



Abdel Kader Bongo Doyendze: *Le Paléolithique du Gabon—Étude des industries pré-historiques du Haut-Ogooué*

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The book is a published version of a dissertation by A. Doyendze submitted to the Université Panthéon-Sorbonne — Paris I in 2019. The project derives from fieldwork developed in Gabon between 2011 and 2014, under the supervision of Professor Manuel Gutierrez. The book is organized in three parts, each of which contains two chapters. The final pages present a detailed index and offer an outline of the book.

In the first part of the book, chapter 1 lays out the geographical and environmental background of the study area in the Haut-Ogooué region of Gabon, focusing on essential aspects of physical and human geography, geology, and paleoclimate. Chapter 2 is dedicated to the historical background, goals, and methods of the research. The first goal is to answer questions about the variability of lithic industries discovered in the study area. The second is to determine whether the Congo provides a useful reference model for the study area, particularly for justifying the establishment of a regional chronology, which the author considers “a crucial problem in the understanding of the ecology of Central Africa in general, and of Gabon in particular” (p. 64). Doyendze proposes to address these questions through critical and methodical analysis of lithic assemblages obtained through several methods: survey, surface collections, test pits,

and extensive archaeological excavations. Although this chapter does not describe the materials and methods for the lithic analysis, the inventory tables later in the book show that the studied sample was less than 1000 pieces.

The second part of the book discusses the collection and study of the archaeological materials. Chapter 3 presents the discovery and excavation of seven archaeological sites: Mvengué II, Banguené, Carrière II, Okondja-Aviation II, Obangampari II, Mvouna, and Mikaka II. The figures for each site include a map of the general location on Google Earth terrain view, an overview photograph, and a schematic stratigraphic section, as well as cumulative plans of excavation. These plans are difficult to read but seem to explain the excavation strategy: areas of 18 m² are standard with “décapage” to 1 m in depth and “fine excavation” trenches to ~1 m in depth. However, it is unclear where the stratigraphic profiles come from, and the strata descriptions are very short. There is also no critical assessment of the stratigraphy—questions about depositional and postdepositional processes at the sites are left unexplored.

The sites each have about six or seven layers, rarely producing more than 100 lithic artifacts in total. Several sites have at least one horizon in which pottery sherds are mixed with lithic materials, but the frequencies of pottery (as well as other artifacts or ecofacts) do not figure in the general inventories. Data analyses focus on the complete assemblages from each site, without any discussion of provenance

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or spatial distributions and relationships among the artifacts, which clearly poses an issue for final interpretation of the sites as “Paléolithique.”

At the end of chapter 3, a subsection entitled “les grottes” reports on the existence of several caves in the region of Haut-Ogooué, including three presented on the map in fig. 169 (p. 212): Ngo Cave near the village of Okoumbi, Mikaka Cave near the Mikaka II open-air site, and one other cave near the village of Makatamangoye. Although the author visited these sites, the local population did not allow photographs or test excavations. Here, it would have been interesting to include a statement reflecting on the heritage value of these caves, including contemporary meanings and taboos, for people from the three nearby villages.

Chapter 4 compares the lithic assemblages between the sites by describing their typological categories. The methodology for lithic analysis is not included, but bibliographic references at the end of the book include works by E. Boëda, J. Tixier, and V. Mourre, which would suggest the analytical methods were based on the systems developed by these authors. Key findings were the identification of 135 Levallois flakes across the seven sites and the preferential use of hard hammer percussion. Based on strong similarities across the lithic assemblages, the author concludes that these sites were contemporaneous.

The third part of the book focuses on chronological and cultural data. First, chapter 5 discusses the chronological, technological, and cultural evolution of Haut-Ogooué. The author highlights the extent to which previous research was based on surface collections and the need to make extensive excavations (“fouilles extensives”) the norm for studying Stone Age sequences in Central Africa. However, the discussion excludes important literature published since the 1970s focusing on postdepositional processes (particularly at “lithic sites”) in the Kalahari Sands. For instance, research in Kinshasa at the Gombe site (Cahen & Moeyersons, 1977; Moeyersons, 1978) began with the same premise as the study in this book—conducting spatial and fabric analysis, lithic refit and microwear analysis, and geoarchaeological and landscape studies. However, this work demonstrated that a wide array of interacting elements (termites, roots, and nematodes and other microbiota) can be found at archaeological sites in tropical and subtropical Africa, leading to the biogenic reworking of deposits and the

subsurface movement of artifacts. Although Doyendze documents lithic refits at every site (a total of 171 pieces across the entire collection, p. 234–235), there is no discussion of their distributions and what this means for the homogeneity (or disturbance) of the excavated layers at the seven sites and across the study area as a whole.

Finally, chapter 6 explores possible parallels with other sites in Gabon and across tropical Africa. Doyendze develops the theme “Le Sangoen du Gabon” (p. 246–249) and further interprets his findings as “MSA-Sangoan,” a term which continues to be debated by scholars, most of whom criticize this as an archaeological “culture.” Photos of the “hachereaux” and “bifaces” listed in the inventories could have helped the author’s argument, but sadly, these were not included in the book. Furthermore, there is no discussion of the position of these possible Sangoan artifacts in relation to “stone lines,” which are well known to archaeologists of Central Africa. These latter receive passing mention in the introductory chapters, but it is nowhere mentioned if they were observed at any of the seven excavated sites. Because sites reportedly predating the Late Stone Age are largely known from surface collections, the discussion would have been enriched by references to sites with well-documented stratigraphic sequences not too far from Haut Ogooué, including Elármekora, also in Gabon, or Shum Laka in Cameroon (Cornelissen, 2016, and references therein), as well as recent research on sites and regional lithic variability elsewhere in West and Central Africa (Chevrier et al., 2016; Lanfranchi, 1996; Taylor, 2016, and references therein). Altogether, it would have been useful for the author to include some discussion of the most recent evolutionary questions and dates relevant to the debates about the Middle Stone Age in tropical regions of Africa.

The whole book is printed in black and white. The figures are generally low resolution, the site and artifact photos are too dark, and the colors/patterns in some figures are difficult to interpret. Better captions and the use of symbols could perhaps have helped to improve the readability of find distribution types, while more lithic drawings in style of fig. 184 (p. 229) could have helped to overcome the color/resolution challenge.

Despite these issues, this book delivers a new and interesting set of data about the archaeology of Gabon and ultimately highlights how much is yet to be learned about past cultural diversity in West-Central Africa.

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