

Human Occupation of the Congo Basin

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Abstract

The Congo Basin has an impressive cultural diversity resulting from millennia of contact, networking, intermarriage, and other types of interethnic mingling and pairing. The region has been inhabited for at least 650,000 years. Hunter-gatherer communities probably preceded the others, but Bantu, Ubangi, and Central Sudanic-speaking communities arrived over the last 4 to 5 millennia. Until the colonial period, mobility was the norm; small, local movements and large, regional shifts were frequent. Climatic changes, the search for natural resources and economic opportunities, conflict avoidance, flight from disease, and social traditional beliefs triggered mobility. During the colonial era (c. 1880–c.1960), traditional patterns of mobility were interrupted. To extract timber, oil, and minerals; to produce palm oil and kernels, cocoa, and cotton; and to secure export markets for metropolitan companies, villages were frequently forcibly relocated to sites where displaced people worked on plantations, logging concessions, mining sites, or infrastructural projects.

After World War II, colonial settlements evolved into large urban centers. Urbanization is one of the recent changes in the Congo Basin. From 1960 to 1968, the Congo Basin countries gained independence; one-party regimes were installed, and repression and economic deterioration followed. Since the 1990s, political regimes have been challenged, and conflicts have broken out in many parts of the Congo Basin, leading to regional and cross-border migrations. Current challenges include high population growth, a youthful demographic, gender disparities, and the marginalization of minority groups. Urbanization, urban expansion, the urban need for natural resources, conflict-induced migrations, and forestry and mining concessions threaten the high cultural and biological diversities.

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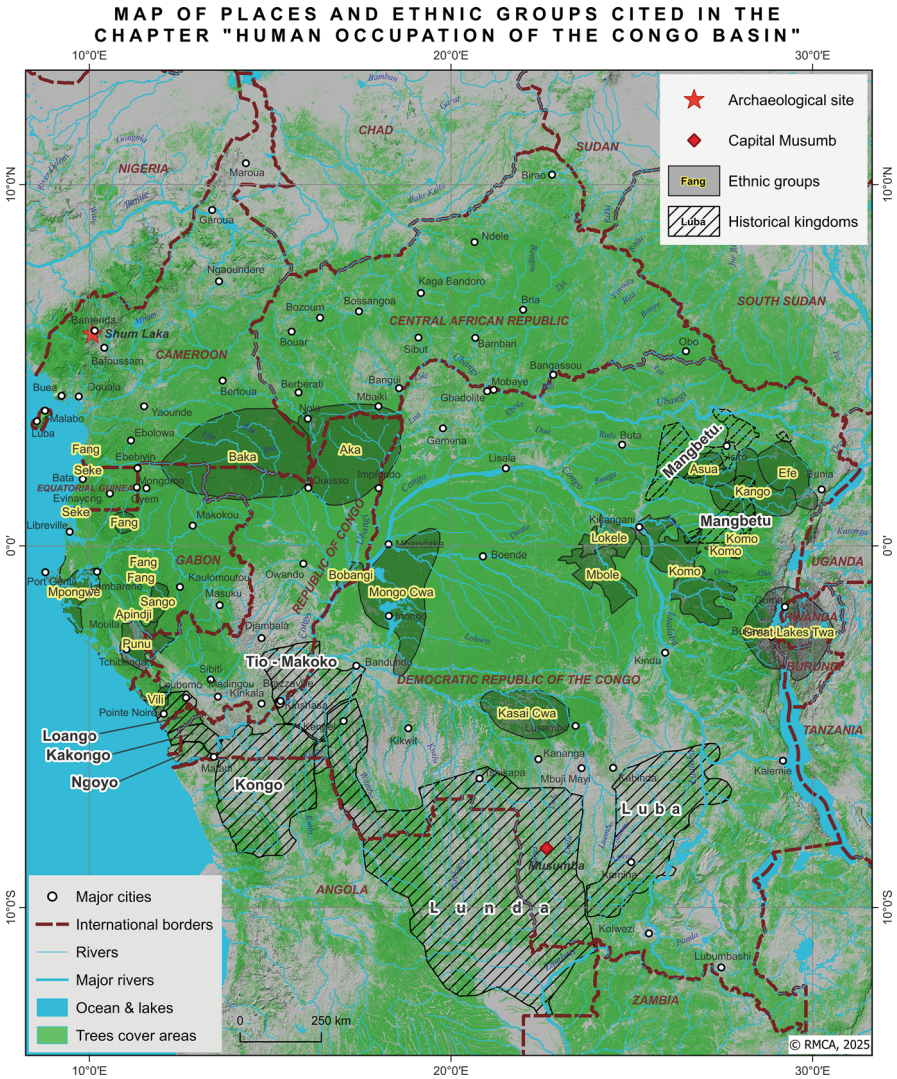
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Keywords

High cultural diversity · Traditional mobility · Forced relocation · Indigenous people · Urbanization · Migrations



Introduction

The high degree of biodiversity in the Congo Basin is equaled by an impressive cultural diversity. To number all communities present in the six countries of the region is difficult, but a language count forms a good proxy. The website Ethnologue lists a total of 605 languages, which constitute 8.5% of all languages spoken in the world (Eberhard et al. 2025).¹ This estimation does not represent the actual number of different communities, as one community can speak various languages and vice versa, but clearly the Congo Basin is highly diverse culturally. The current cultural diversity is not the result of developments occurring in isolation but, on the contrary, of millennia of contact, networking, intermarriage, and other types of interethnic mingling and pairing across the Congo Basin. The region has always been a crossroads, attracting communities from different directions, at different epochs, and with different objectives (subsistence, long-distance trade, colonization). Triggers for the human occupation of the Congo Basin include climate and natural resources, but since the early days, people have also interacted with the rainforest ecosystem, e.g., through practices of small-scale agriculture, hunting and gathering, or fishing – and often through multiple, integrated subsistence approaches. The present chapter offers a history of human dynamics in the Congo Basin: migrations and settlement, demographic rise, economic activities, and more.

Congo Basin Communities

Cultural and political identities of forest communities throughout the Congo River Basin are complex, varied, and often fraught. The ways that any given person self-identifies are plural, layered, and contextual. Forest communities form multiethnic, multilingual clusters, in which local identities are shaped by relationships that traverse and entangle many different social boundaries of similarity and difference, and are shaped by complex dynamics of mutuality as well as tension. Moreover, the ways that people identify themselves and the ways that they are identified by others, particularly by institutions, do not always align.

Since early colonial times, outside observers have used contrasting categories to distinguish the tremendous cultural, economic, and political diversity of the region: pygmies vs. villagers, hunter-gatherers vs. farmers vs. fisher people, and indigenous people vs. those who (are presumed to) have migrated into the forest. These etic (outside) categories offer conceptual handles for making sense of and creating policies for diverse forest communities that live throughout the basin (Bahuchet 1993a). At the same time, forest people identify themselves in a variety of layered, culturally and contextually specific ways; such emic (inside) identities may reflect language, clan, historical heritage, contemporary alliances, and other meaningful,

¹Own calculations: sum of languages per country minus doubles.

dynamic, and shifting ways of expressing the self and relations to others. Importantly, these emic identities may also include etic, outside identities such as “pygmy”—perhaps in alignment with the institutional, political, or outside expectations of the qualities, but in other cases with meanings that diverge, complicate, or even contradict and fill the category with cultural meanings that are specific to a local context in time and place. Whether a forest dweller or an entire forest community is classified as a “pygmy” or a “villager” in scholarly literature or policy papers, such terms flatten out a universe of salient features of ancestry, ecological connection, ritual participation, economic pursuit, marriage and alliance, and many other features of sociality that shape identities (Rupp 2011).

Reliance on static, homogenizing categories of social and political identities leaves outside observers with the impression that the people of the Congo River Basin and the forest itself can be reduced to archetypes and, furthermore, that these distilled simplifications of identity are sufficient, even appropriate, to use as categories to designate political and economic policies that impact and regulate the complex realities of forest peoples today. Because the identity politics of forest communities throughout the Congo River Basin region are complex, dynamic, and varied, this chapter uses reductive categories of identity sparingly and only where they offer value in synthesizing information that pertains across communities. Otherwise, we refer to Congo Basin communities simply as “forest communities,” “communities,” or simply “people,” to avoid layering in distilled categories of identity that can have administrative and political implications for the people of this vast forest region.

Today, the politics of identifying who counts as an “indigenous person” is similarly fraught, particularly when conventions on “indigenous people” offer rights of access to protected areas of the forest or rights to hunt in particular ways, to some forest peoples and not all. The diverse and dynamic human history in the Congo River Basin renders such simplistic demarcations of “indigenous” and “non-indigenous” both impossible and foolish. While linguistic and genetic research demonstrates that certain language communities that have been identified as “pygmy” groups since the mid-nineteenth century were the first human inhabitants of the Congo River Basin, such ancient origins do not preclude movement within the basin over time. Furthermore, being identified as a “pygmy” group does not necessarily mean that the community is an autochthonous or indigenous person in the particular region where they live today. “Pygmy” communities, for example, the Baka and Aka, also have histories of displacement, migration, arrival, and contact with pre-existing forest communities (Bahuchet 1992, 1993b). Furthermore, the deep histories of Bantu language-speaking forest communities (a linguistic group that also includes numerous “pygmy” communities) span a few thousand years (see below), long enough to also be considered indigenous. Identifying who counts as “indigenous” is a contrived and politically motivated exercise, which has more to do with the politics of resource allocation than with accurate understandings of Congo River Basin history.

Human Occupation of the Congo Basin in Precolonial Times

The Congo Basin has been inhabited by modern humans and *Homo* ancestors for at least 650,000 years (Braucher et al. 2022). Little is known about the earliest inhabitants. Data stem mostly from archaeology (see chapter ► “Central African Rainforest Archaeology”) and genetics. Such multidisciplinary evidence in combination with oral traditions of Congo Basin communities indicates that the ancestors of the present-day hunter-gatherers preceded the other people currently living in the Congo Basin (Klieman 2003). The mentioned hunter-gatherers include the Aka or Bayaka (Congo, DRC, CAR), Baka (Cameroun, Gabon, Congo), Babongo (Gabon), Mbuti and Efe (eastern DRC), and the Cwa and Twa communities (DRC and the Great Lakes countries). Genetic studies demonstrate that these communities separated 70,000 years ago from the ancestors of communities whose subsistence practices emphasize forest horticulture, including but not limited to Bantu-speaking peoples, and that the population size of Western hunter-gatherers decreased in the period that Bantu communities are thought to have settled the Congo Basin, i.e., between 4000 and 650 years ago (Batini et al. 2011). Oral traditions mention that hunter-gatherers were guides into the rainforest for the newcomers of that time (Klieman 2003; Metegue N’nah 2006). They continue to be considered as “forest specialists” and have long been in symbiotic relationships with farming communities (e.g., Terashima 1986), to such an extent that they exclusively speak languages closely related to, sometimes even dialects of, the languages of the corresponding farming community.²

The “newcomers” are communities speaking Bantu, Ubangi, and Central Sudanic languages. Parts of their history can be traced by comparative historical linguistics, for instance, the location of their homeland and subsequent expansions (see Ricquier 2020). Efforts are made to couple the resulting insights with archaeological data. While this is met with skepticism by certain scholars, it allows for the formulation of hypotheses about past mobility and networks in the Congo Basin. The best studied case is “the Bantu Expansion.” Linguistic criteria such as high linguistic diversity and the presence of closely affiliated languages (“Bantoid,” “Grassfields Bantu”) indicate that the first Bantu speech communities must have lived in the Grassfields area bordering Nigeria and Cameroon. The archaeological site of Shum Laka was for some time linked to the earliest Bantu speech communities, thus offering a date: 4000 to 5000 years ago. Recent research on ancient DNA proves that the human remains are not genetically related to current Bantu-speaking communities (Lipson et al. 2020). Still, recent genetic research confirms the original linguistic theory that the settlement of the current Bantu-speaking region started in southern Cameroon and spread south and southeastwards (Fortes-Lima et al. 2024). The following large-scale migrations of Bantu-speaking communities tend to be linked to a drier climatic

²These relations might shift, and language then may become an indicator of past networks (e.g., Duke 2021). Scholars are still on a quest to trace the original language of the hunter-gatherer communities, but thus far results are only promising on more recent epochs (e.g., Bahuchet 2012).

period (see below) and to the progressive settlement of the Congo Basin by peoples sharing a similar pottery culture. Archaeological dates set the expansion of the latter as early as the mid-first millennium BC for the Pool region, progressing into the inner Congo Basin and arriving at the Lualaba (eastern DRC), no later than 2010 BP.³

The northern part of the Congo Basin is home to Ubangi-speaking communities. Based on historical-comparative linguistics, Bouquiaux and Thomas (1980) and Saxon (1982) proposed an eastward expansion north of the rainforest 3500 to 4000 years ago. Recent developments in comparative linguistics question the unity and affiliation of Ubangi languages, meaning that the settlement history of Ubangi-speaking communities should also be reconsidered (see Güldemann 2018: 216). The third language group in the Congo Basin is Central Sudanic, largely present in the northeast of the DRC, plus two communities, Furu and Bagiro, on the western part of the CAR-DRC border (Boyeldieu 1990). Relatives of the Congo Basin Central Sudanic languages can be found to the North, on the CAR-Chad border, and in South Sudan. Research on the history of Central Sudanic communities is scant. Based on linguistic arguments, McMaster (1988) assumes that Central Sudanic communities predate Bantu presence in the northeastern DRC.⁴

The static idea of communities being linked to a specific geographic location is a construct of colonial rule (see below). Up to the early colonial period, large population movements were frequent. The Fang, for instance, only settled a few centuries ago in Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, in response to the invasion of other peoples and in search of economic opportunities on the Atlantic Coast (Sitna 2023). This set up a chain of events where the Fang displaced people throughout Gabon (Gray 2002). Another example is the Komo expansion in the northeastern DRC, again triggered by the movement of other peoples, possibly Arab slave traders, and the search for economic opportunities. This expansion, still ongoing at the start of the twentieth century, was considered problematic and halted by early Belgian colonial administrators (Ricquier et al. 2023). Accounts of migrations in the last few centuries are attested by oral traditions, also known as “vernacular history” (see Schoenbrun 2017; Ricquier et al. 2023). Certain colonial administrators, missionaries, and learned local people assembled oral traditions to provide insights into their territories’ precolonial population history, e.g., Gabonese Abbot Raponda-Walker (1960) for communities in Gabon and Governor Moeller (1936) for the Orientale Province of the DRC.

The high mobility in the precolonial era contrasts with the preconceived image of isolated communities in the rainforest. In the Congo Basin, contact has been the norm, not just because of the cited migrations, but also because of trade networks and alliances between different communities, for instance, to co-organize initiation

³ See chapter ► “Central African Rainforest Archaeology” on archaeology and Bostoen (2018) for a recent overview of the Bantu Expansion.

⁴ Central and North Cameroon is also home to other language groups and families, such as Bantoid (Niger-Congo) and Chadic (Afro-Asiatic). From this, we can infer that the precolonial history of this region differs from the remainder of the Congo Basin. It will not be further discussed here.

rituals (see Allovio 2000). As a result, the cultural practices and techniques of the peoples encountered and of the regions crossed were adopted and disseminated. Thus, cults such as Bwiti were adopted by the Fang and Punu peoples from the Apindji and Sango peoples of southeastern and central Gabon (Raponda-Walker and Sillans 2011; Mabika Ognandzi 2017). The languages spoken in the Congo Basin bear witness to this cultural admixture. Sounds and morphological and syntactic elements have been exchanged across language family boundaries (cf. the “Macro-Sudan belt”: Güldemann 2008), and some languages were readily exchanged for alternatives that were more advantageous in the networks at play, such as for hunter-gatherer communities.

Drivers of Movement in the Precolonial Era

Climate and Natural Resources

Scholars tend to explain the settlement of the Congo Basin by rather sedentary communities in terms of subsistence needs and the link with climatic changes. The Bantu Expansion is often cited as a prototypical example of a language/farming dispersal: farmers practicing slash-and-burn agriculture and slowly advancing while clearing new land (Phillipson 2002). The drier period approximately 2500 years ago is believed to have accelerated the process. Openings in the rainforest, especially the Sangha River corridor, would have attracted Bantu speech communities and led them to the savannahs south of the rainforest from where they spread further south and east (Maley and Willis 2010; Bostoen et al. 2015; Grollemund et al. 2015). The adoption of plantains and iron has been considered to have facilitated farming in the rainforest (Vansina 1990). In recent years, the assumption that the earliest Bantu speakers were farmers has been regularly challenged (Bostoen and Koni Muluwa 2017; Bostoen 2018). However, new insights into the antiquity of pearl millet cultivation in the Congo Basin may reaffirm the importance of agriculture for early Bantu speakers (Neumann et al. 2022). Less is known about the link between the expansion of the Ubangi and Central Sudanic communities and natural resources.

After their initial expansions and settlement of specific parts of the Congo Basin, precolonial communities remained mobile as a function of natural resources. Hunter-gatherer communities are known to have preferred a mobile lifestyle, but horticultural communities also relocated, especially to open new fields for cultivation, in search of drinking water supplies, or to avoid conflict. Apart from villages, people also seasonally occupied camps for fishing or hunting as horticulturalists, thus complementing their produce with wild meat or fish.

Human occupation had a profound impact on the composition of the rainforest (Morin-Rivat et al. 2016; Garcin et al. 2018; see chapter ► “[The Evolution of Congo Basin Ecosystem Diversity](#)” for more details). Former village areas leave a mark on the vegetation, from creating short-lived, sun-loving mono-dominant forests in former agricultural fields (which over time transition to shade-tolerant forests) to leaving distinct species assemblages related to cultural practices in former village

centers (Yasuoka 2013). Large expanses of former agricultural fields, now abandoned, have become the primary sources of Okoumé trees, a key forestry export (Engone Obiang et al. 2014), thus demonstrating the large extent to which previous settlement has impacted forest composition (Walters et al. 2025).

Precolonial Politics

In the precolonial era, the Congo Basin was mostly home to smaller political entities. In the precolonial matrilineal belt of Gabon, small villages of approximately 100 people tended to form around matrilineal groups. These populations often relocated village sites within their territories. Some villages are principally located along rivers such as those along the Mpassa River corridor (Deschamps 1962: 61) or Ogowe (Schweitzer 1995: 38–45). In the Batéké Plateaux, numerous copses (small village forests) are a visible testimony to historic settlement and migration patterns (Guillot 1980), present in the form of former village sites throughout today's savanna. In forest areas, villages were established with regular migration, documented from the 1880s to the 1960s (Walters et al. 2025). Past village displacement was the result of villages dividing in response to limited resources, sorcery accusations (Vansina 1973), death, or the overcrowding by shade trees in the case of savanna villages. The villages customary institutions often managed extensive territories (Walters et al. 2015). These territories contained natural resources targeted by colonial governments, and so territorial governance became a crucial question during colonization.

On the edges of the Congo Basin, namely, the south and the northeast, kingdoms arose as early as the fourteenth century, for instance, the Kongo Kingdom and its neighbors Loango, Kakongo, Ngoyo, and Tio at the Atlantic Coast and savannah states such as the Lunda and Luba empires in the south, and some centuries later, the end of the eighteenth century, the Mangbetu Kingdom in the northeast of present-day DRC. With the centralization of power, capital cities emerged, e.g., the Lunda capital Musumb (see Mwangal Mpalang'a-Maruv 2023). With the advent of intercontinental trade around 1500 and the slave trade, larger, commercial settlements grew, for example, at the Loango Coast and along the Congo River (Vansina 1990).

Economic Activities

When European merchants arrived at the African coast at the end of the fifteenth century, they found existing long-distance trade routes. Linguistic and botanical evidence together suggest that the Congo River Basin region has been integrated into networks of trade that extended over long distances, even reaching as far as the Indian Ocean region, as is exemplified by the distribution of bananas throughout the basin (Vansina 1990). The peoples of the Atlantic coast (Mpongwè, Sèké, Vili, etc.) became commercial intermediaries between the Europeans on the coast and the hinterland trading populations (Chamberlin 1977). From the Malebo Pool (area of present-day Brazzaville and Kinshasa), the Bobangi took merchandise further east

along the Congo River (Harms 1981). Precolonial merchandise included copper, iron, and pottery. Central African Rainforest Archaeology in copper-producing areas as early as the tenth century, e.g., the Copperbelt in the Upemba region (southern DRC) and the Niari valley (southern Congo), bear witness to economic and cultural exchanges, for example, in the form of imported ceramics (Nikis and Livingstone Smith 2017; Nikis 2018). Other trade goods probably included salt, raffia cloth, deep red powder made from camwood used for cosmetics and ritual decoration, palm oil, canoes, and food (Vansina 1990: 94). In some areas, an exchange of products between forest specialists, fishermen, and farmers was common. At the end of the nineteenth century, for instance, Lokele (fishermen on the Lomami and Congo River) and Bambole (forest specialists and farmers living in the hinterland) exchanged fish, bushmeat, and agricultural produce, salt, pottery, canoes, drums, and other items (Hunt 1999: 17, 36). Recent anthropological research demonstrates that traders walk distances of 200 km through the forest to trade at markets on the river banks (Takamura 2015). Considering the long-distance trade routes mentioned, this market system may also have a precolonial history.

Demography

Successful agricultural practices may lead to population growth. Indeed, this was the case after the arrival of sedentary communities in the Congo Basin, as is inferred from the accumulation of palm oil and pearl millet remains in archaeological sites, alongside evidence of metallurgy. Two important phases of demographic growth can be cited: the first between 2500 and 1500 BP and the second between 800 and 400 BP (Oslisly et al. 2013; de Saulieu et al. 2021; Seidensticker et al. 2021). In between the two, from 1500 to 1200 BP, a demographic crisis may have occurred, with the population again stabilizing between 1200 and 800 BP. The idea of a “hiatus” or “population collapse” is inferred from a reduction in archaeological sites and is hypothetically attributed to the outbreak of epidemic disease. This hypothesis has not yet been corroborated. Criticism suggests that the idea of a population collapse is rather due to sampling methods (Clist et al. 2021). Still, the epidemic hypothesis should not be completely overlooked since the history of medicine and health portrayed the Congo Basin in general and territories such as Gabon in particular as highly unhealthy through time (Mabika Ognandzi 2017).

Mobility in the Colonial Era

Historical Context

From the end of the fifteenth century onwards, European presence in the Congo Basin remained limited to the coast and had essentially two goals: aggregating and sending enslaved people across the Atlantic Ocean toward the New World plantations and, in a more limited extent, to spread the Catholic faith among the elites and

populations of the Kongo Kingdom. Along with these expansionist activities, European traders and missionaries began to aggregate and export resources such as ivory and ebony, sowing the avaricious extraction of natural resources to come. Colonization in the Congo Basin started in earnest around the 1880s. It had one main driver: the need to secure natural resources for the ever-expanding industries of the West, especially after the demand for enslaved people in the Atlantic world progressively came to a halt in the second half of the nineteenth century (Reid 2020). Technological improvements, such as the steamboat, the machine gun, and the use of quinine as a treatment against malaria, allowed Europeans to move around, map, and eventually take over regions that previously remained out of their reach.

The colonial era (c.1880–c.1960) brought new power structures, modes of governance, and economic practices in the Congo Basin, which heavily impacted human mobility, activities, and spatial dissemination. Colonialism, both as an ideology and as tangible practices of rule, trade, and extraction, has three main characteristics. First, it is a form of racist violence, where rights and duties are unevenly distributed according to the alleged “race” and “ethnicity” of individuals and communities. “Colonizers” saw themselves as biologically and culturally superior to the “colonized” and believed they were endowed with the legitimacy to preside over the political and economic future of the “overseas” territories they aspired to control. Second, the colonial economy was by essence extractive and bent on fostering scalability, that is, simplifying and standardizing modes of production. The main goals of colonial economies were to extract primary resources (oil, minerals, logs), to produce cash crops (palm oil and kernels, cocoa, cotton, ...) as efficiently as possible, and to secure export markets for metropolitan companies. Third, colonial systems resorted to protean forms of violence to reach their goals. They segregated spaces and social hierarchies and routinely resorted to violence and intimidation, to forced labor, and to ensure that the “colonized” would not overstep the subaltern positions to which they were confined.

Although these main characteristics run through the entire colonial time, the end of World War II marked a significant change in the policies and practices in the Congo Basin. Until 1945, violence remained essential to mobilize the African workforce on infrastructure projects, plantations, and rubber harvesting, the enforcement of schemes of population displacement, the assessment and collection of taxes, and the incorporation of local communities in colonial biomedical schemes, such as vaccination campaigns. Colonial governance, wage labor, and Western “hygiene” were considered an integral part of the “civilizing mission,” allegedly undertaken by Europeans in the field, no matter how much constraint their implementation required. In the postwar era, *a.k.a.* the “second colonial occupation” (Ukelina 2017), colonial actors devoted more means and attention to initiatives contributing to “development” and “native welfare.” This period, marked in both French and Belgian colonies by the implementation of ambitious ten-year plans, led to increased urbanization, industrialization, and access to the wage economy by new segments of the Central African population (Cooper 2019).

Colonial Politics and Land Occupation

In the advent of colonization, Europeans established relations and signed treaties with local dignitaries to secure property and sovereignty rights that could be recognized by their imperial competitors. In the future French Equatorial Africa (AEF), some of the first acts of colonial territorialization are the numerous treaties signed between agents of the French government and customary authorities between 1787 and 1899 in present-day Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Central African Republic and Tchad, Gabon, and the Republic of the Congo (Maurin et al. 2016). Numerous exploratory missions were conducted to map lands, identify customary authorities, and document resources for exploitation (e.g. Guiral 1889) and later to create concessions (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972). In the territories of the future Congo Free State (1885–1908) and Belgian Congo (1908–1960), several “geographic associations” set up by King Leopold II of the Belgians signed treaties with local authorities settled on the banks of the Congo River and its tributaries. These treaties, devolving either sovereignty or property rights to Europeans, would serve as the legal foundation for the allocation of a significant portion of the Congo Basin as a personal colony to Leopold II during the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 (Henriet 2015).

Following these “agreements,” colonization became the driving force behind population movements in the Congo Basin in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the AEF, the colonial policy of *regroupement* forced villages to “regroup” in larger settlements near roads to ensure health and education, as well as to create a controllable workforce for the colonial state and its concessions (Legault and Cochrane 2021). *Regroupement* resulted in villages being involuntarily displaced, sometimes over long distances, and was often heavily resisted by local populations (Sautter 1966). During this time, voluntary movement of villages by communities largely stopped, and the colonial *regroupement* policy tended to fix them in their present-day location. Many hunter-gatherer groups also abandoned their mobile lifestyle and settled along roads, near the settlement of farmers or forestry operations (Walters et al. 2025). Certain hunter-gatherers adopted agriculture. However, hunting and collecting food often remained the main subsistence strategy, cultivated foods being mostly obtained through exchange (Joiris and Bahuchet 1993).

The application of *regroupement* policy was highly uneven in space and time. In Gabon, the policy was enacted from 1910 to the 1970s; in the 1950s, 4111 villages were reduced to 770. *Regroupement* policy resulted in large areas of forest and savanna that appeared to be “uninhabited” and which seemed clear for the establishment of colonial concessions for the extraction of natural resources and later for the creation of national parks (Cinnamon 2003; Walters and Wardell 2024). *Regroupement* and the rural exodus also contributed to the emptying of the countryside in Congo of its youth (Vansina 1973), estranging people from their traditional lands and weakening their natural resource governance. The policy and the associated change from customary to colonial rule are remembered by local people for causing intervillage disputes, misunderstandings with colonial administrators, imprisonment, revolts, and bloodshed (Metegue-N’Nah 1981).

In colonial Congo, from 1885 onwards, legal dispositions sanctuarized so-called “native lands”—which comprised recognized villages and their immediate vicinity. In principle, it was impossible for the colonial administration or for private companies to forcibly displace these settlements and their inhabitants in zones where their workforce could effectively be mobilized and better monitored, such as in and around mines, plantations, or agglomerations. However, in practice, public servants deployed in the field effectively used the pretext of sanitary emergencies to actively displace hard-to-reach populations to spots where they could be easily reached by private recruiters and tax collectors. If a zone was classified as infested by the tsetse fly, villages were forcibly removed to stop the spread of sleeping sickness. In several instances, these laws were effectively used to aggregate populations closer to the enclaves and nodes deemed strategic by colonial actors (Henriet 2021).

Colonial Economic Activities

Colonial economies in the Congo Basin were characterized by infrastructural scarcity and extractive priorities. Furthermore, the presence of colonial actors in the field, public or private, has always been limited (Ndaywel 2021). Neither the Belgian Congo nor the AEF were ever meant to become a settler colony. Instead, they were designed as hubs of mineral extraction and cash crop production based on forced labor. They were intended to be economically self-sufficient, so as not to financially burden their respective metropolises. This created a fragmented spatial order, driving coerced economic migration as local populations left their villages to work in precarious conditions in forestry and mining sites.

During colonization, many of the local people were thus called upon to serve the colonial economy in strategic enclaves. Therefore, taking up a job in the colonial economic system generally meant (constrained) economic migration, leaving one’s village or region to work in forestry or mining sites in precarious conditions and far from one’s family (Rich 2007).

In the Congo Basin, the concessionary model dominated the first phase of colonial capitalism, until World War II (Vellut 1982).⁵ From the early 1910s onwards, many companies involved in both extractive and plantation activities implemented paternalistic policies, which included the formal education, religious conversion, medical supervision, housing, and food provision of their indigenous workers and their families. This practice entailed many shortcomings and did not automatically generate an improvement in the general well-being of the labor force. Life in labor camps was often unsanitary, recruits remained regularly constrained to work, epidemic outbreaks were frequent, and food rations were often insufficient (Seibert 2011).

⁵ Concessionary model: The state delegates sovereign prerogatives to a private actor in exchange for the exclusive right on natural resources produced and/or extracted from extensive territories.

After World War II, the ten-year plans led to an expansion of the GNP of 7 percent per year between 1950 and 1957, although colonial actors failed to achieve their wider objectives in terms of welfare and economic efficiency (Vanthemsche 1994). The combination of private paternalism and increased investment in infrastructure stimulated the ongoing urbanization of the Congo Basin. Already in the 1950s, rural exodus was one of the main anxieties for colonial actors, who feared the lack of control they could exert on urban dwellers.

Demography

Colonization triggered a massive demographic crisis in the Congo Basin. It was visible from the late nineteenth century onwards and remained a key driver of imperial biopolitics until the ultimate demise of the Belgian Congo and the AEF. Its causes were multiple yet intimately linked.

First and foremost, the early colonial expansion generated massive population displacements. Inhabitants of the Congo Basin were forcibly mobilized in the accumulation of primary resources that could turn the private colony of King Leopold II into a profitable venture. Hunting elephants and collecting wild rubber—Congo Free State's (CFS) main sources of income—required entire communities to remain on the move or to settle in unsanitary regions, where sleeping sickness was prevalent. New clearings and settlements also transformed existing ecosystems and supported the spread of species that carried deadly illnesses, e.g., the tsetse fly or mosquitoes (Spinage 2012). Furthermore, communities also attempted to escape the grasp of colonial agents and relocated to more remote regions, with limited access to food resources, where they were more vulnerable to illnesses and prone to falling short of foodstuffs. These collective stresses, combined with the introduction of new diseases such as smallpox, influenza, and venereal disease, were linked to a surge in mortality and a dramatic fall in fertility rates (Ndaywel 2021).

The spread of diseases during the colonial era resulted in empty areas on population density maps as entire villages disappeared, which were then claimed by forest (Sautter 1966: 969). Multiple outbreaks of diseases and famine occurred in colonial Gabon from 1910 to the 1930s. During this period, European traders appropriated local trade networks while also aiding the spread of disease (Chamberlin 1977: 6–7; Hymas et al. 2021), bringing people in remote areas into contact with novel coastal diseases (Hartwig and Patterson 1978, pp. 9–10; Headrick 1990, p. 42). Colonial administrators described seeing bodies and skeletons along well-established trade routes (Sautter 1966, pp. 860–861; Coquery-Vidrobitch 1985, pp. 54–56; Gray 2002, p. 158). The best known of the outbreaks was the 1918 Influenza pandemic, when it is estimated that half the population died (Patterson 1975, 1981; Debusman 1993; Rich 2007). The road building, carried out through *regroupement* policy, exacerbated the spread of various diseases, as did bringing porters and workers from greater distances. In some cases, areas were completely depopulated, becoming a “dead zone” which people feared was cursed (Choubert 1954, p. 37; Gray 2002; Hymas 2015). Such areas could remain uninhabited for

decades, during which the forest returns, and new settlement later occurs, creating a cycle of disease/depopulation/forest regeneration (Hymas et al. 2021).

Furthermore, dehumanization at the heart of colonial processes also took an important toll on the populations of the CFS. Enquiries performed in 1904–1905 readily confirmed multiple large-scale exactions purported by soldiers, mercenaries, and representatives of the state and of private companies (Burroughs 2018). They include rape, incarceration, fustigation, amputations, and shooting on sight. However, historians and demographers agree that no genocide effectively took place in the CFS, as it was, for instance, the case in German West Africa in the same period. This consensus is based on the postulate that all definitions of genocide entail the intent to eliminate a specific group and to implement specific strategies of annihilation to achieve this goal. Officials of the Congo Free State and representatives of private companies did not have the intent to massively dispose of the population or to eradicate specific communities. They effectively needed the local labor force to make the colony profitable (Verbeeck 2024). Nevertheless, the massive exactions perpetrated in the CFS are no less abhorrent. They were crimes against humanity, whose extent, scope, and systematic character provoked a widespread public outrage in the Global North, even though most people largely accepted and shared the racist ideology that supported colonial imperialism.

After World War I, colonial actors endeavored to tackle this ongoing demographic crisis. Some administrative reports from the 1930s even alarmingly delve into a potential, impending “wipeout” of the colony’s human population (Sanderson 2018). Christian missions, private companies, and public servants thus massively invested in the development of biopolitical strategies aimed at improving birth rates and curbing death rates. It led to the emergence of sub-Saharan Africa’s largest network of nurseries, dispensaries, and hospitals (Hunt 1988). Significant efforts were made in monitoring and medicalizing childbirth, but also in containing epidemics of sleeping sickness, malaria, and leprosy, among many others. European actors developed massive screening and treatment campaigns, whose preventive and compulsory nature also entailed a fair amount of violence and constraint (Webel 2019). After World War II, the “Second Colonial Occupation” generated significant investments in infrastructure, housing, and urbanization, which stimulated the ongoing Central African demographic growth.

Recent Changes

From the 1960s to the present, Central Africa has undergone profound political, social, and economic transformations marked by independence struggles, authoritarian consolidation, violent conflicts, migration waves, rapid urbanization, and shifting livelihoods. Migration and urbanization continue to reshape societies, while ecological pressures, conservation policies, and climate change intensify challenges for local communities.

The early 1960s saw the independence of Cameroon, the Republic of the Congo, the DRC, the CAR, and Gabon, followed by Equatorial Guinea, which gained

independence from Spain in 1968. Initial optimism was quickly replaced by turbulence, with coups, civil wars, and the Congo Crisis. Economic mismanagement and reliance on structural adjustment programs, combined with oil shocks and copper price collapse, fueled economic decline. A system of patronage and state privatization enriched elites but impoverished the majority, reducing ordinary people to survival strategies.

Repression, economic decay, and lack of opportunities pushed many people from the Congo Basin to envisage and look for a future elsewhere. During the different waves of conflict in the late 1990s and early 2000s, (the 1994 Rwanda genocide, Kabila's coup d'état in Kinshasa, wars in Congo-Brazzaville and the CAR), people migrated in large numbers with their families and remained abroad for long periods. Diasporas in neighboring countries became a springboard for a journey to further horizons, both in Africa and elsewhere. But these diasporas in neighboring countries can also serve as a short-time away, and many people end up returning to their country of origin, repatriating voluntarily, after spending some years away (Wilson 2019). Moreover, while the diasporas increase during conflict times, they do not disappear when the situation calms down. Many end up playing an important economic role in terms of commerce and remittances for those who stay behind in the country of origin, such as the CAR diaspora in Douala, Cameroon, or the Congolese diaspora in Luanda, Angola, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Despite hardening borders, Europe and North America remain an important pole of attraction. In the 1990s, the ancient metropolises, in particular Paris and Brussels, received many immigrants from the Congo, Cameroon, and, to a lesser extent, CAR (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000; Alpes 2016). Latin America has become, in the last decade, a new route to the North, yet many do not make it and get stuck along the way (Echeverri Zuluaga and Acevedo Sáenz 2018). Even if almost negligible in numbers, programs of resettlement also feed into the diasporas of the Global North.

Since the 1980s, subsistence-driven mobility has led to more conflict in the northern and northeastern DRC. Mbororo pastoralists from the CAR, Chad, and Sudan seek pasture and drinking water for their cattle. Some link their recent incursions into the DRC to climate change and drought in the Sahel (Nagabhatla et al. 2021). The tensions between the immigrant pastoralists and local farmers over land use frequently result in violent conflict.

Current Status

The Congo Basin is one of the most ecologically diverse and resource-rich regions globally (Trefon 2016). However, the region also faces significant human challenges, including demographic pressures, shifting age structures, gender dynamics, marginalized populations, and the growing issue of refugees. Analyzing the human occupation of the Congo Basin is challenging, as the area is rarely treated as a whole. Examining sub-Saharan Africa's demographic trends provides insights into the Congo Basin's situation. Understanding this demographic landscape is key to addressing sustainable development, conservation, and governance issues.

Demographics and Population Trends

Sub-Saharan Africa is undergoing a demographic transition characterized by a decrease in mortality, particularly infant mortality, and a slower decline in fertility. This transition is slower than in other regions, leading to rapid population growth and a very young population (May and Guengant 2020; UNDSA 2021). The Congo Basin mirrors this demographic momentum: its young age structure will ensure continued population increase for several decades despite declining fertility (May and Guengant 2020).

This demographic dynamic is further shaped by natural increase and migration, with varying trends across the six countries (Tabutin and Schoumaker 2020). The combined population of these countries exceeds 140 million. The DRC, the most populous country in the region, counts nearly 100 million inhabitants, with one of the highest population growth rates globally (about 3.2% annually). This rapid growth is largely driven by high fertility (around six children per woman) and declining child mortality, resulting in a predominantly youthful population. Cameroon, with 28 million people, faces demographic challenges driven by rapid urbanization, particularly in cities like Yaoundé and Douala, where growing populations are putting increasing pressure on essential services such as water supply, sanitation, healthcare, and education. Despite rapid urban growth, Cameroon faces substantial rural population pressures. The Republic of the Congo (approximately 5 million) and Gabon (about 2.5 million) are also growing, though at slower rates. Gabon's growth is linked to immigration and oil industry development, while the Republic of the Congo's growth is mostly rural (United Nations 2024).

Gabon is the most urbanized country in the region, but population densities vary greatly within the other countries, with urban areas like Kinshasa, Brazzaville, and Yaoundé hosting millions, while vast interior areas are sparsely populated. In rural areas, subsistence farming remains the dominant livelihood, limiting population mobility and economic development (Trefon 2016; May and Guengant 2020; Tabutin and Schoumaker 2020). Consequently, the region is marked by a contrast between rapid urbanization and rural depopulation due to economic challenges, limited infrastructure, and insecurity, particularly in the DRC and the CAR (Trefon 2016).

Age Structure

Like the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, the Congo Basin has a predominantly young population, with a high proportion under the age of 30. This youthfulness results from high fertility rates and relatively low life expectancies, especially in rural areas (May and Guengant 2020; Tabutin and Schoumaker 2020). In the DRC and Cameroon, more than 60% of the population is under 25, while Gabon and the Republic of the Congo show slightly lower youth proportions. However, the region faces increasing life expectancies, which, coupled with higher birth rates, result in growing infrastructure needs to cater to both young and aging populations (UNDESA 2012; United Nations 2024).

In the DRC, nearly half of the population is under 15, creating challenges in education and healthcare, while offering opportunities because it is a dynamic workforce that can drive economic development (World Population Prospects 2024). This demographic also results in high dependency ratios, where a large portion of the population relies on working-age adults (Tabutin and Schoumaker 2020). Sub-Saharan Africa has the potential to benefit from a “demographic dividend” if the working-age population increases relative to dependents (May and Guengant 2020). However, for the region to reap the full benefits of this demographic dividend, fertility must decline, and investments in health, education, and employment are essential. Without these measures, rapid population growth may worsen poverty and inequality (Canning et al. 2015; May and Guengant 2020). In Gabon, for example, there are currently an estimated 200,000 public and private sector jobs but 800,000 people in full-time education. This is a potentially explosive recipe over the coming decade. The Congo Basin, particularly the DRC, faces significant challenges in poverty reduction, governance, and healthcare, which could hinder its ability to benefit from the demographic dividend.

Gender Dynamics and Marginalized Groups

As elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, gender relations in the Congo Basin are influenced by traditional, cultural, and modern factors. While gender dynamics are shifting in urban centers, where more women are accessing education and engaging in small-scale trade and entrepreneurship, in rural areas, women face challenges in accessing education, healthcare, and economic opportunities (UN Women 2024). In this environment, gender roles are traditionally focused on agriculture, household tasks, and caregiving. However, NGOs and government programs are working to increase women’s participation in decision-making, especially in conservation and development (UN Women 2024).

Gender-based violence, particularly sexual violence, is a significant issue, especially in the DRC, which has one of the highest rates globally, often linked to ongoing conflict, political instability, and entrenched gender inequalities (Kelly et al. 2024). While international and some national efforts are addressing this challenge to developing women’s equality and opportunity, progress remains slow.

Besides these gender dynamics, several marginalized groups in the Congo Basin face economic, social, and political exclusion. These include ethnic minorities and people living in remote or conflict-affected areas. Hunter-gatherer groups are marginalized both economically and politically. Their rights to land, culture, and traditional knowledge are often overlooked, and they face discrimination, especially in accessing healthcare, education, and legal protections (Minority Rights Group International 2004; Quattrini 2019).

Refugees and Displacement

As mentioned above, the Congo Basin is heavily impacted by conflict-driven displacement. Political instability, armed conflict, and environmental challenges

have led to large numbers of refugees and internally displaced people in all directions (Flahaux and De Haas 2016; UNHCR 2022; Van Praag et al. 2022). The DRC has dealt with internal displacement for decades, particularly due to the ongoing conflict in the eastern part of the country. Currently, around 5.5 million people are displaced within the DRC, and over 500,000 refugees have fled to neighboring countries, like Uganda and Rwanda (UNHCR 2022). Similarly, the CAR has experienced political instability and armed conflict, leading to significant displacement, with over 600,000 people displaced internally, and many seeking refuge in neighboring countries (UNHCR 2022).

Refugees from the Congo Basin often face difficult conditions in host countries, where access to resources and services is limited. The refugee crisis exacerbates socioeconomic pressures in already-strained countries like Uganda and Cameroon, which host large numbers of displaced persons (UNHCR 2022). Addressing the refugee crisis in the Congo Basin requires not just humanitarian support but also long-term solutions focused on peacebuilding, economic integration, and infrastructure development.

Looking to the Future?

The Congo Basin faces complex demographic, social, and political challenges, deeply intertwined with its environmental and economic conditions. High population growth, a youthful demographic, gender disparities, marginalized groups, and refugee flux necessitate inclusive development strategies. To ensure long-term social cohesion and sustainable development, comprehensive policies must address demographic shifts while focusing on empowering marginalized groups, achieving gender equality, and integrating displaced populations. As May and Guengant (2020) highlight, the long-term stability and development of sub-Saharan Africa in general, and the Congo Basin in particular, will depend on balancing population growth with expanding employment opportunities and investing in education, healthcare, and infrastructure, while ensuring the inclusion of all groups in the development process.

Impact of Colonial and Recent Changes in Mobility on Cultural Identity, Loss of Language, Customary Governance Systems, and Biodiversity

Considering that mobility and contact between different communities are an inherent element of the history of the Congo Basin, cultural elements such as crafts, rites, and languages have been in constant flux. Today, there is increased awareness of the loss of cultural elements. UNESCO dedicated the decade 2022–2032 to the “preservation, revitalization and support of indigenous languages worldwide.”⁶ Language shift

⁶<https://www.unesco.org/en/decades/indigenous-languages>

occurs at a high pace today. Minority languages are exchanged for majority languages, mostly official, national, and/or vehicular languages, or sometimes simply a larger language (e.g., case of Bokala: Lofemba Boningoli Batita 2018). This is not only an urban phenomenon, but ease of contact with urban centers surely has an impact. The rich linguistic diversity can be preserved for future generations in the form of recordings. In the Congo Basin, language documentation is urgent: The number of endangered languages is much higher than the official counts by UNESCO or on the Ethnologue website, and too many of the languages concerned have never been studied (see Ricquier et al. 2022).

There are similar issues for other cultural elements. While contact caused past cultural changes, the current availability of cheap imported commodities accelerates the abandonment of specific crafts. Pottery is a craft currently under pressure and in some places has totally disappeared because of the availability of plastic containers and aluminum pots; traditional palm oil soap is replaced by imports, hunting nets by wire snares and shotguns, fishing nets made of local fibers by nylon nets, etc.

The preservation of traditional knowledge is also important in view of wildlife conservation efforts and even climatic challenges. In a collective volume, Gabonese scholars show that biodiversity preservation is not a new idea for local people in Gabon and the wider Congo Basin. Indeed, traditional knowledge has always been key to the preservation of nature in its diversity. The real issue has been the formulation and transmission of such culturally rooted knowledge (Mouguiama Daouda and Moussirou-Mouyama 2023).

Colonization resulted in many cases in the loss of community lands and the associated governance of natural resources, including lineage-based systems that once governed large parts of the savannas (Vansina 1966). Such losses reduced the power of customary authorities to govern hunting, fire use, and other activities (Walters et al. 2015). Furthermore, the current movement of populations impacts the social fabric and traditional economic systems, resulting in loss of economic autonomy and impoverishment (Ratanga-Atoz 1985: 70–80). The sociocultural transformations that have taken place are proving to be more destructive of the identity of the peoples of the Congo Basin than elsewhere in Africa (Naipul 2010).

It must be observed that the lifestyle of Congo Basin communities, already altered by forced settlement, is currently further endangered by intensive logging operations. Some trees rich in fruit and bark are felled, others knocked down by bulldozers, traps set for game are crushed, nets dragged away, and the animals take refuge deeper and deeper in the forest. The same is true for water, as construction and logging machinery turn streams into ponds, dry them up, or pollute them. There are also cultural consequences, such as the desecration of sacred areas, but some communities also resist logging incursions with varying success (Evine-Binet 2023; Ibola dja bana ba Massaha et al. *in press*). Wildlife reservations further restrict the access of these communities to forest resources. On the other hand, bushmeat demand from cities is very high, and hunter-gatherer communities gain cash by engaging in this commerce. Unfortunately, this leads to the impoverishment of biodiversity and eventually affects their own hunting activities.

Urbanization, finally, tends to have negative impacts on biodiversity (Gutu Sakketa 2023) and is predicted to have increasing negative impacts in Africa and worldwide (Ayeni et al. 2023). Protected areas, as a result of urbanization, may decrease in size, as is the case for a protected area near Libreville, Gabon, which, despite the area decreasing, permitted multiple usages for urban populations while also conserving endangered species (Walters et al. 2016). One of the main drivers of the reduction of protected areas near cities is industrial-scale resource extraction and development (Mascia et al. 2014), often linked to the presence or development of urban areas. For these impacts to be better understood, urban ecology requires further development from a Global South perspective (Shackleton et al. 2021), which, currently, in Africa is largely dominated by studies in South Africa (Awoyemi and Ibáñez-Álamo 2023).

With the inevitable and unending cascades of changes across centuries and throughout the region, communities of the Congo River Basin continue to rely on deep traditions of innovation and resilience. Forest communities continually and actively adapt to new contexts, technologies, and opportunities of the twenty-first century, as they have in centuries past. It is imperative that we work to understand their lived realities today, and work alongside forest communities to ensure the sustainability of people, families, and communities—as well as the forest itself.

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