

Humanities Institute  
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## THE FOREST / Le Silence de la forêt (2003)

Didier Ouénangaré and Bassek Ba Kobhio

### OVERVIEW

*The Forest (Le Silence de la Forêt)* is Central African Didier Ouénangaré and Cameroonian Bassek Ba Kobhio's adaptation of Etienne Goyémidé's 1984 novel of the same name. The film tackles the sensitive question of black-on-black discrimination, in this case, westernized Central Africans' ethnocentrism against a tribe of hunter-gatherers of the so-called "Pygmy group," the Babingas, who have been relegated to the status of animals in their own country. The film also raises the issue of how those who pretend to fight against discrimination often end up, by their aggressive methods, rehearsing the very intolerant gestures they set about to combat. Filmed on location in the Central African Republic, the movie is a co-production by the CAR, Cameroon, Gabon, and France.

### CHARACTERS

Gonaba      A school inspector

Simone      A bar owner. She has a short romantic adventure with Gonaba.

Kali      A young woman from the Babinga tribe. She becomes Gonaba's wife and gives him a male child.

### SYNOPSIS

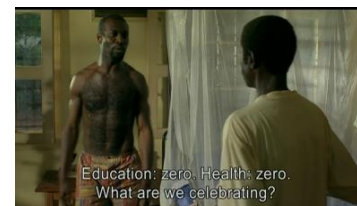
Gonaba, a French-educated Central African, returns to his native country with dreams of helping shape a better future for his people. Ten years later, he assesses his homecoming and realizes with frustration that he has not done much. On the contrary, the corrupt system of indolence and neglect is slowly coopting him. To redeem himself, he decides to open a school in a Babinga tribe to educate them and help them free themselves from the ethnocentrism of their compatriots. However, Gonaba's Eurocentric mindset gets in the way of his good intentions, and he flees the village, having failed in his mission once again, but enriched and sustained by experiential knowledge about the Babingas.

### SCENES

**The homecoming**      After years spent studying in France, Gonaba returns to his native Central African Republic with dreams of transforming the country. On the ferry that carries him across the Ubangi River, he notices that people do not treat him as their compatriot. A woman cautions her child to stay away from him, 'the tall man,' and the ferryman calls him a 'white man' and asks him what he is looking for in this mess of a country. He retorts that he is not a white man but one of them, and that he has come to help pull the country out of its mess. Seized with a fit of hilarity, the ferryman tells him that he is crazy to have returned home, for here it is manioc in the morning, manioc at noon, manioc in the evening and a new set of government ministers every month.



**Disillusionment**      It's been ten years since Gonaba has been back to the Central African Republic. It is the anniversary of his country's independence, and Gonaba is haunted by the mocking laughter of the ferryman. He realizes that the nation has made no progress in the key sectors of development, such as, education and health. Paul, his houseboy, wakes him and brings him his business suit to wear to the independence day celebration. Gonaba tells Paul that he is in no mood to wear a suit and show off in the company of the officials. The country, he says, should be mourning instead of celebrating its botched independence. The houseboy complains that he will be the laughingstock of the town if his boss



is not dressed in a suit. Gonaba reassures Paul that being able to read and write already makes him the greatest houseboy in a town where no servant can boast being literate.

**The Prefect scolds Gonaba** In the official stand of the independence celebration, the Prefect scolds Gonaba for his casual outfit, which, he notes, is not exemplary of a high-ranking civil servant, and he tells Gonaba that he expects him to be better dressed at the evening reception. Gonaba reflects with disgust on the carnivalesque scenes parading in front of the officials seated in business suits under the hot African sun. Gonaba shows up at the evening reception wearing the same outfit, which again draws criticism from the Prefect. The Prefect introduces Gonaba to Simone, the owner of *Le Paris* bar.



**Gonaba defends the Babingas** The Prefect has brought in dancers from the Babinga tribe to entertain his guests. From the balcony, one of the guests throws some food in the middle of the dancers, who scramble to get a morsel. Gonaba disapproves of this and joins the dancers to execute a few steps with them. He fights off one of the Prefect's guards who tries to remove him from the group. The Prefect scolds him for mingling with the Babingas, an attitude that he deems disgraceful for the government, and Gonaba accuses the Prefect of exhibiting human beings as zoo animals. The Prefect argues that the Babingas are a touristic attraction that the country must preserve in its pristine state. Gonaba leaves the reception in protest, and Simone chases after him.



**Gonaba and Simone become lovers** Simone invites Gonaba to her bar. They dance, drink heavily, and finish the night at Gonaba's home. Gonaba has a school tour in a village the next day. Paul is packing a business suit for his boss and Gonaba scolds him for that. Paul is not happy that his boss insists on not wearing a business suit. Simone offers to accompany Gonaba on his journey.



**Gonaba and Simone in Bilolo** When Gonaba and Simone arrive in Bilolo, the village chief, his notables, the headmaster, the teachers, and the villagers are lined up to greet them. The children are also lined up to greet the inspector. The village chief complains to the inspector that the teachers have impregnated several pupils, and the headmaster himself has one young girl reserved for him as a wife who is already pregnant. The headmaster defends himself against the allegations. Gonaba is frustrated that at each one of his visits he has to deal with issues of sexual improprieties. He tells the chief that he would rather hear about progress on the pedagogical initiatives he has put in place and on parental involvement in their children's education.

**Gonaba defends Manga** Gonaba is upset and nearly chokes on his saliva. The chief orders Manga, his Babinga servant, to bring the inspector some palm wine, and he strikes the servant for reacting slowly. Gonaba protests. The chief replies that Manga is an animal that needs to be tamed. Besides, he adds, Manga likes to be beaten. The inspector corrects the chief. The Babingas are full citizens of the country and deserve respect, he says.



**Manga visits Gonaba** Manga comes to visit the inspector at night. He tells him that he wants to know the 'tall men' better and understand the secret of their power. Gonaba tells him that he, too, wants to understand Manga's people better. Gonaba is haunted by Manga's plight and cannot sleep. He makes a resolution to set Manga free and return his dignity to him.

**Gonaba wants to go to a Babinga village** Gonaba tells Simone that he will not return to town with her but will be joining the Babingas to educate them and help them fight injustice. Simone is upset. She tells him that he will be wasting his time because the Babingas have no brains and no soul. Gonaba retorts that this is exactly what her French boyfriend thought of her, and this is why he hid her from his friends and

family. Simone confesses to Gonaba that she was starting to love him because he is a black man who acts like a white man, the closest thing to perfection for her.

**Gonaba and Manga head to the Babinga village** The following day, Gonaba buys back Manga from the village chief, and they head to the Binbingas' village through the thick Central African forest and the thundering cataracts. As they settle for the night under a big tree, Gonaba explains to Manga that he is a citizen of Central Africa, just like chief Sobélé, who held him captive, and any other citizen. To stress his point, Gonaba cites the first Central African president Barthelemy Boganda and Jean Jacques Rousseau, "a white man who thought a lot" and whose proposition is universal. As he explains this, Manga asks what tribe Rousseau is. Manga is surprised that Gonaba would praise a white man in the age of independence. Gonaba replies that it is important to use whatever is good from the whites even if they no longer rule in Central Africa.



**Manga abandons Gonaba in the forest** Manga pulls the picture of a soldier from his pocket, shows it to Gonaba and declares that if he has the same rights as any citizen, then, he wants to be a soldier. Gonaba tries to dissuade him, telling him that he can be a leader of his people if he agrees to work hand in hand with him. Manga insists that he will only return to his village as a soldier. Manga offers Gonaba his necklace and disappears as the inspector falls asleep. In the morning, alone and frightened, Gonaba is caught in a snare, he slips, bumps his head against a tree and passes out, wounded.



**Gonaba at the Babinga village** A group of Babingas on a hunt discover Gonaba unconscious and carry him to their village. The village patriarch, who is also the healer, commits his grandchild Koulou and a young woman named Kali to nursing Gonaba. Kali is teased by the women of the village for her new-found boyfriend. Gonaba lives as a Babinga. Gonaba gradually becomes a part of the Babinga community and partakes in their activities. He hunts with the men and sits with them around the campfire to drink and tell jokes. However, Ekongo, who is in love with Kali and stalks her, does not appreciate Gonaba's presence in the community.



**Gonaba builds a hut** Gonaba sees the Babinga women building a hut while the men are standing around drinking and smoking. As he gives the men a reproachful look and proceeds to help the women, they reject his help and push him away. The men laugh at him, and Kali's brother explains to him that hut-building is a women's task in their community. Later, Gonaba decides to build a hut for himself, a large and rectangular hut that differs from the small, round Babinga huts. He also chooses to build at a location that is reserved for the elders only.



**Gonaba and Kali's wedding** Gonaba and Kali wed in a traditional Babinga ceremony officiated by the village elder. Gonaba is wearing his city clothes and Kali is dressed in traditional Babinga clothes. The whole village joins in a festive dance to celebrate the marriage.



**Gonaba's school** As they see Gonaba struggle to find a large enough tree bark to be used as a blackboard, the children of the village build him a solid board. Gonaba opens his school, and the village's children attend. However, his teaching is not going exactly the way he wants, and he gets frustrated. Kali tries to reason with him, advising him to be patient. She tells him that he must be missing his people because he has been sad lately. She cheers him up when she reveals to him that she is pregnant. The village elder tells Gonaba that the children have no use for his Eurocentric knowledge. What they need





is mythological knowledge about the truth of the world, about their origins, and their brotherhood with the gorilla. Koulou, who has received the myth of the Babingas' origin from his grandfather, passes it on to Gonaba, who now teaches it to the children of the village along with his conventional, Eurocentric knowledge. The children seem to appreciate this new curriculum.

**Kali has a boy** Kali gives Gonaba a boy. Gonaba suggests to his wife that the child should carry his name. She retorts that it is the responsibility of the elder to name the newborn if he is to be accepted in the gorilla fraternity to which the Babingas belong according to their mythology. He tells her that they should go live in the city to give the child a chance of becoming the first educated Babinga. She insists that their life is in the forest. While Ekongo is stalking them, he is attacked by a boa constrictor. Gonaba runs to his rescue.



**Kali's death** Koulou tells Gonaba that his grandfather had troublesome visions, and that he must make offerings to dispel the bad omen. Gonaba tells him that he does not believe these superstitions. On a rainy night, while Gonaba and the village men are on Gonaba's initiation ceremony to become a fully-fledged Babinga hunter, a tree falls on his rectangular house and kills Kali. Gonaba asks the elder for permission to bury his wife instead of hanging her on a tree, as is the custom among the Babingas.



**Gonaba abducts his child** The elder is angry with Gonaba and imputes Kali's death to his arrogance: he built his house where he was not allowed to. Gonaba begs the elder to let him take his child to the city. The elder replies that the child belongs to the forest. Gonaba abducts the child, but he is caught up by the Babingas, who take back the child, tie Gonaba to a tree, and leave him to be devoured by wild beasts in the forest. Ekongo, whom Gonaba has once saved from a boa constrictor, unties Gonaba to pay off his debt to him, vowing to kill him if their paths cross again. Gonaba runs until he hears the first noises of the city and sees its animated streets. He cannot tell exactly how many years he spent in the forest with the Babingas.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### Gonaba

He is a man entangled in his own contradictions. He considers that the Babingas are ill-treated in their country and sets about to free them. However, his intention is fraught with subliminal prejudice. In many places, he repeats the very gestures he tries to dispel in others and even excitedly accepts to be the subject of bigotry on the part of his girlfriend Simone.

**Disillusioned** Gonaba returns to his country with the ideal of transforming it. Ten years later, as a civil servant, he has lost faith in the government to be able or even willing to solve the people's problems. His indictment of the government and the civil servants on the anniversary day of his country's independence is merciless and his assessment of the country's future quite gloomy. Gonaba is disillusioned.

**Guilt-ridden** Gonaba's decision to go to the Babinga village and establish a school there, presumably to help emancipate them, is driven by a sense of guilt. Having failed the mission he assigned himself ten years earlier when he arrived in Central Africa, having failed to motivate his teachers and the student and the parents about the programs he initiated in such places as Bilolo, he creates for himself a new mission, an expiatory one: to set the Babingas free by outfitting them with the tool of alphabetical literacy. It is more to free himself from his guilt than to free the Babingas that Gonaba goes to the Babinga village.

**Pretentious** Gonaba's self-assigned mission of freeing Manga and then going deep into the forest to emancipate the Babingas is tainted with pretension. This is the kind of arrogance that fueled French *mission civilisatrice*, the French colonizers' belief that they were endowed with the saintly mission of saving the backward non-white peoples from darkness by bringing them the light of civilization. Like the French colonizers that preceded him in Central Africa and whose standards of freedom he now advertises to the

Babingas, Gonaba is convinced that he has a noble mission, being the savior of the wretched Babinga people.

*Presumptuous* There is a difference between commiserating with the other, defending their rights as human beings, and pretending to know what is good for them. The first sentiment is empathy and the second is presumption. The lines between these two sentiments can easily be blurred, and with Gonaba, they get blurred very often. They get blurred when he assumes that Western gallantry is applicable to the Babingas, as he decides to help the village women build their hut, assuming that the men are inelegant to let them work alone. They get blurred when Gonaba, a man who spent several years in the cities of Europe and of Central Africa, takes upon himself to lecture the Babingas, people who have survived in the rain forest of Central Africa for centuries, on what kinds of huts they need to build as well as where they need to build them to survive the harsh conditions of the rain forest. The borders between compassion and arrogance get blurred when Gonaba assumes that what will make the Babingas free is the mastery of alphabetical literacy. Finally, the lines get blurred when Gonaba presumes that his Eurocentric conception of freedom is universal and applicable to the Babingas' singular situation.

### **Simone**

Simone seems to go through life with no commitment to issues of social importance. Her commitment is to pleasure, and as pleasure goes, it is better to enjoy it with those who, in her imaginary-ideal, approach perfection: whites or, for lack of anything better, blacks who act like whites.

*Hedonist* Simone is a hedonist. She seems to have no real commitment to anything other than pleasure. She will go the distance to enjoy herself so long as there is no obstacle or serious commitment that presents itself as an impediment to enjoyment. She marries a white man at the age of sixteen and leaves him the moment he becomes impotent. She opens a bar not so much to make money as to be surrounded by pleasure-seekers like herself. She pursues Gonaba and has intense romantic moments with him, but she bails out of the relationship the moment she sees him committing to a venture that will occupy most of his time and leave him little energy to devote to her.

*Uninhibited* Simone has no inhibitions. She lives spontaneously and says what she thinks without coating her words. When the prefect, in his attempts to hide his escapades from his wife, pretends not to have seen Simone for a long time, she instantly corrects him: she reminds him in front of 'madam' that he was in her bar just the night before, leaving him embarrassed. Simone likes Gonaba, so she chases after him when he leaves the prefect's residence in protest, she confesses her fondness towards him, and invites him to her bar. And in the bar, just like in the village of Bilolo, she is not coy about her feelings. She exhibits them for everyone to see.

*Ethnocentric* Simone's views on race are very disturbing. Regarding the Babinga people, she tells Gonaba that he will be wasting his time trying to educate them because they have no brain or soul. Then, she confesses to Gonaba that she is almost falling in love with him because he is a black man who acts like a white man, which for her is ideal. There seems to be, from Simone's perspective, a scale of ethnographic gradation by which the Babingas are slightly above the animals of the Central African forest, then come the ordinary Central Africans, then the "special" Central Africans like Gonaba who, though black, act like whites, and, lastly, the whites at the top of the scale. Simone is fascinated by imaginary whiteness or any mark of It, just as she is repelled by imaginary blackness or any sign of it.

### **Kali**

She is the opposite of Simone. She views her role as a traditional Babingas' healer, caretaker, and mother. She nonetheless plays a transitional role between modernity and tradition.

*Traditional* Her conception of womanhood is traditional. She executes the Babinga women's duties, such as building a hut and caring for her husband and her house. She is a loving and understanding wife. For example, she compliments her husband when he returns from the hunt and she comforts him when he is sad.

*Transitional* Kali is a mother, but not just any mother. She is the mother of the future of the Babinga tribe. Through her comes the child who synthesizes the Eurocentric Central African personalized by Gonaba and the traditional Babingas set in their ways and monumentalized in the village elder.

## THEMES

**Dereliction of duty** On the anniversary of independence, Gonaba tells his houseboy Paul that he is not in the mood for a business suit because there is nothing to celebrate. He adds that the country should instead be mourning for what has become of independence instead of celebrating its failure to guarantee the people such basic things as healthcare and education. At the official independence ceremony, Gonaba reflects on the government officials' fondness for superstition, gaudiness, buffoonery, and amusement while the country is sinking into repression, corruption, and moral indecency. The country's authorities are indeed guilty of dereliction of duty, as nothing has fundamentally changed since the day the ferryman told Gonaba that the Central African Republic is a country of manioc three times a day and a new set of government ministers every month. Gonaba himself recognizes that his enthusiasm to transform the country has been consumed in the general indolence of the country's decision makers. However, it is not just the country's officials who are guilty of dereliction of duty. Gonaba, too, who criticizes them for failing to uphold their duties, is guilty of failing to uphold his. The village chief, Gonaba complains, pesters him with grievances about his teachers impregnating their pupils each time he visits the village. If the problem persists, it is because the inspector that he is has not addressed it properly; it is because he has kept relegating them to the backburner as non-essential. Where he should report the pedophile teachers to the authorities, where he should have them removed from their posts to protect the children of the village, he dismisses the chief's grievance, reminding him that his meeting is not a tribunal.

**Ethnocentrism** In the depth of the Central African forest, as he tries to convince Manga that the Babingas are citizens like any other of their Central African compatriots and, therefore, deserve to be treated as such, Gonaba tells him that according to the father of Central Africa's independence Barthelémy Boganda and according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "a white man who thought a lot," human beings are all equal. Gonaba's mention of French philosopher Rousseau is not fortuitous. It indicates how Gonaba views the Babingas. He sees them as noble savages, innocent, primeval beings devoid of rational thinking, whose lives are governed by direct, spontaneous actions dictated by intuition and instinct rather than by thought and logic. The perception of some people as noble savages, who predate the conception of good and evil, has also made them propitious blank canvases for anthropological and scientific experiments. Gonaba's expiatory voyage into the land of the Babingas can be said to have been prompted by his perception of the Babingas as experimental populations. In other words, why not try with the Babingas the educational initiative that seems to have had trouble gaining a foothold in Bilolo and the other villages? Even better than that, why not try to redeem himself through the Babingas after having failed in his initial mission of "building this country," of "changing this country," which was so mocked by the ferryman on the Ubangi River? The Babingas are Gonaba's investigational subjects, and alphabetic literacy the object of his experiment. His goal is to lead the Babingas from a state of noble savagery to that of civilization through literacy. Of course, he intends to achieve this through sustained experience among his subjects. He will live with them, eat with them, hunt with them, make love with them, even have a child with them. This is where Gonaba's approach differs from that of the prefect. The prefect refuses to associate with the Babingas. He sees them as sub-human creatures, relics from a time immemorial that ought to be preserved for tourist attractions, but he will not socialize with them. Nevertheless, both the prefect and Gonaba maintain the us (intelligent, rational, logical) versus them (unintelligent, irrational, intuitive, instinctive) Manicheanism. They maintain the duality of light versus darkness that was the thrust of the *siècle des Lumières* (the Age of Enlightenment) within which Jean-Jacques Rousseau shone.

**Exoticization** Simone likes to be with Gonaba. She follows him when he leaves the prefect's residence, invites him to her bar, spends the night with him at his home, and offers to accompany him on his inspection tour. She confesses to him that she likes him and is even starting to love him because he is a black man who thinks and acts like a white man. It is, thus, clear that Simone does not love Gonaba for himself but for what he represents to her: an opaline *jouissance*, a white bliss in a black cloak, whiteness in black skin. In France, she lived with a white man who hid her from his family and friends. In Africa, she can find in Gonaba a black man with "white attitude," whatever that means to her, who can proudly exhibit her. Through him

and through her bar "Le Paris", she can openly live her ideal of whiteness stifled in France by a relationship shrouded in shame and lived in secrecy.

**Othering blackness** Gonaba is guilty of accepting an image of himself that puts down his race. What Simone is telling him is the following: "You are black but not like any other black. You are a special black man. You act and think like a white. You have escaped the primitivity of your race and are becoming perfect, without attaining perfection." Simone has a scale of gradation that puts the Babinga who "have no brain and no soul" at the bottom and the white on top. Between the Babinga and the white, she places the ordinary black and the special black, like Gonaba, whiteness, still remaining at the level of an unattainable ideal for blacks. Though the "special" black, as represented by Gonaba in Simone's imaginary, can aim for whiteness, achieving total whiteness remains impossible. Gonaba can only be a fake copy of authentic whiteness. That inauthentic copy of whiteness is, as Simone puts it, her "ideal" love. Authentic whiteness like her French lover can only love her in secrecy and with guilt. Special blackness, aiming for whiteness without attaining it, can adore her in the open, without guilt, and sometimes with unhindered impudence as Gonaba did when he kissed her in public in the village of Bilolo, to the dissatisfaction of Chief Sobélé. Gonaba is a perceptive man, and one would expect him to reject Simone's characterization of him as a mere passageway, as a mere sublime object of her desire, but above all, one would expect him to protest Simone's scale of gradation that promotes him and degrades millions of his compatriots. On the contrary, Gonaba seems to appreciate it as a compliment, and when Simone argues that he should not live with "these savages ... who have no brains nor souls," Gonaba begs Simone to wait for him, promising her that he will not be gone for long, maybe a week or two, and that she will love him more when he comes back from his saintly mission. Gonaba likes this depersonalized image of himself that the mother on the ferry has cautioned her son not to disturb, and that the ferryman has detected as white. Before he opened his mouth to declare that he was coming to save the country, the mother's and the ferryman's keen eyes had already detected something apparent in Gonaba's attitude, the pomposity of the white colonizer, the condescension of the savior, which Simone loves in Gonaba, and which Gonaba, too, seems to love in himself.

**Condescension** Gonaba arrives in the Babinga village dressed in the cloak of a civilizer, a savior supposed to take the Babinga from the age of darkness to that of enlightenment. Where no one is allowed to build a home, Gonaba builds one, telling his guest that they should not carry on with tradition out of mere habit. Where a social and cultural distribution of space and role is established, Gonaba disrupts it, assuming that Western gallantry trumps the Babingas' social order. Where a child is expected to be named by the village elder, Gonaba himself names his child, considering that the child belongs to his wife and him and not to the community. In the end, the village elder, who has been observing Gonaba's cultural blunders with a benevolent eye, becomes angry and scolds him: "Now, I'll really take care of your education." However, Gonaba chooses to flee rather than submit to an education he views as inferior to his French education.

**Transition** Transition in the form of the birth of a new man or new woman is a recurrent theme in postcolonial cinematic texts. It is especially presented as a synthesis where tradition and modernity violently collide. In *The Forest*, Kali gives birth to a male child before dying. That child is the result of an encounter between, on one side, Gonaba (the ferryman's white man, Simone's black man who speaks like a white man, a French-educated Central African) and, on the other side, Kali (a Babinga woman who protests that she is not a tree when Gonaba caresses her, who insists that a mouth is meant to eat when he tries to kiss her on the mouth, but who demands that he kiss her on the mouth before she exhales her last breath). Lema, Gonaba and Kali's child, is the progeny of a modern man and a traditional Babinga woman becoming modern, aiming for modernity in her last muttered word, "bouche/mouth," the very first French word she learned from Gonaba. As Kali whispers this word in the presence of the whole village, and especially in the presence of Koulou, the elder's grand-child and heir, who has accepted a book from Gonaba that he promises to hide from his grandfather and read in private, it is inevitable that the Babingas' new generation to which Lema belongs has been contaminated by alphabetical literacy. From this perspective, Gonaba, who left the Babinga village in less-than-ideal conditions, running off like a fugitive, has accomplished his mission of introducing literacy to the Babingas. Whether this will give them greater freedom than the freedom they enjoy in the Central African forest is another matter.