



"VITAL ARTICLES ON SCIENCE/CREATION"

July 2002

Impact #349

IN SEARCH OF THE CONGO DINOSAUR

There is always something new coming out of Africa.

Herodotus, fifth century B.C.

by William J. Gibbons*

Perhaps the most exciting prospect for the world of creation science is the possibility that dinosaurs may still be living in the remote jungles of the world. Evolution and its accompanying necessity of long ages of evolutionary development would be hard pressed to accommodate a living dinosaur. Such is the story of *Mokele-mbembe*, a creature that some scientists believe could be a surviving sauropod dinosaur. The one area today that would favor living dinosaurs is the vast and unexplored swamps of equatorial Africa. Many of the early accounts of the flora and fauna of West and Central Africa came from missionaries and explorers. In 1776, the Abbé Lievain Bonaventure Proyart, wrote in the *History of Loango, Kakonga, and other Kingdoms in Africa*, about a group of French missionaries who had found the tracks of an enormous unknown animal in the jungle. Pinkerton's translation, published in 1914, reads:

It must be monstrous, the prints of its claws are seen upon the earth, and formed an impression on it of about three feet in circumference. In observing the posture and disposition of the footprints, they concluded that it did not run this part of the way, and that it carried its claws at a distance of seven or eight feet one from the other.

Prints this large could only have been made by an animal the size of an elephant, but elephants do not possess clawed toes. What kind of monster was it? In 1913, the German government decided to survey its then colony of Cameroon, and chose Captain Freiherr von Stein zu Lausnitz to lead the expedition. Von Stein included the following fascinating report on a creature "very much feared by the Negroes of certain parts of the territory of the Congo, the lower Ubangi, the Sangha, and the Ikelemba rivers." They called the animal, *Mokele-mbembe*.

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The animal is said to be of a brownish gray color . . . its size approximating that of an elephant. It is said to have a long and very flexible neck. Some spoke of a long muscular tail like that of an alligator. Canoes coming near it are said to be doomed; the animals are said to attack the vessels at once and to kill the crews but without eating the bodies. The creature is said to live in the caves that have been washed out by the river in the clay of its shores at sharp bends. It is said to climb the shore even in daytime in search of its food; its diet is said to be entirely vegetable.

Very little was heard of *Mokele-mbembe* until 1976 when herpetologist, James Powell from Texas, traveled to Gabon to study rainforest crocodiles. Powell picked up stories from the Fang people about an enormous river monster called *N'yamala*, and a local witchdoctor called Michael Obang picked out a picture of the diplodocus from a book on dinosaurs as being a dead ringer for the *N'yamala* which he saw exit a jungle pool in 1946. Powell later conveyed this information to Dr. Roy P. Mackal, a biologist from the University of Chicago and vice president of the International Society of Cryptozoology. In 1979, Mackal and Powell traveled to the People's Republic of the Congo to investigate *Mokele-mbembe* activity which Mackal believed would be centered in the Likouala region, a huge area of seasonally inundated swamps that was left blank on most maps. In the northern town of Impfondo, situated on the Ubangi river, Mackal and Powell met with the Reverend Eugene Thomas from Ohio, a missionary who had served in the Congo since 1955. Thomas had heard many stories about *Mokele-mbembe* and sent out for firsthand eyewitnesses who had seen the monster. At first Mackal was reluctant to believe that he was on the trail of a living dinosaur. Yet each witness was absolutely emphatic that the illustrations of the apatasaurus and diplodocus in Mackal's book on dinosaurs were dead ringers for the *Mokele-mbembe*. According to Mackal:

The witnesses described animals that were 15 to 30 feet long, mostly head, neck and tail. The head was distinctly snake-like, a long thin tail, and a body approximating the size of an elephant, or at least that of a hippopotamus. The legs are short, with the hind legs possessing three claws. The animals are a reddish brown in color, and have a rooster-like frill running from the top of the head down the back of the neck.

All the eyewitnesses agreed that *mokele-mbembes* live in the rivers, streams, and swampy lakes, and that they are rare and dangerous. Time ran out for Mackal and Powell, and they headed back to the U.S., tantalized by the reports. Mackal returned to the Congo in 1981 with a larger team, and this time headed south on the Likouala aux Herbes River. He attempted to reach the remote Lake Tele, a small, shallow body of water situated in the heart of the swamps where at least one *Mokele-mbembe* was reportedly speared to death by the Bagombe pygmies in 1960. Unfortunately, the narrow water channels that led to the lake from the unexplored Bai River were jammed with fallen trees, making passage impossible with heavy dugout canoes. One flutter of excitement occurred when the expedition was rounding a river bend just south of the town of Epena. A large creature had abruptly submerged near the far bank, producing an 18 inch high wave that buffeted Mackal's

canoe. Crocodiles do not leave such a wake, and hippos that do, are not present in the area, for they have all been chased away by *Mokele-mbembes*, according to the pygmies.

Also in 1981, Herman Regusters, an engineer from Pasadena, California, led his own expedition to the Congo and actually managed to reach Lake Tele. During their exploration of the lake, Regusters and his wife, Kia, observed a long graceful neck ending in a snake like head, emerge from the water about 30 feet away from their inflatable raft. The creature regarded the astonished explorers for a few seconds with its cold reptilian stare before slipping silently under the water. Towards the end of their expedition, the Regusters team heard the ear-splitting roar of a huge animal as it crashed through the swamp near their camp one night. In 1983, Congolese biologist, Marcellin Agnagna, led his own expedition to Lake Tele. After five days of exploring the swamps surrounding the lake, Agnagna and his colleagues spotted a large animal moving out into the water. It had a small head like a lizard, a long neck, and a large broad back. Agnagna attempted to film the creature with his Super 8 cine camera, but during the excitement he forgot to switch the lens setting from macro to a long distance setting. Once again, vital film evidence eluded the world.

My own (first) expedition to the Congo took place from November 1985 to May 1986. Although we were delayed in Brazzaville for several weeks by the slow-motion bureaucratic system, Pastor Thomas graciously used his contacts in the various government departments to help us get underway. We eventually reached Lake Tele after a challenging five-day slog through the dense forest where we observed gorillas, chimpanzees, large pythons, crocodiles, and turtles, but no large monster. We also found that the fear of *Mokele-mbembe* was considerable among the rural Congolese which made information gathering very difficult at times. Our guides hunted daily, and on one occasion shot a monkey that we were unable to identify. The remains (the skin and head) were preserved in formaldehyde and later presented to the British Museum of Natural History in London, England. The monkey was later classified as a new subspecies of *Cerocebus galeritus*, or crestless mangabey monkey.

My second expedition was launched in November 1992 and doubled as an emergency delivery of medical supplies to the mission station in Impfondo where the missionaries maintained a free clinic. On this occasion we headed north on the unexplored Bai River and pushed our way northwest through dense swamps where we found two small lakes that were not even on the maps. Once again our guides were fearful of remaining in the area and we had to cut short our exploration of the swamps. Although many of the inhabitants of the Likouala Region know exactly where we can observe and film a specimen of *Mokele-mbembe*, they believe that to speak openly of the animals to white outsiders means death. It was nothing more than fear and superstition that was stopping us from making a major discovery.

In 1994, a civil war broke out in the Congo, scotching any possibility of a third expedition there. At this point I began to look for an alternative location in Central Africa in order to continue my search and decided to take another look at Cameroon. The south of the country (which borders the Congo) has scarcely been explored and is still rich in lush forests, swamps, and deep broad rivers, just as

Freiherr von Stein had described it in 1913. In November 2000, I traveled to Cameroon with Dave Woetzel from Concord, New Hampshire. We teamed up with Pierre Sima, a Cameroonian national who hunted regularly in the jungle with the Baka pygmies. After purchasing additional supplies, we headed south on some of the worst roads imaginable.

The remainder of our time was spent slogging through waist-high swamp, going from one pygmy village to another. Our efforts were rewarded with firsthand, eyewitness accounts of *Mokele-mbembe* activity dating from 1986 to April 2000. Although the Baka people referred to the animals as *La'Kila-bembe*, they described the animals exactly as the Kelle pygmies in the Congo and confirmed that the monsters still inhabited the rivers, swamps, and streams of southern Cameroon. The pygmies also described the monster as having a series of dermal spikes running the length of its neck, back, and tail. This is a physical feature of sauropod dinosaurs that was unknown to paleontologists until 1991. Additional information was also gathered about other strange animals that reputedly inhabit the forest and swamps, including a large quadruped armed with a heavy neck frill and up to four horns on its head. Our witnesses immediately picked out a picture of the triceratops as being a dead ringer for this animal which is reputed to kill and disembowel elephants.

To our surprise, unlike the pygmies of the Congo, the Baka pygmies of Cameroon do not attach any supernatural or mythical beliefs to the mystery animals of southern Cameroon and were happy to answer our questions and provided a great deal of information about them. As a test, we showed the pygmies pictures of other animals such as the North American bear, which they did not recognize, thus establishing a measure of accuracy and truthfulness in their reporting. Enthralled by our progress, we returned home greatly motivated by the knowledge that we had made important progress in the search for *Mokele-mbembe*.

In February 2002, I returned to Cameroon with a four man Christian expedition. Much valuable time was lost due to problems in finding suitable transportation. However, we did make it back into the target area. Again with the help of our friend, Pierre Sima, we interviewed new eyewitnesses and gathered even more valuable information on *Mokele-mbembe* and other mystery animals of the region. It was, however, the dry season with the river level very low and very little time left for actual field research. We would have to return during the wet season (which is the best time to observe *Mokele-mbembes*, according to almost all eyewitnesses).

I must ask the reader to forgive me for the lack of detail regarding the precise location of my field work as I strongly believe that we are a hairsbreadth away from locating and filming a specimen of *Mokele-mbembe*. If the Lord is willing, I will return to Cameroon in October this year and once again team up with Pierre Sima. Perhaps on this, my fifth expedition, I will now at last film a specimen of *Mokele-mbembe*, the ultimate living fossil!



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