

**People, great apes and disease
in the Sangha basin of
equatorial Africa: an ethno-
historical reading**

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Historical narratives of "human-great ape contact"

- Juxtapose two different kinds of historical narratives:
 - Biomedical/conservationist: An ever-escalating expansion of "human-ape contacts" since the beginning of the 20th century
 - « Sangha basin forest ": "contact" is multifarious, changes over time, and is not always pathogenic.



Paul du Chaillu, *Wild Life under the Equator*, 1868

Narratives from biomedical, conservationist literatures and popular press

- Some single out "human intervention" and "human ape contact" as escalating in linear fashion from the beginning of the 20th century:
 - **HIV-1M emergence** (de Sousa et al., 2012; Pepin, 2011; Timberg & Halperin, 2012; Worobey et al 2008; Takahisa et al 2009; Hahn et al 2000)
 - **Ebola virus** (Walsh et al, 2003; Chapman et al 2006; Kondgen et al 2008)
 - **Other diseases emerging in equatorial forest** (Wolfe et al., 2004)



Worobey et al, 2008)

Shortcomings

- What happened *before* colonization?
 - 18th and 19th century integration of equatorial Africa into expanding global capitalism
 - Many central African societies possessed firearms prior to colonization (Klieman, 2003)
- Technological determinism (Storey 2008; Macola 2010)



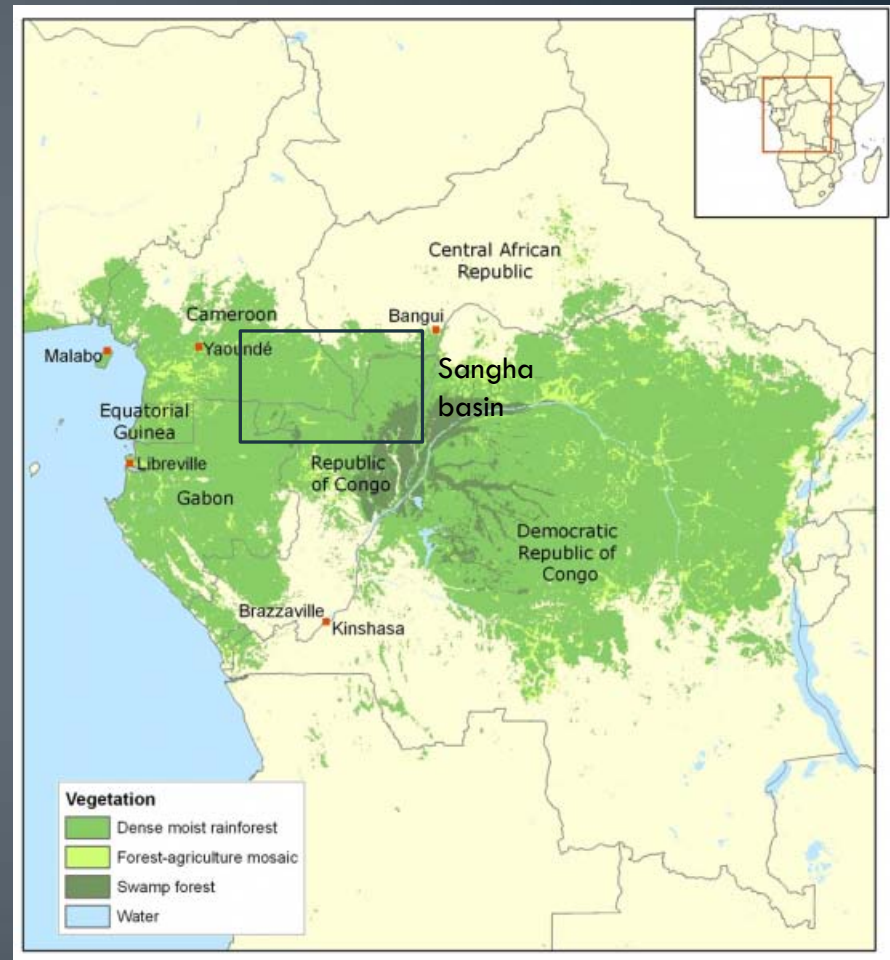
Etienne Muston/
Mission Moll,
1905 (Musée
de l'homme)

This is not just quibbling about historical interpretations...

"The store is still open...And if this apparatus (for generating new viruses) is still there, what are the contemporary implications of it?"

West-central African/Sangha basin societies

- Shared linguistic terms
- Shared histories of material exchanges, trade, colonial rule
- Interconnected histories of mobility, warfare, mutual slave raiding
- Social exchanges (blood brotherhoods, marriages)
- Commonalities in 19th century political organization



Multifarious relations with varied consequences

- **Beginnings and cohabitation:** Human beginnings linked with those of chimpanzees and gorillas, but culminate in ape expulsions
- **Great apes as powerful actors** (19th c expansion of Sokoto caliphate and waves of violence and migration)
- **Source of knowledge/power/competition** for forest resources
- **Deep ambivalence around human-great ape interactions**

Mission Moll,
1905 (Musée
de l'homme)



Apes and infectious spaces

- Sleeping sickness : Henry Raven, 1937

"As the native population increased, new villages would be formed and more clearings made. Then epidemics would occur, killing off great numbers of natives, and their gardens would be neglected to run into secondary growth. The gorillas, with a constitution so nearly like that of man that they can find more food in human plantations than in the virgin forest, would move into these deserted clearings. There with an abundance of food they thrive and congregated, to such an extent eventually that if only a few natives remained they were actually driven out because of their inability to protect their crops against gorillas."



Gorilla nest

Trypanosomiasis epidemic, Cameroon, late 1920s-40s

- Of forest zones with high gorilla densities (Raven, 1937)

"people that went there died of sleeping sickness. I had been told that there were no inhabitants...When we reached there I found a deserted hut by the roadside, but all about was the densest type of jungle and the remains of a great many native houses that had tumbled down."

- **Msgr Sintas, southwestern Ubangi Shari (Nola focus), 1940s**

H.C. Raven
& Meshie (of
southeastern
Cameroon)
(NYT, 2009)



Ebola outbreaks (B. Hewlett, B. Hewlett, A. Epelboin)

- "Outbreak ethnography" in Republic of Congo and Gabon
- Early on, several explanations for individual outbreaks involved contact with chimps and gorillas; neither are causal agents of illness, but rather vehicles through which those who manipulate occult forces transmit poison to victims

Great apes and Ebola transmission

- 1996: local informants of Mayibout, Gabon attribute ebola outbreak to French military exercises w/live ammunition (dead chimpanzee found at site)
- 2003: Congo inhabitants near Odzala and Lossi national parks blame Euro-American administrators and researchers for deliberately poisoning animals there to prevent hunters and trappers from gaining access to them (Hewlett & Hewlett, 2008)

Ebola explanations change

- Explanations shift over time in Congo:
 - *Ekono* (illness caused by contact with polluted persons or substances)
 - *opepe* (epidemic in which infective substance transmitted by air or wind).

Combine local cultural models for infection and disease with biomedical ones (Hewlett and Leach, 2011)

Conclusions: So why pay attention to local narratives of human-great ape contact?

Modify an influential narrative of disease emergence, cast in terms of colonization, guns, and transport in early 20th century by broadening the scope of « human-great ape contact »



Conclusions (continued)

- Insight into local ecology and epidemiology of disease outbreaks
- Focus attention on poverty and political marginalization
Increase investment in primary and hospital health structures and personnel
(fertile grounds for emerging infectious diseases)