

REFORESTATION IS NOT NECESSARY A GOOD THING: FOREST EDGE DYNAMICS, LAND-USE SYSTEM AND CULTURAL ARBITRARINESS IN THE FOREST-SAVANNAH BOUNDARY IN CENTRAL CAMEROON

Edmond Dounias

CEFE-CNRS, 1919 route de Mende, 34293 Montpellier cedex 5, France

E-mail: edmond.dounias@ird.fr

Over the past 10 thousand years, tropical forests have been the theatre of drastic fluctuations that palaeo-ecologists agree to attribute to bioclimatic phenomenon, as changes of such amplitude can hardly be charged to ancient human intervention. Nevertheless, if we consider the future evolution of tropical humid regions, it becomes necessary to understand local practices as they have significantly contributed in shaping the forest landscapes over the past centuries. Local knowledge and know-how become key factors to incorporate in the predictive models destined to assist sustainable landscape management in the near future.

The forest-savannah transition area in the Mbam Province of Central Cameroon is a region of prior interest to question recent history of human interventions that may have shaped the margins of forest landscapes. The forest-savannah ecotone is a very dynamic ecosystem, which evolves naturally in the sense of a fast advance of forest onto savannah, while current human activities tend towards the opposite trend of forest regression.

Almost two centuries ago, a group of cereal cultivators, the Tikar, moved further south from its northern savannahs in search of more forested and unoccupied lands. The Tikar offer an original case of migrants who have perpetuated their savannah ecological customs in their new forest environment. The knock-on effects of cultural choices and related agricultural practices on the landscape become easier to measure in such a dynamic ecological context, as the changes induced are perceptible within a time interval of just a few decades.

However, evolution does not operate only on the biophysical side. During their warlike migration, the Tikar met with and subordinated forest dwellers like the Medjan Pygmies. Sustained by a political system that is based upon a sophisticated canvas of hierarchical chiefdoms, the Tikar performed a judicious combination between the political absorption of their new subordinates and the elaboration of an ethnically diverse identity. Such political predispositions have conclusively conditioned the adaptation of the Tikar to their new forest environment.

In order to illustrate the complex relationships between the dynamic forest-savannah boundary and the Tikar life style, we propose to describe the Tikar perception of their constantly moving ecotone and to detail how their land-use system - still influenced by their savannah origins - subtly interacts with the social, cultural, political and ecological features of the locally absorbed forest dwellers to sketch out a strategy aiming at regulating the excessively rapid progression of the forest edge.

Keywords: Tikar agriculturalists, Medjan Pygmies, Forest-savannah ecotone, Forest transgression, Central Cameroon