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Contesting Forestry in West Africa

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Contesting Forestry in West Africa

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*The Editors
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PART I
INTRODUCTION



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1 Constructing, Contesting and Situating Forestry in West Africa: An Introduction

REGINALD CLINE-COLE AND CLARE MADGE

Aims

If forests are essentially about trees, and forestry principally about people (Jarvis, this volume), then this is a book about forestry. It is informed by the firm belief that forestry is not a simple reflection of an unchanging biophysical reality (Hannigan, 1995). It is neither self-creating nor produced in a vacuum. Indeed, in West Africa, as elsewhere, forestry is constituted by individual practices, societal institutions, cultural beliefs and global-local environmental discourses, among other things. As editors, we believe this has three main implications. First, to conceive of forestry as *constructed* in this way is to deliberately disrupt its 'self-evidence' as a 'natural' entity or phenomenon (Braun and Castree, 1998). Second, it is to make it possible to recast forestry as a nexus of varied ideologies and practices which fluctuate over time and vary across space – a nexus, that is, which is *situated*, both historically and geographically, as well as in lots of other ways. Third, it is to underscore the need for acknowledging the role of conflict, negotiation and dialogue in forestry's production – to recognise, in other words, its *contested* nature. The eighteen contributions which make up this book aim, in the first instance, to demonstrate the value of these linked processes of *construction*, *situation* and *contestation* in producing a nuanced understanding of forestry in a multiplicity of contexts.

Our second main aim is no less important. Jack Westoby (1989) has argued a case for seeing forestry as both 'art' and 'science'. His suggestion that all forestry should be considered essentially *social* does not simply resonate with the notion of 'cultures' of forestry; it also appears to suggest that like other forms of forestry, scientific forestry is essentially a *political science*. We have used these insights as our starting point. For our part we understand forestry

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as complex, highly differentiated, dynamic and perpetually contested ‘cultures’ of resource management and use; cultures within which nature/society relations constitute an integral part of the continual (re-)making of landscape and society (Cline-Cole, 1998). The book, then, is about struggles over, between, and within these cultures. Contributors explore, in different ways and to varying degrees, the differentiated contexts and complicated processes of regional forestry-related ‘negotiations’; the latter’s material and non-material outcomes; and the intricate but fluid relations in which such ‘negotiations’ are embedded, and through which they are sustained.

Ultimately, we have aimed for a book about the regulation of the ecological and environmental in the realm of the social and cultural; and about how these different realms (re-)shape each other in the elaboration of a regional ‘forestry’ and its associated West landscapes and processes.

Scope

How, why, under what conditions, and with what consequences, is (or can) forestry (be) constructed, situated and contested in those parts of West Africa studied? In addressing these related themes, *Contesting Forestry in West Africa* tries to illustrate *why* forestry should not be (re-)presented as simply involving mostly technical and ‘scientific’ activities aimed at harnessing forests, woodlands and trees for human benefit. At the same time it attempts also to demonstrate *how* forestry is primarily ‘about’ relations between people. For example, Sharpe (forthcoming) has shown in fascinating detail how the creation of a forestry department and forest reserves in colonial Cameroon ‘vitalised Native Authorities, led to political contests around forest and office, and made indigenous identity and power worth contesting’. Contests with the forestry department, Sharpe argues, offered local populations the opportunity for negotiating identities. As with the Asante in McCaskie’s contribution (chapter 5), society/‘forest’ relations are central to the construction of identity and tradition, and fundamental to the shaping of local historical experiences. Indeed, both examples speak directly to a unifying theme in the book: it is not just forestry/society relations, but the very nature of what constitutes forestry itself, which is also contested in these pages.

As used in this book, forestry is not only about the ‘commercial’ tree and timber crops which are produced either in plantations or little-humanised forest areas, and discussed in part, albeit in very different ways, by Alexander (chapter 9) and Amanor (chapter 14). After all, few would argue that Amanor’s

discussion of logging in Ghana's forest zone does not constitute 'forestry', even though fully four-fifths of all logs produced come from 'farms' rather than 'forest'. For us, forestry is also, and just as importantly, about the 'sylvan' products, sometimes with locally significant cultural, symbolic or spiritual value, which are collected from farms, fallows and rangelands for subsistence or local exchange in the manner described by Bassett and Boutrais, and also by Schreckenber, in their contributions (chapters 11 and 13, respectively).

Yet while the significance of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) has finally, if somewhat belatedly, succeeded in lodging itself firmly in the mainstream of forestry thought (see Arnold, this volume), the same cannot be said for the spiritual/cultural domains which are alluded to by a number of contributors, but which clearly preoccupy Madge (chapter 6). Why, she asks rhetorically, does mainstream scientific forestry continue to ignore questions such as forest spirits? The answer lies, of course, as she herself readily concedes, in the way in which 'knowledge, power and discourses interweave' to create what passes for forestry in any given situation. Clearly, for much 'scientific' forestry, the notion that ideas about forest/woodland/wilderness '... are not isolated, compartmentalised modules but components of often highly complex metaphysical and philosophical interpretations of the world' (Barber, this volume), is still an alien one. It is for this, among other reasons, that 'our' forestry addresses state policy and practice as in chapters by Schroeder (chapter 7) and Ite (chapter 8), while interrogating everyday 'popular' concerns of the kind highlighted by Cline-Cole (chapter 3) and Ribot (chapter 10). In these last two chapters we have invaluable reminders of how, as always, forestry is the product of the dynamic interplay between dominant and subordinate forces, between heterogeneous populations and varied interests. In other words, the 'production' of forestry, to slightly paraphrase Sivaramakrishnan (1995), involves the interaction of formal scientific and substantive indigenous knowledges within specific global-local contexts.

Thus in colonial Northern Nigeria, as Cline-Cole suggests, forestry interventions appeared to open up conceptual and political space for various interests, including subaltern interests, to pursue their separate agendas and, in the process, constrain the ability of the forestry service to establish the environmental hegemony it so desperately sought. But there is always the possibility, of course, not explored in the chapter, that the reverse might have been the case: that on its own an insistence on pre-existing 'other' considerations just might have prevented the establishment of environmental hegemony. Nonetheless, speculations of this kind, interesting as they may be, ought to be kept in perspective. Fortunately, Schroeder's contribution (chapter

7) serves as a timely reminder here. His chapter shows how forestry-as-indirect-rule (labelled 'community forest management' in his post-independence Gambian case study) is more than capable, in other times and spaces, of reinforcing central control over resources even as it ostensibly devolves responsibility for their management to local-level or so-called 'community' control. In any case, as Ribot (1999: 26) has observed elsewhere, forestry policy and law are 'contested, circumvented, selectively applied, interpreted and reinterpreted in their making and implementation'. Forestry, in other words, is constantly 'on the make', although not necessarily in material terms or indeed in biological 'forests'.

For us, therefore, forestry as knowledge, institution and practice is understood as extending well beyond regional 'forest' zones and as predating the introduction of scientific forestry into the region during the colonial century (Ribot and Cline-Cole, 1997). As Barber (this volume) perceptively observes, '[f]orest in West Africa is never "nature"'. Nor, for that matter, was or is forestry (see, for example, Unwin, 1909; Moloney, 1887; Rajan, 1994; and, *inter alia*, Fairhead and Leach (chapter 4), Schroeder (chapter 7), Ite (chapter 8) and Alexander (chapter 9)). In our view, then, the case studies of landscapes and societies such as those in the wetter savannas in Côte d'Ivoire and Cameroon (Bassett and Boutrais, chapter 11), or in the drier Nigerian Sahel studied by Thomas (chapter 12), are no less deserving of our attention than the examples set along the coast in what some would describe as the 'forest belt proper'. This is the case, we would argue, even where the (seemingly oblique) point of entry is, as in the northern Nigerian case study, a concern with the socio-ecological consequences of dam construction and hydraulic engineering; or, as in the Bassett and Boutrais case study, an interest in contrasting perceptions of environmental (mainly vegetation) change consequent on livestock rearing. In one as in the other case, the hope is that a truly nuanced understanding of the scope and dynamics of processes of landscape change (and their forestry-related implications) would lead to better-informed interventions, which are both 'grounded in actual versus imagined environmental changes' (Bassett and Boutrais, chapter 11) while being mindful of how such changes in turn 'initiate transformation, both in ecology ..., and in ... livelihood strategies' (Thomas, chapter 12), with widely varying consequences for society and nature.

In these and other ways the book deliberately tries to disrupt 'traditional' ideas about what actually constitutes the domain of forestry discourse and practice. It also tries to show how forestry has as much to do with biophysical resources as with the discourses, iconographies, ideologies, power relations

and knowledges used to represent and appropriate these resources, and which are deployed to varying effect by individuals and groups in the McEwan (chapter 2) and Fairhead and Leach (chapter 4) case studies. Indeed, representation, as McEwan notes in her chapter, '... was critical to ... the material and discursive appropriation of ... landscapes, through ... processes of economic and cultural imperialism'. But this, as Fairhead and Leach readily demonstrate, is equally true of ecological/environmental imperialism (see also the contributions by Schroeder, Amanor, Ribot, and Cline-Cole). For not only, they argue, are long-standing and widely-deployed analyses of regional deforestation based on particular representations of society, history and land use (cf. Schroeder's narrative), these narratives, despite their lack of uniformity, *also* '... make claims about forest ecology and dynamics' which are in turn used to stoke particular conservation anxieties and justify particular conservation interventions. Forestry, like woodlands, forests and wildernesses, then, is, in our view, as much symbolic as it is a 'real' definable entity.

The choice of the book's geographical coverage is also not without significance. West Africa is a region whose landscapes and societies have featured prominently, if variably, in the evolution of a modern world-system (Madge and Cline-Cole, 1996). For example, McEwan (chapter 2) notes that '[t]he representation of West African forest landscapes was [so] critical to the demonisation of Africa in the popular British imagination during the nineteenth century', that regional West African forests '... came to epitomise the state of the "dark continent" within th[is] imagination'. Furthermore, the region is, according to many commentators, one which is currently experiencing some of the highest rates of forest/woodland loss, as well as associated land degradation (including desertification), in all of Africa (see, for instance, Bassett and Boutrais, chapter 11; and several of the sources cited by Fairhead and Leach in chapter 4). At the same time, an increasing body of recent research seems to suggest that the extent and pace of such change may have been exaggerated; that forest and woodland cover change is not necessarily unilinear in nature; that many forestry regimes are thriving; and that the varied meanings/understandings of regional forestry can be interrogated in new and exciting ways (Amanor, 1994; 1996; 1999; Madge, 1998; Cline-Cole, 1997; 1998; Fairhead and Leach, 1998; Sharpe, 1998; forthcoming; Ribot and Cline-Cole, 1997). Like the region's forests, regional forestry 'does not fail to astonish' (Barber, this volume).

Hardly any of the foregoing should surprise anyone, for as Paul Richards (1996: 364) has argued, West African forests and woodlands frequently survive, precisely because, as with forestry itself, they are contested domains 'over

which no single central authority has been able to assert undisputed control' (Richards, 1996: 364). By extension, therefore, West African forestry stakeholders must be seen as constituting '... factions that have negotiated ... space[s] for themselves in ... complex and labile sociological landscape[s] where the prime criterion for success is the [global-]local knowledge that allows for survival' (ibid.). Such knowledge, evolving as it does within specific social/economic/political/cultural contexts, has its own cognitive, ideological and interventionist traditions (Rajan, 1994), its own specific 'culture'.

An eclectic approach to the study of the relations underpinning forestry cultures which is based on such insights allows us to transcend traditional institutional and disciplinary boundaries, which segment environmental and livelihood systems and produce 'bounded' readings of relevant processes, relations and outcomes (cf. Leach and Mearns, 1988; see also Swindell, this volume). At the same time, a regional West African focus allows this definitional/conceptual 'breadth' to be given necessary spatial/analytical 'depth' with reference to selected localities and the agency which operates through these localities. In other words, we advance a claim, following Braun and Castree (1998), for constructing, contesting and situating regional West African forestry all the way up; and we stake our territory using contributions which act as a constant reminder of the variety of ways in which forestry functions as fiercely contested site, constantly negotiated terrain and stubbornly resisted domain at a variety of spatial, structural and temporal scales.

Organisation

About half of the chapters making up this edited collection started life as presentations to a workshop held at the University of Birmingham in April, 1996, where the idea for the book was born. These have all being updated, extensively revised or completely rewritten. Further contributions, including two which have previously appeared in modified form as journal articles, have been solicited to provide increased coherence and greater overall balance to the collection. Additionally, four participants at the workshop have contributed introductory syntheses to each of the main sections of the book. Together, the contributions represent work informed by insights derived from a combination of African, Anglo-American and Francophone intellectual traditions, while the contributors represent the disciplines of anthropology, history, geography, forestry, popular culture and ecology.

Significantly, contributions do more than simply explore the complexity, diversity and changing nature of forestry relations through a series of detailed case studies and brief overview essays. They offer, in addition, an opportunity for comparing forestry-related policy and practice in ways which highlight differences and similarities within and between forestry cultures. In some cases this involves the (re)construction of forest and forestry histories (McEwan, Cline-Cole, Fairhead and Leach in part 2); in others, the exploration of specific forestry-related cultures (McCaskie, Madge, Schroeder in part 3). In yet others it entails the unravelling of institutional politics (Ite, Alexander, Ribot in part 4). In others still, the focus is on environmental/ecological change and how such physical transformations are incorporated in new forestry 'imaginings' (Bassett and Boutrais, Thomas, Schreckenber, Amanor in part 5). In almost all cases politics and culture – broadly defined – emerge as core elements of analysis and commentary, with the latter being particularly noticeable in the section syntheses. In these syntheses Swindell, Barber, Arnold and Jarvis have tried to situate chapters and their main arguments within wider currents of academic debate, intellectual discourse and considerations of practical applicability.

As editors our hope is that the collection will prove of some value to people engaged in ongoing debates about the nature and dynamics of forestry policy and practice in the West African region, and contribute something to the 'normalisation' of the notion of a regional forestry, whose various manifestations, because of their multiple meanings, need to be situated in relevant times, places and spaces.

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PART II
HISTORICAL
CONTESTATIONS



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Introduction: Historical Contestations

KEN SWINDELL

European travellers and administrators brought their own intellectual and cultural baggage to West Africa, not least of which were their perceptions of 'nature' and 'wilderness'. However, these were not uniform, and were at times contradictory. On the one hand, they were informed by classical and Judaeo-Christian concepts of humans dominating nature and creating civilised spaces with utilitarian purpose, while on the other, they included Romantic versions of landscape and the 'noble savage'. McEwan's chapter on women travellers' representations of African forests explores these themes (chapter 2). It begins by pointing to the contested definitions of 'forest' shaped by different values and perceptions. Moreover, the representations contained in the writings of these women travellers highlight the gendered nature of such understandings. The five narratives considered cover the period from 1830 to 1900, and contain complex and contradictory views ranging from the forest as a Garden of Eden sullied only by the slave trade to forests as (frequently disorganised) regions of the exotic and dangerous (which contributed to the depiction of Africa as the 'dark continent'). Also, as McEwan makes clear, the forest was 'appropriated' by Europeans in a number of different ways. For example, while missionaries spoke of bringing 'light into the darkness' of the forest and the lives of its inhabitants, utilitarian appropriation, if not always overt, also lurked near the surface. The imperial adventure, of which McEwan's women writers were a part, was securely underwritten by the ideology of free trade liberalism. The latter was couched in terms of unhindered commerce, leading civilisation with one hand and peace with the other, with the result that mankind would be happier, wiser and better.

By the early twentieth century, partition had been accomplished, great strides had been taken in Victorian science, and 'progress' continued as the order of the day. New ideas in biology and chemistry had spilled into agriculture and forestry, enhanced by the creation of new universities, as Britain belatedly tried to keep pace with its continental rivals. Politicians and administrators embraced the belief in science as a means of efficiently exploiting the Empire.

14 *Contesting Forestry in West Africa*

By the early twentieth century, the Empire had become something of an experimental laboratory for science, as it had the virtue of being a clean slate, on which a number of interventions and experiments could be inscribed. The transfer of ideas took place not just between metropolises and colonies, but among the colonies, often with less than satisfactory results. Many British West African foresters both received their training and started their professional careers in India.

Significantly, the administration of West African possessions had to be accomplished without incurring large transfers of imperial aid – in other words ‘colonialism on the cheap’. However, this was frequently translated as ‘indirect rule’, which also accorded with West Africa’s perceived climatic unsuitability for white settlement, and the fears of high mortality and morbidity expressed by earlier travellers. Nonetheless, as Cline-Cole’s account of Northern Nigeria (chapter 3) indicates, indirect rule and its associated devolution of power opened up contested spaces at regional and local levels, where a number of interest groups (chiefs, headmen, pastoralists, administrators and foresters) could operate, creating a variety of outcomes. Central to his chapter is the emergence of a set of negotiated ideologies and practices, which he situates historically and geographically. Yet forestry policy often overrode pre-existing customs and management practices, which were poorly understood. In particular, they ignored the fluid nature of local practice, and severely misunderstood the capacity and suitability of intensively farmed savannas and woodlands to provide fuelwood for urban areas and heavily populated peri-urban and rural areas. As with agriculture and pastoralism, the European forestry mind appeared to be fixed upon ‘boundedness’, whereas local people clearly relied on ‘flexibility and controlled opportunism’. But as Cline-Cole’s chapter shows, the belief that forest rather than farmland should be the chief supplier of fuelwood was widely held. Similarly, non-European forestry became linked with the notion of desertification. The second world war provided an opportunity for colonial forestry to try and address these linked concerns, through the redefinition of forestry space and greater supervision of off-reserve forestry practice. Selective wartime controls were thus placed on pollarding and felling, and the production, transport and exchange of wood. The war years thus saw a bid – not entirely successful – to establish the hegemony of the forestry service, with severe consequences for local farmers and the local fuelwood trade.

By the end of the colonial period European ideas about West African climate change, and its perceived linkages with vegetation, population and agriculture were firmly in place. The relaxed approaches of the pre-war period

towards African methods of resource management and exploitation had hardened, and local populations were cast as perpetrators of environmental damage. The post-war period thus saw new interventions aimed at economic and social development, and environmental management, on a much grander scale than hitherto. In particular, environmental concerns after the Sahelian drought of the late 1960s and early 1970s accelerated intervention, with the political and economic hegemony of the West, led by the USA, being extended to include environmental issues. Furthermore, the agenda for tropical forest conservation was given a higher profile, which provided new opportunities for European experts, in what Fairhead and Leach (chapter 4) describe as a 'culture of interests'. The latter created a fascinating political economy, within which scientific enquiry and its funding were mutually self-supporting.

The chief burden of Fairhead and Leach's argument is the danger of deducing vegetation history from present day observations. Currently unforested areas are assumed to have once been under forest, while isolated areas of high forest are automatically deemed 'relic' vegetation. While the origins of this methodology of evaluating forest cover loss is rooted in the colonial past, there is a continuous updating of assessments of forest loss from new baselines. This practice firmly and consistently situates the problem of forest loss within contemporary local land use and population-resource systems, thereby legitimising outside intervention. In much the same way that colonial forestry officials needed forest surveys to justify the need for forestry departments and services (see chapter 3), so modern environmental planners need to map forest cover loss to make a case for continued investment in forestry and other forms of environmental management (chapter 4). Fairhead and Leach make a case for seeing assessments of both the extent of past forest cover and the rate of the latter's recent rapid diminution as exaggerations. They believe that this is due to faulty science, as well as misconstrued history. The historical reconstruction of past forest cover is beset by complexities, of which the sheer lack of reliable comparative evidence over sufficiently wide areas is a major one. Chapter 4 provides a timely reminder of these dangers. Forests in West Africa are probably best viewed as areas which have undergone long periods of local 'management' and transformation, not necessarily in a unilinear manner. At the same time, the urge to scientifically measure 'reality' is a preoccupation of outsiders. In contrast, local-level understandings are more commonly based on actual experience with flexible and ambiguous 'realities', and in living with and within these. Clashes of cultures of this kind, from the nineteenth century and even earlier, have made West African forests and woodlands arenas of conflict and change, both practically and intellectually.

2 Representing West African Forests in British Imperial Discourse c. 1830-1900

CHERYL MCEWAN

Introduction: Forests as Contested Terrain

Forests are increasingly sites of contestation. This contestation exists on a number of different levels and takes many forms. One example is that the actual definition of the term 'forest' is deeply problematic; what exactly do we mean by forest? Who defines what forest is? Where are forests located? Locally, policy-makers, academics, local residents and migrants all produce different definitions. Similarly, non-African understandings of forest (themselves far from monolithic) differ markedly from the myriad definitions of individuals and groups in many parts of West Africa, and the latter are themselves riven with many contestations. Thus in Cameroon many individuals and groups do not distinguish 'forest' from 'bush' (Sharpe, 1998). Others associate 'forest' with Forest Reserve – land managed for the state by the Forestry Department. Still others refer to zoological or botanical gardens as 'forest'. For some groups, distance is significant; 'forests' are remote areas far removed from settlements (*ibid.*).

Contested definitions such as these are significant in that they can have political impacts regarding the use, ownership, protection and management of forest areas. In the same way, as Sharpe (1998) argues that different interests, ethnic backgrounds and forms of access to resources are reflected in the diversity of views about forest-related issues, so different people value 'forest' in different ways and for different reasons: '... one person's degradation may be another's improvement' (Fairhead and Leach, this volume). Worldviews of this kind are crosscut by factors such as occupation, age, employment history, party allegiances, class differences, and various patterns of local environmental knowledge, which are themselves stratified by gender and ethnicity (see Madge, and Schreckenberg, this volume). Such diversity has huge implications

for strategies of forest management. Indeed, current moves towards participatory management would be naïve to assume the existence of a single indigenous community ‘voice’ anywhere (see Schroeder, and Ribot, this volume). ‘Forest’ is, therefore, contested terrain in a myriad of important ways.

Discussions of West African forests might thus involve a diverse range of issues, including ownership, land-use, the way that gender roles and life patterns are played out in forest environments, conservation and management, and so on. Common to most, if not all, of these issues is the concept of contestation. This chapter thus attempts to explore how the forests of West Africa were discursively and materially signified and appropriated during the Victorian era.¹ Specifically, the chapter analyses representations of forests within British imperialist discourses by drawing on narratives by women travellers; it also discusses the ways in which these representations have been fundamental to the various metaphors applied to West Africa and other parts of the continent. Although the focus here is the nineteenth century, many of the metaphors explored left a legacy which survived the period of high imperialism. Indeed, contemporary popular British images of Africa still draw upon the complex and enduring myth of the ‘dark continent’ (Jarosz, 1992). How did West African forests become symbolic of the continent as a whole within British imperialist discourses? How did changing representations of these forests mirror the evolving nature of British imperialism in this part of Africa? These are some of the questions this chapter explores. Of particular significance is that historical images of West African forests within British imperial discourses were not fixed. Rather they were multifaceted, often contradictory, and generally indicative of the diversity of British interests in the West African region. Such diversity is evident, even within a relatively small sample of imperial writings, such as the selection of narratives by the five nineteenth century women travellers analysed in this chapter.

The women in question were very different personalities. Elizabeth Melville was from an aristocratic background (Walford, 1874). She married a colonial judge and lived and travelled with her husband in Sierra Leone between 1840 and 1846. Her account of her experiences was entitled *A Residence at Sierra Leone* (1849), and contained a strong antislavery message typical of the time. Mary Slessor was a Scottish Presbyterian missionary who spent almost forty years of her life in the Calabar region of southeastern Nigeria between 1876 and 1915. Although her letters were never published in book form, she published regularly in the *Missionary Record* and the *Women’s Missionary Magazine*, both of which had a broad readership in Scotland (McEwan, 1995a). Zélie Colville was the wife of the Acting Commissioner of

Uganda who travelled in the Oil Rivers area of Nigeria in the early 1890s, immediately before the onset of 'high imperialism' in West Africa, as part of a coastal journey around the continent. Like Melville she had an aristocratic background (Walford, 1874), but the fact that she travelled purely as a tourist makes her unique among the writers studied. She published an account of her journey entitled *Round the Black Man's Garden* in 1893. Mary Kingsley was a traveller/explorer who journeyed throughout tropical West Africa between 1892 and 1895 and gained the reputation as *the expert on West Africa* (Birkett, 1992). She published three books about West Africa and numerous articles; her major publications were *Travels in West Africa* (1897) and *West African Studies* (1899).² Finally, Constance Larymore was the wife of a military administrator who travelled with her husband in Southern and Northern Nigeria between 1902 and 1908, at the beginning of Britain's colonial involvement there. She published *A Resident's Wife in Nigeria* in 1908.

As with broader popular geographies of West Africa during the Nineteenth Century, the images of regional forests in these women's narratives evolved over time as the nature of British contact with West Africa during this period changed (see Madge and Cline-Cole, 1996). Brantlinger (1985) has argued persuasively that the vision of Africa in the imaginations of many Victorians, which was informed by scientific theory, exploration literature, fiction and art, evolved with the changing nature of British cultural, economic and political imperialism in the region. Although the forest was initially represented as a commodity to be used, antislavery campaigners increasingly fostered an image of an Edenic West Africa, an unspoilt wilderness, that would be perfectly peaceful were it not for the intrusions of the slave trade.

However, the combined effects of a failure to convert West Africans to Christianity, and a persistently high mortality rate among Europeans travelling to this part of the continent, led to the transformation of this image into a more negative portrayal of West Africa as exotic, unfamiliar and frightening – a region which, it was argued, Britain should abandon. Such negative portrayals held sway throughout the middle of the nineteenth century. By the time of the revival of Britain's interest in West Africa in the 1880s, the dominant image of regional landscapes had become one of absolute pandemonium, one of a lack of the order of 'civilisation'. This depiction of the physical environment coincided with Britain's desire to extend its empire in Africa at the time of the Berlin Conference, and persisted into the twentieth century. Africa became the 'dark continent', and West Africa was epitomised as the centre of this 'dark continent'.³ Of course, Africa was the 'dark continent' only in the tautological sense that many people in Britain defined it as such,

the necessary mirror-image confirming the supposed superiority of an enlightened and ordered Europe.⁴

The construction of these popular imaginative geographies of West Africa, however, was not a simple, linear process and it would be fallacious to reconstruct the genealogy of what was an amalgamation of complicated and often contradictory images in this way. Responses within Britain to West Africa were extremely complex and in no way uniform; competing and conflicting ideas existed simultaneously. Representations of the forests, the meanings ascribed to them, and their uses differed, both within British imperial discourse and between groups and individuals in West Africa itself (see chapters by Cline-Cole, and McCaskie, this volume). In what follows, therefore, I aim, firstly, to examine some of the complexities and contradictions inherent in competing representations of West African forests within British imperialist discourses during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Secondly, I wish to explore the particular ways in which images of the forest in women travellers' accounts contributed to Britain's myth of the 'dark continent'. Finally, I suggest that within these imperial discourses there is evidence of alternative, indigenous understandings of the forest, often as a site of resistance.

West African Forests in British Imperial Discourse

Commodity

At the heart of European imperialism lay economic exploitation and, throughout the nineteenth century, West African forests were viewed in various ways as commodity. In the first instance, of course, the forest was merely a 'savage' backdrop for the brutal business of European slavery. However, with abolition, the expediency of exploiting the raw materials within the forests became apparent as Britain and the other European imperial powers sought to replace the trade in human beings with more 'legitimate' forms of trade. Thus, the forests became the source of such products as palm oil, rubber and cocoa within European economies. Later on, the extraction of such products was sometimes carried out through plantation farming.

Imperialism was not merely about economic and political power; it was also about cultural power – the power to name and the power to represent. Representing West African forests as commodity demanded that they were also represented as devoid of people. As Pratt (1992) argues, explorers and travellers therefore often minimised the presence of Africans in the landscape.

Confrontations with the local inhabitants were downplayed, and instead reports concentrated on the considerably less exciting presentation of landscape. Landscape became central and people were separated from place. Within such discourses, West African peoples were removed in the imagination of the reader from the landscape, and descriptions of them were consigned to separate chapters on 'manners and customs'. The consequence of such discursive methods is obvious: if the indigenous population is imagined as removed from the landscape, any claims that they have to the possession and use of these landscapes is also removed. The landscape is discursively emptied.⁵ Thus, West Africa was portrayed as rich in resources, vast and, most importantly, empty: in other words, a place that was open to British imperialism.

This propensity to portray African landscapes as empty is apparent in Constance Larymore's narrative. She emphasised her position as the first white woman to travel from the southern forests of Nigeria to the deserts in the north, and thus was able to depict herself as discoverer/explorer. Large sections of her narrative consist of panoramic views of forest and savanna in which the local populations do not figure in the least. In addition to discursively emptying the forest landscapes upon which she gazed, Larymore was also able to imagine possessing them. For example, she wrote, 'Outside the town [of Kabba], there is a little stretch of forest belt, and, as no one has ever disputed its possession with me, I am pleased to consider it exclusively my own property' (Larymore, 1908: 118). She referred to this forest as 'my kingdom'. Significantly, Larymore claimed this land not for Britain but for herself; she claimed it not for its potential wealth, but because of the beauty of the flora and fauna contained within the forest. Thus the convention of laying claim to territory was tempered by her delight in the physical environment; her desire to possess was rooted in the aesthetic beauty of the landscape she encountered. However, this metaphorical claiming of land indicated how Larymore placed herself in a position of power and authority in relation to the landscapes that she described, and is not found in the narratives of those women travelling before the end of the nineteenth century. Travelling after 1900 in the newly-created state of Nigeria, Larymore had the authority to appropriate, at least discursively, the forests upon which she gazed. The forest, if not quite commodity, was still a prize that she felt able to claim as property for herself.

Mary Kingsley also appropriated the forests of West Africa, but in very different ways to Larymore. A great deal has been written about Kingsley in recent years, much of it exploring evidence of counter-imperialist strategies in her narratives. Her almost transcendental, romantic poetic descriptions of the forests, her pantheistic reading of these, and her attempts to blend in with

her surroundings, have all been highlighted as running contra to imperialist representations of the forests. However, as several of these critiques (see, for example, Pearce, 1990) have suggested the reading of Kingsley's narrative as anti-imperialist is too simplistic. She may have rejected colonialism in advocating informal, indirect imperialism based on trade and commerce (which she naively believed would benefit Britain and West Africa equally), but this was by no means anti-imperialist. Her spiritual and often poetic responses to forest environments did not prevent her from viewing these same forests as commodity. As she wrote in *Travels in West Africa*, 'Africa has lots of stuff in it; structurally more than any other continent in the world' (1982: 631). She believed the exploitation of these resources were of paramount importance to both Britain and West Africa. The appendix on 'Trade and Labour in West Africa', which posits ideas for the exploitation of this 'stuff' (timber resources, plantation agriculture of tea, coffee, cocoa, palm oil and rubber), is juxtaposed uneasily with the passages of poetic description of the forests found in the main body of the text. In many of her subsequent publications (especially *West African Studies*), Kingsley's representation of the forests of West Africa as commodity became more pronounced as her work moved closer to the more conventional imperialist literature of the time by objectifying the forests as exploitable commodity. For example, Kingsley (1898: 560) wrote in 1895 of 'the great importance to England ... of such regions as the West African ones – regions rich in raw trade stuffs ...'.

Throughout the nineteenth century, then, the forests of West Africa were consistently represented in the narratives of women travellers, as elsewhere, in terms of the human and raw material resources that they contained. However, there was also a rather different metaphor running counter to this representation, which is found in the narratives of the time. This was the metaphor of West Africa as Eden.

Eden, and the Pastoral Myth

Early representations of West Africa, particularly in missionary and antislavery literature before the 1830s, drew heavily on Edenic images of an earthly paradise. This metaphor has been more closely linked with representations of East Africa, particularly in portrayals of a cornucopian landscape overflowing with an abundance of flora and fauna, and in the creation of the national parks in countries such as Tanzania and Kenya (Neumann, 1995). However, up to the mid-nineteenth century, it was also a pervasive image of the forests of West Africa in both travel literature and antislavery treatises.⁶ Interestingly,