Last Days in the Garden of Eden-Among the Pygmies of the Central African Republic

by Geoffrey Clarfield (March 2014)

> *What first impressed me was that, despite the fact that their average height is under four feet, they are both sturdy and independent. They are, as a rule, nomadic, and I have never met anyone who has seen them in large numbers in a settlement. Being hunters, they follow the game in small parties, changing their locality with the migration of the game. Since they are the only real hunters in the Congo Basin, and are versed in all the science of woodcraft, the ordinary traveller (European or native) may pass within a few yards of them and be unaware of their presence, though* ***they*** *meanwhile may be watching* ***him…*** *I can remember on more than one occasion, while marching in a shower of rain, walking over their little footprints, which were still dry but which in a few moments became wet, thus showing that the small people must have passed within a few yards of me, though I had seen or heard nothing; the silence of the great forest seeming, from the presence of human beings, more unbroken than usual.*
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> *– From The Fall of the Congo Arabs by Sidney Langford Hinde,1897, p. 82-83.*

Introduction- Jihad in the Central African Republic

Most African historians and historians of Africa write about the Muslim Arab conquest of North Africa or the Muslim conversion of the peoples of the Sahel, as if it was driven by some natural historical force. They use words like the "spread of Islam" or the "triumph of Islam" and describe it as though it was a civilizing mission that came to bring light to previously pagan, polytheistic, African peoples who are or were, living in a state of "tribalism" or as the Islamic theologians would like to argue, in a state of "jahaliyya," a state of ignorance of Islam. And as an added insult to the conquered, the historians often fail to mention that the goal of these conquests was also gold, plunder, booty and especially slaves.

If you study the history of Islamic expansion as anthropologists are supposed to do, reading

the original Arabic, Turkish and Persian sources you will quickly discover that, more often than not, Muslims have triumphed and expanded through military activity, that is through raiding conquest and slave trading, all of which is supported by the religious concept of "jihad" or holy war.

It began with the rise of Islam 13 centuries ago and it continues today.

So, no one should be at all surprised to discover that largely Moslem rebels called the Seleka, carried out the recent military *coup d'état* in the Central African Republic have descended from its northern border with Chad. They are now gone and a new government is in place. And, they are now being chased out of the country, alongside innocent Muslims by an anti-Muslim backlash which accuses the Muslims of the CAR for not having opposed the Seleka when they had a chance. But we can be sure that they, or something like them, will be back in the near future to bring chaos to that troubled country.

The fact that the Seleka come from the north east of the country which is largely Islamic, and that during their one year reign of terror they raided and despoiled the central and southeast part of the country, which has been the home of traditionalists and Christians, suggests that the "push" of Islam into the Sahel and the forests of Africa is as old as the East African/Central Africa slave trade. It is also the aftereffect (or the continuation of) this same slave trade that under Arab, Somali and Swahili authority in the 19th century used to treat what is now the Central African Republic as a rich source of human booty until oddly and almost finally in the 1890s, they were expelled by European imperial militias.

This specific branch of the Islamic slave trade was definitively closed down at the beginning of the 20th century by the colonizing French who put a temporary end to the slave trade in North Africa, West Africa and which included the greater region that came to be known as French Tropical Africa (and that included what is now the CAR). Not surprisingly, this Indian Ocean based slave trade gets little attention from African historians or historians of Africa as it has been recently revived in the Sinai where the Bedouin enslave and hold for ransom refugees from the Horn of Africa on their way to a hoped for safe haven in Israel or Europe.

As the French are once again intervening militarily in the CAR, as they have so many times during the last few decades, Christians there feared that they would become second-class citizens, or as in northern Nigeria with the Boko Haram, the victims of the latest Jihad. And so they have taken up their own violent and counter crusade against the Muslims of their country.

Just over a year ago, my work took me to the Central African Republic. I flew there from Paris, spent time in the capital city, drove to the southern tip of the country and visited the Pygmy forest dwellers in their homes in this western branch of the great Congolese rainforest. This is what I saw and felt.

Part One – A Martian With a Flashlight

By an accident of history, that is, from the fact that France conquered Algeria in the 1840s and England dominated the Arab east and East Africa, during the nineteenth century and for the first half of the 20th, the continent of Africa was largely divided between Francophones and Anglophones. The French took North Africa and established their empire in West Africa so that by WWII there existed French North Africa, French West Africa and a French Central Africa.

The Belgians took most of the Congo, first as the personal kingdom of the King of Belgium, and once the atrocities committed there by his commercial concessionaries became a worldwide scandal, it was then taken over by the Belgian government. Independence brought dictatorship and an on and off again civil war. Since the fall of Mobute Sese Seko, former dictator and president for life of what he called Zaire, it has now been renamed the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as democratic as its regional warlords and national regime allow it to be.

In the 1960s when independence came to the African colonies of France, France remained and continues to remain the primary and formative influence in the region. France also supported both the rise and the fall of brutal dictator and self declared Emperor Jean Bodel Bokassa who was finally deposed for the murder and eating of up to 30 children, partly because the French elite had access to the CARs diamond mines. So it was easy to get to Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic via the once a week flight that Air France runs from Paris to Bangui. That is the flight I took and that is how I entered formerly French Central Africa.

As I had an empty seat beside me, when we were still quite high and we had not yet made our descent, I looked over a landscape covered with forests as far as the eye could see, with various breaks, only some of them looking as if they are or have been farmed. Not far away I saw a range of green hills that cropped up behind a large river, the Ubangi, which drains into the Congo River farther south. I could see other rivers or bends in the river in the distance and then soon after the various, mostly low lying buildings of Bangui, the capital city, moving out from the river shores. As we made our descent we were told that it was illegal to take pictures in CAR airspace or at the airport. I had no intention of doing so.

The airport looks as if it was built in the 1960s. It is small, run down, there are ceiling

fans everywhere, battling the unstoppable tropical heat and humidity. Everyone crowded around the various functionaries. Everything was done by hand inspection. There were no computers and no databases that could be seen screening who was coming in.

I had to have my passport examined two or three times and then I passed a gate where I had to crush through a crowd to get a few feet farther to the conveyor belt to wait for my luggage. The luggage conveyor belt was tiny and there were crowds of people five layers deep straining to see their bags. A Danish traveller told me that Air France and CAR are generous with the number of bags you could bring in to the country, so some had very many.

I pushed and I was pushed and finally got my bag. I noticed a Chinese couple waiting patiently. The man was wearing a T-shirt that said CAR China Cooperation a sign for those who know of China's designs on CAR's massive tropical hardwood forests. There were many boisterous African men in three piece suits and ties, clearly men of means, who were joyfully pushing here and there in search of their bags. These are no doubt the one percent of the one percent of a country whose average per capita income is about three hundred dollars.

Throughout the crowd of expatriate Europeans and Africans a young man in his twenties, sporting a black beard and decked out in his full monk's habit circulated within the crowd looking for his bag. I spotted it, a fiberglass briefcase with 'Mission Catholique' written on the upper side. He represents the second presence of Catholicism in this part of the world, that Catholicism which first came with French colonialism and which has been battling the ancestor worship and near incessant witchcraft and sorcery accusations that remain part of the daily life of Sub Saharan African farmers and city dwellers.

Another man wore a turban and represented that slow, steady and often violent Moslem intrusion which has been moving south from the Savannah and west from the Indian Ocean for centuries, in search of new converts and formerly slaves and ivory The slavery was dropped under duress some decades ago but the elephant and ivory trade has expanded. If the recent but temporary occupation of the country by Seleka Moslem rebels is anything to go by, there is probably no secular future for CAR. It will one day become the kind of country that Nigeria has become, with a rising fundamentalist north against a Christianized tolerant south who will be at a loss in dealing with this soon to be radicalized group of peoples. Oddly, it is now up to the French whether they allow this to take place and it would seem that they might actually be slowly coming out against this trend.

I found my bags and took them it to customs and was asked if I had anything to declare. My agent was a young woman. Beside her were agents in full military uniform. They let me pass and

immediately I stepped out into a warm, muggy, humid evening awash with dragonflies that flew into my face and everyone else's. Taxi drivers were everywhere, hustling people to take a ride. No one seemed to mind the flies although they got into everything and my glasses flew off my face as I pushed one out of my eye. My local travel agent, Evelyn, identified me and swept me into a cab. We drove to town and I was reminded that that it is often only the stranger who can really see what is in front of everyone's eyes.

Part Two – The Cedars of Lebanon in The Congolese Rainforest

We drove to the hotel and then back to town to buy a cell phone and bug spray. I bought them at a shop in the center of town from a Lebanese shopkeeper who had his Koran behind him. There were some religious sayings on the wall and he smoked a cigarette non-stop as he served me. Again, an accident of history.

The French needed entrepreneurs to open up West Africa and bring in commerce and thus their Christian and Muslim protégés from the Eastern Mediterranean obliged them, whereas the British did the same with Muslim and Hindus from the sub continent in East Africa. I have read that along with almost every other Tom, Dick and Harry from around the world the Lebanese, Syrians and now the Chinese have got their hold on forest concessions in the CAR and, they seem to have done so in partnership with the less savory political players in the country's recent history.

As we drove through town, on dusty pot holed roads I notice with familiarity hundreds of people on the streets, buying and selling cheap foods, walking talking and laughing. Even in poverty, Africans still manage to extract more happiness from the moment than the average New Yorker.

As we drove back to the hotel a jeep had stopped in front of us and the driver was yelling at the night watchman in front of a large residential compound. A large snake was crossing the road. The large land cruiser ran it over and the night watchmen finished it off, beating it to a pulp with a large stick that he was carrying as it is his job to repel unwanted visitors. Luckily, I was carrying a flashlight, which I pulled out to light the way. It is an old habit from my earlier years in East Africa and was most certainly the right thing to do, although when I did so, Evelyn looked at me politely, but with a look in her eyes that I had come from another planet, perhaps Mars.

Part Three- Crossing Fifteen Roadblocks

I woke up early at my hotel, J and R Residence and went outside to discover that there are

green wooded hills surrounding Bangui. I walked out of the compound and I was greeted by marching soldiers on the roadside, some of them in uniform and some in plain clothes. I returned to the dining room and had my simple breakfast of orange juice, a piece of bread and tea. I rearranged my possessions for the 20th time and waited.

First Evelyn showed up and then Abbas, a self-confident fast talking man of commerce. I discovered that I had to pay him 2,100 Euros in advance for use of our four-wheel drive vehicle throughout my stay. He kindly offered to change 480 Euros at a better rate than the bank and disappeared for an hour, leaving behind his younger brother Fadoul, who would be my driver.

Abbas spent the next two hours out of the compound and returned saying that he could only get a rate of 650 CFA not 655. We then went into town and sat with a moneychanger at La Phenice, a restaurant run by Moroccans. All of a sudden Abbas was missing forty euros from what I had given him. I then patiently and firmly explained to him in front of Evelyn that we had written it all down and verified it in my hotel room. I showed him the receipt. I firmly held my ground and he gave in. I suspect I looked naïve and new and he was hoping that I would let it go. I politely asked for my money, got it and we left Bangui, late.

The drive through Bangui was one through bidonvilles and slums. The city is criss crossed with canals that are low on water and filled with garbage, human and avian scavengers, surrounded by miles of mud huts, roadside vendors, motorcycles and other cars, kicking up piles of brown dust.

It was two hours out of Bangui when the road stopped. We drove for hours at a time, passing small villages on the roadside. After six hours we had passed seven roadblocks. We had had one flat tire and the other tire sounded like it was grinding against some hard metal object. Every once in a while, Fadoul would stop by a group of Muslim men and greet them in Arabic. It turned out that Fadoul the driver, was from Chad. By luck we made it to Budo, a largely Muslim way station that is a center for diamond trading, although there were no obvious signs of any wealth around, part of the secrecy of this lucrative trade. We had tea, fixed the tire and returned to Little Paris, a run down guesthouse, without running water or electricity and where I would spend the night

As I sat on my plastic chair I shared a couple of coca colas with Fadoul at the Little Paris as we pondered the stars in the evening sky. He told me about a local man who was 84 years old, had nine wives and had sired 50 children. I managed to complete a bucket shower, and as luck would have it, I had packed two of my own bed sheets and a pillowslip. I sprayed the hell

out of the place, took a sleeping pill and dreamed that a young American peace corps volunteer had rented the room beside mine and that as we got out of our doors in the morning, we compared whose lodging was more uncomfortable in a “discomfort competition.”

It rained torrentially all night. As we had agreed I was up at 5:30 but the driver only roused himself by about seven. By seven thirty we were back on the road.

The whole area of the rainforest in this part of the country is hilly and from the road you can see endless forest from left to right, over the hills and dales. Every once in a while there is more open country and you see the long horned Zebu cattle of the Fulani Muslim nomads of the north and northeast savannah. Two thirds through our drive, Fadoul pointed out two Pygmies standing by the roadside. From then on we passed both Bantu and Pygmy villages on either side of the road. I noted the beehive shaped huts of the Pygmies and was startled by their similarity to the Okiek houses I had seen years ago among forest dwelling Kenyan honey gatherers by that name – perhaps there was an ancient prehistoric connection between the two forms. As we drove on I noted a dead monkey hanging on a stick at a roadside, waiting for a buyer.

The Pygmies in this part of the country live in and around a National Park – The Dzangha Sangha National Park *(There is an diorama of the forest at the Museum of Natural History in Manhattan which gives some idea of what the forest feels and looks like)*. As we entered the park road it narrowed to a one-track trail. Every once and a while we would see a Pygmy dwelling with banana trees nearby. As we approached the gate we were greeted by a uniformed Pygmy forest ranger. We then drove to the Sangha Lodge, a group of simple square wooden buildings on posts, overlooking the river. I was offered two glasses of juice, walked to my room overlooking the river, took a shower and reorganized my stuff. The next day I would have to send my passport to the local police to “register.”

I walked down to the canteen and strolled into the bar and living area where I met an American teacher with the unlikely name of Hope, his Thai wife and 9-year-old son. They managed to tell me that their school in Shanghai had the largest Jane Goodall Roots and Shoots conservation club in the world. As Jane is constantly going on about “hope” I thought that his name was a perfect match for his sentiments.

Talking to hope and his wife I marveled once more at the disconnect between the conservation and development worlds. The Chinese were cutting down the forest while expatriates like this man (who works in China) and his wife, were teaching the children of those international companies based in China and who were destroying the rainforest and the wildlife all around us

and which they had come so far and paid so much to see. Clearly conservationists need to find a better way to argue the benefits of biodiversity. I thought that perhaps they should start with the rising Chinese middle classes.

Part Four -An Ethnomusicologist from New Jersey: Introducing Louis Sarno

I woke up refreshed and had dinner at the canteen while I watched the mist rise on the river, watching pirogues drift by. My driver came to pick me up after breakfast. We first drove down the lodge road and noticed that the sign had been knocked over by an elephant a few minutes earlier, as there was fresh dung beside it. We continued the drive to the WWF compound to fix a tire. We then drove to Louis Sarno's village, parked the car and walked into a compound filled with pygmies of all ages and sizes looking at me with a curious friendliness. I have visited and lived among many different ethnic groups in Africa and among some, the first visit of a foreigner is often received with indifference or downright hostility. You can feel it when it happens, but this was different.

Louis Sarno came walking towards me dressed in a t-shirt and shorts, walking at a relaxed pace. I introduced myself and he said, "I was just off to the WWF office to answer your email." I answered, "I think I have just saved you the trouble." He beckoned me to the back of his wooden house, up a small hill to a gazebo where there were two chairs and a table. I told him who I was and where I work and we then had a spirited discussion about the old masters of music collecting; Lomax, Kunst, and Hugh Tracey who in the case of Tracey, we both felt was a great hero in the collection and preservation of African music. Sarno is a music collector who has lived among the Pygmies for decades and whose archive of recordings is now kept at the Pitt Rivers museum in Oxford England.

He told me that the young Pygmies are changing. He said that the change is coming from inside. He said that Pygmies are individualists and you cannot force them to do anything and so this change in the younger generation is not being forced upon them. It is a result of many things.

Pygmies are now living in villages like there former Bantu "hosts" but they still go out into the forest to live for periods of time, collect honey and hunt. Unfortunately, and despite the efforts of the local WWF conservation projects, which protect the big species (elephants and gorillas), the smaller species upon which the Pygmy depend for hunting, are fast disappearing. As the loggers penetrate the Central African rainforest, they hire Bantus. The minute the Bantus get money, they buy guns. The minute they buy guns they hunt out the wildlife for bush

meat and then, the wildlife disappears.

A few years back the logging concession, which had been run by European companies collapsed in this area but now, the Chinese are involved. Louis showed me a tie dyed outer skirt that all the women used to wear and said it was part of two-layered deal but they now wear western clothes. Nevertheless, I still saw a fair number of bare breasted women during my time there, suggesting that traditional culture and interpersonal relations are still strong.

As we sat on Louis' gazebo a young Pygmy beside us was playing a harp. His friends were accompanying him with small stones and one tone whistles which worked on a polyrhythmic system. They chatted in a friendly manner and passed around a joint of marijuana, which Louis said is a traditional Pygmy custom, not something that they picked up from tourists. He explained that the lyrics of Pygmy songs are usually vowels, or even one word. Louis also told me that and independent American film producer had wanted to do a Hollywood film about Otabenghi, the Pygmy who had once been put on display at the Brooklyn Zoo, and had asked Louis to find a local actor for the part, but she found the project too depressing. Then she hired him to write the screenplay for Oka and then hired Hollywood writers to rewrite it. It is now available on Netflix and it is a fine but imaginative rendering of Louis's life long quest to save Pygmy music for posterity.

Oka is the first film to be filmed in CAR and when it was finished, the producers and director had to comprise an Oscar committee to nominate it in the CAR, as there was not one surviving, active movie theater left in the country. It is romantic comedy based loosely on Louis' life among the Pygmies and his passion for their music and its preservation. The former president of the CAR saw the film, fell in love with the place and now for some years took his annual vacation at the Sangha Lodge. With the money from the film Louis bought the land where "his" Pygmy village now sits.

The Sangha Lodge

He said that the Biaka (the name for the local Pygmies) around here (the village of Bayenga) were formerly in direct vassalage to the riverine Sangha-speaking Bantu agriculturalists and he noted that Congo pygmies often fished, so the line between hunter and farmer was blurred here. He said the relations between the pygmies and their hosts have been variable. He said the Bantus do talk about the Pygmies as animals and inhuman, and that it is not to his mind a colonial invention as the Belgians were not very hard on the Pygmies. As far as the environment goes he says the WWF has not done a bad job taking care of gorillas and elephants,

but is not paying attention to the smaller species that the Pygmies hunt.

Louis told me that in the past the "discipline" of the Pygmies by their Bantu masters could include death. He mentioned one anecdote where a Pygmy woman displeased her Bantu patron. The Bantus summoned the Pygmies to an open clearing, announced the crime, gang raped the woman, covered her skin with a hot irritant and then killed her. I concluded that Louis is a much better ethnographic source than he thinks he is. He told me that he learnt everything by absorption and that when he speaks the local language, his accent stinks.

Louis told tales of his trips to the Congo and his lament at the destruction of the forest being wrought there. He said that it was his idea to recommend the Pygmies as conservationists for the habituation of Gorillas, which is a success story, but that at the same it brings the Pygmies out of the community.

Louis gave me one of his CDs of traditional Pygmy music, told me about his latest trip to New York and to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford where there is much respect for his recordings and photos, but confessed that over the years he has not filmed much, which is a shame. His life and work among the Pygmies is marvelously described in his book, *Song of the Forest*. It is a good read.

Part Five – The Accidental Buddhist-Doing Something to Feel Empty

I woke early and took a leisurely walk down to the canteen at the Sangha lodge. No one was awake. I could hear a chorus of birds and remembered that as I fell asleep the night before, I thought I had heard some sort of primate cackling in the forest as I lay under my mosquito net.

I was still quite jetlagged but I was determined to do something and so I made arrangements to hire a boat to visit a nearby waterfall. I walked down to the landing and a metal boat with a motor was waiting for me. We moved out onto the water, a brown smooth surface with thick rainforest on either side. We passed a local pirogue with a man and a woman paddling slowly, turned a bend in the river and continued. I felt a surge of relief as I felt the cool wind upon my face. It reminded me of childhood summers in northern Ontario with the exception that here and there may lie a crocodile and I was sure that I would not swim in this river nor, set my foot in it.

We arrived at a carved out landing. A Pygmy named Maison met me. He slowly led me up a path. The forest was not as dense as I imagined it would be, but he did cut our way through the underbrush with his machete, branch by branch. There were small streams to cross and I had to balance myself on slippery rocks covered with moss. Maison showed me which branch to hold as I moved up the winding path.

He seemed to embody a rubbery presence in so far as his body and feet moved with the shape of the landscape, whereas my body was at angles and constantly at odds with the path. He slipped once and I slipped many times. I paused to take pictures and had to keep my balance. The air was as thick as the atmosphere of Venus. I was totally soaked from head to foot. We arrived at the top of the falls to see a splendid view. By that time Maison had cut me a walking stick, “mpangulu,” in the local Sangha language. He then found another branch, cut it open and a stream of pure drinking water emerged. I took a photo of him quenching his thirst from this magical branch. We made it down the hill; I drank a half bottle of water and sat still for twenty minutes, exhausted, elated and for the first time in ten years doing, and more importantly thinking nothing. It was the best thing to do at the time.

Part Six – The Never Ending Song; Endless Variations

I returned to the lodge and slept off the afternoon, part exhaustion and part jet lag. I woke in the early evening and drove to Louis’s compound. He received me warmly and we retired to the gazebo where two pygmies named Bayanga and Francois played stick zither and harp to the accompaniment of percussionists. Avery once in a while Francois would get up and dance. In the middle of the performance a forest spirit, an *ejengi*, appeared at the side of the gazebo covered in leaves, shaking and whistling. Louis later explained that one of the guys in the gazebo had gone out and put on the costume but it was not a moment to photograph.

Later Francois made himself a leaf belt and carried leaves, which he seemed to use to bless the head and place in front of each person where they sat. The music and songs were like fractal computer programs, constantly finding new ostinatos and variations, punctuated with yells and names and during some songs long improvised spoken stories or anecdotes. The Pygmies constantly passed around joints and I held the recording machine carefully in waves and waves of smoke, which I inhaled second hand and which seemed only to add to my appreciation of the music.

Louis pointed out to me that the Pygmies were different people in the village than in the forest. In the village the men can become abusive alchoholics but when they return to the

forest, they become balanced and at one with themselves. He said that for that reason Andrea, one of the conservation scientists with the local WWF projects, usually consults Louis as to the character of the Pygmy trackers that she hires, as Louis can vouch for who is dependable and who is not.

Of course when I went back to Louis' house at the end of the "show" the musicians asked for more money. Louis was firm and reminded them that they had been paid in advance. That did not stop them from asking me for another 1000 CFA to buy the tobacco that they mix with their weed, which I happily paid them. He said this is the way things are here. Louis added, "They are hunters and gatherers and are used to exploiting all every and any resource."

Part Seven – Everyone Has a Project

I had come to the Central African Republic to visit Louis and the Pygmies in the company of Canadian filmmaker David York for my 58th birthday and the planning of the trip had triggered some anxiety. The first generalized anxiety that troubled my sleep in New York for a full month before I left was, "what I have I gotten myself into?" I can honestly claim to be an East African hand and know how to get things done there, but CAR?

This is French Central Africa. I assumed that there would be an underlying Bantu unity to the place but I knew there would be myriad differences. I was going alone. I had no network; no backup, no experience here, only my own experience of East Africa. I had read extensively about the area and the Pygmies and had been assisted by some fine research and planning carried out with the help of David's staff. I started to doubt my own formerly tested African social skills. Would I be able to conjure up that friendly innocence which is my style abroad and which I know is non-threatening and which I had learnt through painful experience in East Africa?

Well I had managed to bond with Louis without difficulty, as we were kindred spirits, so one morning I set off to the WWF offices and was received graciously by them. I was proving to myself once again that African skills are transferable. I have never really articulated them, but here they are.

Getting along is everything. You are a visitor here. These countries were once made up of tribes who guarded their territories against outsiders, whether African or otherwise. They still do. You have no rights and should not confuse your privileged position with someone with rights. Even the lowliest local person on the service hierarchy can and will get back at you if they feel slighted. They can make life difficult for you in many ways.

You do not have a right to an opinion. It is best if one does not argue. Appreciation and patience are everything. Complaining just makes things worse. All requests must be polite even when you have paid through the nose. You are here to listen and understand. If you are here in an official capacity you are here to help and, you have to figure out how to help someone who may or may not want your help.

You must be mindful of your body, its cleanliness, its needs, its food and your sleep. You must constantly know the whereabouts of your possessions and watch over them. You must keep your bags locked at all times. When you talk about yourself you must do so in a way, which seems congenial to those around you. You must become a moving island of self-sufficiency and discretion. You only have a right to an opinion outside of the country and know that if you publish it there, it may affect your chances of returning. They can always deny you a visa as on each CAR application they ask if you have been in the country before.

The WWF project office is located in a semi open compound around the village of Bayanga at the entrance to the Gorilla trail. The main office building is low lying and has a sign of the more than ten donors that fund the project, including GTZ which changed its name from GIZ (German aid), and USAID.

I was ushered in to the office of the WWF project by a British woman with long black hair; perhaps in her thirties or early forties, laptop on desk and a pile of files a foot high. I explained that I am an ethnomusicologist giving myself a birthday present coming here, as Pygmy music is the holy grail of ethnomusicologists. I told her that I was writing a piece on the future of the area for the *National Post* and asked her advice on how to proceed. I explained that my colleague David would arrive and join me in a few days and that we would move around with Louis. Anna said that she would make a formal introduction to her CAR counterpart Jose, which I managed in simple French. I explained that I am a “musicologue” and gave him my card. I had taken a few with me from the Lomax Archive where I worked and was in this case institutionally true.

The project director told me they were about to have three days of seminars and presentations at the Doli lodge and that her guests (mostly donors from Britain and the US) were arriving at the local airport in an hour, but that we should talk before the end of the week. She was then off to Russia for a World Heritage conference in the hope that this park would gain some sort of advanced status which would help her project here. She told me that she did not know the history of the project as it had been here for some decades, and that she had come on board only two years ago.

She explained that the project employs scores of local citizens and that there are about five expats here, including Andrea and her gorilla habituation program being among the most interesting projects, using Pygmy trackers, many game scouts and guides and support staff, maybe sixty to hundred at first guess. She mentioned that CAR has a very low level of formal education and attainment and that things are very hierarchical, that meritocracy is not developed and of course there is always the constant challenge of corruption.

She told me that she had done her PhD on chimps in West Africa and had also worked in Madagascar for years. Her French is fluent and her husband is a charming Dutch population biologist who has a love of West African pop music, players like Salif Keita and Ali Farke Toure. She then allowed me to plug into their Wifi and send my email.

I was then introduced to a twenty something German who speaks fluent English. She explained to me that she had got funding from a private donor in Germany who took an interest in Pygmy culture (I assume music as well) and had run the donation through German WWF and then linked it to the larger project here in Bayanga.

Part Eight – Reinventing the Girl Guides and Boy Scouts

Tatiana, is a young earnest German woman studied political science and education to become a teacher but then decided against it. She has instead focused her interests on international development and the environment. She once worked on a project called the Ecological Footprint and then on a GIZ (GTZ) consultancy to organize a youth forum for world heritage sites in biodiversity with the IUCN and the World Heritage program of Unesco. Working with her partner (boyfriend) with a youth group in Ladakh (Tibetan India) and in Bayanga they are trying to set up a youth group of Biaka and Sangha Sangha to work on their cultural identity. According to Tatiana “World Heritage” includes both nature and culture.

This initiative is funded by a private German donor who is interested in Biaka culture, channeled through German branch of the WWF. The goal of the project is to connect the traditional knowledge of the older generation to that of the younger which through the process of villagization is now being lost. Her partner in life and work is a Peruvian named Ernesto who has worked with villages in Peru on social mapping and cultural heritage trying to do similar things.

Here is how she described the project pillars:

- *Her partner knows Louis. He did a project with “exiled traditions” to help them revitalize their old architecture in Peru. This is a cultural identity project, which is*

embedded in a biodiversity framework.

- *Here among the Pygmies they want to create a "social space" so that villagers who do not interact can get to know each other. As there is only one road that goes through the protected area, they are looking for young people with both village roots and those that have had some schooling. So they went to Berberati where there are kids from outside of the area that have been supported by Polish missionaries. They then worked with Biaka students who are now at university and who have worked with the WWF project. According to Tatiana these young educated Pygmies have a culture that is "either dormant or alive" and she wants to bring them together for workshops. They will meet with resource people and elders who still have indigenous knowledge of music, animals and ethnobotany. She added that the Biodiversity Convention has set up a IPPC panel (I forgot to ask her about this acronym)*

- *She and her partner want their seminars to focus on rights and environmental education. They will show young Pygmies documentaries and they will take them to the Dzangha Bai Park where the WWF works*

- *The first workshop will take place in a few months. She has funding for 18 months but actually needs money for 36 months. In between workshops the kids or better still, the trainees, will then go back to the villages with small tasks. The goal is to create a youth movement. Ideally it would be great if there were youth clubs and "booster workshops". Hopefully there will be mobile phones available to help people do this.*

- *She has been overwhelmed by the reaction. They had positive village meetings in May. She told me that the elders really want to transmit their culture to their own youth, and they say they want to do this. The children say that the elders do not want to give it to them. They are hoping that this project will bridge the gap between the generations.*

I am sure, or perhaps I should not be so sure that the project document is clearer than what Tatiana told me. I have quoted or paraphrased her to the best of my ability.

Conserving biodiversity in developing countries is such a challenging thing and so, conservation and development organizations have invented an elaborate jargon to try and explain what they are trying to do. Unfortunately it backfires and rarely makes sense.

I think what an otherwise bright and sincere woman like Tatiana is sayings is that she would like to help elders teach young literate Pygmies, traditional knowledge, things that they would have learnt had they not gone to school. She also wants to start a youth movement. This

is the essence of her project, minus the jargon.

It is sad that Tatiana, the WWF or her German sponsors have not done their own research on youth groups. Girl Guides and Boy Scouts began in Kenya and have been enthusiastically taken up in English speaking Africa. I had met with the National Girl Guides leaders in Kenya a couple of years earlier and was most impressed by what they do and what they have done. In Kenya Girl Guide graduates are pillars of social stability in a turbulent continent and provide young girls with virtuous role models. The donors should be funding them but they do not. Had Tatiana and her German colleagues done a little digging, they would have a successful model to use and many like-minded Africans to help them do it.

It has not happened this way because there is no real 'lateral' development in Africa. Everything is still defined by who has the money and it is almost always in the hands of Western or UN donors. Yes there is the African Union with its policies and teams, but they can be so dominated by the Islamic block and as for the rest of the AU countries, they still have a residual Marxist inspired hatred of the West, which prevents them from starting from what works, from the ground up. They are institutionally lost, intellectual stepchildren of African Socialism. Tatiana would have done better contacting Room to Read, a very successful American NGO whose library projects around the world are dramatically reducing illiteracy in the communities where they work. But again, Room to Read is an American NGO and so, we can be sure the Germans would not fund it.

As I was not there to lecture or educate Tatianna, but simply to observe and understand, I thought of Tatiana and her earnest Germanic approach to things. I could not remind her that the Pygmies of the CAR live to be about 40 at best and one out of two their children die before the age of five. Had she taken that into account her project may have had a different set of priorities. Nevertheless, I suspect her project was interrupted by the Seleka rebels, if it had not already finished its first phase.

Part Nine – Looking Up to Elephants

I awoke up after a bad night's sleep. I had tossed and turned. My birthday was the following day and I would be 59. Today was the day to see the famous Central African elephants who live in the forest and come into the meadow, "the Bai" a wide-open space of water and salt visited by scores of elephants as if at a country club.

My driver arrived at 11:30am and we drove over to the WWF office where I caught up with my email. We continued to the visitor's center. It is a longish round building with a series of indoor panels in French and English that well describe the local environment, the conservation

challenges of the Congo basin, the riverine Bantu Sangha Sangha and the Biaka pygmies of the forest as well as the central role of the more than 20-year-old WWF presence here.

It then goes on to draw your attention to the status of two key species that draw the tourists, the lowland gorilla and the forest elephant. It points out that one third of the park staff are Pygmy trackers and habituaters. As gorillas do not like human visitors it takes up to ten years to habituate gorillas to the presence of humans, starting with the habituation of the Silver backed male. Pygmies therefore must spend years in the forest just hanging around to habituate the gorillas for human tourism and conservation. It is a new line of work for them, as they are expert gorilla trackers from their previous hunting days and, they need the work.

There was no full brochure that explained all of the panels which themselves were most informative. There was a pygmy house recreated on the floor and a copy of Louis Sarno's book *Song of the Forest* and that I had read before I met him, hanging on a post but there was no signage and it was clear that you could not buy a copy. He was however mentioned in one of the panels as was Andrea a middle aged American woman who had spent the last two decades studying the elephants of the Bai where I was soon to go.

I was introduced to my guide Leon, a Bantu from the Chad border and a Pygmy whose name I did not catch. We drove from the visitor's center for just under an hour through thick forests. Then we parked near a guard's station where a number of uniformed men were relaxing near two small pup tents. One sported a Kalashnikov. Leon explained that I must not make noise, be ready to stop and if I had to run, run; that is to run like the wind at a moment's notice. My blood pressure went up a bit, I had a churning sensation in my stomach as I did not know what to expect.

We walked down a path and heard a forest elephant's low bellow. Leon smiled and said, "One of them is near." We immediately faced a river. The water was a couple of feet deep and within fifty yards on our left a large male elephant was foraging amongst the foliage on our side of the river, looking at us and shaking his head and ears which meant he had seen us and was angry. I was asked to go back to the path and wait until they had cleared him off. It took a half an hour and I heard them clapping and hollering to shoo off the elephant as if it were a stray dog. When we returned to the river it had gone, but I knew it was close by. I had seen many elephants in East Africa from the relative safety of my jeep but this was the first time I had been face to face on foot with one with no recourse to modern technology. I felt small, vulnerable, but curiously elated as if I had momentarily been transported to an ancient Pleistocene landscape where humans were predominantly the hunted species.

I took of my shoes, forded the stream, put them back on in a cloud of black butterflies and we began our walk to the Bai, that open watered, well salted and mineraled break in the forest where elephants, buffalo, and other animals and birds get their vitamins. Along the path we saw elephant footprints in the mud beside the path and fresh dung every few yards. We were the intruders here, not the animals.

I was hyper alert and hyper conscious but the one-hour walk was slow and rhythmic. We stopped talking and I asked no questions. I fell into the rhythm of a Central African jungle safari of the 19th century, imagining myself among European explorers following the paths of the Arab slavers and like Henry Morton Stanley, never quite grasping why they were treated with such suspicion and often outright hostility as Stanley himself had once been attacked by Pygmies in the forests of Central Africa. We were marching in single file, hearing nothing but my own and my guides footsteps on the path, the buzzing of insects, the calls of birds too various for my biologically challenged memory to identify and trees here and there whose tops I could not see from my vantage point on the path.

I thought of the French explorer Chaillou who had discovered the chimp and gorilla and more menacingly, the many mango trees where the Moslem slave traders had tracked their route and which they planted as they settled and which were a tell tale sign of their 19th century presence. I had been to Zanzibar many years ago and admired the castle and palace of the former Sultan, but this is that part of the world where he gained his power through the infamous trade in human cargo, the Central and East African slave trade. Here and in the Congo were the source and cradle of his wealth and power. When the British finally crushed his slave trade, he became Sultan in name only.

A low roar of an elephant broke my reveries and I could see the Bai in front of me filled with elephants. As we reached the edge we climbed wooden steps and found ourselves on a covered balcony thirty feet up, staring down and across a Bai filled with elephants of all kinds, male, female young and old in and among a group of buffalos that were lolling in the mud. It was hard not to think of Tarzan and Jane but the thought passed quickly as I tried out my new simple digital camera and transformed myself into a temporary tourist and wildlife photographer.

I had bought my Canon Power Shot in New York the day before I had left. Luckily, Hope, the American teacher from Shanghai was a digital wizard (and fine wildlife photographer) had shown me the basics. I now knew how to recharge the battery and take shots using the primitive

telephoto. I sat for two hours and took about one hundred pictures. I was amazed at the fact that I could look at them after I had taken them and then take a break and look at my series of photos.

I found great satisfaction in taking pictures of the continuous movement of elephants across the landscape, drinking water with their trunks, grouping and regrouping, occasionally making the more familiar elephant scream that feels like a trumpet blast, as well as the lower deep snort and a noise that we are told that we could not hear and that travels for miles in the forest. From time to time two male elephants would face off, fight it out for a minute and then back off. The young would suckle at the teats of their mothers and various elephants would dig into pools that were more than knee deep, sink their trunk in and drink to their heart's content. The sound of birds like the hornbill would pierce the air and parrots would fly by.

I felt completely protected from within the tree house and thought of how many times in prehistory either the trees, or shelters built in the trees had provided early humans with safety from their mammalian predators below. As we climbed down the stairs and continued back to the road on the jungle path we heard the roar of an elephant on our right and the sounds of him crashing through the forest. All of a sudden I felt vulnerable once again and had gone from the emotions of a late 21th century man to the caution and hyper alertness of a hunter-gatherer, but unlike the Pygmies, without the skill and experience to know what from what. It was like a dream of being led on to the stage at Carnegie hall, seeing the piano standing there, knowing that you should know what to do, but having no clue whatsoever. When we returned to the river I crossed it in my shoes this time, ready to run at a moment's notice. This time there was no elephant in sight.

Part Ten – A Concert for David

My colleague David finally arrived at the camp, tired and jet lagged. He woke late and we had lunch together. I briefed him on everything that I had done so far. We discussed the local development needs. It seemed to us that the basic need of the people here is health, given that there is a 50% child mortality rate among the women, rampant disease, malaria, lack of sanitation etc. Hiring pygmy trackers for habituation of Pygmies is one thing, but using the project to provide basic health and referrals to the nearby mission hospital would be the obvious way to do to create goodwill. Somehow no one had yet thought of doing this.

In the hope that I would find that the WWF project had taken this approach, I then spent part of the morning reading through their web site. There is no history of the project, little

description of the range of donors, no baseline and results, no bibliography. There is mention of a research section, which they refer to, but I could not find any documents.

One of the things I noticed is that GTZ has changed its name and the New York Zoological Society has become the ICS International Conservation Society. I saw a book at the Lodge Library called “Eating Apes” which suggested that ICS and WWF donors were missing the boat on the bush meat-poaching crisis in Central Africa, something that Louis had mentioned many times.

Oddly in another book that I found at the lodge, the origins of this WWF project is described in a chapter of a book by Peter Mathieson called *African Silences*. One of the more exotic issues raised in the book is the possible existence of a regional Pygmy elephant smaller than the forest elephant, as the pygmies themselves are smaller than the Bantus around them and perhaps, dwarfism is environmental in its evolutionary effects on both animals and humans No one knows quite for sure, but the South African guide who was staying at the lodge with us claims that he videoed one of these elephants while on a trip to Gabon.

I get up and David rises by lunch. We brief each other. We are going to visit Louis this evening. All is well, my mood is calm and we are a tad optimistic.

In the evening we drive to the WWF compound to receive and send our email. Albert Schweitzer was right. Tropical health is the biggest challenge here in Central Africa. It is humanitarian and in our interest as Westerners and conservationists, as is the reduction of the bush meat trade. I believe that the conservationists are on the wrong track. Interventions should be disease focused. Development workers have to frighten people in the West and then say that the rainforest may offer the cure to so may of our diseases and that unknown diseases may emerge from a declining rainforest if not dealt with at source. Logging and mining are short term interests, that although can be accommodated need to address wider issues. Governments and conservation organizations are not yet able to think along those lines.

The Pygmies in Gabon have a substance called Ibogaine, which is now the hope of doctors who treat drug addiction and alcoholism, yet it is illegal in the USA which is the grip of a crack and cocaine social epidemic. Perhaps modern civilizations greatest self created mess, drug and alcohol abuse can be cured with Pygmy medicine. If this is indeed the case, then the Pygmies deserve the equivalent of the Nobel Prize for medicine.

David and I arrived at Louis’ compound and the place was its usual hustle and bustle of women, children and youths running around in and around his wooden house. In front there are pygmy houses, traditional and modern and behind his square wooden shack is his wonderful gazebo on a

tiny hill. Louis was sitting on the ground rubbing his thigh saying that he had strained his leg and that if I would have trouble walking in the forest he would be just as slow, if not slower.

He pointed out to us a Pygmy woman who was a healer and had a Bantu living with her in treatment for a month and as part of the therapy that she dreamed up wonderful songs which were then shared out. She said to him that one day the most amazing thing had happened to her. Her husband and her woke up one morning, they had had the same dream and dreamed up the same song which was then adopted by others. As he told us this story the man who was a great source of traditional fables came by and sat with us.

Bayanga and Francois played the harp and stick zither together and about eight musicians accompanied them with various polyrhythms while women clapped and sung ostinatos. I got up beside one of the women, captured her ostinato and sang with her for about five minutes. Then a man got up decked out in leaves and danced. Part of his dance was imitating hunting with a spear while another sequence had him on his all fours imitating an animal.

Louis talked about times in the forest when dancers imitating spirits adorn themselves with fluorescent white mushrooms that allow you to see the outline of their dancing bodies at night in the camp without actually seeing their bodies. He explained that the father of the man now dancing once got into an altercation with the local gendarmerie. They beat him to a pulp, released him from jail and he died from internal bleeding. Not only was it a tragic loss for the man and his family and a blow to Louis, but he said that he will never forget when it happened, as the day was 9/11.

The musicians played on for hours, rolling joints, smoking, talking, playing as people came in and out of their houses to watch and participate. Women joined in and some did small dance steps. They set up kerosene lamps, which David said he would later use to film the songs and dances of the Pygmies after the weekend. The three of us played with the idea of a documentary film that would follow the Pygmies from the forest to a performance at Carnegie Hall. Louis pointed out that he had once brought 19 musicians to Paris to perform for Mrs. Mitterand so they were certainly up to it. At the same time, he told us stories of all the diseases- malaria, leprosy, hepatitis, exposure to TB that he had had and his experience in London when he could not pay the hospital bill, but given that he could give blood samples for tropical infections that the staff and students had never seen before, they let him stay for free.

Towards nine in the evening we could see that the musicians were tiring. I went to Louis’

house and we eventually gave the musicians 18,000 CFA francs. He said that if it was not done in public there would be enormous controversy, as a few days ago a number of the musicians in town accosted Louis and claimed that I had met them in town and had promised each of them 10,000 CFA each.

Before that, there had been spirited arguments and discussions about who was to get how much for what reason. Luckily, Louis had advised me to do it this way, otherwise everyone would be angry at me or him over the distribution of the money. It seemed a bit like the discussion of who gets what after a hunt.

We left with the clip from the last recording that we borrowed from Louis. David said he would put it on my computer the next morning. I resolved to get everyone's names for the next gig and pitch a CD that I would co-produce with Louis for Smithsonian or Limitlesssky as a first step towards brining these talented people to Carnegie Hall. I could imagine it, the performances, the dancing and pictures of the rainforest on the back screen, slowly changing.

Part Eleven – Enervated in the Jungle

I woke up tired. I was still marginally jet lagged. David and I had made arrangements with Louis Sarno to go out to a forest camp. We sent out the vehicle to pick up supplies with Louis and then drove to his compound after lunch. My fatigue was increasing and I had not been well for a few days, wondering whether an old strain of malaria was acting up in this tropical environment.

We arrived at Louis's house and a flood of Pygmies climbed up on the back of the pickup. Louis, a visiting British volunteer and I squeezed in and the Pygmies piled on the back of the Toyota Hilux. I started to feel feverish as we drove across potholes on the road. We followed the road for over an hour into the green but now threatening forest. I felt like a character in Lord of the Rings. We passed Pygmy women with their collecting baskets on their backs and small boys and girls. We finally stopped and it started to pour. I realized I was not going to do well on the trek in. I could hear my children, my parents and my family doctor telling me that if I was fatigued, I should turn back.

I felt a surge of disappointment. I was indeed feeling malarial, perhaps an old strain that the doctors had missed in years ago was rising again. I felt as if I had never been in Africa, never done research here, never run a project. For a while I felt that my sixteen years of African experience was all for nothing. I consoled myself by reminding myself that I had just turned 59 and one must be careful. I was reassured that David was fine and he pushed on. I returned slowly with the car in the rain, overwhelmed by the height, the density and the pure

greenness of the forests in all its darkest hues. I fell asleep the moment my head hit the pillow and hoped to wake up healthy. In my sleep I seemed to hear the cacophony of the forest at night but did not wake up.

Part Twelve – Dining with the Donors

The next morning I was weak but whatever fever I had had the day before had finally subsided. I drove to the forest site to pick up Louis and David. As the morning brightened I began to feel better and when I saw the conditions they were coming out of, I realized I had done the right thing by not going. David got lovely footage of Pygmy forest life, music and dance that he would donate to Louis but had been bitten to bits by bugs the night he was out. It had rained off and on.

That evening we had dinner at the lodge with the local WWF crew and their visiting American donors (funders), a most interesting and classic crowd of conservationists. The lodge is run by a South African and so every evening to our surprise, the food was delicious, a variety of salads followed by a main course and desserts of various kinds, using both imported and local varieties of produce followed by a relaxing sit on wicker furniture with a cold beer in hand.

The staff at the lodge are all local Bantu, men with some rudiments of education, some French and one English speaker named William who is the owner's right hand man. All guests eat together at two long tables and the talk is lively. Of course it usually focuses on which birds and wildlife were seen during the day, from the 350 species of birds and of course the charismatic species, gorillas, forest elephants, buffalo, sitatunga and bongo.

The donors were largely American and each one gave a speech. They did not seem to have prepared their remarks and they rambled on and on. The common feature of all of the speeches was hyperbole. "You guys are fantastic, awesome, amazing, doing amazing work." That was the common refrain. My Slovak dinner partners asked me if I had picked up on the hyperbole. I told him that the thing I loved about hyperbole was that it was great, fantastic. He laughed.

After dinner one young donor rep told me that his organization specialized in funding gorilla conservation projects and the rights of transgendered people. Transgendered people? It was a term that I was hearing more and more often, but for the life of me I could not figure out how this donor organization in the UK had made a connection between the two. I imagined that it must be that the donor is a transgendered human with an interest in gorilla conservation. There could be no other answer, and I quickly put the matter out of my mind.

The talkative forty nine year old American schoolteacher from Shanghai, his Thai wife and

their nine-year-old son had been the most active that day, up at six and trekking about for most of the day. They were remarkable photographers and carried cameras as long as my arm. Every summer they travelled to various parts of the world, sampling the wildlife and experiencing other places and peoples. Hope was pessimistic about the future of teaching as a profession in the States, but at the same time had more of a hate love relationship with the Chinese who he seemed to despise. He showed me a sequence of photos from Madagascar of lemurs in different positions which made them look like Chinese master dancers.

Then there was the Slovak, a Swiss resident and his Chinese partner, a Taiwanese woman who is head of Johnson and Johnson for Eastern China and who come to Bayanga because, among other reasons, she said she could not receive email here and therefore could have a real holiday. Among the lodge guests there were two Swiss engineers who were friends for life, and whose wives let them go bush on a biannual trip. One told me how the Swiss government was busy buying 300 billion Euros to dilute the power of their currency and how even the Swiss worry that the world may no longer let its super rich hole up their money in Swiss banks. Yes the long arm of the French revolution is finally coming to the Swiss Alps, as they have resisted its EU versions until the present day. Somehow, his uniquely Swiss concerns failed to arouse my sympathy.

As each one asked me why I was in Bayanga they were all equally shocked and surprised that I had come to experience Pygmy music. Although Louis Sarno's book on his experience of living among and recording the music of the local Pygmies for the last three decades could be found on the book shelf in the dining room/canteen of the lodge, no one there seemed to have read it. I explained that not only is Pygmy music and dance a marvel in and of itself, I pointed out that it may be the source of all music and have a timeline of forty thousand years of stylistic continuity.

Part Thirteen – Night Sounds

The generators at the lodge close down at 10:30. By that time it is fairly dark as the lodge is merely a few huts placed on a small ridge at the side of the Sangha River, a tributary of the Congo River of legendary literary fame. As there was no moon for most of the time I was there, the sky above the river remained cloudy and dark.

As the diurnal nature of the life of the river and forest come alive the noise level increases. The river is still and without waves. Every once in a while you hear an enormous splash, probably a carnivorous tiger fish that is as long as an adult man's extended arm and has a series of vicious long teeth that can be examined, as there is a skull of one adorning

the canteen wall. The noise of insects increases, the cicadas come on and off, and in the relative coolness of the evening the forest sounds are magnified.

Every few hours you can hear a sudden bang coming from somewhere within the forest. Perhaps a branch has come down from the canopy falling a hundred feet or so, making a sudden crashing noise. Elephants have been known to come to the camp edges. You can see their footprints and dung just where the road out begins, across a small creek that flows into the river.

At various points at night the rising crescendo of the mammalian tree hyrax can be heard, slowly rising to a peak and then declining in an eerie reflection of our general mammalian tendency to give a rise and fall to all our communicative utterances.

As I fell in and out of sleep I would wonder who was hunting who, and what lay hidden, lurking in the quiet, hiding in the forest darkness. When I woke just before sunrise, the forest had become quiet. The soundscape had changed, as if someone had lowered the volume button, the light was beginning to penetrate the clouds over the river and I would walk down to the plank balcony of the canteen overlooking the river and watch the mist disappear, like a series of semi transparent curtains that some unmoved mover was slowly pulling aside for me, so that I could once again survey the river and its forested corridors without obstruction.

Part Fourteen – Once More Among the Elephants

David and I went to the Bai once again as this was his first and my second time. On our way out, there were two elephants obstructing the river. We watched the Pygmies chase them away, banging their machetes on the ground. The elephants then moved back into the forest, invisible but within close range. As we crossed the river I veered a few inches from the path and slipped into the footprint of one of the elephants that had left its impression under the water’s surface. I was instantly up to my waist in water, startled and taken aback by the largeness of the hole into which I had slid. I imagined that one hundred or one hundred and fifty years ago this kind of slip could have put an end to the life of an aspiring European big game hunter or explorer. Luckily I had my Pygmy guides to watch over me, as a mere twenty years ago they would have been hunting the animals that we had paid so much money to come and watch.

Part Fifteen – A Concert for Bayanga

David and I had spent a week looking forward to this day. We had spent much time with Louis and his Pygmy colleagues, in particular two key musicians, Francois the harp player and Bayenga, the stick zither player. Francois is larger than life. He has star quality, like a

grand Calypsonian. Bayenga is shy and retiring and gets by on the sheer quality of his singing and playing, although Francois is just as good. In a lifetime of playing with musicians you can tell when one often stands out. That was Francois' gift. He could, if given the chance, single handedly hold the attention of an audience at Carnegie hall.

This was a paid gig that we had arranged to film and record and Louis brought us to an opening in the forest, a twenty-minute walk from his present house. Here he told me that he used to set up a desk and chair, away from the hustle and bustle of the village, bring a notebook and pen and write. It is here where he wrote his book *Song of the Forest* which tells of his 30-year involvement with the Pygmies, their daily life and their music and dance, which is what brought him here and has kept him here.

We walked out to the forest clearing and David set up his camera and digital tape recorder. The musicians started in and the light coming through the tress alternated in such a way that everyone was either bathed in golden afternoon rays or somehow blended in with the myriad of greens and browns. Dancers both male and female adorned themselves with leaves and often, full costumes of green leaves and then danced as if they were spirits of the forest. People came and went. What started with ten or fifteen people ended up with twenty to thirty people, once again emphasizing the groupiness and also the independence of the Pygmies.

Despite the fact that we were a twenty minute walk from Louis's house, children came from far and wide, sat with their elders, congregated at the sides and joined in multi-part polyrhythmic clapping that they pick up in the daily round of life that is Biaka, filled with song and dance. Once again I thought of the Pharaohs and their love of Pygmy music and dancing. Here I was in the 21st century in the center of the forest whose dwellers once gave the elite of Ancient Egypt its greatest thrill. And here I was, four thousand years later listening to the music of this old world elite.

But better still, if Alan Lomax was correct and the Pygmy music style is a more than forty thousand year old and provides us with a clear echo of the earliest human music, then, we were truly watching a performance that was taking place in the last days of the Garden of Eden, for the Moslem rebels that had terrorized Bayanga a year later, and their holy war have been expelled from the country. If they, or there Al Qaeda affiliates return the Pygmies do not stand a chance against them. All they can do is run away deeper into the forest, until the loggers and the rebels ensure that there is no forest to runaway to.

Part Fifteen -The Road Back to Bangui

Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, is a large African capital that spreads inland from a point on the Ubangi River. Driving through Bangui at night you will pass large numbers of people walking the streets, you will see hundreds if not thousands of small oil lamps lighting up the side of the road and with that light you will then see, local restaurants, bars, butcheries and shops of all kind. The road is clogged with pedestrians, motorcycles, trucks, taxis and a few brave men on bicycles. It is a city with its presidential palace, its central circle, shopping areas for expats and a Kilometer Cinq open market that one gendarme told me is “plein de voleurs” filled with thieves, during the day and night.

It is a flat city with more than one hundred distinct “quartiers” or communities, each one expanding out from the river in endless compounds of aluminum covered cement houses or more often, the mud brick equivalent. Unemployment is at an all time high and under employment is endemic. There is little hope for growth in the private sector and the African elite, with help from the local indigenous Syrian and Lebanese commercial elite, is selling off most of the forest to Chinese lumber companies who need the natural resources of Africa to fuel the engine of their own industrial revolution.

We left Bayanga early and as it is about a fourteen hour drive from Bangui we took along an armed Gendarme, a largish man named Apollinaire, dressed in battle fatigues, carrying a Kalashnikov with a loaded clip and sporting a pistol that he almost sat on as we road along. The private road out of the forest was filled with pot holes that gave us the slowest going of the day, then we got onto the main Bayanga road, drove through tall rainforest which showed some sign of cutting and exited 17 kilometers farther on at the park gate where we were bid farewell by more armed forest rangers in battle fatigues, both Bantu and Pygmy. The day before I had witnessed the rangers at the WWF office in front of a stack of guns with which they wage their unsuccessful war against the poacher sand who destroy the small game that was once the mainstay of Pygmy hunters.

I had expected a warm sunny day, but it was overcast and thus we could see a larger range of greens among the trees and vegetation on either side of the road. The tallness of the forest is hard to catch on film. Suffice it to say that the trees were so high that it was like being in a green Manhattan. You look up and then realize that you have to stretch your neck further to see the tree tops. If the eye was a camera it would take two shots to get the measure of the height of the forest. Only when it gets hilly, do you get to look across a forested valley that once again gives you a three-dimensional feel for where you are and where you are coming from. Otherwise, there is just endless forest on either side of you and the road ahead and behind. Unless the road is very steep, you still have little idea of whether you are rising or falling. As you rise the humidity goes down, and you begin to breathe easier.

Ahmad our driver had the look of a Chadian nomad, high cheekbones and skinny as a stick. Perhaps he was of Fulani origin. As we approached the forested but open highlands, more like proto savanna, we would come across the long horned zebu cattle of the Moslem Fulani called Bororo, thin young men wrapped in robes typical of Sahelian herders, from neck to ankle, carrying herding sticks, looking at us with caution and serious curiosity as they herded their cattle across the road. They are the complete opposite of the Pygmy. A closed Muslim pastoral society in studied contrast to the open and merry hunter-gatherers. Occasionally, we would see their women would walking behind them and many of them are as yet unveiled.

Weeks earlier, on the way up to Bayenga our driver Fadoul had to negotiate each of the 15 roadblocks with surly armed guards. First we would wait, sometimes they would engage us in conversation, sometimes he had to pay them something, but it was always a reminder that bureaucrats and soldiers could lord it over anyone else. This time at each roadblock we received a warm welcome from Apollinaire's fellow gendarmes. They would come and greet him, smile and wave us through. We got so used to this VIP treatment that as we came to know him we started referring to him as Capitaine, Commandante and finally General Apollinaire, as he was locally perceived to be a VIP travelling with foreign guests.

The Central African Republic is larger than France. It has only a few million people. As we drove north we noticed that at various points along the road there would be a settlement and behind it, long logging roads that went as far as the eye could see. Ecologist John Reader has written that until the last century this is what most of Africa was like, vast stretches of land filled with forest and wildlife, punctuated by small and relatively isolated villages. This settlement pattern is still the case here in the CAR and it gives the visitor a visceral taste of what was once called "Old Africa," the Africa of a time before the coming of modernity.

You can feel it, touch it, smell it and taste it in the hot sweet tea, which you buy at the infrequent roadside stops. It is evident in the occasional mangrove trees that accompany these villages and which are signs of the 19th century Swahili and Arab slave trading villages that once supported the eastern slave route of the Islamic world, so well and dramatically documented by Hinde in his book on the war against the last Congolese Arab slave traders and which he wrote and published in 1897, in what was the end of this preindustrial and essentially prehistoric chapter of Africa, after the scramble.

It would appear that the period of French colonization and the subsequent rule by big men during the post independence period is now turning into a clash of civilizations between modernizing African and Islamicizing Africans. Most writers who identify with the Pygmies have

worried about the effects of logging, AIDs, multinationals and development on the traditional life and culture of the Pygmies. No writer on the Pygmies has ever considered that their way of life may eventually be destroyed by Klashnikov wielding Jihadis. In this case they only stayed for a year before they were pushed out by French and African Union soldiers, but I suspect they will return.

Unfortunately for the Pygmies this seems to be their fate. They cannot depend on the help of an African American president who will never speak up for them. If they are lucky, the French may leave behind soldiers after their latest interventions as they have done in the past in the CAR when things get out of hand. If the French and the African Union reestablish a military presence in the country this may allow the Pygmies to survive in the forest a little while longer, against what looks like insurmountable odds. Let us hope that they do.

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