takes a pessimistic tone. This, I feel, is much in discordance with the array of “possible solutions” he portrayed in the preceding chapter. Is he realising that these solutions are too optimistic. Are they a *utopia* of some sort?

When considering the complexity of the social crisis portrayed in *Kinshasa*, concern seems justified indeed. One gets a feeling, of why so many “development projects” do not attain their objectives when focussing on technical fixes and not taking into account social dynamics. Surely, improvements of the economic climate would relief part of the strain, as would, in the case of Congo, a peaceful settlement of its internal and external conflicts. On the individual level, some innovative thoughts are required for seeing how people can improve their social status and networking, and how some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable persons could become empowered. Filip De Boeck contends that, although the extended family has often become problematic, it remains the most important unit to explore and redefine anew the rhythms of reciprocity, commensality, conjugality and gender relations in the urban context. It also remains the only one capable of rescuing the figure of “the hunter” from the field of a disappropriative imaginary of sorcery and witchcraft.

Impossible, it may seem, but the forests of Central Africa are hence more important than just for the sake of “biodiversity conservation” or “carbon sequestration”. They are equally important as a source of cultural inspiration and this surely is so for many more persons than just for the urban dwellers of Kinshasa.

Finally, the intention of this letter being to present some thought provoking reflections on people’s agency in land management, I warmly welcome any comments.

References

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