

# **The Business of Sustainable Development**

**AN AFRICAN FOREST TALE**



**STORY BY Jesse Ribot  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY Mor Gueye**

## Acknowledgments

I want to thank Mor Gueye for his patience and brilliance. He listened, understood and represented this story based on my descriptions in a mix of languages and through several interpreters—with a lot of mime and sketches—over the period of a year. Mor Gueye painted well over thirty images for this project. He patiently worked and re-worked paintings to produce the twenty-one plates in this book. It was always a pleasure to work with him. Warm thanks go to the late Serign Gueye, Mor Gueye's son, who assisted his father by listening to and interpreting the story and by working with me to draft first sketches. I am grateful to Masse Lo, Salieu Coré Diallo, Sagane Thiaw, Elhadji Bâ and Semou Ndiaye who all came to my rescue in helping to interpret between French and Wolof. The collaboration with Mor Gueye would not have been possible without their company on my frequent visits to Gueye's studio. Thanks to Laurence Boutinot who enthusiastically took on the impossible task of rendering the poem in French. Serign used the French text to make some of the initial sketches. Thanks to Franko Khoury for his wonderful job photographing these works and for his support for and encouragement on the project—the images are perfect. Many thanks to Jon Anderson, Christine Kreamer, Ruth Mandel and Sita Reddy for giving me lots of wonderful ideas on how to promote and to use this story for educational purposes and for helping me to see the multiple audiences that have an interest in this kind of African political economy and history. I also want to thank my parents Harriet and Seymour Ribot and my Aunt and Uncle Rhoda and Mel Unger, who have always lovingly encouraged even my nuttiest projects—including this one. The most thanks go to Allyson Purpura for supporting me throughout this project. Allyson also suggested I present this project as a gallery show—which resulted in an exhibit at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (WWICS) from April through June 2005. Deep thanks to Cope Cumpston for the design and layout of this book.

Copyright 2017, Jesse Ribot

**PREVIOUS PUBLICATION:** Variations on the text portion of *The Business of Sustainable Development: An African Forest Tale* have been published in three venues. These include: *Africa Today*, Vol. 44, No. 2, April-June 1997, pp. 261-4; *Lokayan Bulletin* (New Delhi), Vol. 13, No. 3, November-December 1997; and *Medicine and Global Survival*, Vol. 5, No. 2, October 1998. The author retains the copyright.

**EXHIBITION:** The text and images were exhibited at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars gallery April through June 2005.

**TELEVISION AND RADIO:** The text and images also appeared on the television and radio news program Dialogue in June 2005. Dialogue is a globally syndicated radio and television show hosted by George Liston Seay. Dialogue's radio program is broadcast on nearly 160 public radio, commercial and community stations in the US. The program is also broadcast abroad on NPR Worldwide, Arm Forces Radio Network and WorldSpace digital radio. Dialogue's, television program is locally broadcast with the help of MHz Networks on Direct TV, nationally on the "Colours" channel via the Dish Network, and via international I Channel network in Canada.



MOR GUEYE

In memory of Mor Gueye's son Serign

Serign died December 2016 after being evicted  
from the studio in which he and his father  
had painted his whole life

He died of a broken heart

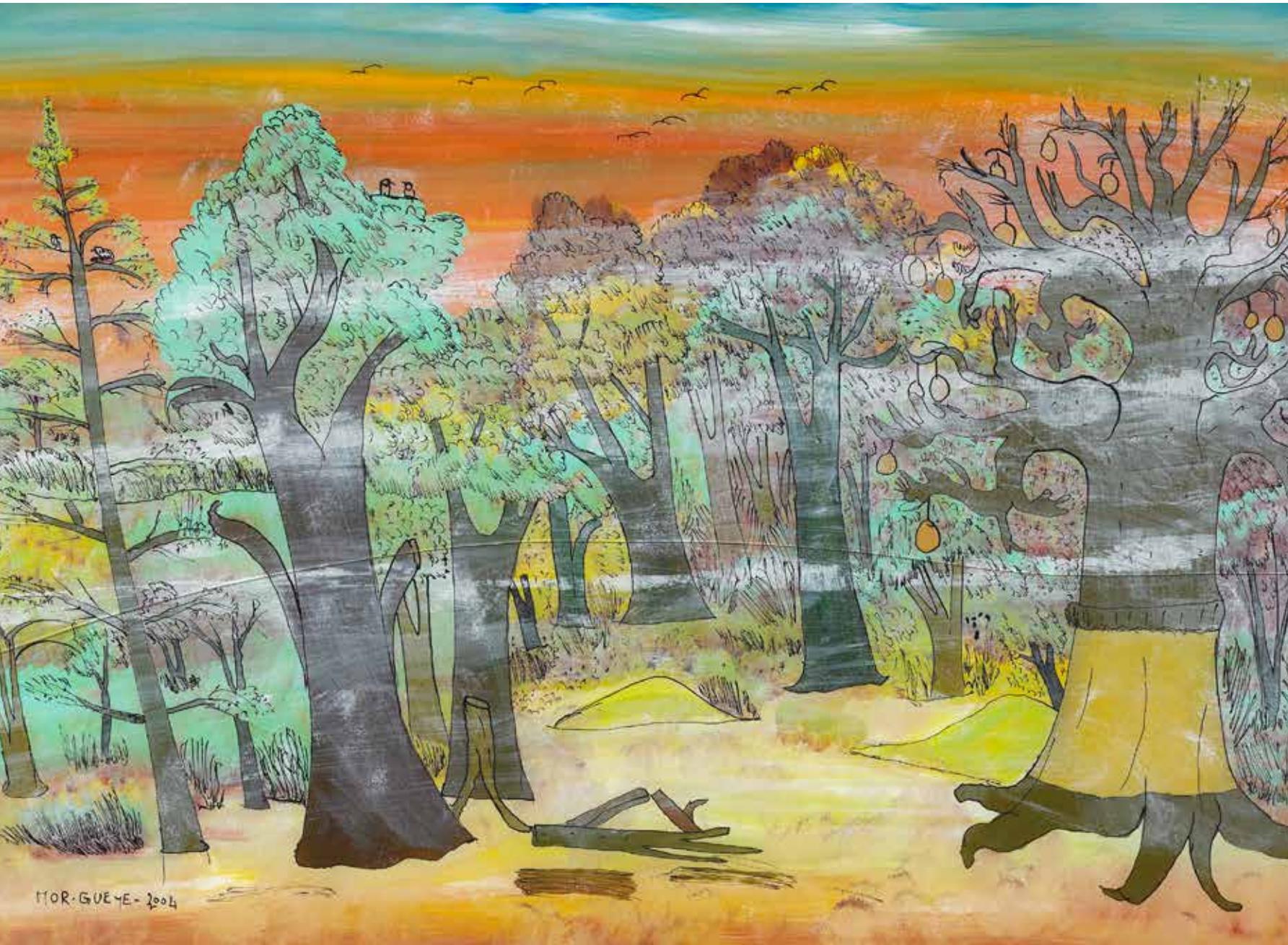


In memory of Seymour, Rhoda and Mel

They recently joined the ancestors  
after long loving lives on earth

## An Ode to the Lorax

Way back in the days of pre-colonial bliss  
when primordial forests were covered with mist



Ferocious young hunters ate nuts, berries and bees  
and picked monkey-bread pods from the baobab trees.



One glorious morning Abdou Jallow Njiaye was harpooning dogfish and eating them braaied . . .

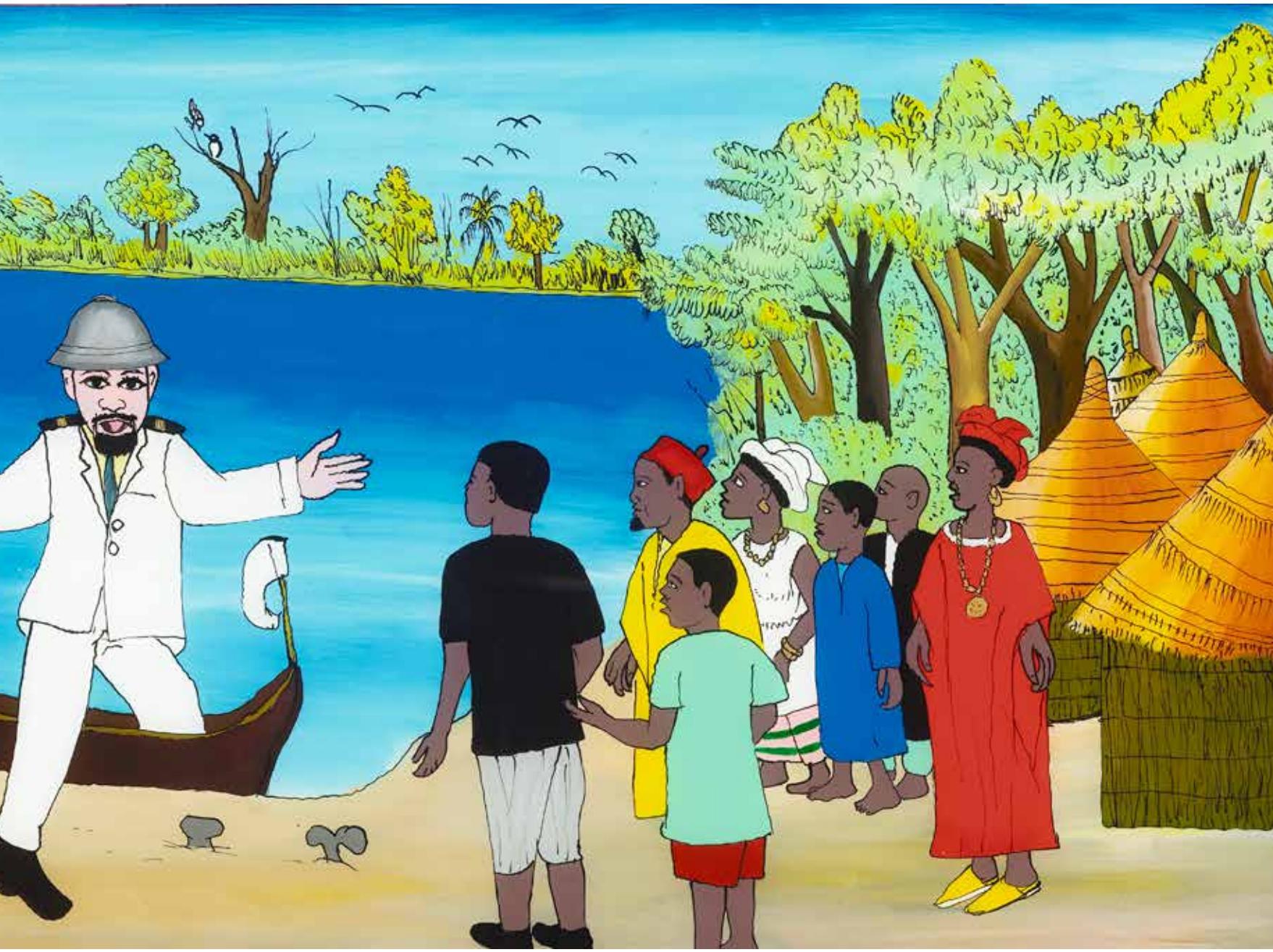


. . . when he noted a speck sailing in from the sea.  
It was Captain Lusitanious Frangelli McGee  
with a flag, a cigar and a beard full of fleas.



Stepping out of his dingboat onto the beach  
he cordially introduced himself  
with spect-perfluous speech.

He waved and he bowed and then he announced:  
“Bark-dudalus Cronkus et Fribulous Sneess  
by dint of my foot please give me a piece.”



Abdou consulted friends, mothers and chiefs  
offering the captain a well-shaded seat  
on the branch of a fruit-laden smorgasbord tree  
with a vine for a foot rest and a cup of bark tea  
a view of the village, the forest and sea.



But, off sailed the captain waving his hat . . .  
. . . he was back in a fortnight with five boats at that.



McFilch and O'Pillage set up their camp  
smack dab in the village by kerosene lamp.  
Cousins Extracto and Bernard du Corvée  
built rows of square houses in less than a day,  
trading green widgets for fruit-laden trays.



Extracto and Corvée soon launched their affairs  
when they pulled out hack hackers, tree snappers and shears.

They were met eye to eye by incredulous chiefs  
with oddball requests and illogical beefs.

"Please" said one chief with a sad twisted smile  
"your hacking is stretching for over a mile.

These forests provide us with edible sap  
and cowberry fruits;

. . . not to mention the spirits  
that live in their roots."

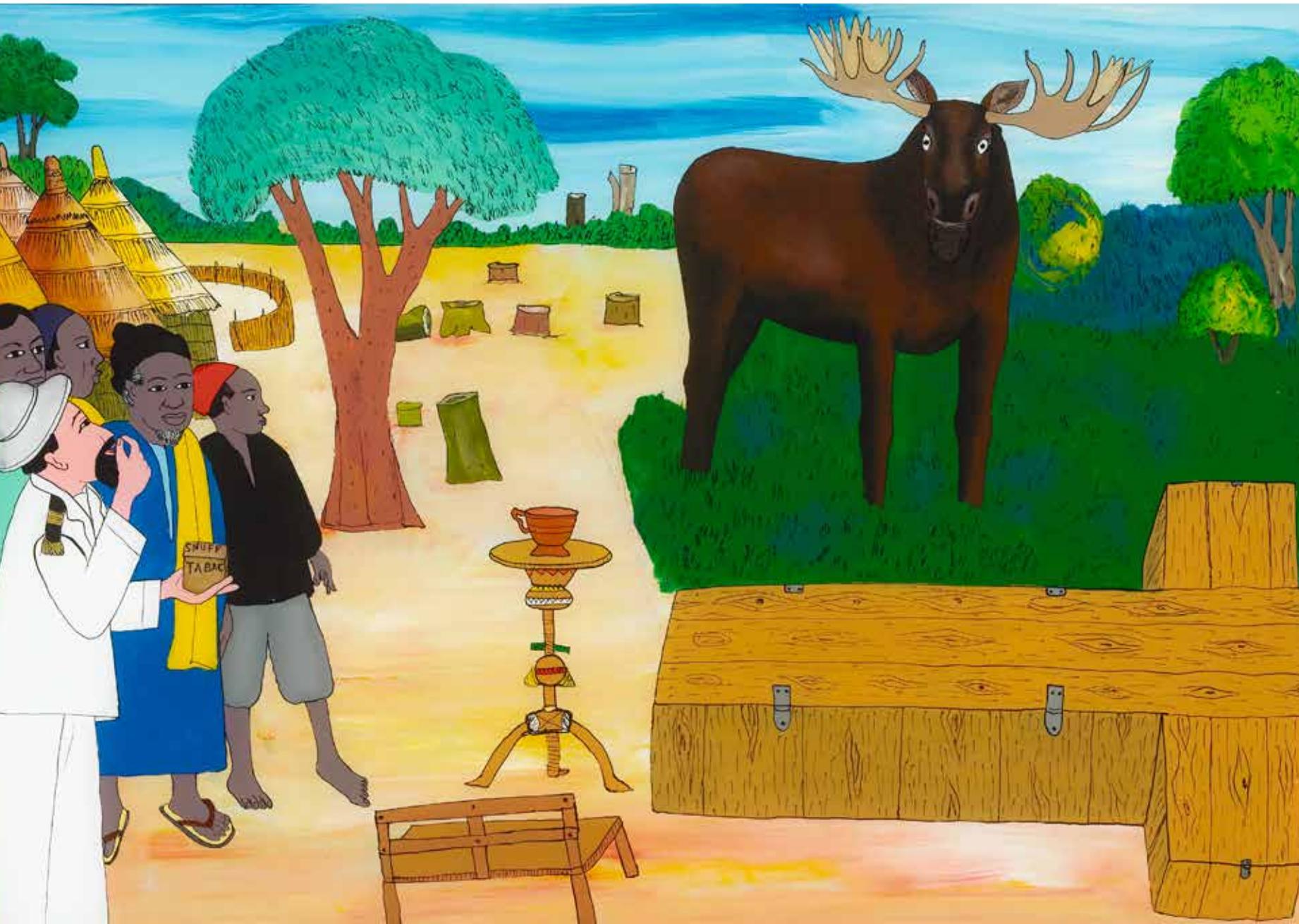


"Never fear," barked McGee, "our work does no harm.  
It's your very own cutting that's cause for alarm.  
Why cutting in chaos for your housing and fuel  
wastes fine wood we could sell in ol' Liverpool.  
If you keep using forests for your insatiable needs,  
how will we ever supply Europe with *thneeds*?"

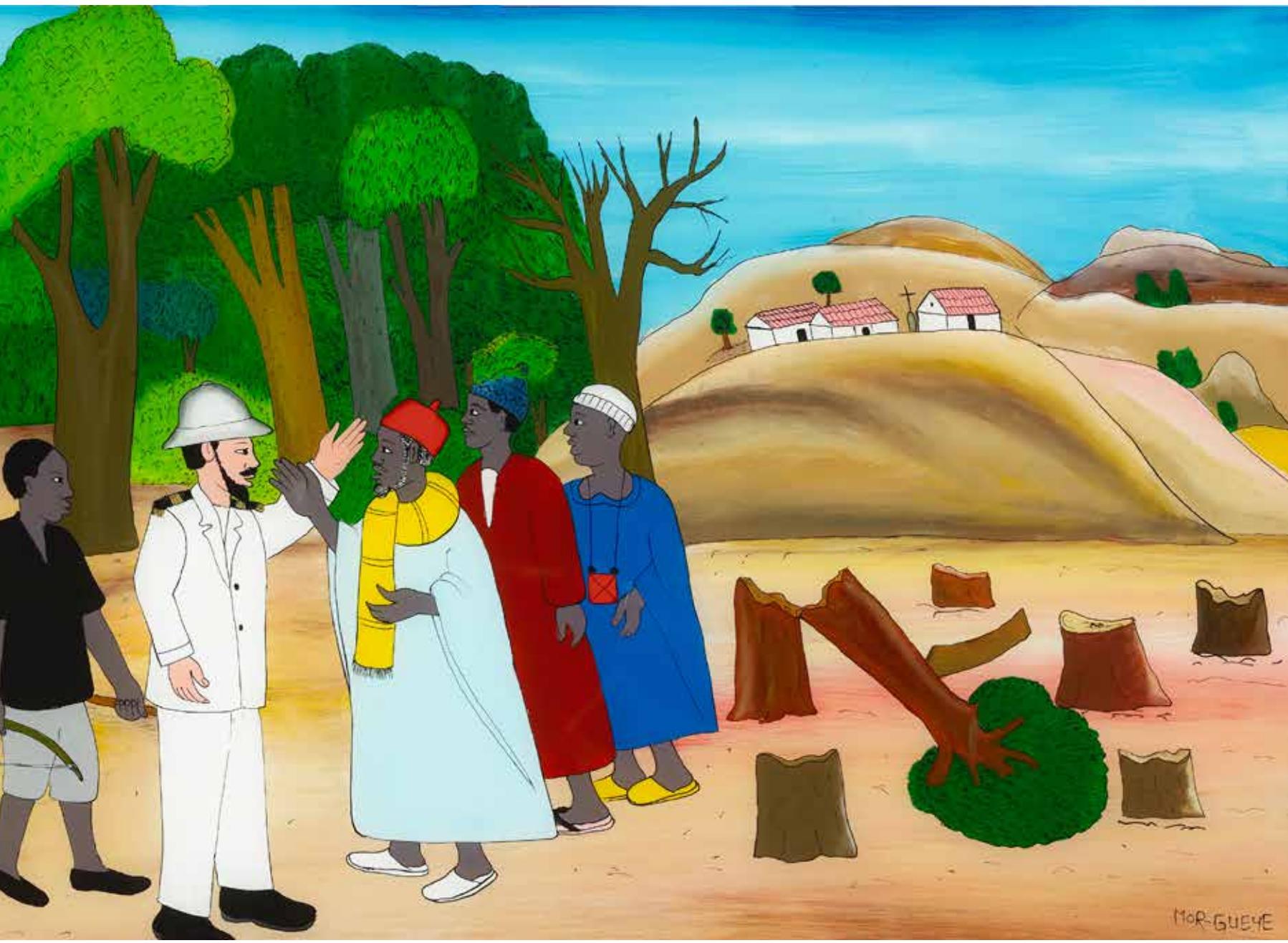


*"A thneed? A thneed!!!*

Why . . . a thneed is a thing with just so many uses!  
It can serve as a coffin for great northern mooses.  
It can serve as a bench or a box to hold snuff  
or a stylish stand for a fine coffee cup."



“Can’t you see” said McGee “I come with a vision.  
We’ll cut down the forests from here to Mount Mission.  
We’ll rotate them by decades and watch them grow back.  
So there’ll always be forests for continuous hack-hack.”



"Sustainable-bility we'll call it" he said.  
"There'll be eternal growth from now till we're dead.  
The whole lovely thing will take place in straight lines  
and it's assured to work smoothly due to exorbitant fines."

"The best for the most and the most for the best—  
mostly me, he then mumbled—and jobs for the rest. . . ."



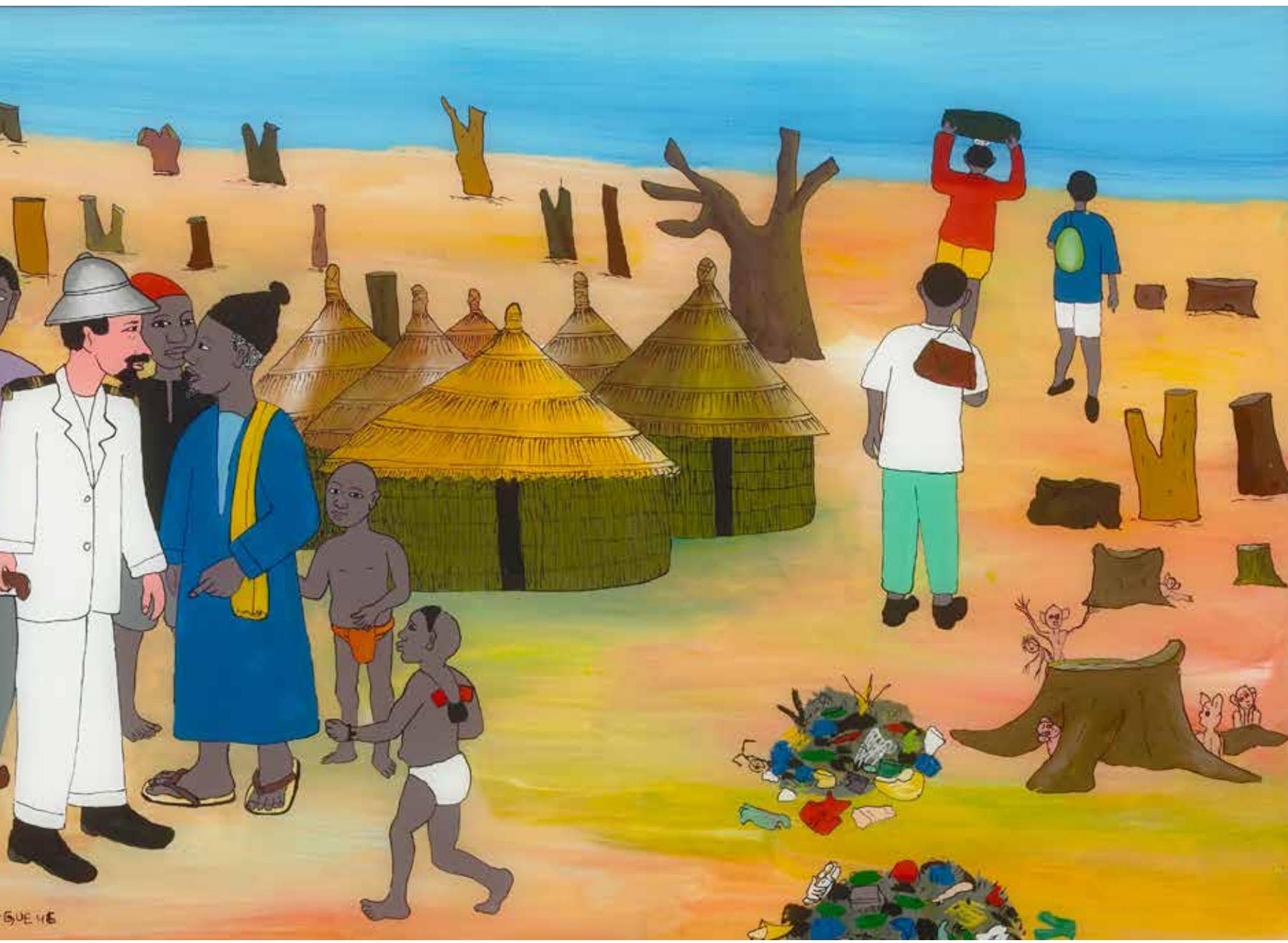
"Yes" spoke the chief, "I can see with your eyes.  
Have you ever considered selling kola-nut pies?  
. . . or tradable permits for black clouds in the sky?"



"Why, your work leaves our village in a sea of new stumps  
we don't even have places to hide rubbish dumps.

The rains won't come without forests around  
and your sustainable-bility drives our young out of town.

We can't wait ten years for our trees to grow back.  
We must cook our next meal on that wood that you hack.  
We have bellies to fill and spirits to feed.  
So, please take leave of this place, and go home in good speed."



“Nonsense!” quipped McGee;  
“if you use trees just to survive,  
the *thneeds* of all nations will be cruelly deprived.

Don’t waste them for fodder or your daily fuel.  
In the life of your nation play your role as a tool  
—for supporting the national good is the rule.”



"Look here in the rulebook—which you must obey—  
you have rights to the things that we don't take away.

But we can't take the wood without taking the trees  
so you'll have to make do with the stumps and some seeds.

You can grow village woodlots—eucalyptus or pines  
we'll help you to manage them through incentives and fines.



If you want to participate please lend in a hand.  
Do as we tell you and we'll tell you you can.

If you listen-look-learn and do as we say  
even democratization will be on its way!

We must protect forests from people like you  
so people with business will have business to do."



Abdou and the chiefs puzzled looks at each other,  
when they heard the wise voice of Abdou's first mother. . . .

She said: "I can remember the last time you came,  
you said something totally different but you did just the same.

This time it is I who will outline the rules:  
You must stop hogging access to markets and tools.

We will cut and sell forests just as we like—  
keeping smorgasbord trees and paths to ride bikes.

The woods of my vision are a patchwork so fine,  
of trees giving lumber and rope-making vines.  
We'll keep great stately egg trees, and bee trees with honey.  
We'll eat purple zump fruits, and sell some for money."



"And, when it's time for the harvest  
we'll dance the night through  
eating crumpets McFufu  
we may even invite you."



MOR-GUEYE

The End



## Postscript: 40 Years Later

Abdou and the chiefs puzzled looks at each other,  
when in rolled the Mercedes of Abdou's minister-brother.

He said "Hey there old chiefs I know it's been tough,  
but you won't control land with this democracy stuff.  
When the people have chosen, their reps. hold the land,  
and it won't be a tool in your traditional hand.

If it belongs to the people (*and the people ain't you*),  
you can't allocate it for your inherited due.

If you can't gain favor by distributing land,  
how can we use chiefs to strengthen our hand?

We must stop local voting and re-install you,  
so us central controllers can dance the night through,  
sipping fine gin and tonics with no need for a coup."



## About the Author, Artist and Photographer

In the late 1990s, I wrote these verses while attempting to write a history of colonial forestry policy in West Africa. I call it 'An Ode to the Lorax' after Dr. Seuss's environmental children's book *The Lorax* (Random House, 1971). As I tried to write the story with all its contradictions, it felt more like a Dr. Seuss tale than a scholarly history. So, I began writing in verse. To my delight, the resulting text told the story better than anything I had written in more serious moments. This book tells the story of disjunction between European and local discourses in colonial domination. It also speaks to the period from independence to the present. After independence, national ministries and international agencies have assumed functions and roles similar to those of the former colonial merchants and officers.

When I asked Senegalese reverse glass artist Mor Gueye—whose studio I had frequented since the mid 1980s—to illustrate the poem, he graciously accepted. This book features twenty-one of the resulting paintings.

### THE AUTHOR: Jesse Ribot

Native of New Jersey, Ribot is glassblower, potter and film maker. In his spare time he is a Professor of Human Geography and Anthropology at University of Illinois. He has researched and published on social vulnerability in the face of climate change, concepts of property and access, natural resource commodity chains, and democratic decentralization of natural resources. His work concentrates on West Africa with comparative material drawn from around the world. He has conducted field research in Senegal since 1986. Learn more about Ribot's work at [www.JesseRibot.com](http://www.JesseRibot.com).

### THE ARTIST: Mor Gueye

Mor Gueye, 80 when he completed this project, is an internationally renowned Senegalese artist. Born in a village in central Senegal, Gueye moved to Dakar on the eve of Senegal's independence in 1960, where he has lived ever since. His work has appeared in a number of exhibitions in Africa, Europe and the US. Most recently, he and his son Serign Gueye were featured in the exhibition *A Saint in the City* at

the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History. Gueye uses a technique popular in urban Senegal known as 'reverse-glass painting', where he paints on one side of a glass pane to be viewed from the other. He is a devout 'Baye Fall', a member of this Sufi sect of Mouridism in Senegal. As a young man, Gueye recounts that Amadu Bamba, the great Mouride leader, came to him in a dream that inspired his first painting. While Gueye works in a range of genres, most of his paintings depict scenes from Mouride history. Indeed, Gueye considers himself a historian, and his deepest joy is in recounting Bamba's life, creating a visual hagiography of this great Sufi saint. He feels his paintings are 'like prayers', which in their making convey *baraka* or blessings.

The image on page five was painted originally by Mor Gueye, but was modified and repainted by his son Mam Gueye for this book. Mam Gueye is a reverse-glass painter working in Dakar.



Mor Gueye

### THE PHOTOGRAPHERS: Franklin Pierre Khoury and Chris Brown

The art in this volume was photographed by Franklin Pierre Khoury, the art photographer of the Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC. The image by Mam Gueye on page five was photographed by Chris Brown, art photographer and drummer living in Champaign, Illinois.

