

Roads and Development in Eastern Congo: declining livelihoods and growing self-reliance
among the Lese and Efe

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Mail arrived yesterday from Kuli, the clinic health worker. It had been over 9 months since we last received word from the Lese and Efe who run the community clinic and primary school in the Ituri forest in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. Kuli must have been determined to share with us the latest information about Andisengi - his community. He had walked 100 miles out of Lese territory to hand a wad of letters without envelopes to someone heading to Beni, one of the gateway cities to east Africa. From there the letters made their way miraculously to Nairobi, where an anonymous and clearly generous stranger placed them in a plain brown envelope with no return address, affixed the necessary stamps and sent the package to us at the Ituri Forest Peoples Fund here in the United States.

Kuli wrote

“Monsieur Davidi,
Habari yako? We are OK here but were terrified during the war when Mobutu’s soldiers came. No one in Andisengi was shot. We all fled across the river to hide further into the forest. The soldiers broke into our houses and took all our seed rice and peanuts. They broke the door of the clinic, pillaged the dispensary and stole the cash box. They took my stethoscope, my tweezers and my syringes. The women had hidden the microscope so the soldiers could not steal it. They torn down the door of the store house and took everything. We heard lots of bombs near the Nepoko river. We only returned to our houses when the liberators arrived. We only have cassava and plantains to plant this year but Kabila’s Alliance soldiers don’t steal from us. We don’t know how we can restart the clinic without medicine but the school still has one or two books and the teachers are all still here. We will wait and see if anything improves with Kabila, now that the war is over. When are you coming here?

Kuli, who is probably representative of most people in the Ituri, has great hopes for his country, now that Mobutu is not in power. For the last 30 years the people of the Ituri forest have powerlessly watched a corrupt and incompetent government grow rich, as the road system has progressively collapsed and rural livelihoods plunge ever more steeply downward.

In 1985, Mobutu's regime declared that all schools that were not built of brick with corrugated tin roofs were no longer eligible for state support. This effectively closed rural primary schools, and brought children's education to a halt in Andisengi as the nearest mission-run school was over 40 miles away. Yet, a group of parents in Andisengi were sufficiently concerned about keeping their school going that they organized a work team to repair the mud-walled and leaf roofed school room, but they were unable to persuade the teacher to continue teaching in exchange for food and help in his field. This understandable rebuff by the teacher spurred the community to ask us to establish the Ituri forest Peoples Fund.

The initial goal of the Fund was to sell locally made artifacts and seek donations in the US to raise money to pay the teacher's salary and to purchase text books. Since then, this special project of Cultural Survival has been able to help the Lese and Efe to provide the school with books and supplies, support nine teachers and educate over 230 children each year.

Families in Andisengi have a tradition of independence, and an

abiding suspicion of those not very closely related to them. Most years families are able to make do on their own because they can meet the challenges of providing themselves with food and shelter. Arranging schooling for their children, however, is a community level challenge -- one that exceeds the capacity of any individual family. Becoming a community is central to supporting a school, and for the independent families of Andisengi this has not been easy. Families have had to trust that they would not be alone in committing time, energy and scarce capital into community projects. Equally important, families have had to believe that they could provide community level services for themselves, and not wait for others -- the Belgians, the Mobutu government, or most recently the American researchers -- to do so. Even with these barriers, the concept of and capacity for community level self-help has progressively taken root in the Ituri. In Andisengi it has been a process championed by two bright and hard-working brothers, who as a result of their persistence and honesty have gained considerable respect in the community. It has also been a process necessitated by the increasingly feeble and predatory government of Mobutu, that while failing to provide poor rural communities with social services or access to markets, had never stopped taxing them.

People of the Andisengi district of eastern Congo

The Lese are southern-sudanic speaking farmers who moved into the forest at least several hundred years ago. Each year farmers clear a small patch of secondary forest to cultivate plantains, cassava, peanuts, upland rice, squash, and sweet potatoes most of which are not endemic to Africa but were introduced by Arab traders and colonial administrators. Each Lese clan is involved in a complex, intergenerational exchange relationship with a band of Efe who now speak a dialect of the Lese language. The Efe are foragers who have probably lived in the forest for thousands of years. They hunt with bow and arrow, and gather fish, honey, mushrooms, snails, insects, and forest fruits. The Efe exchange forest foods, medicines and building materials as well as their labor in Lese fields for agricultural crops that provide over 60% of their annual calories.

Soon after starting the school, the community established a Parents' Committee to help find ways to come to consensus on community level actions that pertain to the school. Committee roles and membership were decided without outside influence. The Committee members are consistently strong advocates of educating children, and they have a reputation for integrity and fairness. Interestingly they have not been the "big men" of the community. In the last five years, the Committee's actions have gained the confidence and respect of the community, and reflect the Committee's progressive empowerment. The Parents' Committee was able to bring the community together with the teachers to clear a field behind the school where the children cultivate cassava. The children bring half of the cassava home to share with their families, and when they can, the remainder is dried and sold to passing traders to buy school supplies. The Committee started organizing end-of-year school graduation celebrations that not only publicly lauded children for their progress in school, but brought families together as a community to provide and prepare food for the feast. Most recently, the Committee has negotiated the difficult tasks of changing which teacher had the authority and prestige of being the school headmaster, and arranging for the community to hear evidence about a teacher accused of using his pupils to work in his fields after school. After the hearing, the community asked the Committee to fire the teacher and find a replacement.

Building on the success of the community primary school, the Lese and Efe of Andisengi decided in 1992 to provide themselves with primary health care by establishing the only clinic and pharmacy within 50 miles. Two years ago, the Clinic Committee came up with a clever solution to prevent inflation from eroding the value of the money that patients paid for clinic services, and that the health worker uses to buy medicines and supplies. One of the members noted, at a meeting, that though the price of palm oil kept rising month after month, at any one time you could always buy two leaves of tobacco and a bar of soap with a bottle of palm oil. He argued that if Kuli purchased palm oil with the money in the clinic cash box and stored it in plastic jerrycans, the monetary value of the palm oil would rise over time. Thus when Kuli was ready to make the 80 mile trip to the nearest mission hospital to buy medicines, he could sell the palm oil to recoup the cash without any loss in its purchasing power.

The difficulties facing communities like Andisengi to provide themselves with social services are numerous, and all have been exacerbated by the declining state of the roads. The road has always been a concern for people, but never so much as it was last year when we returned to the Ituri to continue our research. Kombuta, one of the teachers of the community run primary school bemoaned:

"The roads are dead. The government killed them. They stopped fixing the roads after beating the Simba rebels, back when I was a boy. It's been months since we've seen a Toyota 4x4 pass by. And since the heavy rains started even the bicycle traders have ceased coming. I doubt that they will be back until the dry season arrives in January. At least when the traders were around we could sell bushmeat for clothes, salt and soap. Now we've had to start making our own salt from charred banana skins, and my daughters, look over there, they are

making soap from palm oil and ashes. There are even some families that I know who are having to resort to wear bark-cloth like our ancestors!”

Konbuta was right, over the last 30 years the roads, or more correctly the state of the roads has been the primary factor driving the local economy and dictating whether forest resources are exploited or conserved in the forests of eastern Congo.

In the 1940's as part of the war effort the Belgian colonialist forced Ituri forest farmers and foragers to build the three roads that now traverse the region. These laborers and their families were then resettled in roadside villages, where they have largely remained since. In the 1950s the road through the Lese district was two lanes wide, and sufficiently cambered to allow cars to speed along at over 80 miles/hr. Even in 1981 when we first arrived in the region to conduct

research on the socio-ecology of Efe foragers and Lese farmers, our battered vehicle could easily travel the last 70 miles to our field site in 5-6 hours. By last summer, however, the road was hardly recognizable as such. It was now a narrow, double-tracked, walking trail liberally interspersed with water filled, holes often 10-15 feet deep and hundreds of yards in length. In many places it was guesswork where the real road lay, as truck drivers had created multiple tracks in tenacious attempts to get through the quagmire. Abandoned vehicles littered the roadside, and mini tent-cities huddled next to disabled trucks where the drivers waited for weeks or months for their assistants to return from a walking search for spare parts. In 1996 the first 30 miles of our trip took 6 hours and the last 40 miles, 2 days on foot.

Back in the 60s and 70s when the road was in a decent state of repair, Lese farmers made a fairly good living cultivating coffee, peanuts and rice for the market, and Efe foragers benefited from the market economy through their exchange relationship with the farmers. However, as the roads became increasingly impassable, markets for rice, peanuts and coffee ground to a halt, and rural families slid into poverty.

Ngofi, the local chief, whose kids we watched running around in the tattered remnants of what were once prized US-consumer hand-me-downs, ruefully showed us the charcoal-fueled flat-iron that he still keeps as a reminder of the days before independence when the

The Ituri Forest Peoples Fund

The Fund was established by a group of concerned anthropologist, ecologists, psychologists and physicians, who have been working in the Ituri forest since 1979, to promote the health, education and self determination of indigenous people living in the Ituri rain forest of northeastern Zaire. The goals of the Fund evolved between 1985 and 1988 as we responded to the local community's endeavor to provide their children with primary education, and their desire to establish a community health clinic and pharmacy. Since its inception the fund has supported a "from the ground up" community health care and education initiative proposed, orchestrated and run by Lese farmers and Efe foragers. If you would like more information on the activities of the fund or would like to make a contribution please contact Dr. David S. Wilkie by Email at DWilkie@msn.com or by Mail at IFPF/Cultural Survival 96, Mount Auburn Street, Cambridge, MA 02138.

road was good, and he could afford to buy several changes of clothes for his wives and children from the numerous traders who visited the village every week

By the mid-1980s bushmeat was about the only item produced by the Lese and Efe that was in sufficient demand outside the district to warrant the high transportation costs. However, closure of the road in 1996 cut off even this source of revenue, severely hurting the Lese and Efe economies and returning them to a time when all of the goods used were produced and consumed locally.

Collapse of the road system has not, however, hurt everything in the Ituri. On our trudge to our field site, we were astonished by the number of primate troops and elephant sign we saw. It seemed that as the roads became impassable, the bushmeat trade declined, allowing the wildlife to once again thrive.

In the summer of 1996 it was impossible to believe that conditions in the Ituri would not continue to get worse. Yet, in less than a year the situation has changed dramatically. In June 1997, Laurent Kabila declared that one of the first priorities of the government of the newly created Democratic Republic of Congo was to rehabilitate the dilapidated road system. Though getting information about the region has been difficult these past few months, the message is consistent. The roads are improving and it's primarily the traders who are responsible. The single most important reason this is happening is that, since the Kabila Alliance took over, the disincentives to repairing the roads have been removed, and traders keen on exploiting the rich resources within the forest are finding ways to fix the bridges and fill the holes.

What will this piecemeal repair of the road system mean to the Lese and Efe living in the Ituri? Once again, they will be able to obtain much needed goods such as clothes, salt and medicines – initially, no doubt, through the sale or exchange of bushmeat. How long forest game populations will be able to withstand the intensification of hunting is unclear. Evidence from research in the area suggests that monkeys and some species of forest antelope are highly vulnerable to over-hunting. So unless markets for agricultural crops revive quickly, the new found prosperity of the Lese and Efe associated with the repair of the road system may be short lived. Equally important, even a marginally improved road system may encourage families who live in densely populated Kivu to move into the Ituri in search of land to plant fields, or abandoned coffee plantations to restore. As one trader from Kivu said “ If the roads get better, I'd buy a coffee plantation from one of these forest villages, and my wife could move there to manage it for me. I bet I could get it really cheap. Just last week a Lese offered to sell his overgrown plantation to me for my sneakers - they are desperate”. With the revival of the old coffee plantations inevitably other immigrants will come in search of employment and “vacant” forest land needed to grow their own food crops. For each acre of coffee plantation revitalized, an additional three acres of Lese and Efe forest is likely to be cleared to feed the plantation workers and their families.

Though repair of the road system may bring a modest increase in prosperity to the exceedingly poor inhabitants of the Ituri forest, bushmeat hunting is unlikely to be a sustainable source of income, and the potential influx of large numbers of wealthier and

better educated immigrants along the roads may jeopardize the long-term security of access by Lese and Efe to their land and forest resources. Though only a revival of agricultural markets is likely to result in a sustained improvement in rural livelihoods, and increased capacity of the Lese and Efe in Andisengi to support their community school and clinic, this assumes that they are able to hold on to enough of their land to benefit, once more, from participation in the market.

So while the future for the Lese and Efe and prospects for their community school and clinic are neither clear nor necessarily rosy, one thing is sure, the roads have always been and will continue to be a mixed blessing!

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