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African Sacred Groves

ECOLOGICAL DYNAMICS & SOCIAL CHANGE



PART THREE

The Symbol of Forests

9

Loggers v. Spirits *in the Beng Forest, Côte d'Ivoire* Competing Models

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The first time I set foot inside the rain forest in West Africa, I felt overwhelmed. Birds and mammals whose names I didn't know were chirping (the Beng would say 'crying') above me and making a variety of quiet moans and noisy howls around me, hidden by canopied foliage so tightly interwoven I could scarcely detect where the leaves of one tree separated from those of another. The rain forest of Côte d'Ivoire was an organic, singular place whose massiveness seemed forever unknowable.

A village elder, Kona, was leading my husband and me to his fields inside the forest that day. He'd recently adopted us for the time we'd be living in his small village in the Beng region some 200 miles north of the Atlantic coastline, and this was Kona's first time serving as forest guide to Westerners. Kona was amused by our wide-eyed wonder at the vast, overarching forest, our incessant barrage of questions. To him, the space through which we were walking was powerful – but hardly undifferentiated: indeed, every spot oozed economic, cultural or religious significance to him.

Kona knew the names of every insect that crawled or flew by, and whether or not it stung people; he recognized which part of each plant at our feet (bark, leaves, roots) might be used to cure which disease; he could predict when and where he'd be likely to find the game he was so skilled at hunting, from forest snail to majestic elephant; he could easily identify the *zo* tree whose bark men strip off and process to make bark cloth bags and mats;¹ and he could point out the *kprow kprow* fruit that produces oil-bearing seeds that children of years past strung on thin sticks and lit as small, portable lamps.²

Yes, Kona's ecological knowledge of the rain forest was impressive; but equally fascinating, Kona commanded a second layer of knowledge of the rain

¹ For a description of the difficult work involved in this craft, see Gottlieb and Graham (1994:305).

² For a description of how these lamps are made, see Gottlieb and Graham (1994:305–6).

forest that was initially less visible to me. This is the sort of knowledge we might call social, for Kona easily saw the human contours of the forest, not just its natural foundations. He recalled which farmer owned rights to tap which palm trees and pick fruits from which banana plants; he remembered how many years each patch of earth had lain fallow since it was last planted; he easily identified the owner of each field (whose contours sometimes faded seamlessly into the surrounding forest to me) as it was staked out as a wedge in a pie-like circle; and he readily noticed the picket (initially camouflaged to me by the surrounding trees) that had been planted in the forest to mark the halfway spot on the path that connected two neighboring villages, indicating where the residents of one village could stop working while doing their annual path-clearing work that their village chief mandated, in order to maintain their half of the road. This invisible but nonetheless tangible social landscape started slowly to open itself to me as I began to study local socio-ecological knowledge and came to appreciate the enormous understanding of the local geocultural landscape that lay inside each Beng farmer's mind.

Humbling as this knowledge of Kona's was, what came to amaze me even more was a third layer of his knowledge that proved the most invisible of all. As I studied the Beng universe, I understood that the forest was alive with an entire unseen cosmos, a cultural imaginary whose contours are charted by the Beng as precisely as were the more tangible components of the forest. It is this cultural imaginary that is the focus of the pages that follow. For the Beng world is populated not only by flora and fauna visible to the human eye, but also by forces imperceptible to humans yet decisive in their effects on humans. This invisibility is the subject of much Beng thought.³

A Beng folktale explains that a gulf now separates the world of humans from that of spirits . . . although this gulf did not always exist. This version of the folktale was told to me by master storyteller, Akwe Kouadio Baa, who himself heard it recounted by an elder and liked it so much that he became moved to put it to song when entertaining a small audience. This is the story Baa told:

A certain man and a certain spirit went to construct a village. Every day, they ate *foutou*, but there were always leftovers.⁴ They ate meat, but there were leftovers. They drank palm wine, but there were always leftovers. When they were done eating, the man would roll a cigarette, every day he would roll a cigarette! One day, the spirit said, 'When we eat *foutou*, we always leave leftovers. When we eat meat, we always have leftovers. When we drink our palm wine, we always have leftovers. In addition, when you "eat your fire," I can't stay by your side.'

The man asked, 'Why is that?'

The spirit replied, 'If the day comes that we don't find anything to eat or drink, you'll come and eat me!'⁵ Then the spirit ran off into the forest. The next morning, the man

³ For more on Beng religion, see Gottlieb (1996:19–45; 2004), Gottlieb and Graham (1994).

⁴ *Foutou* is a starch dish common throughout much of the rain forest area of West Africa; women make it from cooked yams pounded into an elastic ball and eaten with an accompanying sauce.

⁵ The spirit thought that the man smoking the cigarette was literally 'eating fire.' The spirit imagined that a man who could 'eat fire' could eat anything, including the spirit. In earlier times, the Beng used to smoke tobacco in wooden pipes; cigarettes, either commercially rolled in paper or home-rolled in corn stalks, are a more recent introduction.

said he was going hunting. The spirit went ahead to where the man would be coming. The spirit asked him, 'In your village, when women pound something, between the mortar and the pestle, which of the two of them makes the noise that resounds the farthest?' The man replied, 'It's the mortar whose noise resounds the farthest.' The spirit then asked him, 'But if the pestle hadn't hit against the mortar...?' The man said, 'Ah! It's the pestle whose noise resounds the farthest! It's true: if the pestle hadn't hit against the mortar...!' The spirit then beat up the man. The man ran off, ran off to his village. Every day in the forest, the spirit hit the man when he was out hunting. Finally, the man's child said to him, 'Papa, why haven't you killed anything the past five days when you've been out hunting?'

He said, 'Little boy, it's not my fault. The spirit that left went and waited for me in the forest. Every day he beats me up! In beating me up, he asks me, "Between the noise of the mortar and the noise of the pestle, which resounds the farthest?" If I don't know, he beats me up!'

His son said, 'Papa, tomorrow I'm going along too.'

The next morning, the boy and his father went off to go hunting. As soon as they got there, they saw the spirit right away. He came and asked the man, 'In your village, between the noise of the mortar and the noise of the pestle, which travels the farthest?'

The child ran up to his father's side and went and smacked the spirit on his cheek, *kpao*. Then he asked the spirit, 'Between my hand and your cheek, which one sounds the loudest?'

The spirit answered, 'I beat up your father, beat him up, beat him up, and he wasn't able to ask me about it at all. You, just a child, you've come and hit me and you've asked me about my affairs. But I'm not able to do the same to you. This is a great source of shame to me. Therefore, from now on, I'll be able to see people, but people themselves will no longer be able to see me.' Then he put darkness between us. And that's why we don't see spirits any more – that's the reason.

We see that this fable chronicles an irrevocable rupture that distances humans from spirits because of the superior wisdom of a human child that a spirit finds humiliating. Nevertheless, the Beng continue to maintain active relations with the spirits, of whom they recognize several types. One major group contains two distinct subgroups living in the bush: *gaḡwroḡ* and *alufy#*.⁶ The second major group of spirits (*bḡḡzḡ*) is directly associated with the Earth, which is accordingly conceived as spiritually powerful. These *bḡḡzḡ* spirits prefer to congregate around spots in the forest where a small pool of water is adjacent to a hill – a combination that the spirits reputedly find especially hospitable. Thus people put shrines at such places, and indigenous priests come once every six days to make offerings at these shrines.⁷

The Beng have imagined much about the existence of the forest-dwelling spirits. Despite the gulf separating them from humans, there are myriad connections between the two worlds – connections that constitute a virtual hallmark of Beng eco-thought.

⁶ The latter are pygmy-sized spirits – some say, powerful beings rather than spirits *per se* – living on the village/forest border.

⁷ Another group of spiritual beings, called *unu* (souls), exists as ancestors in the afterlife (*unugbe*, lit. 'soul village'); these figure prominently in the lives of the living and especially in infants and young children (see Gottlieb 2004) but are not affiliated with the forest and hence are not discussed here further. The Beng also recognize a deity called *eci* that I translate loosely as 'sky/god.'

Thus, every village is affiliated with a specific patch of Earth (in some cases, two or even three Earths) that is given a proper name; while known to most adults, the names of these Earths are considered too powerful to utter in normal discourse.⁸ Some Earths are also considered to be affiliated with a specific matriline. Each such Earth is considered to have precise contours localized in a particular spot, and particular *bogzo* spirits are said to reside at these spots. In fact, the terrestrial orientation of the Beng places its emphasis on these spirits of the Earth.⁹ Many villagers frequently make offerings to the spirits connected with the named patch of forest-based Earth that is associated with their village. The *bogzo* spirits affiliated with certain named Earths are said to be especially powerful. On occasion, people may travel to other villages to make offerings to particular spirits that a religious specialist has told them are responsible for their wellbeing.

Two kinds of indigenous religious practitioners maintain ties with these various spirits. Diviners (who may be male or female) use a variety of techniques – including interpreting the patterns made by cowry shells thrown on a mat, or the patterns made by water mixed with kaolin when swirled around in a brass bowl. Spirits are temporarily drawn from the forest to these items. Once the bush spirits have entered the village to congregate around the objects, diviners communicate with the invisible spirits and then interpret the spirits' communications to concerned clients.

Clients often consult a diviner because of sickness or misfortune in the family. Depending on what the spirit recommends, the diviner may offer a simple herbal remedy to the client and/or prescribe a sacrifice to (a) particular spirit(s) affiliated with the bush at large, or with a particular named Earth, or with the land of the ancestors.

Masters of the Earth (who are virtually always male) officiate over the offerings that diviners prescribe. These religious figures worship the Earth spirits once every six days (according to the six-day Beng calendar) by offering prayers and animal sacrifices on behalf of individuals (or, occasionally, groups) who seek protection against evils such as witchcraft; relief from afflictions that are deemed to have a spiritual cause; atonement for past sins committed; or thanks for past wishes granted or good luck experienced. Individuals who sacrifice a sheep at such a shrine may hope that the spirits that reside in the shrine may make the person very successful at work and thus wealthy. Occasionally, a village chief may offer a sheep to sacrifice to the resident shrine spirits to ask for a plentiful coffee crop for the whole village. In making such a request, the chief would promise that should the wish be granted, he would later return to thank the shrine's bush spirits by offering a cow, which all residents of his village would take up a collection to buy. All these sacrifices create a strong continuity between the village-based world of humans and the forest-based world of spirits.¹⁰

⁸ To honor this strong preference, I do not divulge their names in any of my writings.

⁹ As with many African religious systems, the sky deity is rather remote and, while evoked frequently in casual speech, is never the direct object of sacrifice. For some discussion of this trend comparatively in sub-Saharan Africa, see Ray 1999.

¹⁰ Until very recently, most Beng villagers have maintained an active commitment to the religious

hearing these mysterious sounds, villagers say that they always hear announced the death of one of their villagemates who was indeed a person classified as *kale*.

Certain kinds of humans are routinely assumed to be *kale*. At the malevolent end of the spectrum of people, witches are considered *kale*, as evidenced by their superhuman powers. But many benevolent people are also able to maintain relations with spirits and are thus considered *kale*. These include diviners and some exceptionally talented artists – sculptors, musicians and dancers.¹¹ Since all diviners are regularly in touch with spirits, they are categorically considered *kale*.¹² One diviner I came to know, Kouakou Ba, is said to have been born *kale* having begun to divine when he was just a child. Because his gifts are said to derive directly from god (*ea*) and he maintains close relations with the bush spirits, Kouakou Ba is said to be incapable of lying when he divines; for this he is greatly respected, and his wide reputation draws him clients from as far as the coastal city of Abidjan. Diviners use a variety of methods to attract spirits to communicate with them; some diviners (called *siawoli*, or ‘spirit dancers’) own statues that are said to please and draw the spirits to them. When these diviners wish to become possessed by spirits so as to perform a divination, they bring out their statues to attract the forest spirits to the figures, so that the spirits will possess and communicate to the diviner while dancing; the diviner can then diagnose the cause of the client’s problem. In this case, the statues are considered to constitute a kind of sacrifice to the spirits. Thus as part of the divination session, the diviner should crack an egg onto the statue as a sacrifice to the spirits when making a request on behalf of a client – whether good health, financial success, a productive harvest, a healthy child, or good luck. Great artists also maintain intimate relations with the spirits. As an example, let us consider the case of ‘Kouakou,’ a talented sculptor, musician and herbalist I knew who was said to ‘have spirits behind him’. Although middle-aged, Kouakou had never married – a striking anomaly in Beng villages. His neighbors explained that Kouakou didn’t need a human wife because he had a spirit wife who left him content. Some neighbors speculated that spirits might even live in Kouakou’s drums and statues. Although, as the folktale quoted above indicated, spirits are generally said to reside in the forest and eschew human habitations, there are exceptions: spirits are attracted to ritual paraphernalia kept by certain spiritually powerful people such as Kouakou. Another talented musician I knew was rumored to be *kale* because his mother always applied white clay or kaolin (*sepe*) on his forehead while he danced and sang. The white clay known as *sepe* is considered to be the ‘powder of the spirits’ (*go fwe*); the spirits are said to like it (*go vi a ni*) and to dust their own (invisible) bodies with it. Thus when a human uses kaolin, spirits are reportedly attracted to the person and may then protect him or her. Likewise, diviners who perform divinations by drawing spirits to statues sprinkle *sepe* on the plate on which they place the statues, to attract the spirits to it. In similar

¹¹ In fact, the distinction between witches on the one hand and diviners/artists/healers on the other hand is not as sharply drawn as Westerners might think. For a discussion of the continuum between good and evil use of occult powers in Beng practice, see Gottlieb 1989.

¹² For more on Beng diviners, see Gottlieb 1996: Ch. 2, Gottlieb and Graham 1994.

fashion, when offering a sacrifice to forest spirits, people put some *sepe* on the ground next to the item being left for the spirits.

Beyond diviners and artists, ordinary people may be said occasionally to have 'spirits behind them.' For example, if someone falls sick and consults a diviner, the diviner may diagnose that the patient 'has spirits behind' him or her. The diviner may specify that these spirits 'want' statues carved for them; the sculptures would generally be carved to represent the same gender as is attributed to the spirit. Once having commissioned a sculptor to carve such a statue to draw or even house the forest spirit, the sculpture's owner should clothe the statue and keep it inside the house.

More dramatically, some people are said to 'come from' the world of the bush spirits. In this case, some identifying feature usually distinguishes them visually from most of their peers. For example, people with red hair are said to be gifts from particular forest spirits, who bestowed the person as a newborn on a human family. Generally, a spirit gives a red-haired infant to a parent (of either gender) who is a member of the clan that is associated with that spirit's shrine. While such red-haired people are still children, their parents must regularly offer sacrifices to the donor spirits to thank them for their gift; when they are grown, these redheads offer the necessary sacrifices themselves.

Such a child, as a 'child of the spirits,' can often 'see clearly,' being attributed powers of a clairvoyant. As with other people who are judged *kale*, a red-haired child can often predict when there will be a death in the village. Foreseeing the death, the clairvoyant will start privately celebrating the funeral by tapping drums, crying, and singing funeral songs, without revealing the name of the person whose death he or she has forecast.

A red-haired child may be given certain ritually powerful objects with which to dance, to attract spirits that would allow the child to become a diviner and a healer. When a red-haired girl is initiated to be married, she may announce that because of her connection with bush spirits, she needs certain items as gifts to maintain her ties to the *bogzo*, such as a white chicken, a white *pagne* cloth, and a white dress. The red hair itself is considered to be both powerful and a source of vulnerability. When red-haired children get a haircut, they put the cut hair in a separate covered pot that is kept by their father (as adults, red-haired individuals may maintain the pots themselves). This is to protect them: if someone were to get hold of some of their locks of hair, it is thought, the thief might sell the hair to witches in exchange for some 'meat' to 'eat.'

A woman may experience a premonition that she may bear a red-headed child in the future as a gift from the spirits. Here is a case I recorded from my field notes of one such instance:

One day 'Akissi' was in bed and thought she saw a bush spirit on her, wearing a white *pagne*. She told this to the Master of the Earth in her village, who explained that the being she had seen was a particular male *bogzo* from the forest. The spirit had appeared as a way to announce that he intended to bestow a daughter on Akissi some time in the future. The Master of the Earth instructed Akissi to perform a sacrifice to the spirit the following Friday. The sacrifice was to be of a particular sort that the Beng call called *folie*, which consists of yam *foutou* [see Note 4] with red palm oil plus an egg, all wrapped

together in a broad leaf. From then on, the Master of the Earth continued, every so often on a Friday, Akissi should offer this same sacrifice to the *bogzo*, along with a liter of palm wine.

Akissi followed the instructions of the Master of the Earth, and some time later, she became pregnant and gave birth to a girl. The baby had somewhat reddish hair and was said to be a gift from the male forest spirit that had visited Akissi much earlier. After the birth, the Master of the Earth instructed Akissi that every Friday, she should continue to offer a *folie* sacrifice to the spirit, to thank him for having given her the baby girl.

The range of people discussed above who have unusual relations with the forest spirits clearly indicates how the spirits, while long ago rendered invisible and relegated to the forest, nonetheless continue to noticeably influence the lives of humans. But it is not only through their relations with exceptional people that the spirits remain connected to the human world. The spirits themselves reportedly maintain strong continuity with people's daily practices in their own quotidian lives: as with the ancient Greek gods, the lives of forest spirits recognized by the Beng are said to parallel in uncanny ways the lives of humans.

Thus the spirits are said to live in villages much like human villages. The cultural geography of the rain forest includes specific places that the Beng say are 'spirit villages,' and these are located in specific sites that Beng adults can readily identify. People attempt to steer clear of these sites so as not to disturb the spirits. Children are taught never to approach such places, which are considered exclusive property of the spirits. Should any human approach such an area, it is said that the spirits will take that person and never allow him or her to leave that part of the forest. The spirits are especially likely to congregate in the afternoons at the spots that the Beng have marked as shrines. It is said that any ordinary person who approaches a spirit at such a shrine will perceive the spirit in human form, into which it has changed, and will immediately die. It is taboo for people other than a Master of the Earth to approach these shrines in the daytime.

With the slash-and-burn method of agriculture that Beng farmers employ, Beng women are charged with burning off fields that were planted the previous year. Women are extremely careful to control their fires so as to prevent the fire from spreading to any part of the forest that is said to house an invisible spirit village. Most women are highly skilled at setting and containing their field burning, but occasionally a fire burns out of bounds. If a woman's fire accidentally goes out of control and an area identified as a spirit village is burnt down, the farmer leaves herself vulnerable to terrible punishment by the angry spirits, and disaster is said to ensue. One madwoman I knew was said to have been cursed by the spirits and gone mad after inadvertently burning down a part of the forest that is said to be the abode of spirits.¹³

In some spots where many spirits reportedly live, people say that the spirits want the nearby forest paths to remain well cleared, because many spirits share the paths with people. If the paths are left overgrown, the spirits are said to become angry and send illnesses to the village(s) that they consider responsible for maintaining the path.

¹³ For another perspective on this madwoman, cf. Gottlieb 2004:105.

Not only do the spirits live in human-like villages; according to the Beng, the spirits also have the same bodily desires that rule humans. For example, they get hungry as humans do and they like to eat human food; however, being invisible, the forest spirits do not grow such food themselves. Instead, they rely on food provided to them by people. Some farmers plant fields near the places that humans have identified as spirit villages, and these farmers expect that the local bush spirits will help themselves to their crops. For this reason, people do not ask questions if they discover some crops missing from their fields, as they assume the absent items must have been taken by spirits who were feeding themselves.

Indeed, people say that the bush spirits come out of their villages once every six days (the length of the traditional Beng week) to eat yams and other crops growing in people's fields. Since this occurs every six days, the sixth day in the Beng week is designated as a 'rest day' from work for people: on this day (called *ba fe* for villages in the savanna region of the Beng area, and *po fe* for villages in the forest region), it is taboo (*sô pɔ*) for people to enter into the forest to work in their fields or even to chop down trees or fetch water from forest ponds. On these days, the hill spirits are said to be out and about eating in the humans' fields, and if a farmer were to see the spirits, his or her life would be in danger. The spirit would flee, and the farmer would be required to apologize to the spirit by sacrificing a chicken; even so, death might be the spirits' punishment for having been seen by a human.

Within their 'villages,' spirits are said to be especially partial to living in certain species of trees in the forest. The tall *iroko* tree (*Chlorophora excelsa*, in the mulberry family) – sometimes called a West African teak because of its high-quality wood – is said by the Beng to be a spirit-sheltering tree *par excellence*.¹⁴ If a Beng sculptor wishes to carve a statue from *iroko* wood, before cutting down the tree, he must first make an offering to the spirits that he assumes live in the tree.¹⁵ With such an offering, the sculptor both apologizes for disturbing the spirits, and warns the spirits to vacate the tree and find another tree to serve as their abode elsewhere in the forest. Only by engaging in such a propitiatory sacrifice can a sculptor avoid disaster when he chops down the forest giant that is the *iroko* tree.

Not only do bush spirits reportedly live in human-like 'villages,' they are also said to be gendered. Male and female spirits are said to marry, have children, and generally structure their lives in ways that resemble the lives of human families. The *bɔŋzɔ* are reportedly partial to the colors red and white and wear a human style of clothing (*pagnes*) made from red or white cloth. People say that if a spirit sees a human child wearing red or white clothing while in the forest/fields, the spirit might be drawn to the child and might even think that the child is a spirit; in either case, the spirit is likely to take the child

¹⁴ Technically an *iroko* tree is considered spiritually powerful – we might say, 'sacred' – only if it hosts a spirit. However, technically, any *iroko* tree might host spirits so in effect all *irokos* are regarded as 'sacred' because of their potential. The Beng also prize *iroko* trees because their hard wood makes excellent furniture; however, I never heard anyone claim that this was the reason for the tree's sacred connections.

¹⁵ I use the masculine pronoun here intentionally because all Beng sculptors are male.

family always to guard this special cord carefully. When he outgrew it, his family kept the spirit's waistband hanging on the wall inside the house.

As these cases suggest, the bush spirits maintain an active presence in the lives and minds of village-dwelling Beng. Despite the fact that the two sets of beings inhabit different worlds and that the spirits are said to be invisible to humans, their disparate worlds are nevertheless clearly interconnected. Indeed, this interconnection is actively maintained in both directions to the point that each discursively depends on the other for existence, despite the fact that these interconnections are hedged by rules, and each tries to maintain respect for the other by way of these rules. A delicate balance should be achieved as long as the rules for engagement are followed.

Nevertheless, the respect that Beng people routinely try to accord the spirits is not shared by all visitors to the region. When 'strangers' (*tinin*) enter the area, they may be unaware of the invisible spirits that the Beng see in the forest; alternatively, if the visitors are monotheists – whether Christian or Muslim – they may ridicule the claim of the spirits' existence altogether.¹⁷ Such visitors to the region may either inadvertently or even deliberately flout the rules that the Beng say the spirits demand of humans when entering their territory. A clash of cultural systems inevitably ensues. As an example, let us consider this story.

The rainy season had begun, and two large trucks bearing molasses from the sugar plantations in the north were heading down the road south to Abidjan to unload their sweet cargo. But the rains had degraded the dirt roads so much that one of the trucks became mired in a mud ditch on the side of a road leading through a hilly portion of the Beng region. The driver of the second truck endeavored to hitch his rig up to his colleague's vehicle and pull the first truck free, but this only resulted in the second truck getting stuck as well. A third rescue truck met the same unhappy fate. Beng villagers watching the spectacle unfold informed the drivers that as far as they were concerned, the trucks had by no means been subject to an 'accident.' Rather, bush spirits that live in the forest surrounding the hillside road had been offended by the weight, noise and polluting fumes of the trucks traveling through their territory; in protest, the forest-dwelling spirits had derailed the vehicles. Beng elders suggested that the drivers offer the bush spirits a chicken sacrifice by way of apology.

Now, not only were the drivers not Beng, they were also Muslims. Still, on hearing the Beng interpretation of the religious foundation of their unfortunate situation, the drivers agreed to sacrifice a chicken to the local forest spirits that their Beng hosts averred were the cause of the trucks' problems. Soon after the chicken was offered, a rescue truck arrived from the closest town and effectively pulled the trucks back onto the road. The Beng took the finale to this saga as legitimation of their dealings with the forest spirits.¹⁸

In this case, despite their own monotheistic orientation, strangers to the region demonstrated respect for the local polytheistic landscape in agreeing to

¹⁷ For another perspective on 'strangers' in the Beng region – especially their effect on and relation to young children – see Gottlieb 2004:146–64.

¹⁸ For a longer narration of this story, see Gottlieb and Graham 1994:204–8.

acknowledge the forest spirits' existence by offering them a sacrifice. A few years later, a somewhat similar event – this time involving loggers – had a much darker outcome.

To many actors in the contemporary world, the rain forest of the Beng region offers an entirely different source of power from that which the Beng attribute it. Rather than spiritual wealth, logging companies now view the forest as a source of financial wealth. According to the current Director of Waters and Forests in Côte d'Ivoire (who is a Beng man), the *iroko* is currently 'the most expensive tree on the market' (Boussou Koffi, August 3, 2004). In the Beng region, commercial logging began in the 1980s, especially focusing on *irokos*.¹⁹ Currently, a large *iroko* tree might sell for up to 250,000 CFA in Côte d'Ivoire (Boussou Koffi, Aug. 3, 2004), with the Beng enjoying none of the profits when such a tree has come from their region.²⁰ The financial incentive is strong for logging companies, and the resultant level of deforestation already accomplished in Côte d'Ivoire by logging companies has now been well established for much of sub-Saharan Africa:

[A]ccording to the FAO, Africa lost the highest percentage of rainforests during the 1980s of any biogeographical realm, a trend that continued from 1990–1995.

Around the turn of the century, West Africa had some 193,000 sq. miles (500,000 sq. km) of coastal rainforest. However, the tropical forests of West Africa, mostly lowland formations easily accessible from the coast, have been largely depleted by commercial exploitation, namely logging, and conversion for agriculture. Now, according to the FAO 1997, only 22.8% of West Africa's moist forests remain, much of this degraded... countries like Cote d'Ivoire have suffered extensive forest loss as a result of commercial logging and agriculture...

(Butler 2002)

Indeed, as of 1999–2000, Côte d'Ivoire was experiencing an annual loss of 4.3 percent of its forests (*ibid.*). Where the Beng see the large trees of the surrounding forest as the abode of invisible but powerful spirits whose complex demands must be vigilantly accommodated, capital flows redefine those same trees as the abode of cash that must be sought by any means and at all costs. Marx long ago argued that cash itself has become the ultimate fetish; in the Ivoirian rain forest, one sees two kinds of symbolic treasure locked into an irreconcilable, even fatal competition.

This competition is now being written on the bodies of loggers. Some years ago, several lumberjacks were sent by logging companies to chop down *iroko* trees in the Beng part of the rain forest. Well trained in the technicalities of their trade but ignorant of the hidden Beng landscape, the loggers chopped

¹⁹ The two companies that have most recently logged in the Beng region are F.I.P. and INPROBOIS. (F.I.P. and INPROBOIS are members of the European Foundation for the Preservation of the African Forest Resource; see <http://www.ifasite.com/index.php?rub=Foundation&langue=en>.) A third company, a subsidiary of MOBIO, was active in the Beng region early on but has not sent in loggers to the region in recent years (Boussou Koffi, August 2004). Loggers typically made deals with Beng villagers that resulted in the Beng receiving a relatively modest gift from the company, which they might or might not be able to use, in exchange for logging rights.

²⁰ As of June 2005, the exchange rate was 536 CFA = US\$1.

down several *iroko* trees – those same trees that the Beng claim are the abode of local forest spirits – without offering the resident spirits any propitiatory sacrifices in advance. According to Beng reports, the spirits that made their home in the *iroko* trees were angered by the loggers destroying their residence without either asking forgiveness ahead of time or offering compensation after the fact. In cutting down the giant trees, some of the outsider lumberjacks were severely injured; others were killed by the very trees they were endeavoring to fell. Their surviving colleagues interpreted the tragedy as the result of the forest spirits' revenge. According to Beng reports, many loggers hearing of the events became fearful of the local forest spirits, and some refused to work in the region.

In short, those who have visited, or have even just passed through, the Beng area from afar have often experienced firsthand what they consider as the force of the Beng spirits, and they have then brought stories of their frightening adventures back to the cities. In these ways, to the extent that they are known outside their immediate region, the Beng have occupied a somewhat respected, somewhat feared place in the nation's cultural imaginary. While modernity makes its seemingly one-way march, the fiercely held religious traditions of the Beng have served as a potent counterweight to the seeming inevitability of social and religious change. Yet Beng spirits are not universally accepted. Spiritual and mechanistic causal schemes compete for discursive dominance in the local setting.²¹

Ecologists witness with increasing urgency the relentless destruction of the earth's forests, especially rain forests. According to some specialists, 'Today only one fifth of the world's original forest cover remains, and Global Forests Watch is predicting another 40 percent of the remaining forest will be lost in the next 10 to 20 years' (Semillero Africa 2000). In Ivory Coast, this trend is particularly insidious:

Ivory Coast, the biggest timber exporter in Africa, lost about two-thirds (over 56%) of its closed forest in 20 years from 12 million ha in 1956 to 4 million in 1977 (Timberlake 1991). The annual rate of deforestation is 6.5%

(Organization for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa n.d.).

More recently, the ongoing civil war in Côte d'Ivoire (for which a peace accord was signed in January 2003 but which is still causing continued local upheaval as of this writing) has fully disrupted logging activity in the Beng region.

In any case, although three companies retain interests in the Beng rain forest, it is unclear whether logging will recommence when the political disturbances are finally settled. Regardless of the national outcome of the civil war, according to the director of the nation's Waters and Forests Ministry, nearly all of the *irokos* in the Beng region have already been cut down, with no efforts at replanting (Boussou Koffi, August 4, 2004). The timber companies seem to have focused entirely on short-term gain with no thought of sustainability even of their profits, let alone of the forest itself.

²¹ For another set of perspectives on how different forces are vying for dominance in a complex geopolitical Ivorian landscape, cf. Hellweg 2004.

down several *iroko* trees – those same trees that the Beng claim are the abode of local forest spirits – without offering the resident spirits any propitiatory sacrifices in advance. According to Beng reports, the spirits that made their home in the *iroko* trees were angered by the loggers destroying their residence without either asking forgiveness ahead of time or offering compensation after the fact. In cutting down the giant trees, some of the outsider lumberjacks were severely injured; others were killed by the very trees they were endeavoring to fell. Their surviving colleagues interpreted the tragedy as the result of the forest spirits' revenge. According to Beng reports, many loggers hearing of the events became fearful of the local forest spirits, and some refused to work in the region.

In short, those who have visited, or have even just passed through, the Beng area from afar have often experienced firsthand what they consider as the force of the Beng spirits, and they have then brought stories of their frightening adventures back to the cities. In these ways, to the extent that they are known outside their immediate region, the Beng have occupied a somewhat respected, somewhat feared place in the nation's cultural imaginary. While modernity makes its seemingly one-way march, the fiercely held religious traditions of the Beng have served as a potent counterweight to the seeming inevitability of social and religious change. Yet Beng spirits are not universally accepted. Spiritual and mechanistic causal schemes compete for discursive dominance in the local setting.²¹

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As I have suggested, with each felling of a tree in the Beng section of the rain forest, another trunk of cultural significance was felled too. As the Beng see it, not only the trees but the spirits who they say inhabit those trees are under siege. When a spirit's abode is destroyed, the spirit will endeavor to find another nearby *iroko* to inhabit; failing that, the Beng say, the spirit will have to go farther afield to locate a new home. Unlike in northern Benin, where forest-based deities may remain despite dwindling resources (Siebert, personal communication, Jan. 31, 2005), in the worst-case scenario the Beng can imagine that all the spirits would abandon the Beng region altogether.

While this is barely thinkable to most Beng, it remains to be seen which regime of the forest – economic and discursive alike – prevails.

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